



OXFAM REPORT

BEST STATES TO WORK IN AMERICA DURING COVID-19

A SPECIAL EDITION OF THE BEST STATES TO WORK IN AMERICA INDEX



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America

INTRODUCTION

Workers in America today are facing historic threats to their ability to work safely and provide for their families. We are witnessing a generational crisis, deeply rooted in inequality and injustice, deepened and exposed by a global pandemic. But your experience of this crisis varies greatly based on where you live and work. For the last two years, Oxfam America has produced a Best States to Work Index (BSWI), which tracks how states treat, protect, and pay workers. Formulated in 2017 and published for the first time in 2018, this index was born out of a vacuum left by inadequate federal agencies, static federal policies on wages, and the continued movement toward privatization. The BSWI focused on how states were forced to address this failure of our national institutions to protect workers. The federal minimum wage, for example, has not been increased in over a decade, while the cost of living continues to rise. States stepped up to provide policies and infrastructure where the federal government did not.

As we began to update the index for 2020, the world was plunged into a global pandemic. As the realities of the coronavirus reached the United States, the question of how states treat, protect, and care for workers, especially women in the workplace, became more vital than ever, an issue of survival. The specter of widespread poverty, hunger, and homelessness became very real as the federal government abdicated responsibility by declining to issue a national stay-at-home order or workplace safety mandates, by withholding federal resources, and by telling governors that they were responsible for their residents' well-being.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic made blindingly clear long-standing realities. Workers lack workplace protections and resources. Due to stagnant minimum wages, increased cost of living, and privatized health care, working families disproportionately bear the cost of limited federal support. As a result, these families have little to no savings, and many US working-class communities face poor nutrition and unstable access to affordable food. Many working families are one missed paycheck away from homelessness. The pandemic has also disproportionately affected women and people of color, whose unemployment rates continue to far exceed the national rate. Furthermore, as schools remain closed or transition to remote learning, working mothers are being asked to choose between childcare and employment.² The prescription for this societal illness is the same as before the pandemic, but enacting it is more urgent than ever: we must tackle the structural disempowerment of workers in America, begin to curb the vast inequalities that divide us, and limit the power of corporations and the hyperwealthy over our politics, and we must do so in a way that integrates racial and gender justice.

As the pandemic arrived in the United States at the beginning of 2020, the current presidential administration repeatedly dismissed its seriousness, thus losing time to prepare for it. By early April, when the United States developed multiple hot spots, particularly in New York and New Orleans, there was no federal plan in place to address the pandemic.³ Though the executive branch of the federal government shirked responsibility, the legislative branch passed several bills meant to provide support for workers amid a pandemic, thus beginning the long process needed to address the societal malady that has brought us to this juncture.

On March 18, Congress passed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which mandated free COVID-19 testing, established coronavirus-related paid leave for many workers, and expanded unemployment insurance, food security initiatives, and federal money for Medicaid.

On March 27, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, which granted federal stipends of up to \$1,200 to individuals and added \$600 a week to unemployment benefits through the end of July. And on April 23, Congress passed the Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act to provide grants for small businesses and to fund public health measures.⁴ While these laws were all crucial for supporting workers and working families, they were temporary stopgaps for surging unemployment and growing cases of COVID-19 across the country. And states still had to provide most of the resources and public health measures for their residents.⁵ Working families continued to be incredibly vulnerable, especially when many elements of these congressional relief packages expired on July 31.

With this in mind, we developed a new version of the BSWI, one that specifically addresses the challenges that working families face during this pandemic and recognizes the current recession's uniquely gendered impact. The Best States to Work During COVID-19 Index assesses and ranks all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico on how well they are proactively protecting, supporting, and defending their workers amid a pandemic.⁶ Whereas the standard BSWI focused on three central dimensions of working as such—wages, worker protections, and the right to organize—the COVID-19 edition shifts to three dimensions that affect working families particularly during the pandemic: **worker protections, health care, and unemployment support**. While these issues affect all workers, our report demonstrates that they affect women disproportionately. The pandemic has revealed that, in addition to protecting employed workers, states must proactively support unemployed workers and provide health care coverage when companies close.

These three dimensions of the current index encompass 27 data points relating to policies on childcare, food assistance, personal protective equipment (PPE), paid leave, expanded unemployment benefits, and free COVID-19 treatment. Each dimension raises a number of questions: How have states protected workers during the pandemic? How have they protected workers at work? How have they supported workers prevented from working due to the pandemic? And how have they sought to keep workers healthy? In some but not all cases, states produced a strong array of policies to support and protect workers.

The pandemic has exposed many truths. Workers need and deserve affordable and quality childcare and health care, fair and adequate wages, protective equipment, paid leave, dignity, and a meaningful say in their working conditions.

Low-wage workers, who have long faced diminished resources and little appreciation, have known these truths for years. While many people now understand the importance of warehouse workers, truck drivers, farmworkers, meatpackers, grocery workers, and elder care and health workers, these workers are still not adequately paid or properly protected, their jobs still undervalued and under-resourced. While we have a great deal more to do at both the state and federal levels, we can learn from the state-level experiments in good (and bad) governance during this pandemic. This index is just a first step on that path of learning.

WHICH STATES ARE AT THE TOP AND THE BOTTOM OF THE INDEX?

Some states have been proactive amid COVID-19 in modeling policies and practices that value workers in a way that should not be limited to a pandemic. **Washington** topped the index, with an overall score of 76.41 out of a possible 100 points. **New Jersey**, which came in second overall with 72.17, tied several states for fourth in health care—all of which expanded Medicaid and telehealth and instituted a premium payment grace period—and ranked second on unemployment support by enacting policies such as moratoriums on evictions and utility shutoffs. **California** came in third overall with a score of 72.03 but ranked first in worker protection policies; it was the only state to institute unemployment funds for undocumented workers during the time period we considered. However, California implemented fewer policies to secure housing, such as eviction moratoriums and rent forgiveness, than did top-ranked Washington. **Massachusetts** came in fourth overall with a score of 71.66, due in part to its strong worker protections and unemployment payments.

At the bottom of the index was **Alabama**, with a total score of 17.76, followed by **Missouri**, with a score of 22.08, and **Georgia**, with a score of 23.08. These states scored very low on worker protection policies and unemployment support due to their choice not to enact paid leave, mask mandates, or PPE requirements and their failure to support out-of-work individuals. All three of these states did not provide housing assistance.

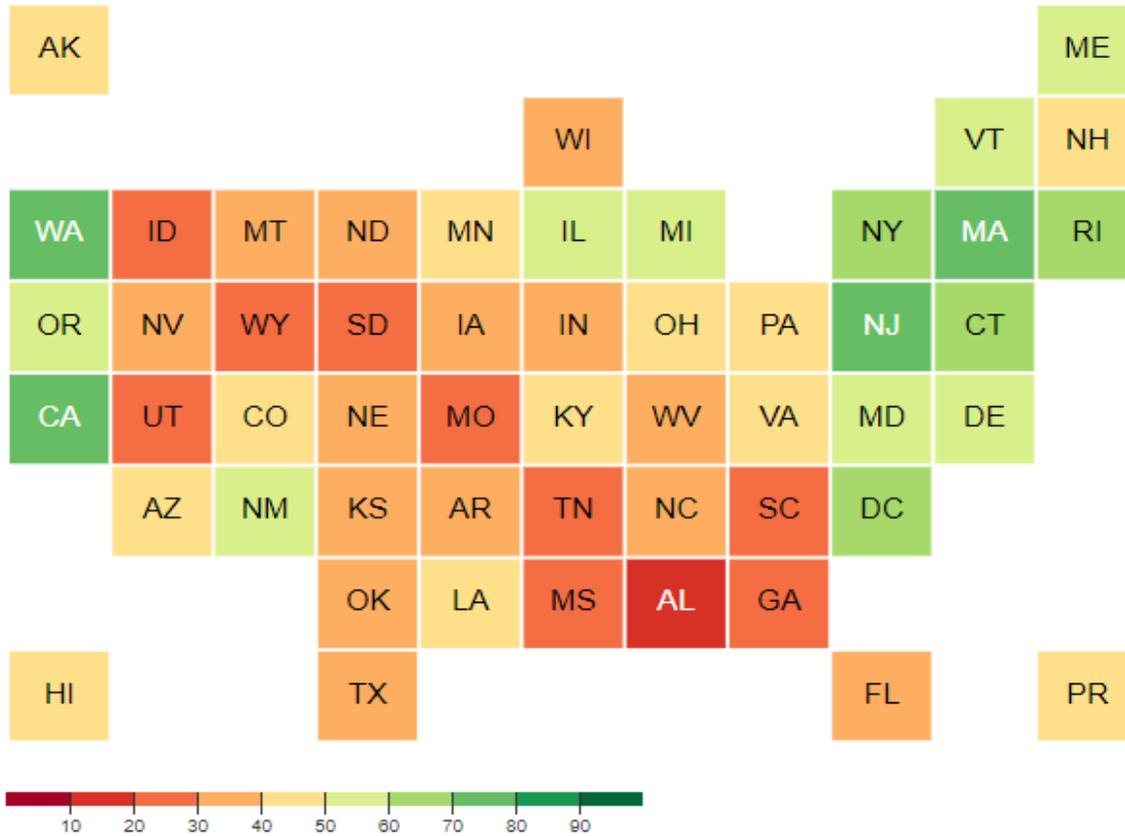
Regionally, the Northeast more proactively supported workers. Of the top ten states in the index, six are in the Northeast: New Jersey (2), Massachusetts (4), Connecticut (5), New York (6), Rhode Island (8), and Vermont (9). Three Western states made the top ten—Washington (1), California (3), and Oregon (10)—and three fell in the bottom ten—Wyoming (49), Utah (45), and Idaho (43). The Midwest just missed the top ten; its highest-scoring state, Illinois, ranking 11th, but the region did have representation in the bottom ten: Missouri (51) and South Dakota (47).

