



# Penn State Public Policy Journal

Spring 2025 | Volume 3

## **Analysis of Socioeconomic Factors Influencing Food Stamp Reciprocity Among U.S. Households**

by Kelsey Brown and Victoria Yeboah

## **The Medicaid Coverage Gap: Expansion vs. Non-Expansion States**

by Shahid Khan

## **A Research Design for Organized Crime in Latin America**

by Kysbell Gonzalez

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# About

The *Penn State Public Policy Journal* is a student-led publication founded in 2022 by a group of MPP students at the Penn State School of Public Policy. The Journal is currently published by the Public Policy Association at Penn State (PPAPS), a registered student organization based at the Penn State University Park campus.

# Mission

Our mission at the *Penn State Public Policy Journal* is to offer Penn State students the opportunity to publish original public policy analysis and research, and to share recommended policy approaches with a wider audience. By doing so, we hope to encourage students think critically and creatively about some of the biggest challenges facing society, and in turn produce and share high-quality, nuanced research.

# Focus & Scope

The Penn State Public Policy Journal publishes submissions on a wide range of issues. As a generalist publication intended for a wide audience, we welcome submissions from public policy scholars, political scientists, economists, legal scholars, sociologists, public health researchers, and others, as long as the work exhibits intellectual rigor, scholarly depth, accessible writing, and relevance to the public policy sphere.

# Support

Penn State Public Policy Journal is generously sponsored by the Penn State School of Public Policy. In particular, we would like to thank the faculty, staff, and students of the School of Public Policy for their continued support, without which this edition would not have been possible.

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# Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

The Public Policy Association at Penn State (PPAPS) is proud to release the third edition of the Penn State Public Policy Journal (PSPPJ). The purpose of PSPPJ is to provide a platform for students from a wide array of academic disciplines to research, analyze, and discuss the most pertinent public policy issues we face today. We would like to thank all authors, editors, and members of PSPPA for their support and hard work that helped make the third edition of this journal a reality.

The publication of the third edition of PSPPJ would not have been possible if not for the efforts of our editors, our undergraduate student membership, and our fellow Master of Public Policy students, all of whom contributed their invaluable perspectives and expertise. We would also like to thank Dr. Lilliard Richardson, Jeremy Hoffman, Dustin Elder, Dr. Kelly Duran, and the rest of the faculty from the Penn State School of Public Policy for supporting our academic pursuits inside and outside of the classroom. Their support provided us with the necessary tools to pursue our passions and examine these critical policy issues.

Public policy entails grappling with and understanding complex societal issues. Public policy problems intersect every industry and have impacts on both domestic and global populations. We hope that the insights and findings contained within the third edition of the Penn State Public Policy Journal help us to think about broader implications of policy for society at large and one's own journey toward creating a better world.

Sincerely,



Xiomara Larkin  
*Co-Editor-in-Chief*



Shahid Khan  
*Co-Editor-in-Chief*

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# Association Between Social & Demographic Factors and Income in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

In the U.S., programs developed that address households' income levels based on socioeconomic factors help to identify barriers to income attainment, so everyone served by these entities has the opportunity to achieve a fair income level regardless of race, gender, or level of education. Despite a significant increase in higher education levels while also changing circumstances to factors such as race and gender, the corresponding rise in income has not been equally as pronounced across these three spectrums. Disparity, particularly noted among non-whites, highlights the reality that income levels vary significantly based on race, gender, and level of education. This finding is a pressing and urgent issue that demands immediate attention. This research addresses the persistent income disparity in the United States, focusing on the intricate relationships between social factors and income level by delving into household income, variables, and their relationships.

This research question explores if there is an association between social and demographic factors and household income. The study results concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in average income between the level of household education, level of household by race, and level of household by gender when compared individually to household income level. A rigorous and comprehensive research methodology was employed to study this concept. Using R code statistical analysis software, data was analyzed and collected from the American Community Survey (ACS) to ensure the validity and

reliability of findings. While strides in society to close both minority and gender gaps concerning income have been made, this research results underscore the continuous need for further research and policy changes. Moreover, this is not a one-time effort but a constant journey towards income equity impacted by social and demographic factors.

## **MOTIVATION**

While available data shows that there are positive or negative effects of gender, race, and education level on household income, a further study in this area could help policy analysts determine if government institutions must make additional investments that could help close the gap in economic disparities between groups. Therefore, the impact of this research on policy decisions is significant and potentially transformative. According to Pew Research Center (2022), “in 2022, American women typically earned 82 cents for every dollar earned by men. That was about the same as in 2002 when women earned 80 cents to the dollar.” Moreover, “despite dramatic changes, large gaps remain when minority education attainment and outcomes are compared to white Americans” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). These findings highlight the income, gender, and race gap as it relates to income level. It also illustrates disparities in the salary among men and women and the slow increase in pay for women when compared to their counterparts by both gender and race.

The relationship between the level of education and household income level, gender and household income level, and race and household income level were explored when analyzing the data. The research question analyzes “Is there an association between social/demographic factors and household income?” With significantly different results in income levels among these groups, there is an opportunity for policymakers to help close the gap and act.

The U.S. Secretary of Education and the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Accountability oversees educational policy in the United States including impact of education on communities. Moreover, the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability oversees federal policies and programs across the board in relation to income and other

factors and committees. Both the U.S. Secretary of Education and the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Accountability can benefit from this research study. Analysis of data provided further inferences about the relationship between levels of education and income and demonstrates that there is a continuing persistent gender and race inequality within the U.S. that must be addressed.

## **DATA SOURCE**

For this analysis, the dataset utilized is derived from the American Community Survey (ACS) in 2016. The ACS is a project that has replaced the ten-year census as the primary source of information on population and housing data in America under the U.S. Census Bureau (IPUMS USA, 2024). The ACS provides a broad scope that includes various demographic, social, and economic variables and topics. Moreover, it depicts the characteristics of the U.S. population in specific periods. Overall, it is a reliable and valuable resource for examining and drawing inferences about nationwide broader population dynamics.

Several critical variables in the 2016 ACS dataset were utilized for this research and analysis. Within the research, we included household educational level, gender, total personal income, and race. This research was subset to one person per household representative of one household. Then, we made educational attainment into a binary variable called level of educational attainment. This binary variable was classified into two groups: higher education (for households with at least 1 year of college and higher) and lower education (for households with grade 12 and lower). The same structure was applied for race where a new binary variable was created and categorized as white households (for households considered white) and nonwhite households inclusive of African American, American Indian, Chinese, Japanese, other Asian or Pacific islander, other races, two major races, and three or more significant races. Finally, gender was separated into male and female.

Although the ACS provides a comprehensive data frame robust for public policy and social research, potential biases and limitations may occur during sampling methods or underrepresentation of specific

groups noted in race variable which did not include individually Hispanic, Spanish and Latino. For clarification, Hispanic or Latino origin is measured within the ACS. However, it is categorized under separate variables. In addition, some missing data in longitudinal studies and observational research like this may limit the analysis. Potential biases may also occur during sampling methods of specific groups by gender variable, the ACS dataset only provided male and female gender.

## **METHODS**

We created three hypotheses: 1. Households with a college education or higher will exhibit higher incomes levels than those with a high school education or lower. 2. Male households will exhibit higher income levels than female households. 3. White households will exhibit higher income levels than nonwhite households.

We performed a statistical analysis to determine whether there is an association between the household's annual total income and social/demographic factors, specifically education level, race, and gender. We classified education, race and gender at the household level. We did this by looking at the primary householder (the first person listed) in each household within the ACS dataset. The methods used to look at the association between household income and key social factors were descriptive statistics and bivariate comparisons. Descriptive analysis describes the association between the households' total annual income and their education level, race, and gender. Results provided an overview of the U.S. population and its characteristics noting differences in income gap across dimensions.

A bivariate table of means with 95% confidence intervals displays the relationship of variables by analyzing the differences or similarities of the households in specific categories: households with higher levels of education to their income in comparison to lower education households, gaps in mean income among races by white households and non-white households, and household income analyzed by male or female.

RESULTS

Results indicate a significant difference in household total income across three independent variables (level of education, race, and gender). Statistics conclude that income is significantly associated with social and demographic factors.

TABLE 1. BIVARIATE TABLE OF ANALYSIS OF MEAN ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

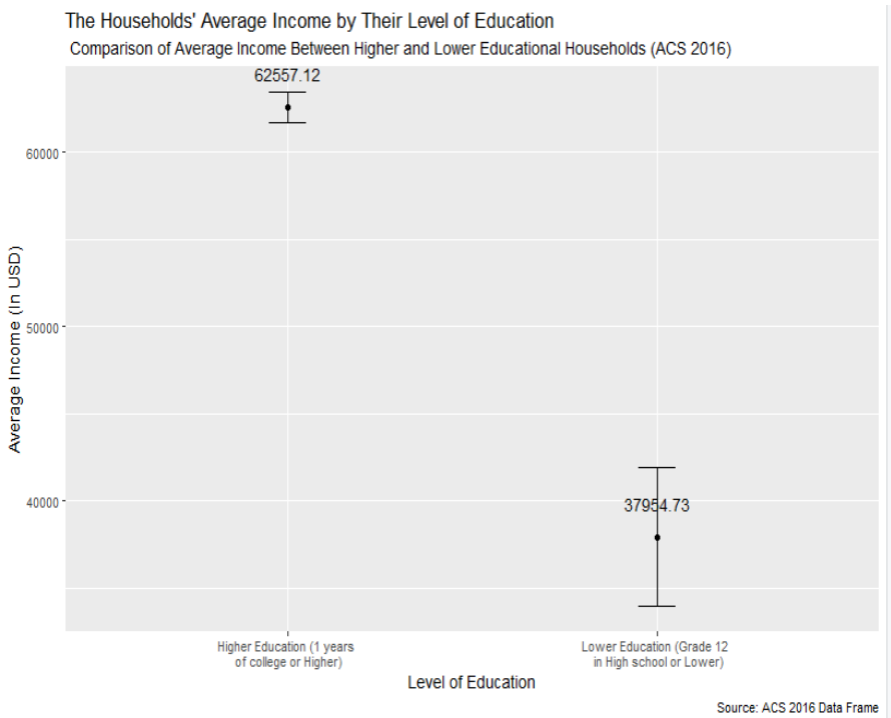
Level of education	Mean	N (sample size)	Standard deviation	Margin of error	Lower Confidence Interval	Upper Confidence Interval
Higher education (college graduate or above)	\$62,557	28,552	\$75,610	\$877	\$61,680	\$63,434
Lower education (High school graduate or below)	\$37,955	20966	\$294,396	\$3,985	\$41,940	\$41,940

\* Income is classified as total personal income in the past 12 months.

\* Confidence Interval set at 95%

As shown in Table 1 , households with a higher-level education (at least one year of college or more) account for 28,552 households within the sample size. We found that households in which at least one member of the household had a higher level of education (defined as at least one year of college education or more) have a mean annual household income of \$62,557, notably higher than the \$37,955 mean annual household income for the 20,966 households within the sample size with a high school or lower educational level.

FIGURE 1. MEAN ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION AT (95%) CONFIDENCE LEVEL

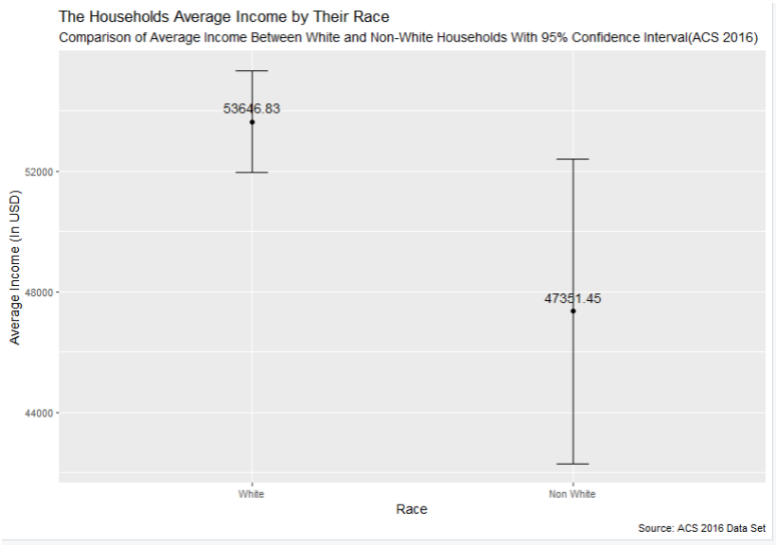


\*ACS dataset level of education was categorized as (1) nursery school to grade 4, (2) grades 5-8, (3) grade 9, (4) grade 10, (5) grade 11, (6) grade 12, (7) 1-year college, (8) two-year college, (9) 3-year college, (10) 4-year college, (11) 5+ year college. Education levels (lveduc), coded as a binary variable with higher education coded as 1 representing nursery-grade 12 and lower education coded as 0 representing 1 year college-5+ year college.

TABLE 2. BIVARIATE TABLE OF ANALYSIS OF MEAN ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY RACE

Race	Mean	N (sample size)	Standard deviation	Margin of error	Lower Confidence Interval	Upper Confidence Interval
White	\$53,647	37,669	\$167,724	\$1,649	\$51,953	\$55,341
Non- White	\$47,351	11,849	\$279,798	\$5,038	\$42,313	\$52,389

FIGURE 2. MEAN ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY RACE: COMPARISON OF AVERAGE INCOME BETWEEN WHITE AND NON-WHITE HOUSEHOLDS (95%) CONFIDENCE LEVEL



\* ACS dataset for race was categorized as (1) White, (2) Black/African American, (3) American Indian or Alaska Native, (4) Chinese, (5) Japanese, (6) other Asians of Pacific Islander, (7) other race, (8) two major races, and (9) three or more significant races. White coded as (0)



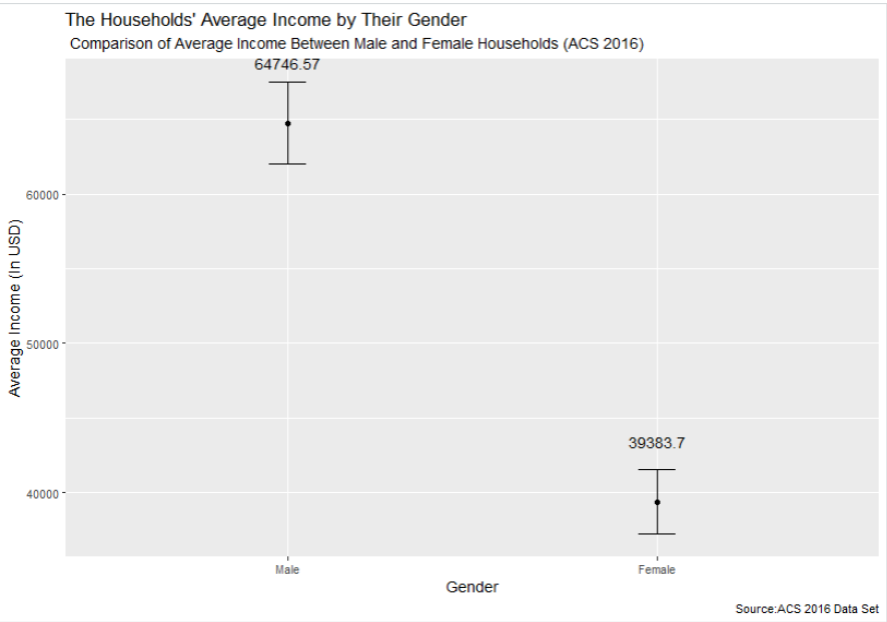
*representing white. Nonwhite coded as (1) representing all other codes in race or codes 2-9.*

Table 2 reveals that 37,669 white households have an average annual household income of \$53,647 per year. This is higher than non-white classified races, which include Black/African American, American Indian/ Alaskan Native, Chinese, Japanese, Other Asian or Pacific Islander, and other than the 11,849 households of nonwhite races that earn only \$47,351 average annual household income. These figures emphasize the need to address structural inequalities through policies targeted to minorities in the U.S. population.

TABLE 3. BIVARIATE **T**ABLE OF **A**NALYSIS FOR MEAN ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD **I**NCOME **B**y **G**ENDER.

Gender	Mean	N (sample size)	Standard deviation	margin	Lower Confidence Interval	Upper Confidence Interval
Male	\$64,747	24906	\$222,209	\$2,760	\$61,987	\$67,506
Female	\$39,384	24612	\$174,553	\$2,181	\$37,203	\$41,564

**FIGURE 3. MEAN ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY GENDER AT THE (95%) CONFIDENCE LEVEL**



*\* ACS dataset for sex was categorized as (1) for male and (2) for female.*

In terms of gender, the analysis shows disparities of income between male and female households. Table 3 reveals that 24,906 male households have an average annual household income of \$64,747. This is higher than their 24,612 female counterparts who only earn on average \$39,384. Although the number of male households and female households is almost equal, males earn about twice as much as female households.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The results of this research provide an avenue where an inference can be made that there is an associational relationship between these three variables and higher household income levels. Our analysis

shows that higher levels of education is correlated with higher income. Moreover, one of the hypotheses predicted that households with a college education or higher would exhibit higher household income levels than those with a high school education or lower. Analysis results for average household income based on having a college degree or below was \$62,557. Among households with lower education, the household income was \$37,955. This reminds how vital education can improve financial stability and proves the association between educational roles and economic outcomes.

The main implication of the research results regarding average household income based on level of education is that households with higher education levels are more likely to have a higher income level than households with lower education level. Therefore, the data concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups. This research informs policy analysts the suggestion that investing in higher education can improve household income levels. With this data result, a policy increasing tuition aid for qualified applicants could be a reasonable request. This policy could help open doors for more students to attend college and get higher educational degrees. For example, increasing Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) levels could help students with college aid, therefore positively increasing their chances to attain higher household income levels.

When analyzing household income levels and race, results indicate that income differences between races are noted primarily in nonwhite groups in the dataset. In the research study, the average income for white households was \$53,647, compared to \$47,351 for nonwhite households. Additionally, a total of 37,669 were white households when compared to 11,849 nonwhite households. These results show that white households were three times higher than nonwhite households. Therefore, this data informs policy analysts and suggests that nonwhite households have lower household income levels than white households. In contrast, white households have a shorter margin, starting around \$52,000 to almost \$60,000. Policy suggestions could be made to provide low-interest rate loans to support minority communities in order to create a pathway toward attainment of income equality. This could highlight for policymakers that investing in ways to provide opportunities for nonwhite households to obtain

economic income mobility could help increase household income levels.

When analyzing household income levels and gender, the proportion of male households in the dataset is 24,906 households, while female households are 24,612 households. Although the proportion of households is almost equal for males and females, the data shows that the average male household income is \$64,474, while the average female household income is \$39,384, highlighting a significant difference between male and female household income. Looking at the data, male households make almost double the average household income compared to female households. This data informs policy analysts of gender disparities and further illustrates significant salary gaps. Implementing transparent salary ranges in job postings could promote fairness and ensure that all applicants are aware of the compensation for a position regardless of gender. Other strategies might include for policymakers to foster mentorship programs that support underrepresented groups in negotiating their salaries and conducting regular pay audits within organizations to identify and rectify discrepancies. Moreover, providing training for hiring managers inequitable compensation practices could further contribute to a more just hiring process. Additionally, mechanisms can be established that require employers to disclose the wages of all their employees, enabling the comparison of pay between males and females. Moreover, companies that engage in discriminatory practices could face penalties.

Currently, there are developed pathways within government that help groups have economic mobility. However, more needs to be done. Further investment in research can help government entities find more information about the relationship between different data variables and possible considerations of policy solutions. Moreover, if the U.S. Secretary of Education and the U.S. House Oversight and Accountability Committee could work together to help tackle issues using an intersectional strategy based on my research more effective policy changes could occur.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER ANALYSIS**

This study had its limitations. It only looked at white household income and grouped other races as "nonwhite." Future studies that include different races could provide crucial information on the relationship between household income and race and significant differences among the race groups.

Further studies that stratify the data to look at the level of education could provide insight into household income that could be directly correlated with and impacted by the level of education. By categorizing the level of education as (1) for college and above education level and (2) for high school and below education level, this research was limited in analyzing educational level at a level that could have look at potential significant household income level differences based on specific levels of education. Further studies that analyzed data at all levels of the education continuum could provide opportunities to target and support specific levels of education which may have the highest impact on household income level.

Although the ACS data source had many households relevant to information about gender, gender was not further subdivided to include crucial population characteristics. Gender was categorized as (1) male and (2) female only. However, the data set did not account for any other gender groups, thus excluding other gender-diverse households. Furthermore, this population is also considered a minority group. The ACS dataset did not provide an opportunity to study this group's household income level based on level of education, race, or gender. Having the ability to study, this group could provide additional information that could have impacted the study findings. Further analysis could highlight significant differences among this population.

Furthermore, the analysis is limited because it does not include multivariate analysis. Therefore, it cannot correlate the combined impact of race, gender, level of education on household income level.

A final potential limitation of this study is the classification of household characteristics. This is because our research is based solely on the first individuals listed in each household. This approach may

introduce bias and obscure the data. To improve accuracy, future research should analyze these variables at the individual level, aligning the unit of analysis with the level at which these characteristics could be measured.

Areas of further research can be done by looking at the geographic location of the datasets. Data can be subject to variation based on a particular state or region. Variation within household income levels could also depend on different factors based on location. This can be included in race, gender, and level of education, which may highlight significant differences. This can also be included based on race and gender as well. Therefore, future research could analyze the differences between those regions for further data analysis. Moreover, the data could be visually shown as a heat map.

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# Provision of Portable Retirement Savings for Military Spouses Who Work in Education

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## INTRODUCTION

As of 2022, there were 578,952 spouses of active-duty US military Service members (US Department of Defense, 2023). For military families, geographic relocation is frequent due to the Service member receiving new Permanent Change of Station (PCS) orders. In 2019, approximately 81% of military spouses surveyed reported receiving new PCS orders one or more times in the previous five years (Office of People Analytics, 2020). For military spouses who contribute to pension plans, frequent geographic relocations can sometimes create challenges in saving for retirement (Marchitello, 2020). Approximately 11% of military spouses work in education, a field where retirement benefits often include pensions and are primarily determined at the state level (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2018). States may be able to provide military spouses who work in education with the opportunity to grow retirement savings commensurate to their colleagues by offering a portable, 401k-style retirement option.

## HOW MIGHT TEACHER PENSION PLANS CREATE CHALLENGES FOR MILITARY SPOUSES?

Teachers who relocate to a new state, including military spouses who move when their Service member spouse receives new PCS orders, face significant obstacles in securing pension benefits. Most state pension systems require teachers to meet a minimum vesting period before they qualify for any retirement benefits, meaning those who move before reaching this threshold forfeit both their employer contributions and the promised pension payout. Research indicates

that among the ten states with the highest concentrations of military spouses, the minimum vesting period is at least five years (Marchitello, 2020). This structure creates a particular disadvantage for military spouses, as the average military-connected family relocates every two to three years (US Department of Defense, 2023, April 3), making it unlikely that they will remain in a single state long enough to vest in a pension plan. As a result, military spouses working in education often leave behind unvested contributions in multiple states, ultimately diminishing their long-term retirement security.

### **WHAT HAS BEEN DONE TO ADDRESS MILITARY SPOUSE RETIREMENT SAVINGS?**

Efforts have been made to address the issue of military spouse retirement savings. Some states have begun offering interest credit on employee contributions to the pension account if an individual relocates before they are fully vested (Marchitello, 2020). Additionally, a bipartisan group of federal legislators is aware of the issues surrounding military spouse retirement savings and is taking action to address them. The Military Spouses Retirement Security Act provides tax incentives to small employers that grant employees who are military spouses immediate eligibility for retirement plan participation and fully match the employee contributions as they would for another employee who is fully vested and has been employed for two years or more (Manfre, 2020). However, this is only applicable to military spouses who work for small businesses and not military spouses who work in public education.

### **WHY IS A PORTABLE RETIREMENT PLAN NECESSARY FOR MILITARY SPOUSES WORKING IN EDUCATION?**

Military spouses who work in education would benefit if states provided the option to contribute to portable retirement savings plans. If states offer teachers two options: 1. a portable, 401k-style retirement plan and 2. a pension plan, individuals could choose which plan to participate in based on their circumstances. Individuals who plan to remain in the same state can continue participating in the pension plan.



In contrast, individuals, including military spouses, who plan to relocate can participate in the portable plan. In this case, military spouses could contribute to the same retirement account in the event of geographic relocation, thus providing the opportunity to grow retirement savings equal to their colleagues. Portable retirement plans are offered to teachers in some states. However, in the ten states with the most military spouses, only four offer a portable retirement savings option, such as 401k plans (Marchitello, 2020).

Some experts call for a policy solution modeled after the 1983 Federal Employee Retirement System Act, which created a three-part, hybrid model in which federal workers contribute to a “less generous” pension plan, a 401k style plan, and Social Security (Kan & Aldeman, 2015). While a hybrid model would improve portability and retirement savings for frequently relocating military spouses, it is unknown if it would provide the opportunity to grow retirement savings that are equal to their colleagues who remain in the same state throughout their careers because military spouses would still have to contribute to pension plans.

## **HOW CAN POLICYMAKERS MOVE FORWARD?**

A mechanism may be available to encourage states to provide a portable retirement plan. The Interstate Teacher Mobility Compact (ITMC) was finalized in 2023 and creates reciprocity for teacher licenses among participating states. As of the time of writing, the ITMC has been enacted in eleven states and is pending in eight more (National Center for Interstate Compacts, 2024). Of the ten states with the most Service members (Marchitello, 2020), Florida and Colorado have enacted legislation to participate in the ITMC, and California, Virginia, and Washington have pending legislation (National Center for Interstate Compacts, 2024). Policymakers should have conversations with the National Center for Interstate Compacts to explore strategies to improve the portability of retirement benefits for military spouses via the expansion of the ITMC.

## CONCLUSION

Addressing concerns related to the retirement savings for military spouses who work in education could increase the number of Service members who reenlist. Research suggests that when a military spouse wants their Service member to continue to serve in the military, the Service member is more likely to reenlist (Rosen & Durand, 1995). However, the percentage of military spouses who have reported dissatisfaction with the military way of life has steadily increased since 2012. A military spouse dissatisfied with the military way of life is approximately eight times more likely to want the Service member to leave active-duty military service (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2023). Ensuring that military spouses in education have access to adequate retirement benefits could play a critical role in improving their overall satisfaction with military life, ultimately supporting retention and readiness within the armed forces.

