

A ONE VOICE REPORT

# THE STATE OF WORKING MISSISSIPPI



## Executive Summary

A strong Mississippi economy is one that offers everyone the chance to thrive, providing fair wages, quality jobs, and opportunities for a secure future that strengthens both individuals and communities across the state. However, many Mississippians, despite their hard work, still struggle to meet basic needs, such as providing food for their families, securing stable housing, obtaining reliable transportation, affording childcare, accessing healthcare, ensuring quality education for their children, and finding opportunities for rest, relaxation, and personal growth and development.

Mississippi's future faces additional challenges as the state's population declines, with young people in particular leaving for better opportunities, higher wages, and stronger investments in education and well-being elsewhere. This trend reflects a deeper issue: the state's historical lack of investment in workers and families.

One reason for this is that for 150 years, worker policies across the South prioritized business interests in the form of low wages, low taxes, few regulations on businesses, few labor protections, a weak safety net, and opposition to union all at the expense of working people.<sup>1</sup> As a result, many workers across the South and in Mississippi are still experiencing low wages, underfunded public services, little to no access to important government services, deep racial divisions, and high poverty rates.<sup>2</sup>

This report highlights the shortcomings of the current economic development model and its damaging impact on Mississippi's workforce, providing data on workers' conditions and proposing solutions to reverse population decline and build a stronger, more prosperous Mississippi.

By prioritizing equitable investments such as implementing worker protections, diversifying the economy, increasing wages and closing wage gaps, and increasing investments in education, Mississippi can create a future that reflects its values and provides lasting prosperity for generations to come.

### KEY FINDINGS

01

Mississippi's economic development strategies, both past and present, have often prioritized businesses and underpaid labor frequently at the expense of workers' prosperity.

02

Demographic trends, including the state's population size, age distribution, and racial composition, shape Mississippi's economic landscape. These factors affect labor availability, quality, and market opportunities, with significant implications for the state's economic development.

03

Key aspects of Mississippi's labor market, such as the types of jobs available, wage structures, and employment status, offer insights into workers' experiences. These factors show improvements are needed to build a more equitable and prosperous job market for the state's residents.

04

Analyzing key economic indicators like labor force participation, GDP, unemployment rates, and income levels helps policymakers understand Mississippi's economic environment. This analysis allows for the identification of weaknesses, assessment of policy effectiveness, and determination of the need for targeted interventions to improve job quality and wage levels.

05

The experiences of Mississippians with poverty and inequality exacerbate the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by workers, influencing their current living conditions and future potential for upward economic mobility.

06

To ensure a Mississippi where everyone thrives, there is an urgent need for policy reforms that create equitable economic opportunities for all residents. This includes adapting worker protections, encouraging economic diversification, reducing occupational segregation, and enhancing educational opportunities.

## The Southern Economic Development Model: An Overview of the Economic Development

To understand Mississippi's current economic landscape, we must first look at its historical roots. The state's economy has long been shaped by labor-intensive industries such as agriculture and manufacturing.<sup>3</sup> Historically, these sectors relied heavily on exploitative labor practices, beginning with the enslavement of Black people and continuing with minimal compensation in sharecropping and domestic labor.<sup>4</sup>

In today's context, the concept of low-cost labor is masked under the pretense of supporting business friendly practices.<sup>5</sup> This model, also known as the "Southern economic development model," is characterized by low wages, low taxes, minimal regulations on businesses, limited labor protections, a weak safety net, and strong opposition to unions.<sup>6</sup>

While this strategy has attracted businesses and created jobs, many of these positions are low-wage positions that do not offer enough earnings to support a family or include benefits like healthcare and paid time off.<sup>7</sup> As a result, wealth has become concentrated among the richest and most powerful individuals in the region,<sup>8</sup> while most Southern workers are left with low wages, underfunded public services, a weak social safety net, deep racial divides, and high poverty rates.<sup>9</sup>



## Overview of Demographic Trends: The Changing Face of Mississippi's Residents

Demographic trends shape the economic landscape and shape Mississippi's economic growth.<sup>10</sup> Demographic characteristics such as age, race, and gender significantly influence Mississippi's economic development.<sup>11</sup> These factors affect the size and quality of the labor force, as well as the types of job opportunities available within the state. A young, educated, and diverse population can drive innovation and economic growth, while disparities in education, employment opportunities, or population declines can hinder progress.<sup>12</sup>

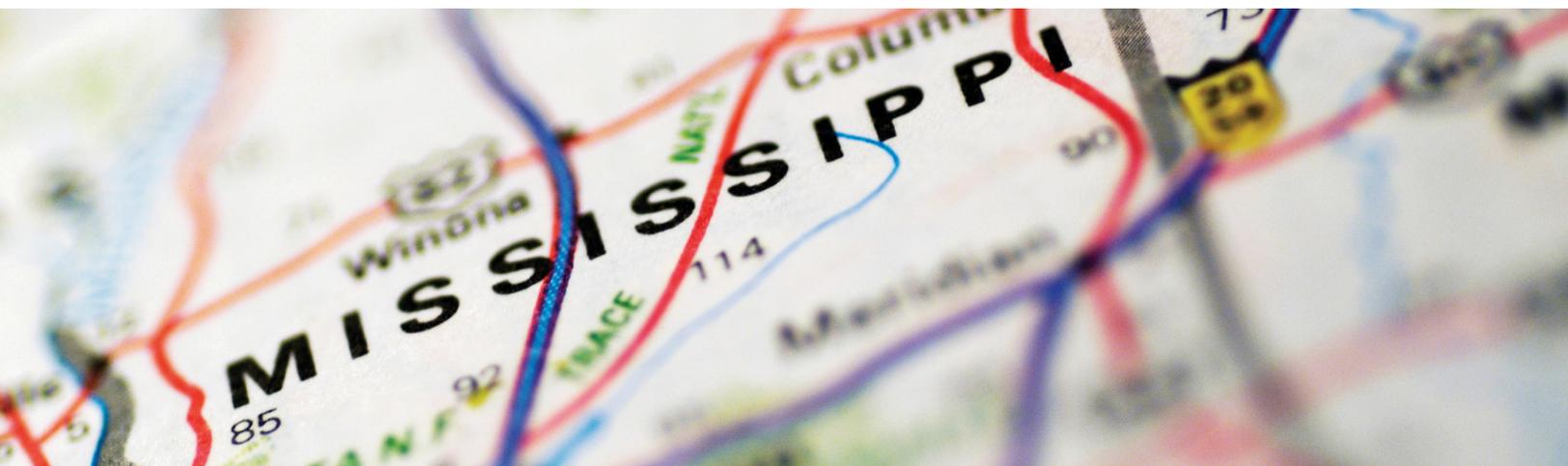
### *Population:*

Mississippi is experiencing a population decline. As the 35th most populous state,<sup>13</sup> with a population of approximately 2.93 million as of 2023.<sup>14</sup> The state was only one of three states to lose population in the 2020 Census, with the largest declines among working-age residents.<sup>15</sup> This population loss stems from factors such as limited job opportunities, poor access to quality education and healthcare, high poverty rates, and migration to urban areas.<sup>16</sup>

Mississippi's rural makeup significantly impacts its economy and the working conditions of its residents. Mississippi's 82 counties and 298 municipalities are mostly rural, with 79.3% of counties classified as rural.<sup>17</sup>