The South is disproportionately represented at the bottom of our index, with Alabama (52), Georgia (50), Mississippi (48), South Carolina (46), and Tennessee (44) all in the bottom ten. These low rankings were due to a confluence of factors that created a perfect storm of neglect in the face of a global pandemic: limited worker protection policies such as paid leave, PPE requirements, or protections against forced return to work; a decision not to expand Medicaid, not to provide telehealth services, and not to expand workers' compensation; and, finally, no rent forgiveness or protection against evictions and utility shutoffs. These same states also lack policies that primarily benefit women workers. Three of the five states lack laws offering protection against workplace sexual harassment, and all except South Carolina lack pregnancy accommodations. None of the five states provide paid family leave; given that women in the United States are more likely than men to take time off when a child is sick, women workers in these Southern states are more likely to have to choose between caring for a loved one and earning an income.⁷

Table 1: The Best States to Work During COVID-19

State	Ranking	Overall Score	Worker Protections (45%)	Health Care (20%)	Unemployment Support (35%)
Washington	1	76.41	83.3	66.3	73.3
New Jersey	2	72.17	79.2	70.0	64.4
California	3	72.03	91.7	70.0	47.9
Massachusetts	4	71.66	83.3	70.0	57.6
Connecticut	5	64.04	66.7	58.8	63.7
New York	6	63.91	79.2	56.3	48.7
District of Columbia	7	62.99	75.0	63.8	47.1
Rhode Island	8	61.67	68.8	55.0	56.4
Vermont	9	60.27	60.4	70.0	54.5
Oregon	10	58.53	58.3	58.8	58.7
Illinois	11	58.47	64.6	85.0	35.5
Maryland	12	55.45	64.6	55.0	44.0
Michigan	13	55.31	58.3	62.5	47.3
New Mexico	14	52.60	54.2	71.3	39.9
Delaware	15	52.43	47.9	62.5	52.5
Maine	16	51.86	54.2	55.0	47.1
Minnesota	17	51.03	52.1	55.0	47.4
Colorado	18	50.77	54.2	55.0	44.0
Pennsylvania	19	50.09	52.1	40.0	53.3
Kentucky	20	47.53	29.2	70.0	58.3
Puerto Rico	21	46.35	56.3	66.3	22.3
Arizona	22	46.22	50.0	55.0	36.3
Hawaii	23	43.33	41.7	36.3	49.5
Virginia	24	43.29	45.8	55.0	33.3
Ohio	25	42.82	25.0	70.0	50.2
Louisiana	26	42.41	41.7	52.5	37.6
Alaska	27	41.46	35.4	66.3	35.1
Nevada	28	40.97	45.8	40.0	35.3
New Hampshire	29	40.54	27.1	62.5	45.3
Nebraska	30	39.86	35.4	55.0	36.9
Arkansas	31	39.12	29.2	71.3	33.5
Texas	32	38.14	33.3	40.0	43.3
Kansas	33	38.05	35.4	40.0	40.3
Iowa	34	38.01	25.0	55.0	45.0
Montana	35	37.98	27.1	48.8	45.8
West Virginia	36	37.70	31.3	41.3	44.0
North Dakota	37	36.82	31.3	43.8	40.0
North Carolina	38	35.99	41.7	43.8	24.3
Wisconsin	39	35.87	31.3	32.5	43.7
Indiana	40	33.84	29.2	40.0	36.3
Florida	41	32.72	45.8	26.3	19.6
Oklahoma	42	31.71	18.8	47.5	39.3
Idaho	43	29.84	20.8	62.5	22.7
Tennessee	44	29.42	29.2	25.0	32.3
Utah	45	29.36	20.8	62.5	21.4
South Carolina	46	27.76	29.2	25.0	27.5
South Dakota	47	25.82	16.7	33.8	33.0
Mississippi	48	25.48	12.5	43.8	31.7
Wyoming	49	24.14	16.7	40.0	24.7
Georgia	50	23.08	12.5	28.8	33.4
Missouri	51	22.08	22.9	25.0	19.3
Alabama	52	17.76	16.7	25.0	15.0

Figure 1: Overall BSWI During COVID-19 Scores



Full data and the online interactive map

Please refer to the Oxfam website for a full interactive map of the index data:

www.oxfamamerica.org/covidmap

At this location, you can also find the full database with scores on each element.

BUILDING THE INDEX

While developing the index to track how states and territories supported their workers during COVID-19, we were guided by the question on the minds of many in the United States when the pandemic struck: What do we need to survive this? For workers, the answer fundamentally consisted of workplace safety and worker support, needs that differed for men and women. As unemployment soared in early March, supporting workers expanded to include those millions whose jobs were either put on hold or cut altogether. Additionally, as an index intended to track a disease's impact, the question of health was fundamental. Since in the United States health care is tied to employment status for the vast majority of the population, health care support became more and more vital as unemployment increased at nearly the same pace as COVID-19 infections.

Limitations of the Index

The Best States to Work During COVID-19 Index has many limitations, due to its complexity and the fact that indexes by their nature only capture a static moment of time. While this index traces state- and territory-level policies to protect workers during the pandemic, limitations of time and resources meant that our index could not measure the degree to which those policies were enacted and enforced, important in assessing their impact on a worker's daily lived experience. How states classify workers, for example, often results in workers being denied their rights.⁸

Similarly, the index could not include whether states communicated about these policies to the people whose lives would be affected in a language that they could understand, a vital question for policymakers to consider. This index also does not consider private corporations and their role in enforcing policies.

Dimensions: When we set out to build a BSWI specific to the moment of COVID-19, we saw immediately that we needed to abandon some of the three dimensions used in our previous indexes. We have retained only the dimension of worker protections, more important amid COVID-19 than ever before. Under this dimension we still included certain policies that support workers' well-being both in normal times and during a pandemic: paid sick and family leave, pregnancy accommodations, and protections against workplace sexual harassment. However, the rest of the components now included as part of this dimension reflect the COVID-19 context: PPE requirements, protection against forced return to work, and mask mandates. That we abandoned the other two dimensions of previous indexes—wages and the right to organize—reflects not their diminished importance but rather how working and being unemployed during this pandemic differ from during normal times.

For instance, with so many people out of work due to the pandemic, wages suddenly became less immediately relevant. So our index pivoted accordingly to instead include unemployment support and health care as dimensions. As with the dimension of worker protections, some components of the two new dimensions pertain to policies not specific to COVID-19 (Medicaid expansion, unemployment insurance payments). But we did focus largely on policies related to COVID-19: whether and how states disaggregated their COVID-19 data, expanded access to

telehealth, and housing protections, to list a few examples. (For a full list of components, see “The Three Policy Dimensions.”)

