

IT TAKES A NATION

*A Federal Policy Agenda to Ensure Income Security
for Parents and Children in the South*



CEPR CENTER
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Opportunities

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Victoria Coan, a Ph.D. candidate at Ohio State University and research intern at CEPR from February 2023 to January 2024, conducted, with Shawn, a series of individual interviews with mothers in November and December 2023. Coan wrote summaries of the interviews, identified common themes, and wrote the initial draft of Table 1 summarizing the themes of those interviews. They also created most of the figures in the report and contributed to its discussion of food insecurity and mothers' understanding of economic security.

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Executive Summary

The Magnolia Mother's Trust and Inclusive Child Allowances

Established by Springboard To Opportunities, the Magnolia Mother's Trust has offered \$1,000 a month for 12 months to over 400 Black mothers in Jackson, Mississippi, since 2018. Like inclusive child allowances in nearly all wealthy countries except the US, the Trust's monthly monetary benefit is not conditioned on meeting a minimum earnings test or other burdensome requirements.

The Trust's model, informed by the wisdom and values of mothers, illuminates a pathway that, if taken by federal policymakers, would ensure family economic security nationwide.

Economic Security is a Policy Choice

The number of children whose parents had adequate incomes increased by more than five million between 2019 and 2021. This was the most substantial recorded increase in family economic security in US history, and it happened in every region, including the South, and among every ethnoracial grouping of children, including Black, Hispanic, and Native American children.

This historic improvement happened because the president and majorities in the House and Senate made policy choices that applied nationwide and across classes. The most critical choice for families was temporarily changing the federal Child Tax Credit into a larger, more inclusive, and more immediate federal child benefit.

The Growing Movement for Income Security

President Biden's American Families Plan would have locked an inclusive child benefit into place beyond 2021, along with other crucial family security measures—paid family and medical leave, universal pre-K, and near-universal childcare assistance—that would have put more money in the pockets of US parents, including parents in the South. Unfortunately, it was not enacted because a single Southern Democratic Senator representing West Virginia, one of the least economically secure states, did not support it.

Despite this setback, a new movement of ideas and organizing around income security, exemplified by the Mother's Trust and Springboard To Opportunities, is impacting politics and policy development. The American Families Plan came as close to passing as it did because of this movement. Progressive cross-class and cross-ethnoracial coalitions are amassing the political power needed to expand state-level income security programs in a growing number of states.

It Will Take a Nation

There is little immediate hope for pro-family-security reforms at the state level in much of the South. Assuring economic security in the South remains, as FDR put it in 1938, "the Nation's problem, not merely the South's."

To increase economic security in every region of the United States, we must follow the policy pathway illuminated by the Mother's Trust and the American Families Plan.

A Plan for Building Out Our Social Security System to Ensure Family Economic Security

This pathway requires building out our social security system to ensure that parents have adequate and consistent incomes while not penalizing the care and employment choices they make.

Family security benefits—including inclusive child benefits, paid family and medical leave, care allowances, universal child care, and child support advances—should be easy to explain to families, easy to access, and broad-based instead of narrowly targeted. Crucial income security elements that are commonplace in other wealthy countries with higher levels of basic economic security than the US include:

- *A universal and unified child allowance.* The separate child benefits currently provided by the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit should be expanded and brought together in a unified and universal child benefit that is simple, automatic, paid monthly to mothers, and understood as an essential part of our social security system.
- *Paid family and medical leave.* The FAMILY Act introduced in Congress in 2023 would provide two key components of an effective and adequate social security system: income support for new parents, regardless of gender, who meet the past earnings requirement for coverage, and temporary disability insurance for covered workers. It also provides wage replacement insurance for workers who take leave to care for a family member experiencing a serious health condition. It could be further strengthened by giving additional paid leave to new parents. Canada, for example, provides up to 15 weeks of maternity leave and a standard parental leave benefit of up to 40 weeks that can be shared between the parents.
- *Supplemental security income for caregivers:* Many caregivers provide valuable unpaid care to new children and other family members but lack the recent employment needed to qualify for an adequate paid leave benefit. They should be eligible for federal supplemental security income or a caregiver allowance. In addition, all caregivers, not just spouses, should be able to qualify for our social security system's old-age and disability insurance benefits based on their past unpaid caregiving labor.
- *Assured child support in advance:* The child support enforcement system needs fundamental rethinking. Child support enforcement should be decoupled from Temporary Assistance and other means-tested programs. For parents who seek public child support services, the federal government should ensure that they receive a minimum monthly child support payment in cases where it is not paid or paid late by a noncustodial parent. Such payments, sometimes called child support assurance or an advance on child maintenance, are provided by many wealthy countries as part of their public child support systems.

... the South presents right now the nation's No. 1 economic problem—the nation's problem, not merely the South's. For we have an economic unbalance in the nation as a whole, due to this very condition of the South. It is an unbalance that can and must be righted, for the sake of the South and of the nation.
—President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1938)

The principal subject of poverty research ... ought to be the forces, processes, agents, institutions, and so on that "decide" that a proportion of the population will end up poor.
—Herbert Gans (1995)

American poverty research has devoted much attention to poverty in Northeastern and Midwestern cities and relatively less attention to the South, where poverty has been persistently higher.
—Regina Baker (2019)

Introduction and Overview

In 2019, just before the COVID pandemic, one in five US children lived in households with inadequate incomes.¹ Compared to children in other nearby wealthy countries, like Canada and Ireland, US children have long faced higher risks of poverty and insecurity. Children in the South, as well as Black, Hispanic, and Native American children nationwide, are especially likely to live in households with inadequate incomes.²

But 2021 was different. Despite the pandemic, the share of children with inadequate incomes dropped by one-third—more than five million children—between 2019 and 2021. This was the most substantial recorded decline in the history of the United States, and it happened in every region, including the South, and among every ethnoracial grouping of children, including Black, Hispanic, and Native American children. Similarly, the share of children with incomes below the supplemental poverty line, a lower standard, especially in the South, that measures the number of children with *very*

¹ There is no official federal standard of income adequacy. This report uses half of median disposable income, adjusted for family size, as a minimum standard of income adequacy. For a mother caring for two children, meeting this standard required about \$37,000 in disposable income in 2019. While higher than the outmoded federal poverty line, this is still a conservative measure of the income needed for a solo mother caring for two children to live at a modest but adequate level.

² This report generally uses the Census Bureau's definition of the South, but there are some noted exceptions.

inadequate incomes, dropped by more than half over this same period in every region of the United States.³

2021 was different because the president and the majorities in the House and Senate made policy choices that bolstered family security and applied nationwide and across economic classes. These policies were bold, relatively straightforward, and easy to understand. They mostly involved the provision of assured income and some essential services, like health insurance, in non-stigmatizing ways without burdensome tests or extensive paperwork.

The most critical policy choice for parents and children was temporarily changing the federal Child Tax Credit into a larger, more inclusive, and more immediate federal child benefit. 2021's inclusive child benefit increased parents' and children's economic security in a progressive and nearly universal way. Parents with unstable and unquestionably inadequate incomes were helped the most. But the improvement also helped tens of millions of middle-income parents who already had adequate incomes by most measures but still felt strapped and insecure, especially regarding investments in their children's future.

Since half of the benefit was paid automatically every month starting in mid-2021, parents had more money when their children would benefit most from it instead of waiting until 2022 to get all of it as a lump-sum payment from the Internal Revenue Service. The benefit increased the purchasing power of working-class families, a diverse group that is disproportionately Black, Hispanic, and female, and whose purchases helped speed economic recovery and job growth at a crucial time.⁴

Most wealthy countries have long provided this kind of inclusive child benefit—a child or family allowance—every month as an essential part of their social security systems. Child allowances have their roots in early 20th-century debates about family wages and mothers' endowments. Nearby English-speaking countries—Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom—adopted them in the mid-1940s and have expanded them since. The United States never did, due in large part to classism, racism, and other durable

³ Author's calculation using IPUMS CPS-ASEC.

⁴ Despite mythologies about the demographics of the US working class, it is very diverse, and Black women are much more likely to identify as working class than white men and women. [Fremstad](#) (2014). Moreover, as [Piven and Cloward](#) (1977, xxiii-xxiv) noted in the 1970s, low-income people are not a "stratum beneath the working class, but rather a stratum within the working that is poor by standards prevailing in society at the time." This is even more the case today than it was in the 1970s.

inequalities that also impeded the expansion of family social security measures like paid family leave and universal child care.

Biden's Big Deal for Families

In November 2021, the House passed legislation proposed by President Biden that would have locked the inclusive child benefit into place going forward. Biden's proposal, the American Families Plan, included additional measures—paid family and medical leave, universal pre-K, and near-universal childcare assistance—that would have put more money in the pockets of parents across the United States and social classes, including the parents in the South with the lowest incomes.⁵ The package had limitations but would have increased parents' economic security and opportunity while narrowing class, race, and regional inequalities.

In short, the American Families Plan would have been a big deal. A much bigger deal than the Affordable Care Act, which then Vice President Biden memorably called a BFD after its passage in 2010.⁶ Unfortunately, the Plan died in the Senate after a single conservative Southern Democratic senator and modern-day coal baron, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, pulled his support. The following year, despite the increasingly strong labor market and an increase in parents' employment, the number of children living in families with inadequate incomes surged back. The United States again became an outlier among wealthy countries, as did the South among US regions.

As demonstrated by the temporary transformation of the Child Tax Credit into an inclusive child benefit—and one man's ability to stand in the way of a measure that would have increased the economic security of the vast majority of families he represented—the level and extent of economic insecurity that any wealthy country allows their people to experience is a policy choice. Countries and states that have more inclusive social security systems have fewer economically insecure families and higher parental employment levels. This is especially the case when these systems are coupled with labor and economic policies that promote full employment and put more power in the collective hands of workers, women, and social movements.

⁵ [White House \(2021\)](#).

⁶ BFD is the acronym for the term Biden used. [Schnell \(2022\)](#).

Economic Insecurity is a Policy Choice Shaped by Institutions and Power

Policy differences among states and wealthy countries are due to differences in institutions and power. As one leading social policy expert succinctly says, “Power and institutions cause policy, which causes poverty.”⁷ The power and institutions in the United States and other wealthy countries that have promoted family economic security include a variety of mass-membership organizations and people’s movements. The institutions that have blocked effective economic security policies for families include Southern politicians who were committed to maintaining racial and class hierarchies. Throughout the 20th century, they were able to exercise their extraordinary power in Congress to shape foundational social security and labor laws in ways that bolstered white supremacy in the South, stymied the labor and civil rights movements, and impeded the development of a social democratic party that coherently represented the diverse working-class majority.

Reasons to Believe that Fundamental Improvements Are Possible

Despite this past and the considerable path-dependence of the institutional structures it created, there is good reason to believe that fundamental pro-family reform is possible now in ways that it has not been in previous decades. A new movement of ideas and organizing around income security is impacting politics and policy development. The American Families Plan came as close to passing as it did because of this movement.

Progressive cross-class and cross-ethnoracial coalitions have amassed the political power needed to expand state-level income security programs in many states. Thirteen states and the District of Columbia now have paid family and medical leave programs, including four states that authorized programs within the last two years.⁸ Eleven states provide refundable child tax credits, meaning their value can exceed a parent’s state income tax obligations.⁹ A few have benefits that resemble inclusive child allowances. Eight states provide universal free school lunches.¹⁰

Moreover, it has become increasingly clear that neo-conservative family policy has failed. This approach is exemplified by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a poorly designed block grant program that replaced the Social Security Act’s Aid to Families with Dependent Children. States have long diverted federal Temporary

⁷ [Brady \(2023\)](#).

⁸ [Shabo \(2024\)](#).

⁹ [ITEP \(2023\)](#).

¹⁰ [AP \(2023\)](#).

Assistance funds away from focused economic security measures for families to a diffuse set of programs and services that too often "bear a tenuous relationship" to the purposes for which the funds must be used.¹¹

The News from Mississippi

The long decline of Temporary Assistance has been mostly quiet and almost invisible to the public eye, but Mississippi provides an exceptionally vivid illustration of it. In fiscal year 2021, Mississippi received \$86 million from the federal government to operate its Temporary Assistance program.¹² Yet, it spent only \$4 million that same year on providing assistance in the form of monthly money payments to low-income families with children.¹³ Even though Temporary Assistance is supposed to support "the formation and maintenance of two-parent families, no two-parent families in the state received monthly income assistance.¹⁴ In a state home to nearly 700,000 children, only 222 single-parent families received Temporary Assistance payments on average each month in 2021.¹⁵

In February 2020, the Director of Mississippi's Department of Human Services, the state agency overseeing Temporary Assistance, was arrested for being part of an alleged conspiracy that used funds for a "variety of business entities and schemes." This included diverting millions of federal dollars to the "rich and powerful," including a wealthy retired pro football player (Brett Favre) and "the sons of a wealthy retired WWE wrestler" — instead of "helping some of the neediest people in the nation."¹⁶ The former Mississippi Department of Human Services director and six others plead guilty to criminal charges. The role of others, including Favre and former Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant, is still being investigated.¹⁷

But Mississippi has long been a land of contradictions. Over the same period as the Temporary Assistance scandal was playing out, Springboard To Opportunities in Jackson, Mississippi, was putting in place an effort that should light the way to true security for parents and their children nationwide. This effort, the Magnolia Mother's

¹¹ [HHS](#) (2023).