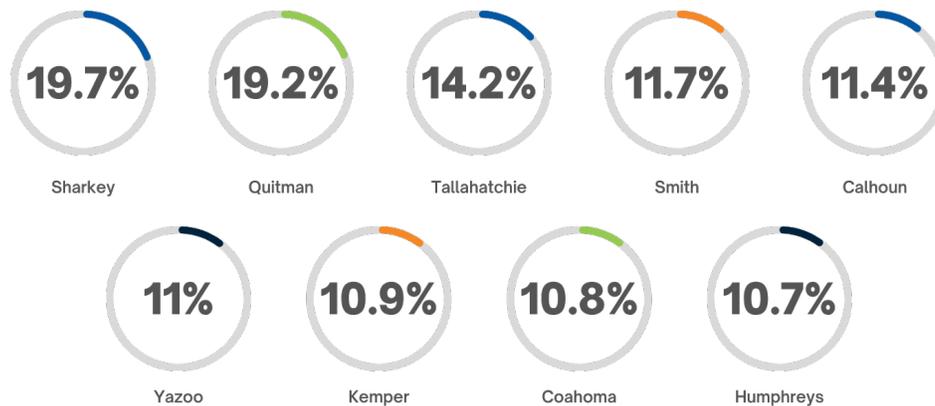
Rural areas typically offer fewer job opportunities, concentrated in low-wage sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, and low-wage service industries, which tend to offer lower wages and limited benefits.<sup>18</sup> These sectors are vulnerable to economic downturns, such as changes in agricultural prices or demand for goods, leading to job instability and economic uncertainty for workers.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, the absence of large employers and unions in rural areas means workers have fewer protections and less bargaining power to advocate for higher wages, benefits, or improved working conditions.<sup>20</sup> With limited transportation and infrastructure in many rural counties, workers also face logistical challenges, such as long commutes, reduced access to healthcare and childcare, and limited internet connectivity, which can affect job performance and career advancement.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, rural workers often have fewer opportunities for education and skills training, which limits their mobility into higher-paying or specialized fields.<sup>22</sup> Collectively, these factors make it harder for rural workers in Mississippi to achieve economic security and access the protections and resources they need to thrive.<sup>23</sup>





## The Counties with the greatest percentage losses<sup>29</sup>



**NOTE: All numbers are negative**

Source: Mississippi Department of Employment Security

Infrastructure challenges in the Delta exacerbate these economic vulnerabilities. Broadband access remains below 50% in some counties, limiting opportunities for remote work, education, and economic development.<sup>30</sup> Educational attainment is also lower than the state average, with about 25% of Delta residents holding a high school diploma or less, reducing access to higher-wage jobs.<sup>31</sup>

The Delta's demographic profile further highlights its uniqueness and challenges. The region has a majority Black population, with some counties ranging from 60% to over 80% Black, compared to the state average of 38%.<sup>32</sup> White residents often account for less than 40% of the population, and other racial and ethnic groups, such as Hispanic, Asian, and Native American populations, each make up less than 5%.<sup>33</sup>

These characteristics make the Delta unique in the region's social and economic landscape, but economically it is a struggling part of Mississippi. Similarly, unemployment in the Delta often exceeds 7%, compared to the state's 3.5% average.<sup>34</sup> These challenges stem from the region's historical reliance on agriculture and systemic racial disparities in education, income, and access to resources.<sup>35</sup>

Overall, the state's population loss weakens workers' rights because there are fewer people available to work, and less demand for workers.<sup>36</sup> In places with big population losses, employers do not feel as much pressure to raise wages or improve working conditions, raise wages, or offer benefits because there are fewer people competing for jobs.<sup>37</sup> Workers in these areas have fewer options to move or negotiate for better pay and benefits.<sup>38</sup> With fewer people, it's also harder to push for better worker protection.<sup>39</sup> This creates a cycle of economic challenges and makes workers more vulnerable to being treated unfairly.<sup>40</sup>

## Age:

In addition to Mississippi's declining population, the state's older population is increasing. Approximately 16.5% of Mississippi's residents are now 65 years or older, compared to the national average of 16%.<sup>41</sup> The proportion of the population aged 60 and older is also growing more rapidly than other age groups.<sup>42</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by 2030, 25.3% of Mississippi's population will be 60 or older.<sup>43</sup> This trend is expected to continue, with projections indicating that by 2030, nearly one in five Mississippians will be of retirement age.<sup>44</sup>

## The older population is increasing, while the Mississippi state population is declining



### 29.3%

Increase in Mississippi population of adults 65+ between 2010 and 2021.

### 15.9%

of Mississippi over 65+  
In some countries older adults make up nearly 25% of the population

### Aging population Density

- 1 Dot = 100 People Age 65+

State Total: 474,270

Source: Mississippi Department of Employment Security

Mississippi's aging population affects workers' rights by creating labor shortages and putting pressure on social services.<sup>45</sup> As more people retire, fewer workers are available, especially in industries like healthcare, manufacturing, and agriculture.<sup>46</sup> With fewer young workers entering the workforce, employers may offer lower wages and benefits, knowing there's less competition for jobs.<sup>47</sup>

An aging population also strains healthcare and pension systems, which can take resources away from improving labor protections or addressing workplace issues like unsafe conditions or wage disparities.<sup>48</sup> Older workers may face age-related discrimination, particularly in hiring, promotions, and job security, as employers may favor younger, less expensive workers.<sup>49</sup> With fewer people to advocate for change, such as through unions or worker advocacy groups, the ability to push for stronger workers' rights protections becomes more difficult, leaving all workers at risk of lower wages, limited benefits, and workplace exploitation.<sup>50</sup>

## Race

Mississippi's demographic composition is becoming increasingly diverse. White residents currently make up 56.02% of the population.<sup>51</sup> Although they remain the majority, the white population has been gradually decreasing.<sup>52</sup> Conversely, minoritized groups are growing in number, with Mississippi expected to be the

majority minority by 2054, average of 12.2%, making Mississippi the state with the largest proportion of Black residents.<sup>54</sup> And while the Hispanic community is smaller, it has seen substantial growth and now comprises about 3.55% of the population.<sup>55</sup>

Race and Hispanic Origin	Percentage
White alone, percent	58.7%
Black or African American alone, percent	37.8%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone, percent	0.7%
Asian alone, percent	1.2%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, percent	0.1%
Two or More Races, percent	1.5%
Hispanic or Latino, percent	3.9%
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, percent	55.6%

Source: United States Census Bureau

Understanding the racial composition of Mississippi's workforce is crucial to addressing why many Mississippians, despite being employed, lack the resources to thrive.<sup>56</sup> In Mississippi, race significantly impacts wages and the economic well-being of workers, presenting challenges, such as discrimination, unequal pay, and limited access to career advancement. For example, Black workers often earn less than their white counterparts due to systemic barriers like discriminatory practices and unequal access to education and job opportunities.<sup>57</sup>

*As the state with the largest percentage of African Americans, the economic and social well-being of African Americans is a vital component of Mississippi's overall health.*

