



OXFAM REPORT

BEST STATES TO WORK IN THE U.S. 2025



OXFAM

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ABOUT THE BEST STATES TO WORK INDEX (BSWI)

In 2018, Oxfam decided it was time to survey the states across the country and to catalog the many policies that have a dramatic effect on workers' lives. The result was the annual Best States to Work Index (BSWI), which scores and ranks the states.

This edition is the BSWI for 2025.

- The interactive map for all workers is here:
www.oxfamamerica.org/statemap2025.
- The interactive map for working women is here:
www.oxfamamerica.org/statewomenmap2025.

WHY 52?

This index covers all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia (a federal district) and Puerto Rico (a territory). There are many reasons to include these two, starting with the large populations of US citizens in both of them. The population of DC is just over 700,000 people—larger than the total population of both Wyoming and Vermont. Puerto Rico has a population larger than nearly 20 of the states, with roughly 3.2 million inhabitants. Each also has a significant history of laws around working conditions and compensation.

For simplicity, we use the word “states” in this report to cover all 52 entities.

WHAT'S THE TIMEFRAME?

All data is based on policies and laws in effect by July 1, 2025.

INTRODUCTION

The Best States to Work Index (BSWI), now in its seventh edition, was originally created to capture how states stepped into gaps left by federal inaction to support low-wage workers and working families. Every policy tracked in the BSWI is either absent (like paid leave or heat protections) or insufficient (like minimum wages) at the federal level but has some precedent at the state level. This index is a model of what states can and have done to support low-wage workers and working families, and what the federal government should pass at the national level. Since before this index was introduced in 2018 and up until the release of this report, Congress has failed to pass universal access to paid leave, rights to organize and bargain collectively, and higher wages. This inaction has left many people stuck in cyclical patterns of poverty. Yet the impact of these policy decisions does not fall equally on all communities; these policy gaps exacerbate inequality in the US, especially along lines of gender, race, and class.

Oxfam has long focused its work on frameworks of inequality globally and locally, and in the United States the trend of economic inequality is continuing to worsen in the face of new policy decisions on one hand and policy stagnation on the other. While Congress has failed to pass new laws in support of low-wage workers and working families, only recently new legislation passed that supports the enrichment of the wealthiest people in the United States to the detriment of everyone else. Beyond tax cuts for the wealthy and big corporations, the July 2025 budget bill also slashes larger holes in the country's social safety net, meaning folks who already earn too little to make ends meet will struggle more to access food and medical care.ⁱ

As demonstrated in Oxfam's 2024 report, "The Crisis of Low Wages," the reality of stagnating and low wages specifically and disproportionately hurts women, especially women of color, communities of color, and single parents. The federal minimum wage has stagnated at \$7.25 for 16 years, the longest the federal minimum wage has remained unchanged since the minimum wage was established in 1938.ⁱⁱ While the overall number of low-wage workers at the national level has decreased in the last few years, that is largely thanks to minimum wage increases at the state level that have helped raise the wage floor for millions of workers.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet the lack of federal action means the widening inequality from state to state is increasing, as many states rely on the federal minimum to set their wage floors.

Due to occupational segregation women, and especially women of color, are stuck in low-wage positions lacking paid family or paid sick leave. For those women who are primary breadwinners or single parents, this often means losing pay to care for sick family members, putting the families' ability to afford basic costs of living at risk, and continuing the cycle of poverty even for full-time workers.^{iv} What's more, in the private sector, among the top 10 percent of earners, 96 percent have paid sick leave from their employer, while of the bottom 10 percent of earners, only 38 percent have paid sick leave. And those 38 percent with paid sick leave enjoy it largely due to policies at the state level.^v Similarly, the racist and sexist exclusions of certain workers from federal labor protections, dating back to the 1930s, continue to contribute to a hierarchy wherein the labor of some is valued above the labor of others.^{vi} These legacies of exclusion include a lack of basic protections for immigrant workers, many of whom are left vulnerable to exploitation from their employers and face intimidation and retaliation for exercising rights in the workplace. Workforces

that heavily rely on immigrant workers – including domestic workers, farmworkers, and service industry workers – are further excluded from crucial wage and workplace protections, as well as the ability to organize. The legacies of federal labor policies written in the 1930s which purposefully removed Black workers from key protections today continue to exclude immigrants at a time when our economy is more reliant on immigrant workers than ever before.^{vii}

In our seventh year of completing this index, our research has made it clear that the lack of new and improved federal standards has widened geographic inequality. Year over year we see some states step into the gap of federal inaction and raise the bar almost annually to protect their residents, while others do nothing and, in some cases, work to proactively roll back the protections their residents had previously enjoyed. This year was a tale of recession. In 2025, many states chose not to pass new laws helping low-wage workers and working families, and instead rolled back protections that had existed previously. This year, we saw more states weaken child labor protections,^{viii} states are trying (and in some cases succeeding) at ending the policy of paying tipped workers an equal wage to nontipped workers,^{ix} and in the last few years Florida and Texas have actually banned the creation of heat protections for outdoor workers.^x

While our index focuses on labor policies, our research demonstrates the strong correlation between states that perform well in our index—which is to say states with robust labor laws across wages, worker protections, and rights to organize—and measures of community well-being, including: lower rates of poverty, lower rates of food insecurity, lower rates of infant mortality, higher gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, higher median household income, and higher unionization rates. The hypothesis of this work is that when states—and the federal government—invest in workers’ pay, protections, and collective action, this correlates to improved measures of well-being for workers and their families. Our correlations work has proven this hypothesis to be correct. The reality is that governments that invest in the well-being of working people by paying them a strong wage, ensuring their safety at work, and ensuring their voice can be heard are the same governments invested in the well-being of their communities more broadly. Workers’ rights and labor policy are just one part of a larger social safety net that can benefit everyone. While the fight continues nationally to raise the bar for everyone, the clear impact of these policies at the state level is evident. The hope in creating indexes such as these is that there will eventually be so much progress at the federal level that our state tracking is rendered irrelevant. But in the meantime, we continue to focus on state-level progress to demonstrate how policies investing in low-wage workers and working families benefit all of society.

ABOUT THE INDEX

For the last seven years, Oxfam has produced the Best States to Work Index (BSWI), which tracks how states protect, support, and pay workers. Formulated in 2017 and published for the first time in 2018, this index was born out of a vacuum left by inadequate federal agencies and static federal policies in support of workers. The BSWI focuses on how states are compelled to address the failure of our national institutions to support workers and working families.

The 2025 BSWI tracks 27 policies across all 50 states plus Washington, DC and Puerto Rico, ranking the states from best (1) to worst (52).¹

Our ranking system is meant to inspire a race to the top for all states; it is an advocacy tool to help policymakers identify the spaces where there is room for improvement at the state and federal levels. There is no state with a perfect score; even those states at the very top of our ranking have room for improvement. The top state this year is the District of Columbia, with a score of 87.66. On the other end of the spectrum, the bottom state, North Carolina, ranks 52nd, with a total score of 5.83.

Table 1 provides this year’s BSWI rankings and overall scores across all three policy dimensions tracked in the index: wages, worker protections, and rights to organize.

TABLE 1. THE BEST STATES TO WORK INDEX, SEPTEMBER 2025

State	Ranking	Overall Score	Wages Score	Worker Protections Score	Rights to Organize Score
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	1	87.66	91.02	75	100
CALIFORNIA	2	85.45	76.13	85.71	100
OREGON	3	85.13	69.08	92.86	100
NEW YORK	4	83.32	70.79	85.71	100
WASHINGTON	5	76.79	76.35	75	80
ILLINOIS	6	73.24	70.59	60.71	95
NEW JERSEY	7	72.03	70.71	60.71	90
CONNECTICUT	8	70.89	67.86	67.86	80
MASSACHUSETTS	9	69.91	59.15	67.86	90
COLORADO	10	67.81	72.65	60.71	70
MAINE	11	67.81	75.78	50	80
MINNESOTA	12	67.77	56.92	64.29	90
RHODE ISLAND	13	63.8	53.25	64.29	80
HAWAII	14	63.36	58.39	50	90
MARYLAND	15	62.93	63.56	57.14	70
VERMONT	16	62.77	56.92	50	90
DELAWARE	17	62.38	62.2	39.29	95
PUERTO RICO	18	60.95	43	67.86	80
NEVADA	19	60.33	60.21	53.57	70
NEW MEXICO	20	58.35	60.45	40.48	80
ALASKA	21	53.7	58.22	29.76	80
NEBRASKA	22	53.55	56.78	38.1	70
VIRGINIA	23	51.95	42.37	53.57	65
OHIO	24	51.22	45.76	26.19	95
MISSOURI	25	49.86	57.99	33.33	60
ARIZONA	26	49.54	69.68	40.48	30

¹ We note that while the report and our interactive map refer to all 52 localities as “states,” we acknowledge that District of Columbia is a federal district, and Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory. Our use of “states” is not a political statement of statehood and should not be taken as such, but rather a standardization of language for simplicity.