Unlike past BSWI’s, the current index weighs differently each dimension when calculating the overall state rankings. Since the worker protections dimension has more components than the other two dimensions, it contributes 45 percent of each state’s overall score; unemployment support and health care comprise 35 percent and 20 percent of the overall score, respectively. (For a breakdown of how we calculated the index’s overall ranking, see Appendix 1.) The current index also often required a scoring system more complex than the largely binary system used for earlier indexes, in which states were given a score of 1 for having a particular policy and a score of 0 for not having the policy. The components of the current index required much more gradation. For example, we assessed childcare for essential workers according to a four-point scale (0, .25, .5, 1), as states’ policies ranged from providing no childcare for essential workers to fully covering childcare for all essential workers regardless of position or income. Food assistance, another complicated issue, required an eight-point scale. The complexity of these policy issues made creating even a simplified four- or eight-point scale difficult, but we sought to make state policy decisions as measurable and comparable as possible.

States, federal districts, and territories: In addition to all 50 states and the District of Columbia, covered by past editions of the BSWI, this current index also includes Puerto Rico. We deemed it crucial to include both the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico not only based on their population size (the District of Columbia has a larger population than either Vermont or Wyoming, and Puerto Rico, with nearly 3.2 million inhabitants, ranks above 20 states in terms of population), but also because of how they have fared during the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, the District of Columbia had one of the highest rates of infections in the region.⁹ Puerto Rico was the first US territory to issue a stay-at-home order and to close its borders to outside travel.¹⁰ These measures kept the number of positive cases low there and provided an alternative policy model to those of many other states.

Time frame: All data points included in the index capture policies, legislation, and executive orders in place from February 15 through July 1, 2020, which reflects our past BSWI where we cap our data collection on July 1. While these dates certainly do not bookend the pandemic, they encapsulate the first spike in the pandemic, when the policies measured by the index became crucial.¹¹ Several of the policies tracked in this index (expanded Medicaid, paid sick and family leave) predate the pandemic but directly affect the well-being of workers and their families amid a global health crisis. We credited states for policies in place as of February 15 or by July 1, 2020.

State versus federal policy: Because this index tracks state policies, we did not focus on federal bills and mandates. Though this pandemic brought about social policies previously thought politically impossible (basic federal stipends, the expansion of unemployment to the self-employed and gig workers, waived costs for some medical testing, mandated paid leave), many gaps in federal-level policies still remained that state governments were uniquely positioned to fill. The federal government continues to exclude undocumented workers from COVID-19 relief bills, even though their role in our national economy has become more important than ever during the pandemic. Health care access continues to be limited by federal inaction and even persistent attempts to overturn the Affordable Care Act.¹² And the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) failed to develop mandatory safety standards during the pandemic to keep workers healthy. Even had the agency worked to set such standards, as it should have, its woeful underfunding and understaffing mean that it would not have been able to meet the national need for enforcement. The danger of OSHA’s inaction

became immediately apparent as COVID-19 hot spots cropped up in workplaces, from meatpacking plants to elder care facilities, where PPE was unavailable or underutilized.¹³

So US states and territories could either step into the void left by insufficient federal and corporate policies or merely follow the current administration's meager, contradictory frameworks for how to best handle this virus.

Unemployment payments: When tracking the extent to which state unemployment checks cover cost of living,* we did **not** include the extra \$600 mandated in the CARES Act. There are many good assessments of how this federal mandate affected unemployment support, but that extra money, as of this report's writing, expired on July 31, 2020, after which unemployment checks reverted to the original amount mandated by a particular state or territory.¹⁴ COVID-19 made the need for robust state-level unemployment support immediately clear, even with the additional federal money. Unfortunately, unemployment payments for all states do not cover the full cost of living for a working parent with two dependents, though some states do better than others.

Unemployment payments accounted for 15 percent of the overall index score. Unemployment support during this pandemic has been the difference, in some cases, between stability and hunger and homelessness.

How are we calculating unemployment versus cost of living?

In order to offer a better picture of unemployment at the state level, Oxfam America averaged the minimum and maximum amount of unemployment offered by each state. While states have relatively comparable minimum unemployment payments, the maximum unemployment payments vary widely by state. We then compared this state average to each state's costs of living for a working individual with two dependents, based on the MIT Living Wage Calculator.¹⁵ The differences among states are striking: Washington covers on average 86 percent of the cost of living for an unemployed person supporting a family, whereas Mississippi only covers 7 percent of those costs.¹⁶

Gender and care work: This index not only focuses on workers during a pandemic but also analyzes how states support working families, especially working mothers. The closure of schools and day care centers, combined with the unequal burden historically placed on women and girls to provide unpaid care work, created extra labor for working women across the economic spectrum. Our index focuses on worker protections that disproportionately benefit women, such as pregnancy protection, protection against sexual harassment, and—given the

* Throughout the index, the term "cost of living" refers to the calculation made by the MIT Living Wage Calculator for a working individual with two dependents. However, as the website for the MIT calculator clarifies, the number it suggests for cost of living meets "minimum standards" for families or individuals to subsist at the most essential level, not to thrive or to achieve a basic but decent standard of living. This term therefore does not refer to a living wage.

fact that women in the United States do considerably more care work than men—paid sick and family leave and state-provided childcare for workers. In the US as around the world, women are expected to provide for our families' care and health when society does not.¹⁷ The index also includes support specific to COVID-19, such as state-provided childcare for essential workers and increased food assistance (which became particularly acute as the pandemic closed schools, a food source for up to 50 percent of US public schoolchildren).¹⁸ According to a recent Brookings Institution report, households headed by single working mothers are most susceptible to food insecurity during COVID-19.¹⁹ When we compare the cost of living for single parents with two dependents to how much states provide in unemployment payments, we see clearly that all states can and should do more to support single working mothers both during the pandemic and in general.

Data disaggregation: Our index also tracks whether states and territories disaggregate the data that they collect for COVID-19 based on sex and race. This disaggregation creates more accurate data for the pandemic and thus shines a light on underlying issues such as community health inequalities. Access to such data enables more effective policymaking that targets specific populations' unique needs. The UN Women's COVID-19 working group, for example, tracks global data on the pandemic and continues to remind world leaders that women consistently have less access to health care, make up a majority of low-wage workers, and assume unequal care burdens for children, the elderly, the ill, and the home, in addition to comprising the majority of frontline health workers, while also experiencing rising rates of gender-based violence during the pandemic.²⁰ Data on COVID-19 cases and mortality in the United States also points toward the disease's disproportionate impact on communities of color, especially those in low-wage employment, rural communities, and areas that already posed health risks to their populations prior to the pandemic. Disaggregating COVID-19 data by race and sex, therefore, helps further illuminate health inequities—specifically, lack of access to resources such as healthy food and health care—that have laid the foundation for the recent staggering losses within communities of color.²¹

Preemption

In our regular BSWI we track state-level preemption: a state legislature's ability to overturn local mandates or legislation. Preemption can have a huge, damaging impact: states have prevented cities from implementing higher minimum wages, overturned city paid leave laws, and undermined city initiatives in support of LGBTQIA+ rights. However, at a federal level, national mandates that overturn state policies have historically provided important civil rights advances, such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that ended school segregation. Preemption remains a complicated issue.

While our Best States to Work During COVID-19 Index does not include preemption as a data point, it's important to look at *how* governments have used preemption during the pandemic, particularly its implications for racial justice. State preemption has been used most visibly in overturning local mask mandates and social distancing measures—the strongest example (at the time of this report's writing) being the executive order issued by Georgia's governor, Brian Kemp, that overturned the mask mandate implemented by Atlanta's mayor, Keisha Lance Bottoms.²²

HOW CAN POLICYMAKERS USE THE INDEX?

This index seeks to put together otherwise disparate data points in order to guide states in creating policies to support workers, especially in the face of a global pandemic. Though we built this index to reflect state- and territory-level responses to the coronavirus, the policies and positions tracked by the index reflect a valuing of and support for workers that goes beyond responding to COVID-19. Like our regular BSWI, the Best States to Work During COVID-19 Index **provides guidance for policymakers to create stronger and more resilient structures to protect workers**. We hope that this index, like the regular BSWI, will inspire a “race to the top” as states actively seek to protect and support their workers. As we have learned during this pandemic, workers, especially low-wage and essential workers, are crucial to our collective survival.