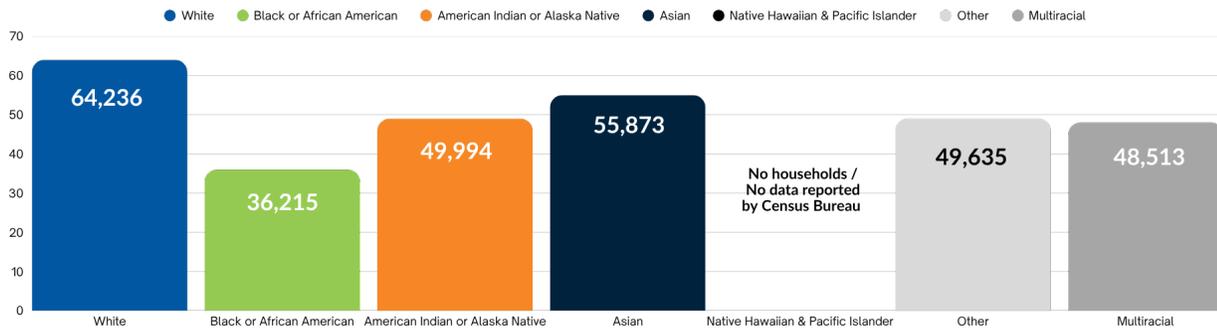
-Income Inequality

Income Inequality

Income inequality in wages by race in Mississippi is a significant issue, with Black and Hispanic workers often earning considerably less than their white counterparts. For instance, for every dollar that a white Mississippian makes, a Black Mississippian makes \$0.75 and a Hispanic Mississippian makes \$0.71.<sup>58</sup> This wage gap adds up overtime. White workers earn an average of \$64,236 annually, while Black workers earn \$36,215—a difference of \$28,021.<sup>59</sup> This income disparity is substantial enough that the gap alone is sufficient for a single person to survive.

## Mississippi median household income diversity across racial categories

In 2022, White households had the highest median income of 64,236.

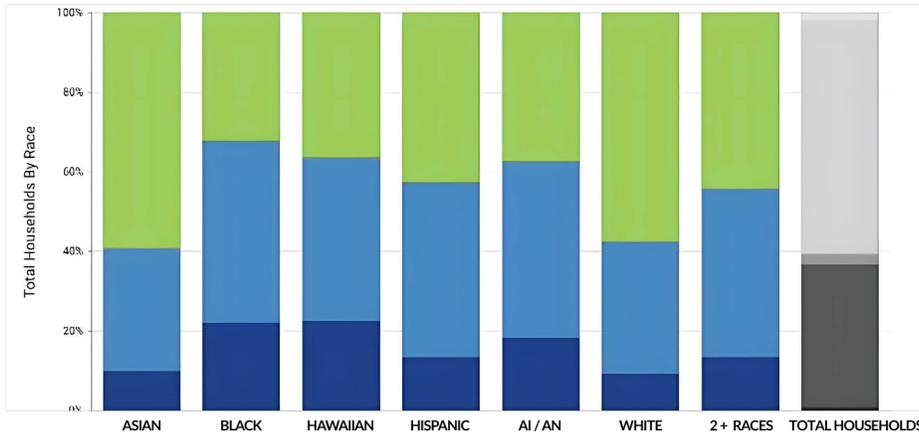


Source: Neilsberg Research

## Financial Hardship is Not Equally Distributed

By total number, groups with the largest population of households below the ALICE Threshold tend to also be in the largest demographic groups. However, when looking at the proportion of each group that is below the ALICE Threshold, it is clear that some groups are more likely to be ALICE than others.

Households by Race/Ethnicity, Mississippi, 2022



Source: United Way

This wage disparity is rooted in a history of systemic racism and discrimination, which has limited access to quality education, high-paying jobs, and career advancement opportunities for people of color.<sup>60</sup> In Mississippi, these disparities are further exacerbated by the state's economic model, which relies heavily on low-wage industries. Black and Hispanic workers are more likely to be employed in these lower-paying sectors and face additional barriers such as discriminatory hiring practices and a lack of access to networks and resources that could lead to better job opportunities.<sup>61</sup> As a result, they experience lower income levels, reduced economic mobility, and limited opportunities for wealth accumulation compared to white workers.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, workers of color are more likely to be employed in jobs without comprehensive benefits like healthcare, paid leave, and retirement plans, further impacting their economic security and overall well-being.<sup>63</sup>

### Mississippi

## Mississippi's earnings disparity relative to white workers

Race or Ethnicity	No. of Workers	Share of Workers	Average Weekly Earnings	Earnings of Dollar
White	727,707	59.67%	\$912.00	\$1.00
Black	431,253	35.36%	\$684.03	\$0.75
American Indian / American Indian	2,652	0.22%	\$707.51	\$0.78
Asian/Pacific Islander	13,507	1.11%	\$730.27	\$0.80
Hispanic/ Latino	32,174	2.64%	\$651.35	\$0.71
Multiracial	12,298	1.01%	\$535.74	\$0.59

Source: United States Department of Labor

Income disparities also exist for women. Women in Mississippi earn less on average than their male counterparts, even when performing similar jobs or holding similar qualifications. For every dollar that a male makes in Mississippi, a female makes \$0.74.<sup>64</sup> This, too, is especially concerning because in Mississippi, eight out of ten Black women are the breadwinners of their families.<sup>65</sup> This disparity means that women have less income to support themselves and their families, save for emergencies, or invest in their futures. The gap also compounds over time, leading to substantial differences in lifetime earnings and retirement savings. Additionally, the gender pay gap can impact access to healthcare, education, and housing, further perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting opportunities for advancement.

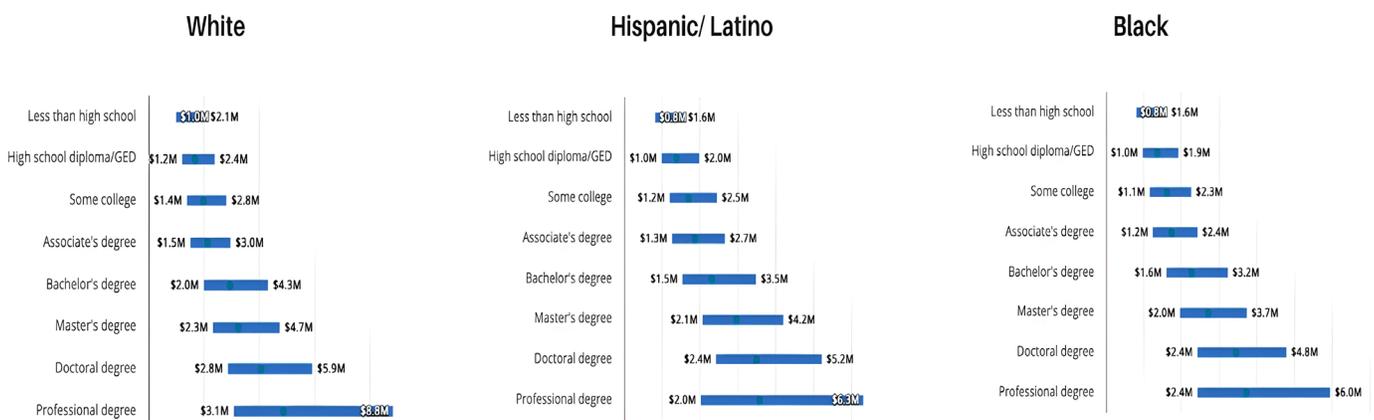


## Mississippi's earnings disparity relative to male workers

Sex	Number of Workers	Share of Workers	Average Weekly Earnings	Earnings of Dollar
Male	626,475	51%	\$937.53	\$1.00
Female	593,188	49%	\$696.64	\$0.74

Source: United States Department of Labor

For Black and Hispanic women, it's worse. Black women, on average, earn significantly less than both their white male and female counterparts, as well as Black men. Black women in Mississippi are making 55 cents to the dollar.<sup>66</sup> Over a year, Black women are losing over \$20,000 a year.<sup>67</sup> This wage disparity limits their financial stability and reduces their ability to invest in essential areas like housing, education, and healthcare. Consequently, this gap contributes to higher rates of poverty among Black women, negatively impacting their families and communities. By perpetuating economic inequality and limiting opportunities for upward mobility, the gender pay gap for Black women ultimately undermines Mississippi's potential for a more prosperous and equitable society.