State	Ranking	Overall Score	Wages Score	Worker Protections Score	Rights to Organize Score
MONTANA	27	48.02	53.39	33.33	60
MICHIGAN	28	47.53	51.12	34.52	60
SOUTH DAKOTA	29	45.57	62.89	29.76	40
FLORIDA	30	43.62	51.76	22.62	60
NEW HAMPSHIRE	31	40.89	18.89	38.1	80
PENNSYLVANIA	32	35.84	13.57	29.76	80
IOWA	33	26.72	22	22.62	40
NORTH DAKOTA	34	25.22	21.39	26.19	30
WEST VIRGINIA	35	24.84	36.07	22.62	10
IDAHO	36	24.07	12.26	33.33	30
WISCONSIN	37	24.02	21.5	29.76	20
INDIANA	38	23.38	7.41	22.62	50
ARKANSAS	39	23.22	41.4	19.05	0
OKLAHOMA	40	21.25	11.46	26.19	30
KANSAS	41	20.62	9.87	26.19	30
KENTUCKY	42	19.83	14.17	19.05	30
LOUISIANA	43	19.61	12.56	27.38	20
WYOMING	44	19.5	19.57	26.19	10
TEXAS	45	15.14	14.93	26.19	0
UTAH	46	14.11	9.24	29.76	0
SOUTH CAROLINA	47	12.5	8.33	26.19	0
TENNESSEE	48	12.14	7.43	19.05	10
GEORGIA	49	10.6	9.82	19.05	0
ALABAMA	50	9.41	8.95	9.52	10
MISSISSIPPI	51	9.09	10.22	7.14	10
NORTH CAROLINA	52	5.83	7.28	8.33	0

FIGURE 1. OVERALL BSWI SCORES, 2025

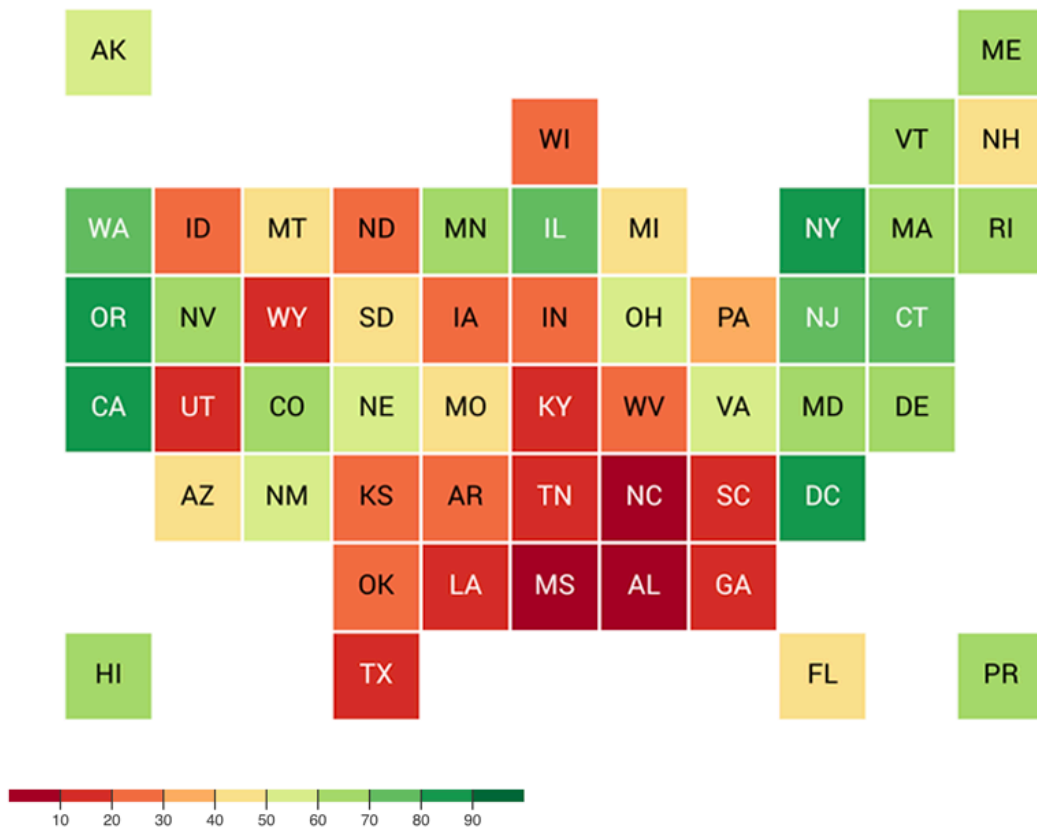


Figure 1 shows a map of the states, with colors indicating higher and lower scores, helping to demonstrate the widening geographic inequality of where policies do or do not exist at the state level.

As mentioned previously, the policies tracked in our index are either missing or insufficient at the federal level, so while this index is meant as a tool for state policymakers and residents to advocate at the local level, it is also a tool for the federal government to identify the many policies that, if implemented at the national level, would benefit millions of workers and working families. The following sections provide an overview of each of the three policy dimensions in depth.

For a full database with scores on each data point for each state, please refer to the interactive map on the Oxfam website: www.oxfamamerica.org/statemap2025.

WHAT DOES THE INDEX TELL US?

Although the index is a complex capture of 27 policies across three policy dimensions—wages, worker protections, and rights to organize—the basic question this index aims to answer is: Which states are proactively seeking to protect and support workers and working families? The three dimensions of the index create the foundation for improving the lives of all workers and working families. Essentially all workers fare better with stronger wages, rights to organize and collectively bargain, and robust protections in the workplace, regardless of location.

WHAT'S NEW IN THE INDEX THIS YEAR?

Unlike past years' indexes, where new policies were added to the index to reflect changing labor landscapes, this year no new policies have been added. This is largely to reflect the reality that the most pressing challenges for all workers, and low-wage workers in particular, is the growing effort to roll back worker-friendly policies at the state and federal levels. As our partners at Economic Policy Institute (EPI), among others, have been closely tracking, there are growing attempts by state legislators to undermine federal standards, including frameworks of minimum wages and child labor protections as outlined in the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Project 2025 offered a blueprint for undermining federal labor standards, and several states—including Ohio, Iowa, and Florida—have adopted the playbook by passing legislation weakening child labor protections, minimum wage mandates, and occupational health and safety measures.^{xi} Much like our partners, allies, and peer advocates, Oxfam is focusing this year on the efforts by state and federal policymakers to strip workers and working families of their hard-won gains.

INDEX SCORES

The states are scored on a scale of 0–100 points, with each dimension's policies comprising a different proportion of the overall score: wages (40 percent), worker protections (35 percent), and rights to organize (15 percent).² The difference between those scoring at the bottom of the index and at the top are stark. The 27 policies tracked in our index can determine whether workers are safe at work, can afford food for a family, and whether they have a voice in the workplace.

At the top of the index, as has been the case each year, the top five states are coastal, reflecting both the West Coast and the Northeast. For the last several years, the same states have been rotating among the top five, reflecting consistent increases in minimum wages and steady investments in long-term policy agendas. At the top of the index this year is the **District of Columbia** with a cumulative score of 87.66, a score boosted due to DC's minimum wage, the highest in the country, as well as one of the country's strongest unemployment support systems and paid leave policies. **California** comes in second, with a cumulative score of 85.45; in third place is **Oregon** with 83.13; fourth is **New York** with 83.32; and fifth place is **Washington** with 76.79.

² For a more detailed breakdown of how each policy is weighted to the overall score, see Appendix 1 & 2.

The top five states in our index feature some of the strongest minimum wages in the country, provide paid leave, and ensure child labor protections; three of the five (California, Oregon, and Washington) have heat standards for outdoor workers and four of the five (California, New York, Oregon, and Washington) have warehouse worker protections.

At the bottom of the index, the five lowest-ranking states fall once again in the South, and none scores above 15 points: **North Carolina** (52) has a score of 5.83, **Mississippi** (51) scores 9.09, **Alabama** (50) scores 9.41, **Georgia** (49) scores 10.60, and **Tennessee** (48) scores 12.14. Of these bottom states, all have a minimum wage stuck at the federal level of \$7.25, none mandates paid leave, and all have so-called “right-to-work” laws on the books. The bottom four states have been the bottom four states for the last several years running, demonstrating a consistency at the state level in not passing new laws in support of low-wage workers and working families. In 2025, Tennessee took 48 over from South Carolina, which had held the rank for several years previously, reflecting the state’s higher cost of living as well as Tennessee having weakened child labor protections while those protections remain in place in South Carolina.

While we want to celebrate those states at the top of our index, as we explain below, no state has a perfect score and every state still has some room for improvement. For the most part, our states scoring the highest are states where the minimum wage—while strong—still cannot keep up with the cost of living for a family. This is part of the reason our index can be used not just to encourage states at the bottom of our index to do more, but also as a tool to help the federal government see opportunities to set a higher bar across the country for low-wage workers and working families.

CHANGES IN INDEX RANKINGS SINCE 2024

The very top and very bottom of our state rankings reflect remarkable consistency. Another clear trend in our state rankings is that states in the upper half of our rankings are those states that have raised their minimum wage above the federal minimum of \$7.25.

A few states have passed new legislation worthy of celebration, which also raised their rankings in 2025. States in the top 15 of the index are typically consistent in their rank and tend to perform well across all measures, including having strong minimum wages, so ranking shifts usually reflect a notable policy change. Since last year, Maine passed new legislation extending minimum wages to farmworkers, a policy that’s set to take effect January 1, 2026, moving Maine up to 11 from 12 last year. Other shifts in rankings in the upper half of the index more typically reflect the strong impact of raising the minimum wage. For Rhode Island (now 13, up from 16 last year), Delaware (17, up from 20), and Nebraska (22, up from 24), these ranking changes reflect robust increases in the state minimum wage—each going up at least a dollar an hour.

2025 was also a big year for new paid sick leave policies gaining traction through ballot initiatives: Alaska, Nebraska, and Missouri voters all said yes to paid sick leave. However, in Nebraska the governor just signed a law narrowing the terms of who is entitled to paid sick leave ahead of the October implementation deadline (providing exemptions for small businesses, agricultural workers, and workers aged 14 and 15).^{xii} And in Missouri, going further than Nebraska, the governor recently signed a bill repealing provisions of Proposition A, which provided paid sick leave and raised the minimum wage in Missouri. While the paid sick leave provisions of the proposition, which passed in

the November 2024 election, took effect May 1, 2025, the new law signed by the governor will take effect—and revoke paid sick leave from Missouri workers—on August 28, 2025. Per the methodology of our index, Missouri received credit for the ballot initiative-mandated paid leave, as it was in effect as of July 1, 2025, but will only be enjoyed by Missourians for those few months before it is revoked.^{xiii}

Other shifts in rankings reflect states performing worse—or more accurately rolling back protections for low-wage workers and working families, shifting some peer states up the index though no new policies have passed. Most of the states that revoked child labor protections fell in our rankings this year. Oklahoma, for example, fell to 40 from 36 with new policies passed to strip away child labor protections; Indiana fell to 38 from 33, and Louisiana fell to 43 from 41. The methodology of our index is such that each policy we track is afforded a certain percentage of the overall score, so where states pass harmful policies (like stripping away child labor protections) but pass beneficial policies in the same year (like paid sick leave) their rankings hold, like in the case of Alaska.³

For the most part, state rankings have stayed within a few positions of rankings from last year. This reality helps underscore the importance of federal policy change to move the needle for all workers, regardless of location within the United States. Progress at the state level is crucial and should be celebrated. But until the federal government creates more policies in support of low-wage workers and working families, the divide between worker experience based on geography will continue to grow.

