

PANDEMIC RECOVERY AND RESILIENCY PLAN

West Alabama Regional Commission
March 31, 2021



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Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan
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About the West Alabama Regional Commission

The West Alabama Regional Commission (WARC) is one of the 12 regional councils in the State of Alabama. The councils serve local governments and citizens by coordinating region-wide projects and services, promoting cooperation among the local governments, and carrying out state and federal programs on a regional basis. The West Alabama area is designated Planning District 2, or Region 2. The WARC encompasses Bibb, Fayette, Greene, Hale, Lamar, Pickens and Tuscaloosa counties.

The West Alabama Regional Commission covers an area that includes seven counties and 37 municipalities in Region 2. The council is governed by an executive committee and a board of directors.

The WARC receives its funding from federal matching grants, member government dues, an annual appropriation from the State of Alabama, and contract fees.

The scope of the commission's work includes economic and community development, transportation planning, nutrition and assistance programs for the elderly, a part-time employment program for low income senior citizens, technical assistance, tourism promotion, and public information.

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Key Observations and Implications

This report was researched and prepared over the course of 2020, 2021 and early 2022. The conditions brought about by the pandemic changed from month to month during this time and continues to change. Some of the research and conclusions considered early in the process have proven out and some have not. Suffice to say that studying the pandemic and its impacts on the local and regional economy is a dynamic process and should be understood in that light.

While the COVID-19 pandemic appeared to be in decline during the Summer of 2021, by late Summer and early Fall, a new variant of the virus (Delta) was causing a new wave of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. And, by Winter of 2021 and into early 2022, an additional variant (Omicron) was making its way through the population. Cases in the West Alabama Region had gone from 37,792 as of May 26, 2021 to 50,151 four months later on September 27, 2021 and to 82,231 on March 10, 2022. Deaths over the same period went from 794 to 947 to 1,245. At the same time, the Regional, State and National economy has proven to be largely resilient with a few lingering exceptions.

Economic Resilience Data

On the topic of economic resilience, a number of efforts were underway over the course of the COVID-19 Pandemic to examine the social and economic impacts. The National Economic Resilience Data Explorer (NERDE) was developed by the Argonne National Laboratory in partnership with the U. S. Economic Development Administration. The purpose of the “Explorer” is to assist local and regional officials with local economic recovery and resilience analysis including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local economies. The data includes: economic distress indicators including per capita income and unemployment by industry; workforce indicators including civilian labor force and unemployment; indicators relating to the local economy including the top five industries, industry value added, and GDP growth rate; industry trends; disaster risk; and COVID-19 impacts. The “Explorer” should be consulted from time to time, particularly when an economic shock due to a natural or health hazard has occurred.

Of COVID-19 Impacts, the “Explorer” contains a County Economic Impact Index. It also indicates local government revenue vulnerability and changes in employment in the top five industries since January 2020. The County Economic Impact Index estimates the change in overall county level economic activity during the COVID-19 pandemic relative to January 2020 which was just prior to the onset of the pandemic impacts. An index value greater than 1 indicates gains while an index value less than 1 indicates losses in economic activity. Importantly, the index compares the economic change within the county relative to itself, not as compared to another county or area.

Over the course of the pandemic, the values have fluctuated. In most cases, the lowest index value showing impact due to the pandemic was in April 2020. The accompanying chart indicates the low index value for April 2020 and a later index value which was in September 2021. A higher value for September 2021 indicates the extent of recovery toward the pre-pandemic level of economic activity. Bibb County and Fayette County are closer to recovery to their pre-pandemic level of economic activity than is the case with the statewide average. The other counties in the West Alabama Region are not quite as close to full recovery.

In addition to this County Economic Impact Index, there are other indexing tools that may be consulted to determine local and regional vulnerability to a pandemic. As the COVID-19 pandemic wanes, however, there is some question as to whether the data contained in these tools will be updated over time.

Implications for a Post Pandemic Regional Economy

A number of key observations may be made that have implications for the local and regional economy as the COVID-19 pandemic subsides. Some of these are mentioned or alluded to in the chapters contained in this report. A number of these key observations are reiterated here as considerations to keep in mind as future economic strategies are developed and considered.

- *Unpredictable course of the pandemic.* In addition to resistance in dealing with the pandemic, as the COVID-19 pandemic has continued, variants have arisen along with uncertainty whether vaccinations and therapies will be sufficient to prevent its spread. By September, 2021, over one in 500 Americans had died from the disease. The rate of vaccination has been slow in the State of Alabama - much slower than in other parts of the Country. Low rates of vaccination, not just within the State but worldwide, may lead to future variants that can overcome the most recent vaccines and therapies. Locally, this raises the question as to whether local and regional health care infrastructure can keep up and whether it can be prepared for new “waves” of the disease that may come. This underscores the need to support a resilient health care infrastructure as essential to maintenance of a strong economy.
- *Resistance to change.* People resist change. People always have, and continue to have, considerable resistance to change, even in the face of a deadly disease. This can be seen in their work habits, their shopping habits, and even their habits that relate to their own health and the health of their community. Whether their doubts and concerns are justified, they need to be listened to and addressed in order to effectively deal with such events as a pandemic.
- *Financial markets have continued to expand.* From the initial downturn in the financial markets in March of 2020, the markets have continued to expand. Although the financial markets do not provide a complete picture of the state of the economy, they do indicate underlying strength and resilience particularly when seen in concert with continued reduction in unemployment.
- *Manufacturing strength.* Manufacturing will remain a strong component of the local and regional economy. The impacts of the pandemic on manufacturing establishments were dealt with early and quickly. Of course, this is to be expected of the larger manufacturing companies that are pressed to maintain high productivity levels. Their innate resiliency is of benefit to the local and regional economy as it tends to maintain a minimum level of personal income.
- *Supply chain disruption.* Supply chain disruptions continue to plague some industries. One notable example is the need for computer chips for the automotive industry. Some disruptions will get better and some may linger. Others may come and go. In a worldwide pandemic, rolling infections from country to country and from state to state can cause varying disruptions at varying times, causing difficulty for local businesses and industries that depend on these supply chains and have few alternatives.
- *Demand for workers.* Businesses locally and nationwide are experiencing difficult in attracting workers, particularly in those occupations that are typically not as well compensated as others. While this is a difficulty for business, it may also be considered an indication of economic health and growth since the demand for workers is outstripping the supply. The result of such a supply/demand imbalance will likely be an increase in wages by those businesses that can sustain the cost.

Characteristics of the Post Pandemic Workplace

Workplaces have changed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to deal with the impacts at the time. As time has passed, some changes have been reversed, but some changes will, or should, remain in order to create and maintain a local and regional economy that is more resilient to economic shock. The notes below are not intended to be exhaustive, but are a few of the characteristics that are expected to be found in resilient workplaces.

- *Alternative work arrangements.* Prepared businesses and organizations will need to be better equipped to restructure their operations for alternative work arrangements in the event of another pandemic or similar emergency. This will be less applicable to manufacturing and processing types of businesses and personal services, but more applicable to those occupations that are located in offices and similar workplaces. These alternative work arrangements may include working at home, staggered work hours, innovative office and workplace design options, and others. Work at home will continue, albeit to a lesser degree than at the height of the pandemic. Because of this, internet security will be even more important as heightened security takes place not only at the organizational level but at home due to work related communications between work and home.
- *Personal safety and health.* In the workplace and other places where people gather, personal safety and health will continue to be on peoples minds for both workers and customers. Solutions that do not overly impede operations or personal comfort may be found to be good ideas to stay in place permanently.
- *Communications technology.* Online retailing is here to stay. Many aspects of online retailing lends it to larger businesses, although there are more and more innovative solutions being made available to smaller businesses as well. Online meeting and other forms of business coordination and operation, whether from home or the business workplace, will increase over time due to the efficiencies that may be attained from their use. Because of this, training in communications technology skills and the provision of these services will be critical for many small businesses.
- *Broadband access.* As has been pointed out elsewhere in this report, broadband access will become more and more critical to maintaining a resilient local and regional economy, particularly in rural areas. This will require broadband expansion throughout the region. The challenge will be expansion to those areas where it is not economically viable. It's not just about the initial capital expense, but the ongoing maintenance and operation which requires a sustainable revenue stream over time.
- *Productivity demands.* It has been noted that certain business sectors are having difficulty finding workers and that this situation might persist and may result in higher wages. A response to this situation may well be a demand by business for higher productivity in order to maintain the desired level of business activity or acceptance that the prior level of activity cannot be sustained. One way to raise productivity is to implement well thought out capital expenditures for which access to capital resources will be required. Other ways include a demand for more effort from existing workers or the discovery of better operational efficiency.
- *Resiliency from economic shock.* The early days of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a recognition of the need for resilience in the workplace and in the community. Economic shock will occur from time to time whether from a health emergency or a natural hazard or even an impactful corporate or governmental decision. This will require preparation by business and community leaders as well as a mindset that welcomes innovation and adjustment.

Personal and Community Health

This report does not examine medical issues, however, the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic call for renewed emphasis on personal and community health. Elsewhere in this report it is noted that there are social and economic disparities in pandemic cases and unemployment due to the pandemic. It is also noted that the data is incomplete in many cases making it difficult to draw firm conclusions. Nevertheless, disparities exist and should continue to be examined. Further, many more people no longer take their health for granted and are more aware of how their surroundings, and the people in their surroundings, can impact their health. People are more aware of their co-morbidities, the need to maintain a healthy lifestyle, and the need to stay in shape, as well as how mental health can be affected by events such as a pandemic. Communities can support individuals by creating awareness of commonalities and disparities within the community that can affect personal health and by taking actions that can help to create healthy communities just as employers can help to create healthy workplaces.



Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan

Chapter 1. Purpose of the Plan

The COVID-19 Pandemic
The BETTER Recovery and Resiliency Program
The Purpose of the Program
Program Oversight, Conduct, and Support

The COVID-19 Pandemic

During the Winter and Spring of 2020, a novel coronavirus spread worldwide causing severe economic dislocation besides the immediate impacts to individual health and well-being. The disease caused by the coronavirus is commonly known as COVID-19. The disease was declared a pandemic and continued throughout the Summer and Fall. By early December 2020, as vaccines were being announced, the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center was reporting over 65,000,000 cases worldwide and over 1,500,000 deaths. In the United States there had been over 14,000,000 cases and over 275,000 deaths from the disease. And in Alabama, there had been just over 260,000 confirmed cases and over 3,700 deaths. By the end of December 2021 - a year later - the Pandemic had begun to subside in the previous Summer only to re-emerge as a "Delta" variant in the Fall of 2021 and as an "Omicron" variant.

in the Winter or 2021. By the end of December 2021, there had been 79,198,539 cases and 959,533 deaths nationwide, while there were 1,288,454 cases and 18,766 deaths in statewide. While the medical field learned better treatments, and people and businesses learned to avoid exposure, the number of infections and deaths continued to rise, fluctuating from season to season and event to event.

The same source indicated 82,231 confirmed cases and 1,245 deaths through December 2021 for the West Alabama counties of Bibb, Fayette, Greene, Hale, Lamar, Pickens, and Tuscaloosa which make up the area of the West Alabama Regional Commission.

Beyond the impact on individual health, economic dislocation was the result of efforts to prevent the disease, or at least to “flatten the curve” so as to mitigate the increasing demand on medical services. Those efforts included masking and social distancing in addition to business closure mandated by governmental authorities. As the Pandemic progressed, closure mandates were lifted but the damage to business lingered as employees were laid off, debts piled up, and fear kept customers from returning.

The unemployment rate for the West Alabama Region was 6.0% in October 2020. This compares to 2.9% to 3.2% early in the year and a high of 16.4% in April. That is to say, while regional unemployment recovered significantly, it remained twice as high as it was before the pandemic for some time. By December 2021, though, the unemployment rate had recovered in most areas and recovered to 3.0% for the West Alabama Region.

Business closures, both temporary and lasting, both partial and complete, suggested severe dislocation on that score as well. Anecdotally, concerns were expressed regarding supply chains, local small business, tourism especially university related tourism, and housing.

The health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 are immense and wide ranging. It is beyond the scope of this project to study specific medical and health care issues. The challenge is to develop a more complete understanding of the impacts of the recent Pandemic on business activity and employment, both present and future, and develop recommendations regarding:

1. management of pandemic effects in order to mitigate ongoing impacts on business activity; and
2. strategies for long-term economic recovery and resilience due to related economic shock.

The BETTER West Alabama Program

In response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the West Alabama Regional Commission created a pandemic recovery and resiliency program entitled *“BETTER (Bringing Economic Tools To Enrich and Revitalize) West Alabama.”* BETTER West Alabama includes three elements: 1) a pandemic recovery and resiliency plan; 2) technical assistance and capacity building; and 3) organizational capacity support for coronavirus response.

Element 1. Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan

Element 1 is a Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan that includes an economic impact study leading to recovery and resiliency recommendations. It serves as an adjunct to the current West Alabama Economic Development Playbook which serves as the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the West Alabama Economic Development District. The impact study summarizes local and regional assets, examines employment impacts and re-employment opportunities, and assesses business

closures and post-pandemic opportunities. The recovery recommendations includes recommendations for asset and infrastructure development; workforce and training; and business assistance and entrepreneurial support.

Element 2. Technical Assistance and Capacity Building

Element 2 is for the West Alabama Regional Commission to provide technical assistance and help build capacity within the Region. Among the ways to help build capacity is to provide leadership and capacity building through training to elected officials and others in the region to increase the region's ability to address impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic and, by extension, to other similar emergencies that may arise. Other ways are to ensure municipal support staff such as municipal clerks have access to specialized training, and assist local agencies to successfully operate within any new guidelines that result from the pandemic.

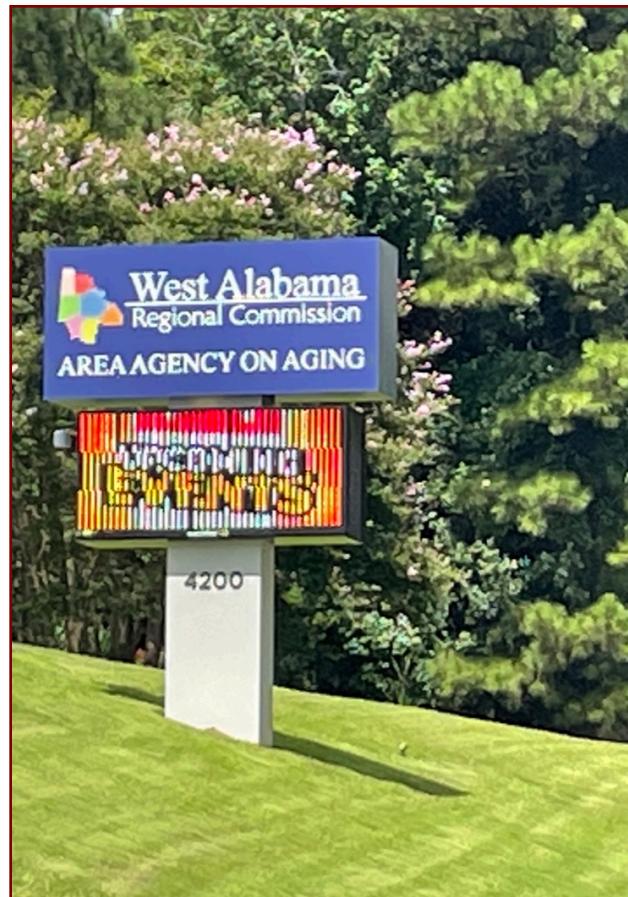
Element 3. Organizational Capacity Support for Coronavirus Response

Element 3 is for the West Alabama Regional Commission to directly assist member governments, local agencies, and business and industry to recover from the economic injury resulting from the coronavirus. This work will include, but not be limited to, technical assistance to local governments and agency stakeholders; identification of eligible grant programs; development and implementation of grant funded projects; and promotion of available resources and financial assistance to business and industry.

The Purpose of the Program

The West Alabama Economic Development District is primarily rural with the exception of Tuscaloosa County, which includes the region's most populous city, the City of Tuscaloosa. Impacts from the Pandemic and any associated recovery needs will vary considerably within the region. Certain efforts of this program will be focused accordingly. Each work element of this program complements and supports broader goals of the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). These activities allow for a wide range of engagement among local leaders, business, and industry and will support the many efforts being undertaken to stabilize and re-build the region's economy in the wake of the unforeseen losses across all sectors of the economy both locally and globally.

Those who might benefit from BETTER West Alabama is a broad group as would be expected for an issue as large as a pandemic. Those who might benefit include workers, businesses, and communities. This includes workers who were unemployed due to the Pandemic, in particular, those who remain



unemployed as the Pandemic wears on and who may find difficulty regaining employment as it subsides. By extension, it includes any unemployed workers regardless of the circumstances of their unemployment as well as those who left the labor force due to any perceived unlikelihood of gainful employment. It also includes businesses and other organizations that were negatively impacted by the Pandemic. This is of concern both due to workers who were impacted and small business owners who were impacted as well. Also of concern are larger businesses and organizations that have a local presence and must remain strong as major employers and pillars of the local economy. Finally, it includes local and regional communities as represented by general purpose and special purpose governmental organizations and other service organizations that have as their mission to provide the infrastructure and services necessary to support and enhance the development, sustainability, and resiliency of the local and regional economy.

Partners and Resources

The primary stakeholders of BETTER West Alabama include a broad cross-section of partners and resources throughout the Region and beyond. Among those organizations or groups of organizations that may be impacted by the Pandemic or that may have an impact on building a BETTER West Alabama through this Program are the following.

West Alabama Regional Commission. A regional economic development organization that conceived and serves to plan, manage and implement the strategies and recommendations of this Program.

U. S. Economic Development Administration. The Federal agency that provides the funding and ultimate oversight for this Program.

University of Alabama Center for Economic Development. A division of the University of Alabama based in Tuscaloosa that serves to support the economic development of local and regional communities and that specifically serves in support of the West Alabama Regional Commission in the development and implementation of this Program.

Municipalities. The thirty-seven (37) respective municipal governments within the service area of the West Alabama Regional Commission.

Counties. The seven (7) respective county commissions within the service area of the West Alabama Regional Commission including those of Bibb, Fayette, Greene, Hale, Lamar, Pickens, and Tuscaloosa counties.

Alabama Small Business Development Center Network. Based at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, the Network coordinates the activities of Small Business Development Centers throughout the State.

UA Small Business Development Center. Part of the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) Network, this Center is based at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa and provides services to small businesses that are starting up or continuing to develop and grow.

Chambers of Commerce. Serving the local and regional business community with business networking and services, there are a number of chambers of commerce serving counties and communities throughout the West Alabama Region.

Community Colleges. Community colleges within the Region include:

- Bevill State Community College which has five locations including centers within the Region at Carrollton and Fayette. Bevill State's programs include workforce development and career technical education.
- Shelton State Community College is located in Tuscaloosa. Shelton State's programs include workforce development and community and corporate education.

West Alabama Regional Workforce Council. This is a workforce development organization based in Tuscaloosa that covers the seven counties in the West Alabama Economic Development District as well as Marengo and Sumter counties.

Other Partners and Resources. A range of other partners and resources are listed in the West Alabama Economic Development Playbook. These include the organizations within the Region as well as a number of State and Federal Agencies. Any of these organizations at some point may have a stake in, or have a role to play in, the implementation of any opportunities that may result from the development of this Program.

Regional Comprehensive Economic Development

As stated above, this Study and Program is prepared as an adjunct to the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) of the West Alabama Economic Development District. The purpose of a CEDS is to plan a coordinated approach to the economic development of a district. More broadly, its purpose is to promote the overall economic prosperity of the area and its people while assuring the livability of its communities and the quality of its environment.

A Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy serves to maximize inherent competitive strengths to enhance local, regional, national and global connections. Connecting the Region by fostering meaningful, value-added partnerships that link industry, education, and leadership builds on regional innovation capacity and helps strengthen local economies. Looked at as part of a broader, synergistic and dynamic system of processes, a regional economic development strategy can help position a Region toward sustained prosperity now and into the future. A Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy is about connection and strengthening the civic, built and natural infrastructure within the Region to help support the sustainability, resiliency, adaptability and diversification of the local economy.

Economic Sustainability and Resiliency

Economic Sustainability. Sustainability may be described in many ways. The concept of sustainability recognizes the interrelationships between the regional economy, the prosperity of the people, and the quality of the environment. It may also be described as the ability of the area to continuously prosper over time. Closely related to the concept of economic sustainability, economic resiliency is crucial to a regional economy.

Economic Resiliency. Whereas sustainability refers to the ability of the economy to function over time, resiliency refers to the ability of the local and regional economy to bounce back from economic shock. Economic shock could be due to a natural disaster that affects the local economy, a plant closing, or anything, such as a pandemic, that would have a significant negative impact on local jobs and income. A goal of economic resiliency is to make the community shock resistant so that such events have as little negative impact as possible. In its paper, "*Regional Resilience*," the Rural Policy Research Institute states that "A resilient region (or community) is one that is able to anticipate threats, reduce the impact of

these threats by taking pre-emptive action, respond appropriately when these threats materialize, and recover afterwards.” The paper goes on to explain that for a region to recover to a pre-shock level of economic activity, it may be necessary to achieve a “new normal” that is at least as favorable.

Adaptability. Even without a pandemic, we live in an era of rapid change. There are broad demographic changes at play as well as changing economic and fiscal realities. These changes have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. As these changes take place, programs and organizations will have to be prepared to reposition themselves accordingly in order to remain effective and relevant. Adaptation to changing external realities such as globalization or new technologies will have to be realized in order to remain competitive. This may include retraining a resilient workforce to be prepared for changing industrial and technological advancement, and investing in the proper infrastructure necessary to support growing demand.

Diversification. Economic diversification is an ingredient to creating a shock resistant community. Diversification assures that when one major employer or employment sector suffers, there are other major employers or sectors that will soften the blow to the overall community. Diversification is related to cluster strategies whereby a community identifies industry or occupation clusters to strengthen its economy. The primary categories of industry or occupational clusters are: 1) traded clusters which are those industries which trade across economic regions or areas; 2) local clusters with are those industries which trade within an economic area; and 3) natural endowment clusters which are those industries that are located within the area due to the existence of natural resources or features.

Vulnerability. A community or region’s vulnerability to economic shock may be due to a number of factors. It could be because of their location, past development decisions, socio-economic characteristics, an un-diversified economic structure, or other factors. Becoming more resilient requires recognizing local vulnerabilities and developing strategies to address them. Depending on the nature of a disaster or other economic shock, the vulnerability may be physical, economic or social. In the current pandemic, it is arguable that all three categories of vulnerability must be addressed.

Project Oversight, Conduct, and Support

Steering Committee

The West Alabama Regional Commission (WARC) has designated a Steering Committee to oversee the conduct and progress of the BETTER West Alabama program. the Steering Committee consists of: 1) the Chairman of the Board of WARC; 2) Dennis Stripling who serves WARC as its Executive Director; and Cory Johnson who serves WARC as its Director of Community and Economic Development. Ms. Johnson also serves as project manager for this effort.

Project Team

The Project Team consists of the staff of the Department of Community and Economic Development of the West Alabama Regional Commission, selected staff of the University Center for Economic Development of the University of Alabama, and Cedar Mountain Associates as a project consultant. Other individuals and organizations were consulted from time to time during the course of the project.

Project Support

Funding for this project was provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act through a grant from the United States Economic Development Administration (EDA). EDA CARES Act recovery assistance provides a wide-range of financial assistance to communities and regions as they respond to and recover from the impacts of the pandemic.



Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan

Chapter 2. The Regional Overview

Location and Geography
Characteristics of the Population
Characteristics of the Economy

This Chapter presents a brief overview of the West Alabama Economic Development District also known as *Region II* of Alabama. The purpose is to gain an understanding of the regional situation in general as it stood prior to the pandemic. The primary resource for much of the information presented is the “*West Alabama Economic Development Playbook*” which was adopted by the West Alabama Regional Commission on September 21, 2017. Information was derived from a number of Federal agencies as noted. The information presented here is intended to summarize and update that information. For more details and a more complete view of the Region II’s economy, one should refer to the Playbook, in particular, see Appendix B - Regional Backdrop. Much of this information will be expanded in subsequent Chapters that will provide more detail on employment, unemployment and business activity.

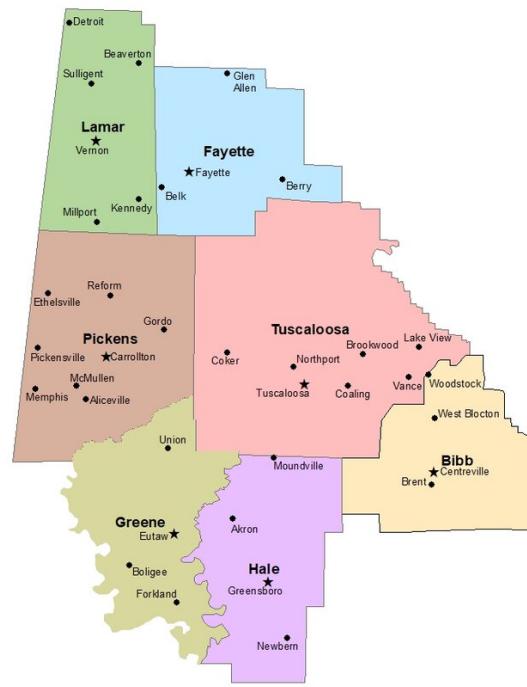
Location and Geography

The West Alabama Economic Development District is located in West Central Alabama bordering the State of Mississippi. Region II consists of seven counties and covers 5,347.8 square miles. This area amounts to roughly ten percent of the area of the State of Alabama.

Region II lies in an area of the State where the Fall Line Hills give way to the Black Belt of Southwest Alabama. Major waterways include the Black Warrior River which flows through the central area of the Region and the Tombigbee River which flows along its Western edge and connects to the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. Both of these rivers are navigable and ultimately flow into Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. The largest Lake in the Region is Lake Tuscaloosa which lies just northeast of the City of Tuscaloosa.

Region II is bisected by Interstate 20/59 which connects the Region to Birmingham to the Northeast and Meridian, MS to the Southwest. Other major highways are US 11 which parallels I-20/59, US 43 which traverses the District north and south, US 82 with runs Northwest to Southeast to connect the District to the State Capitol at Montgomery.

Centered on the Tuscaloosa Metropolitan Area, the District is in proximity to the other metropolitan areas of Birmingham which is about 60 miles to the Northeast, Montgomery - 100 miles to the Southeast, Mobile - 200 miles to the South, Jackson - 190 miles to the Southwest, and the Shoals area which is about 190 miles to the North.



Characteristics of the Population

Population Density and Distribution.

The total population of the District was estimated to be 321,260 in 2020. The area and population of the respective counties within the District is shown on the attached table along with the population density of each county in comparison with the State and Nation. Population density is stated in terms of persons per square mile. What is striking here is the difference between the density of Tuscaloosa County compared with the density of the other rural counties of the District.