Additionally, by capturing unemployment support and health care in addition to worker protection policies, this index can allow policymakers to see workers holistically, as people who need support inside and outside the workplace to thrive and succeed. As this pandemic has also demonstrated, without a broad social safety net, life grinds to a halt. During this moment of great suffering, we have a unique opportunity to build a more resilient and sustainable social contract, a New Deal for a new century. The question is whether state—and federal—policymakers will seize the moment to support the people in this country, documented and undocumented, of all races and genders.

Undocumented Workers

Undocumented workers are crucial to the US economy, contributing greatly to many industries, including the all-important food sector. Nearly half of US farmworkers are undocumented, and immigrants comprise over one-third of workers in meatpacking plants.²³ During COVID-19, when the federal government deemed jobs related to the food supply chain essential, undocumented workers became critical to consistent access to food and yet were excluded from all pandemic-related federal aid. Even families with one undocumented member were excluded from receiving the \$1,200 federal stimulus checks.²⁴

During our reporting period, only California had created a fund to provide unemployment support to undocumented workers and their families.²⁵ In addition to food supply, undocumented workers also comprise an important part of other crucial employment sectors: construction, childcare, janitorial work, the hotel industry, landscaping, and food service.²⁶ Regardless of their crucial value to our economy, undocumented workers are also human beings deserving of dignity, equal protections, and respect for their basic human rights alongside US citizens and residents.

THE THREE POLICY DIMENSIONS

WORKER PROTECTIONS: 45 PERCENT OF OVERALL RANKING SCORE

OSHA has been understaffed and underfunded for decades. Before COVID-19, OSHA was already failing to keep up with worker safety violations and workplace complaints. However, under this presidential administration, OSHA neglected to create credible, mandatory standards to increase worker protections in the case of a pandemic.²⁷ Given this lack of infrastructure, the onset of COVID-19 heightened workplace risks, as this airborne disease threatened any person working in an indoor or crowded setting. But beyond threatening workplace safety, the pandemic created a need for greater state infrastructure that could assure worker and community safety as well as job stability and access to resources for working parents. Thus the index's dimension of workplace protections captures states' multifaceted approaches to not only keeping workers safe but keeping jobs stable, minding community health, and enabling working parents—especially those deemed essential—to continue to work.

We group the worker protection policies included in the index under three subthemes: general workplace protections, protections related to COVID-19, and protections for local communities. We weigh each of these subthemes as contributing to the index score thus (for full definitions of each component, see Appendix 1):

General workplace protections (15 percent of the overall score):

- Mandated paid sick leave
- Mandated paid family leave
- Protection against sexual harassment
- Pregnancy accommodations

Workplace protections related to COVID-19 (15 percent of overall score)

- Protection against forced return to work
- Protection against retaliation
- State funded childcare for essential workers²⁸
- No state-mandated corporate liability immunity related to COVID-19²⁹

Protections for local communities (15 percent of the overall score)

- State-level loans and grants for small businesses
- State PPE requirements
- State definitions of what qualifies as an essential occupation
- Face mask requirements

California ranked first in workplace protections, with **Washington** and **Massachusetts** tying for second place. **Georgia** and **Mississippi**, tied for last, noticeably lack policies that benefit women particularly. For example, neither state mandates pregnancy accommodations, paid family leave, or paid sick leave. Nor have they passed protections against workplace sexual harassment or retaliation against workers.

This points to how state-enacted workplace protections have special salience in terms of gender as well as race. Of the 55 million essential workers in the United States, the highest proportion work in two industries: food and agriculture (11.4 million) and health care (16.7 million). Women comprise 76 percent of health care workers, and people of color make up 50 percent of the food and agriculture workforce. Both of these essential sectors are disproportionately exposed to COVID-19.³⁰ Unfortunately, such disproportional work exposure is also reflected in the gender and racial disparities seen in COVID-19 diagnoses and mortality.³¹

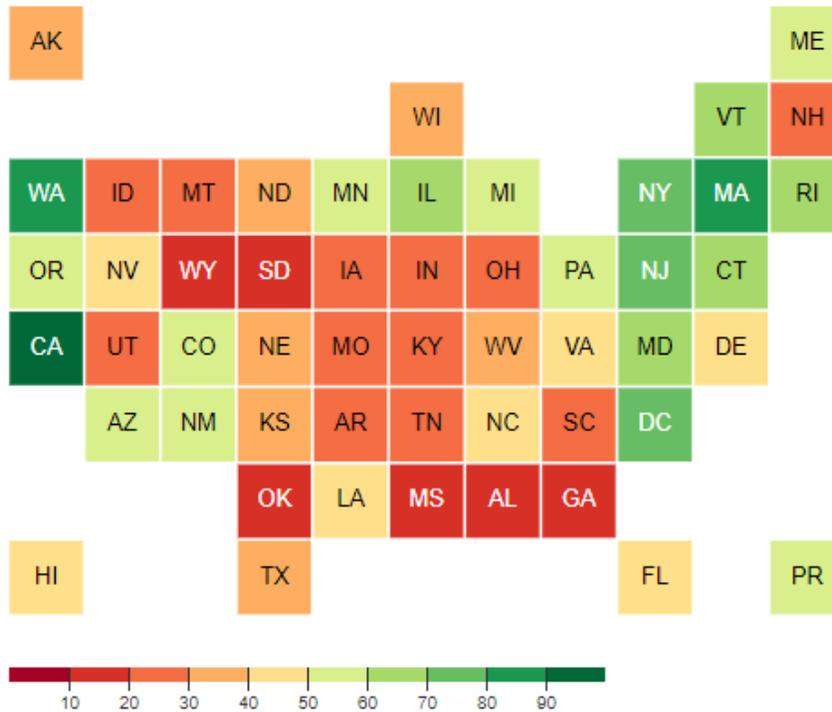
Reopening State Economies and Worker Safety

State-level workplace protection policies are crucial, especially in the absence of strong federal government action. For instance, the federal government issued no minimum safety requirements that states needed to meet in order to reopen their economies, leaving worker safety to the discretion of state-level leaders and policymakers. In most reopening states, unfortunately, workers have only been given the option to *not return* to a job under the federal framework of Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), which created very specific parameters for when one can still receive an unemployment check after refusing to return to work. These parameters include a COVID-19 diagnosis, primary caregiver responsibilities for a dependent with COVID-19, underlying health risks, transportation limitations due to declared public health emergencies, and the death of a family member due to COVID-19.³² So as COVID-19 continues to spread across the country, workers face the harrowing choice between economic necessity and personal health risk. As some schools continue with remote learning while workplaces call back their employees, many working parents—especially mothers, given their uneven share of childcare responsibilities—will be made to choose between caring for a child and earning a living. Only nine states or territories have means for workers to refuse returning to work based on unsafe working conditions created by COVID-19.

Table 2: Worker Protections Scores

State	Ranking	Score	State	Ranking	Score
California	1	91.7	North Carolina	25	41.7
Washington	2	83.3	Alaska	28	35.4
Massachusetts	2	83.3	Nebraska	28	35.4
New Jersey	4	79.2	Kansas	28	35.4
New York	4	79.2	Texas	31	33.3
District of Columbia	6	75	West Virginia	32	31.3
Rhode Island	7	68.8	North Dakota	32	31.3
Connecticut	8	66.7	Wisconsin	32	31.3
Illinois	9	64.6	Kentucky	35	29.2
Maryland	9	64.6	Arkansas	35	29.2
Vermont	11	60.4	Indiana	35	29.2
Oregon	12	58.3	Tennessee	35	29.2
Michigan	12	58.3	South Carolina	35	29.2
Puerto Rico	14	56.3	New Hampshire	40	27.1
New Mexico	15	54.2	Montana	40	27.1
Maine	15	54.2	Ohio	42	25
Colorado	15	54.2	Iowa	42	25
Minnesota	18	52.1	Missouri	44	22.9
Pennsylvania	18	52.1	Idaho	45	20.8
Arizona	20	50	Utah	45	20.8
Delaware	21	47.9	Oklahoma	47	18.8
Virginia	22	45.8	South Dakota	48	16.7
Nevada	22	45.8	Wyoming	48	16.7
Florida	22	45.8	Alabama	48	16.7
Hawaii	25	41.7	Mississippi	51	12.5
Louisiana	25	41.7	Georgia	51	12.5

