Journal of Affairs

Cornell Policy Group

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Cornell University

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FALL 2025 CORE EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

Sejal Sekhar '27, *Co-President*
Sejal Sekhar is a junior studying Public Policy with minors in Business and Law & Society. She joined the Education Center in her freshman year and has since served as the Assistant Education Center Director, Education Center Director, and now Co-President of CPG. Sejal is interested in researching educational inequalities and creating policies that address them. Outside of CPG, Sejal is a brother of Cornell's Kappa Alpha Pi Pre-Law Fraternity, a board member of the Community Partnership Funding Board, and a dancer on Cornell's competitive Bhangra Team.

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Elliott Serna is a junior at Cornell University's Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, studying Public Policy. Elliott joined Cornell Policy Group in the fall of 2023, working as an analyst and later Director of the Center for Domestic Policy, before serving as Co-President. His work centers on the U.S. administrative state, with a focus on how the micro-level behaviors of public servants shape macro-level policy outcomes. Outside of CPG, Elliott is an Undergraduate Research Fellow at The People Lab at Harvard Kennedy School of Government and a research assistant for Dr. Jan Voelkel and the Cornell Econometrics Lab.

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Jaiden Fisher-Dayn is a junior in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, majoring in Public Policy. He joined the Cornell Policy Group during the fall of 2023 as an Analyst in the Center for Education Policy. Since then, he has been the Director of New Member Education and is currently the Director of Internal Affairs. Jaiden is a lifelong New Yorker and is passionate about New York policy and politics. During his summers, he has interned with the Department of Justice and the Legal Aid Society. Outside of CPG, Jaiden helps lead the Cornell University Parole Initiative, is a member of the Compassionate Release Project, and is the President of the Club Basketball team.

Alix Kerebel '28, *Director of External Affairs*
Alix Kerebel is a sophomore at the Brooks School studying Public Policy. Within CPG, she writes for the Center for Environmental & Technology Policy and serves as the Director of External Affairs. Her policy interests lie in environmental policy, and more specifically, environmental justice.

Merrick Word-Brown '28, *Director of Advocacy*
Merrick Word-Brown is a sophomore at Cornell University, majoring in Public Policy with a minor in Global Health. He joined CPG in the spring of 2025 as an analyst in the Center for Health Policy and now serves as Director of Advocacy. Merrick is passionate about developing and advocating for data-informed policies to address issues such as climate change, health disparities, and income inequality.

Keten Abebe '27, *Director of Equity*
Keten Abebe is a junior at the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, majoring in Public Policy. She is also pursuing three minors respectively in International Relations, Inequality Studies, and Law and Society. She joined CPG in the fall of 2023 as an analyst for the Foreign Policy Center and currently serves as CPG's inaugural Director of Equity. Keten's policy interests lie in the field of international affairs, specifically within sustainability, human rights advocacy, international law, and the intersection between racial/gender disparities and policy. Outside of CPG, Keten is the Vice President of Corporate Relations for the Black Ivy Pre-Law Society, an Institute of Politics and Global Affairs Scholar, a Brooks School course assistant, and the university's Student-Elected Undergraduate Trustee. She also conducts legal review and sustainable development projects as a Research Analyst for Regenerative Africa Consulting and loves exploring the intersection of policy and the law.

FALL 2025 CORE EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS (CONT.)

Zain Ali '26, *New Member Educator*
Zain Ali is a senior from Houston, TX, studying Public Policy in the Brooks School, where his primary policy interests are in Foreign and Education Policy. He is also active in the Cornell Political Union as Events Director, the Cornell Veterans Association, and with the Ithaca Big Brothers Big Sisters as a mentor. In his free time, Zain loves to read, play video games, and watch sunsets.

Austin Grattan '26, *New Member Educator*
Austin Grattan is a senior at the Brooks School of Public Policy. He majors in Health Care Policy and minors in LGBT Studies and Law & Society. He is originally from Albany, NY. He has previous work experience at The Brookings Institution, the US Government Accountability Office, the Emerson Collective, and the New York League of Conservation Voters. At Cornell, he is involved in undergraduate research with the LDI Replication Lab and is a member of Alpha Iota Gamma Pre-Health Professional Fraternity. In the future, he hopes to be an empirical health economist.

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Enrico Hernandez is a sophomore at Cornell University's College of Human Ecology, studying Global and Public Health Sciences with a minor in Health Policy and concentration in Human Development. Enrico serves as the Program Assistant for CPG's New Member Education initiative, supporting each new CPG member during their matriculation and first semester in CPG. Outside of CPG, Enrico is the Undergraduate Representative for the Cornell Filipino Association (CFA). In this role, Enrico is responsible for fostering community in CFA, serving as a liaison between the executive board and general body members, and developing social events to increase club activity.

Kaitlyn Z. Varriale '25, *Graduate Strategic Advisor*
Kaitlyn Z. Varriale is a Cornell Sloan MHA Candidate and Fellow, and an alumna of the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, where she graduated in three years with a Bachelor of Science in Health Care Policy and minors in Health Equity and Law & Society. She currently serves as CPG's Graduate Strategic Advisor, having begun as an Analyst in the Center for Health Policy in her freshman year and risen to its Director by her sophomore year. Kaitlyn brings extensive experience from Northwell and is passionate about advancing health justice and operational excellence through strategic administration. Outside CPG, she is Vice President of Strategic Planning for Sloan's Women+ in Healthcare Leadership, a Teaching Assistant for U.S. Healthcare Systems, and a Legislative Policy Committee member on the Breakthrough T1D Young Advocates in Action Council, as well as other roles on and off campus. Kaitlyn enjoys outdoor recreation, working out, and spending time with family and friends. She aspires to become a health system administrator, leading strategies to elevate the health of all.

FALL 2025 EDITORS

Isabela Virginia Wilson ‘26, *Editor-in-Chief*
Isabela Virginia Wilson is a senior pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Government in the College of Arts & Sciences with minors in Law & Society and East Asian Studies. She joined Cornell Policy Group in the fall of 2023 as a Foreign Policy Analyst and currently serves as its Editor-in-Chief. Her policy interests pertain to national defense and human rights issues affecting East Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Outside of CPG, she is a research assistant for the Cornell Government Department’s Gender and Security Sector Lab and is a fellow of Pi Lambda Sigma (POLIS). After graduation, Isabela plans to pursue a Juris Doctorate and practice in national security law.

Arjun Anugole ‘28, *Associate Editor*
Arjun Anugole is a sophomore, majoring in Biological Sciences with a minor in Health Policy on a pre-medical track. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 as an analyst for the Center for Health Policy and now serves as an Associate Editor. Arjun is interested in addressing racial health inequities, therapeutic modalities for human disease, and artificial intelligence in medicine. Outside of CPG, he is a member of Alpha Iota Gamma, an undergraduate researcher in the Rudd lab, and a teaching assistant for CHEM 2070.

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Quinn Friedman is a sophomore studying Industrial and Labor Relations, pursuing minors in Law and Society and Labor Economics. He joined CPG in the spring of 2025 as an analyst in the Center for Domestic Policy and currently serves as an Associate Editor. His policy interests focus on labor issues and improving the conditions of working people. Outside of CPG, Quinn is the Vice President of Cornell Club Boxing.

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Avery Prince is a sophomore studying Public Policy at the Brooks School. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 as an analyst in the Center for Domestic Policy and served as the Assistant Domestic Center Director in the spring of 2025. His policy interests lie in the fields of criminal justice, policing, and education. Outside of CPG, Avery is a news writer for the Cornell Daily Sun, a member of Cornell Sports Analytics, the Prison Reform and Education Project, Cornell University American Civil Liberties Union, and the Philanthropy Executive of Pi Kappa Phi.

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Krystlove Yeboah is a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences studying Government and Sociology with a minor in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She joined the Cornell Policy Group in the spring of 2024 as an analyst for the Foreign Policy Center and currently serves as an Associate Editor. Her policy interests include educational policy, youth empowerment, and social equity within the African Diaspora. Outside of CPG, Krystlove serves as a Peer Mentor for the College of Arts and Sciences, a Writing Tutor for the John S. Knight Institute, and a Research Fellow with the Jeb. E. Brooks School’s Center on Global Democracy.

FALL 2025 CENTER DIRECTORS

Amani Agrawal '27, *Director, Center for Domestic Policy*
Amani Agrawal is a junior studying Industrial and Labor Relations at the ILR School. She joined CPG as a domestic policy analyst in the fall of 2024 and now serves as the Director of the Center for Domestic Policy. Amani's policy interests include prison reform, reduced recidivism, and improving access to healthcare and educational opportunities for incarcerated individuals. Beyond CPG, Amani is the Recruitment Director for the Cornell International Affairs Review, a contributing news journalist for the Cornell Daily Sun, and a member of Kappa Alpha Theta.

Samuel Stille '26, *Assistant Director, Center for Domestic Policy*
Samuel Stille is a senior studying Public Policy at the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy. He joined CPG in Spring 2023 in the Domestic Policy Center and currently serves as the Assistant Center Director for Domestic Policy. Samuel is interested in corporate regulation, transportation policy, and income inequality. Outside of CPG, he is a teaching assistant for two classes and the Treasurer for Friends of Médecins Sans Frontières.

Aryan Shah '28, *Director, Center for Economic Policy*
Aryan Shah is a sophomore studying Public Policy, with intended minors in Data Science and Applied Economics. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 as an analyst in the Economic Center and currently serves as the Director of the Center for Economic Policy. Aryan's policy interests lie at the intersection of economic policy and data analysis, specifically in the fields of infrastructure, urban development, and economic inequality. Outside of CPG, Aryan is an Undergraduate Democracy Fellow for the Cornell Center on Global Democracy, an analyst for the Cornell Data Journal, and a member of a social fraternity.

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Lake Wiesmayr is a junior in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, studying Sustainable Business and Environmental Economics. She joined CPG as an Economic Policy Analyst in Spring 2025 and now serves as Assistant Director of the Center for Economic Policy. Her economic policy interests span the climate and natural resources, critical minerals, and international development finance. Beyond CPG, Lake is a part of the Cornell International Affairs Review, the Emerging Markets Institute Club, the Empire State Service Corps, the Campus Sustainability Office, and Kappa Alpha Theta.

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Danielle Berkowitz is a junior studying public policy at the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, with intended minors in Law & Society and Business. She joined CPG in the fall of 2023 as an analyst for the Center for Education Policy and now serves as its Center Director. Danielle's policy interests focus on addressing education inequality by advancing access to resources and supporting underrepresented communities. Her experience across the nonprofit, government, and private consulting sectors has strengthened her commitment to equity-driven and community-focused policymaking.

Rohith Tsundupalli '28, *Assistant Director, Center for Education Policy*
Rohith Tsundupalli is a sophomore studying Public Policy at the Brooks School of Public Policy. He joined Cornell Policy Group as an education policy analyst in the spring of 2025 and now serves as the Assistant Center Director of the Center for Education Policy. Rohith's policy interests focus on educational inequality and economic mobility. Outside of CPG, Rohith is the Executive Administrator of Cornell's Kappa Alpha Pi Pre-Law Fraternity, an editor for the Cornell Undergraduate Economic Review, and a contributing news journalist for The Cornell Daily Sun.

FALL 2025 CENTER DIRECTORS (CONT.)

Kashyap Rajesh '28, *Director, Center for Environmental & Technology Policy*
Kashyap Rajesh is a sophomore studying Information Science and Government, with a minor in artificial intelligence. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 and currently serves as the Director of the Center for Environment & Technology Policy. His policy interests span a range of tech-related issues, including AI-generated deepfakes, AI companions, surveillance and data privacy, national security risks, and chip/export control policy. On campus, Kashyap is involved in the Kappa Alpha Pi Pre-Law Fraternity, Cornell Tarana A Cappella team, Cornell Consult Your Community, and the Cornell Political Strategy Group.

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Finn is a sophomore studying Urban and Regional Studies in the College of Art, Architecture, and Planning. He joined CPG as an Environment & Technology Policy Analyst in the spring of 2025 and now serves as the Assistant Center Director for Environment & Technology Policy. He is interested in contributing to the fight against the climate crisis and hopes to use his skills and knowledge to contribute to sustainability-focused policy in the future. Outside of CPG, Finn is a sub-team leader for Cornell University Sustainable Design and a member of Cornell Club Table Tennis and Sigma Alpha Epsilon.

Zaki Ahmad '28, *Director, Center for Foreign Policy*
Zaki Ahmad is a sophomore majoring in Industrial and Labor Relations with minors in Finance and International Markets & Development. He joined CPG in the fall of 2024 and currently serves as the Director of the Center for Foreign Policy, where he focuses on writing about labor and international economic issues. Outside of CPG, Zaki competes in consulting case competitions, is an active member of UCHA, a social fraternity, and enjoys running in his free time.

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Jorge Mariño is a senior studying Government at the College of Arts and Sciences. He joined CPG as a Foreign Policy Analyst in the Spring of 2024 and now serves as the Assistant Center Director of the Center for Foreign Affairs. Jorge's policy interests intersect between Latin American politics, democratic backsliding, and economic development. Beyond CPG, Jorge is the Secretary of Democrats at Cornell University.

Kimia Shahriyar '28, *Director, Center for Health Policy*
Kimia Shahriyar is a sophomore at the Brooks School pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Health Care Policy. She currently serves as the Director of the Center for Health Policy, where her policy and research interests include harm reduction, drug legislation, and equitable access to healthcare. Outside of CPG, Kimia is the recruitment chair for End Overdose Cornell and a member of Alpha Iota Gamma. She hopes to integrate her background in clinical care and health policy to advance more sustainable health systems.

Tanirika Choudhry '28, *Assistant Director, Center for Health Policy*
Tanirika Choudhry is a sophomore studying Healthcare Policy on a pre-medical track in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy. She joined the CPG's Health Policy Center in Fall 2024 as an analyst and now serves as the Assistant Center Director. Tanirika's interests include mental health care delivery, health equity, and insurance reforms. Outside of CPG, she is involved in research through Weill Cornell and is a dancer in Cornell Bhangra.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Dear Reader,

On behalf of Cornell Policy Group, I am pleased to present the twenty-fourth edition of the *Journal of Affairs*.

I have had the pleasure of assisting our analysts in developing and crafting their unique policy ideas during my first semester as Cornell Policy Group's Editor-in-Chief. With assistance from our organization's new executive board and my predecessor, Henry Han '26, this organization's work continues to distinguish us as Cornell University's premier, undergraduate-led policy publication.

This semester's *Journal of Affairs* contains thirty-seven policy proposals across our six policy centers. The Cornell Policy Group's analysts developed and refined a diverse array of policy ideas, including but not limited to a youth boxing program in New York City's public school system, a federal mass timber initiative, improvements to federal special education requirements, and community-led health equity zones. Every analyst conducted extensive research and presented innovative solutions to some of the most pressing policy issues affecting the modern world.

In addition to the incredible work from Cornell Policy Group's returning members, our new analyst class has exceeded our expectations with a set of outstanding proposals. The strength of our new analyst training program and the guidance of our organization's New Member Educators, Austin Grattan '26 and Zain Ali '26, equipped our new class with critical writing and professional skills that will assist them within and beyond Cornell Policy Group.

Furthermore, I am thrilled to introduce a new chapter for the Cornell Policy Group *Journal of Affairs*: "Crossroads." "Crossroads" contains intersectional policy proposals written by two authors belonging to different policy centers. By allowing analysts to compose a proposal with a peer outside of their policy field, Cornell Policy Group aims to reflect real-world policy discourse and promote diverse policy perspectives. I extend my gratitude to Alix Kerebel '28 from the Center for Environmental & Technology Policy and Kimia Shahriyar '28 from the Center for Health Policy for writing a fantastic joint policy proposal discussing syringe disposal and ecological harm for the chapter's release. With the exceptional foundation they laid, we hope to see "Crossroads" continue and develop in future editions.

After a successful semester, I am confident that our members will continue to adapt to and innovate with the ever-evolving policy landscape. With support from our talented Associate Editors, Center Directors, and Assistant Center Directors, I look forward to continuing my role as Editor-in-Chief for an additional semester as we prepare the twenty-fifth edition in Spring 2026.

Thank you to everyone who has supported Cornell Policy Group and this publication. I hope you enjoy reading our analysts' policy proposals from this semester.

Sincerely,

Isabela Virginia Wilson '26

Editor-in-Chief

"CROSSROADS"

INTERSECTIONAL, CROSS-CENTER POLICIES

<u>Environmental & Technology and Health Policy</u>

"Eco-Harm Reduction: A Climate-Conscious Framework for Syringe Service Operations"

Alix Kerebel: Center for Environmental & Technology Policy
Kimia Shahriyar: Center for Health Policy

Eco-Harm Reduction: A Climate-Conscious Framework for Syringe Service Operations

By Alix Kerebel, ak2755@cornell.edu and Kimia Shahriyar, ks2462@cornell.edu

Syringe Service Programs reduce overdose and infectious disease transmission, but their disposal practices currently operate outside New York's environmental sustainability standards. Coordinated oversight and tiered technical assistance would align harm reduction services with New York's climate and public health commitments.

Background

The New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), in collaboration with the Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS), licenses and funds Syringe Service Programs (SSPs) to reduce infectious disease transmission, prevent overdose, and connect people who use drugs to services.[1] These programs serve as a cornerstone of harm reduction, providing sterile injection supplies, naloxone, and safe disposal options for syringes and sharps.[2] While SSPs provide public health benefits, improper syringe disposal poses not only biohazard risks but also long-term ecological impacts. They have been shown to pollute the land around them and create greenhouse gas emissions from medical waste incineration.[3] For example, in other Northeast cities, SSPs have been found to create 20,000 to 500,000 new improperly disposed needles in nearby communities.[4] In Connecticut specifically, from 2019 to 2023, there were 2,487,747 needles unreturned to SSPs.[5]

New York State's broader environmental commitments, codified through the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), demand that all state-funded initiatives incorporate sustainability and climate resilience into their operations.[6] SSPs handle significant volumes of medical-grade waste, single-use plastic, and packaging waste, and strive to make their communities cleaner through syringe exchange.[7] Yet many facilities lack renewable energy infrastructure or waste-tracking technology, and their disposal processes often depend on carbon-intensive transportation and incineration.[5]

Across the state, local sanitation departments and SSPs face increasing criticism and public pressure to address environmental damage.[7,8] The intersection between harm reduction and environmental sustainability presents both a challenge and an opportunity: the same systems designed to protect public health can also protect environmental health. To do so, SSPs need structured accountability and guidance.

Policy Idea

The New York State Assembly should pass a bill requiring New York's Department of Health (NYSDOH), in partnership with the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), to implement the Eco-Integrated Harm Reduction Compliance Program (EHRCP) to align syringe service operations with environmental sustainability standards. To ensure accountability, NYSDOH and DEC would conduct coordinated audits using digital dashboards that integrate data from sensor-equipped kiosks and regulated medical waste manifests.

Agencies demonstrating compliance through reduced litter, lower carbon output, and proper waste chain documentation would receive EHRCP and qualify for up to $400,000 in continued state funding. To support equitable implementation, the state would also provide tiered technical assistance based on program capacity and scale: smaller or volunteer-run SSPs would receive individualized implementation support, standardized training modules, and subsidized equipment, while larger SSPs with greater throughput would be required to meet proportionally higher reporting and waste-monitoring benchmarks.

Policy Analysis

New York State's proposed EHRCP builds on existing harm reduction funding mechanisms to address the state's dual crises of opioid-related harm and environmental degradation. This policy seeks to ensure that the millions allocated through the Opioid Settlement Fund, an SSP funding initiative by NYS, are not only advancing public health but also environmental stewardship.

SSPs have multiple solutions at hand to ensure compliance with the EHRCP. For example, engineers have recently developed biodegradable needles that are safe to use while being more eco-friendly.[9] On a smaller scale, techniques like providing take-home waste containers, collecting needles on site, setting up drop boxes, issuing needles on a need-based system, or syringe buybacks are already being implemented by various SSPs in the United States and thus can be replicated, at least to some degree, by SSPs impacted by this legislation.[7]

In Maine, a 2025 syringe buyback program, which can be incorporated into syringe service programs, preceded a 76% drop in syringe litter within the first 6 weeks of implementation.[7] A similar program in Boston was associated with a 50% drop in complaints regarding syringe litter.[7] In Baltimore, neighborhood drop boxes reduced waste by 3,000 needles over 10 months.[7] By learning lessons from other places, NY SSPs can, themselves, reduce their environmental impact. The solutions exist; this legislation would encourage them.

Highlights

- New York State's Syringe Service Programs (SSPs) can create environmental consequences, such as increased pollution and emissions, by improperly disposing of needles, creating plastic waste, and transporting materials. [3,4]
- Since they are state-funded, SSPs should increase sustainability efforts to align with the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act.[5]
- The NYSDOH and DEC should implement the Eco-Integrated Harm Reduction Compliance Program (EHRCP), which would set sustainability objectives for NY SSPs. It would mandate that NYS SSPs show progress in improving sustainability to obtain an EHRCP certification.
- The EHRCP would sustainably decrease environmental damage while increasing accountability for SSPs. Through self-reported progress and audits, the state would ensure SSPs reduce their environmental footprints while supporting them in their sustainability efforts.[2,5,9] States can model sustainable improvements after previously successful efforts in other cities.[7]

Implementation

New York State should implement new regulatory guidelines for sustainability measures within SSPs. After passage, the NYSDOH should work in conjunction with the DEC to oversee the program and its implementation.

To specifically support smaller SSPs in implementing this policy, the state should provide individualized support, training modules, and subsidized equipment. Small SSPs shall be defined as those in the bottom three quartiles of syringe distribution in NYS, while large SSPs shall be those in the top quartile.[10] To follow these guidelines, the NYSDOH and DEC should create a smaller working group to publish a manual for smaller SSPs, outlining potential sustainability measures amongst the three categories: reduced litter, lower carbon output, and waste chain documentation. If any of the proposed techniques require employee training, instructions should be included in the manual, or the group must send teams to the SSPs to provide training. Additionally, the working group should act as a resource for smaller SSPs to reach out to with implementation concerns.

To further support all SSPs with implementation, the NYSDOH and DEC should subsidize equipment (such as biodegradable needles or take-home boxes) or previously tested strategies. Funding should come from the money allocated in the Opioid Settlement Fund and begin within six months of this policy's passage, to ensure swift support while allocating time for adaptation. Given that SSP funding is unreliable and is often overwhelmingly reliant on fundraising, special donor monetary value estimates cannot be established based on general state and local tax revenue and grant minimums alone.[11,12]

To earn the EHRCP certification, SSPs must demonstrate any progress towards NYS's sustainability metrics. The agencies should measure progress through biannual audits to ensure accountability in state fund usage.[2] Smaller SSPs will be subject to the following tier-based consequences: After 18 months of non-compliance, SSP representatives will meet with NYSDOH and DEC representatives to discuss future implementation plans. After two years, the SSP will lose half of its projected funding for the next four quarters. After three years, the SSP will lose state funding until it demonstrates conformance. Large SSPs will be subject to the same consequences, but shorter time limitations of one year, 18 months, and two years for each respective phase. Self-reporting and auditing should be implemented after six months of passage to give SSPs time to adapt. New York State Assemblymembers Phil Steck and Steve Otis should introduce this policy into the Committees on Alcoholism & Drug Abuse and Environmental Conservation.

To address concerns from lawmakers about a heavy burden on the NYSDOH and DEC, policymakers should emphasize that audits are six months apart and some aspects, such as the purchase of certain technologies, can be tracked virtually. To combat opposition surrounding funding, policymakers should emphasize that the NYSDOH and DEC can adjust subsidization funding based on resource availability and target it towards only certain, cost-effective programs.

SSPs are critical to harm reduction efforts in NYS. With this program, the state can ensure these harm reduction efforts persist sustainably.

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Domestic Policy

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Jab, Cross, Hook: Implementing Boxing Programs in New York City Public Schools

By Quinn Friedman, qaf2@cornell.edu

Boxing programs offer a practical lever to address systemic challenges facing New York City's most vulnerable high schools. Expanding access by establishing boxing as a sport under the Public School Athletic League can foster equity, discipline, and well-being among students.

Background

The Public School Athletic League (PSAL) is the governing body for high school sports across New York City, covering twenty-five sports for over 45,000 student-athletes.[1] However, PSAL excludes boxing from its list of approved sports, forcing interested youths to join private gyms where memberships and training costs are prohibitively high for low-income individuals.[1,2] While more affordable options exist, they lack in quality, safety, and consistency. As a result, private gym costs have priced many low-income youths out of pursuing boxing.

This exclusion occurs amid boxing's national resurgence. In 2024, approximately 8.9 million Americans participated in boxing and mixed martial arts, representing a 6% increase from the previous year—primarily due to increased interest among Generation Z.[3,4] These access barriers persist precisely where boxing could deliver the greatest impact—in the city's most disadvantaged school communities. Chronic absenteeism affected 39.8% of public-school students citywide in the 2022-23 school year, with rates reaching approximately 44% for schools with higher poverty rates.[5] Furthermore, academic performance lags critically: in 2024, only 23% of eighth graders scored proficient in math and 29% in reading.[6] Moreover, scoring disparities line up with economic and racial disparities. Students who are in the bottom economic quartile, Black, or Hispanic consistently underperform compared to their counterparts.[6]

Mental health crises compound these challenges. According to a 2021 New York State Department of Education study, 38% of high schoolers reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless, with 16% seriously considering suicide.[7] Both rates were higher among Black and Latino students.[7] Students at public schools with high poverty rates are also at a greater risk for exposure to drugs, violence, punitive discipline, and negative peer influences—factors which exacerbate the school-to-prison pipeline for many Black and Hispanic students.[8,9]

Implementing boxing into youth educational settings offers a novel and promising approach for confronting these issues.

Policy Idea

The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) should designate boxing as an official PSAL sport, mandating PSAL to coordinate and oversee boxing programs and competitions across high schools. Given the potential risks to brain health, safety must be paramount. PSAL should enforce the following regulations: only USA Boxing-certified coaches may lead teams, all participants must use protective equipment, and competitions must strictly follow amateur boxing rules (headgear, fewer rounds, and medical supervision).[10] Additionally, competitions will require parental permission and maintain complete optionality; school boxing programs will allow students to participate without compelling them to compete.

Additional NYCDOE funding should support the development of boxing programs. These grants should go towards finding space, securing equipment, and hiring coaches. The NYCDOE should allocate funds through a need-based, tiered system, prioritizing public schools with the smallest budgets that serve low-income student bases.

Policy Analysis

Introducing boxing into New York City public high schools through PSAL will expand access to meet the sport's growing demand and benefit low-income students who cannot afford private gyms. PSAL does not require direct membership fees, eliminating financial barriers and promoting equity.[11]

Extensive research supports a positive link between boxing and improved academic outcomes. FutureEd highlights that targeted youth engagement programs, such as sports, mentorship, and afterschool activities, effectively reduce absenteeism, especially in low-income urban areas.[12] Notably, the report points to a successful Chicago-based boxing program that showed promising reductions in absenteeism.[12] Additionally, the *International Journal of Higher Education* found that combat sports programs improve stress management, concentration, and memory, leading to boosts in academic achievement.[13] PSAL eligibility rules require students to maintain at least 90% attendance, achieve a minimum GPA of 65, and fulfill credit requirements.[11] These considerations support that implementing boxing programs across high schools will increase overall student performance.

Boxing also offers pathways out of adverse environments involving drugs and violence. According to a University of Wolverhampton study, combat sports can induce positive behavioral change through structured environments of discipline and regulation.[14] The psychological benefits of boxing help at-risk youths resist negative external influences, potentially disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline.[14]

Substantial evidence demonstrates that boxing improves mental health and well-being. A 2022 *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* review found that non-contact boxing interventions consistently reduce substance abuse, depression, and anxiety while improving mood, self-efficacy, and quality of life.[15] Boxing also provides a positive source of community and belonging, particularly for hard-to-reach youths—those enduring mental health issues, societal exclusion, and disadvantaged backgrounds.[16] These factors broadly suggest boxing's validity in addressing the growing mental health crisis, providing structure and skills that extend far beyond the classroom and gym.

Highlights

- The Public School Athletic League (PSAL) currently does not offer boxing programs, restricting affordable access to the sport during a period of burgeoning youth interest.[1,2,3]
- New York City public high schools, especially those serving low-income and marginalized students, face urgent challenges, including falling academic outcomes, adverse environments, and mental health crises.[6,7,8]
- The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) should integrate boxing as an official PSAL sport, supported by dedicated funding and strict safety regulations.
- A large body of research demonstrates boxing's positive effects on mental health, student performance, and behavior, supporting its potential to address key issues within New York City's public education system.[13,14,15]

Implementation

Several key actors' support will be instrumental in establishing boxing as a PSAL sport. The NYCDOE should work closely with Daniel Harris, PSAL's senior executive director, whose responsibilities include strategic partnerships and policy oversight.[17] Internal support can be mobilized by forming a coalition with PSAL sports coordinators managing high-contact sports such as wrestling, football, rugby, and lacrosse, including Ken Bigley, Solomon Fisher-Smith, and John Murphy.[17] Due to the similarities between these sports and boxing, these coordinators may be willing to endorse boxing's inclusion within PSAL. Following successful implementation, one of these individuals should become the boxing coordinator due to their experience in managing physical, high-risk sports.

PSAL has a history of partnering with corporate and nonprofit organizations such as Nike and Beat the Streets Wrestling to secure funding, resources, and opportunities for its programs.[18] Building on this model, several boxing-related organizations could become key stakeholders. USA Boxing Metro, New York City's governing body of amateur boxing, could assist PSAL in finding coaches, sanctioning events, and ensuring safety standards.[19] Nonprofit organizations, such as NYC Cops & Kids Boxing Club and Gleason's Give a Kid a Dream program, make for natural partners in expanding equitable access to boxing, given their similar missions.[20,21] Finally, PSAL should also pursue corporate sponsorships from Everlast and Title Boxing, which could provide supplementary funding and equipment. Drawing on estimates of boxing gym costs, a school-based program would likely require on the order of tens of thousands of dollars in startup funding.[22]

PSAL boxing can anticipate significant resistance from parent and teacher groups. Despite research documenting the positive effects of boxing, public perceptions of the sport remain predominantly negative, due to its association with violence, brutality, and head trauma.[23,24] These concerns are particularly pronounced among parents and educators who care about the long-term health of their children and students. Therefore, to successfully establish boxing programs, the NYCDOE should conduct targeted informational and educational campaigns for parents and parent-teacher associations to ensure decisions are informed by evidence rather than cultural bias.

These campaigns would be conducted through in-person sessions with medical and boxing experts. Importantly, they must acknowledge that boxing is a physically demanding and dangerous sport at the professional level, where severe brain trauma can occur.[25] Any attempt to downplay these risks does a disservice to those concerned about youth health and safety. However, it is equally important to communicate that amateur boxing differs substantially from its professional counterpart. A study by the University of Notre Dame found that amateur boxing, when conducted in a medically supervised and controlled environment, is relatively safe, with minimal risk of declining brain function.[26] It should also be emphasized that within PSAL boxing, any head contact, whether in sparring or competition, is entirely optional—students can choose to participate solely in non-contact training.

Presenting parents and educators with a balanced, accurate depiction of amateur boxing's risks and benefits is crucial to building trust and increasing the viability of boxing becoming a PSAL sport.

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Protecting Undocumented Workers: Anonymity in Texas Wage Theft Claims

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To reduce undocumented wage theft and allow undocumented immigrants to report violations without fear of retaliation or deportation, Texas should allow anonymous wage theft reporting and protect citizenship information.

Background

Wage theft occurs when employers withhold employees' earned benefits and wages guaranteed by contract or law.[1] In Texas, this crime is pervasive in most industries.[2] From 2009 to 2022, minimum wage violations cost workers over $12 billion, with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) ordering employers to repay nearly $99 million in wages between 2010 and 2020.[2,3] Today, more than $78 million remains unpaid.[2] This significant outstanding amount demonstrates the scale of wage theft across Texas.

Undocumented workers are 68% more likely to experience wage theft, and four of the five largest regions of wage theft sit along the Texas-Mexico border.[2,3] In New Mexico, only 12% of self-reported undocumented immigrant wage theft victims reported wage claims to authorities.[4] Given Texas's large undocumented population and lack of anonymity protections, reporting is likely similarly low.[5] Fear of deportation limits undocumented immigrants' ability to report wage theft, as Texas's government does not punish employers for reporting undocumented employees to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).[6] This fear of deportation allows businesses to abuse undocumented workers without consequence. Though Texas reform has criminalized wage theft, such as the 2011 Wage Theft Law, this law and other Texas code changes have failed to provide targeted assistance to undocumented immigrants and allow for the continued exploitation of undocumented workers.[7] More protections are needed for undocumented workers to address the wage theft crisis.

Policy Idea

The Texas legislature should classify employer reporting of worker immigration status as an adverse action in wage theft cases and grant anonymity to undocumented workers who file claims. The Texas Workforce Commission Labor Law Section would be responsible for implementing this law. This law would be based on California Labor Code §244, which prohibits employers from reporting or threatening to report an individual's immigration status when they exercise rights guaranteed by California law.[8,9] Under this policy, the TWC would develop clear procedures for receiving anonymous wage theft claims and protecting worker confidentiality in the wage theft claim process. Codifying employer reporting of worker immigration status as an adverse action and providing anonymity in wage theft claims would decrease the prevalence of undocumented worker abuse and enable the TWC to hold employers responsible for wage theft.

Policy Analysis

Providing anonymity in wage theft claims would likely encourage undocumented immigrants to report more wage violations, improving the TWC's ability to hold employers accountable for undocumented labor exploitation. While non-retaliation laws exist federally and in Texas, these protections do not impose sufficient penalties for employers who threaten ICE reporting.[4] Treating immigration-based threats as retaliation would deter employees from exploiting undocumented workers and increase wage theft enforcement across worker populations.

California's implementation of Labor Code §244 in 2014 proves that providing anonymity for wage theft claims increases reporting.[10] From 2017 to 2018 and from 2022 to 2023, the California Labor Commissioner's Office's backlogs increased from 22,000 to 47,000, and the median time to issue a wage claim also increased from 379 to 854 days.[10] Additionally, complaints over immigration-related retaliation threats in California increased from 20 in 2016 to 94 in 2017.[11] These figures reflect an uptick in overall and undocumented immigrant wage theft reporting. In Texas, this increase could be emulated through reducing the fear of deportation, enabling undocumented workers to have access to meaningful labor legal protections.

Anonymity has increased claim success in Massachusetts as well. The Massachusetts Attorney General's Office refuses to share information with ICE, and the state criminalizes employer retaliation against undocumented workers who report wage theft.[12] In 2023, Massachusetts reported assessments of $13.4 million in unpaid wages and penalties, compared to assessments of over $10 million in Texas, despite Texas having approximately 24 million more people.[13,14,15] These significantly greater wage theft assessments illustrate the benefits of strengthening protections for undocumented immigrants in wage theft reporting, demonstrating the overall effectiveness that this policy would have.