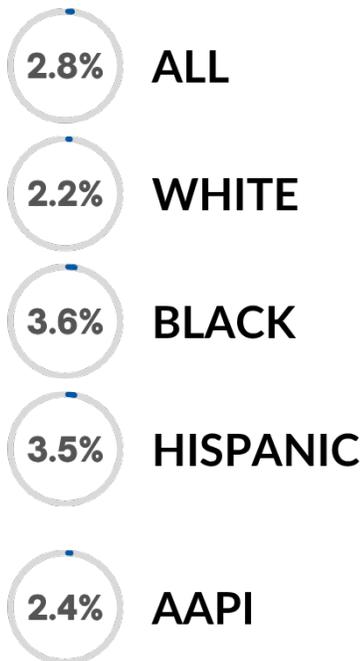
Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce



### Unemployment By Race

Racial disparities in unemployment rates underscore deep-seated systemic issues that continue to undermine the economic stability and progress of minority groups. For instance, Black and Hispanic populations face disproportionately high levels of joblessness compared to their white counterparts. Recent data shows that the unemployment rate for Black Mississippians (3.6%) is nearly double that of white residents (2.2%).<sup>68</sup> Also, the Hispanic population in Mississippi, though smaller than the Black population, is growing and contributing significantly to the state's economy. However, Hispanic Mississippians (3.5%) also experience higher unemployment rates, and their struggles are often overshadowed by broader discussions on immigration.<sup>69</sup> This persistent disparity highlights that improvements in economic indicators do not necessarily translate into equitable outcomes for all segments of the population.

## Mississippi



Source: Economic Policy Institute

In regions with growing populations of Latino or other minority workers, there may also be increased vulnerability to exploitation if there are language barriers or limited access to labor protections.<sup>70</sup> Without strong enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and policies that promote equal opportunity, existing disparities are exacerbated, making it more difficult for workers to secure fair wages, job stability, and adequate benefits.<sup>71</sup>

Overall, shifting demographics in Mississippi underscore the need for inclusive labor policies that protect all workers, regardless of race or background.<sup>72</sup>

## Industry Insights: The Impact of Jobs and Employment on Workers in Mississippi

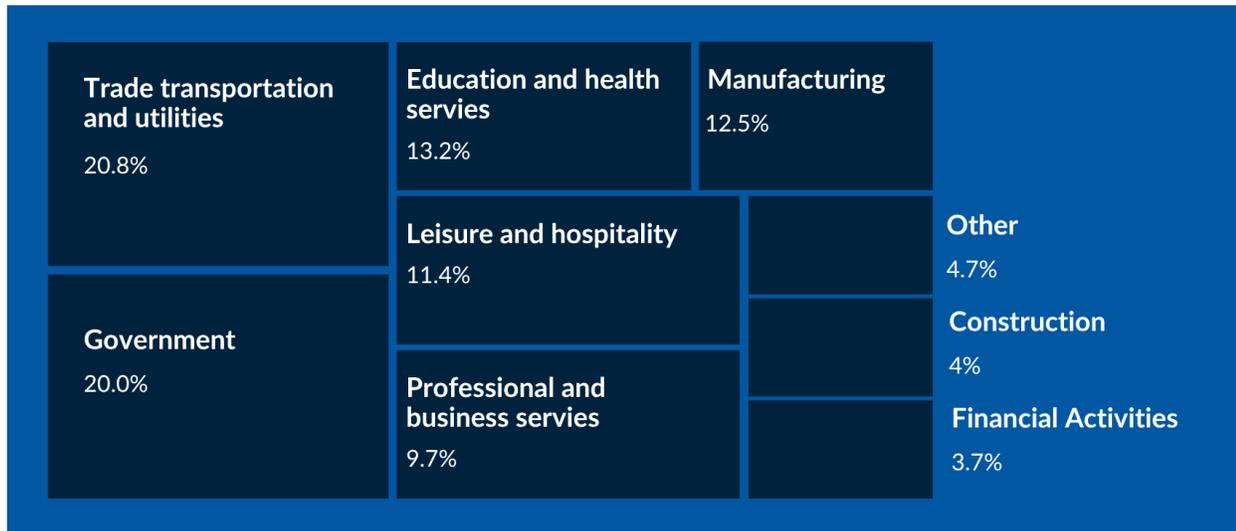
Critical components that define the state's labor market, including the types of jobs available and the employment status of its workforce help provide a better understanding of the current state of workers' rights in Mississippi, highlighting the areas where progress is needed and the opportunities for creating a more equitable and supportive labor environment for workers across the state.

### *Jobs*

Understanding Mississippi's job market is essential for workers' rights because it reveals the availability of jobs, the location of jobs, demand for skills, and prevailing wages. This knowledge helps identify economic strengths and weaknesses, guiding efforts to align job training with market needs, and addressing issues like income inequality and discriminatory practices. It also informs advocacy for fair labor standards and equitable economic opportunities, ensuring that workers can secure stable, well-paying jobs with essential benefits.

### Mississippi

## Top industries of employment



Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce



Overall, Mississippi's economy is diverse, providing a broad range of job opportunities. Over 65% of Mississippians are employed by private companies.<sup>73</sup> Although the majority of businesses in Mississippi are classified as small, major employers such as Nissan, Toyota, Viking, Amazon, Milwaukee Tools, and Sanderson Farms play a significant role in integrating Mississippi's workforce into the global economy.<sup>74</sup> However, many of these jobs are not easily accessible for a significant number of workers across the state.<sup>75</sup> Often, workers must travel long distances, incur higher commuting costs, and spend more time away from home to reach these opportunities, which can negatively impact their overall economic well-being.<sup>76</sup>



It is also important to recognize that, while private sector jobs make up most employment opportunities, Mississippi's economy relies heavily on government support. Local, state, and federal jobs employ 18.6% of Mississippians, which is higher than the national average of 14.3%.<sup>78</sup> Traditionally, governmental positions provide economic stability, good jobs benefits, and greater worker protections than private sector jobs. However, this sector does face several challenges.