Figure 2: Worker Protections



HEALTH CARE: 20 PERCENT OF OVERALL RANKING SCORE

The United States has a privatized health system that, for the most part, is intrinsically connected to a person's employment status. During this global pandemic, the US experienced unprecedented job losses as nonessential businesses were required to temporarily close and people were told to stay in place. As a result of widespread furloughs, layoffs, and small business closures, access to health care became a paramount issue. The dimension of our index dedicated to this issue focuses on how states, given the limitations of this country's privatized health care system, have sought to support the health needs of their residents, whether employed or not, who now face a highly transmittable respiratory disease. As components of the health care dimension we measured:

Health care expansion (15 percent of the overall score)

- Expanded Medicaid access
- Expanded telehealth services
- Premium payment grace period
- Waived cost sharing for COVID-19 treatment
- Expanded workers' compensation due to COVID-19

Transparent COVID-19 case reporting (5 percent of the overall score)

- COVID-19 data disaggregated by sex
- COVID-19 data disaggregated by race

By measuring all these policies and practices, some predating COVID-19 (expanded Medicaid) and others directly related to the pandemic (disaggregated data, telehealth, expanded workers' compensation), we seek to capture state responses to a public health crisis. Because this index specifically focuses on workers, and because certain workers deemed essential at the pandemic's beginning were disproportionately exposed to the coronavirus, we thought it crucial to include in our ranking whether states and territories expanded workers' compensation to explicitly include COVID-19.

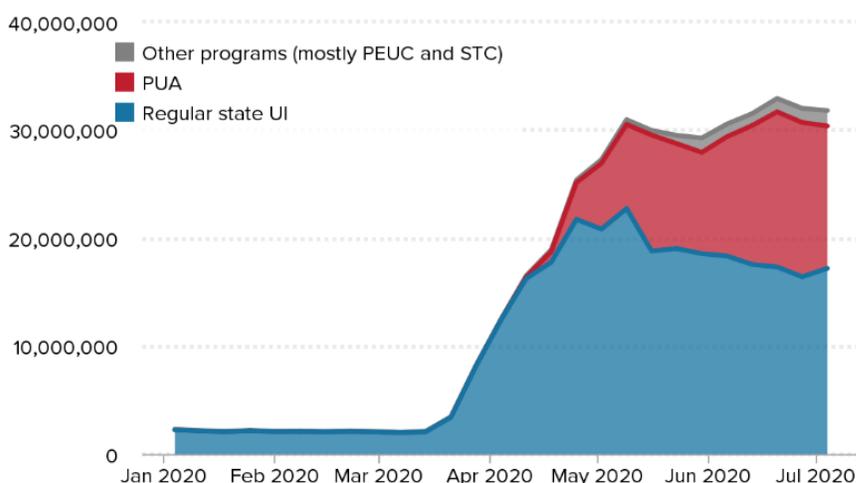
Illinois ranked first for the health care dimension, **Arkansas** and **New Mexico** tied for second, and six states tied for fourth: **California, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio,** and **Vermont**. So many states ranked so well for this dimension because so many disaggregated their COVID-19 data, a simple yet critical task that gained states points in the rankings. Multiple states tied for worst: **Alabama, Missouri, South Carolina,** and **Tennessee**. These bottom-ranking states all have not expanded Medicaid, have not granted a grace period for premium payments, and have not waived cost sharing for COVID-19 treatment.

UNEMPLOYMENT SUPPORT: 35 PERCENT OF OVERALL RANKING SCORE

Due to the coronavirus’s impact, the United States in recent months has experienced unemployment rates that have reached heights unseen since the Great Depression.³³ The job losses in April alone eliminated a decade of gains for women in the workforce.³⁴ And while the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the federal agency tasked with tracking all national data on labor (including employment, employment by sectors, and unemployment), reported crucial drops in the unemployment rate since the spike in April, the footnotes of their own report suggest that their numbers were flawed and that the decrease in unemployment was not as substantial as advertised.³⁵

Continuing unemployment claims in all programs

January 4, 2020–July 4, 2020



Notes: Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) is the federal program for workers who are out of work because of the virus but who are not eligible for regular state unemployment insurance benefits (e.g. the self-employed). "Other programs" includes PEUC, STC, and others; a full list can be found in the bottom panel of the table on page 4 at this link <https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf>.

Source: U.S. Employment and Training Administration, Initial Claims [ICSA], retrieved from Department of Labor (DOL), <https://oui.doleta.gov/unemploy/docs/persons.xls> and <https://www.dol.gov/ui/data.pdf>, July 23, 2020.

Economic Policy Institute

Source: "UI claims and GDP growth are historically bad," Economic Policy Institute, 30 July, 2020.

Without employment and thus without income, families find themselves in dire straits, needing to pay for housing, food, transportation, and, in some cases, medical bills while the country waits for COVID-19 to become manageable. Single parents—80 percent of whom are mothers—are most at risk of falling into poverty.³⁶ With the unemployment dimension of the index, we ask how states and territories pivoted to support the increasing number of workers unemployed due to COVID-19, their livelihoods at stake.

We included in this dimension:

Unemployment support provided in response to COVID-19 (10 percent of the overall score)

- Relaxed eligibility criteria
- Expanded unemployment support (beyond that provided by the CARES Act)
- Eligibility for undocumented workers

General unemployment support (15 percent of the overall score)

- Ratio of average unemployment benefits provided to cost of living

Housing and food assistance provided in response to COVID-19 (10 percent of the overall score)

- Moratorium on evictions (beyond that provided by the CARES Act)
- Moratorium on utility shutoffs
- Grace period for rent payments
- Increased food assistance

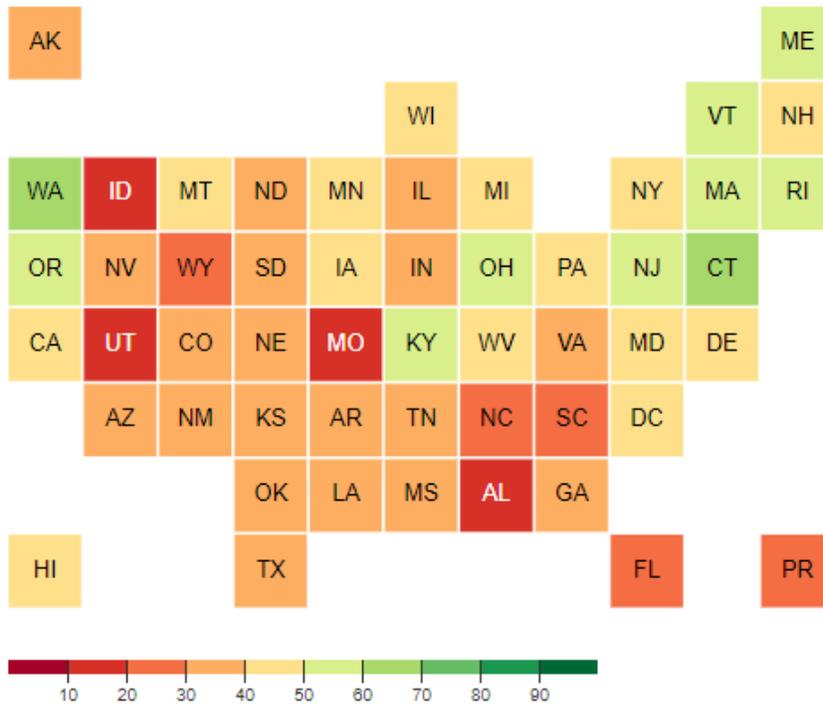
Unemployment support exists to assist workers who lose their jobs through no fault of their own but still need to maintain stable housing and access to food. As our index demonstrates, some states have stepped up to support people, and some have not. Overwhelmingly states in the Northeast have invested in their residents. **Connecticut**, for example, which ranked third for this dimension, was the only state to implement moratoriums on evictions and utility shutoffs and to offer rent forgiveness. **New York, New Jersey, and New Hampshire** (as well as the Western state of **Washington**) implemented two of these three provisions and battled the highly increased risk for homelessness created by the pandemic. These same states also increased food assistance to ensure that residents and their families did not go hungry while employment remained precarious or unavailable. **Alabama** ranked lowest in providing unemployment support, below **Missouri, Florida, and Utah**. These states offered no housing assistance and had very low unemployment payments; only one (**Alabama**) relaxed the eligibility criteria for unemployment.