Highlights

- Between 2009 and 2022, Texas employees lost over $12 billion from minimum wage violations. Employers have repaid only $21 million of the $99 million that the Texas Workforce Commission ordered them to pay.[2,3]
- Undocumented workers, who are 68% more likely to experience wage theft, are significantly less likely to pursue wage theft claims due to fear of employers reporting their immigration status.[2,4,6]
- To increase undocumented immigrant wage theft reporting and improve undocumented labor conditions, the Texas Labor Commission should classify employer reporting of immigration status as an adverse action and provide anonymity in citizenship status when reporting wage theft claims.
- California Labor Code §244 and Massachusetts's wage theft policy demonstrate that anonymous citizenship in wage theft claims increases reporting and recovery of unpaid wages.[9,10,13]

Implementation

The Texas Legislature should begin the implementation process by introducing a bill that advances through committee review and authorizes the TWC to enforce the policy. The agency should provide anonymity for undocumented immigrants by creating confidential reporting channels. It should also strengthen penalties for employer retaliation by adding an investigative staff to track employer reports and threats to report an employee's immigration status. Representative Mary González (D), who has proposed other legislation combating wage theft, could sponsor the legislation before it advances to the House Business & Industry Committee.[16,17] In 2019, Gonzalez introduced a bill to publish a database of managers, owners, and companies with a history of wage theft.[18] Her previous wage theft legislation stalled primarily due to anti-regulation business groups, as the bill forced businesses to publicize data that many businesses preferred to keep private. However, this legislation has more feasibility due to its focus on adjusting TWC wage theft administration; as a result, businesses do not participate in the implementation process, unlike in Gonzalez's previous legislation. Thus, corporations are more likely not to heavily oppose the legislation. To counter anti-immigration sentiment, González can emphasize that extending labor protections to undocumented workers reduces incentives for their exploitation, benefiting documented workers through fairer hiring and wage practices.[19]

After enactment, the TWC should establish a complaint mechanism with anonymous citizenship status for undocumented workers, using California's Labor Commissioner process as a model.[10] The California Labor Commissioner allows each Californian to make wage theft claims while not asking for citizenship status, keeping all data entirely confidential, and punishing employer immigrant status retaliation.[21] Texas's wage theft process should operate similarly and never collect citizenship data.

Funding should come from reallocating existing enforcement resources within the TWC towards supporting this complaint mechanism. This would entail redirecting a portion of the Wage Claim Program's investigative budget and moving staff from investigating fraud to investigating employer retaliation. The operating budget for the agency's labor law enforcement activities is \$4.5 million for the 2026 fiscal year.[14] Allocating \$1 million to support investigative staff for employer retaliation would enable the TWC to track and punish employer retaliation effectively. When investigative staff identify employer reporting of worker immigration status due to filed wage theft claims, the classification of this retaliation as an adverse action enables the TWC to take legal action against employers committing these crimes. Employers can be forced to pay civil fines and compensate employees for initial violations, and face suspension and incarceration in cases of severe, frequent wage theft.

To evaluate the policy's effectiveness, the TWC should partner with university researchers and labor organizations, such as University of Texas at Austin professor Kara Takasaki and the National Employment Law Project (NELP), to track undocumented wage theft reporting and employer retaliation. Professor Takasaki has studied immigrant day labor wage theft and would be a knowledgeable and valuable figure in tracking the policy's results.[21] The NELP specializes in wage theft enforcement research and worker protections, allowing it to provide expertise in evaluating the policy's impact.[1] Data-driven analysis would be key in maintaining legislative funding and identifying areas that require expanded resources. The TWC's effective redirection of resources towards punishing employer retaliation in wage theft claims will expand undocumented labor rights and decrease the pervasiveness of wage theft across Texas.

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Beyond the Photo Op: Investing in Every Child Through Baby Bonds

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A federal baby bond program would provide every American child with the resources necessary to build a prosperous future. Congress should shift Trump Accounts into a baby bond program to make investment into education, home ownership, and businesses accessible for all.

Background

The United States is the wealthiest nation in the world.[1] However, its citizens face a growing affordability crisis. 70% of undergraduate students are saddled with debt upon graduation, as the cost of education rises precipitously each year.[2,3] Furthermore, housing costs and the median age of first-time homebuyers in the US hit an all-time high in 2025.[4,5] As a result of high costs, retirement is out of reach for many Americans, and 45% of older adults lack the income necessary to afford the baseline cost of living.[6,7]

The struggle to lead a financially stable life in the US derives from wealth inequality: the bottom 50% of Americans hold just 2.5% of the nation's wealth.[8] This inequity extends to race, with the average White family in America holding ten times as much wealth as their Black counterparts, even within the same income levels.[9] This racial wealth gap stems primarily from the higher prevalence of intergenerational wealth transfers among White Americans.[9]

Baby bonds, a policy increasingly popular in recent years, seek to utilize the wealth-building concept of inheritance to address wealth inequity. The American Opportunity Accounts Act (AOAA), for example, would grant every American $1,000 at birth, with additional government contributions each year relative to household income.[10] This money could only be used upon the child's eighteenth birthday.

AOAA failed to generate bipartisan support and pass. However, the One Big Beautiful Bill's "Trump Accounts" closely resemble baby bonds.[11] Trump Accounts allot $1,000 to each American child at birth, but the government makes no further contributions to these funds.[12] Instead, the child's family, future employers and the employers of parents, and nonprofit and government donors can make additional deposits. This inclusion of household contributions encourages saving but dampens the government's role in supporting the futures of disadvantaged Americans.

Policy Idea

Congress should amend the Trump Administration's Big Beautiful Bill to shift the established Trump Accounts into baby bonds. If Congress passes an amendment to the law providing for the contribution of up to $2,000 by the federal government each year, inversely proportional to household wealth, Trump Accounts could serve as a meaningful investment into the futures of our children, and with them, our nation. Distinct from the AOAA's bond proposal but in alignment with the Trump Account model, family members and employers could also contribute to the established funds, maximizing funding and cementing the futures of American children as a joint responsibility between the family and the state.

Policy Analysis

Baby bond programs have been modeled to improve the financial well-being of all households, with such increases concentrated among Black households, effectively shrinking the racial wealth gap. A 2019 study utilized Panel Study of Income Dynamics data to simulate the institution of a baby bond program, finding promising results for both improving American households' economic well-being and diminishing the pervasive racial wealth gap in America.[13] According to the study, 25% of young adult households had accumulated no wealth; upon adjusting for the implementation of a baby bond program, these individuals would each possess over $30,000 in assets. Furthermore, White young adult households' median net worth was nearly 16 times that of Black young adult households. Instituting a baby bond program reduced this disparity by 91%, to just 1.4 times that of Black young adult households.

A further study using the Urban Institute's Dynamic Simulation of Income Model analyzed the effects on wealth generation that the AAOA would have if it were implemented in 2024.[14] The study found that the program would decrease the number of individuals taking student loans and the overall debt student loan holders borrowed, and increase home equity accumulation and retirement savings.[14] These effects were projected to be particularly meaningful among Black and Hispanic individuals, demonstrating both an overall improvement in American financial well-being and a reduction in racial inequality as a result of baby bond implementation.

Highlights

- The United States is increasingly unaffordable for many Americans, who struggle to invest in higher education, homes, or businesses without having accumulated long-term savings.[2,4]
- Baby bonds, a federal program providing each American child with a $1,000 seed at birth and continuing contributions based on household income, resemble the Trump Accounts established by the Big Beautiful Bill.
- Baby bonds lead to increases in wealth for all households with children, with particularly profound effects on racial minorities, who are less likely to have and pass on generational wealth.[13]
- Utilizing Trump Accounts as a foundation could enable the establishment of a baby bond policy through bipartisan cooperation and efficient implementation.

Implementation

The Big Beautiful Bill Act's establishment of federal Trump Accounts paves a smooth path towards the introduction of baby bonds. Rather than limit government contribution to the initial $1,000 seed, a simple amendment could provide for continued contributions based inversely on household wealth. This change would still align with the goal of Trump Accounts: allowing all American youth to begin saving money at a young age, increasing the likelihood of the Trump Administration's support. Baby bonds have traditionally received mostly Democratic backing and Republican opposition, stemming from concerns regarding program costs and the targeting of low-income households.[15] Building a baby bond policy through the framework of the Trump Accounts, which the Republicans already support, might alleviate some of these concerns by making their imposition less drastic and paving the way for bipartisan agreement.

This transition from Trump Accounts into a baby bond program would be supported by Senators Cory Booker and Representative Ayanna Pressley, who have previously introduced the American Opportunity Account Act.[16] Catering support from Republicans such as Senator Ted Cruz and Congressman Blake Moore, who introduced the legislative proposal eventually passed as Trump Accounts, will be integral in securing bipartisan approval and passing the bill through the House Ways and Means Committee and Senate Committee on Finance.[17,18] Organizations, including the Center for Law and Social Policy, Children's Defense Fund, NAACP, National Women's Law Center, and Color of Change, would serve as an important and likely source of support during such a shift, as they endorsed the original baby bond proposal.[16]

Furthermore, many states have already introduced baby bond policies, demonstrating the widespread interest necessary to unveil such a large program. These state policies serve as useful models regarding effective legislative and implementation strategies. The federal government could take lessons from pilot programs in Connecticut, California, and Washington, DC, when building out its baby bond system, preventing errors arising from inexperience.[19,20,21] Passing a baby bond policy would also be facilitated by the ease of implementation; the establishment of Trump Accounts has led to the development of bureaucratic processes for running these funds through the Department of the Treasury and the Internal Revenue Service, enabling a seamless, immediately achievable transition.[22] The Treasury would create a system to continuously evaluate how much money each child would receive in proportion to their household's income, which would be adjusted yearly in accordance with inflation. This additional program feature would

The pivot from the Trump Accounts to baby bonds might receive pushback surrounding the negative stigma often associated with welfare programs, a result of the assumption that they promote laziness and perpetual exploitation.[23] However, individuals can only utilize baby bonds for "productive" purposes, or human and financial capital investments. Examples of accepted usages include funding educational opportunities, opening small businesses, and purchasing a home.[10] Dissent might also arise due to the elevated costs to the government of additional yearly contributions.[24] Such pushback could be countered by pointing to the fact that by supporting homeownership, entrepreneurship, and education, baby bonds could pay for themselves in the long run, benefitting the economy and reducing future dependence on government assistance programs.[25,26] Through meaningful, sustained investment in our children, we can strengthen our nation's future.

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Clarifying “For Cause”: Preserving The Federal Reserve’s Independence

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Congress should amend the Federal Reserve Act to define “for cause” in removal protections explicitly. Such an amendment will protect the Fed’s independence across all its functions, limit executive overreach, and maintain market stability through clear statutory boundaries.

Background

Sound economic policymaking rests on a widely accepted principle: central banks must remain independent of short-term executive interference.[1] Despite the U.S.’s tradition of central bank independence, its statutory protections are vulnerable.[2] Shortly after the Supreme Court’s decision in *Humphrey’s Executor v. United States* in 1935, Congress limited presidential authority by amending the Federal Reserve Act to allow removal of governors only “for cause by the President.”[3] However, Congress never legally defined “cause.” Courts have generally interpreted the phrase as encompassing serious job-related misconduct, incapacity, or dereliction of duty, but this ambiguity leaves room for executive overreach.[4] Recent litigation tested this vagueness when the Trump administration invoked the “for cause” provision to remove Federal Reserve Governor Lisa Cook for alleged private misconduct unrelated to her official duties, exposing the fragility of existing safeguards.[5]

In recent years, courts have grappled with the constitutional limits of presidential control over independent regulatory agencies. Recent Supreme Court rulings have narrowed long-standing protections for agency independence, creating uncertainty about how thoroughly insulated such bodies are from executive power.[6] This tension between executive authority and institutional autonomy has considerable implications for bodies like the Federal Reserve, whose credibility depends on its ability to act without political interference.

Policy Idea

Congress should amend the Federal Reserve Act to explicitly define “for cause” as job-related misconduct, incapacity, or gross neglect of duty, while specifying that private misconduct unrelated to official responsibilities does not qualify under these provisions. The amendment should further specify that “for cause” applies uniformly across all Federal Reserve responsibilities, including monetary policy, bank supervision, regulatory rulemaking, and oversight of the payments system.
Clarifying these standards would not only comprehensively insulate the Fed from executive interference but also reduce unnecessary volatility in financial markets.[7] The amendment would strengthen credibility without weakening accountability. The Fed would remain subject to congressional oversight, public reporting, and external audits.

Policy Analysis

Research demonstrates that greater central bank independence is correlated with lower inflation volatility, which in turn fosters greater market stability.[8] An August 2025 study measuring presidential influence on the Federal Reserve found that greater political pressure was associated with increased uncertainty surrounding both markets and future monetary policy.[9] Additionally, a 2019 National Bureau of Economic Research paper found that President Trump’s tweets criticizing the Federal Reserve raised stock prices in anticipation of easier monetary policy.[10]

These risks are amplified by recent judicial reasoning in *Wilcox v. Trump* (2025), which weakened longstanding protections for independent agencies. In *Wilcox*, the district court reviewed President Trump’s attempt to remove National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) Member Gwynne Wilcox and upheld *Humphrey’s Executor* only after filtering it through the narrower logic of *Seila Law v. CFPB* (2020).[11] Instead of treating *Humphrey’s* as a broad affirmation of agency independence, the court stressed that the NLRB remained protected solely because it fit *Seila*’s limited carve-out for multimember boards with staggered terms.[12,13]

Legislative precedent supports clarifying the law. Congress has codified explicit removal standards for other independent agencies, including the Federal Trade Commission.[14] A statutory definition of "for cause" would align the Federal Reserve Act with the established removal standards in *Humphrey's Executor* and in statutes governing other independent agencies. Congress should also specify that this standard applies uniformly across all Federal Reserve functions. Without such clarification, courts could preserve the Federal Reserve's independence in rate-setting while stripping it away in supervisory or regulatory matters. The February 2025 Executive Order asserting presidential authority over the Fed's non-monetary powers underscores this risk.[15] The proposed amendment is attainable and narrowly targeted, strengthening credibility while maintaining the Fed's existing obligations to congressional oversight, public reporting, and external audits.

Highlights

- The Federal Reserve Act limits presidential removal of governors to "for cause"; however, the statute does not define the term, leaving modern courts to interpret its scope without clear statutory guidance.[4]
- Ambiguity in the Federal Reserve Act's "for cause" clause leaves the Fed vulnerable to political interference, as demonstrated by recent litigation testing the limits of executive authority.[5]
- Congress should amend the Act to explicitly define "for cause" as job-related misconduct, incapacity, or gross neglect of duty and apply this definition uniformly across all Federal Reserve roles.
- Clarifying these standards would preserve the Fed's independence while maintaining accountability through congressional oversight. Research indicates that stronger central-bank autonomy is correlated with lower inflation volatility and greater market confidence, reinforcing economic arguments for statutory reform.[8]

Implementation

Passing an amendment to the Federal Reserve Act will require coordinated legislative and institutional effort; however, the foundations for success already exist. In *Cook v. Trump* (2025), US District Judge Jia Cobb and Washington, DC Circuit Court Judges Bradley Garcia and Michelle Childs affirmed the statutory protections governing term security for Federal Reserve governors, strengthening the legal basis for clarifying for-cause removal.[16] Reform advocates can cite these rulings during committee hearings to demonstrate judicial consensus on the need for clearer statutory guidance.

The House Financial Services Committee and the Senate Banking Committee should lead the legislative process.[17,18] Likely supporters include Senator Sherrod Brown, who has long defended the transparency and oversight provisions in the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, and Senator Thom Tillis, who recently cautioned against politically motivated removal of Fed leadership.[19] The Dodd-Frank Act's restructuring of the Federal Reserve Banks shows that Congress can successfully amend the Fed's statutory framework.[21] In the first year after introduction, Congress should hold hearings, revise the bill during markup, and move to pass the amendment.

Recent tensions over presidential control of economic policy, including disputes about personnel removals, tariff authority, and emergency economic actions, risk politicizing the reform.[5,22] Advocates should therefore frame the amendment as a forward-looking institutional safeguard that protects both current and future administrations. By emphasizing the amendment's value as a bipartisan, stability-oriented measure rather than a rebuke of the Trump administration, proponents strengthen their appeal to shared interests in credible governance and reduced financial volatility. Stronger removal protections could raise concerns about reduced democratic accountability by limiting presidential control. To address these concerns, the amendment would require public disclosure of all removal attempts and maintain congressional oversight of the Fed's decision-making. These provisions will preserve transparency and accountability while ensuring that scrutiny of the Fed occurs exclusively through constitutional processes.

Existing precedent strengthens the feasibility of such a reform. Congress has previously enacted for-cause removal protections for multi-member commissions and individual executive offices.[23] In *Morrison v. Olson* (1988), the Supreme Court upheld for-cause limits on the removal of the independent counsel.[23] Similarly, the Securities and Exchange Commission's structure shows that for-cause protections remain a constitutionally sound and enduring feature of independent financial regulation. The Supreme Court reaffirmed this framework in *Free Enterprise Fund v. PCAOB* (2010).[24] These precedents demonstrate that Congress can reinforce the Federal Reserve's independence while maintaining constitutional balance.

After enactment, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) should develop a monitoring framework, including metrics such as removal attempts, documented executive pressure, and deviations from standard appointment or communication procedures. Within two to three years after the amendment's passage, the GAO will begin publishing annual reports on executive interference attempts, creating a permanent oversight system that reaffirms the Federal Reserve's independence publicly.

Codifying "for cause" removal standards reaffirms the constitutional balance underlying the federal administrative system. By clearly defining the boundaries of executive authority, the amendment will strengthen the stability of monetary governance and reinforce long-term market confidence.

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Closing the Gap for Renters: A Refundable Tax Credit to Combat New York's Increasing Rent Burdens

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New York State should implement a refundable renter's tax credit to reduce rent burdens, promote housing stability, and offer benefits to increasingly struggling renters who have historically been excluded from homeowner-focused financial assistance.

Background

Housing has become increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible, leaving the US in the midst of an ever-worsening crisis. Households are spending a larger portion of their income on housing, with the number of households spending over 30% of their income on rent rising to over 22.6 million.[1] Higher rent burdens increase the likelihood of eviction, both of which are associated with higher mortality rates and can put heavy financial and health strain on household members.[2] Furthermore, huge increases in the number of renters in the US have led to higher rent prices that have outpaced income growth over the same period, forcing renters to allocate larger portions of their income to their rent.[3]

Households struggling to keep up with rent can use Section 8 housing choice vouchers, which offer subsidies from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD); however, not enough of these vouchers exist to support every rent-burdened household.[4] Moreover, huge waitlists force households to wait up to eight years for Section 8 vouchers, while some households never receive rental assistance at all.[5] Even applicants receiving aid can be stigmatized, leading landlords to reject voucher-holding applicants and limit housing options.[6]

Several states have already experimented with the idea of a tax assistance for renters, with Massachusetts offering up to $4,000 in tax deductions for rent on primary residences and Minnesota offering up to $2,640 refundable tax credit for renters.[7] New York State also has a refundable tax credit in place for renters, but it is highly restricted based on income and household members' age.[7] Overall, existing government support programs leave rent-burdened households without effective relief, revealing a gap that New York can fill with more accessible and inclusive statewide benefits.

Policy Idea

The New York State Assembly should amend the tax code to provide a refundable tax credit for renters whose rent costs constitute more than 40% of their annual gross income. This policy benefits low-income renters who are severely burdened by the cost of their rent and are excluded from homeowner-focused benefits. The state would calculate the credit amount as the difference between the gross rent amount paid annually and 40% of the renter's after-tax annual gross income.

To qualify, renters must: [1] reside in New York State for at least one year, [2] have a household income below 80% of the Area Median Income (AMI), and [3] have annual rent payments that exceed 40% of their annual gross income. The New York State Department of Taxation and Finance (NYSDTF) would administer this tax credit through New York's existing income tax system, minimizing administrative burden and allowing easy, efficient, and private delivery of benefits.

Policy Analysis

Implementing a refundable tax credit for renters would expand housing options for low-income households and offer a cost-effective method to maintain affordability without increasing administrative costs.[8] As the number of renters increases, so does the cost of renting and the difficulty of finding affordable housing that does not increase rent burdens.[3] By offering a tax credit, renters would receive immediate support that would improve housing stability and allow spending on other crucial necessities, promoting economic growth.[9] This benefit would fill the gap in aid for renters in the current tax policy, providing in-need households with a directed and simple type of support that is more accessible than other rent-centered policies.

While tax-based financial benefits are available to homeowners in the US, renters are not offered the same opportunities.[10] Homeowners have access to mortgage interest deductions and property tax write-offs, which grant them an easily accessible tax advantage over renters.[11] While these benefits are helpful, they fail to address the increasing needs of renters. In 2023, 24% of household owners were cost-burdened, as compared to roughly 50% of renter households being cost-burdened in the same year.[12] Offering a state-level renters' tax credit would aim to bridge this gap by providing tax benefits directly to New York State renters in need.

Policies like the federal Child Tax Credit (CTC) demonstrate the effectiveness of using the tax system to direct support to specific groups, having proven to be extremely effective at reducing child poverty.[13] Modeling a similarly directed tax credit for renters could replicate these successes and be an effective way to ensure impact in a convenient and familiar fashion. The CTC particularly eased strain on families by providing an income boost that helped avoid spending family savings, a model that could offer similar financial comfort to renters if implemented precisely.[13]

Highlights

- As rent prices rise, households spend a larger portion of their income on housing and are increasingly suffering from rent burden, straining their finances and decreasing overall health outcomes.[1,2,3]
- A refundable renter's tax credit would support the most rent-burdened New Yorkers, reducing financial strain on households who meet the eligibility criteria of one year of New York residency, household income below 80% of the AMI, and rent payments that constitute over 40% of annual gross income.[8]
- Existing tax policies like mortgage interest deductions and property tax write-offs offer direct support to homeowners, while this credit instead targets the increasing renter population, who are currently excluded from existing tax benefits.[4]
- Modeled after other effective tax credits, this policy would provide a financial boost while minimizing administrative burden and avoiding stigma, providing accessible and practical aid to renters.[13]

Implementation

To implement this policy, the New York State Assembly should introduce a bill that amends the state tax code to include an annual, refundable credit for households that spend over 40% of their income on rent. New York State Senator Brian Kavanagh (D), Chair of the Committee on Housing, Construction, and Community Development, is a prime candidate to sponsor this bill, given his history of spearheading and passing legislation related to affordable housing and tenant protection.[14,15] For example, Senator Kavanagh sponsors Senate Bill S72, which proposes a state-funded rental assistance program for the homeless or those losing their home.[16] This proposal similarly supports those who spend more than 30% of their income on housing, positioning Senator Kavanagh to propose a renter-focused tax credit program.

To secure funding for the policy, the New York State Assembly could reallocate roughly 20% of the recently approved more than $1.5 billion of funding for affordable housing statewide, totaling roughly $300 million.[17] The state's fiscal year 2026 budget includes a significant amount of funding for programs that are meant to increase safety, accessibility, and affordability within housing, and this renter's tax credit aligns directly with those goals.[17] Other states have implemented similar programs, spending around 20% of their housing budget on tax benefits for renters. Vermont, for example, spends roughly $9.5 million of its $47 million dedicated to property tax assistance to offer tax benefits specifically to low-income renters.[18] New York State could follow a similar model to provide these benefits, using a realistic portion of the budget to deliver significant support to a population that is increasingly in need of financial assistance.

Additionally, support from advocacy organizations could help secure traction for this policy. The New York Housing Conference, for example, currently advocates for tax incentives for renters as a central pillar of their policy priorities.[19] While some organizations support tax incentives, their cost and the prioritization of homeownership could cause some opposition to the implementation of this policy. To overcome this opposition, organizations like the Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the Supportive Housing Network of New York could use their platforms to broaden interest in a renters' tax credit, particularly by using community networks to emphasize statewide relevance.[20,21] Furthermore, similar policies have recently gained increased national relevance, with multiple proposals in the last four sessions of Congress and strong support from federal-focused policy centers.[22]

After the New York State Assembly passes the policy, the NYSDTF would oversee the program's implementation over the next three years within the already-existing income tax system, delivering benefits to those who qualify without requiring an application process or additional government wing. In the tax cycle following the policy's passing, renters would submit proof of rent payments and income to claim the credit as part of their usual tax filings, simplifying the process and ensuring broad disbursement. To ensure the public is aware of the eligibility requirements, NYSDTF could create a website or distribute an informational package to landlord associations or community centers that describes the eligibility criteria. Overall, New York State can take meaningful action to fight increasing rent burdens and support affordable housing by implementing a practical, targeted, and necessary tax credit that directly assists renters.

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ECONOMIC POLICY

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Tax Land, Not Homes: A Land Value Tax to Address California's Housing Crisis

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The state's housing affordability crisis is driven in part by a tax system that discourages new development. California should modify Proposition 13 and adopt a land value tax to boost housing construction and make homes more affordable.

Background

California is facing a severe housing affordability crisis, with current home prices roughly 11 times the typical family's annual income—a ratio nearly triple that of the 1960s.[1] While Californian households earn about 20% more than the national average, the median California home costs over $840,000, nearly twice the national average, according to Zillow.[2,3,4] A slow rate of homebuilding largely drives this affordability gap. In 2024, California authorized the construction of 2.58 housing units per 1000 residents, while the national rate was 4.35 units.[5,6] This slow pace of construction leads to housing scarcity and makes it harder for residents to find homes.

While numerous factors influence housing production, one major issue is the design of California's property tax system. Local governments typically levy these taxes, proportional to home values, to fund public services. However, California has a unique legal framework for how to collect these taxes. In 1978, California voters approved Proposition 13, a constitutional amendment that limited property taxes to 1% of their assessed value (determined by the sale price), with a maximum annual increase of 2%.[7] Because California housing prices have grown an average of 5.53% per year since 1978, this cap causes assessed values to fall far below market values over time, giving a large tax break to longtime homeowners.[8]

As a result, municipalities collect less revenue from property taxes and seek other funding sources. To compensate, many rely on impact fees, a one-time charge on new development to help pay for public services.[9] California's average impact fees are nearly three times the national average, making housing construction significantly more expensive and discouraging production.[10] Together, these problems show that California needs a better way to fund public services while encouraging, rather than discouraging, new development.

Policy Idea

To address California's ongoing housing shortage, the state should modify Proposition 13 and gradually phase in a revenue-neutral land value tax (LVT) to replace property taxes and eliminate costly impact fees. Property taxes depend on a home's value, reflecting both the building and the land beneath it. Two similar homes can have vastly different prices because proximity to jobs, transit, and amenities drive up land value, not building quality. An LVT would tax only this land value, not the physical structure.[11]

The tax would spur development by penalizing landowners who underutilize valuable land and rewarding those who build or improve property.[12] By increasing housing production, California would begin to address the lack of available homes and improve affordability.

Policy Analysis

Economists generally agree that LVTs are an effective form of taxation because they do not penalize construction or building improvements.[13] Under California's current system, traditional property taxes and impact fees can discourage development by raising costs when landowners build.[10] An LVT, by contrast, would tax only the land itself, not the buildings, ensuring that developers are not punished for adding housing.[11] In practice, two adjacent lots would face similar tax rates, regardless of how developed they were. That dynamic creates an enormous incentive for owners of often underutilized parcels, such as parking lots, to either develop the land more productively or sell it to someone who will.

LVTs have a proven track record of success. More than 30 countries use a form of the tax, as well as select municipalities in the United States.[12] Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for example, adopted a two-tiered tax system in 1982, taxing land at a much higher rate than buildings. The city saw $1.2 billion in new investment, and the number of vacant structures declined by around eightfold, from 4,200 to 500.[14] Harrisburg's mayor at the time, Stephen Reed, said that the updated tax structure "encouraged vertical development" and was a key factor in the community's economic revitalization.[14]

California could realize similar benefits. For instance, a model from the Syracuse University Maxwell School suggests that an LVT could increase housing development by between 14% and 32% in the state.[15] A literature review found that new housing supply, even at market rates, increases affordability. Wealthier residents move into newly built homes, freeing up more lower-priced options for households across the income spectrum.[16] Taken together, this evidence indicates that an LVT would be a highly effective tool for boosting housing production and increasing affordability.

Highlights

- California's median home price of $840,000 is nearly twice the national average, contributing to a severe affordability crisis; yet the state builds only about half as many housing units per capita as the rest of the country.[3,4,5,6]
- Proposition 13 keeps property taxes artificially low for longtime owners, reducing revenue for public services and forcing local governments to levy impact fees on new developments, disincentivizing housing production.[7,8,10]
- California should implement a land value tax (LVT) to tax land, not buildings, encouraging development on underutilized parcels instead of penalizing it.[11,12]
- Evidence from Pennsylvania and economic research indicates that LVTs increase investment and housing supply. One study suggests that an LVT in California could boost home production by 14% to 32%. Increased housing production would, in turn, enhance affordability.[14,15,16]

Implementation

Because Proposition 13 is embedded in the state constitution, California must replace it through a constitutional amendment before adopting an LVT.[7] Voters must approve any change to California's constitution. The State Legislature could place the amendment on the ballot with a two-thirds vote in both the Assembly and the Senate, or citizens could place the amendment directly on the ballot through an initiative by submitting a petition.[17] A petition would require gathering signatures equivalent to 8% of the votes cast in the last gubernatorial election, 874,641.[18] In the 2024 election, the State Legislature placed all three proposed constitutional amendments on the ballot, suggesting that the legislative route would likely be more feasible.[19]

Assemblymember Alex Lee could propose this amendment in the California State Assembly when the Legislature reconvenes in January 2026.[20] He had previously authored Assembly Bill 362 to study the effectiveness of a statewide land value tax system.[21] Although the bill died in committee in January 2024, its introduction signals Lee's support for the policy and suggests he would be a credible sponsor for a constitutional amendment.

Historically considered a third rail in California politics, the primary limitation to passing an LVT is political resistance to overturning Proposition 13.[22] The law provides predictable and low tax rates, particularly for older, long-term homeowners, who vote at high rates. This concern, however, can be reduced through careful policy design that protects existing homeowners and ensures a fair transition. First, polling data suggests that housing affordability and cost of living are top concerns for California voters, which may soften resistance to reforms like an LVT.[23] Second, the California Legislature would design the policy to be revenue neutral. For example, they could set the LVT rate just high enough to replace the revenue currently raised from taxing both land and buildings within each jurisdiction, ensuring most property owners would not face higher bills. After Allentown, PA implemented a two-tiered system like Harrisburg, most homeowners saw their taxes decrease because the burden shifted to valuable, underdeveloped land.[24] Third, tax administrators would implement the policy with a phase-in period, meaning the tax shift would happen over time to give property owners time to adjust. Specifically, California would adopt a two-tiered system similar to some Pennsylvania towns and gradually increase the proportion of tax levied on just land.

Another limitation is community opposition to new housing. Even if an LVT creates a greater development incentive, local governments influenced by anti-housing lobbying groups could obstruct new construction. However, in recent years, the state government has enacted numerous pro-housing laws to mitigate these obstacles. In 2024, Governor Gavin Newsom signed over 60 related housing bills, many of which reduce state and local barriers to housing production.[25] In October 2025, he signed Senate Bill 79, legalizing multi-family housing near busy public transit stops throughout the state.[26] These regulatory reforms are a necessary complement to realizing the potential of an LVT, and also show broad political support for pro-housing reforms.

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Going Green: How the Fed Can Fight Climate Change

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Over the next two years, the Federal Reserve should engage in portfolio reallocation of its ongoing asset purchases towards green bonds, ensuring that at least 30% of net monthly corporate bond purchases are green-labeled securities.

Background

The federal adoption of sustainability goals is often described as antithetical to strong economic growth.[1] However, climate change is one of the biggest threats to the United States' economy.[2] Research suggests that climate change could negatively impact two main avenues of gross domestic product (GDP) growth: productivity and business investment.[3] Rising temperatures and heat waves could result in lower output per worker, leading to declines in productivity.[3] Unstable environments, where physical capital is routinely damaged or destroyed due to the effects of extreme weather events, discourage businesses from making substantial investments across industries.[3] The projected increase in certain extreme weather events is also expected to affect the overall economy through its impacts on a variety of sectors, such as housing, infrastructure, and agriculture.[4] Climate-change-induced hazards could put nearly one-third of the US housing stock and billions of dollars in property at high risk of being destroyed.[3]. Heat waves, heavy precipitation, and natural disasters could destroy transportation infrastructure, causing delays and disruptions to public transport systems, adding to the costs of repairs, and disrupting supply chains and travel.[3] The US economy is estimated to lose 1% to 4% of GDP annually, or about 0.7% of GDP for every 1 degree Fahrenheit increase in average temperatures.[3]

The US Department of Energy (DOE) is the largest federal funder of climate change and clean energy research programs.[5] In 2025, the Trump administration announced the termination of 24 clean energy projects managed by the DOE, cutting over $3 billion in taxpayer-funded financial assistance.[6] These actions reflect a broader policy shift away from federal support for clean energy and climate initiatives, impacting the research and development of renewable energy technologies.[7] The defunding of traditional federal green initiatives, coupled with the economic impacts of climate change, necessitates a creative adoption of sustainable solutions in other federal agencies.

Policy Idea

To adapt to the defunding of the DOE's sustainable initiatives, the Federal Reserve (Fed), in coordination with other central banks, should adopt Green Quantitative Easing (QE) as a core monetary policy tool. Specifically, over the next two years, the Fed should reallocate its ongoing asset portfolio purchases toward green bonds, so that at least 30% of net monthly corporate bond purchases are green-labeled securities.

