



2026 Policy Priorities

Mississippi

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is dedicated to safeguarding civil rights and building 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 equity, 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 Creating Pathways for Upward Economic Mobility
- **Ending Over-Criminalization and Mass Incarceration:** Favoring Community-Based Alternatives to Carceral Solutions
- **Strengthening Democracy:** Expanding Access and Improving Engagement
- **Countering Hate and Extremism:** Ensuring Inclusive Education

Food Security for Children and Families

Congress has long recognized the importance of food security programs, particularly 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. Starting in FY28, states will be assessed additional costs based on the program’s error rate.

In FY27, Mississippi’s total SNAP obligation is estimated to increase by \$29.4 million — simply to maintain the current service levels; and could rise to a total obligation of \$168.9 million in FY29 based on the program’s error rate assessment.

An estimated 380,000 Mississippians, living at or below the federal poverty level, depend on an average monthly benefit of \$183 to purchase groceries. Nearly 67% of participants are families with children and more than 41% 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. The program is designed to fill the gap for families with children living in poverty when school is out. In Mississippi, an estimated 300,000 children in Mississippi are eligible for Summer EBT, yet the state does not participate. Based on USDA estimates, Mississippi is leaving roughly \$38 million in federal food assistance and an overall economic impact of \$58 million to \$70 million on the table each year that could help families buy groceries and give children a hunger-free summer.

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It is a fundamental moral obligation, not an optional expense, to ensure that Mississippi's budget choices do not leave children, seniors or families in need to go hungry.

Recommendations

- Fully fund Mississippi'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.
- Protect SNAP, WIC and school meal programs from state-level cuts or restrictive policies adopted to offset the federal cost shift.
- 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 Mississippi is maximizing available federal funds for food security.

Improving Cash Assistance (TANF) as an Economic Safeguard

Mississippi's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is in desperate need of reform. TANF is intended to offer temporary financial relief to families living in poverty by providing cash assistance benefits for families to purchase necessities such as food, clothing and shelter. Currently, Mississippi spends about 5% of its \$86.5 million annual TANF award on cash payments to needy families, which means it spends less than 10% of its federal allocation on direct assistance.

We celebrate the recent administrative improvement, effective Oct. 1, 2024, that extends eligibility to families with income of 50% of the federal poverty level (up from 25%). However, much more needs to be done to ensure that qualifying Mississippians receive critical direct cash assistance. Of the 190,000 Mississippi children living in poverty, less than 2,700 families received TANF assistance in 2022. In October 2024, it was reported that only 125 applications, or 9% of people applying for TANF, make it through the application process each month. For the few who do receive benefits, monthly cash assistance remains among the lowest in the nation, doing little to alleviate the struggles of those in need.

Meanwhile, instead of reaching families experiencing financial crises, TANF funds have been misdirected toward a range of frivolous projects. Money that should have gone to struggling households with children was instead spent on horse ranches, personal trainers, motivational speeches that never occurred, and even the construction of a volleyball arena on a college campus. Such egregious abuses siphoned crucial resources away from the families who desperately needed them.

Mississippi's approach to TANF differs significantly from federal guidelines. For example, though federal law considers school an allowable work activity, Mississippi does not credit it as such. This means that many Mississippians who could be eligible for TANF because they are attending college are forced to choose between access to short-term cash assistance and the life-changing economic safeguard of education or workforce training.



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Recommendations

- Increase the base amount of TANF assistance from \$260 per month for a family of three to \$510 and link benefit levels to a cost-of-living adjustment. This proactive measure is designed to prevent further erosion of benefits over time, ensuring that the assistance provided remains aligned with the actual cost of living without the need for regular legislative action.
- Allocate nearly \$150 million in unobligated reserves to essential services such as housing supplements, emergency assistance and higher cash benefits.
- Credit education and job training as qualifying work activity, as allowable under federal law; this will allow recipients to build skills needed to achieve long-term financial independence.
- Simplify the enrollment process to make the program more accessible and remove barriers to enrollment such as drug testing and the family cap.

Ensuring Health Care for All

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.

Yet access to and affordability of health care coverage remains a significant barrier, particularly for Black people. Federal law has empowered Mississippi to expand access to health care to its poorest citizens since 2014. For over a decade, Mississippi's lawmakers have failed to provide a pathway to utilize the available federal funding, and its residents have suffered unnecessarily. If Mississippi expanded Medicaid to cover those living at or below 138% of the federal poverty level, an estimated 125,000 individuals aged 19-64 would have health insurance immediately.

Mississippi is one of only 10 states that has not expanded Medicaid coverage to those falling into the health care access gap despite it being cost-effective to do so. Benefits of Medicaid expansion include increased access to health care for people of color and people with disabilities, the preservation of rural community hospitals, and improved access to the basic health resources for communities that have been shut out of health care systems.