TRENDS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

The BSWI reveals several illuminating, and altogether consistent, trends and patterns among the states:

- State labor policies vary dramatically.
 - BSWI overall scores range from 5.83 (North Carolina) to 87.66 (District of Columbia). These starkly different scores demonstrate that while the federal government does not act, where someone lives has an immense impact on workers and working families' economic security, safety at work, and ability to organize. As our correlations data demonstrates below, these labor landscape scores also reflect measures of well-being. This geographic differentiation within the same country, therefore, is startling. As an example, workers in DC are guaranteed paid sick and paid family leave, are guaranteed a minimum wage of \$17.95 an hour, protected against sexual harassment in the workplace, and can organize regardless of if they work in the public or private sector. None of those things are true in North Carolina.
- Regions show distinct patterns—to a point.
 - While states within the four Census Regions tend to score close to each other (for example, states in the Northeast score much higher than states in the South),

³ For a deeper dive into how states' rankings have changed over time since we started the BSWI, see our 2023 Best States to Work report for a capture of index rankings over a five year period: <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/best-and-worst-states-to-work-in-america-2023/>.

several bordering states stand in marked contrast to each other. For example, in the Midwest, Illinois (6) is between Wisconsin (37) and Indiana (38). On the West Coast, Oregon (3) and Washington (5) are next to Idaho (36), while in the Rocky Mountain region Colorado (10) borders Utah (46). Widening geographic inequality does not mean regions of the country, in some cases it's as near as state borders.

- Even the highest state minimum wage is not enough to support a family.
 - According to a simple ratio of the minimum wage compared to the basic cost of living for a family of four, no state minimum wage reaches even half the cost of living for a family of four with one wage earner. The closest is the District of Columbia, which boasts the highest minimum wage in the country, where the minimum wage still only covers 40.6 percent of the cost of living for a family—which is down almost a full percentage point from last year despite raised wages, reflecting increased costs. No minimum wage has kept up with inflation, least of all the federal minimum (which, at \$7.25 an hour, is a poverty wage that continues to depress the wage floor for workers and has been stagnant for 16 years).
- Workers need more robust protections at the state and federal levels.
 - While the momentum behind the call for paid leave for all continues to grow, this annual index helps highlight the huge gaps in paid leave coverage for workers. The majority of states still lack any kind of paid leave, as well as lacking fair scheduling practices or protections for excluded workers. While the country waits for the federal government to close these gaps, states and localities must continue to be proactive in the fight for workers' rights.

HOW CAN POLICYMAKERS USE THE BSWI?

Oxfam's goal with the BSWI is always to inspire a race to the top among policymakers at the state and federal levels. This index is a celebration of what can happen when policies are created with the well-being of people in mind. Workers and working families can thrive when they are valued. This index seeks to shine a light on where policymakers are responding to and enacting policies put forward by workers and workers' advocates, and where policymakers can do more.

Oxfam hopes the BSWI can inspire this race to the top in three key ways:

- First, this index allows a state to evaluate its labor policies, and it provides guidance as to the types of legislation the state government may enact to improve its treatment of workers. States may gain inspiration from neighboring states or states ranking just above them. Small policy changes can mean worlds of difference for their residents.
- Second, the research can guide policymakers and advocates toward the states where the most improvement is required. Overall, states found at the bottom of the BSWI need to make greater efforts to advance labor legislation.
- Third, and finally, this index underlines the stark differences in conditions faced by workers and working families based only on geography. Our federal government has the power to raise the bar at the national level to make certain that all workers are paid a robust wage, are protected at work, and are ensured rights to organize.

BEST STATES FOR WORKING WOMEN

Although the BSWI has always placed an emphasis on the experience of women in the workplace and has included many policies that directly or disproportionately impact women (e.g., equal pay or paid breaks for pumping breastmilk), we pulled out specific policies to provide a separate index to cover women at work. These data points appear in the overall BSWI, but by extracting these specific policies we aim to emphasize which states proactively seek to support women workers.

Essentially, where a woman lives and works defines whether she will be treated with dignity and respect in the workplace and whether or not she can provide for a family. The Best States for Working Women (BSWW) focuses on tipped wages at the state level, as that is a workforce that overwhelmingly comprises women. According to data from the National Women’s Law Center, 69.2 percent of tipped wage workers are women at the national level, a number that notably increases in many states. In Iowa and Maine, that number is 79 percent.^{xiv} Not only are women overwhelmingly represented in tipped wage industries, but tipped wage workers are disproportionately women of color and often are single parents.^{xv} While the tipped wage is based on the assumption that customers will compensate workers directly for their service and that employers are legally obligated to ensure tipped workers earn at least the state minimum wage, the enforcement of this policy is lax at best, leading to rampant wage theft.^{xvi} Making matters worse, the reliance on customers to make up the difference in wages through tips leads to disproportionately high levels of sexual harassment for workers, especially women, in tipped wage jobs.^{xvii} Our BSWW specifically analyzes the strength of the base tipped wage for a family, to help highlight the impact of the tipped wage on trapping too many workers—namely working women—in cyclical poverty.

Both our BSWI and BSWW place a strong emphasis on paid leave, a policy that especially benefits women. Women, and especially mothers, hold disproportionate care responsibilities.^{xviii} As a result of this reality, the ability to take paid sick leave to care for oneself or a sick family member (a responsibility typically held by women in their families) helps women by not forcing them to choose between a paycheck and recovering from an illness. Similarly, paid family leave is a crucial policy that helps pregnant workers safely give birth and have the opportunity to rest and recover without losing income. Notably, Black mothers are disproportionately heads of households or family breadwinners (69 percent), meaning the positive impact of paid leave has an uneven benefit across genders and races.^{xix} Paid leave, like many of the policies captured in BSWI and BSWW, while gender- and race-neutral on its face, has outsized impact on women (especially women of color) and would go a long way in establishing a labor landscape that values all workers.

The BSWW focuses on policies that either disproportionately or directly impact women at work, but also reflects policies that act in some ways as a proxy for a larger issue. In the case of the right to organize dimension for BSWW, we emphasize states that support the right to organize and collectively bargain for public teachers. This policy, one that also appears in the BSWI, is a proxy that helps reflect states that support unionization in the public sector and state-based support for one of the largest public sectors that overwhelmingly employs women (as of 2024, 77 percent of public school teachers were women^{xx}). Though we focus on public teachers for the BSWW, the union difference for working women in general is clear: unions benefit women. Women who belong to unions and are able to collectively bargain earn higher wages than their nonunion counterparts,

and there are smaller gender wage gaps for union members. Better benefits, safety measures, and protection from unfair dismissal mean union members are more likely to speak up against unfair, discriminatory, harassing, or unsafe work environments.^{xxi}

The components we chose to pull out of the main BSWI and highlight for our capture of the Best States for Working Women Index are:

- **Wages.** We focus specifically on the ratio of tipped wages to cost of living for one wage earner and two dependents.
- **Worker protections.** We looked at the following for worker protections:
 - Paid pumping breaks
 - Equal pay
 - Paid leave (sick and family)
 - Fixed and fair scheduling
 - Protection against sexual harassment in the workplace
 - Domestic worker protections
- **Rights to organize.** We looked at rights to organize for public school teachers.

Since the number of data points for the Best States for Working Women index differs from the number of data points in our BSWI, we also developed a separate weighting system for the overall score of this index based on the above three dimensions. The weight breakdown of each dimension, just like the 2024 women’s index, is: 20 percent wages, 60 percent worker protections, and 20 percent rights to organize. The discrepancy in the weights is largely due to the volume of data points in the worker protections dimension and the wish to give each policy at least 10 percent of the overall score. Table 2 gives the rankings of the Best States for Working Women index.

TABLE 2. RANKING AND SCORES FOR BEST STATES FOR WORKING WOMEN, SEPTEMBER 2025

State	Ranking	Overall Score	State	Ranking	Overall Score
Oregon	1	89.08	Delaware	27	42.79
New York	2	86.01	South Dakota	28	40.01
California	3	83.20	Nebraska	29	39.60
District of Columbia	4	82.31	Ohio	30	39.36
Illinois	5	76.05	Oklahoma	31	38.85
Washington	6	75.00	Indiana	32	38.76
Minnesota	7	72.07	Iowa	33	37.40
Connecticut	8	68.13	Idaho	34	35.21
Massachusetts	9	68.08	Pennsylvania	35	34.55
Nevada	10	67.73	Wisconsin	36	34.07
New Jersey	11	67.17	Kansas	37	33.75
Rhode Island	12	65.14	Arizona	38	32.54
Puerto Rico	13	63.50	North Dakota	39	28.64
Hawaii	14	62.37	Tennessee	40	23.69
Maine	15	55.46	Louisiana	41	17.11
Virginia	16	55.00	Arkansas	42	14.94
Vermont	17	54.53	West Virginia	43	14.93

State	Ranking	Overall Score	State	Ranking	Overall Score
Alaska	18	54.20	Kentucky	44	13.92
New Mexico	19	50.11	South Carolina	45	13.76
Maryland	20	49.56	Texas	46	13.74
Missouri	21	46.79	Wyoming	47	13.61
Montana	22	46.68	Georgia	48	13.59
Michigan	23	46.43	Utah	49	13.36
Florida	24	46.09	Alabama	50	7.15
Colorado	25	43.90	North Carolina	51	3.68
New Hampshire	26	43.25	Mississippi	52	0.58

When focusing on these policies, though there is significant overlap between the scores and ranks in our BSWW with the BSWI, there are some important differences. Oregon moves to the top spot of the BSWW based on their status as a “one fair wage” state or state that has eradicated the subminimum tipped wage, marking their wage score as higher than most. Minnesota, 12 in the regular index but 7 in the BSWW, is one of only five states that mandates all breastfeeding workers receive paid breaks to express breastmilk, supports public teachers’ right to collectively bargain, and joins Oregon as a “one fair wage state.” Finally, Nevada is another example of a state ranked much higher in the BSWW compared to the BSWI (5 in BSWW, 19 in BSWI). Nevada is a “one fair wage” state, it has a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, and protects public teachers’ right to organize and collectively bargain. Overall, the top of the BSWW closely reflects states with a [Domestic Workers Bill of Rights](#), some form of scheduling protections, and protections for public school teacher collective bargaining.

On the other end of the spectrum, the same states that feature at the bottom of the regular index are also at the bottom of the women’s index. The South dominates the bottom rankings of both indexes, reflecting the lack of policies in support of working women and families in that region. Ranking last in the BSWW are Southern states that do not include any protections against sexual harassment in the workplace, rely on the federal minimum and tipped minimum wages, and provide no paid leave: Georgia (48), Alabama (50), North Carolina (51), and Mississippi (52). The relative consistency in rankings across our BSWI and the BSWW underscores the fact that states that value women in the workplace value workers. The consistency also illustrates the fact that more than anything else, federal action is needed to lift the standard for all workers, including those living in states where local inaction persists.