Population Change

The population of the District increased by 27,333 from 2010 to 2020. The 2020 population has turned out to be even higher than the projected population for 2030. This growth in the District is on the

strength of Tuscaloosa and Pickens counties. Over two-thirds of the population of the District is in Tuscaloosa County. The population growth rate in Tuscaloosa County is more than twice as high as the Nation and State, and is higher than the District growth rate as well. All other counties in the District are estimated and projected to lose population over the last ten years and over the next ten years as well.

Population Age

The median age is that age at which half the population is older and half the population is younger. Between 2010 and 2019, the Nation, State and all the counties in West Alabama saw their population getting older. Of the total District population in 2020, those age 18 to 64 totaled 175,513 or 57.6% of the total population. Of these, 34,147 were college age (age 18 to 24) in Tuscaloosa County which, of course, is the home of the University of Alabama.

Race and Ethnicity

As with the State and Nation, the District saw a decrease in the white alone population as a proportion of the total population between 2010 and 2020. However, one of the rural counties in the District, Hale County, saw an increase in the white alone category. Of the total population of the district in 2020 of 321,260, the white alone population was 196,804. The population in those categories other than the white alone category was 124,456. Of those in categories other than white alone, most (98,734) are black alone. The Hispanic population of the District was 14,905 in 2020, up from 7,333 in 2010. This is 4.6% of the District population. In Alabama, the Hispanic population was 264,047 or 5.3%, and in the United States the proportion was 18.7%

Educational Attainment

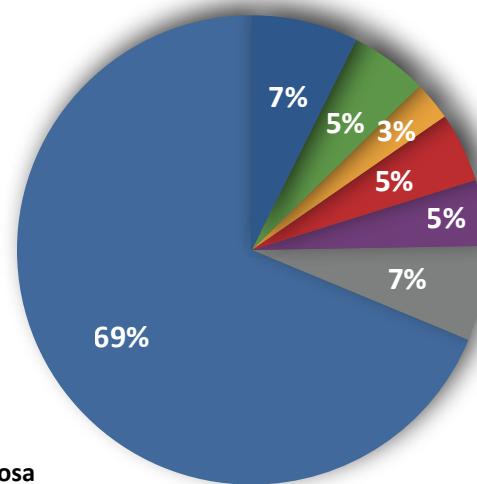
Educational attainment is generally lower in the District than for the State and for the Nation as a whole. Only Tuscaloosa County, as might be expected, has a higher attainment than the State in regard to those holding a high school diploma and those holding a bachelor's degree. But even then, it is less than the Nation as a whole. The other counties, rural in nature, have a strikingly lower incidence of those who hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

Characteristics of the Economy

Median Household Income

Median household income is that level of income that is in the middle. That is to say, half of the households in an area have incomes higher and half have incomes lower. Median household income increased from 2010 to 2020 in both the State and the Nation by 28.4% and 29.9% respectively. However, the level of income within the State as compared to the Nation remains considerably less.

Relative Population of Counties



Interestingly, the rate of increase in median household income for Bibb County significantly exceeded the State and Nation during this time period. Of particular concern are Greene County where the level of income is roughly half that of the Nation and both Greene and Hale counties where the rate of increase in income is less than 10% when the rate of every other county is over 10%.

Poverty

Many people who live in Alabama and West Alabama live in poverty, that is, they don't have sufficient income to meet their basic needs. The Census Bureau uses a set of income thresholds to determine who is in poverty. Those thresholds vary by family size and composition. The poverty rate in the State of Alabama as well as all of the counties in West Alabama remain well above the poverty rate of the Nation as a whole. Four of the seven counties of West Alabama have poverty rates above 20%. One county, Greene, experienced an increase in the poverty rates over the period from 2010 to 2020 of 17.4%. Low income persons and persons in poverty are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and other forms of economic shock due to their lack of resources that can be used for recovery.

Employment Growth

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics performs a quarterly census of employment and wages (QCEW) for those employers and workers covered by unemployment insurance or compensation. It doesn't cover everyone, but it can give an indication of changes in the local and regional economy by looking at the number of jobs and the number of establishments over time. The differences between West Alabama counties in the area of job growth is striking. Job growth from 2010 to 2019 in Bibb and Lamar counties was above the State level and, in Tuscaloosa County, it was almost double. However, four counties have had little job growth or significant declines.

Establishment Growth

Using the quarterly census of employment and wages (QCEW) as discussed above for workers, the change in the number of local and regional establishments can be looked at over time to examine economic growth and decline. The State, the West Alabama Region, and all counties in the area had significantly slower establishment growth over 2010 to 2020 than the Nation. Bibb and Tuscaloosa counties were well above the other counties in establishment growth.

Average Compensation

Again, using the quarterly census of employment and wages (QCEW), average annual wage growth can be shown and compared to the State. Notably, no counties in the Region have an average annual wage as high as the State. Also, while all counties have compensation levels that have increased, one county is lagging far behind.

Table 2-1: Area and Population Density by County in 2020

	Square Miles	Population in 2020	Population Density
United States	3,809,525.00	331,449,281	87.01
Alabama	50,633.00	5,024,279	99.23
Region II	5,347.80	321,260	60.07
Bibb	622.40	22,293	35.82
Fayette	627.50	16,321	26.01
Greene	646.90	7,730	11.95
Hale	643.80	14,785	22.97
Lamar	604.70	13,972	23.11
Pickens	881.20	19,123	21.70
Tuscaloosa	1,321.30	227,036	171.83

Sources: US Census; UA Center for Business and Economic Research.

Table 2-2: Population Growth from 2010 to 2030

	2010 Census	2020 Census	Growth %	2030 Projection
United States	308,745,538	331,449,281	7.4%	---
Alabama	4,779,736	5,024,279	5.1%	5,124,380
Region II	293,927	321,260	9.3%	320,790
Bibb	22,915	22,293	-2.7%	22,023
Fayette	17,241	16,321	-5.3%	15,207
Greene	9,045	7,730	-14.5%	7,326
Hale	15,760	14,785	-6.2%	13,600
Lamar	14,564	13,972	-4.1%	12,086
Pickens	19,746	19,123	-3.2%	20,289
Tuscaloosa	194,656	227,036	16.6%	230,259

Sources: West Alabama Economic Playbook; UA Center for Business and Economic Research.

Table 2-3: Median Age from 2010 to 2020

	2010	2020	Change %
United States	37.2	38.2	2.7%
Alabama	37.9	39.2	3.4%
Region II	- - -	- - -	- - -
Bibb	38.0	39.9	5.0%
Fayette	42.6	43.9	3.1%
Greene	41.8	44.6	6.7%
Hale	40.0	40.8	2.0%
Lamar	43.5	44.3	1.8%
Pickens	41.9	42.5	1.4%
Tuscaloosa	31.3	33.2	6.1%

Sources: US Census, ACS 5-year Estimates.

Table 2-4: Race as Indicated by Change in the White Alone Population from 2010 to 2020

	2010	2020	Change %
United States	78.3%	76.5%	-2.3%
Alabama	70.3%	69.2%	-1.6%
Region II	66.7%	61.3%	-8.2%
Bibb	76.6%	74.3%	-3.1%
Fayette	87.0%	83.7%	-3.8%
Greene	17.8%	16.8%	-5.4%
Hale	40.1%	40.6%	1.2%
Lamar	87.3%	85.6%	-1.9%
Pickens	56.9%	56.2%	-1.3%
Tuscaloosa	67.6%	60.2%	-11.0%

Sources: US Census.

Table 2-5: Educational Attainment for Persons Age 25 and Older in 2020

	High School or Higher	Bachelor Degree or Higher
United States	88.6%	33.1%
Alabama	87.1%	26.3%
Region II	---	---
Bibb	79.1%	10.4%
Fayette	82.7%	12.4%
Greene	79.2%	10.1%
Hale	84.0%	14.2%
Lamar	82.3%	11.9%
Pickens	81.6%	14.1%
Tuscaloosa	88.3%	31.6%

Sources: US Census, ACS 5-year Estimates.

Table 2-6: Median Household Income 2010 to 2020

	2010	2020	Change %
United States	\$ 50,046.00	\$ 64,994.00	29.9%
Alabama	\$ 40,538.00	\$ 52,035.00	28.4%
Region II	---	---	---
Bibb	\$ 35,472.00	\$ 51,721.00	45.8%
Fayette	\$ 32,643.00	\$ 41,469.00	27.0%
Greene	\$ 27,117.00	\$ 26,688.00	-1.6%
Hale	\$ 31,790.00	\$ 30,793.00	-3.1%
Lamar	\$ 32,993.00	\$ 42,688.00	29.4%
Pickens	\$ 31,032.00	\$ 40,362.00	30.1%
Tuscaloosa	\$ 43,098.00	\$ 54,283.00	26.0%

Sources: US Census; ACS 5-Year Estimates.

Table 2-7: Poverty Rate 2010 to 2020

	2010	2020	Change %
United States	15.3%	12.8%	-16.3%
Alabama	18.9%	16.0%	-15.3%
Region II	---	---	---
Bibb	20.9%	18.1%	-13.4%
Fayette	27.3%	20.8%	-23.8%
Greene	31.0%	36.4%	17.4%
Hale	24.8%	24.6%	-0.8%
Lamar	21.5%	17.7%	-17.7%
Pickens	24.4%	24.7%	1.2%
Tuscaloosa	18.0%	17.2%	-4.4%

Sources: US Census; ACS 5-Year Estimates.

Table 2-8: Change in Jobs 2010 to 2020

	2010	2019	Change %
United States	127,820,442	139,103,773	8.8%
Alabama	1,813,155	1,909,145	5.3%
Region II	102,137	109,872	7.6%
Bibb	4,030	4,653	15.5%
Fayette	3,982	3,891	-2.3%
Greene	1,949	1,833	-6.0%
Hale	2,905	2,529	-12.9%
Lamar	3,124	3,321	6.3%
Pickens	3,810	3,561	-6.5%
Tuscaloosa	82,338	90,084	9.4%

Sources: Statsamerica (US Bureau of Labor Statistics)

Table 2-9: Change in Establishments 2010 to 2020

	2010	2020	Change %
United States	8,993,109	10,487,687	16.6%
Alabama	116,828	132,136	13.1%
Region II	6,058	6,469	6.8%
Bibb	345	370	7.2%
Fayette	358	346	-3.4%
Greene	159	165	3.8%
Hale	274	288	5.1%
Lamar	287	280	-2.4%
Pickens	352	340	-3.4%
Tuscaloosa	4,283	4,680	9.3%

Sources: Statsamerica (US Bureau of Labor Statistics)

Table 2-10: Annual Average Wage 2010 to 2020

	2010	2020	Change %
United States	\$ 46,751.00	\$ 64,021.00	36.9%
Alabama	\$ 40,289.00	\$ 52,210.00	29.6%
Region II	---	---	---
Bibb	\$ 33,123.00	\$ 45,974.00	38.8%
Fayette	\$ 28,039.00	\$ 35,845.00	27.8%
Greene	\$ 32,453.00	\$ 36,280.00	11.8%
Hale	\$ 30,746.00	\$ 41,200.00	34.0%
Lamar	\$ 31,419.00	\$ 42,537.00	35.4%
Pickens	\$ 30,639.00	\$ 41,926.00	36.8%
Tuscaloosa	\$ 40,198.00	\$ 49,881.00	24.1%

Sources: Statsamerica (US Bureau of Labor Statistics)



Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan

Chapter 3. Local and Regional Assets

Assets for Recovery and Resiliency
Counties, Cities, and Towns
Summary of Selected Assets

Assets for Recovery and Resiliency

This Chapter is a summary of selected local and regional assets that may be used for long-term recovery and future economic development. Much information regarding economic assets is already in place and documented as a result of prior efforts of the West Alabama Regional Commission. These are presented the West Alabama Economic Development Playbook. For the purposes of this Program, it was desired to discover a broader selection of asset categories that may be of advantage under a new “post-pandemic” normal.

The summary of selected assets presented in this report is not intended to be an exhaustive study of each and every asset that can be identified within the local and regional area. Rather, it is an examination of those assets that are considered to have the greatest opportunity to have a positive

impact on recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and future resiliency, whether or not the asset or opportunity is directly pandemic related.

Counties, Cities, and Towns

Fundamental to any discussion of local and regional assets are the local governments across the Region. In the West Alabama Region, there are seven counties and 37 municipalities. It is important to have an understanding of these local governmental organizations. These local governmental organizations should be considered essential assets in promoting the general economic prosperity of the Region. In addition, most projects or programs to improve local and regional assets will need some level of participation by the local government for implementation. These counties and municipalities are listed in the following tables. The first table lists the counties. It indicates the metropolitan area the county is in and its population in 2020.

Metropolitan Area and Population by County in 2020

County	Metropolitan Area	Population
Bibb	Metropolitan (Birmingham)	22,293
Fayette	Non-metropolitan	16,321
Greene	Non-metropolitan	7,730
Hale	Metropolitan (Tuscaloosa)	14,785
Lamar	Non-metropolitan	13,972
Pickens	Metropolitan (Tuscaloosa)	19,123
Tuscaloosa	Metropolitan (Tuscaloosa)	227,036
West Alabama Total		321,260

Sources: US Census; US Office of Management and Budget.

The second table lists the 37 municipalities within the West Alabama Region. The table indicates the county in which each municipality is located and its population. Other than the cities of Tuscaloosa and Northport in Tuscaloosa County, all of these communities have a population of less than 5,000 people. This is indicative of the rural nature of much of the Region. It also indicates the probable difficulty in amassing the necessary resources to make substantial improvements to local and regional assets such as infrastructure. This suggests the importance and necessity of securing State or Federal assistance prior to undertaking such projects.

Population of Cities and Towns in 2020

Municipality	County	Population
Brent	Bibb	2,972
Centreville	Bibb	2,800
West Blocton	Bibb	1,217
Woodstock	Bibb	1,472
Belk	Fayette	186

Berry	Fayette	1,216
Fayette	Fayette	4,285
Glen Allen	Fayette	433
Boligee	Greene	301
Eutaw	Greene	2,937
Forkland	Greene	445
Union	Greene	180
Akron	Hale	225
Greensboro	Hale	2,218
Moundville	Hale	3,024
Newbern	Hale	133
Beaverton	Lamar	187
Detroit	Lamar	230
Kennedy	Lamar	435
Millport	Lamar	1,010
Sulligent	Lamar	1,879
Vernon	Lamar	1,921
Aliceville	Pickens	2,177
Carrollton	Pickens	1,023
Ethelsville	Pickens	49
Gordo	Pickens	1,628
McMullen	Pickens	32
Memphis	Pickens	29
Pickensville	Pickens	557
Reform	Pickens	1,520
Brookwood	Tuscaloosa	2,504
Coaling	Tuscaloosa	2,035
Coker	Tuscaloosa	904
Lake View	Tuscaloosa	3,560
Northport	Tuscaloosa	31,125
Tuscaloosa	Tuscaloosa	99,600
Vance	Tuscaloosa	2,092

Sources: West Alabama Regional Commission; US Census.

Summary of Selected Assets

A work session on local and regional assets was conducted in December 2020 with a small working group for the purpose of identifying and examining local and regional assets in the West Alabama Region. The members of the working group were selected to participate because of their personal knowledge about the West Alabama Region.

The working group started by reviewing the regional economic situation and the economic assets as found in the West Alabama Economic Playbook. This was expanded in an attempt to list key assets in a range of categories. To start the discussion, the categories were listed as: natural assets, built assets, social assets, economic assets, and service assets. As it turned out, some assets actually belong in multiple categories, such as natural assets and service assets which may also be economic assets. And other categories, namely financial and governmental, came forward in their importance.

Nineteen key assets were identified by the work session participants. Since several of these were quite similar, they were consolidated down to the fifteen selected assets which are listed below. In the end, the categories in which the assets are summarized below are listed as:

- 1) Economic assets;
- 2) Service assets;
- 3) Financial assets; and
- 4) Built assets.

Economic Assets

Manufacturing Sector. The manufacturing sector is a large component of the regional economy. The automotive cluster is of particular importance to this economic sector. The proportion of the regional economic base in manufacturing is second only to the Mobile area. Manufacturing is present in all counties but has its strongest presence in Tuscaloosa County. Among covered employment in 2019 reported by the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, 20,428 people in the Region worked in manufacturing and 1,535 worked in mining. Mining and manufacturing accounted for 18.7% of covered employment in the Region as compared to 13.8% statewide. The assets in the manufacturing sector are privately owned and funded. Economic development programs at the State and Federal level provide incentives to growth in this sector. The West Alabama Regional Commission maintains a Directory of Mining and Manufacturing that contains contact information for regional manufacturers along with indications of products and employment.

Commercial Sector. The commercial sector includes a broad cross-section of retail, service, and other businesses. This sector has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic due to the personal interaction that is in the nature of these businesses and because many of these businesses are locally owned and lack the resources of larger companies. The assets in the commercial sector are privately owned and funded. While centered regionally in Tuscaloosa, there are commercial enterprises in almost every community.

Outdoor Recreation/Tourism Cluster. The outdoor recreation/tourism cluster is, in part, a subset of the commercial sector that tends to capitalize on the natural assets and resources present within the Region for the purposes of promoting tourism and support services. The businesses in this cluster are privately owned but they typically depend on publicly owned and funded lands and resources to generate activity. Most outdoor recreation is accomplished on a local basis in addition to the system of State Parks.

Among the State Parks, Lake Lurleen State Park is located within the Region. The primary resource for statewide recreation is the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). The SCORP contains an overview of statewide and regional demand and needs of various types of outdoor recreation pursuits. It also contains a catalog of resources that may be used for recreation improvements. A new SCORP has been completed. Participation in the preparation of the SCORP is important to assure that the needs of the people within the Region are addressed. The West Alabama Regional Commission has been participating in this effort.

Cultural and Historic Resources. Culture and historic resources within the Region may often be capitalized on for the purpose of promoting tourism and support services. The businesses in this cluster are privately owned. They often depend on publicly owned or community supported lands and resources to generate activity. These resources may be a historic site or a neighborhood or district that contains a number of structures. They may be associated with a person or with an historical event. An interactive map on the web site of the Alabama Historical Commission shows within the Region too many resources and types of resources to list here. Individual communities need to know about the programs and grants available to take advantage of these resources as well as the tax benefits that may be available to those who own and improve them. Many of these programs and grants are available through the Alabama Historical Commission.

Agricultural Sector. The rural areas of the Region have a large agricultural component to their economy. This component includes significant poultry and catfish farming. Forestry is also an important component of the Regions economy. According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture (the next Census of Agriculture will be in 2022) there were 2,450 farms within the Region covering 1,107 square miles of land. These farms produced a market value of products sold totaling \$255,979,000. Of this total, 86.9% was in livestock, poultry, aquaculture, etc. The total market value of products sold was 4.3% of the statewide total. Also, there were 3,802 producers working on farms within the Region which was 5.9% of the statewide total number of producers. The assets in this sector are privately owned and funded with significant support from Federal and State agricultural programs. In particular, U.S. Department of Agriculture operates the Rural Development Agency which targets communities in need and then empowers them with financial and technical resources.

Workforce. This refers to the entire workforce of the region. The workforce is, of course, found throughout the Region, but has by far its largest concentration in the Tuscaloosa area. The civilian labor force of the Region in December 2020 was 141,509 with 102,719 of that total being in Tuscaloosa County. There was concern that over the course of the pandemic, the labor force within the Region would decline. It has actually fluctuated over the course of 2020 with a high of 145,468 and a low of 139,180. In January 2020, the share of the labor force in the Region to the total population was 47.1% while in December 2020, the share was 46.5% - a decline of 0.6 points over the course the year. This is a total of 1,820 workers less than when the year started. Unemployment has fluctuated much more greatly. Starting in January 2020, the unemployment rate was 3.1% for the Region, fell to a low of 2.8% in February then rose to a high of 16.4% in April and then declining to 4.0% in December 2020. At its height in April, the actual number of unemployed was 23,844. The number settled to 5,676 in December 2020. Opportunities include capitalizing on the workforce pipeline from education and skills training including manufacturing training leading to employment with major employers as well as smaller employers. It specifically includes the West Alabama Works program.

Service Assets

Higher Education. Higher education is a significant component of the regional economy and provides essential services to deal with economic and health issues. The Region has one major university, one

college and two community colleges. A higher education cluster centered on the University of Alabama is located in Tuscaloosa with a selection of two-year schools, career centers, and training centers in the other counties. Most of these institutions are publicly funded. As an economic asset as well as a service asset, the University of Alabama reports a total statewide economic impact of \$2.905 billion and providing 13,784 jobs. The University's Fall 2020 enrollment was 37,842. In addition to instruction, the University operates a wealth of outreach programs and offices. Relevant to this project is the University Center for Economic Development which is serving as a project partner. Other programs and offices have been, and are expected to be, consulted as a part of this project. These relationships will continue to be beneficial with future projects as well.

Medical and Health Care Infrastructure. This broadly includes hospitals, clinics, private practice offices, health department facilities, mental health facilities, etc. In addition to providing services, this sector employs a large number of people and is a significant component of the regional economy. A hospital is located in all but two of the counties in the Region, those being Lamar and Pickens counties. These assets are both publicly and privately funded. Many, if not most, of these organizations are listed in the West Alabama Senior Resource Directory. A better perspective on the location of facilities and on those areas where there are few facilities could be gained by preparing a map of health care facilities. This could reveal those populations that might need better access to medical care and help to devise strategies to assist them.

Non-Profit and Volunteer Organizations. Non-profit and volunteer organizations provide services for the public or social benefit without generating a profit. In this context of this project, it includes churches. These organizations can be used for social interaction, community activities, family outreach, and so on. In many ways they are an overlooked resource. These are locally and regionally based organizations that are privately owned and largely funded by a variety of private sources. A quick online search reveals a multitude of non-profits within the Region. The Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama has a "Non-Profit Council" for the purpose of providing collaborative relationships between non-profits and the business community. The Alabama Association of Nonprofits lists fifteen members in the Tuscaloosa area alone. A catalog of non-profit and volunteer organizations could be prepared as a companion to the catalog of foundations mentioned below.

First Responders. First responders includes the police departments, fire departments, emergency management agencies (EMA's) within each county, and E911 offices as well as the State and Federal supportive agencies. First responders have extensive experience in dealing with emergency situations and have expertise in the logistics of emergency situations. The county emergency management agencies each have local emergency planning committees (LEPC's) and are accustomed to coordinating activities across a range of local and state agencies as situations require. It has been determined that EMA's should be extensively involved in pandemic response and relief efforts. It may be worthwhile to consider the extent of their involvement for future events.

Political Leadership. This reference to political leadership primarily refers to the locally and regionally based elected leaders within the Region. These leaders are mostly mayors, commissioners, and council members of their respective counties, cities, and towns. Within the Region there are seven counties and 37 municipalities. Leadership training is essential for local elected officials to familiarize them with best practices in the governance and management of their communities as well as with those intergovernmental programs and funding that may be of benefit to their communities. Due to turnover as the result of elections, it is necessary to provide leadership training on a periodic basis for new elected officials. Periodic training also serves as a review and reminder for those who are continuing in office. A number of organizations provide training to political leadership. These include the Association of County Commissions of Alabama (ACCA), the Alabama League of Municipalities (ALM), the Economic

Development Association of Alabama (EDAA), the Alabama Community Leadership Network (ACLN) and others. Such training programs should be reviewed from time to time to assure their relevance in light of changing conditions and current issues and events.

Public Agencies and Programs. State and Federal agencies and programs provide intergovernmental aid to communities for a wide range of needs and purposes. In addition to their regular programs, these agencies provided a variety of funding programs directed toward pandemic relief and economic recovery. Whether a regular program or one specific to the pandemic, this assistance may be in the form of grants or loans or both. Each individual agency or program will have its own purposes for providing assistance and its own criteria for determining those communities or projects that will be eligible for submitting an application and that will receive an award of funding. Upon deciding on a project for which they would like to receive assistance, applicants for funding will sometimes work directly with a funding agency or with an intermediary that will assist with the request for funding and possibly with the administration of those funds received. It is often preferable to procure the assistance of professional grant writers and administrators early in the process to avoid problems and delays. The West Alabama Regional Commission provides this assistance for the most commonly used grant and loan programs for the communities within its service area. The Commission regularly works with the funding programs of the following agencies:

- Appalachian Regional Commission (Local Development District);
- Delta Regional Authority (Local Development District);
- Economic Development Administration (Economic Development District); and
- Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs.



The Commission works with a range of other agencies from time-to-time as needs warrant. The Commission publishes a "Grant and Loan Guide" for the benefit of local government agencies within the Region to assist them in determining those programs and funding sources that would be most appropriate and helpful for their respective projects and communities.

Financial Assets

Financial Institutions. Private financial institutions includes banks, credit unions and the like as both primary and secondary sources of financing for business activity. While they have a local presence, most of them will be based elsewhere. Programs such as those of the RLF program at the West Alabama Regional Commission can help with lower credit ratings and higher risk businesses. The RLF program can provide loans to local businesses to support job creation and/or retention throughout the Region. The RLF program does not operate in competition with private sector financial institutions but is supplemental to them.

Local and Regional Foundations. Foundations may be community foundations, family foundations or corporate foundations. Of importance here are those foundations that provide funding for local and regional community-based causes. Relevant foundations may or may not be based within the locality or region. There are also web-based resources that post funding opportunities such as Smart Growth Online and membership organizations such as the Council on Foundations. A more in-depth review of foundations and other private organizations that provide funding for community-based causes should be performed along with periodic review of such resources to remain aware of possible opportunities. A

catalog of foundation resources could be prepared as a companion to the catalog of non-profit organizations mentioned above and could be included in WARC's *Grant and Loan Guide*.

Built Assets

Transportation Assets. This refers to the full range of transportation resources including public transportation and the practical allocation of those resources. The allocation of resources is guided by the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and the Rural Planning Organization (RPO) for their respective service areas. All of the counties in the Region receive a selection of transit services provided by specific non-profit organizations - usually for specific clientele such as senior citizens or persons with disabilities. Additionally, Bibb, Greene, and Hale counties receive services from West Alabama Public Transportation (WAPT) which provides both fixed route and demand response service. Pickens County receives demand response service from HELP, Inc. The Tuscaloosa County Parking and Transit Authority (TCPTA) provides fixed route and demand response service within the City of Tuscaloosa. Anyone interested in these services should contact the specific service provider they are interested in to make sure they meet any eligibility requirements. According to the West Alabama Coordinated Public Transit Plan: Report for 2021, all counties within the Region have noted the lack of funding. Additional transportation funding was made available through the CARES Act which was passed by Congress in response to the pandemic in order to, among other things, assist disadvantaged workers who may have been particularly impacted by the pandemic. WAPT, HELP, and TCPTA have received CARES Act funding.

Community Infrastructure. This includes the range of infrastructure and utilities, i.e., potable water, sanitary sewer, storm drainage, and local streets. The need for infrastructure improvements can vary widely from community to community. Local leaders intuitively know the needs of their communities. Working with them to develop an overall strategy for improvement can help make the most of investments. Of particular concern are those infrastructure needs in low and moderate income communities. While these communities are often left behind when it comes to economic prosperity, the impacts of the pandemic likely serve to exacerbate these problems due to lingering unemployment and the resulting decline in revenues needed to make improvements. The Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program is particularly useful for these types of projects.