Quantitative easing involves the large-scale purchase of financial assets, such as government bonds, mortgage-backed securities, and other investments, to increase liquidity and stimulate the economy.[8] Green QE reorients central bank asset purchases toward environmentally beneficial investments.[8] Instead of buying government bonds or mortgage-backed securities indiscriminately, central banks would prioritize green bonds, climate-linked securities, and sustainable infrastructure assets.[9] This policy would simultaneously inject liquidity into the economy and steer capital toward decarbonization, making climate action a central part of monetary policy.[8]

Policy Analysis

By 2025, the global green bond market reached $3 trillion in cumulative issuance, the total value of green bonds issued globally over time, offering a deeper and more enticing pool of investable assets for Green QE programs.[10] An available and substantial supply of green bonds is critical to the viability of this policy, as QE programs require large liquid assets to buy and sell.[11] Besides the healthy growth of the global green bond market, evidence suggests that such quantitative easing programs can redirect investment without harming financial stability.[12] The European Central Bank (ECB) has already integrated climate considerations into its monetary policy, adjusting collateral frameworks and asset purchases to reflect climate risks.[13] A study that compared the yields of eligible and ineligible green corporate bonds under the ECB's green QE program found that the ECB's green QE corporate-bond purchase programs significantly improved financing conditions for eligible green bonds.[14] The ECB's adoption of climate considerations proves that major banks, such as the Fed, could successfully adopt Green QE to encourage investment into sustainable projects by corporations [14]

Furthermore, unlike direct subsidies, Green QE leverages existing monetary operations without requiring the passage of new tax revenue or appropriations.[15] When assessed on a macro-economic timeline, the policy would lower borrowing costs for climate projects, accelerate renewable deployment, and reduce long-term energy price volatility by increasing demand for green assets. In the short term, QE tilt—a shift in strategy that favors certain asset types or monetary policy goals—could lower yields on eligible green corporate bonds, ease financing conditions for green firms, and ultimately encourage stable growth in this field and cheaper green products in the market.[12,14,15] In the long term, the policy could deepen and expand sustainable energy markets and lower long-term costs of capital for green projects.[12,14,15]

Highlights

- Recent economic and environmental research suggests that climate change will affect 22 different sectors of the United States economy, costing it an estimated $520 billion each year through the damage of property and critical infrastructure, disruptions to international supply chains, and declines in productivity of numerous industries, including forestry, fishing, agriculture, and tourism.[16]
- Despite these potentially disastrous effects on the US economy, there have been massive recent federal rollbacks in programs and research aimed at addressing climate change.[5,6,7]
- Therefore, the Federal Reserve, which has a core mandate to protect financial stability, should adopt Green Quantitative Easing (QE). This process would reallocate the Fed's fossil fuel investments toward green bonds, climate-linked securities, and sustainable infrastructure assets.[8,9]
- This policy would lower borrowing costs for projects aimed at addressing climate change, accelerating renewable energy implementation in various industries, and reducing sustainable energy price volatility.[12,14,15]

Implementation

Effective climate change solutions require substantial investments, long-term project goals, and backing by stable institutions.[17] These demanding conditions make climate change projects susceptible to failure due to the significant shifts in climate policy that occur with changes in presidential administrations, which make long-term projects less viable.[18] While there are many ways for the Fed to implement monetary policy without executive oversight, central banks face political and legal risks for the actions they take if they don't align with the climate goals of a presidential administration.[19] The Fed has recently expressed caution about its own formal participation in addressing climate change due to the absence, and even pushback, of a mandate from the presidential administration.[20] However, Green QE, unlike direct subsidies, leverages existing monetary operations without requiring the passage of new tax revenue or appropriations.[15] This key difference may allow implementation without presidential discretion or pushback.[15] Further, the Fed can independently implement GQE through the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC).[21] The FOMC sets the Fed's monetary policy agenda and goals, and is the sole body that could approve shifting asset purchases toward green bonds.[21,22]

While the FOMC acts independently, applying bipartisan pressure can encourage the committee to act.[23] Several US Congress members are pushing for action on climate-related economic risks, and for the Federal Reserve to integrate climate concerns into its oversight.[24,25] To mobilize more support for this cause, political action committees supportive of QE, such as the Democracy Collaborative, should lobby at the federal, local, and state levels by marketing this policy as a way to boost the US economy during current uncertain economic conditions, while investing in sustainable industries.[26] This lobbying strategy will be effective in building strong bipartisan coalitions and political support, as promises to support industries close to the heart of their voter bases will draw in Republicans who may be skeptical of supporting a green policy.[27] These bipartisan coalitions may combat some of the initial concerns about the policy's adoption under a Republican dominated government, while providing more stability for the continuation of this project during shifts in political administrations. Further, the FOMC's monetary policies are heavily influenced by market signals and investor demand.[28] By framing the redistribution of assets as a policy addressing financial stability and market-functioning concerns, the FOMC could be convinced to implement such a policy to protect against economic uncertainty caused by climate change. Major financial institutions could also apply pressure to adopt the policy. Support for Green QE is found within a range of advocacy groups, including business coalitions, international advocacy organizations, and academics. To mobilize support for this cause, business coalitions that advocate the implementation of GQE, like Positive Money, an international monetary-policy non-governmental organization, and the We Mean Business Coalition could lobby members of the FOMC.[29,30] Overall, the combination of independent oversight by the FOMC, input from major financial institutions, and bipartisan support for Green QE's implementation is at the heart of the policy: an idea that would bridge the free market with climate change goals, and make monetary policy the movement toward a better future.

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Fostering the Next Generation of China Hands: Increased Funding for US-China Exchange

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The number of Americans studying in China has decreased drastically in recent years, threatening the future of US-China diplomacy. The US Department of Education should allocate special scholarship funding for students to study in China to bolster their low numbers.

Background

In November 2023, Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, pledged that "China is ready to invite 50,000 young Americans to China on exchange and study programs in the next five years" during an event in San Francisco.[1] This announcement followed an in-depth discussion with former president Joe Biden about the future of US-China relations at a time when the number of American students in China was significantly dropping.[2] Specifically, the number of American students studying in China has decreased from a high of nearly 15,000 in 2011 to just 800 in 2024.[3] This number is even more alarming, and implies a great disequilibrium, when considering that roughly 300,000 Chinese students were in the US in 2024.[3]

Such an imbalance in exchange can possess detrimental effects down the line. Without Americans partaking in study abroad programs throughout China, the US will lose out on a generation of "China hands," or experts who possess a strong command of Mandarin Chinese and a deep cultural understanding of China.[4] These human resources are particularly invaluable for facilitating successful diplomacy in an era of heightened geopolitical tensions and global competition.[5]

The barriers to studying abroad in China as an American are not insignificant. Some of the most pressing issues for prospective students are China's strict visa requirements, concerns over the arbitrary implementation of exit bans, and financial burdens.[6,7,8] Whereas the ability to resolve the first two rests largely with officials of the Chinese government, allocation of scholarship funds by the US Department of Education would help remedy the latter.

Policy Idea

To promote cross-cultural exchange and bolster the number of American students studying in China, the US Department of Education should allocate scholarship funding for 100 students who wish to study abroad there. The government would disseminate these grants directly to public universities, which would then award them to students. Scholarships would be merit-based and $5,000 per semester, roughly matching the monthly stipends, airfare, and housing coverage offered by prestigious initiatives such as the Critical Language Scholarship.[9] Potential participants would need to complete an application demonstrating their interest in improving diplomatic ties between the US and China. This measure would increase incentives for students to select China as the destination of their study abroad. By alleviating some of the financial burden, the additional funding could sway students who were otherwise on the fence about entering China for academic study.

Policy Analysis

The economic burden of living and studying abroad can seriously deter students from pursuing this valuable experience. Daily living expenses in China are roughly 45% lower than in the US.[10] Analysts estimate living expenses in a first-tier Chinese city like Beijing, excluding tuition and rent costs, to be around $600 USD per month.[11] This affordability in itself already serves as an incentive for those studying abroad to consider China, but additional financial support could further reinforce the decision. For example, flying to and from China is expensive, often costing upwards of $1,000 USD for a round-trip ticket during peak seasons.[12] If scholarship funding or grants could cover these travel and living costs, it would relieve students of a major financial burden associated with traveling to China.

An example of a similarly structured and successful program is the Critical Language Scholarship (CLS), which fully funds students' study abroad experiences to increase American competitiveness across various fields. According to CLS, their funding has supported over 10,000 Americans in this venture since the program's inception in 2006, around 20% of whom studied in China.[13,14] A survey of CLS alumni found that 93% stated that participation in the program influenced their career goals, and nearly 70% employ the cultural knowledge they gained through this experience in their current jobs.[15] Furthermore, a University of California Education Abroad Program study examined students' primary motivations for studying abroad. They discovered that learning about another culture, developing intercultural skills, and increasing awareness of global issues ranked as three of the top four responses.[16] These two examples reflect not only the desire of students to develop strong diplomatic skills, but also the capacity for study abroad scholarships to shape a new generation of leaders.

Highlights

- The number of American students studying in China has declined to a worrisome level in recent years, falling from nearly 15,000 in 2011 to only 800 in 2024.[3]
- If the US does not remedy this disparity, it will lose out on a generation of would-be China experts to facilitate successful diplomacy between the two nations.[4,5]
- The US Department of Education should provide subsidies of $5,000 per semester to 100 students studying abroad in China to mitigate the economic stress caused by air travel, living expenses, and tuition.[8,9,12]
- Research indicates that increased scholarship funding for study abroad programs significantly boosts participation and helps equip a new generation of diplomatic leaders with indispensable linguistic skills and cultural knowledge.[13,15]

Implementation

The US Department of Education should implement this policy at the federal level to ensure equitable distribution of scholarship funds across all states. However, the funds would specifically target students of public universities, as students from wealthier backgrounds are significantly more likely to attend private universities than public ones.[17] A 2017 study by Opportunity Insights found that at 38 of the most prominent US private universities, including Brown, Yale, and Princeton, more students belonged to the top 1% of the income distribution than the bottom 60%.[18] Additionally, a 2023 College Pulse survey showed that students at private universities were twice as likely as public university students to say they had studied abroad.[19] Therefore, the US Department of Education should disseminate these scholarship funds to public universities to maximize their impact. The application process would be conducted by an external government committee and involve a careful assessment of applicants' academic history, transcripts, and statements of purpose. Any students with an interest in China and a desire to promote global cooperation and diplomacy would be eligible recipients.

To implement this policy, Congress would need to authorize the program and allocate the necessary amount of funding in the annual appropriations bill.[20] Lawmakers who support conserving federal funds would likely take issue with this policy, arguing it is an overstep to use funds for this program.[21] The federal government has spent an estimated $4 billion on funding for STEM programs, many of which are intended to increase the US's global competitiveness with China.[22] The federal government should place similar emphasis on developing an effective American diplomatic capacity to engage with China. This approach makes it possible to foster a positive, rather than antagonistic, relationship between these two global powers.

The first four years of this policy's implementation will serve as a trial period. The Institute of International Education will measure the policy's effectiveness by comparing the number of students from participating universities studying in China before and after its implementation. Other factors can also influence these numbers, such as the evolving US-China geopolitical relationship. Therefore, the National Center for Education Statistics should conduct surveys of participating students, inquiring as to the relevance of the scholarship funding in their decision to travel to China. If the policy does not effectively boost participation in study abroad programs in China, the Department of Education will amend it to disburse fewer scholarships each year and begin exploring other possible solutions, such as working with the Chinese government to limit the imposition of exit bans, loosen visa restrictions, and more. If, however, the policy is successful in bolstering American student presence in China, its implementation will continue into the foreseeable future, helping foster a new generation of China hands to engage in meaningful cross-cultural diplomacy.

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Fortifying the Blockchain: Mandated Federal Disclosure of Cryptocurrency Trading

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Cybercrime is on the rise. The US should amend the Bank Secrecy Act of 1970 to include monitoring of cryptocurrency blockchains to protect market stability and reduce illicit activity.

Background

Following the disastrous financial crisis of 2008, the United States economy saw a permanent shift in economic behavior and attitudes.[1] Angered by unemployment, recession, and the treatment of the economy as political capital, American employees quickly lost trust in the federal government's methods of financial regulation. This lack of faith created the perfect ground for cryptocurrency in 2009 as a method of circumventing the minted US dollar, otherwise referred to as "fiat" currency.[2,3] The value of cryptocurrency in the US has grown at a compound annual rate (CAR) of 99%, exponentially outpacing the average growth of traditional payment methods, which held an average CAR of 8% from 2018 to 2023.[4] Estimates from July 2025 state that 14% of Americans utilize cryptocurrency, with this rate rapidly increasing.[5]

Alongside this profound increase in cryptocurrency popularity comes an increase in potential harm. The volatility and decentralization of standard digital assets, or digital fungible tokens, make the online market an unpredictable store of value.[6] In February 2016, Bitcoin's value plummeted by $8,000, an estimated 60% drop in per-token value held just two months prior.[7] The usage of cryptocurrency for illicit activity also reached an estimated $51.3 billion in 2024, with funds used for ransomware, scams, illicit-actor organizations, and child sexual abuse material, among others.[6] Cryptocurrency companies are expected to file "Suspicious Activity Reports" with the US Department of the Treasury's Office of the Comptroller of the Currency.[8] However, the office lacks the capacity to properly handle cryptocurrency blockchains, leading to underreporting, difficulty navigating reported information, and a misaligned strategy to combat illicit activity.[8,9] As cryptocurrency begins to play a larger role in the US economy, it is imperative to protect market stability and integrity by requiring cryptocurrency providers to report all transactions on their platforms.

Policy Idea

To regulate the unregulated landscape of cryptocurrency, the US should expand legal regulations to encompass the digital fungible landscape by mandating cryptocurrency companies to report all activity in digital spaces and creating a new reporting space solely for blockchain disclosure. To accomplish this goal, Congress would amend the 1970 Bank Secrecy Act to include digital assets, in addition to mandating the creation of an online data-reporting technology that is exclusive to cryptocurrency transactions.[8] If a reported transaction is viewed as suspicious, the US Treasury should handle the execution of regulatory mandates and inspection of suspected criminal activity.

Policy Analysis

The creation of blockchain-exclusive disclosure allows companies to report following a transaction, maintaining the competitiveness of digital assets as currency while mitigating most terminal risks, such as money laundering and cybercrime.[10,11] Cyberattacks, bad-faith trading, and scams promote increased anxiety, decreased prices, and higher market volatility.[10] Creating a mandatory reporting system for suspicious activity improves prosecution ability, thus limiting actors that can cause wider economic disruptions.[8,10]

Tightened US regulations on cryptocurrency have led to a 0.34% decline in Bitcoin's price, with many projections showing price stabilization in the months following changes in demand for cryptocurrencies.[11] Furthermore, a study by cryptocurrency analysts noted a 35% decrease in ransomware-related cryptocurrency payments in 2024 following mandated reporting for suspicious activity in cryptocurrency markets.[12] While the analysts cite several changes that could have brought on this change, they largely credited increased law enforcement actions.[12] As a result of increasing crackdowns, the risks of criminal blockchain activity increased while these activities' profitability decreased, creating an incentive to implement mandatory reporting, especially in instances where illegal activity is covert.[9,12]

In a case study of the Financial Transactions and Reports Centre of Canada, which requires digital banks and wallet-holding entities to report all Bitcoin transactions on their platforms, mandatory reporting increased effective enforcement against illicit transactions.[13] Canada instituted this requirement in 2021, improving the monitoring of digital assets.[13,14] Cryptocurrency reports resulted in 1,783 unique instances of disclosure to the Canadian government, increasing the effectiveness and transparency of digital trade.[14] Financial losses due to cryptocurrency reporting would be incredibly minimal while cybercrime decreases drastically, proving that mandatory reporting of all transactions would be effective and provide a net benefit for the American economy.[11]

Highlights

- In 2024, $51.3 billion in cryptocurrency was used for illicit transactions, with cybercriminals using these funds for ransomware, child sexual abuse material, and scams.[6] The growth of the cryptocurrency market has quickly outpaced that of traditional currency, signaling a need for tighter regulation similar to that of traditional financial systems.[4]
- Voluntary reporting of cryptocurrency transactions is only partially effective at mitigating illicit activity, largely due to unnoticed suspicious activity, untrained law enforcement, and a lack of incentivization [8,9]
- Congress should require cryptocurrency providers to report all transactions to a new centralized database, allowing the Department of the Treasury to police and regulate the policy.[13]
- Ransomware attacks and cybercrime lessen the value of cryptocurrency in the US more than regulatory measures.[11,12] Mandated cryptocurrency reporting in Canada has made the enforcement and monitoring of digital assets more efficient, ensuring market stability.[14]

Implementation

To properly enact a mandatory reporting space for cryptocurrency transactions, Congress should amend the 1970 Bank Secrecy Act (BSA), which requires financial agencies to provide information to the US to combat money laundering.[15] To address jurisdictional challenges, Congress must alter 31 U.S.C. § 5312 to include "digital methods" and "cryptocurrency" as eligible financial agencies for data sharing.[15] Additionally, Congress should create a central reporting system intended only for digital assets through 31 U.S.C. § 5318 of the BSA, an act that outlines compliance and policing procedures for financial law.[16]

The Congressional Research Service will support the legislation by providing relevant information regarding cybercrime within the US, increases in cryptocurrency usage over time, and how Canada's required reporting for all cryptocurrency transactions is applied in the US economy.[13] Congress will determine funding for this measure during its annual appropriations process. Estimates from Canadian regulations suggest an initial investment of $10 million, followed by an annual maintenance cost of $5 million.[17]

Complete implementation should span across three years. The first year will involve programming the central cryptocurrency database, with the second year building familiarity with cryptocurrency, and the third year requiring the most prominent suppliers to report transactions. Using these figures, the House Committee on Financial Services would propose this amendment.[18] Aside from handling legislation on financial regulation, this committee is fairly bipartisan, with 30 Republican and 24 Democratic members.[18] By leveraging this support on an issue that encompasses bipartisan concerns, such as economic stability, the amendment will be resilient against polarization.[19] In the annual appropriations process, Congress will delegate funds to the Department of the Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FCEN) to support the growth of digital asset security and the creation of a uniform reporting space.[9] The US will not have access to information regarding cryptocurrency transactions in other nations, including from providers and traders who choose to relocate or move their trading offshore. Following the creation of this uniform reporting space, investigators will be provided basic training on the cryptocurrency blockchain while working intimately with government programmers for specialized tasks within the reporting space.

Independent from voluntary victim reporting from the FBI, the Treasury's FCEN will operate this system, using all compiled data available to state and federal law enforcement agencies as applicable. The US will require cryptocurrency providers to supply the FCEN with wallet identifiers, risk tags, and technical information on trades, which facilitates expedited investigation processes. In the status quo, financial law enforcement agencies are unaware of the evasive nature of cryptocurrency blockchains, often creating gaps in meaningful intervention.[9] The Department of the Treasury lacks expertise.[9] Amending the BSA acts as a proactive measure, creating a uniform reporting measure for cryptocurrency. Consequently, the technological infrastructure needed for blockchain disclosure will simplify the processes of tracking, monitoring, and acting on bad-faith transactions.[9] This policy, as implemented by Congress and executed by the FCEN, will mandate transparency in cryptocurrency trading and mitigate price volatility.

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Separating the Defense Production Act From International Development Finance

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The Defense Production Act should no longer grant the Development Finance Corporation domestic investment authority, as doing so undermines the agency's global mission and duplicates existing efforts. The DFC should refocus its international efforts to reduce Chinese dominance in critical mineral sectors.

Background

Congress created the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) in 2018 through the bipartisan Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act during President Trump's first term.[1,2] The DFC's mission is to mobilize private sector investment for development in emerging markets to foster growth and enhance US global economic leadership.[1,2]

In March 2025, Trump issued an executive order that used the Defense Production Act (DPA) to authorize the DFC to make domestic investments that would create, maintain, expand, and restore American mineral production.[3] Congress passed the DPA in 1950 to support defense manufacturing during the Korean War, but presidents have since used the law to bypass market forces and bureaucracy during crises.[4,5] The DPA's broad authority has often allowed administrations to push political objectives only tangentially related to national defense.[5,6]

The DFC's shift toward domestic projects directly contradicts the international development mandate.[2] However, the administration justified the move by citing national security concerns over China's dominance in the critical minerals sector, which gives China leverage over the US through inputs essential to technologies ranging from smartphones to fighter jets.[3,7,8] However, the DPA was never intended to regulate such emerging policy areas, nor to grant authority to agencies with limited domestic investment experience.[5,6,9]

Trump previously used the DPA in 2020 to expand the DFC's domestic role to boost medical production during the COVID-19 pandemic.[9,10,11] The effort was deemed unsuccessful after a proposed vaccine loan to Kodak triggered insider trading and market distortion allegations, displaying the DFC's inexperience in domestic investment.[9] The US already has the deepest and most sophisticated capital markets in the world, suggesting the DFC should refocus on international development rather than duplicating domestic efforts.[9]

Policy Idea

To better support US strategic interests, Congress should amend the DPA to prohibit its application to the DFC. The DPA already authorizes several other government agencies to invest domestically in critical mineral supply chains, making DFC inclusion redundant.[9,10,12] Instead, the DFC should focus on its original mission while addressing the national security threat posed by China's critical mineral monopoly.[2,3] The DFC can reduce dependence on Chinese-controlled resources and strengthen American presence overseas by financing mining and mineral processing projects in emerging markets. Amending the DPA would allow the DFC to fully concentrate on international investments that advance US economic and geopolitical goals without duplicating programs already handled by other domestic agencies.[9,10,12]

Policy Analysis

President Trump invoked Title III of the DPA to authorize DFC domestic investment, which allows the government to administer loans, guarantees, and direct purchases to expand production of critical goods.[12] However, this authority duplicates powers already held by other agencies, such as the Department of Defense's (DOD) Office of Strategic Capital (OSC) and the Department of Energy (DOE), which are better equipped to manage domestic investments.[4,10,12] For example, the DOD OSC recently provided MP Materials, the only rare earth mine in America, a $150 million loan and 15% equity stake valued at $400 million.[13] Similarly, the DOE committed over $1 billion to grants for domestic mineral stimulation, plus a recent

5% equity stake and a $2.23 billion loan to Lithium Americas.[14,15] These investments demonstrate that other agencies already have significant domestic funding capacity, making it unnecessary for the DFC to divert from its international mission.

Many emerging economies are actively seeking alternatives to Chinese capital and critical mineral supply chain control, creating opportunities for strategic investment.[16,17,18] In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where China controls roughly 80% of mining operations, local governments and private stakeholders are increasingly calling for diversification and responsible development.[17,19,20] The Biden administration attempted to support the DRC through the DFC, using a $553 million loan to accelerate responsible mining and upgrade transport routes.[21,22] However, the project lost traction after the Trump administration cancelled and defunded several foreign assistance programs, terminating 83% of existing global investments across 70 mineral-producing countries.[23,24] Revoking DPA authority would return the DFC to a more impactful international role, allowing the agency to leverage its expertise to re-engage these markets to build American credibility abroad while providing alternatives to Chinese control.[19,20,25]

Highlights

- President Trump invoked the Defense Production Act (DPA) to authorize the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) to make domestic critical mineral investments, despite the agency's mission of supporting international development in emerging economies.[1,2,3,4,9]
- National security concerns over China's control of critical minerals justified the order, as this gives China leverage over US industry and technology.[7,8,9]
- Amending the DPA to prohibit its application to the DFC would prevent future diversions of the agency into domestic mineral financing and eliminate overlap with agencies already equipped for this work, including the Department of Defense and Department of Energy.[9,10]
- Such an amendment would enable the DFC to advance its original mission of investing in emerging economies, thereby helping reduce China's dominance in global critical mineral supply chains while avoiding duplication of investments already being made by other federal agencies.[19,20,25]

Implementation

Congress must periodically reauthorize the DPA, providing an opportunity to amend, clarify, or restrict the scope of the law's authority.[26] The 118th Congress introduced multiple bills seeking to restrict DPA usage in specific sectors, including electric vehicle batteries and solar panel projects. This reflects growing congressional interest in tightening the law's scope.[26] Congress will consider the next reauthorization in the coming months and is expected to extend DPA authority until 2026.[26,27] The reauthorization process presents an opportunity for Congress to draft legislation explicitly prohibiting the use of DPA authority for the DFC, ensuring that the agency focuses on its international development mission rather than domestic investment.[26]

Members of Congress have long noted challenges with executive use of the DPA, with some criticizing its market disruptions.[26] Many Republicans and moderate Democrats opposed the Biden administration's use of the law for clean energy, calling for reforms to limit its scope.[28] While not solving all DPA issues, bipartisan agreement could form around protecting foreign aid programs. Large majorities oppose cuts to aid, and Congress has historically passed packages across party lines.[29,30] The DFC enjoys consistent bipartisan support, including a 280% budget increase in 2026 under the Trump administration, despite the US Agency for International Development's (USAID) elimination.[31] Advocacy from international development non-profits could bolster support by urging the DFC to focus on overseas missions to maintain U.S. credibility. For example, the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition recently highlighted securing critical mineral supply chains in emerging markets such as the DRC, a position that aligns with a stronger DFC role and could guide lobbying efforts.[32,33] Framing such legislation as restoring the DPA's original intent could attract bipartisan backing.

Political challenges remain, particularly because President Trump implemented the original executive order, making it unlikely that the administration would support legislation rolling back the authority it granted.[3] At the same time, Trump has shown a willingness to shift opinions toward certain policy priorities, particularly when it comes to China.[34,35] For example, after implementing sweeping tariffs on China, Trump rolled some of these back to accept renewed rare earth exports, suggesting that the administration could be open to reconsidering the current authority.[35]

If introduced, the bill would move through the standard committee and floor process and then go to the President, with Congress retaining the ability to override a veto.[36,37] Once enacted, the DPA would continue to apply to the seven other government agencies originally designated under the law.[10] The DOD and DOE would take over the DFC's existing domestic role, monitoring investments that have already been made to streamline efforts. Meanwhile, the DFC can continue to finance projects in emerging markets where critical minerals are strategically important, supporting both economic growth and national security. In this way, the DFC can pursue the original mission while still advancing the broader strategic objective of reducing Chinese dominance of critical mineral supply chains.

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EDUCATION POLICY

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Capping School Voucher Allocation to Protect Low-Income Students and Public Schools

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Congress should amend the Educational Choice for Children Act to decrease its maximum tax credit from $1,700 to $850, thereby reducing the federal tax burden and redirecting revenue toward Title I schools to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Background

On July 4, 2025, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) came into law, encompassing a wide range of policy provisions.[1] One of these, the Educational Choice for Children Act (ECCA) will provide a 100% tax credit for annual donations up to $1,700 to “nonprofit scholarship-granting organizations” that fund private and religious K-12 school vouchers beginning in 2027.[2] States can opt into this program and allow families earning up to 300% of their area’s median income to benefit from these subsidized taxpayer donations, meaning roughly 90% of families nationwide could qualify for a limited number of vouchers.[3]

Although the policy intends to mitigate educational inequality and expand access to private education for low-income families, the evidence is mixed. A majority of school voucher recipients across states are from high-income households, and only a small share previously attended public schools before receiving vouchers.[4,5] Moreover, just 10% of families are within ten miles of an age-appropriate private school, which disadvantages rural and suburban communities.[3]

The ECCA also lacks a cap on the total amount of credited donations. While Congress initially estimated a $5 billion annual cost, other analysts project potential expenditures as high as $101 billion if participation grows.[6] For comparison, Title I schools, serving high-poverty areas, receive around $18 billion in federal funding.[7]

Finally, there is limited evidence to support the idea that vouchers present a superior educational opportunity to students. In fact, research suggests that private voucher recipients often perform worse academically than their public school peers.[8] Expanding voucher subsidies at the federal level diverts tax revenue from improving public education and exacerbates education inequality rather than alleviating it. To avoid these risks, legislators must collaborate to reduce the ECCA’s impact.

Policy Idea

To limit the federal tax burden of school voucher programs, Congress should amend the Educational Choice for Children Act during the 2028-2029 legislative session—approximately one year after the program’s start date. This amendment should decrease the maximum tax credit amount from $1,700 to $850 annually, halving the proposed guaranteed return in order to gauge the immediate impacts of weaning off the program, and introduce a funding mechanism that channels the resulting federal savings towards after-school programming in Title I schools. In particular, the federal government should support 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLCs), federally funded remedial after-school programs that are proven to improve attendance in schools with high truancy rates.

Policy Analysis

By restricting the tax incentive, the federal government would discourage upper-middle- and high-income donors from enabling the disproportionate growth of private voucher systems. Furthermore, reallocating the resulting tax savings to Title I schools, particularly in the pursuit of targeting gaps in funding, would strengthen federal investment in high-poverty districts.[9] Currently, approximately 24.6 million children attend Title I schools, compared to just over 1 million participating in school choice programs, such as Education Savings Account tax credits and general school vouchers.[9,10,11,] While Title I funding, when split for the population it serves, provides $829 per student per year, the ECCA alone designates $5,000 per year to only certain students. Redirecting even a portion of the foregone voucher expenditures could improve educational outcomes for low-income students.

Through redirecting an estimated maximum of $2.5 billion to Title I schools annually (as opposed to the initial $5 billion cap), legislators could focus on programs impacting high-poverty schools directly. For instance, Title I status is an eligibility criterion for 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLCs), federally funded remedial after-school programs that are proven to improve attendance in schools with high truancy rates. As of 2024, two in three funding requests for public school CCLCs were denied on the basis of low program funds.[12] The annual supplemental funding made available by limiting the ECCA credit would allow for this demand to be met, the new funds nearly tripling the current $1.3 billion allocation for CCLCs in 2023.[13] Overall. this policy provides more flexibility to the federal budget to protect the schools that serve all students, not just a wealthier few.

Highlights

- A provision under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) offers a 100% tax credit for annual donations of up to $1,700 to organizations that fund private and religious K-12 school vouchers.[2]
- The provision could cost the US up to $5 billion annually. [6]
- School voucher programs, despite their intentions, disproportionately subsidize the education of children already coming from wealthy families, and show mixed results in actually improving academic outcomes.[3,4,5,8]
- Reallocating half of programming funds could create a massive scale change for remedial after-school programs in Title I schools, such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers.[12]

Implementation

A Congressional representative should introduce changes to the ECCA during the 2028-2029 legislative session and take effect between the 2029 and 2030 fiscal years. During the interim, legislators and education advocates should collaborate on a public awareness campaign to raise public awareness of the ineffectiveness and inequality enabled by the ECCA and similar voucher programs. The National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE), which collaborates with organizations such as the National Parent Teacher Association, is a promising advocacy group that could lead this effort by developing outreach materials for parents, educators, and community members.[14] These materials could include social media advertisements and a sample call script, encouraging citizens to write and call their local and state representatives and advocate for reforming the ECCA.[14] Funding for this outreach effort may be acquired through a fundraising collaboration between individual legislators and the local chapters of the aforementioned organizations.

Following the public awareness campaign, the bill to amend the ECCA should be proposed to the House Committee on Ways and Means, the same committee responsible for the original Act.[15] A potential champion for this bill on the individual state level would be New Mexico Democrat Melanie Stansbury, who penned a letter to members of the Cabinet stating her opposition to the ECCA on account of its threat to tribal sovereignty.[16] Upon introduction of the bill into the House, a second round of media engagement should follow, specifically imploring community members to urge their representatives to support the amendment. Simultaneously, Congress should establish a task force to track the policy's effectiveness. Using data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the task force would assess the policy's effects on academic achievement and educational equity on the national scale.[17] Following one full year of implementation, the task force should publicly release its findings in a press conference open to education policy journalists and the public. If the data shows nonexistent or negative impacts on NAEP scores, legislators should draft the bill for the upcoming legislative session and feature the task force's findings in the rationale.

Due to the Republican majority in both the House and Senate, passing a restriction on school choice policies will prove difficult. However, legislators and advocates must appeal to opponents' priorities, such as the threats toward rural schools. If the bill comes to pass. NAEP scores should continue to be tracked in relation to the implementation of the amendment, controlling for other factors at play. If NAEP scores increase, the tax funds proportionate to what would have been spent on the other half of the

ECCA tax credit will be allocated towards targeted supports and interventions in Title I schools, bringing that money to schools that need it, with instructions on how to use it. State agencies would fund these centers independently in accordance with the passing of the federal budget.[18] States that continue to opt into this tax credit program can compare the family income distribution to voucher recipients before and after the amendment to assess whether the lower credit improves access for low- and middle-income families. Similar longitudinal analyses should measure academic outcomes, such as standardized test scores, across public and voucher schools, disaggregated by income and geographic region. Ex-ante data should aim to understand whether tax incentivization truly made these vouchers more accessible and more effective in producing academic improvement. With this analysis, legislators can observe and track which federal programs support more equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for students and stop subsidizing inequity.

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From Work-Study to Workforce: Transforming Student Aid into Career Pathways

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Federal Work-Study (FWS) offers financial aid through part-time jobs but often limits students to campus jobs that fail to prepare them for careers. The Department of Education (ED) should restructure FWS to provide paid, career-relevant opportunities that build skills, experience, and professional networks.

Background

Across the US, recent college graduates are coming face-to-face with one of the most challenging markets for entry-level jobs in a decade.[1] College tuition is only continuing to increase, leaving students burdened by debt after graduation and facing an economy where jobs are scarce and competition is fierce.[2] Not long ago, simply earning a degree often guaranteed a stable job right out of college and put people on the path toward homeownership and financial security.[3] Today, however, a degree alone is no longer enough. Hands-on experience and professional connections have become essential for standing out to employers and securing a job, as internships and professional networks open doors that coursework alone cannot.[4,5] However, many students—particularly those from low-income families—lack access to these opportunities, often because they cannot afford to take unpaid internships or lack the professional connections to secure them.[6]

The federal government's Federal Work-Study (FWS) program was designed to reduce financial barriers by allowing eligible students to earn money for educational expenses through part-time work, ideally related to their field of study.[7] However, because universities are responsible for managing aspects of the FWS program—such as determining eligibility and helping students find job openings—the program often falls short of this goal. With the majority of FWS wages being directed toward on-campus positions, the program often traps students in low-skill, minimum-wage campus jobs that do little to support career readiness or professional growth.[8]

This disconnect is especially concerning in today's economy. Students often take on work-study jobs to manage college costs and reduce loans, but the time commitment can limit their ability to develop the skills and professional networks needed to secure well-paying jobs and repay the debt student aid rarely covers.[9]

Policy Idea

The Department of Education's (ED) Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) should restructure the FWS program to offer paid, career-relevant opportunities that prepare students for success post-graduation. Rather than limiting opportunities to on-campus jobs, the FSA should help facilitate partnerships between higher education institutions and private-sector employers, while also expanding access to public sector employment opportunities. Students would be able to earn FWS wages while participating in paid internships, apprenticeships, or fellowship programs aligned with their academic and career goals, equipping them with the experience and networking opportunities needed to improve career readiness. The FSA should also provide stronger guidance and resources for institutions that administer FWS to ensure the program remains effective and accessible. This could include clearer standards for job quality, basic training for financial-aid staff, and simple tools to help schools match students with relevant jobs.

Policy Analysis

During President Trump's first administration, US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos piloted the FWS experimental sites, demonstrating that such reforms are feasible. The program allowed select institutions to use FWS funds to explore private sector employment, including internships, apprenticeships, and clinical rotations.[10] Results showed that these career-focused, paid opportunities helped improve employment outcomes, build professional networks, increase college completion rates, and reduce student borrowing.[11,12] However, this reform was not permanently implemented because many institutions lacked the necessary resources to sustain off-campus partnerships, and federal guidance was inconsistent.[12]

Furthermore, the FWS funding structure makes this expansion financially feasible. FWS operates as a cost-sharing program in which the federal government typically covers up to 75% of a student's wages, while the employer contributes the remaining share.[12] However, currently, the federal share increases to as much as 90% for students employed at private organizations or at a federal, state, or local public organization.[13] Therefore, this structure allows federal funds to leverage additional private and institutional resources, expanding the program's reach without increased federal spending. Additionally, for public and private sector employers, many of whom already offer internships, partnering with FWS can reduce their labor costs, enabling them to hire more students within existing financial constraints.