Reflecting many of the policies tracked in BSWW, our colleagues at Legal Momentum have created a useful guideline specific to women in the workplace, the [Working Woman's Bill of Rights](#), which outlines the different legal protections most needed to support women at work. These resources are key to policymakers hoping to proactively support and protect working women at the state and federal level.

ANALYSIS OF THE THREE POLICY AREAS

DIMENSION 1: WAGES—40 PERCENT OF OVERALL SCORE

The goal of the wage dimension is to emphasize the importance of the minimum wage and to understand how policymakers can proactively work to ensure minimum wages more closely reflect the cost of living. This dimension also emphasizes the importance of unemployment support. Programs meant to help workers who are between jobs are a form of income protection, enabling workers to keep their families fed and housed. In the US, workers themselves pay into unemployment systems and should therefore benefit when between jobs.

The wage dimension of the BSWI focuses on several key policies that create a picture of how states approach the issues of wages for their workers. These include the following:

- Ratio of minimum wage to cost of living for a family of four⁴
- Ratio of tipped wage to minimum wage
- Local control over minimum wages (lack of local control is often referred to as preemption, as the state overrides local rules)
- Extension of the minimum wage to farmworkers
- Ratio of unemployment insurance (UI) benefits to cost of living for a family of four

The federal minimum wage in the United States has not changed in 16 years, the longest period the minimum wage has remained unchanged since the policy was created under President Roosevelt during the New Deal. Minimum wages are a decidedly bipartisan issue; most people agree that work should be paid fairly. As a reflection of this reality, 30 states, DC, and Puerto Rico have a minimum wage higher than the federal minimum, and several of those states—including states like Florida, Alaska, and Missouri—have a higher minimum wage as a result of a ballot initiative.^{xxii} Voters overwhelmingly agree that higher minimum wages are a good idea.

Raising the minimum wage, and ending subminimum wages such as tipped wages, would have a disproportionate impact on workers of color, especially women of color. In July 2024, Oxfam released the report “The Crisis of Low Wages” that demonstrates how workers earning low wages, or less than \$17 an hour, are disproportionately women and women of color. While 23 percent of all

⁴ Oxfam believes a living wage should provide for a family and should not require two wage earners. The BSWI therefore uses a family of four with one wage earner as the standard for measuring wages as calculated by the MIT Living Wage Calculator. While the average family has multiple wage earners, considering only one wage earner in the family speaks to child-care needs that are currently outside the realm of affordability for most. This is an aspirational standard for how significantly the US minimum wage needs to be increased to provide for a family in this country. It also reflects the reality that even with two wage earners, the cost of child care currently is so high it is nearly the equivalent of a full salary for one parent if they make the minimum wage, rendering that second salary near moot to cover all other family costs. For example, a full-time minimum wage worker earns \$15,080 before taxes. According to ChildCare Aware of America, the average cost of child care for a year for one child was \$13,128. See “Child Care in America: 2024 Price and Supply,” ChildCare Aware of America, May 2025, <https://www.childcareaware.org/price-landscape24/#PriceofCare>.

workers in the US earn low wages, nearly 28 percent of women earn low wages compared to 19 percent of men. But when looking through an intersectional lens, those numbers jump higher still: 35 percent of Black women earn low wages at the national level, and nearly 40 percent of Latina women do.^{xxiii} Importantly, over 42 percent of single parents earn low wages, a population that studies show tend to be women and especially women of color.^{xxiv} Furthermore, tipped wage workers have the highest representation among low-wage workers, with over 53 percent of tipped wage workers earning low wages at the national level, helping demonstrate the need to end subminimum tipped wages.^{xxv}

In each dimension, each state earns a score on a scale of 0 to 100; scores closer to 100 indicate states are more invested in properly compensating workers.

No state's minimum wage covers even half the cost of living for a family. The states that come closest are the District of Columbia, where the nation's highest minimum wage of \$17.95 covers 40.6 percent of a family's expenses; Washington, where the minimum wage (\$16.66) covers 35 percent; and Connecticut, where the minimum wage of \$16.35 covers 34.1 percent.

Still, the purpose of our use of ratios to measure minimum wages is not only to celebrate those states that continue to proactively raise their minimum wages (in some cases annually and indexed to inflation), but to demonstrate that even those states that far outperform others in terms of wages are still not keeping up with costs for a family. While the United States continues to rely on individuals to pay for every basic necessity, and provides little-to-no safety net for families needing help paying for things as expensive as child care or basic health care, all wages remain insufficient, especially as costs of basic goods continue to rise.

As mentioned above, the BSWI also includes a measure of the tipped minimum wage, specifically the ratio of what proportion of the state minimum wage is covered by the tipped wage. There are an estimated 4.9 million tipped wage workers in the United States, and while subminimum wages continue to exist, these workers are stuck at higher levels of poverty than their minimum-wage working peers.^{xxvi} The federal tipped minimum wage is \$2.13 and has been stuck there since 1991 (in contrast to the federal minimum wage, which was most recently increased in 2009). The tipped minimum wage is less than 30 percent of the full minimum wage, which itself has lost more than 27 percent of its value since it was raised in 2009.^{xxvii} There are seven states that have implemented policies mandating the end of subminimum tipped wages, earning the designation "one fair wage" states. These are: Alaska, California, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington. States that have implemented "one fair wage" policies have lower instances of poverty among tipped workers and smaller gender wage gaps, especially for women of color.^{xxviii} Unfortunately these policies are being attacked, and policymakers are even working—in some cases successfully—to roll back the successful one fair wage provisions often passed by voters themselves. In Michigan, the governor recently signed legislation maintaining the states' subminimum tipped wage after a noted legal battle that made its way to the Michigan Supreme Court after a years-long fight to get a one fair wage provision placed onto a ballot initiative.^{xxix} In the District of Columbia, the DC Council voted to partially overturn Initiative 82, a voter-approved ballot initiative ending the subminimum tipped wage.^{xxx} While much has been made of the 2025 tax bill's temporary income tax deductions for tips and overtime, these provisions will benefit higher-income households more than low-wage workers, many of whom won't benefit at all because they don't earn enough to require them to pay

federal income tax. Raising the minimum wage and eliminating the subminimum tipped wage would do far more to help workers.^{xxxi}

The BSWI continues to also track the ratio of average weekly unemployment insurance (UI) payments for a full-time minimum-wage worker to the cost of living. Since UI payments are a system created to provide support for workers who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own to help cover costs while they find a new position, minimum basic payments should provide a safety net for workers to survive. However, most states' UI payments cover less than 20 percent of the most basic costs of living, undermining the intent of UI and leaving workers and working families without support.

TABLE 3. RANKING AND SCORES FOR WAGE DIMENSION, SEPTEMBER 2025

State	Wage Dimension Ranking	Wage Dimension Score	State	Wage Dimension Ranking	Wage Dimension Score
District of Columbia	1	91.02	Michigan	27	51.12
Washington	2	76.35	Ohio	28	45.76
California	3	76.13	Puerto Rico	29	43
Maine	4	75.78	Virginia	30	42.37
Colorado	5	72.65	Arkansas	31	41.4
New York	6	70.79	West Virginia	32	36.07
New Jersey	7	70.71	Iowa	33	22
Illinois	8	70.59	Wisconsin	34	21.5
Arizona	9	69.68	North Dakota	35	21.39
Oregon	10	69.08	Wyoming	36	19.57
Connecticut	11	67.86	New Hampshire	37	18.89
Maryland	12	63.56	Texas	38	14.93
South Dakota	13	62.89	Kentucky	39	14.17
Delaware	14	62.2	Pennsylvania	40	13.57
New Mexico	15	60.45	Louisiana	41	12.56
Nevada	16	60.21	Idaho	42	12.26
Massachusetts	17	59.15	Oklahoma	43	11.46
Hawaii	18	58.39	Mississippi	44	10.22
Alaska	19	58.22	Kansas	45	9.87
Missouri	20	57.99	Georgia	46	9.82
Vermont	21	56.92	Utah	46	9.24
Minnesota	22	56.92	Alabama	48	8.95
Nebraska	23	56.78	South Carolina	49	8.33
Montana	24	53.39	Tennessee	50	7.43
Rhode Island	25	53.25	Indiana	51	7.41
Florida	26	51.76	North Carolina	52	7.28

At the top of the wage dimension rankings is the District of Columbia, with a score of 91.02, followed by Washington (76.35), California (76.13), Maine (75.78), and Colorado (72.65), which reflects notable changes in the top five when compared to last year. Maine rocketing up to fourth place in the wage dimension reflects their increased minimum wage and their new policy extending minimum wages

to farmworkers, an exciting change. Unlike previous top five states New York and New Jersey, states that continue to perform well across all the wage dimension indicators, Colorado sneaks up the ranking through its stronger tipped wage, which this year increased to \$11.79. Of those states in the top five, all raised their wages in 2024, two are one fair wage states (California and Washington), and all have higher-than-average UI payments, though with much room still for improvement. See Table 3 for rankings and scores of states for the wage dimension.

On the opposite side of the rankings, the states at the bottom of the wage dimension are North Carolina, with a score of 7.28, followed by Indiana (7.41), Tennessee (7.43), South Carolina (8.33), and Alabama (8.95). Like in the overall index ranking, the states at the bottom of the wage dimension ranking are predominantly in the South, where wages remain stuck at the federal minimum, UI benefits are notably low, and states have legislation that allows the state to overturn higher wages at the local level.⁵ Indiana stands out as a state at the bottom of the wage dimension but not in the bottom 10 of the overall index. While Indiana significantly lags on wage policies, the state does provide several of the policies tracked in the worker protection and rights to organize dimensions, helping buoy the state to 38 overall. This is unique considering most states in the bottom five positions of any dimension typically choose to maintain the federal floor across all three dimensions.

DIMENSION 2: WORKER PROTECTIONS—35 PERCENT OF OVERALL SCORE

This dimension focuses specifically on policies that support workers’ and working families’ needs inside and outside the workplace. Our index focuses on policies with a care economy in mind, or an economy that respects and values people outside their economic output and understands the intrinsic importance of unpaid care to society. Our index emphasizes policies that would directly or disproportionately benefit women, since women—and especially women of color—are overrepresented among low-wage workers. Additionally, sectors that pay low wages do not typically provide policies our index tracks, such as paid leave or flexible schedules, unless mandated by law. These policies, therefore, are especially important to caregivers (disproportionately women, whether providing care for children, elderly, people with disabilities, or communities)^{xxxii} and parents as they seek to balance the demands of work and family. The policies tracked in this dimension help answer questions about whether workers will be able to care for themselves or a loved one without losing their jobs.