Community Facilities. This includes those facilities typical of a functioning community, e.g., city and town halls, community centers, police and fire stations, etc. These facilities are often used by members of the community for a variety of purposes beyond their stated purpose, particularly in smaller communities. In many cases, these facilities are inadequate due to age, community growth, or uneven maintenance over the years. There are a number of programs that may be used to upgrade them, such as, the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG), the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) programs, and the Rural Development programs of the USDA. Community planning funds may be requested from some of these programs to develop an overall strategy that will best assess and prioritize the use of program funding.

Digital/Broadband Resources. This refers to communications infrastructure of all types. Some areas, particularly rural, however, do not have full access to reliable broadband services. This makes it difficult to expand the local economy since modern industry and distribution usually requires access to broadband service. Various programs have been proposed over the years to address this problem. The most recent programs are appropriately directed toward private sector providers to address the economics of expansion to rural areas. The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA) operates the Broadband Connectivity for Students program. In addition, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA), both of which WARC is affiliated, make funding available for broadband projects. The State's ARC program lists among its targeted

investment priorities to “expand broadband access throughout Appalachian Alabama” and to “ensure that Alabama citizens in rural areas have access to high-speed broadband internet.” The DRA’s “Strategic Economic Development Plan” includes a strategy to “expand and improve access to affordable digital infrastructure across the region, especially in areas where it is currently deficient.” The USDA offers telecommunication loan and grant programs for: 1) community connect grants; 2) distance learning and telemedicine grants; 3) rural broadband access loan and loan guarantees; and 4) telecommunications infrastructure loans and guarantees.



Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan

Chapter 4. Employment Considerations

-
- Pandemic Cases in the West Alabama Region
 - Labor Force Trends
 - Demographic Characteristics of Unemployment Claims
 - Socio-Economic Factors for Resilience
 - The Household Pulse Survey
 - Locally Identified Issues
 - Persistent Unemployment and the Economic Recovery
 - Reference Tables
-

Pandemic Cases in the West Alabama Region

This Chapter of the Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan examines the employment impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on West Alabama communities and on employment within the Region. It also takes a look at some of the factors that come into play in the event of a pandemic or similar economic shock. This examination and discussion looks at selected socio-economic characteristics of the population and workforce, unemployment, and occupational characteristics of those unemployed. Vulnerable

populations such as race, age and gender are reviewed along with a word on persistent unemployment and the economic recovery. The discussion is followed by a number of reference tables presenting supporting data from various sources as noted.

The accompanying chart presents a comparison of COVID-19 cases and deaths. The cases and deaths reported are from January 21, 2020 until March 10, 2022. The cases in the West Alabama Region are compared with the cases in the counties in West Alabama as well at the State and Nation. The data suggests that the number of cases and deaths were more in West Alabama in proportion to its population than for the State and much more than for the Nation as whole.

Cases and Deaths as of March 10, 2022

	Cases	Deaths	Deaths/Cases	Cases per 100k	Deaths per 100k
United States	79,198,539	959,533	1.2%	23,895	289
Alabama	1,288,454	18,766	1.5%	25,645	374
West Alabama	82,231	1,245	1.5%	25,596	388
Bibb	6,400	100	1.6%	28,709	449
Fayette	4,964	93	1.9%	30,415	570
Greene	1,859	48	2.6%	24,049	621
Hale	4,672	102	2.2%	31,600	690
Lamar	3,693	62	1.7%	26,431	444
Pickens	5,228	99	1.9%	27,339	518
Tuscaloosa	55,415	741	1.3%	24,408	326

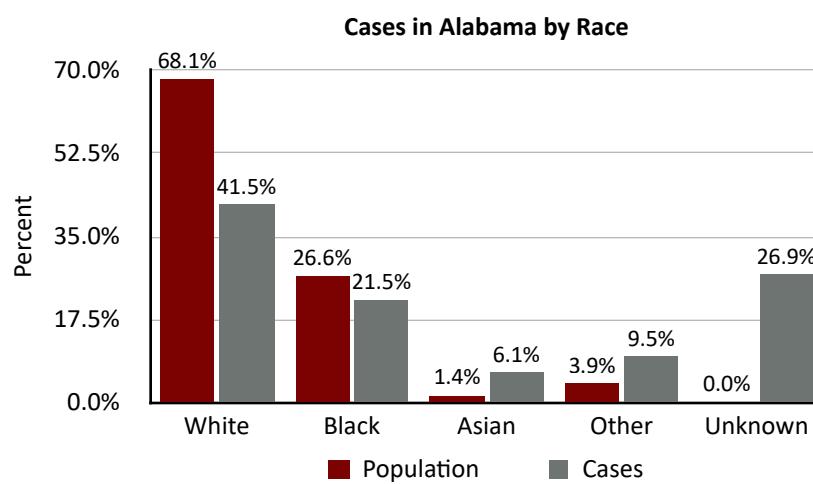
Source: Centers for Disease Control as of May 26, 2021.

Notes: Cases and deaths are both confirmed and probable; per 100k indicates per 100,000 total population.

Demographics of Cases. The Centers for Disease Control presents demographic information regarding cases and deaths for those geographic areas that contributed data and for which the information is known. This information can be found and reviewed at <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#demographics>. It will be

changing as time goes on. As of June 2, 2021, based on available information, the Asian and Black populations had somewhat less cases than their proportion of the total population while the White population had much less than theirs. At the same time, American Indian and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander populations had somewhat more cases than their proportion of the total population while the Hispanic population had much more than theirs. As for deaths from

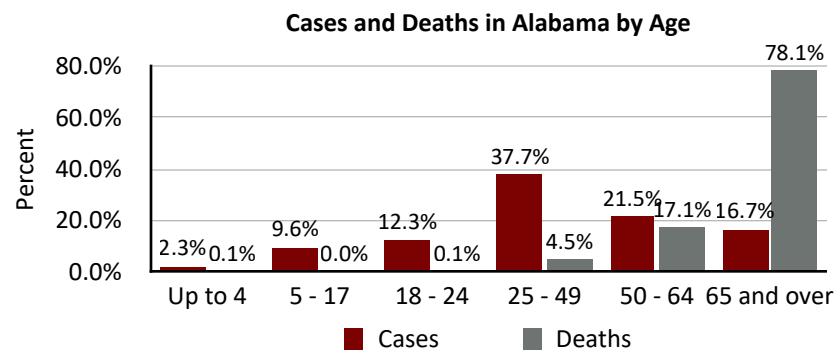
COVID-19, the Asian and White populations had fewer cases than their proportion of the total population while the American Indian, Black, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic populations had



more cases than their proportion of the total population. Of course, there are many reasons for variation in impacts of COVID-19. However, the greater number of cases among the Hispanic population, and the fact that deaths among the Black population are disproportionate to cases among the same population brings questions to mind regarding the effectiveness of disease prevention prior to infection and medical care once an infection is found.

The Alabama Department of Public Health maintains information on its web site that indicates cases and deaths by age, gender, race, and ethnicity. The information on race is presented in the accompanying chart, however, the number of cases in which race or ethnicity is unknown makes it difficult to draw conclusions. There are 26.9% of cases in which race is unknown and 52.2% of cases in which ethnicity is unknown.

As for gender, females accounted for 54.0% of the cases in Alabama while females are 51.6% of the population. Males accounted for 44.4% of the cases while making up 48.4% of the population. Of 1.6% of the cases, gender was unknown.



As is well known, by far most of the cases that result in death are among older patients. This is clearly shown in the accompanying chart which shows cases and deaths in Alabama by age.

Vaccinations. According to the Centers for Disease Control and the Alabama Department of Public Health, vaccinations in Alabama and in West Alabama appear to be lagging the National rate of vaccination somewhat for the over 65 age group, and lagging quite a bit for the population in general. Vaccinations are available to all age groups except the very young under age 6, although this may be approved soon. As always with vaccines, there is an element of distrust or wait-and-see among many people. It is generally agreed that a high rate of vaccination is necessary to bring the coronavirus under control and fully and safely resume normal activities.

Vaccinations as of March 10, 2022

County	Population Fully Vaccinated	% of Population Vaccinated	Age 65 and Over Fully Vaccinated	% of Age 65 and Over Fully Vaccinated
United States	216,355,844	65.2%	48,676,530	88.8%
Alabama	2,326,671	46.3%	*	*
West Alabama	132,648	41.3%	35,408	78.7%
Bibb	7,713	34.4%	2,291	61.4%
Fayette	5,653	34.7%	2,140	60.4%
Greene	4,084	50.4%	1,398	74.0%
Hale	8,917	60.9%	2,433	84.3%
Lamar	6,016	43.6%	2,379	77.7%
Pickens	9,724	48.8%	2,863	73.7%
Tuscaloosa	90,541	43.2%	21,904	76.1%

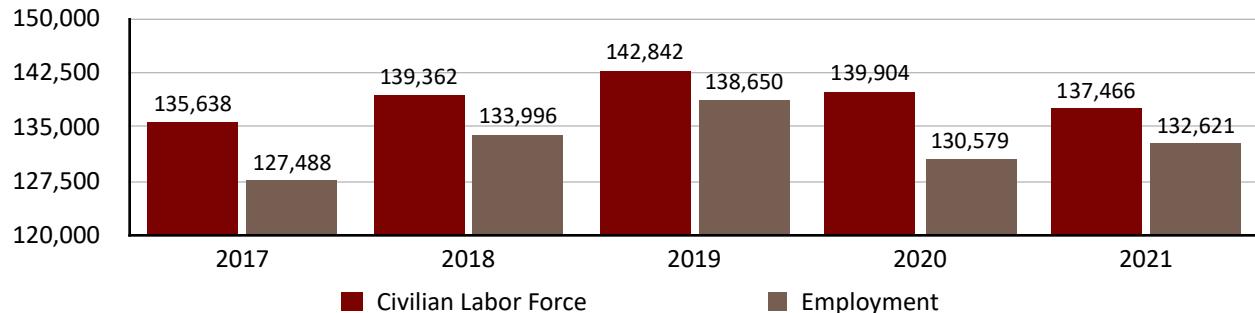
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Alabama Department of Public Health as of March 10, 2022.

Note: Vaccinated are persons who have completed the vaccine series, * - insufficient data.

Labor Force Trends

A review of the labor force over the past five years prior to the pandemic is helpful to observe ongoing trends that were already in play. The Reference Tables at the end of this Chapter include, for the years 2017 to 2021, the Civilian Labor Force, Employment, Average Annual Unemployment, and the Average Annual Unemployment Rate.

Labor Force Trend in West Alabama

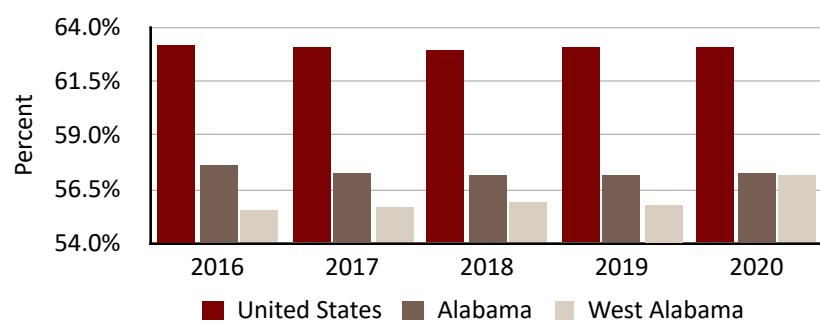


Civilian Labor Force and Employment. According to information from the Alabama Department of Labor, the civilian labor force and employment in West Alabama had grown steadily over the past five years until 2020 when the civilian labor force fell back to 2018 levels and employment fell back to 2017 levels. The Reference Tables show a similar trend at both the state and national level with the Nation as a whole having a more extreme fall back.

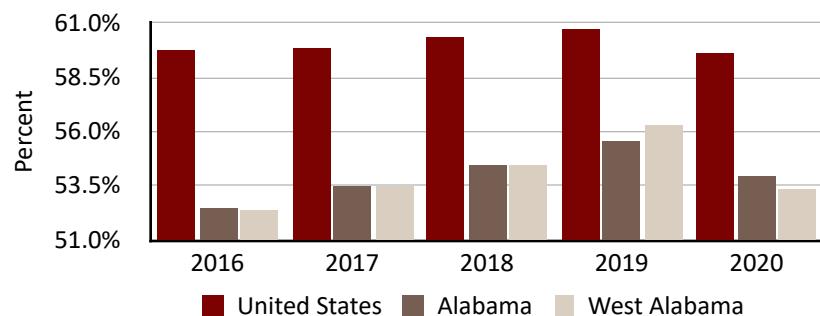
Labor Force Participation Rate.

The labor force participation rate can be used to determine the proportion of the population that is in the workforce or actively seeking work. A higher rate indicates willingness to engage in economic activity while a lower rate may indicate discouragement as people have difficulty finding and keeping suitable employment. In recent years, the National rate has typically hovered around 63.0%. The rate for the State and the Region have been quite a bit less than the National rate in recent years. The rate for the West Alabama Region, though, does not appear to have suffered over the course of the pandemic as substantially as that of the State and Nation. While there are other ways to calculate this rate, for comparison purposes in this study, it is calculated as the civilian labor force divided by the population aged 16 and over (Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates).

Labor Force Participation

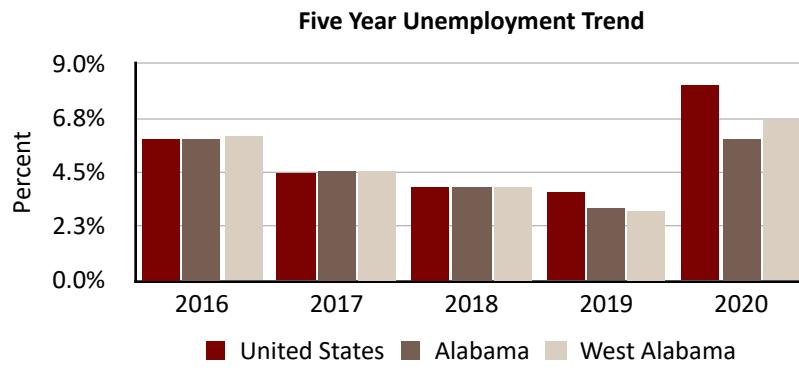


Employment to Population Ratio



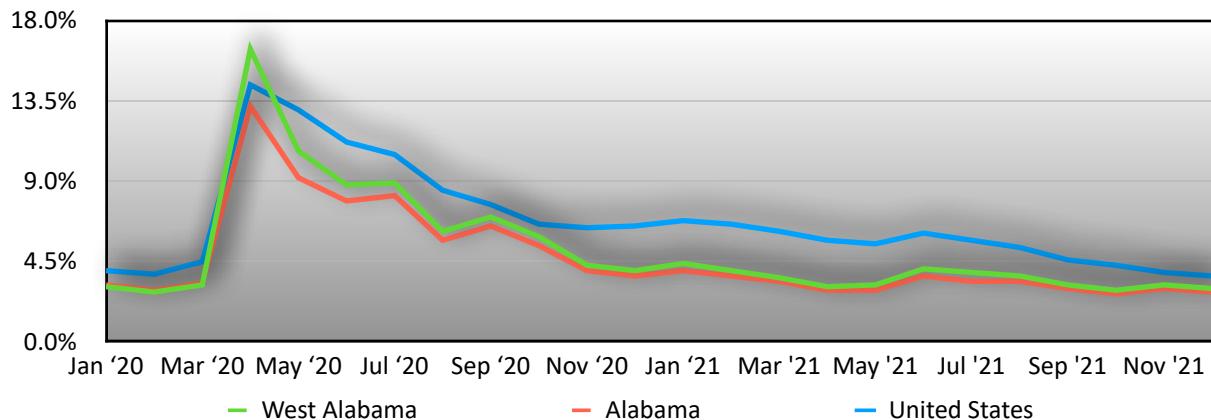
Employment to Population Ratio. Employment can be compared to the population to derive an employment to population ratio. This ratio can be a more reliable indicator of the economic situation showing job shrinkage or growth. As the chart indicates, while the labor force participation rate had mostly held steady until the pandemic in 2020, the State and Region had experienced substantial job growth. As the pandemic recovery progresses, it will be interesting to see how employment grows to catch up with pre-pandemic job growth. While there are other ways to calculate this rate, for comparison purposes in this study, it is calculated as the employment divided by the population aged 16 and over (Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates).

Unemployment Trend. The unemployment rate was steadily decreasing at the National, State, and Regional level for several years until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In the West Alabama Region the annual average unemployment rate went from 6.0% in 2016, to 2.9% in 2019, and then back up to 6.7% in 2020 while the National rate shot up to 8.1%.



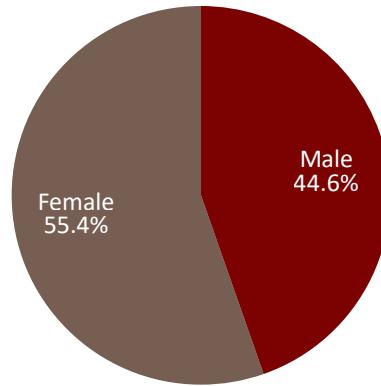
Unemployment During the COVID-19 Pandemic. The unemployment rate rose dramatically in March and April of 2020 and then began declining month by month during the remainder of 2020 and the early months of 2021. The unemployment rate for the West Alabama Region was 3.1% in January 2020. It peaked at 16.4% in April 2020 and has declined to 3.0% in December 2021 - just under the rate of January 2020. This is just above the December 2021 rate of 2.8% for the State and considerably below the December 2021 rate of 3.7% for the Nation. The State unemployment rate of 2.8% for December 2021 is just below the low for the State unemployment rate in February 2020. The National unemployment rate of 3.7% in December 2021 is actually lower than the low of 3.8% nationally in February 2020. While the unemployment rate must be examined in light of the labor force participation rate, it was noted above that it does not appear that the labor force participation rate for West Alabama has suffered as much as that of the State and Nation over the course of the pandemic.

Unemployment Rate: January 2020 to December 2021



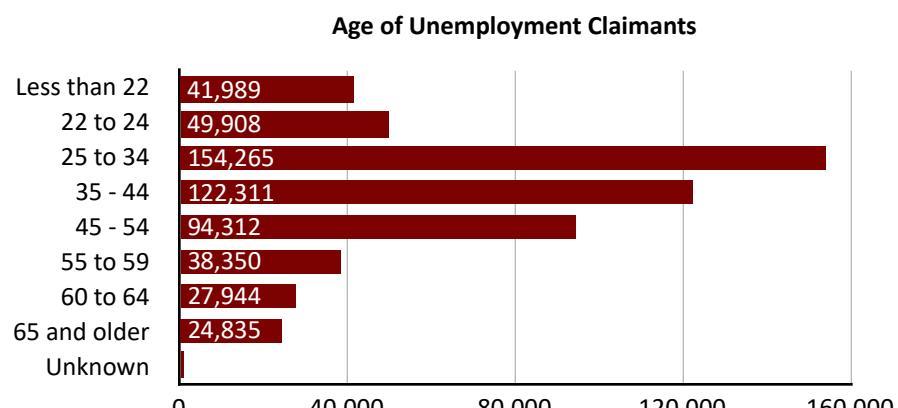
Demographic Characteristics of Unemployment Insurance Claims

The Alabama Department of Labor maintains data on the demographics of unemployment claimants. This information is particularly useful when understood in the climate of an economic emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Information is presented here by gender, age, race, industry, and occupation for Alabama statewide for the calendar year 2020. The calendar year 2020, of course, was the initial and most extensive period of unemployment during the pandemic. Information for the West Alabama Region of the State was requested but was not provided for the purposes of this report. It is hoped that it will be provided at some point, if not through this effort, through the West Alabama Workforce Development Council. In any case, the Statewide data is expected to be largely reflective of the Region.

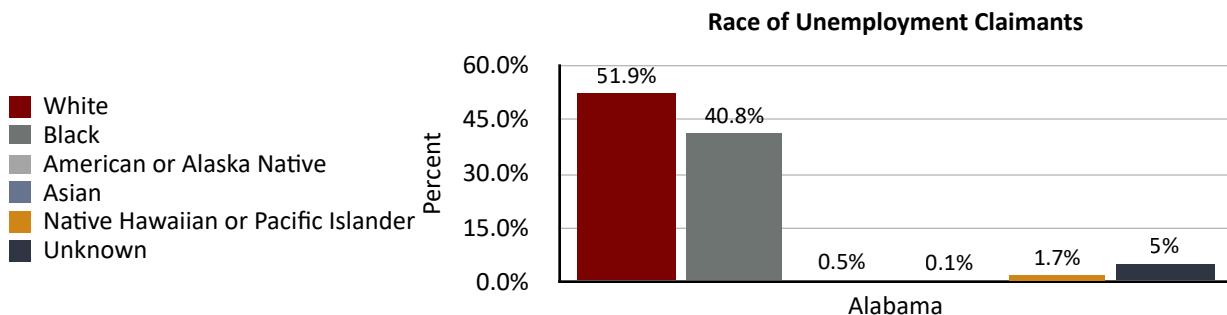


Gender. In 2020, there were 555,246 unemployment claimants statewide listed according to gender. Of these 307,419 were women and 246,827 were men. These claimants were disproportionately women at about 55.4% - 10 percentage points more than men. Not only were women disproportionately impacted by unemployment, it is highly expected that they will have more difficulty re-entering the workforce due to issues such as childcare.

Age. In 2020, there were 555,173 unemployment claimants statewide listed according to age. Although all age groups saw significant need for unemployment claims, the younger age groups, particularly the 25 - 34 age group, had more claims by far. These younger age groups tend to have entry level jobs, little seniority, and/or are not quite as well established in their careers. At the same time, while those in older age groups have not made as many unemployment claims, when they do find themselves unemployed they will have more trouble returning to work and may leave the workforce altogether.

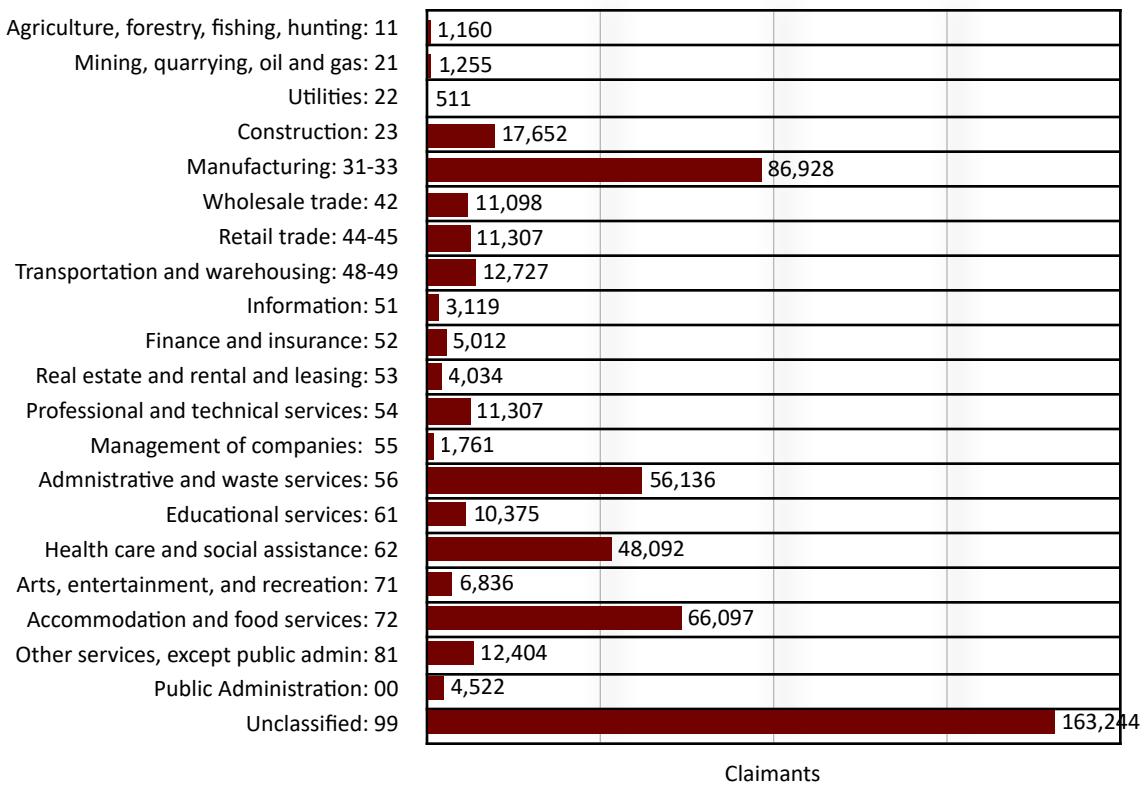


Race. In 2020, there were 558,244 unemployment claimants statewide listed according to race. The black population represents 26.6% of the population, however, they represented 40.8% of the unemployment claims in 2020 Statewide.



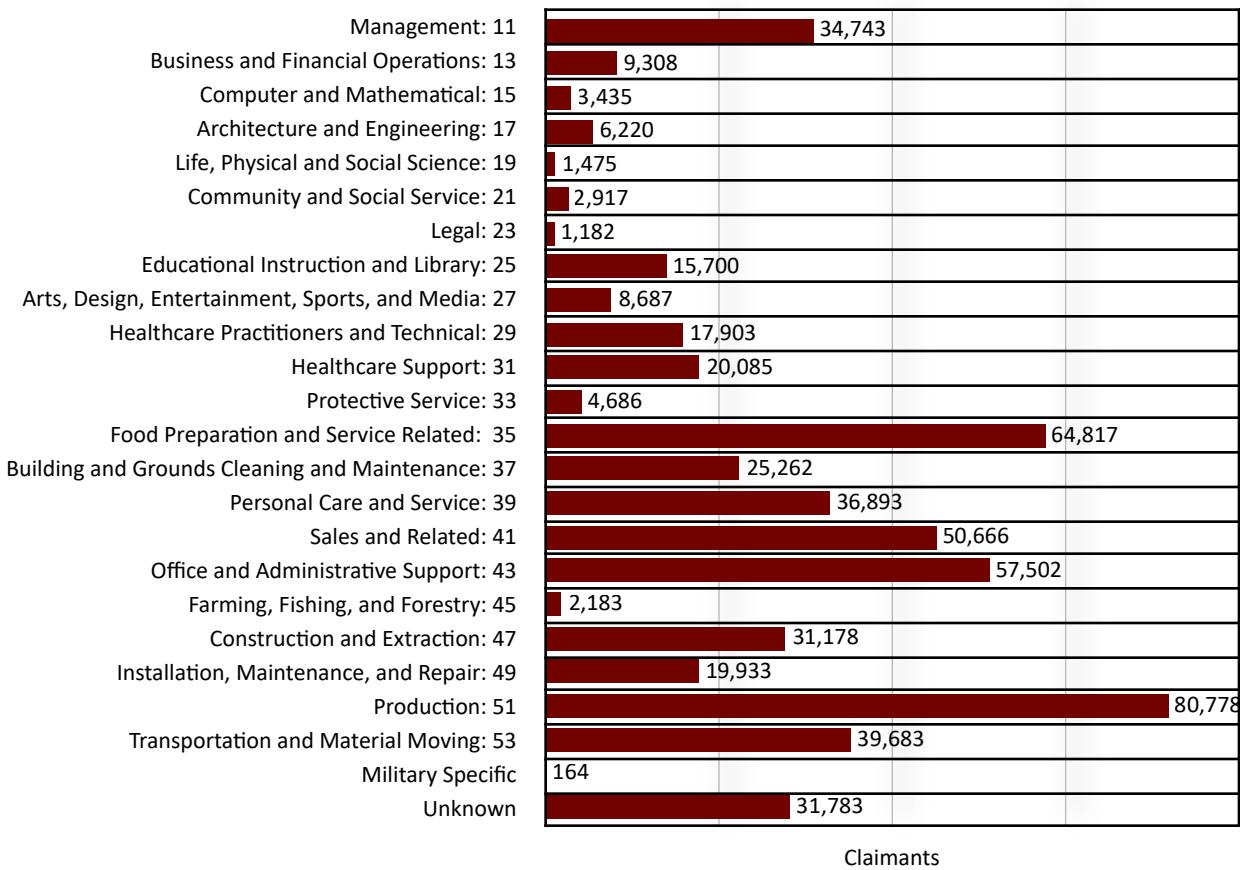
Industry. In 2020, there were 535,576 unemployment claimants statewide listed according to industry. Of these, 163,244 were unclassified with regard to the industry in which they had worked. For those of which the industry was known, the four highest industry groups of unemployment claimants were, in order of claims, manufacturing, accommodation and food services, administration and waste services, and health care and social assistance. It must be noted that these were total claimants for the State for 2020, whether or not they were attributed to the pandemic. The following chart illustrates the claimants by industry for 2020.