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# Medication-Assisted Treatment for Opioid Use Disorder: Vermont's Hub-and-Spoke Model

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## INTRODUCTION

The opioid crisis is one of the most pressing public health emergencies in the United States, with devastating consequences for individuals, families, and communities. Over the past two decades, the crisis has unfolded in three distinct waves: a rise in prescription opioid misuse, an increase in heroin use, and, more recently, a surge in synthetic opioid-related deaths driven by fentanyl. As of 2021, opioid overdoses claimed over 100,000 lives annually and impose a financial burden exceeding \$1 trillion due to healthcare costs, lost productivity, and criminal justice expenditures (CDC, 2021). Addressing this crisis requires comprehensive, evidence-based solutions that focus on both prevention and treatment.

Vermont, a predominantly rural state, has been particularly hard hit, with overdose deaths reaching a peak of 360 in 2017, the highest relative rate in the nation at that time (Brooklyn and Sigmon, 2015). Amid this crisis, Vermont implemented the hub-and-spoke model for medication-assisted treatment (MAT) in 2013. This innovative system integrates regional hubs, which provide intensive addiction treatment, with local spokes in primary care settings, ensuring continuity of care for individuals with opioid use disorder (OUD). The model leverages Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act to reduce financial barriers and address geographic disparities by embedding Spokes within community health centers.

This paper traces the five stages of the policy process: agenda setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation of Vermont's hub-and-spoke model. Using Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework and the Advocacy Coalition Framework, this paper analyzes the

model's development, evaluates its effectiveness, and proposes recommendations for improvement.

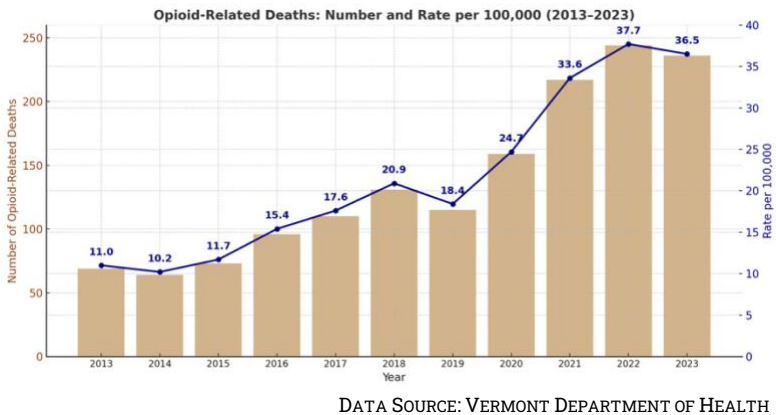
## **THE PROBLEM**

The opioid crisis emerged from a combination of medical, economic, and social factors that converged over decades. In the 1990s, pharmaceutical companies aggressively marketed opioids like OxyContin as non-addictive painkillers, leading to widespread overprescription. When regulatory measures reduced access to these medications, many individuals turned to heroin as a cheaper and more accessible alternative. The crisis worsened in the 2010s with the proliferation of synthetic opioids like fentanyl, which is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine (Kolodny et al. 2015). Fentanyl-related deaths now account for the majority of opioid overdoses nationwide.

Vermont's rural healthcare system was particularly unprepared to address the growing crisis. Many regions lacked MAT-certified providers, and transportation barriers often made it difficult for patients to access the limited treatment facilities available. Emergency departments became the default care settings for overdose cases, a costly and inefficient response that did little to address the root causes of addiction. Moreover, the stigma surrounding addiction discourages individuals from seeking treatment, perpetuating cycles of substance use and overdose.

The economic and social costs of the crisis have been staggering. Beyond healthcare expenditures, Vermont has experienced significant losses in workforce productivity and increased strain on the criminal justice system. Families and communities have borne the emotional toll of addiction, with rising rates of homelessness, child welfare interventions, and mental health crises. The state has recognized that only a systemic, integrated approach could effectively address these multifaceted challenges. Below one can see opioid overdose deaths in Vermont from 2013-2023.

FIGURE 1. OPIOID OVERDOSE DEATHS IN VERMONT (2013-2023)



THE POLICY

The hub-and-spoke model, which ensures continuing care, was developed to address systemic barriers to addiction treatment in Vermont by creating a coordinated system where hubs provide specialized treatment, while spokes offer ongoing community-based support. Hubs are specialized addiction treatment centers offering methadone and buprenorphine administration, counseling, and case management. They cater to patients with severe OUD who require intensive support. Each hub serves as a regional hub of expertise, staffed by addiction specialist nurses, and counselors equipped to handle complex cases.

Spokes, on the other hand, extend the continuum of care by integrating MAT into primary care practices and community health centers. These settings allow stabilized patients to receive ongoing treatment and behavioral health services in familiar environments, reducing stigma, and normalizing addiction care as part of routine medical practice. This structure ensures that patients transition seamlessly between levels of care based on their needs, thereby fostering long-term recovery.

The funding for this model is primarily derived from Medicaid, which covers approximately 86% of hub services and a significant portion of

spoke services. Vermont's Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act was critical in making MAT accessible to low-income populations. Additionally, the model incorporates wraparound services, such as housing support, employment assistance, and mental health care, addressing the broader social determinants of health (Vermont Blueprint for Health, 2023).

## **AGENDA SETTING**

The development of Vermont's hub-and-spoke model can be explained through Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework. The problem stream was defined by the increasing rates of opioid overdoses and their associated economic and social costs. Public health reports and media coverage emphasized the need for urgent action, framing addiction as a public health crisis. The policy stream included emerging evidence from agencies like the CDC and NIDA, which identified MAT as the gold standard for OUD treatment. These findings highlighted the efficacy of integrating behavioral and pharmacological therapies to address addiction holistically.

The political stream aligned in 2014 when Governor Peter Shumlin dedicated his entire State of the State address to the opioid crisis. Shumlin's leadership reframed addiction as a treatable medical condition, garnering bipartisan support for policy solutions that emphasized prevention and recovery over punitive approaches. Advocacy groups, including Vermont Recovery Network, amplified the voices of individuals and families affected by addiction, ensuring that policymakers prioritized MAT as a critical intervention. This convergence of problem, policy, and political streams created a policy window that enabled the adoption of the hub-and-spoke model.

## **POLICY FORMULATION**

### ***A. CAUSAL MECHANISMS***

The hub-and-spoke model treats OUD as a chronic condition that requires long-term management. Methadone and buprenorphine act as partial or full opioid agonists, stabilizing brain chemistry and

reducing withdrawal symptoms, while counseling addresses the psychological aspects of addiction. This dual approach increases the likelihood of sustained recovery by addressing both the biological and behavioral dimensions of addiction (Brooklyn and Sigmon, 2015).

Economic analyses underscore MAT's cost-effectiveness. A 2023 study by NIDA found that for every dollar spent on MAT, \$4-\$7 is saved in healthcare costs, reduced criminal justice interactions, and improved productivity (NIDA, 2023). Vermont's decision to integrate care through Hubs and Spokes enhances efficiency, as resources are allocated based on patient needs and severity levels.

## ***B. POLICY TOOLS***

The policy employs regulatory tools, such as licensing requirements for hubs, to ensure adherence to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) standards. Financial tools include Medicaid reimbursement for MAT services and federal grants to support infrastructure development. Informational tools, including public awareness campaigns, aim to reduce stigma and educate communities about MAT's effectiveness.

## **POLICY ADOPTION**

The adoption of the hub-and-spoke model coordinated efforts among a diverse coalition of stakeholders. Key players included state health agencies, addiction treatment specialists, advocacy organizations, and federal funders. Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act played a pivotal role in creating the financial framework for this model. By enabling low-income individuals to access MAT services, Medicaid funding ensured equitable access to care across Vermont. The state also leveraged grants from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to develop infrastructure and train providers.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework offers a lens to understand how these groups achieved policy adoption despite initial resistance. Addiction treatment advocates reframed MAT as a medical solution to



a public health crisis rather than a controversial harm reduction strategy. Public testimonies from individuals and families affected by opioid use highlighted the life-saving potential of MAT, creating emotional and political momentum for the policy. These narratives helped overcome opposition from groups wary of MAT's reliance on medications like methadone and buprenorphine, which some critics perceived as substituting one addiction for another.

Governor Shumlin's leadership was instrumental in unifying stakeholders and aligning legislative priorities. His administration engaged healthcare providers and community organizations to build consensus around the policy's goals. This collaborative approach ensured that the hub-and-spoke model was not only adopted but also widely supported, creating a foundation for successful implementation.

## **POLICY IMPLEMENTATION**

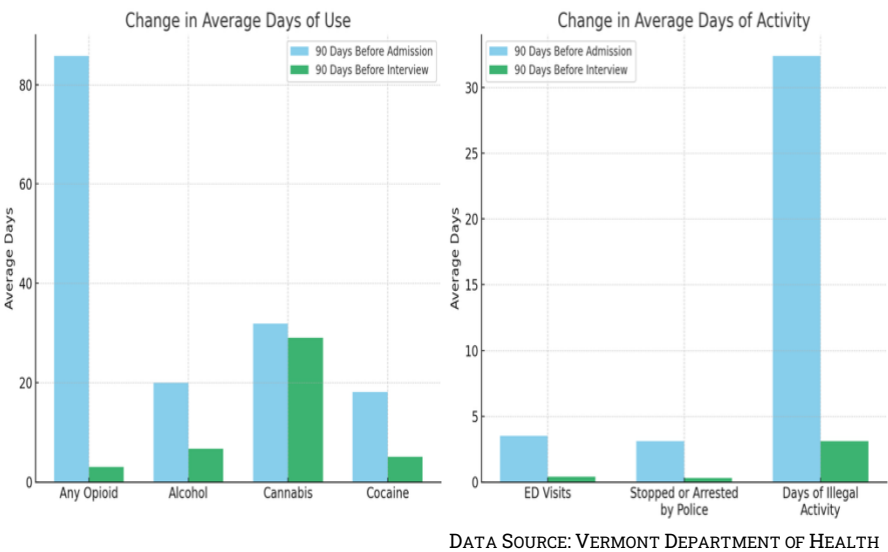
The implementation of Vermont's hub-and-spoke model faced several logistical and cultural challenges. Workforce shortages were among the most pressing issues, particularly in rural areas where healthcare resources were already limited. Recruiting MAT-certified providers required targeted incentives, including loan repayment programs and professional development opportunities. To address geographic barriers, Vermont expanded telemedicine services, enabling patients in remote regions to access MAT consultations and prescriptions virtually.

Another challenge was ensuring the equitable distribution of resources across hubs and spokes. Some regions had a higher concentration of spokes, while others relied heavily on hubs for both intensive and maintenance care. To address these disparities, Vermont used Medicaid funding to subsidize treatment in underserved areas and implemented data-driven resource allocation strategies. These measures helped balance access across the state, ensuring that patients could receive appropriate care regardless of their location.

The cultural stigma around addiction and MAT persisted as a significant barrier during implementation. Public awareness

campaigns played a critical role in shifting perceptions, emphasizing that addiction is a treatable medical condition rather than a moral failing. By integrating spokes into primary care practices, the model normalized MAT as part of standard healthcare, reducing stigma among both providers and patients. These efforts were supported by testimonials from individuals in recovery whose stories highlighted the transformative impact of MAT on their lives and communities. Below one can see the change in average days of use and change in average days of activity 90 days before admission and 90 days before interview.

**FIGURE 2: CHANGE IN AVERAGE DAYS OF USE AND CHANGE IN AVERAGE DAYS OF ACTIVITY**



**POLICY EVALUATION**

The evaluation of Vermont’s hub-and-spoke model demonstrates its effectiveness in addressing the opioid crisis. Quantitative metrics highlight significant reductions in opioid use, injection drug use, and overdose rates among participants. A study by the Vermont Department of Health found that opioid use among participants decreased by 96%, while injection drug use dropped by 92%. Emergency department visits declined by 89%, and arrests and police

interactions fell by 90% (Vermont Blueprint for Health, 2023). These outcomes underscore the model's success in reducing the health and social harms associated with OUD.

Qualitative data also reveal positive impacts on participants' mental health, housing stability, and employment outcomes. Patients reported increased satisfaction with their lives, citing improvements in personal relationships, financial stability, and overall well-being. These findings align with research indicating that MAT not only reduces substance use but also supports broader social and economic recovery (Brooklyn and Sigmon, 2015).

Despite these successes, evaluation efforts face limitations. The lack of standardized metrics across regions makes it challenging to assess statewide outcomes comprehensively. Long-term recovery outcomes, such as sustained employment and housing stability, are not consistently tracked. Addressing these gaps requires the development of a unified evaluation framework that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative measures, ensuring a holistic understanding of the model's impact.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Vermont's hub-and-spoke model has set a benchmark for innovative addiction treatments, but further enhancements are necessary to maximize its impact. Standardizing evaluation frameworks should be a priority to ensure consistent data collection and enable robust comparisons across regions. This effort would provide policymakers and practitioners with the insights needed to refine the model and address emerging challenges,

Expanding telemedicine infrastructure is another critical recommendation. While telemedicine has improved access to MAT in rural areas, further investments are needed to enhance connectivity and provider training. This would ensure that all patients, regardless of location, can access high-quality care. Additionally, increasing financial incentives for MAT certification could address workforce shortages, particularly in underserved regions.

Finally, public education campaigns should continue to challenge stigma and promote MAT as a life-saving intervention. These campaigns could highlight the stories of individuals in recovery, showcasing the transformative power of MAT and fostering greater community support. By addressing these gaps, Vermont can strengthen its addiction treatment system and provide a replicable model for other states. The hub-and-spoke model demonstrates the potential of comprehensive, patient-centered policies to tackle complex public health crises, offering hope in the face of a devastating epidemic.

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# Failures in Adolescent Sexual Health Education in the United States

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## INTRODUCTION

American sex education frequently attempts to prevent issues associated with adolescent sexual health. However, the curriculum is often disorganized, with every state conducting its own research and implementing its own strategies. In fact, according to a report conducted by Guttmacher (2024), sex education faces extreme disparities state-by-state. Only twenty-six U.S. states and Washington D.C. require sex/HIV education, and only eighteen of those states require that the curriculum be scientifically accurate (Guttmacher, 2024). In contrast, thirty-nine states require school districts to provide information on abstinence (the choice to forgo sexual experiences).

Further, the policy space is extremely contentious, with several lawmakers preaching abstinence education and others advocating for a comprehensive curriculum. This dispute has led to educational failures for adolescents. Most notably, current sex education standards, or lack thereof, have led to severe issues with teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and queer representation. Additionally, abstinence education has failed at the very thing it attempts to do: reducing the number of teens engaging in sexual intercourse.

## TEEN PREGNANCY

As many would expect, teenage pregnancy remains a prevalent issue in the United States. According to the Center for Disease Control, the birth rate for mothers aged 15-19 years old is 13.6 births per 1,000 females (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024). In terms of health effects, teen girls who endure unintended pregnancies are more likely to experience birth complications (Christian, 2024). Studies connect unintended pregnancies with preeclampsia and

postpartum hemorrhage, both of which can lead to maternal death (Christian, 2024). Further, young girls are “likely to develop an obstetric fistula, a condition where a tear in the birth canal leads a woman to leak feces or urine” (Christian, 2024). While adolescent girls only account for approximately 10% of all unintended births, they also account for 25% of obstetric fistula cases (Christian, 2024).

Additionally, adolescent females who survive childbirth are likely to face challenges throughout their lives. Young mothers are likely to drop out of school or have a second child while they are still teenagers (Christian, 2024). These challenges contribute towards social inequality, intensifying racial and ethnic disparities (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024). In fact, only 30% of non-Hispanic Black females reported receiving instruction on birth control access before intercourse, in contrast to 45% for non-Hispanic White females and 49% for Hispanic females (Guttmacher, 2022). Therefore, teen pregnancy results in not only health challenges, but societal ones, as well.

While one may point the cause of teen pregnancy to other sources (such as income disparity, race, etc.), a report conducted by Guttmacher (2022) proves that many girls and boys are woefully unprepared for sexual intercourse. Less than half of girls and about a third of boys receive information about birth control before intercourse; about 40% know little about condoms and 75% know little about oral contraceptives (Guttmacher, 2022). This knowledge is paramount for making safe decisions about sex.

## **SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES**

Sexually transmitted infections and diseases also prove to be prevailing problems. STIs can cause infertility, adverse pregnancy and birth outcomes, and weakness towards future STI acquisition (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024). According to Children’s National Hospital, people aged under twenty-five account for 63% of the twelve million STDs recorded each year. Teenagers account for three million of those cases (Children’s National Hospital, n.d.). Therefore, it is concerning that a study from 2015-2019 showed that teens are taught to just say no, rather than realistic solutions for safe

sex. Approximately 81% of females and 79% of males claimed they were told to say “no” to sex propositions, while 67% of females and 58% males were told to wait until marriage (Guttmacher, 2022). In contrast, only 48% of females and 45% of males were informed on access to birth control and only 55% of females and 60% of males were told how to use a condom (Guttmacher, 2022).

## **QUEER REPRESENTATION**

Queer representation within sex education is also lackluster. In a report from 2015-2019, homosexual males “were less likely than straight males to report that they had received instruction about STIs or HIV” (Guttmacher, 2022). They were also less likely to be informed on where to obtain birth control. In comparison, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2024) states that a more comprehensive sex education leads to lower rates of homophobia, greater understanding of gender, and increased recognition of gender equity and justice.

Unfortunately, not all states agree on whether sexual orientation and gender identity should be covered in sex education curricula. Only ten states require that sex education includes content on the queer community (Guttmacher, 2022). In stark contrast, seven states mandate that the sex education curricula include content that discriminates against LGBTQ+ individuals (Guttmacher, 2022). In addition to discrimination within schools, these youth are at risk of facing additional sexual health challenges within their states (Guttmacher, 2022).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Sex education is important for a variety of factors. It provides information about human sexuality (including, but not limited to, growth and development, anatomy, and reproduction) while developing healthy attitudes (Planned Parenthood, 2016). It helps young people make responsible choices about sexual relationships whilst enhancing communication experiences (Planned Parenthood, 2016). The American Academy of Pediatrics affirms these statements, suggesting that sex education helps young people practice healthy sexual behavior and good decision-making.



Several lawmakers have attempted to improve the problems listed through abstinence-only education, believing that preventing sexual experiences will prevent teen pregnancy and STDs. Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence suggests that abstinence education does not prevent teenage sexual experiences. Abstinence education does not reduce risk-taking behaviors and does not delay sexual intercourse (Planned Parenthood, 2016). It also does not reduce the number of sexual partners in teens, nor does it help teens reduce illegal substances intake (Planned Parenthood). Alarming, teenagers in abstinence-only programs are less likely than teens in comprehensive programs to believe that condoms reduce risk of STIs (Planned Parenthood, 2016).

All in all, sex education is vital for teenage health. Evidence demonstrates that comprehensive sex education improves health outcomes and delays sexual intercourse in teens (World Health Organization, 2023). Further, over 95% of parents believe that sex education should cover information on STIs, healthy relationships, birth control, and abstinence (Planned Parenthood, 2016). Comprehensive education covers these topics, and more, leading to an empowered and healthy younger generation.

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# The Mouth of a Shark: Causes of Migration in the Northern Triangle of Central America

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## **ABSTRACT**

Award-winning British-Somali poet Warsan Shire begins her poem about the refugee experience, *Home*, with the claim that “no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.” These words undoubtedly ring true for the approximately 6.2 million migrants who have departed from Central America (Aguilera et al., 2022), seeking a better life in another country. Fleeing violence, corruption, dismal living conditions, and extreme weather, migrants have left their countries in massive waves in search of a new home. As of 2019, upwards of half of these migrants, more than 3.75 million, had integrated into the United States (Babich and Batalova, 2023). This includes 580,000 refugees and asylum seekers, 300,000 forcibly displaced persons, and 90,800 stateless people (Aguilera et al., 2022). As the primary destination for many migrants, the United States accounted for 74% of the Central American refugee total by the end of 2020 (UN DESA, 2025). The number of Central American migrants has increased by 137% since 1990 (UN DESA, 2025) and shows no signs of slowing down. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and extreme weather events, 43% of people in Central America state that they would like to migrate (World Food Program USA, 2023).

Since roughly 86% of Central Americans in the United States in 2019 were born in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Babich and Batalova, 2023), these countries will serve as case studies to investigate the factors that are forcing out Central American refugees. These three countries form a geographical region known as the Northern Triangle and are also part of the “Dry Corridor,” where 8 million people are moderately or severely hungry due to extreme drought in the region (World Food Program USA, 2023). Commonalities among

Northern Triangle countries suggest that the primary catalysts causing migration out of Central America are a lack of economic opportunities, extreme weather events related to climate change, and violence and corruption. These factors are inherently interconnected, as the severity of one factor impacts the severity of the others. Discovering viable and sustainable solutions to each problem will be the first step in reducing mass migration out of Central America.

## **HISTORY OF MIGRATION FROM CENTRAL AMERICA**

In an interview with CNN International (2015), Professor Alexander Betts of Oxford University's world-renowned Refugee Studies Centre stated that "refugees and displacement will be one of the defining issues of the 21st century." For Central Americans, however, displacement has been a major issue as far back as the 1970s. The first officially recorded Central American migrant arrived on United States soil in 1820 (de Mott, 2019). Others followed throughout the 19th century, but the migration rate did not significantly increase until 1950. During the 1950s and 1960s, the immigrant population consisted primarily of middle- and upper-middle-class students or young professionals from Panama and Honduras pursuing a better education. This trend underwent a major shift as a large influx in the 1970s poured in when civil wars and economic instability led many Central Americans to migrate (de Mott 2019). Immigrants from countries torn apart by war - many of which involved the United States government - such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala received little education and held few technical skills, leading to many being rejected as legal immigrants. With a large portion of rejected migrants nonetheless finding paths into the country, the Central American immigrant population in the United States rose by nearly one million every decade since 1980 (Babich and Batalova, 2023). This led to the creation of the "undocumented migrant" classification that is currently utilized. Many migrants took unskilled labor jobs with poor wages and working conditions, accepting these terms due to fear of being discovered and deported (Babich and Batalova, 2023). The fact that many migrants would rather work in these miserable conditions than return to their country of origin confirms that certain factors are posing a serious threat to their safety and well-being.

However, just because these migrants pursue a path to a better life in another country does not mean that this path is safe either. In 2021 alone, more than 5,755 Central American migrants died on their route, and many more faced numerous human rights infractions such as kidnapping, robbery, and extortion (Aguilera et al., 2022). The Missing Migrants Project estimates a total of 7,008 migrants who have disappeared in the Americas, representing an increase of 55% over the last 5 years (Amnesty International, 2023). Women compose an even more vulnerable group of migrants. Despite 2 of 3 migrants from Honduras being women who are fleeing gender violence and inequality in their home country (Aguilera et al., 2022), an estimated 60 to 80 percent of female migrants also face sexual violence on the migrant route (Brigida, 2016). In addition, “only 43% of care services for survivors of gender-based violence are accessible within a kilometer of the nearest migratory route” (Aguilera et al., 2022). This difficult journey can have adverse effects on the mental health of refugees, with nearly one-third of them experiencing clear signs of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Song & Teichholtz, n.d.). This array of concerns within the migration process requires a multi-faceted response to mitigate harm.

## **ECONOMIC STRUGGLES IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE**

The Northern Triangle region faces “existing issues of weak governance, lack of security, and unequal economic growth [that] have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and by two hurricanes that struck the region in November 2020” (Savoy and Sady-Kennedy, 2021). The refugee crisis originating from the region has become more acute in recent years due to “the high levels of poverty, violence, and instability in the area” (Savoy and Sady-Kennedy, 2021). In a 2021 survey by the World Food Programme, almost 15% of Northern Triangle residents stated that they were in the process of planning their migration, nearly doubling from 8% in 2018 (Savoy and Sady-Kennedy, 2021). Economic hardships in these countries are a major driving force for this desire to migrate. All three countries of the Northern Triangle rank in the bottom 6 of 32 countries in Latin America in terms of Gross National Product per capita, with an average GNP per capita of \$3,603 – \$4,603 in Guatemala, \$3,799 in El Salvador, and \$2,406 in Honduras (Savoy and Sady-Kennedy, 2021) — compared to the Latin American

average of \$8,068 (Macrotrends, 2024). Business and investment opportunities in the Northern Triangle remain stagnant due to limited access to finance and the risk of falling victim to rampant criminal extortion. With Panama and Costa Rica receiving the greater share of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Central America (Savoy and Sady-Kennedy, 2021), the Northern Triangle has often been neglected as a location for financial development due to the high level of risk associated with this area. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the region struggle to expand due to many businesses not officially registering because of the time commitment necessary. This sets off a chain where these unofficial SMEs do not pay taxes and have scarce access to finance, limiting the tax base and funds of local governments. In addition, even if SMEs do expand, they are then more likely to be targeted by regional gangs for criminal extortion, discouraging any economic growth and leading to a steady decrease of FDI in the Northern Triangle (Savoy and Sady-Kennedy, 2021). In 2019, FDI was \$998 million in Guatemala, \$947 million in Honduras, and \$662 million in El Salvador (Savoy and Sady-Kennedy, 2021), a small portion of the \$51 billion in FDI received by the entirety of Central America in 2020 (UNCTAD, 2022), which was already a historically low FDI year. Overall, the poor allocation of resources in both the public and private sectors have made the national institutions of the Northern Triangle feeble and incompetent in responding to their economic circumstances, giving residents no other choice than to seek opportunities elsewhere.

## **CLIMATE RISKS IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE**

Environmental changes resulting from climate change are also playing an alarming role in the limited growth of Northern Triangle countries. Central America “has become significantly hotter and dryer in recent decades” (Meyer, 2024), leading to long-term droughts in this so-called Dry Corridor. These droughts reduce crop yield and limit jobs in the coffee sector, which provides employment for 1.3 million families in the Northern Triangle (Meyer, 2024). Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador all rank in the top ten of the Global Climate Risk Index (Pacillo et al., 2022), which “analyzes to what extent countries have been affected by the impacts of climate-related extreme weather events” (UNESCO, 2021). In late summer, the Dry Corridor faces a two-week

period known as the Central American Mid-Summer Drought, which has the potential to severely restrict crop yield and livestock productivity, contributing to the region's food insecurity (Pacillo et al., 2022). Amid many residents selling land and actively migrating, the combination of Hurricanes Eta and Iota and the COVID-19 pandemic further devastated the region. Economic output declined by 9% in Honduras, 8.2% in El Salvador, and 1.8% in Guatemala (Meyer, 2024). Food insecurity nearly tripled, from affecting 2.2 million people in 2019 to 6.4 million in 2021 (Meyer, 2024). 7.2 million Guatemalans and Hondurans were food insecure by mid-2022 (Meyer, 2024). Following these shocks, "individuals experiencing moderate or severe hunger were two to three times more likely to be making concrete preparations to migrate than those who were not" (Meyer, 2024). With the region's "limited adaptive capacity" (Pacillo et al., 2022), the worsening of climate conditions will further exacerbate these impacts and force the migration of smallholder producers to the cities, or, likely, out of the country. Competition for the natural resources and land in rural communities can also incite further violence and migration, as many gangs engage in the practice of land grabbing, occupying cultivated areas for easy access to coffee and sugarcane (Pacillo et al., 2022). The link between climate, poverty, and violence was displayed by an analysis that concluded that "precipitation anomalies and temperature extremes increase agricultural production costs, reduce agricultural income, and hence increase household level food insecurity, poverty and inequality" (Pacillo et al., 2022). The increased costs and reduced income, combined with higher poverty rates, elevate both the "likelihood and intensity of conflicts at the municipal level" (Pacillo et al., 2022).