For instance, budget constraints often limit salaries and resources, making it hard to attract and retain talent, especially in rural areas. The state's low tax and spending model has led to underfunded public services and inadequate infrastructure, impacting job performance. Political pressures influence hiring and promotions, leading to less merit-based advancements. Additionally, disparities in pay and benefits among local, state, and federal employees can cause dissatisfaction and high turnover rates. Finally, the lack of union representation limits employees' ability to advocate for better working conditions and protections.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), in 2023, only 7.0 percent of wage and salary workers in Mississippi were union members, significantly lower than the national average of 10.0 percent.<sup>79</sup> This disparity is largely attributable to Mississippi’s status as a “right-to-work state.”<sup>80</sup> In short, the phrase “right to work” refers to an employee’s ability to work for an employer without joining a union or paying agency fees for representation.<sup>81</sup> These laws undermine unions’ bargaining strength. Right-to-work laws lead to lower wages and benefits, weaken workplace protections, and decrease the likelihood that employers will engage in negotiations with their employees.<sup>82</sup> Although these laws are advanced as a strategy for attracting new businesses to the state, research from the Economic Policy Institute demonstrates that right- to-work laws do not positively impact job growth.<sup>83</sup>

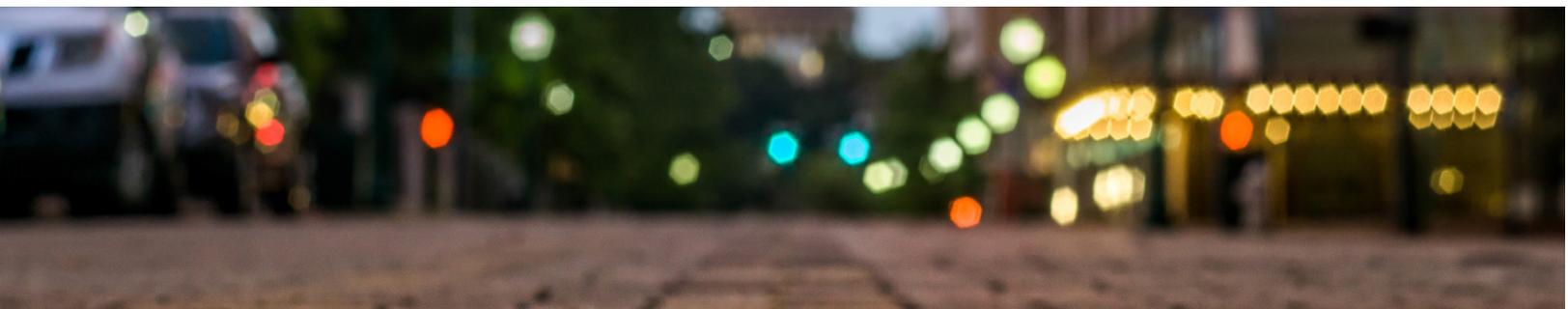
In addition, Mississippi is a hub for small businesses. Approximately 99% of the state’s businesses classify as small businesses.<sup>84</sup> These businesses provide employment opportunities within local communities, but they are more vulnerable to economic fluctuations and lack the financial buffers and benefits of larger corporations.

### *Employment Opportunities*

Mississippians face a significant challenge in the job market, characterized by overrepresentation in low-wage sectors and near exclusion from high-wage industries. As a result, while Mississippians are working hard, many workers in these sectors struggle to make ends meet, often living paycheck to paycheck without the security of healthcare, retirement plans, or adequate paid leave—factors that limit their potential to thrive.<sup>85</sup>

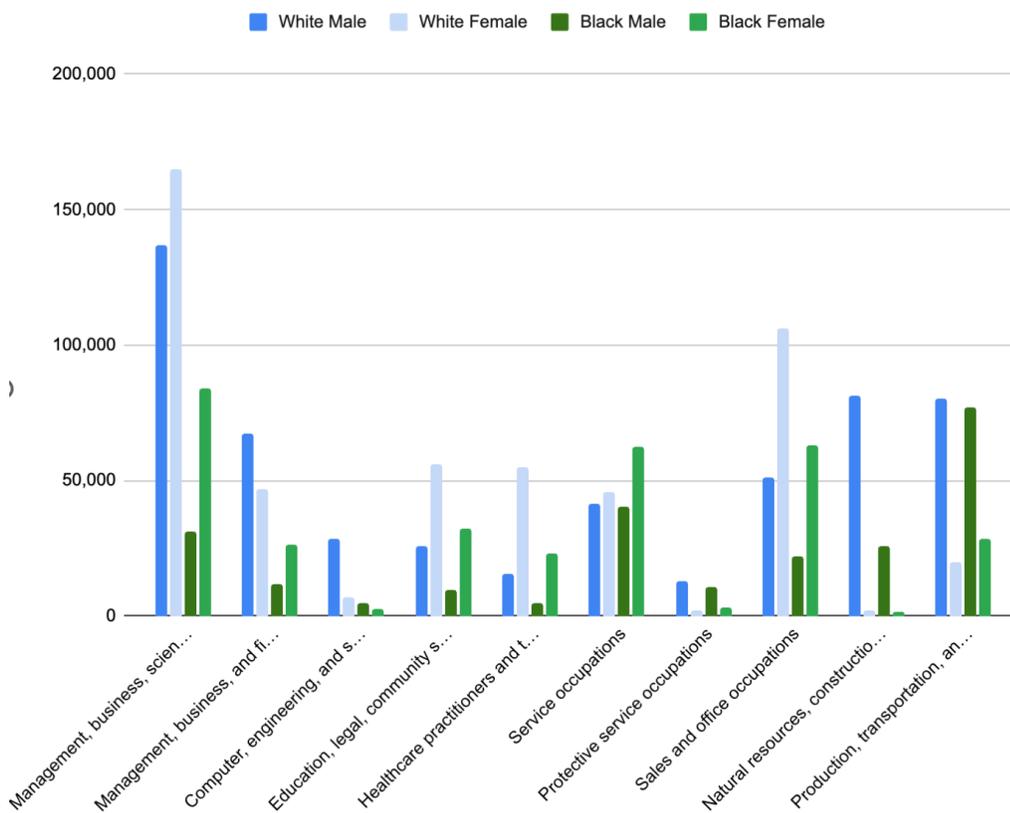
	Example(s)	Nurses, physical therapists, dental hygienists, medical assistants	Rank, the South (number out of 16)
Service Occupations	Food service, retail, customer service	15	5
Manufacturing Industry	Assembly line worker, technician	8	3
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical Occupations	Nurses, physical therapists, dental hygienists, medical assistants	3	2

Source: United States Census Bureau



Employment opportunities in Mississippi also appear to differ significantly by race and gender, as highlighted by disparities in occupational representation. According to the data, white workers, particularly men, are concentrated in higher-paying sectors such as management and STEM-related fields, while Black workers, especially women, are overrepresented in lower-wage service and office roles. Black men are heavily employed in labor-intensive jobs, such as production and transportation, which often lack upward mobility. These disparities reflect systemic barriers to equitable employment opportunities, perpetuating wage gaps, and limiting access to resources like healthcare and retirement plans. This uneven distribution underscores how race and gender influence economic security and workforce outcomes for Mississippians.