With the need for greater protections and support in mind, the policies we track for this dimension include:

- Paid pumping breaks
- Equal pay mandate
- Paid family and medical leave
- Fair scheduling
- Protection against sexual harassment
- Extension of workers’ compensation to farmworkers

⁵ The states at the bottom of the wage dimension have UI benefits of \$145 or less. See spreadsheet of data for more.

- Protections for domestic workers
- Heat standards for outdoor workers
- Warehouse worker protections
- Child labor protections

As with the last couple years, our index includes a measure of which states have sought to weaken child labor protections. There are now 17 states (up from 12 in 2024 and 4 in 2023) that have passed measures to lower the age of working, extend the hours youth can work, or remove the requirement for parental consent: Alabama, Alaska (new this year), Arkansas, Florida (new this year), Indiana (new this year), Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana (new this year), Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma (new this year), Tennessee, and West Virginia.* As our partners at the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) have indicated, many of the youth found working in violation of federal child labor standards are unaccompanied migrant youth, implicating not only major corporations—ranging from meatpacking firms to car factories to food sanitation companies—but also broken systems across several branches of the federal government.^{xxxiii} State-level bills meant to weaken protections for child labor are pushed forward by powerful lobbies, including restaurant associations and private equity firms who oversee major meatpacking plants.^{xxxiv} However, when it comes to child labor, not all the news is bad. In the face of many states working to roll back child labor protections, more are working hard to reinforce the importance of child labor protections. Model legislation in this fight can be found in Colorado (incentivizing reporting violations and offering remediation to children) and Illinois (setting standards for work permits).^{xxxv}

TABLE 4. RANKING AND SCORES OF WORKER PROTECTION DIMENSION, SEPTEMBER 2025

State	Worker Protection Dimension Ranking	Worker Protection Dimension Score	State	Worker Protection Dimension Ranking	Worker Protection Dimension Score
Oregon	1	92.86	Missouri	26	33.33
California	2	85.71	Montana	26	33.33
New York	2	85.71	Alaska	29	29.76
District of Columbia	4	75	Pennsylvania	29	29.76
Washington	4	75	South Dakota	29	29.76
Connecticut	6	67.86	Utah	29	29.76
Massachusetts	6	67.86	Wisconsin	29	29.76
Puerto Rico	6	67.86	Louisiana	34	27.38
Minnesota	9	64.29	Kansas	35	26.19
Rhode Island	9	64.29	North Dakota	35	26.19
Colorado	11	60.71	Ohio	35	26.19
Illinois	11	60.71	Oklahoma	35	26.19
New Jersey	11	60.71	South Carolina	35	26.19
Maryland	14	57.14	Texas	35	26.19
Nevada	15	53.57	Wyoming	35	26.19

* Some of those states passed their child labor rollbacks in 2024, but are only reflected in our index this year.

State	Worker Protection Dimension Ranking	Worker Protection Dimension Score	State	Worker Protection Dimension Ranking	Worker Protection Dimension Score
Virginia	15	53.57	Florida	42	22.62
Hawaii	17	50	Indiana	42	22.62
Maine	17	50	Iowa	42	22.62
Vermont	17	50	West Virginia	42	22.62
Arizona	20	40.48	Arkansas	46	19.05
New Mexico	20	40.48	Georgia	46	19.05
Delaware	22	39.29	Kentucky	46	19.05
Nebraska	23	38.1	Tennessee	46	19.05
New Hampshire	23	38.1	Alabama	50	9.52
Michigan	25	34.52	North Carolina	51	8.33
Idaho	26	33.33	Mississippi	52	7.14

Just like last year, Oregon ranks first with an overall score of 92.86, followed by California and New York (tied at 85.71), and DC and Washington tied in fourth (75). Oregon, Washington, and California are the only states with a heat standard to protect all outdoor workers and are three of the five states to have passed warehouse worker protection bills, pushing them toward the top of the index. Washington just passed new legislation mandating paid lactation breaks, which will be in effect starting in 2027, becoming the fifth state to require pumping breaks be paid.^{xxxvi} Importantly, all states in the top five positions have passed some form of paid leave legislation. See Table 4 for ranking and scores for the worker protection dimension.

On the bottom of this dimension's rankings, as in the previous six years, Mississippi is dead last with a score of 7.14. In previous years Mississippi held the distinction of being the only state to score zero points in our worker protections dimension. However, and as with last year, Mississippi earns some points by virtue of being a state that has not passed legislation aimed at weakening child labor protections. North Carolina comes second to last, with a score of 8.33, followed by Alabama (9.52), then Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, and Arkansas tied for 46 with a score of 19.05. With the exception of Georgia, the states at the bottom of the worker protection dimension are all states that have weakened child labor protections.

Mississippi continues to hold the unique position of being the only state in the country without a basic equal pay law. As mentioned in previous iterations of this index, in April 2022 Mississippi passed what its legislature framed as an "equal pay" law (the first in the state). However, our index does not give the state credit for a piece of legislation that is less protective than the federal standard, and in fact subverts the rights of people under the federal equal pay standard. More specifically, "The Mississippi Act also contains an unusual provision requiring that employees must waive their right to a federal claim in order to be eligible to bring a claim under the state law."^{xxxvii} This equal pay law, nominal at best, does not provide any true protections or mandates, and indeed creates legal loopholes for continued pay discrimination—including on the basis of sex—based on perceived or asserted length of service or work experience. Thus, not only does Mississippi still lack a true equal pay mandate, but its legislation actively undermines federal equal pay protections.

While this is a dimension where we are keeping a close eye on rollbacks, there were several new policies that passed in this dimension across a few states that are worth highlighting and celebrating. Since the last BSWI, Maryland and Nevada both passed heat standards for outdoor workers, helping to protect workers from extreme heat exposure, heat-related injury, or death. One of the greatest risks in the changing climate reality in the US—much like the rest of the world—is increased heat, and this risk multiplies in workplaces where there is little-to-no regulation. While both Florida and Texas passed bills stopping localities from creating their own heat standards, seeing Maryland and Nevada join the ranks of California, Colorado, Oregon, and Washington in protecting outdoor workers from extreme heat is heartening.^{xxxviii}

Five states either passed new legislation in support of sick leave or had their sick leave policies take effect, including Alaska, Connecticut, Michigan, Missouri, and Nebraska (notably, and as mentioned earlier both Missouri and Nebraska have hollowed out provisions on sick leave passed by voters in November 2024). The District of Columbia has ended the ability for private sector employers to ask for salary histories—something that leads to rampant wage inequality, especially across gender and racial lines.

DIMENSION 3: RIGHTS TO ORGANIZE—25 PERCENT OF OVERALL SCORE

According to data released from the Bureau of Labor Statistics at the beginning of 2025, national union membership rates have dropped below 10 percent of workers, currently sitting at 9.9 percent, the lowest rate it has ever been in the US.^{xxxix} When zooming in on public vs. private sectors, the numbers get more jarring. The union membership rate in the public sector (which includes federal workers, state workers, public teachers, municipal employees, among others) was 32.2 percent in 2024. In the private sector, on the other hand, that number was 5.9 percent.^{xl} The process of joining a union in the private sector (especially compared to the public sector, where in some cases the workforce is unionized by law) is notably complicated. If workers want to join a union, they bear the responsibility of organizing and convincing at least 50 percent of their colleagues to join, and even then the average time it takes to move from a union filing to a signed contract is almost a year and a half.^{xli} This reality stands in stark contrast to other economic peer nations, where unionization rates are consistently high due to, among other factors, the existence of sectoral bargaining, by which workers are not in a contract with their individual employer but rather an entire branch of work is covered by collective bargaining.^{xlii}

The union difference is clear. When workers act collectively, they have more power. Historically, unions have played a crucial role in supporting workers in the US: they protect rights to speak out about problems, bargain for higher wages, and push for stronger protections. What's more, unions make a notable and disproportionate impact on working women, helping to close the pay gap and increase wages for often underpaid professions like care workers.^{xliii}

As such, Oxfam continues to emphasize rights to organize in the BSWI, and to advocate for the need for more and stronger support of building worker power. This dimension therefore tracks laws that help or discourage workers from acting together. When a state has a so-called “right-to-work” law, it is much more difficult for unions to organize and to thrive, since states with these laws prohibit unions from collecting dues from people who benefit from their activities. Beyond recognizing

states that protect the power of unions, this dimension also measures how states approach the organization of public workers or of individuals employed or funded by the state itself.

The policies tracked in this dimension include:

- “Right-to-work” laws
- Right to organize for public school teachers
- Project labor agreements (PLAs): agreements that stipulate that contracts for public construction projects must go exclusively to unionized firms
- Protection against retaliation
- Protection for collective bargaining

TABLE 5. RANKING AND SCORES OF RIGHTS TO ORGANIZE DIMENSION, SEPTEMBER 2025

State	Rights to Organize Dimension Rank	Rights to Organize Dimension Score	State	Rights to Organize Dimension Rank	Rights to Organize Dimension Score
California	1	100	Florida	27	60
District of Columbia	1	100	Michigan	27	60
New York	1	100	Missouri	27	60
Oregon	1	100	Montana	27	60
Delaware	5	95	Indiana	31	50
Illinois	5	95	Iowa	32	40
Ohio	5	95	South Dakota	32	40
Hawaii	8	90	Arizona	34	30
Massachusetts	8	90	Idaho	34	30
Minnesota	8	90	Kansas	34	30
New Jersey	8	90	Kentucky	34	30
Vermont	8	90	North Dakota	34	30
Alaska	13	80	Oklahoma	34	30
Connecticut	13	80	Louisiana	40	20
Maine	13	80	Wisconsin	40	20
New Hampshire	13	80	Alabama	42	10
New Mexico	13	80	Mississippi	42	10
Pennsylvania	13	80	Tennessee	42	10
Puerto Rico	13	80	West Virginia	42	10
Rhode Island	13	80	Wyoming	42	10
Washington	13	80	Arkansas	47	0
Colorado	22	70	Georgia	47	0
Maryland	22	70	North Carolina	47	0
Nebraska	22	70	South Carolina	47	0
Nevada	22	70	Texas	47	0
Virginia	26	65	Utah	47	0

Four states tie for first place in the rights to organize dimension with a perfect score of 100: California, the District of Columbia, New York, and Oregon. At the bottom, with scores of zero, Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah have no support for worker organizing, whether by public or private employees. Utah joins the bottom of the rankings in this dimension for the first time this year thanks to a new bill that revoked the right to collectively bargain from public sector workers in the state, including firefighters who previously enjoyed the most protection in the state to collectively bargain.^{xliv} This new bill was signed by Utah's governor over "pleas from teachers, firefighters, and police."^{xlv}

One state to watch as it relates to collective bargaining and rights to organize is Wisconsin. Back in 2011, then-governor Scott Walker passed what is known as "Act 10" which stripped public workers—including teachers, nurses, state government workers, and even prison guards—of their right to bargain collectively, and had a knock-on effect of making health care and retirement benefits more expensive. A judge in December 2024 deemed Act 10 unconstitutional, handing a massive victory to unions who filed the case initially, and now after appeal the case is moving to the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Depending on that ruling, Wisconsin could soon see collective bargaining rights restored to public workers and a rise in union membership back to pre-Act 10 levels, when Wisconsin had one of the highest rates of unionization states in the country.^{xlvi} While the appeal waits for a Supreme Court ruling, Act 10 is still in effect, but depending on those rulings, next year's BSWI could show a very different score in Wisconsin.

