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# FLATTENED



HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC KNOCKED  
FINANCIALLY INSECURE ALABAMIANS ON THEIR BACKS  
AND WIDENED THE RACIAL PROSPERITY GAP

## **About Alabama Appleseed Center for Law & Justice**

Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice is a non-profit, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1999 whose mission is to work to achieve justice and equity for all Alabamians. Alabama Appleseed is a member of the national Appleseed Network, which includes 18 Appleseed Centers across the U.S. and in Mexico City. Alabama Appleseed is also a member of the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law's Legal Impact Network, a collaborative of 36 advocacy organizations from across the country working with communities to end poverty and achieve racial justice at the federal, state, and local levels.

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CENTER for LAW & JUSTICE

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## **Report Highlights**

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We surveyed 389 financially insecure Alabamians from 32 counties, seeking to understand how their daily lives and financial circumstances had changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also used census and other data to look at how the pandemic has affected Alabama as a whole.

Black Alabamians had the highest death rates of any racial or ethnic group in the state. We found that they were also disproportionately exposed to the pandemic's other dangers:

- 55 percent of Black workers in Alabama worked in essential occupations such as registered nurses, cashiers, and cooks, compared to just 43 percent of white workers.
- Black workers were also over-represented in the bottom wage quartile, where the rate of employment in Alabama dropped 16.7 percent between January and October, compared with less than 7 percent middle- and high-wage workers.

Regardless of race, most of our survey respondents were in desperate straits:

- Nearly half earned less than \$15,000 a year.
- Nearly half had lost their jobs since March 13, but only about four in ten of those who applied for unemployment benefits received them, usually after weeks of waiting.

Empty pockets meant wrenching choices with potentially dangerous outcomes:

- Seven out of ten respondents could not pay a recurring expense such as mortgage, rent, car payment, utility, credit card, or student loan because their financial circumstances had changed.
- Two-thirds sought food assistance and 14 percent took out a high-cost payday or title loan. Many had never needed those things before.
- Nearly a quarter feared or were threatened with eviction, and 4 percent were evicted.
- Eight percent of survey respondents had to physically go to court during the pandemic. More than half were there to make a payment on a payment plan or attend a compliance hearing regarding fines and fees.
- Seven had spent time in jail since March 13, including three who were there because they had fallen behind on fines, fees, or court costs.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**“Alabama is a family. And there is no better time than now for our Alabama family to come together, be strong, and stand united,” said Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey in a video message released March 20, 2020. “We will resume our daily lives in the near future once we defeat this illness.”<sup>1</sup>**

In the early days of the pandemic, Ivey’s hopeful admonition seemed true. Alabamians were uncommonly thoughtful toward each other, from small gestures like checking on neighbors and sewing masks to more ambitious efforts like creating mutual aid funds. Most of us thought it would be just a matter of weeks before the sacrifices of social distancing paid off and life got back to normal.

But as March turned into April, it became clear that not everyone was experiencing the pandemic the same way. People of means stocked up on food, reoriented toward working from home and set their children to chalking positive messages on driveways and

digesting jury-rigged virtual school. Meanwhile, food banks quickly began to run low on supplies,<sup>2</sup> even as essential workers, many of them in low-paying jobs, risked their lives stocking shelves, packing meat, working in nursing homes, and keeping the basic infrastructure of Alabama running.

Many Alabamians lost their jobs, yet that pain was unevenly distributed too. Workers in the bottom quartile of earnings experienced far higher rates of unemployment than anyone else at every point during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

As the pandemic dragged on, fractures widened along cracks that seem baked into Alabama’s very foundation. It is important

to remember that even before this pandemic devastated the economy, Alabama was the fifth poorest state in the U.S., with 800,000 of our residents living in poverty, many of them children.

As the months passed, poor Alabamians struggled to keep things together, while people of means mostly got by. Black Alabamians faced a far bleaker reality on average than their white peers. Rural Black Alabamians suffered worst of all.

This report is an effort to document the experiences of financially insecure Alabamians navigating the challenges of 2020. It is a product of Alabama Appleseed's work with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Southern Partnership to Reduce Debt, which is developing strategies to lessen the impact of criminal and civil judicial fines and fees, as well as medical fees and high-cost consumer products, on communities of color.

Between May and September 2020, Alabama Appleseed worked with partners to survey 389 Alabamians from 32 of Alabama's 67 counties, seeking to capture how their daily lives and financial circumstances had changed since March 13, 2020, the day Gov. Kay Ivey declared a statewide public health emergency.<sup>4</sup> We also interviewed individuals whose lives, plans, and prospects were upended by the pandemic and recession, and spoke with direct service providers who were reeling from the scale of need and suffering.

We supplemented our survey work with an analysis of racial disparities in health

and access to healthcare. We also examined racial disparities in the pandemic's economic consequences due to differences in earnings, job loss, and types of employment between Black and white Alabamians.

Our findings are grim. In order to participate in our survey, respondents had to affirm that their personal finances had been affected by the pandemic and shutdown. Three-quarters of those who answered this question affirmatively were African American, though African Americans comprise only about one quarter of Alabama's population.

This was not a scientific survey. Among other things, the pandemic limited our ability to travel and meant we had to survey people largely outdoors and in places where they were already gathered such as lines for food or other forms of assistance.

But the over-representation of African Americans in our sample also reflects the fact that African Americans on average are experiencing worse hardship during this pandemic than their white neighbors and peers. Our findings regarding disparities in health, healthcare, and employment paint a familiar picture. Alabama relied disproportionately on Black residents to keep the state running while simultaneously declining to attend to their health, safety, and economic wellbeing.

Black Alabamians paid for the state's indifference with their lives. Among other things, they were disproportionately likely to work in low-paying essential occupations, for instance preparing food or providing

# 389

The number of  
**Alabamians surveyed**  
representing 56 cities  
across 32 counties.



PHOTO BY RESURRECTION CATHOLIC MISSIONS

A volunteer **delivers** **meals** to families in North Montgomery.

health care and assistance to vulnerable nursing home residents. They were also disproportionately likely to lack health insurance and to live in places with little or no health-care infrastructure. Because of these factors, which stem not from innate characteristics but from more than a century of laws, policies, court decisions, and funding priorities that fail to recognize the human rights of Black Alabamians, they suffered more than white Alabamians from the impacts of COVID-19.

Our survey respondents were in desperate straits:

- Nearly half earned less than \$15,000 a year.
- Before the pandemic, three-quarters of them usually worked, while the rest relied on other forms of income such as social security, disability, or another adult in the house who worked.
- Nearly half had lost their jobs since March 13, but only about four in ten of those who applied for unemployment benefits received them, usually after weeks of waiting.
- Whether or not they kept their jobs, a little over half of our respondents made less money from work since March 13.

► One quarter of respondents never received a stimulus check from the U.S. government.

Empty pockets meant wrenching choices:

- Seven out of ten respondents could not pay a recurring expense such as mortgage, rent, car payment, utility, credit card, or student loan because their financial circumstances had changed due to the pandemic.
- To try to make ends meet, two-thirds sought food assistance and 14 percent took out a high-cost payday or title loan. Many had never needed those things before.
- Despite doing everything they could to stay current on bills, nearly a quarter of our respondents feared or were threatened with eviction, and 4 percent were evicted. Close to a fifth feared or had been threatened with repossession of their car, and 4 percent had actually had their cars repossessed.

Nor were respondents able to avoid contact with the criminal justice system, even as many courts suspended non-emergency dockets and cases of COVID-19 exploded in jails and prison.

- Eight percent of survey respondents had to physically go to court during the pandemic. More than half of them were there to make a payment on a payment plan or attend a compliance hearing regarding fines and fees they had fallen behind on.
- Seven respondents had spent time in jail since March 13, and all of them had to put up money or property to get out — including three who were there because they could not afford to pay their fines and fees.

In other words, while the pandemic devastated Alabamians' health and finances, some jurisdictions continued to lock people up for being too poor to pay their court debt.

### WHAT MUST COME NEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis are not yet over, but they have already exhausted financially insecure Alabamians and widened our state's racial prosperity gap. We are currently experiencing "the most unequal recession in modern U.S. history"—a crisis that, according to a Washington Post analysis, has "deliver[ed] a mild setback for those at or near the top and a depression-like blow for those at the bottom."<sup>5</sup>

This crisis has cost people their lives, health, jobs, savings, and stability. It is far past time to take bold, creative steps to help the "Alabama family" of Gov. Ivey's encouraging speech get back on its feet.

Alabama must expand Medicaid. It must create stronger protections for people facing eviction, foreclosure, or the loss of a vehicle or other necessary possession. It must increase unemployment benefits so people who lose their jobs can survive to find new ones. It must find a way to get speedy Internet access in every community and home so everyone can fully participate in online opportunities, especially schooling. It must take steps to ensure safe, affordable child-care options are available when everyone gets back to work. It must drastically reduce its reliance on fines, fees, and court costs to fund basic services, and remit legal financial obligations owed by people who will never

be able to pay. It must stop taking driver's licenses from people who are not dangerous drivers, and let Alabamians get back to work.

Alabama cannot recover unless individuals and families recover. Our businesses cannot recover unless employees are stable and healthy enough to return to work. Our future cannot be prosperous unless children are housed, fed, and able to learn. Supporting Alabamians' health, safety, and prosperity must be lawmakers' top priority in 2021.

**Pandemic-driven joblessness** left many families newly in need of food assistance.



PHOTO BY RESURRECTION CATHOLIC MISSIONS

# Introduction

PIKE ROAD, Ala. (Sept. 14, 2020) Clarissa Jiles and her husband are not the kind of people you'd think would need food assistance. Jiles works in school security, a job she enjoys because it means she's on the same vacation schedule as her children, ages 6, 11, 12, and 15. Her husband, a barber, is the primary earner.

But not now. The Jiles' youngest son has a heart murmur and asthma, conditions that put him at risk of serious complications if he becomes ill with COVID-19. Since the start of the pandemic, Jiles' husband has been afraid to cut hair unless he knows the customer extremely well and trusts them to be strictly adhering to social distancing guidelines, lest he bring the virus home. He is not eligible for unemployment under these circumstances, and like many small business owners, he struggled to navigate the complex requirements of the paycheck protection loan program.<sup>6</sup> He earns a little extra money playing drums during online church services, but only a little.

Local public schools opened on schedule, but the Jiles family chose the virtual option because of their little boy's medical vulnerability. Jiles took leave under the *Families First Coronavirus Response Act*,<sup>7</sup> which requires certain employers to provide up to 12 weeks of paid leave at two-thirds' pay to employees who are unable to work for child-care reasons. After taxes and other deductions, her pay came to about \$500 a month.

The Jiles's extended family helped pay for three Chromebooks and an iPad so the children could participate in virtual school. But the family's monthly bills are over \$2,000. What money they got from the stimulus

check<sup>8</sup> went quickly, as did their savings. Their church helped keep food on the table.

When Jiles spoke with Alabama Appleseed in September, she and her husband were behind on their mortgage. Her 12 weeks of family leave were nearly gone and she was terrified at the prospect of returning to work and potentially bringing the virus into her home.

"[W]e don't know what we're going to do because we know we can't have our son go back to school. So now we're debating on if I'm going to go back or what I'm going to do if I don't go back," she said. "The pandemic has really, really hit us hard."

The Jiles family is not alone. The COVID-19 pandemic ravaged Alabama, killing well over 3,500 people and sickening more than 250,000 between March and December.<sup>9</sup>

The suffering was not evenly distributed. Black Alabamians like the Jiles family were more likely than any other racial or ethnic group besides Hispanics to contract the virus, and Black people experienced the highest death rates of any racial or ethnic group in Alabama.<sup>10</sup>

Black Alabamians also suffered disproportionately from the collateral economic consequences of the pandemic. They were overrepresented in the bottom wage quartile, where employment decreased by 16.7 percent between Jan. 15 and Sept. 30.<sup>11</sup> They were more likely than any other group to seek unemployment benefits.<sup>12</sup> And according to our calculations (*see Part 2 of this report*) they were more likely to do essential work that increased their risk of exposure to the novel coronavirus.