¹² [HHS](#) (2022). Federal fiscal years start in October and run through September, so federal fiscal year 2021 started in October 2020.

¹³ [HHS](#) (2022).

¹⁴ [HHS](#) (2022b).

¹⁵ [HHS](#)(2022c).

¹⁶ First quote: [Mississippi Today](#) (2022); second quote: [Mississippi Today](#) (2023); third quote: [AP](#) (2023).

¹⁷ See stories at [Mississippi Free Press](#) (various dates).

Trust, has provided over 400 Black mothers with \$1,000 a month for 12 months. Like inclusive child allowances in other countries, this monthly monetary benefit is not conditioned on meeting a minimum earnings test or other behavioral requirements. If a mother is not employed and starts a new job, she continues to receive the \$1,000 monthly for the full 12 months. If a mother is employed and her hours are cut or she is laid off, she gets the same benefit for the full 12 months. If she leaves her job or cuts back on work hours—whether to care for children or other family members, address a disabling health condition, obtain further education, or any other reason—she continues to receive the same benefit.

In addition to operating the Mother’s Trust, Springboard is one of the leaders of a bold new income security movement that challenges classist and racist notions of who deserves social security. Black mothers and their children have long been portrayed as particularly undeserving of social security, especially when it takes the form of monetary income that is not conditioned on meeting strict hourly work and morals tests.

It Will Take a Nation

Despite the growing number of states that have adopted new and improved income security measures—and despite the success of the Mother’s Trust and an increasing number of local assured income programs across the United States—we need to be clear-eyed about what can be accomplished at the state level in Mississippi and many other Southern and Midwestern states.

Southern states are the least likely to have raised their minimum wage above \$7.25/hr and the most likely to have state-level policies that make it more difficult for workers to unionize. They have long had restrictive Unemployment Insurance and Temporary Assistance programs that provide lower benefits and come with more hassle than in most other regions. Seven of the ten states that have yet to expand Medicaid, an option made available under 2010’s Affordable Care Act, are in the South. The economic model in these states caters to corporate interests and the wealthy and underfunds public services.

Consequently, the South “lags other regions of the country on most indicators of economic health.”¹⁸ In many respects, the South has changed considerably since the early New Deal era. But it is still, as FDR put it in 1938: “the Nation’s No. 1 economic

¹⁸ Childers (2023).

problem.” FDR viewed this fact as “the Nation’s problem, not merely the South’s” because of an “economic unbalance in the Nation as a whole, due to this very condition of the South.”¹⁹

While the states leading the way on income security have continued to serve as “laboratories of democracy,” many other states, particularly in the South and parts of the Midwest, have become laboratories of “democratic backsliding.”²⁰ Electoral democracy in these states has “narrowed dramatically, as state governments gerrymandered districts and created new barriers to participation and restrictions on the franchise.”²¹

In short, there is little immediate hope for necessary pro-family reforms at the state level in much of the American South. Assuring family economic security in the South is “the Nation’s problem, not merely the South’s.”²²

Following the Lead of the Magnolia Mother’s Trust: A Federal Policy Agenda for Family Income Security and Prosperity

To increase economic security in every region of the United States, we need to follow the lead of the Mother’s Trust by building out critical missing pieces of our social security system. Most of these missing pieces would ensure that parents have adequate and consistent incomes while not penalizing the care and employment choices parents make. President Biden’s American Families Plan includes most of the significant elements.²³ If just the expansions of the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit were permanently adopted, hundreds of thousands of children in Mississippi across economic and social classes would be more economically secure today and have increased opportunities.²⁴

Still, with the current divided Congress unlikely to agree on much this year, it’s an excellent time to review the American Families Plan to make further refinements and clarify its vision. Particular focus should be given to ensuring adequate coverage and getting the institutional structure of each of the plan’s programs right. The plan should be guided by a clear vision: expanding our social security system to ensure parents and

¹⁹ [National Emergency Council](#) (1938).

²⁰ [Grumbach](#) (2022).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² [FDR](#) (1938).

²³ [White House](#) (nd).

²⁴ [White House](#) (2021).

children are free from want and have consistent and adequate incomes. The plan's income adequacy and economic security goals should aim higher than the inadequate standard provided by the federal poverty line.

Family security benefits—including inclusive child benefits, paid family and medical leave, and child care—should be easy to explain to families, easy to access, and broad-based instead of narrowly targeted. Ideally, the child benefits currently provided by the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit would be replaced with a unified child benefit that is simple, automatic, paid monthly to mothers, and understood as an essential part of our social security system.

The Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act introduced in Congress in 2023 would provide income support for new parents, regardless of gender, who meet the past earnings requirement for coverage and, for all covered workers, a form of temporary disability insurance. It also provides temporary wage replacement insurance for workers who take leave to care for a family member experiencing a serious health condition. It could be further strengthened by giving each new parent more than 12 weeks of paid leave.

There should be supplemental security income and caregiver's allowances for people who provide valuable unpaid care to new children and other family members but don't have enough earnings from recent paid employment to receive an adequate or any paid leave benefit. Similarly, all caregivers, not just spouses, should be able to qualify for old-age and disability insurance based on their past unpaid caregiving and not just their earnings histories.

We also need to rethink the current federal child support enforcement program fundamentally. The state shouldn't force a parent seeking means-tested assistance to sue the child's other parent for child support. For parents who opt into the public child support system, the government should ensure they receive a minimum monthly child support payment in cases where it is not paid or paid late by the other parent. Finally, although this report focuses on parents and children, it's important to remember that everybody deserves economic security and equal opportunity, including adults who have yet to become parents and those who never will.

Publicly funded child care, health insurance, and housing assistance are crucial for family economic security but beyond the scope of this report, which focuses on income security and monthly monetary benefits rather than non-monetary benefits and services. One essential monetary benefit, Unemployment Insurance, is not covered in

this report but does need significant reforms, including robust federal standards to ensure equality across regions and states and job search and training allowances that ensure all people have income while they are looking for a job or participating in a job training program.

Part 1 of this report discusses the enduring American economic and social security ideal. This ideal extends from FDR's speeches in the 1930s and 1940s to Black mothers in Jackson, Mississippi, today. This part also discusses Black mothers' understanding of this ideal, the extent to which current means-tested programs are inconsistent with these broadly shared ideals, and how the Magnolia Mother's Trust is lighting the way to policies that live up to our ideals.

Part 2 discusses the economic security of parents and children today and documents differences between US regions and states using two core measures: income adequacy and food security. This part focuses on the South, which has received less attention from US poverty researchers than other regions, even though it is the poorest region. It then explains how economic insecurity is not a fact of nature or how things are and must remain. Instead, it is a policy choice made mainly by elected officials, particularly Presidents, members of Congress, and state Governors and legislators, but also by Judges and administrative agencies. Their decisions shape social security laws, labor laws, and fiscal and economic policy decisions, all of which determine who is protected against common risks to economic security and how much protection they get. The policy choices public officials make are shaped, in turn, by power and institutions.

Part 3 lays out the critical elements of a federal legislative agenda to ensure family economic security in the South and the rest of the nation. These elements include a unified and inclusive child allowance, paid family and medical leave, supplemental security income for caregivers and caregiver allowances, and a reformed child support system. President Biden's 2021 American Families Plan includes some elements, but refinements and improvements must be considered.

A forthcoming working paper delves deeper into the historical question of why inclusive family allowances, which have long been a core element of other countries' social security systems, are not part of ours. To answer this question, it reviews the history of child benefits and social security for parents and children since 1911 in the US, Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom.

Part 1–The Enduring American Ideal of Economic and Social Security

FDR's Vision for Economic Security

In June 1934, five years into the Great Recession, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt sent a message to Congress pledging to rebuild and reorganize “many of the structures of our economic life”²⁵ His priority going forward was economic security:

Among our objectives I place the security of the men, women and children of the Nation first. This security for the individual and for the family concerns itself primarily with three factors. People want decent homes to live in; they want to locate them where they can engage in productive work; and they want some safe-guard against misfortunes which cannot be wholly eliminated in this man-made world or ours.

FDR’s economic security ideal wasn’t limited to retirement and old-age benefits for industrial workers. As he told Labor Secretary Francis Perkins then and later reiterated in a State of the Union address, economic security measures should cover everybody and extend from “the cradle to the grave.”²⁶

That same month, FDR signed an executive order establishing a Committee on Economic Security to design an economic security plan. Six months later, FDR sent Congress his committee’s final report to Congress and his administration’s draft Economic Security legislation based on the report. The Committee’s report began with a bold vision for “the assurance of an adequate income to each human being in childhood, youth, middle age, or old age”:²⁷

The one almost all-embracing measure of security is an assured income. A program of economic security, as we envision it, must have as its primary aim the assurance of an adequate income to each human being in childhood, youth, middle age, or old age--in sickness or in health. It must provide safeguards against all of the hazards leading to destitution and dependency.

In his 1935 State of the Union address presenting the Committee’s plan, FDR noted that he had “a clear mandate from the people” to rein in “undue private power” over private and public affairs.²⁸ He then noted that American men shared the “ambition to

²⁵ [FDR](#) (1934).

²⁶ Perkins in [Witte](#) (1963).

²⁷ [CES](#) (1935).

²⁸ [FDR](#) (1935).

obtain ... a proper security, a reasonable leisure, and a decent living throughout life” for themselves and their children.²⁹

At the same time, FDR and his Committee distinguished between their guiding vision and what they viewed as politically obtainable in the short term. As the Committee’s report acknowledged: “A piecemeal approach is dictated by practical considerations, but the broad objectives should never be forgotten. Whatever measures are deemed immediately expedient should be so designed that they can be embodied in the complete program which we must have ere long.” The Committee’s piecemeal approach included four major components: 1) federal old-age insurance funded by a payroll tax, 2) unemployment insurance primarily administered by the states, 3) aid to “fatherless” children administered by states with the federal paying part of the costs; and 4) old-age assistance, also state-administered and partially financed by the federal government.

Child Allowances: An Essential Piece Missing from the US Social Security System

Child and family allowances were notably absent from the Committee’s plan. Initially developed in Catholic countries in Northern Europe as a response to the fact that most employers did not pay men a family wage—an amount sufficient for a male breadwinner to support a spouse and several children—early family allowances initially took the form of employment benefits within specific occupations or sectors. At the same time, feminists and other reformers in the United Kingdom were increasingly pushing for “mother’s endowments”—inclusive child allowances paid directly to mothers. These allowances would assure a basic income stream for all families regardless of parents’ employment and marital status.

While the family wage idea centered on men in wage and salary jobs, the mother’s endowment idea started with women whose unpaid labor raising children and supporting men made waged labor and society possible. Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom would all have state-funded family allowances within a decade.

As a forthcoming working paper researched and drafted alongside this report documents, the development of child allowances was being watched and commented on in the United States throughout this period. The Bureau of Labor Statistics published a series of reports in the 1920s, and a few American experts developed family allowance and family endowment plans in the 1920s. Unlike the United Kingdom, however, the US lacked any significant movement or set of campaigns for family allowances during this period. Instead of inclusive family allowances, married white women’s associations in the

²⁹ FDR (1935).

United States focused on means- and morals-tested Mother's Pensions for widows and certain other mothers.

As FDR's politically pragmatic plan for economic security passed through Congress in 1935, policymakers made many changes that moved it further from his original vision. The already-weak Aid to Fatherless Children section, renamed Aid to Dependent Children, was further weakened. Minimum standards for grants, a more inclusive definition of eligible children, and staffing requirements were stripped out during the legislative process.³⁰ Instead of a floor on ADC grants, the enacted version imposed a ceiling—\$18 for the first child and \$12 for each additional child in the family.

Despite its many limitations, the Social Security Act of 1935 was a step forward and created programs and institutions that could be built on in subsequent years. In January 1941, FDR gave his famous Four Freedoms Speech. His third freedom was "freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world."³¹

In 1944, with the end of the war in sight, he called for ensuring freedom from want in the United States through a second Bill of Rights, a legislative program that would have built on the Social Security Act. He again highlighted "security" as the "one supreme objective for the future" and made clear that he meant not just physical security but also "economic security, social security, moral security."³² He explained that true freedom required economic security: "We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. Necessitous men are not free men."

Echoing the Declaration of Independence, he explained, "In our day these economic truths have become accepted as self-evident. We have accepted, so to speak, a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all regardless of station, race, or creed." FDR died a little over a year after making this speech. Still, his vision has lived on even as subsequent progressive reformers

³⁰ States could provide more adequate grants but could not claim federal funds for any grant amount that exceeded these limits. Instead of an inclusive definition of eligible children, ADC, as enacted, could only be provided to children "deprived of parental support or care by reason of the death, continued absence from the home, or physical or mental incapacity of a parent" and who were living with their mother or at least one other listed relative.

³¹ FDR (1941).

³² FDR (1944).

expanded it to account for women’s dual role as breadwinners in the market and unpaid care providers outside it.³³

How Black Women in Jackson, Mississippi, Understand Prosperity and Economic Security Today

This history may seem very distant from the economic ambitions and struggles of black women today in Jackson, Mississippi. However, focus groups and interviews conducted with them by Springboard To Opportunities and researchers at New America, Social Insights, and the Center for Economic and Policy Research over the last eight years show otherwise.