Unemployment Claimants by Industry in 2020



Occupation. In 2020, there were 567,183 unemployment claimants statewide listed according to occupation. Of these, 31,783 were unknown with regard to their occupation. For those of which the occupation was known, the four highest occupation groups of unemployment claimants were, in order of claims, production, for preparation and service related, office and administrative support, and sales and related occupations. As with claimants by industry, It must be noted that these were total claimants for the State for 2020, whether or not they were attributed to the pandemic. The following chart illustrates the claimants by occupation for 2020.

Unemployment Claimants by Occupation in 2020



Socio-Economic Factors for Resiliency

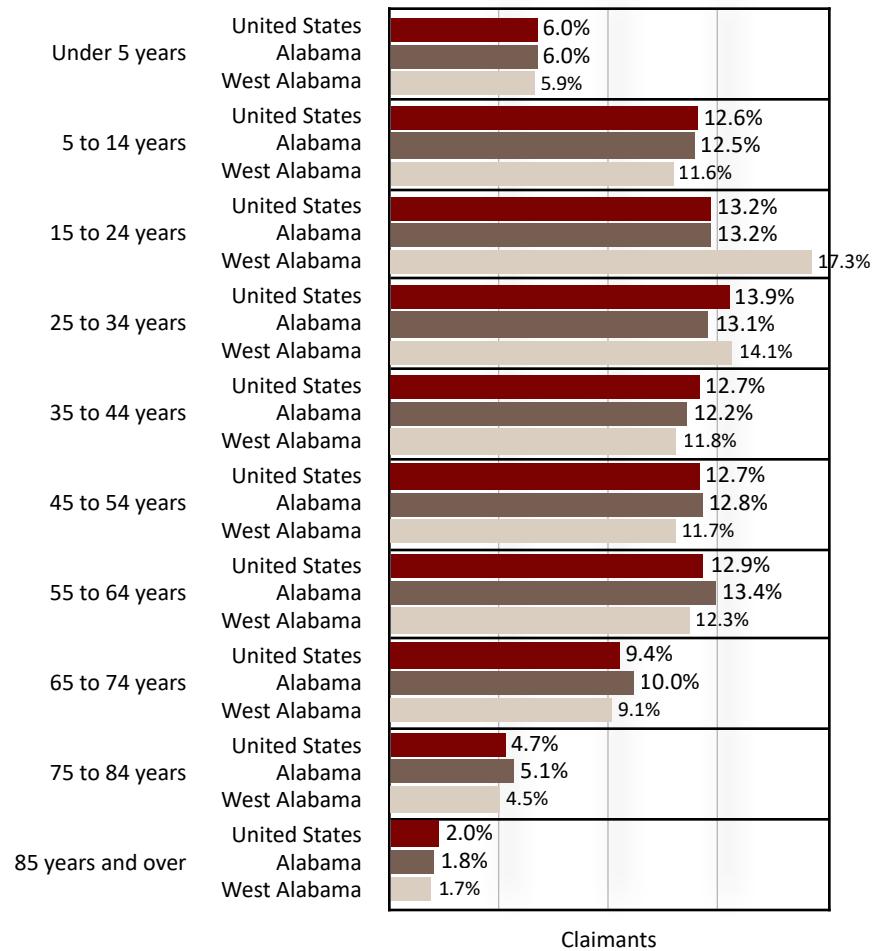
The characteristics of the population was briefly introduced in a previous chapter on the Regional Situation. That Chapter indicated population change, median age, race and ethnicity, and educational attainment. The following paragraphs take a closer look at selected socio-economic factors that appear to have been affected by the recent pandemic and likely play a role in the economic resilience of the community. These factors include age, race, the hispanic or latino population, single parents, health insurance, school and college enrollment, computer and internet availability, vehicle availability, the use of public transportation, and those who work from home. The information presented in this section is from the American Community Survey and the 2020 Decennial Census of the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Age. In a previous chapter it was noted that the median age in all of the counties except one in West Alabama are older than the median age of the State and Nation which are 39.4 and 38.4 respectively. The counties with the oldest median age are Fayette at 43.7 and Lamar at 44.8. The county with the youngest median age is Tuscaloosa at 33.7. As noted previously, this is not unexpected due to the presence of the

University of Alabama. The chart indicates the proportion of the population of the Nation, State and West Alabama in 10-year cohorts. Other than being skewed by the 15 to 24 year old age group in West Alabama, the proportion of the population in the various age groups of the Nation, State and Region are actually quite similar. The strength of the younger age groups may indicate support for future employment, however, substantial employment growth in West Alabama will probably require significant in-migration.

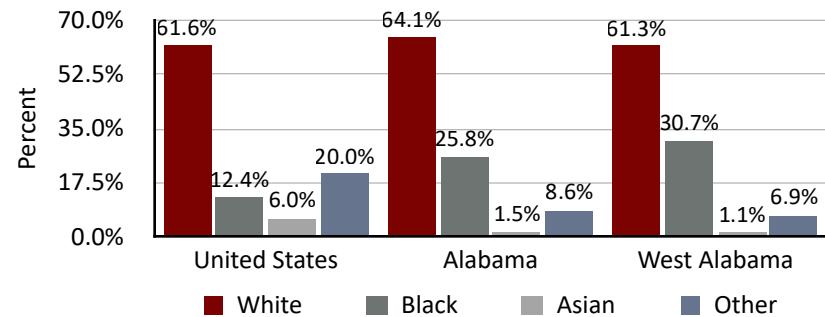
Race. There are indications that minority populations may be more likely to have economic

Comparative Population by Age in 2020



Claimants

Population by Race in 2020

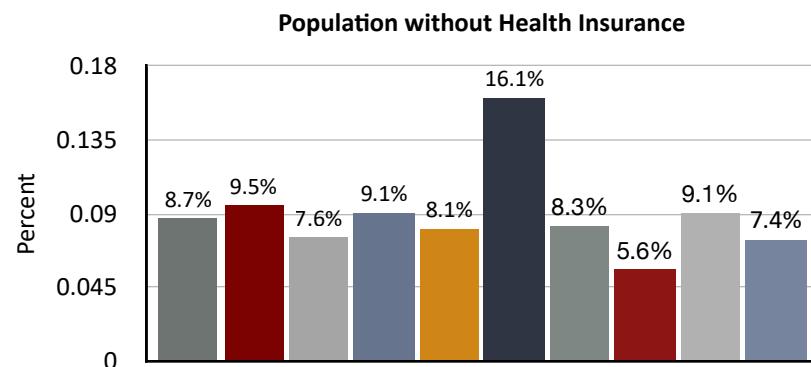
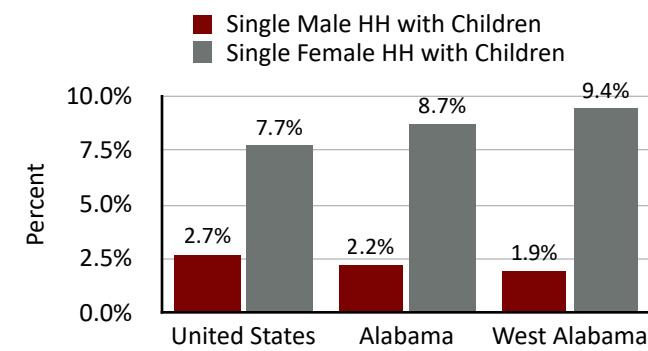
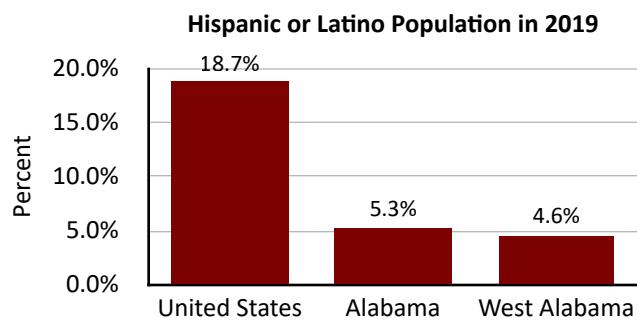


difficulty in the event of a pandemic, natural hazard event, or other economic downturn. Within the Region, the proportion of the Asian population and those of races other than White, Black, or Asian are considerably less than that of the State or Nation. However, the proportion of the black population is considerably higher than that of the State or Nation. This is particularly true in Greene, Hale, and Pickens counties where the proportion of the Black population is 80.8%, 56.4%, and 39.2% respectively. More detailed information is shown in the Reference Tables.

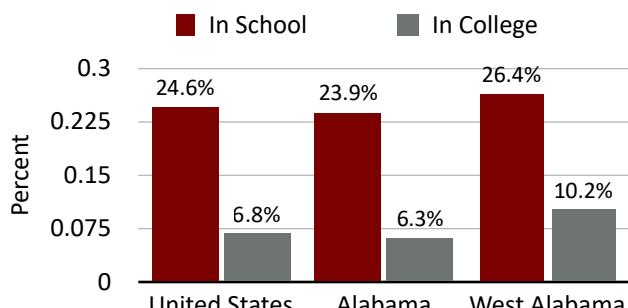
Hispanic or Latino. As with race, there are indications that those persons who are Hispanic or Latino may be more likely to have economic difficulty in the event of a pandemic, natural hazard event, or other economic downturn. The Hispanic or Latino population of West Alabama is proportionately less than that of the State and significantly less than that of the Nation as a whole.

Single Parents. Single parents are particularly vulnerable to unemployment when events such a pandemic occur that can affect the opening of schools or the availability of childcare. There were 110,807 households in the West Alabama Region in 2020. Of these, 2,155 or 1.9% were of a male householder with children and with no spouse or partner, and 10,395 were of a female householder with children with no spouse or partner. This is a total of 12,550 householders who will likely have difficulty re-entering the workforce if childcare is limited or prohibitively expensive. In West Alabama, single women with children form a much more significant population group than would be expected when compared to the Nation as a whole.

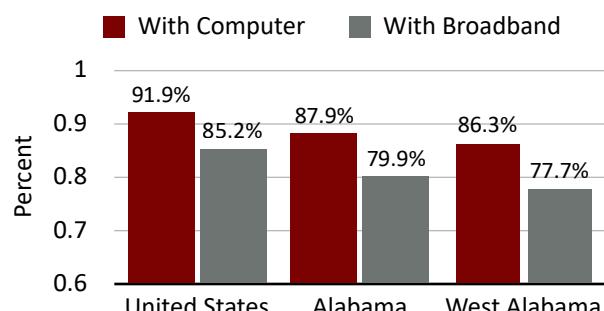
Health Insurance. As of 2020 just before the COVID-19 pandemic, the civilian non-institutionalized population of the West Alabama Region was 299,066. This is 5,446 less than the total estimated population of 304,512 (ACS population estimates may differ from the 2020 Decennial Census). Of the civilian non-institutionalized population, the percentage that did not have any health insurance is shown in the attached chart. While the Region and several counties have a lower percentage of people that have no health insurance, a few counties have significantly higher percentages of people without health insurance than would be expected when compared with the Region, the State, or the Nation.



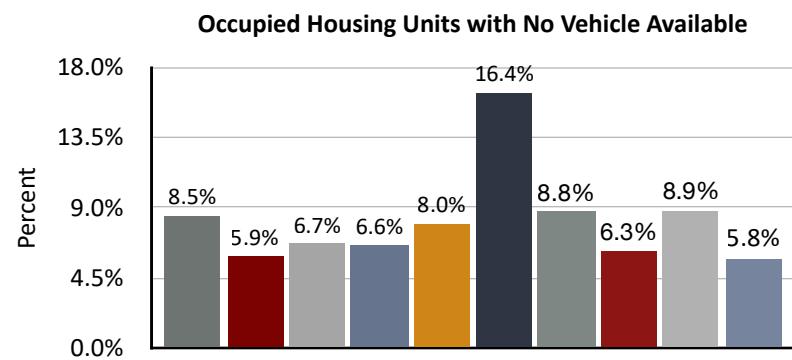
School and College Enrollment. In a previous section presenting an overview of the regional economy, educational attainment of persons over age 25 was discussed. It was noted that educational attainment is generally lower in West Alabama than for the State and for the Nation as a whole. It is also of interest to note the number of those who are currently enrolled in school or college. In West Alabama, as expected, the proportion of the population enrolled in school somewhat reflects that of the State and Nation, but enrollment in college or graduate school is very much higher, primarily due to the presence of the University of Alabama. The student population of Tuscaloosa needs to be kept in mind when reviewing other socio-economic information since it tends to skew the results. This is particularly true with regard to the labor force. More detailed information is shown in the Reference Tables.



Computer and Internet Availability. When the pandemic began to force people to stay home from work, there were many who were able to continue their work duties by working from home. Critical to being able to do this is the availability of appropriate technology. There were 110,807 households in the West Alabama Region in 2020. Of these households, 95,636 or 86.3% had access to a computer and 86,139 or 77.7% had a broadband internet subscription. This is a bit less compared to the State but is a significantly less percentage compared to the Nation. This comparison is even more pronounced in the rural counties of the Region where the incidence of broadband subscription falls to 55.6% in Greene County. Enhanced broadband availability to more households will be necessary to assure better resiliency in the event of a future pandemic or similar emergency as well as making adjustments to new ways of working. More detailed information is shown in the Reference Tables.



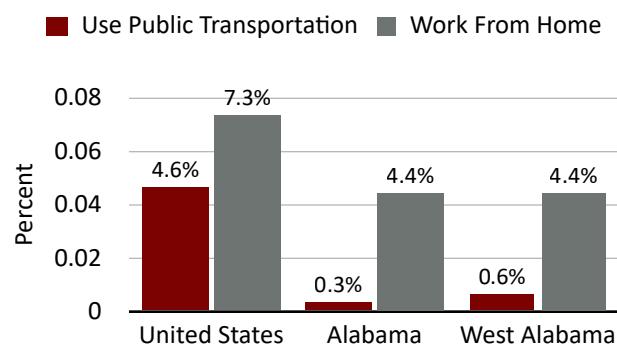
- United States
- Alabama
- West Alabama
- Bibb
- Fayette
- Greene
- Hale
- Lamar
- Pickens
- Tuscaloosa



Vehicle Availability. Vehicle availability is, of course, critical to people being able to get to work. This is particularly true in rural areas with little access to public transportation. The percentage of occupied housing units with no vehicle available in 2020 is shown. The National rate is higher than the State and Regional rate, but Greene, Hale and Pickens counties have unusually high percentages with no vehicle available. This could affect potential workers ability to get to work. More detailed information is shown in the Reference Tables.

Use of Public Transportation. In West Alabama as well as the State as a whole, the use of public transportation to commute to work is very small as compared to the Nation. This is reflected by, or is a reflection of, the lack of public transportation options within the Region. This is also discussed in the Chapter on Local and Regional Assets. The availability of public transportation can be a factor for those who rely on lower income jobs, particularly in times of economic difficulty.

Work from Home. Although it is less than the National rate, those who worked from home in 2020 was much closer to the National rate than was the case with the use of public transportation. It is expected that this rate will jump. However, local leaders have said that the lack of broadband internet availability has prevented many from working from home who otherwise could have done so during the pandemic.

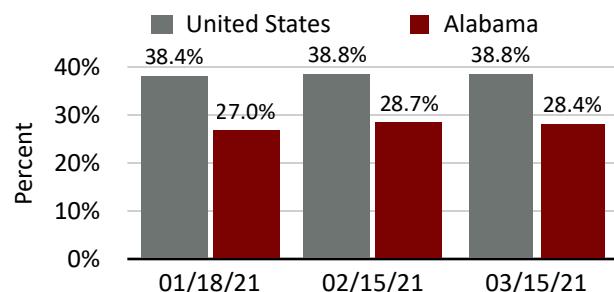
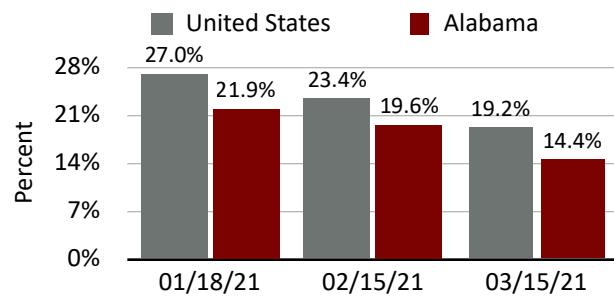


The Household Pulse Survey

The U.S. Census Bureau has been performing a Household Pulse Survey to measure household experiences during the coronavirus pandemic. The most recent phase ended at the end of March 2021. Another phase will begin in April 2021. This survey is similar to the Small Business Pulse Survey which the Bureau has been doing this since the Spring of 2020 in order to obtain some sense of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on small businesses. The data are presented for the Nation, the States and for larger metropolitan areas. For this *Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Program*, the information was reviewed as a comparison of the Nation with the State of Alabama. This was done in order to infer certain results for the West Alabama Region and thus ascertain some of the issues likely to affect West Alabama businesses. Rather than go back to earlier stages of the pandemic, the information was reviewed from January 2021 through March 2021 to get a better idea of the changes occurring in more recent months. Since it is a survey, there may be fluctuations from week to week that need to be understood in light of the overall trends. To review more detailed data from the survey, the source can be found at <https://www.census.gov/data/experimental-data-products/household-pulse-survey.html>.

Expected Loss in Employment Income. This reflects the percentage of adults who expect someone in their household to have a loss in employment income in the next 4 weeks. For the first three months of 2021, both the Nation and State showed noticeable declines which indicates improving sentiment regarding the prospects for the near future.

Telework. This reflects those adults living in households where at least one adult has substituted some or all of their in-person work for telework because of the coronavirus pandemic. These responses are quite stable over the course of the most recent three months. This raises the question of whether there will be many who choose not to return to working on-site working but would rather continue to work from home.

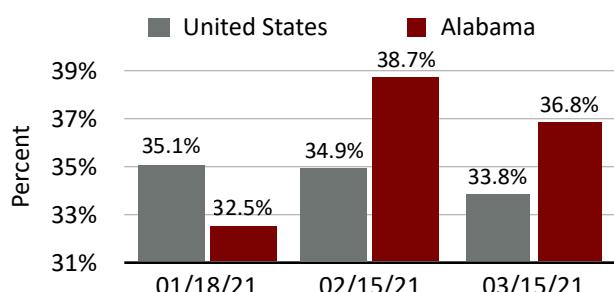
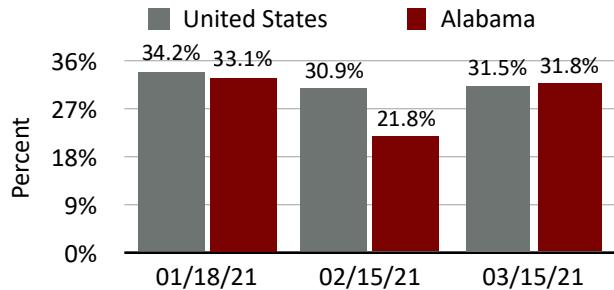
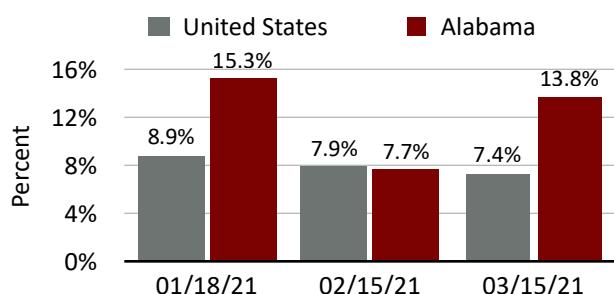
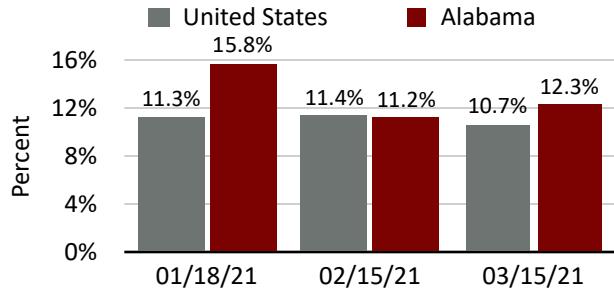


Food Scarcity. This reflects the percentage of adults in households where there was either sometimes or often not enough to eat in the last 7 days. Notwithstanding what appears to be a spike in January for Alabama, the State seems to typically be a bit higher than the Nation in this regard. Looking back from September 2020, food scarcity in Alabama was at 13.2% and increased to a high of 16.8% over the Fall into November while it ranged from about 10.0% to 12.0% for the Nation.

Housing Insecurity. This reflects the percentage of adults who are not current on rent or mortgage payments and who have slight or no confidence that their household can pay next month's rent or mortgage on time. The disparity between January and March with February is striking. Looking back from September 2020, the results for Alabama fluctuated considerably making it difficult to draw conclusions except that the State results are consistently higher than those for the Nation. Over the same period the results for the National rose from 7.3% in September to 9.1% in December then steadily declining over the most recent three months as shown.

Likelihood of eviction or foreclosure. Percentage of adults living in households not current on rent or mortgage where eviction foreclosure in the next two months is either very likely or somewhat likely. While tending to decline, these results are concerning for both the household that has to obtain replacement housing with great difficulty and with the owner who must contend with foregone rents or mortgage payments.

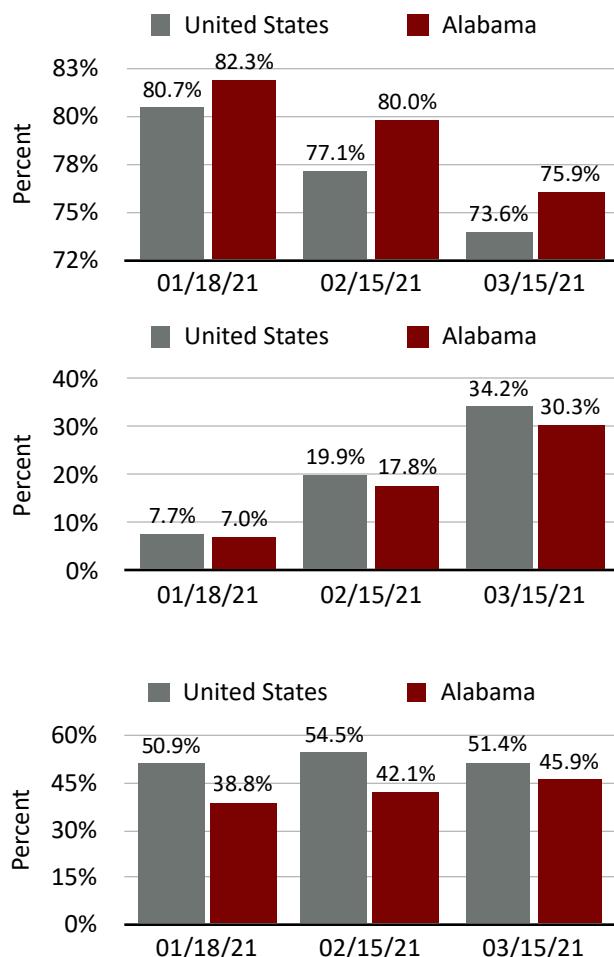
Difficulty paying for usual household expenses. Percentage of adults living in households where it has been somewhat or very difficult to pay for usual household expenses during the coronavirus pandemic. Similarly to housing insecurity, the results have fluctuated but the trend appears to be declining at least on a National basis.



Change in post-secondary education. Percentage of adults in households where at least one adult was planning on taking post-secondary classes this fall, but for whom those plans have either been consoled or changed in some significant way. For both the State and Nation, these results appear to be declining significantly which is a good sign for long-term recovery from the pandemic.

Received a COVID-19 vaccine. Percentage of adults who have received a COVID-19 vaccine. This is survey results and is not based on actual vaccinations. Nevertheless, the results are encouraging for both the Nation and the State. This data is supplemented by actual data presented in another section of this report.

Likelihood of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. Percentage of adults who have not received a COVID-19 vaccine (but definitely will once available). As with the responses regarding vaccination, these results are encouraging in that the proportion of those who will get the vaccine is rising with time and as more and more people actually get the vaccine.



Locally Identified Issues

The information that can be derived from local, state, and national information sources present only part of the picture when considering the impact of the pandemic on local communities. The Study Team formed by the West Alabama Regional Commission met at several work sessions to discuss these issues and identified a number of issue areas that were felt to be applicable to the West Alabama Region. The work sessions were supplemented by interviews with a selection of local officials around the Region. The result of these work sessions and leadership interviews was a selection of key takeaways and common themes.

- **Lifestyle and return to work choices.** As vaccinations began to be made available and the economy began to recover, there was concern that workers would be slow to return to work. This is true to some extent, however, job growth nationally and locally continues to grow, though not quite as fast as many in the business community would like. This is discussed more in the next section on persistent unemployment and the economic recovery. In any case, workers who were displaced by the pandemic appear to be taking the opportunity for a re-evaluation of lifestyle and career choices, including an assessment of personal budget realities and possibilities.
- **Mental health.** Job loss always has an affect on a person's mental and emotional state. People identify themselves with their job. When you meet someone, they ask "what do you do?" When millions have lost their jobs nationally, and thousands locally, there will be institutional requirements to deal with the mental and emotional fallout. Some of the issues to be dealt with are those regarding socialization

and stigmatization. There were already issues related to opioid abuse and diseases of despair. These were exacerbated by the pandemic and associated job loss.