**“[W]e don’t know what we’re going to do because we know we can’t have our son go back to school. So now we’re debating on if I’m going to go back [to work] or what I’m going to do if I don’t go back. The pandemic has really, really hit us hard.”**

At the same time, Alabama’s racial wealth gap, itself a product of centuries of overt and structural racism, meant Black Alabamians were less likely to have adequate savings or family wealth to draw on to pay unexpected medical bills, childcare costs, or to cover expenses between paychecks or while waiting for unemployment insurance claims to come through.

This report chronicles the experiences of Alabamians who, like Clarissa Giles and her family, found themselves in difficult straits as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores how historical inequities, structural racism, and present-day disparities in health, access to healthcare, and employment experience mean that financially insecure and Black Alabamians were disproportionately sickened, killed, and impoverished during the pandemic. It presents findings from Alabama Appleseed’s survey of nearly 400 Alabamians — Black, white, and Latinx — whose personal finances were impacted by the pandemic and economic crisis. And it includes personal stories of hardship shared by Alabamians we met as we distributed the survey between May and September, as well as insights from direct service providers who saw their caseloads skyrocket and clients suffer as COVID-19 flattened Alabamians who were already struggling to get by.

At the start of 2020, no one knew what it meant to “flatten the curve.” As the year progressed, we learned to work together to do just that.

What was hard to envision was the ways this pandemic would flatten *us*. Nearly a year

into this crisis, it is past time to make public policy choices designed to cushion the blow. We must make sure every Alabamian has an equitable opportunity to emerge from the pandemic as intact as possible.

**Gabrielle Simmons**  
of Selma fills out a survey while waiting for food assistance in June.

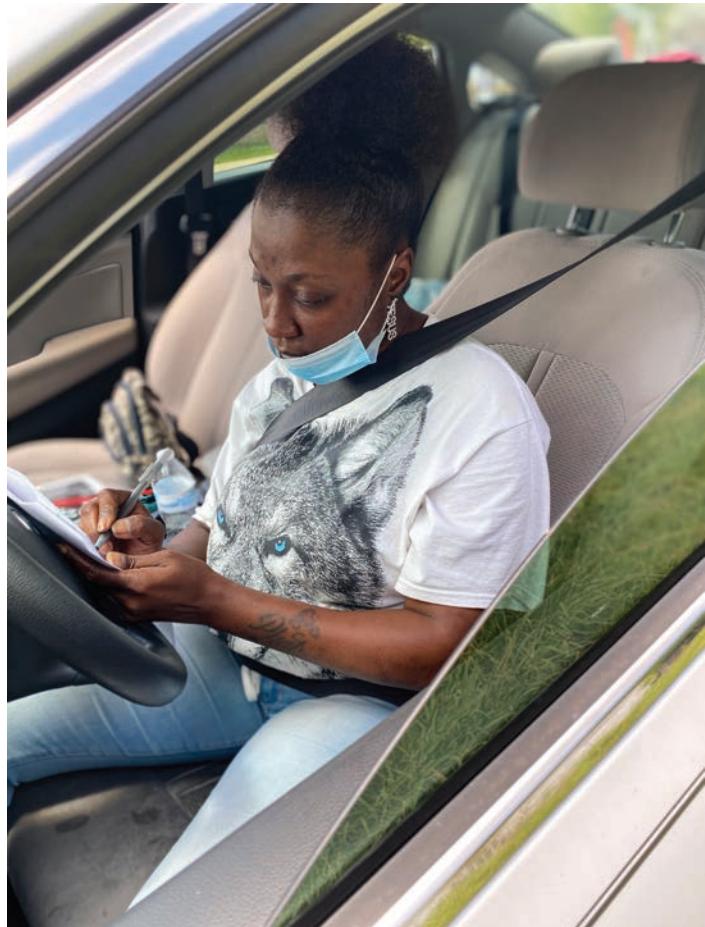


PHOTO BY LEAH NELSON

# PART I

HEALTH AND HEALTHCARE

# Disparities in health and healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic

“In Alabama, African Americans tend to live in poorer communities, have less access to healthcare services, and have higher instances of chronic disease. These and other social and socioeconomic risk factors contribute to disproportionately higher risk of morbidity and mortality related to COVID-19.”<sup>13</sup> So says the Alabama Department of Public Health at the top of a webpage dedicated to helping “vulnerable populations” find food, learn to clean and disinfect their homes, and otherwise take steps to protect themselves from a disease that has ravaged their communities.

The Department of Public Health is right: Alabamians of color, and particularly Black Alabamians, have disproportionately suffered from the health consequences of this pandemic. According to the COVID Tracking Project at The Atlantic, Black Alabamians had the highest death rate from COVID-19 at 84 per 100,000, followed by white Alabamians at 50 per 100,000 and Hispanic or Latinx at 38 per 100,000.

Hispanic Alabamians were most likely to contract COVID-19 with 4,069 cases per 100,000 people, followed by African Americans at 3,081 cases per 100,000, and white people at 1,906 per 100,000. Alabamians of Asian descent had the lowest rates of infection and death, with 1,037 infections and 17 deaths per 100,000.<sup>14</sup>

## THE BLACK BELT

Residents of Alabama’s Black Belt counties, a rural part of the state whose population is

disproportionately Black, were among the hardest hit of all. It took a while for COVID-19 testing sites to be set up in these counties. As the virus began to spread widely, the results of the delay were made worse by inadequate and discriminatory testing protocols, lack of healthcare infrastructure, poverty, lack of transportation, and a high rate of underlying health conditions that can be linked to environmental injustice, among other disparities.

Public health officials scrambled to find effective, equitable ways to test for COVID-19. In late March, as community spread of COVID-19 was becoming apparent in more remote parts of Alabama, most Black Belt counties relied on mobile testing sites. An Alabama Appleseed investigation found that Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) employees had no clear plan for how often they would return to a given county or location. The problems created by infrequent, unpredictable test sites were compounded by the implementation of screening criteria that were stricter than what was outlined on the ADPH website.<sup>15</sup>

As tests became more available and the system improved, Black Belt counties repeatedly emerged as hotspots with some of the worst COVID-19 rates in the state. Residents of practically all of the western Black Belt counties were in the highest risk category for becoming severely ill if infected.<sup>16</sup> By May 18, seven of the top 12 high-risk counties where COVID-19 cases were growing nationwide (Butler, Dallas, Bullock, Lowndes, Choctaw,

**7/12**

In May, 7 of the top 12 high-risk counties nationwide where COVID-19 cases were rising were in Alabama:  
**Butler, Dallas, Bullock, Lowndes, Choctaw, Marengo, Hale**

Marengo, and Hale) were in Alabama’s Black Belt.<sup>17</sup> The populations of all seven counties had higher-than-average rates of some or all of the following risk factors: obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, lung disease, and heart disease.

But why? The facts identified by the Alabama Department of Public Health — that Black Alabamians “tend to live in poorer communities, have less access to healthcare services, and have higher instances of chronic disease” are neither immutable nor innate. Black Alabamians do not desire to have a worse quality of life than their white neighbors and peers. Poor living conditions, lack of access to healthcare, and higher instances of chronic disease all have a common cause.

### THE ROLE OF RACISM

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) observes that racial and ethnic minority groups are more likely to get sick and die because of social determinants of health including, among other things, the toxic impact of racism and discrimination, lack of insurance, lack of access to healthcare providers, and distrust of healthcare systems.<sup>18</sup>

Explaining reasons for this distrust, the CDC cites the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the African American Male (also called the Tuskegee Syphilis Study), a horrific and shameful 40-year research experiment in which the United States Public Health Service deliberately withheld treatment from Black men who suffered from syphilis because they were curious to see how the illness played out over time.<sup>19</sup> President Bill Clinton apologized for this study in 1997, but the damage was done. Its corrosive impact remains visible, and alarming, today.<sup>20</sup> And Alabama’s Black Belt was ground zero for this ghoulish experiment.

Even if Black Alabamians trusted the healthcare system completely, that system as

they experience it is in tatters, particularly in parts of the state with largely Black populations. Seven rural hospitals in Alabama have closed since 2010<sup>21</sup> and more than half are considered vulnerable or at risk of closure, according to a 2020 report by the Chartis Center for Rural Health.<sup>22</sup> Numerous studies cite Alabama’s refusal to expand Medicaid as a key factor accelerating hospital closures and other rural-urban disparities in access to healthcare.<sup>23</sup>

In an issue brief published in 2020, the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama observed that 17 of Alabama’s 24 Black Belt counties were below the statewide average for hospital beds per 1000 residents, and that four of those counties (Lamar, Lowndes, Perry, and Pickens) had no hospital at all.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Lowndes County has only one doctor.<sup>25</sup>

In many parts of the Black Belt travel time to the nearest hospital could be an hour or more, making it costly and difficult for many residents to access care. “Longer travel times for patients mean delays in treatment and worse health outcomes,” the issue brief observes.<sup>26</sup>

In June, as Black Belt hospitals filled up, COVID-19 patients from places like Lowndes, Dallas, and Butler counties flowed to Montgomery’s Jackson Hospital. By the middle of the month, Jackson had about 240 COVID-19 patients. Half were on ventilators, and 90 percent of those who were on ventilators were Black.<sup>27</sup> A woman whose husband is a facilities manager at a Montgomery cemetery told Alabama Appleseed around that time that her family was able to make ends meet because her husband was earning overtime digging graves.

The lack of hospitals in the Black Belt is not a choice made by its residents. Lowndes County desperately wants one; it pays \$19,000 a month to have an ambulance on hand to take people to hospitals in neighboring counties. But Alabama did not expand Medicaid, despite estimates showing that doing so

## Alabamians Without Health Insurance 2018

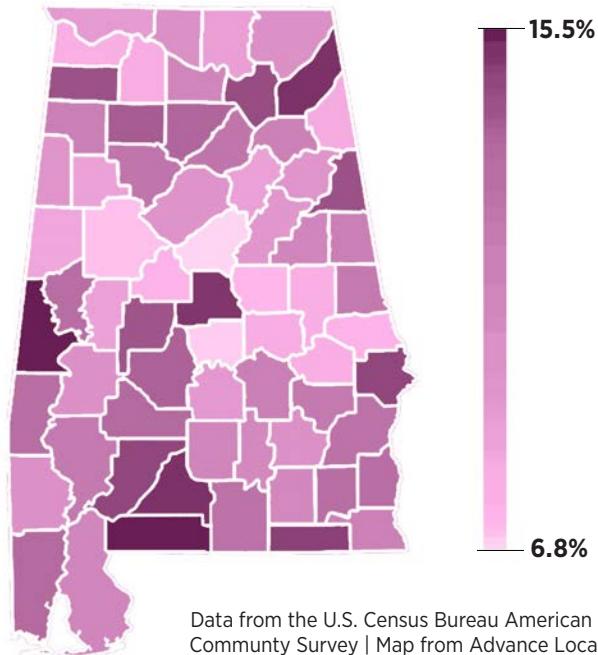
would have benefitted up to 300,000 Alabamians who would have been eligible for coverage, added thousands of jobs and billions of dollars to the economy, and protected rural hospitals.<sup>28</sup> Yet as COVID-19 exploded across the state in April, Gov. Kay Ivey rejected the idea of Medicaid expansion as “irresponsible.”<sup>29</sup>

Black Alabamians suffer disproportionately from that choice, though thousands of white Alabamians go uninsured as well. According to AL.com, about 9 percent of white Alabamians lack health insurance of any type, as do 12 percent of Black Alabamians. In Sumter County, which had the highest uninsured rate in the state, 19 percent of Black residents had no insurance, compared to 5 percent of white residents.<sup>30</sup>

### ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

The same parts of Alabama where healthcare is sparse or inaccessible are also disproportionately saddled with environmental pollution that is linked to poor health. In Perry County’s Uniontown, coal ash dumped into a landfill near a historic Black cemetery is associated with an array of health problems including respiratory issues, headaches, dizziness, nausea, and vomiting.<sup>31</sup> Uniontown is also home to sewage overflows and spray fields where untreated wastewater sometimes flows into nearby houses and yards.<sup>32</sup> Perry County, which has a population of 8,923 and is 70 percent Black, has no hospital.