In 1935, FDR highlighted “the ambition of the individual to obtain for him and his a proper security, a reasonable leisure, and a decent living throughout life.” As the words “his and his” make clear, he had the ambitions of men foremost in his mind. But Black women then and today share these same ambitions.

When asked what prosperity means to them, mothers in the Magnolia Mother’s Trust commonly highlight the central importance of basic economic security and not having to worry about making ends meet daily:

Prosperity will feel like not worrying about where your next meal is going to come from, having a roof over your head...Prosperity to me is just having peace with where you at in life, even if it's not the best...as long as you have good health, family good, place to sleep, & food to eat. That's prosperity to me!³⁴

It means you are stable knowing you do not have to worry. Knowing you believe you are capable of maintaining and knowing that you are or have achieved a majority of what you planned as far as your goals.³⁵

FDR also asserted that men’s ambition for economic security was “to be preferred to the appetite for great wealth and great power.” Black mothers in the Mother’s Trust agree. For them, prosperity is “never about ‘my financial portfolio. It’s, ‘I want a house with a garage that I can park my car in.’ It’s about safety and security, and having privacy—not having a neighbor below you or above you.”³⁶

³³ For more on breadwinner liberalism, which remained the dominant form of liberalism through the 1960s, see [Self](#) (2012).

³⁴ [Social Insights](#) (2023b).

³⁵ [Social Insights](#) (2023b).

³⁶ Aisha Nyandoro, quoted in [Emerson Collective](#) (2023).

Table 1. Themes from In-depth Interviews with Mothers in November-December 2023.

Categories	Themes
<p>Federalism and Public Policy</p>	<p>Mississippi makes life harder for families than other states. Means-tested aid is burdensome and invasive.</p> <p><i>"I wish we could get some of the help you have up there down here"</i></p> <p><i>"Mississippi only gives the bare minimum compared to other states."</i></p> <p><i>"I want to work but I need help to get there...they [Mississippi's government] make it hard"</i></p> <p><i>"The goverment should be doing more to help poor people...not pry into their personal lives...give them the resources needed to succeed."</i></p> <p><i> Policymakers need to know that "people need more money to survive, without more money, none of the problems facing families and communities like mine can be solved."</i></p> <p><i>Means-tested "government benefits should not place so many demands on recipients...we deserve a voice and to share our opinions and experiences."</i></p>
<p>Community, Care, and Family</p>	<p>The Mother's Trust sustains existing communities by increasing mothers' capabilities to help neighbors and extended family members. Mother's Trust builds community by facilitating connections between mothers. It helps to be part of a group of people who have had similar experiences and can provide advice and support.</p> <p>The Mother's Trust helps mothers afford family and social activities, like going to a movie, eating in a restaurant, and taking a family vacation, that are fun and memorable. One mother with serious health problems described being able to afford a Christmas tree and presents.</p> <p><i>"I don't go many places, I don't do many things, [the Mother's Trust] gave me places to go and a community of mothers going through the same kinds of things I am."</i></p>
<p>Dignity and Emotional Well-Being</p>	<p>The stable and assured nature of the monthly Mother's Trust benefit reduces stress and worry related to making ends meet and increases feelings of independence and capability to live decently without burdensome means-tested benefits.</p> <p><i>"For [means-tested] benefits you have to tell your whole life story just to get a little help."</i></p> <p><i>"You put in all the paperwork [for means-tested benefits] but then they still might miss a month of your benefits and what are you supposed to do in the meantime?"</i></p>
<p>Economic Security</p>	<p>Available jobs don't pay enough to afford decent housing, a good diet, transportation (car payment, maintenance, gas) and what children need to have a good life (things like sports and other extra-curricular activities, school supplies, child care, fun and memorable family activities).</p> <p>Stable and assured income makes it possible to pay for basics on time without going into debt. For one mother, having proof from the Trust of assured income for 12 months made it possible to obtain affordable credit needed to buy a car.</p> <p><i>"I can make ends meet where they were not always meeting before."</i></p> <p><i>"Economic security" includes being give "my kids what they need--take them to school, enroll them in extracurriculars [football for her son, basketball and volleyball for her daughter]."</i></p>

Source: Individual in-depth interviews of seven mothers, all of whom were either current enrollees or alumna of the Mother's Trust, conducted by Victoria Coan and Shawn Fremstad in November-December 2023.

Today, policymakers and poverty researchers often talk a lot about the importance of poverty reduction. Yet, how some of them understand poverty is reductive and inadequate when compared to elements of the economic security ideal shared by FDR in the 1930s and 1940s and Black mothers today in Jackson. FDR’s vision for economic security wasn’t limited to a bare minimum consisting of only the most basic necessities—as already noted, it included a “reasonable leisure” and a “decent living throughout life.”³⁷

For Black mothers in Jackson today, aspirations for “decent living” and “reasonable leisure” are typically centered on time with their children and include “the joy of being able to go on vacation with your kids annually, knowing that that is now a part of your family’s traditions and culture.”³⁸

The decent life they want for their children includes social, community, and developmental activities. Economic security isn’t limited to having the bare minimum of food and shelter. As seen in Table 1, a summary of themes from a series of recent in-depth interviews with Mother’s Trust mothers (both alumna and current participants), it includes “the ability to give your kids what they need—take them to school, enroll them in extracurricular activities, give them opportunities to go out and do things with their friends.”³⁹ With the monthly payments provided by Mother’s Trust, mothers can “register a child for Little League, sign up for a class at the gym, even take the whole family out to the movies or host a backyard BBQ.”⁴⁰

Even as FDR discussed his vision for assured income and economic security across the lifespan, he typically distinguished it from “relief”—subsistence benefits that were means-tested and too often meanly provided by private and public agencies. People who sought and received relief were looked down upon and stigmatized as “needy” and “dependent.”

Roughly 90 years later, Black mothers in Jackson have similar views about how some of today’s means-tested assistance programs operate in Mississippi. In focus groups and interviews conducted before the establishment of the Mother’s Trust, mothers described “taking steps to improve their economic circumstances and prospects—whether by pursuing a higher-paying job, going back to school, or saving money.”⁴¹

³⁷ And his 1944 speech calling for a second bill of rights, included recreation. [FDR](#) (1944).

³⁸ Aisha Nyandoro, quoted in [Emerson Collective](#) (2023).

³⁹ Interview of Chandra by Victoria Coan and Shawn Fremstad (December 2023).

⁴⁰ [Emerson Collective](#) (2023).

⁴¹ [New America and Springboard To Opportunities](#) (2017).

However, existing means-tested benefit programs “rarely support[ed] their efforts to do so” and even impeded them. These programmatic limitations and barriers were “shaped by a narrative of negative identity, and in particular, a presumption that low-income people do not share the same goals, deserve the same outcomes, or work as hard as other Americans.”⁴²

In-kind means-tested programs like SNAP, while appreciated by the mothers, come with paperwork, administrative burdens, and restrictions on how benefits can be used. SNAP benefits, for example, generally can’t be utilized to purchase meals away from home, even though away-from-home meals can be a necessity for time-strapped parents who are often shuttling between home, paid employment, and their children’s schools and activities. In some means-tested programs, support “declines quickly as employment income rises, which can be particularly destabilizing for workers with inconsistent schedules and low wages.”⁴³ Many of the Black mothers interviewed before the establishment of the Mother’s Trust described having “lost eligibility for public assistance or been deemed ineligible due to modest increases in income that may not even apply to every paycheck.”

Even childcare assistance, intended to support parents’ employment and their children’s development, is means-tested and rationed in ways that counter these goals. As the 2017 report explained:⁴⁴

... a disconnect [between] program design and stated goals came up particularly frequently with reference to child care (‘They told me I couldn’t get child care because I had a job’), and several women described having to pay high costs out of pocket when they were unable to get a subsidy. Many women also pointed to the lack of child care as one of the greatest barriers to pursuing work and education.

Of course, FDR was a white, liberal, and politically pragmatic man of his time. As broad as his vision was, his vision of economic security had limitations, and to pass legislation that implemented parts of it, he needed the votes of Southern Democrats committed to maintaining Jim Crow in their states. Still, this makes the overlapping continuities between his economic security vision and the aspirations of Black women in Jackson today even more striking.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Supplying One of Social Security's Missing Elements: The Magnolia Mother's Trust

As Springboard's CEO Aisha Nyandoro has recounted, "every story we heard" about economic insecurity stemmed from the lack of a consistent and adequate stream of monetary income.⁴⁵

Springboard had been focused on day-to-day programs, but we started to see the layer under that. Every story we heard was something that could be resolved with cash. It was, 'I'm really stressed because my daughter made the cheerleading squad, and I don't know where I'm going to get the \$175 for her to participate,' or 'I feel like such a bad mom because I don't have the money to have pizza with my kids on Friday.' Consistent income would alleviate the strain.

In most other wealthy countries, this need for income is addressed through national social security systems that provide a range of income-security benefits to families, including inclusive child allowances, paid family and medical leave, and caregiver allowances. These programs offer monetary benefits at least monthly, typically without strict means tests that penalize employment and create resentment by denying benefits to families who aren't near the bottom of the income distribution. Many other wealthy countries also have accessible and affordable childcare systems that allow mothers to work and go to school, even when their children are young.

Springboard created the Magnolia Mother's Trust to address our current system's failure to assure that the parents they worked with had the kind of consistent income in other countries through their security systems. Like child allowances in different countries, the benefit is not conditioned on meeting a minimum earnings test or other behavioral requirements. Most of the mothers are employed, but they continue to receive the same monthly benefit if they are laid off, have to leave their job or cut back hours to care for children or other family members, address a disabling health condition, decide to obtain further education or any other reason.

Over 400 Black mothers in Jackson have participated in the Mother's Trust. The initial pilot program consisted of 20 women from December 2018 to November 2019. The second, third, and fourth cohorts of the Mother's Trust have all consisted of approximately 100 mothers in each cohort.

Springboard is a small non-governmental organization with limited funding and capacity, so participation in the Mother's Trust is limited to 12 months and to mothers

⁴⁵ [Emerson Collective](#) (2023).

in the housing communities that Springboard works in. But it's clear that even with these limitations, the program has made a tremendous difference in Jackson and provides a model that should be extended and built upon nationally.

Researchers at Social Insights Research have conducted two evaluations of the Mother's Trust. The first evaluation, released early last year, included surveys and interviews of Mother's Trust alums and in-person youth focus groups with children of alums.⁴⁶ The researchers concluded that participation in the Mother's Trust had a lasting positive impact on parenting efficacy, parent-child relationships, and children's mental health.

The second evaluation focused on mothers in the Trust's 4th cohort from April 2022 to May 2023.⁴⁷ Mothers completed surveys at both the beginning and end of the program. They were invited to participate in other participatory research activities, including ecological momentary assessments using mobile phones and Photovoice, a method that combines photography with storytelling to promote self-advocacy. Nearly all mothers (97 percent) were high school graduates, and 42 percent had education beyond high school. Most mothers had one or two children, including at least one under age 6.

The share of mothers reporting a "great deal of financial stress" was cut in half between the beginning and end of the program. The number of mothers who were employed or in school increased substantially. The researchers found that improving mothers' material conditions helped them "parent in the ways they have always desired and to expand their children's future opportunities."

Social Insights' researchers documented two distinct "journeys" that the Mother's Trust made possible. The first entailed basic economic security: "being able to stay on top of bills and provide steadily for their children even in the midst of obstacles like job loss, health issues, car breakdowns, etc." For these mothers, the Trust made it possible to "stay afloat and not capsize, enabling them to make repairs to their boat as they hit big and small rocks on the river of life." The second involved basic economic security and "building better boats," including building up savings, paying off debts, getting better jobs, obtaining more reliable transportation, or moving toward home ownership.

Springboard is also working to build the collective influence and power of mothers. This includes supporting mothers—through fellowships, storytelling labs, and policy and media partnerships—as they develop tools and skills to meet with policymakers

⁴⁶ [Social Insights](#) (2023a).

⁴⁷ [Social Insights](#) (2023b). The quotes in this paragraph and the following one are all from this report.

and community leaders.⁴⁸ *Front and Center*, a collaboration with Ms. Magazine, gives mothers a platform to share their experiences and insights with a public audience.⁴⁹

Fig. 1. Photos of 27 women on Ms. magazine's website. Each woman's photo is linked to an op-ed that discusses her experience in the Magnolia Mother's Trust.



Source: [Ms. Magazine](#) (2024).

⁴⁸ [Springboard](#) (nd).

⁴⁹ [Ms. Magazine](#) (2024).

Journalists and professional activists sometimes treat working-class people as individual “poster children” or objects of pity in a way that can distract attention from the policy choices and structural realities that produce poverty and insecurity.⁵⁰ But *Front and Center* treats them as unique people and a collective force. This can be seen in **Figure 1**, a set of photos from the Front and Center webpage, each of which links to an op-ed written by a mother.

⁵⁰ [Epp and Jennings \(2021\)](#) and [Southern Mindshift Project \(2024\)](#).