Importantly, expanding work-based learning through FWS has strong bipartisan support. A 2025 Bipartisan Policy Center report found that modernizing FWS to include more career-relevant opportunities aligns with the priorities of both parties.[12] Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Susan Collins (R-ME) introduced the *Head Start for Our Future Act*, which allows FWS funding to support positions in early childhood education and shows that expanding FWS to strengthen career readiness has bipartisan support.[14] Together, the success of FWS pilots, along with its funding model and bipartisan support, shows that expanding FWS to offer paid, career-relevant opportunities is both feasible and effective.

Highlights

- Rising college tuition and an increasingly competitive job market have made it harder for graduates to secure employment after graduation.[2]
- The Federal Work-Study (FWS) program supports students with financial need but often places them in low-skill, on-campus jobs unrelated to their career goals.[8]
- Restructuring FWS to include paid, career-focused positions through partnerships with private and public employers would provide students with the experience and connections necessary to improve career readiness after graduation.
- Evidence from successful pilot programs and bipartisan support demonstrates that expanding FWS to include paid, career-relevant job opportunities is both feasible and cost-effective.[13,14]

Implementation

Building on lessons from the FWS experimental pilot, implementation should focus on strengthening partnerships with employers and providing institutions with clear federal guidance on how to develop effective, career-focused work-study placements.[10]

In the first year, FSA should collaborate with the Department of Labor (DOL) to link universities with existing employer networks. Using the DOL's labor market data and regional partnerships would allow universities to identify industries experiencing job growth and match students with relevant opportunities in those fields.[15] FSA should also partner with organizations that already connect employers and schools—such as the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, Business Roundtable, and local workforce development boards—to identify businesses that could be interested in hiring FWS students.[16,17] While building these partnerships, FSA should promote the FWS cost-sharing model as an incentive for employers, highlighting reduced labor costs and access to a motivated, skilled student workforce.

Following the first year of partnership development, FSA should publish a comprehensive implementation guide to support universities in placing students in FWS jobs.[12] Under this guidance, financial aid offices—which already determine student eligibility for FWS— would continue managing wages and compliance, while career service offices would focus on identifying opportunities and matching students with employers.[18] The guide would also outline how universities can leverage the provided federal employer networks, local workforce boards, and school-specific resources, including alumni, to expand placement options for students. Although implementation would require coordination amongst current administration, costs would be limited by FWS's existing cost-sharing structure and could be absorbed largely through reallocation of current funds rather than increased federal spending. Ultimately, by connecting financial aid and career offices with federal guidance, FWS can effectively prepare students for careers while ensuring equitable access for all students.

Lastly, the ED should track the outcomes across participating universities on an annual basis using metrics that reflect program effectiveness, including the number of students placed in career-relevant positions, the quality of mentorship and professional development received, employer satisfaction with student performance, and equitable access. Additionally, universities should collect feedback from participating FWS students and employers to refine placement processes, partnerships, and support resources. Conducting continuous evaluation and feedback will ensure the program evolves to meet changing workforce demands while remaining accessible and relevant to all students, equipping them with the skills, experience, and professional connections needed to repay debt and build successful careers.

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A Straightforward Future: Implementing Straight-Average Semesterly Grading in Maryland Public Secondary Schools

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To curb grade inflation in Maryland, Maryland public secondary schools should implement Straight Average semester grading. This grading system has been proven to improve classroom learning and the educational development of students.

Background

Across the US and especially in Maryland, grade inflation has been a salient trend in K-12 education. Nationally, test scores have declined since the COVID-19 pandemic, with National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, measuring baseline proficiency in English and math, declining five points in reading and eight points in math for eighth graders from 2019 to 2024.[1] Simultaneously, the average national high school grade point average (GPA) increased from 2.95 to 3.0 between 2020 and 2024 despite falling test scores, reflecting grade inflation.[2] In Maryland, eighth-grade NAEP scores also notably declined from 2019 to 2025. Math scores dropped from 280 to 268, reading scores fell from 264 to 258, and math and reading proficiency decreased by 8% and 3%, respectively.[3] Yet, in Montgomery County, Maryland's largest district, GPAs rose, with more than 51% of the class of 2023 graduating with a weighted GPA of 4.0 or higher.[4]

Grade inflation hurts students for various reasons. To start, inflation leads to "grade compression," where the majority of GPAs fall within a narrowing range, making it harder for high-achieving students to stand out in college applications.[5,6] Thus, these students often have to take on additional stress through extracurriculars to differentiate themselves.[7] Second, grade inflation allows students to pass courses without developing the skills necessary for future success in higher education and the workforce.[6,8,9] Third, grade inflation can exacerbate the achievement gap by making it harder to identify students who need additional support, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.[17] Finally, existing Maryland semester grading policies that take the higher of two quarter grades enable students to devote effort in only one quarter of a semester, creating a loophole that fuels disengagement and increased chronic absenteeism.[10]

Policy Idea

To combat grade inflation and prioritize classroom learning, Maryland's 24 public school districts should implement "Straight Average" semester grading for secondary school students across all of Maryland's 24 public school districts. Straight Average grading calculates an individual student's final semester grade using a simple algorithm, where the student's two individual quarter percentages are averaged for a final percentage ((quarter 1% + quarter 2%)/2), which then translates to a semester grade. This calculation puts equal weight on both quarters and makes exact percentages matter, encouraging students to remain engaged throughout the entire semester. This proposal would also standardize semesterly grading policy across the state, creating a more equal standard of academic achievement for all students. At the district level, predefined grading distributions should remain the same. All Maryland public school districts use a quarter system within the semester, making the grading change feasible for each district.[11,12,13]

Policy Analysis

Tackling increasing trends of grade inflation is paramount to building a Maryland public education system that adequately prepares students for life after graduation, and Straight Average semesterly grading is a proven solution.

First, there is strong evidence that stricter grading policies increase classroom learning and associated test scores. In a North Carolina study of Algebra I classes, researchers found that harsher grading policies cultivated better performance on standardized Algebra I tests.[14] These students also performed better in subsequent classes like Geometry and Algebra II, showcasing the long-term effects of increased standards, such as a stricter semesterly grading policy.[14]

More specifically, two of Maryland's largest public school districts, Harford and Montgomery County (MCPS), have successfully implemented Straight Average semesterly grading and seen increased test scores. MCPS recently implemented the policy in 2025, but Harford County implemented it in 2022 and has seen subsequent increases in English language arts (ELA) and math proficiency, with average ELA scores on the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program for third through tenth graders increasing from 56.7% to 60.2% and from 24.9% to 28.4% in math, from 2024 to 2025.[15,16]

Furthermore, the need to combat grade inflation has received broad bipartisan support at the national and state levels, indicating that similar reforms in Maryland would be politically viable. Reports from the *America First Policy Institute* and the *Progressive Policy Institute* both highlight discrepancies between test scores and rising grades and call for a renewed emphasis on rigor.[17,18] At the state level, Texas's HB4234, requiring average grades on college transcripts, passed this session with strong bipartisan backing, offering precedent for similar reforms in Maryland designed to address grade inflation, like Straight-Average grading.[19]

Highlights

- Grade inflation has increased in K-12 education both at the national level and in Maryland specifically, with National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores falling as GPAs rise.[1,2,3,4]
- Grade inflation harms students by hurting their chances in college admissions, disincentivizing them from becoming proficient in essential skills, and exacerbating existing issues like the achievement gap and chronic absenteeism.[5,6,7,8,9,10]
- To combat grade inflation and promote classroom learning, Maryland's public secondary schools should implement Straight Average semesterly grading, where a student's final semester grade is calculated by averaging the student's two individual quarter percentages.
- Two of Maryland's largest districts, Harford and Montgomery County, have implemented Straight Average semester grading and have seen subsequent increases in classroom learning and associated test scores, demonstrating the effectiveness of this system.[15,16]

Implementation

All 24 of Maryland's public school districts should start by implementing a pilot program for the 2026-2027 school year, where sixth- and ninth-grade students in public middle and high schools receive their final semester grades for both semesters through Straight Average grading. For the pilot program, at the individual district level, the grading conversions, from percentages to letter grades, should remain the same. These conversions do vary by district, and some districts use alternate systems like the "+" and "-" system.[20] However, this proposal only seeks to change how a final semester grade percentage is calculated, not what grade it converts to. Local district officials should coordinate communication about the pilot program to families and students in their districts.

Following the conclusion of the one-year pilot, each school district should submit a one-time report to the Maryland State Board of Education (MSBE), detailing how its students transitioned and any concerns it has about a permanent implementation of Straight Average semester grading for secondary-school students. Besides MSBE, the intended recipients of the report will be the Governor, and Maryland's Senate President and House Speaker, as is standard practice in Maryland legislative affairs.[21]

Finally, MSBE should use this pilot data to create a new comprehensive policy for the 2028-2029 school year mandating that all Maryland public secondary schools utilize Straight Average semester grading, pursuant to their right to create educational regulations outside of the traditional legislative process.[22] This policy should reflect feedback from the pilot program and should include provisions to help ease transitional pains for students. These provisions should stem from specific feedback but could include increased funding for student mental health support, expanding peer-based tutoring and exam preparation opportunities, or setting stricter standards surrounding course syllabi and curricula, so students have a clear understanding of what's expected of them.

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) would oversee the enforcement of this proposal. It would be responsible for ensuring that districts implement the pilot program, submit their reports, and send them directly to members of the MSBE. They would have the discretion to penalize districts and individual schools that are non-compliant as they see fit. MSDE should also coordinate with individual districts to set up teacher training on implementation and provide students with the necessary support while establishing clear standards.

In short, all Maryland public school districts should first implement a pilot program of Straight Average grading and report feedback to MSBE. With this feedback, MSBE should create a comprehensive policy that sets Straight Average grading as the standard for all districts for the 2028-2029 year, while incorporating suggested support structures to ease the transition experience for students. Finally, MSDE would be responsible for enforcing this proposal, from the initial pilot program to the final comprehensive policy. They should ensure districts comply, impose penalties when necessary, and coordinate teacher training sessions on implementing the final policy.

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Reallocating Missouri Tax Vouchers for Public School Equity

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Almost half of the high schools in St. Louis are private schools due to the lasting effects of redlining. Recently, the state tax-credit voucher system underwent a structural change that worsens the divide between private and public schools, underscoring the need to modify it further to incentivize public school enrollment.

Background

St. Louis, Missouri, consistently ranks among the top 20 most segregated cities in the US.[1] The city's segregation is rooted in the lingering effects of Jim Crow-era redlining and the city's resistance to desegregation after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling.[2] In response to the mandate to desegregate schools, white families participated in "white flight"—a large-scale migration from racially diverse neighborhoods to suburban areas.[3] Nearly eight decades after white flight began in St. Louis, inequities not only persist but continue to worsen. Over the past 30 years, local reports still show notable segregation, with around 78% of students being enrolled in racially concentrated school districts.[4]

Beyond the racial divide within public schools, the effects of white flight are most evident in the relationship between private and public schools. After affluent white families left the city, Catholic and private school enrollment increased as families sought to avoid racial integration. Consequently, St. Louis had one of the highest private-school enrollment rates per capita in the country during the late twentieth century.[4] Of the 109 high schools in St. Louis, 46% are private.[5] A district's funding allocation depends on attendance, meaning the decline in public school enrollment leads to a reduction in funding that widens opportunity gaps between affluent and under-resourced schools.[6] In 2025, the state tax-credit voucher system, MOScholars, underwent a structural change to become a general revenue-funded voucher system.[7] The legislation changed the voucher system to pull funding from the state's general tax revenue rather than private entity donations.[7] In a city with already high private school enrollment, this legislation drains public school funding and redirects resources that would support public education into affluent families.

Policy Idea

To uphold the importance of private schools in St. Louis without worsening educational inequalities, Missouri Governor Mike Kehoe, with the support of Missouri's legislature, should implement a reallocation voucher system. The vouchers would redirect up to 50% of state scholarship funds to under-resourced public schools rather than directly to families. If families choose to reallocate voucher funds, they would receive a tax credit in return for their donation to public schools. By using formulas that evaluate student poverty rates and household income, a data-driven approach would create a dynamic and transparent reallocation system. Superintendents and oversight bodies, such as the Missouri State Department, will constantly reevaluate the formulas based on success rate and financial feasibility.

Policy Analysis

Policymakers developed vouchers based on the belief that funding should follow the child rather than the school. By upholding this principle while advancing educational equality, this policy creates a mutually beneficial system. Parents of private school children benefit through autonomy of school choice and by receiving a donation tax credit, while underfunded public schools receive additional funding. Given that the average cost of instruction materials, service, and capital costs is roughly $18,000 per pupil, the fiscal impact of students transferring to public schools is substantial.[8] Additional funding could improve curriculum, teacher quality, and overall facilities in underfunded schools, thereby helping mitigate the lingering effects of redlining.[9] Researchers report that every additional dollar spent on schools has approximately a two-dollar return on investment.[9] The students who benefit the most from supplemental school funding are low-income students who experience an increase in graduation rates and earned wages.[9]

Redlining's effect on education often gets overlooked, but studies between districts located in historically redlined neighborhoods receive less per-pupil funding and face below-average test scores.[10] These studies even go on to highlight the need for modern intervention and creating policy that can address the implications of redlining while simultaneously improving the outcomes of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.[10] The proposed policy revises the current system in St. Louis that perpetuates redlining inequities and allocates money to underfunded districts while upholding the city's desire to have a large private school presence. Therefore, a voucher reallocation system can work within the city's current practices rather than require an overhaul to correct historical wrongdoings.

Highlights

- After the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling to desegregate schools, many white families relocated to suburban areas to resist racial integration.[2] As a result, almost half of the high schools in St. Louis are private, underscoring the lasting impact of educational inequities caused by the Jim Crow era.[5]
- In 2025, the state tax-credit voucher system changed to begin pulling funding from the state's general tax revenue, thereby reducing public school funding and exacerbating inequities between public and private schools.[6]
- To preserve the city's preference for private schools while preserving funding for public schools, a policy that reallocates voucher funds into public schools and offers a tax credit to families should be offered.
- A reallocation system allows historically redlined districts to receive additional funding, which studies have demonstrated improves outcomes of low-income students.[10]

Implementation

This policy aims to address the root cause of educational inequality, rather than band-aid solutions such as one-time grants or crowdfunding, by allocating resources to low-income schools located in historically redlined areas. The proposed reallocation voucher system would refine the MOScholars program to maintain parental choice and tax benefits through a three-part phased rollout. The rollout would improve the current application portal by introducing school-tiering criteria and adding data-driven adjustments to facilitate the proposed system's implementation while minimizing disruptions.

In phase one, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should create a school tiering system based on current per-pupil funding, neighborhood socioeconomic status (SES) factors, and student-need indexing to determine how much funding each school should receive. The tiering system will sort schools into either Tier A, Tier B, or Tier C based on equity metrics, such as the percentage of low-income students, with Tier A receiving the most reallocation. Additionally, it will evaluate academic growth using standardized metrics, such as test scores. Each school will be re-sorted based on demonstrated growth to prevent schools from continuously receiving funding if clear needs are not proven after funding increases. Families currently using online portals to receive vouchers will face minor changes to their current system, such as verification prompts and linked tax credits, to incentivize participation and avoid the creation of a new platform. An initial formula of up to 50% reallocation to under-resourced schools establishes a meaningful equity level while maintaining a cap that accounts for program risk between individual-level aid and system-level investment. Eight to 12 selected districts with varying socioeconomic profiles will pilot the program and use data-driven formula readjustment to refine the tiering system. The refining will establish constant inflation adjustments and add yearly renewal systems for families, allowing for administrative ease and increasing efficiency by automatically enrolling families receiving vouchers for several years unless a student graduates or transfers to a public school.

The second phase includes satisfaction feedback and test score improvement prior to statewide expansion. After successful testing, the Missouri House of Representatives' Elementary and Secondary Education Committee will push for statewide implementation of the reallocation voucher system under the stipulation of close monitoring by school districts.

The third phase, which will take place one to two years after pilot implementation, will optimize the program and ensure its long-term success by publishing annual equity and cost reports to increase transparency.

This policy is structured to incrementally expand to allow proper evaluation by lawmakers prior to statewide adoption. The foreseen pushback in the legislative process will likely come from two sides: school-choice advocates and fiscal conservatives. To address objections regarding the reduction in family-based aid, the policy allows families who participate in the reallocation to be eligible for a tax deduction up to $5,000. Through a statutory cap and use of existing funds, the pilot program's design mitigates long-term budget creep. By combining evidence-based scaling with gradual implementation, the program balances the interests of families, lawmakers, and taxpayers while prioritizing equity and budget neutrality for long-term success.

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Bridging the Distance: Addressing Rural Student Transportation Inequities Through Partnership Grants

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Transportation inequities in rural districts hinder educational access and student success. Through a new Rural Student Transportation Partnership Grant, the US Department of Education can improve efficiency, reduce absenteeism, and ensure reliable transportation for all students, regardless of geography.

Background

Transportation barriers have become a leading driver of chronic absenteeism and inequitable learning opportunities. Reliable transportation is a fundamental requirement for educational access, yet students in rural districts consistently face longer commutes, fewer transit options, and higher transportation costs than their urban peers.[1] According to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than nine million students, nearly one in five nationwide, attend schools in rural communities, many of which lack reliable or affordable transportation options.[2]

Recent analyses of national travel data show that the average rural student travels more than six miles to school each day, compared to an average of three to five miles for students in suburban and urban settings.[3] Longer travel distances and limited routes mean that many rural students spend considerably more time commuting, which can restrict participation in after-school programs, limit access to advanced coursework, and widen academic achievement gaps.[3]

Simultaneously, rural school districts operate under tighter budgets and face severe workforce shortages, particularly among bus drivers. From September 2019 to September 2021, the number of school bus drivers declined by 14%, and 65% of respondents in a 2023 survey described ongoing shortages.[4] Rising fuel costs and declining enrollment compound these challenges, forcing some rural districts to consolidate or eliminate bus routes entirely.[5] These cuts leave students in remote areas with fewer reliable options for getting to school.[5]

To address these challenges, several states have adopted collaborative models, including Montana, Ohio, and Kentucky. Montana's Inter-District Transportation Agreement (IDTA) allows neighboring districts to share bus routes, drivers, and funding mechanisms to expand busing coverage efficiently.[6] Implementing this cooperative model nationally could reduce transportation inequities among rural and urban students by guaranteeing that every student, regardless of geography, has a dependable way to reach school.

Policy Idea

Beyond Montana's Inter-District Transportation Agreement (IDTA) system, few policymakers have prioritized improving transportation access for rural students, leaving this critical issue largely overlooked in national education policy. To address inequities in transportation, the US Department of Education (ED) should establish a Rural Student Transportation Partnership Grant (RSTPG) modeled after Montana's IDTA framework. This federal-backed program would fund state and regional collaborations that allow neighboring districts to share bus routes, drivers, and funding while coordinating with local transit agencies to expand coverage efficiently.

States would apply for competitive discretionary grants by submitting transportation plans that demonstrate cost savings, reduced commute times, and improved attendance outcomes. By incentivizing cross-district cooperation and integrating existing federal transit resources, the RSTPG would create a sustainable, scalable model that ensures all students have access to consistent, safe, and affordable transportation to and from school.

Policy Analysis

Several studies demonstrate that expanding shared-service models similar to Montana's IDTA model through the RSTPG would provide both economic and educational benefits. New York's

Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) program, for example, enables districts to manage transportation and administrative functions jointly, offering cost-effective service delivery for specialized programs.[7] In Texas, Dallas County Schools saves taxpayers up to 52% annually by coordinating transportation among 13 districts.[7] Similarly, Michigan's Genesee Intermediate School District generates $1.5 million in annual savings through its regional consortium.[7] These successful precedents highlight that Montana's IDTA framework could be effectively scaled through federal support under the RSTPG, particularly in rural and geographically dispersed regions.

When considering costs, rural districts spend significantly more per pupil on transportation—often twice as much as urban districts—due to longer routes and lower ridership.[8] Montana's IDTA model reduces expenses through shared routes and state mileage-based reimbursements.[9] Implementing the RSTPG would not only reduce financial strain on rural districts but also create a sustainable infrastructure for student success.

Research indicates that reliable transportation directly impacts student success. According to a Department of Transportation (DOT) and ED fact sheet, chronic absenteeism, defined as a student missing 10% or more of school days. rose from 17% in 2018-19 to 31% in 2021-22.[10] These statistics show that inadequate transportation is a significant barrier to regular attendance.[11] A 2023 *Education Finance & Policy* study found that Michigan students identified as "most at risk for chronic absenteeism" who were provided with school-funded transportation demonstrated measurable improvements in attendance rates.[12] Moreover, another study links bus rides over one hour to absenteeism rates of around 12% among third to sixth graders in a major urban district, illustrating how extended commute times can hinder attendance and thus academic performance.[13]

Highlights

- Rural students face disproportionate barriers to education due to long commutes, limited transit options, and severe bus driver shortages.[1]
- Rising operational costs and workforce shortages have forced some rural districts to consolidate or eliminate bus routes, exacerbating attendance and achievement disparities among geographically isolated students.
- Montana's Inter-District Transportation Agreement demonstrates how cooperative systems, where neighboring districts share routes, drivers, and costs, can reduce inefficiencies and sustain reliable transportation access for students. Similar shared-service frameworks in New York, Texas, and Michigan demonstrate that shared-service systems have improved efficiency and lowered operational strain without sacrificing coverage.[7]
- The Rural Student Transportation Partnership Grant would scale Montana's model nationally through federal discretionary funding, empowering states to collaborate across districts and coordinate with local transit agencies. This policy would reduce absenteeism and ensure that every student, regardless of geography, has consistent, safe, and affordable transportation to and from school.

Implementation

To address transportation inequities in rural districts, this proposal directs the ED to administer the RSTPG, and support shared-route initiatives modeled after Montana's IDTA. The program would operate as a competitive discretionary grant providing twenty to thirty awards each year, with individual amounts between five million and ten million dollars based on state need and projected savings. Funding would come from existing K through twelve discretionary funds that the ED may reallocate under current federal rules.[14] Although Project 2025 proposes limits on ED authority, the RSTPG remains feasible under existing law. Executive Order 14332, "Improving Oversight of Federal Grantmaking," introduces stricter review of discretionary funding, yet the program's transparency and performance requirements align with these expectations.[15] The implementation plan includes public reporting and data-driven evaluation, requiring states to share metrics such as commute times, cost per pupil, attendance changes, and route efficiency. These indicators would allow the ED and the Office of Management and Budget to monitor progress and determine eligibility for renewal.[15] Annual progress audits and public transparency tools would align the program with the executive order's emphasis on accountability and fiscal oversight.

If the ED undergoes administrative restructuring, oversight and data collection for the RSTPG could shift to state education agencies or regional offices, maintaining continuity under revised federal authority. This transition is feasible because ED programs have already been reassigned to other entities, including the Department of Labor, which now oversees TRIO, GEAR UP, and career and technical education through interagency agreements.[16] These changes show that ED program functions and funding streams can be transferred without undermining program intent or access. ED would still retain authority to distribute competitive discretionary grants, while the OMB's expanded oversight role emphasizes transparency, fiscal accountability, and performance-based evaluation.[15,16] These features ensure the program can withstand political changes while continuing to deliver reliable transportation access for rural students.

To obtain the RSTPG, each participating state would submit a competitive grant application to the ED, outlining current transportation barriers, proposed inter-district collaborations, and projected outcomes. Applications must include a comprehensive needs assessment and baseline data on student commute times and attendance, as well as a budget specifying how funds will be used to support shared routes, technology integration, and regional coordination. As part of the transparency-driven requirements emphasized in Executive Order 14332, each state would also be required to set measurable performance targets for cost savings, route efficiency, and attendance improvements that can be verified through collected data and publicly accessible reports.[15] Implementation would follow a phased schedule in which states apply during the first year, launch pilot routes in the second year, and transition to full program operation in subsequent years.

Despite an evolving federal landscape, the RSTPG offers a resilient, results-oriented model that complements the current administration's focus on efficiency and accountability. By embedding data-driven metrics, public transparency, and state-level flexibility into every stage of implementation, the program can withstand administrative restructuring and guarantee reliable, equitable transportation for rural students nationwide.

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Education Over Litigation: Fixing the Broken IDEA Due Process System

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To ensure fair and timely access to special education services, Congress should amend the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to replace adversarial hearings with a tiered system of mandatory mediation, independent state ombudsmen, and expedited hearings under strict federal timelines.

Background

Since Congress enacted the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, parents of students with disabilities have relied on due process hearings to enforce their child's right to a "Free Appropriate Public Education."[1,2] Over time, however, this system has become slow, costly, and inequitable.[3] IDEA hearings often evolve into drawn-out, adversarial legal battles between parents and school districts, contributing to growing case backlogs.[4] For example, New York City saw a 34% increase in cases between 2021 and 2022.[3]

As the number of due process hearings continues to rise nationwide, families and school districts spend over $90 million each year on special education dispute resolution, diverting resources from classrooms and exacerbating inequities for those unable to afford legal representation.[4] According to the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE), mediation requests have declined while the number of due process complaints has increased, suggesting a troubling shift away from collaboration and toward litigation.[5] This trend disproportionately affects low-income and minority families, especially in rural communities, who are notably underrepresented in these hearings.[6]

The IDEA mandates that school systems make mediation available, but participation is voluntary, and many disputes escalate unnecessarily.[7] Lawyers warn that this system favors well-resourced districts, as affluent parents who are dissatisfied with their child's education are more likely to pursue legal action.[8] While some states have improved their mediation efforts, access to dispute resolution remains uneven, resulting in persistent structural disparities.[9] Without reform, many families will continue to face a "justice gap," where rights exist in theory but not in practice.

Policy Idea

To address inequities and inefficiencies in special education dispute resolution, Congress should amend the IDEA to establish a three-tiered system that streamlines and expedites conflict resolution. [1] The policy should require mandatory mediation, encouraging early engagement with trained, neutral mediators certified by state education agencies or appointed through dispute-resolution networks. [2] Each state should establish an independent special education ombudsman office to guide parents and resolve disputes informally before escalation, with the US Department of Education (ED) overseeing implementation and compliance. [3] When due process hearings are necessary, the IDEA should impose expedited timelines—90 days for standard disputes, and 45 days for disciplinary cases. To meet these deadlines, states would receive federal grants to expand staff, modernize case management systems, and support professional development for mediators and ombudsmen. Together, these reforms would mitigate inequities in IDEA enforcement, making dispute resolution accessible and timely for families, regardless of income or location.

Policy Analysis

IDEA due process filings continue to impose heavy financial and equity burdens on schools and families. Data shows that due process complaints rose by 16.4% nationally between the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 school years.[10] Nationally, fully adjudicated hearings now take an average of over 200 days to resolve, and litigation continues to divert critical educational resources.[3] For instance, the District of Columbia paid $3.1 million in attorney fees for special education disputes alone in fiscal year 2023, highlighting the need to amend the IDEA.[11]

Empirical evidence supports collaborative alternatives to litigation. Four leading dispute-resolution providers analyzed 449 mediation cases and successfully settled 78% of them, regardless of whether participation was voluntary or court-ordered.[12] The study also showed that mediation costs far less, concludes faster, and leaves participants more satisfied than litigation, reinforcing its viability as a mandated first step in resolving IDEA disputes.[12]

Independent ombudsman offices and federally expedited timelines are equally important. A 2022 Government Accountability Office report found wide disparities across states in how special education complaints are handled, noting that inconsistent oversight disproportionately disadvantages low-income families.[9] Establishing ombudsmen—neutral officials who promote fair processes and provide confidential guidance to parents, educators, and students with disabilities—would mitigate these disparities by offering families early intervention, an approach proven to improve fairness and compliance in public service systems.[13,14,15] Expedited hearing tracks governed by strict timelines also produce faster resolutions and fewer appeals. A 90-day limit for standard disputes aligns with strong practices in administrative law, while a 45-day deadline for disciplinary cases mirrors the expedited track already permitted under federal IDEA regulations.[16,17,18] Overall, a tiered IDEA reform would preserve parents' due process rights while ensuring equitable, timely, and cost-effective access to special education services for every student.

Highlights

- Due process hearings under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have become lengthy, expensive, and inequitable. Fully adjudicated cases take over 200 days to resolve on average, and families and school districts spend more than $90 million annually on disputes rather than student services.[3,4]
- Congress should amend the IDEA to require mediation as the first step in special education disputes, a process supported by research demonstrating a 78% resolution rate across multiple providers.[12]
- Congress should amend the IDEA to require each state to establish an independent special-education ombudsman office, with the ED overseeing implementation and supporting neutral guidance for families, particularly those in low-income and rural communities.[9,14]
- Once Congress amends the IDEA to impose expedited federal timelines, states would administer streamlined hearings to ensure that students receive services quickly without sacrificing parents' due process rights.[16,17,18]

Implementation

Congress should pass legislation amending the IDEA to require a mandatory mediation-first process, establish independent state special education ombudsman offices, and enforce expedited hearing timelines. Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) should sponsor this bill, given his bipartisan leadership on disability policy. As both a state legislator and US Senator, he has worked across party lines to advance major reforms, including the Achieving a Better Life Experience Act, which supports families raising children with disabilities.[19] More recently, Senator Van Hollen partnered with Representatives Jared Huffman (D-CA) and Glenn Thompson (R-PA) to reintroduce legislation that would mandate Congress to fully fund the IDEA.[20,21] His roles on the Senate Appropriations and Budget Committees further equip him to secure federal resources for states to implement mediation programs, ombudsman offices, and meet timelines.[19] With the IDEA Full Funding Act demonstrating bipartisan appeal earlier this year, legislation improving dispute resolution is similarly achievable.[22]

To garner support, national disability advocacy organizations, such as the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates and the National Disability Rights Network, could testify before Congress about how the current system harms low-income and rural families.[23,24] Research centers such as CADRE could present data demonstrating mediation's cost-effectiveness and positive satisfaction outcomes.[25] With its expertise in system oversight and ombudsman design, CADRE could also advocate for requiring these offices in every state.[26]

Once Congress passes the policy, the ED's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) would issue regulations clarifying state responsibilities, distribute federal grants to support administrative capacity, and monitor compliance with timelines.[27] If administrative restructuring or resource constraints limit OSEP's capacity, oversight could shift to state education agencies or regional offices to maintain program continuity. Transparent reporting requirements and federally standardized metrics would also protect accountability regardless of changes in federal leadership. States would then launch each step of the proposed three-tier system and hire or train personnel to meet new deadlines, using a combination of existing IDEA Part B allocations and redirected state special education dollars.[28]

During the first year of implementation, the ED and states' departments of education should establish baseline metrics and begin monitoring the effectiveness of renewed dispute resolution. By years two and three, states should conduct ongoing evaluations using both qualitative and quantitative evidence. Interviews and surveys with parents, school special education directors, mediators, and ombudsmen will demonstrate how well families understand their rights and how the new processes function in practice. Direct feedback from low-income and rural families will further reveal whether inequities persist and where additional support is needed. Quantitative data such as mediation participation rates, resolution times, legal costs, and the number of cases reaching due process hearings will indicate whether disputes are being resolved more efficiently and equitably. Tracking disparities across income, disability category, and geography will ensure benefits reach historically underserved groups. Continuous review will guide adjustments and keep reforms responsive to student and family needs. Ultimately, a more accessible and timely dispute-resolution system will strengthen educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

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Addressing Immigrant Inequity: Implementing Tuition-Free English Language Programs in Community Colleges

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To increase mobility for immigrants, the federal government should provide funding and enforcement for the implementation of tuition-free English Learning Support (ELS) programs, increasing access to employment opportunities for non-English speaking immigrants.

Background

Approximately one-third of immigrants in the US with limited English proficiency (LEP) have struggled to obtain or keep a job due as a result of language barriers.[1] Even if they do obtain a job, immigrants with LEP often work lower-income jobs without benefits.[2] It is estimated that 70% of the immigrants working in these positions are overqualified for the work that they are doing.[3] These positions tend to have poor working conditions, which cause a significant negative mental health effect on immigrants.[4] Despite an increase in physical injury for immigrants in these positions, these jobs are less likely to provide employer-provided health insurance, leaving 31% of the immigrant population with difficulties accessing healthcare services.[5] This lack of access notably hinders economic mobility for immigrants, decreasing productivity in the US by a striking estimation of 12%.[6]

This evidence has prompted legal action, such as the 1974 Supreme Court case *Lau v. Nicholas*, which ruled in favor of comprehensive bilingual programs in schools under the Civil Rights Act.[7] The Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 strengthened the precedent set by this case, which legally mandates support for English learners.[8] As of 2025, 15 states have introduced legislation regarding English Language Support (ELS) programs, with five states having enacted such legislation.[9] Despite this progress, inequality in employment and healthcare access for immigrants with LEP persists, affecting 26 million immigrants annually.[10] Current programs aimed at improving immigrant access to English learning programs are small-scale and largely ineffective. For example, the Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS) has been largely criticized for failing to teach students the language skills the program initially intended to improve.[11] We must work to increase the mobility for immigrants in our country by breaking down language barriers.

Policy Idea

The federal government should increase funding for free ELS programs to improve immigrants' English fluency, thereby expanding access to employment opportunities and healthcare services. The Department of Education (ED) should be responsible for establishing and properly allocating a federal grant program that would fully cover the tuition of attending ELS classes at community colleges in areas with heightened immigrant populations for eligible students.[5] Eligibility requirements would include LEP assessed through the comprehensive diagnostic Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and proof of low-income financial status, defined by low-income thresholds. Under this policy, the ED would work individually with each state to make personalized plans to manage the flow of funding to individual schools on a needs-tested basis.

Policy Analysis

The success of similar ELS programs in other countries demonstrates how this policy can be feasible. Germany successfully launched multiple ELS programs through a multitude of funding sources, including federal public funds, taxpayer dollars, and private sponsors.[12] Research suggests ELS programs in Germany increased the probability of employment by 9%.[13] Denmark launched a similarly successful program through federally funded per-student grants.[14] A Denmark study showed ELS programs increased employment opportunities by

24%.[15] ELS programs worldwide have shown drastic success in increasing employment opportunities.

Research points to the effectiveness of utilizing community colleges to host ELS programs. Many community colleges have pre-existing ELS programs that integrate both academic and professional development.[16] The physical environment of community colleges offers access to educational libraries and technology. The pre-embedded resources and structures within community colleges make implementing this policy more feasible and effective.[17]

Studies have found that ELS programs have profoundly positive economic effects. Research suggests that ELS programs can increase wages by as much as 80%.[18] Another study found that the return of these programs could actually generate a positive tax return of 6%.[16] Through an economic scope, this policy is politically feasible due to its high returns. These high positive returns would significantly uplift immigrant communities with higher wages, while simultaneously stimulating the economy.