Wastewater treatment is also lacking in much of the Black Belt. The region’s dense prairie soil renders traditional septic systems unworkable, frequently leading pools of raw sewage to form in residential areas.<sup>33</sup>



Data from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey | Map from Advance Local

Researchers from the University of South Alabama have found that in Wilcox and Hale counties “onsite wastewater systems fail at a rate of roughly 50 percent.”<sup>34</sup> An engineering researcher from the University of Alabama estimated that 60 percent of Wilcox county homes are “without sewage access and water treatment [and] it is possible that 500,000 gallons of sewage enters rivers and streams in Wilcox County every day.”<sup>35</sup>

Environmental justice advocates in Lowndes County have long sought an investigation of the region’s substandard sanitation infrastructure, which among other things has caused the re-emergence of hookworm, a parasitic disease thought to have been eliminated in the U.S.<sup>36</sup> Exposure to raw sewage is associated with a range of health risks.

Each of these three counties is majority Black.<sup>37</sup> Before COVID-19 hit, at least 25 percent of their residents lived in poverty.<sup>38</sup> In May 2020, Lowndes County had both the highest rate of unemployment (26 percent), and the highest rate of COVID-19 cases in the state.<sup>39</sup> By June, the state’s worst outbreaks were mostly clustered in the Black Belt.<sup>40</sup>

## MASS INCARCERATION

Across America, some of the worst outbreaks of COVID-19 have been in jails and prisons, where quarters are close, social distancing virtually impossible, and distribution of items like personal protective equipment and hand sanitizer was hampered early on by limited budgets.

Black Alabamians are grossly overrepresented in jails<sup>41</sup> and prisons,<sup>42</sup> comprising about 55 percent of each according to the most recent numbers available, though they comprise only 27 percent of Alabama's population.

In an open letter published April 14, 2020, 43 public health experts and physicians implored Alabama lawmakers and prison officials to take steps to protect inmates, including through expedited releases and medical furloughs.<sup>43</sup> Though several hundred prisoners were released through implementation of an early release law that passed years ago but was first utilized during the pandemic, Alabama's already unsanitary, violent, dangerous prisons remained overcrowded and filthy.<sup>44</sup> As of Nov. 29, there had been at least 711 cases of COVID-19 and 32 deaths from it in Alabama prisons.<sup>45</sup> The state ranked ninth worst in the country for the number of COVID deaths per 10,000 people.<sup>46</sup>

Jail populations did drop for a time. On March 26, Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey issued a sweeping public safety order granting local jurisdictions discretion to stop jailing people for most nonviolent crimes.<sup>47</sup> Many Alabama jails saw drops in their populations in the months after that order, including drops of a third or more of the pre-pandemic jail populations in Chambers, Cherokee, Coffee, and Pike counties.<sup>48</sup> But even where local officials had been proactive in trying to reduce populations to keep people alive, jail populations crept back up because the Alabama Department of Corrections has lagged in transferring people who have been sentenced to state prisons. More than 3,300 state-sentenced inmates are now packed into county jails.<sup>49</sup>

# How the YWCA Balanced the Dangers of COVID-19, Domestic Violence, and Civil Unrest in Birmingham

BIRMINGHAM, ALA | SEPT. 23, 2020

To say that the pandemic has complicated Catherine Alexander-Wright's work would be an insulting understatement. As Associate Vice President of Safety and Comprehensive Case Management at the YWCA of Central Alabama, Wright oversees domestic violence and supportive services in Jefferson, Blount, and St. Clair Counties, including two confidential shelters, a family law center, as well as advocacy, counseling, and support group services.

The shelters take in women and families who are escaping dangerous situations in their homes. Many of them are in mortal danger, living in places they cannot stay even when a pandemic makes fleeing itself dangerous. So when the governor declared a public health emergency on March 13th,<sup>74</sup> it fell to Wright and her team to figure out how to balance the demands of sheltering domestic violence survivors against the demands of protecting them from a deadly pathogen.

"[A]ll of the leadership staff came in on Monday the 16th and made arrangements for confidentiality, how were we going to share data, who could work remotely. We were going cubicle to cubicle — even if you just had a little thing of hand sanitizer by your desk, something that we used to take for granted. We scooped up everything, and those who were still in shelters got the hand sanitizer. If you were working in shelter, you got everything we had. Because even by the 13th and that following weekend, we could not get bleach, Lysol, hand sanitizer, gloves, masks," she said.

The shelters continued to take people in. The Attorney General's office called and offered to help get the YWCA's emergency orders for personal protective equipment (PPE) and other necessities prioritized, and YWCA staff coordinated with the Church of the Highlands, a megachurch with multiple campuses across the state to collect PPE. They implemented social distancing, set up

sanitizing stations, staggered meal schedules, switched to phone counseling, and hired a consultant with a Master's in Public Health to conduct a needs assessment and develop a protocol to protect both staff and clients.

The magnitude of need was overwhelming. There was a dip in calls to the domestic violent crisis hotline the weekend of March 13th, but soon after that, volume increased 50 percent over normal. “[T]hose were equally terrifying,” Wright said. “No calls means people can’t get to the phone. Then when it went up, it was like, ‘Oh my goodness. How long is this going to be? Can we house all these people? Can we safety plan with all these people?’”

Financial stress, job loss, and close quarters during the safer-at-home order made things more dangerous for the YWCA’s clients, with domestic disagreements turning violent as tempers frayed in the pressure cooker of the pandemic’s early weeks. “[W]e just had to make it work. Just because somebody was quarantining didn’t mean that the perpetrator wouldn’t come back or wouldn’t come to their house. We had a new threat of people threatening to expose each other. You know, ‘I’ll expose you and our kids to COVID, I’m positive, I’ll make you positive.’”

The emergencies just kept coming. Many clients feared or faced eviction, even after the CDC ordered a temporary halt to residential evictions.<sup>75</sup> Homeless clients lacked access to hand-washing stations and struggled to get to testing sites.

And then there was the staff. Some had compromised immune systems; some had school-aged children suddenly without a place to go during the day. Staff were already emotionally depleted by the trauma of working in an environment that is high-stress and high-stakes when, in late May, police in Minneapolis killed George Floyd, an unarmed Black man whose death beneath the knee of a police officer triggered civil rights protests and counter-protests nationwide.

“[N]ot just our clients but our staff who are individuals of color who were exhausted, hurt, angry, did not have the emotional reserves to help other people in their job or talk to their supervisors about it, especially if their supervisor is a white person,” said Wright, who is white. The YWCA organized optional spaces for people to talk if they felt that would help. But trauma

was ongoing. The YWCA’s shelter was damaged during a protest over a Confederate monument. It was forced to close early when white nationalist supporters showed up in counter-protest. Staffers, many of them people of color, had to alter their work routes after warnings that “they may have to intersect or interact with somebody who’s screaming at them,” Wright said.

The protests and counter-protests died down, but clients’ needs remained. When schools remained closed, families required not only food but speedy internet connections and devices to keep their children engaged and educated. Poor internet service in rural Blount and St. Clair counties put children who live there at a disadvantage.

“The individuals that are charged with the welfare of the people of the state, of making sure that families are safe, that kids are fed and healthy and educated, and that families have access to what they need to thrive,” need to act boldly, Wright said.

If “we value life, and we want people to have kids, and we want families to be together, yet [some lawmakers say] ‘I think you’re going to sit at home for six hundred dollars of COVID [unemployment] money’ — there is a tremendous disconnect.”

**“The individuals that are charged with the welfare of the people of the state, of making sure that families are safe, that kids are fed and healthy and educated, and that families have access to what they need to thrive,” need to act boldly.**

**CATHERINE ALEXANDER-WRIGHT**

# PART II

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

# Disparities in economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic

“The outsized challenges that Black Americans are facing are a reflection of the generally diminished economic position and health status that they faced prior to this crisis. Several pre-COVID-19 economic conditions — including lower levels of income and wealth, higher unemployment, and greater levels of food and housing insecurity — leave Black families with fewer buffers to absorb economic shocks and contribute to Black households’ vulnerability to the COVID-19 economic crisis,” observed scholars at the Brookings Institution’s Hamilton Project in August.<sup>50</sup>

Each of these challenges has its correlate in Alabama. Here, African Americans rank last among racial groups in terms of median household income, with half of Black households earning \$30,200 or less compared to a statewide median of \$44,800 and a median for non-Hispanic whites of \$51,000.<sup>51</sup>

That income disparity is only the tip of the iceberg. The legacy of slavery, sharecropping, convict labor, enforced segregation, and other mechanisms of *de jure* white supremacy mean that Black families here have historically lacked equal opportunities to accumulate wealth.<sup>52</sup> Modern-day determinants like segregated and unequal schools, lending discrimination, employment discrimination, and a criminal punishment system that disproportionately polices

and incarcerates Black Alabamians and also strips Black families of wealth via the invisible tax of fines, fees, and court costs<sup>53</sup> mean that Alabama’s racial wealth divide continues to gape. These same racial disparities result in appalling and predictable health consequences.

## DANGEROUS DISPARITIES IN TYPE OF EMPLOYMENT

Our findings demonstrate that Black Alabamians were more likely to be exposed to the novel coronavirus because they were disproportionately likely to be essential workers who could not do their jobs from home.

## METHODOLOGY

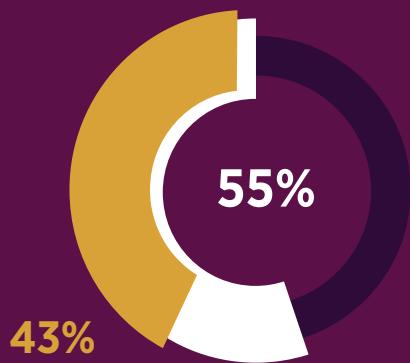
Inspired by the Brookings Institution’s research on disparities in the essential work force, we replicated their national research at a state level.<sup>54</sup> To do this, we relied on the list of essential occupations they devised that corresponded to the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (2019 and 2014-2018). After creating a variable using the essential occupation codes, we looked at Alabama’s essential employees as well as specific occupations by race. When looking at specific occupations, we decided to use ACS 2014-2018 to get a larger and more accurate sample. We gathered data from IPUMS USA.<sup>55</sup>



## FINDINGS

# Essential Occupations

■ Black workers  
■ White workers



## WORKERS IN ALABAMA

IN ESSENTIAL OCCUPATIONS SUCH AS  
REGISTERED NURSES, CASHIERS, AND COOKS.

Alabama relied disproportionately on Black residents to keep the state running while simultaneously declining to attend to their health, safety, and economic wellbeing. Black Alabamians were more likely than whites to work in essential occupations where they risked exposure to the virus, more likely to work in low-paying jobs that experienced high levels of layoffs, and less likely to have access to healthcare.

**4X**

EMPLOYED BLACK ALABAMIAN  
WERE 4 times more likely than  
white workers to work as a home  
health aide or a nursing assistant.

## FINDINGS

We found that in 2019, 55 percent of Black workers in Alabama worked in essential occupations such as registered nurses, cashiers, and cooks. In comparison, just 43 percent of white workers held essential occupations.<sup>56</sup>

Among other things, the data show that employed Black Alabamians (2014-2018) were:

- 4 times more likely than white workers to work as a home health aide.
- 2 times more likely than white workers to work as a licensed practical or licensed vocational nurse.
- 2.6 times more likely than white workers to work as a personal care aid.
- 4 times more likely than white workers to work as a nursing assistant.
- 1.7 times more likely than white workers to work as bus drivers and other inter-city transit.
- 1.7 times more likely than white workers to work as butchers and other meat, poultry, and fish processing workers.