Part 2—Economic Insecurity in the South: Measures, Patterns, and Explanations

As discussed in **Part 1**, both FDR in the 1930s and 1940s and Black mothers today hold overlapping understandings of economic security. When asked to describe prosperity, most Black mothers in the Mothers’ Trust associate it with “stability and having enough to meet their needs” and “fewer worries about daily life” rather than the kind of “financial abundance” that people at the upper reaches of the income distribution associate with prosperity.⁵¹

At its core, the more fundamental economic security and prosperity that Mother’s Trust mothers want requires an income that is both *adequate* and *consistent* over time.⁵² While there is no single quantitative measure of this kind of economic security, numerous measures capture various aspects. In this report, we focus on two well-measured elements of basic economic security: being food secure and having an adequate income.

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is associated with many adverse outcomes. Among children, these include negative education, physical health, and mental health outcomes.⁵³ Food insecurity is not a direct measure of income inadequacy. Instead, it captures the extent to which people are worried about their economic ability to obtain adequate food, typically over a calendar year. Even if a family has more than sufficient income in most months of the year, they may experience income losses for periods during the year that leave them feeling insecure about their ability to afford adequate food.

The US Department of Agriculture’s food security measure gauges whether households have consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living throughout the year.⁵⁴ In 2022, more than 17 million households—nearly 13 percent—were food insecure at some point. Families that include children are more likely to be food insecure. In 2022, 17.3 percent of households with children were food insecure compared to 12 percent of other households.⁵⁵

⁵¹ [Social Insights](#) (2023b).

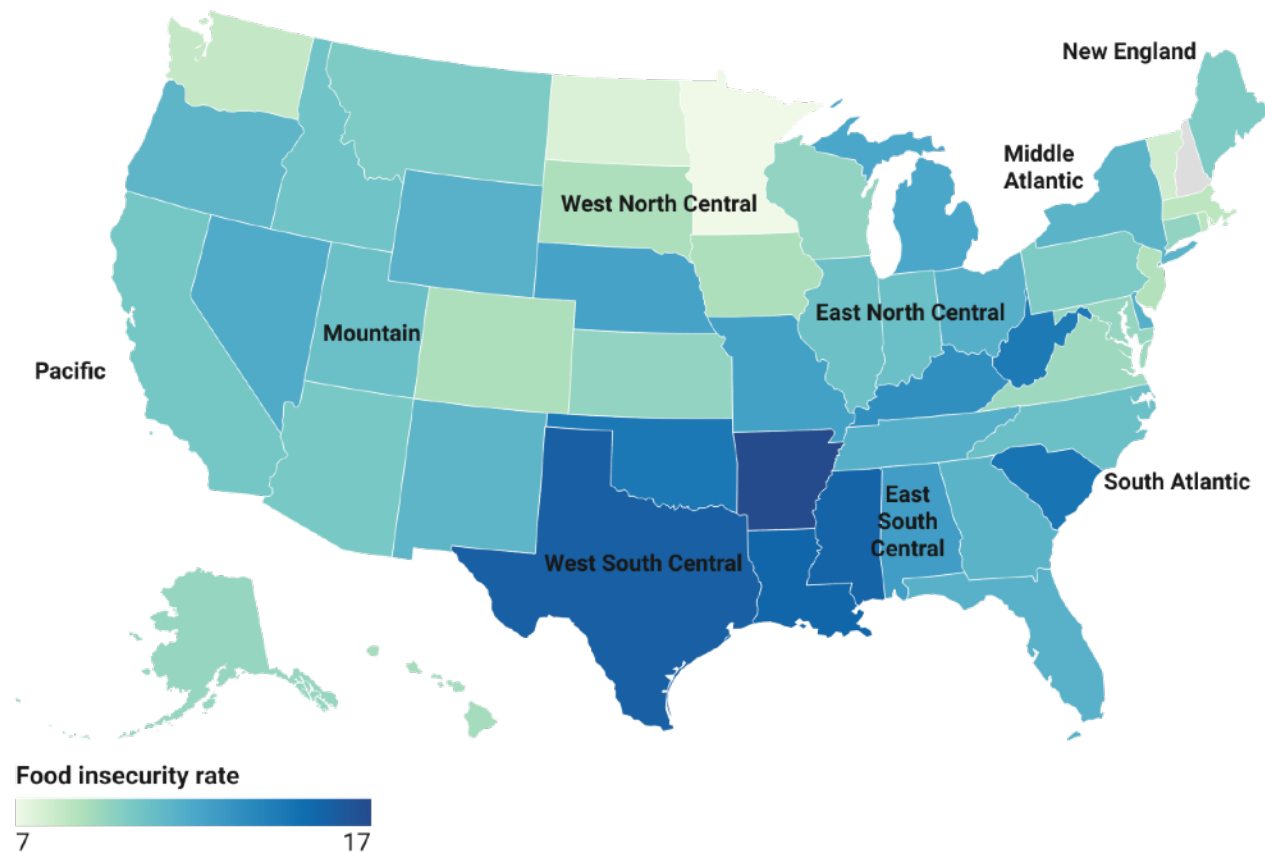
⁵² For a similar definition of economic security and how to measure it, see [National Academy of Social Insurance](#) (2022).

⁵³ [Thomas, Miller, and Morrissey](#) (2019).

⁵⁴ USDA has tracked food security annually since 2001, using a methodology developed with extensive review and input from the Committee on National Statistics.

⁵⁵ [USDA](#) (2023, Tables 1A, 1B, 2).

Figure 2. State-level food insecurity in the United States, 2020-2022



Source: [USDA](#) (2023).

Within the United States, food insecurity varies considerably by state and region of residence. **Figure 2** shows food insecurity across US states in 2020-2022. State food insecurity rates range from 6.2 percent in New Hampshire to 16.6 percent in Arkansas. Food insecurity is overwhelmingly concentrated in the South, where 14.5 percent of households experienced food insecurity in 2022.⁵⁶

Between 2019 and 2020—the first year of the pandemic—the South was the only region where food insecurity increased.⁵⁷ During 2020 and 2022, the 13 states with the highest food insecurity rates were in the South. Only two Southern states—North Carolina and Virginia—have food insecurity rates below the national average.

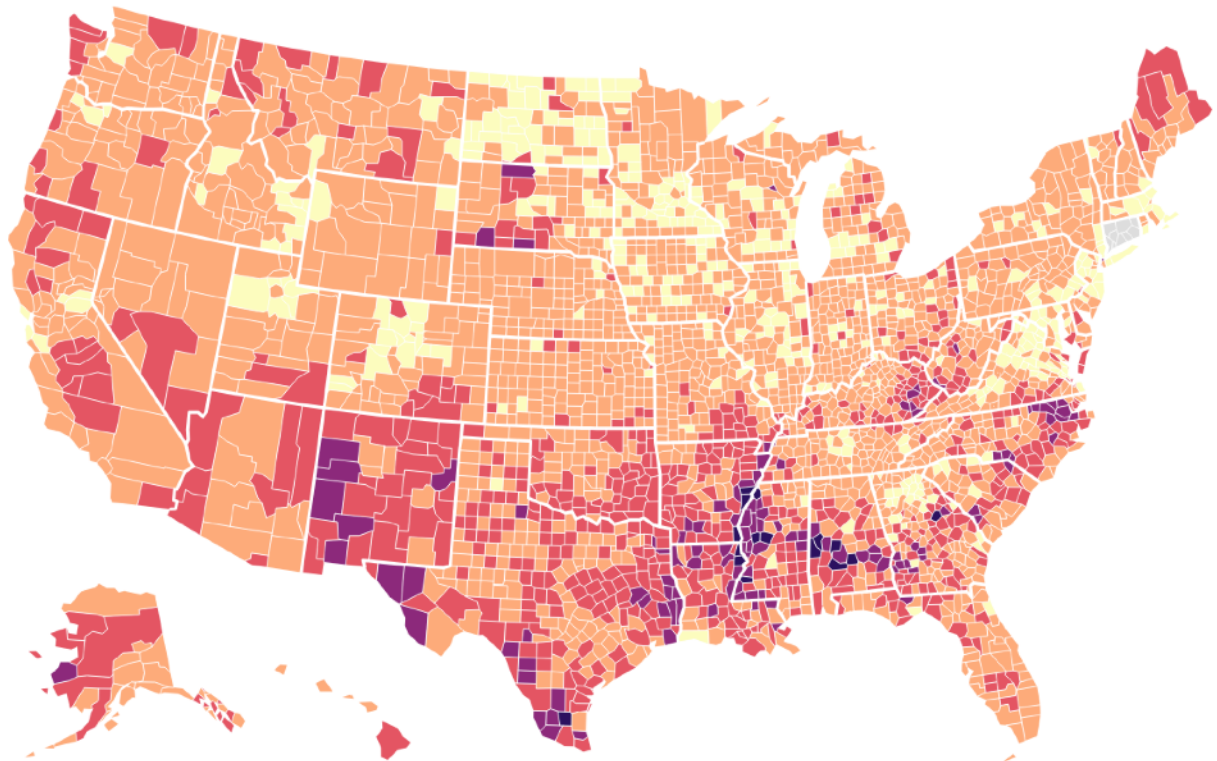
Geographic trends in food insecurity among children follow a similarly concentrated pattern. In 2022, more than 13 million children lived in food-insecure households.

⁵⁶ [Rabbitt and others](#) (2023, Table 4).

⁵⁷ [Coleman-Jensen and others](#) (2021, fig. 5).

Fig. 3. Percentage of children in food insecure households In U.S. countries, 2022

■ < 8.56 ■ 8.56–17.12 ■ 17.12–25.68 ■ 25.68–34.24 ■ ≥ 34.24



Source: [Feeding America](#) (nd).

Figure 3 displays county-level rates of food insecurity among households with children in 2021 using data from Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap project.⁵⁸

The highest levels of food insecurity are concentrated in the Cotton Belt, including the Mississippi Delta, and in the middle of the Appalachian Region, particularly Eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, and Southern Ohio. Food insecurity is also incredibly high in and around Native lands located across the United States, including the Navajo Nation, tribal lands in South and North Dakota, and parts of Alaska where Native Alaskans are the vast majority of the population. Lastly, food insecurity is concentrated in counties on the Texas-Mexico border. All of these areas share histories of economic exploitation and extreme injustices against people based on how they were categorized in ethnic and racial terms.

⁵⁸ [Feeding America](#) (2023).

Measuring Income Adequacy

The federal government produces two income poverty measures: an official and a supplemental poverty measure. Both are measures of having a *very* inadequate income—one that falls far from what most people would consider the minimum adequate income families need to purchase necessary goods and services.⁵⁹ These measures are particularly inadequate for parents with children and people with disabilities.⁶⁰

Testifying before a Senate committee in December 1966, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. argued:⁶¹

A major reason for our failures is that we aim too low. Our goal is not to bring the discriminated up to a limited, particular level, but to reduce the gap between them and the rest of American society. As standards of life rise for affluent Americans, we cannot peg the poor at the old levels of 'subsistence.' For example, the [federal] poverty line, set too low to begin with, must not only be adjusted for changes in the cost of living ... but for changes in the average standard of living of all America.

Because the income lines used in the current government poverty measures are set too low to serve as reasonable indicators of income *adequacy*, even at a modest or basic level, this report uses a somewhat higher income threshold to measure income adequacy. Public opinion and other research have long shown that a measure set at about half of median disposable income, adjusted for family size, better reflects public understanding of basic income adequacy than poverty measures with little connection to changes in mainstream living standards.⁶² For a solo mother caring for two children in Mississippi, an income adequacy threshold based on this method was \$34,360 in 2018, compared to \$20,201 using the official poverty measure and an average of \$22,564 using the supplemental poverty measure.⁶³

To determine whether a family has income below or above half of median disposable income, payroll, and income taxes are subtracted (since they are not available to pay for goods and services), and benefits provided through the tax system, like the Child Tax

⁵⁹ Fremstad (2020).

⁶⁰ Folbre, Fremstad, Gonalons-Pons, and Coan (2023).

⁶¹ MLK (1966, p. 2969). Similarly, in his last book, MLK (1967) noted that for “a guaranteed income to “operate as a consistently progressive measure,” it must be pegged to the “median income of society and not just the lowest levels of income.” King wasn’t suggesting that income assurances should equal median income, only that they should be set at an adequate level in the first place and not fall further behind mainstream living standards over time, as has occurred with the outmoded federal poverty developed in the 1960s.

⁶² Fremstad (2020).

⁶³ Census Bureau’s official poverty thresholds and author’s calculations using [IPUMS CPS-ASEC](#) data and [LIS](#) data.

Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit, are added.⁶⁴ Although not paid in money, specific in-kind housing and food benefits, like SNAP, are also added. Once this is done, families with income above half of median disposable income (adjusted for family size) are counted as having adequate incomes. Those with income below it have inadequate incomes.

This income adequacy measure is commonly used in rich countries worldwide and by researchers, including in some of the most compelling US research discussed in this report.⁶⁵ It is also more consistent with how mothers in the Mothers Trust understand basic economic security as not limited to bare subsistence. Instead, it includes having resources for social and community activities and recreation for their children and themselves.

Measures pegged to a percentage of median disposable income are often referred to as relative low-income or relative poverty measures. This is because they are set in relation to the standard of living of people in the very middle of a nation's income distribution.⁶⁶ This report uses "income adequacy" instead of poverty or relative poverty to avoid confusion with the two federal poverty measures and emphasize *income* adequacy.⁶⁷

The supplemental poverty measure developed by the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics addresses some of the most severe problems with the old-fashioned official poverty measure. Yet, it needs to be set higher, especially for families with children and in the South, to serve as a primary measure of income adequacy. Despite their inadequacies, we also use the federal government's poverty measures in a few places in this report, typically when they provide the best or only off-the-shelf measure or are used in crucial research we cite.