## **VIOLENCE AND CORRUPTION IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE**

Violence and corruption complete the triangle of migration catalysts for the Northern Triangle region. In the Northern Triangle, "land ownership and economic power historically have been concentrated in the hands of a small group of elites, leaving a legacy of extreme inequality and widespread poverty" (Meyer, 2024). In addition, estimates suggest that there are roughly 36,000 gang members in Honduras, 25,000 in El Salvador, and 14,000 in Guatemala (Pacillo et al., 2022). Violence has been a problem for many years but, since the

2000s, the Northern Triangle region has become a primary route for the transportation of narcotics exchanged between groups in South America and the United States. Gangs such as *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (M-18) engage in brutal turf wars to gain control of these routes. A disturbing amount of gender-based and community violence results from these intrasquad quarrels, as 71,500 Salvadorans and 247,000 Hondurans have been displaced internally by violence, and “Salvadorans and Hondurans who have been victims of multiple crimes have significantly higher migration intentions than those who have not” (Meyer, 2024). Unfortunately, Guatemala’s government chooses to not monitor internal displacement caused by violence, but the conclusion would likely be similar. This logically suggests more international migration as well, since “if a climate migrant decides to move externally rather than internally because internal migration is unsafe, then violence, in addition to climate change, is responsible for the decision to flee north” (Bermeo and Leblang, 2021). A study by the Brookings Institute indicates that the combination of decreased precipitation and increased violence was associated with an increased flow of migrants (Bermeo and Leblang, 2021). Therefore, migration could decrease with more resilience to the impacts of climate change or violence. However, efforts to address these factors are hindered by insufficient governance and corruption. “Investments in improved governance, anti-corruption measures, and violence prevention are necessary to create a sustainable, long-term, and peaceful development path” in the Northern Triangle (Bermeo and Leblang, 2021).

## ORIGINS OF ISSUES IN GUATEMALA

The history of Guatemala is “marked by authoritarian military regimes, a small landholding elite, and repression of the majority” (Williams et al. 2025). The culmination of this system was the Guatemalan Civil War, which lasted from 1960 to 1996 and killed over 200,000 Guatemalans (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2009). The roots of this brutal breaking point originated in 1944, when a civilian government was elected on a platform of “ambitious land reforms” (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2009). These reforms, spearheaded by President Jacobo Arbenz, clashed with the objectives of dominant multinational corporations. As a result, the C.I.A. got



involved in 1954 and choreographed Arbenz' overthrow and the installation of a right-wing military dictator. Over the next two decades, this military system forcibly removed any political opponents or reform efforts, causing the Left to militarize and commence a civil war against the sitting government. The Guatemalan government engaged in many unethical war tactics and, following the election of General Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia in 1978, "recorded cases of extrajudicial killings rose from 100 in 1978 to over 10,000 in 1981" (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2009). In the early 1980s, a new leader, General Efraín Ríos Montt, engaged in even more widespread, senseless killing, taking the lives of over 70,000 indigenous people (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2009). Continuous raids in indigenous villages caused between 500,000 and 1.5 million Guatemalans to be displaced internally or as refugees (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2009). A new constitution was finally passed in 1986 which allowed for a gradual transition to peace, finalized by a United Nations accord in 1996. During the civil war period, "over 400,000 Guatemalans fled to the United States, Mexico, and Canada" (Kuo, n.d.). This movement featured a spike in 1976 due to a catastrophic earthquake, highlighting the overlap of political violence and environmental factors in migration. Today, Guatemala continues to face instability - particularly in the economic sector - as migration is associated with rural poverty and agricultural stress linked to climate change. About 49% of Guatemala's population is considered poor, and the country has the highest levels of childhood stunting in Central America and sixth highest in the world (Bermeo et al., 2022). With the agricultural sector employing one-third of Guatemalan workers, "increasing agricultural resilience to climate change, tackling rural poverty, and improving internal migration options will [provide] viable domestic alternatives for Guatemalans who currently view migration as a necessity" (Bermeo et al., 2022).

## ORIGINS OF ISSUES IN EL SALVADOR

The political history of El Salvador is comparable to that of Guatemala. Under European rule throughout the 1800s, indigenous people - about 95% of the population - were made peasants under the rule of "a small minority of landholders" called the Fourteen Families, which imposed a system of military dictatorships (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2025). The complete obliteration of a peasant revolt in

January 1932, killing around 30,000 civilians, reinforced the rule of the military government (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2025). As left-wing and right-wing forces exchanged blows throughout the 1970s, tensions erupted in 1980 after the killing of Archbishop Oscar Romero, a dedicated human rights activist. Multiple atrocities were committed just that year, including a sniper attack at Archbishop Romero's funeral and the rape and murder of four women at the hands of military forces (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2025). When President Ronald Reagan was elected, the United States considered El Salvador to be an ally in the Cold War. As a result, when the leftist coalition of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front "launched an all-out attack" (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2025) against the military government, the U.S. provided aid and assistance to the sitting government, including groups that were known for committing war crimes. Over the twelve years of the civil war, upwards of 75,000 Salvadorans lost their lives (Center for Justice and Accountability 2025). As with the Guatemalan war, a report on the atrocities committed by the government finally brought a gradual end to the conflict. "It is estimated that more than 25 percent of its population migrated or fled during the country's civil war," with more than 334,000 Salvadorans traveling to the United States (Gammage, 2007). Both countries face lasting issues of impunity, failing to hold perpetrators accountable. This has allowed other injustices to arise as "deep socioeconomic and gender inequality, the impact of COVID-19, and the effects of natural hazards and disasters" contribute greatly to the population's vulnerability (IFRC, 2022). 20% of the country's population remains unemployed, with four out of every five people considering it *very* or *somewhat* difficult to obtain employment in El Salvador. Continued crime and violence clearly harm social development and economic growth, serving as catalysts for the migration of people from El Salvador (IFRC, 2022).

## ORIGINS OF ISSUES IN HONDURAS

Though Honduras did not suffer from the political clash of a civil war, it features many of the same injustices present in Guatemala and El Salvador that cause migration. More than 200 families a day cross the southern U.S. border from Honduras. Around 48% of Honduras' population lives in poverty, unable to support themselves and their

families in their own country (Association for a More Just Society, 2020). This economic hardship, combined with severe violence and corruption, forces many people out of their homes. The homicide rate in Honduras in 2011 was 86.5 per 100,000 people, which is 18 times higher than the United States and one of the highest in the world (Association for a More Just Society, 2020). 57% of Hondurans report never feeling safe at home as “robbery, gang violence, extortion, and assault are daily realities for many, especially those living in Honduras’ poor urban neighborhoods” (Association for a More Just Society, 2020). These poor urban areas are trapped by the country’s corruption, which blocks Hondurans from having access to adequate education, health, security, and other resources and services that they require to live a full life. In the 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index, which explores “how corrupt their public sectors are perceived to be” (Transparency International, 2024), Honduras received its lowest rating since 2012, ranking 157th out of 180 countries (Association for a More Just Society, 2020). In 2018, corruption cost Honduras over \$2 billion, the equivalent of 12.5% of its GDP (Association for a More Just Society, 2020). Overall, Hondurans are compelled to flee the country as the government’s inability to provide basic services aggravates existing economic and social conditions, eliminating any hope for a better future.

## **UNITED STATES RESPONSE TO MASS MIGRATION**

The wave of migrants arriving at the southern border of the United States has been at the forefront of U.S. policy debates, particularly since President Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric during his first term introduced the idea that these migrants were mounting an “invasion” (Villarreal, 2023). Trump lived up to his campaign promises when his administration cut \$370 million in financial assistance to Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras in an effort to reduce the number of migrants at the border (Wroughton and Zengerle, 2019). According to the Government Accountability Office, the more than year-long hiatus in funding negatively impacted about 56% of U.S.-backed developmental initiatives in the Northern Triangle (Meyer, 2024). Despite more welcoming rhetoric and pledges to implement a “fair and humane immigration system” (Villarreal, 2023), the Biden administration relied on a similar approach of enacting legal barriers at

the border. Both Trump and Biden enforced the controversial Title 42 policy, which was initially created to manage public health by granting the government the power to take emergency action to “stop the introduction of communicable diseases” (Villarreal, 2023). While the policy has been in place for decades, it was widely used beginning in March 2020 by the administration of then-President Donald Trump in order to regulate border crossings under the premise of increased COVID-19 precautions. Since unaccompanied children are exempt from Title 42, some parents made the difficult decision to send their kids across the border alone. Recently, actions were taken to reunite children with their families, and Biden stopped holding migrant families in ICE detention. Overall, though not impeccable, Biden made “some positive moves toward solutions, bolstered by a different rhetoric, new alternative legal pathways, and attempts at more efficient processing” (Villarreal, 2023). In May 2021, the United States Agency for International Development debuted the Northern Triangle Task Force to address safety, corruption, and economic development in the region through partnerships with both the public and private sectors (Meyer, 2024). In July 2021, the Biden administration proposed the Collaborative Migration Management Strategy to build a structured approach towards migration at the southern border, providing \$295.6 million in humanitarian aid to Central America in 2022 (Meyer, 2024). Finally, the administration recruited investment from the private sector, obtaining more than \$3.2 billion through former Vice President Kamala Harris’ “Call to Action” initiative (Savoy and Sady-Kennedy, 2021). Through a holistic approach to foreign aid, these initiatives provided hope that decisive action may be able to eradicate the root causes of mass migration out of Central America.

## CONCLUSION

The Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have endured troubled histories of rampant war, violence, and corruption. Now, the combined stressors of economic difficulties and climate change threaten to worsen conditions in the region. These countries, along with the rest of Central America, urgently require assistance. As migrants from these countries continue to flood the southern border of the United States, leaders must recall that the U.S. was a main contributor in two of the civil wars that contributed to

migration. As such, it is the country's moral and global duty to provide aid and shelter to migrants from these countries. Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, President of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, once said that "we welcome refugees, not because *they* are American but because *we* are American" (Young, 2023). As such, the United States must revisit its core values of freedom and opportunity to welcome the thousands of migrants arriving in the United States with hopes of a better life. By addressing the root causes of violence and corruption, economic stagnation, and climate change, Central America can begin to rebuild internally. Until then, these countries will remain the mouth of a shark, forcing its citizens to navigate to safer waters.

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# **Empowering Migrants: Navigating Asylum Challenges and Solutions at the Southern Border**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Immigration has been part of American history since the nation's founding. The influx of migrants seeking asylum has surged. By the end of the 2022 fiscal year, the U.S. Border Patrol had come into contact with nearly 2.77 million migrants (Collier, 2022). Further complicating the asylum process are the termination and ensuing legal battles surrounding the Trump-era "Remain in Mexico" policy, adding layers of complexity to asylum-seeking procedures.

Asylum seekers come from diverse backgrounds, fleeing failing regimes, seeking economic opportunities, or escaping personal dangers such as poverty, violence, and corruption in their home countries. The backlog of asylum cases, totaling 750,000, highlights both the demand for asylum in the United States and the daunting challenges faced by those navigating the legal system.

The Biden administration previously implemented measures to expedite case decisions and clear court backlogs in response to the accumulation of cases. These initiatives included introducing new programs and allocating funding and resources to bolster asylum processing, such as hiring additional judges and staff. Addressing the root causes of economic migration, the administration invested in job creation and development in countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Significant policy shifts from the previous Trump administration have been observed, including the termination of the “Remain in Mexico” policy, the refusal to expel unaccompanied minors under Title 42, and the increase in refugee resettlement caps. These policy changes have far-reaching implications for the treatment and processing of asylum-seekers at the southern border, influencing their access to legal pathways, protection, and opportunities for resettlement in the United States.

Although the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services department deals with immigration services there needs to be a change in how that institution works. Making sure that the refugees seeking asylum don’t lose confidence in the ability of those who can help. The current measures have benefited the asylees yet it’s not enough. Providing legal assistance to asylum seekers and implementing streamlined asylum procedures to ensure that claims are processed efficiently without compromising due process rights.

## **LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

An asylum seeker is a person who left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries” (United Nations, 1948, Art 14.). Once a refugee is physically in the US there are two different processes they can go through to guarantee asylum: the affirmative process, and the defense process.

The most common route is the affirmative process. To file for asylum you need to fill out Form I- 589, Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal, within one year of arrival to the US. If the application gets accepted you then you must provide fingerprints, a background/security check, interview, and receive a decision.

Another way a person can seek asylum is through Defensive Asylum. Under this process, the applicant is placed in removal proceedings before an immigration judge at the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), meaning that the asylees go through three different court hearings. This allows the applicant to apply as a defense against

removal from the U.S. Going through the process asylees don't get appointed counsel for individuals in immigration courts, even if they aren't able to obtain an attorney on their own. Meaning that asylum seekers must navigate the legal process without assistance.

## **POLICIES**

There have been many policies in response to asylum seekers, throughout recent years. One of them is the "Migrant Protection Protocols" (MPP) or "Remain in Mexico". This policy forces certain asylum seekers to wait out their U.S. immigration court cases in Mexico with little or no access to legal counsel. For over three years MPP has caused 75,000 asylum seekers to wait for the court hearings in Mexico - particularly northern border towns. Migrants must gather evidence and prepare for a trial conducted in English, a language that few speak fluently, while also struggling to keep their families safe. These asylees face dangerous conditions, including but not limited to torture and assault. The protocol was then terminated on June 1, 2021.

Another policy was enacted on March 20, 2020, called "Title 42". This policy lets "border authorities quickly expel migrants even asylum-seekers who normally would be granted entry to have their claims evaluated, due to concerns they could spread the [COVID] in the United States" (Collier, 2022). Although it didn't protect people from COVID-19, as more people were living in closer proximity, it drove up the encounters at the border as people crossed repeatedly. The policy ended up expelling three million asylum seekers between 2020 and May 11, 2023, when it was ended. This rule faced several legal challenges for undermining the US obligations to asylum under National and International law, there was never a health rationale for denying people their legal right to claim asylum.

On May 12, 2023, President Biden implemented the Asylum Ban, or the Circumvention of Lawful Pathways Rule, which prohibits asylum seekers from gaining entry to the United States if they have passed through another country on their way to the southern border unless they had previously applied for asylum elsewhere or secured a limited appointment time at a port of entry through the CBP One app. This

policy transforms the asylum system into a lottery, subjecting the most vulnerable individuals to chance and leaving them in unsafe conditions. The resulting long waits at ports of entry have compelled Mexico to address escalating humanitarian needs as asylum seekers endure years of waiting for safety in the U.S. Consequently, families are exposed to the threats of murder, rape, extortion, and other forms of violence. The call to rescind the Asylum Ban arises from the understanding that such strict restrictions deny thousands of people asylum and forces them back into danger, violating both domestic and international laws that guarantee the right to seek asylum. Moreover, this policy contradicts promises made by the Biden administration to overhaul asylum policies deemed inhumane.

## **THE EVOLVING IMMIGRATION LANDSCAPE**

In the United States, the backlog of asylum cases has reached a staggering 750,000, amidst a total of nearly two million immigration cases, with wait times extending to at least five years. Asylum-seekers caught in this backlog face significant challenges, including the inability to legally work for approximately a year while awaiting their hearings.

Recognizing the urgency of this situation, the Biden administration announced a new program in May 2023 aimed at expediting the processing of asylum claims and clearing court backlogs. This initiative grants asylum officers, in addition to immigration court judges, the authority to decide cases, mandates timely interviews within 21 to 45 days of arrival, and accelerates case decisions. To support this effort, the Department of Justice has requested \$177 million to hire 100 judges and staff.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-Mexico border continues to witness a massive influx of migrants, with approximately 10,000 arrivals per day, predominantly asylum seekers. Border Patrol sectors experiencing the highest influx include Del Rio and El Paso, Texas; Tucson, Arizona; and San Diego, California. The situation reached a critical point in December 2023, marked by some of the heaviest arrivals ever, where the Border Patrol processed about 10,500 migrants on December 19

alone, with approximately 40 percent being families or unaccompanied children.

However, even for those asylum seekers who successfully make it to the U.S., the outcome of their asylum claims depends significantly on their access to legal representation. Unlike in the U.S. criminal legal system, asylum seekers are not guaranteed government-funded lawyers.

Yet, studies indicate that having legal representation significantly increases the likelihood of being granted asylum. Therefore, addressing the asylum backlog becomes imperative, given that the current delays force asylum seekers to endure prolonged waits of five to seven years, emphasizing the urgent need for a more efficient and humane asylum system.

## **HUMANITARIAN CONCERN**

Thousands of asylum seekers remain stranded in dangerous cities in Mexico and are forced to wait for a court hearing for more than a year. The difficult journey to the US by asylum seekers sheds light on the severe realities faced by those seeking refuge in the United States. Natalia, 22, and her husband Jose have faced many setbacks in their pursuit of a better life. In February 2023, they fled to the US after receiving threats and enduring extortion from criminal gangs, leaving behind their two kids with their grandmother. After reaching Mexico, their path was defined by challenges and unpredictability, such as nights spent on the streets as they awaited asylum paperwork. In the thick of misinformation and false expectations, they eventually secured temporary shelter in Ciudad Juárez. Despite facing difficulties with an inefficient appointment system, they persisted. Three months later, in April 2023, she successfully presented her family's asylum case, signifying a promising stride towards ensuring a brighter future for their children (The International Rescue Committee, 2024). Their story is one of thousands.

Despite the promises of protection under international agreements, such as Article 14 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, stating that everyone has the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution

in other countries, and the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and its 1967 Protocol, which protects refugees from being returned to countries where they risk being persecuted, their path is filled with obstacles. Organized criminal networks and human smugglers target them, as well as experiencing physical and psychological trauma.

In border cities like Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, asylum seekers are met with overcrowded shelters unable to meet their basic needs, leaving many to fend for themselves on the streets. With up to 125 people arriving daily, these cities become hives of desperation, where vulnerable individuals, including children, are exposed to exploitation and harm. The failure of governments to address this humanitarian crisis perpetuates a cycle of suffering for asylum seekers and highlights the urgent need for coordinated efforts to provide adequate support and protection for those fleeing persecution.

## CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

### *CHALLENGES*

The growing issue of backlogs in asylum cases remains a significant challenge within the system. Despite efforts to increase the number of judges and staff, the backlog continues to grow. This can largely be credited to the escalating global crisis of violence and political instability, prompting a surge in individuals seeking refuge from persecution and conflict. With each influx of humanitarian migrants, comes a corresponding surge in asylum applications. While many applicants may meet the criteria for asylum, others, though ineligible, still flee terrible circumstances with genuine belief in their claims. For a considerable portion of migrants, asylum represents their sole avenue towards attaining permanent status, spotlights the strain on the outdated U.S. immigration system that struggles to cope with the mounting backlogs.

The intricacies of asylum petitions, coupled with the constantly shifting policy landscape, further compound the backlog issue. Experienced immigration attorneys invest substantial time, typically between 50 to 75 hours per application, navigating this complex process. Factors such as trauma experienced by applicants or detention can

significantly prolong the application process as well. Adding to the complexity, the shifts of policies at the U.S.- Mexico border worsen confusion and obstruct fair and efficient adjudication. Inconsistent policies can undermine the credibility of asylum decisions, leading to lengthy appeals that only add to the backlog. While Congress holds the responsibility of shaping immigration laws, the execution lies within the executive branch, resulting in varying regulations and policies from one administration to the next.

Policy shifts that restrict asylum eligibility or impede due process can force migrants into precarious situations, necessitating federal reconsideration of cases and perpetuating the backlog cycle. Addressing these systemic challenges requires comprehensive reforms that prioritize fair and efficient asylum adjudication processes.

## ***SOLUTIONS***

To address the mounting backlogs in asylum cases, Congress holds the key to implementing effective solutions that align with the challenges of the 21st century. By creating orderly and humane immigration pathways, policymakers can significantly reduce the need for individuals to embark on perilous journeys to the U.S.- Mexico border and seek asylum. Two of the most probable solutions would be to increase the resources to strengthen the immigration system and have immigration judges and ICE attorneys choose to make things easier and faster by transferring less important cases to other organizations.

To address the growing backlog in asylum cases, it's crucial to provide extra funding for expanding immigration judge teams, asylum officers, and community support. Despite relying mainly on fees, USCIS faces a rising workload of humanitarian applications exempt from fees. While Congress allocated \$275 million in additional funding for USCIS in 2022 to tackle the backlog, 27 more substantial financial support is needed. This would help USCIS access the personnel and resources necessary to speed up the processing of protection claims, reduce backlog accumulation, and enhance overall efficiency. Beyond legislative action, immigration judges and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) attorneys possess the discretion to

streamline the process by administratively working or defending low-priority cases to other departments. This targeted approach can effectively reduce the defensive asylum backlog, particularly when asylum seekers willingly agree and have alternative legal avenues for long-term residence in the US.

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## CONCLUSIONS

Every day there are more people seeking asylum, addressing the surge in asylum seekers and the backlog of asylum cases requires urgent action. While the current administration has initiated measures, more comprehensive reforms are needed. Additional funding is crucial to expand immigration infrastructure and expedite processing. Empowering immigration judges and ICE attorneys to streamline low-priority cases can help reduce the backlog. Overall, policymakers must prioritize fair and efficient asylum processes to uphold America's commitment to providing refuge for those in need.



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# Where Family Meets Service: The Geographic Distribution of Children in Military Families in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between the number of children in active-duty military families and their geographic location, specifically comparing families stationed in urban versus non-urban areas. Analyses were conducted to examine the difference in the number of children in active-duty Service members' households depending on whether the family is stationed in an urban or non-urban area. This distinction could help the Department of Defense (DoD) efficiently deploy resources to address unintended pregnancies or meet childcare needs, to improve satisfaction with the military way of life among military spouses and retention among Service members.

Service members and their families have universal access to free contraceptives through military healthcare, which aims to support their family planning needs. However, recent trends have shown a decline in the use of both long and short-acting reversible contraception among active-duty women. This decrease is concerning, particularly since unintended pregnancies in military families occur at rates approximately 50% higher than in the general U.S. population (Military Health System, 2022).

Adding to these challenges, military families often struggle to find reliable childcare. Long waitlists, a lack of transparency, and limited access to quality options significantly stress Service members and their families. Approximately 23% of military families with childcare needs cannot secure adequate care (Williams, 2022). This strain is most pronounced among junior enlisted families, who are more likely to deal with economic instability and food insecurity. Childcare issues

further exacerbate these challenges, making it harder for these families to achieve financial security (Blue Star Families, 2021).

Dissatisfaction with military life is increasing among spouses, with many expressing concerns about the lifestyle and its impact on their families. Research shows that the issue of greatest concern among active-duty military spouses is their own employment (Blue Star Families, 2024). Factors influencing the concern may include difficulty finding employment due to frequent geographic transitions, the difficult decision to leave the workforce to care for their children due to difficulty finding childcare, and the high costs associated with childcare. This dissatisfaction is strongly linked to a desire for their Service member spouse to leave active duty, creating a barrier to retention (Rosen & Durand, 1995). The combination of these stressors - unintended pregnancies, lack of childcare, economic challenges, and dissatisfaction with military life - poses significant obstacles to the well-being and retention of military families.

The Government Accountability Office found that it costs the DoD about \$52,800 to separate and replace a Service member in the 2009 fiscal year (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011). The adjusted value of \$52,800 from 2009 to 2024, accounting for an average annual inflation rate of 2.5%, is approximately \$76,470. It is estimated that each year, approximately 200,000 Servicemembers separate from military service (U.S. Department of Labor, n. d.). Therefore, the total cost to replace Service members each year is approximately \$15 billion. This means that every one percent increase in retention would ultimately save the DoD about \$153,000,000.

Given these concerns, an exploration was conducted to examine whether the geographic location of military families - specifically, whether they live in urban or non-urban areas - affects the number of children they have, and how that might be connected to issues of unintended pregnancies and childcare needs. This could help the DoD efficiently use its resources to increase the use of contraceptives and meet the childcare needs of active-duty military families.

The analysis found that families in non-urban areas tend to have more children on average than those in urban areas. The findings suggest a

relationship exists between geographic location and family size in military households. This insight could help the Department of Defense (DoD) better allocate resources to meet the needs of military families, particularly by improving childcare services and staff levels in areas of higher demand.

This analysis has several limitations. Military spouses were not included in the unintended pregnancies data from the DoD. Additionally, the ACS data is from 2016, while DoD data may be more recent, introducing potential discrepancies. A smaller ACS sample size and non-representative distribution of Service members across the military branches may also impact the generalizability and accuracy of the findings. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into factors influencing family size in military households, supporting informed policy recommendations.

Further research is recommended to explore unplanned pregnancy rates among military spouses, particularly in non-urban areas. Improving the compensation and staffing of Child Development Centers (CDCs) to address childcare shortages is also recommended. Finally, improving forecasting for childcare demand could lead to better service provision and higher family satisfaction, ultimately supporting retention efforts for the military.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

To explore this idea, the following question was asked: Is there a relationship between the number of children that families with an active-duty Service member have, depending on whether they are stationed in a metropolitan area or a non-metropolitan area?

To test this, two competing hypotheses were established. The null hypothesis is that there is no relationship between the number of children Service members have and the type of area they are stationed in, whether urban or non-urban. On the other hand, the alternative hypothesis suggests that such a relationship does exist, with the number of children varying based on whether the family is in an urban or non-urban area.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The examination was conducted using the 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) dataset, which includes detailed information on 119,837 individuals across the United States. To test the hypothesis, the analysis focused on families with at least one active-duty Service member rather than including all Service members.