Highlights

- Approximately one-third of immigrants in the US struggle to find or keep a job due to limited English proficiency (LEP), which greatly hinders their economic mobility.[1]
- The jobs individuals with LEP can obtain often have poor working conditions, which adversely impact their physical and mental health.[4]
- The Department of Education (ED) should increase funding for free ELS programs at community colleges to improve immigrants' English fluency, thereby expanding their access to employment opportunities and healthcare.
- Free ELS programs may increase employment opportunities by as much as 24% while simultaneously increasing immigrants' wages by 80% and generating a positive economic tax return of 6%.[15,16,18]

Implementation

The ED should oversee the implementation of increased funding for ELS programs. Before fully implementing the policy, the ED should conduct a pilot program for 2 years in California, a state with an immigrant population of 11.3 million individuals, while the actual course is completed by students in the first year, and the results are then evaluated in the second year.[19] In the first year, students across the state will engage in comprehensive ELS programs at community colleges. In the second year, researchers from the ED should track these programs' progress. This tracking would include factors such as changes in salary, working conditions, and benefits received, with a specific focus on changes in healthcare accessibility and jobs received.

After the pilot program is completed, the policy will be adjusted based on the results to be more effective. This policy will be introduced as a standalone federal bill. Sponsors for this bill would include democratic members of Congress who vocalize support for immigrants and education. Immigrant-serving organizations and collegiate institutions, such as the National Immigration Forum, the American Association of Community Colleges, and workforce development boards, will help in the passage of this policy. Contractors include groups that oppose immigrant populations, such as individuals in the Federation for American Immigration Reform who disregard the economic effects of immigrants. In order to appeal to these groups, the policy must be presented from a purely economic standpoint rather than focusing on its human effects. Given the well-documented evidence of large-scale economic growth and increased immigrant economic mobility, there is an increased likelihood that this policy will be passed.[16,18] In the House of Representatives, this bill would likely pass through the Committee on Education. In the Senate, the bill will likely go through the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee. Once the policy is successfully passed into legislation, the implementation stage will begin.

First, the ED should focus on obtaining funding from the previously mentioned expanders while redirecting funds from the US Department of the Treasury. The Learning Policy Institute estimates that a national free ELS program would cost around $2 billion.[2] The ED would also identify key states with a need for ELS programs through in-depth demographic analysis of populations with heightened poverty levels, LEP, and a large pool of immigrants across the US. Urban areas with heightened immigrant populations will receive the majority of the funding, while the rest of the funding will be dispersed to smaller cities and suburban areas with substantial immigrant populations.

With proper funding, states would coordinate with community colleges to allocate subsidies to create free ELS programs. Research points to the effectiveness of utilizing community colleges to host ELS programs.[17] Many community colleges have pre-existing ELS programs, such as LaGuardia Community College, that integrate both academic and professional development.[19] The pre-embedded resources and structures within community colleges make implementing this policy more feasible and effective.[16,17] Once ELS programs are properly implemented into community colleges, the ED must continue evaluating the success of these programs over the first ten years. ELS programs will significantly boost economic production and mobility in the US.

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Public Interest Litigation for Privacy: Empowering NPOs for Consumer Protection

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The US has several enforcement gaps in consumer privacy protection. Congress should establish Privacy Public Interest Litigation (PPIL) to strengthen US privacy law enforcement by granting qualified nonprofit organizations (NPOs) standing to file public interest lawsuits.

Background

The United States is facing a privacy crisis characterized by fragmented regulations and limited pathways for accountability. [1,2,3] As of 2025, only 20 states have enacted comprehensive privacy laws, and attempts to pass federal privacy legislation have repeatedly failed, leaving a significant gap in national data protection standards.[1] This patchwork of regulations creates compliance challenges for national businesses while providing inconsistent protection for consumers.[1]

In the first half of 2025 alone, data compromises affected an estimated 166 million individuals.[2] These incidents continue to grow, with the number of reported breaches in the first half of 2025 being 55% of the total reported in the full year of 2024.[2,4] The average cost of a data breach in the United States reached $4.4 million in 2025, the highest of any region worldwide.[3] These breaches disproportionately harm vulnerable populations, including racial and ethnic minorities, low-income individuals, elderly persons, and people with disabilities, enabling discrimination in employment, housing, healthcare, and advertising.[3]

Current enforcement mechanisms are insufficient. Most state privacy laws grant enforcement authority to state attorneys general, who face resource constraints and competing priorities.[5] Federal agencies, like the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), pursue enforcement actions, but their limited staff cannot adequately police or enforce the vast modern digital landscape.[6] Moreover, few state privacy laws include a private right of action, which limits individuals' ability to seek claims for privacy violations. [5,7]

Meanwhile, established privacy advocacy organizations possess significant expertise but lack the legal standing to bring enforcement actions. Under current US law, organizations such as the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), and the American Civil Liberties Union cannot directly litigate privacy violations on behalf of the public interest.[8] This structural limitation constrains specialized privacy expertise that could complement government enforcement and strengthen consumer protection.

Policy Idea

Congress should establish a Privacy Public Interest Litigation (PPIL) framework modeled on China's Environmental Public Interest Litigation (EPIL) system. This policy would grant legal standing to qualified nonprofit organizations to file civil lawsuits against entities that violate privacy laws and harm public interest.[9] Qualified organizations must satisfy two requirements: they must register with the FTC or with the attorney general at the state level, and they must engage in privacy protection activities for at least three consecutive years. The framework would not replace existing enforcement mechanisms but would complement government actions and fill gaps in enforcement capacity.

Courts would maintain discretion to award reasonable attorney fees and costs to prevailing organizations, ensuring the sustainability of enforcement efforts. Before filing, organizations must notify the FTC or state attorney general, allowing governments to intervene or assume control of actions when appropriate.

Policy Analysis

China's experience with EPIL provides compelling evidence for this policy. Since 2015, EPIL has empowered non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to sue polluters, established clear criteria and court procedures, and demonstrated that jurisdictions can successfully structure and implement public interest litigation, even in a civil law system.[9,10] Under China's EPIL system, NGOs can file EPIL cases outside of their region against polluters anywhere in the country.[9,10] Of the 110 NGO-initiated EPIL cases that reached final resolution between 2015 and 2020, NGOs achieved successful or partly successful outcomes in 49 cases, reached settlements in 10 cases, and lost only three cases outright, yielding a 95.2% success rate when excluding court rejections and withdrawals.[11] This high success rate demonstrates the viability of organizational standing and the effectiveness of public interest litigation in addressing systemic violations.

Existing privacy advocacy organizations possess the necessary expertise to serve as qualified plaintiffs. Organizations like EPIC and EFF have successfully pursued consumer privacy complaints with the FTC and filed more than 100 amicus briefs in federal courts on emerging privacy issues, with courts citing EFF arguments in landmark decisions.[8,12] These organizations could effectively utilize litigation authority to advance the public interest.

Highlights

- The US's current privacy enforcement capacity is insufficient to address widespread violations affecting millions of Americans, with 166 million individuals impacted by data compromises in the first half of 2025 alone.[2]
- A Privacy Public Interest Litigation (PPIL) framework would grant standing to qualified nonprofit organizations with three consecutive years of privacy-focused experience to file civil lawsuits for violations that harm the public interest.
- China's Environmental Public Interest Litigation (EPIL) model the viability of organizational standing in privacy enforcement, with qualified NGOs achieving a 95.2% success rate in resolved cases between 2015 and 2020, showing that public interest litigation systems can broaden enforcement channels and strengthen oversight over issues that harm the overall public.[9,10,11]
- PPIL complements existing government enforcement by utilizing specialized nonprofit expertise while maintaining coordination with federal and state agencies through notification and intervention mechanisms.

Implementation

The Privacy Public Interest Protection Act should be implemented through federal legislation and introduced through the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Technology, and Data Privacy, or the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, both of which have jurisdiction over privacy legislation.[13,14] However, bipartisan passage faces significant obstacles, as recent federal privacy legislation attempts, like the American Privacy Rights Act (2024), have stalled despite initial bipartisan momentum due to disagreements over preemption or enforcement.[15] The Chinese EPIL model, while operationally successful, may further complicate political feasibility given current US-China tensions and conservative skepticism toward expanding litigation pathways.

Implementation support should come from existing privacy advocacy organizations, consumer protection groups, and civil rights organizations. A coalition of 34 organizations has called for meaningful nationwide privacy protections.[3] These organizations should lobby state attorney general associations to support the policy as a complement to their enforcement efforts.

Organizationally, the FTC must establish and administer a registration and qualification system. Organizations seeking qualification would have to submit applications demonstrating three consecutive years of privacy protection activities, tax-exempt status under section 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(4) of the Internal Revenue Code, and absence of legal violations.[16] Based on similar registration programs, the system would require approximately 2-3 full-time employees for application review plus basic IT infrastructure for the public database (an estimated annual cost of $500,000, or roughly 0.12% of the FTC's current budget).[17,18] The FTC can absorb these administrative costs within its existing $425.7 million annual budget, as this represents minimal additional resources compared to the agency's current operations.[19]

Potential hurdles include opposition from industry groups concerned about litigation costs and conservative lawmakers skeptical of expanded litigation. Proponents should emphasize that the policy targets systematic violations by bad actors rather than technical compliance issues, protects businesses that respect consumer privacy, and addresses enforcement gaps that harm both the consumer and responsible companies competing against violators. The policy's similarity to environmental citizen suit provisions in federal laws, such as the Clean Water Act, provides precedent for organizational standing.[20]

Critics may also argue that expanding litigation could burden businesses or lead to frivolous lawsuits. However, the three-year qualification requirement, registration requirements, and required coordination with government agencies provide safeguards against abuse. Additionally, the policy focuses on systemic violations and public interest harms rather than individual violations, ensuring that enforcement efforts would target meaningful misconduct that government agencies lack the resources to address.

Implementation should therefore proceed in phases over 18 months; the first six months should focus on FTC rulemaking for qualification procedures and application processing. Months seven through 12 involve processing the initial applications and establishing the qualified organization registry. Months 13 through 18 allow the organizations to begin notifying agencies and filing initial cases, with the FTC monitoring early implementation and adjusting procedures as needed. This phased approach ensures careful oversight during early implementation while empowering qualified organizations to begin addressing the privacy enforcement gap.

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Between Empathy and Algorithms: Shaping AI's Role in Mental Health

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Generation Z is often labeled the loneliest generation worldwide, raising questions about how artificial intelligence contributes to this issue. Governing how AI operates in the future, particularly in relation to mental health and human connection, is crucial to humanity's well-being.

Background

As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly involved in daily life, it is beginning to influence how individuals perceive and manage their own mental well-being. In August 2025, 16-year-old Adam Raine died by suicide after using ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence chatbot, to discuss his mental health. He bypassed the system's safeguards by disguising his prompts as "writing exercises," and the chatbot reportedly provided responses that validated his suicidal thoughts.[1] Had Adam received support from licensed human professionals, this tragedy might have been prevented.

Research in neurobiology and psychology demonstrates that human health and well-being depend on meaningful social interactions that provide emotional validation, encouragement, and positive reinforcement.[2] Evidence points to Generation ("Gen") Z being lonelier than past generations, with 73% of Gen Z individuals feeling alone "sometimes or always".[3] As this generation spends more time in digital environments, many are turning to AI chatbots as substitutes for genuine human connection. A study by Tebra found that 1 in 4 Americans are more likely to turn to an AI chatbot for emotional support rather than attending traditional therapy.[4] Countless social media posts also discuss using ChatGPT as a therapist, with 16.7 million TikTok posts in March 2025 alone.[5] These trends imply a reliance on AI and social media for emotional support, potentially at the expense of seeking guidance from trained human professionals.

In recent years, the need for such regulations has become more urgent. In 2025, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton opened an investigation into AI developers, including Meta and Character.AI, for allegedly misleading children by marketing AI chatbots as mental health tools.[6] These chatbots impersonated licensed professionals and provided emotional support without appropriate surveillance.[6] Because the FTC already defines impersonation and misleading representations as forms of "deceptive commercial practice", the behaviors under investigation fall directly within existing consumer protection concerns.[7] Action is needed now to prevent more cases of bending pre-established laws with AI.

Policy Idea

Congress should enact a Federal AI Mental Health Safety Certification Act to mitigate the psychological risks posed by AI interactions. This policy would require all publicly available AI models and chatbots to undergo independent mental health safety audits before deployment and at regular intervals after (e.g., annually or after major model updates). These audits would assess how AI systems respond to users and whether their outputs align with established psychological safety guidelines. A joint task force composed of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), and a technology-oriented regulation body, such as the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), would coordinate auditing standards, enforcement, and certification.

Policy Analysis

In the medical field, scientists are testing AI's ability to resolve ethical issues in medical scenarios. A study published in *BMC Medical Ethics* highlighted the importance of accountability and bias evaluation in AI-assisted decision-making within healthcare settings. The study conducted across multiple NHS facilities in the West Midlands, United Kingdom, revealed that while AI can improve efficiency and resource allocation, AI is not able to resolve ethical challenges well, particularly those involving accountability, transparency, and bias in medical scenarios.[8] Without considering these impacts, AI will only threaten patient safety and trust. These same standards should directly apply to psychologically related decision-making. Unregulated AI algorithms could misinterpret emotional cues or offer harmful advice.

Multiple peer-reviewed studies demonstrate that human-led interventions outperform AI-only systems in mental health treatment. In a pilot study comparing text-based CBT delivered by a human therapist versus an AI system (ChatGPT), the human therapist significantly outscored the AI on nearly all domains of the Cognitive Therapy Rating Scale.[9] A mixed-methods study in the National Library of Medicine comparing licensed therapists and large language-model-based chatbots found therapists engaged in more elaboration and self-disclosure. Conversely, chatbots used more generic suggestions and psychoeducation, concluding that current chatbots are unsuitable as standalone therapists.[10] These findings strongly support the case that AI tools used in mental-health situations should not replace human professionals, and that rigorous certification, auditing, and oversight are needed before such systems are deployed for larger populations.

Highlights

- Generation Z faces record levels of loneliness, with many turning to AI chatbots for emotional support instead of seeking help from human professionals.[1,2,3]
- Reliance on AI for mental health can worsen isolation, as AI may misinterpret emotional cues, reinforce harmful thoughts, and gradually replace meaningful human interaction.[4,5]
- A Federal AI Mental Health Safety Certification Act would require all public AI models and chatbots to have audits before deployment and at regular intervals to ensure psychological safety standards are met.
- Peer-reviewed studies show that AI systems consistently underperform human therapists in empathy, accountability, and psychology, and may provide generic or unsafe responses; therefore, independent safety audits are necessary to prevent harmful misinterpretations and unethical emotional guidance.[9,10]

Implementation

The implementation of the AI Mental Health Safety Certification Act would begin with the establishment of an AI Mental Health Oversight Task Force by Congress, with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) jointly operating it.[11,12] This task force would be responsible for standardizing testing protocols to evaluate AI models for psychological safety. These protocols would simulate emotionally sensitive conversations, such as loneliness, depression, or suicidal thoughts, and assess whether AI systems respond safely and direct users to appropriate human resources. Standards would be created within the first year after the creation of the task force. Once finalized, these standards would certify AI systems before their public release and require annual audits to remain in compliance.

The policy would mandate public transparency reports, allowing the public and policymakers to monitor how AI handles mental health scenarios that range from suicidal thoughts to hallucinations. The oversight task force would require an estimated $45-60 million in annual federal funding to operate, based on projected staffing (approximately 100-150 full-time employees), research, audit processes, and interagency coordination costs. Taxpayers will fund the creation and maintenance of the oversight task force, while AI companies will cover individual audit costs to ensure continued market participation without insolvency. If an AI or chatbot fails certification, it would face mandatory suspension by the AI Mental Health Oversight Task Force until deficiencies are corrected and verified through a follow-up audit within three months of the first offence. Repeated or willful noncompliance could result in civil penalties, removal from public access, or revocation of operating licenses.

This act's rollout would occur in three phases: the first year would focus on forming the task force and drafting initial standards; years two and three would pilot the program with major developers such as OpenAI, Meta, and Google that benefit from early accreditation and can set benchmarks for the wider industry; and by year four, certification would become mandatory for all publicly accessible AI systems. The House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce, or the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP), both of which introduce legislation regarding mental health and consumer protection, could introduce this policy.[13,14]

Lawmakers may argue that emotional safety is too subjective to regulate. To address this, policymakers could design the certification process with industry experts, like in years two and three of the rollout, to be more flexible in the range of subjective messages that can be rated. Public relations incentives, such as recognition or reviews, could address legal concerns of legislators. For example, tech companies that voluntarily participate in early certification trials would help demonstrate industry leadership and thus be given more awareness during national campaigns. Oversight costs and data privacy will also be considered carefully. For businesses that argue that regulatory costs are too high, yearly audits would be scaled for company size and revenue to be reasonably manageable. Audits will not access individual and personally private data from the companies themselves.

Lastly, ensuring these regulations remain effective over time and building public and institutional support requires partnerships with leading mental health organizations, including the American Psychological Association (APA), the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), and Mental Health America, which will vouch for these AI companies if they comply with standards. Academic institutions studying digital well-being, such as Stanford's Human-Centered AI Institute, could offer educational and theoretical backing to strengthen audits in addition to the task force's standards.[15] To create more public support, national awareness campaigns could demonstrate the limits of AI's ability to empathize and assist someone exhibiting mental health issues. By adopting these measures, policymakers can usher in a new era of AI that preserves the irreplaceable value of human connection, protects users, and ensures that no one faces their hardest moments guided by an algorithm.

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Tik-Tok: Time is Running Out for Online Adverse Advertisers Targeting Minors

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Regulatory bodies and legislative actors standardize how online providers can process, handle, and collect consumer data for targeted advertising. Users under 18 years old should have agency over the start and end of their exposure to deceptive online marketing tactics.

Background

Generations of people are growing up with a presence in both the digital and physical worlds. The emergence of this new reality presents many new opportunities and harm. Children are spending an increasingly large portion of their lives online, with a 2021 survey finding that eight- to twelve-year-olds accumulated about 5.5 hours of screen time daily, and teens spent approximately 8.5 hours daily.[1]

Teenagers can encounter an estimated 1,260 ads every day.[2,3] This amount is ten to twenty times more than the number of ads on children's networks in the early aughts, where ads were structured into a commercial break that clearly delineated commercials from content. Nowadays, ads are constructed to blend seamlessly into the user's content.[1] A study conducted by Harvard in 2022 displays the pervasiveness of the online advertising industry in how YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, Meta subsidiaries, Alphabet, Nvidia, and X to have amassed around $11 billion in advertising revenue from US users under the age of 18.[4] These ads are so effective that a quarter of all family and child purchases occur on the same day as learning about a product from an influencer.[5]

Notably, the U.S. federal government does not have an overarching data privacy law for its citizens, leaving a vastly unregulated means of collecting advertisement data and revenue.[1] However, legislation can incrementally increase user data protection by focusing on sectors of the population who are vulnerable to privacy infringement, such as children under 16 years old.

Policy Idea

Congress should pass a law mandating that online service providers offer an opt-in or opt-out system at the very start of a user's interaction with a platform, with explicit ad disclosures and increased consumer rights over their data spanning across a temporal and geographical domain.[1,6] This policy proposal will inhibit deceptive marketing practices targeted toward children and demand transparency from online service providers to allow minors—interchangeably denoted as users under the age of 16 years old—to differentiate between advertising and other forms of content and interactions with the digital platform.[6] Platforms providing a "parental controls" option can offer a different algorithm pathway and advertising mechanism to reduce deceptive ads targeted towards children.[1,7] At the end of a child's content experience, users should have the option to request that an online provider delete any previously collected data—whether stored domestically or overseas—and/or opt out of future data collection.[7,8]

Policy Analysis

Unregulated children's content advertising leads to financial harm, such as accidental or impulsive purchases without parental approval.[7] Apple has faced lawsuits from parents whose children had spent thousands of dollars on their platforms.[9] The adults argued that some in-app Apple purchases did not provide any safeguards against other users, such as their children, from charging their account.[9] At the time, these platforms did not require a password for a purchase or notify adult users that purchases could be made for up to 30 minutes without additional authorization.[9] These charges fell outside of the adult's knowledge and initial lawful, approved agreement. However, the case effectively forced Apple to grant $32.5 million to parents and introduce a safeguard requiring users to give "explicit authorization" for online purchases and eliminating the platform's deceptive practices, as encouraged by this policy proposal.[9]

The ability to retroactively withdraw users' data, including profiles or financial information, eliminates the likelihood of another family falling for deceptive interfaces that encourage fraudulent purchases. Mandating online service providers to have a parental controls system proactively prevents unauthorized purchases, since this content would be identified and removed by the algorithm, effectively stopping a child's interaction with deceptive ads before they happen.[7] This policy is effective in its ability to standardize data and privacy protections across the US and beyond due to its dual-pronged approach that ensures an immediate presence of data protection for young users from the beginning to the end of their online interactions.

Highlights

- The rate of screentime for children increases every year, so their presence in a digital reality must be protected.[1] Adverse advertising targeted towards children is an $11 billion industry, yet there is no existing legislation that protects children's data privacy.[1,3,4]
- So, this policy can fill this gap with a dual-pronged approach to minor's online activity from initial engagement with a platform through continued use.
- Key components include mandatory parental controls interfaces, limits on ads targeted at minors, and the option to remove any previously collected data.[1,6,7]
- Effective implementation will require raising the public's awareness of predatory consumer data practices, interest groups collaborating with the private sector, and legislative oversight by policymakers in consumer data protection.

Implementation

This policy's implementation should span several years. The first phase should include a public image campaign orchestrated by the Federal Trade Commission to raise awareness of the importance of data privacy for Americans and to spread awareness about the adverse targeting of young users by advertisers. Interest groups such as the Family Online Safety Institute, Thorn, and the National Association for Media Literacy Education all have relationships with TikTok, X, and Meta.[11] These interest groups can effectively use their past relationships and initiatives with private tech companies to counteract any lobbying efforts from opposing forces, such as online entertainment conglomerates specializing in video games and social media.

However, due to the proposed policy's digital reliance to promote the bill, it would encounter challenges from major internet stakeholders. Private stakeholders may refute this proposal's overarching guidelines by claiming it promotes censorship, severely stifles profitability, infringes on the liberty of the private sector to contribute and influence the market, or that the decision to use the service of an online provider rests in American users' hands.[9] Private technological companies are extremely adept at lobbying lawmakers and maximizing their resources. But, supporters of this proposed bill can counteract these measures through leveraging the moral nature of protecting the youth in the public opinion leg of this proposed bill to amass a coalition of supporters across the aisle from the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology alongside the Senate Committee of Commerce, Science, and Transportation who can rely on their policy knowledge to provide evidentiary support for the bill during Congressional floor debates and legislative role to enact the bill. The European Union only saw an 8% deduction in profit and 2% in sales, with major tech companies shouldering little to none of the burden in the wake of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulations, as observed in a University of Oxford study.[10] Most of the economic externalities were in the form of compliance payouts to the government.[9] These statements are evidence that legislators can utilize to overcome opposition from private companies. The Federal Trade Commission can collect funds by fining non-compliant companies, which could also largely contribute to redistributing economic and public services into the domestic economy. This fine-based framework could be used to strengthen the FTC's enforcement of this bill and further strengthen the policy proposal's efficacy.

Once the public's awareness increases, the second stage of the implementation process can begin with a legislative bill from the Congressional Committee on Science, Space, and Technology. The authors of this bill should be political actors with a specialized background in data privacy. House Representative Khanna's commitment to data protection is exemplified in his proposal, "The Internet Bill of Rights," which provides a framework for the processing and handling of consumer data.[12] House Representative Frank Pallone Jr. would be an excellent candidate to support this bill because of his recent sponsorship of H.R.8152 - American Data Privacy and Protection Act, urging the communications industry to secure personal data against unauthorized access.[13] Once the bill is signed into law, the Federal Trade Commission should enforce the law, since the agency has demonstrated support in previous memorandums advocating for increased public sector involvement in regulating private sector technology. This policy proposal offers a national framework for digital stakeholders to uphold transparency in the processing, handling, and collection of the online activity of its youngest users to fortify measures of protecting children's presence in the virtual world just as much as their presence in the physical world.

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Securing Responsible Innovation: Strengthening US Oversight on Human Genetic Engineering

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Germline editing technology poses significant health risks to future generations. Congress should enact legislation providing the National Institute of Health (NIH) with regulatory authority over all genetic engineering research and establish a Bioethics Council under the NIH to address "gray-area" research.

Background

The role of gene therapy technologies has greatly expanded over the past decade, growing from Zinc Finger Nucleases and Transcription Activator-Like Effector Nucleases tools in 2005 to the groundbreaking Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats (CRISPR-Cas9) genome editor invented in 2019.[1] Compared to its predecessors, CRISPR is cheaper, faster, and highly accurate, contributing to the technology's rise in popularity for agricultural, animal, and human research. However, human-facilitated genetic engineering raises many pressing ethical concerns. For example, Chinese researcher Jiankui He, the first individual to use CRISPR to edit the human genome, altered the genes of two human embryos in an effort to make them resistant to HIV.[2] Shenzhen's city court sentenced him to three years in prison for violating many ethical principles and placing the lives of innocent children at risk.[2]

Nonetheless, CRISPR technology has continued to gain traction and is viewed as a means to develop personalized cancer treatments. However, the unregulated use of this novel gene therapy instrument can contribute to new diseases, future hereditary concerns, greater societal inequity, and biosafety hazards.[3] The impacts of CRISPR can outlast an individual's lifespan, altering the genome for future generations. While the US has limited germline editing, genetic modification that is passed transgenerationally, by banning the National Institute of Health (NIH) from providing federal funding for germline editing research, no federal legislation exists to regulate human genetic engineering.[4] In 2001, the Senate introduced the Human Germline Gene Modification Prohibition Act, which served to ban all germline editing; however, this act was not passed.[5] The NIH has crafted a list of nonbinding, suggested regulations for gene editing research, but these guidelines only apply to federally funded research and lack enforceability.[6] Without streamlined and binding policies, CRISPR's consequences will be lasting, even transgenerational.

Policy Idea

Congress should enact legislation providing the NIH with binding regulatory authority over all human genetic engineering research. The NIH's current genetic engineering guidelines would become a mandatory set of regulations, building upon the US's existing genetics policy framework.[7] Furthermore, Congress should institute a National Bioethics Council within the NIH to help enforce the regulations and analyze any ethically ambiguous cases. The Council would evaluate proposed studies involving germline modification to ensure that they abide by national ethical standards. It will also review proposed genetic engineering studies, issue ethical oversight, and coordinate with the NIH enforcement team to ensure that research adheres to ethical standards. The board would be responsible for monitoring research and enforcing ethical principles, while the enforcement team would provide licensing and report compliance.

Policy Analysis

Greater ethical regulations can help increase the general public's trust in gene editing technologies and broaden the scope of influence for future solutions. Clearer guidelines may also help foster collaboration and investment among the private and public sectors, increasing the rate of innovation for new treatments. Similar legislation has proven to be highly effective in other nations, such as the United Kingdom, where the Gene Therapy Advisory Committee guides the ethical acceptability of upcoming research.[8] Furthermore, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) and the

Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) regulate germline and somatic genetic editing, respectively.[9] The UK's Nuffield Council on Bioethics has also contributed greatly, producing over 83 published policy consultation responses, 16 policy briefings, 40 parliamentary mentions, and over 5,000 media mentions.[10] This demonstrates the growing influence of advising committees on policy, helping develop safer paths to innovation. Similarly, China's Ministry of Health has imposed regulations and restrictions on the genetic engineering of embryos, limiting the impacts of germline editing.[11]

Although genetic engineering requires significant regulations, this unique technology leads to innovative medical solutions. For example, Casgevy, a sickle cell anemia treatment, was developed with CRISPR technology.[12] Furthermore, CRISPR demonstrates growing potential in treatment development for cancers, autoimmune diseases, and heart disease. [13,14] For example, in a Phase 1 in-human trial, CRISPR technology successfully reduced LDL cholesterol by 50% and triglycerides by 55%, which could significantly reduce heart disease risk.[14] Therefore, this technology continues to prove invaluable for the future of scientific innovation. The implementation of binding ethical oversight through the NIH allows for the responsible advancement of cutting-edge genetic technology, while protecting the individual, ensuring scientific accountability, and matching international standards.

Highlights

- Unregulated genetic engineering technologies contribute to the development of new diseases, biosafety hazards, and future hereditary concerns.[3]
- Congress should develop legislation granting the NIH regulatory authority over all genetic engineering research and implement a Bioethics Council under the NIH to analyze ethically ambiguous cases. NIH regulations should be enforced through NIH-provided research licensing, with consequences delivered through fines or funding cuts.
- The United Kingdom and China have successfully implemented strict restrictions on germline editing, preventing research from causing harmful, multigenerational effects.[8,9,11]
- Greater ethical oversight can foster greater collaboration between the public and private sectors and increase public trust, leading to greater technological advancement.[10,12]

Implementation

This policy will likely require three to five years to implement, with one to two years for the bill to pass through Congress, one to two years for the NIH rulemaking process, and one year for the development of the Bioethics Council.

To provide the NIH with regulatory authority for genetic engineering research and develop a bioethics council, Congress should introduce identical bills through the Committees on Science, Space, and Technology, Energy and Commerce, the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP), and Commerce, Science, and Transportation.[15,16,17,18] Congressmen Yvette Clarke (D-NY) and Robert Aderholt (R-AL), members of both parties who have interests or expertise in biotechnology, ethics, and health-related policy issues, could co-sponsor this bill.[19,20,21] Representative Clarke's interests in regulating new technologies and health policy can be uniquely integrated in the bill on genetic engineering regulations. Additionally, Representative Aderholt previously expressed support for a ban on human embryo genetic engineering.[19,20]

Beyond bipartisan sponsorship's ability to help the bill pass in a polarized legislature, strategic communication should emphasize the parties' shared goals. For example, members should highlight the national security benefits of regulated research, opportunities for economic development through enhanced innovation, and the international prestige obtained through ethical leadership. NIH witnesses could comment on the feasibility analysis of establishing a bioethics board, as greater funding would be needed to equip the NIH with enforceability capabilities and extra staff. Furthermore, the Federal Drug Administration's (FDA) perspective is required to ensure there is limited overlap between new NIH regulations and the FDA's genetics policies. For example, the FDA released a gene editing guidance document in 2024, outlining expectations for products involving gene editing.[22] Private companies, including Mammoth Biosciences and Variantyx, can also provide valuable insight on the bill's commercial research implications.[23]

After passing through Congress and proceeding with the NIH's rulemaking process, the Bioethics Council can begin development. The council should comprise approximately 15 scientists, ethicists, legal representatives, and policy analysts to provide diverse perspectives on germline editing research ethics [24]. This development would require approximately 2 to 4 million dollars in order to account for the staff and board members, operational tasks, publications, and public engagement.

To enforce the Council's new authority, researchers would have to receive NIH licensing for genetic engineering research. Failing to comply with these licensing protocols would result in penalties, such as fines or funding cuts. One possible risk is that implementing the bioethics board may slow down research approvals, potentially reducing innovation. To mitigate this issue, the Bioethics Council should be required to publish clear licensing timelines for each case, ensuring oversight without stifling progress. These timelines would range from 3-6 months in length and help to ensure both speed and safety in licensing procedures. Companies would receive their timelines after completing the licensing application process. Overall, providing the NIH with binding regulatory authority and instituting a National Bioethics Council can greatly curb unethical genetic engineering practices and promote safer, stronger innovation.

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Sustainable AI Scaling Through US Data Center Energy Efficiency and Reuse

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In the US, a surge in data center usage driven by the artificial intelligence (AI) boom has strained electric grids and increased carbon emissions. These effects can be mitigated through the creation of federal requirements for energy efficiency and reuse.

Background

The post-2020 boom in artificial intelligence (AI) has led to a massive increase in demand for data centers and energy.[1] The United States has the highest energy consumption per data center in the world, and the resulting energy usage is expected to increase by over two and a half times in the next five years.[2] The rest of the world is also moving in a similar direction, with data center electricity demand projected to double by 2030.[2]

Companies building data centers often target low-cost land with limited legacy load, meaning it is relatively free from prior contamination.[3] In particular, Texas and Virginia have experienced a boom in the number of data centers being built there, but the grids in these places have often struggled to keep up with demand.[4] Bloomberg has reported that over 75% of areas with severe power distortions are within 50 miles of data centers, putting significant pressure on local governments and power companies to maintain energy grids.[5] Furthermore, costs are often passed on to residents in these towns, driving up the cost of living.[6]

CPUs running in data centers generate heat that can be captured and reused as energy. However, it is usually discarded. For example, Meta's campus in Odense, Denmark, recovers around 100,000 MWh/year of heat, showing the feasibility of large-scale energy reuse. However, energy reuse on this scale is normally an exception.[7] No voluntary guidelines on reusing energy within data centers exist in the US, so implementing a policy addressing this issue will reduce electricity demand, which often comes from fossil fuels, as well as ease peak stress on electric and gas systems.[8] Without federal efficiency or reuse standards, US data center expansion will only continue to raise costs and carbon emissions.

Policy Idea

US data centers built after January 1, 2026, and consuming over 200 kilowatts per year must achieve an Energy Reuse Factor (ERF) of more than 10% by two years after opening, 15% by four years, and 20% after six years. Furthermore, these data centers should also have to meet Power Usage Effectiveness standards (PUE), a measure of the facility's total energy usage divided by energy used by the IT equipment, which currently mandates a ratio less than 1.2 after two years.[9] Data centers that already exist must reach less than 1.5 by 2028 and 1.3 by 2031.[10,11] Lastly, all centers must use at least 25% renewable electricity after two years, and 50% after five years. The Department of Energy (DOE) would oversee compliance through mandatory annual reports evaluating the PUE and ERF for each data center. These measures would decrease the environmental impacts of data center usage.[12]

Policy Analysis

Germany's 2023 Energy Efficiency Act (EnEfG) shows the potential for this policy to be successful on a national scale.[13] The EnEfG required that data centers had to run on at least 50% renewable energy by 2024 and 100% by 2027. It also raised PUE requirements, and centers had to report heat reuse performance based on ERF. I chose to target ERF, PUE, and renewable energy share as reducing environmental impact via these specific metrics would internalize infrastructure and pollution costs, guide hyperscale build-out toward communities with viable heat loads and improve long-run reliability. These measures would effectively transform data center heat from a liability into a public asset while aligning AI infrastructure with national climate goals.

Case studies demonstrate that waste heat can be recycled at scale. In Ireland, waste heat from an Amazon data center is used to heat the Tallaght District, saving 1,500 tons of carbon annually.[14] Although critics could argue that federal ERF and PUE mandates would raise costs significantly in the short term and lead to a decrease in AI investment, investment in AI within Germany post-EnEfG has continued to increase.[15]

In the US, demand for energy due to data centers will skyrocket: the DOE estimates energy consumption due to data centers was about 4.4% of electricity used nationwide in 2023, and could increase to 12% by 2028.[16] On an international level, assessments similarly project global data-center demand roughly doubling by 2030.[12] In places without heat reuse laws, costs fall on taxpayers, and reliance on fossil fuels increases—for example, the dollar amount of energy usage due to AI was $74.8B in 2023.[17,18] However, the German EnEfG as well as the examples of Amazon's and Meta's data centers in Ireland and Denmark show that we can decrease the amount of electricity used, demonstrating the effectiveness of this proposal.