Economic insecurity is a matter of having adequate income *on an ongoing basis*. Income adequacy should be measured on both a monthly and annual basis. Due to data limitations, this report uses yearly measures. However, readers should remember that a

⁶⁴ Disposable income includes income from labor, land, and capital (what economists call "factor income" since it is derived from the "factors" of production) and income from most social benefits, less any payments of taxes and social insurance contributions. LIS (nd).

⁶⁵ Sometimes a slightly higher threshold, like 60 percent of median disposable income, is used instead of 50 percent.

⁶⁶ The United Kingdom uses 60 percent of median income and refers to it as "relative low income." Statistics Sweden uses the same measure but calls it "at risk of poverty." Eurostat, the European Union's statistical agency, uses the same measure and also refers to it as being at risk of poverty. The OECD uses 50 percent of median income and refers to it as poverty.

⁶⁷ The term poverty is often used to refer to having a very limited amount of things other than income (e.g., time poverty and asset poverty) and is also viewed by many experts as multi-dimensional.

household can have an adequate annual income by adding together all the income received during the year but still experience economic insecurity when that income is received irregularly. Moreover, some important sources of income, like the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit, are only received as a single lump sum once a year, typically in Spring, but are counted for statistical purposes as if they had been obtained in the prior year.

Income Inadequacy: Place, Race, and Historical Injustice

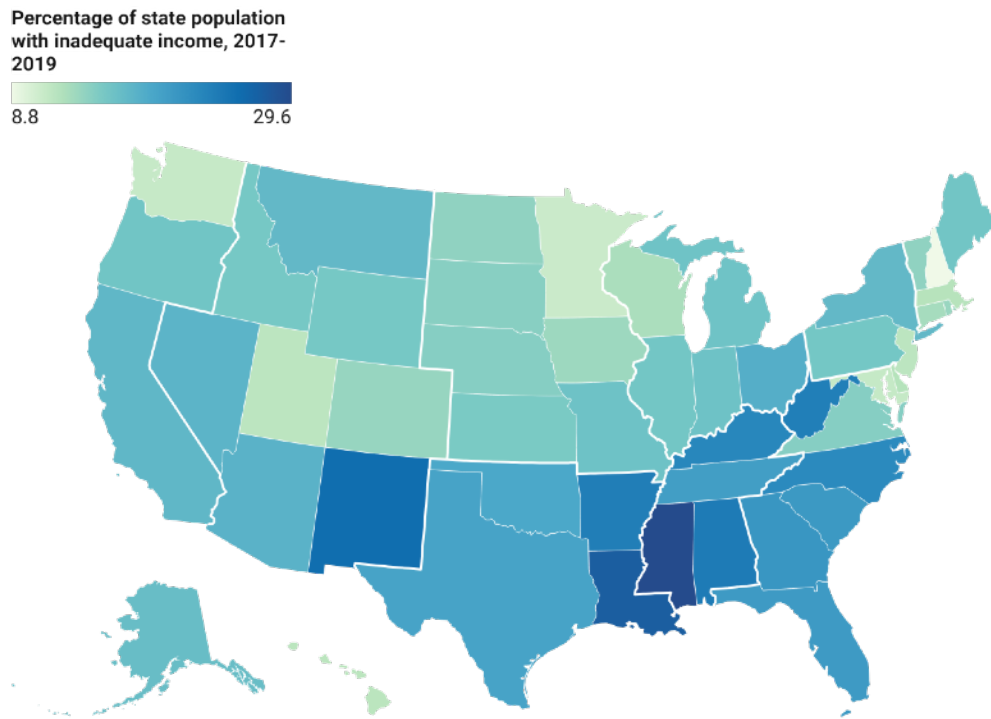
The map in **Figure 4** shows the percentage of people in each state who live in households with inadequate incomes. Within the United States, this income-inadequacy rate varies from 8.8 percent in New Hampshire to 29.6 percent in Mississippi. Of the fifteen states with the highest rates of income inadequacy, all but two (New Mexico and Ohio) are in the South.

The United States Department of Agriculture tracks “persistent poverty” and “enduring poverty” locally.⁶⁸ Persistent poverty areas are counties and census tracts where poverty rates (a measure of very inadequate income) have been at least 20 percent or higher in four consecutive measurement periods spanning roughly 30 years. **Figure 5** is a USDA map of counties and tracts with persistent poverty.

In **Figures 2 to 5**, the South, parts of the Southwest, and Native lands in other parts of the US stand out as the regions and places with the lowest levels of economic security as measured by food insecurity, income poverty, and income inadequacy. **Figure 6** shows the percentage of enslaved people by county in 1860. In the Deep South, the maps of food insecurity, persistent poverty, and slavery in 1860 look like near mirror images.

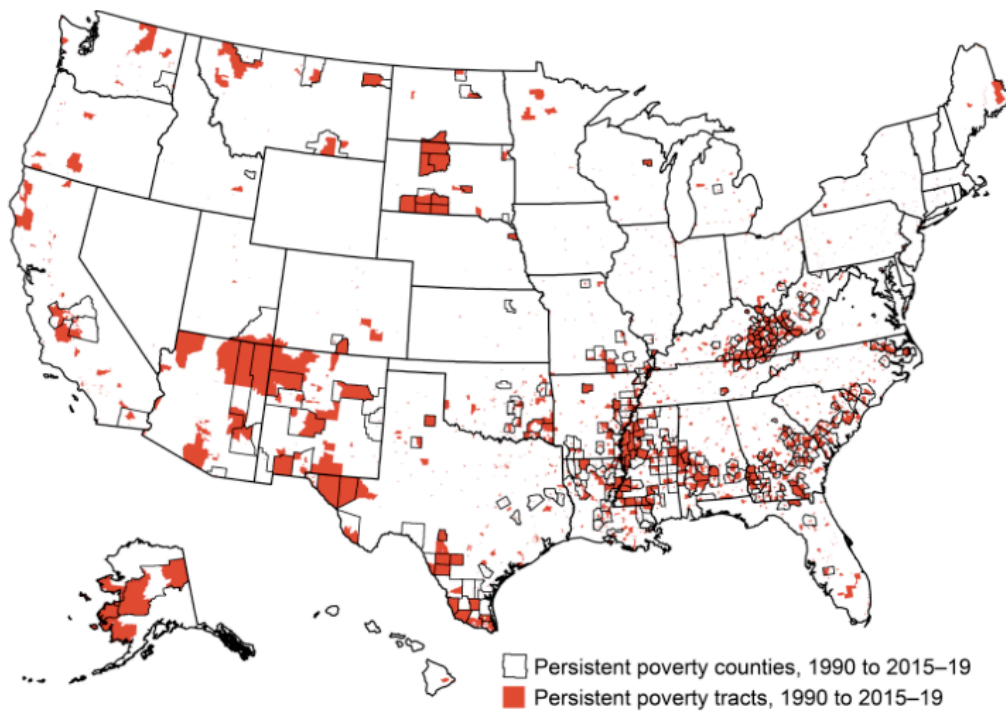
⁶⁸ [USDA](#) (2023). USDA uses the official poverty measure, which, as this report has noted, has considerable limitations regarding income adequacy. If USDA used a more adequate income measure, there would be more areas of “persistent income inadequacy,” but the general geographic distribution probably would not change much.

Fig. 4. Income Inadequacy is a bigger problem in the South than in other regions



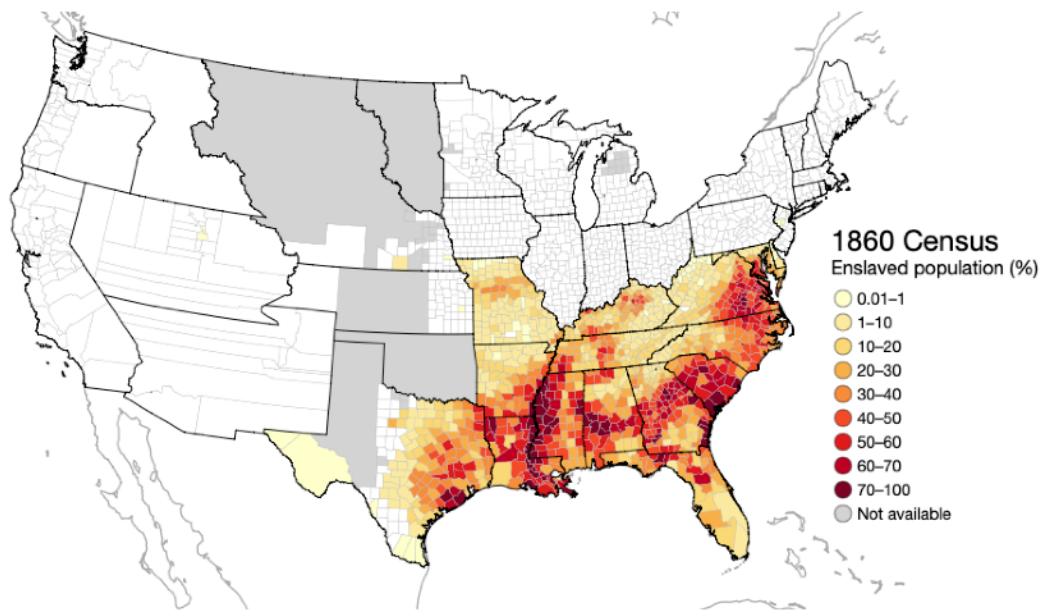
Source: Julie Cai (CEPR) using CPS-ASEC.

Fig. 5. US areas that are "persistently poor"



Source: USDA.

Fig. 6. Percentage of state populations enslaved in 1860



Source: [Mullin \(2022\)](#).

There were relatively few enslaved people in the Appalachian areas of the South. But as Kathryn Edin and her colleagues explain in a recent book, what persistently poor regions of the South:⁶⁹

...shared in common was a history of intensive resource extraction and profound human exploitation not seen to the same degree elsewhere in the United States. In these places, it was not enough to be comfortably profiting from one's enterprise. The goal of the landowning class was to build vast wealth on the backs of those laboring on the land. In each place, this economic pattern emerged (or, in the case of the Cotton Belt, fully flourished) in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. In each place, one industry linked to national and global markets came to dominate the economy, a pattern that held broadly into the 1960s, when King Cotton, King Coal, and the others would bow to the twin forces of automation and competition from global markets.

Why is Economic Insecurity So High in the American South?

Most of the research that tries to explain economic insecurity, poverty, and income inadequacy in the United States focuses on the characteristics and behaviors of low-income people—including whether they are working enough, their education, and how

⁶⁹ [Edin, Shaefer, and Nelson \(2023, 8\)](#).

they spend their income. Whether or not women are married—and for those who are not, how to push them to get married—has been a particular obsession for decades.⁷⁰ There has been far too little concern with “the forces, processes, agents, institutions, and so on that ‘decide’ that a proportion of the population will end up poor.”⁷¹

Another limitation of American poverty research is that it “has devoted much attention to poverty in the Northeastern and Midwestern cities and relatively less attention to the South.”⁷² These research blind spots are interrelated and harmful. As sociologists Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee noted in *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia*, published in 2000, the “overwhelming emphasis of today’s so-called “welfare reform” on changing the behavior of poor individuals diverts attention from the question of how places grow poor.”⁷³

A new, more diverse generation of scholars is working to correct these research imbalances. They include Regina Baker at the University of North Carolina,⁷⁴ Deadric T. Williams at the University of Kentucky, Knoxville,⁷⁵ Jamila Michener at Cornell,⁷⁶ Bradley Hardy at American University and the Brookings Institution,⁷⁷ and Christina Cross at Harvard.⁷⁸

Baker, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina and a Southerner born and raised in Savannah, Georgia, is a leading expert on how institutions have shaped poverty and inequality “across people, places, and time in the United States,” particularly in the South.⁷⁹ In a recent paper, Baker examined how the South's state-

⁷⁰ [Fremstad, Glynn, and Williams \(2019\)](#).

⁷¹ [Gans \(1995, 127\)](#).

⁷² [Baker \(2019\)](#).

⁷³ [Billings and Blee \(2020\)](#).

⁷⁴ In addition to the research discussed in this section, [Baker's](#) relevant research includes [Baker \(2015\)](#), [Baker \(2022\)](#), [Baker \(2023\)](#), [Baker and Burton \(2018\)](#), [Baker and O'Connell \(2022\)](#); [Baker, Brady, Parolin, and Williams \(2022\)](#), [Brady, Baker, and Finnigan \(2013\)](#), and [Williams and Baker \(2021\)](#).

⁷⁵ Related work by [Williams](#) includes [Williams \(2019\)](#), [Williams \(2020\)](#), [Williams and Baker \(2021\)](#), [Williams, Sanner, Jenen, and Simon \(2022\)](#), and [Baker, Brady, Parolin, and Williams \(2022\)](#).

⁷⁶ See [Michener \(2018\)](#), [\(2022\)](#), [\(2023\)](#); [Michener and Brower \(2020\)](#), and [Michener, SoRelle, and Thurston \(2022\)](#).