Many of the federal unemployment policies created by the CARES Act and the Families First Coronavirus Response Act were set to expire on July 31, 2020, or earlier, and state-level emergency responses followed suit. As mentioned before, we tracked data through July 1, 2020, for this index. Thus as emergency declarations expire and with them their additional unemployment benefits, a wave of evictions potentially looms. Ending the social safety nets created by the state and federal emergency responses, such as moratoriums on eviction, will disproportionately affect communities of color, as has COVID-19.³⁷ The Pew Research Center recently reported that unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic has been highest among women, with women of color particularly affected, because coronavirus-related closures have been highest in industries that employ higher numbers of women: hospitality, child and elder care, and education. As of May, Hispanic women and Black women bore the highest unemployment rates in the country (19.5 percent and 17.2 percent of each group were unemployed, respectively).³⁸

Table 4: Unemployment Support Scores

State	Ranking	Score	State	Ranking	Score
Washington	1	73.3	Kansas	27	40.3
New Jersey	2	64.4	North Dakota	28	40.0
Connecticut	3	63.7	New Mexico	29	39.9
Oregon	4	58.7	Oklahoma	30	39.3
Kentucky	5	58.3	Louisiana	31	37.6
Massachusetts	6	57.6	Nebraska	32	36.9
Rhode Island	7	56.4	Arizona	33	36.3
Vermont	8	54.5	Indiana	33	36.3
Pennsylvania	9	53.3	Illinois	35	35.5
Delaware	10	52.5	Nevada	36	35.3
Ohio	11	50.2	Alaska	37	35.1
Hawaii	12	49.5	Arkansas	38	33.5
New York	13	48.7	Georgia	39	33.4
California	14	47.9	Virginia	40	33.3
Minnesota	15	47.4	South Dakota	41	33.0
Michigan	16	47.3	Tennessee	42	32.3
District of Columbia	17	47.1	Mississippi	43	31.7
Maine	17	47.1	South Carolina	44	27.5
Montana	19	45.8	Wyoming	45	24.7
New Hampshire	20	45.3	North Carolina	46	24.3
Iowa	21	45.0	Idaho	47	22.7
Maryland	22	44.0	Puerto Rico	48	22.3
Colorado	22	44.0	Utah	49	21.4
West Virginia	22	44.0	Florida	50	19.6
Wisconsin	25	43.7	Missouri	51	19.3
Texas	26	43.3	Alabama	52	15.0

Figure 4: Unemployment support



WHERE IS NEW PROGRESS HAPPENING?

After July 1, 2020, when we ended data collection for the Best States to Work During COVID-19 Index, several states implemented important new policies focused on protecting their workers during the pandemic.

The best example, touted by some as setting the new standard for addressing COVID-19, is **Virginia's** new worker protection legislation. As state officials explained, they implemented these new policies, which they call an "emergency temporary standard," because OSHA and the federal government have failed workers.³⁹ Several other states have created what the National Employment Law Project (NELP) terms "comprehensive COVID worker safety protections."⁴⁰ Most of the states listed by NELP also rank highly on Oxfam America's Best States to Work During COVID-19 Index, especially in the worker protections dimension; **Washington**, for instance, created in early August a \$40 million fund for undocumented workers affected by COVID-19.⁴¹ However, some exceptions, aside from Virginia, stand out.

Kentucky, which in our index ranks 20th overall and 35th for worker protections, passed a new wave of protection policies after July 1 including mask mandates and PPE requirements for businesses, which our index does not reflect.⁴² And in early August, voters in **Missouri**, which ranked 51st overall and 49th for health care on our index, passed an amendment to expand Medicaid.⁴³

These new measures demonstrate the impact of COVID-19, which even more than halfway through the summer shows no signs of slowing. We applaud states that have chosen to pivot and provide worker protection policies, unemployment support, and health care expansion, despite their delay in enacting these earlier in the year.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN?

Ultimately, this index shows that many states have a lot of work to do in order to support workers in general but *especially* during a global pandemic. The federal government has sidestepped its responsibility to support workers and their families during a crisis, which by necessity has devolved to states and territories. And though some states—especially on the East and West Coasts—did well in filling this void left by the federal government, no state scored over 80 points on the index, which indicates that all states still have room for improvement. We hope that policymakers use the index to see their states’ or territories’ weaknesses and then seek to actively address these weaknesses as part of a “race to the top” among states and territories.

While we hope to not experience another global pandemic in our lifetime, the policies tracked by this index will support the well-being of working families both during pandemics and during normal times. Health data, for example, should always be disaggregated by race and sex. Medicaid should be expanded regardless of the current disease scenario. Unemployment support should be stronger and granted to gig workers and undocumented workers. Workplace protections should always be robust and enforced. We need paid leave across the economy.

The issues captured in this index are nonpartisan; they are issues of protection and community health. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of all workers. Oxfam America has long held that all work has dignity, as do all human beings, and this has never been truer. We must treat all workers with the respect and care that they deserve; we must provide them the infrastructure needed to live and thrive before, during, and after a global health scare.

We must continue to value the labor of poultry workers, truck drivers, grocery store workers, factory workers, service workers, medical workers, cleaning staff, teachers, and caretakers, among many, many others. By providing the policies tracked in this index, states and territories (as well as the federal government) can demonstrate how they value working families and the promise of dignified work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are recommendations for state and territorial policymakers that will improve the lives of workers and their families both amid COVID-19 and after its threat has passed. The policy recommendations are united by the core concept that the United States needs to build a more resilient social contract for the twenty-first century. We must start on a path to make low-wage work sustainable and fair, which will allow our society to withstand shocks to the economic system caused by future pandemics or other emergencies.

- **Improve worker protections**
 - Pass paid sick time and paid family and medical leave programs that cover all workers
 - Fund childcare for all workers
- **Expand Medicaid**
- **Increase unemployment payments**

Though our recommendations target state lawmakers, we note that the federal government is falling unacceptably short of its obligations to protect workers. The federal government has the most power to make sweeping changes that would improve the realities of workers and their families. State budget shortfalls due to the pandemic require federal investment in order to allow states to take some of our policy recommendations.

In the context of COVID-19, the federal government needs to quickly pass more relief packages that holistically tackle the current emergency and that provide support to low-wage workers and the unemployed. Evictions must be stopped during this emergency. Masks should be required nationally. The \$600 federal unemployment supplement should continue until unemployment rates fall below a reasonable threshold. The maximum monthly SNAP benefit should be increased by 15 percent, and the minimum should go from \$16 to \$30.

OSHA should issue emergency workplace standards, and Congress should provide the resources and oversight to enforce them. Paid leave protections provided under the first set of COVID-19 relief bills should be expanded to cover all workers, and Congress should fund pandemic premium pay for frontline workers. We need federal legislation to protect workers against retaliation for speaking up and raising safety and health concerns, among others.

These are not partisan issues; they are issues of survival and resilience, issues that need to be addressed for our economy to recover and to withstand future crises.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: METRIC DESCRIPTIONS AND POINT ALLOTMENT FOR THE BEST STATES TO WORK DURING COVID-19 INDEX

Worker protections (45 percent):

- General workplace protections (15 percent)
 - Mandated paid sick leave (0, .5, or 1)
 - States received 1 point for enacted laws mandating that private employers provide paid sick leave. States received .5 for passing legislation that is not yet in effect. We collected this data from the National Partnership for Women and Families, which we then verified for each state via the NCSL's legislative database.
 - Mandated paid family leave (0, .5, or 1)
 - States received 1 point for having legislated paid family leave that exceeds FMLA standards for private employers. This may include time for bereavement and sick family members, but we primarily focused on maternity and paternity leave. States received .5 for passing legislation that is not yet in effect. We collected this data from the National Partnership for Women and Families, which we then verified for each state using the NCSL's legislative database.
 - Protection against sexual harassment (0 or 1)
 - States received 1 point for having legislated a ban on workplace sexual harassment, including penalties and legal recourse for workers who report incidents. This must be beyond federal OSHA reporting, which classifies only limited definitions of sexual harassment under "workplace hazard". We collected data for each state using the legislative database maintained by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) and confirmed with the National Women's Law Center (NWLC).
 - Pregnancy accommodations (0 or 1)
 - States received 1 point for having legislated pregnancy accommodations in the workplace that exceed Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) standards for private employers. These accommodations may include but are not limited to the right to pump breast milk in the workplace. We collected this data from the National Partnership for Women and Families, which we then verified for each state via the NCSL's legislative database.
- Workplace protections related to COVID-19 (15 percent)
 - Protection against forced return to work (0 or 1)
 - States received 1 point for having provided, through either legislation or executive order, a legal framework granting either protection or recourse for employees who refuse to return to work during the pandemic. We gave both states with robust legal protections (such as Minnesota) and states with less forceful protections (like New York and New Jersey) full credit. We gave a score of 0 to the many states whose frameworks only allowed workers unwilling to return to work to receive Pandemic Unemployment Assistance