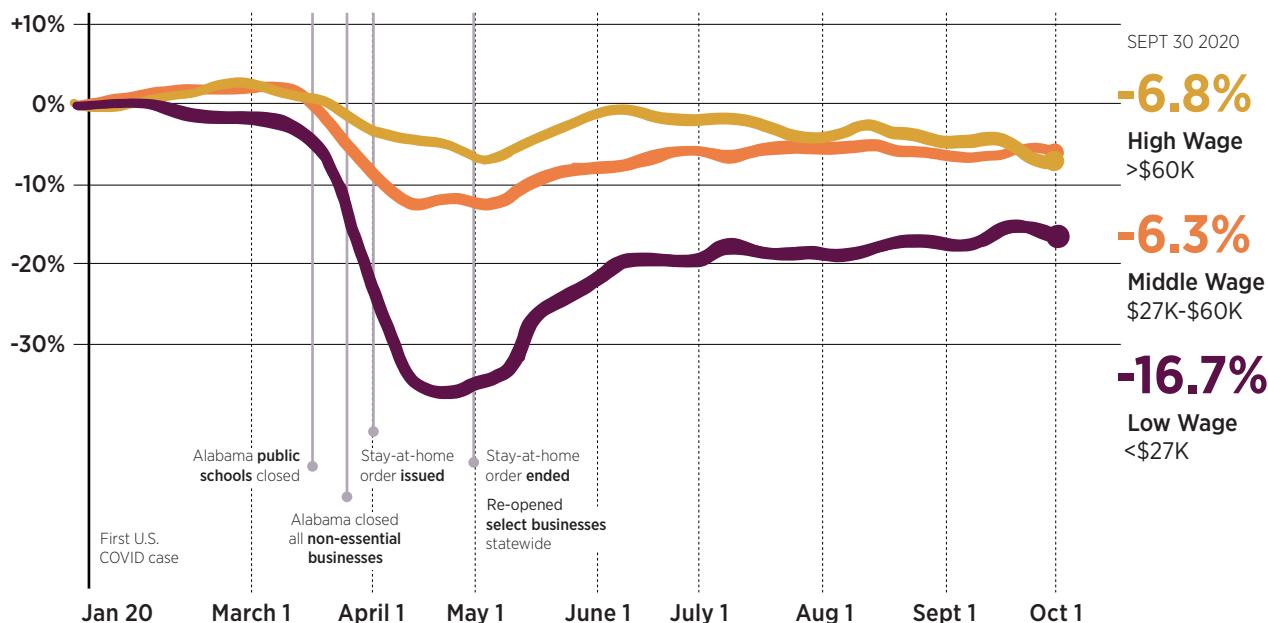
## DISPARITIES IN EARNINGS AND JOB LOSS

Our research also uncovered a striking variation in job loss with workers who earn the least most likely to lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic. Those with less of a cushion fell the hardest. Nationally, employment rates among workers in the bottom wage quartile — those earning less than \$27,000 per year — dropped by 19.2 percent between January and the end of September. By contrast, middle wage workers earning between \$27,000 and \$60,000 saw employment rates drop 4.7 percent, while high wage workers earning more than \$60,000 saw a slight *increase* of 0.2 percent.<sup>57</sup>

Alabama workers followed a similar pattern. Those in the bottom wage quartile saw a 16.7 percent drop in employment rates; middle wage workers dropped 6.3 percent, and high wage workers dropped 6.8 percent.<sup>58</sup>

## Percent Change in Employment

In Alabama, as of September 30, 2020, employment rates among workers in the bottom wage quartile **decreased by 16.7%** compared to January 2020 (not seasonally adjusted).



\*Change in employment rates (not seasonally adjusted), indexed to January 4-31, 2020. This series is based on payroll data from Paychex and Intuit, worker-level data on employment and earnings from Earnin, and timesheet data from Kronos. The dotted line in the low-wage series is a prediction of employment rates based on Kronos data.<sup>59</sup> Opportunity Insights Economic Tracker

### METHODOLOGY

We sought to find the racial composition of workers in the bottom quartile in Alabama. We chose the ACS because of its size and its sufficient inclusion of individual annual income. After creating a variable that represented individuals earning less than \$27,000, we looked at the racial composition of the bottom quartile in the unweighted sample.<sup>60</sup> To be thorough, we also performed a test of significance.

### FINDINGS

We estimate Black workers comprised 25 percent of workers in this quartile but only 19 percent of Alabama's workers. Put simply,

Black workers were disproportionately likely to work the exact type of low-paying jobs that evaporated during the pandemic. This difference is confirmed to be statistically significant.

Given all this, it is not surprising that Black workers in Alabama were also over-represented among unemployment claimants. In August 2020, the most recent month for which data was publicly available, 54 percent of unemployment claimants in Alabama were Black even though Black people comprise only about 19 percent of the state's workers.<sup>61</sup>

# PART III

WHAT WE FOUND

# Survey Results

## METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this section of the report were generated through a survey developed by Alabama Appleseed with input from Alabama-based direct service providers who were observing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the populations with whom they work. In both the design of the survey instrument and the recruitment of respondents, we sought to capture the experience of financially insecure individuals and families in Alabama who were experiencing the destabilizing impact of the pandemic and accompanying economic contraction.

Between May and September 2020, we surveyed 378 English-speaking Alabamians. We also translated the original survey into Spanish and collected 11 responses from Spanish-speaking Alabamians. Survey participants reported residency by ZIP code, and surveys completed by individuals who did not indicate Alabama residency were discarded. Participants reported residing in 122 ZIP codes representing 56 cities across 32 of Alabama's 67 counties.

The necessity of social distancing and fact the that many people were staying home as much as possible presented a challenge in recruitment. As a result, geographic locations are not representative of Alabama's population distribution overall. We disseminated the survey in places where people were already gathering and where we were able to receive permission to be. Sites included car lines for food distribution and the offices of direct

service providers who were assisting individuals in need. We also disseminated the survey at a line for assistance with unemployment insurance issues at Alabama State University in Montgomery, Ala. A few people took the survey online after we shared it on social media.

Compensation for respondents depended largely on the preference of the organizations that permitted us to disseminate surveys. Some respondents were compensated for their time with \$15 Wal-Mart gift cards. Individuals surveyed at Alabama State University were offered snacks. Receipt of gift cards or snacks was not contingent on answering in any particular way except that all had to affirm that they resided in Alabama and been financially impacted by the pandemic.

The survey was confidential, and those who shared their stories in greater detail did so with the knowledge that their stories and names would be included in this report.

## A NOTE ABOUT DEMOGRAPHICS

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Alabama is roughly 65 percent non-Hispanic white, 27 percent Black, and five percent Hispanic or Latinx, with other races making up the remainder.<sup>62</sup> The racial and ethnic makeup of our survey population diverges from that significantly, with 18 percent of respondents identifying as white, 76 percent as Black or African American, and 4 percent identifying as Hispanic or Latino.

We offered surveys where people were naturally gathering, and only people who said they were financially impacted by the

**48%**

of respondents  
had at least one  
**child under 19 who  
depended on them  
financially**. 27%  
had at least one  
retired, disabled, or  
unemployed adult  
who depended on  
them financially.

pandemic were invited to take the survey. As discussed in detail elsewhere in this paper, in Alabama and nationwide, Black people have been disproportionately affected by both the health and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is likely a contributing factor explaining their disproportionate representation in our respondent population.

## FINDINGS

### *Demographics and circumstances*

#### AGE

Respondents ranged in age from 18-86.

#### GENDER

27 percent were men and 73 percent were women, with less than 1 percent reporting “other” as their gender.

#### RACE AND ETHNICITY

18 percent of respondents were white, 76 percent were Black, 4 percent were Latinx, and less than 2 percent identified as other races or ethnicities.

#### FAMILY

48 percent of respondents had at least one child under 19 who depended on them financially. 27 percent had at least one retired,

disabled, or unemployed adult who depended on them financially.

## EMPLOYMENT

75 percent of respondents usually worked. 25 percent were adults who do not usually work because they rely on income from another source such as another adult in the house who works or a government benefit like disability or social security.

## FINANCES

71 percent of respondents had bank accounts, while 29 percent did not.

## TRANSPORTATION

81 percent of respondents had driver’s licenses, while 19 percent did not.

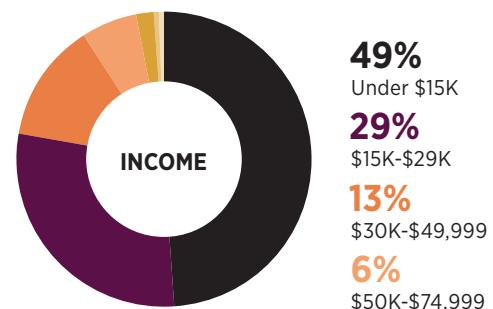
## HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF THE PANDEMIC

Only 9 percent of respondents fell ill with COVID-19, but 41 percent of them at some point self-quarantined on the advice of a healthcare professional or employer.

14 percent of them had to care for a child, spouse, or other family member who was ill with COVID-19.

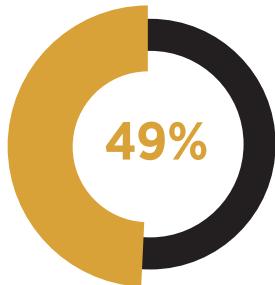
Of respondents who sought testing for COVID-19, only 60 percent (85 out of 142) were able to get a test when they requested one.

INCOME RANGE	PERCENT
Under \$15,000	49 percent
Between \$15,000-\$29,999	29 percent
Between \$30,000 and \$49,999	13 percent
Between \$50,000 and \$74,999	6 percent
Between \$75,000 and \$99,999	2 percent
Between \$100,000 and \$150,000	Less than 1 percent
Over \$150,000	Less than 1 percent



## Employment and Income

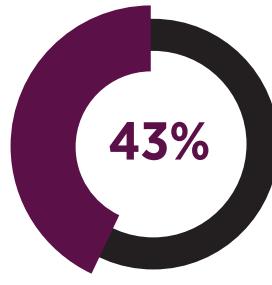
Data based on survey respondents' experience since March 13, 2020.



LOST A **JOB**



MISSED A **RENT OR MORTGAGE PAYMENT**



UNABLE TO PAY **A UTILITY BILL**

### EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME DURING THE PANDEMIC

We asked respondents about their employment and income experiences since March 13.

- 49 percent lost their jobs.
- 46 percent applied for unemployment.

Of those who applied for unemployment, only 39 percent (68 out of 173) received it.

Unemployment insurance checks took a long time to reach the people who needed them. Nearly half waited four weeks or more, and more than eight in ten waited three weeks or more. Given that only 61 percent of Americans report having enough cash on hand to cover an unexpected \$400 expense,<sup>63</sup> this wait was likely devastating for many

individuals and families.

Whether or not they kept their jobs, 52 percent of respondents made less money from work since March 13. Many said their hours were cut, that sales or demand for their services decreased, or that they lost income while quarantining due to illness or exposure to COVID-19. Some explained that they usually supplement their regular jobs with income from gig work like cleaning houses or babysitting, which dropped off as the economy contracted and people started staying home. Others experienced new expenses as a result of the pandemic: "It takes every dime to get things to stay protected," wrote one respondent.

Only 76 percent of respondents received

NUMBER OF WEEKS after applying that respondents received unemployment insurance checks	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS
1	3 percent
2	12 percent
3	34 percent
4	22 percent
5	6 percent
6	8 percent
8	8 percent
More than 8	5 percent

**29%**

The percentage of respondents who **DID NOT HAVE A BANK ACCOUNT** making it difficult to receive or deposit stimulus checks.