This distinction was made because active-duty personnel are in full-time, permanent military roles, which has a large impact on their household dynamics and use of DoD resources. Active-duty members are required to relocate frequently due to Permanent Change of Station (PCS) orders, typically every 2–4 years, often with limited control over the final destination. This mobility and reliance on DoD support systems, such as housing, healthcare, and child services, create unique family and household characteristics that differ from those of Reserve or National Guard members. In contrast, Reserve and Guard members serve part-time and primarily maintain civilian lifestyles with periodic military obligations. Their households are less likely to experience frequent relocations or depend heavily on DoD resources, making their experiences less comparable to active-duty families in the context of the study. By narrowing the focus to active-duty families, the dataset ensured that it reflected the unique challenges and factors relevant to this population, aligning with the scope of the hypothesis.

The focus on active-duty military families resulted in a sample of 363 families. To better understand the impact of location on family dynamics, the variable representing metropolitan status was re-coded to separate households into urban and non-urban categories, distinguishing families living in cities from those in more rural or suburban areas.

The key measure in the study, the dependent variable was the number of children in each household. This helped assess how factors like location might influence family size.

The final dataset included 309 urban households and 54 non-urban households. With To isolate families with at least one active-duty

Service member and ensure that dual-military households were counted only once, a new variable was created to identify whether any member of the household was an active-duty Service member. This approach allowed for the inclusion of households where the active-duty Service member might not be the head of household, while ensuring that dual-military families were not duplicated. After running the necessary code to create this variable, the dataset was reviewed manually to confirm that there were no duplicate observations, ensuring the integrity of the data.

In the ACS dataset, metropolitan status is determined using Primary Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) and Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs). PUMAs are geographic regions that serve as a basis for statistical reporting, while MSAs represent larger urban areas that meet specific criteria defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. In this context, households are categorized into urban and non-urban groups. Urban households are those fully within an MSA, while non-urban households are either partially within an MSA or located outside any MSA altogether. This classification allows for a clearer distinction between households in highly populated urban areas and those in more rural or suburban regions.

With this distribution, the sample size was large enough to ensure that the findings could be applied more broadly to the population of active-duty military families, making the results reliable and generalizable.

Various analyses were performed to visualize the distribution of the data in the sample. Graph 1 displays the distribution of active-duty military households in urban versus non-urban areas. Graph 2 displays the mean number of children based on geographic location along with the confidence intervals for those means. These figures provide evidence to draw conclusions related to the number of children in these types of households, providing the foundation for the recommended policy process.

Alongside these visualizations, a t-test and proportion test were conducted to further analyze the results of the sample. A t-test was conducted as compared to a z-test as the sample size was so small. It provided a more accurate result and allowed for a more concise

analysis. The proportion test showed that the sample was likely not proportionate to the distribution of active-duty Service members; it does not align with data provided by the military on the distribution of active-duty Service members in the United States (Blue Star Families, 2024).

While the 2016 ACS data is nationally representative, it is outdated and is limited on sample size for this investigation. To mitigate this, further academic material was examined to draw conclusions on the key variables utilized in this research.

RESULTS

FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF ACTIVE-DUTY MILITARY HOUSEHOLDS BY GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

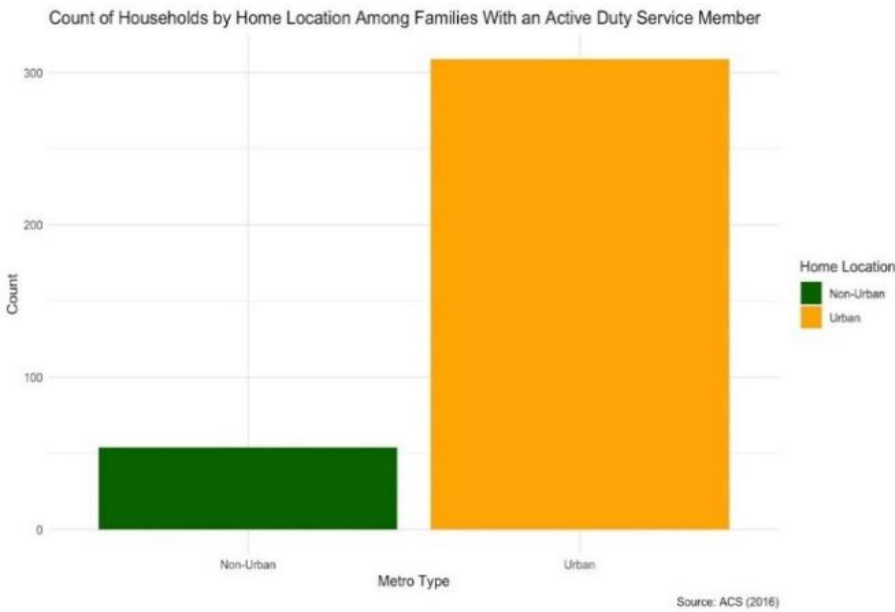




Figure 1 illustrates the proportion of active-duty military households located in urban versus non-urban areas. The results show that a majority of active-duty Service members reside in urban areas. One could anticipate to see a relationship between a higher distribution of households in relation to the number of children per household.

**FIGURE 2: MEAN NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN ACTIVE-DUTY MILITARY HOUSEHOLDS BY GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION**

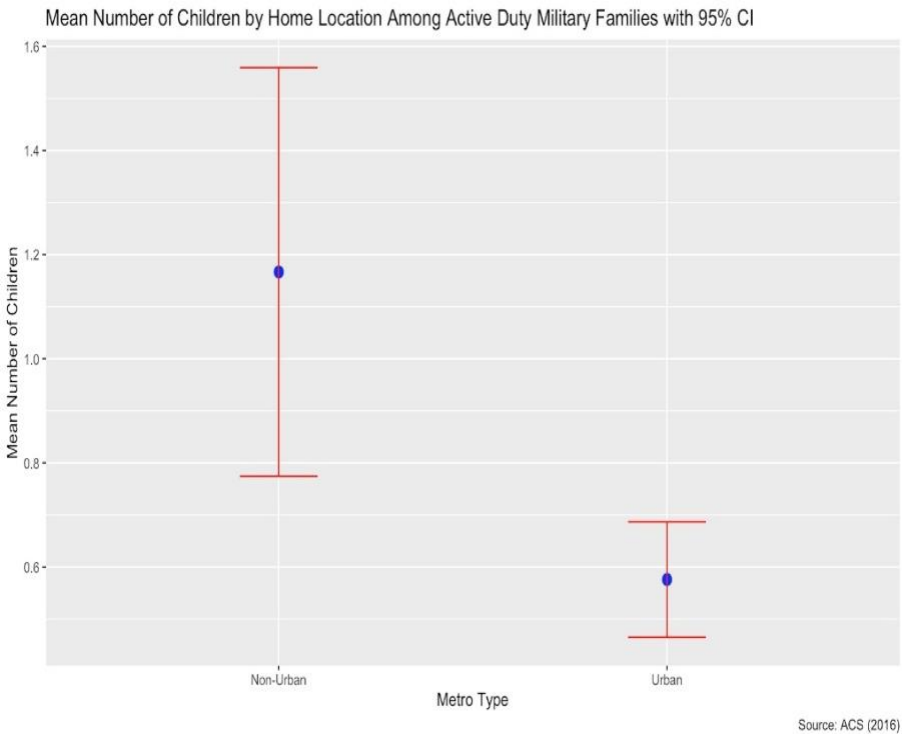


Figure 2 shows that there is a higher mean average of children per active-duty household in non-urban areas rather than in urban areas. Households in non-urban areas have a higher mean number of children compared to those in urban areas amongst active-duty military families. Confidence intervals for these means do not intersect each other, leading to conclusions that indicate the null hypothesis can be rejected.

FIGURE 3: COMPARISON OF MEAN NUMBER OF CHILDREN BETWEEN CIVILIAN AND MILITARY HOUSEHOLDS.

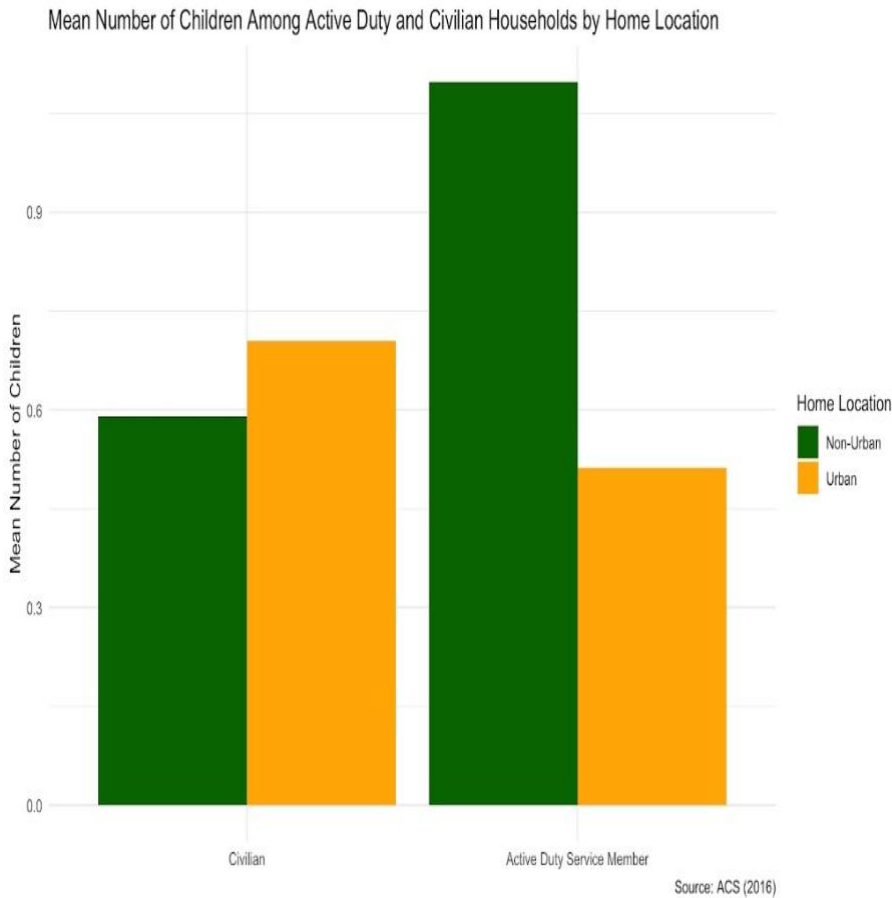


Figure 3 compares the mean number of children per household based on geographic location for both civilian and active-duty families. In non-urban settings, active-duty families tend to have more children on average than their civilian counterparts. However, in urban locations, civilian families tend to have more children on average. While not integral to answer the research question, it can be used for further analysis to investigate the reasons why the distribution of children in these households is as so.

*STATISTICAL ANALYSES*

A t-test was conducted to compare the mean number of children in urban versus non-urban households for active-duty families. The test yielded a p-value of less than 0.05, allowing us to reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference in the mean number of children. Additionally, a proportion test was performed to evaluate whether the sample distribution of urban and non-urban households reflects the actual geographic distribution of active-duty Service members (See Table 1). The test results indicate that the sample is not proportionate to the true distribution of active-duty Service members (Blue Star Families, 2024).

The p-test and t-tests conducted provided evidence to reject the null hypothesis. The t-test results show a statistically significant difference in the average number of children (nchild) between families with an active-duty Service member living in non-urban areas (i.e., Group 1) and families with an active-duty Service member living in urban areas (i.e., Group 2), with:  $t(2.9017) > tcrit(2.00)$ ,  $p(0.0051) < 0.05$ , and non-overlapping confidence intervals. The p-value is less than 0.05, indicating that there is strong evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

**TABLE 1: PROPORTION OF CHILDREN PER HOUSEHOLD BASED ON GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION**

Metro	Count (Individuals)	Proportion
Non-Urban	54	0.149
Urban	309	0.851

**LIMITATIONS**

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these results. Firstly, when considering the data available to examine the rate of unintended pregnancies in the military, military spouses are not included in the military data used to compare the data collected from the ACS dataset. Additionally, the ACS data used in this research is

from 2016, whereas DoD data may be more recent, potentially leading to discrepancies in findings. The sample size available for examination within the ACS may possibly be restrictive in the results collected. A larger sample size could yield more robust and generalizable results.

Different branches of the military are stationed in distinct locations (e.g., the Army in rural areas, the Navy in urban areas), which may skew geographic data distribution. However, significant variation exists depending on the geographic distribution of military installations, which may influence household characteristics. Similarly, the ACS data is not proportionate to the true distribution of active-duty Service members, which may impact the validity of the conclusions drawn.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide valuable insights into the geographic and demographic factors influencing family size in military households, forming foundation for targeted policy recommendations.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of this analysis, the following three policy recommendations are proposed to address the challenges identified in this research.

### ***ADDRESSING UNINTENDED PREGNANCIES IN MILITARY FAMILIES***

Unintended pregnancies within the military can impact the retention rate of Service members and their ability to continue to serve their country. This paper recommends initiatives centered around destigmatizing the use of contraceptives for both Service members and their partners with an emphasis on personal safety, family-planning, and general health and wellness. In a similar vein, expanding access to contraceptive resources and making them readily accessible is crucial in providing Service members and their partners with their bodily autonomy. Improving the availability of and informing Service members and their partners of emergency contraception and long-term contraceptives such as the Pill and IUDs through on-base medical facilities will benefit Service member retention and improve quality of life for Service members and their families.

Funding studies to capture the unintended pregnancy rates amongst military spouses would provide insightful information to aid in more comprehensive family-planning programs for Service members. Studies such as these could explore what factors are prohibiting active-duty Service member families from having more children in urban areas. Family-planning initiatives tailored to Service members and their families would help to improve the retention rate of Service members and improve the quality of life for them and their families.

### ***ENHANCING CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER (CDC) STAFFING AND RESOURCE PLANNING***

Using studies such as this should be employed to assist in resource allocation based on trends in family size and geographic location. This approach can ensure more timely and effective support for Service members and their families. Updating current demand estimation practices by integrating predictive tools that account for geographic and demographic trends would provide further support for families of Service members. Providing care based on the proportion of children on base rather than the same number universally would make CDC more accessible to families on base, aiding in improving retention. Alongside this, Service members know their relocation up to six months in advance, using this tracking model to forecast CDC needs would allow families to feel more prepared to relocate.

Strategic Staffing Initiatives developed through a proactive approach to CDC staffing would include estimating future demand for CDC services based on predictive analyses, offering competitive pay and targeted hiring incentives to attract qualified CDC staff to areas with high anticipated need, and accelerate the hiring and training of CDC workers to meet anticipated demand in a timely manner.

By adopting these recommendations, the Department of Defense can enhance family planning resources, optimize service deployment, and improve support for military families, ultimately contributing to the well-being and readiness of Service members.

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# Hate Crime Prevention Through Education in Pennsylvania

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## ABSTRACT

Hate crimes are acts of violence perpetrated against an individual or group based on a specific facet of their being, for example, race, gender, religion, or socioeconomic status. In the United States, in 2022, the Department of Justice reported that 59.1% of all hate crimes were committed based on race, 17.2% were based on religion, and 17.1% were based on sexual orientation (US Department of Justice, 2024). These acts of violence are often not premeditated and are caused by radicalized individuals specifically targeting minority groups that do not align with their extremist views. Multiple factors drive outgroup hate, resulting in hate crimes. Based on data reported in 2022, 80% of the known offenders were over the age of 18, and 50% of the known offenders were white. In Pennsylvania specifically, race-based hate crimes are the most prevalent, with over 60-70% of all hate crimes committed in Pennsylvania relating to race from 2020-2022 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024). While these statistics are striking as is, they are dependent on the reporting of these violent events. In this policy brief, I will explore some of the key root causes of hate crimes, such as political polarization, radicalism, and extremism, and discuss how their impact has reverberated throughout the United States.

## INTRODUCTION

With the increase of political polarization in the United States, hate crimes have steadily increased with many different factors for causation (U.S. Department of Justice, 2025). While motivations behind hate crimes vary and are often unpredictable, addressing the root causes of this type of violence and educating people are viable steps the US government can take to prevent hate crimes. Hate crime rates will decrease with an increase in education surrounding healthy

mindsets, coping mechanisms, and comprehensive, accurate history in schools K-12. With the implementation of more government funding for education and better-designed history and civic teachings, the rates of hate crimes will decrease over time due to a more comprehensive education.

In this policy brief, I will address how hate crimes have risen over the past decade and what the US government and state legislature can do to take action to prevent them from rising. This policy will build upon laws currently in use, drawing inspiration from hate crime prevention programs globally. Considering Pennsylvania, this policy will address how the state government can work with K-12 public schools to design comprehensive Civics & Government, and History courses that begin at an early age to inform and encourage open discussions on why hate crimes happen and how they can be prevented. This approach leans on how comprehensive education can be the intervening factor for adolescents becoming radicalized.

This policy will specifically look at how Pennsylvania can take action to build up these courses to teach students a more uniform and accurate curriculum as well as address the underlying factors that cause hate crimes. As seen with common-core curriculum already in place, these common-core-inspired history and Civics & Government courses would provide teachers with an outlined agenda of topics and concepts to cover that are unified across the commonwealth. The curriculum will address two crucial aspects of hate crimes, radicalization and extremism. These two concepts are core aspects of what leads to hate crimes. At present, there are no clear guidelines established in the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for discussing radicalization, extremism, or online media literacy. This policy will address these limitations and provide a new framework for these conversations in schools.

Addressing potential limitations to this policy, a clear barrier would be parent reaction to a new curriculum. In the United States, parents are actively involved in what is taught to their children, as compared to other countries. This policy will address how parent intervention can be mitigated along with how this policy will improve current education policy in Pennsylvania schools.



## ROOT CAUSES OF HATE CRIMES

### *POLARIZATION*

In the United States, the political climate has grown increasingly more polarized over the last decade. Polarization is the political divide between one group and another. The more polarized a topic, government, or group of people is, the more both sides disagree with each other. About 80% of partisan Americans report feeling very unfavorably toward individuals associated with opposing political parties (Pew Research Center, 2022). An example of polarization is the current political climate between Democrats and Republicans in the United States before and after the 2024 Presidential election.. Recent data reports that 47-72% of members of the GOP feel that nonmembers are immoral while 35-65% of Democrats feel nonmembers are immoral (As Partisan, 2022). This is evidence to highlight how American politics have become a moral high-ground contest. The contested morality of politics in America has led to the idea that political violence can be acceptable if the other side is “evil”.

Political polarization has led to partisan gridlock, an inability to foster legislative compromise, as well as the erosion of institutional and behavioral norms for politicians. The gridlocked institutions have made politicians turn to outside of law-making, using the courts to further their agendas. This has fostered more discontent within the government, leading people to distrust the system of government along with fading confidence in the government’s ability to create a safe and fair system for citizens.

Polarization has also led to the weakening of democratic practices. In the 2023 Piazza study on how political polarization can impact political violence, Piazza reports that dehumanization of out-partisans, moralization of politics, and mobilization are three main triggering factors to political violence (Piazza, 2023).

## *RADICALIZATION & EXTREMISM*

With political affiliation becoming equated to moral standing, it is easy for individuals to fall into radicalization and extremism at an early age. Radicalization is the “transformation rooted in grievances, networks, enabling environments, and ideology that brings an individual to hold radical beliefs and support the uses of violence” (Leap & Young, 2021). It is a necessary component of political violence however, not all individuals who hold radical beliefs will engage in violence. Radicalization may be linear or nonlinear, meaning the process could be gradual or immediate. In the context of hate crimes, radicalization can happen for various reasons. Some examples of this are personal grievances leading to in-group/out-group dichotomies, group grievances, “slippery slope” engagement with extremist groups, and hate and dehumanization. These examples are pathways for individuals to become radicalized and in some cases, commit acts of political violence such as hate crimes.

Adolescents have become a target for radicalization via online activity, social media, and peer pressure. Social, psychological, and ideological factors all play a role in how a person could become radicalized. Extremist groups can exploit adolescents who feel disenfranchised, alienated, and as though they lack purpose by convincing them that their purpose lies in the extremist group’s goals. With certain social media and news outlets leaning into polarization for views, it can be easy for the average person to consume media that may not be entirely factual, biased, or hateful, and take it as fact. Looking at the historical context of media as a driver of political violence, there is a notable trend of media being used to mobilize political violence. This is demonstrated in the use of radio during the Rwandan genocide, the use of radio to fuel Nazi propaganda during World War II, and now with new contemporary media being produced, dehumanization and hate being spread through social media and video games. As noted in the Piazza study, dehumanization is one of the main ways polarizations can translate into political violence (Piazza, 2023). Dehumanization is the act of equating a person to a nonhuman being or object to lessen their value as a person. The use of dehumanization makes it easy for extremist groups and radicalized people to commit acts of violence

against an outgroup, as they do not see the outgroup as human. This is an extreme form of radicalization.

Studies have shown that the “strain” theory could potentially explain why hate crimes happen. Strain theory is the idea that economically disadvantaged people who lack proper resources to achieve their goals seek out group members to scapegoat as responsible for their problems. This can then translate into harmful rhetoric seen in media like, “minorities are taking my benefits, housing, jobs, etc.” While the majority of people will not resort to violence when experiencing this way of thinking, there is evidence to show that radicalized individuals may become violent and commit a hate crime. This is a criticism of strain theory, as it takes away the agency and autonomy of individuals; not every “radical” thinking person will commit a hate crime.

## **CURRENT EDUCATION POLICY IMPLEMENTATION**

The common-core curriculum is an initiative designed to keep students on track for what they should understand and what skills they should be proficient in in preparation for higher education or the workforce (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). Common-core curriculum paired with state academic standards provides an agenda for teachers K-12 to prepare students for life after high school. This foundation prepares students for not only further education but also teaches them life skills that will be used throughout their lives. In Pennsylvania, there are academic standards for twelve specific subjects that provide school districts with a guide to developing a tailored curriculum for their community. These common core standards were adopted in July 2010 with the goal of giving students an education that teaches critical thinking, and decision-making, and is tailored for each grade level (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). Schools may decide whether or not to implement these academic standards as a model curriculum (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013). In this brief, civics and government, history, and standards for reading and writing in history and social studies will be examined. These standards outline multiple different objectives for students to be proficient in by graduation. According to the Pennsylvania State Board of Education, these standards apply to

students from grade 3 until graduation for civics and government and history (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, 2002).

### *COMMON-CORE & ACADEMIC STANDARDS*

The academic standards for civics and government include four core areas of study: principles and documents of government, rights and responsibilities of citizenship, how Government works, and how international relationships function (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2002). This academic standard took effect on January 11, 2003 (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, n.d.a). Within these core subjects, there are four different grade levels in which specific subject material must be covered. These grades are third, sixth, ninth, and twelfth. While these subjects are intersectional and may appear earlier than the prescribed benchmarks, the Board of Education notes that they must be fully discussed and developed by the benchmarked times. The timestamps for different lessons ensure that students understand the foundation of each subject before moving on to more difficult and theoretical material.

Similarly, history also has four core subjects that are designed in the same framework as above. They are historical analysis and skills development, Pennsylvania history, United States history, and world history (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, 2002a). This academic standard was put into effect on January 11, 2003 (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, n.d.b). History is taught earlier in school than civics and government. Beginning in first grade, students begin learning Pennsylvania, United States, and World history from “beginnings to present” (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, 2002a). The timeline in place is to again ensure students have an understanding of the past before moving on to analyzing the events that took place. The Board of Education makes a note in its outline for history academic standards that it is up to the interpreter of the standards to decide which historical events are age-appropriate and how they are to be taught (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, 2002a).

Lastly, the Pennsylvania Core Standards for reading and writing in history and social studies have two core subjects: reading and writing

(Pennsylvania State Board of Education, 2014). Within these two core subjects, there are outlined goals for grades 6-12 on what level students should be comprehending and verbalizing what they read. The outlined goals for reading target the student's ability to "read, understand, and respond to informational text - with an emphasis on comprehension, making connections among ideas and between texts with a focus on textual evidence" (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, 2014). For writing, "Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content" (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, 2014). These core subjects were approved and implemented on March 1, 2014 (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, n.d.a).

Within the common core framework, schools are not obligated to take on these academic standards. However, Pennsylvania is one of the 40 states that have adopted common-core curriculum as of 2024. In Pennsylvania, proficiency exams begin in elementary school and continue throughout high school. These exams are known as PSSAs and Keystone Exams. These exams test students to ensure they are being taught the required English, reading, and math requirements for their grade levels (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, n.d.b). It has become a graduation requirement to pass the Keystone exam with proficiency in high school (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, n.d.b).

### ***HATE CRIME PREVENTION PROGRAMS***

In the article, "Hate Crime Prevention Programs", author Darko Dimovski highlights the different programs used around the world to mitigate the frequency of hate crimes (Dimovski, 2020). He uses specific programs used by the United States and Canada to discuss how effective these strategies are. In this brief, two examples in the article are pertinent. The first was a program conducted in Canada that helped young people leave a Neo-Nazi group that was recruiting local teens and young adults. This program put effort into educating the members who were becoming radicalized and encouraged more engagement with the community for these individuals (Dimovski, 2020, p. 84). Because the community took such immediate action, these

young adults were pulled out of what could have been a very dangerous situation, thanks to comprehensive education and community building. A similar initiative was introduced in Norway in 1997 that yielded very promising results, with 35 out of 38 young members becoming deradicalized after going through the program's education and taking part in working for the community; it gave the members a new purpose (Dimovski, 2020, p. 84). This initiative was used around the world with success.

In the United States, channels such as PBS worked to promote nonviolence and targeted communities suffering from racism during the 90s (Dimovski, 2020, p. 90). With the rise in media and technology, networks like PBS realized that showcasing media that promoted nonviolence and provided information on hate crimes, how to react in a situation where a hate crime could occur, and how recruiting for extremist groups worked, would prepare people to combat bias and radicalization. This initiative was proven to be very successful with multiple versions of the program played around the country. There were programs designed to raise awareness about how racism impacts people as well as counteracting "intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, and hate crimes" (Dimovski, 2020, p. 90). Utilizing programs such as within the United States education system would provide the tools, audience, and scope needed to target children and young adults.

## **ANALYSIS & CRITIQUE OF CURRENT POLICIES**

The foundation of current education policies for Pennsylvania provides an adequate framework for what should be taught at each grade level. However, it does not address the current events of the past decade in the outline currently provided by the State Department of Education. As the current academic standards for Civics & Government and History were last updated in 2002, there is a clear need for a redesigned curriculum that addresses the political climate of the present decade. Within this scope, the opportunity presents itself for the state to readjust how it allows individual school districts to choose what is taught. While it makes sense that a student's education may not be the same as another, there should be no lack of education due to educators, school boards, or communities deciding what aspects of

history or civic engagement are taught. Uniformity is required to ensure all students receive a comprehensive education that prepares them for life after high school in both the workforce and higher education.