⁷⁷ Relevant work includes [Hardy \(2012\)](#), [Hardy \(2014\)](#), [Gaines, Hardy, and Schweitzer \(2021\)](#), [Hardy, Samudra, and Davis \(2019\)](#), [Hardy, Smeeding, and Zilliak \(2018\)](#), [JA Williams, Logan, and Hardy \(2021\)](#), and [Logan, Hardy, and Parman \(2021\)](#).

⁷⁸ Related work by [Cross](#) includes [Cross \(2021\)](#), [Cross \(2020\)](#), [Cross, Fomby, and Letiecq \(2022\)](#), [Parolin, Cross, and O'Brien \(2022\)](#).

⁷⁹ [Baker \(nd\)](#).

level “historical racial regimes” influence economic insecurity.⁸⁰ To measure the strength of historical racial regimes, Baker created a standardized scale consisting of:⁸¹

- the total proportion of the state population enslaved in 1860;
- the share of sharecroppers in the state that was Black in 1930;
- the number, from 0 to 4, of state-level “disfranchisement devices” that aimed to keep Blacks from voting, specifically poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and the White primary; and
- the share of each state’s US Senators and Representatives signing the “Southern Manifesto,” in which they pledged to “bring about a reversal of *Brown v. Board of Education*” and “commended the motives of those States which have declared the intention to resist forced integration by any lawful means.”⁸²

In short, the scale “essentially measures different past manifestations of the US racial regime, spanning 100 years, that collectively shaped inequality.”⁸³

Baker compared state racial regime scores with the difference between Black and White income inadequacy rates in each state. The horizontal axis of the scatterplot in **Figure 7** shows racial regime scores, and the vertical axis shows the percentage-point difference in Black and White income-inadequacy rates.

Mississippi has the highest racial regime score, closely followed by Louisiana, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. West Virginia has the lowest score, with Delaware, Kentucky, and Maryland having the lowest scores. The state rankings are generally consistent with how these states split during the Confederacy: the states with less restrictive racial regimes were border states that allowed slavery in 1860 but remained in the Union—or, in the case of West Virginia, joined the Union after separating from Virginia. The states with more restrictive racial regimes were all in the Confederacy.

As **Figure 7** shows, Baker found a robust positive relationship between state racial regime scores and state Black-White income inadequacy gaps ($r=.77$). States with more restrictive racial regimes in the past also have more significant Black-White disparities in income adequacy today. Using statistical techniques that control for a range of

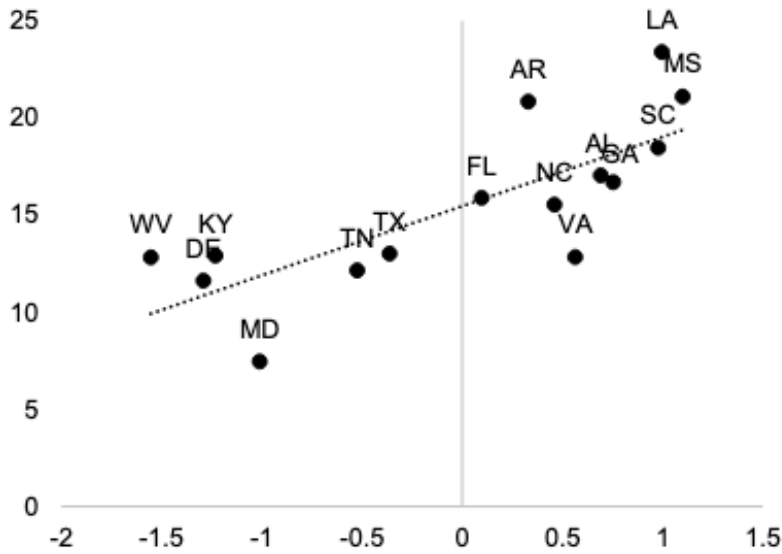
⁸⁰ Baker (2022).

⁸¹ The mean of the scale is set at 0, and the standard deviation is about 1.

⁸² 102 Cong. Rec. 4515-16 (1956).

⁸³ Baker (2022).

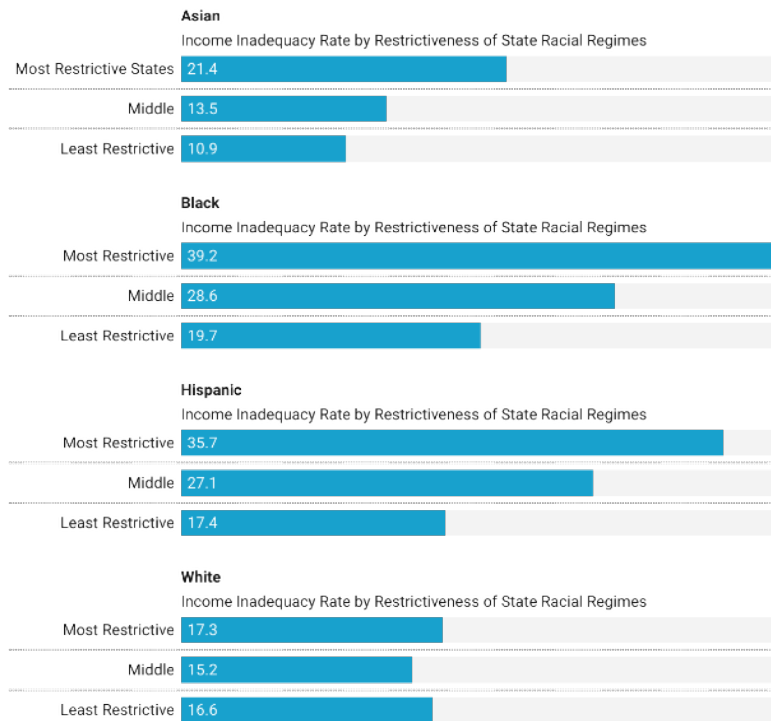
Fig. 7. States with more restrictive racial regimes in the past have higher Black-White disparities in income adequacy today.



Historical racial regime restrictiveness is measured on the horizontal axis and difference between Black and White income inadequacy rates (2010-2018) on the vertical axis.

Source: Baker (2022)

Fig. 8. Income inadequacy rates (2017-2019) by historical state racial regime score of states in the South



Source: Julie Cai, using Baker's (2022) racial regime scores.

factors mediating this relationship, Baker found that it holds: “even after adjusting for a range of predictors of poverty, several of which could mediate the relationship between HRR and poverty.”⁸⁴

Julie Cai of the Center for Economic and Policy Research has used Baker’s historical racial regime scores to examine if the same relationship holds for income inadequacy rates in 2017-2019, the years just before the pandemic. **Figure 8** shows the 2017-2019 income-inadequacy rates for four ethnoracial groupings of people in Southern states categorized by the restrictiveness of their past racial regimes.

Income inadequacy in states with the most restrictive racial regimes is nearly 20 percentage points higher for Black and Hispanic people than in the states with the least restrictive regimes and just over 10 percentage points higher in the middle. Inadequacy is much lower among White than Black people in all the states. Still, there is no clear relationship between White people’s income inadequacy rates and the restrictiveness of past racial regimes. The income inadequacy rate in the most restrictive states is only slightly higher (less than one percentage point) than in the least restrictive ones.

Baker’s research on the relationship between state-level historical racial regimes and current-day economic security is part of a growing body of sophisticated quantitative research documenting how slavery, Jim Crow, and subsequent attempts to maintain a racial hierarchy continue to influence policy in the South today.

A full review of this literature is beyond this report’s scope, but includes:

- Acharya and his colleagues documented how regional differences in white Southern political and racial attitudes today can be traced back to the percentage of persons enslaved in 1860.⁸⁵
- Williams, Logan, and Hardy found that areas with high levels of historical white violence against Blacks have higher levels of economic insecurity today and do less to reduce it by increasing the minimum wage and using their TANF funds to provide monthly income support to parents and children.⁸⁶
- Hana Brown’s racialized conflict theory helps explain how racial divisions can structure welfare state development in the absence of de jure discrimination.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Baker (2022).

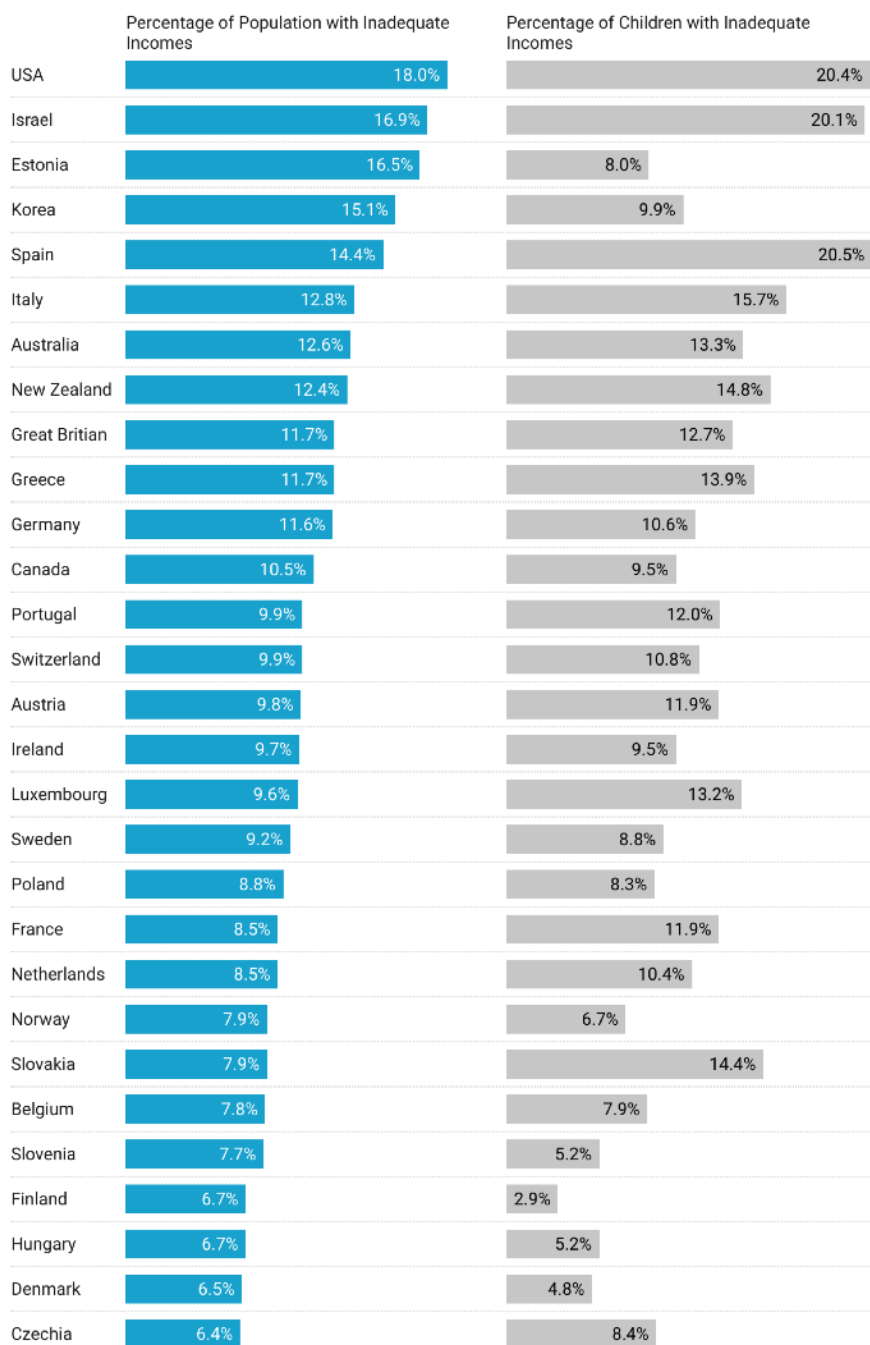
⁸⁵ Archarya, Blackwell, and Sen (2016) and (2018).

⁸⁶ Williams, Logan, and Hardy (2021).

⁸⁷ Brown (2013).

This and other related research help us understand how dominant interests and institutions created racialized groups in ways that facilitated economic exploitation and the hoarding of opportunities and power.

Fig. 9. People in the US are more likely to have inadequate incomes than people in other wealthy countries



Source: LIS.

Notes: Income inadequacy line set at 50 percent of median disposable income adjusted for household (at-risk of poverty or relative poverty).

Different Places Choose Different Levels of Economic Insecurity

Figure 9 compares the US with 29 other wealthy countries. The US has the highest overall income inadequacy rate—18 percent of all people in 2022. Among US children, 20.4 percent had inadequate incomes that year, a virtual tie with Spain for the highest income inadequacy rate.

Why is income inadequacy so much higher in the United States? David Brady and his colleagues have provided one of the most convincing answers to this question by developing a framework that compares the *prevalence* of certain economic security risks (like non-employment) in the US and 29 rich countries with the income *penalties* of experiencing these risks.⁸⁸ They look at four risks to economic security that have long been pointed to by policymakers: being a solo mother (not living with a partner or spouse to share child care and household expenses), being a “teen” or young parent (under age 25), non-employment (living in a household without any employed people), and not having a high school degree.

They find that the United States does not stand out regarding the total prevalence of these risks—in fact, “despite having unusually high poverty, the United States has below average prevalences of risks.”⁸⁹ Reducing the prevalence of these risks “would not lead to a large reduction in poverty.”⁹⁰ What makes the United States different is that the income penalties for experiencing these risks are higher than in any other 29 countries.