Highlights

- Artificial intelligence's (AI) expansion has increased energy demand due to AI data centers. US energy usage is expected to increase by over two and a half times by 2030.[1,2]
- As a result, carbon emissions have spiked, and the US power grid has become strained.[4 5]
- This policy proposal would impose Energy Reuse Factor (ERF) and Power Usage Effectiveness (PUE) standards via the Department of Energy (DOE) onto AI data centers and would require them to source a portion of their power from renewable energy.[9,10,11]
- Reducing energy consumption from non-renewable sources would improve the development of environmentally friendly AI infrastructure, while saving money.[14,15,17,18]

Implementation

To implement this policy proposal, Congress would mobilize the DOE to regulate and enforce the staged benchmarks proposed. As climate-oriented policy is hard to push through Congress, this bill would be framed as a cost-saving measure for AI development. Key allies in passing this bill could be Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) and Cory Booker (D-NJ). These two senators co-lead the Senate companion to the landmark Environmental Justice For All Act, which focuses on equitable environmental policies. As climate-oriented policy is hard to push through Congress, this bill would be framed as a cost-saving measure for AI development, as AI development has been a priority of the current presidential administration. Lastly, critics of this bill might argue that it would hinder investment in AI; however, there is no conclusive evidence to support this statement.[19]

Once passed, data centers would internally track PUE, ERF, and renewable electricity and submit in a yearly report to the DOE. To fund this, an emission tax would be created: data centers that consume more than 200 kilowatts per year would have a tax of 0.1%, which would satisfy the costs of running this policy. Additionally, the DOE would provide technical guidance to help data centers satisfy the new policy requirements. To accomplish this goal, the DOE could create a website where data center operators can provide their centers' measurements of the PUE, ERF, and renewable energy shares. Third-party energy auditors could be called in to verify the accuracy of the metrics submitted on behalf of the data centers.

This policy is unlikely to be popular among data center operators. To remedy this, the DOE would also reward data center operators who meet proposed standards. For example, the DOE should grant low-interest loans for the development or renovation of heat recovery and renewable energy systems. Centers that hit targets far ahead of schedule could receive additional rewards, such as higher depreciation benefits and tax benefits. For data centers that do not satisfy standards, higher emission taxes of 0.2% (double the normal rate) would be imposed.

The project will be expensive; affording both the personnel and infrastructure to fund this policy will likely be around $8 million based on the costs of similar bills. In order to ensure feasibility, implementation of this policy proposal would occur in phases. In the first year, the DOE would provide guidance to data center operators and verify that operators satisfied benchmarks. The DOE, over the subsequent two years, would analyze how data is collected, capacity is built, and the development of programs and infrastructure for testing scalable waste heat reuse. These measures would help to inform future AI data center construction. By 2028, all newly constructed data centers would have to meet the 10% ERF and 1.2 PUE requirements. Amongst pre-existing data centers, the energy systems would undergo overhauls and or retrofitting. Over time, this policy would increase investment and awareness in energy efficiency, leading to the construction of sustainable AI infrastructure that meets future US climate and energy goals.

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The Infrastructure Expressway: A Road Map for Better Permitting Reform

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Inefficient and uncoordinated infrastructure permitting has led to ballooning costs and extreme delays. The US Environmental Protection Agency should consolidate permitting to a "lead agency" approach with expedited, bundled, and concurrent permitting for projects of high importance.

Background

The United States' track record in completing necessary and important heavy civil infrastructure projects is dismal and one of the worst in the entire world. Each year, roughly $250 to $280 billion of capital enters the permitting process, and McKinsey analysis finds that each dollar takes roughly four to five years to move through the permitting process.[1] Heavy civil infrastructure projects are particularly prone to this issue of "completion risk"—that is, the projects are almost always completed years late, and costs skyrocket.[2] According to the US Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration, it takes an average of 13 years for a major highway project to go from concept to ribbon-cutting.[3] These effects, in turn, have made it increasingly impossible for the US to keep its existing infrastructure in a state of good repair as the country prioritizes new projects, and states with strict permitting processes have had difficulty constructing even simple housing projects to keep prices affordable.

Furthermore, the slow pace of construction of major projects has handicapped major utility and civil infrastructure assets from adding necessary capacity to match demand. This handicapping, combined with general inflation dating back to the early 2020s, has prompted a major hike in energy rates—a 6.5% rise nationwide this year alone.[4] The federal government has attempted to solve this problem before, with the implementation of the FAST-41 Project (Title 41 of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act) in 2015. FAST-41 established a voluntary process for improving federal agency coordination and timeliness of environmental reviews for infrastructure projects.[6]

Policy Idea

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) should substantially overhaul its federal permitting system to facilitate the timely and economical completion of heavy civil infrastructure projects. Specifically, the government should launch the Infrastructure Expressway system to provide an opt-in, expedited parallel permitting process for projects that hit certain eligibility targets. The Infrastructure Expressway would contain these provisions:

1. A newly constructed single lead agency, the Infrastructure Permitting Agency, will coordinate all reviews across the Clean Air Act, Endangered Species Act, and National Environmental Policy Act. All environmental review work is subject to a hard 18-month deadline.
2. Concurrent permitting will replace sequential permitting and allow for all simultaneous permitting.

Policy Analysis

Upwards of 95% of energy projects awaiting approval are clean energy projects, including solar, wind, and hydropower.[7] These energy sources are imperative for reducing reliance on fossil fuels. Some projects are ostensibly fairly contested, but some 70% of projects undergoing environmental impact reviews never face litigation, and the reduction in the potential for litigation will drastically reduce project delivery timelines.[7]

The ability to deliver projects on time and on budget is paramount for achieving climate emissions reduction goals. Analysis by Princeton professor Jesse Jenkins found that 80% of the carbon emissions reductions in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act will not be achieved unless the US can double its electric transmission capacity through new power lines.[9] With some estimates pointing to litigation delaying projects by an average of 3.9 years, the ability to execute critical projects in a quicker timeframe will be imperative to addressing the urgency of the climate crisis.[10]

Previous policy efforts to reform permitting have been meager, albeit successful. The FAST-41 program has actually been quite effective—infrastructure projects supported through FAST-41 achieved a Record of Decision (ROD) nearly 18 months faster than those that did not opt-in to the program.[5] FAST-41 provides covered projects with a dedicated infrastructure project advisor, a coordinated permitting timetable posted publicly on the permitting dashboard, and senior federal agency visibility at the deputy secretary level.[5] However, the program continues to suffer from a limited breadth of projects covered, as it requires projects to exceed $200 million in total investment and meet other specific eligibility criteria.[9] When expanded to a broader scope, the Infrastructure Expressway is poised to reduce waiting times for approval and can drastically reduce the possibility of facing litigation.

Highlights

- The US faces a severe infrastructure construction backlog owing to an onerous review and permitting process. If unaddressed, the country will fall further behind on major projects.[1]
- The creation of a "one-stop" approach with the EPA coordinating permitting will drastically reduce completion time and completion risk with major projects.[4,6,7]
- Reducing delays and litigation in project delivery greatly aids the US' overall climate resilience in the face of time-sensitive impacts.
- Removing the potential for litigation drastically reduces delay potential, and FAST-41 projects have averted four years of construction delays, on average. Furthermore, accelerated construction of electricity capacity will greatly reduce greenhouse gas emissions in a critical time for climate action [9]

Implementation

Infrastructure reform has strong bipartisan backing from both parties, who view current permitting as either excessively bureaucratic or unnecessary.[4] A bipartisan group of lawmakers has twice proposed legislation aimed at fast-tracking projects in both the energy sector and the digital technology sector.[4] Reform appeal extends beyond Congress, with more than a dozen bipartisan governors calling for energy permitting reform as of late October 2025, soliciting ideas for project acceleration and discussing barriers at both the state and federal level.[11] In light of that momentum, implementation of the policy should be swift.

Very few, if any, structural changes are necessary for the execution of the "Infrastructure Expressway." The essence of the reform is a restructuring of existing agencies and modified guidelines for federal oversight. The policy can take effect immediately post-implementation. While full agency consolidation might require federal funding and re-shuffling, elements of the FAST-41 approach can be applied to accelerate the process.

Existing projects are not eligible for the expressway, but new projects can apply to join the program, assuming they meet the following eligibility requirements: First, total project costs must exceed $500 million. Second, projects must show secured funding for at least 30% of total costs and a credible plan for the remaining financing. 30% is common among project finance as it reflects investor optimism while granting space for new types of capital if desired.[12] Finally, the EPA will implement several impartially assessed tiered Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) thresholds to ensure project viability (ratio of monetized project benefits to costs). Energy transmission and highways' BCR will be 3:1, public transportation at 1.5:1, and water infrastructure at 2:1. These differences in BCR reflect different expected earnings across sectors.

Federal permitting reform is effective but has limitations. The policy implementation could be hindered by the EPA's inability to thoroughly regulate at the state level, where many projects are located. Interstate transmission projects face particularly acute challenges, as transmission line developers may need approvals from multiple state governments along the line's path, and the current framework can allow a single state to block a transmission project that is supported by neighboring jurisdictions.[11] States assign primary permitting responsibility to different entities—33 states use state public utility commissions, eight use special siting boards, and four use non-utility commission agencies—making the process piecemeal and haphazard.[13]

In light of the limited scope of federal reform, the Infrastructure Expressway's initial focus on large federal projects can catalyze state-level reform further into the future. Given the bipartisan nature of the issue, states can use the Infrastructure Expressway as a template for more curated policy solutions that can fit their own needs. This process has been done in the reverse implementation order, where Gov. Romney's Massachusetts healthcare law became the basis for the Affordable Care Act. The broad nature of the Infrastructure Expressway can allow for a comparable slimmed-down approach to be implemented at the state level. This approach, in turn, can apply extensive benefits nationwide.

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Coordinating the City of Ithaca's EVs For An Affordable and Clean Future

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Ithaca, New York's Green New Deal set several climate and net-zero emission goals with deadlines of 2030. To achieve them, the Common Council should enact a pilot program to utilize municipal renewable energy resources for energy markets or grid services.

Background

On September 17, 2020, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) released Order No. 2222, which aimed to encourage distributed energy resources (DERs) to participate in FERC jurisdictional electricity markets.[1] DERs include a wide variety of resources, including but not limited to rooftop solar, battery energy storage systems (BESS), and electric vehicles (EVs).[2] Due to the historical organization of FERC jurisdictional energy markets before the order, DERs could not participate unless they were very large, known as utility-scale, as organized energy markets prioritized traditional methods of energy generation like natural gas.[3] The New York Independent System Operator (NYISO) first demonstrated their near compliance with Order 2222 in 2024, as it created a system for the DER aggregation and set a minimum of ten kilowatts (kW) to participate.[4]

Ithaca is a city in upstate New York and has vast sustainability goals, outlined in their Ithaca Green New Deal (IGND), including community-wide carbon neutrality by 2030.[5] To reach this goal, the city established a Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) program in which it can leverage the totality of residents' buying power to purchase cost-efficient renewable energy, along with an effort to electrify all buildings.[6] To get the most benefits out of electrification policy decisions associated with the IGND, the City of Ithaca should attempt to generate revenue in exchange for grid services provided to utility companies. This novel policy idea could create benefits that previously did not exist with conventional vehicles and natural gas plants.

Policy Idea

Using a similar aggregation technique to CCA, the City of Ithaca should implement a pilot program to aggregate the city's municipal DER resources to provide ancillary and grid services to New York State Electric & Gas (NYSEG) or participate in the NYISO capacity market if the resources reach the 10 kW threshold. The pilot program should be placed under the City of Ithaca's Planning and Development Division for maximum efficiency, and they should be tasked with finding a suitable private company to best implement the aggregation. The Planning and Development Division should first be tasked with finding resources from IGND initiatives that are municipally owned, whether that be electric vehicles or rooftop solar panels that can be enrolled in NYSEG ancillary and grid services programs. For initial funding, Ithaca can borrow new money with bonds, but the program would pay for itself in the end.

Policy Analysis

The IGND stipulates that the city's government operations need to be sourced with 100% renewable energy by 2025, and reduce the emissions of fleet vehicles by 50% by 2050.[7] To assess how municipal assets can be best used for grid services and revenue generation, one could look to a pilot program undertaken by The University of Delaware, Delmarva Power, and the PJM Interconnection.[8] This program assessed how EVs can be best used as a grid-integrated asset and everyday vehicle through three pathways: behind-the-meter charging to reduce costs and peak demand, at retail where they sell depending on price signals, or in wholesale markets through capacity where they are willing to plug in at peak demand.[9] The University of Delaware bid their EVs into the wholesale market, and from 2013 to 2016 earned $1,200 per year per vehicle.[9]

Currently, the City of Ithaca owns 198 vehicles across nine departments, of which they plan to electrify 25% annually.[10] Once these electric vehicles are delivered, and bidirectional vehicle-to-grid capabilities are added to EV chargers, the City could start generating significant extra revenue for the times these vehicles are inactive. This program would not have any effect on city operations, as the EVs can be used when necessary, and then be left on the charger to dispatch energy back and forth to the grid. The University of Delaware study found that enrolling in a customer peak reduction program in the PJM Interconnection could net up to $2,500 with only 100 hours needed per year on standby at the charger.[9] These benefits could be reflected in the NYSEG Commercial System Relief Program, which functions similarly to the PJM program. The only stakeholders are the City of Ithaca, a potential private partner, NYSEG, and the residents who benefit from the City having extra revenue.

Highlights

- The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) Order No. 2222 seeks to revolutionize US energy markets by allowing aggregated distributed energy resources (DERs) to participate, with which the New York Independent System Operator (NYISO) recently nearly reached compliance.[1,4]
- The Ithaca Green New Deal aims to reduce the City's operations to carbon neutrality by 2030 and requires bold action for effective implementation.[5]
- The City of Ithaca should implement a pilot program to aggregate its municipal DER resources to either join NYISO-organized capacity markets or provide ancillary and grid services to local utility companies.
- Municipally owned vehicles are a prime target once electrified, as a pilot program by the University of Delaware found that electric vehicles can make $1,200 per year per vehicle once bid into energy markets.[9]

Implementation

To aggregate municipal resources, the City of Ithaca has two paths of implementation it could take: The City could either use its existing knowledge from the CCA program's implementation or contract with a private company with extensive institutional knowledge to act as a manager. Companies like EnelX can act as facilitators to aggregate willing resources into utility DR programs, while still providing the city with monetary benefits.[11] Given that the CCA program has been significantly delayed, the Town Council should look for a private partnership to facilitate and act as a manager for the EVs.

Ithaca's current mayor, Robert Cantelmo, would need to be supportive of the private approach, along with a simple majority of the ten-member Common Council. The Mayor and Common Council are committed to the IGND and most likely would be supportive of the bill to generate extra revenue from municipal resources, as long as the program did not take away from functionality.[12] However, the Common Council could delay an aggregation bill while the City Departments are busy implementing other facets of the IGND, like the full rollout of CCA, which officials have repeatedly delayed. To avoid significant delays of an aggregation bill, IGND advocates like Sunrise Ithaca and Sustainable Finger Lakes should advocate for the bill during the creation of the Climate Action Plan for 2027-2028, as key action plans for 2025-2026 are already completed. As the Planning Committee and Town Council reevaluate the Action Plan every two years, organizations like Sunrise Ithaca can preemptively build support among the Mayor and Common Council Members, or build grassroots support among residents on the Town Council.[7] Once the policy idea of EV aggregation is placed on the Climate Action Plan, the implementation process could start, which involves passing the bill and putting out a request for proposal for potential private partners.

There are significant capital costs associated with this program that would have to be rectified. From the fast 2-way chargers to the EVs, this program would require investment from the state or federal government to be successful. The City could potentially leverage green bonds as a funding mechanism, but it is unclear whether the City's finances could currently support that as an option.

To build support, supporters should point to the monetary benefits seen in the University of Delaware and PJM Interconnection report. More pressure can be applied once NYISO becomes fully FERC compliant with Order No. 2222, which FERC has set for December 31, 2026.[4.] Waiting for full compliance with Order No. 2222 would also give NYISO and the private sector more time to fully understand how to leverage DER resources, on the municipal level, for a flexible and efficient grid. A successfully implemented city vehicle aggregation plan could generate revenue that could aid with the City's budget, while generating environmental benefits from reduced gas use.

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Mass Timber: A Green Substitute for Emissions-Heavy Construction Materials

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Rapid urban growth and rising construction-related emissions demand action on the federal level. A joint Mass Timber Construction Initiative between the USDA and DOE will accelerate the usage of low-carbon building materials and modernize US urban development.

Background

As urban areas in the US expand rapidly, construction-related carbon emissions remain a major threat to the planet. In 2022, the built environment was responsible for 37% of global carbon emissions; embodied carbon, defined as the emissions associated with the manufacture and use of construction materials, made up 10% of this number.[1] Given the US construction industry's continued growth in recent years, especially when compared to other leading nations such as China, reducing the environmental costs of future urban growth is particularly crucial.[2]

Currently, steel and concrete are the two most common building materials in the US.[3] Despite being cost-effective and resilient, they both have immense carbon footprints—the manufacture of steel and concrete alone makes up around 5% of annual global emissions.[4,5] Environmentally friendly modifications to both steel and concrete are largely impractical and unlikely to substantially reduce emissions due to industry concerns over quality control and the inability to meet market demand.[6]

As a replacement, developers in select areas of the US have begun to utilize mass timber, an umbrella term for types of engineered wood that manufacturers form by bonding or layering planks of lumber, due to its promising status as an environmentally-conscious building material.[7] While a typical concrete and steel slab result in 390 and 240 kilograms of embodied carbon per square meter, respectively, a frame made from a common type of mass timber only contributes 130.[8] Furthermore, a 2021 study found that, on average, mass timber multistory residential buildings produce a 76% to 91% and 81% to 94% lower amount of total carbon emissions as compared to steel and concrete buildings, respectively.[1] The federal government must create policy to incentivize developers to use mass timber, given both high initial costs and unfamiliarity within the construction industry.[9]

Policy Idea

The Department of Energy (DOE) and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) should jointly establish and administer an initiative to promote the creation of local mass timber pilot programs, called the Mass Timber Construction Initiative (MTCI). The MTCI would build on the DOE's Advanced Building Construction (ABC) Initiative, which aims to increase construction productivity by promoting the use of innovative, energy-efficient building materials and practices.[10] The MTCI would operate in a top-down manner, providing city planning departments with technical assistance to overcome barriers like fire-safety approval, permitting, and building code unfamiliarity. The program will also offer targeted grants to cities to stimulate mass timber developments, which the USDA's Wood Innovations Grant Program (WIGP) and the DOE's Resilient and Efficient Codes Implementation (RECI) grant program would fund. Lastly, the MTCI would provide oversight, ensuring that local mass timber pilot programs are efficient and cost-effective, helping city planners model their approach.

Policy Analysis

Given Boston's success in boosting the usage of mass timber throughout the city, using the city's Mass Timber Accelerator program as a blueprint for other cities alike will ensure the MTCI's effectiveness.[7] Since 2022, New York and Atlanta have already created similar mass timber accelerator programs modeled after that of Boston, reflecting the promising potential of the MTCI modeled after Boston.[11] According to a 2024 report from the city, eight mass timber projects totaling 1.3 million square feet are either actively under construction or will be in the following year.[7] The report also noted an additional 22 buildings totaling 4.3 million square feet as future projects.[7] Furthermore, several of the aforementioned projects feature buildings that are eight stories or taller.[7] This benchmark is vital to reinforce urban density and ensure mass timber high rises become commonplace—in 2022, only 15 mass timber high rises, either finished or under construction, existed in the US.[12]

In addition to its environmental benefits, mass timber can prove to be more financially sound than traditional building materials. For instance, a 2020 USDA Forest Service study found that the total life-cycle cost of a 12-story mass timber building was 2.4% lower than that of a functionally equivalent concrete building over a 60-year study period.[13] However, the same study found that front-end costs were 26% higher for the mass timber building.[13] Furthermore, utilizing mass timber can save developers money in the construction phase, as mass timber's assembly can be over 50% quicker than alternative building materials.[14] Given that the initial cost of construction is the biggest barrier for mass timber developments, the MTCI's proposed grants will be crucial in maintaining the financial health of early-stage projects.

Highlights

- In 2022, embodied carbon from the manufacture and use of construction materials made up over 9% of global carbon dioxide emissions.[1,3]
- Developers are increasingly opting to use mass timber, an engineered wood formed by bonding or layering planks of lumber, given its low carbon footprint compared to traditional materials.[6]
- The Department of Energy (DOE) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) should jointly establish and administer an initiative to promote the creation of local mass timber pilot programs, called the Mass Timber Construction Initiative (MTCI). The MTCI would provide city planning agencies with support via grants and technical assistance.
- The MTCI will use Boston's Mass Timber Accelerator as a blueprint for other planning agencies, given the program's success in jumpstarting new mass timber developments. The MTCI's offered grants will help cities overcome the initial financial constraints that often come with mass timber developments.

Implementation

To kickstart this program, several congresspeople could sponsor this policy and garner bipartisan support. In the House of Representatives, Arkansas Republican Bruce Westerman is a known proponent of mass timber, particularly due to the material's efficiency in construction and relationship to the logging and forestry industry.[15] In 2021, Westerman also introduced the Trillion Trees Act, which focused on the planting of trees to sequester carbon and create new domestic timber markets.[16] The bill also included market incentives for sustainable building material research and garnered a total of 105 cosponsors.[16,17] In the Senate, Oregon Democrat Jeff Merkley introduced the Mass Timber Federal Buildings Act of 2025 in March of this year, which then referred the bill to the Committee on Environment and Public Works.[18] This bill is co-sponsored by three other senators, two of whom, James Risch and Mike Crapo, are Idaho Republicans.

To pass this policy through a Republican-controlled Congress, legislators must frame the MTCI as an initiative focused on reinvigorating the nation's economy and supply chain, particularly through the construction and forestry industries. Opposition will certainly cite concerns regarding the funding behind the MTCI. Legislators sponsoring this policy should emphasize the fact that a rise in the usage of mass timber is quite likely to boost the economy by helping construction firms save on costs. Furthermore, strong funding already exists through the USDA Wood Innovations Program and DOE's RECI grants, which typically provide up to $300,000 and $500,000–$10 million, respectively.[19, 20] The MTCI will simply redirect the allocations of these preexisting programs and will not necessarily require any additional funding.

In addition, legislators must frame the MTCI as a supply-chain initiative focused on economic revitalization. Advocates should highlight that using mass timber in 30% of new buildings by 2050 will increase the US's plantation forest land by 0.8 mega hectares, roughly the size of Puerto Rico.[21] This strategy should work particularly well given President Trump's efforts to revitalize the nation's forestry industry, particularly through Executive Order 14225, "Immediate Expansion of American Timber Production."[22]

Upon enactment, a joint USDA-DOE steering committee will oversee implementation, establishing regional hubs managed by existing USDA Wood Innovations Coordinators and ABC Collaborative experts to assist city planning departments. Crucially, the MTCI will be fiscally neutral, simply redirecting allocations from the USDA Wood Innovations Program and DOE's RECI grants, avoiding the need for new funding. To maximize taxpayer investment, the MTCI will enforce strict cost-sharing measures, including the WIGP's mandatory 1:1 non-federal match.[19] This requirement compels stakeholders to invest in their own success, framing the initiative as a disciplined public-private partnership.

Based on Boston's Mass Timber Accelerator, the MTCI should take around 10-15 years to achieve critical scale, accounting for planning and construction cycles.[8] A national Mass Timber Construction Initiative would position the United States to cut carbon emissions, strengthen the industrial economy, and modernize urban development in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

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From Exception to Elimination: Closing India's Marital Rape Loophole

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To address the widespread impunity for sexual violence within marriage, the Indian government should implement a comprehensive policy that criminalizes marital rape and strengthens legal, institutional, and cultural mechanisms to ensure accountability and protect survivors.

Background

Marital rape remains legally permissible in India, reinforcing the archaic notion that marriage grants a husband unconditional sexual access to his wife.[1,2,3] Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) defines rape as forced sexual intercourse, yet it excludes a husband who has sex with his wife so long as she is older than 15.[4] Studies show that one in five men has forced his wife into sex and that two-thirds of married women aged 15 to 49 have experienced domestic violence or marital rape, highlighting how this exemption denies many women access to justice.[4] Marital rape is also linked to mental health consequences, including PTSD and clinical depression.[5]

Due to the controversial exemption, the Supreme Court of India has revisited the issue multiple times. In 2017, advocates called for its repeal, stressing that consent cannot be presumed in marriage.[6] In *Independent Thought v. Union of India* (2019), the Court criminalized sexual intercourse with a wife under 18, signaling a shift in how consent is understood.[6] Subsequently, in 2024, the government argued that criminalization could destabilize marriage and increase false allegations of rape.[2,6] It cited the 2005 Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, which recognizes sexual abuse but imposes no specific penalties beyond the Penal Code provision allowing up to three years' imprisonment for cruelty toward spouses.[6] These justifications arise from beliefs that women owe marital duty and that sexual compliance protects family honor.[7]

Thus far, India's laws have not protected women against marital rape.[2] Being one of the 36 countries that do not criminalize marital rape, India's exception normalizes sexual violence and infringes on women's autonomy.[8,9] This gap underscores the need to criminalize marital rape and challenge cultural norms perpetuating sexism in India.

Policy Idea

To address the legal and cultural conditions that enable marital rape in India, the Parliament should remove the marital rape exception from Section 375 of the IPC.[10] This policy would operate through two core pillars, namely legislative reform and cultural change. Legislative reform would criminalize marital rape and establish clear legal procedures, while public awareness campaigns would challenge harmful norms around consent within marriage to confront the cultural acceptance of marital rape.[5] These campaigns should leverage schools, media, and community programs to reshape societal attitudes. Coordinated efforts between the government and organizations like All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) or the RIT Foundation are also essential to expand crisis centers, shelters, and legal aid, ensuring survivors receive comprehensive support.[5,11,12,13]

Policy Analysis

Criminalizing marital rape has advanced gender justice in multiple countries, suggesting the same could be done in India.[14,15] In the United States, ending the marital rape exemption increased accountability and reduced tolerance for sexual violence in marriage.[15] In Nepal, a neighboring country of India with similar values, marital rape was criminalized in *Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD), Thapathali v His Majesty's Government (HMG)*, making Nepal a leading example for India.[16] As Nepal's definition of marital rape aligned with that of non-marital rape, reported rape cases increased, suggesting women became more willing to report sexual violence.[11] While limited longitudinal data prevent a conclusive assessment of Nepal's long-term outcomes, early trends indicate that in both the US and Nepal, criminalizing marital rape deterred perpetrators by increasing legal consequences.[15] However, to ensure that criminalization translates into action, India must redefine consent both legally and culturally.

In *FWLD v. HMG*, Nepal ruled that rape is defined by lack of consent, not marital status.[17] Automatic spousal consent was rejected, and sexual autonomy of married women was recognized.[18] Treating marital rape and nonmarital rape with legal neutrality shifted patriarchal beliefs that wives are a husband's property.[19] This redefinition, paired with mass movements like UN Women's HeForShe campaign, which has over two million activists representing 600 million people, could have similar effects in India, where attitudes toward marriage and consent mirror those in Nepal.[16] In fact, the RIT Foundation in India has taken similar action to the FWLD in Nepal.[20] Although *RIT Foundation v. Union* (2022) did not criminalize marital rape, Nepal's history shows the need for sustained lobbying to advance this reform.[21] Lobbying in India must similarly focus on both criminalizing marital rape and challenging the cultural norms that sustain it.

Highlights

- Marital rape remains legal in India due to the exemption in Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, reinforcing patriarchal norms and denying countless women protection.[1,2,3]
- India must criminalize marital rape through a two-pronged policy that addresses legal and cultural issues by removing the marital rape exemption, strengthening policy and judicial capacity to handle cases sensitively, and implementing public education campaigns to reshape norms around consent in marriage.
- Nepal's legal reforms and the *Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD), Thapathali v His Majesty's Government (HMG)* ruling display how defining consent can shift both legal and cultural attitudes, presenting a model for India.[16,20]

Implementation

The implementation phase should span ten years, as Nepal demonstrates that recognizing marital rape in 2003 did not shift enforcement until sentencing was strengthened in 2017.[22] Because legislation in India takes an average of 261 days to pass, two years should be allocated to amending the 2005 Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) to criminalize marital rape while allowing time to mitigate cultural backlash once the exception is removed.[4,23]

Following this amendment, the government should introduce a Marital Rape Criminalization (MRC) Bill in the third year, with full implementation targeted for the fourth year. A statutory bill is most effective because it allows Parliament to set penalties without the limitations of amendments or judicial rulings.[24,25]

Given the political controversy of criminalizing marital rape, India's less polarized upper house, the Rajya Sabha, provides the most strategic point for starting reform.[26,27] Unlike the directly elected Lok Sabha, responsible for financial legislation and government formation, the Rajya Sabha is not responsible for approving financial bills.[27,28] Introducing the MRC Bill here first avoids premature rejection on fiscal grounds, a justification the Lok Sabha could legitimately invoke even if underlying opposition is ideological. Swati Maliwal, a Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha, should advocate for this bill and leverage her position as the former Chairperson of the Delhi Commission for Women, where she combatted gender-based violence.[29] Through this, the MRC would become a private member's bill, drawing attention to the issue without executive sponsorship and creating a venue for early consensus building.[26,27] Only after gaining support from the Rajya Sabha should the bill be brought before the Lok Sabha, reducing early rejection risk and encouraging government endorsement once the reform enters Parliament in full.[28]

The MRC Bill should contain three key clauses. First, it must repeal Exception 2 from the IPC's Section 375, establishing that non-consensual intercourse within marriage constitutes rape. Second, uniformly define consent and clarify that it applies under marriage. Third, mandate a minimum criminal sentence of ten years, equivalent to that for non-marital rape.[30]

In the fourth year, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) should lead cultural reforms with AIDWA and the RIT Foundation.[12,13,31,32] Schools can integrate a consent module into the Central Board Secondary Education curriculum, workplaces can add a one-hour annual Prevention of Sexual Harassment session, and Panchayats, the third tier of government, should hold community discussions for rural populations.[33,34,35] Social media and television outreach should reinforce these reforms nationwide. Finally, the Ministry of Law and Justice and the National Crime Records Bureau should create a distinct data classification for marital rape to track case progression and conviction rates.[36] Annual publication of these statistics, similar to domestic violence and dowry death data, would improve transparency, guide resource allocation, and ensure accountability across states.[37]

Taken together, these reforms would strengthen India's legal framework and affirm its commitment to women's autonomy, dignity, and equality.

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Expanding Migrant Workers' Rights in Qatar By Repealing Absconding Laws

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Qatar's Ministry of Labor should urgently repeal absconding laws and implement government-regulated, multilingual rights training for migrant workers to end ongoing labor exploitation, strengthen worker protections, and ensure fair labor practices ahead of future international events.

Background

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar brought global attention to migrant labor exploitation and workers' rights.[1] With over two million migrant workers making up 95% of Qatar's workforce in 2019, foreign labor was essential to completing the event's massive infrastructure projects.[2] During construction, workers faced hazardous conditions, wage theft, and exploitation, with an estimated 6,500 workers dying.[1] Exploitative practices continued after the World Cup's finish, with workers suffering from stolen benefits, legal instability, and job insecurity, exposing the lingering malignant impacts of the Kafala System.[3] The Kafala System, historically used across Qatar and the Arab Gulf, ties migrant workers to their employers and gives employers significant control over both their employment and residency status. Employers can renew or revoke visas at will and restrict job mobility, enabling widespread abuse and expanding forced labor.[4]

While Qatar implemented major labor reforms in 2020 and 2021, absconding laws remain a major barrier to genuine progress.[5] These laws allow authorities to file criminal charges against migrant workers who leave their jobs without employer permission, enabling employers to take strict retaliatory measures against workers who try to escape abusive or unsafe conditions.[6] With major international events such as the 2027 FIBA Basketball World Cup in Qatar's capital city of Doha approaching, these laws risk forcing thousands of migrant workers to remain in dangerous environments under threat of termination, detention, or deportation.[7]

Policy Idea

To effectively combat forced labor, wage theft, and employer abuse, Qatar's Ministry of Labor should repeal absconding laws, ensuring migrant workers can leave their employers without fear of criminalization or retaliation. This reform would ensure that companies uphold fair labor practices to maintain workforce stability.

Qatar's Ministry of Labor should also mandate employer-led, government-regulated rights training for all migrant workers. These standardized training programs, conducted in workers' native languages, would educate them on their legal rights, wage protections, and grievance procedures, empowering them to identify unfair treatment and seek recourse against abuse.

Policy Analysis

Qatar's experience with prior labor reforms demonstrates that abolishing restrictive employer control mechanisms can yield measurable improvements in worker mobility, awareness of rights, and overall economic productivity. After Qatar formally dismantled the Kafala System in 2020, workers were permitted to change employers after a short notice period, which permitted increased job mobility.[8,9] Between November 2020 and August 2022, nearly 350,000 workers changed employers, outpacing pre-reform rates of 18,000 in 2019.[8] By October 2023, over 669,000 job change applications had been approved.[5]

Structural reform also proves to be effective when coupled with accessible mechanisms for exercising new rights, as seen in the Qatari Ministry of Labor's 2021 launch of a digital whistleblower platform, MaaSaken.[8] By enabling anonymous complaints, MaaSaken more than doubled the number of labor dispute cases lodged, leading to over 24,600 processed between October 2021 and October 2022.[8] These results suggest that combining legal reform with educational and government-led support initiatives can increase workers' willingness to report abuse and exercise their rights.

Regional examples, such as the labor law revisions of Saudi Arabia, reinforce the potential positive impact of abolishing Qatari absconding laws. In June 2025, Saudi Arabia abolished its own Kafala System, impacting over 13 million foreign workers.[10] Additionally, new regulations introduced in July 2025 established a 60-day grace period during which workers can re-sign with their employer, transfer, or leave the country before being classified as absconders.[11] Workers who fail to act within that period are flagged as absent, removed from employer records, and risk deportation.[12] If Qatar follows this trajectory by repealing absconding laws and implementing standardized rights training, it can both reinforce its reputation as a leader in Gulf labor reform and build on the proven successes of its 2020 and 2021 initiatives.