As in previous editions of our Best States to Work Index, the South still stands out as the region of the country with the fewest protections for workers' rights to organize. This reality reflects a long history of Southern policymakers fighting unionization. Back in the 1930s, Southern senators mandated the exclusion of agricultural and domestic workers from the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935, which established the right for workers in the United States to organize and bargain collectively. At that time, these workforces were almost exclusively comprised of Black workers, and Black women in the case of domestic workers.^{xlvii} Even today, agricultural and domestic workers overwhelmingly comprise workers of color and continue to be excluded from rights to organize, a long legacy of racial and gender discrimination in labor laws' foundation that needs to be amended. See Table 5 for rankings and scores for the rights to organize dimension.

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN BSWI STATE SCORES AND INDICATORS OF WELL-BEING

In past editions of the BSWI, we tracked how index rankings correlated with measures of well-being at the state level to better understand the possible impact of policies in support of workers and working families. Once again this year we measured how our index scores correlated with measures of median household income, poverty, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, food insecurity, unionization rates, and infant mortality. The inclusion of these measures seeks to paint a more holistic picture of how people fare at the local level. While measures of poverty, food insecurity, and infant mortality are straightforward indicators of health and well-being, median household income, and GDP per capita reflect the economic well-being of workers; and unionization rates are but one measure of building worker power. As mentioned earlier, the union difference is a significant one. Unions help provide workers with safer workplaces, narrower gender- and race-based wage gaps, and more benefits like paid leave.

Across our measures of well-being, there was a very strong correlation to BSWI scores. For every 10 points a state's score increased, there was a correlation with:

- \$3,254 increase in median household income
- 0.4 percentage point reduction in households below 100 percent of the federal poverty level
- \$5,573 increase in GDP per capita
- 0.4 percentage point reduction in food insecurity
- 1.3 percentage point increase in unionization rates
- 0.281 lower infant mortality rate per 1,000 births

These measures are significant, with a 99 percent confidence interval, with this significance robust to our control set model specification (for more, see our correlation methodology section in Appendix 3). What these correlations indicate is that those states with more robust labor landscapes—another way of saying states that score highly on BSWI—are strongly correlated with states that also invest more in people across many measures and pass policies to reflect that fact. This explains the strong correlation between states that score well on our BSWI and states where people hold higher incomes, experience less poverty, have less food insecurity, and have fewer infant deaths. Also, there is a clear correlation between states with robust labor laws and higher rates of unionization, an investment in worker power and reflection of policies meant to enable collective bargaining.

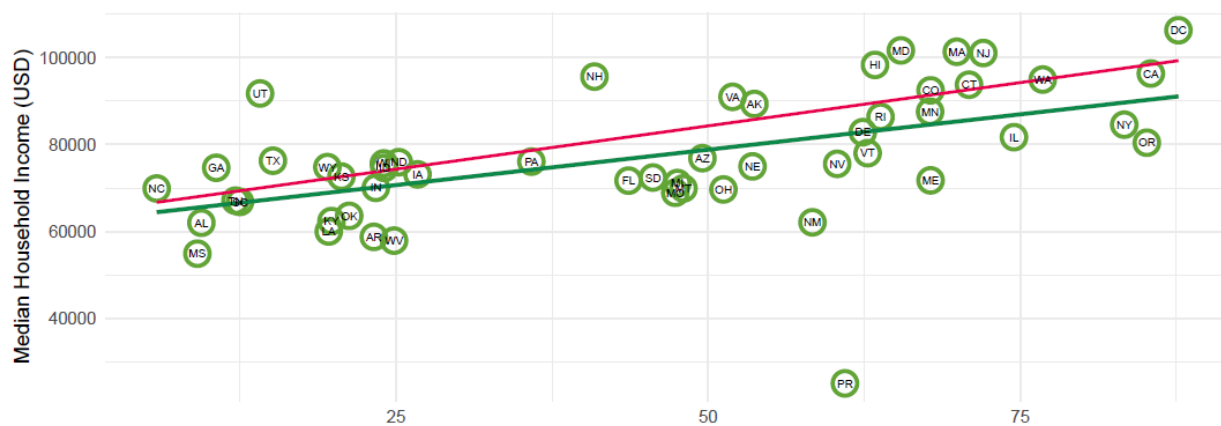
To assess the strength of the relationship between the well-being indicators and BSWI 2025 state scores, we ran a total of three models: (1) a **base model** containing only the dependent and independent variable (BSWI score); (2) a **controlled model** that included state demographics and federal spending as a proportion of GDP to attempt to isolate the worker policy environment from state latent characteristics; and (3) a **robustness check model** that further incorporated fixed effects based on Bureau of Economic Activity (BEA) region to isolate any regional component of variation.

A clearer visualization of how BSWI scores correlate with the above measures are as follows:

in the case of median household incomes, a 10-point score increase correlates with an increase of \$3,254 per household. See Figure 2.

FIGURE 2. BSWI 2025 CORRELATION TO MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME, UNITED STATES DOLLARS (USD)

Base regression fit presented in dark green, model controlling for state demographics in red.



Data is sourced from US government sources, including the Census American Community Survey (ACS), the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In the case of federal poverty levels (FPLs) at the state level, the correlation reveals that for every 10-point increase in BSWI scores, states' federal poverty rate drops by .4 percentage points. See Figure 3.

FIGURE 3. BSWI 2025 CORRELATION TO PERCENT BELOW 100 PERCENT FPL

Base regression fit presented in dark green, model controlling for state demographics in red.

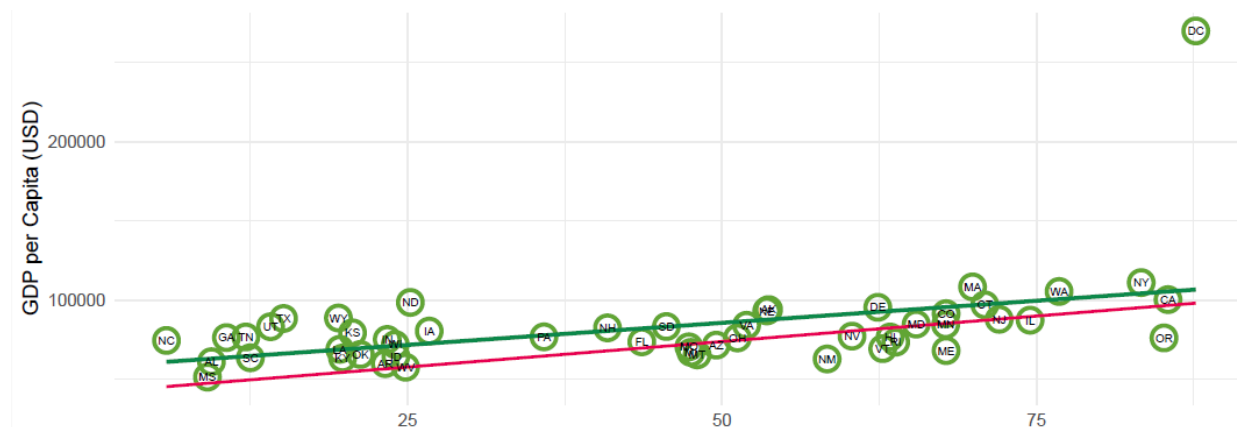


Data is sourced from US government sources, including the Census American Community Survey (ACS), the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In the case of GDP per capita, every 10-point score increase in BSWI correlates with an increase of \$5,573 per capita—a phrase to indicate how much revenue individuals generate. See Figure 4.

FIGURE 4. BSWI 2025 CORRELATION TO GDP PER CAPITA (USD)

Base regression fit presented in dark green, model controlling for state demographics in red.

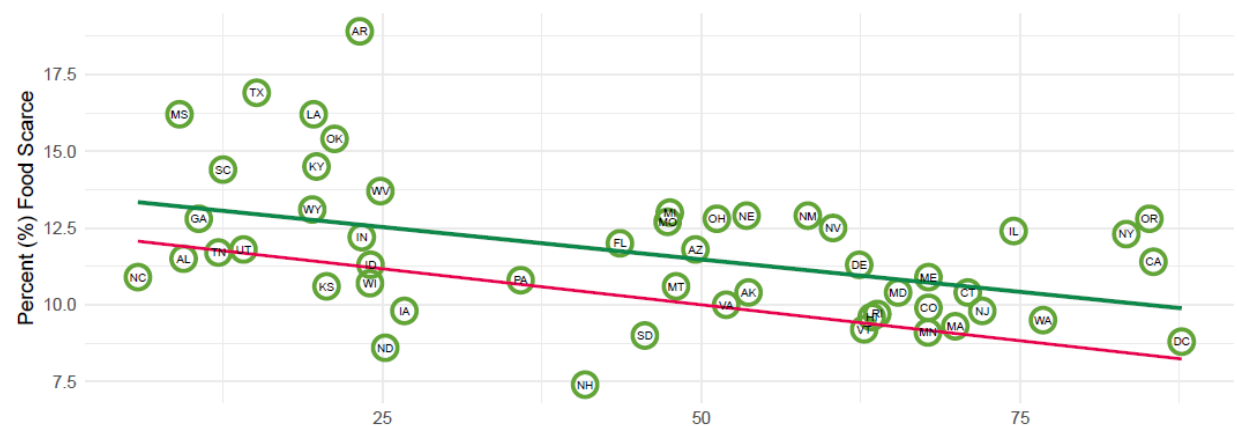


Data is sourced from US government sources, including the Census American Community Survey (ACS), the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In the case of food insecurity, every 10-point increase in BSWI score correlates to a .4 percentage-point drop in percent of the state population experiencing food insecurity. See Figure 5.