The income penalties for experiencing these risks are primarily determined by the strength of the social security system a person lives in. For example, job loss is a common risk to economic security. However, the size of the income penalty experienced by a person who has lost their job depends on the coverage and adequacy of a country’s unemployment insurance system and other benefits and services the government provides to unemployed people.

All else equal, parents face more significant economic security risks than non-parents because parents have to care for their children, which takes time and money. This wasn’t as big of a problem in earlier eras when most children lived on farms and were engaged in household production or could contribute to household income through employment (of course, child labor was, and still is, a problem). But children today,

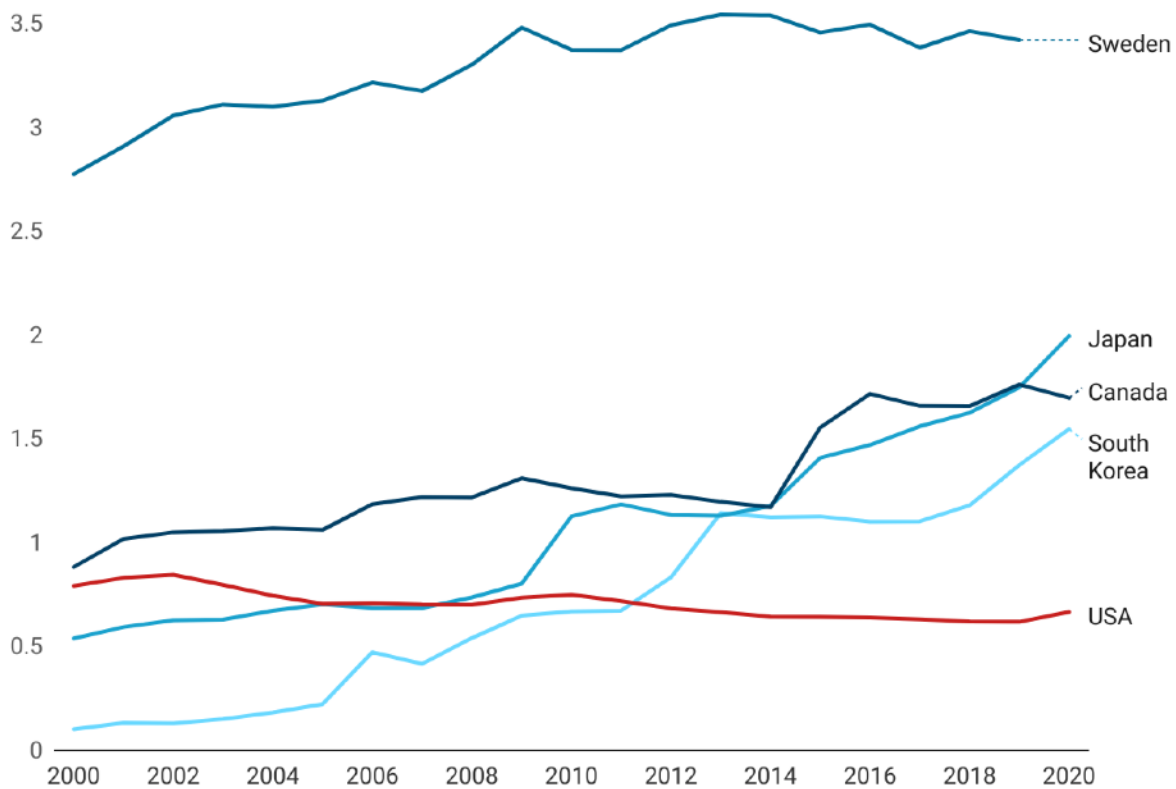
⁸⁸ Brady, Finnigan, and Hübgen (2017).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

absent a trust fund, don't come with supplemental incomes and primarily depend on working-age parents for a substantial portion of their lives. Most rich countries increase the economic security of families with children by providing a range of inclusive child benefits, including broad-based monthly child allowances, no-cost and low-cost child care, and paid family and medical leave.

Fig. 10. United States Has Fallen Behind on Investments in Family Security

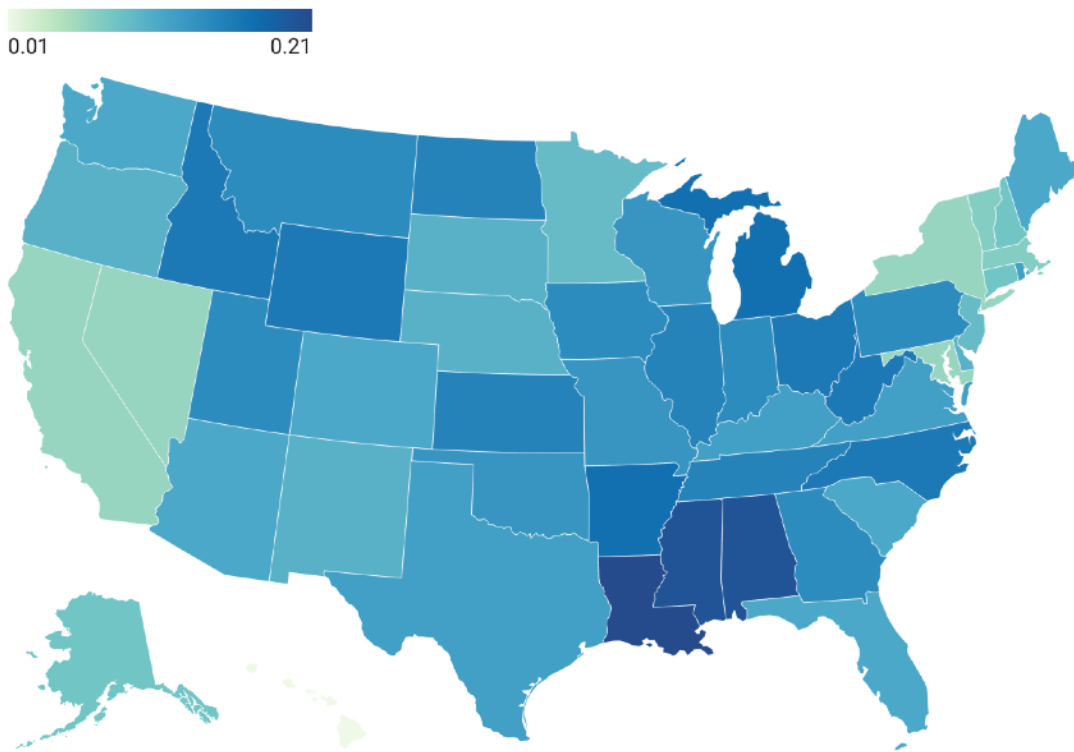


This chart tracks public expenditures on family benefits as a percentage of GDP. Family benefits include financial support that is exclusively for families and children. Spending recorded in other social policy areas, such as health and housing, also assist families, but not exclusively, and is not included in this indicator.

Source: OECD (2024).

The United States invests much less in these family benefits than most wealthy countries. **Figure 10** shows trends in public spending on families, including financial support exclusively for families and children, in five wealthy countries since 2000. One of the countries, Sweden, has long spent more on family benefits than most countries in the OECD. The United States has consistently spent much less on family benefits. Three countries—Canada, Japan, and Korea—spent less or roughly the same amount as the United States in 2000 but have doubled their family investments over the last two

Fig. 11. Risk Penalties Faced by Solo Mothers, 1993 to 2016



Source: Nicholson (2022).

decades. All three spend more than twice their GDP on family benefits than the United States. In other words, while other countries have opted to provide more economic security for families, the United States has decided to stick to a low level of family investment and a high level of family insecurity.

Within the United States, there is a similar divergence between states and regions. Applying Brady's risk penalties approach to US states, D. Adam Nicholson finds that many Southern states are among the poorest, have the highest prevalences of risks, and have the highest penalties."⁹¹

Figure 11 shows the risk penalties faced by solo mothers by state between 1993 and 2016. The four states with the highest penalties for solo mothers are in the South (Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi), as are seven of the 11 states with the highest penalties. Three of the 20 states with the lowest risk penalties are in the Census Bureau's Southern East Center region. Still, they are all mid-Atlantic states that were

⁹¹ Nicholson (2022).

part of the Union during the Civil War (Delaware, Maryland, and the District of Columbia).

State-level differences in economic security and the risks for solo parents and groups are primarily due to policy choices. State-level policymakers in the South are the most likely to make policy choices that contribute to regional disparities in economic security, and federal-level conservative policymakers elected from Southern states have been a driving force in designing key federal policies in ways that allow Southern states to do this.

Along these lines, Nicholson notes that the variation in state-level penalties for being a solo mother more than doubled after the full implementation of the Temporary Assistance block grant program in the late 1990s.⁹² Zachery Parolin has shown how the extraordinary discretion given to state decisions about how to spend federal Temporary Assistance funds has contributed to the black-white child poverty gap.⁹³ States with more Black residents are less likely to prioritize the direct provision of monthly income assistance to parents but more likely to use Temporary Assistance funds to promote marriage. Merely “neutralizing this bias would reduce the black-white child poverty gap by up to 15 percent.”

In a 2021 paper, researchers at the Center for American Progress and Bradley Hardy, a public policy professor at Georgetown University, examined differences in state-level policies and found that US regions with more Black and Latino people have weaker economic security systems and “higher rates of hardship and worse economic outcomes overall.”⁹⁴ Among their key findings:

- Southern states are the least likely to have raised the minimum wage above \$7.25/hr and the most likely to have state-level policies that make it more difficult for workers to unionize. In addition to increasing union members’ wages and working standards, unions build collective power that generally improves state-level employment and income security policies for low-income and working-class people.
- Unemployment Insurance benefits are lower and more restrictive in the South and much of the Midwest: “Average weekly UI benefits were \$72 lower in the South, \$30

⁹² [Nicholson](#) (2022) (“Variation in the single motherhood penalty across states more than doubled, going from .34 in 1998 to .78 in 2016.”)

⁹³ [Parolin](#) (2021).

⁹⁴ [Gaines, Hardy, and Schweitzer](#) (2021).

lower in the Midwest, and \$25 lower in the West than those provided in the Northeast across the years evaluated.”

- Consistent with Parolin’s research, Temporary Assistance benefits are much lower and more limited in the South.

In addition to deepening geographic inequalities in economic security and well-being, giving states so much discretion to provide substandard protections against risks to economic security can have adverse effects on democratic citizenship and political participation, as Jamila Michener has found in her work on Medicaid.⁹⁵

These regional policy disparities are not new and have deep historical roots. In a 2019 paper, *Why is the American South Poorer?*, Baker found that higher Southern poverty rates are primarily explained by the lower “power resources” that low-income, working-class people and Black people across economic classes have in the South.⁹⁶ Power resources refer to the role that mass-member organizations, including labor unions and social democratic parties, play in the “mobilization of less advantaged groups of citizens around shared interests.”⁹⁷ Baker found that regional differences in power resources, such as levels of unionization in the South and the minority status of political parties that represent the interests of low-income people, are the most important factors explaining higher Black poverty rates in the South than in the non-South.

This finding is consistent with recent research by Tom VanHeuvelen, a sociologist at the University of Minnesota, and David Brady, documenting that union membership and the percentage of workers in unions have statistically and substantively significant negative relationships” with state-level income adequacy.⁹⁸ Moreover, “higher state union density spills over to reduce poverty among non-union households, and there is no evidence that higher state union density worsens poverty for non-union households or undermines employment.”

Absent federal action, state-level policy disparities, and the effects of these disparities, are likely to grow. Progressive cross-class and cross-ethnoracial coalitions have amassed the power to expand state-level income and social security programs. Thirteen states and the District of Columbia now have paid family and medical leave programs,

⁹⁵ Michener (2018). See also Soss, Hacker, and Mettler (2007).

⁹⁶ Baker (2019).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ VanHeuvelen and Brady (2022).

including four states that authorized programs within the last two years.⁹⁹ Eleven states provide Child Tax Credits that are “refundable” (can exceed state income tax obligations), and a few have fully inclusive benefits that are similar in some respects to child allowances.¹⁰⁰ Eight states provide universal free school lunches.¹⁰¹

While the states leading the way on income security have continued to serve as “laboratories of democracy,” many other states, particularly in the South and parts of the Midwest, have become laboratories of “democratic backsliding.”¹⁰² Electoral democracy in many states has “narrowed dramatically, as state governments gerrymandered districts and created new barriers to participation and restrictions on the franchise.”¹⁰³

⁹⁹ [Shabo](#) (2024).

¹⁰⁰ [ITEP](#) (2023).

¹⁰¹ [AP](#) (2023).

¹⁰² [Grumbach](#) (2022).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

Part 3—It Takes a Nation: A Federal Policy Agenda for Income Security

To increase economic security in all states and regions, we need to expand our social security system, especially by adding long missing elements that ensure the security of children and their parents. We are in a better place today than a decade ago because President Biden’s American Families Plan includes significant elements.¹⁰⁴ If the child benefit provisions of the plan—expansions of the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit—had been adopted in 2021, hundreds of thousands of Mississippi children and their parents would be more secure and have more opportunities in the future.¹⁰⁵

Still, now that we are out of the pandemic and the economy has fully recovered, reviewing the American Families Plan to shore up weaknesses and make further refinements is essential. Particular focus should be given to ensuring adequate coverage and getting the institutional structure of each of the plan’s programs right.