Highlights

- The 2022 FIFA World Cup exposed severe migrant labor abuses in Qatar, where over two million foreign workers, composing 95% of the workforce, faced exploitation under the restrictive Kafala System.[2]
- Qatar's absconding laws still criminalize workers who leave abusive employers despite recent reforms, reinforcing coercive labor practices and limiting job mobility.[6]
- Repealing absconding laws and introducing standardized, multilingual rights training would empower workers to report abuse, promote accountability, and strengthen Qatar's labor market stability.[1]
- Evidence from Qatar's 2020 and 2021 reforms and regional examples, such as Saudi Arabia's Kafala abolition, demonstrates that eliminating employer control mechanisms improves worker mobility, increases awareness of rights, and enhances labor ethics.[5,10]

Implementation

Stakeholders in repealing absconding laws include Qatar's Ministry of Labor, responsible for labor policy and drafting amendments, and the Ministry of Interior, which controls residency, immigration enforcement, and current absconding regulations. As Qatar is a constitutional monarchy, legal changes require alignment across ministries and final approval by the Amir. Within the Ministry of Labor, support can be built by framing repeal as consistent with the Qatar National Vision 2030 and the state's partnership with the International Labor Organization (ILO).[1,13] The ILO, among other global entities, continues to advocate and invest in improving workers' rights following the crisis of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.[1] Just as international pressure led to Qatar's 2020 and 2021 labor reforms, repealing absconding charges and implementing worker education initiatives represent practical, necessary steps to address persistent labor exploitation.[5] Repealing absconding laws enhances Qatar's global reputation, protects foreign investment, and sustains momentum after scrutiny during the 2022 FIFA World Cup, making reform politically advantageous and diplomatically strategic.

Employers and business associations—particularly in construction, hospitality, and recruitment sectors—are likely to resist repealing absconding laws due to concerns about increased workforce turnover, higher recruitment costs, and potential instability. These concerns reflect those raised during Qatar's 2020–2021 labor reforms and mirror resistance seen in Saudi Arabia following Kafala amendments, where employers feared losing control over their workforce.[14] To address this, it is important to maintain and clearly communicate employer protections similar to those established after the 2020 reforms. This includes requiring workers to submit formal resignation notices and obtain approval or acknowledgment from both the current and new employers during job transfers. Employers should also have defined channels to raise concerns about transfers, ensuring transparency and oversight while respecting workers' rights to change employers. Such balanced procedures help alleviate business concerns while supporting migrant worker mobility and labor rights.[14]

Compliance should be enforced by joint auditing task forces from the Ministries of Labor and Interior that would oversee implementation, using digital reporting platforms to document compliance and violations while preventing blacklisting or informal retaliation against workers. These audits must verify that employers uphold fair labor practices consistent with the repeal of absconding laws, including ensuring workers' freedom to leave abusive employment without penalty, adherence to contract terms, payment of fair wages, and safe working conditions. Audits should also confirm that mandated rights training programs are effectively delivered in workers' native languages, that workers understand their rights, and that grievance mechanisms are accessible and functional. By making certification contingent on these criteria, the audits reinforce protections against forced labor and abuse, promote transparency, and incentivize companies to comply with new labor reforms.[13]

Repealing absconding laws must be paired with large-scale labor-rights training. To overcome extensive language barriers, the government could collaborate with Migrant-Rights.org and Translators Without Borders to translate and culturally adapt educational materials into workers' primary languages.[15,16] These programs ensure workers understand the new system, their rights, and how to report abuses—crucial for preventing exploitation under any reformed framework.

A realistic implementation timeline spans two to three years, aligned with Qatar's prior technical cooperation with the ILO, which involved similar multi-year Kafala reforms.[6] While Qatar does not publish full cost estimates for reforms, available data illustrate the scale of investment: the Workers' Support and Insurance Fund had disbursed over $320 million by 2022.[17] These figures indicate substantial existing resource commitment, supporting the feasibility of repealing absconding laws and expanding worker-rights training within Qatar's current reform infrastructure.

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The United States Should Pursue A Two-Pronged Approach to Combat Haitian Gangs

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Congress should intervene and remedy the Haitian gang crisis by funding private security companies Vectus Global and Constellis while also renewing economic relief programs to bolster the Haitian economy.

Background

The gang crisis in Haiti, aided by political and economic instability, has reached unprecedented levels and shows no sign of abatement.[1] Armed gangs control 85% of the capital, Port-au-Prince, and are establishing governance structures that threaten the existing government and make the country unsafe for many.[2,3]Around half of gang members are children, and sexual violence against teenage girls rose by 1,000% in 2024.[4] Additionally, the country's food inflation rate remains around a staggering 35%, and half of the country's population faces acute hunger.[5,6] In 2025, the United States exacerbated the crisis by refusing to renew the Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through the Partnership Encouragement Act (HOPE) and the Haiti Economic Lift Program (HELP). These programs made Haitian textile and apparel exports, Haiti's largest industry, exempt from taxation.[7] Without the programs, the Haitian economy contracted by 4.2% over the last year.[5]

To counter the gangs' progress, the United Nations (UN) Security Council authorized a Multinational Security Support mission (MSS) in Haiti in 2024.[8] However, the mission was severely undermanned, operating with only 1,000 of the 2,500 personnel originally envisioned, and failed to stabilize Haiti.[8] To rectify this failure, the Security Council commissioned the Gang Suppression Force (GSF) on September 30, 2025.[2] The GSF will consist of 5,500 international military personnel intent on addressing security threats in Haiti to allow for future socioeconomic development.[1] Alongside UN aid, the Haitian government is also employing the American private security company Vectus Global to bolster its police force.[8] The company has sent hundreds of mercenaries to Haiti to instruct local forces and coordinate drone strikes, but they have been unable to curb the gangs' influence.[8] Thus, further US assistance is necessary to help resolve Haiti's crisis.

Policy Idea

Congress should enact a two-pronged plan to combat the Haitian gangs. First, it should extend a substantial economic commitment to private security firms Vectus Global and Constellis to reinforce the military personnel provided by the GSF. American private military firms have faced backlash for human rights violations in the past, so this policy must include a provision of strict US and UN oversight over the firm's actions in Haiti. Second, the US government should renew the HOPE and HELP programs immediately. This step would boost future Haitian economic prospects and help the country to rebuild once gang influence has been diminished. Together, this approach addresses the current threat of gangs and enables Haiti's future development.

Policy Analysis

The GSF does not assure international funding, troop contributions, or effective leadership.[9] The UN resolution suggests that support will primarily come from the countries that are closest to the situation. However, these nations face significant humanitarian crises of their own, with 16.3% of the Caribbean population facing severe hunger.[10] Thus, Vectus and Constellis provide more reliable commitments than the GSF alone, which relies heavily on voluntary support from struggling—and potentially unwilling—countries. Private security companies provide the same services as state-organized militaries, but they often perform tasks better, faster, or at lower costs.[11] In addition, studies show that private contractors engage locals in reconstructing their communities, which is one of the GSF's primary goals.

The HELP program, created in 2010, nearly tripled Haitian knit and woven apparel import quotas and employed over 10,000 Haitians.[7,12] Congress must continue this increased importation of Haitian textiles because trade accounts for about 40% of Haiti's GDP.[13] However, the country currently faces a significant trade deficit, spending about 15% more on imports than it earns from exports.[13] Consequently, its GDP has decreased by 3.1% over the last year.[14] As Haiti's top trade partner, the US should extend these programs to help reverse these economic downturns.[13]

This approach is necessary to prevent the imminent collapse of a Haitian state that could eventually affect the Americas as a whole.[3] From 2022 to 2024, over 420,000 Haitian nationals entered the US, a number that will certainly rise due to displacement levels in Haiti increasing by 36% just last year.[15,16] According to the US ambassador to the UN, the gangs will turn the country into an "exporter of crime, violence, and drugs" and could spark an even greater migrant crisis across Latin America if left unresolved.[1]

Highlights

- The gang crisis in Haiti is reaching extreme levels, spurring a severe economic downturn and intense humanitarian issues.[1,2,3,5,6] The United Nations Security Council recently commissioned the Gang Suppression Force (GSF) to alleviate the situation, but further US aid is necessary to ensure stability.[2]
- To curb gang violence and improve Haiti's economy, Congress should pass legislation renewing the Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through the Partnership Encouragement Act (HOPE) and Haiti Economic Lift Program (HELP) and enlist private security companies Vectus Global and Constellis. The United Nations and Department of State must maintain oversight over these firms' dealings.
- The private military firms, which perform duties more efficiently than state militaries, will provide additional troops to aid the Haitian police in combating the spread of gangs.[8,11] Simultaneously, the HOPE and HELP programs will help bolster the textile industry in Haiti, its largest source of revenue.[7]

Implementation

The House Foreign Affairs Committee should introduce the legislation as an extension of its July 2025 Strategy to Address Key Priorities Affecting Security and Empowerment in Haiti Act (SAK PASE), which would require the Department of State to create a "comprehensive strategy" to address the situation in Haiti.[17] First, Representatives Gregory Murphy (R-NC) and Gregory Meeks (D-NY), who composed the SAK PASE Act, should draft legislation resuming the HOPE and HELP programs that expired earlier this year.[9,17] Humanitarian organizations, immigration agencies, and lawmakers with large Hispanic constituencies would be key supporters. Second, the House Armed Services Committee, led by Chairman Mike Rogers (R-AL) should propose contracting Vectus Global and Constellis. Republicans like Rogers and Michael McCaul (R-TX), who have argued for greater US involvement in Haiti, would spearhead this legislation, and Republicans would be likely to approve this clause given its potential effects on migration and drug trafficking.[18,19]

Private military companies have a history of human rights violations, but by aligning with the UN, the United States can avoid public backlash.[20] The UN consistently utilizes Private Military Security Companies (PMSCs) for protection, risk assessments, and security training, and requires them to sign a standardized Memorandum of Understanding.[21,22] The US should mandate that Vectus and Constellis sign a similar agreement, requiring the mercenaries to report to and cooperate with the UN Designated Official for Haiti, thus minimizing the risk of human rights abuses.[22]

Simultaneously, the GSF will provide the medical support and information systems necessary to aid Haitian civilians.[23] It also entails a plan for the country's long-term development, helping Haitians to resume domestic oversight over national security.[1] Working with the GSF, Vectus and Constellis can ensure a humanitarian and peacekeeping mission that furthers Haiti's economic and security prospects while also limiting public criticism.

Although the Haitian government has not confirmed the exact number, it is reportedly paying Vectus Global roughly $44 million for the installment, in addition to 20% of customs revenue increases over the next three years.[8,24] The US is obligated to pay about $20 billion in foreign assistance this year.[25] To extend a competitive offer of roughly 50 million to Vectus and Constellis, the US must increase its budget by an extra 0.5%, which is certainly justifiable to prevent further spikes in immigration and drug trafficking.

This policy's impact can be measured by reductions in gang-controlled territory over the next one to two years and by improvements in Haitian export levels and GDP over the next 1-5 years. The effects on immigration will likely require more time to emerge, but a gradual decline in Haitian migration can be expected. Thus, by reinstating the HOPE and HELP programs and deploying Vectus Global and Constellis alongside the GSF, the United States can begin to alleviate the economic and humanitarian pressures driving Haiti's gang crisis.

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Regional Processing Centers: Multilateral Solutions for Reducing US Border Overload

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To alleviate stress on the immigration system, the US should enter into a multilateral agreement with key stakeholders in Latin America to establish Regional Processing Centers aimed at increasing federal processing capacity and providing an alternative to immigration detention centers.

Background

The continued flow of immigrants toward the US southern border has overwhelmed federal processing capacity.[1] Despite US Border Control having more than 2 million encounters on the southern border in each of the past three fiscal years, reports suggest that the US immigration system only has the capacity to humanely process 564,000 to 576,000 migrants per year.[2,3] Resulting overcrowding in immigration detention centers has led to human rights violations, including cells holding more than double their capacity and detainees being forced to sleep on concrete floors.[4,5,6]

Due to turmoil across the Western Hemisphere, immigration policies have shifted towards multilateral agreements to tackle the root causes of the problem.[7,8] For example, the US established the Central American Minors (CAM) Program in 2014 to reduce the number of unaccompanied minors traveling to the US southern border by providing a pathway to apply for legal status in the US from their home countries.[9] Similarly, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) created the Protection Transfer Arrangement (PTA) Program in 2016 to transfer migrants fleeing violence to a processing center in Costa Rica and match them with a country for resettlement.[10]

Building on these initiatives, the Safety Mobility Offices (SMOs) are offices established in four countries, which allow nine nationalities to apply online and be screened for resettlement and other eligible legal residency pathways.[11,12] These SMOs are effectively screening and information centers where eligible applicants are informed of pathways they should pursue, rather than actual processing centers.[13] However, the SMOs are too limited in scale to meaningfully shape migration patterns, assisting only a fraction of those seeking legal aid.[14] These policies demonstrate the need for a collaborative regional approach to immigration while also pointing to viable solutions.

Policy Idea

To alleviate stress on the US immigration system, the US should enter a multilateral agreement with Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Ecuador to replace the SMOs with Regional Processing Centers (RPCs). Modeled after the SMOs, the RPCs will use an online application to screen applicants for asylum or visa eligibility. Unlike SMOs, however, the RPCs will allow applicants to apply for legal residency from their home country and be scaled up to facilitate an increased processing capacity. This approach will reduce the flow of migrants heading towards the US border.

The actors implementing the RPCs include the US, partner countries, and international bodies such as the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Funding for the RPCs will be provided through congressional appropriation and reallocated SMO resources. Program success will be tracked using metrics such as processing times, cost per case, and the number of refugees resettled.

Policy Analysis

Initial reports suggest that the SMOs the RPCs are modeled after have successfully improved access to resettlement and decreased processing times. Nineteen months after SMOs' implementation, 26,738 refugees arrived in the US, and more than 1,000 individuals were referred from SMOs to other countries for resettlement.[15] The resettlement of 6,000 individuals from Latin America and the Caribbean in the fiscal year 2023 is a 1,400% increase from 2021 and more than double that of 2022.[16] Furthermore, the SMOs have cut processing times from a traditionally multi-year process to approximately four months.[17] The CAM Program, which allowed applicants to apply for legal residency from their home country, was similarly successful. A year after CAM was implemented, there was a 45% decrease in unaccompanied minors arriving at the US southern border.[9] Taken together, the results of the SMOs and CAM suggest that regionally based, pre-entry processing mechanisms like the RPCs can reduce processing times and irregular migration.

RPCs will be a more cost-effective alternative to the existing immigration system's focus on detaining illegal immigrants. The average daily cost of detaining an individual is $164.65 and the average detainment period is 50 days, making the average cost of detainment in an immigration detention center $8,232.50.[16,17] In comparison, the US spent approximately $81.7 million to process 266,750 applications, making the application processing cost through SMOs around $3,265, which is $4,967.50 less than the cost of detainment.[14,18] Diverting potential detainees towards RPCs will also reduce overcrowding in detention centers and make it more feasible for staff to meet basic hygiene and medical access standards, therefore decreasing human rights violations.[4,19,20] These statistics indicate that RPCs will provide an effective alternative to immigration detention.

Highlights

- The US southern border has repeatedly faced surges in migration, resulting in severely strained federal processing capacity, long waiting times, and human rights violations in overcrowded detention centers.[1,2,3,4,5,6]
- To alleviate stress on the immigration system, the US should enter into a multilateral agreement with Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Ecuador to establish Regional Processing Centers (RPCs), enabling applicants to apply for asylum or visas from their home countries.
- Evidence from Safety Mobility Offices (SMOs) and the Central American Minors (CAM) Program indicates that regionally based pre-entry processing mechanisms significantly cut processing times and increase immigrant resettlement capacity.[9,14]
- Although detention is a primary tool for addressing irregular immigration under the current system, RPCs offer a more cost-effective and humane alternative to immigration detention centers.[4,14,16,17,18,19,20]

Implementation

The RPCs should be implemented in two stages: a pilot program to evaluate effectiveness, followed by a gradual expansion in the number and capacity of RPCs. In the first stage, lasting a year, the existing SMOs operating in 13 cities across Latin America will transition to the RPC model to leverage pre-existing infrastructure and international partnerships.[18] The UNHCR and IOM will continue to employ staff to monitor online applications and conduct initial screenings. At the same time, US immigration officials will be permanently stationed on-site to conduct interviews and background checks in accordance with US immigration procedures.[12,21]

Before the pilot program, the US should establish benchmarks on performance metrics, such as processing times, for the pilot RPCs that will trigger scale-up.[10] After these benchmarks are met, the US should select three to five high-priority cities that serve as key migration or origin points to concentrate resources where they will have the most impact and reduce infrastructure needs. The US should direct staffing and infrastructure resources to the locations within a year, repeating the process until RPCs are established at the majority of the 100 cities designated as priority SMO locations.[22]

The Departments of State (DOS) and Homeland Security (DHS) should seek initial funding from Congress for the RPCs by reallocating funds intended to bolster the SMOs. The DOS's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration fiscal year (FY) 2025 budget request included $300 million for the SMOs.[23] Considering that only $81.7 million was needed to establish the SMOs, an allocation of $300 million will be sufficient to fund the pilot RPCs.[18] Increased immigration budget appropriations similar to FY24 budget increases would provide long-term funding.[24]

The proposed agreement should be formalized through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed by the US, partner countries, the UNHCR, and the IOM. MoUs have historically been effective in clarifying the terms and responsibilities of multilateral agreements and facilitating immigration programs.[10,25,26]

Formal negotiations will require DOS and DHS officials to identify each stakeholder's objectives and convene country-specific and international representatives.[27]

The President, acting through the DOS and DHS, should formalize the MoU as a presidential executive agreement rather than a treaty to increase political feasibility.[28,29] A treaty requires two-thirds of the Senate to vote in favor of the treaty.[30] Comparatively, an executive agreement requires only presidential approval, and there is precedent for presidents implementing sweeping immigration reforms through executive agreements.[29,31,32] However, because executive agreements can be amended or revoked by a successor without Senate approval, using this mechanism rather than a treaty may weaken the long-term durability of the RPCs and discourage partner countries from making sustained investments in the program.[33] Ultimately, combining an executive agreement with strong monitoring mechanisms and sustained congressional funding will be essential to reassure partner countries that the RPCs will endure beyond any single administration and justify their long-term investments in the program.

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Peru Must Reform Its Election Auditing Capabilities to Revive Democratic Transparency

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Peruvian President José Jerí should invite the Organization of American States' (OAS) Department of Electoral Observation (DECO) to empower Peru's National Office of Electoral Processes (ONPE) by improving election auditing efforts ahead of the April 2026 general election.

Background

For years, Peru has struggled to present itself as a formidable democracy due to its Congress's constant attempts to interfere with Peruvian elections. Bill No.06246, which attempted to allow Congress to impeach members of Peru's autonomous National Board of Justice (JNP), serves as an example of Congress attempting to interfere in elections by changing the makeup of the JNP, which appoints specialists to Peru's National Office of Electoral Processes (ONPE).[1] Worse yet, Peruvian congressional members recently passed laws (such as Bill No.32310) that weaken the Public Ministry of Peru's ability to investigate cases relating to congressmen under corruption and extortion charges.[2,3] Since June 2024, Peruvians have witnessed their elected officials enhance criminal immunity for themselves at the cost of undermining Peru's democratic and electoral guardrails.[4]

Continuing the trend of political corruption, Peru is facing one of its most consequential presidential crises in 2025. In addition to Congress exonerating its members under criminal investigation by weakening the Public Ministry of Peru's capabilities, its members have also undermined the executive branch by impeaching former president Dina Boluarte, who was equally corrupt, for her inability to combat organized crime.[5] Her impeachment marks the sixth Peruvian president to be impeached by Congress over the course of four years.[6,7] The frequency of Congress's impeachments against the president not only represents how Peruvian democratic checks and balances have eroded over time, but also how Congress seeks to discharge its members under criminal investigation, as seen with Congresswoman Keiko Fujimori recently announcing her fourth bid for the presidency after the Peruvian constitutional court dismissed her money-laundering case in October 2025.[8] Peruvian democracy will not survive if its elected officials refuse to accept responsibility and continue to override the rule of law.

Policy Idea

To prevent the further erosion of Peru's democracy, Peruvian President José Jerí should invite the Organization of American States (OAS) Department of Electoral Observation (DECO) to empower the ONPE to help instill trust in Peruvian democracy before the April 2026 general election. First, President José Jerí should send a formal request to the OAS asking for DECO's help in improving the state's ability to not only manage and screen candidates but also rebuild trust amongst the Peruvian population by ensuring that Congress will not interfere with voting processes. Given that the OAS Secretariat for Strengthening Democracy tasks DECO to work with OAS member states that ask for the OAS's help, DECO will proceed to work with Peru's ONPE by aiding the staff's election auditing efforts, which could include, but are not limited to, verifying electoral rolls and voting records.

Policy Analysis

DECO's help can reaffirm electoral integrity ahead of Peru's scheduled elections. In June 2025, DECO met with the ONPE in Lima, successfully training over 50 ONPE staff on how to combat disinformation through the use of artificial intelligence.[9] Given that DECO and ONPE are already working together, DECO can discourage Congress from manipulating the pre-election auditing process using its reporting, real-time observational, and diplomatic scrutiny pressures.

The OAS's strengthening of electoral auditing efforts in Brazil further exemplifies how it can help

Peru strengthen its democracy. In 2022, the OAS helped Brazil improve its electoral auditing technological capabilities through various measures, including using a Public Security Test (TPS) to confirm the legitimacy of votes coming into electronic ballot boxes.[10] Although the OAS does not have the authority to stop specific candidates or parties from participating in the elections, DECO, empowering the ONPE with the tech it used in Brazil, could strengthen the ONPE's auditing capacity. In doing so, DECO can potentially defeat attempts by Congress to falsely claim state-led vote fraud as a pretext to intervene.

Apart from establishing ties with the ONPE, the OAS's recent work in preventing democratic backsliding in Guatemala portrays how the OAS can secure democracy in Latin America. In 2023, the OAS Permanent Council condemned Guatemalan elites' attempts to intimidate electoral officials.[11] The then OAS Secretary General, Luis Almagro, was able to successfully resolve the crisis by sponsoring an electoral mission to oversee elected President Bernando Arévalo's transition to power.[12] While the OAS did not directly empower election auditing in Guatemala, its role demonstrates how its oversight and international scrutiny pressures can empower institutional and electoral integrity against actors seeking to exert undemocratic influence in Peru. The OAS's involvement in Peru can prevent congressional factions from manipulating the ONPE's pre-election auditing process.

Highlights

- Peru's Congress is interfering in elections and weakening the executive branch's power, highlighting the erosion of democratic checks and balances in Peru.[1,2,3]
- Peru's president should invite the Organization of American States' (OAS) Department of Electoral Observation (DECO) to Peru to rebuild trust in Peruvian democracy before the April 2026 general election by improving election auditing efforts.
- DECO has already met with the ONPE, training staff on how to combat disinformation through the use of artificial intelligence.[9]
- DECO's improving Brazil's auditing efforts and preventing democratic backsliding in Peru are potential solutions the OAS and ONPE to strive for to improve transparency in Peru's future elections.[12]

Implementation

President José Jerí must request OAS help before December 15th (the last day of the 2025-2026 legislative session), especially given that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) recently scrutinized Peru's Congress for failing to uphold due process or institutional integrity when ousting Dina Boluarte.[13] Although only one part of the OAS is actively scrutinizing the situation in Peru, Jerí is failing to prove to outsiders that he can handle the situation in Peru. On October 21st, 2025, he declared a state of emergency due to increasingly violent anti-corruption protests that had spread from Lima to the rest of the country.[14] Without the OAS's help, Jerí is likely to lose control of Peru before the scheduled election.

Despite the stakes facing Peru, Jerí may be hesitant to request OAS assistance in light of his skepticism towards the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR). While serving as the President of Peru's Congress, Jerí expressed his desire for Peru to withdraw from IACtHR in September 2025 after the court urged Peru to deny amnesty to police who committed human rights abuses.[15,16] Despite his skepticism of IACtHR, Jerí has caved to OAS pressure as seen in his attempt to amend the 1954 Caracas Convention on Diplomatic Asylum's rules on amnesty.[17] Civic unrest and protests are unlikely to cool in the next few months, meaning that growing pressure on Jerí to ensure transparency in Peru's upcoming elections will stimulate Jerí to turn to the OAS before he loses control of Peru.

Assuming Jerí requests the OAS's help, he will first have to draft a formal request to the OAS before December 15th to allow DECO to operate in Peru from December to the end of April. According to the Second Edition of OAS's 2024 Electoral Observation Missions Manuals, OAS member states can request the OAS's advisory services.[18] Moreover, a member state's invitation includes informing the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Elmer Schialer Salcedo, and having the executive branch guarantee DECO full cooperation and security while in Peru, two duties Peru has an obligation to fulfill per their status as an OAS member.[18] In return, DECO will respect the sovereignty of the host country, its constitution, and its laws by not replacing actors in the electoral process.[18]

Assuming Peru agrees to host DECO in mid-to-late December, DECO will deploy a rapid-response technical mission by early-to-mid February, allowing it to strengthen its auditing capacity, install real-time vote verification systems, and issue public reports that increase electoral transparency from then to the end of April.[10] By taking charge of inviting the OAS over, Jerí will signal his resolve to improve Peru's democratic institutions, raising the stakes for corrupt congressional factions attempting to contest or manipulate electoral integrity ahead of the 2026 elections.

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HEALTH POLICY

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Federally Implementing Health Equity Zones to Eliminate Disparities and Improve Community Engagement

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Americans experience some of the most significant health disparities due to socioeconomic factors and location, with minimal interventions or community input. To counteract growing inequities, a policy that creates community-led Health Equity Zones should be implemented.

Background

In 2021, life expectancy in the US varied by 20.4 years depending on an individual's race, ethnicity, and where they lived.[1] In fact, studies suggest that healthcare accounts for only 10-20% of health outcomes.[2,3] Social factors, such as education quality, housing access, and economic stability, directly influence health and are often homogeneously clustered among neighborhoods.[4] Residential segregation is deeply rooted in the history of the US and continues to influence present-day neighborhoods.[4] In an analysis of 63,694 census tracts, the difference in life expectancy between high-segregated and low-segregated neighborhoods was 4.2 years.[5] Furthermore, a higher percentage of the people in the high-segregated neighborhoods lacked a college education, were living below the federal poverty level, and were unemployed, displaying the profound impact of socioeconomic factors on health outcomes.[5]

A study of 11 high-income nations found that the US had the highest number of geographical health disparities, experiencing the worst health outcomes and health equity.[6] The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that areas with socioeconomic disadvantages had significantly higher prevalence of chronic disease, reflecting an unequal distribution of resources.[7] There is notable geographic variation among the social determinants of health, illustrating a need for individualized interventions.[8]

Marginalized areas that require the most community infrastructure, individualized care, and high-quality healthcare are typically those most underrepresented and excluded from making healthcare decisions.[9] Currently, several health systems take a "one-size-fits-all" approach to address healthcare needs, failing to tailor solutions to specific communities.[10] Populations of minority communities are often excluded and underrepresented in patient engagement spaces.[11] To effectively address the socioeconomic factors that perpetuate health disparities in marginalized areas, it is essential to incorporate the input of the communities that are most directly impacted.

Policy Idea

To manage the socioeconomic disparities affecting health outcomes throughout the US, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should implement a policy that leverages community involvement through the creation of Health Equity Zones (HEZs). An advisory board will evaluate urban, rural, and Native American communities and utilize socioeconomic metrics to select areas to implement HEZs. Upon the selection of HEZs, the policy would include:

1. A data-driven needs assessment of the HEZ through demographic surveys and direct community engagement to identify necessary priorities and implement a personalized action plan that addresses food insecurity, housing affordability, transportation, education quality, economic opportunity, and various other social factors.
2. Construction of a cross-sector community-led group to lead the HEZs, consisting of community stakeholders, organizations, and residents that effectively represent the diverse makeup of the community.
3. Metrics evaluating the effectiveness of HEZs in improving health outcomes.

Policy Analysis

The federal implementation of HEZs is necessary to introduce community participation and improve public health outcomes, requiring commitments from the HHS, advisory boards, community organizations, and, most importantly, residents. HEZs have demonstrated success through their adoption in states such as Rhode Island and Washington, returning positive outcomes across multiple sectors.[12,13] In a statewide evaluation of Rhode Island's HEZs, reports showed that social vulnerability dropped by 21% in HEZ communities, with improvements in factors such as income, housing, pollution, and access to healthy food.[14] The assessment displayed considerable economic benefits through reduced healthcare costs, increased long-term savings, and the attraction of national investments, such as a $10.75 million investment by Blue Meridian Partners in Rhode Island, thus far.[14,15] The report also found lower public insurance costs within HEZs and higher resilience to significant difficulties, such as pandemics or natural disasters.[14] For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Rhode Island HEZs distributed over 4 million masks, half a million meals, and 300,000 self-testing kits.[15] Moreover, residents living in HEZs had significantly lower rates of chronic disease.[14] Ultimately, HEZs improve social well-being, economic outcomes, and overall health; implementing HEZs on a federal scale would likely yield similar results.

Federally enacting cross-sector community-led coalitions for HEZs enables increased representation and community engagement, ensuring that investments are locally guided rather than through a top-down approach. There is substantial evidence that active community engagement successfully informs community decisions and yields socioeconomic and health benefits, particularly for disadvantaged populations.[16,17,18,19] HEZs statewide in Rhode Island saw a 163% increase in community engagement over the course of four years.[20] By applying similar models to create representative community-led initiatives, this policy has a rational strategy to amplify community voices and harness the long-term benefits.

Highlights

- The US suffers from some of the most severe health inequities due to disparities in socioeconomic factors, such as education quality, housing access, and economic stability.[1,2,3]
- Current solutions to improve healthcare outcomes often employ a "one-size-fits-all" approach that fails to tailor healthcare investments to specific communities and excludes the input of the affected populations.[9,10,11]
- To improve socioeconomic health disparities, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should implement a policy that establishes community-led Health Equity Zones (HEZs) for high-need areas across the US, conducts personalized needs assessments, and consistently evaluates HEZs for effectiveness and necessary improvements.
- Existing state models, such as Rhode Island and Washington, will allow for easier development and implementation of HEZs; furthermore, reports indicate HEZs improve access to social factors, enhance health outcomes, possess economic benefits, and successfully engage communities.[14,20]

Implementation

To formally introduce a policy that federally enacts HEZs to Congress, Senator Lisa Blunt Rochester, a leading advocate for health equity and public health initiatives for marginalized communities, would introduce the bill.[21] Upon its introduction, the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, which maintains jurisdiction over the HHS and other public health programs, will hold hearings on the proposed policy to assess its feasibility and generate public support.[22]

Specifically, to implement this policy, the HHS would need to garner bipartisan support. The policy aims to implement HEZs in high-need areas experiencing the worst health outcomes. Currently, many of these communities are rural populations located in the Deep South, the Midwest, and the Appalachian region, all of which are predominantly conservative.[23,24,25] By emphasizing the benefit to conservative voters, the policy would gain greater bipartisan support to be leveraged through Congress. Moreover, a policy that intends to improve health through addressing environmental factors aligns with the goals of the *Make Our Children*

Healthy Again: Assessment, which seeks to identify the environmental drivers of children's declining health.[26]

The policy would gain additional support due to a notable amount of already-administered state legislation and HEZ initiatives. States like Rhode Island and Washington have successfully implemented HEZs, with nine other states joining a similar collaboration to address health-related social needs, providing a practical model for creating HEZs.[12,13,27]

After the policy's passage, the implementation of the policy would comprise four phases. In phase one, lasting three months, the HHS would begin a coordinated effort to create an advisory board with community health experts that utilizes various socioeconomic metrics to identify high-need regions with poor health outcomes. After the areas for HEZ design are chosen, phase two would commence for the following three months. The HHS, in partnership with state governments and public health organizations, would conduct a needs assessment based on local public health data, demographic surveys, and community input through forums. Based on the assessment results, phase three of the policy will construct cross-sector advisory groups led by community residents and local stakeholders. The advisory groups will create a tailored action plan to allocate, increase, and redirect investments while also informing and influencing relevant state and federal legislation to benefit their targeted population. Finally, phase four of the policy will evaluate the effectiveness of the HEZs. Every six months, the HHS and state governments will collect and analyze data related to socioeconomic factors and health outcomes of the specific communities. Based on the metrics, the community-led groups will adapt and adjust their plans to implement necessary changes and improvements.

The policy may experience pushback due to the additional funding required from the HHS. However, by emphasizing to policymakers and their constituents that HEZs have indicated notable long-term economic benefits through reduced healthcare costs and increased savings, the policy can combat targeted opposition.[14,15] Overall, through collaborative government and community operations, a federal policy administering HEZs will provide long-standing socioeconomic, health, and community benefits.

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When Doctors Need Doctors: Protecting Clinician Mental-Health Access

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The US Department of Health and Human Services should implement the CARE Act, which would establish a national standard limiting licensure and credentialing questions only to current impairment. This reform ensures clinicians can seek mental-health care without fear, strengthening workforce stability and advancing patient safety.

Background

The United States is facing a crisis within the healthcare workforce, with roughly 43.2% of doctors reporting at least one symptom of burnout in 2024.[1] Although this number is declining, its prevalence remains high across specialties and has long-term impacts on physician culture and patient outcomes.[2] For example, the Commonwealth Fund found that nearly half of US primary-care physicians reported feeling burned out, and more than one-third of those planned to stop seeing patients within one to three years.[3]

A critical factor contributing to persistent burnout and untreated mental health conditions lies within professional culture and regulatory structures. State medical boards and hospital credentialing forms have historically asked physicians, residents, and applicants whether they have ever been diagnosed with or treated for a mental health condition.[4]

These questions, along with the consequences that can follow, deter care-seeking: a 2025 study found that more than 40% of physicians, medical students, and residents reported fearing disclosure requirements on licensure forms.[5] This fear results in many conditions going untreated, increased suicide risk, reduced clinician well-being, greater burnout and medical errors, and turnover—factors which undermine patient care stability.[6]

In recent years, 29 states have begun reforming their licensure language to focus on current impairments rather than past treatment history.[7,8] However, this progress is inconsistent as requirements and the respective changes vary by state, creating confusion for physicians and residents, uneven protections, and persistent fear around disclosure.[4] Some states have eliminated past-history questions, while others still allow invasive or punitive language.[4] Without a clear national standard, clinicians remain vulnerable to punitive reporting expectations that undermine their ability to access mental-health resources and workforce stability.

Policy Idea

To protect clinicians' mental health and establish consistent standards nationwide, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), in partnership with the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), should implement the Clinician Access & Rights to Equitable Mental Health (CARE) Act. This policy addresses persistent stigma and fear surrounding seeking mental health support by setting a national standard for the questions medical boards, hospitals, and residency programs may ask. It should limit inquiries strictly to current impairments that interfere with safe medical practice and eliminate questions about all previous mental-health care, protecting clinicians' right to seek treatment without fear. The CARE Act builds on the Dr. Lorna Breen Health Care Provider Protection Act, enacted in 2022, which focused on the federal government's broader efforts to safeguard clinician mental health.[10]

Policy Analysis

While the Breen Act addresses stigma and funds wellness programs, it does not change licensure or credentialing rules. Data consistently demonstrates that regulatory fear suppresses help-seeking. More than 40% of physicians, residents, and medical students delay or avoid mental-health care due to licensure concerns, and nearly one-third reported knowing a colleague who did the same.[9] A 2024 KLAS industry report additionally found that physician turnover reached 13%, with mental health strain as a leading driver.[12] The medical field is a demanding field, and untreated mental health concerns contribute to early exit from clinical practice, which can impose significant replacement and productivity costs of between $500,000 and $1 million.[12] Hence, even the smallest improvements in retention, especially by positively supporting the physicians' health themselves, would not only benefit the healthcare industry but also provide substantial cost savings.