- *Working conditions.* In some industries and occupations, particularly those where people work in close quarters and/or those that have close contact with the public, there has been concern for adjustment to new working conditions and whether worker safety and health is being fully considered. This raises the question among the workforce - will it be back to business as usual? In some industries and occupations the answer will be yes and in others, the answer may well be no. As the pandemic recedes, some of these concerns have eased but there remain ongoing issues with regard to these issues. Some workers can be expected to be more comfortable returning to work, and current workers will be more appreciative, with better employer concern and action to promote a safe workplace and a healthy workforce.
- *Education.* It is concerning that, among young people, there will be a long term learning gap due to the COVID-19 pandemic since many students were not able to get the full benefit of their education year in 2020 and 2021. Education is the initial stage of the workforce pipeline that is critical to future personal prosperity. Along with these concerns about education are concerns about the development of personal essential skills that are needed to be successful in any workplace.
- *Workforce development.* West Alabama has a very well developed workforce development system with the Region 3 West Alabama Workforce Development Council and West Alabama Works. Concerns had been expressed that there may be long lead times to develop new workforce programs. However, West Alabama Works has a broad range of workforce development programs that are scalable and can quickly be expanded to meet an increase in demand. One concern early in the pandemic was that there would be a need for skill training and retraining for new skills due to the changing job market in a "new normal" economy. However, it has been reported that the labor needs before the pandemic are still much the same now that the economy is recovering. Concerns were expressed regarding workforce development needs regarding manufacturing, apprenticeships and other targeted workforce efforts.
- *Compensation.* Along with the loss of jobs and loss of income early in the pandemic, there has been continuing concern for the low wages of what are now considered "essential" positions. There are those who don't like the terminology of "essential" positions because it implies the other jobs are therefore non-essential. Of course, every job is in some way essential to a fully functioning economy. But, it is also necessary to recognize positions that are critical in the event of an emergency such as a pandemic. These include health care workers, first responders, education workers, and caregivers who are depended on by those who are most vulnerable. Many of the positions in these areas are known for low wages, yet they are the ones we can't do without when there is an emergency. The continuing concern is that workers in these positions will leave for other higher paying jobs, first because of the stress of the jobs themselves, and second because the labor shortage will make more higher paying jobs available. And the next time we need these workers, they won't be there.
- *Measurement of resiliency.* The measurement of resiliency is not directly an employment impacts issue. However, it did come up in conversations and is relevant to the overall intent of this study. One question was whether the measurement of the labor force was a valid measure. It is probably not sufficient. One way to measure resiliency is to gauge the accomplishment of objectives and strategies that are put in place to make a community or regional area more resilient to economic shock. Also, the US Bureau of the Census also has an experimental product that purports to measure the economic resilience of local communities.

Persistent Unemployment and the Economic Recovery

In the previous paragraphs discussing labor force trends, it was noted that the unemployment rate had continued to fall approaching pre-pandemic levels. As it turns out, concerns about persistent unemployment early in the pandemic have given way to concerns about a labor shortage. This seems to be mostly with regard to service workers such as those in food service. The economy is recovering from the pandemic quickly as vaccinations become more widespread and in spite of COVID-19 variants in late 2021. Several reasons for this have been discussed both locally and in the media. Some of the reasons include the following.

- *Unemployment benefits.* Unemployment benefits were expanded early in the pandemic and were extended as the pandemic wore on. As the economy recovers, the complaint is that laid-off workers will not return to work if the unemployment benefits are higher than the pay they would get for working. Whether or not it is warranted, unemployment benefits get much of the blame for the labor shortage. In Alabama and several other states, those benefits ended in June, 2021 and Nationally they ended in September, 2021.
- *Schools and child care.* In the late Spring and early summer of 2021 as the initial wave of the pandemic was receding and the economy recovering, not all schools and child care facilities were fully open. It was hoped that by September of 2021, as long the pandemic did not make an unexpected comeback, schools and child care facilities would be fully open thus enabling those workers with child care needs to be able to return to work full time. As it turned out, COVID-19 variants in late 2021 complicated the return for some schools leading to doubt and uncertainty regarding the availability of schools and child care facilities.
- *Lower labor force participation rate.* An ongoing decline of the labor force participation rate was exacerbated by the pandemic. For several years, the labor force participation rate was already in gradual decline and then it dipped when workplaces closed due to the pandemic. This long term trend will continue to cause problems in the labor market long after the pandemic effects are over.
- *Predicted labor shortage.* In the West Alabama Economic Development Playbook which serves as the Comprehensive Economic Development Program for the West Alabama Region, it was already predicted that there would be a labor shortage within the Region in coming years. This was based on well respected and published workforce development studies. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the trend and pushed up the timing of the labor shortage.
- *Early retirement.* Many people in the baby boomer age cohort have retired or are nearing retirement. The pandemic overcame inertia and caused people to retire who perhaps were not quite ready. Now that they are retired, they will probably not be re-joining the workforce.
- *Fear of disease.* For some who have not yet been vaccinated, and some who have, there is lingering fear of getting or spreading COVID-19 if they re-enter the workforce prematurely. This is a reasonable fear in light of the magnitude of deaths from the disease and the serious long term effects that some people continue to suffer long after they have initially recovered. This is particularly true for those workers who have an underlying condition that could cause their contraction of the disease to be much more serious.
- *Aggressive job switching.* Some employers have complained of aggressive job switching by workers. Since there is a labor shortage it is a workers market. So, workers are looking for the best deal they can get and will quickly leave a current job for a better one. While this is good news for workers, the turnover causes difficulty for employers. This is primarily due to having to constantly be training new

employees which slows down productivity. There is also a tangible cost of turnover and no-shows in terms of the investment in training and preparing new employees.

- *Worker skills.* Workers may lack the necessary skills for available jobs. While this has been mentioned and is always true to some extent, the nature of the pandemic and recovery suggests that this is not a major part of the current problem. Much, if not most, of the labor shortage is in service jobs for which training can be accomplished fairly quickly. On the other hand, it has been reported locally, and shown in this report, that manufacturing jobs in West Alabama were affected relatively little by the pandemic.
 - *Small business closure and re-opening.* Early in the pandemic as workers were being laid off, small businesses were closing. Larger businesses are better prepared, both financially and operationally, to sustain themselves during an economic shock and begin rehiring when the downturn is over. Small businesses, though, have much more difficulty in setting back up and returning to normal, if they can at all. Those workers who were at small businesses may be slow to return to work, and the small businesses may find that their former workers are no longer available when they need them.
 - *Economy/labor disequilibrium.* The speed of the economic recovery has outstripped the ability of labor to keep up. This is due to some of the items discussed above and other things that cause people to take their time when deciding whether and when to return to the workforce. Eventually, the economy will trend to a point of equilibrium. This might be expected to occur when unemployment benefits have expired, when schools, child care, and other institutions are fully open, and fear of disease has settled. It should be noted, though, that different industry groups will progress at different rates and timelines. These differing timelines can cause a ripple effect from industry to industry until equilibrium is achieved.
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Table 4-1: Civilian Labor Force: 2017 to 2021

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Bibb	8,527	8,569	8,639	8,640	8,613
Fayette	6,536	6,501	6,582	6,562	6,574
Greene	2,845	2,849	2,889	3,015	2,855
Hale	5,932	5,954	6,076	6,075	5,863
Lamar	5,726	5,718	5,802	5,730	5,694
Pickens	7,699	7,713	7,904	7,660	7,532
Tuscaloosa	99,589	102,058	104,950	102,222	100,335
West Alabama	136,854	139,362	142,842	139,904	137,466
Alabama	2,172,455	2,207,019	2,237,278	2,230,118	2,223,364
United States	160,320,000	162,075,000	163,539,000	160,742,000	161,204,000

Source: Alabama Department of Labor

Table 4-2: Employment: 2017 to 2021

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Bibb	8,142	8,229	8,371	8,067	8,334
Fayette	6,218	6,237	6,376	6,236	6,386
Greene	2,623	2,660	2,727	2,687	2,665
Hale	5,568	5,653	5,834	5,503	5,541
Lamar	5,478	5,502	5,621	5,452	5,536
Pickens	7,273	7,360	7,625	7,161	7,244
Tuscaloosa	95,310	98,355	102,096	95,473	96,915
West Alabama	130,612	133,996	138,650	130,579	132,621
Alabama	2,073,396	2,120,704	2,169,395	2,099,062	2,151,051
United States	153,337,000	155,761,000	157,538,000	147,795,000	15,251,000

Source: Alabama Department of Labor

Table 4-3: Average Annual Unemployment: 2017 to 2021

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Bibb	385	340	268	573	279
Fayette	318	264	206	326	188
Greene	222	189	162	328	190
Hale	364	301	242	572	322
Lamar	248	216	181	278	158
Pickens	426	353	279	499	288
Tuscaloosa	4,279	3,703	2,854	6,749	3,420
West Alabama	6,242	5,366	4,192	9,325	4,845
Alabama	99,059	86,315	67,883	131,056	72,314
United States	6,892,000	6,314,000	6,001,000	12,947,000	8,623,000

Source: Alabama Department of Labor

Table 4-4: Average Annual Unemployment Rate: 2017 to 2021

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Bibb	4.5%	4.0%	3.1%	6.6%	3.2%
Fayette	4.9%	4.1%	3.1%	5.0%	2.9%
Greene	7.8%	6.6%	5.6%	10.9%	6.7%
Hale	6.1%	5.1%	4.0%	9.4%	5.5%
Lamar	4.3%	3.8%	3.1%	4.9%	2.8%
Pickens	5.5%	4.6%	3.5%	6.5%	3.8%
Tuscaloosa	4.3%	3.6%	2.7%	6.6%	3.4%
West Alabama	4.6%	3.9%	2.9%	6.7%	3.5%
Alabama	4.6%	3.9%	3.0%	5.9%	3.3%
United States	4.4%	3.9%	3.7%	8.1%	5.3%

Source: Alabama Department of Labor

Table 4-5: Labor Force and Employment

	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
United States							
Total Population	303,965,272	316,515,021	318,558,162	321,004,407	322,903,030	324,697,795	331,449,281
16 years and over	238,733,844	251,221,309	253,323,709	255,797,692	257,754,872	259,662,880	261,649,873
Civilian labor force	154,037,474	158,897,824	159,807,099	161,159,470	162,248,196	163,555,585	164,759,496
Labor force participation rate	64.5%	63.3%	63.1%	63.0%	62.9%	63.0%	63.0%
Employment	141,833,331	145,747,779	151,436,000	153,337,000	155,761,000	157,538,000	155,888,980
Jobs to Population Ratio	59.4%	58.0%	59.8%	59.9%	60.4%	60.7%	59.6%
Alabama							
	78.5%						
Total Population	4,712,651	4,830,620	4,841,164	4,850,771	4,864,680	4,876,250	5,024,279
16 years and over	3,714,504	3,846,845	3,864,302	3,876,136	3,894,696	3,907,144	3,926,842
Civilian labor force	2,230,879	2,229,422	2,226,504	2,220,900	2,224,606	2,229,479	2,245,329
Labor force participation rate	60.1%	58.0%	57.6%	57.3%	57.1%	57.1%	57.2%
Employment	2,036,867	2,022,325	2,029,157	2,073,396	2,120,704	2,169,395	2,119,986
Jobs to Population Ratio	54.8%	52.6%	52.5%	53.5%	54.5%	55.5%	54.0%
West Alabama							
Total Population	288,496	297,900	299,680	301,380	302,869	303,553	321,260
16 years and over	231,286	241,320	243,177	244,354	246,087	246,304	247,350
Civilian labor force	135,310	133,640	134,981	135,768	137,496	137,547	141,146
Labor force participation rate	58.5%	55.4%	55.5%	55.6%	55.9%	55.8%	57.1%
Employment	124,315	121,908	127,488	130,612	133,996	138,650	131,960
Jobs to Population Ratio	53.7%	50.5%	52.4%	53.5%	54.5%	56.3%	53.3%

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles.

	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*
Bibb							
Total Population	22,610	22,604	22,572	22,580	22,527	22,493	22,293
16 years and over	17,963	18,339	18,496	18,415	18,470	18,492	18,421
Civilian labor force	10,806	9,046	8,997	8,899	8,757	9,046	8,970
Labor force participation rate	60.2%	49.3%	48.6%	48.3%	47.4%	48.9%	48.7%
Fayette							
Total Population	17,472	16,896	16,783	16,657	16,585	16,494	16,321
16 years and over	14,017	13,666	13,696	13,535	13,491	13,428	13,446
Civilian labor force	7,282	6,804	6,815	6,883	6,863	6,766	6,978
Labor force participation rate	52.0%	49.8%	49.8%	50.9%	50.9%	50.4%	51.9%
Greene							
Total Population	9,255	8,697	8,587	8,533	8,426	8,324	7,730
16 years and over	7,267	6,858	6,787	6,681	6,661	6,544	6,557
Civilian labor force	3,692	3,030	2,870	2,830	2,619	2,707	2,749
Labor force participation rate	50.8%	44.2%	42.3%	42.4%	39.3%	41.4%	41.9%
Hale							
Total Population	16,168	15,256	15,159	14,995	14,887	14,809	14,785
16 years and over	12,450	12,104	12,072	12,000	11,857	11,792	11,696
Civilian labor force	7,005	6,094	5,730	5,949	5,769	6,007	5,790
Labor force participation rate	56.3%	50.3%	47.5%	49.6%	48.7%	50.9%	49.5%
Lamar							
Total Population	14,743	14,133	14,066	14,021	13,933	13,885	13,972
16 years and over	11,740	11,462	11,425	11,279	11,160	11,104	11,011
Civilian labor force	6,282	6,001	5,690	5,835	5,803	5,753	5,553
Labor force participation rate	53.5%	52.4%	49.8%	51.7%	52.0%	51.8%	50.4%
Pickens							
Total Population	19,917	19,856	20,042	20,170	20,298	20,243	19,123
16 years and over	15,742	16,113	16,346	16,554	16,837	16,747	16,622
Civilian labor force	8,436	7,785	7,854	7,861	7,978	7,819	7,488
Labor force participation rate	53.6%	48.3%	48.0%	47.5%	47.4%	46.7%	45.0%
Tuscaloosa							
Total Population	188,331	200,458	202,471	204,424	206,213	207,305	227,036
16 years and over	152,107	162,778	164,355	165,890	167,611	168,197	169,597
Civilian labor force	91,807	94,880	97,025	97,511	99,707	99,449	103,618
Labor force participation rate	60.4%	58.3%	59.0%	58.8%	59.5%	59.1%	61.1%

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles.

Table 4-6: Unemployment Claims by Gender in 2020

	Claimants	Percent
Male	247,827	44.6%
Female	307,419	55.4%
Total	555,246	100.0%

Source: Alabama Department of Labor.

Table 4-7: Unemployment Claims By Age in 2020 Statewide

Age	Claimants	Percent
Less than 22	41,989	7.6%
22 to 24	49,908	9.0%
25 to 34	154,265	27.8%
35 - 44	122,311	22.0%
45 - 54	94,312	17.0%
55 to 59	38,350	6.9%
60 to 64	27,944	5.0%
65 and older	24,835	4.5%
Unknown	1,259	0.2%
Total	555,173	100.0%

Source: Alabama Department of Labor.

Table 4-8: Unemployment Claims by Race in 2020 Statewide

	Claimants	Percent
White	289,813	51.9%
Black	228,042	40.8%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2,702	0.5%
Asian	730	0.1%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	9,318	1.7%
Unknown	27,639	5.0%
Total	558,244	100.0%

Source: Alabama Department of Labor.

Table 4-9: Unemployment Claims by Industry in 2020 Statewide

Industry	Claimants	Percent
Accommodation and Food Services	66,097	12.3%
Admin., Support, Waste Management, Remediation	56,136	10.5%
Agriculture/Forestry	1,160	0.2%
Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	6,836	1.3%
Construction	17,652	3.3%
EdcaitonServices	10,375	1.9%
Finance and Insurance	5,012	0.9%
Health Care and social Assitance	48,092	9.0%
Information	3,119	0.6%
Management of Companies and Enterprises	1,761	0.3%
Mnaufacturing	86,928	16.2%
Mining	1,255	0.2%
Other Services (except Public Admin)	12,403	2.3%
Professional Scientific & Technical Services	11,307	2.1%
Public Administration	4,522	0.8%
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	4,034	0.8%
Retail Trade	11,307	2.1%
Transportation and Warehousing	12,727	2.4%
Unclassified Establishments	163,244	30.5%
Utilities	511	0.1%
Wholesale Trade	11,098	2.1%
Total	535,576	100.0%

Source: Alabama Department of Labor.

Table 4-10: Unemployment Claims by Occupation in 2020 Statewide

Occupation	Claimants	Percent
Production	80,778	14.2%
Food Preparation and Servicing Related	64,817	11.4%
Office and Administrative Support	57,502	10.1%
Sales and Related	50,666	8.9%
Transportation and Material Moving	39,683	7.0%
Personal Care and Service	36,893	6.5%
Management	34,743	6.1%
Construction and Extraction	31,178	5.5%
Unknown	31,783	5.6%
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	25,262	4.5%
Healthcare Support	20,085	3.5%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	19,933	3.5%
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	17,903	3.2%
Education, Training and Library	15,700	2.8%
Business and Financial Operations	9,308	1.6%
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	8,687	1.5%
Architecture and Engineering	6,220	1.1%
Protective Service	4,686	0.8%
Computer and Mathematical	3,435	0.6%
Community and Social Services	2,917	0.5%
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	2,183	0.4%
Life, Physical, and Social Science	1,475	0.3%
Legal	1,182	0.2%
Military Specific	164	0.0%
Total	567,183	100.0%

Source: Alabama Department of Labor.

Table 4-11: Population by Age in the United States in 2020

	Male	Female	Total
Under 5 years	10,051,876	9,598,316	19,650,192
5 to 14 years	20,988,855	20,098,094	41,086,949
15 to 24 years	21,997,246	20,998,087	42,995,333
25 to 34 years	23,075,008	22,410,157	45,485,165
35 to 44 years	20,624,884	20,721,793	41,346,677
45 to 54 years	20,494,858	21,045,878	41,540,736
55 to 64 years	20,321,540	21,779,899	42,101,439
65 to 74 years	14,263,431	16,284,519	30,547,950
75 to 84 years	6,641,941	8,551,110	15,193,051
85 years and over	2,358,891	4,262,925	6,621,816
Total Population	160,818,530	165,750,778	326,569,308

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Detailed Tables

Percent of Population by Age in the United States in 2020 based on Above Data

	Male	Female	Total
Under 5 years	6.3%	5.8%	6.0%
5 to 14 years	13.1%	12.1%	12.6%
15 to 24 years	13.7%	12.7%	13.2%
25 to 34 years	14.3%	13.5%	13.9%
35 to 44 years	12.8%	12.5%	12.7%
45 to 54 years	12.7%	12.7%	12.7%
55 to 64 years	12.6%	13.1%	12.9%
65 to 74 years	8.9%	9.8%	9.4%
75 to 84 years	4.1%	5.2%	4.7%
85 years and over	1.5%	2.6%	2.0%
Total Population	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4-12: Population by Age in Alabama in 2020

	Male	Female	Total
Under 5 years	149,579	144,353	293,932
5 to 14 years	311,224	298,756	609,980
15 to 24 years	325,956	319,312	645,268
25 to 34 years	317,069	324,798	641,867
35 to 44 years	287,534	307,722	595,256
45 to 54 years	303,213	322,619	625,832
55 to 64 years	310,951	342,666	653,617
65 to 74 years	226,142	264,899	491,041
75 to 84 years	105,008	142,760	247,768
85 years and over	29,058	59,567	88,625
Total Population	2,365,734	2,527,452	4,893,186

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Detailed Tables

Percent of Population by Age in Alabama in 2020 based on Above Data

	Male	Female	Total
Under 5 years	6.3%	5.7%	6.0%
5 to 14 years	13.2%	11.8%	12.5%
15 to 24 years	13.8%	12.6%	13.2%
25 to 34 years	13.4%	12.9%	13.1%
35 to 44 years	12.2%	12.2%	12.2%
45 to 54 years	12.8%	12.8%	12.8%
55 to 64 years	13.1%	13.6%	13.4%
65 to 74 years	9.6%	10.5%	10.0%
75 to 84 years	4.4%	5.6%	5.1%
85 years and over	1.2%	2.4%	1.8%
Total Population	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4-13: Population by Age in West Alabama in 2020

	Male	Female	Total
Under 5 years	9,374	8,624	17,998
5 to 14 years	18,030	17,170	35,200
15 to 24 years	26,159	26,669	52,828
25 to 34 years	21,646	21,371	43,017
35 to 44 years	17,456	18,586	36,042
45 to 54 years	17,268	18,469	35,737
55 to 64 years	17,960	19,450	37,410
65 to 74 years	12,828	14,732	27,560
75 to 84 years	5,500	8,175	13,675
85 years and over	1,729	3,316	5,045
Total Population	147,950	156,562	304,512

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Detailed Tables

Percent of Population by Age in West Alabama in 2020 based on Above Data

	Male	Female	Total
Under 5 years	6.3%	5.5%	5.9%
5 to 14 years	12.2%	11.0%	11.6%
15 to 24 years	17.7%	17.0%	17.3%
25 to 34 years	14.6%	13.7%	14.1%
35 to 44 years	11.8%	11.9%	11.8%
45 to 54 years	11.7%	11.8%	11.7%
55 to 64 years	12.1%	12.4%	12.3%
65 to 74 years	8.7%	9.4%	9.1%
75 to 84 years	3.7%	5.2%	4.5%
85 years and over	1.2%	2.1%	1.7%
Total Population	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4-14: Population by Race in 2020

	Total Population	White	Black or African American	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	Some Other Race	Two or More Races
USA	331,449,281	204,277,273	41,104,200	3,727,135	19,886,049	689,966	27,915,715	33,848,943
Alabama	5,024,279	3,220,452	1,296,162	33,625	76,660	2,984	137,443	256,953
West Ala	321,260	196,804	98,734	1,201	3,452	140	7,405	13,524
Bibb	22,293	16,555	4,413	60	32	9	465	759
Fayette	16,321	13,666	1,736	72	51	6	144	646
Greene	7,730	1,301	6,246	5	7	0	33	138
Hale	14,785	5,999	8,337	39	25	15	66	304
Lamar	13,972	11,962	1,425	35	6	6	96	442
Pickens	19,123	10,739	7,489	27	78	0	290	500
Tuscaloosa	227,036	136,582	69,088	963	3,253	104	6,311	10,735

Source: U.S. Census, 2020 Decennial Census.

Population by Race in 2020 by Percent

	White	Black or African American	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	Some Other Race	Two or More Races
USA	61.6%	12.4%	1.1%	6.0%	0.2%	8.4%	10.2%
Alabama	64.1%	25.8%	0.7%	1.5%	0.1%	2.7%	5.1%
West Ala	61.3%	30.7%	0.4%	1.1%	0.0%	2.3%	4.2%
Bibb	74.3%	19.8%	0.3%	0.1%	0.0%	2.1%	3.4%
Fayette	83.7%	10.6%	0.4%	0.3%	0.0%	0.9%	4.0%
Greene	16.8%	80.8%	0.1%	0.1%	0.0%	0.4%	1.8%
Hale	40.6%	56.4%	0.3%	0.2%	0.1%	0.4%	2.1%
Lamar	85.6%	10.2%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	3.2%
Pickens	56.2%	39.2%	0.1%	0.4%	0.0%	1.5%	2.6%
Tuscaloosa	60.2%	30.4%	0.4%	1.4%	0.0%	2.8%	4.7%

Table 4-15: Hispanic or Latino Population in 2020

	Total Population	Hispanic or Latino	% Hispanic or Latino
United States	331,449,281	62,080,044	18.7%
Alabama	5,024,279	264,047	5.3%
West Alabama	321,260	14,905	4.6%
Bibb	22,293	740	3.3%
Fayette	16,321	396	2.4%
Greene	7,730	61	0.8%
Hale	14,785	149	1.0%
Lamar	13,972	208	1.5%
Pickens	19,123	1,053	5.5%
Tuscaloosa	227,036	12,298	5.4%

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles

Table 4-16: Single HH with Children and no Spouse or Partner in 2020

	Total Households	Male householder, no spouse, with children	Female householder, no spouse, with children
United States	122,354,219	3,276,924	9,385,686
Alabama	1,888,504	40,936	164,114
West Alabama	110,807	2,155	10,395
Bibb	7,259	282	919
Fayette	6,805	174	422
Greene	3,178	71	283
Hale	5,490	79	665
Lamar	5,631	52	316
Pickens	7,731	219	818
Tuscaloosa	74,713	1,278	6,972

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles (Totals may differ from 2020 Decennial Census).

Single Householders with Children and no Spouse or Partner in 2020 by Percent

	Male householder, no spouse, with children	Female householder, no spouse, with children
United States	2.7%	7.7%
Alabama	2.2%	8.7%
West Alabama	1.9%	9.4%
Bibb	3.9%	12.7%
Fayette	2.6%	6.2%
Greene	2.2%	8.9%
Hale	1.4%	12.1%
Lamar	0.9%	5.6%
Pickens	2.8%	10.6%
Tuscaloosa	1.7%	9.3%

Table 4-17: Population With and Without Health Insurance in 2020

	Total Population	Civilian Non-institutionalized Population	CNP With Health Insurance	CNP Without Health Insurance	Percent Without Health Insurance
United States	326,569,308	321,525,041	293,466,138	28,058,578	8.7%
Alabama	4,893,186	4,813,429	4,357,884	455,545	9.5%
West Alabama	304,512	299,066	276,361	22,705	7.6%
Bibb	22,374	20,748	18,870	1,878	9.1%
Fayette	16,406	16,218	14,902	1,316	8.1%
Greene	8,221	8,167	6,813	1,354	16.6%
Hale	14,754	14,543	13,343	1,200	8.3%
Lamar	13,854	13,684	12,923	761	5.6%
Pickens	20,049	18,413	16,685	1,728	9.4%
Tuscaloosa	208,854	207,293	192,825	14,468	7.0%

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles (Totals may differ from 2020 Decennial Census).

Table 4-18: Population Enrolled in School or College in 2020

	Total Population	Enrolled in School	Enrolled in College or Graduate School
United States	326,569,308	80,497,960	22,229,106
Alabama	4,893,186	1,168,551	308,435
West Alabama	304,512	80,496	31,050
Bibb	22,374	4,192	655
Fayette	16,406	3,575	747
Greene	8,221	1,584	212
Hale	14,754	3,370	634
Lamar	13,854	2,874	494
Pickens	20,049	3,861	651
Tuscaloosa	208,854	61,040	27,657

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles (Totals may differ from 2020 Decennial Census).