As stated on the Pennsylvania Board of Education's website, the academic standards are up to interpretation of the reader, thus leaving the decision-making for what exactly is taught up to the schools themselves (Pennsylvania Board of Education, n.d.a). With the passing of certain standardized testing mandatory for graduation, certain topics must be covered in class so students can receive their diplomas. This, however, does not ensure that educators can or will educate their students on crucial political topics related to polarized concepts such as radicalization and extremism. These policies, while giving educators room to establish what works best for their demographic, need to be updated to fit the modern day.

Within the outlined academic standards, there are clear descriptions of what type of questions students should be able to answer, what concepts they should understand, and what type of competencies students should be proficient in (Pennsylvania State Board of Education, 2002b, Page 5). The ideas outlined in the documents for civics and government do not include discussions on political polarization, radicalization, or extremism as any core vocabulary or concepts. While the current model has the foundation for what could be a successful curriculum, it does not provide adequate information for educators to provide their students with. The History curriculum framework does not go in-depth on what events specifically should be studied. While this allows educators the freedom to teach their students about various historical events, it also limits the education students could be receiving. To provide a comprehensive history curriculum for students, a new education policy is needed to give students a core foundation of how American society has progressed and how global events impact the United States.

### *POLICY SUGGESTION*

Drawing inspiration from common-core, new civics & government courses along with history would be standardized and uniform across the commonwealth ensuring all students receive a comprehensive history of the United States, the government, and core issues that are the root of many of the motivations behind hate crimes. By starting civic engagement education and comprehensive history education at a young age, it instills the concept of ethics allowing students to grow up understanding how others should be treated. Upbringings vary from family to family, with different lived experiences for each intersectional identity. Teaching students about core values from a young age provides them the framework to grow into positive contributing individuals.

### *POLICY SPECIFICS*

Building upon the Pennsylvania Academic Standards currently in place, this new education policy will add discussions on radicalization, polarization, extremism, and online media literacy starting in seventh grade. The depth of what is taught will be adjusted to the grade level but opening these discussions early on will ensure a strong foundation upon entering high school where more comprehensive and analytical discussions on these topics will take place. Not only will this new curriculum adjustment be beneficial for the classroom, but it will also provide the opportunity for more teachers to be hired with the addition of the social media literacy course. As compared to how the academic standards have been applied in the past, these concepts would be requirements of the curriculum once implemented. This is to ensure all schools provide their students with the necessary skills to address political activity.

In middle school, teachers would aim to introduce the aforementioned concepts, provide key examples, and explain how radicalization and polarization occur. This new curriculum would also pave the way for a required class on online media literacy in the seventh grade. Students are taught how to comprehend literature, but schools are not formally



required to educate their students on how to comprehend online media. As technology is constantly changing and is integral to the everyday lives of millions of Americans, students would be taught how to determine factual versus opinionated media, how to identify misinformation, and how to practice safe online behaviors. Middle school students are typically between the ages of 11 and 13. Ensuring students at this age and education level have at minimum a surface-level understanding of government and civics is crucial for them to understand the logistics and theoretical concepts to be introduced in high school.

As students' progress into high school, teachers would then expand the lessons into discussions on how to recognize radicalization, address the real-life consequences of extremism, and discuss the implications of polarization on society. The lessons on radicalization, polarization, and extremism will build upon each other and provide students with the critical thinking skills needed to make informed decisions regarding their government. Regarding actual curriculum changes, the academic standards would be updated to include recent events such as January 6, 2021, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversations surrounding these topics would be introduced in both civics and government classes as well as History classes. Considering the polarized nature of both of these events, students would need an understanding of polarization and radicalization before discussing them in class. These examples would be used to address how polarization occurs (COVID-19) and how radicalized individuals can become violent in extreme situations like January 6th.

### ***REDUCING HATE CRIMES THROUGH POLICY***

This revised common core education policy for Pennsylvania would lower hate crimes by addressing some of the root issues that can trigger hate crimes. Educating students on how to recognize radicalization and extremism, providing students with a comprehensive education on history, civics, and government, and providing students the capability to identify bias in media will lower the risk that teens and young adults will turn to extremism. As an example of how this education policy would be effective, had this policy been in place before the COVID-19 pandemic, there could have been fewer

attacks against Asian Americans during and after the pandemic. As misinformation, bias, and dehumanization tactics were used by multiple different newsgroups, politicians, and other social media outlets, some individuals who became radicalized participated in Asian American hate after hearing false statements regarding the spread and origin of the pandemic. Notably, ABC News Network reported on how misinformed remarks made by major politicians were found to have caused heightened rates of hate crimes directed towards Asian Americans (Reja, 2021). If the policy had been employed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it could have given students the ability to recognize the misinformed media as inflammatory, racist, and inaccurate, leading to fewer acts of violence against Asian Americans.

### *POTENTIAL CRITIQUES*

It would be remiss to argue a policy such as this without considering the backlash it could potentially receive from communities, as well as some potential limitations of this approach. This policy advocates for a more comprehensive history and civic and government education in K-12 schools with an additional focus on radicalization, extremism, and online media literacy. To see results from this change will take time. It is a gradual process but ultimately rewarding as it gives students the skills to think critically, improve decision-making, understand how media can be biased, and determine what is factual versus opinionated.

As mentioned in an analysis of bullying and hate crimes in public schools in the United States, authors Boehme, Burrow, and Jung address how intersectional bullying and hate crimes can occur and how response from the school's administration is vital in preventing hateful events from occurring again (Boehme et al., 2024). Due to this, they make the point that education and awareness programs may not be enough to discourage students from committing acts of violence based on identity (Boehme et al., 2024, p. 10). To mitigate this risk, they offer the solution for teachers and administrators to include more holistic approaches to intervention (Boehme et al., 2024, p. 10). Introducing the proposed policy of integrating a more comprehensive curriculum of civics, polarization, and media-literacy could help to

compensate for some of the possible loose ends connected to administrative response.

Considering the reaction parents and communities had to common-core education in the early 2010s, it is not inconceivable to think the reaction to a new state-wide curriculum would result in similar reactions today. As discussed, the United States' political climate is extremely polarized at present. Introducing a curriculum to students where discussions about what radicalization and extremism are, how they impact people, and how to disseminate between biased and unbiased media may result in polarized communities rejecting the curriculum.

Regarding the proposed online media literacy course, some may argue it is the job of parents to educate their children on how to safely use the internet. To that, it can be argued that not all parents have been educated on these practices, and they may not have the resources to teach their children how to identify bias or practice safe internet usage.

## **CONCLUSION**

In closing, comprehensive, updated, and unified civics, government, and history courses are needed in public schools K-12 to help reduce the number of hate crimes in Pennsylvania and, subsequently, the United States. The common-core framework provides the outline for what could be a successful and meaningful education for students across the Commonwealth. While this may not be the fastest-acting way to decrease the number of hate crimes, it ensures that the next generations of Americans will have the skills needed to create a safer country. Teaching students from a young age about civic engagement, how to recognize patterns of radicalization, and how to be safe on the internet are just a few of the measures the state of Pennsylvania can take to equip students with critical life skills.

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# Housing Inequality in the United States

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Housing inequality in the United States remains a pressing issue, exacerbated by exclusionary zoning policies that restrict the development of affordable housing. These policies have historically segregated communities by race and socioeconomic status, contributing to a widening wealth gap and limited access to opportunity. The rising cost of housing has placed immense financial strain on working-class and middle-income families, making homeownership and rental affordability increasingly out of reach. This policy memo outlines the historical context of zoning laws, their impact on housing disparities, and proposes zoning reforms aimed at fostering inclusivity and affordability. By revising restrictive land-use policies, municipalities can increase the supply of affordable housing, promote socioeconomic integration, and create more equitable communities. Local governments must take bold action to modernize zoning laws and address the systemic barriers that have perpetuated housing inequality for generations.

## INTRODUCTION

This policy memo serves as a critical resource for policymakers, urban planners, housing advocates, and community stakeholders who seek to address housing inequality through zoning reform. It provides a data-driven analysis of the challenges posed by exclusionary zoning, offers targeted policy recommendations, and examines the potential benefits and challenges associated with implementation. The core focus is on increasing the supply of affordable housing, ensuring that working-class families, young professionals, and historically marginalized groups can access safe and reasonably priced homes. By adopting the reforms proposed in this memo, local governments

can take meaningful steps toward dismantling systemic barriers to affordable housing and fostering more inclusive communities.

## **UNDERSTANDING ZONING LAWS AND THEIR HISTORY**

Zoning laws were first introduced in the early 20th century to regulate urban development and ensure orderly land use. While initially intended to separate residential, commercial, and industrial areas, these regulations quickly became tools for racial and economic exclusion. Single-family zoning, which dominates many American suburbs, was often enacted to prevent the construction of multifamily housing, thereby restricting lower-income households, disproportionately communities of color from moving into wealthier neighborhoods (Rothstein, 2017).

The long-term effects of exclusionary zoning are profound. These policies have contributed to a housing supply crisis by artificially constraining the availability of affordable units, driving up housing costs, and exacerbating homelessness. The racial wealth gap has widened as homeownership opportunities remain largely inaccessible to historically marginalized groups. Addressing these entrenched disparities requires a fundamental shift in land-use policies to enable more equitable housing development.

Exclusionary zoning policies, including single-family zoning and minimum lot size requirements, limit the types of housing that can be built in many areas. These restrictions reduce housing supply, increase costs, and reinforce socioeconomic segregation (Pendall, 2000). Research shows that restrictive zoning policies drive up home prices by limiting density, leading to shortages of affordable rental and homeownership opportunities (Glaeser et al., 2005). The affordability crisis has reached a breaking point, with millions of Americans spending more than 30% of their income on housing, leaving little for other essentials like healthcare and education. Addressing these challenges requires proactive policy changes that prioritize housing accessibility over neighborhood exclusivity.

## POLICY SOLUTIONS

To effectively combat housing inequality and make housing more affordable, the following zoning reforms should be implemented:

- **Inclusionary Zoning:** Require that a portion of new residential developments include affordable housing units. This policy has been successful in cities like New York and San Francisco, where it has helped create thousands of affordable units without displacing existing residents (Schuetz et al., 2011). Inclusionary zoning ensures that new development directly contributes to affordability, rather than merely increasing market-rate supply.
- **Upzoning:** Amend zoning codes to allow for increased housing density, particularly in areas dominated by single-family homes. Upzoning policies in Minneapolis and Portland have demonstrated that increasing density can help alleviate housing shortages and reduce rents (Been et al., 2019). Allowing more duplexes, triplexes, and multifamily developments will expand options for cost-conscious renters and buyers.
- **Streamlined Permitting and Development Approvals:** Simplify and expedite the process for approving affordable housing developments. Lengthy and bureaucratic permitting processes drive up costs and deter developers from building needed housing (Glaeser et al., 2005). Cities should implement clear, fast-tracked approval processes to encourage development and lower construction costs, ultimately making housing more affordable for residents.
- **Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs):** Permit and incentivize the construction of ADUs, such as backyard cottages or basement apartments. ADUs provide a cost-effective way to increase affordable housing options without major infrastructure overhauls (Chapple et al., 2020). They also create additional income opportunities for homeowners, making housing more affordable for both renters and property owners.



**Rental and Homeownership Assistance Programs:** Beyond zoning changes, policymakers should introduce incentives such as tax credits for affordable housing developers and subsidies for low-income renters. These measures can bridge affordability gaps and ensure that new housing stock is accessible to those most in need.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Implementing these zoning reforms will have significant and wide-reaching benefits:

- **Increased Housing Supply and Affordability:** By allowing for higher-density development and affordable housing mandates, these policies will help address housing shortages and stabilize rising costs, making housing more attainable for middle- and low-income households.
- **Greater Socioeconomic and Racial Integration:** Expanding housing options in historically exclusive neighborhoods will provide low-income families and people of color with access to better schools, jobs, and public services.
- **Economic Growth and Workforce Stability:** More affordable housing ensures that workers can live closer to employment centers, reducing commute times and boosting local economies. Affordable housing supports workforce retention, allowing businesses to thrive.
- **Community Opposition and Political Challenges:** While these reforms provide clear benefits, they may face resistance from residents who fear changes in neighborhood character or declining property values. Policymakers must engage communities through public forums, education campaigns, and incentives to garner support for reform.

## CONCLUSION

The persistence of housing inequality in America is deeply tied to outdated and exclusionary zoning laws. By implementing targeted zoning reforms—including inclusionary zoning, upzoning, streamlined permitting, ADU legalization, and expanded affordability programs—municipalities can take meaningful steps toward fostering equitable housing opportunities. While challenges exist, the long-term benefits of reform outweigh short-term resistance. A commitment to inclusive land-use policies will help ensure that all Americans have access to safe, affordable housing, promoting stronger, more diverse, and economically vibrant communities.

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# **The Medicalization and Colonization of Pregnancy and Childbirth As It Relates to Women in the United States: How Do We Improve Maternal Health Outcomes?**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The medicalization and colonization of pregnancy has led to high rates of negative birth outcomes for Women of Color, a gendered and racially biased healthcare system, and an internalized notion of “doing pregnancy correctly”. In this paper, I will use concepts such as medicalization, obstetric racism, and obstetric violence to articulate the detrimental effects that medicalization and colonization have had on pregnancy and childbirth. Following, I will discuss three policy implications to create more positive health outcomes for laboring mothers.

Three research questions are utilized that will help to explain some of the negative realities generated by the colonization and medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth. In the first section, I explain the history and cultural significance of colonization and medicalization in the United States, the Black maternal mortality epidemic, and obstetric racism. This explanation builds the context and foundation for the concepts discussed in the paper. Explaining the historical context of medicalization and its modern-day applications provides the connections for the reader to see how systemic racism is present in the American healthcare system today. When discussing the Black maternal mortality rate, I draw on research generated by scholars and government sources such as the CDC (Hoyert, 2023). The empirical evidence presented by these sources validates the concepts at play concerning the Black maternal mortality rate. Lastly, using the information presented thus far, I explain how this translates into

obstetric racism, why this is a dangerous problem, and how it impacts women across the United States.

The second section of this paper explores how medicalization and the colonization of pregnancy have led to the erasure of Indigenous and women-centered knowledge. This section draws on research examining indigenous experiences, doula and midwife experiences, as well as how these experiences are demonized and othered by the current obstetric care system. The conclusion of this section discusses how the erasure of indigenous and women-centered practices ultimately leads to poorer health outcomes, as well as how this creates a more negative view of the body. First-hand accounts from doulas and midwives provide insight to the real-life treatment of caregivers and mothers by healthcare providers. This provides the opportunity to read the viewpoints of what caregivers like doulas and midwives have to offer and apply that to how the erasure of knowledge has led to the colonization of the body.

The final section of this paper discusses how the Institutionalization of medicalization throughout pregnancy affects women. Two critical concepts are employed in this context to answer this question. The first concept explores the dehumanization of pregnancy and childbirth, while the second explores the obstetric violence perpetuated by the US healthcare system and how it has become institutionalized. The discussion will draw on sources discussed previously as well as added examples to visualize how dehumanization takes place and how it negatively impacts women. The culmination of all concepts presented in this paper will be utilized to discuss the final concept, obstetric violence.

## **HOW WOMEN OF COLOR ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED MORE NEGATIVELY BY COLONIZATION AND MEDICALIZATION WITHIN THE CURRENT OBSTETRIC CARE SYSTEM**

### ***COLONIZATION AND MEDICALIZATION***

While not unique to the United States, colonization and medicalization of Black women and pregnancy has played a critical role in shaping how the healthcare system views Black bodies. Colonization is an

ongoing marginalization rooted in racism that stems from the oppression of populations, cultures, and religion.

One of the most identifiable examples of this is the treatment of Black individuals and Black culture in the United States. Black women in the US often suffer more due to the complicated and intersectional traumas they experience because of colonization (Wald, 2022). When reading historical documents, stories, and reports on how Black women were treated throughout the tenure of slavery, it is clear how such generational traumas affect the population today and how they are treated in society as well. The Bridgeman-Bunyoli article offers up a unique perspective on how the legacies left behind by slavery have become internalized into the healthcare system today. They utilize the term “embodiment” to describe how the generational traumas experienced by African Americans have become internalized (Bridgeman-Bunyoli et al., 2022). A critical concept introduced by midwives in this setting was the realization that these traumas have been passed down from generation to generation as a way for the new generation to “survive Blackness in America” (Bridgeman-Bunyoli et al., 2022, p. 532). This type of trauma does not allow Black women to feel safe, comfortable, nor respected by healthcare providers in a system that is focused around white people (Bridgeman-Bunyoli et al., 2022). Participants in the focus groups and interviews of this study described how the constant exposure to systemic racism creates an extremely negative view of Black motherhood (Bridgeman-Bunyoli et al., 2022). This is a direct result of colonization and how it impacts every aspect of Black motherhood. It strips away the trust in her body, her capability, and her strength.

Colonization has led to the institutionalization of racism in every aspect of the United States government, healthcare system, and culture. This internalization has led to the normalization of treating Black bodies as racial biases. The colonization of Black women’s reproduction can be traced back to how slaves were treated in early America.

Understanding how medicalization permeates through healthcare in the United States is paramount to understanding how pregnancy and childbirth become medicalized. Medicalization is the process of making something that is nonmedical into something diagnosable

(Rutherford & Wood, 2022). This is often tied to being able to prescribe or treat this now “medicalized condition.” It is a symptom of capitalism and colonization, stemming from the need to generate as much capital as possible regardless of the ethical concerns.

Medicalization is characterized by “the use of technoscience to monitor, survey, and manage health from a medical perspective, including the use of routine testing and the prevention of limitless potential health complications” (Rutherford & Wood, 2022, p. 296). It conceptualizes the growing desire of the medical model for patients to solely rely on technology and “experts” for any ailments to the body. For pregnant people, this can result in the breakdown of trust in their body as it becomes internalized that only doctors or “experts” possess the knowledge to help or understand pregnancy. As “technoscientific” methods are assumed to always be correct, it destroys the ability for disagreement or debate around treatment.

As medicalization is the premise of the obstetric care system in the United States, it puts women in a position where pregnancy becomes something to “cure”, to be hyper-vigilant about doing correctly, and again, prevents women from intuitively listening to their bodies. It leads mothers to see “normal” pregnancies as only what is depicted in self-help pregnancy literature, media, and clinical context (Rutherford & Wood, 2022). As the Western model of obstetric care becomes the only accepted format for pregnancy, it erases the indigenous and midwifery practices that have been passed down for centuries, labeling them as irrelevant, dangerous, and not as good as “modern medicine”.

Other viewpoints on medicalization, such as liberal and trans feminisms, offer more insight into the dangers of medicalization. Authored by Cristina Richie, the article *Not Sick: Liberal, Trans, and Crip Feminist Critiques of Medicalization* argues that medicalization occurs when “the medical gaze intersects with the male gaze” (Richie, 2019, p. 376). The male gaze in medicine is a controlling, paternalistic, and patriarchal legacy of how the medical system was created. Not only does it impact the socially constructed norms and boundaries of what is acceptable, it impacts the institutions that the United States depends on for daily life. The United States medical system is an exemplar of how the male gaze can be dangerous, exclusionary, and anti-woman.

The modern medical system foundationally excluded women and people of color. These problems have not dissipated and neither have the influences left behind by the misogyny and racism that was cultivated in that space. The male gaze permeates almost every aspect of American culture today.

Richie (2019) goes on to explain in her article the different focuses and thoughts between liberal, trans, and crip feminisms when critiquing medicalization. Highlighting the example Richie gives, liberal feminism looks at how the female body is perceived post-partum and how the medicalized gaze influences the choices women make after giving birth. From this perspective, medicalization focuses on the gender expectations put in place by the male gaze (Richie, 2019). She highlights how women often feel pressured to ensure their body returns to what it looked like prior to having children, disregarding the health both physical and mental changes that have occurred. It reinstates the concept that women are sexual objects, required to look their best within the male gaze. This is translated into women being told that their bodies are wrong or disfigured after birth and therefore, require a medical solution wherein these types of “medical solutions” are expensive plastic surgeries or medications. This “pathologization” of women’s bodies post-partum, internalizes the notion that women must accommodate and become what the male gaze demands, “it treats their flesh and functions as machinery” (Richie, 2019, p. 378). Using this perspective, Richie discusses the combined influence of medicalization and essentialism which assumes all women as heterosexual, cis-gendered, wealthy, white women. Essentialism forces women to fit into a box that is not attainable, realistic, or possible for all women. This includes the expectation of motherhood, menstruation, having heterosexual intimacy, and desiring men (Richie, 2019).

As opposed to liberal feminist critique, trans feminist critiques of medicalization offer up a perspective stemming from Black feminism as well as womanism (Richie, 2019). According to Richie, trans feminism argues that gender dysphoria should not be a medical condition, and that that way of thinking about gender is harmful to individuals who are outside of the binary expression of gender (Richie, 2019). A main point of the trans feminist argument presented by Richie

is the acceptance of variability of gender expression and how that acceptance or denial impacts medical treatment. The medicalization of trans people makes them feel as though they are ill and are in need of fixing. These “medical” solutions may lead trans individuals to undergo these procedures in order to avoid facing stigma, bias, and hate rather than for themselves; this a “band-aid solution” to much larger societal issues surrounding gender. Trans feminism argues we need to address and fix the core issues in order for trans people to feel accepted and for them to not feel pressured into medical procedures when they may not want them. This aspect of trans critique of medicalization is applicable to the normalized coercion of unnecessary medical procedures during childbirth, i.e. nurses and doctors continuously suggesting the use of drugs like pitocin to advance labor more quickly or the use of an epidural when mothers have already expressed the disinterest in such intervention. Richie’s arguments on liberal and trans feminist critiques offer up more perspectives into how harmful medicalization can be for women.

For people who do not have the privilege of knowing or access to resources outside of their socioeconomic class, medicalization is a harmful and potentially dangerous situation. As medicalization puts the care of pregnant people in the hands of healthcare providers entirely, this automatically puts Black mothers at a disadvantage. With this system in place, going to receive treatment or working with a medical professional can be a stressful, tiring, and sometimes dangerous experience for Black women due to the underlying personal and systemic biases in place. With the Black maternal death rate upwards of twice as high as the white maternal death rate in the United States, this raises major concerns for Black mothers when going for prenatal appointments as well as going to the hospital for labor (Wald, 2022).

### ***BLACK MATERNAL DEATH RATE***

In the United States, the Black maternal death rate is one of the highest globally for a nation that boasts technological advancements and resources (Wald, 2022). This statistic is rooted in colonization and slavery. Stemming from inhumane and brutal experiments performed on Black women throughout slavery, stereotypes and untrue “facts”



were spread in the medical community on what Black men and women could and could not do (Wald, 2022). Some of the most harmful outcomes of these procedures comes from J. Marion Simms, a physician who experimented on female slaves to create new procedures for white women (Wald, 2022).

One of the most well-known examples of his work is the development of a procedure to repair vaginal fistulas (Wald, 2022). The Black women who underwent these procedures were not given any pain management, medication, or anesthesia, along with being operated on non-consensually (Wald, 2022). Due to this medical malpractice, Black women are now oftentimes perceived to be able to withstand more pain than white women, again an untrue, racialized, and dangerous assumption (Salinas et al., 2022).

In 2022, an expansive study conducted by researchers in the United States found alarmingly increased rates of Black maternal mortality and how they have continued to rise. Typically, higher-income countries have a better maternal mortality rate as compared to low-income countries (Patterson et al., 2022). This is a logical assumption to be the standard due to more resources being allocated to the country's medical system, education system, and other social services. The US is an anomaly in this statistic due to its strikingly increased maternal mortality rates (MMR) (Patterson et al., 2022). Prior to the information presented in this study, researchers found that MMR had doubled from 2000 to 2014 for Black women meanwhile globally it had done the opposite for other developed nations (Patterson et al., 2022, p. 1262). Out of the 34 countries that report their MMR to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States ranked 32nd out of 34 (Patterson et al., 2022, p. 1262). In the research presented in *Gendered Racism on the Body: An Intersectional Approach to Maternal Mortality in the United States*, it was found that in more than one method of data gathering, the Black maternal mortality rate was always higher than the white maternal mortality rate. The overall MMR for Black women was 59.38% while for white women it was 24.2% (Patterson et al., 2022, p. 1284). A more focused method of data collection, including the "multiple cause of death approach", found that the rates were much higher for both groups. The MMR for Black women for this approach was 84.03% and the MMR for white

women was 44.49% (Patterson et al., 2022, p. 1284). This is an extremely concerning statistic that demonstrates how dangerous it is for women to give birth in the United States. The authors also noted that, “Black women always fare worse than their white counterparts. This is the case even when controlling for a variety of factors. For example, Tucker et al. (2007) found that although Black and white women did not differ in their prevalence of five specific pregnancy complications (preeclampsia, eclampsia, abruptio placentae, placenta previa, and postpartum hemorrhage), they were two to three times more likely to die from these complications than white women” (Patterson et al., 2022, p. 1284). This clearly highlights how Black women face higher dangers giving birth due to their race.

Extensive research has been conducted regarding a concept unique to the United States; the concept “weathering” describes the accelerated aging caused by the negative socioeconomic, cultural, and generational traumas experienced by Black people living in America (e.g. Wald, 2022; Martin & Montagne, 2017; Villanosa, 2018). The concept of weathering examines how these disparities between white and Black mothers, more negatively affects Black mothers, their children, and their experience with motherhood (Wald, 2022). It has been found that due to these disparities, Black mothers will face higher rates of medical complications, like preeclampsia, than white mothers will (Wald, 2022). In this context, weathering itself is a direct result of institutionalized obstetric racism. Obstetric racism is a crucial component to how Black women are disrespected and harmed by the obstetric care system in the United States today. This type of racism targets Black women and other Women of Color specifically based on race and gender and ultimately leads to poorer health outcomes for non-white mothers (Davis, 2019).

### ***OBSTETRIC RACISM***

Obstetric racism is the underlying and overt racial biases that contribute to lesser care, leading to harmful and sometimes deadly outcomes (Davis, 2019). The United States is founded on a racialized, colonial history with oppressive laws, policies, and institutions in place as core actors (Davis, 2019). The obstetric care system in the United States has a strong racial bias, with implications a generational bias

incur. Black infant and maternal mortality rates in the United States are two to three times as high as compared to white infants and maternal mortality rates (Collins et al., 2021, p. 4132). A study conducted by Braveman in 2017, later analyzed by Collins et al. (2021), found that the increased stress, emotional turmoil, and worry caused by the fear of facing obstetric racism caused more negative outcomes in Black mothers such as low birth weight, preterm birth, and increased infant mortality.

