



2026 Policy Priorities

Louisiana

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) works to safeguard civil rights gains and build a more equitable and just society. Rooted in the South, where the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement continues to shape the struggle for racial equality, we partner with communities to dismantle white supremacy and strengthen intersectional movements to advance transformative policies and human rights for all.

Our work includes providing subject-matter expertise and technical assistance to partners, stakeholders, and state and local officials to drive impactful initiatives that ensure a future where Black and Brown communities are not only represented but deeply respected as part of a thriving democracy. We focus on:

- **Eradicating Poverty:** Protecting Social Safety Net Programs and Building Pathways for Upward Economic Mobility
- **Strengthening Democracy:** Expanding Access and Ensuring Fair Representation
- **Ending Over-Criminalization and Mass Incarceration:** Favoring Community-Based Alternatives to Carceral Solutions and Transparency and Accountability for Law Enforcement Actors
- **Countering Hate and Extremism:** Ensuring Inclusive Education

Food Security for Children and Families

Congress has long recognized the importance of food security programs, especially for children. Like many national programs, the operation of food security programs like School Lunch Program; Women, Infants and Children (WIC); and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have been primarily funded by the federal government. The federal budget (called “The One Big Beautiful Bill Act”), passed in July 2025, shifts financial burden to the states, increasing their administrative costs from 50% to 75% in FY27 and, starting in FY28, states will be assessed additional costs based on the program’s error rate. In FY27, Louisiana’s total SNAP obligation is estimated to increase by \$50.7 million — simply to maintain the current service levels; and rise to a total obligation of \$229 million in FY28.

An estimated 850,000 Louisianans, living at or below the federal poverty level, depend on an average monthly benefit of \$165 to purchase groceries. Nearly 70% of participants are families with children, and more than 37% are families with members who are older adults or individuals with a disability.

In addition to SNAP, Congress created the Summer EBT pilot in 2011 and made it permanent with broad bipartisan support in 2022. This program is specifically designed to fill the gap when school is out: More than 28 million children receive free or reduced-price school meals during the year, but only about one in six are reached by traditional summer meal sites. Based on the USDA’s estimate of the nearly 600,000 children eligible for the program, Louisiana could expect an expected economic impact of \$106.9 million to \$128.3 million from Summer EBT benefits. Although Louisiana opted out of the Summer EBT Program in 2024, the

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Legislature approved a new grocery benefits program to provide families \$120 for each eligible school-aged child to buy groceries when school is out.

In Louisiana, an estimated 257,000 children under the age of 18 were living in poverty in 2022, with 40% of those being Black children. It is a fundamental moral obligation, not an optional expense, to ensure that Louisiana's budget choices do not leave children, seniors, or families in need to go hungry.

Recommendations:

- Fully fund Louisiana's increased share of SNAP administrative costs mandated under the federal One Big Beautiful Bill Act, without reducing eligibility, benefit levels, or access to the program.
- Provide adequate funding for the operation of summer nutrition programs and academic-year breakfasts for school-aged children, including seeking appropriate matching funds from the USDA annually, or as available, to support vital programs.
- Direct all relevant local and state agencies to partner with schools, community organizations, and health providers to identify and enroll eligible but unenrolled children and families in SNAP, WIC, Summer EBT and other anti-poverty programs.
- Require annual public reporting on participation, hunger indicators, and use of federal nutrition dollars to ensure Louisiana is maximizing available federal funds for food security.

Health Care Access and Affordability

A key indicator of a thriving society is the health of its people. Access to affordable and quality health care is key to a family's economic security. Sadly, medical bills remain one of the leading factors in a person or family's decision to file bankruptcy. Eradicating poverty starts with improving access to affordable health care.

