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FALL 2024 CORE EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

Gary Wu '26, Co-President

Gary is a junior studying Policy Analysis and Management with minors in Business and Law & Society. He joined the Economics Center his freshman year and has since served as the Economics Center Director and now Co-President of CPG. Gary's policy interests lie in the intersection of law, economics, data privacy, and the healthcare industry. Outside of CPG, Gary's a Senior Research Assistant for the Labor Dynamics Institute and is conducting an independent research project as a Rawlings Cornell Presidential Scholar. After his undergrad, Gary plans on attending law school with a focus on healthcare and data privacy law.

Isabel Lee '26, Co-President

Isabel is a junior studying Health Care Policy with a minor in Philosophy. She was an Environment and Technology analyst for Spring 2023 and served as the center's director the following 2023-2024 school year. As for her policy interests, Isabel is interested in the intersection between healthcare and technology policies, especially regarding EMS health technology.

Keten Abebe '27, Director of Internal Affairs

Keten is sophomore 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 Fall 2023 as an analyst for the Foreign Policy Center and currently serves as CPG's Director of Internal Affairs. 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 New Member Development for the Black Ivy Pre-Law Society, an Institute of Politics and Global Affairs Scholar, a Brooks School course assistant and a Cornell Tradition's Fellow. She also conducts legal review and sustainable development projects as a Research Analyst for Regenerative Africa Consulting.

Ava Boris '27, Director of External Affairs

Ava is a Sophomore studying Public Policy and International Relations at Cornell University. As a member of CPG Ava serves as an analyst for the Healthcare Center and the Director of External Affairs for the organization. Ava has focused her studies on understanding national security issues through the lens of gender and interpersonal relationships. Outside of CPG Ava is a member of Kappa Alpha Theta and Pi Lambda Sigma. She also is a teaching assistant for PUBPOL 2301: Introduction to Policy Analysis.

Lilia Mitra '26, Advocacy Director

Lilia is a junior studying Health Care Policy in the Brooks School of Public Policy. She joined CPG in Fall 2023 as an analyst in the Healthcare Center and now serves as Advocacy Director. Lilia's policy interests include eliminating health disparities, protecting access to reproductive care, and improving public education. Outside of CPG, Lilia is a member of Phi Delta Epsilon and Tri Delta and works as an LSC organic chemistry tutor.

Grace Chen '24, New Member Educator

Grace is a senior, majoring in Policy Analysis and Management in the Brooks School of Public Policy. She joined CPG in Fall 2021 as an analyst for the Economic Center and has previously served as the Economic Center Director and the Co-President. Grace's policy interests lie within the economic analysis of social welfare programs, policing and racial discrimination, and education. Outside of CPG, Grace is in Social Business Consulting, Asian American InterVarsity, and is a pre-doctorate fellow for Professor Daniela Scur in Dyson. She also loves to dance, bake, and blog.

Sahithi Jammulamadaka '25, New Member Educator

Sahithi is a senior, majoring in Policy Analysis and Management in the Brooks School of Public Policy. She joined CPG as an analyst for the Economic Center in Spring 2022. She previously served as Assistant Center Director for the Economics Center before her current role as one of the New Member Educators. Her policy interests lie in

education and housing policy, specifically in researching creative financing opportunities in those fields. Outside of CPG Sahithi is in International Business Consulting, Cornell Undergraduate Economic Review, a teaching assistant for both PUBPOL 2301 and INFO 1200, and a member of a dance team.

Franklin Zheng '25, Senior Advisor

Franklin is a senior studying Information Science with minors in International Relations and German Studies. He joined CPG in Fall 2021 as an analyst in the Center for Environmental and Technology Policy and served as the Editor-in-Chief from 2022 to 2024. Outside of CPG, Franklin conducts research on global police force violence in the Gender and Security Sector Lab and works on artificial intelligence integration in the open-source intelligence cycle at USCENCOM.

FALL 2024 EDITORS

Henry Han '26, Editor-in-Chief

Henry is a junior, majoring in Industrial and Labor Relations at the ILR School. He joined CPG in Fall 2023 as an analyst for the Center of Environmental and Technology Policy and now serves as the Editor-in-Chief after previously serving as Assistant Center Director of Environmental and Technology Policy. Henry is interested in labor, electoral, and agriculture policies, pursuing these interests as a research fellow with the Worker Institute on the Labor Action Tracker and serving as Junior Representation on the ILR Student Government Association. Henry is also the Director of Publications for the Scheinman Conflict Resolution Club.

Rachel Baron '27, Associate Editor

Rachel is a junior studying Government, with a minor in International Relations. She has been with CPG's Domestic Center since Fall 2023, and now serves as Associate Editor and Assistant Center Director of Domestic Policy. She's interested in a wide range of policy topics, all centered around how domestic policy can affect human rights on a global scale. Beyond CPG, Rachel is an undergraduate scholar for the Institute of Policy and Global Affairs, an editor for the Cornell International Affairs Review, a brother of Phi Alpha Delta, and a sister in Delta Delta Delta.