Population Enrolled in School or College in 2020 by Percent

	Enrolled in School	Enrolled in College or Graduate School
United States	24.6%	6.8%
Alabama	23.9%	6.3%
West Alabama	26.4%	10.2%
Bibb	18.7%	2.9%
Fayette	21.8%	4.6%
Greene	19.3%	2.6%
Hale	22.8%	4.3%
Lamar	20.7%	3.6%
Pickens	19.3%	3.2%
Tuscaloosa	29.2%	13.2%

Table 4-19: Computer and Internet Availability in 2020

	Total Households	With a Computer	With a Broadband Internet Subscription
United States	122,354,219	112,398,526	104,302,759
Alabama	1,888,504	1,659,065	1,509,065
West Alabama	110,807	95,636	86,139
Bibb	7,259	6,041	5,526
Fayette	6,805	5,410	4,786
Greene	3,178	2,182	1,768
Hale	5,490	4,045	3,444
Lamar	5,631	4,363	3,676
Pickens	7,731	6,205	5,489
Tuscaloosa	74,713	67,390	61,450

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles (Totals may differ from 2020 Decennial Census).

Computer and Internet Availability in 2020 by Percent

	With a Computer	With a Broadband Internet Subscription
United States	91.9%	85.2%
Alabama	87.9%	79.9%
West Alabama	86.3%	77.7%
Bibb	83.2%	76.1%
Fayette	79.5%	70.3%
Greene	68.7%	55.6%
Hale	73.7%	62.7%
Lamar	77.5%	65.3%
Pickens	80.3%	71.0%
Tuscaloosa	90.2%	82.2%

Table 4-20: Occupied housing Units with No Vehicle Available in 2020

	Total Housing Units	Occupied Housing Units	No Vehicle Available
United States	138,432,751	122,354,219	10,344,521
Alabama	2,270,398	1,888,504	111,849
West Alabama	139,457	110,807	7,382
Bibb	9,237	7,259	481
Fayette	8,493	6,805	545
Greene	5,131	3,178	522
Hale	7,847	5,490	485
Lamar	7,410	5,631	355
Pickens	9,620	7,731	686
Tuscaloosa	91,719	74,713	4,308

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles (Totals may differ from 2020 Decennial Census).

Occupied housing Units with No Vehicle Available in 2020 by Percent

	Occupied Housing Units as % of Total	No Vehicle Available as % of Occupied
United States	88.4%	8.5%
Alabama	83.2%	5.9%
West Alabama	79.5%	6.7%
Bibb	78.6%	6.6%
Fayette	80.1%	8.0%
Greene	61.9%	16.4%
Hale	70.0%	8.8%
Lamar	76.0%	6.3%
Pickens	80.4%	8.9%
Tuscaloosa	81.5%	5.8%

Table 4-21: Use of Public Transportation and Work From Home in 2020

	Workers 16 Years and Over	Public Transportation to Work	Worked from Home
United States	153,665,654	7,044,886	11,153,095
Alabama	2,095,195	6,960	92,836
West Alabama	129,234	735	5,682
Bibb	8,107	0	289
Fayette	6,354	0	208
Greene	2,270	0	86
Hale	5,185	5	103
Lamar	5,135	31	141
Pickens	6,705	26	438
Tuscaloosa	95,478	673	4,417

Source: U.S. Census, ACS 5-year Estimates Data Profiles

Use of Public Transportation and Work From Home in 2020 by Percent

	Public Transportation to Work	Worked from Home
United States	4.6%	7.3%
Alabama	0.3%	4.4%
West Alabama	0.6%	4.4%
Bibb	0.0%	3.6%
Fayette	0.0%	3.3%
Greene	0.0%	3.8%
Hale	0.1%	2.0%
Lamar	0.6%	2.7%
Pickens	0.4%	6.5%
Tuscaloosa	0.7%	4.6%



Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan Chapter 5. Business Considerations

-
- Changes to Gross Domestic Product
 - Employment Change by Sector
 - Industry and Occupation Clusters
 - Business Pulse Survey
 - Locally Identified Issues
-

Issues of employment and those relating to business are always overlapping. Many of the issues that relate to businesses were discussed in the previous chapter on employment considerations. Some additional issues are presented here in order to provide a more complete picture of the impact of the pandemic on the local and regional economy.

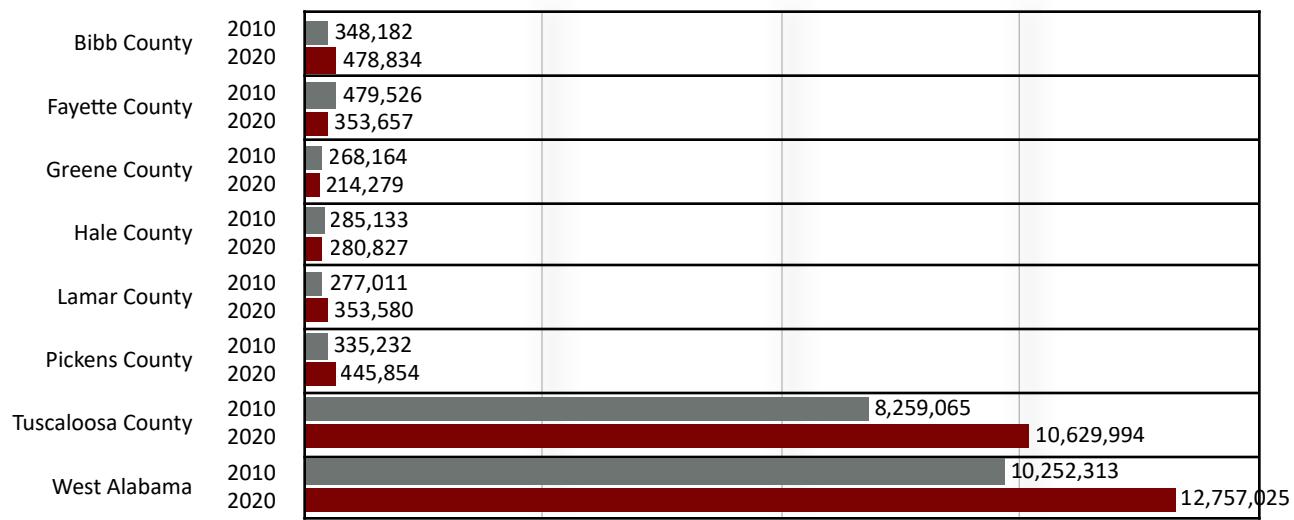
Changes to Gross Domestic Product

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the market value of goods and services produced by labor and property in the United States. It is the primary measure of U.S. production and can be stated for states and counties as well as for the nation. According to the U. S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, real GDP by county is an inflation-adjusted measure of each area's gross product that is based on prices for the goods

and services produced within an area. The real estimates of gross domestic product (GDP) by county are measured in chained (2012) dollars.

Tuscaloosa County had by far the greatest gain of the counties in the Region with an increase of 28.7% over the ten year period. The County largely drove the GDP gain for the West Alabama Region which was 24.4% as compared to a GDP gain of 28.0% for the State of Alabama as whole. Going forward, one of the challenges to the local and regional economy will be the economic growth of the rural counties within the Region.

Change in Gross Domestic Product from 2010 to 2020



Employment Change by Sector

Changes in employment including job loss and increases in employment by industrial sector may be discerned by examining the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) prepared by the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics of the Department of Labor. The data is examined by NAICS sectors which stands for the North American Industry Classification System (numbers appearing beside a classification in the following charts are the classification code). The data is reported quarterly and it is grouped according to whether the reporting entity is under public ownership or private ownership. The data is for June 2020, which reflects the time period of the greatest job loss during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, and one year earlier for June 2019 for comparison purposes.

Public Ownership. For those entities under public ownership, it is difficult to draw conclusions for most industry groups due to suppressed information from the data source. That being the case, the remainder of this discussion will concern those entities under private ownership.

Private Ownership. For those entities under private ownership, twenty sectors and the number of employees in each sector, respectively, are shown in the attached chart. The chart shows the total employment for the seven counties within the West Alabama Region. By June 2020 the pandemic was well underway and most of the job loss was already felt. In fact, some rehiring was apparently already underway. The four industry sectors with the highest job loss in the West Alabama Region from June 2019 to June 2020 are as follows. The job loss of 7,025 in these four sectors is about 81.4% of the total job loss of 8,626.

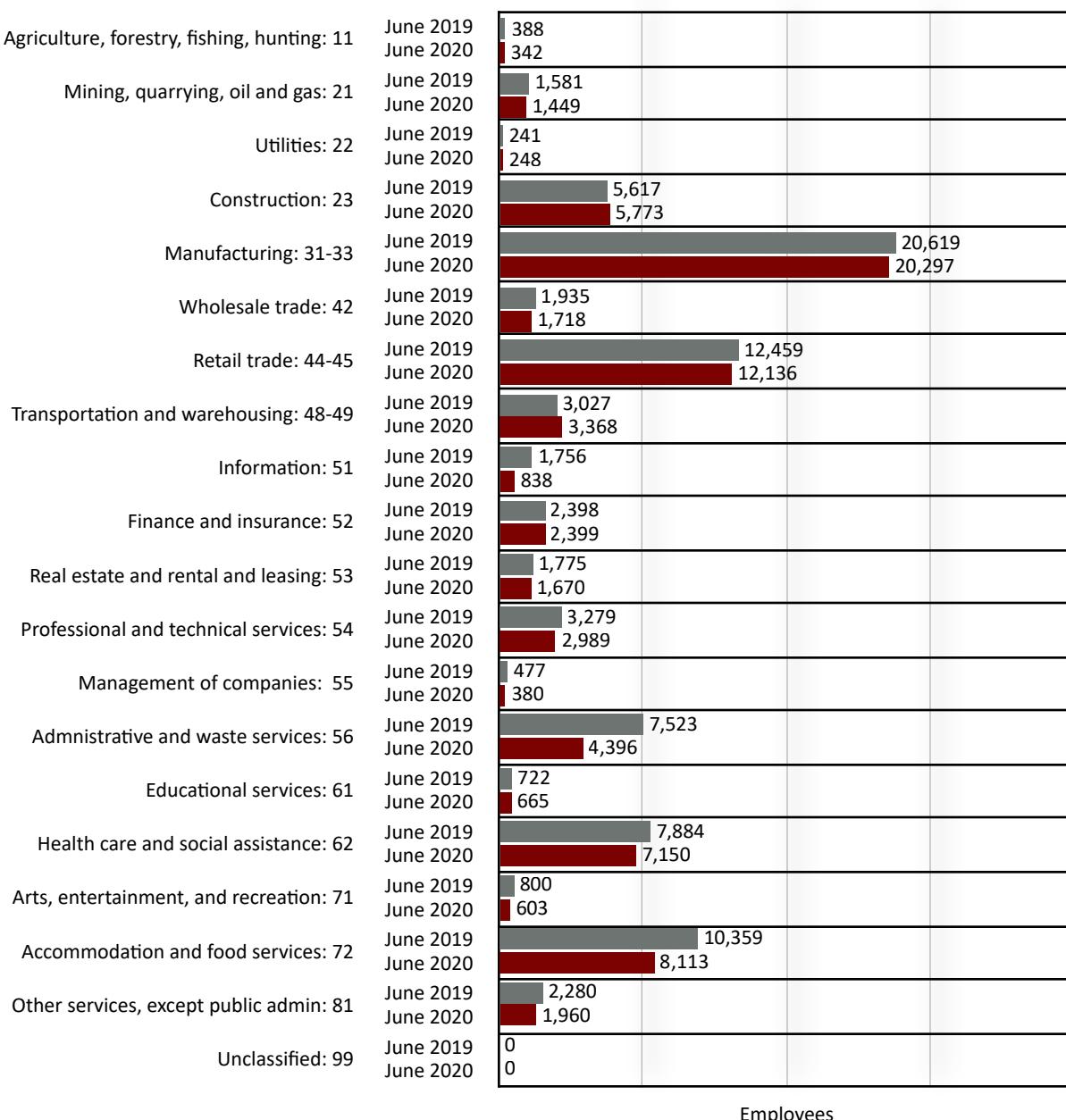
- 1) Information (#51): 918 jobs;
- 2) Administrative and waste services (#56): 3,127 jobs;
- 3) Health care and social assistance (#62): 734 jobs; and
- 4) Accommodation and food services (#72): 2,246 jobs.

The large job loss within the accommodation and food services sector is not surprising, however, the large job loss in administrative and waste services is a curiosity. A closer look indicates more specifically the sub-sectors of most of this job loss. The exact number of jobs is difficult to calculate at the sub-sector level due to suppressed information, but it appears that it is in the following sub-sectors:

- 1) Within the information sector, the greatest job loss was more specifically in the publishing industries, not including the internet (#511) sub-sector;
- 2) Within the administrative and waste services sector, the greatest job loss was more specifically in the administrative and support services (#561) sub-sector. There was little change in the waste management and remediation services (#562) sub-sector;
- 3) Within the health care and social assistance sector, the greatest job loss was split between the ambulatory health care (#621) sub-sector and the nursing and residential care facilities (#623) sub-sector. There was little change in the social assistance (#624) sub-sector; and
- 4) Within the accommodation and food services sector, the greatest job loss was by far more specifically in the food services and drinking places (#722) sub-sector.

Comparison of Employment under Private Ownership. A comparison of employment under private ownership is shown in the two following charts. The first chart entitled "Employment under Private Ownership in June 2020" shows the percentage of employment in each of twenty industry sectors. These are compared according to the percentage for the United States, for the State of Alabama, and for the West Alabama Region. The supporting data for this chart is for June 2020 so it is several months into the pandemic.

Employment in Private Entities for 2019 and 2020

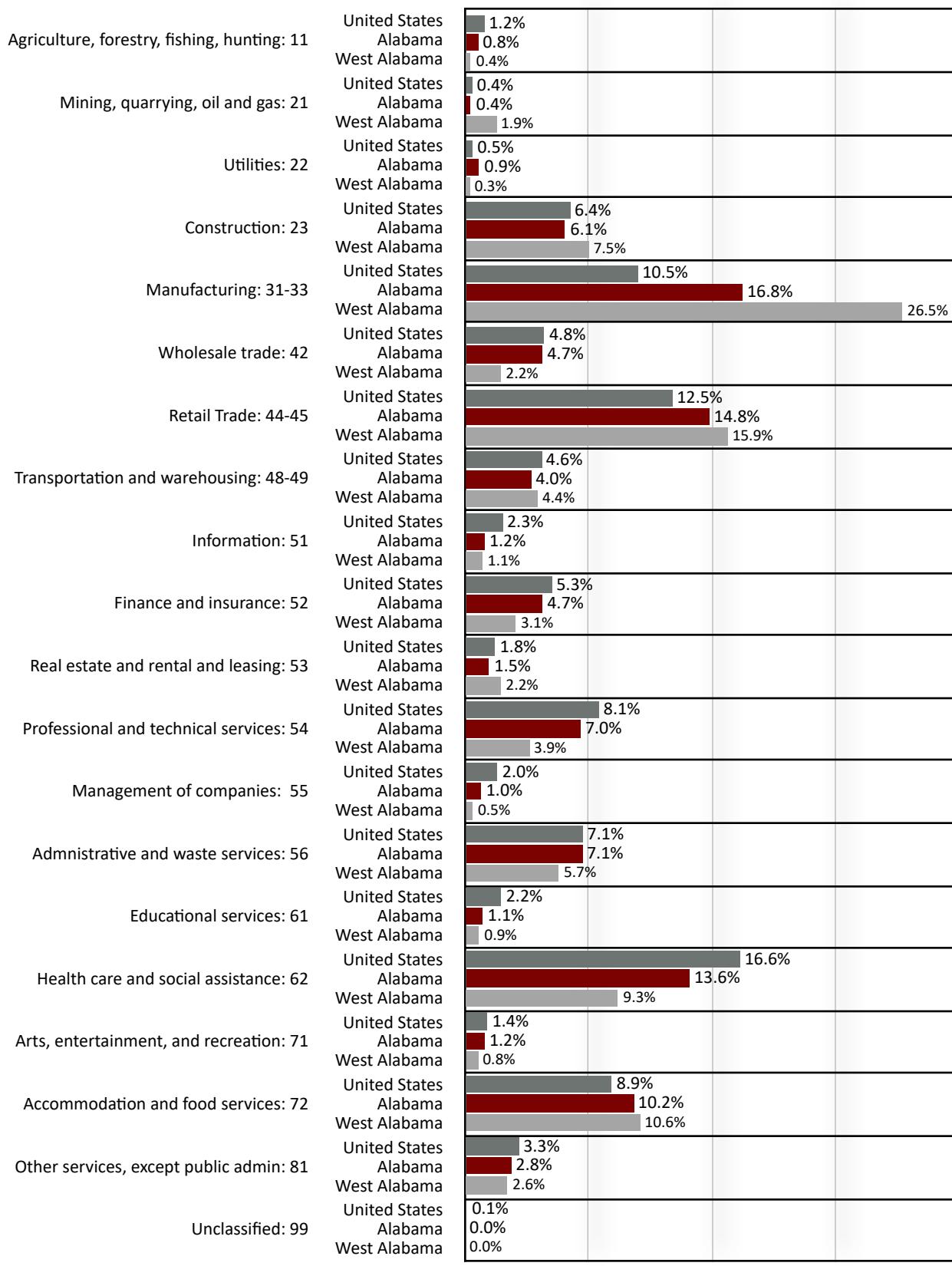


An examination of the chart shows a much greater relative share for manufacturing and for retail trade within the Region as compared to the State and Nation and a somewhat greater share for construction and for accommodation and food services. Although it is a small overall industry sector, the relative share of employment in mining, quarrying, oil and gas is much greater than is typical for the State or Nation.

Most other industry sectors have about the same or somewhat less of a share of employment within the Region as compared to the State and Nation. Notable are the lesser relative share of employment for professional and technical services and for health care and social assistance.

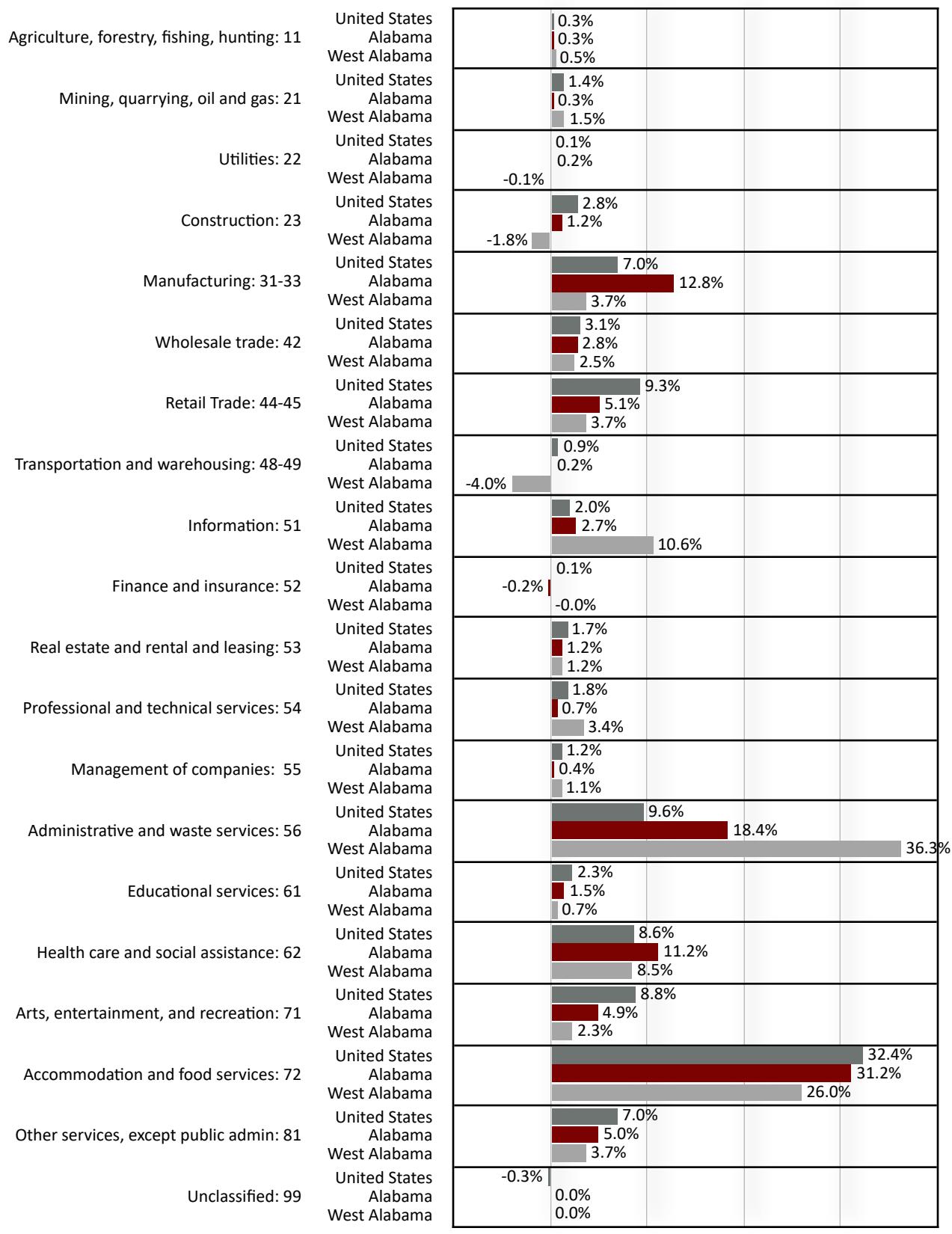
The second chart entitles “Private Entity Job Loss from 2019 to 2020” shows a comparison of the percentage of job loss for the United States, the State of Alabama, and the West Alabama Region. The supporting data is for June 2019 and June 2020. This chart coincides with the previous chart above that showed numerical job loss by sector for the Region. Similar to that chart, the sectors with the greatest percentage of job loss within the West Alabama Region are information, administration and waste services, health care and social assistance, and accommodation and food services. What is striking is how the Region had so much of a higher rate of job loss as compared to the State and Nation with respect to the information sector and to the administration and waste services sector. Conversely, the West Alabama Region’s manufacturing sector experienced significantly less job loss as compared to the manufacturing sector of the State and Nation.

Employment under Private Ownership in June 2020



Percent of Employees

Private Entity Job Loss from 2019 to 2020



Industry and Occupation Clusters

An economic cluster is a core of related economic entities that work together to produce goods and services. In contrast to an economic sector, which is defined based on similar industries categorized by outputs, a cluster is a group of companies located in a similar geography which work together through all stages of production from inputs (including goods and services) to outputs. Cluster-based economic development is founded in the concept of targeting investments to conform to the economic strengths of the region or to develop new economic strengths and increase the concentration of inter-dependent, growth-oriented enterprises in the regional economy.

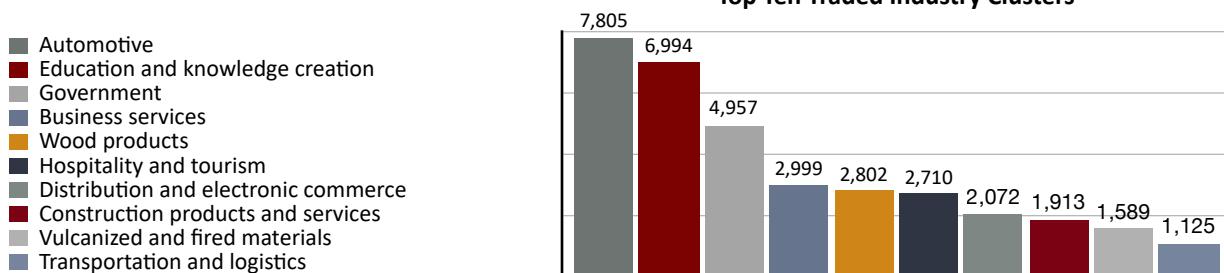
Strongest Traded Clusters. One way of looking at industry clusters is to determine those clusters that are strong relative to other areas of the country. A strong cluster is a cluster that has high employment specialization in a region. That is, it is ranking in the top 25% of all regions in the country by specialization and also by meeting minimum criteria for employment and establishments. This approach is used by the Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness (ISC) of the Harvard Business School. According to ISC, strong traded clusters for the West Alabama Region include:

- Automotive;
- Wood Products;
- Construction Products and Services;
- Forestry; and
- Oil and Gas Production and Transportation.

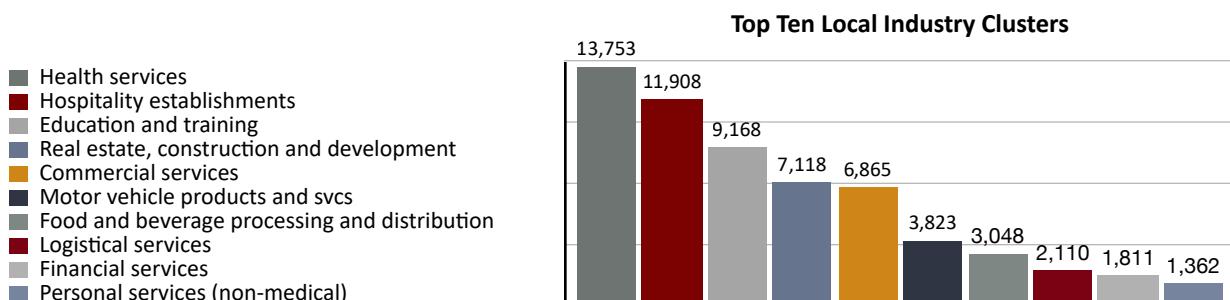
A similar review indicates nineteen strong traded clusters for the entire State of Alabama. All of the clusters indicated for West Alabama above are also listed among the States clusters except for oil and gas production and transportation.

Further review of ISC information for the West Alabama Region using the most recent data (2017) notes that “traded clusters” share of regional employment is 22% while the “local clusters” share of regional employment is 78%. Traded clusters refer to those industries which trade across economic areas, that is, between this region and other regions wherever they may be. For example, automobiles may be manufactured in one area to be sold primarily elsewhere. Local clusters refer to those industries which trade within an economic area, for example, personal services provided to the people who live within the area. By point of comparison, the traded clusters’ share of statewide employment is 34% while “local clusters” share of statewide employment is 66%

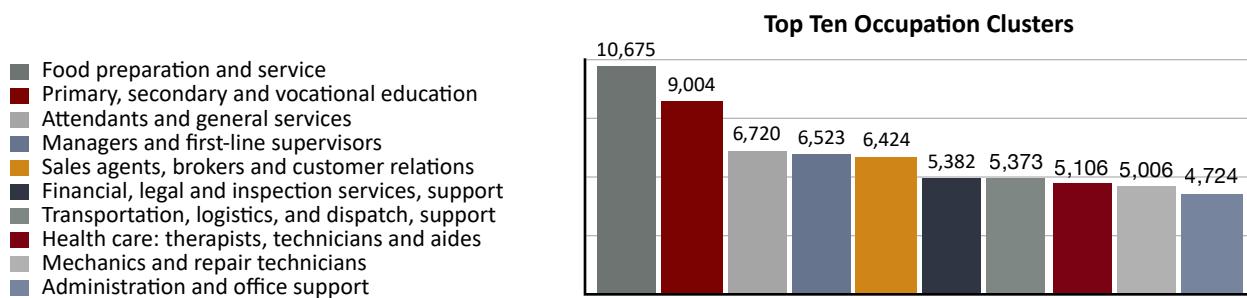
Top Ten Traded Industry Clusters. Another way of looking at industry clusters is simply their size based on employment. The *Regionizer* is an online economic research tool at statsamerica.org (a service of Indiana Business Research Center) that allows the building of a multi-county region to focus on commuting patterns, demographics, and clusters of industries and occupations. According to the Regionizer, the top ten *traded* industry clusters by employment for the West Alabama Region are shown on the following graph. These are the top ten out of 52 identified *traded* industry clusters. The data is based on 2018 data released 10/22/19. Not surprisingly, the automotive and education clusters are the largest traded clusters for the West Alabama Region. Most of the top traded clusters for the West Alabama Region are also on the top ten list for the State of Alabama. However, the wood products cluster and the vulcanized and fired materials cluster are on the regional top ten list but are not on the state top ten list. The livestock processing cluster and the financial services cluster are on the state top ten list but are not on the regional top ten list.