Though Louisiana has expanded Medicaid, health care remains inaccessible to many who need it. To make matters worse, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, passed in July 2025, declined to extend the tax credits for health care premiums paid toward plans accessed through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) marketplace. As a result, health care costs are set to skyrocket in 2026 for nearly 300,000 Louisianians enrolled in an ACA plan. As an example, a 60-year-old couple living in East Baton Rouge, earning \$85,000, will see their monthly premium for a Bronze Plan increase from \$0 to \$1,802. Further, because insurance providers anticipate that the unaffordable price jump will force many to drop out of coverage, they have increased costs in the private market as well.

Recommendations:

- Safeguard tax credits for hardworking Louisiana families to ensure coverage and meaningful access to basic medical care.
- Improve state administration of Medicare and Medicaid services, including enrollment and redetermination processes, call centers, and associated IT services.
- Fund rural health care access, including hospitals and mobile tele-health programs.
- Reduce costs and barriers to access, especially for low-income Black and Brown residents that live in rural, high-poverty counties.

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Affordable, Quality Housing

Louisiana’s ranking as one of the poorest states in the nation, coupled with the recent rise in inflation and lack of affordable housing, has increased the population of individuals facing housing stability. An increasing number of Louisiana residents are simply trying to survive without shelter or are one financial emergency away from being without a home themselves. Additionally, once people are housed, they often struggle to repair or maintain their homes.

In 2024, the Legislature passed a law criminalizing individuals attempting to gain resources while standing in public roadways and highways. Additionally, municipalities such as Baton Rouge, Livingston and New Orleans are adopting local laws aimed at removing unhoused people from public spaces, instead of working to address the most direct challenge — the lack of affordable homes for low-wage earners and other drivers of homelessness. State and local policies should instead be focused on funding solutions to foster stability and dignity, which enable individuals to rebuild financially and reintegrate into their communities — without calls to criminalize people experiencing homelessness.

Recommendations:

- Reinforce the dignity of its residents by allocating U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds to ensure quality, affordable housing for Louisianans — regardless of their economic, physical or mental health status.
- Address the needs of local unhoused populations and the drivers of homelessness by investing in alternative strategies, such as affordable and secure housing, which have proven successful nationwide.
- Reject criminal penalties for people experiencing homelessness who establish encampment areas or solicit assistance and provide pathways towards safe housing.
- Clearly define the rights of unhoused individuals and families to minimize interactions with law enforcement and unnecessary and harmful jail time.

Securing Democracy and Ensuring Voting Rights

A U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2024 forced the Louisiana Legislature to create a second majority-minority congressional district for Louisianans. As a result, Louisiana (whose population is one-third Black) now has two African American members of its six-person congressional delegation. In the legislative session following the Supreme Court ruling, Louisiana lawmakers who were unhappy with the outcome introduced bills to restrict voter access, such as limits upon voter registration drives and absentee voting procedures, as well as encouraging aggressive scrubbing of voter registration rolls. The state of Louisiana continued their efforts to redraw the congressional map and, again, sought redress from the U.S. Supreme Court. As we await the ruling in *Louisiana v. Callais*, it is evident that achievements made by Black and Brown voters are met with counterattempts to disenfranchise and dilute voting power — underscoring how critical it is to pursue a fair and just democracy.

Meanwhile, more than 36,000 residents remain disenfranchised due to past convictions. While voting rights can be restored after completing incarceration, parole or probation, many of those eligible to do so face bureaucratic barriers such as providing burdensome documentation to election officials before being able to re-register. These expensive and time-consuming documentation requirements disproportionately affect Black and Brown communities, further exacerbating racial disparities in voter participation. Additional concerns — such as executive orders directing the Office of Motor Vehicles (OMV) to issue misleading voter-eligibility warnings and increased pressure to purge voter rolls — further emphasize the need for strong protections.



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These deterrents and impediments are worsened by the lack of election administration protocols following hurricanes or other natural disasters. Supervisors of elections, elected officials who are closest to the ground when natural disasters strike, cannot act until the governor issues an executive order allowing for accommodations and flexibility. The local election officials know their community best and are the most efficient office to respond to the complicated needs of voters after a natural disaster. However, simple access to a voting booth or early voting opportunity is not enough. In a hurricane- and flood-prone state like Louisiana, backup equipment like printers, paper and scanners are all needed to ensure a seamless-as-possible election should disaster strike a community.