Sex by Occupation for the Civilian Employed Population 16 Years and Over



Sex by Occupation for the Civilian Employed Population 16 Years and Over

Source: United States Census Bureau

These disparities result in minority workers being concentrated in lower-paying jobs with limited advancement prospects, hindering their ability to save, invest, and build generational wealth.<sup>86</sup> Black people and other workers of color are more likely to lack access to comprehensive benefits like healthcare, paid leave, and retirement plans, further affecting their economic security and overall well-being.<sup>87</sup> Addressing these issues requires targeted policies and initiatives to reduce racial disparities in wages, improve access to education and training, and dismantle systemic barriers perpetuating economic inequality.

### Automation

Moreover, these jobs are increasingly vulnerable to automated systems and robots and outsourcing to private or third-party firms, often located in different regions or countries. Service occupations, such as food preparation and serving, and retail sales, face a 46% and 28% higher likelihood of automation, respectively.<sup>88</sup> Healthcare practitioners also face a 21% chance of automation.<sup>89</sup> The manufacturing sector in Mississippi is particularly affected, with workers encountering a 57% probability of job automation due to these trends.<sup>90</sup> This shift could displace workers and reduce job opportunities for those whose skills do not match new technological demands. It affects job availability and presents challenges for workers who may lack the skills required for other types of employment.

### High-Wage Jobs

Mississippi faces a critical challenge: it ranks at the bottom nationally for employment in high-wage sectors such as management, business, financial occupations, information technology, and STEM fields like computer, engineering, and science.<sup>91</sup> Ultimately, this stark reality not only limits economic growth, but also impedes the state's ability to offer a stable and prosperous future for its residents.

In addition, these rankings emphasize the urgent need for policies that build a robust workforce capable of filling these high-wage roles. Addressing this deficit requires a holistic policy approach that strengthens workforce skills through targeted education and training programs while also investing in the infrastructure such as childcare, healthcare access, and public assistance—that enables individuals to pursue and sustain employment in these fields.

	Examples	Rank, nationally Scale of 51	Rank, the South Scale of 16
Management, Business, and Financial Occupations	Accountant, Chief Financial Officer, Human Resources Manager	51	16
Information Industry	Web Developer, IT Support Specialist, Cybersecurity Analyst	51	16
Computer, Engineering, and Science Occupations	Electrical engineer, Biologist, Computer Scientist	51	16

This underrepresentation highlights an economic gap that, if addressed, could empower workers with better-paying jobs, strengthen local communities, and enhance Mississippi's appeal to industries seeking skilled talent and could attract forward-thinking companies and industries that are more likely to invest in communities.

High-wage jobs are crucial for Mississippi's economic vitality for several reasons. Investing in high-wage sectors is not merely about enhancing individual prosperity. It's also about fostering a resilient and sustainable economy for the state. The current lack of representation in these fields underscores a significant economic divide.

### *Improving Job Quality*

Improving job quality is essential because it directly impacts workers' economic stability, well-being, and ability to contribute meaningfully to their communities. High-quality jobs generally offer fair wages, benefits, and opportunities for advancement, which help employees support their families, invest in their future, and access better health and education. For communities, quality jobs reduce poverty rates, boost local economies through increased spending, and attract further investment by creating a skilled, stable workforce. For employers, high-quality jobs lead to higher productivity, greater employee satisfaction, and lower turnover rates, which can make a region more competitive and appealing for new industries. Ultimately, prioritizing job quality fosters a stronger, more resilient economy that benefits individuals, businesses, and the community as a whole.

To improve overall job quality, Mississippi can prioritize policy changes that make the state a more attractive environment for both employers and skilled professionals. For example, without sufficient investments in infrastructure, education, and workforce development, job quality in the state may stagnate, limiting opportunities for workers to secure stable, well-paying positions. Infrastructure improvements, such as reliable transportation and broadband access, are essential for connecting workers to jobs and supporting business operations. Education and workforce development ensure that workers have the skills needed for higher-quality roles and career advancement. In addition, improved job quality in Mississippi demands investment in essential support systems such as affordable childcare, healthcare, and public assistance that enable workers to thrive. By addressing these gaps, Mississippi can strengthen its ability to retain and attract well-paying jobs, driving economic growth and building a more competitive job market.

## **Other Economic Indicators**

By analyzing key economic indicators like labor force participation, GDP, unemployment, and income, policymakers can gain a comprehensive understanding of Mississippi's overall economic environment and its impact on workers. It allows for the identification of economic weaknesses, the effectiveness of policy measures, and the need for targeted interventions to improve job quality, wage levels, and overall economic health.

### *Unemployment*

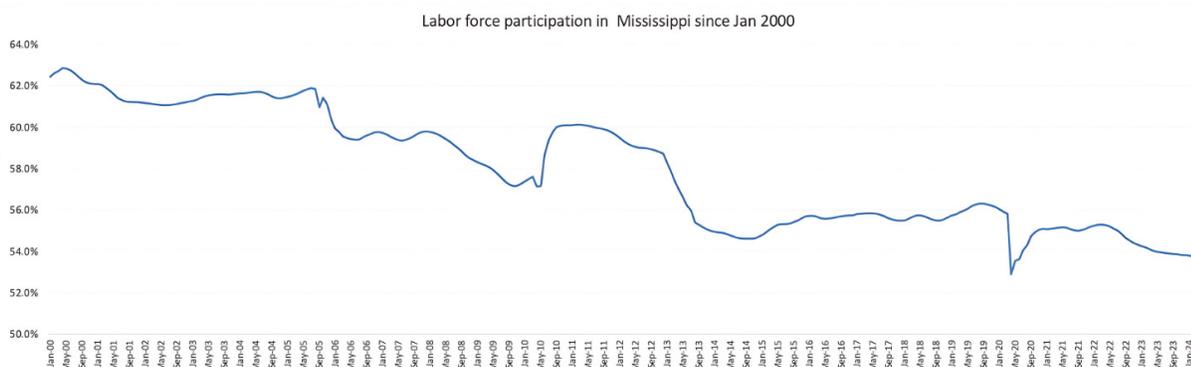
The unemployment rate reveals the proportion of the labor force that is actively seeking work but cannot find employment.<sup>92</sup> A high unemployment rate can signal economic distress, limited job opportunities, and

challenges for workers in securing stable employment. Conversely, a low unemployment rate might suggest a healthier job market, although it is important to consider the quality and sustainability of those jobs. Mississippi's unemployment rate stands at 2.8%, below the national average of 4%, indicating that a higher proportion of Mississippians are employed compared to the nation as a whole.<sup>93</sup>

While Mississippi's lower unemployment rate might initially suggest a favorable economic situation, the state and its residents are facing significant economic challenges. For example, even though Mississippi has a low unemployment rate, the state's labor force participation rate is also low.<sup>94</sup> This means that while unemployment numbers are down, employment has not increased, and a significant number of Mississippians are not actively working or looking for work.<sup>95</sup>

### Labor Force Participation

Labor force participation rates are a crucial indicator of economic health and workforce engagement.<sup>96</sup> This indicator measures the percentage of the working-age population (aged 16 and older) that is either employed or actively seeking employment.<sup>97</sup> A high labor force participation rate indicates a strong, engaged workforce, while a declining rate can suggest economic difficulties, such as a lack of job opportunities or discouragement among job seekers. Mississippi's low labor participation rate of 54.9%, compared to 62.2% nationally, and its trend of declining labor force participation has significant implications for the state's economy.<sup>98</sup>



Source: Economic Policy Institute

For example, a low labor force participation rate in Mississippi impacts the economy by reducing overall economic output and limiting growth potential. It results in a smaller tax base, affecting public services and infrastructure investment. Additionally, it correlates with higher poverty and inequality, increasing the demand for social services. This situation may also indicate a skills mismatch or barriers to employment, such as inadequate access to childcare or transportation. Overall, it hinders economic development and efforts to create a more prosperous and equitable state.