# Desperate Alabamians camp out to get help with Unemployment Insurance claims

When layoffs spiked during the pandemic, so did unemployment insurance claims — and with them, the need for assistance with resolving administrative issues that resulted in delays and denials of those claims. The Alabama Department of Labor's phone lines were overwhelmed almost immediately.

Increased call volume caused by COVID-19 came just as staffing at call centers for unemployment insurance claims was at its lowest point in over a decade, Alabama Labor Secretary Fitzgerald Washington told Appleseed.

In 2008, Alabama's call centers had 250 employees.

At the start of the pandemic, they had 40. This dramatic reduction was the result of more than a decade of funding cutbacks driven by improving unemployment rates in the wake of the Great Recession, Washington said.

The Department of Labor (DOL) worked as quickly as it could to ramp up staffing at its call center and brought in private vendors to provide in-person service, but could still only process 300 claims per day, Washington said.

Washington explained that in May, DOL began requiring claimants to show up in person in Montgomery to talk with specialists who could help resolve their issues. Because of low capacity, the department intentionally did not publicize this option, but people who had received help with their claims took to social media and soon, hundreds of people began to line up daily, first at the Crampton Bowl and then at the Dunn-Oliver Acadome, an arena on the campus of Alabama State University.

On July 2, Alabama Appleseed distributed water, snacks, and surveys to some of the hundreds of people who gathered to get their claims sorted out at the Acadome. We spoke with people from all over the state who had been waiting since the night before. There were people who camped out with young children, people who had driven hours, people who had been there before only to have to return when their claims again were denied for administrative reasons. We interviewed one woman who waited 11 hours and vomited three times in Alabama's brutal summer heat.

We collected 86 surveys before a Department of Labor employee called security and forced us to leave, stating that we did not have permission to talk with the people waiting in the Acadome parking lot. Soon after, the Department of Labor switched to an appointment-based system so claimants would no longer have to wait in day-long lines to have their issues resolved.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF AL.COM



a stimulus check from the U.S. government. Of those who did not, the largest group did not apply because they thought they weren't eligible. Nearly the same percentage could not figure out how to apply or did not understand the website. Others did not get money because they lacked bank accounts or stable mailing addresses, or because they were not U.S. citizens. Some eligible individuals did not receive their checks because they owed child support and the checks were garnished.

### RISKY TRADEOFFS AND HARD CHOICES

Many respondents had to choose which bills to pay:

- 35 percent missed a rent or mortgage payment.
- 45 percent were unable to pay a utility bill.
- 34 percent were unable to keep up with car loan payments.
- 37 percent were behind on credit card payments.
- 42 percent missed payments on some other loan or bill, including medical bills, child support payments, payday and title loans, and student loans.
- 19 percent missed payments for ongoing fines fees, court costs, or restitution, exposing themselves to financial penalties, loss of their drivers' licenses, or even possible jail time if a judge found their failure to pay was willful or if, as is common, they miss a court date related to their nonpayment.

Many had to seek financial or other forms of assistance they never expected to need:

- 14 percent took out a high-cost payday or title loan. Of those, 27 percent (35/129) took out such a loan for the first time in their lives.
- 66 percent sought food assistance. Of those, 57 percent (158/279) had never needed food assistance before (*It is worth noting that about a quarter of our surveys were distributed at lines for food assistance, which may have boosted this number somewhat but does not explain it completely*).
- Many respondents also sought direct financial assistance, free or affordable healthcare or

mental healthcare, or fee legal assistance. Of those, only 63 percent (144/229) got the help they needed in a timely fashion.

### HOMELESSNESS AND THREATS TO STABILITY

Despite their best efforts to stay ahead of bills, many respondents lost or feared losing their most important assets:

- 23 percent of respondents feared or been threatened with eviction, and 4 percent were evicted.
- 17 percent of respondents feared or had been threatened with repossession of their car and 4 percent had their cars repossessed.

### INTERACTIONS WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Many Alabama courts shut down or severely limited their activity near the start of the pandemic. But despite pressure from public health experts and advocacy groups, they did not completely halt nonessential activities or implement moratoria on the collection of legal financial obligations like fines and fees.

Eight percent of survey respondents had to physically go to court in the period after March 13. Over half of them (16/28) were there to make a payment on a payment plan or attend a compliance hearing regarding fines and fees they had fallen behind on paying.

### THOSE WHO WERE JAILED

Seven respondents had spent time in jail since March 13, and all of them had to put up money or property to get out.

Six respondents told us why they were jailed during the pandemic. Three of them – two charged with driving under the influence and one charged with theft – were jailed for reasons deemed appropriate under the governor's March 26 emergency order. The other three were jailed in connection with unpaid fines and fees.

### OUTLOOK

About one-third of respondents thought they

**45%**

The percentage of respondents **UNABLE TO PAY A UTILITY BILL** at some point since the COVID-19 pandemic.

# Jailed in Montgomery as case numbers soared

would not bounce back from the pandemic by the end of 2020. Asked about their biggest concern over the next 3 to 6 months, respondents listed concrete fears like getting sick, being unable to keep up with bills, unemployment, loss of income, homelessness, being unable to provide for their children and keep them safe and educated. They also articulated more abstract concerns like isolation and instability.

## In their own words

► I need health care. It's hard to remain healthy when you are refused assistance bc you don't have insure. (sic) And you have to pay to stay out of jail.

► People like me who work for themselves as an independent contractor have been largely overlooked by the system. 2) The amount of money from the Federal government is nowhere close to the income lost. 3) If we didn't already know, then we sure know now the need for universal healthcare in this country. If I get sick, it will mean either bankruptcy or death ... or both.

► Single mom, immune compromised and forced to put her kids in school and be exposed to covid19 so she can work also exposing herself and no aftercare or early buses mean full-time work is going to be hard to find also fiance's sitting in prison on a parole [violation] with asthma and a liver disorder waiting to die of Corona we are about to lose everything and our life is over

► I have been using extra money on food and

Repeatedly over the course of the pandemic, public health officials have sounded the alarm about jails and prisons as petri dishes where conditions make it nearly impossible to control the spread of COVID-19, endangering inmates, corrections staff, and communities.

"For jails in particular, conditions that promote transmission combined with large movements of people in and out can act to amplify the spread of COVID-19 within communities across the state," wrote public health faculty in an open letter to Alabama lawmakers published April 14, 2020. "In the coming weeks and months, uninfected individuals entering jail will be subject to elevated transmission rates in these facilities. Those who have shorter stays or contract COVID-19 towards the end of their stay will unknowingly bring new infections back to their communities."

Despite these warnings, the city of Montgomery continued to jail people for low-level, non-violent offenses.

**Reunca Lewis** | April 17, 2020

Late on a Friday afternoon, Montgomery police pulled over Reunca Lewis, a 23-year-old Black woman, because she did not have a car tag. She explained to the officer that her vehicle was new and she had been unable to figure out how register it because state offices are closed due to the pandemic.

The officer issued a warning, then returned to his car and ran her name and the name of her 20-year-old passenger. Three other police cars pulled up while they waited. When he returned to the car, the officer told them that he was arresting them for failing to appear at hearings on unpaid traffic tickets. In the back of the car, Lewis's six-year-old son wept in fear while Lewis' mother rushed across town to pick up the car and take the child home.

Lewis and her passenger spent the weekend locked in a jail with two other women, one of whom was coughing and begging for medical attention, before they were able to see a judge. None of the women she was with had personal protective equipment like gloves or face masks. There was no hand sanitizer or hot water. The

inmates who gave her a jumper, mat, and other supplies when she was booked were without protective equipment, as were the inmates who worked in the kitchen.

“Are our lives or tickets more important to them? Like, this is a fatal virus,” she asked rhetorically. “People are dying. They had us in there for tickets.”

**K.D.** | April 24, 2020

Montgomery police arrested K.D., a 21-year-old Black woman, for violating a pandemic-related curfew. At the time of her arrest, she was in the car with a man who exited the vehicle and fled on foot when police approached. Police asked for his name; she told them. They told her she would “take the fall” for his decision to flee and arrested her for violating curfew. She did not know there was a curfew in effect.

K.D. was not charged with any other crime. She was booked into jail and held in a cell with several other women until curfew ended at 5 a.m. the next morning, at which point she was permitted to leave on a signature bond.

**T.W.** | April 28, 2020

Montgomery police arrested T.W., a 21-year-old Black man, while he was out riding a 4-wheeler with some friends. They ran his name and found some unpaid tickets.

Police took T.W. to jail, took his temperature, gave him a face mask, and placed him in a cell with three other men. He was released the next morning and told to return to his \$25 per month payment plan. When he spoke to Alabama Appleseed, he was looking for work and said he did not expect to be able to pay until he found a job.

**“Are our lives or tickets more important to them? People are dying. They had us in there for tickets.”**

**REUNCA LEWIS**

clothing for my kids. it is hard to pay a \$360.00 light bill living on a fixed income of \$785.00

► Reduced hours has made it hard to pay bills, really to do anything. It has stress[ed] my family and myself out. Can’t sleep, just thinking what would come next. We need lawmakers to stop fighting and do the right thing for the people.

► I need to overcome this Cv-19 virus, I am asthmatic and I need health care that’s affordable. I need a job that pays livable wages.

► The crisis devastated my well being, not having a job, not knowing if my family and I will eat, no money for medications, gas, medical bills not being paid and having to sell items from my house just to live. My blood pressure stays elevated and anxiety I am experiencing on a regular basics. I am not asking for a hand out, I just want a job in order to be a productive citizen and take care of my family.

► I live on a marginal income from SS, and am trying to train with help of Goodwill, Easterseals to find a new skill of work. However, I still need assistance from family to make through to end of the month. Due to COVID-19 I was unable to depend on my family for help. There are bills outstanding but arrangements made. I am not homeless, hungry, or broken yet, but there are circumstances like \$16 a month SNAP benefits, that don’t get me through.

► I am a single, female that stayed home to raise a family for 19 years, so I did not have a lot in retirement and I am just beginning to build my social security earnings after divorcing 5 years ago. It is detrimental to lose nearly 27% of the little retirement I have due to the pandemic crisis causing the economy to fall.

# PART IV

DISPATCHES FROM ALABAMA

JUNE-OCTOBER, 2020

## Stories from the Field

### A JUNE MORNING IN SELMA

SELMA, ALA | JUNE 4, 2020

On June 4, Appleseed staff traveled to Selma High School to survey people who needed food assistance. Cars lined up for hours in the sweltering heat, running their air conditioners as volunteers prepared to give out boxes of food. Some people in line worried about running out of gas as they kept their cars running to keep from wilting in the heat but showed up early anyway to ensure they wouldn't go hungry. Hunger loomed: As the pandemic wore on, 15 percent of Alabama adults reported not having enough to eat and 12 percent of Alabama adults living with children said their children were not eating enough because they could not afford food.<sup>64</sup>

In Selma, people brought neighbors, friends, or relatives who needed food but had no transportation of their own. Many had no choice but to bring small children who played or cried or dozed in their car seats as the hours passed. The line of cars filled the school's parking lot and stretched onto the street beyond.

### AHMAD HAKIM

Ahmad Hakim, 72, of Selma, waited in his truck for his turn to get a box of food at Selma High School. Hakim, who makes less than \$15,000 a year, usually supplements his Social Security check with work, but because of social distancing requirements was not able to get out and work to make ends meet.