Recommendations:

- Expand voter access and remove policies intended to suppress participation.
- Permit same-day registration statewide.
- Expand absentee voting access for individuals detained pretrial.
- Implement preclearance procedures to prevent discriminatory election changes.
- Establish universal voter registration for individuals with prior convictions.
- Guarantee voters impacted by natural disasters have easy access to participate in our elections.
- Give parish elections supervisors flexibility and all necessary equipment, including supply reserves, to respond to the needs of their community in the wake of a natural disaster.

Increasing Transparency and Accountability for Law Enforcement

Police departments and sheriffs' offices across Louisiana are not required to report even the most fundamental law enforcement information, such as the number of stops or arrests they make. Critical accountability data on uses of force, citizen complaints and officer discipline are similarly absent from publicly available accounting.

Without consistent and accessible reporting, Louisiana cannot meaningfully evaluate policing practices of the more than 300 law enforcement agencies or assess their contribution to the state's high incarceration rate.

The SPLC's research has identified an extreme lack of diversity in Louisiana law enforcement (over 90% of sheriffs were white men as of 2022). To achieve community stability and public safety, it is necessary to invest taxpayer funds in initiatives such as intentional and robust recruitment efforts that increase diversity of law enforcement; racial bias training; and requiring data transparency of police activity. Doing so will increase accountability for official law enforcement activities — including racial biases. Relatedly, police agencies cannot effectively evaluate their own performance or counter criticisms of unfair targeting and systemic misconduct. Trust can only be established if communities have access to information, and public servants are held accountable for their misdeeds.

Recommendations:

- Mandate standardized public reporting of critical law enforcement activity statewide including stops, arrests, use-of-force incidents, citizen complaints and officer discipline, with no exemptions for agencies with racial profiling policies.
- Require annual racial-bias and accountability training for all agencies.
- Establish an independent ombudsman to evaluate resident complaints regarding law enforcement behavior.



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Adult Court and Prisons are No Place for a Child

Prior to 2016, Louisiana was one of only two states that automatically prosecuted 17-year-olds as adults, regardless of the severity of the offense. The Raise the Age Act, which took effect in 2017, raised the age for which a child was considered an adult from 17 to 18, meaning that individuals under the age of 18 would be processed through the youth legal system rather than the adult criminal system. Exceptions were implemented for certain serious crimes, where district attorneys had discretion on whether children could still be transferred to adult court.

However, in 2024, Louisiana lawmakers passed legislation to once again treat 17-year-olds as adults in criminal cases. Then, in March 2025, 66% of voters (52 of 64 parishes) roundly rejected a ballot measure (Act 3) that would have amended the state constitution to grant the legislature the authority to name offenses for which children as young as 10 years old could be prosecuted as an adult.

Out of the 203 17-year-olds who were arrested in Orleans, Jefferson and East Baton Rouge parishes between April and September 2024, 141, or 69%, were arrested for offenses that are not listed as violent crimes under Louisiana law. Just 13% of the defendants — a little over two dozen — have been accused of the type of violent crimes that lawmakers cited when arguing for the legislation (e.g., rape, armed robbery and murder); there was no need to change the law — under the Raise the Age Act, district attorneys had the authority to try these crimes in adult court. Furthermore, this reversal was unnecessary because the low number of violent youth crime convictions mirrors the consistent trend of decreasing youth arrest rates. Between 2000 and 2020, Louisiana and the U.S. have seen youth arrest rates decline by 67% and 80% respectively — suggesting that adult prisons are not as necessary to deal with youth crime as current rhetoric makes it seem.