Medicaid expansion could also save Mississippi's 34 rural hospitals struggling financially and at risk of closure. Driving factors for the crisis are a combination of rising costs of providing care and expenses related to uninsured community members. Easing their financial burden would prevent a health care desert by keeping the hospital and its well-paid jobs in the community, as well as boosting the local economy and schools.

Further exacerbating access to care is Mississippi's destructive "Medicaid unwinding," which has led to the removal of nearly 100,000 people from the state's insurance program. Not only has the Legislature failed to ensure residents have access to affordable, quality health care, but they have made statutory changes in recent years that make it more difficult for those Mississippians seeking gender-affirming care to receive the necessary treatment.

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 340,000 Mississippians enrolled in an ACA plan. As an example, a 60-year-old couple living in Jackson, earning \$85,000, will see their monthly premium for a Bronze Plan increase from \$473



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to \$2,580. Further, because insurance providers anticipate that the price jump will force many to drop out of coverage, they have increased costs in the private market as well.

Recommendations:

- Provide tax credits for hardworking Mississippi families to ensure coverage and meaningful access to basic medical care.
- Authorize the expansion of Medicaid in a way that enables it to accept the federal funding available to do so, with coverage for adults with low incomes at least up to 138% of the federal poverty level and without added work requirements.
- Bundle Medicaid assistance with housing assistance to help people with low incomes who have disabilities get back on their feet.
- Improve state administration of Medicaid, including enrollment and redetermination processes, call centers, and associated IT services.
- Reduce costs and barriers to access, especially for low-income Black and Brown residents that live in rural, high-poverty counties.

Early Voting and No-Excuse Absentee Voting

Voting should be a simple, convenient process that allows every eligible voter to easily participate. Unfortunately, Mississippi remains one of the few Southern states without an early voting period, leaving it an outlier compared to neighboring states like Louisiana, Georgia and Florida. This barrier disproportionately impacts working families, individuals with disabilities, and those lacking reliable transportation. Establishing early voting and no-excuse absentee voting would make participation more accessible to all Mississippians and reduce long lines on Election Day. Another option would be to implement no-excuse absentee voting. Through either one of these policies, Mississippi would make voting more accessible to all voters, thereby improving our democratic process and increasing voter participation.

In the 2024 general election, early voting proved overwhelmingly popular, across party lines, in states that offered it. Nearly one half of all voters in Louisiana and Florida and over 70% in Georgia and North Carolina casting early ballots. Studies show that no-excuse absentee voting boosts participation across demographics without partisan advantage. Mississippi should join other states in modernizing its election laws to increase participation and fairness by making voting more accessible for all people.

Recommendations:

- Create a statewide early voting program that includes at least two Saturdays before any primary or general election.
- Permit no-excuse absentee voting; allow for permanent vote-by-mail requests with prepaid postage for return ballots.
- Authorize automatic and same-day voter registration.

Restoring Voting Rights to People with Past Criminal Convictions

Under Mississippi's Constitution, individuals convicted of certain felonies are prohibited from voting for life. After Florida restored the voting rights of people with felony convictions in 2018, Mississippi remains the only state that has maintained this lifetime ban on voting. The origins of Mississippi's constitutional disenfranchisement date back to Reconstruction following the Civil War and are



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deeply tainted with racial bias. Crimes that were perceived as being committed more often by Black people, such as burglary and theft, resulted in losing one's voting rights, while violent crimes more likely to have been committed by white people, such as murder or rape, did not. These laws were explicitly designed to suppress the rights of Black voters. Today, a staggering 16% of Mississippi's Black population is disenfranchised.

Overall, more than 230,000 Mississippians, or 1 in 10 adults in the state, are barred from voting due to a past criminal conviction. This policy undermines and creates barriers to reintegration into society for those who have completed their sentences. Voting allows individuals to make personal changes and societal impact for their families and community. Ensuring people with prior convictions have access to participate fully in democracy is foundational to the rehabilitative process. Furthermore, research shows that allowing formerly incarcerated people to vote also lowers recidivism rates.

In August 2023, in response to a case brought by the SPLC and co-counsel — *Hopkins v. Hosemann* — the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit struck down Mississippi's disenfranchisement scheme. In this historic decision, the appeals court found that the Mississippi law — which bars people convicted of certain crimes, some very minor, from voting in Mississippi for life — was a violation of the U.S. Constitution's ban against cruel and unusual punishment. Unfortunately, in July 2024, over the objection of six judges, the full Fifth Circuit panel overturned that decision, declining to restore voting rights to permanently disenfranchised Mississippians. What's more, the decision stated that Mississippi's felony disenfranchisement laws can only be changed by the state's Legislature.

Recommendations:

- Address historical racial bias by removing legal barriers to enfranchisement.
- Revise the state Constitution — and adopt any necessary companion legislation — to enable the restoration of voting rights to people with past criminal convictions upon release from prison, regardless of outstanding fines, fees or restitution.

