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CONTACT

Genevieve Friedman
(212) 784-5709

A Portrait of Louisiana Reveals Pandemic Could Worsen Statewide Disparities in Well-Being

Measure of America's latest report on human development in Louisiana breaks down well-being by race, place, and gender and shows where relief efforts could make the most impact

BATON ROUGE, La. – October 29, 2020 – [Measure of America](#), a project of the Social Science Research Council, today released [A Portrait of Louisiana 2020](#), an extensive study of the well-being of Louisianans across race, place, and gender that builds on the findings of *A Portrait of Louisiana 2009*. The report is based on the American Human Development Index (HDI), which is derived from the U.N. Human Development Index and measures well-being across three key indicators: life expectancy, access to education, and earnings. It offers detailed analysis and data by parish and demographic group for each indicator, **serving as a map of vulnerability** to help **advocates, governments, and community members** measure progress and see where the need for support exists as Louisiana faces the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis, and a record-breaking hurricane season.

The report found that Louisiana's HDI score has improved over the last decade: life expectancy and earnings overall have increased slightly, and there was a substantial increase in the percentage of adults with a bachelor's degree. However, the state's score (4.35) remains below the U.S. average (5.24) and significant gaps exist by race, gender, and geography. Many of the communities with lower scores also face disproportionate harm from the current crises, which threaten to worsen existing disparities.

"Our research aims to illuminate the gaps that prevent every individual in every community from living a freely chosen life of value," said Kristen Lewis, Director of Measure of America. "Louisiana has made important progress over the past decade, but that progress has not been distributed equally. As the state recovers from the catastrophic health and economic impacts of Covid-19 and a devastating storm season, policymakers should use the map of vulnerability offered by *A Portrait of Louisiana* to target resources and support to the places and people who need them most."

Key findings in *A Portrait of Louisiana 2020* include:

- **Overall well-being:** Black Louisianans have the lowest HDI score (2.93) of the major racial and ethnic groups, and Asians have the highest (6.29), followed by whites (5.15), and Latinos (4.62). East Carroll Parish has the lowest HDI score in the state (1.49) compared to a high of 5.35 in Ascension Parish, just above the US average (5.24). The ten lowest-scoring parishes are made up of small towns and rural areas, primarily in the northeast region of the state.
- **Health:** Life expectancy among Asian Louisianans (87.5 years) is more than a decade longer than among Black residents (73.4 years); this number drops another four years among Black men (69.5 years). The maternal mortality rate in Louisiana is nearly four times the national average, with major disparities by race: Black women have a rate four times higher than white women in the state.
- **Earnings:** White Louisianans' median earnings are nearly double that of Black Louisianans (\$39,288 versus \$22,430) and are much higher than those of Latino (\$25,422) and Asian workers (\$26,457). Of Louisiana's 64 parishes, 26 meet the standard for persistent poverty, and 42 for

persistent child poverty, meaning that at least 20 percent of residents were poor from 1980 to 2011. Men earn significantly more than women in the state as a whole (\$41,057 compared to \$25,137), and white men earn much more than any other demographic group, \$49,406—nearly \$20,000 dollars more than the second-highest-earning demographic, Asian men (\$31,127).

- **Education:** Louisiana has a higher rate (51.3 percent) of preschool enrollment than the country as a whole (47.9 percent), and Black children in Louisiana are more likely to be enrolled in pre-K than white children (61.1 versus 47.0 percent). Black adults in Louisiana are nearly twice as likely as white adults to lack a high school diploma and half as many have a bachelor's degree. Latino residents have the lowest overall levels of educational attainment and enrollment. Women are more likely than men to have high school, bachelor's, and graduate degrees—yet they earn less.
- **Youth disconnection:** Louisiana has the fourth-highest rate of youth disconnection—16-24 year-olds neither working nor in school—in the country (16.4 percent), and the rate ranges from 9.2 percent in Lincoln Parish to 77.2 percent in East Carroll Parish. Black youth are nearly twice as likely to be disconnected (22.3 percent) as white youth (12.2 percent). People gain many of the capabilities fundamental to a freely chosen life during their teens and early twenties, making youth disconnection a significant hurdle to human development.
- **Incarceration:** The average rate of prison admissions is nearly twice as high in the lowest-scoring parishes as in the highest-scoring ones.

By late July, the Covid-19 death rate in Louisiana—home to the second-highest share of Black residents in the country—was climbing faster than in all but three states, and Black people accounted for 50.3 percent of Covid-19 deaths, despite making up only 32.1 percent of the population. The inequalities in the data are driven by both current and historically rooted factors, including residential segregation, poverty, health disparities, and the legacy of slavery, among others.

But progress is possible: *A Portrait of Louisiana 2020* details several policies, such as paid medical leave, broadband access for all, expanded public transportation, and universal pre-K, that can reduce disparities in health, education, and income. The report serves as a guide for Louisiana's communities, advocates, and policymakers to work toward closing gaps in well-being, both during recovery from the pandemic and over the long term.

"This report shows how there is nothing inevitable about inequality in Louisiana," said Davante Lewis, Director of Public Affairs and Outreach at the Louisiana Budget Project. "The well-being gaps in the state are the result of policy decisions and the racial disparities are the result of centuries of systemic racism. But people in power can improve well-being for those who are most vulnerable by making different, better choices."

"This timely research is a critical component in generating thoughtful programs, dialogue and action that contribute to improving Louisiana's health, education, living standards and human development," said Jenée Slocum, director of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication. "We are working toward research-based, action-oriented solutions that strengthen the well-being of Louisianans, and this is a substantial step in the right direction."

A Portrait of Louisiana 2020 is based on 2018 data, the latest available from the American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The full report is available [here](#). It was released at a launch event hosted by the Louisiana Budget Project and the LSU

Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs. *A Portrait of Louisiana 2020* was made possible through the support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and JPMorgan Chase & Co.

About Measure of America

An initiative of the **Social Science Research Council**, Measure of America provides easy-to-use yet methodologically sound tools for understanding the distribution of well-being and opportunity in America and stimulating fact-based dialogue about issues we all care about: health, education, and living standards.

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