According to SPLC research, youth incarcerated in adult facilities are more likely to experience extensive solitary confinement, greater recidivism, and higher suicide rates — making adult prisons hardly appropriate for children that are still in the early stages of brain development. When youth are prosecuted as adults and pushed into the adult prison system, that conviction will forever impact them — creating lifelong obstacles to finding housing, accessing education, and employment. Furthermore, when they return to their communities, they are more likely to be arrested again. This harms our communities as well as our family structures. To turn the tide, Louisiana needs to meaningfully invest in programs and community-based alternatives to incarceration of children such as additional resources for counseling, tutoring and substance abuse treatment, and investing in school policies and programs which have a proven positive impact on youth.

Recommendations:

- Restore the Raise the Age Act and ensure 17-year-olds remain in the youth justice system.
- Remove all children under the age of 18 from adult facilities statewide.
- Fund diversion programs that reduce the likelihood of youth entering the criminal legal system and alternatives to incarceration. Examples include community-based alternatives, school-based policies and programs that prioritize rehabilitation, counseling, tutoring and drug use treatment services.

Building a Community Response in Local Budgeting

The residents of the city of New Orleans continue to struggle to find affordable housing, quality food, decent wages, support for their family and a sense of safety in their neighborhoods. Fighting for the equitable and transparent allocation of over \$388 million in American Rescue Plan Act dollars has been a priority since 2022. The culmination of the work was the creation of the Big Easy Deal through a collaboration known as the Big Easy Budget Coalition.

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In 2023 the coalition was able to secure the proper allocation of \$26 million in ARPA funds and \$20 million from the general budget to support investments in housing, basic needs, and community violence interventions, but several critical need areas were not covered in those allocations. In 2024, the goal was to have the city of New Orleans invest \$125.5 million into the needs of its residents: \$100 million in affordable housing; \$18 million in youth services; \$4 million in food security; and \$3.5 million in violence prevention. Of that request, only \$37.8 million was secured to be allocated in 2025.

When surveyed, nearly 500 residents of Orleans Parish stated that the top priorities for city investments should be education, safe and affordable housing for all residents, opportunities for youth, and mental health services. When it comes to community safety, New Orleanians' top priorities are prevention through early intervention, skills and employment training, and treatment. State and local policies and funding priorities should match the needs and priorities of all community members.

Recommendations:

- Ensure a public-facing, accessible, equitable and transparent budgeting process that includes community input opportunities.
- Fully fund the Big Easy Deal in 2026 to ensure that all areas of concern raised by the residents of Orleans Parish are backed with adequate finances.

Inclusive Education and Dignity for All

In recent years, we witnessed activists and politicians who advanced racist strategies to attack crucial anti-discrimination policies in K-12 and higher education settings. Our children deserve a truthful education about race and racism in this country. Attempts to quash these conversations are attacks on democracy, justice and community. Furthermore, they limit our ability, as a society, to deal frankly with our past or future. Students must learn the full picture of U.S. history, especially when it does not live up to our shared values. The U.S. is founded on ideals of liberty, freedom and equality, but built on slavery, exploitation and exclusion. Lesson plans and policies that suppress honest and vulnerable discussions and analysis of this history are harmful and fail to provide a path toward equity and mutual respect.

In addition to efforts to erase Black history from schools and to eliminate diversity and inclusion programs, a number of harmful policies that target the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth in Louisiana have been put forward. These include bills that prevent children from openly expressing themselves at school, playing on sports teams with their peers, or using the restroom in which they feel safe. As a result, LGBTQ+ kids and their families are forced to navigate ongoing and unacceptable obstacles to their educational futures and well-being.

Recommendations:

- Reject the politicization of education. Instead, embrace the importance of encouraging students and youth to learn about Black history and the diversity of the United States, including an honest account of its histories, races and cultures.
- Support the dignity of LGBTQ+ people, particularly youth. Reject any policies that further harm children by censoring their personal expression, denying them access to educational materials, or otherwise puts them at greater risk of bullying or self-harm.
- Retain the independence of local libraries as safe havens within their communities.
- Increase funding and support for public schools and provide policy changes to reduce racial and socioeconomic inequities.



For more information, visit splcenter.org or contact:

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