FIGURE 5. BSWI 2025 CORRELATION TO PERCENT FOOD SCARCE

Base regression fit presented in dark green, model controlling for state demographics in red.

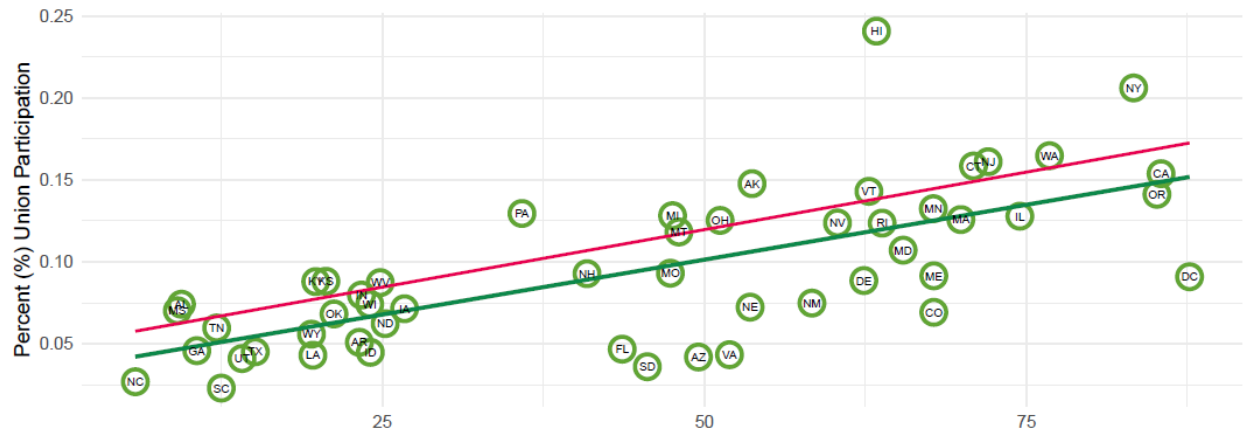


Data is sourced from US government sources, including the Census American Community Survey (ACS), the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In the case of unionization rates, every 10-point score increase in BSWI correlates to a 1.3 percentage-point increase in unionization rates (a staggering number considering the average rate of unionization in the country as a whole hovers at 9.9 percent of all workers). See Figure 6.

FIGURE 6. BSWI 2025 CORRELATION TO PERCENT OF UNION PARTICIPATION

Base regression fit presented in dark green, model controlling for state demographics in red.

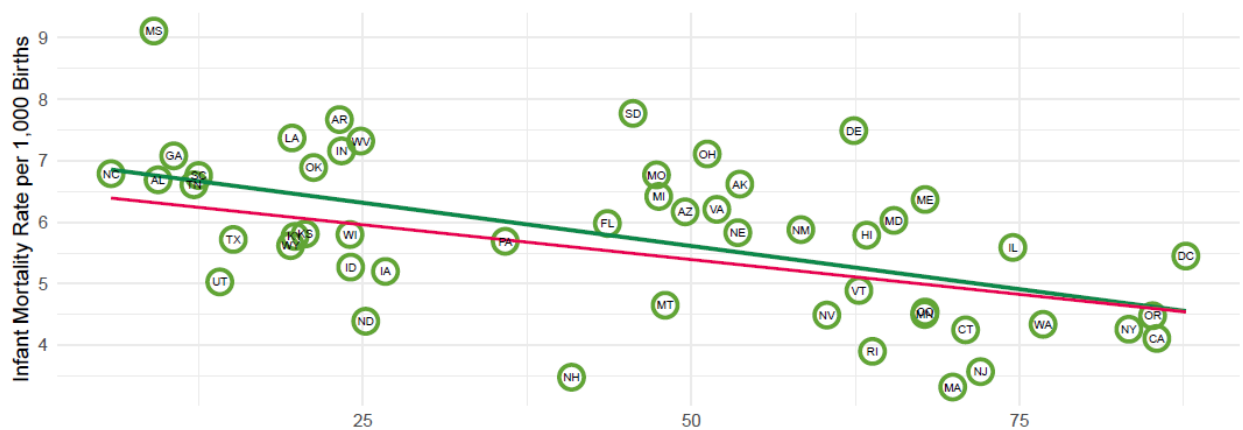


Data is sourced from US government sources, including the Census American Community Survey (ACS), the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Finally, for infant mortality, every 10-point increase in BSWI score correlates to 0.281 fewer infant mortalities per 1,000 births. See Figure 7.

FIGURE 7. BSWI 2025 CORRELATION TO INFANT MORTALITY RATE PER 1,000 BIRTHS

Base regression fit presented in dark green, model controlling for state demographics in red.



Data is sourced from US government sources, including the Census American Community Survey (ACS), the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Though the differentiation of .3 or .5 percentage points may seem low, the impact is quite large. The difference in scores across our index (a range of more than 80 points between the best and worst state) can correlate to up to a 4-percentage point reduction between the worst and the best state on measures of food instability and poverty levels. Put more simply, that's a correlation with a nearly 40 percent reduction in the number of people experiencing food insecurity or poverty in our highest-ranking state when compared to our lowest-ranking state.

All our correlations are predicated on score increases by factors of 10, meaning states like the District of Columbia, California, Oregon, and New York, which score in the 80s, are correlated with important positive measures of their residents' well-being. On the other hand, there are states like North Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama with overall BSWI scores below 10 points. In no measure of well-being are those states at the bottom of our ranking making any strides toward greater health and stability based on all the many policies tracked in BSWI.

The importance of these correlations is how they demonstrate that a strong performance in the BSWI indicates more than supporting workers within the workplace. The correlations between well-being and BSWI scores help create a holistic picture of the potential impact of strong policies on the well-being of residents. Put another way, our analysis suggests that the more policies states have toward creating a social safety net—which includes labor policies captured in our index and reflected in the states' score—the more likely it is that there is a strong social safety net, which correlates with fewer people in the state experiencing hunger or poverty or infant mortality. These correlations are simply greater proof that health and wealth disparities are the result of policy choices for which there are many solutions.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Best States to Work Index offers opportunities for both federal and state policymakers to proactively improve the lives of workers and working families. While some states are rolling back protections, others are modeling how to strengthen workers' rights. Oxfam celebrates where progress has been made and hopes this resource can help push for continued progress at the state and federal levels.

WAGES

Oxfam calls on both state and federal policymakers to RAISE THE WAGE. Subminimum tipped wages should be abolished, minimum wage exclusions of certain workers must end, and the minimum wage needs to be lifted.

- At the federal level, there is a piece of legislation ready to implement all these policies: the [Raise the Wage Act](#). It would raise the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$17 over five years; enact automatic, indexed wage increases; and gradually eliminate subminimum wages for tipped workers, disabled workers, and youth.
 - While we wait for the federal government to raise the minimum wage, **states have the power to raise their own minimum wage**. And what's more, some states have passed legislation to index automatic minimum wage increases to inflation.^{xlvi} More states should adopt the same policy.
 - [Washington](#)'s minimum wage, while still inadequate to support a family, is a good model for states to consider, as it 1) has a high ratio of wage-to-cost-of-living; 2) ties automatic annual wage increases to the level of inflation; 3) allows localities to set a higher wage than the state standard; and 4) eliminates the subminimum tipped wage, making it a "one fair wage" state. However, Washington fails to fully extend minimum wage protections to farmworkers.

Given the extreme cost of care for children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, and the burden these costs place on already insufficient wages, there is a serious need for federal investment in the care economy. Congress can help make care services more accessible and affordable, while increasing pay for child-care workers and early educators, including through the [Child Care for Working Families Act](#) and the [Child Care for Every Community Act](#).

WORKER PROTECTIONS

We need stronger worker protections at the state and federal levels, including paid family and medical leave, strengthened equal pay laws, paid pumping breaks, stronger child labor laws, and protections for domestic workers.⁶ Happily, there are already bills available for the federal

⁶ There are many additional, urgently needed worker protections, including strengthened protections against discrimination and harassment, protections against wage theft, and protections against unfair scheduling practices. Congress should pass—and states can follow the model of—the [BE HEARD in the Workplace Act](#), the [Schedules That Work Act](#), and the [Part-Time Worker Bill of Rights Act](#), to start.

government to adopt that will improve the worker protection landscape for all workers in the US. And some states are moving to strengthen worker protections on their own.

Paid Leave: Congress should provide paid sick and family leave for all workers. To establish federal paid leave standards, Congress should pass:

- The [FAMILY Act](#), which provides up to 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave for reasons ranging from medical issues to childbirth, or to support care responsibilities.
- The [Healthy Families Act](#), which guarantees up to seven paid sick days a year for short-term illness, preventive care, caring for a sick family member, or seeking assistance related to domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

Congress should pass the [Job Protection Act](#) to expand access to unpaid leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), and the [Caring for All Families Act](#), which expands the definition of “family” under the FMLA.

- **States have started to fill the gap** by enacting paid sick and family leave programs. [Oregon’s paid leave policy](#) is comprehensive, covering private, public, and part-time employees, and extending “safe leave” coverage for survivors of sexual assaults, domestic violence, harassment, or stalking.

Equal Pay: The [Paycheck Fairness Act](#) aims to close the gender wage gap by strengthening the Equal Pay Act, including limiting employers’ reliance on an applicant’s salary history, protecting workers from retaliation for discussing their wages, and requiring employers to prove that pay disparities are not solely related to gender.

- **States can strengthen equal pay laws**, too, by mandating equal pay across both the private and public sectors, and restricting pay secrecy practices and salary history requirements in the private sector. [New York](#) and [New Jersey](#)’s equal pay laws include a comprehensive list of protected classes (including gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, disability, and, in New York’s case, even domestic violence victim status).

Protections for Domestic Workers: The [Domestic Workers Bill of Rights](#) extends pay and leave rights to domestic workers while mandating health and safety precautions, including language around fair and fixed scheduling. [Twelve states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and two major cities](#) have already passed their own domestic workers bill of rights.

Heat Protection Standards: As temperatures and heat-related worker deaths continue to climb, a set of federal heat protections for all workers is essential. Congress should pass the [Asunción Valdivia Heat Illness, Injury, and Fatality Prevention Act](#), and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) should enact its [proposed regulation](#) protecting indoor and outdoor workers from heat.

- While we wait for the federal heat standard, **states can implement their own** heat-related worker protections. In fact, Oregon, Washington, California, Colorado, Maryland, and Nevada have issued their own heat standards. Other states should follow suit, and all should include protections for both outdoor and indoor workers.