Family security benefits—including child benefits, paid family and medical leave, care allowances, child care, and advance child support assurances—should be easy to explain and access and not place excessive administrative burdens on families.

A Unified Child Benefit

Because it offsets a portion of the costs of raising children, a well-designed child benefit increases the income and economic security of all families with children. Because it includes children regardless of their parents’ current employment status and earnings, a well-designed child benefit reduces the extent and depth of income inadequacy among children living in low-income families. Over the long term, a well-designed child benefit is a form of public investment in children that will provide social benefits — not just individual benefits to those families that receive it — that far exceed its costs.

A well-designed child benefit is also a just institution that treats children and parents with equal concern and respect.¹⁰⁶ It does this by publicly recognizing the essential work that all parents do in raising children and the equal value of all children.¹⁰⁷ As

¹⁰⁴ [White House](#) (n.d.).

¹⁰⁵ [White House](#) (2021).

¹⁰⁶ [Rothstein](#) (1998).

¹⁰⁷ As economist [Nancy Folbre](#) (2008) puts it: “Children ... provide benefits to their future fellow workers and taxpayers. The contributions they make to the economy can easily exceed the cost of the resources devoted to raising them. Those who enjoy those contributions are not necessarily those who paid the costs.”

economist Nancy Folbre puts it: “Children ... provide benefits to their future fellow workers and taxpayers. The contributions they make to the economy can easily exceed the cost of the resources devoted to raising them. Those who enjoy those contributions are not necessarily those who paid the costs.”¹⁰⁸

An inclusive child benefit also recognizes that children are essentially, and quite correctly, excluded from the labor market and have a right to a decent childhood that includes education, rest and leisure, play and recreational activities, and free participation in cultural life and the arts.

To best accomplish these objectives, a well-designed child benefit should be (1) broadly universal, (2) adequate on both an annual and monthly basis, (3) simple, and (4) visible in a way that creates positive policy feedback loops over time.¹⁰⁹ A child benefit designed this way will build public trust, reduce class divisions, minimize the burdens parents must endure to claim it, and be politically stable over time.

Ideally, the child benefits currently provided by the CTC and the EITC would be replaced with a unified child benefit that is simple, automatic, and understood as part of our social security system.¹¹⁰ This benefit should be a flat per-child amount, paid monthly by the Social Security Administration without an income test and any subsequent reconciliation required.¹¹¹ Adding an upfront income test would make the benefit more progressive in a pure distributional sense. Still, it would also make obtaining the benefit more burdensome for working-class and middle-class families. Concerns about progressivity would be better addressed by making the benefit taxable for families above a certain income level and otherwise increasing taxes on high-income people.

Children living with their parents should remain eligible for the credit until the month after they turn 19 or finish high school, whichever is later. As in some other countries, consideration should be given to extending the credit beyond a child’s 19th birthday. In Australia, the child benefit includes 18-to-19-year-olds as long as they meet specific “study requirements.” Italy’s Parliament, controlled by conservatives, recently

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ On the importance of creating positive policy feedback loops, see [Hertel-Fernandez](#) (2020).

¹¹⁰ [Fremstad](#) (2021), [Hammond and Orr](#) (2021), and [Matthews](#) (2021).

¹¹¹ As [Madrick and Kaverman](#) (2021) argue, “while the IRS makes sense in the short-term to get the CTC payments out to families by July [2021], it’s not the most natural fit for a long-term child allowance program, especially given families don’t generally interface with the actual agency, nor does it have the most user-friendly reputation.”

approved a new universal child allowance that includes children up to age 21 who meet these requirements.¹¹²

The amount of the child benefit should be at least one-third of the average amount that middle-income families spend per child. Tying the benefit to a share of middle-income expenditures on children would reinforce the message that the benefit is universal—and not merely a narrowly targeted “poverty” program—and make clear that it only covers a portion of the typical child-raising costs.

The US Department of Agriculture estimates that a two-adult family with two children will spend \$14,410 on their youngest child in 2020.¹¹³ Setting the benefit equal to one-third of this amount would result in a monthly per-child benefit of about \$400 in 2020 dollars and a somewhat higher level today. The benefit should be adjusted annually to keep pace with annual changes in average family incomes. In other words, the benefit shouldn’t just keep pace with price changes but also keep pace with increased mainstream living standards for children.

To further ensure the child benefit is adequate for all families, at least two kinds of supplemental benefits should be considered: (1) a supplement for parents caring for a child with a disability, and (2) a supplement for solo parents, defined as parents who are neither married nor living with a domestic partner. These supplements are common in other countries with a universal or otherwise inclusive child benefit program.

The EITC should be restructured as an individual worker credit with a maximum credit of at least \$1,500, and that doesn’t start phasing out until individual earnings exceed roughly \$20,000. The individual worker credit would be similar to the temporary expansion of the childless EITC in American Rescue. However, unlike the current childless EITC: (1) it would use the same credit structure for all individual workers regardless of filing status or presence of children; (2) it would be paid automatically to employees as an offset to withholding with an option to opt-out of automatic payment, and (3) it would be treated as taxable income for tax units with incomes about the median or some similar level.

While this leaves the worker credit much more submerged than the Unified Child Benefit, the practical advantages to poorly compensated workers of receiving the

¹¹² [European Commission](#) (nd); [Zuanna and McDonald](#) (2023). Besides this requirement, the Italian child benefit “guarantees a minimum child benefit to any Italian household that applies for it; no condition attached.” [Vidotto and Lucangeli](#) (2022).

¹¹³ [Lino and others](#) (2017).

worker credit in their regular paychecks likely outweigh the more general advantages of visibility. The worker credit would also reduce second-earner penalties in the tax code for married couples.

Paid Family and Medical Leave

The 2023 Family and Medical Leave Insurance Act (FAMILY Act) provides a good starting point for family and medical leave.¹¹⁴ The Act would establish an Office of Paid Family and Medical Leave as part of the Social Security Administration. Covered workers would be eligible for up to 12 weeks of partial income when they take time off to care for a newborn or newly adopted child. The same amount of leave would be available for covered workers who take time leave to address their severe health conditions, including pregnancy and childbirth recovery and the severe health condition of a family member.¹¹⁵

A broad range of caregiving relationships would be covered, including domestic partners and people with chosen family relationships. Any worker who has earned at least \$2,000 in income in the prior two years would be covered. Poorly compensated workers would receive up to 85 percent of their regular wages while on leave; typical full-time workers would receive around two-thirds of their salaries.

The FAMILY Act would provide two key components of an effective and adequate social security system—income support for new parents, regardless of gender, who meet the past earnings requirement for coverage, and a form of temporary disability insurance for covered workers. It also provides wage replacement insurance for workers who take leave to care for a family member experiencing a serious health condition.

The FAMILY Act could be further strengthened by providing additional leave for new parents. Canada, for example, provides up to 15 weeks of maternity leave and a standard parental leave benefit of up to 40 weeks that can be shared between the parents (limited to 35 weeks if only one parent takes leave).¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ [National Partnership for Women and Families](#) (2023).

¹¹⁵ Paid leave could also be taken to address the effects of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking and to make certain arrangements arising from the military deployment of a spouse, child, or parent.

¹¹⁶ [Government of Canada](#) (2023).

Supplemental Security Income, Old-Age Insurance, and Disability Insurance for Caregivers

Paid family and medical leave is limited to people who have worked a sufficient amount over the last two. Because the benefit is tied to past earnings, albeit progressively, people with meager earnings will receive meager benefits. But people providing unpaid care need income regardless of their recent past earnings. As Joshua McCabe and Monica Rodriguez, analysts at the Niskanen Institute, a conservative but heterodox think tank, have noted: “One downside of contributory paid parental leave programs is that their work eligibility requirements end up excluding a sizable portion of potential new parents who have not accumulated enough earnings, hours, or tenure with an employer to draw the benefit when their child is born.”¹¹⁷

This problem could be addressed by extending eligibility for Supplemental Security Income to unpaid caregivers. SSI already provides income to people who are elderly or disabled but not eligible for Old-Age Insurance or Disability Insurance or who only receive a small monthly benefit from OAI or DI.

In addition, all caregivers, not just spouses, should be able to qualify for our social security system’s old-age and disability insurance benefits based on their past unpaid caregiving labor. Caregiver credits are common in other wealthy countries.¹¹⁸

From Child Support Enforcement to Child Support Security

The federal government should prohibit states from forcing parents to sign over their rights to child support as a condition of receiving Temporary Assistance or any other benefit. Children should always benefit directly when one of their parents pays child support to the other parent.

For parents who opt into the public child support system, the government should ensure that they receive a minimum monthly child support payment in cases where it is not paid or paid late by a noncustodial parent. Such payments, sometimes called “child support assurance” or an “advance on maintenance,” are provided by many wealthy countries as part of their public child support systems.¹¹⁹ In a 2019 consensus report, the National Academy of Sciences included both an inclusive child allowance

¹¹⁷ [McCabe and Rodriguez \(2024\)](#).

¹¹⁸ [Jankowski \(2011\)](#); [Fultz \(2011\)](#)

¹¹⁹ [European Parliament \(2014\)](#).

and child support assurance in its list of 10 policies and programs that would do the most to reduce child poverty.¹²⁰

There are other problems with the current public child support system. A recent in-depth report on Maryland's child support enforcement system concludes that:¹²¹

Two decades of research present a stark picture: Unrealistic child support policies and practices entangle poor African American men and their families in poverty and have become a destabilizing force in the Baltimore community. Child support orders set beyond the ability of non-custodial parents to comply push them out of low-wage jobs, drown them in debt, hound them into the underground economy, and chase them out of their children's lives.

The child support enforcement system should be reformed to focus on the best interests of children and parents rather than treating child support as a form of punitive taxation. Child support guidelines and policies should be reformed to ensure that child support orders reflect parents' ability to pay given labor market realities, especially for disadvantaged or working-class parents. This will reduce uncollectible child support debt and increase the likelihood that disadvantaged non-custodial parents provide support regularly.

¹²⁰ [NAS](#) (2019).

¹²¹ [Abell Foundation](#) (2020).

Conclusion

There is little immediate hope for pro-family-security reforms at the state level in much of the South. Assuring economic security in the South remains, as FDR put it in 1938, “the Nation’s problem, not merely the South’s.” To increase economic security in every region of the United States, we must follow the policy pathway illuminated by the Mother’s Trust and the American Families Plan. This pathway requires building out our social security system to ensure that parents have adequate and consistent incomes while not penalizing the care and employment choices they make. Federal family security benefits should include inclusive child benefits, paid family and medical leave, supplemental security income for unpaid caregivers, assured child support, and universal child care. These should be easy to explain to families, accessible, and broad-based instead of narrowly targeted.

About Springboard To Opportunities

Springboard To Opportunities is a nonprofit organization working with residents of affordable housing in Jackson, Mississippi. Springboard's approach is rooted in deep listening, authenticity, dignity, and respect for every resident. Springboard began its work ten years ago through affordable housing service contracts, interacting directly with families in their residential communities and establishing strategic partnerships with local organizations to curate resources that meet residents' self-stated needs and goals. Springboard partners with affordable housing residents, property managers, and community stakeholders to build pathways for adults, children, and families to define and realize their goals for school, work, and life.

Springboard's programs are fundamentally resident-driven and resident-focused. Springboard recognizes that stable, affordable housing on its own is insufficient for family and community success. In addition to helping residents sustain their housing and thrive in their housing communities, Springboard asks residents about their broader hopes and ambitions and the challenges and struggles that stand in the way of their success. As a direct result of these continuous conversations, Springboard staff work with residents to design programs that help them make progress toward their highest priorities and solve their most pressing problems, defining and activating a personalized plan for their unique definition of success.

In its first decade of existence, Springboard To Opportunities established itself as an invaluable source of support for Jackson's affordable housing residents. It built trust by helping residents maintain and retain housing; offering emergency cash and other resources in times of crisis to help people meet their basic needs; and creating space and time for personalized coaching, learning, and leadership development opportunities, such as Springboard's fellowships in Policy and Systems Change, Workforce Development, and Education Advocacy.

In 2018, Springboard launched The Magnolia Mother's Trust (MMT), a guaranteed basic income program that went on to become a national standard-bearer for guaranteed income programs nationwide. MMT provides residents \$1,000 cash on a monthly basis for 12 continuous months; access to a community coach to help with goal-setting; resources for mental health and crisis support; opportunities for self-advocacy; financial planning education; and opportunities to build social capital, a sense of community, and leadership capabilities.

About the Center for Economic and Policy Research

The Center for Economic and Policy Research supports efforts to restructure the economic system and social state to work for the diverse many, not the elite few. Our work shows how well-crafted laws and policies can produce a more inclusive economy, higher living standards, and more freedom and power for many in the United States and the world.

Shawn Fremstad is the Director of Law and Political Economy and Senior Advisor at the Center. As a legal aid attorney during the first seven years of his career, he represented working-class and low-income people in various civil legal matters, state-level legislative matters, and administrative rulemaking. Since then, he has worked in national think tanks in Washington, D.C., for over two decades, including at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, where he was the Deputy Director of Income Security, and at the Center for American Progress, where he was a Senior Fellow working on economic security, family policy, and immigration policy issues.