Austin Grattan '26, Associate Editor

Austin is a junior studying Health Care Policy with a minor in LGBT Studies. He joined CPG in Fall 2023 as an analyst in the Healthcare Center and now serves as Associate Editor in Chief. Austin's policy interests include health insurance access, medical education, social determinants of health, and LGBTQ+ health disparities. Outside of CPG, Austin is a member of Alpha Iota Gamma and is a TA for PUBPOL 1111. After graduation, Austin plans to pursue a PhD and eventually be a fellow at a think tank, work in the government, or enter academia.

Isabela Wilson '26, Associate Editor

Isabela is a junior pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Government with minors in International Relations, Law & Society, and East Asian Studies with a focus on the Korean peninsula. She joined Cornell Policy Group in Fall 2023 as a Foreign Policy Analyst and currently serves as an Associate Editor and Assistant Center Director of Foreign Policy. Her policy interests include South Korean policy with focuses on immigration, education, and the Korean diaspora. Outside CPG, she is also involved in The Cornell International Affairs Review and Pi Lambda Sigma (POLIS).

FALL 2024 CENTER DIRECTORS

Elliot Serna '27, *Center Director for Domestic Policy*

Elliott is a student at Cornell University's Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy studying Public Policy with a minor in Urban and Regional Studies. Elliott serves as Center Director of CPG's Domestic Policy Center, supporting the Center's work at the fore of all topics touching US domestic policy. Outside of CPG, Elliott is a student researcher working on housing policy research with the Brooks School's Senior Associate Dean of Public Engagement, Dr. Jamila Michener, and economics replication work with Cornell's Labor Dynamics Institute, with a particular research interest in community development and administrative reform.

Rachel Baron '27, *Assistant Center Director for Domestic Policy*

Rachel is a junior studying Government, with a minor in International Relations. She has been with CPG's Domestic Center since Fall 2023, and now serves as Associate Editor and Assistant Center Director of Domestic Policy. She's interested in a wide range of policy topics, all centered around how domestic policy can affect human rights on a global scale. Beyond CPG, Rachel is an undergraduate scholar for the Institute of Policy and Global Affairs, an editor for the Cornell International Affairs Review, a brother of Phi Alpha Delta, and a sister in Delta Delta Delta.

Alice Lee '26, *Center Director for Economic Policy*

Alice is a junior, majoring in Policy Analysis and Management with an intended minor in Applied Economics. She joined CPG as an economic policy analyst in Fall 2023, and now serves as the Economic Center Director. Alice's policy interests include housing rights, racial disparities in economic mobility, and social welfare programs in general.

Nathaniel Cain '27, *Assistant Center Director for Economic Policy*

Nathaniel is a sophomore, majoring in Policy Analysis and Management. He joined CPG in Fall 2023, and he is most interested in consumer protection policy, macroeconomic policy, and housing policy. Outside of CPG, he is the Head Teaching Assistant for the introductory public policy course at Cornell, a research assistant within the ILR School, a member of a student consulting organization, and a DJ for WVBR.

Sejal Sekhar '27, *Center Director for Education Policy*

Sejal is a sophomore, majoring in Public Policy in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy with plans of minoring in Business and Law & Society. She joined CPG in Fall 2023 and 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 Community Partnership Funding Board, and a dancer on Cornell's competitive Bhangra Team.

Danielle Berkowitz '27, *Assistant Center Director for Education Policy*

Danielle Berkowitz is a sophomore studying public policy at the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, with intended minors in Law and Society and Business. She joined CPG in the Fall 2023 as an analyst for the Education Center and now serves as Assistant Education Center Director. Danielle's policy interests focus on addressing education inequality, specifically advancing equitable resource access and creating policies that effectively support underrepresented communities.

Krislyn Michel '27, *Center Director for Environmental & Technology Policy*

Krislyn Michel is a Public Policy major with an interest in specializing in environmental, data/technology, and social policy. She is also pursuing two minors respectively in Inequality Studies alongside Law and Society. She joined CPG in Fall 2023 and is interested in equitable approaches pollution, environmental racism, and consumer data protection. Outside of CPG, she is a member of various student dance groups, a campaign fellow for Students4NY,

and serves as a student ambassador for the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy. In her free time, she enjoys thrifting, analyzing film and media, attending concerts, and cooking.