- (PUA), as this is a federal protection rather than a state mandate. We collected this data for each state from state-level sources.
- Protection against wage theft retaliation (0, .25, .5, .75, or 1)
 - States received credit for legislation that protects workers against employer retaliation, specifically relating to wages. Based on the framework created by the National Employment Law Project (NELP), we gave a full point to states whose legislation provides workers with back pay, monetary damages, recovered attorney fees, and the right to bring complaints to government agencies and to court, with the potential for government-imposed fines on violators. We gave .75 points to states whose legislation includes all the above with the exception of government-imposed fines. States awarded .5 points have not legislated government-imposed fines and do not provide easy means for workers to complain to government agencies in order to recover damages; these states do allow for back pay, court cases against employers, recovered attorney fees, and court-mandated damages against employers. States awarded .25 points have legislated only criminal penalties for employers who retaliate against employees who bring complaints of wage theft. States received no points if they had no legal protections against wage theft retaliation.
 - State funded childcare for essential workers (0, .25, .5, or 1)
 - States received credit for having implemented, through either legislation or executive order, some form of childcare for essential workers. To receive a full point, the childcare had to be fully subsidized by the state and provided to all essential workers with no income cap; states with partially subsidized childcare received a half point. States received a quarter point for incentivizing private providers to create childcare programs for essential workers. We collected this data for each state from state-level sources.
 - No state-mandated corporate liability immunity related to COVID-19 (0, .5, or 1)
 - States received 0 points if they have already on the books legislation that protects companies from legal action by employees who contract COVID-19 at work. States in the process of considering such legislation received .5 points. States that do not grant such immunity to corporations received 1 point. We collected this data for each state.
 - Protections for local communities (15 percent)
 - State-level loans and grants for small businesses (0, .5, or 1)
 - To receive credit, states must provide, through either legislation or executive order, state-funded loans or grants for small businesses affected by COVID-19. States received 1 point for creating a fund that helps keep afloat any small business affected by COVID-19. States received a half point for creating grant or loan programs geared toward small businesses in specific sectors only, such as hospitality. States received no points for federal funding provided by the Small Business Administration. We collected this data for each state from state-level sources.
 - State PPE requirements (0, .5, or 1)
 - To receive credit, states must mandate specific PPE to be worn for specific jobs (whether or not the state mandates that employers provide this PPE) beyond Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations. States that received half credit only gave PPE frameworks for health care workers and first responders. States received full credit for providing such frameworks for additional economic sectors. We collected this data for each state from state-level sources.

- State definitions of what qualifies as an essential occupation (0, .5, or 1)
 - To receive credit, the state must define, through either legislation or executive order, what counts as an essential occupation. States received 1 point for definitions that reflect local contexts and a half point for only following federal guidance. We awarded no points to states that left it to businesses to define essential occupations. We collected this data for each state from state-level sources.
- Face mask requirements (0, .5, or 1)
 - States received a full point for mandating, through either legislation or executive order, that the entire population wear face masks when in public. States received a half point for mandating only that all employees wear face masks while at work. We collected this data for each state.

Health care (20 percent):

- Health care expansion (15 percent)
 - Expanded Medicaid access (0 or 1)
 - We awarded 1 point to states that, through either legislation or executive order, have expanded access to Medicaid for workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Any expansion of access merited full credit. We collected the data from the database maintained by the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF); we then verified this data for each state via the NCSL's legislative database.
 - Expanded telehealth services (0, .5, or 1)
 - A state received points if, through either legislation or executive order, it had expanded telehealth services for workers statewide. States received full credit if such expansion was still active as of July 1; states received half credit if their plans, executed at some time during the pandemic, had expired by this date. We collected the data from the KFF's database on state policy to address COVID-19; we then verified this data for each state via the NCSL's legislative database.
 - Premium payment grace period (0, .25, .5, or 1)
 - We awarded points to states that had implemented during the pandemic, through either legislation or executive order, a grace period for health insurance premium payments. States received full credit if this policy affected all premium payments; states received half credit if the grace period applied only to premium payments related to COVID-19 treatment. States received quarter credit for any expired program related to premium payment grace periods. We collected the data from the KFF's database on state policy action to address COVID-19; we then verified this data for each state via the NCSL's legislative database.
 - Waived cost sharing for COVID-19 treatment (0, .5, or 1)
 - A state received full credit if, through either legislation or executive order, it had waived cost sharing for COVID-19 treatment. We gave states half credit for cost sharing waivers implemented through a state insurer agreement. We collected the data from the KFF's database on state policy action to address COVID-19; we then verified this data for each state via the NCSL's legislative database.
 - Expanded workers' compensation due to COVID-19 (0, .5, or 1)
 - We awarded points to states that, through either legislation or executive order, had expanded their workers' compensation program. States received full credit if this expansion applied to all workers; we awarded half credit if the expansion affected only health care workers and other frontline workers. We collected the data from the KFF's database on state policy action to address

COVID-19; we then verified this data for each state via the NCSL's legislative database.

- Transparent COVID-19 case reporting (5 percent)
 - COVID-19 data disaggregated by sex (0 or 1)
 - The state received a point for disaggregating its COVID-19 data by gender.
 - COVID-19 data disaggregated by race (0 or 1)
 - The state received a point for disaggregating its COVID-19 data by race, a category that the state at a minimum had to break down according to the four categories used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (whites, Blacks or African Americans, Asians, and persons of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity). We collected this data from *The Atlantic's* "COVID Tracking Project."

Unemployment support (35 percent):