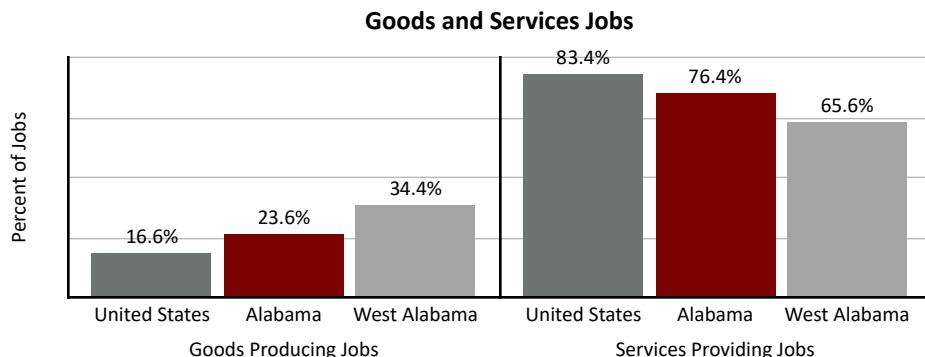
Top Ten Local Industry Clusters. According to the *Regionizer*, the top ten *local* industry clusters by employment for the West Alabama Region are shown on the following graph. These are the top ten out of 16 identified local industry clusters. The data is based on 2018 data released 10/22/19. The top ten local clusters are the same for the West Alabama Region as for the State of Alabama. However, there is a difference in importance. For the Region, education and training is a more important cluster and commercial services are less important than for the State, respectively.



Top ten occupation clusters. Occupations can be examined and presented in a way similar to that of industry clusters. According to the *Regionizer*, the top ten occupation clusters by employment for the West Alabama Region are shown on the following graph. These are the top ten out of 24 identified occupation clusters. The data is based on 2018 data released 10/22/19. The top ten occupation clusters are the same for the West Alabama Region as for the State of Alabama. In both cases, food preparation and service is the largest cluster. However, the primary, secondary and vocational education cluster is ranked #2 regionally and #8 statewide, whereas the sales agent, brokers and customer relations cluster is ranked #2 statewide and #5 regionally.



Goods and Services Jobs. Occupations and jobs may be looked at as to whether the job is a good producing job or a service providing job. The *Regionizer* described above provides a way to compare this information for various areas. The following chart compares the percentage of jobs that are good producing and those that are services providing for the United States, Alabama and West Alabama. The percentage of jobs devoted to goods producing is more than twice that of the nation as a whole. This indicates a strong manufacturing sector within the West Alabama Region.



Target Sectors and Industries.

In any discussion of industry

and occupational clusters, it is important to review and consider the priorities of organizations directly involved in economic development. In the West Alabama Region, four organizations need to be considered: the Department of Commerce of the State of Alabama, the Tuscaloosa County Industrial Development Authority, C-3 of Northwest Alabama, and the Region 3 Workforce Council. The priorities of these organization can be compared with the information provided above. A brief review of the target sectors of these organizations follows. This review indicates that they are heavily interested in the manufacturing sectors. This is not unexpected given the prevalence of manufacturing employment as indicated in the accompanying issue brief on Employment Change by Sector and in light of the impact manufacturing typically has on investment and wages.

Alabama Department of Commerce. The Alabama Department of Commerce has performed extensive study into the targeting of industries for economic development which is contained in *Accelerate Alabama 2.0* which is available on their web site. This study describes seven targeted business sectors. It should be remembered that these sectors are of statewide priorities and may or may not be completely applicable to the West Alabama Region. The targeted businesses sectors are as follows:

- Aerospace/Aviation;
- Agricultural Products / Food Production;
- Automotive;
- Chemicals;
- Forestry Products;
- Metal and Advanced Materials; and
- Bioscience.

The respective descriptions of these targeted sectors in *Accelerate Alabama 2.0* map the intensity of employment in these sectors by county. A review of these maps focusing on the West Alabama Region show the highest prevalence of employment to be in the agricultural products/food production sector and the automotive sector. While all of these target sectors have some prevalence of employment within the Region, the lowest prevalence of employment among was in the aerospace/aviation sector and the bioscience sector. The other three sectors were in the middle between the highest and the lowest.

Additionally, in a January 21, 2021 article on the Department of Commerce's website, the Department reports that, notwithstanding the pandemic, they are seeing strong growth in the automotive, logistics and distribution, and high technology sectors.

Tuscaloosa County Economic Development Authority. The Tuscaloosa County Economic Development Authority has its focus on Tuscaloosa County, of course, which is by far the largest county in the West Alabama Region in terms of both population and employment. The Authority's target industries are:

- Advanced Manufacturing;
- Aerospace;
- Alternative Energy;
- Automotive;
- Business Services; and
- Health care.

C-3 of Northwest Alabama. C-3 of Northwest Alabama, or the Northwest Alabama Economic Development Alliance, serves Fayette, Lamar, and Marion counties. Fayette and Lamar counties both lie within the West Alabama Region. C-3 lists four target industries as being perfectly suited for their three county area. These are:

- Logistics / distribution;
- Automotive vehicle assembly / parts manufacturing;
- Specialty metal fabrication; and
- Motor vehicle bodies and trailers.

Region 3 Workforce Development Council. The Region 3 Workforce Development Council serves nine counties. Of these, seven are part of the West Alabama Region. The Council also serves Marengo and Sumter counties. The Council lists five target industries in its strategic plan to provide focus to its efforts. These target industries are:

- Automotive;
- Health care;
- Construction;
- Manufacturing; and
- Service industry.

Follow up discussions with the representatives of the Council confirmed that ongoing evidence during the pandemic shows that these target industries should continue to be the regional targets going forward.

The Small Business Pulse Survey

The U.S. Census Bureau weekly performs a Small Business Pulse Survey. They have been doing this since the Spring of 2020 in order to obtain some sense of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses. The data are presented for the Nation, the States and for larger metropolitan areas with responses from small businesses that have up to 499 employees. For this *Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan*, the information was reviewed as a comparison of the Nation with the State of Alabama. This was done in order to infer certain results for the West Alabama Region and thus ascertain some of the issues likely to affect West Alabama businesses. The information was reviewed from 4/26/20 through 01/10/21 which is the period of the COVID-19 pandemic prior to the availability of vaccines.

The information from the Census comes in two parts: 1) a weekly index comparison, and 2) a weekly response comparison. The weekly index comparison is briefly described without graphs below. The weekly response comparison of more specific questions is then presented in more detail, but there is still too much data to cover it fully. Not all of the questions and responses on the survey, nor all of the timeframes, are reviewed. For the purposes of this Program, a selection of the most relevant weekly responses from small businesses is presented. To review more detailed data from the survey, the source can be found at <https://www.census.gov/data/experimental-data-products/small-business-pulse-survey.html>.

Weekly Index Comparison

The weekly index comparison includes four indices: 1) the Overall Sentiment Index; 2) the Operational Challenges Index; 3) the Financial Stress Index; and 4) the Expected Recovery Index.

Overall Sentiment Index. The Overall Sentiment Index (OSI) assesses the overall effect of the pandemic on businesses. The overall sentiment slowly but steadily rose from Spring until early Fall when it leveled out nationally. The overall sentiment in Alabama has been consistently better than that of the Nation since 4/26/20 until the last few weeks at the end of 2020 when it fell to about the national level.

Operational Challenges Index. The Operational Challenges Index (OCI) assesses the overall effect of the pandemic on business operations. The operational challenges index indicates a significant improvement from Spring to mid Summer where it levels off until late fall when it declines again. The Alabama index closely tracks that of the Nation.

Financial Stress Index. The Financial Stress Index (FSI) assesses the financial difficulties experienced by businesses. The financial stress index starts low and improves through the Spring and Summer and then tails off slightly in the winter. The Alabama index somewhat tracks the National index, though erratically.

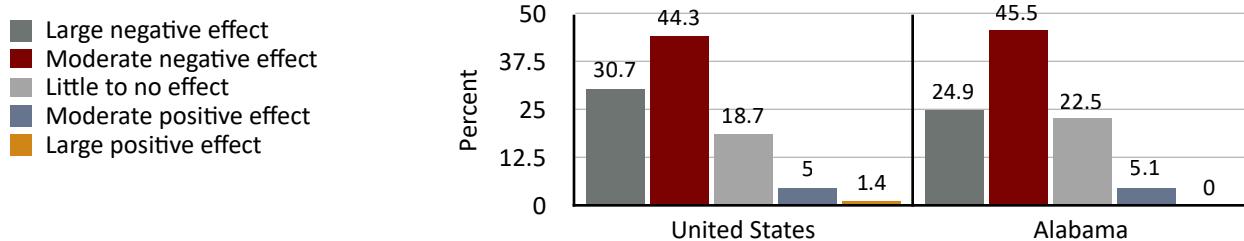
Expected Recovery Index. The Expected Recovery Index (ERI) summarizes the length of the expected recovery of businesses. The economic recovery index, though up and down over the timeframe of the survey, ends up at about the same place from Spring through Summer and Fall to Winter. This index for Alabama is noticeably better than that of the Nation.

Weekly Response Comparison

The Survey contains 23 questions for small businesses regarding the effect go the pandemic on their operations. The results from eleven of the most relevant questions on the survey are presented below.

Overall Effect. Businesses were asked “Overall, how has this business been affected by the Coronavirus pandemic?” The most recent response as of 01/10/21 is as shown in the graph below. The most

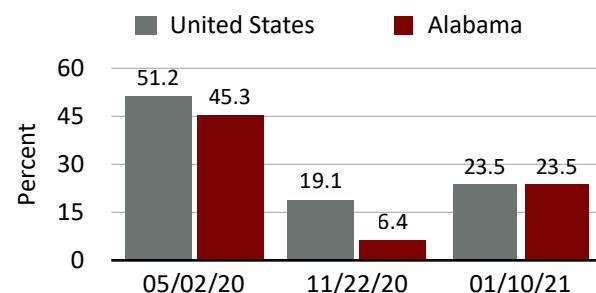
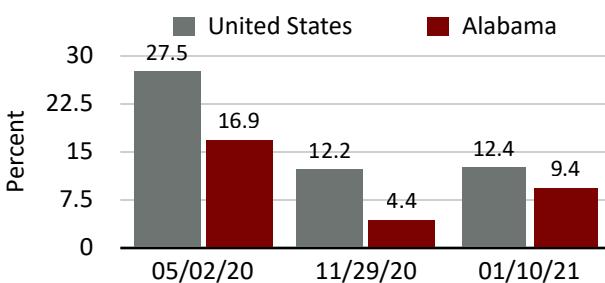
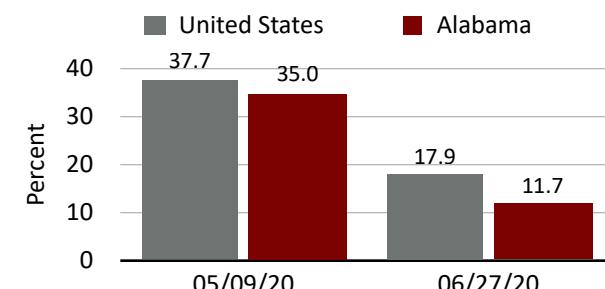
common response at both the State and national level is that there has been a moderate negative effect with a large negative effect being the second most common response. These responses have been fairly consistent since early August. Early in the pandemic, preceding the week of 05/02/20, there was much greater concern about negative effects with the responses indicating a large negative effect at 51.4% at the national level and 40.6% at the state level.



Temporary Closure. Businesses were asked “In the last week, did this business temporarily close any of its locations for at least a day?” To this yes or no question, 05/09/20 was the second week of the survey and was the highest week for “yes” answers, the percentage decreased into the Summer to 06/27/20 which was the last week this question was asked.

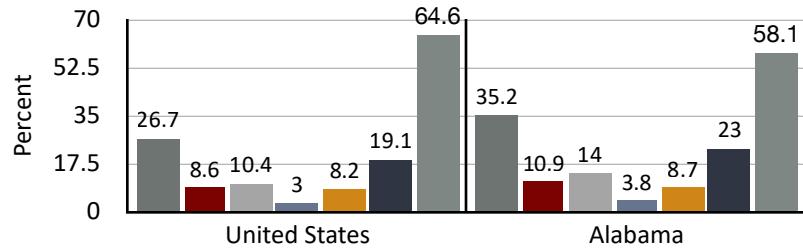
Change in employees. Businesses were asked “In the last week, did this business have a change in the number of paid employees?” The possible responses were yes-increased, yes-decreased, or no change. Of those that answered that they had decreased the number of employees in the preceding week: 05/02/20 was the first and highest week. The percentage decreased over the Summer and Fall to 4.4% for the week preceding 11/29/20, and has since risen over the Winter to 9.4% for the most recent week.

Change in hours. Businesses were asked “In the last week, did this business have a change in the total number of hour worked by paid employees?” The possible responses were yes-decreased or no change. Of those that answered that they had decreased hours in the preceding week: 5/02/20 was the first and highest week. The percentage decreased over the Summer and Fall to 6.4% for the week preceding 11/22/20, and has since risen over the Winter to 23.5% for the most recent week.



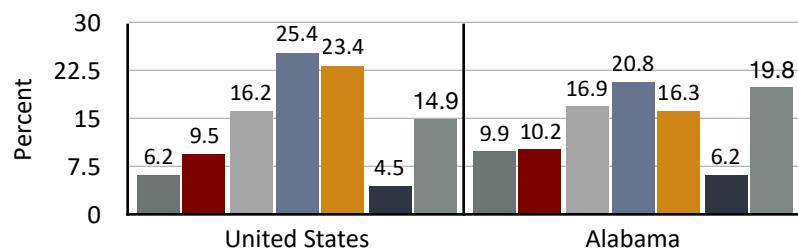
Delays/Difficulties. Businesses were asked “In the last week, did this business have any of the following?” There were a number of possible responses including supplier delays, whether they had difficulty locating alternate suppliers, production delays, or delays with delivery and shipping to customers. Only the response for the most recent week, that is, 01/10/21, is shown. Consistently, for both the Nation and the State, the biggest problems were domestic supplier delays and delivery/shipping delays.

- Domestic supplier delays
- Foreign supplier delays
- Alternate domestic suppliers
- Alternate foreign suppliers
- Production delays
- Delivery/shipping delays
- None of the above



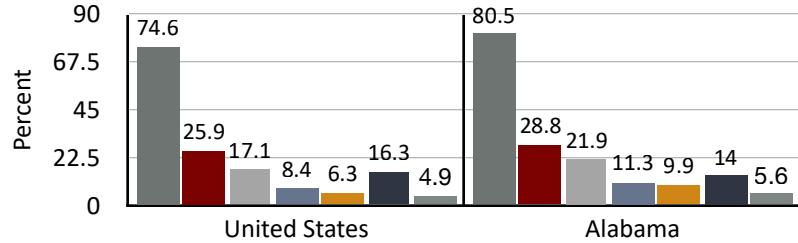
Cash on Hand. Businesses were asked “How would you describe the current availability of cash on hand for this business, including any financial assistance or loans?” They responded in regard to the period of time for which they had cash on hand for business operations. The responses varied widely over the course of the survey from Spring through Summer and Fall. The most recent response as of 01/10/21 is shown in the graph below. While at first glance the State results appear to somewhat track that of the Nation, a closer look indicates that Alabama businesses have a shorter cash position than those of the Nation. That is because more Alabama businesses have cash available for one day to two weeks of operations whereas, nationally, more businesses have cash available for one to three months or more of operations.

- 1-7 days of operations
- 1-2 weeks of operations
- 3-4 weeks of operations
- 1-2 months of operations
- 3 or more months of operations
- No cash available for operations
- Don't know

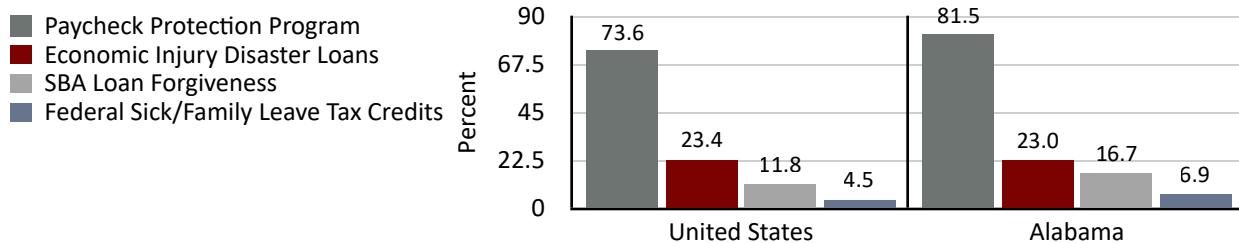


Requested Assistance. Businesses were asked “Since March 13, 2020, has this business requested financial assistance from any top the following sources?” About fourteen possible responses were listed with the responses that were used by Alabama businesses listed below. The responses were fairly steady over the timeframe of the survey. The most recent response as of 01/10/21 is as shown below. Clearly, the most common response by far is the Paycheck Protection Program with Economic Injury Disaster Loans being the next most common response. Also, 13.0% of Alabama businesses and 18.5% of businesses nationally responded that they had not requested financial assistance from any source.

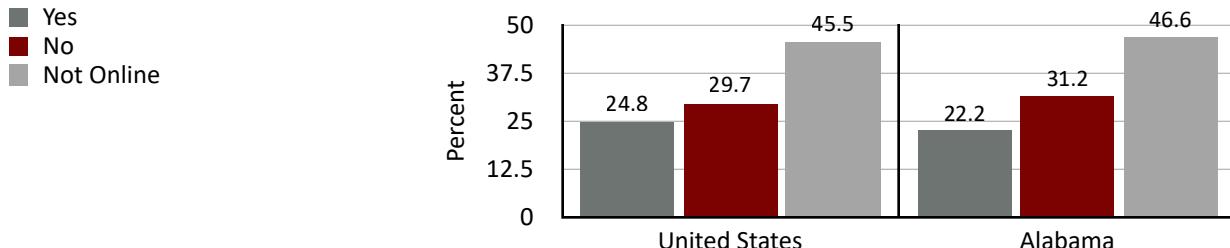
- Paycheck Protection Program
- Economic Injury Disaster Loans
- SBA Loan Forgiveness
- State or Local Programs
- Banks
- Self, Family or Friends
- Federal Sick/Family Leave Tax Credits



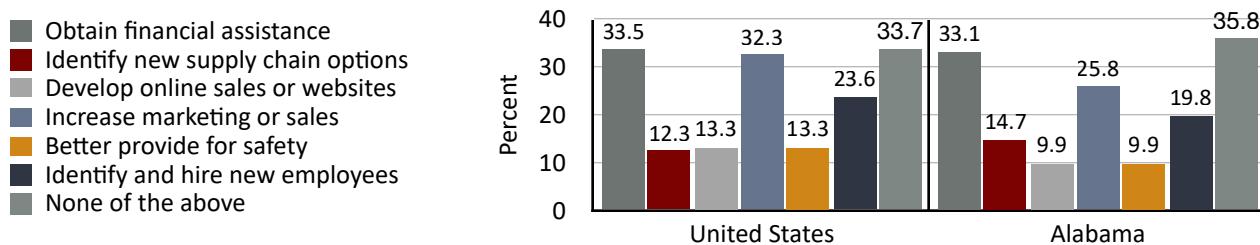
Received Assistance. Related to the previous question regarding requested assistance, businesses were asked “Since March 13, 2020, has this business received financial assistance from any of these programs of the Federal governments?” About nine possible responses were listed with the responses that were used by Alabama businesses shown below. As with the responses on requested assistance, the responses were fairly steady over the timeframe of the survey. The most recent response as of 01/10/21 is as shown. Again, the most common response is the Paycheck Protection Program. Also, 13.4% of Alabama businesses and 22.1% of businesses nationally responded that they had not received financial assistance from any source.



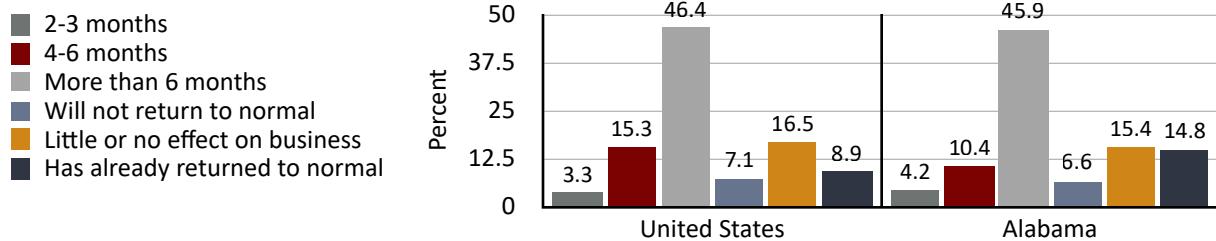
Online Platforms. Businesses were asked “Since March 13, 2020, has there been an increase in this business’s use of online platform to offer goods and services?” This question was first asked in early August and the responses have been up and down since then. Businesses could respond “yes,” “no,” or “this business does not use online platforms to offer goods and services.” The most recent response as of 01/10/21 is as shown. Under the circumstances of the pandemic, it is interesting that the least common response both for the State and nationally is “yes” and that, by far, the most common response both for the State and nationally is that they are not online.



Future Needs. Businesses were asked “In the next six months, do you think this businesses will need to do any of the following?” This question was first asked in early August and the responses have been mixed since then. The most recent response as of 01/10/21 is as shown. The only choice of responses that was not selected by any respondent was that they would need to permanently close the business. Responses at the State level were similar to that of the Nation. The most common responses in both cases were to obtain financial assistance and to increase marketing or sales.



Expectations. Businesses were asked “In your opinion, how much time do you think will pass before this business returns to its normal level of operations relative to one year ago?” The most recent response as of 01/10/21 is as follows. By far, the most common response for both the State and the Nation was that this business will not return to normal. Conversely, 30.4% of Alabama respondents said that the pandemic has had little to no effect on their business or that they had already returned to normal.



Locally Identified Issues

In the previous chapter on employment considerations, it was noted that the information that can be derived from local, state, and national information sources present only part of the picture when considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local communities. As with the previous chapter, the Study Team formed by the West Alabama Regional Commission met at several work sessions to discuss these issues and identified a number of issue areas that were felt to be applicable to the West Alabama Region. The work sessions were supplemented by interviews with a selection of local officials around the Region. The result of these work sessions and leadership interviews was a selection key takeaways and common themes.

- *A broad range of businesses were initially impacted by the pandemic.* Those types of businesses largely corresponded to those indicated by the information derived from data sources. Small businesses and entrepreneurs that involved face-to-face sales bore the brunt of the impacts. These businesses included:
 - Tourism related businesses including sports tourism which is particularly important to the Tuscaloosa area, hospitality/entertainment businesses, restaurants and bars, theaters and other venues where groups gather;
 - Health care businesses that are not COVID-19 oriented, e.g., dentists, other routine care, and elective procedures;
 - Meat and poultry processing;
 - Personal services, e.g., hair and nail services, child care, etc., and education as an economic sector;
 - Retailing, although the impact seemed to be more of a shift to more localized shopping and online shopping; and
 - Commercial real estate.
- *Workforce related impacts.* These impacts included layoff of good workers and loss of benefits by workers at the outset. Then as the pandemic wore on and businesses attempted to return to prior levels of activity, lack of available workforce and maintenance of staffing levels became the primary difficulty along with the difficulty of cross-training staff. Among the reasons for staffing difficulties, lack of child care was often mentioned along with the provision of unemployment benefits. Going forward, it is expected that there will be local pockets with a tight labor market and shortages in particular occupations. These issues, along with rising wage rates, could make it difficult to grow a business in some areas.
- *Finance related impacts.* Many businesses experienced financial difficulties associated with the pandemic, particularly small businesses which don't have large financial reserves. These businesses experienced fluctuating costs and revenues and the need to maintain payment for fixed costs such as rental and lease expenses. For these businesses, access to capital will likely pose continuing problems for some time to come.
- *Operations related impacts.* Operations related impacts to businesses included disruptions in operations including supply chain issues, reduced hours and operations at times, safety costs including enhanced cleanliness of facilities and procedures, and the costs of other safety needs for both workers and customers. As has been stated in other contexts, broadband access will be increasingly important to businesses operations going forward.
- *Relationship related impacts.* Temporary periods of time out-of-businesses or when normal business operations are disrupted, such as was caused by the pandemic, can lead to weakened businesses relationships. This may include supply relationships and relationships with business services providers

such as accounting and legal services. Not being able to rely on others, even due to reasons beyond their control, and vice versa can lead to an erosion of trust which is essential to a good business climate. Also, relationships with customers suffer as they find other businesses to fulfill their needs.

- *Lingering Impacts.* One concern about the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is regarding those lingering impacts that will be difficult to resolve and may take an extended period of time to deal with. Chief among these is the problem of lasting business debt. There is also concern about gaps in products and services, particularly with regard to disruptions in supply chains. Health and safety issues will continue to be a concern of both workers and customers and may require some businesses to continue to practice that address these concerns along with the continuing costs involved.
 - *Education and career choice.* Education and career choices should be examined and reinforced in light of changes in the economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Reinforcement of career choices is of particular concern for the sixth grade through high school, but continue through post-secondary education. The education gap created by the pandemic may lead to a micro-generation that lags in terms of both training for skilled occupations and occupations that require a college education. Also of particular concern are the ramifications of lost learning that extend to lower grade levels, that is, pre-K through the sixth grade. Crucial learning windows exist for essential skills, such as reading skills, between the ages of five to seven. Lost learning of these skills is not easily regained with equivalent instruction as a later age.
 - *Non-profits/churches/philanthropy.* Non-profits, including churches, provide a multitude of services within most communities. It is known that some of these institutions suffered during the early days of the pandemic in terms of both attendance and contributions. This, in turn, affected their capacity to respond to local needs. The full extent of this problem needs to be examined including whether the problem is expected to linger going forward.
 - *Mental health services.* Many areas of the country, including the local and regional area, were already experiencing problems with drug abuse, in particular opioid abuse. The event of the pandemic along with the associated loss of employment tended to exacerbate the problems of mental health and strain mental health services regardless of whether the problems were associated only with drug abuse. It is feared that some will have continuing difficulty with the return to society and to the workforce.
 - *Business resiliency.* Many businesses, particularly small businesses, were not as prepared for the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as they might have been. A number of businesses have closed, though perhaps not as many as might have been feared early in the pandemic. Most businesses that stayed open or re-opened were able to make adjustments and innovations that made it possible for them to do so in keeping with health and safety requirements. Still, there are ongoing finance and workforce issues to deal with. New perspectives will be required by businesses in order to be better prepared for the future health hazard and natural hazard events.
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Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan

Chapter 6. Opportunities for Recovery and Resiliency

Goals and Objectives

Common Themes

Opportunities

Authority and Work Program

The ultimate purpose of this Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan is to develop opportunities for implementation that can be used by the West Alabama Regional Commission to support its efforts in community and economic development and thereby create a more prosperous and resilient West Alabama Region. To that end, the goals and objectives of the Commission's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy are reviewed in the following paragraphs. Then, certain common themes that were observed in the development of the opportunities are expressed followed by a description of the opportunities themselves. Finally, a few comments regarding a work program are noted.