Listening to first-hand experiences of Black mothers, a team of researchers in the United States interviewed Black mothers on their experience of giving birth in hospital while accompanied by a perinatal support professional (PNP). A perinatal support professional is a person with midwife or doula training (Collins et al., 2021). While they are not “board-certified” they are extremely knowledgeable on birth practices and offer a close support network to birthing mothers (Collins et al., 2021). In the study, some experiences were recorded as positive, however, there was a concerning number of negative experiences for the non-white mothers. These experiences likely would not have happened to them had they been white mothers instead. Even with a PNP present, the study concluded that racial stereotypes directly impacted the type of care the patients received (Collins et al., 2021). These stereotypes created an intersectional issue for these Black mothers where not only was the standard for patients to be quiet and submissive but also expected them to portray an image of “chastity and serenity”, both stereotypical traits commonly associated with the idealized white woman (Collins et al., 2021).

One of the main and most concerning acts of racial prejudice presented in this study was how the mothers felt disrespected, ignored, and coerced into unnecessary medical procedures. Even though these mothers had a perinatal support professional alongside them, they often felt as though their feelings, complaints, needs, and birth plans were disregarded. Some mothers reported their birth plans as being ignored completely while others discussed how some medical professionals regarded their own knowledge above that of the perinatal support professional and the mother (Collins et al., 2021).

These are just a few of the most concerning acts of racial prejudice presented in this study. The mothers felt disrespected, ignored, and coerced into unnecessary medical procedures (Collins et al., 2021). Doctors did not trust the Black mothers and their perinatal care professionals to make decisions for themselves and thus, enacted to ignore their birthing plans (Collins et al., 2021). Similarly, some of the mothers reported that certain medical professionals would refuse care until they submitted to what the medical professional wanted them to do, i.e. an epidural before continuing treatment (Collins et al., 2021). This is harmful and dangerous coercion of the Black mother and body.

Troubling stereotypes surrounding how Black women experience pain also came to light during this study. It is an unproven and racist idea that Black individuals have a higher pain tolerance and therefore, experience less pain during medical procedures than white individuals.

This type of racial discrimination is evident in every aspect of the healthcare system in the United States, not just the obstetric care system. When the medical professionals ignored the pain and the complaints of their Black laboring mothers, it not only made the mothers feel unseen and unheard but left them in a much more painful and dangerous situation than what a white woman may have experienced (Collins et al., 2021). Black women are forced to experience more pain than white women for medical procedures that are often not needed. This kind of obstetric racism not only endangers the life of the mother but that of the child as well.

## **HOW THE MEDICALIZATION AND COLONIZATION OF PREGNANCY HAS LED TO THE ERASURE OF INDIGENOUS AND WOMEN-CENTERED KNOWLEDGE**

### ***NON-MEDICALIZED & ALTERNATIVE BIRTH PRACTICES***

Throughout history, women have practiced different methods of birthing outside the medicalized hospital setting, varying across cultures. As a result of colonization and medicalization, many of these practices have been pathologized or portrayed as unsafe as compared to a profitable hospital birth. For Native Americans, many culturally important birth practices were erased and diminished, as western

expansion and colonization thrived in early America (Maxwell et al., 2022). Maxwell et al. (2022) have previously explained the complex and longstanding generational traumas associated with pregnancy and childbirth for mothers in the Keetoowah and Cherokee tribe. Traditionally, the Keetoowah and Cherokee tribes had a matrilineal society before western influence and colonization (Maxwell et al., 2022). In interviews outlined in the Maxwell article, tribe members explained how women depended on birth practices passed down from generation to generation to feel connected to their community, ancestors, and culture. Interviewees explained that having a tangible connection to their community allows them to feel like a mother (Maxwell et al., 2022). An example given described how certain rituals are performed while the mother is pregnant in order to protect mother and child, as well as purification rituals being performed with tribal leaders to protect the baby (Maxwell et al., 2022). The community is actively involved in the pregnancy and birth process, with women helping during the birth and tribal healers singing and offering assistance when needed (Maxwell et al., 2022). The support continues after the birth with the community helping the mother adjust and recover as well as helping to raise the child (Maxwell et al., 2022). Everything is done to honor, protect, and uplift the mother and child throughout the pregnancy and birthing process. For indigenous communities such as these, the focus is entirely on what is best for the mother and child whereas in the American obstetric care system, there is a concerning trend of doctors doing what is more convenient for them (Collins et al., 2021).

The medicalization and colonization of birth practices has led to the erasure of Indigenous and women-centered knowledge in Western medicine. Non-medicalized birth practices, such as healing rituals and purification rituals, are culturally significant to numerous Native communities (Maxwell, 2022). The colonization of early America not only detrimentally affected the African people who were forcibly brought to the continent, but the Indigenous populations who occupied the land for centuries prior. Colonization has destroyed the lives of millions, cultures, groups, and lineages as well as, demonized anything outside of the Western “norm”. This demonization has led to the medicalization seen in pregnancy and childbirth treatments (Wertz, 2013). In hospitals, mothers oftentimes feel pressured, coerced, or

unsure about medical procedures that are not fully explained to them (Collins et al., 2019). As previously mentioned in the Obstetric Racism discussion, non-white mothers feel the brunt of the ongoing effects colonization continues to perpetuate today. While all mothers regardless of race experience the medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth, Women of Color are statistically more likely to experience more complications and have a higher risk of maternal death (e.g. Braveman, 2017; Maxwell et al., 2022).

When accessible to mothers, non-medicalized and alternative birth practices provide the opportunity for women to take back control of their health and proceed with their pregnancy however they choose to. The privileged option of being able to choose an alternative method can make a mother feel safer, comfortable, at ease in her pregnancy, and ultimately, improve her mental and physical well-being. It is important to understand that some women do not have access to non-medicalized or alternative birth practices, whether it be due to cultural background, financial capability, or availability where they live. A prime example of a popular non-medicalized and alternative birth practice in the United States is the use of a Doula or Midwife during the pregnancy and birth. Doulas and Midwives offer extensive knowledge and insight into the birthing process, both physically and emotionally for the mother (Salinas et al., 2022). However, these services are oftentimes not free nor covered by a majority of insurance providers (Salinas et al., 2022).

### *DOULAS AND MIDWIVES*

Doulas and midwives have provided aid and support throughout pregnancy and birth for centuries. While both come with separate functions and histories, they both play a vital role in how pregnancy is viewed across cultures. Midwives are people, typically women, trained to help mothers give birth (Wertz, 2013). Midwifery was common practice in many different countries, including the United States up until the late antebellum period in early America (Salinas, et al., 2022). The decline of midwives in the US can be attributed to the Protestant church, with midwifery being claimed as “witchcraft” as well as the rise of medical doctors as primary caretakers (Wertz, 2013). The demonization of women’s knowledge led to the erasure of women’s

work towards ensuring a safe pregnancy and delivery (Wertz, 2013). As midwives were being discredited during this time by the church, medical doctors also began discrediting midwives as a way to gain control over women's bodies and obstetric practice (Wertz, 2013). With the growing market of medical doctors in early America, white, male doctors became the primary source of care, eliminating women's voices from the forefront of obstetric care (Salinas et al., 2022). They became the only people in this era of American society acceptable of possessing birthing knowledge, discrediting the midwives and traditional knowledge passed down from generations of birth work from both midwifery practice and Indigenous knowledge (e.g. Salinas et al, 2022; Wertz, 2013). For midwives today, their practice still remains limited and usually only accessible to those who can afford their services. In some states, the guidelines and rules in place limit the capability of midwives to what the medical doctors assigned to a case dictate. For example, in Pennsylvania, for a midwife to practice, they must have a written agreement on a birth plan with a medical doctor that they must adhere to (Wald, 2022). This severely limits the duties and abilities of midwives, as it only allows them to do what medical doctors allow them to do, diminishing the credit and autonomy of women-centered knowledge.

As described in the article *Doulas, Racism, and Whiteness: How Birth Support Workers Process Advocacy towards Women of Color*, "Doulas are trained birth support workers who provide nonmedical support during pregnancy, childbirth, and early post-partum care" (Salinas et al., 2022, p. 2). They provide emotional and moral support throughout the pregnancy, advocate for their client, and help them through childbirth at the hospital or at home (Salinas et al., 2022). It is important to note that the doula community is primarily white women. It most often serves middle class white women who are able to afford doula services. This does not mean only white women are able to access this resource; Black women hire doula services as well; however, it is generally more difficult to do so due to stratified economic means across race. Since white women have been at the forefront of providing doula care, they oftentimes are not helping the women who need their support the most. Middle and upper class communities are typically the only people able to afford this type of care, leaving the low-income communities out of the picture (Salinas et al., 2022). Not only that, but

communities of color are sometimes out of reach of doula support due to the cultural stigmatism, cost, and inaccessibility to their communities. This inaccessibility can be tied to racial segregation in the US, with white women not having access to some of the social networks of Black communities (Salinas et al., 2022). While there is a growing push for Black and Latina doulas to work in POC communities and be at the forefront of doula care, it will take time, effort, and money for this to be accomplished (Salinas et al., 2022). There is limited research on how white doulas help to mediate racism and uplift the voices of their clients who are not white (Salinas et al., 2022). Going forward, it may be useful for researchers to examine the relationships between white doulas and their non-white clients in order to determine if and how white doulas advocate effectively, as well as, defend and uphold the requests made by their clients.

## **HOW THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF MEDICALIZATION THROUGHOUT PREGNANCY AFFECTS WOMEN**

### ***DEHUMANIZATION OF WOMEN***

Since its conception, the practice of gynecology and obstetrics have been rooted in racism and colonization. The nonconsensual use of Black women's bodies by J. Marion Simms created a specialty of medicine founded on the misuse of women's bodies (Wald, 2022). This specialty of medicine is built upon treating its patients as tools. With this in mind, it is clear that while technology and training has advanced, women are continuously thought of as tools of reproduction rather than people. This can be seen in the treatment of laboring Black mothers who are refused adequate pain medication, in how the media portrays a "correct" way to "do pregnancy", and how women view their bodies throughout pregnancy (e.g. Rutherford & Wood, 2019; Collins et al., 2021). More examples of this dehumanization can be found in how throughout pregnancy, the mother is told only to focus on the child whether that is through media or the medical system. This creates the idea that when pregnant, a woman is simply the incubator, sending a message to the mother that she is not herself, but a tool of reproduction.



The concept of disembodiment can be related to how dehumanizing the pregnancy process can be made to be by the medical system. Referencing Carla Lam's article, "Thinking Through Post constructionism: Reflections on (Reproductive) Disembodiment and Misfits", disembodiment in reproduction has detrimental effects on the individual women as well as how society conceptualizes pregnancy (Lam, 2016). While her article focuses on the impact contraception has had on the "dis/embodiment" of pregnancy, her discussion and theory can be applied to this discussion as well. By separating body from self, it reinforces the idea that a woman's body is not her own. This loss of autonomy is seen in debates and practices related to abortion rights, fertility treatments, and medical treatment decision-making.

Connected to the colonization of the body, the dehumanization of women is rooted in the misuse, mistreatment, and commodification of women. In the obstetric care system, I argue that women are made to feel as objects throughout the pregnancy process. This happens due to the cultural and medical associations with pregnancy and childbirth, along with the subsequent ties to motherhood and what it means to be a mother. Evidence of this is presented in multiple scholarly sources. An example of such is Nelson's take on Body Knowledge in her article, *Historicizing Body Knowledge*. Nelson argues that the embodied experiences of women are essential to understanding how women are commodified within healthcare (Nelson, 2019). When mothers are not given all of the information available, it prevents them from making informed decisions on their bodies. This creates a power imbalance, leaving the medical provider with more say on what to do with her body than herself. The lack of medical decision-making autonomy as demonstrated in the Collins study, exemplifies how women are not viewed as individuals who can make sound decisions for themselves. This is an act of dehumanization.

### *OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE*

While variations of the definition of obstetric violence exist, it can generally be described as the "abuse or mistreatment by a health care provider of a female who is engaged in fertility treatment, preconception care, pregnant, birthing, or postpartum; or the performance of any invasive or surgical procedure during the full span

of the childbearing continuum without informed consent, that is coerced, or in violation of refusal” (Garcia, 2020). Obstetric violence is not racially specific, however, with the existing statistics on maternal mortality rate (MMR) and first-hand accounts of the treatment of Women of Color in the healthcare system, Women of Color often suffer more so than white women. It is a somewhat recently developed theory that aims to discuss the violence perpetrated against people who are pregnant or may become pregnant.

The medicalized idea of “fixing” women is a core aspect of how obstetric violence is perpetuated. Author Salinas describes obstetric violence as, “frequent medical interventions aiming to alleviate women from the ‘ailments’ of pregnancy consisting of invasive interventions that result in higher Cesarean section (C-section) rates and worse maternal health interventions” (Salinas et., al, 2022, p. 2-3). The US has some of the highest rates of MMR and infant mortality in the developed world (Hoyert, 2023). These increased rates can be attributed to the mistreatment of non-white mothers by the obstetric care system. Owens and Fett connect institutionalized racism to the increased Black MMR and infant mortality in the US in their article Black Maternal and Infant Health: Historical Legacies of Slavery. They argue that systemic racism is one of the main culprits in obstetric violence against Black mothers (Owens & Fett, 2019). This is demonstrated by statistics like, “In 1850, enslaved infants died before 1 year of age at a rate 1.6 times higher than that of White infants (340 vs 217 deaths per 1000 live births). In comparison, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention figures from 2016 show that today non-Hispanic Black infant mortality is 2.3 times higher than mortality among non-Hispanic White babies (11.4 deaths and 4.9 deaths, respectively)” (Owens & Fett, 2019). They discuss that instead of working to fix underlying biases and practices, healthcare providers have begun to internalize and believe certain stereotypes about Black mothers, as seen in their dismissal of pain (Owens & Fett, 2019). As the US healthcare system has done virtually nothing to lower the MMR and infant mortality rate, it is apparent that these acts of obstetric violence are overlooked, disregarded, and forgotten.

Collins’ study on how Black mothers are treated in hospital during labor and delivery highlights extremely prevalent and dangerous realities of

obstetric violence in healthcare (Collins et al., 2021). Even with a midwife or doula present, mothers still felt pressured and coerced into procedures they did not initially request nor want (Collins et al., 2021). The coercion of drugs like pitocin, is a prime example of how easy it is for healthcare providers to overlook the desires and needs of their patients when they are in a vulnerable position. More extreme cases of coercion are discussed in Collins' study with mothers being told their doctor would not help them unless they had certain medical procedures done, an epidural (Collins et al., 2021). As an epidural is not a medically necessary procedure for a natural birth, this coercion simply appeases the doctor in this case, rather than the wishes of the patient (Collins et al., 2021).

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS IN A CHANGING ADMINISTRATION**

Considering the current political climate and the content discussed in this paper, I will present three policy recommendations to improve the health outcomes of pregnant individuals. I first will address combatting obstetric racism in the medical system through improved medical training requirements and heightened accountability initiatives. Following, I will discuss policies healthcare systems should implement to reduce unnecessary medical interventions in childbirth. I will conclude by arguing for policies to enact legal protections against obstetric violence.

### ***ADDRESSING OBSTETRIC RACISM THROUGH MEDICAL TRAINING AND ACCOUNTABILITY***

Addressing obstetric racism requires a comprehensive approach that tackles its root causes. All medical professionals training to become practicing doctors in the United States should be required to undergo implicit bias training focused on the historical and systemic racism embedded in maternal healthcare. Instilling this knowledge early in their careers will equip doctors with the awareness and tools necessary to provide equitable, patient-centered care. Not only would this training make treatment safer for pregnant individuals, but it would also foster greater trust in medical professionals. To implement this, education policies should mandate the integration of such curriculum in American medical schools.

Beyond education, independent maternal health review boards should be established to investigate cases of obstetric racism and ensure accountability in medical settings. Third-party oversight would introduce an additional layer of responsibility, track progress through data collection, and encourage healthcare providers to be more intentional in their maternal care practices. These federal oversight boards would play a critical role in driving systemic change and improving maternal health outcomes.

### ***REDUCING UNNECESSARY MEDICAL INTERVENTIONS IN CHILDBIRTH***

Hospitals should implement clear guidelines to reduce unnecessary medical interventions, such as non-medically indicated inductions and C-sections, particularly for low-risk pregnancies. Addressing racial disparities in unplanned C-sections and other invasive procedures, especially those disproportionately affecting Black mothers, requires a multifaceted approach. This includes increasing transparency in maternal health data, expanding advocacy through birth support professionals, and fostering greater diversity within the medical workforce.

To ensure more equitable maternal health outcomes, policies must prioritize informed consent and patient autonomy, guaranteeing that pregnant individuals have the right to decline interventions without coercion. Implementing these measures will not only improve maternal care but also build trust in the healthcare system, particularly for historically marginalized communities.

### ***LEGAL PROTECTIONS AGAINST OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE***

Legislation should explicitly recognize obstetric violence as a form of gender-based violence, providing legal recourse for individuals subjected to coercion, mistreatment, or non-consensual procedures during childbirth. Strengthening patient rights laws is essential to ensuring that individuals can report mistreatment without fear of retaliation or compromised care. These protections would empower pregnant individuals to make informed medical decisions, foster greater trust in doctor-patient relationships, and hold healthcare

providers accountable for delivering safe, respectful, and patient-centered care.

Beyond legal accountability, such legislation would contribute to improved maternal health outcomes by reducing unnecessary medical interventions, lowering stress and trauma associated with childbirth, and encouraging healthcare providers to adopt evidence-based, patient-centered practices. When patients feel supported and respected, they are more likely to seek prenatal care, communicate openly with providers, and engage in shared decision-making—factors that have been linked to lower rates of maternal morbidity and mortality. Additionally, legal recognition of obstetric violence would incentivize hospitals and medical institutions to implement systemic changes, such as mandatory consent protocols and bias training, further ensuring safer, more equitable maternal care.

## CONCLUSION

This paper the negative impact colonization and medicalization have had on pregnancy and childbirth in the United States and how policy can be enacted to create better health outcomes for mothers. High rates of negative birth outcomes for Women of Color, a gendered and racially biased healthcare system, as well as a dangerous perpetuation of obstetric violence have become the norm in the United States healthcare. Overall, the information presented has confirmed the continuance of obstetric harm towards women in the US. This is due in part to the cultural legacies left behind by slavery and colonization, gender and racial biases, and the erasure of women-centered knowledge and medical autonomy.

Implementing these policy recommendations is essential to addressing the systemic inequities that have long compromised maternal health in the United States. By advancing comprehensive reforms in medical training, reducing unnecessary interventions, and legally recognizing obstetric violence, policymakers can take meaningful steps toward ensuring safer, more equitable, and patient-centered care for all pregnant individuals. In essence, the colonization and medicalization of the United States' healthcare system, women will continue to face gender and racial discrimination that could cost them

their lives unless policymakers take action to actively address these issues.

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# Analysis of Socioeconomic Factors Influencing Food Stamp Reciprocity Among U.S Households

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This memo investigates the impact of household income and other socioeconomic factors, such as race, education, geographic location, and health insurance coverage, on the likelihood of food stamp reciprocity in the United States. The methodological approach combined descriptive statistics and inferential analysis using the 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) to answer the research question: "Do household income and other socioeconomic factors such as race, education, geographic location, and health insurance coverage directly correlate to whether or not a household receives food stamps?"

The research included data cleaning, hypothesis testing, and visualizations to explore the distribution of household income, race, education levels, and health insurance status among food stamp recipients. It also extends far beyond the immediate objective of understanding food assistance dependency. It contributes to the broader discussion on social welfare, poverty alleviation, and equity by revealing how structural inequalities intersect with access to critical resources. The motivation for this research lies in its potential to enhance understanding of the distribution of food stamps in the U.S., improve program design, and inform policy at multiple levels of governance, especially the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). By addressing the root causes of food insecurity and highlighting the systemic barriers households face, this study aims to pave the way for more inclusive, equitable, and impactful food assistance policies.

Key findings from this research indicate that the average household income is significantly lower for households receiving food stamps than those not. Additionally, racial disparities were evident, with Black and American Indian/Alaska Native households showing the highest proportions of food stamp reciprocity. Lower educational attainment correlated with increased food stamp reciprocity, and households without health insurance were more likely to rely on food stamps. Geographic analysis revealed that New Mexico had the highest proportion of food stamp recipients, while Wyoming had the lowest.

There are many restrictions on how SNAP is currently allocated (Bolen et al., 2021), but based on these findings, it is recommended that federal, state, and local policymakers adapt the allocation of resources to the unique needs of their communities.

## **MOTIVATION**

Exploring the socioeconomic factors that influence a household's likelihood of receiving food stamps is critical to understanding systemic inequities and addressing the root causes of economic hardship. Food assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), serve as a vital safety net for millions of households throughout the United States. However, participation in these programs is shaped by a complex web of determinants, including geographic location, education levels, employment opportunities, family makeup, and access to social services. Unpacking these factors is not only essential for improving program accessibility but also for fostering a deeper understanding of how structural inequalities drive food insecurity and the distribution of food stamps.

This policy memo is motivated by the need to identify the socioeconomic barriers that perpetuate dependence on food assistance and to inform strategies to address them effectively. By testing the hypothesis that various socioeconomic factors significantly correlate with food stamp reciprocity, this research question aims to reveal trends that the USDA can consider as use as they decide how to allocate their resources. The USDA administers food stamps via SNAP at the federal level and could utilize this information to refine program

eligibility criteria, outreach efforts, and resource allocation strategies. For example, insights into which populations are underserved or face disproportionate barriers to accessing SNAP could prompt adjustments in program administration, ensuring it is more inclusive and effective.

State and local policymakers also play an important role in shaping the implementation of food assistance programs. By understanding how regional disparities and socioeconomic factors influence food security, these policymakers can design initiatives tailored to their specific communities. For instance, urban areas with high poverty rates might benefit from policies aimed at increasing access to affordable childcare or creating job placement programs, whereas rural areas with limited job opportunities could focus on education policies. Finally, this research highlights the value of data-driven policymaking. By identifying and analyzing the correlations between socioeconomic factors and food stamp usage, this research equips policymakers with the evidence needed to create policies that are both effective and equitable. It emphasizes the importance of using rigorous analysis to address social challenges and ensures that resources are allocated correctly to achieve measurable outcomes.

## **DATA SOURCE**

This research utilizes data from the 2016 American Community Survey (ACS), a comprehensive survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau. This dataset provides detailed insights into the social, economic, housing, and demographic characteristics of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

The 2016 ACS dataset includes 119,837 observations, representing all U.S. households. To operationalize the constructs relevant to this study, the initial research preparation began by narrowing the dataset to household-level observations, reducing the sample to 50,000 observations. Key variables of interest were identified and cleaned to ensure accuracy and consistency. The cleaning process included re-coding categorical data, removing missing or ambiguous responses, and ensuring that variables aligned with the constructs being analyzed.

Although this data source offers valuable insights, a few limitations were encountered along the way. One key limitation lies in the dataset's temporal restriction. The data was collected in 2016, reflecting that specific period's societal, economic, and demographic conditions. Consequently, it may not fully capture dynamic changes or trends that have occurred since then, potentially limiting the applicability of our findings to current times. Another limitation stems from the reliance on self-reported data. Many of the variables in the ACS data are based on information provided directly by respondents, which introduces the possibility of errors due to response bias, misinterpretation of questions, or reporting inaccuracies.

Another significant limitation was the exclusion of Hispanics and Latinos identified in the race variable. In the ACS data, Hispanics and Latinos are categorized as a Hispanic origin variable rather than being integrated into the race variable. As a result, individuals identifying as Hispanic or Latino are required to select a racial category that does not necessarily represent them as Hispanic. The separation of race and ethnicity in the dataset limits the ability to analyze the intersectionality of these identities effectively. It also risks underrepresenting or misinterpreting the diversity within the ACS data. For researchers like us, focused on racial disparities, this separation complicates efforts to draw nuanced conclusions about data for Hispanic and Latino households. For example, through our research, it was concluded that New Mexico is the state with the highest proportion of food stamp recipients in the country, however, when looking at the demographic makeup of New Mexico presented by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 50.1% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2023). Having this data within the race variable would allow a direct comparison of Hispanics/ Latinos to the other races such as Black and White, rather than doing a vague comparison of whites to non-whites.

## **METHODS**

All data processing and statistical analysis were conducted in RStudio to examine the socioeconomic factors influencing food stamp recipients. The analysis focused on households, with the data subset to the household level based on the value of the household head.

Specifically, using “pernum” equal to one, ensures that the analysis was centered on the household head as the representative individual. After subsetting, the sample consisted of 43,831 households, which were analyzed. The variables for study in the dataset included food stamp recipient status, total household income, race, state, educational attainment, and health insurance coverage.

For the descriptive analysis, the minimum, maximum, mean, median, mode, and standard deviation values for the selected variables were calculated for those they applied, and the type of variable was each identified (Appendix A). In addition, the frequency distribution for each variable was computed to identify the most frequent response for each variable (Appendix B). Inferential analysis was performed to analyze the difference in household incomes between households that receive food stamps and those that do not, focusing on estimating confidence intervals (CI) for the mean household income of each group, and to determine with how much confidence the sample mean represents the true population mean, by calculating a 99% CI for the mean household income of each group. To investigate whether households receiving food stamps have significantly lower household incomes compared to the overall mean, a one-sample, one-tailed t-test at a 5% significance level was conducted. The objective was to test the hypothesis that households receiving food stamps have an average total household income equal to the overall mean of \$82,711.88.

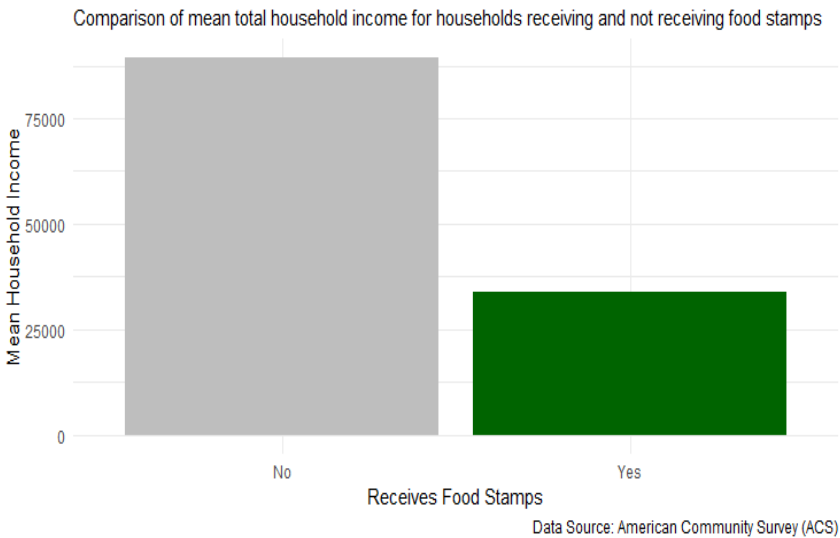
This method provided evidence related to the research question because it enabled the examination of the relationship between food stamp reciprocity and household income, as well as other variables such as mentioned, to identify patterns and disparities among socioeconomic and demographic groups.