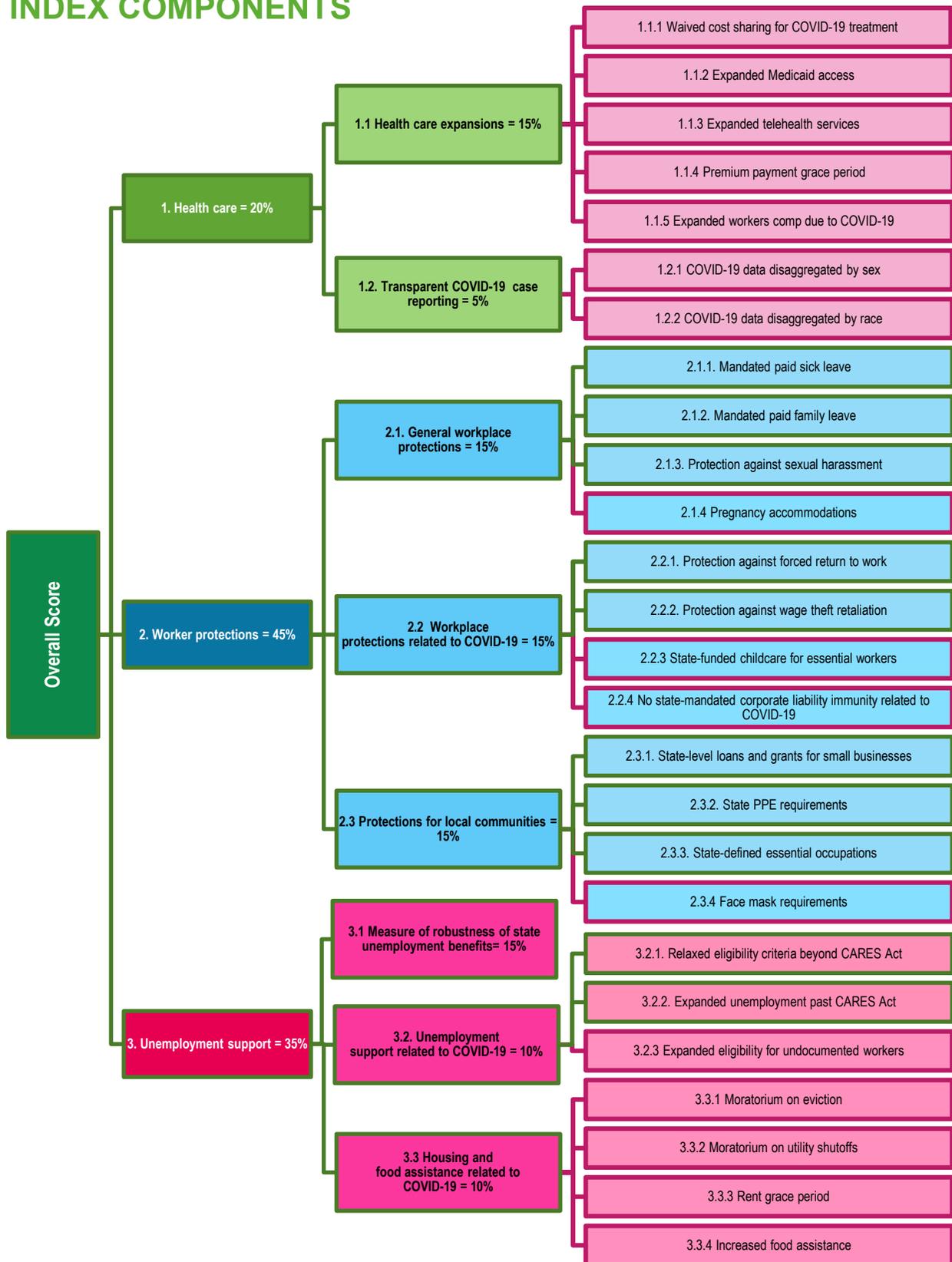
- Unemployment support provided in response to COVID-19 (10 percent)
 - Relaxed eligibility criteria (0, .5, or 1)
 - States received .5 points if they have waived the work search requirement for all applicants for unemployment benefits (regardless of their reason for applying) and made eligible for benefits anyone laid off for a reason related to COVID-19. States received 1 point if, in addition to this, they did not require a one-week wait period before receiving benefits (or waived this wait period during the pandemic). We collected this data from each state, which we then verified using the state data on the coronavirus and unemployment benefits compiled by the website Justia (<https://www.justia.com/covid-19/50-state-covid-19-resources/coronavirus-and-unemployment-benefits-50-state-resources/>).
 - Expanded unemployment support (beyond that provided by the CARES Act) (0, .25, .5, .75, or 1)
 - States received full credit if they offered regular UI benefits and extended benefits (EB) for a length of time longer than the median length of coverage for all states (which is 26 weeks for regular UI benefits and 13 weeks for EB), even after CARES Act–related expansions of unemployment support had expired. The Expanded unemployment support metric is scored out of 1 point, with 0.5 points being allocated each to (1) regular UI benefits and (2) extended benefits. The score each state gets is based on how they compare to the median length of time across the nation. If their individual standard is less than median, they get no credit, at median is half-credit, and above median is full credit. Because of this, each state can get either 0, 0.25, or 0.5 points for both (1) regular UI benefits and (2) extended benefits (that way, if a state is exemplar in both, they get a full 1.0 credit). This data was collected from the Office of Unemployment Insurance and cross-checked against the policy breakdown of this issue offered by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.
 - Eligibility for undocumented workers (0 or 1)
 - States received a point for having a UI system or a private-public partnership fund in place to support unemployed undocumented workers. We did not give states credit for city-specific programs, such as New York City's. We collected this data from each state.
- General unemployment support (15 percent)
 - Ratio of average unemployment benefits provided to cost of living (between 0 and 1)
 - This metric captures variation in the true coverage of a state's unemployment insurance (UI) system in light of what counts as a subsistence

wage in that state. Using the Office of Unemployment Insurance's 2019 *Comparison of State Unemployment Insurance Laws*, we first calculated the minimum unemployment payments made by each state for a minimum-wage worker with median worker experience. We relied on state data to determine maximum unemployment payments. We then calculated the ratios of both the minimum and maximum payments by each state to the amount of money required to maintain a minimum standard of subsistence there for a working individual with two dependents, which we determined for all states and the District of Columbia using the MIT Living Wage Calculator (we calculated this amount independently for Puerto Rico). We then normalized these two ratios for each state (minimum unemployment payment to cost of living, maximum unemployment payment to cost of living) to a scale from 0 to 1; the state with the best ratio of UI coverage to a subsistence wage in the state received a 1, while the state with the worst ratio received a 0. We then averaged each state's two normalized scores to generate for each state a ratio of average unemployment payment to cost of living.

- Housing and food assistance provided in response to COVID-19 (10 percent)
 - Moratorium on evictions (0 or 1)
 - State received 1 point for having implemented, through either legislation or executive order, a moratorium on *both* the initiation of eviction proceedings and the enforcement of evictions by lawful personnel, with exceptions for evictions due to personal safety and other extreme situations. We deemed inadequate the efforts of several states who issued moratoriums on eviction proceedings without curtailing police action to implement earlier-issued evictions. Oxfam America found multiple states with exceedingly worker-friendly policies regarding eviction during the COVID-19 pandemic; for instance, Illinois has taken executive action explicitly barring landlords from locking out tenants. We collected this data for each state, which we then cross-checked against Boston University's COVID-19 US state policy (CUSP) database and Columbia University's Health Justice Clinic database.
 - Moratorium on utility shutoffs (0 or 1)
 - States received a point for implementing, through either legislation or executive order, a moratorium during the pandemic on utility shutoffs due to nonpayment. A state did not need to waive payments for utilities to receive a full point for this metric. We collected this data for each state, which we then cross-checked against Boston University's CUSP database and Columbia University's Health Justice Clinic database.
 - Grace period for rent payments (0 or 1)
 - To receive a point, states must have specified, through either legislation or executive order, a grace period of any length of time for rent payments to be followed by all landlords and tenants; they must also have guaranteed workers a month or more to follow up on missed rent payments before eviction notices or other housing action can be taken against them. The index's July 1 cutoff may exclude states who began implementing eviction moratoriums at a later point during the pandemic and thus may later implement such grace periods, a natural policy progression from eviction moratoriums. We collected this data from each state, which we then cross-checked against Boston University's CUSP database and Columbia University's Health Justice Clinic database.
 - Increased food assistance (0, .125, .25, .375, .5, .625, .75, .875, or 1)
 - For full credit, the state (i) has implemented an emergency allotment waiver from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) through

June 30, (ii) has implemented food assistance programming for children not currently in school, known as Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), (iii) has requested from the USDA extended certification periods (the length of time for which Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] benefits have been approved) through June 30, and (iv) has requested from the USDA that the interview requirements to qualify for SNAP be reduced through June 30. Half credit is given when the state implemented one of these program extensions during the early crisis but did not extend it through June 30. This metric is scored on a 1-point scale, with full credit for each submetric given 0.25 points. We collected this data from SNAP's COVID-19 Waivers by State database.

APPENDIX 2: DIAGRAM OF INDEX COMPONENTS



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transportation, warehouse, and delivery (4 million workers); industrial, commercial, and residential facilities and services (6.8 million workers); health care (16.7 million workers); government and community-based services (4.6 million workers); communications and information technology (3.2 million workers); the financial sector (3 million workers); the energy sector (1.3 million workers); water and wastewater management (107,846 workers); the chemical sector (271,160 workers); and critical manufacturing (2 million workers). See Celine McNicholas and Margaret Poydock, “Who are essential workers?: A comprehensive look at their wages, demographics, and unionization rates,” *Economic Policy Institute: Working Economics Blog*, 19 May, 2020, [https://www.epi.org/blog/who-are-essential-workers-a-comprehensive-look-at-their-wages-demographics-and-unionization-rates/#:~:text=People%20of%20color%20make%20up,high%20school%20diploma%20\(29%25\)](https://www.epi.org/blog/who-are-essential-workers-a-comprehensive-look-at-their-wages-demographics-and-unionization-rates/#:~:text=People%20of%20color%20make%20up,high%20school%20diploma%20(29%25))

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COVER: As a deadly airborne virus, COVID-19 presented an instant challenge to workers and employers in the US. Essential workers need robust protections, including masks. *The Best States to Work During COVID-19* asks the question: How is each state helping working families manage during the COVID-19 pandemic? *Photo: STEKLO*



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