Jack Turner '26, Assistant Center Director for Environmental & Technology Policy

Jack is a junior majoring in Public Policy, and joined CPG in Fall 2023. He is most interested in the intersection of transportation and infrastructure policy aimed at improving mobility for all. Outside of CPG, Jack loves to spend time outdoors, especially on a bike or through running. He is especially passionate about long-distance running and can frequently be found at the Cornell Running Club which he is the Co-VP of, or working in Rhodes Hall on a CUSD project team

Bingsong Li '26, Center Director for Foreign Policy

Bingsong Li is a junior studying Government and Information Science. Joining CPG as a foreign policy analyst in Spring 2022 and becoming Center Director in Spring 2023, Bing is fascinated by the intersection between foreign policy and technology. Bing conducts computational social sciences research in Bowers CIS and can also be found in Cornell Writing Centers, POLIS, and the Translator Interpreter Program.

Olivia LaBonte '26, Co-Assistant Center Director for Foreign Policy

Olivia is a junior, majoring in Government in the College of Arts and Sciences. She joined CPG in Fall 2023 as an analyst for the Center of Foreign Policy and now serves as the Co-Assistant Center Director for Foreign Policy. Olivia is interested in human rights, atrocity prevention, and security policy. Outside of CPG, she is a member of the Cornell University Parole Initiative

Krystlove Yeboah '27, Co-Assistant Center Director for Foreign Policy

Krystlove is Co-Assistant Center Director for Foreign Policy. She is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences majoring in Government and Sociology. Outside of CPG, she is a Research Fellow for the Brooks School of Public Policy's Center for Global Democracy and a Student Career Advisor. Her policy interests include civic engagement and economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa

Kaitlyn Z Varriale '25, Center Director for Healthcare Policy

Kaitlyn is a senior, majoring in Healthcare Policy in the Brooks School of Public Policy. She joined CPG in Fall 2022 as an analyst for the Center of Healthcare Policy and now serves as the Healthcare Center Director. Kaitlyn is interested in pioneering and managing a more equitable, efficient, and high-quality healthcare system and strategically pairing health justice and optimal operations through an administrator's lens.

Zoë O'Halloran '27, Assistant Center Director for Healthcare Policy

Zoë O'Halloran is a sophomore in the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy studying Health Care Policy on a pre-medical track. She joined CPG in Spring 2024 as a Healthcare Policy Analyst and now serves as the Assistant Center Director for the Healthcare Policy Center. Zoë's policy interests include the regulation of pharmaceutical development and international healthcare policy. Outside of CPG, Zoë is the Treasurer of the Cornell Chapter of The Diabetes Link and a member of a pre-professional chemistry fraternity. She is also an undergraduate research student in the Shaw Lab.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Dear Reader,

On behalf of the Cornell Policy Group, I am excited to publish the twenty-second edition of the Journal of Affairs, the successor of the former Roosevelt Review.

I have had the pleasure of editing and crafting this journal during my first semester as editor-in-chief after two years under the previous editor-in-chief, Franklin Zheng. With his guidance and under new executive leadership, Cornell Policy Group wrote thirty-nine policy proposals ranging from a variety of policy fields, including but not limited to agriculture and electoral reform. Each analyst presented original, innovative solutions based on rigorous research to niche and broad-ranging issues, with each center presenting proposals personal to the analysts. Our incoming class of new analysts, the most selective class of Cornell Policy Group, has only added to the originality and new perspectives we continually seek to add to our ever-evolving group. We have added three associate editors to the editing process to oversee these new proposals and people to strengthen writing quality and standardization. With the help of our new member educators leading the new analyst training program, we can teach our new class critical writing and professional practices within and beyond Cornell Policy Group.

After a successful semester of effective restructuring with additional members, I have complete faith that our group is ready to continue our success. I am confident all of our members will thrive as we continue to formulate solutions to problems in a constantly changing world. I extend my most sincere gratitude to everyone who has supported the Cornell Policy Group and this publication. I look forward to continuing my role as editor-in-chief for another semester as we prepare the twenty-third edition in Spring 2025. I hope you enjoy our policy proposals from this semester.

Sincerely,

Henry Han
Editor-in-Chief

DOMESTIC POLICY

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Pre-Release Earnings Program: Providing Incarcerated Individuals a Financial Safety Net for Reintegration

By Amani Agrawal, aa2747@cornell.edu

To reduce recidivism and foster equitable reintegration, New York State should implement a Pre-Release Earnings Program to provide incarcerated individuals with liveable wages for their work in prison, and thus an accessible financial safety net upon their release.