## RESULTS

The descriptive analysis revealed several key insights into socioeconomic factors influencing food stamp reciprocity. First and foremost, the average household income across all U.S. households was \$82,711.88, ranging widely from -\$11,200 to \$1,386,000, with a median household income of \$58,700, indicating that half of the households in the U.S. earn below that amount (Figure 1).

A standard deviation of \$90,525.47 reflects the significant variability in income levels. As shown in Figure 1 below, non-food stamp recipients had a substantially higher mean household income of \$89,279, compared to the significantly lower mean household income of \$33,774 for food stamp recipients.

**FIGURE 1. MEAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY FOOD STAMP RECIPIENCY STATUS**



The inferential analysis, based on a subset of 43,831 households, indicates that 38,645 or 88.17% of households do not receive food stamps, while 5,186 or 11.83% do rely on food assistance. Using a 99% confidence level, we estimate that the true mean household income for non-recipients lies between \$88,058.00 and \$90,500, while for food stamp recipients, it falls between \$32,245 and \$35,302 (Table 1).

TABLE 1: TOTAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME STATISTICS AND FOOD STAMP RECIPIENCY STATUS

Food Stamp Reciprocity	Mean of Total Household	Standard Deviation	Sample (n)	Lower Confidence Interval	Upper Confidence Interval
No	\$89,279	\$93,194	38,645	\$88,058	\$90,500
Yes	\$33,774	\$42,727	5,186	\$32,245	\$35,302

To further explore income disparities, the hypothesis that households receiving food stamps have a mean total household income equal to the overall average of \$82,711.88 was tested, using a one-tailed t-test at a 5% significance level. The computed (using values from Table 1) t-statistic was -38.93, far below the critical value of 1.645 for a one-tailed test. The resulting p-value of 2.299699e-291 is extremely close to zero. Based on these results, we reject the null hypothesis that households receiving food stamps have household income equal to the average total household income. This means there is strong evidence that the total household income for households receiving food stamps is extremely below \$82,711.88.

*GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION (STATES) AND FOOD STAMP RECIPIENCY*

The research included creating a heat map to visually identify the states with the highest proportions of food stamp recipients. This approach quickly discerned regional trends and disparities in food stamp utilization across the United States. By viewing this data as proportions, it was easier to determine the areas where food insecurity and reliance on food stamps are the most pronounced

**FIGURE 2. PROPORTION OF HOUSEHOLDS RECEIVING FOOD STAMPS BY STATE.**

Proportion calculated as the number of households receiving food stamps divided by the total household



Data Source: American Community Survey (ACS) 2016

As visualized in Figure 2, it is evident that New Mexico is the state with the highest proportion of food stamp recipients at 17% while Wyoming is the state with the lowest proportion of food stamp recipients at only 2%. An analysis of the heat map revealed that food stamp reciprocity tends to be lower in the Midwest than in other regions of the country. After discovering this trend, the next step was to directly compare mean household income in New Mexico and Wyoming. This research revealed that New Mexico has the lowest average household income out of all 50 states at \$60,310.00. On the other hand, it was revealed that the average household income in Wyoming is \$77,596.59, a noticeable difference in means from the low average income seen in New Mexico.

It is significant to note that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Development defines a “low-income” household as, “80 percent of the median family income for the area, subject to adjustments for areas with unusually high or low income or housing costs” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1998). Using the median total income for all U.S. households, it can be determined that to be considered low-income in the U.S. from a federal perspective, a household must have a total household income of less than \$46,960 per year. However, interpreting New Mexico’s low-income status looks



different as their median total household income is lower than the U.S.'s at \$42,700. This information suggests that to be considered a low-income household in the state of New Mexico, household income must be less than \$34,160 per year. Although the average household income in Wyoming is not as high as the mean household income for all of America, kindly consider that the cost of living in Wyoming is ranked within the top twenty most affordable states in the country (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2022).

### ***RACE AND FOOD STAMP RECIPIENCY***

The research was extended to explore the relationship between race and food stamp recipients. It was concluded that Black / African Americans, followed by American Indian/ Alaska Native were the two races with the highest proportion of food stamp recipients while Chinese and Japanese were the two races with the lowest proportion of food stamp recipients. These findings challenge assumptions that geographic location dictates food stamp reciprocity, suggesting instead, that racial disparities persist regardless of regional context. The independence from geographic factors points toward broader structural inequalities, such as differences in access to education, employment opportunities, and systemic discrimination, which may disproportionately affect certain racial groups (Gee et al., 2011). Furthermore, this data highlights the need to explore other intersecting factors such as socioeconomic status, historical inequities, and policy implementation at the state and federal levels to better understand the root causes of these disparities. These insights could inform targeted interventions and policy adjustments to address the inequities observed in food stamp distribution.

### ***EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND FOOD STAMP RECIPIENCY***

Additionally, observing the relationship between educational attainment and food stamp reciprocity provided critical insights into the socio-economic dimensions of food insecurity. Educational attainment is a well-documented determinant of economic stability, and understanding its role in food stamp participation can shed light on the structural barriers faced by individuals with varying levels of education. The proportion of food stamp recipients within different

educational attainment categories was calculated, and the analysis revealed a clear relationship. Households headed by individuals with lower levels of education, such as those with a high school diploma or less, were significantly more likely to receive food stamps. In contrast, households led by individuals with a college education exhibited much lower participation rates in food stamp reciprocity. These findings suggest that educational disparities play a substantial role in shaping economic vulnerability and access to resources. Lower educational attainment often correlates with limited employment opportunities, lower wages, and reduced job stability, all of which can increase reliance on social safety nets like food stamps (Carlson et al., 2022). Addressing these disparities through policy measures could reduce dependency on food stamps and allow for long-term economic self-sufficiency. Integrating an educational factor into the broader analysis allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex factors that influence food insecurity and the pathways to creating more equitable outcomes.

### ***HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE AND FOOD STAMP RECIPIENCY***

Next was to explore the relationship between food stamp reciprocity and health insurance coverage, aiming to understand whether households receiving food assistance were more or less likely to have access to health insurance. This analysis was motivated by the interconnection of food security and healthcare access, as both are critical components of overall well-being and socioeconomic status. The software R calculated the proportion of food stamp recipients across households with and without health insurance coverage. The results revealed a concerning trend that households receiving food stamps were much more likely to lack health insurance coverage than households that did not receive food stamps. The majority of households that do not receive food stamps had some form of health insurance coverage (40,789 households) as indicated by "Yes". Nevertheless, a significant portion of households that do receive food stamps remains without health insurance coverage. These findings highlight the nature of the poverty cycle in America, as households that struggle to afford basic necessities like food may also face difficulty accessing healthcare, further exacerbating their financial and health challenges. This relationship underscores the importance of

integrating social safety net programs to not only address food insecurity but also other related issues like access to healthcare.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

These findings reveal significant disparities in food stamp reciprocity across racial groups, educational attainment, health insurance coverage, the state in which one lives in, and total household income.<sup>n</sup> These results provide valuable insights into the complex socioeconomic factors that influence food security. Key implications are seen through racial disparities, educational attainment, and gaps in health insurance coverage. The high proportion of food stamp recipients among Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native households suggests that racial inequities transcend beyond geographic boundaries. This emphasizes the need for policies addressing systemic discrimination and expanding economic opportunities for historically marginalized communities. Additionally, the strong relationship between educational attainment and food stamp reciprocity highlights education as a critical factor in economic sufficiency. Policies that increase access to education and vocational training for low-income populations could reduce the reliance on food stamps. Lastly, the significant overlap between food stamp reciprocity and lack of health insurance coverage indicates a compounded vulnerability among food stamp recipients. Integrating food assistance with healthcare programs, such as expanding Medicaid eligibility, could provide a more comprehensive safety net for all low-income Americans.

We urge policymakers to use these findings to optimize resource allocation within the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program by targeting the root causes of food insecurity and improving the program's reach and efficiency. The USDA's resource allocation strategies can benefit from this data-driven approach that leverages heat maps and predictive modeling. By analyzing trends in SNAP utilization and food insecurity, the USDA can adjust resources to respond to the emerging needs and trends seen throughout the country. Tracking program results over time would help identify what works well making it possible to use those successful strategies in other areas that need them. For example, a pilot program in New

Mexico that integrates higher benefit levels, educational initiatives, and healthcare access could serve as a model for addressing food insecurity in similar regions.

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# Nuclear Fusion: Clean Energy for All

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Energy serves as a constant source of tension in government and politics. As technology continues to improve, demand for energy rises and thus the need for increases in production as well. Traditional sources of energy, fossil fuels, can often be tied to geographic resources, which can relate it to foreign policy and trade. In addition, they contribute to pollution and the warming of our climate, which draws opposition from environmental groups. Current sources of energy, whether they are fossil fuels or renewables like solar or wind power, are limited in supply, which makes them sensitive to inflation and other price changes. Nuclear fusion, on the other hand, provides the opportunity to create ample, clean energy. Government investment in fusion research could accelerate the development of this technology, benefiting the United States' economy, environment, and national security.

## BACKGROUND

The 2024 Emissions Gap report by the United Nations revealed that the planet is on track to be 2.6-3.1°C warmer by the end of the century, higher than the 1.5-2°C agreement made in the 2015 Paris Accord. This warming is driven by the continued use of fossil fuels, which increase greenhouse gas emissions. The report admits that sufficient change will need immediate action by all sectors of the economy (UN, 2024). One of the most important changes the world needs to make is a shift from fossil fuels to clean energy sources. The main barrier that until now prevented the switch from to a cleaner energy source, such as solar, wind, hydroelectric, geothermal, or nuclear fission is the cost. Fossil fuels were far cheaper than other energy sources, though solar and wind power are now cheaper in many parts of the world (IRENA, 2023). Still, the low cost and existing infrastructure signals the continued use of fossil fuels in the future unless we can develop a

vastly superior option. The developing field of nuclear fusion offers a solution to this problem. Fusion would provide massive amounts of safe energy with minimal waste (Adams & Wilkins, 2016). To limit global greenhouse gas emissions while also increasing energy production, policymakers need to focus their efforts on developing nuclear fusion.

Lowering greenhouse emissions is a crucial step to limit global temperature increases. Climate change is a multifaceted problem that threatens the well-being of everyone except the richest and most powerful. The average temperatures that are currently mostly only found in the Sahara Desert, comprising 0.8% of global land, will be experienced in 19% of global land by 2070 if climate change continues at its current rate, affecting 3.5 billion people (Xu, et al., 2020). With this many people's homes becoming uninhabitable, climate change will lead to the largest refugee crisis the world has ever faced. Billions of people will be forced to become "climate refugees", fleeing from the central, uninhabitable bands of the world to North America, Europe, and Northern Asia. Unless warming is limited to 1.5°C as agreed to in the Paris accord, nations will need to prepare for this influx of refugees, assuming they do not choose to leave them all to die. Because of the decrease in habitable land, as well as the influx in population, space will be at a premium. Space-hungry forms of power like geothermal plants, solar farms, and wind farms will be more expensive. Meanwhile, fusion will be able to create the most energy from the fewest resources. In this future, compact and high-efficiency power sources like fusion will be the most desirable. Fusion energy would provide unique benefits that traditional sources of energy cannot match, while also lacking the same consequences.

## **DRAWBACKS TO OTHER CLEAN ENERGY SOURCES**

Simply switching to clean forms of energy would limit greenhouse gas emissions by a considerable amount, so why should it be fusion power in particular? Each of the current forms of clean energy today have considerable downsides. Solar power is inconsistent; it depends on daytime and good weather to create power. In addition, solar panels and batteries are comprised of toxic materials, many of which need to be mined, which can damage the environment if not disposed of properly. Solar panels are also not very efficient, with modern panels

not even able to convert a third of solar energy to electricity, and large-scale plants also require a wide area. Finally, solar panels degrade quickly, having a life span of around 35 years with its efficiency dropping by .5% each year (Rhodes, 2022).

Wind power shares similar problems: its efficiency is capped at 59.3% and it requires vast, open land ("Disadvantages"). Hydroelectric power, which generates electricity from flowing water, can be damaging to the local environment. It can harm wildlife populations in and around the body of water it is built in, and it can also displace human settlements nearby. In addition, these plants can only be built in certain geographic conditions, meaning that while it is a good source of clean power, hydroelectric power cannot meet the needs of the world (Malkov, 2020). Geothermal energy, which uses heat from the Earth's crust, is cheap and highly renewable but has its own slew of problems. It can release toxic gases into the atmosphere, mitigating the efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It is also extremely dependent on geography, since it needs to be built far away from human settlements, usually on the boundaries between tectonic plates. Due to its location, they can also cause earthquakes, which can devastate both livelihoods and economies (Bhatta, 2021).

Nuclear fission is one of the most powerful sources of energy we have today; however, it is also undesirable because human errors can lead to catastrophic consequences. Fission works by launching neutrons into the nuclei of atoms, which release more neutrons and trigger a chain reaction. These uncontrolled chain reactions are the technology used in nuclear weapons, as well as causing the meltdowns at Chernobyl and Fukushima Daiichi. Nuclear power has gained a negative connotation due to its association with these meltdowns, not to mention the toxic waste it produces. In addition, fission uses uranium-235 as fuel. This very rare resource acts as a ceiling on the production capacity of nuclear fission. While the safety of fission can be controversial, nuclear fusion is both clean and safe. It is around 4 million times as powerful as the burning of fossil fuels (ITER). It is also around 4 times as powerful as nuclear fission ("Fusion Energy", 2021). Fusion power provides the best solution to the question of what power source can replace fossil fuels.



## *PROGRESS ON NUCLEAR FUSION*

Fusion is the opposite reaction of fission. As the name suggests, in a fusion reaction, two nuclei are combined to form a new nucleus, releasing massive amounts of energy in the process. For this to happen, fusion fuel needs to reach temperatures of more than 100 million degrees Celsius for the nuclei to be moving fast enough to react (Willis & Liou, 2021). There are two known ways to induce a fusion reaction. The first is a tokamak, a donut-shaped machine that uses magnetic fields to confine the fuel into a plasma and superheat it (Lancot, n.d.). This method is being researched at ITER in France. The second is called Inertial Confinement Fusion, in which a laser strikes a fuel pellet to increase the temperature and compress its volume to such levels that fusion is possible (Hamerly, 2011). This method is being researched at the National Ignition Facility in California. In fact, in August of 2021, this facility achieved energy positivity for the first time ever, with the fuel absorbing 230 kilojoules of energy and releasing 1.3 megajoules, about a six-times increase. That being said, the energy to power the laser was still greater than this, which means that despite this achievement, fusion power still has a long way to go before commercial viability (Wright, 2021). Additionally, a tokamak in China managed to sustain a superheated plasma for almost 18 minutes, another breakthrough in fusion research (Pester, 2025).

A key benefit of nuclear fusion is its safety. Unlike fission, in which a chain reaction can get out of hand, fusion reactions are self-limiting. Because the reaction needs such extreme conditions to proceed, once those conditions are no longer met, the reaction simply stops. In addition, the waste produced by fusion is short-lived with low levels of radiation, as opposed to the long-lasting, highly radioactive waste from fission. Finally, the fuel for fusion is much more bountiful than fission. The first reactant, deuterium, is a naturally-occurring isotope of hydrogen that occurs in seawater. The second reactant, tritium, is a naturally-occurring isotope of hydrogen that is mostly reserved for use in nuclear weapons. However, lithium can be used to create tritium during a fusion reaction, and there is excess lithium in seawater as well. Therefore, while the extremely rare tritium would be needed to begin the fuel reaction, the abundant deuterium and lithium would be all that is needed to continue the reaction. Where a coal power plant would use

2.7 billion kilograms of coal, an equivalent fusion reactor would only need 250 kilograms of fuel, with only a few grams of fuel being reacted at any given time (Lancot).

## **CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING FUSION ADOPTION**

Fusion power sounds like the perfect energy source: carbon-free, abundant fuel, safe reaction and waste, and massive amounts of power. Just as every other power source has its downside, the downside of fusion is that it does not yet exist at its full potential. As it stands right now, fusion energy costs more energy than it releases, making all other aspects of it worthless. That being said, progress is slowly and steadily being made, as mentioned earlier, since scientists recently achieved energy gain from fusion for the first time. However, this has yet to be reproduced, and no ambitious predictions should be made based on it. Because of the uncertainty of the future of fusion, governments should not put all their eggs in one basket and throw all other forms of clean power by the wayside. They should continue to invest in solar, wind, geothermal, hydroelectric, and fission power and subsidize their costs. However, fusion has shown enough progress over the years and has a great enough potential upside that we should prioritize it as an energy source for the future. For those who are worried about the loss of jobs if oil and gas are phased out, clean energies like fusion and solar will create advanced jobs just like fossil fuels did; economics will not be a reason to hold off on investing in the future.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Investing in fusion energy should be a priority going into the future because it will greatly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Limiting greenhouse gas emissions is essential to preventing global temperature increases, which will reduce the amount of the planet's land that becomes decertified and uninhabitable, and in turn reduce the number of refugees fleeing to this country. To be clear, investing in fusion will take time to see returns since the technology is not advanced enough yet, but researchers should be given the benefit of the doubt considering the progress they have made recently as well as the potential benefits of successful fusion. It is extremely important to

consider this issue because energy is a huge aspect of the world. Even today, we can see the downsides of fossil fuels in our volatile gas prices and Europe struggling between sanctioning Russia for its atrocities against Ukraine or paying Russia for its fossil fuels. The United States has ample access to seawater, which would prevent any reliance upon fossil fuels. Having an energy source like fusion would allow the nation to have energy security, improving our self-sufficiency. In this technological world where energy is of the utmost importance, investing in fusion would lead to the best results for the most people.

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# **A Research Design on Organized Crime in Latin America**

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## **INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTION**

The early 2000s resulted in a shift in the socio-political environment of many Latin American countries, as it gave rise to a serious issue that regimes needed to address: the rise of organized crime. In just ten years, Latin American countries accounted for “approximately 30 percent of the world’s homicides despite only having nearly eight percent of its population” (Human Development Report for Latin America 2013-2014, n.d.). Today some of the most powerful organized crime organizations reside in Latin America.

Although Latin American countries range from less-developed countries to developing countries, many struggle with corruption, thus making it harder for regimes to adequately protect their citizens when problems arise. Some Latin American countries have weak states, such as El Salvador, while others have stable states, such as Argentina. Nevertheless, they often struggle to allocate resources to better the livelihood of their citizens due to the overall high criminal environment. This makes me pose the question: how do Latin American regimes respond to the threat of organized crime.

Organized crime is a prevalent and serious issue that many Latin American countries are struggling to tackle, which has resulted in many regimes implementing an iron fist. For organized crime to expand and eventually acquire control over a region, there must be an adequate environment for these organizations to thrive. Factors such as poverty and education can lead to organized crime having influential power due to the ideology of low economic opportunity. This means that corruption must be present and the country must experience low economic development for organized crime to increase.

As organized crime continues to gain more control in a Latin American country, a regime is most likely to implement new legislation to attempt to combat the threat of organized crime. Organized crime has quickly become one of El Salvador's most prominent contentious issues. President Bukele, whom many have identified as having more of a conservative perspective on the issue, has instituted what he refers to as gang crack-down policies, through the implementation of State of Emergencies/Exceptions. Although, when looking at the bigger picture organized crime has decreased under his strict policy response, the civil rights of civilians were reduced in the process. This instance portrays that due to some of these countries being weak states and having limited resources, civil rights are put on pause when enacting these legislations so that the regime can focus its resources on combating the rise of organized crime. This is just one example of how these strict policies negatively affect the lives of citizens, especially low-income individuals, as it allows decision-makers to incarcerate individuals without probable cause.

Through the development of this paper, I aim to depict the overarching theme of how civil rights are reduced throughout various parts of the implementation of strict legislation, such as mano dura policies, by conservative parties when combating the threat of organized crime.

### *DEFINING LOW ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT*

For organized crime to expand by recruiting individuals, particularly younger individuals, there must be low economic opportunity which stems from low economic development. When referencing low economic development throughout this paper I will be utilizing the definition composed by British Columbia, which states that it is when regimes lack "programs, policies or activities that seek to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community" (British Columbia, 2023).

### *DEFINING CORRUPTION*

Political integrity is crucial for a regime to function properly as it builds a foundation of trust between citizens and government officials. It further solidifies the establishment of democratic processes. Nonetheless, in regard to Latin America, many countries experience political corruption. Throughout this paper, the terms corruption and political corruption will be used interchangeably and will be referenced as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (Transparency International, 2022).

### *DEFINING ORGANIZED CRIME*

The positivist approach depicts that there are components that influence the occurrence of crime. Nonetheless, organized crime is distinctly different from regular criminal activity such as armed robbery. The topic of organized crime is very ambiguous which why there is not one specific definition to explain what organized crime is and what categories of criminal activity fall under that umbrella. According to Reuters and Kalyvas, organized crime is “a phenomenon comprising hierarchically organized groups of criminals with the ability to use violence, or the threat of it, for acquiring or defending the control of illegal markets to extract economic benefits from them” (Kalyvas, 2015, pg. 1518). Correspondingly, according to Albanese there are four key components needed to identify organized crime: “a continuing organization, an organization that operates rationally for profit, the use of force or threats, and the need for corruption to maintain immunity from law enforcement” (Albanese, 2000, pg. 411). When measuring organized crime, it must fit into the definitions mentioned above. Additionally, the areas of organized crime that will be mentioned throughout this paper will be: human, sex, and drug trafficking; smuggling; fraud, street gangs, cartels, and money laundering.

### *DEFINING LOW CITIZEN SECURITY*

Low citizen security will be referenced as the lack of “policies and programs that prioritize safety, security and the rights of residents within a framework of state responsibility and citizen engagement” (Muggah & Tobón, 2017).

### *DEFINING PUBLIC OPINION*

Public opinion will be referred to as views mutually agreed upon a community within society. In relation to this paper, I aim to illustrate how the influence of organized crime in a neighborhood can lead to the public opinion of organized crime that it is a contentious issue.

### *DEFINING CIVIL RIGHTS*

This paper ultimately analyzes the relationship between the increase of organized crime and the reduction of civil rights. The term civil rights will be used as the laws that “protect individuals’ freedom from infringement by governments, social organizations, and private individuals. They ensure one’s entitlement to participate in the civil and political life of society and the state” (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019). Additionally, this definition includes the right not to be detained without probable cause. When measuring the reduction of civil rights I will also look for Homicide instances where policy stringency resulted in the abuse of basic human rights.

### *DEFINING POLITICAL PARTIES*

Throughout this paper, the mention of the conservative party will be associated with the implementation of strict legislation that reduces civil rights. On the other hand, when mentioning the liberal party, it will refer to the implementation of legislation that preserves the civil rights of citizens. This stems from the research that Allisha Holland stated in her research article on mano dura policies in El Salvador.

### *DEFINING MANO DURA POLICIES*

Mano dura policies, referred to as the “iron fist” in English, tend to be strict forms of legislation often implemented during a short period of time. Mano dura policies are utilized to decrease crime. These policies increase mass incarceration, militarization, sentencing, and police raids.



## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY

Corruption plays an integral part in the rise of organized crime and thus would be an antecedent variable in my hypothesis. Corruption being present within a regime, allows organized crime groups to exploit government officials and resources to their advantage, which "weakens citizen support of democratization" (Sung, 2004, pg. 22). This is crucial as democracy is often associated with the introduction of civil rights as it establishes basic human rights within a regime. Political corruption fosters an environment of inequality and due to its unethical practices strips citizens of their civil rights. Although there must be corruption for organized crime to thrive, once organized crime gains control over a regime it can lead to more political corruption to occur.

Additionally, for organized crime to expand, Albanese states that there must be low economic opportunity. He derived this idea from the book "Delinquency and Opportunity" written by Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin and applied it to the topic of organized crime. This idea can be used to explain why organized crime groups primarily target younger individuals in low-income communities. This is because the concept states that due to some people being unable to accomplish societal norms such as obtaining a higher education or a good-paying job, they are more likely to get recruited into organized crime groups as they believe there is no other path to better their current lives (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960).

Moreover, Cloward and Ohlin further portray that due to these young individuals living in low-income communities, they are prone to being exposed to crime from an early age. They utilize the term "fence" to showcase that within these communities there might be an older individual who is already involved in criminal activity encouraging the younger individuals to engage in small crimes (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). This then causes the young individuals to be socialized to believe that being involved in criminal activity is socially acceptable as they are living in an environment where they are constantly exposed to crime. This creates an easy avenue for organized crime groups to target and recruit individuals by taking advantage of their social and economic status. This is depicted in the study conducted by Robert Muggah and Katherine Tobón as they concluded that "a 1% increase in youth

unemployment is connected to a 0.34% increase in homicides per 100,000 people” in Latin American countries (Muggah & Tobón, 2017). Correspondingly, Robert Muggah and Katherine Tobón’s findings suggest that “a 1% increase in the GDP growth rate is correlated with 0.24% fewer homicides per 100,000” in Latin American countries (Muggah & Tobón, 2017). This supports the idea of low economic opportunity because if a country has high economic development, individuals are able to have economic opportunity and would not have to resort to getting involved in organized crime organizations.

Moreover, this portrays that low economic development leads to a rise in organized crime, which is why it is an antecedent variable in my hypothesis. Overall, factors such as low economic development and corruption create an environment that allows organized crime to flourish within a country and thus gain control over certain regions.

As organized crime gains control over regions and brings more crime to neighborhoods, there will be a collective agreement on low citizen security. In fear of the power these organizations hold, many individuals will feel unsafe doing simple tasks such as walking to the store to buy a gallon of milk. This fear that is instilled in the community is something that is shared by all of the individuals who are living in these neighborhoods. As this becomes a shared experience, public opinion forms: organized crime is a contentious issue. This means that public opinion regarding organized crime is that it is a social problem and thus politicians must do something to combat this issue.