State-level reforms demonstrate that updating licensure language improves help-seeking. States such as Michigan, New York, and Connecticut have narrowed or eliminated their mental-health-related questions to inquire only about current impairment.[4] Following these reforms, physicians in these states reported reduced fear of punitive licensure consequences and increased willingness to seek counseling or therapy.[13]

The CARE Act is designed to close the regulatory gap existing nationwide by making clinician mental health privacy standards consistent across the country without eliminating state authority over licensure enforcement. Current federal frameworks, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA), unified previously inconsistent state and institutional policies on protecting patient privacy and guaranteeing emergency care regardless of insurance or racial status.[12,14] Hence, evidence shows that creating a federal floor for these interventions can improve consistency, accountability, and safety while preserving state roles.

Highlights

- Over 40% of physicians, residents, and medical students avoid or delay mental-health treatment due to licensure-related disclosure fears.[5]
- Although roughly half of the United States has begun updating its disclosure regulations, inconsistent standards and uneven enforcement continue to fuel fear and confusion; meanwhile, the Dr. Lorna Breen Act funded stigma-reduction efforts but left licensure-related structural barriers intact.[7,8]
- To address this issue, the CARE Act should be established by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) to establish a national floor on the "current-impairment-only" standard, protecting access to care while preserving state licensing authority.
- Outdated licensure rules drive clinician fear, suppress mental-health care, and fuel costly turnover – while state reforms show that a current-impairment-only standard increases help-seeking and retention.[9,12,13]

Implementation

The CARE Act should be implemented through guidance from the HHS and OCR. This guidance would require medical boards, hospitals, and residency programs to update their licensure and credentialing questions to ask only about current impairment, not past or current mental health treatments or any other invasive questions. This requires coordinated efforts from HHS and OCR and clear marketing to stakeholders.

To begin, HHS should release official language for states and healthcare institutions to follow, along with examples of compliant application questions. The policy's messaging would focus on patient safety, stigma reduction, and clinician retention, emphasizing that protecting clinicians protects patients. Institutions would be given a phased timeline to adopt the new language in their respective licensing or residency applications, such as one year for hospitals and training programs and two years for state boards. This staggered implementation reduces administrative burden and ensures that smaller or resource-limited institutions have adequate time to update systems, forms, and review processes.

Key partners such as the Dr. Lora Breen Foundation, American Medical Association, Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), and the Association of American Medical Colleges would support its rollout and increase publicity.[16,17,18] Members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee and the House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee from states already following components of CARE—such as Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy or New York Representative Paul Tonko—could champion the effort.[4] A public comment period would allow medical boards, physician groups, resident unions, and hospital associations to provide input.

Enforcement of the CARE Act would occur through existing accreditation pathways. National accreditation bodies, such as the ACGME for residency programs and state medical boards for licensure, would be required to integrate the updated language standards into their reviewing processes.[17] To ensure proper compliance, the OCR would allow clinicians who encounter non-compliant forms to report them. Programs or institutions that fail to comply after their respective timelines would risk a citation to their accreditation status, which could result in loss of eligibility for federal funding, reduced residency match participation, and reputational harm.

Additionally, unlike developing wellness programs, this proposal requires limited federal spending by primarily relying on regulatory clarity and enforcement mechanisms already in place by the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services and HHS.

Political resistance from malpractice insurers and state medical boards, especially those that ask invasive mental health questions, such as Florida or Washington, is to be expected.[9] However, this opposition can be mitigated by emphasizing that the CARE Act preserves state oversight while improving clinician well-being and workforce stability. Burnout-related physician turnover costs health systems an estimated $4.6 billion annually, and even modest retention gains would outweigh administrative costs.[9,12,15] The success of this act will depend on the collaboration with physician groups, hospital leaders, and trainees to support both the regulatory shift and the broader cultural change needed to make accessing mental-health care safe and routine for clinicians.

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Mandating Early-Stage Palliative Care Consultations in New York State

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An expansion of New York's PCIA led by the New York State Department of Health should be implemented over a three-year timeline to incorporate early-stage palliative care consultations and standardized patient education—reducing avoidable end-of-life expenditures while improving overall patient satisfaction.

Background

Medicare spends over 25% of its annual budget on the 5% of enrollees in their final year of life.[1] Due to a lack of patient awareness on the full scope of treatment options and their respective outcomes, end-of-life care often fails to alleviate suffering and limit unnecessary treatments, further contributing to wasteful medical spending.[2] One study found that 69% of patients with metastatic lung cancer and 81% of patients with advanced colorectal cancer were not made aware that chemotherapy is a palliative, rather than curative, treatment.[3] Palliative care is defined as health care treatment intended to prevent or relieve pain and suffering to enhance a patient's quality of life, which can extend into hospice care.[4] Hospice is a comfort-driven form of end-of-life care utilized in place of curative treatment.[5] Patient and caregiver knowledge on these distinctions is essential in making informed and tailored decisions on plans of care.

Hospice care is associated with decreased hospital stays and, as a result, can reduce spending by $900–$5,000 for beneficiaries not in nursing homes.[6] Providing patients and families with education on palliative care options not only decreases individual expenses but also minimizes aggressive and unnecessary end-of-life care, especially in hospital settings.[7] New York's Palliative Care Information Act (PCIA), which came into effect on February 9, 2011, aims to promote more informed decisions on end-of-life care by requiring physicians and nurse practitioners to provide terminally ill patients with palliative care education.[8] However, information may only be provided to patients whose illness results in a prognosis of six months or less.[9] While the PCIA addresses the need for expanded access to palliative care education, it places a limit on which patients are eligible to receive such consultations.

Policy Idea

The New York State legislature should amend the PCIA to mandate palliative care consultations at the onset of a terminal disease diagnosis, rather than in the patient's final months of life, providing a promising approach to cultivate targeted, higher-value care. Physicians and nurse practitioners would be required to provide a state-standardized information packet, developed in collaboration with the Hospice & Palliative Care Association of New York State and adhering to International Classification of Diseases (ICD) definitions. The amendment would additionally mandate a 10-minute palliative care consultation within 30 days of diagnosis. Funding for provider training, pamphlet printing, and outreach would be derived from Medicare's Quality Improvement Organization (QIO) funds, requiring approximately $500,000 annually. This amendment would not only ensure consistency across patient-provider communication on palliative care options but also contribute to reduced hospitalizations and aggressive end-of-life treatment.

Policy Analysis

Before the PCIA's passing in 2011, approximately 12.3% of terminally ill patients received palliative care consults; after the law's passing, this figure increased to 37.7%.[10] In addition to increased access to palliative care education, mandating earlier-stage palliative care consultations would further increase the aforementioned impact and result in a reduction in patients' length of hospitalization and subsequent medical costs.[11] In a pilot study on Advocate Aurora Health in Illinois, referral for early palliative care consultations by the third day of hospitalization resulted in a total decrease in the cost of care by approximately $5,000 when comparing the pilot group to baseline and control groups.[11] Similar studies have found a high correlation between earlier hospice evaluations during a patient's first two days in the hospital and lower costs.[12] Further expanding the PCIA's mandated consultations to patients at the onset of a terminal disease proves to be a cost-effective strategy.

Patient satisfaction with quality of care is also likely to increase overall with the implementation of the PCIA's amendment. The University of Michigan's 2025 National Poll on Healthy Aging found that 36% of respondents above the age of 50 had a basic understanding of palliative care; however, once provided with a clear definition, 84% indicated interest in receiving it if they were to develop a serious condition.[13] Additionally, a 2011 report by Public Opinion Strategies found that 58% of patients with a serious illness feared doctors may not provide all of the treatment options or choices available.[14] 50% of respondents in the study reported that doctors do not spend enough time talking and listening to patients and their families.[14] Both of these concerns are directly addressed by mandating early-stage palliative care education: information and consultations are extended to a larger patient population.

Highlights

- New York's Palliative Care Information Act (PCIA) requires that physicians and nurse practitioners offer information regarding palliative and end-of-life care options to terminally ill patients with a prognosis of six months or less.[8]
- Studies indicate that the PCIA nearly tripled the amount of palliative care consultations patients received in New York from 12.3% to 37.7%, a promising sign of expanded access to patient education.[10]
- An extension to the PCIA mandating earlier-stage palliative care consultations within 30 days of diagnosis, regardless of the patient's prognosis, would promote strategically informed decisions on the patient's plan of care in the long term; this effort includes the distribution of standardized pamphlets on options of care coupled with individual physician consultations.
- A reduction in aggressive end-of-life care, unnecessary hospitalizations, medical expenditures, and increased quality of care and patient satisfaction are likely outcomes of this amendment to the PCIA.[7,10,13]

Implementation

The expansion of the PCIA should follow a three-year timeline. The first year should consist of identifying potential patient and provider stakeholders within ten health systems in each of New York's defined regions.[15] Support from external organizations, such as the Hospice and Palliative Care Association of New York State, would help further publicize the program by promoting regional conferences and forming partnerships with hospice providers to disseminate updates via provider newsletters and webinar briefings.[16] Additionally, collaboration with the New York State Department of Health is needed to develop a physician training program that ensures standardized dissemination of palliative care concepts. Verification of accuracy and elimination of bias in the palliative care information pamphlets should also occur within this planning stage, requiring extensive collaboration with government agencies such as the United States Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality to ensure the policy aligns with quality metrics and standardized best practices.

The second year should establish a pilot program within the indicated interested health systems. Within these systems, physicians would conduct early-stage palliative care consultations for all terminally ill patients, regardless of whether their prognosis is six months or less. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this program, a thorough analysis of 30-day readmission rates, patient and family satisfaction indexes, average length of inpatient hospital stays, palliative care utilization rates, and cost-per-patient averages would be monitored. Approximately $20,000 would be allocated from Medicare's QIO to fund this initial program, which is reflective of the relatively small scale of covering clinician training workshops and data collection for the project.[17]

The third year of this timeline would result in statewide implementation following legislative hearings. Committees that oversee bills related to long-term and end-of-life care, along with Medicaid spending, such as the New York State Assembly Health Committee and the Aging Committee, would aid in this initiative. A potential setback may come from legislators representing rural and under-resourced districts, who may be concerned about the costs incurred by expanding palliative care access. However, health economists and Assembly Health Committee members need to emphasize the robust research showing that early palliative care intervention can reduce costly end-of-life hospitalizations and expenditures.[11] To address New York residents' concerns about funding the program, there must be an emphasis by the Department of Health and supporting legislators on using Medicare's QIO exclusively, as state taxes will not be increased. While statewide implementation would require substantial funding to support training and data collection, QIO allocations would be targeted specifically to offset the costs without burdening state budgets.

With this three-year implementation, the policy should address rising hospitalization costs in end-of-life care and improve patient satisfaction with quality of care.

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Where Did All the Pediatricians Go?: Increasing Medicaid Provider Payments to Bolster the Pediatric Workforce

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To address the shortage of pediatric subspecialists in the United States, Medicaid should raise reimbursement rates for pediatric services to parity with Medicare rates. Higher salaries will attract more physicians to the pediatric workforce, thereby increasing access to care for children.

Background

The United States is facing a critical shortage of pediatric subspecialty providers, resulting in longer wait times and widening pediatric healthcare deserts. According to a Children's Hospital Association workforce assessment, wait times to see certain pediatric specialists can reach up to 13 weeks.[1] Recent trends also show fewer medical students pursuing pediatrics, with 8% of pediatric residency positions going unfilled during the 2024 official match process.[2] Financial barriers are the likely culprit. On average, medical school graduates accumulate over $200,000 in educational debt.[3] Furthermore, although pediatric subspecialists undergo longer training periods than comparable adult providers, their lifetime earnings are significantly lower.[4] Low Medicaid reimbursement rates are a major contributor to this gap.[2] Nearly half of all US children are covered by Medicaid or the associated Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), but Medicaid reimbursement for pediatric services is substantially lower than that for adult care under Medicare or commercial insurance.[5,6]

The most notable federal attempt to raise Medicaid physician payments was the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA), which temporarily allocated federal funds to increase Medicaid reimbursement to Medicare levels for primary care physicians and pediatricians.[7] The program ended after two years due to inconclusive evidence on its effectiveness.[8] States have also piloted innovative policies to increase pediatric provider payments. Massachusetts' *MassHealth Primary Care Sub-Capitation Program,* for example, pays pediatricians using a per-member-per-month rate, rather than fee-for-service, allowing more financial freedom.[9] While official data are pending, early analyses suggest most participating practices have experienced stable or increased revenue.[10] However, states differ widely in their capacity to fund and sustain such programs. To bolster the pediatric workforce and ensure equitable access to care for all children, the federal government should intervene on the payer side.

Policy Idea

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) should provide subsidies through the Medicaid federal matching program to enable states to raise Medicaid reimbursement rates for pediatric services to parity with Medicare rates. The average Medicaid-to-Medicare fee index, which measures state Medicaid fees relative to Medicare fees, is 0.75 across all services and 0.66 for primary care.[11] Because Medicaid reimbursement varies substantially by state, CMS should prioritize those with below-average parity, while allowing wealthier states to self-fund the increase. To accomplish this goal, Congress will need to pass legislation, similar to the ACA, that allocates new funding to the Medicaid federal matching program, which subsidizes state Medicaid programs. To gauge workforce impacts, the subsidies should last at least ten years, with an option to extend them to lower-income states that cannot fund the difference.

Policy Analysis

Aligning Medicaid pediatric physician payments with Medicare rates will alleviate the ongoing financial uncertainty associated with specializing in pediatrics and encourage more medical students to pursue pediatric subspecialty care. Bolstering the pediatric workforce to increase access to care for children is a policy goal with strong political and economic support. Children's health interventions generate large returns on investment; routine childhood immunizations alone save the United States $540 billion annually.[12] Medicaid coverage in early life also yields lifelong benefits, such as decreased incidence of chronic illness in adulthood and higher educational attainment.[13]

Although past policy evaluations have not focused specifically on pediatricians, a 2018 study found strong evidence that the ACA's Medicaid payment boost led office-based pediatricians to increase the number of Medicaid patients in their panels by six percentage points on average.[14] More providers accepting Medicaid positively impact children's access to care. The direct impact of the proposed policy would be higher pediatric provider salaries, but the broader goal is to expand the pediatric workforce over time. According to the Medicaid-to-Medicare fee index, parity could increase pediatric salaries by up to 25 percentage points in some states.[7] Such a substantial change in compensation could have long-term effects on specialty choice among medical students. The ACA's two-year window was short relative to a typical physician's training period, so a federal subsidy program spanning at least a decade is needed to evaluate the workforce impact of higher pediatric Medicaid payments.

Evidence from past policies shows that childhood Medicaid eligibility improves lifelong health and that pediatricians respond to higher reimbursement by increasing Medicaid participation. Together, these findings demonstrate that increasing pediatric provider payments can strengthen the Medicaid program, attract more physicians to pediatrics, and expand access to care for children nationwide.

Highlights

- Medicaid and the associated Children's Health Insurance Program cover nearly half of all US children.[5]
- Low Medicaid reimbursement rates are driving future physicians away from careers in pediatrics, creating a critical shortage of pediatric subspecialists and limiting children's access to care.[2]
- The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) should provide a ten-year subsidy to state Medicaid programs to raise pediatric provider reimbursement rates to parity with Medicare costs, which are up to 50% higher.[2]
- Aligning Medicaid pediatric physician payments with Medicare rates will alleviate the ongoing financial uncertainty associated with careers in pediatrics,[2] encourage more medical students to pursue pediatric subspecialty care and increase access to pediatric healthcare.[14]

Implementation

Implementing Medicaid-Medicare parity for pediatric services will require collaboration at the federal and state levels. The most effective political avenue for this proposal is passing a Medicaid and CHIP payment reform bill through the Senate Finance Committee and the House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee, both of which oversee Medicaid legislation. Key allies in Congress include Senator Ben Ray Luján (D-NM) and Representative David Valadao (R-CA), who both represent constituencies with high Medicaid enrollment and openly pushed back against recent Medicaid cuts.[15,16] With these two sponsoring bills in both chambers of Congress during the 2026-2027 legislative session, a broad bipartisan coalition could be built around Medicaid pediatric provider parity. Although Medicaid spending has been under strict scrutiny under the current administration, increasing Medicaid funding is popular and evidence based. Over 80% of Americans across the political spectrum hold positive views of Medicaid.[17] With the national spotlight on Medicaid funding over the last year, public pressure could push Medicaid pediatric provider payments to the forefront of the next legislative session.

A key challenge with adjusting Medicaid and CHIP reimbursement rates is that the two programs, though strongly related and administratively similar within states, are financed differently at the federal level.[18] While Medicaid is a mandatory item in the federal budget, CHIP must be reauthorized through congressional action, and state spending on CHIP is matched at an enhanced rate.[19] The proposed Medicaid-Medicare parity legislation will mandate changes in reimbursement rates for both programs using federal funds, coordinating the various health insurance programs that affect children.

Once Congress passes the legislation, CMS must issue formal guidance within six months to define eligibility criteria, reporting requirements, and federal matching rates for each state. During year one, CMS will accept applications for Medicaid State Plan Amendments (SPAs), which are agreements between states and the federal government that outline program activities and ensure federal fund matching. All states that submit SPAs will receive federal funds drawn from the over $900 billion in Medicaid savings anticipated under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.[20] However, states with below-average Medicaid-Medicare parity will be prioritized, with the lowest-income states receiving 100% subsidies for the payment increase. During years two to four, states will adjust their Medicaid payment schedules and work closely with CMS to match them to comparable Medicare rates. For the remaining trial years, states should implement Medicare-Medicaid parity and collect comprehensive data on pediatric providers' Medicaid participation, the number of visits by juvenile Medicaid recipients, and wait times for pediatric specialist visits. During the final year, the Medicaid and CHIP Payment and Access Commission (MACPAC) will conduct a final review of pediatric workforce trends to determine whether parity should be extended and how it should be funded in the long term.

Potential hurdles to passing legislation and implementing new Medicaid policy include political resistance to increased federal spending and variation in state administrative capacity. To mitigate political challenges, interest groups such as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children's Hospital Association should work with their lobbying arms to frame the proposal as a targeted, time-limited investment in the pediatric workforce, rather than an entitlement expansion.[21,22] State administrative changes will be the largest barrier to policy implementation, as reimbursement changes can be time-consuming and costly. Allocated funding will include a small subsidy for administrative needs to overcome this challenge. Over the ten-year implementation window, this policy can provide evidence on how to sustainably expand the pediatric workforce and enhance children's access to care.

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Postpartum Medicaid: Universal Screening and Mental Health Support to Protect Maternal Well-Being

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Coverage gaps and inconsistent screening leave many mothers with untreated postpartum depression. Mandating universal screenings at six weeks, six months, and one year, paired with year-long Medicaid coverage and guaranteed therapy or peer support, will reduce harm and lower costs.

Background

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a major contributor to maternal morbidity and mortality, yet remains underdiagnosed and undertreated in the United States. Approximately one in eight mothers experiences PPD symptoms, and reported diagnosis rates have nearly doubled over the past decade, climbing from 9.4% in 2010 to 19.0% in 2021.[1,2] Although clinical guidelines emphasize early postpartum screening from two to six weeks, evidence shows PPD typically emerges during the first two to three postpartum months and can persist long after.[3,4] About 7% of mothers experience depressive symptoms nine to ten months postpartum.[5] Among preventable pregnancy-related deaths, 63% of mental health-related deaths occur between 43 and 365 days after birth, compared with 18% of preventable deaths from other causes.[6] Risk also varies by income: by three months postpartum, 25% of lower-income mothers screened above the clinical threshold for depressive symptoms versus 9% of higher-income peers, with rates climbing when low income overlaps with unemployment, less education, or being unmarried.[7]

Despite these risks, screening practices remain inconsistent. 79.1% of women report being asked about depression during pregnancy, 87.4% after delivery, and nearly 20% say they were never asked during prenatal visits.[1] The consequences of untreated PPD are severe: increased maternal mortality, impaired mother-infant bonding, negative developmental outcomes for children, and higher long-term social and healthcare costs.[8,9,10,11]

Medicaid finances approximately 41% of US births, positioning it as a critical tool for reform.[12] However, federal law requires state coverage for only about 60 days postpartum, leaving many women uninsured during the highest-risk months.[12] While the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 allowed states to extend coverage to 12 months, and the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 made this option permanent, integration of screening and treatment remains fragmented.[12] Without consistent coverage, universal screening, and access to treatment, thousands of low-income mothers continue to face avoidable risks.

Policy Idea

Congress should pass legislation amending existing postpartum Medicaid policy to establish a standardized national framework for detecting and treating postpartum depression. Universal screenings would be required at six weeks, six months, and twelve months postpartum, incorporated into both maternal and pediatric visits to maximize access.[13] Providers would be required to use validated tools, such as the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale, and conduct "warm handoffs" to behavioral health providers for positive screens, ensuring continuity of care rather than one-time referrals.[14]

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) would require states to extend Medicaid eligibility to 12 months postpartum and mandate that states reimburse evidence-based treatments, including individual therapy, group therapy, and peer-support programs.[15,16,17] Performance benchmarks would be included in Managed Care Organization (MCO) contracts, with financial incentives for compliance and penalties for non-reporting.[18]

Policy Analysis

PPD typically emerges during the first two to three postpartum months, when many low-income mothers lose Medicaid coverage under the current 60-day limit.[4,12] Extending eligibility to 12 months closes this gap. As of 2024, 46 states and Washington, DC, have implemented or approved 12-month extensions under the American Rescue Plan Act, and early adopters show measurable gains, including for low-income mothers.[12,19] In states that expanded Medicaid, postpartum hospitalizations fell 17% within 60 days of birth.[20] In Illinois, postpartum visit attendance rose nearly 30%, and continuity of behavioral health care improved for mothers with depressive symptoms.[21] Arkansas also demonstrated this: continuous insurance in the first six months postpartum increased 27.8 percentage points, outpatient visits increased by relatively 75%, racial gaps narrowed, and antidepressant access improved for mothers at the highest PPD risk.[22,23]

Economic evidence highlights feasibility. Untreated maternal depression raises psychiatric hospitalizations, emergency care use, and long-term child developmental costs, contributing an estimated $14 billion annually in downstream costs that Medicaid disproportionately absorbs.[11,24,25,26] Although PPD-specific analyses are limited, findings from the Oregon Medicaid experiment are suggestive: coverage led to a 40% reduction in unmet mental health needs, demonstrating that timely treatment prevents emergencies and lowers long-term costs.[27] Expanding access to individual therapy and peer support programs also strengthens postpartum mental health. Cognitive-behavioral therapy reduces PPD and anxiety symptoms by 81%, while peer-led interventions cut depressive symptoms by about 33%.[28,29,30,31,32,33]

Finally, integrating PPD screening and treatment metrics into MCO contracts, setting performance standards and penalties, aligns maternal mental health with successful models from other chronic conditions.[34] California demonstrates this: as Medi-Cal shifted births into managed care plans that covered two-thirds of births by 2019, statewide accountability requirements gained influence.[35,36] Applying similar standardized PPD metrics would ensure consistent detection and follow-up.

Highlights

- Postpartum depression (PPD) affects one in eight new mothers and is a leading contributor to maternal morbidity and mortality, yet screening and treatment remain inconsistent across states.[1,12]
- Universal PPD screenings should be mandated at six weeks, six months, and one year postpartum and be integrated into both maternal and pediatric visits. Positive screens would result in "warm handoffs" to behavioral health.
- Medicaid coverage would be extended to 12 months postpartum nationwide, ensuring access to therapy, group, and peer support programs, while incorporating accountability measures into Managed Care Organization (MCO) contracts.[15,16,17,18]
- Economic and clinical evidence across the United States support this approach: consistent coverage and treatment reduce maternal deaths, improve child developmental outcomes, and lower long-term healthcare costs, which makes prevention both a moral and financial imperative.[6,8,10,11]

Implementation

The postpartum Medicaid coverage extension would be introduced through congressional amendments to Title XIX of the Social Security Act.[37] Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), a champion of several bills aimed at improving long-term maternal health, and Representatives Lauren Underwood (D-IL) and Alma Adams (D-NC), co-chairs of the Black Maternal Health Caucus and co-authors of the Momnibus Act, would likely endorse this bill.[38,39,40] Medicaid expansion would likely face opposition in a Republican-controlled Congress, but framing the policy as a cost-saving intervention would help neutralize partisan resistance: untreated PPD costs over $14 billion annually in downstream health, developmental, and productivity losses, and Medicaid bears a disproportionate share.[11,24,25,26] Collaborating with these lawmakers, who sit on or work closely with the Senate Finance Committee and the House Committee on Ways and Means, aligns the proposal with the committees directly responsible for Medicaid policymaking.[41]

In Phase I, the first 12 months post-enactment, CMS would release formal guidance requiring all states to incorporate standardized PPD screening metrics into their Medicaid MCO contracts. Providers would be mandated to use validated screening tools, including the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression

Scale, and establish referral systems to behavioral health specialists for positive screens.[14] States would submit annual screening and follow-up data to CMS, ensuring compliance, with facilities failing to meet benchmarks subject to corrective action plans or temporary reductions in federal matching funds. To address early concerns, particularly from under-resourced states, CMS could issue technical assistance grants, phased rollout options, and guidance emphasizing that expanded screening reduces long-term costs to budgets.

Phase II, months 12 to 24, would focus on expanding provider and infrastructure capacity. CMS and the Health Resources and Services Administration would jointly fund telehealth and peer-support initiatives to address workforce shortages, especially in rural areas. States could reallocate resources from the Maternal and Child Health Block Grant, the Opioid Settlement Fund, and Behavioral Health Workforce Development programs to support implementation.[42,43]

Public and political mobilization would rely on coordinated action among key stakeholders. Postpartum Support International could expand provider training and help states integrate warm handoffs into clinical workflows.[44] The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists would distribute updated screening guidelines, develop provider toolkits, and push adoption through its state sections.[45] State Medicaid directors would operationalize contract changes, oversee data reporting, and coordinate reimbursement structures. The Department of Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health would lead a national awareness campaign within six months of enactment, highlighting the preventable nature of PPD-related deaths through patient narratives and provider endorsements.

Success would be measured through quantifiable metrics and federal oversight. CMS's Center for Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program Services would collect and publish state-level data annually on screening completion at each interval, referral rates, treatment follow-ups, mental health-related emergency visits, and changes in maternal mortality. Annual performance scorecards would reinforce accountability and standardization across states. Ultimately, this implementation plan positions PPD screening and treatment as a cost-effective, bipartisan opportunity to reduce preventable maternal health nationwide.

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Ensuring Improved Healthcare Quality and Oversight within Georgia Prisons

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Georgia's privatized prison healthcare system has resulted in severe neglect, mismanagement, and preventable deaths of prisoners. Establishing an independent health oversight office within the Georgia Department of Public Health would enforce clinical standards, increase transparency, and ensure correctional health practices.

Background

The Georgia prison healthcare system has faced long-standing deficiencies due to its privatized structure under Wellpath, a healthcare contractor.[1] Many formal complaints from federal and state legislators, along with an investigation by *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* have documented systemic issues.[1,2] These issues include delayed responses, unhandled mental healthcare, and falsified medical records.[1,2] Wellpath has been named in over 1,400 lawsuits nationwide, many alleging violations of the Eighth Amendment for "deliberate indifference" to serious medical needs, as established in the Supreme Court case *Estelle v. Gamble* (1976).[2,3,4] Per this case, inmates must receive timely, adequate, ethical, and non-discriminatory health care.[4,5] The Georgia Department of Corrections (GDC) terminated its contract with Wellpath and switched to Centurion Health on July 1, 2024.[1,5] Centurion currently provides health services at over 30 Georgia state prison facilities and serves a population of 52,000 inmates.[6] Though Wellpath's contract was terminated, transparency and oversight are needed to prevent similar issues from recurring under Centurion's care.

The Georgia Administrative Code Rule 125-4-4 ("Medical Services") outlines several healthcare requirements, such as mandatory intake physicals, emergency response protocols, medical transfers, and chronic care obligations.[7] These requirements include many baseline provisions but lack meaningful oversight mechanisms to ensure that prisons are compliant, such as staffing ratios, chronic disease management, or mental health treatment.[7] Most concerningly, the rule lacks an independent review body.[3,4,5] Unlike Maryland and California, Georgia lacks established independent oversight committees to monitor correctional care, relying on self-reporting through a private contractor.[8,9] This lack of transparency has resulted in preventable deaths, worsening of chronic conditions, rising litigation costs, and a continuation of inhumane conditions.[3,4] Therefore, implementing an independent oversight framework is essential to proper healthcare in Georgia's prisons.

Policy Idea

To ensure that all inmates receive proper healthcare, the Georgia Department of Public Health (GDPH) should propose amending Georgia Code Rule 125-4-4 to establish a permanent Office of Correctional Health Oversight (OCHO) within the GDPH. This office would be responsible for conducting quarterly inspections of correctional medical units, publishing annual reports detailing compliance rates, patient outcomes, and mortality reviews, as well as requiring that private healthcare contractors submit their performance data to the GDPH. The office would enforce minimum clinical standards such as a 1:100 nurse-to-inmate ratio, 24-hour on-site nursing in Level IV facilities, and timely external specialist referrals. It would also monitor the availability of chronic disease management protocols, access to addiction treatment (e.g., medications for opioid use disorder), and consistent mental health referral systems. Lastly, OCHO would establish a whistleblower protection channel for medical staff and inmates to report violations.

Policy Analysis

The Georgia Administrative Rule 125-4-4 ("Medical Services") currently lacks enforceable standards. While it outlines many baseline provisions such as sick call procedures, intake screenings, and off-site referrals, it lacks detail on key areas, including staffing ratios, chronic disease management, and mental health treatment.[7] This rule makes it difficult for prisons' compliance to be monitored, leading to worse patient outcomes and unfulfilled constitutional protections. To ensure compliance, the code must be strengthened through the implementation of OCHO.

Creating an independent oversight office has proven effective in multiple jurisdictions. In 2024, Maryland's Correctional Ombudsman Act (H.B. 1296) empowered the state to investigate its inmate healthcare complaints and mandate reforms, leading to improved transparency and accountability.[8] Similarly, California appointed a federal receiver to manage its prison health system in 2006, which yielded measurable outcomes such as reduced mortality rates, increased staffing, and better chronic disease management.[9,10] This federal receiver, along with mandates from the state government, now enforces a 1:100 nurse-to-inmate ratio with 24/7 care, leading to the positive outcomes seen in inmate health.[9] Both Maryland and California have indicated timely care to ensure that every incarcerated individual will have access to medically necessary health care services seven days per week, 24 hours per day, with an efficient and effective scheduling system.[8,9,10] California even set a target of 85% of appointments to be in the timely care window, but has shown that it exceeded the goal with 89% of required medical appointments being in the timely window.[10] These requirements, therefore, should directly influence the standards that OCHO puts in place to mimic similar positive outcomes.

Highlights

- Georgia's prison health system lacks proper independent oversight, enabling mismanagement through private contractors, as seen under former provider Wellpath, and may potentially occur through current provider Centurion.[1,2,3]
- Amending Georgia Department of Correction (GDP) Rule 125-4-4 to establish an Office of Correctional Health Oversight (OCHO) would improve enforcement of basic inmate care and accountability of the private health provider through quarterly audits, public reporting, staffing standards, whistleblower protection, and contract performance reviews.
- Similar models in Maryland and California have proven success in improving health outcomes and compliance, demonstrating how comparable reform could produce positive results in the Georgia correctional health system.[8,9]

Implementation

The Georgia Department of Public Health (GDPH), in collaboration with the Georgia General Assembly would propose an amendment to Georgia Code Rule 125-4-4 to include a subsection titled "13: Medical Oversight." This subsection would establish the Office of Correctional Health Oversight (OCHO) under the GDPH's authority to address gaps in enforcement and care standards, including mental health treatment protocols, staffing ratios, and chronic disease management.

To ensure long-term compliance, subsection "13: Medical Oversight" should occur in a phased rollout. During the first year, the GDPH should appoint a Director of Correctional Health Oversight, recruit clinical and correctional health inspectors, and finalize oversight standards, including nurse-to-inmate ratios, required training certifications, and review timelines. To align standards with medical necessity and operational feasibility, the department should consult correctional healthcare experts, such as correctional physicians, nurses, and public health officials experienced in prison health systems. Key stakeholders, including formerly incarcerated individuals, families of current inmates, and medical directors of contracted providers, would provide testimony and input to build public support, demonstrate urgency, and reassure lawmakers of feasibility.

In the second year, OCHO should launch mandatory quarterly unannounced inspections in all GDC medical units and implement a secure digital reporting system to centralize contractor data, mortality reviews, and compliance metrics. These inspections should ensure that facilities cannot artificially prepare for the review. During this phase, OCHO should coordinate with Georgia's Department of Community Health to complete the state's application for Medicaid Reentry Section 1115 Demonstration Waiver, which allows reimbursement for pre-release care.[11]

Within the third year, Phase III, OCHO should publish its first public annual oversight report evaluating contractor performance based on inspection outcomes. Using this data, OCHO should issue recommendations for renewal or non-renewal of contracts based on compliance with care standards, adequate staffing, and timely correction of deficiencies, where repeated violations would warrant non-renewal. There will be continual annual oversight reports starting this year. Additionally, this phase would provide oversight on the first wave of mandatory staff training on standards of care and whistleblower protections.

This implementation represents a cost-effective preventive strategy that reduces fiscal liability. From 2018 to 2024, malpractice and neglect claims cost Georgia taxpayers over $20 million in settlements.[12] Comparable oversight models in Maryland and California indicate that establishing OCHO would cost approximately $3.5 million to $5 million annually at full implementation, significantly less than recent settlement costs. Independent oversight would further lower litigation and federal intervention costs by reducing medical negligence. This policy would also make Georgia eligible for the Department of Justice's Correctional Health and Safety Grants under the Federal Prison Oversight Act (H.R. 3019).[13] Additionally, the Medicaid 1115 waiver could reduce uncompensated costs associated with emergency care post-release, freeing up state-level funds to sustain OCHO operations in the long term.

Because private correctional healthcare providers hold substantial lobbying influence, political resistance to increased oversight is likely. This opposition could slow legislative action or weaken proposed enforcement powers. To mitigate this, the GDPH would emphasize the policy's cost savings, reduced liability, and improved constitutional compliance to give legislators clear justification for adopting reform despite industry pressure.

By addressing Georgia's lack of enforcement mechanisms and institutional accountability, this phased plan should not only improve care standards but also prevent costly litigation, reduce preventable deaths, and rebuild trust in Georgia's correctional healthcare system.

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