Warehouse Worker Protections: Congress should pass the [Warehouse Worker Protection Act](#) to protect workers from abusive, dangerous productivity and speed quotas that drive high rates of worker injury. The bill requires transparency around quotas, prohibits management from enforcing quotas that interfere with workers' ability to take breaks or use the restroom, and protects workers from punishment for failing to meet impermissible quotas.

- [Washington](#), [Oregon](#), [New York](#), [Minnesota](#), and [California](#) have already enacted their own warehouse worker protection laws. Other states should follow suit.

RIGHTS TO ORGANIZE

The federal government must enshrine the rights of workers to build power collectively. At the state level, the prevalence of "right-to-work" laws demonstrates the systematic approach to undermining worker power and the clear need for the federal government to protect workers' rights to organize. To that end, the federal government has one crucial piece of legislation to pass:

- The [Richard L. Trumka Protecting the Right to Organize \("PRO"\) Act](#), a bill that expands the protections around workers' rights to bargain and organize as a collective.

States, meanwhile, can support rights to organize, including by:

- Repealing "right-to-work" laws. [Michigan](#) recently repealed its "right-to-work" law, the first state to do so in many years.
- Protecting the rights of state and local employees, including public school teachers, to collectively bargain. [Illinois](#) is a good example.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

APPENDIX 1: METRIC DESCRIPTIONS AND POINT ALLOTMENT FOR THE BEST STATES TO WORK INDEX

We allocated points across the three dimensions in the following manner.

WAGE DIMENSION (40 PERCENT OF TOTAL)

Wage Ratio (15 percent): Created by determining the ratio of the state minimum wage to the MIT Living Wage at the state level, calculated for a household of two adults (one working) and two children. In cases where minimum wage varies by corporate size, the lower value is taken, whereas in cases where there is a secondary minimum wage for when employers provide health insurance, the higher value is taken. The final ratios are normalized between 0 and 100 for use in the index.

Tipped Wage Ratio (5 percent): Created by determining the ratio of the state minimum tipped wage to the state minimum wage. In cases where the tipped wage varies, the one representing more workers is used (e.g., higher cash wages for bartenders vs. all other workers are ignored). The final ratios are normalized between 0 and 1.

Local Control of Minimum Wage (5 percent): States receive a 1 if they have not proactively restricted the capacity for localities to impose higher minimum wages through preemption law. This is in contrast to the 2019 definition, which looked at passive restriction due to the implicit preemption of state constitutions.

Minimum Wage for Farmworkers (5 percent): States receive a 1 if agricultural workers are entitled to the same minimum wage as all other workers, and a 0.5 if they generally receive the same wage with some exceptions in the law. States with mandated lower minimum wages or no minimum wage receive a 0.

Unemployment Payments (10 percent): Created by determining the ratio of the average state unemployment insurance (UI) payments for full-time minimum wage workers to the MIT Living Wage at the state level, calculated for a household of four with two adults (one working) and two children. The final ratios are normalized between 0 and 100 for use in the index.

WORKER PROTECTIONS (35 PERCENT OF TOTAL)

Paid Pumping Breaks (2.5 percent): For paid pumping breaks, states receive a 1 if they mandate that pumping breaks taken by breastfeeding workers be considered “paid breaks.” States receive a .5 if this policy applies to at least some workers; in most cases, this applies to public employees. States receive a 0 if no workers are entitled to paid breaks for pumping or expressing breastmilk.

Equal Pay (5 percent): For basic equal pay, the state receives a 1 if it has mandated equal pay across private and public sectors. For pay secrecy, the state receives a 1 if it has specific

legislation restricting pay secrecy practices in the private sector. For salary history, the state receives a 1 if it has restricted private sector salary history requirements.

Paid Leave (5 percent): Our “paid leave” data point covers both paid sick and family leave. For paid family leave, a state receives a 1 if it has passed and implemented paid family leave across the state, and a 0.5 if legislation has passed but not yet gone into effect. This must apply for employers with 15 or more employees. For paid sick leave, a state receives a 1 if it has passed and implemented paid sick leave across the state, and a 0.5 if legislation has passed but has not yet gone into effect. This differs from the 2019 index in that laws passed but not yet implemented are given partial credit.

Scheduling (5 percent): A state receives a 1 in each of the four scheduling categories (flexible scheduling, reporting pay, split shift pay, and advanced shift notice) if it has implemented a statewide policy (private and public sectors) on the subject in question. This differs from the 2019 index in that states where city-specific scheduling laws that might have applied to the majority of the state’s population are no longer considered valid.

Sexual Harassment Protections (5 percent): The state receives a 1 if it has laws or legal precedent utilizing fair employment legislation explicitly regarding sexual harassment and its restriction in the workplace.

Protections for Excluded Workers (5 percent): Workers’ compensation for farmworkers: a state receives full credit (1) if agricultural workers are fully covered by workers’ compensation in the state and partial credit (0.5) if they either are partially covered or covered with exemptions. Domestic workers’ rights and protections: the state receives full credit (1) for implementing a policy that strikes the exclusion of domestic workers. Policies tracked by the National Domestic Workers Alliance include: overtime pay, paid sick days, workplace harassment and discrimination, safety and health, meal and rest breaks, protections for live-in workers, and privacy. If states have no worker policies that explicitly include domestic workers, they receive no credit.

Heat Safety Standard (2.5 percent): A state receives full credit (1) for implementing a heat safety standard to protect outdoor workers.

Warehouse Worker Protections (2.5 percent): A state receives full credit (1) for enacting a policy limiting the use of quotas in warehouse spaces to protect workers.

Child Labor Protections (2.5 percent): A state receives full credit (1) if they have not passed any legislation weakening or hollowing up child labor protections, including but not limited to expanding the ages of child workers to younger ages, waiving a requirement for parental consent, or extending hours child workers can work. States receive a 0 if they have passed any legislation that weakens child labor protections.

RIGHTS TO ORGANIZE (25 PERCENT OF TOTAL)

Right-to-Work Law (5 percent): A state receives a 0 if it has passed a “right-to-work” law and a 1 if it has not.

Right to Organize for Teachers (5 percent): For collective bargaining, states receive a 1 if their state-wide collective bargaining laws cover K–12 public school teachers. In wage negotiation, states must mandate wage be a subject of teachers’ collective bargaining negotiation procedures to receive a 1.

Project Labor Agreements (5 percent): A state receives a 0 if it has passed a project labor agreement preemption law and a 1 if it has not.

Protection against Retaliation (5 percent): States receive credit for legislation that protects workers against employer retaliation, specifically relating to wages. They can score 0, .5, .75, or 1. Based on the framework created by the National Employment Law Project (NELP), we gave a full point to states whose legislation provides workers with back pay, monetary damages, recovered attorney fees, and the right to bring complaints to government agencies and to court, with the potential for government-imposed fines on violators. We gave .75 points to states whose legislation includes all the above, with the exception of government-imposed fines. States awarded .5 points have not legislated government-imposed fines and do not provide easy means for workers to complain to government agencies in order to recover damages; however, these states allow for back pay, court cases against employers, recovered attorney fees, and court-mandated damages against employers. States receive no points if they have only legislated criminal penalties (and not civil) for employers who retaliate against employees who bring complaints of wage theft or have provided no framework to protect workers from retaliation beyond the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).

Collective Bargaining (5 percent): States receive a 1 if collective bargaining is required for public sector workers, and a 0.5 if it is allowed within the state.

APPENDIX 2: EXPLANATION OF COMPOSITE SCORE CALCULATION

- Wage Dimension (40 percent of total)
 - 15 percent, Ratio of Minimum Wage to Cost of Living
 - 5 percent, Ratio of Tipped Cash Wage to Minimum Wage
 - 5 percent, Local Control of Minimum Wage
 - 5 percent, Minimum Wage Extension to Farmworkers
 - 10 percent, Ratio of Unemployment to Cost of Living
- Worker Protection Dimension (35 percent of total)
 - 2.5 percent, Paid Pumping Break
 - 5 percent, Equal Pay
 - Basic Equal Pay
 - No Pay Secrecy
 - No Private Sector Salary History
 - 5 percent, Paid Leave
 - Paid Family Leave
 - Paid Sick Leave
 - 5 percent, Scheduling
 - Flexible Scheduling

- Reporting Pay
 - Split Shift Pay
 - Advance Shift Notice
- 5 percent, Sexual Harassment Protections
- 5 percent, Protections for Excluded Workers
 - Extension of Workers' Compensation to Farmworkers
 - Domestic Worker Rights and Protections
- 5 percent, Workplace Safety
 - Heat Standard
 - Warehouse Worker Protections
- 2.5 percent, Child Labor Protections
- Right to Organize Dimension (25 percent of total)
 - 5 percent, Right-to-Work Law
 - 5 percent, Right to Organize for Teachers
 - 5 percent, Project Labor Agreements
 - 5 percent, Protection against Retaliation
 - 5 percent, Collective Bargaining

APPENDIX 3: CORRELATION CALCULATION METHODOLOGY

The authors recognize that the wage policies and worker protections passed in a given state are likely reflective of many socioeconomic indicators that may be used in defining worker welfare. However, we believe a purely correlational exercise may still be of intrinsic value, particularly in generating suggestive evidence that may warrant further exploration by other researchers. With this limited scope in mind, we ran a simple ordinary least squares (OLS) regression across several socioeconomic metrics chosen to represent the experience of low-wage workers in several spheres of welfare. This included metrics for median household income and poverty rate as defined by the federal poverty level (FPL), but also metrics on infant mortality, food insecurity, union participation, unemployment, and GDP per capita.

To assess the robustness of the relationship between the indicators and BSWI 2025 state scores, we ran a total of three models: (1) a **base model** containing only the dependent and independent variable (BSWI score); (2) a **controlled model** that included state demographics and federal spending as a proportion of GDP to attempt to isolate the worker policy environment from state latent characteristics; and (3) a **robustness check model** that further incorporated fixed effects based on Bureau of Economic Activity (BEA) region to isolate any regional component of variation. Our control model accounts for state demographics (percent female, percent African American/Black, percent Latinx, percent white) and federal spending on a per capita basis; the fixed effects model seeks to separate latent “fixed” characteristics from each state from the relationship between the BSWI index and various outcomes. Apart from median household income and GDP per capita, all relationships highlighted above remain significant (with a 99 percent confidence interval) and of similar magnitude in the robustness check model, giving more suggestive evidence for further research in this policy area.

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