Robert Muggah and Katherine Tobón analyzed citizen security across Latin American countries. They primarily focused on Latin American countries as they have high crime rates and victimization. They found that out of all the countries that were analyzed, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia experience high homicide rates, “accounting for 1 in 4 homicides globally” (Muggah & Tobón, 2017). This depicts that these countries have a high overall crime rate, which reflects the control organized crime organizations have. These high homicide rates also illustrate that the citizens of these countries might not feel safe and thus these countries experience low citizen security. Due to this shared sense of low citizen security, the public opinion of organized crime in those countries is that it is a serious problem that must be fixed.

As organized crime continues to rise, regimes are more likely to implement legislation to combat the threat that these organizations hold due to public opinion regarding organized crime. Nevertheless, political party affiliation often determines the severity of these new legislations and the effect they have on civil rights. Regimes that have a conservative party in power are more likely to constrict the civil rights of their citizens through ratifying strict laws, such as state of exceptions/emergencies and *mano dura* policies. On the other hand, liberal political parties are more likely to “resist militarized security policies and defend individual rights” (Holland, n.d., pg. 45).

Correspondingly, the rise of organized crime can affect public opinion which can then result in the public electing conservative leaders as they are more prone to implement strict legislations to combat organized crime. In the case of Brazil and Columbia, where organized crime has increased throughout the years, there is a low sense of citizen security and thus citizens “support the need to implement extraordinary security measures” (Rosen & Cutrona, 2020). Furthermore, individuals who have been victims of crime are more likely to be in favor of *mano dura* policies and thus are more likely to elect conservative officials (Bateson, 2012). A collective group of citizens within a country must all agree that the rise of organized crime is a social problem and thus something must be done. This can result in penal populism as political parties then propose “longer prison sentences and more police on the streets” to gain public support (Holland, n.d., pg. 45).

*Mano dura* policies are strict legislations implemented to decrease organized crime. Although *mano dura* policies are seen as aggressive by some, many politicians deem it necessary to combat the threat of organized crime. Nevertheless, many have critiqued this form of legislation as inhumane as they believe that aspects of these policies such as mass incarceration are abusing the human rights of citizens (Rosen & Cutrona, 2020). According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, *mano dura* policies “will ultimately weaken the rule of law and the state’s ability to present a sustainable response to crime” (Democracy Dies under *Mano Dura*: Anti-Crime Strategies in the Northern Triangle, 2023).

The literature showcases that there is a similar relationship of who gets negatively affected in regards to the implementation of mano dura policies. Mano dura policies tend to be more “radical” as the word itself represents “repression” (Holland, n.d., pg. 46). state they will implement strict laws to decrease organized crime. Nonetheless, due to these political officials believing that “collective security requires relaxed individual rights,” citizens often experience a reduction of their civil rights (Holland, n.d., pg. 47). Overall, the literature supports that the more organized crime within a country, the less civil rights the citizens of that country will have.

Alisha Holland conducted an experiment on El Salvador studying how mano dura policies emerged due to organized crime. Holland studied this by reviewing the current literature, conducting surveys, and utilizing government data sources from the national police. In the case of El Salvador, the regime has struggled with the rise of organized crime over time, resulting in the public coming to a consensus that something must be done. According to Holland, “El Salvador resorted to mano dura policies when homicide rates, the most reliable proxy for crime, eased” (Holland, n.d., pg. 49). This is important as it indicates that confounding variables such as public opinion may influence this relationship. Throughout the article, she depicts the results from survey questions she was able to gather from 1987 to 2010. One example of the question participants were asked is “In your opinion, what is the principal problem that faces El Salvador” (Holland, n.d., pg. 51). This is coded based on whether participants state crime is the major issue. This survey question would be important for my thesis as it analyzes whether participants viewed crime as a severe issue at various times from 1987 to 2010. The survey questions are useful as they showcase whether or not public opinion differed over time through the implementation of mano dura policies. Similarly, questions regarding what party citizens believed was more adequate to combat the contentious issues of crime were asked of participants in a survey conducted from 1996 to 2004. This is coded based on the answers participants provided. This is important as Holland states that the conservative party is more likely to implement stricter legislation to fight organized crime. The more likely the public views crime as a social problem, the more likely the conservative party will propose legislation to decrease organized crime.

Mano dura policies are an example of how regimes react to the threat of organized crime. Although it aims to benefit the public by attempting to alleviate the issue, it ends up restricting civil rights. Holland depicts this by stating that the public has “named crime as one of the country’s most pressing problems since the 1990s” (Holland, n.d., pg. 50). This allowed for President Bukele, part of the conservative party, to get elected as president as he is anti-organized crime. President Bukele enacted a state of exception, also referred to as gang crackdown policies, on various occasions to decrease organized crime (Bishop, 2022). This state of exception permitted the regime to put constitutional rights on pause, resulting in the imprisonment of innocent civilians. Moreover, the gang crackdown policies under the Bukele administration prevented anyone incarcerated the right to acquire an attorney or a jury trial. This showcases that in this instance, civil rights were reduced in an attempt to decrease the threat of organized crime. This showcases how political parties, such as the conservative party, politicize organized crime to gain votes and pass strict legislation that ends up harming individuals by reducing their civil rights. Likewise, the findings suggest that individuals who identify as low-income and/or are crime victims are more likely to vote in favor of the conservative party as organized crime directly affects their livelihood (Holland, n.d., pg. 45). Nevertheless, these groups of people are the ones that tend to see more of a decrease in their civil rights (Holland, n.d., pg. 45).

Overall, the presence of corruption and low economic opportunity allow organized crime groups to increase and take control of neighborhoods. This control leads to a sense of low citizen security and thus public opinion regarding organized crime is that it is a social problem. Low citizen security further leads to many individuals fearing going outside. This panic and the overall threat that organized crime groups pose puts the “already weakened states in Latin America... under serious pressure” (Yumpu.com, n.d.). Conservative parties tend to view the threat of organized crime as severe and thus implement mano dura policies to combat this issue. Although it has resulted in decreasing organized crime in some countries, this aggressive approach ultimately infringes on the civil rights of citizens.

## EXAMPLES

The report conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime depicts the effects organized crime, primarily cocaine trafficking, has had in some of the Latin American countries I will be looking at from the years 2000-2011. The report further indicated that Mexican legislation ratified in 2006, created obstacles for the cocaine trafficking industry to smuggle cocaine through Mexico. This led to an increase in cocaine trafficking in countries such as El Salvador and Honduras, due to their proximity to Mexico. Moreover, during the time this report was conducted, the public opinion of those residing in Central America deemed that the rise of crime, which is “inflamed by transnational organized crime and drug trafficking” is a social problem (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2012). The report provides a time series comparing incarceration rates and murder rates in El Salvador from 2000 to 2010. This was coded as the incarceration rate per 100,000 population and murder rate per 100,000. Throughout the years, more people were incarcerated. This can be seen as a regime response to an attempt to alleviate the increase of organized crime. Nevertheless, this can lead to overcrowded prison facilities and inevitably reduce the civil rights of prisoners as these conditions can lead to abusing their human rights. The report illustrated the results from a survey it asked citizens of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala in 2010: “What is the most important issue facing your country in 2010” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2012). This is coded based on whether participants answer the question by stating crime or unemployment. This is important as it demonstrates that during this time, the public believed that crime was the most important issue. I believe that as organized crime increases, the public is more likely to state that this is a severe problem, and thus they will vote for political candidates that align with their views and implement an iron fist.

## OTHER FINDINGS

Gianmarco Daniele offers an alternative explanation that is different from what I hypothesize in his research article. He depicts that by having corruption and organized crime continuously rising, organized crime groups can influence which political party is in office through

bribery. Similarly, organized crime organizations can also deter political officials from running for office if their political agenda threatens the expansion of the organized crime group. In the study he conducted, Daniele showcases how the Italian mafia would kill political officials and thus this would dissuade other political officials from running, especially if the murder occurred in an area near them (Daniele, 2019). Although this study analyzes Italy, this could pertain to Latin American organized crime organizations. These tactics would allow organized crime organizations to dictate which political party is put into office. By being able to control this process, organized crime can influence what legislation is being ratified. These laws will benefit and allow for organized crime to continue to rise. If organized crime increases through bribery and political corruption, there will be a sense of low citizen security. This is because there will be an increased sense of fear as individuals will no longer trust the government and organized crime groups will have more control over their neighborhoods. The article illustrates that the presence of corruption will result in a decrease in civil rights, as organized crime groups will choose a political official who will put the needs of the organization above its citizens. One thing to note is that organized crime groups might not aim to decrease civil rights, but due to government resources being used to help organized crime groups flourish, civil rights will inevitably be reduced as there will be inequality as corruption is present. This reduction of civil rights can be seen by organized crime groups ensuring that elections are not free and fair. Although this is a different explanation than the one I propose, it leads to the same conclusion: civil rights will be reduced when organized crime increases.

## **HYPOTHESES AND MEASURES**

I hypothesize that the more organized crime in a country, the more likely a regime reduces the civil rights of citizens. This hypothesis relates to my theory as the more control organized crime groups have over an area, the more likely public opinion will be that this is a contentious issue and that action must be taken. Due to the rise of organized crime creating panic among citizens, political officials are more likely to advertise anti-organized crime legislation. This leads to political parties, such as the conservative party, being put into power and enacting laws like *mano dura* policies. In an attempt to alleviate

the power organized crime groups have over an area, regimes are likely to implement ambiguous legislation. This reduces the civil rights of those involved in organized crime, but in doing so, it inevitably reduces the civil rights of all citizens. To conduct my research question and test out my hypothesis, I will be analyzing organized crime as my main independent variable. Additionally, the control variable that I will analyze is the type of political party that is in power, such as conservative or liberal parties, and the public opinion of the threat of organized crime. Moreover, my dependent variable will be the reduction of civil rights as I believe that there is a direct link between the rise of organized crime and the reduction of civil rights. The antecedent variables found within my hypothesis are low economic development and corruption as I will illustrate how those factors lead to a rise of organized crime within a regime. Nevertheless, in some instances, the continuous rise of organized crime can lead to more corruption.

FIGURE 1: VISUALIZATION OF THE THEORY

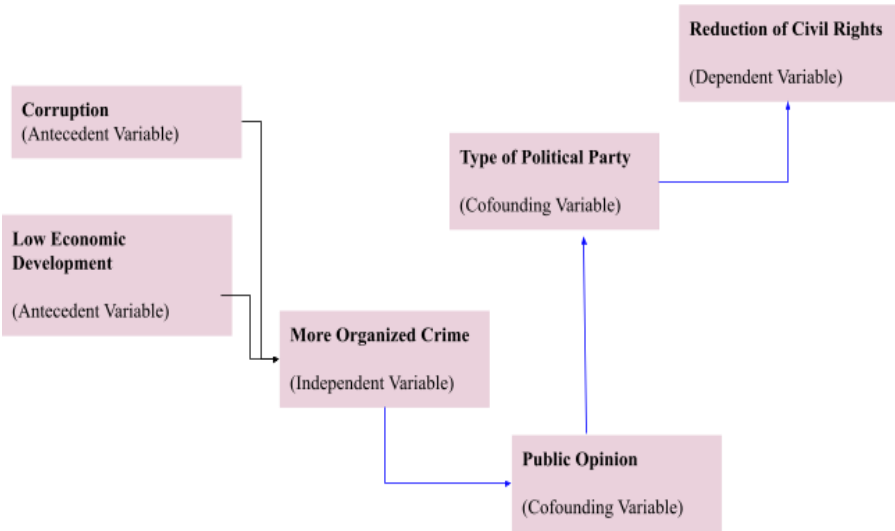


Figure 1 depicts that Latin American countries must have low economic development and experience corruption to allow organized crime to increase. By organized crime groups flourishing due to these precursor factors, they can gain control of neighborhoods. This leads



to low citizen security, and thus the public opinion will be that organized crime is a social problem and politicians must enact legislation to combat the power these organizations hold. To alleviate this issue the conservative party is more likely to implement strict legislation such as *mano dura* policies. However, because these countries are often weak states that experience political corruption, they have limited resources to utilize. This means that civil rights are reduced so that regimes can focus solely on decreasing organized crime, even though that might not be their intended plan when proposing these legislations.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

My theory and hypothesis apply to less-developed and developing Latin American countries. Furthermore, this can pertain to countries that have low economic development and experience corruption and good economic development with minimal corruption present. Some of the countries within my sample have a high overall crime rate, making it a perfect environment for organized crime to increase. Others experience low crime rates and are known to be some of the safest Latin American countries to visit. To attempt to answer my research question, I will analyze Brazil, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina. This country selection accounts for the Latin American countries with the highest amount of organized crime, those that fall in the middle, and those that have little presence of organized crime. To showcase the linkage between high organized crime and the reduction of civil rights, my unit of analysis will be countries from 2002 to 2022, specifically the Latin American countries mentioned above. Overall, this country selection accounts for countries with high organized crime and countries with low organized crime to see if my hypothesis applies to both instances.

To conduct my research question and test out my hypothesis, I will be doing a quantitative analysis. I will do a time series design to illustrate how the relationship between organized crime and civil rights has changed throughout the years in the countries I have chosen. In comparison to a cross-sectional design, a time series research design is best suited for my hypothesis as I will be able to analyze the statistical data over various time periods. To accomplish this, I will look at data from 2002 to 2022 to be able to present enough current

evidence to depict my theory. Mano dura policies were first implemented around 2003. This is why I decided to limit my time frame from 2002, which allows me to look at my country selection before mano dura policies were first enacted, to 2022 to account for current events that are occurring regarding organized crime. By using this research design, I will be able to utilize primary and secondary sources from other scholars to derive my conclusion about my research question. This research design will allow me to observe my independent variables, confounder variables, and dependent variables over time and see how this linkage could have potentially changed over time. By utilizing a longitudinal approach, I will be able to further portray how factors such as age and period effects can influence my theory. I will have to rely on the data acquired by other scholars when conducting my research, which will strengthen my findings. To adequately answer my research question, I wanted to showcase the relationship between my independent and dependent variables throughout time. Looking at this linkage during different periods will allow me to conclude whether there is a strong relationship between these variables or if there might be other factors that have a stronger influence on my dependent variable.

## **DATA AND FEASIBILITY**

The Latinobarometro has a plethora of survey questions that cover my time frame for the countries within my sample. Using this platform will allow me to gain insight into what public opinion was on organized crime throughout time. The 2011 report asked participants “What is the type of organized crime that is committed most frequently” (Latinobarometro, n.d.)? The findings showed that in Argentina, a developing Latin American country, 41.2% of the public believe it is a non-organized crime, while 40% of Brazilians believe it is the drug trafficking industry (Latinobarometro, n.d.). These statistics are crucial as they not only portray the difference in public opinion across countries but also across time in the same countries. Additionally, the 2020 report asked participants “Are there armed groups, organized crime, or gangs where you live” (Latinobarometro, n.d.). Out of all the countries in comparison, most Brazilians (82.9%) felt that they did live in neighborhoods where organized crime was present, while 25.9% of Hondurans felt that they did not (Latinobarometro, n.d.). This will be

helpful when conducting my honor thesis in determining what countries my hypothesis applies to. This data source is reasonable to implement with my research design as it has data on all of the countries in my sample and covers my time periods.

The Global Competitiveness Report from the World Economic Forum is another great platform that is reasonable to implement with my research design. This source provides the same information over my selected period of time for my country selection. Furthermore, one of my antecedent variables is economic development. This source looks at various areas within a country to analyze its economic success worldwide as well as its GDP. For example in the 2020 report, participants were asked "In your country, to what extent does organized crime (mafia-oriented racketeering, extortion) impose costs on businesses" (Global Competitiveness Report 2020, n.d.). This information is important as it can shed light as to why some countries continue to have low economic development over time. Moreover, this also showcases what the public opinion is on organized crime. For example, those who answered "a great extent" are more likely to put political officials who are anti-organized crime in power (Global Competitiveness Report 2020, n.d.). Furthermore, this source would be useful in analyzing the differences between the countries in my sample. The Global Competitiveness Report also provides an organized crime index that will allow me to analyze how much organized crime was in Brazil, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina from 2002 to 2022.

To assess the level of corruption Brazil, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina have had from 2002 to 2022, I will be utilizing the Corruption Perception Index (CPI). As I am doing a time series on the countries mentioned above, the CPI ranks countries based on a scale of 0-100. The closer the country's CPI is to 100 the little to no corruption is present. A score of 0 represents that the country is very corrupt. This database also allows you to look at how the score of a country has changed over time. These scores are accounted for based on things such as "bribery, diversion of public funds, and officials using their public office for private gain without facing consequences" (Transparency International, 2022). To find systematic information on the implementation of *mano dura*

policies in Brazil, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina I will be utilizing government websites and academic journals. These sources will allow me to see if/when mano dura policies were enacted in the countries above mentioned from 2002 to 2022. Mano dura policies will be a categorical variable. When coding mano dura policies, 0 will represent no mano dura policy implemented, while 1 will represent mano dura policy implemented.

To find systematic information on what political party is in power in Brazil, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina I will be utilizing government websites and academic journals. These sources will allow me to see what political party the president of those countries is from 2002 to 2022. The type of political party will be a categorical variable. When coding the type of political party, 0 will represent the liberal party, while 1 will represent the conservative party.

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# The Medicaid Coverage Gap: Expansion vs. Non-Expansion States

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## INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

This issue brief addresses and defines the divide between states that have expanded Medicaid and those that have not and the effects that the insurance coverage gap entails for those on Medicaid rolls. Furthermore, this issue brief will address how policy alternatives can aim to bridge this gap. Medicaid is a government-sponsored insurance program within the United States present in all 50 states. The purpose of Medicaid is to aid lower-income individuals and families to receive access to medical services. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) sets minimum standards (2022). Approximately 85.6 million Americans were enrolled in Medicaid as of 2022. Each state is allowed to choose whether to “expand” its Medicaid coverage based on income. Non-expansion means that only individuals making below the Federal Poverty Limit, currently \$14,580 annually, can qualify for services (CMS, 2022). Robin Rudowitz is vice president of the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) and Director for program on Medicaid and the Uninsured. Rudowitz has spent decades overseeing programs and research on low-income population coverage. According to Rudowitz et al. (2023), Medicaid expansion is described as expanding Medicaid eligibility to nonelderly adults who earn, as mentioned, \$14,580 annually, which is below the required 138 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL). The pros and cons of expansion vs. non-expansion has become a political struggle within states on whether to expand or not expand coverage and services.

## *PROPONENTS OF EXPANSION*

Supporters of expansion have often pointed toward the existence of a “coverage gap,” which occurs when individuals do not qualify for

Medicaid services but still struggle to attain proper insurance coverage and/or medical services. The coverage gap is defined as non-elderly adults who do not qualify for expanded Medicaid eligibility in non-expansion states; 1.9 million people in 10 states fall into the coverage gap (Rudowitz et al., 2023). This Graph does not consider those who will eventually be disenrolled from Medicaid with the end of pandemic income exceptions, which will be discussed in a later section. Currently 40 states and Washington D.C. have expanded Medicaid to include those lower income populations that otherwise would not qualify due to being over the FPL. Within these expansion states, they have seen uninsured rates of 8.1% compared to 15.4% in non-expansion states (Rudowitz et al., 2023). Not only has the uninsured rate decreased, but consumer behavior in preventive care was also affected by Medicaid expansion. According to the Commonwealth Fund, a private foundation whose aim is to advocate for health care reform, “Parents were 2.8 percentage points more likely to have had a flu shot and nonparents were 6.7 points more likely to have had a mammogram [in expansion states]. Among nonparents in the potential gap who were diagnosed with high blood pressure, those in expansion states were 1.9 points more likely to take medication to treat their condition” (Glied & Weiss, 2023). Those percentage increases were in 2023 and do not account for the increases in rates in other years; furthermore many were still included in Medicaid rolls immediately post pandemic. These Graphs are significant because they pertain to the population within that coverage gap seeing the results of expansion even after events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***OPPONENTS OF EXPANSION***

Primarily in non-expansion states such as Texas and Mississippi, officials disagree with the benefits of expansion. The costs of implementation, as well as ideological reasons, are often cited as barriers to expansion in these states. Texas is the largest state economically and population wise among non-expansion states. The Texas Medical Association represents more than 55,000 healthcare professionals in Texas and analyzes the costs and benefits of expansion within the state. According to Joey Berlin of the association, the state’s contribution to Medicaid expansion



would be \$650 million per year, with the federal government contributing \$5.65 billion per year (Berlin, 2020). The price tag is often touted as a reason for why Texas expanding Medicaid could overburden the state. Mississippi's speaker of the House of Representatives has expressed similar sentiments. According to the newspaper Mississippi Today, state Rep. Phillip Gunn has refused to accept \$1 billion in federal aid for Medicaid expansion and has proclaimed that Mississippi still would not be able to afford expansion (Pender, 2022). Texas Gov. Greg Abbot, who has long since opposed expansion, pointed to traditional ways of doing health insurance as working best. According to Abbot in the Texas Tribune, "The best way to get health care insurance is through an employer.. 'Since I was re-elected, Texas has added more new jobs than any other state ... Medicaid was created to serve the most vulnerable, not able-bodied adults who can and should get health care through an employer'" (Kreisberg, 2022). These financial and ideological standings are important to understand to properly address the future of expansion and non-expansion.

### *EFFECTS OF COVID-19*

During the pandemic, states were able to have continuous Medicaid enrollment, in which income did not affect whether an individual would stay on Medicaid. The federal government agreed to increase federal contributions to Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) to 90 percent for states to pause disenrollments. This was a three-year pause. According to the KFF, "After declines in enrollment from 2017 through 2019, preliminary data for December 2022 show that total Medicaid/CHIP enrollment grew to 92.3 million, an increase of 21.2 million from enrollment in February 2020 [29.8%]" (Corallo & Moreno, 2023, para. 1). This gave the appearance of expansion in many states that had not expanded. KFF also points out that expansion states are predicted to keep most of their enrollees due to the 138 percent FPL threshold. However, non-expansion states will revert to disenrolling individuals below that threshold (Rudowitz et al., 2023). However, as COVID restrictions and cases decreased, so did Medicaid freezes in most non-expansion states. According to the Commonwealth Fund, as many as 3.8 million people had lost coverage under Medicaid post-covid

(Coleman, 2023). This lost coverage has caused a ripple effect not only for those directly affected by the loss but also the debate regarding what policy solutions and alternatives can remedy the coverage gap. These solutions will be discussed in greater depth in the next two sections.

## **POLICY ALTERNATIVES**

### ***FINANCIAL INCENTIVES***

Financial proposals have included matching state funding for Medicaid programs to incentivize their implementation. According to the KFF, a new proposal would give new expansion states 100% matching for the first three years, which is an option similar how it was for those states who originally expanded in 2014 (Rudowitz et al., 2021). Another proposal by Rudowitz et al. is to provide additional incentives for all expansion states to increase opportunity costs for states that still choose to not expand. These incentives would include increasing the current match rate for expansion and increases on disproportionate share hospital systems. Which are payments to offset the out-of-pocket costs for Medicaid sponsored treatments.

### ***NEW PUBLIC OPTIONS***

A new public option plan would cover those who fall within the coverage gap. This option would be available to all groups, similar to Medigap plans for Medicare. For those without coverage, i.e. the population within the coverage gap, this option would have full scope of medical benefits funded by the government premium free (Rudowitz et al., 2021). The design of such an option would include either a broad or narrow approach. The broad approach would entail a completely reworked system to circumvent state regulation to deliver broad coverage to uninsured individuals and would include expanding benefits in both expansion and non-expansion states. A narrow option would be more targeted toward smaller groups of individuals specifically within the gap in non-expansion states. A public option's premiums could be similar to the private marketplace

to keep the benchmark premium or could be substantially lower on par with Medicare rates (CBO. 2021).

### ***EXPANDING ELIGIBILITY***

This policy alternative takes a middle approach to expanding benefits to groups within the coverage gap by expanding existing benefits in the insurance marketplace. A recommendation proposed by Rudowitz et al. (2021) would be extending federal marketplace premium subsidies to those below the poverty line. It would work by providing them with cost-sharing reductions that would result in individuals in the coverage gap paying about 6% of their annual health care costs, an effective cost sharing technique similar to Medicaid. In addition, this could be supplemented by additional subsidies explained by Holahan et al. of the Commonwealth Fund, which calls for using Affordable Care Act (ACA) subsidies to extend federal marketplace subsidies to those below the poverty line (2021). This would result in 2.9 million people gaining additional coverage due to being under the 138% limit.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***FINANCIAL INCENTIVES***

This brief recommends implementing financial incentives for all expansion states due to the increased opportunity cost that would make non-expansion unviable in the long term. Incentives such as 100% matching have been increasingly successful in bringing states to Medicaid expansion since the passage of the ACA. Increased financial incentives also increase the opportunity costs of states that choose to continue to block expansion by raising traditional rates (Rudowitz et al., 2021). Political feasibility would be mixed but have trended positively. In December of 2023, according to the KFF, South Dakota became one of the newest states to adopt Medicaid expansion after a ballot initiative had passed in 2022. Even states such as Mississippi, which have had local politicians such as state Rep. Phillip Gun pass orders to have ballot initiatives to determine Medicaid expansion in the future. So, with increased financial and political pressures to expand, offering additional financial incentives

to states to aid those in the coverage gap would be the most realistic policy option.

### *EXPANDING ELIGIBILITY*

The insurance market presents a middle ground with both government level and private market pros and cons. This option would be able to utilize existing marketplace structures within states and circumnavigate state regulations. It would also result in groups within the coverage gap to have access to better cost-sharing plans that may have an actuarial value of up to 94%, which is where the 6% remaining overall costs come from (Rudowitz et al., 2021). However, according to the Commonwealth Fund, compared to Medicaid, fewer people would be eligible for coverage due to the requirement that offer of worker coverage not be offered in the marketplace. In addition, those with this expanded coverage would still have higher cost-sharing compared to Medicaid with the possibility of paying premiums (Holahan et al., 2021).

### *NEW PUBLIC OPTION*

A public option has been determined as the least desirable option due to the complexities and design questions surrounding its creation. According to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) in 2021, this option would need to consider the following: geographic scope, funding, conformity with state regulations, availability, payment rates, provider participation, administrative taxes, and risk-adjustment transfers. Administratively, establishing a new agency or program from scratch will need to be implemented within various states to provide coverage (CBO, 2021). Additionally, questions regarding premiums, out of network coverage, and extent of coverage and funding would need to be addressed (CBO, 2021). Also, political feasibility would be another challenge due to the use of taxpayer money to establish a system for a relatively small population. However, a public option could allow for greater flexibility in providing coverage to those in the gap and a narrow public option would be easier to implement compared to a broad public option (Rudowitz et al., 2021)

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