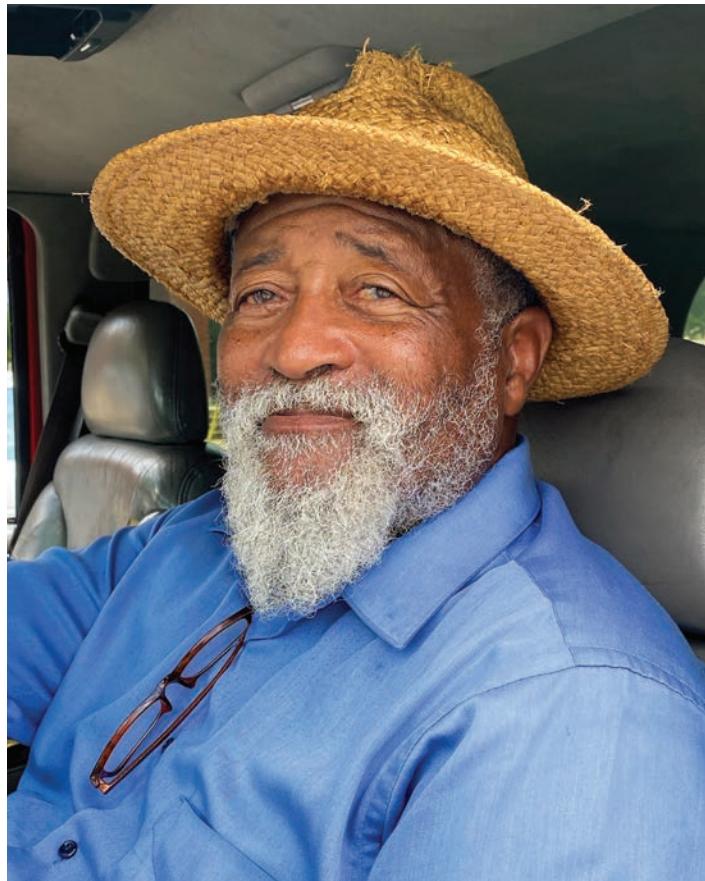


PHOTO BY LEAH NELSON

He received his stimulus check, but it did not go far. His biggest concern over the next 3-6 months, he wrote, was "Will I get evicted or go hungry?"

# “That unemployment in this pandemic is what’s carrying us over. Me myself, and I’m sure plenty more people.”

Tonya

PHOTOS BY LEAH NELSON



Tonya's unemployment checks inexplicably stopped mid-pandemic, but her bills kept piling up.



## TONYA

Tonya, 41, was helping friends pick up food at Selma High School. She had been furloughed from her job because of the pandemic and was living on savings and unemployment checks when suddenly, the checks stopped. When she called to find out why, she was told there was a glitch in the system.

For days, she called repeatedly, leaving voicemails with several people. “I looked at my phone probably 200 times today,” she said, exasperated. “That unemployment in this pandemic is what’s carrying us over. Me myself, and I’m sure plenty more people.”

“I got bills, real bills that ain’t gonna hold up because of a glitch.”

## CALLIE GREER

Callie Greer, a Selma Community Organizer known locally as “Mama Callie,” usually earns money by cooking for large gatherings. Social distancing put a stop to those, but COVID-19 has kept Greer’s husband busy at his job maintaining a cemetery in Montgomery.

“He drives from Selma to Montgomery every day; that’s the only work he can find right now. And so it would be like, ‘I gotta stay late today baby because I’ve gotta dig more holes.’ I’m like, ‘Didn’t you dig two holes yesterday?’ He’s like, ‘Yeah but I gotta dig three today.’ So that’s like six funerals on a Saturday. Now that might not seem like a lot to people, but for one cemetery in Montgomery to bury anywhere from four to six or more people every weekend is a lot of people. It’s a lot of dead people,” Greer said.

Making matters worse, their families can’t grieve together at funerals because of

# Hunger in Montgomery

***“We’re supposed to be living in what – the land of plenty?”***

MONTGOMERY, ALA | SEPT. 25, 2020

Twila Webster spent her summer fighting child hunger. Not in some third world country, but three miles from the Alabama Statehouse.

Webster is the Director of Child Nutrition at Resurrection Catholic School in north Montgomery. Through its work as a sponsor with the USDA, Resurrection this summer began a grab-and-go feeding program, packing hundreds of brown bag meals for children in their service area.

To ensure that children whose parents couldn't get to the school would still get the food they needed, Webster and her staff also brought meals to the Chisholm and Highland Avenue areas of Montgomery — high-poverty neighborhoods not three miles from where some Alabama lawmakers pondered spending \$200 million in CARES Act funds on a new statehouse.<sup>73</sup>

“There’s a lot of devastation out there,” Webster said. “We gave out one sack lunch and the little girl asked, are you coming back tomorrow? And they tell you how they like milk, oh God, it’s sad. And we’re supposed to be living in what — the land of plenty? You know, and you’ve got one person with one sack lunch makes a difference.”

On her route, Webster met a single mother of five children had worked at a grocery store which cut her position when foot traffic to the store plummeted at the start of the pandemic. That mother’s oldest child was 10, far too young to stay home and watch four smaller siblings alone.

She met a family with eight children that had run out of food, whose children came outside to greet her without shoes or inadequate clothing. Their mother, Webster said, usually earned money cleaning at a hotel. That work dried up when the pandemic shut down travel. As to finding another job, “[If] you got eight kids, who’s going to keep your kids if the daycare is closed? What do you do?” The woman’s mother had been keeping the youngest kids for her, but underlying health conditions put her at risk for serious complications if she got ill, Webster said.

“[E]verybody’s in a compromising position here,” Webster said. She set them up with enough food to last two weeks but could not stop worrying about them.

Talking about the parents who had been laid off, who were unable to seek new jobs because they no longer had childcare as a result of the pandemic, who could not feed their children on the meager budgets offered by food stamps or other forms of temporary assistance, Webster broke down — and not for the first time. “The first day I cried so hard because I’m like, you know, what if those were my kids?”

Yet Webster’s own family has struggled too. “I have a daughter who’s been at Cracker Barrel for seven years. She wants to go back to work but she can’t right now. She has a 15-month-old, and she has a seven-year-old who has autism. So it’s not that people don’t want to work. They want to go back.”

But like many others, her daughter, she said, “had no choice. Especially when daycare’s closing down. School’s closing down. Nobody’s planned for this, but boom, you know?”



PHOTOS BY RESURRECTION CATHOLIC MISSIONS

# **“It’s causing me to either reinvent myself or put aside what I wanted to be.”**

**Quenita Mitchell**

social distancing requirement. “They park across the street [for funerals]. But they can’t literally be there,” said Greer. “You can’t literally hug. It’s crazy.”

## **QUENITA MITCHELL**

**MONTGOMERY, ALA | AUG. 2, 2020**

Quenita Mitchell followed all the rules. The 36-year-old Montgomery resident got a degree in Business Administration. She got married. She and her husband had a child.

She found a job she loved, raising money for the American Cancer Society. It came with health insurance and a retirement plan. The family lived paycheck to paycheck, but the paychecks were adequate. Wanting the best for her little girl but leery of Montgomery’s underfunded and chronically failing public schools, Mitchell secured a place for her daughter at a private school. Kindergarten would start in August 2020.

The pandemic upended everything.

In March, her daughter’s childcare center closed, along with virtually every other childcare center in the state. “It was hard for me to have my daughter who is five years old at home with me all day every day, with me, with no one to play with, to try to keep her busy,” Mitchell said.

Mitchell’s grandparents both died in the first half of 2020. Three days after burying her grandfather, she learned she would be furloughed. The furlough turned into a layoff. It took three weeks for Mitchell to receive unemployment. She benefitted from the additional \$600 provided for by the CARES Act<sup>65</sup> for about a month before the

extra benefit ended. After that, her check plummeted to \$243 per week. Her husband is also unemployed.

Mitchell couldn’t afford COBRA, which would have cost \$2,400 a month. On the private market, insurance for just herself would have cost about \$800. She was able to get her daughter on ALL Kids, Alabama’s health insurance program for low-income families, but she’s not sure how she’ll pay the \$104 fee. She’s terrified to be without insurance in the middle of a public health crisis, but she has no resources to fix that.

“My rent is \$1,040 a month, and that doesn’t include the garbage, the water bill, and the trash service. So that \$1,040 is just rent. So at this point on unemployment, I’m bringing home just enough to cover the rent, just barely. No food. No insurance. No car note. No anything else. No cell phone bill,” she said. “And that doesn’t even cover the cost of [school] tuition. And of course there was uniforms that she needed, and new shoes for school. ... And because of COVID, it was recommended that she have more than one nap mat because they’re sending them home every day to be washed. So of course that list just goes on. I just – it breaks my heart.”

Mitchell estimates she has applied for at least 20 jobs, ranging from professional positions to unskilled jobs at big box stores. She was rejected from a job at a faith-affiliated university because she belonged to the wrong church. Some employers wrote back saying they were no longer hiring. Some didn’t reply at all.

Mitchell’s options are grim. “I know I need a job. But I also know that I can’t take

[just] anything. I've got a daughter."

"I'm spinning my wheels," Mitchell said. "It's causing me to either reinvent myself or put aside what I wanted to be."

### **JOANN ABROM**

**JASPER, ALA** | AUG. 27, 2020

Twenty-eight years at Wal-Mart. Joann Abrom, of Jasper, was one loyal employee until she contracted COVID-19 in May.

She recovered after a few weeks but passed the virus along to her 7-year-old grandson, Denzel, then needed to stay home and care for him. "He has nobody but me," she said.

Though both Abrom and Denzel regained their health, COVID-19 forced changes with Denzel's schooling that made it impossible for Joann to return to work. The boy only attends school in person on Monday and Tuesday, then he is home Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday and attends school virtually, which requires a lot of help and oversight from his grandmother.

Abrom hopes to return to work, but until Denzel's school schedule returns to normal, that's simply impossible. Her financial stability is up in the air, but her commitment to raising the little boy, whose birth mother died from a drug overdose, is unwavering.

When told that he was lucky to have her, Abrom's response was: "I'm lucky to have him."

### **BILLY BILES**

**MCCALLA, ALA** | OCT. 30, 2020

Billy Biles was the smiling face in the McDonald's drive-through late nights when nowhere else was opened but people were hungry.

Some nights he was the only one there, making burgers, taking orders, running the register. Biles worked a lot of overtime. And he needed that extra income to put his life back together and keep it from unraveling after spending "23 years, four months, and 16 days," in prison, then finally getting released at age 50.



PHOTO BY CARLA CROWDER

## **"He has nobody but me."**

**Joann Abrom**



**Billy Biles,** owes at least \$5,000 for COVID-related medical bills.

Before COVID-19, Biles was on an impressive trajectory of hard work and self-sufficiency, especially given that he'd been in prison most of his adult life. When he was first released, he worked two jobs, one at Region's Field during Birmingham Barons games and a second at McDonald's. He borrowed his mother's car and at times even slept in it between shifts. Then he found a garage apartment in McCalla and got a raise at McDonald's which enabled him to quit his second job. McDonald's recognized him



as manager material, so he took classes and pretty soon was running the overnight shift and clocking lots of overtime. "The money was getting good," he recalled.

In May, Biles got sick. He had every symptom of COVID-19, but multiple tests came back negative. He would feel a little better

and continue to work. He rebounded in June and felt much better. But by early July he felt terrible and, finally, a test came back positive. He had COVID-19 and pneumonia.

Positive for COVID-19 meant no more overnight shifts and no more overtime. Although McDonald's continued to pay part of his salary, his extended bout with COVID-19 resulted in over two months of lost overtime that Biles estimated at \$4,000. Simultaneously, the medical bills arrived for all the tests and various treatments related to suffering through COVID-19 and pneumonia with no health insurance. At one point, doctors wanted to put him in the hospital because his illness persisted. They would call every day and he would intentionally downplay his symptoms because he had no health insurance and he'd seen enough prison hospitals that he was determined to avoid all hospitals if possible.

Finally, he tested negative and returned to McDonald's in early September. His incredible work ethic is paying off. A job offer in the auto manufacturing industry resulted in McDonald's offering him a raise and promotion, which comes with health insurance.

But he was uninsured during his prolonged illness and he's unsure how he will pay his estimated \$5,000 in COVID-related medical bills. Though Biles is upbeat about his future, his finances are as precarious as ever. "My family don't have any money. That's been our biggest problem all our lives. Our problems would be solved if we just had a little bit of money."