Goals and Objectives

This report was prepared as an adjunct to the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the West Alabama Region. That CEDS is known as the “*West Alabama Economic Development Playbook*.” As such, it is important to reiterate the Goals and Objectives presented in the CEDS since these are the essential guideposts for the economic development of the Region. The Goals of the Regional CEDS focus on three broad areas of concern which are *People, Places and Purpose*. The opportunities for implementation described in this report are selected to conform with and help to accomplish, and in some cases expand upon, the three broad goals for the West Alabama Region. These three goals and their associated objectives are as follows.

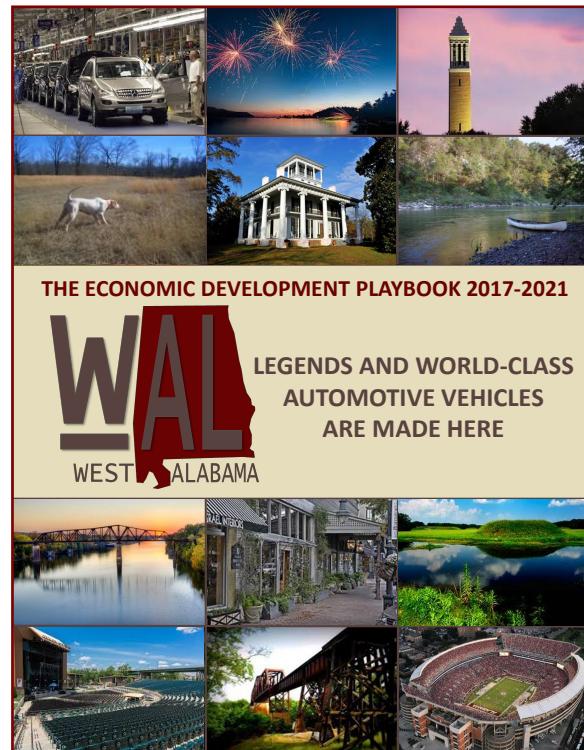
People. Assist citizens of the region with opportunities to better their lives and their communities.

1.1. Ensure a skilled local workforce is available to increase economic capacity in the region.

1.2. Support improvements to educational and training programs and facilities that align with current and anticipated job opportunities.

1.3. Collaborate with educators to include the teaching of basic and social skills in order to enhance workforce readiness.

1.4. Expand and market opportunities for all levels of job seekers within the region and secure a pathway to training for displaced and under skilled workers.



Places. Assist communities in efforts to improve the region as a desirable place to live and work.

2.1. Invest in the development, maintenance and improvement of public infrastructure necessary to enhance the quality of life in the region.

2.2. Encourage increased community and private sector participation in the development of public facilities, affordable housing, and transportation services.

2.3. Support efforts to improve education, healthcare and public safety; and provide needed community services and facilities throughout the region.

2.4. Protect and maintain natural resources and quality of place assets to attract and benefit residents and increase tourism.

Purpose. Assist job creators and innovators to locate or expand in our regional economy and be successful.

3.1. Work in partnership with local, regional, state, and national organizations to locate and expand business and industry that diversify or strengthen the region's economy.

3.2. Develop or improve infrastructure, sites and buildings to better attract and serve business and industry.

3.3. Promote the use of federal and state programs that cultivate entrepreneurs and stimulate economic growth, research and development, and international trade.

3.4. Partner with business and economic development organizations and financial institutions to provide services to business and industry that attract talent into the region.

The above objectives are largely addressed through one or more of the opportunities that are described in the following paragraphs. It has been noted that one objective in particular, objective 1.3 that discusses basic and social skills, better known as essential skills, should be reviewed and updated in the course of updating the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) to better reflect current thinking on the subject. The importance of these types of skills are, and should be, recognized throughout the workforce development process. It should further be noted that the (CEDS) is reviewed annually and updated every five years. The opportunities described below should be reviewed periodically as well in light of updates to the CEDS.

Common Themes

In the course developing opportunities for recovery and resiliency, four common themes presented themselves again and again. These are stated here and should be kept in mind when reviewing the descriptions of the opportunities. These may be considered a sort of “overall” strategy to provide guidance to any activities or strategies that follow.

1. *Relationships and partnerships.* Most, if not all, of the necessary institutions are already in place in the West Alabama Region. In fact, some of them are quite effective at what they do. But, as in most situations, they need support, or at least key relationships and partnerships they can rely on to accomplish their goals. For the purposes of this discussion, a relationship is a situation in which two organizations are in communication with one another on a regular basis and aware of the capabilities each can bring to bear on community issues and needs. A partnership is a relationship in which a formal working arrangement has been made. Relationships and partnerships are critical for the other of the common themes to be effective - that is, education and training, knowledge and research, and finance and administration.
 2. *Education and training.* Education and training is important for workers, for the business community, and for community leaders in order have a well-rounded economic development program. In fact, as much as we speak of worker training, it is the community leaders and the business community that need such services every bit as much.
 3. *Knowledge and research.* The West Alabama Region is particularly blessed with outstanding research facilities and institutions. Creative partnerships should be used to engage and leverage research expertise in support of local and regional organizations
 4. *Finance and administration.* One of the primary activities of the West Alabama Regional Commission is, and always will be, to provide assistance to local and regional governments and other organizations in securing access to financial support from federal and state agencies. This includes financing opportunities for community development, economic development, business development, and other organizational support of a similar nature.
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Opportunities

The following opportunities for implementation are intended to supplement the goals and objectives of the regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) as outlined above with a selection of opportunities that are chosen to best address those goals and objectives while relating to the current situation which, in this case, is the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three areas of opportunities were identified. These areas are intended to specifically address three components of the local and regional economy - the workers, the community, and business. These areas correspond to the goals of the CEDS that relate to people, places and purpose. Workforce and training is intended to address worker needs. Asset and infrastructure development opportunities are intended to address community needs. And, business assistance and entrepreneurial support is intended to address business needs, particularly the needs of small business. These opportunities are intended to 1) address the issues of recovery and resiliency that arose due to the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) address issues of resiliency that may be expected to arise in a future emergency of a similar nature; and 3) address the existing economic goals and vision of the region as stated in the CEDS. Although the opportunities are described under one of the three areas, they can each be thought of as pertaining to each of the other areas. This list of opportunities is not exhaustive and is not intended to be. Many other opportunities for implementation can be brought to bear in such a situation and many were considered. The selected opportunities are those thought to be most applicable to the situation as it currently stands, and are most closely within the capacity of the West Alabama Regional Commission to effect accomplishment within reasonable means and timeframe. While the perspective of these opportunities is that of the Regional Commission, some of them might not be fully accomplished by the Regional Commission, although they may be initiated or supported by it. Clearly, some opportunities are more extensive than others and some will be more impactful than others. The following chart lists fifteen opportunities, five for each area of concern.

Summary of Opportunities

Workforce and Training Opportunities	Asset and Infrastructure Development Opportunities	Business and Entrepreneurial Support Opportunities
<i>Supporting the CEDS Goal for People</i>	<i>Supporting the CEDS Goal for Places</i>	<i>Supporting the CEDS Goal for Purpose</i>
Workforce Development Coordination and Outreach	Community Development Financing	Rural Business Outreach and Assistance
Regional Workforce Development Council Support	Economic Development Financing	Financial Programs Outreach and Assistance
Work-Related Transportation Options	Higher Education Relationships	Revolving Loan Fund Enhancement
Work-Related Child Care Options	Health Care Asset Mapping	Emergency Business Practices Resource Guide
Community Leadership Training	Private Foundation Asset Mapping	Business District Planning and Development

Opportunities for Workforce and Training

The workforce refers to the labor pool of an area such as the West Alabama Region. It includes both those who are employed and those who are unemployed. As was detailed in a previous chapter, there can be any number of ways to define or examine the workforce. What is clear, though, is that it is the workforce that is most impacted in the event of an economic shock such as that brought on by a pandemic. In relation to workforce and training, three key findings are that:

- The unemployment rate for the West Alabama Region had all but fully recovered to pre-pandemic levels by Spring 2021. Also, the labor force participation rate of the West Alabama Region does not appear to have suffered over the course of the pandemic as substantially as that of the State and Nation;
- According to regional workforce leaders, major post-pandemic employment prospects within the region are not dissimilar to those prospects and industry/occupational targets that were in effect prior to the pandemic; and
- Leadership training is essential for local elected officials and community leaders in order to familiarize them with best practices in governance and management of their communities as well as with intergovernmental programs and funding.

A number of opportunities were developed that would best capitalize on the most promising future employment options based on anticipated post-pandemic employment patterns in light of current circumstances. Among the opportunities considered, five were selected to address workforce and training. These are:

- Workforce development coordination and outreach;
- Regional workforce development council support;
- Work-related transportation options;
- Work related child care options; and
- Community leadership training.

1.1 Workforce Development Coordination and Outreach. The purpose of this opportunity is to participate with the various workforce development entities within the region to increase mutual awareness and awareness of programs among potential workforce clients. Besides broad-based workforce development programs, these efforts would include the promotion of those programs that focus on trades and apprenticeship as well as those programs that assist people who are re-entering the workforce following incarceration.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 1.4 and addresses regional workforce and training, specifically the extension and marketing of workforce development programs.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity should be undertaken immediately and continue on an ongoing basis. While communication and participation may be of little difficulty, promotion and assistance with the design and implementation of some of these programs could well be of moderate difficulty notwithstanding the low cost of participation.

1.2 Regional Workforce Development Council Support. The purpose of this opportunity is to support and participate in the programs of the Region 3 Workforce Development Council (West Alabama Works). This is especially important when it comes to the extension of workforce development programs to smaller communities and rural areas. Among the activities included in this opportunity are those that

would assist in discovering and acquiring the resources where appropriate to expand the capacity and staffing of workforce development programs.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 1.2 and 1.4 and addresses regional workforce and training issues, specifically the support of workforce development programs and organizations.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity should be undertaken immediately and continue on an ongoing basis. While participation is of little difficulty, it may prove to be of moderate difficulty and moderate cost to discover and procure sufficient funding on a regular basis

1.3 Work-Related Transportation Options. The purpose of this opportunity is to explore the expansion of work-related transportation options. Options may include expansion of traditional transit and demand response transit, the exploration of van-pooling and car-pooling programs to local industry, the provision of low income vehicle acquisition programs, and other programs. Work-related transportation is a consideration in the West Alabama Coordinated Public Transit Plan and should be considered an essential component of the overall workforce development strategy of the Region.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objectives 1.1 and 2.2 and addresses workforce and training issues, specifically the removal of barriers to workforce participation.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity should be scheduled for the long-term since it will take some time to perform the studies that will be necessary and to establish any additional or expanded programs. It will be done with considerable difficulty and considerable cost due to additional labor and acquisition of equipment that will be necessary.

1.4 Work-Related Child Care Options. The purpose of this opportunity is to explore the expansion of work-related child care options and should place an emphasis on affordability. Child care options are normally provided by private for-profit or private non-profit organizations and sometimes by the employers themselves. Work-related child care should be considered an essential component of the overall workforce development strategy of the Region.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 1.1 and 2.3 and addresses workforce and training issues, specifically the removal of barriers to workforce participation.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity should be scheduled for the long-term since it will take some time to perform the studies that will be necessary to establish any additional or expanded programs. It will be done with considerable difficulty and considerable cost due to additional labor and acquisition of equipment that will be necessary.

1.5 Community Leadership Training. The purpose of this opportunity is to provide leadership training to local and regional political leadership on the broad range of issues and opportunities facing local communities including best practices in governance and management of their communities as well as regarding intergovernmental programs and funding. This training should initially be provided as a part of the Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Program. It should be updated and provided periodically on an as-needed basis along with a review of leadership training programs to assure their relevance to current issues and events.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 2.2 and addresses regional governmental assets, specifically political leadership.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity can be, and is scheduled to be, performed immediately. It can be done with moderate difficulty and for moderate cost. The difficult and cost are due to the preparation of materials and presentation along with marketing.

Opportunities for Asset and Infrastructure Development

Asset and infrastructure development refers to the facilities and institutions that are established to support various community activities and purposes. This is particularly true for infrastructure that supports economic activities and purposes. It may refer to roads, bridges, and utilities as well as those facilities that support essential community purposes such as education, health care, and governmental services. In relation to asset and infrastructure development, three key findings are that:

- Manufacturing, particularly the automotive cluster, is a large and important component of the regional economy;
- Higher education is a significant component of the regional economy providing essential services dealing with economic and health issues; and
- In many cases, community infrastructure and facilities are inadequate due to age, community growth, or uneven maintenance over the years. Of particular concern for economic development purposes is the provision of reliable broadband services.

In the course of developing this project, it was determined that the primary asset groups that should be examined are economic assets, service assets, financial assets, governmental assets, and built assets. A number of opportunities were developed that would best capitalize on those assets that will have the most positive impact on future post-pandemic economic development in light of current circumstances. Among the opportunities considered, five were selected to address asset and infrastructure development. These are:

- Community development financing;
- Economic development financing;
- Higher education relationships;
- Health care asset mapping; and
- Private foundation asset mapping.

2.1 Community Development Financing. The purpose of this opportunity is to promote the full use of grant and loan programs for the improvement of priority community facility and infrastructure needs. This involves the promotion of these programs and opportunities to local communities and assisting them in their use. Although there are many components to this strategy, three are worthy of specific mention: community development plans; the *Grant and Loan Guide*; and broadband expansion.

A community development strategy could be done in concert with a series of community development plans for the ongoing improvement of community facilities and infrastructure throughout the Region. These community development plans can be accomplished as a companion to the Region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). As an additional component to this opportunity, periodically update and re-publish the *Grant and Loan Guide* to assure that current fund availability and project eligibility is reflected and that local leaders are aware of the range of opportunities that are presented. As for the facilities themselves, the lack of reliable broadband service was repeatedly mentioned as a hindrance to working, shopping, and studying at home in many parts of

the Region. As part of this opportunity, assure that local community leaders are familiar with ADECA, ARC, DRA and USDA broadband expansion programs and assist them with funding where appropriate.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objectives 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and 3.3, and addresses regional governmental assets as well as built assets, specifically community facilities and infrastructure including digital/broadband resources.

Timeline and investment. This is already an ongoing strategy that should be continued indefinitely with the new feature of a series of community development plans. The core activity of promoting programs and opportunities can be done with moderate difficulty and low cost since the primary activity is promotion and preparation of funding proposals which requires some effort but is normally done with current staff.

The *Grant and Loan Guide* was recently re-published and distributed. This resource should continue to be updated periodically as conditions change and as a reminder to local leaders of the opportunities available. It can be done with little difficulty and low cost due to the initial research already having been performed.

2.2 Economic Development Financing. The purpose of this opportunity is to assist with funding for infrastructure needs and/or pandemic response needs of business and industry. This may include the programs of the Economic Development Administration (EDA), the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), the Delta Regional Authority (DRA), the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG), and other funding programs that may be identified. Assistance will consist primarily of preparation, submission, and administration of grants to support economic development projects where appropriate. In particular, this opportunity should be brought to bear when a prospective economic development project supports diversification of the local or regional economy and/or supports strengthening a targeted economic cluster.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objectives 3.1 and 3.3 and addresses regional economic assets, specifically the manufacturing sector of the economy.

Timeline and investment. This opportunity is a current strategy that should continue on an ongoing basis. It can be accomplished with moderate difficulty due to the work required to prepare funding requests, however, it can be done for low cost within current or modestly expanded staffing levels.

2.3 Higher Education Relationships. The purpose of this opportunity is to maintain and enhance relationships with programs and offices of the University of Alabama and other institutions of higher education within the Region in order to take advantage of the knowledge and resources that can be made available from project to project. Many higher education programs can be taken advantage of, but two of the primary relationships are the University Center for Economic Development and the Center for Business and Economic Research, both of which are complementary to the purposes of the West Alabama Regional Commission.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 2.3 and addresses regional service assets, specifically higher education.

Timeline and investment. This opportunity is already ongoing and should be continued and explored for additional opportunities. It can be continued with little difficulty and low cost with the primary activity being the acquisition of project funding from project to project.

2.4 Health Care Asset Mapping. The purpose of this opportunity is to geo-locate and prepare a map of health care facilities, including mental health facilities, throughout the Region to better understand the proximity of the population to services. While it is important to discover gaps in geographic health care coverage, this opportunity also helps to prepare for a more resilient region in the event of future emergencies that involve a health care impact. As such, it is important to include consideration of not just health care, medical care, and mental health facilities, but the emergency services that support those facilities. This includes emergency management services, ambulance and paramedic services, other first responders, air medical services and helicopter pad facilities, and so forth.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 2.3 and addresses regional service assets, specifically medical care, health care, and mental health infrastructure.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity should be done in the short-term. It will involve moderate difficulty and moderate cost due to probable necessity of staff time to perform the research and reporting necessary for completion.

2.5 Private Foundation Asset Mapping. The purpose of this opportunity is to prepare a catalog of private foundations that are based within the West Alabama Region and that provide funding noting the purposes for which they provide funding and how public funding and foundation funding can supplement each other to better fund projects of public or social benefit.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objectives 2.2 and 2.3 and addresses regional financial assets, specifically local and regional foundations.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity should be performed in the short-term and updated periodically. It can be done with little difficulty and low cost since the primary activity is preliminary research. This could be developed as a section within the *Grant and Loan Guide*. More effort will be necessary when attempting to establish relationships and arrange funding in cooperation with these private foundations.

Opportunities for Business Assistance and Entrepreneurial Support

The business community of the West Alabama Region includes the full range of business activity from small businesses with only a few employees to large manufacturers, some of which are known worldwide. For larger businesses with multiple locations, the more common local and regional support services are economic development strategies such as tax incentives and infrastructure agreements. For small businesses, business counseling and entrepreneurial support services are normally the more appropriate strategies.

Further, almost all businesses require financial assistance in order to operate. This is usually from traditional private banking entities. However, when small businesses are attempting start-up or expansion or even to maintain their financial position, assistance from a public or non-profit economic development entity is sometimes necessary. These business assistance programs are available under certain circumstances to local businesses in support of the creation or retention of jobs in the local and regional economy.

In relation to business assistance and entrepreneurial support, three key findings are that:

- The job loss in four industry sectors accounted for over 80% of the regional job loss when unemployment was at its height during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Those four industry sectors were information, administrative and waste services, health care and social assistance, and accommodating and food services. Sub-sectors particularly hard hit were publishing, administrative and support services, ambulatory health care, nursing and residential care facilities, and food services and drinking establishments.
- A labor shortage in the West Alabama Region had already been predicted for coming years. The COVID-19 Pandemic exacerbated the trend pushing up the timing of the shortage and causing businesses to struggle to find workers as the pandemic subsided.
- While larger businesses are better prepared, both financially and operationally, to sustain themselves during an economic shock, small businesses have much more difficulty in returning to normal, if they can at all.

With specific regard to business financial assistance, three additional key findings are that:

- Many businesses experienced fluctuating and unexpected costs due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. These costs could include, among any number of things, rent and lease expenses, safety and health costs for both employees and customers, and costly disruption in operations;
- Certain business relationships are important to sustaining a business during the best of times, and are critical during times of economic shock. These business relationships especially include legal, banking and accounting relationships.
- Small businesses are going to continue to need a variety of support services for some time come with the most common need, not surprisingly, being a selection of financial support services.

A number of opportunities were developed that would best capitalize on those business opportunities for displaced individuals and others who may be interested in starting and growing their own business in light of current circumstances, and that would best capitalize on programs and opportunities to provide financial assistance including the use and expansion of local revolving loan funds and other economic development grant and loan programs in light of current circumstances. Among the opportunities considered, five were selected to address business assistance and entrepreneurial support. These are:

- Rural business outreach and assistance;
- Financial programs outreach and assistance;
- The Revolving Loan Fund;
- Emergency business practices resource guide; and
- Business district planning and development.

3.1 Rural Business Outreach and Assistance. The purpose of this opportunity is to provide for outreach and assistance to businesses in smaller communities and rural areas of the Region. This includes exploring the establishment of rural business assistance centers in strategic locations, or more likely, virtual centers that can be accessed from any location. This could be done perhaps through a non-profit or other organization and could take the form of an actual center, an informational center, or a programmatic effort that involves outreach. A special effort should be made to target and extend federal programs to these businesses. In particular, explore the use of USDA Rural Community and Business Service Programs to support business activity.

Support the Small Business Development Center (SBDC). A significant portion of this opportunity is to support and make use of the programs of the Small Business Development Center. This includes counseling services and business planning to help businesses make and attain realistic goals and to develop sound and sustainable business practices. It can also include financial training. Part of this strategy is also to assist the Small Business Development Center in discovering and acquiring the resources necessary to increase staffing to meet the needs of local and regional businesses.

Support Local Chambers of Commerce. Another portion of this opportunity is to support and participate in the programs of local Chambers of Commerce. This is especially important in regard to the Chambers in small communities and rural areas where resources are much more limited. It includes utilizing the networking apparatus of local Chambers for outreach to their communities and providing assistance where appropriate in the expansion of Chamber programs that can be of benefit to local businesses.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 3.3 and addresses regional business counseling and entrepreneurial support.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity should be started in the short-term and continue on an ongoing basis. It is expected to be of moderate difficulty and moderate cost due to substantial and continuing staff time that will be necessary

3.2 Financial Programs Outreach and Assistance. The purpose of this opportunity is to share knowledge of financial assistance that is available for local business. Take opportunities to speak at local functions such as Chamber of Commerce meetings and hold events such as “Bankers Breakfasts” to inform key business leaders about the financing opportunities that are available, including those opportunities that make use of West Alabama Regional Commission’s Revolving Loan Fund or other programs for business based on Federal or State assistance.

This opportunity may also include finance and accounting counseling that could be accomplished in partnership with a non-profit business financial counseling organization to provide training and assistance to businesses in better money management practices including those practices what will serve to protect them during economic downturns. It is not the purpose of this strategy to replace or compete with the services provided by private sector accounting firms, but to familiarize early stage or growing businesses on the value of professional practices, assistance, and relationships.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 3.4 and addresses business financial assistance.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity can be started in the short-term and continue to be provided on an ongoing basis. It can be begun with little difficulty, just finding a partner and designing a program. But, continuing the program will entail moderate cost due to the need for staffing or contracting.

3.3 Revolving Loan Fund Enhancement. The purpose of this opportunity is to use the West Alabama Regional Commission’s Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) to leverage funding from financial institutions for the benefit of local businesses. This opportunity includes the continuation of this program along with a program review to determine whether program enhancements are advisable. Also, it should be considered whether to extend the reach and effectiveness of the RLF through partnerships with other business assistance organizations such as local incubators and entrepreneurial centers. These organizations can help promote the Fund to their clients who are already known to them and of whom they are already aware of their respective financial capacities.

Additionally, it may be possible to establish a partnership with a non-profit business lending program that is similar to Revolving Loan Fund program. Partnering with another non-profit lending program would assist in extending available resources, strengthening the vetting process, and spreading the risk of the RLF Program.

Another program enhancement could be to prepare and present business lending education to those small businesses that make use of the RLF Program. The education should be presented by a third party that has expertise in this area of business. This would be accomplished through the auspices of the RLF Program.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 3.4 and addresses regional business financial assistance.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity should be started in the short-term and continued on an on-going basis. It can be started with little difficulty and low cost since the primary activities are evaluation and adjustment of the program, if necessary, and establishment of working relationships with organizations that have complementary objectives. The educational component could be provided on an as-needed basis as new customers come on board with the Revolving Loan Fund program. It can be started with little to moderate difficulty, mainly due to the need to design and develop an education program. It could increase to moderate cost over time depending on the number of new Revolving Loan Fund customers.

3.4 Emergency Business Practices Resource Guide. The purpose of this opportunity is to promote resources that businesses can use to prepare for the economic shock that may accompany a natural hazard or health hazard event. Many of these resources and the knowledge they represent are already in place. Local and regional businesses would benefit by bringing these resources together into a single source document that would serve to digest the many resources available and simplify the search process for the measures that are appropriate for a particular business. This Guide could be done in cooperation with local Chambers of Commerce along with the Small Business Development Center.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 3.4 and addresses regional business counseling and entrepreneurial support.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity should be undertaken in the short term and continue to be updated on a periodic basis. It is expected to be of moderate difficulty and moderate cost due to either the staff time that will be necessary or the procurement of research and consulting services.

3.5 Business District Planning and Development. The purpose of this opportunity is to promote best practices in community planning in support of the economics of town centers and other business districts. Well-planned and vital town centers and business districts are supportive of business activity and community vitality. This opportunity includes the promotion of business district planning in municipalities throughout the Region as appropriate. This may be done in consideration of the historic resources present in many communities. In these cases, familiarize local communities with the programs and grants available through the Alabama Historical Commission and other historical and cultural grants and programs.

Objective. This opportunity supports CEDS Objective 2.4 and 3.2, and addresses regional economic assets, specifically the commercial sector of the economy and the cultural and historic resources that support economic activity.

Timeframe and investment. This opportunity should be undertaken in the short term and continue intermittently on an as-needed basis. It is expected to be of moderate difficulty and moderate cost due to either the staff time that will be necessary or the procurement of community planning consulting services.

Authority and Work Program

This Pandemic Recovery and Resiliency Plan is developed and prepared as an adjunct to the West Alabama Regional Commission's (WARC) Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). As such, it is intended for adoption by the Board of Directors of the West Alabama Regional Commission and submission to the U.S. Economic Development Administration. Adoption serves as authorization for the Commission staff to take action in furtherance of the recommendations contained herein and the goals and objectives of the Regional CEDS.

Oversight of this Plan and the opportunities for implementation contained herein are vested in the Community and Economic Development Department of the West Alabama Regional Commission (WARC). The Department, with the advice of the Executive Director and Board of Directors of WARC, oversees the CEDS and the activities and measures considered to be reasonably attainable within the scope of each year with the intent of addressing the highest priorities and eventually accomplishing the objectives of the entire CEDS. In the process of overseeing the CEDS, the Department should take into consideration the opportunities represented in this Plan determining those that may most appropriate to be addressed in a given year.