Protecting Students from the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Mississippi students receive disparate discipline in school settings. Students with disabilities as well as Black and Brown children continue to confront disproportionately harsh discipline practices in Mississippi classrooms. Alarming, a Black child is suspended from school every 15 minutes in Mississippi.

Due to the lack of state guidance, many schools across the state enforce mandatory expulsion of students after their second incident of disruptive behavior. Additionally, there is no exception in the compulsory attendance law for absences related to a student's disability. As a state with some of the highest school suspension and expulsion rates in the country, Mississippi has promoted a school-to-prison pipeline that contributes to the highest adult incarceration rate in the United States.

Incarceration is harmful to our youth and expensive to taxpayers. In recent years, Mississippi has incarcerated more and more children in juvenile facilities, while devoting fewer resources to community alternatives that could have a more positive impact and reduce state-spending overall. Children are our most valuable resource, but Mississippi is not investing in them. We suggest that Mississippi invest in an approach that points our youth toward success, not prisons. The SPLC's report *Only Young Once: The Case for Mississippi's Investment in Youth Decarceration* provides compelling data that underscores the need for a policy response that will address racial inequalities. For example, Black children are incarcerated at nearly four times the rate of non-Black children, and incarcerating a young person in Mississippi for one year (\$155,125) is more expensive than the alternatives combined: The annual

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cost to educate a child in Mississippi public schools is \$9,258; it costs \$18,250 to fund community-based alternatives to incarceration; enrollment for Ole Miss and Mississippi State University is \$41,210 annually.

Additionally, Mississippi has yet to meaningfully reinvest in programs and community-based alternatives to incarceration such as additional resources for counseling, tutoring and substance abuse treatment and investing in school policies and programs that have a proven impact on youth. Furthermore, the failure of Mississippi to accept federal funding available to expand Medicaid eligibility exacerbates challenges faced by those who are struggling economically. Children who have access to health care and food are much less likely to be part of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Recommendations:

- Raise the minimum age for youth adjudication and incarceration from 10 to at least 14 years old.
- Make nonviolent and low-level offenses non-jailable for youth. Make technical violations and status offenses non-jailable and nonarrestable for youth.
- Fund diversion programs for youths as an alternative to incarceration. Examples include community-based alternatives, school-based policies and programs that prioritize rehabilitation, counseling, tutoring, and drug use treatment services.
- End the assessment of court fines and fees for children.
- Amend all public education laws to ensure they are compliant with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- Prioritize compliance with IDEA and ensure students receive the special education services they are entitled to under the law.

Preserve Public Funds for Public Schools

Mississippi's public education system is facing a renewed threat from efforts by state elected leaders who support private school voucher programs. While marketed as "school choice," these proposals would divert critical public funds from already under-resourced public schools into private institutions that are not accountable to taxpayers and can legally exclude students based on race, religion, disability or sexual orientation.

This approach is not new. In the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Mississippi and other Southern states used state-funded tuition grants to support segregation academies to resist school integration. Today's voucher initiatives mirror that legacy — functioning as a modern-day tool of resegregation that would roll back decades of progress toward racial and economic equity.

By shifting taxpayer dollars away from neighborhood schools, voucher systems would disproportionately harm Black, Brown, rural and low-income communities, worsening existing inequities in educational quality, access and opportunity. These programs funnel resources to families who can already afford private tuition, leaving behind children whose futures depend on a strong public education system and the path out of generational poverty it helps create.

Vouchers also carry serious economic implications. Public schools are key employers and community anchors — especially in small towns and rural areas. Every diverted dollar weakens not only the educational infrastructure but also the local economy that relies on public school jobs and investment. When public funds are redirected into private systems, Mississippi's children lose — and the cycle of poverty continues.

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Recommendations:

- Reject all private school voucher and tax-credit programs that divert public dollars from public education.
- Invest in equitable funding, infrastructure improvements, and teacher pay increases to strengthen public education across all districts.

Affordable, Quality Housing

The state of Mississippi, as well as municipalities such as Jackson, are adopting 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.

While Mississippi has the lowest rate of homelessness in the nation, the housing options available are often unsafe or nearly unlivable. Additionally, once people are housed, they often struggle to repair or maintain their homes. Solutions focused on stability and dignity, which enable individuals to rebuild financially and reintegrate into their communities – without calls to criminalize people experiencing homelessness – are crucial and should be the focus of state and local policies and funding priorities.

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 Mississippians – 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 has proven successful nationwide.
- Reject criminal penalties for people experiencing homelessness who establish encampment areas or solicit assistance and provide pathways toward safe housing.
- Clearly define the rights of unhoused individuals and families to minimize interactions with law enforcement and unnecessary and harmful jail time.

Inclusive Education and Dignity for All

In recent years, we have 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 Mississippi 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 put 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.



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