## What Must Come Next

“We don’t want to blame victims. One of the things I hope we come out of this entire crisis with on the other end is a little more empathy. We’re seeing a lot of people talk about the economy and how difficult it is. It’s very stressful not knowing where your next paycheck is coming from, not knowing how to pay your rent, whether you can put food on the table. If you do have a job right now and your kids are at home, how do you handle daycare? These are very stressful, very real things. But people in poor communities, that single mom has been dealing with these same issues for a very long time. I hope we come out of this having a better appreciation with what poor people are going through and [when] we make public policy, we can remember what it felt like.”<sup>66</sup>

**Dr. Regina Benjamin** | Alabama native and U.S. Surgeon General, 2009-2013

The COVID-19 pandemic will be an object of study for decades to come. As this paper is being written in late 2020, it is an evolving crisis. Though there appears to be light at the end of the tunnel in the form of several promising vaccine candidates, infectious disease experts believe it will be many months before life even begins to return to a recognizable version of pre-pandemic “normal.”<sup>67</sup>

The pace of economic recovery is hard to predict, but what we are experiencing now is “the most unequal recession in modern U.S. history.”<sup>68</sup> The pandemic, according to a Washington Post analysis published in late September, “deliver[ed] a mild setback for those at or near the top and a depression-like blow for those at the bottom.”<sup>69</sup> Regardless of what happens in financial markets in the coming months and years, the real-world damage documented in this report is stunning. Mitigating and reversing its impact will take time, creativity, and boldness.

Alabama Appleseed does not pretend to have complete and detailed recommendations for all aspects of recovery. One step seems obvious and not worth serious debate: shoring up the state's tattered and grossly inequitable healthcare infrastructure. The most straightforward way to accomplish this would be to expand Medicaid. If lawmakers in this state value life, they will find the money to start putting healthcare within reach of all Alabamians.

But most problems caused — or, more accurately, exacerbated — by this pandemic have less obvious remedies. It is Appleseed's hope that the findings of this report will be used by policy experts, lawmakers, advocates, and others to support evidence-based mechanisms to accomplish the following:

- Create stronger protections for people facing eviction, foreclosure, or the loss of a vehicle or other necessary possession. If and when additional federal stimulus funds are approved, direct a portion of these funds toward rental and mortgage assistance, as has been done in numerous other states including Pennsylvania,<sup>70</sup> Mississippi,<sup>71</sup> and Texas.<sup>72</sup>
- Increase unemployment benefits so people who lose their jobs can pay their bills and stay afloat while they look for work.
- Expand rural broadband internet access. Find a way to get speedy Internet access in every home so children can participate in online education and adults can engage with the digital world where so many crucial opportunities exist.
- Take steps to financially support childcare providers, whose income has declined as a result of reduced enrollment due to COVID-19. Work with children's advocates and early education providers to ensure safe, affordable childcare options are available when people get back to work.
- Drastically reduce reliance on fines, fees, and court costs as a source of funding for basic state services, and remit legal financial obligations owed by people who will never be able to pay, including those who experienced financial setbacks as a result of the pandemic.
- Stop taking driver's licenses from people who are not dangerous drivers, and let Alabamians get back to work.

COVID-19 is a crisis unprecedented in modern memory, and while recovery will be complicated, certain principles are not. Among them is the fact that the economy is made up of individuals and families, and Alabama cannot prosper if it does not attend to the basic needs of every one of its residents. People who do not have bootstraps cannot pull themselves up.

As policymakers and politicians chart a path forward, Alabama Appleseed prays they reject the easy binaries of political orthodoxy and act instead with boldness, courage, compassion, and resolve. The future of millions lies in their hands. ●

# Appendix

## **Open Letter to Governor Ivey regarding unspent CARES Act funds**

SIGNED BY 82 ALABAMA NONPROFITS AND FAITH GROUPS

October 30, 2020

**RE: Unspent CARES Act Funds**

Dear Governor Ivey:

Children are hungry. Parents are frightened. Teachers are overwhelmed. The pain and suffering wrought by COVID-19 and the resulting economic crisis continues to devastate families and communities across Alabama. Coronavirus Relief Fund dollars are helping tremendously where local and state agencies, schools and universities, small businesses and nonprofits, and other entities have had access to these critical funds. The money has been a lifeline.

With two months for Alabama to spend approximately \$1 billion in remaining CARES Act funds, the undersigned organizations write in order to share ongoing needs of struggling Alabamians whom we serve and provide recommendations for distribution of these federal funds based on data and insights we have gathered in the field.

Our recommendations focus on individual needs that remain unmet and include examples of approved CARES Act spending in other states that have been effective in getting CARES Act funds directly to eligible, hurting individuals and supporting services. Guidance from the U.S. Treasury has been clear that emergency financial assistance to individuals and families directly impacted by loss of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic is an allowable use.<sup>1</sup> Rather than sending unspent funds back to Washington, we strongly recommend investing in the health, safety, and economic futures of the people of Alabama.

Though we are eight months into the pandemic, recent data suggests conditions are worsening in Alabama. With a 7-day average of 845 new cases per day as we head into the flu season, state health officials have expressed concerns about another spike,<sup>2</sup>

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1 See U.S. Treasury, Coronavirus Relief Fund, Frequently Asked Questions, Updated as of September 2, 2020, p. 5.

2 Mary Sell, *After Improvement, Virus Cases Worsening*, *Alabama Daily News*, Oct. 21, 2020, at <https://www.aldailynews.com/after-improvement-virus-cases-worsening-in-alabama/>.

which could create further economic woes for unemployed and underemployed Alabamians and their families. While unemployment benefits have buoyed thousands of families, the enhanced \$600 weekly available in response to the massive COVID-related job losses has long expired. With the maximum \$275 weekly unemployment benefit limited to 13 weeks, for many Alabamians, those payments ended months ago. But rent still must be paid, children must be fed, and elders must be cared for.

It is important to remember that even before this pandemic devastated the economy, Alabama was the fifth poorest state in the U.S. with 800,000 of our residents living in poverty.<sup>3</sup> These CARES Act funds provide our best hope to ensure the economic downturn does not force these families into long term, catastrophic conditions that will impact generations to come.

### **Alleviating Hunger**

Data from across the state incontrovertibly show a spike in families who rely on food banks during the COVID-induced economic emergencies. School closures have meant children who normally eat at school are at home, often with parents who have lost their jobs due to COVID-related closures. The crisis is hitting our most vulnerable.

Alabama Appleseed's survey of 400 people impact by COVID revealed that 63% had sought food assistance, many for the first time. Hunger Free Alabama's survey showed similar results with 58% of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants having trouble buying food at some point during the pandemic.

Feeding the Gulf Coast, the food bank covering lower Alabama, faced a 30 percent increase in need across their community. They expect to see that need remain or even rise to 38 percent through the rest of the year. That 30 percent spike translates to about 8,378,000 additional meals. The Community Food Bank of Central Alabama reports that they spent more on food in one month and a half in 2020 than they paid in all of 2019.

Just a few examples of states that have made CARES awards to food banks include: \$10 million in Arkansas, \$15 million in Florida, \$9 million in Minnesota, \$6 million in North Carolina, and \$15 million in Wisconsin. An additional \$5 million in support through CARES Act funding could shore up this vital resource and move Alabama closer to how numerous other states have spent these funds to fight hunger.

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<sup>3</sup> Alabama Possible, Barriers to Prosperity: Data Sheet 2020, <https://alabamapossible.org/2020/05/21/4480/>

Currently in Alabama, food banks that are relied upon by tens of thousands of Alabamians qualified for the same \$15,000 available to other nonprofits, thus the food banks combined received \$135,000. Though much appreciated, this was a fraction of what other states have allocated and much less than the \$10 million provided to less vital recipients, such as the timber industry and tourism marketing.

### **Addressing evictions and homelessness**

Multiple indicators show evictions are rising in Alabama, no surprise given the massive increase in joblessness due to COVID. Once the state's eviction moratorium expired June 1, evictions increased by more than 50% in Alabama's most populous counties.<sup>4</sup> Legal Services Alabama opened 359 new eviction cases in June and July alone, a 60% increase from last year. The most recent U.S. Census Household Pulse survey found that between September 16-28, 13% of Alabama renters said it was "very likely" they would be evicted in the next two months and another 32% said it was "somewhat likely." Researchers at the Aspen Institute predict as many as 290,000 people are at risk of eviction in Alabama, based on levels of unemployment.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, families with school children are among these cases. With many Alabama school systems still virtual, including Montgomery, this means parents are juggling homelessness and homeschooling. They deserve help.

Nationwide, a majority of states have created CARES Act-funded programs that allow residents to receive a form of rent, mortgage, and/or utility bill funding if their income has been impacted by COVID. Some states permit residents to apply directly, followed by the state sending payment to a landlord. Other states require the landlord to apply. Many states have income-based eligibility. There are a variety of models on which Alabama could pattern a program.

For example, [Pennsylvania](#) has set aside \$150 million in CARES Act funds for rent assistance. Renters are eligible for up to \$750 per month for six months. Enrollment forms are available online and a call center is available to assist applicants with questions.

Texas has created an [eviction diversion program](#) which allows landlords who have begun the legal process of eviction to place their lawsuits on hold in exchange for six

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<sup>4</sup> As reported by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, based on court filings from Jefferson, Montgomery, Madison, and Mobile counties.

<sup>5</sup> Aspen Institute, 20 million renters are at risk of eviction, policymakers must act now to mitigate widespread hardship, June 19, 2020, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/20-million-renters-are-at-risk-of-eviction/>

months of rent money (from CARES funding). Texas has dedicated \$167 million to this program.

In Mississippi, lawmakers recently **re-allocated \$20 million** in unused CARES Act funding for rental assistance that also helps landlords, who struggle when rents go unpaid.

Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a **temporary halt in residential evictions** through December 2020 that measure neither removes the requirement that renters pay rent, nor offsets lost income to landlords when rent goes unpaid. Without remedial measures, Alabama is poised to experience a tidal wave of evictions in early 2021. Rather than sending unspent CARES Act funds back to Washington, we highly recommend dedicating a portion of these funds to income-based rental and mortgage assistance.

### **Supporting vulnerable populations**

#### *Assisted Living and Congregate Care Facilities*

While CARES Act funding has greatly assisted nursing homes and other congregate care facilities with testing and PPE, we know more is needed, as deadly outbreaks continue.<sup>6</sup> The scope and scale of COVID testing is grossly lacking in congregate care facilities and unspent CARES Act funding could address these shortcomings. Alabama should prioritize regular and ongoing testing for residents, staff, inspectors, and visitors.

Thus far, Alabama has spent \$10 million on COVID testing in nursing homes, according to the October 18, 2020 Coronavirus Relief Fund expenditures report. However, there remain reported shortages **reported shortages** of PPE (defined as not having a one-week supply of N95 masks, surgical masks, gowns, gloves.)<sup>7</sup>

Adequate testing is also needed among other vulnerable populations, staff who serve them, and family and support persons who visit them. These populations include: residents of assisted living centers, specialty care assisted living facilities, group homes, hospitals including state Department of Mental Health hospitals, congregate juvenile justice facilities, and facilities that house youth served by the Department of Mental Health and Department of Human Resources, including youth in residential and

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<sup>6</sup> Amy Yurkinin, How an Emergency Evacuation to Save Nursing Home Residents Put Lives at Risk, Oct. 19, 2020 at <https://www.al.com/coronavirus/2020/10/how-an-emergency-evacuation-to-save-nursing-home-residents-put-lives-at-risk.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aarp.org/ppi/issues/caregiving/info-2020/nursing-home-covid-dashboard.html>

psychiatric residential treatment facilities.

Additional funding should also be made available to ensure contact tracing after new infections are discovered, to strengthen PPE supplies to people in impacted facilities.