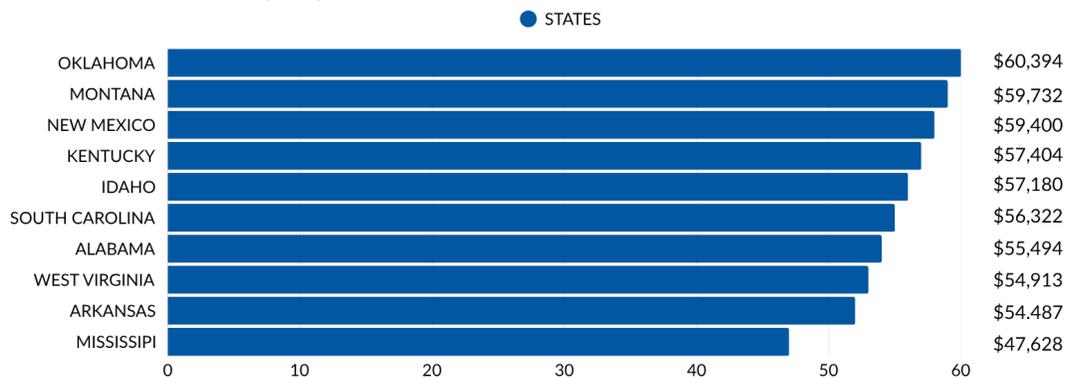
### GDP

GDP measures the total economic output of a state, reflecting the state's overall economic activity and productivity.<sup>99</sup> A growing GDP suggests a robust economy, while a stagnating or declining GDP can indicate economic challenges that affect job availability and wage growth.

Mississippi's GDP per capita remains below the national average and is the lowest among all states.<sup>100</sup> This indicates that, despite ongoing economic activity, the wealth generated per person in Mississippi is lower compared to other states. Low GDP in Mississippi also negatively impacts the economy by reducing income levels, limiting job opportunities, and hindering business growth. It, too, leads to lower tax revenues, which can restrict funding for essential public services like education and healthcare. And it constrains economic development and perpetuates poverty and inequality.

## Seven of the 10 states with the lowest capita GDP are in the South, Mississippi has the lowest of all states

Ten states with the lowest GDP per capita, 2022



GDP per capita is state GDP divided by resident population. GDP in 2022 dollars

Source: Economic Policy Institute

### Median Household Income

Median household income provides insight into the typical earnings of households within the state.<sup>101</sup> It reflects the standard of living and economic stability of residents. Lower median household income can indicate that workers are struggling to earn sufficient wages to cover their basic needs and maintain a reasonable quality of life. It also highlights income inequality and economic disparities within the state.

Mississippians have some of the lowest incomes and earnings in the country.<sup>102</sup> The national median household income is \$74,755, whereas Mississippi's median household income stands at \$52,719 a difference of approximately \$22,000.<sup>103</sup> This ranks Mississippi last among the nation and across the South.<sup>104</sup>

*Low wages could be contributed to the lack of state minimum wage.*

Mississippi adheres to the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, a rate that has not been adjusted since 2009.<sup>105</sup> States have the power to set minimum wages above the federal level.<sup>106</sup> Currently, thirty states and Washington, D.C. have established minimum wages higher than the federal level.<sup>107</sup> In 2023 alone, 27 states and 42 cities and counties created laws to raise their minimum wages, with some that adjust for inflation, leading to annual increases.<sup>108</sup> The latest federal proposal, the Raise the Wage Act of 2023, would have gradually increased the federal minimum wage to \$17 per hour by 2028 if passed.<sup>109</sup>

Raising the minimum wage in Mississippi is critical for improving workers' quality of life by reducing poverty and ensuring they earn enough to cover basic needs like food, housing, and healthcare. It can reduce financial strain on low-income families and decrease reliance on public assistance. Additionally, higher wages boost local economic activity as workers spend more, stimulating business growth and job creation.



Source: Economic Policy Institute

#### Per Capita Income

Per capita income provides insight into the average income earned by individuals in a state. It helps assess the standard of living and economic well-being of residents.<sup>110</sup> Mississippi's per capita of \$48,100 currently ranks 50th in the United States.<sup>111</sup> Generally, low per capita income can highlight issues with wage levels and economic disparity, impacting workers' ability to meet basic needs and pursue a higher quality of life.

Within the state, counties with lower per capita incomes are typically rural, with limited job opportunities and lower levels of educational attainment. For example, in counties where agriculture once drove the local

economy, income levels have declined due to a lack of state investment in economic diversification. These areas often have fewer healthcare and educational facilities, minimal public transportation, and a scarcity of well-paying jobs, which can trap residents in low-income cycles.

In contrast, counties with higher per capita incomes generally benefit from a more diverse range of industries, including healthcare, manufacturing, and professional services, that offer higher wages and career growth. These counties typically have more highly educated populations, often due to proximity to universities or colleges, and benefit from better access to infrastructure like broadband, public transit, and business services. These factors support a more vibrant local economy, enabling residents to earn higher incomes, contribute to community growth, and enjoy a better quality of life.

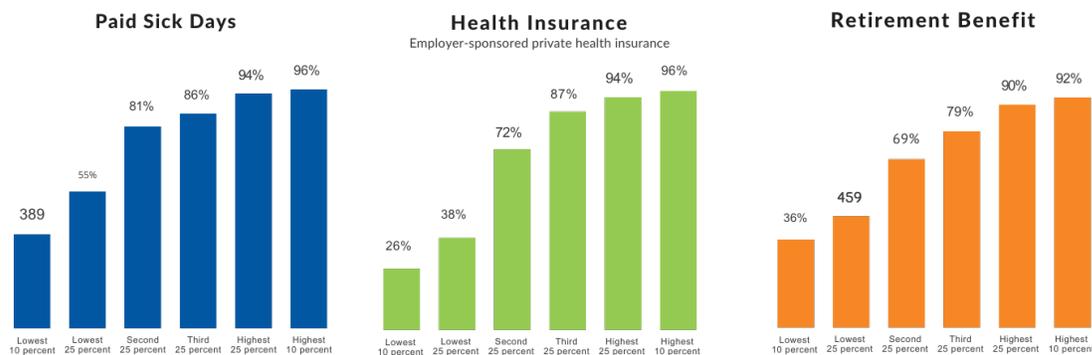




Workers experiencing poverty often struggle with job instability, working in low-wage, temporary, or part-time positions without benefits. This instability is compounded by poor health, which can increase absenteeism and reduce productivity, further undermining employment stability. Additionally, limited access to education and training restricts skill development and job readiness, reducing earning potential and economic mobility. High poverty rates also impact the broader community by decreasing consumer spending and investment, straining public services, and hindering economic growth.

## People who are paid the least also have the fewest basic benefits

Share of U.S. private industry workers with access to select benefits by wage level



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics' National Compensation Survey

It is important to highlight that poverty is not an unavoidable fate but a direct outcome of collective policy decisions. Addressing these issues in the context of worker policy requires improving education and job training, increasing wages, enhancing job stability, and supporting health and well-being to break the cycle of poverty and strengthen the labor market.

