

Economic Justice Policy Priorities for 2021

*The Jesuit Conference Office of Justice and Ecology
and the Ignatian Solidarity Network*

“What you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.” — Matthew 25:45

As one of the world’s wealthiest countries, the U.S. has both the obligation and opportunity to end poverty. And yet, over the past 50 years, income inequality in the U.S. has grown substantially. [From 1989 to 2016 the wealth gap between the richest and poorest Americans has more than doubled](#), and the pandemic has only compounded this disparity.

- Since March 2020, [nearly 63 million unemployment claims have been filed](#), leading to the greatest unemployment rate since the Great Depression.
- In September 2020, [more than 6 million households](#) were behind on rent or mortgage payments.
- Before COVID, [35 million people in the U.S. experienced hunger](#). After COVID, it is estimated that more than 50 million are food insecure, including 17 million children.

The struggle for economic justice is more urgent than ever. We need policies that will rebuild our economy and give everyone the opportunity to flourish.

Pope Francis Center

Living out Jesus’ preferential option for the poor, many Jesuit works provide essential services to people struggling amid the pandemic. In Detroit, the [Pope Francis Center \(PFC\)](#) has grown into a large operation that serves up to 530 meals a day — nearly double its pre-pandemic average. With help from Detroit’s Housing and Revitalization Department, PFC has expanded to the convention center, where it not only offers food and shelter but “treats each guest as a whole person, ministering to their mind, body and spirit, while honoring them with dignity, fairness and respect.”



A Jesuit volunteer serves meals outside the Pope Francis Center.

To mitigate the economic effects of COVID and respect the dignity of all, we ask the new Administration and Congress to:

- **Increase federal nutritional programs.** The high unemployment rate has left many families struggling to put food on their tables. Local food banks and other community-based organizations are overwhelmed. Policymakers should [increase the SNAP \(food stamps\) maximum benefit by 15%](#). SNAP benefits are one of the fastest, most effective ways to help low-income families. They also directly boost the economy.

- **Extend unemployment insurance benefits.** The unemployed need extra funds to keep pace with the rising costs of the pandemic. Families that were economically stressed before are now completely under water, drowning in unpaid debt. [Unemployment benefits are one of the quickest recovery measures](#), as they can be enacted immediately and then funneled back into the economy through purchases.
- **Extend the federal moratorium on evictions and foreclosures.** [Thirteen million renters are behind on rent](#), and this burden falls disproportionately on households of color and families with children. As back rent and late fees pile up, many renters are at serious risk of eviction.
- **Issue new stimulus payments.** Another round of stimulus checks will provide immediate relief to struggling families and strengthen the economy. Payments should be progressively targeted to households most in need.
- **Provide targeted assistance to small businesses, especially to minority-owned businesses.** The last stimulus package successfully delivered funds to struggling businesses through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). However, the distribution of checks has not been equal. Small business owners who live in underbanked communities have been the last to receive payments, [which has had a disproportionate impact on Black- and Latino-owned businesses](#). Policymakers must ensure that unbanked communities have equal access to government assistance.
- **Ensure access to COVID testing and treatment for low-income households.** Many essential workers live in low-income communities, which, compared to other communities, have higher infection and death rates. The pandemic has once again revealed the long-standing inequalities, [especially racial inequalities](#), that plague our nation. Making sure that everyone, regardless of income, has equal access to quality healthcare is essential.
- **Expand and increase the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC).** Tax credits that are adjusted for gross income reduce poverty and raise after-tax incomes of low-income families. [By expanding the EITC and CTC, policymakers can create a more effective and inclusive tax code that helps working-class families.](#)



Volunteers stock a food cupboard (CNS photo).



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