#### *Prisons and Jails*

Incarcerated Alabamians are particularly vulnerable to infection. There are tens of thousands of individuals housed in state prisons, local jails, and ICE Detention facilities — all places where it is impossible to practice social distancing and where individuals are wholly reliant on the government for testing, PPE, medical care, and quarantining. The consequences have been dire. Within ADOC, 532 incarcerated people have contracted the virus and 27 have died, as of October 29. Another 455 staff members have contracted the virus, two of whom have died.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, conditions at Draper Quarantine Intake Facility are unhealthy and inadequate yet the previously decommissioned prison is being used to house people entering ADOC from county jails. Draper is also housing patients who test positive for COVID from Staton and Elmore prisons. Multiple undersigned organizations have received credible reports that incarcerated people transferred to Draper are being confined to a classroom in a building with no toilets, no running water, and repeated power outages.

Credible reports, including video, from Bullock Correctional Facility also show unhealthy and unsanitary conditions, including flooded cells, broken sinks, and a lack of PPE.<sup>9</sup> Bullock has been the site of a large COVID outbreak with 58 positive cases and one death.

ADOC was appropriated \$125 million of CARES Act funding, \$98 million of which remains unspent. While testing of incarcerated people has increased, ADOC still has tested only about 12% of individuals in its custody. CARES Act funding could easily fund a dramatic increase in testing of both incarcerated people and ADOC staff, which could help slow the spread of COVID-19 and save lives.

Numerous states, both those with smaller prison populations, such as [Wyoming](#), and those with larger populations, including [North Carolina](#), Texas, and Michigan have

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8 Data provided by the Alabama Department of Corrections <http://www.doc.alabama.gov/covid19news>

9 Mike Cason, Inmate Video Gives Peek Inside Alabama Prison During Quarantine, [al.com](https://www.al.com/news/2020/08/inmate-video-gives-peek-inside-alabama-prison-during-quarantine.html), Aug. 18, 2020 at <https://www.al.com/news/2020/08/inmate-video-gives-peek-inside-alabama-prison-during-quarantine.html>

conducted mass testing of all prison staff and incarcerated people. North Carolina, which has a larger prison population than Alabama, completed testing for about \$3.3 million. So far, North Carolina's COVID-19 death rate for prisoners is lower than Alabama's.<sup>10</sup> Testing saves lives and there has been no explanation provided as to why Alabama cannot devote some of the millions in unspent CARES Act funds to do what many other states have done to protect their incarcerated populations.

CARES Act funding could also support the addition and/or repair of basic hygiene equipment, such as sinks and showers, in Alabama prisons.

Robust research has also emerged linking community spread of COVID to people cycling in and out of nearby jails.<sup>11</sup> Short-term incarceration in jails could be putting entire communities at risk. Therefore, increased COVID testing in jails would be another important way to make vulnerable Alabamians safer and put these unspent funds to use.

#### *Assisting Youth Aging Out of State Care*

Juvenile justice advocates have expressed concern about the impact that COVID-19 will have on many of Alabama's older youth who will (or already have) age out of the child welfare system during this crisis. Given their age and circumstances, this population may be at risk of housing instability, food insecurity, economic harm, and lack of familial and social support.

We urge decision makers to allocate a portion of the remaining CARES Act fund to ensure a continuum of care for youth who would have otherwise aged out of the child welfare system this year. [California](#), [Alaska](#), and the [District of Columbia](#) may serve as useful models as each has created mechanisms which allow youth who would have aged out of state care to choose to remain under such care during the pandemic.

#### **Keeping Quality Childcare Available**

Alabama's childcare industry is in crisis. It is no secret that child care providers play a critical role within our state. For parents in the workforce or seeking employment,

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<sup>10</sup> North Carolina Department of Public Safety, Mass Covid-19 Testing of All Offenders in State Prison Completed, at [www.ncdps.gov/news/press-releases/2020/08/06/mass-covid-19-testing-all-offenders-state-prison-completed](http://www.ncdps.gov/news/press-releases/2020/08/06/mass-covid-19-testing-all-offenders-state-prison-completed)

<sup>11</sup> Juan Silieza, The Harvard Gazette, *Jailing Practices Appear to Fuel Coronavirus Spread*, Aug. 3, 2020, at <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/08/harvard-study-links-jailing-practices-to-covid-19-spread/>

access to affordable quality childcare is essential. However, as a result of the pandemic, 44% of Alabama childcare providers believe that absent additional financial support, they will have to close permanently. Prior to the pandemic there was already a shortage of available childcare providers, especially for many low-income and high need children, so additional closures will only impede the state's economic recovery efforts.

Childcare centers throughout the state have experienced significant decreases in enrollment<sup>12</sup> and many providers are in desperate need of additional financial assistance to help them stay afloat in the coming months. Throughout the state, childcare enrollment has dropped by 64 percent; and 94 percent of childcare providers are currently serving fewer children than they were pre-COVID. Before this pandemic, many childcare providers were already operating on razor-thin margins, so the loss of revenue associated with lower enrollment has made those margins much thinner.

Of particular alarm, between March and August of this year, childcare providers serving the state's most vulnerable children - those that are from low-income families and eligible for child care subsidies from DHR - experienced a loss of over \$27 million dollars in subsidy funding alone.<sup>13</sup> Research shows that nearly 80% of these subsidies aid African-American children;<sup>14</sup> thus, Black communities are likely to be disproportionately impacted should child care providers experience permanent closures as a consequence of that decrease in revenue.

Throughout the country, various states have recognized the urgency associated with the need to stabilize the economic impact COVID-19 had on the child care industry. While the steps Alabama has already taken to aid childcare centers have provided an essential lifeline, the use of CARES Act funding in numerous other states provide useful examples of some additional ways that Alabama leaders can further aid our state's child care providers.

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12 The Alabama Childcare Coalition reports that as of August 2020, only 63% of childcare centers have reopened. And amongst childcare centers within their network, the average decrease in enrollment has been approximately 40%, with some centers experiencing decreases as high as 80%. Similarly, the Alabama Child Care Task Force has found that Alabama child care centers are experiencing increased operating costs yet 94% of providers have experienced decreased enrollment.

13 See Alabama Department of Human Resources, Facts and Figures, Detailed Monthly Statistical Reporting for DHR Services, <https://dhr.alabama.gov/facts-and-figures/> (calculation created using figures found in Table I2 or the March - August 2020 reports).

14 Carol Gundlach, Enhanced child care funding makes life better for Alabama's children and families, July 2, 2019, Alabama Arise, <https://www.alarise.org/resources/enhanced-child-care-funding-makes-life-better-for-alabamas-children-and-families/>

Most notably, both Mississippi and Tennessee have continued to provide childcare providers with 100% of the subsidy payment amount that they were receiving before the disruptions caused by COVID-19. By using [enrollment rather than attendance](#) numbers to determine subsidy rates, both states have worked to ensure that childcare providers that service low-income families experience minimal financial loss.

Since Alabama currently uses a mixed model - providing 50% of subsidy payments for children enrolled yet not attending child care and 100% of subsidy payments for children attending childcare; an immediate recommendation would be for the state to adopt the purely enrollment-based subsidy funding model utilized by our neighbor [Tennessee](#), which has committed to providing this level of support through the remainder of the calendar year.

To the extent that any childcare providers and/or their staff have unique health vulnerabilities that prevent them from being able to safely reopen, or should public health guidelines – especially for providers located in hotspots - caution against reopening, we urge the state to still allow these providers to be eligible for financial assistance for fixed expenses (such as rent) and reopening costs. Ultimately, we ask the state to prioritize the goal of preventing as many permanent child care closures as possible – even to the extent that that involves providing some financial assistance to centers that experience temporary closures due to heightened health risks.

#### **Additional concerns**

The realities of COVID-19 have brought into stark relief numerous wealth-based disparities in Alabama communities, among them access to high-speed internet and the tools necessary for virtual learning. We know these issues are challenging and have been given a lot of consideration. To the extent that you need additional voices to weigh in, we are happy to assist. Because of the complexity around addressing these infrastructure needs, we support state leaders who are trying to get an extension on the deadline to utilize CARES Act funds, as some of the most critical challenges may require more time to remedy.

One geographic area of particular concern is the Black Belt. Small towns and rural communities in this region need technical assistance and guidance both in protecting their communities and in drawing down CARES Act funding that they deserve.

We appreciate your thoughtful leadership in these demanding times. Please know that these recommendations are based on the needs and experiences of everyday Alabamians who are struggling mightily to stay safe, care for their children, and contribute to our state's recovery. Now more than ever, we must invest in our people.

We look forward to working with you on ensuring the federal relief available to Alabamians addresses these critical needs facing Alabama's people.

Sincerely,

**82 Alabama organizations**

Alabama Appleseed Center for Law & Justice  
Alabama Arise  
Alabama Disability Advocacy Project (ADAP)  
SPLC Action Fund  
Adelante Alabama Worker Center  
Alabama Civil Justice Foundation  
Black Belt Community Foundation  
Central Alabama Fair Housing Coalition  
Volunteer Lawyers Birmingham  
Montgomery Volunteer Lawyers Program  
Greater Birmingham Ministries  
Alabama Chapter American Academy of Pediatrics  
Black Warrior Riverkeeper  
League of Women Voters of Alabama  
National Lawyers Guild, Alabama chapter  
Alabama Coalition on Black Civic Participation  
GASP  
AIDS Alabama  
Thrive Alabama  
Energy Alabama  
Alabama Justice Initiative  
Project Hope to Abolish the Death Penalty  
Community Food Bank of Central Alabama  
North Alabama Peace Network  
Restorative Strategies, LLC  
Montevallo Progressive Alliance  
Bay Area Women Coalition, Incorporated  
Council on American-Islamic Relations, Alabama (CAIR)

First Christian Church of Montgomery  
Open Table United Church of Christ  
Medical Advocacy & Outreach  
Community Enabler Developer, Inc.  
Alabama Coalition for Immigrant Justice  
Trinity United Methodist Church  
Faith in Action Alabama  
The Alabama Child Care Coalition  
Alabama Institute for Social Justice  
YWCA of Central Alabama  
Alabama Justice Initiative  
Auburn Justice Coalition  
Stay Focused Project  
Children First Foundation, Inc.  
Pervis Mann Ministries  
Disability Leadership Coalition of Alabama  
Abilities Unlimited LLC DBA Accessible Alabama  
Progressive Women of Northeast Alabama  
Tennessee Valley Progressive Alliance  
The Knights & Orchids Society  
YMCA of Birmingham  
Interfaith Montgomery  
Etowah Visitation Project  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mobile  
Alabama CURE  
Children First Foundation, Inc.  
Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama (HICA)

Jobs to Move America  
Health Action Partnership of Jefferson County  
Yellowhammer Fund  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mobile  
Birmingham AIDS Outreach (BAO)  
National MS Society  
Our Lady of the Valley Catholic Church-SDL  
Community Enabler Developer, Inc.  
Montgomery Pride United  
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas  
United Women of Color  
Church & Society, Anniston First United Methodist Church  
WHOM IT CONCERNS INC.  
Nightingale Clinic  
Alabama Asthma Coalition  
YMCA of Selma Dallas County  
Alabama Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival  
Enterprise Family YMCA  
YMCA of Tuscaloosa County  
YMCA of Calhoun County  
Heart of the Valley YMCA  
Brewton Area YMCA  
Alabama Alliance of YMCAs  
YMCA of the Shoals  
Human Rights Campaign Alabama  
Alabama Sierra Club  
YMCA of South Alabama

cc: members of the Alabama Legislature

## Endnotes

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**“We’re looking at some pretty dark days  
for the foreseeable future.”**

DR. SCOTT HARRIS // Alabama State Health Officer, Dec. 9, 2020

**“Reduced hours has made it hard to pay bills, really to do anything. It has stress[ed] my family and myself out. Can’t sleep, just thinking what would come next. We need lawmakers to stop fighting and do the right thing for the people.”**

“FLATTENED” SURVEY PARTICIPANT



ALABAMA APPLESEED  
CENTER for LAW & JUSTICE