### Examining the Impact of Inequality on Workers' Rights in Mississippi

Race, income, employment and educational disparities significantly impact workers' rights in Mississippi, creating a complex web of challenges that disproportionately affect minority and low-income workers. These factors intersect to shape the opportunities, protections, and economic stability available to different groups.

This inequality not only perpetuates economic and social divides but also hampers the overall economic growth and well-being of the state. Addressing these disparities is crucial for ensuring fair and equitable treatment for all workers.

#### *Unemployment by Geography*

In addition, in Mississippi, geography significantly influences opportunity. Where you live in the state can profoundly impact your job prospects, income potential, and overall quality of life. Urban areas like Jackson, Gulfport, and Biloxi generally offer more job opportunities, while rural areas provide more limited options.

Consequently, rural counties experience higher unemployment rates than urban counties. For rural residents, providing for their families often involves traveling significant distances, sometimes across county lines. In Mississippi, 37.4% of employees work outside their county of residence compared to 24.6% nationally, making it the third-highest rate in the country.<sup>114</sup>

Traveling for employment presents its own set of challenges. For residents without reliable personal vehicles, the distance to job opportunities can become insurmountable. Even for those who do own a car, the costs of fuel, maintenance, and time spent commuting can be significant burdens, further complicating their efforts to secure and maintain employment.

Moreover, given the state's high employment rate, expanding unemployment benefits is critical to support Mississippi workers who are struggling during such challenging times. Currently, Mississippi has the lowest maximum unemployment benefits in the U.S. of \$235 per week.<sup>115</sup> The maximum weeks of benefits for Mississippi is 26 weeks. Comparatively, Massachusetts has the highest at \$823.<sup>116</sup> Increased unemployment assistance can help alleviate the financial burdens faced by individuals who may need to travel significant distances for employment, enabling them to maintain stability while seeking new job opportunities.<sup>117</sup> Enhancing unemployment benefits could serve as a crucial safety net, ensuring that workers have the necessary support to navigate the complexities of job loss and economic instability.<sup>118</sup>





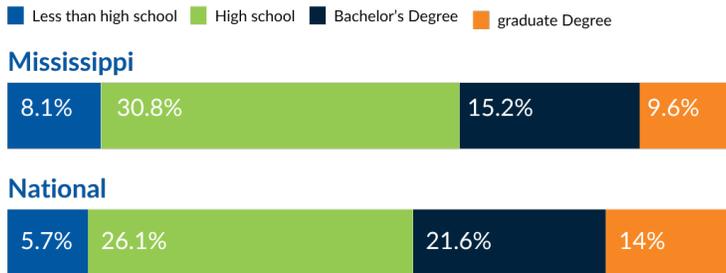
education, with only a quarter of the population holding a bachelor’s degree and just 8.34% having attained a graduate degree.<sup>121</sup>

Even more, national data reveals a troubling trend: Black individuals with college or advanced degrees often earn less than white individuals with lower educational attainment.<sup>122</sup> Factors contributing to this disparity include racial discrimination in hiring and promotion practices, limited access to high-paying industries and occupations, and an unequal distribution of wealth and resources that perpetuate economic inequalities over generations.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, this wage gap persists across various fields and sectors, including healthcare, education, finance, and technology, where Black professionals often earn less than their white counterparts despite having similar qualifications and experience.<sup>124</sup> This phenomenon highlights deeper systemic inequalities rooted in historical and structural racism that continue to shape economic opportunities for Mississippi’s workers.

In all, addressing these disparities is crucial for ensuring equal access to opportunities and improving the overall economic well-being of all Mississippians. And by investing in educational infrastructure, expanding access to affordable higher education, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities, Mississippi can empower its residents to compete more effectively in the modern workforce and contribute to sustained economic growth and prosperity.<sup>125</sup>

Mississippi

Educational attainment profile



NOTE: Totals do not include some college, associate degree

Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce

Mississippi

Graduation Rate

Population	Mississippi
ALL	88.9
WHITE	90.3
BLACK	87.9



## Post-Secondary Enrollment Data

All	60.5%
Female	67.8%
Male	52.7%
Black or African American	54.5%
White	67.9%
Alaskan Native or Native American	70.3%
Asian	78.0%
Hispanic or Latino	44.7%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	77.8%
Two or more races	57.9%

Source: Economic Policy Institute

## Conclusion

Mississippi's past and present economic development strategies have prioritized cheap labor at the expense of true prosperity for all. While these strategies have attracted businesses and created jobs, they have also perpetuated economic disparities and limited opportunities for many workers. It is time for Mississippi to adopt a more comprehensive approach to economic development—one that prioritizes the well-being of all citizens, fosters sustainable growth, and bridges the gap between the wealthy and the economically marginalized. By doing so, Mississippi can build a more resilient, inclusive, and thriving economy for future generations.

To achieve this goal, Mississippi lawmakers must commit to dismantling barriers to economic advancement and championing equitable policies that uplift all residents. Bold action is needed to ensure fair wages, expand access to essential benefits, and promote economic stability. By choosing policies that prioritize the well-being of all citizens, Mississippi can compete in the global economy and transform its economy into one that empowers every individual and family to thrive.

## Policy Recommendations

*Adopt Worker Protections: Protecting workers is vital for ensuring the well-being and prosperity of all Mississippians. Key strategies include:*

- **Implementing and increasing minimum wage laws** to guarantee fair compensation for all workers.
- **Providing paid sick leave and family leave**, allowing workers to address health needs and family responsibilities without financial hardship.
- **Guaranteeing access to healthcare benefits**, including affordable insurance coverage and preventive care services.
- **Protecting workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain** for improved wages, benefits, and working conditions.
- **Expanding unemployment benefits** to support workers during job loss or economic downturns.
- **Implementing fair scheduling practices** to provide predictable schedules and adequate notice of shift changes.
- **Enforcing laws against wage theft and other exploitation** to ensure workers receive the compensation they are legally entitled to.

*Encourage Economic Diversification: Diversifying Mississippi's economy can generate more high-paying jobs. Key strategies include:*

- **Incentivizing business investment** in high-tech and professional sectors.
- **Supporting small businesses** through grants, loans, and entrepreneurial training programs.
- **Developing infrastructure** to attract new industries and enhance economic connectivity.
- **Closing tax loopholes** to ensure corporations contribute their fair share in taxes, providing revenue for essential services and infrastructure.

*Reduce Occupational Segregation: Addressing occupational segregation can help close wage gaps. Key strategies include:*

- **Expanding workforce development programs** to prepare underrepresented groups for high-paying careers.
- **Promoting fair hiring practices** and career advancement opportunities.
- **Encouraging companies to adopt transparent pay scales** and reduce wage discrimination.

*Enhance Educational Opportunities: Investing in education is crucial for empowering residents to compete in the modern workforce and contribute to sustained economic growth. Key strategies include:*

- **Increasing funding for schools**, particularly in underserved areas, to ensure equal educational opportunities.
- **Expanding access to higher education** through scholarships, grants, and support for community colleges and vocational training.
- **Promoting early childhood education** to build a strong foundation for future learning and development.

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