Background

The United States incarcerates 1.2 million people in state and federal prisons, of which 33,793 are incarcerated in New York State (NYS).¹ In the US, two-thirds of these incarcerated individuals also work, performing jobs similar to those of unincarcerated individuals.² However, the legal protections afforded to these workers differ significantly based on their incarcerated status. The Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution protects unincarcerated individuals from unethical labor practices yet explicitly omits those “held in confinement due to criminal conviction.”² The Fair Labor Standards Act further permits unethical practices via their definitions of employees and employers.³ Consequently, incarcerated workers face harsh working conditions, with more than 76 percent of inmates reporting they are forced to either work or face solitary confinement.²

In US prisons, inmates are assigned either industry or non-industry work. The former refers to jobs that involve manufacturing signs or furniture, while the latter refers to prison support jobs in the maintenance sector.⁴ In NYS, non-industry jobs, which pay less than

industry jobs at an hourly wage between \$0.10 to \$0.33, are the most common.³ These wages come from less than one percent of the state’s correctional budget.² Additionally, non-industry wages in NYS are significantly lower than the nationwide incarcerated average of \$0.86 per hour.⁵

Such non-industry wages lead to financial instability that drastically affects incarcerated individuals during incarceration and reintegration. With their current meager wages, the 95 percent of incarcerated individuals returning to their communities lack financial safety, increasing their risk of recidivism, as full-time incarcerated workers earn approximately \$2000 annually — far below the \$35,000 needed to cover a modest cost of living in NYS.^{6,7} Therefore, the NYS non-industry wages are insufficient for most prisoners supporting their families.

Policy Idea

NYS should implement a pre-release earnings program that provides individuals incarcerated for non-violent crimes with living wages in the form of state minimum wage. This program would be implemented after an individual is granted parole, limiting the program’s scope while increasing

its financial feasibility. Focusing on non-violent offenders prioritizes lower-risk individuals, making the initiative affordable and appealing to the public. The American Correctional Association and the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) must ensure fair wages by aligning prison labor pay with living costs.

Additionally, non-violent inmates granted parole would be required to establish mandatory savings accounts — with a minimum of 80 percent of inmates’ total wages, considering their minimal financial responsibilities — which they can access upon release. While some may argue that incarcerated individuals do not deserve higher wages due to their criminal record, fair pay reduces reoffending rates and supports successful reintegration, ultimately enhancing public safety.

Policy Analysis

Empirical evidence supports financial stability’s role in reducing recidivism rates.⁹ Research at the University of Southern California (USC) reveals that economic stability is directly correlated to reduced recidivism as criminal behavior is closely linked to income levels.⁹ Beyond USC, College Bound Dorchester, a Boston-based

non-profit, has given those with a criminal record in Richmond, California, a \$400 weekly stipend.¹⁰ Over the next seven years, the city saw a decrease of over 50 percent in its homicide rate, with research suggesting a causal link to the stipend program.¹⁰ Both USC's research and the Dorchester program exemplify the correlation between financial stability and reduced recidivism.

Additionally, investing in living wages for incarcerated individuals could be cost-effective as studies show that a one percent increase in economic freedom is correlated with a 0.47 percent decrease in recidivism.¹¹ With annual housing costs at \$60,000 to \$70,000 per inmate, reducing recidivism and lowering the number of inmates is cost-effective.^{12,13} Moreover, since incarcerated individuals' wages are subject to deductions that prisons retain with federal, non-incarcerated taxpayer money, paying inmates a livable wage could reduce the financial burden on taxpayers, shrink the excessive profit margins of private prisons, and reduce recidivism rates.³ Reducing private prison profits is crucial because it removes the financial incentive for companies to keep incarceration rates high.¹⁴ In turn, the justice system can refocus on rehabilitation and public safety.

Further, international examples support this approach. In Norway, where recidivism rates lie at 20 percent, prisons provide incarcerated individuals with wages competitive with civilian wages.¹⁵ Incarcerated individuals are given spending freedom, exercising responsibility that translates to future reintegration. Implementing a savings account program in NYS,

would provide a similar financial foundation, directly contributing to reduced recidivism and smoother reintegration.¹⁵

Highlights

- 32,613 individuals are incarcerated in New York State (NYS), with two-thirds of them working in industry and non-industry jobs.¹ The Thirteenth Amendment and the Fair Labor Standards Act jointly enable prison labor practices that do not meet the ethical labor standards that are upheld for non-incarcerated individuals.²
- Incarcerated individuals rely on their wages to support their families and have limited financial ability to do so with an average hourly wage between \$0.10 and \$0.33.³
- Studies show a clear link between financial stability and reduced recidivism rates, with Norway's implementation of fair wages for incarcerated individuals resulting in one of the lowest global recidivism rates.¹⁵
- Implementing a pre-release earnings program will provide incarcerated individuals with living wages and a financial safety net following their release. Such economic stability would lead to successful reintegration and decreased recidivism.

Implementation

Successfully implementing a pre-release earnings program in NYS requires collaboration with the

Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), the American Correctional Association (ACA), and a shift in funding. DOCCS should play a central role in structuring, implementing, and monitoring the program.¹⁶ First, DOCCS would need to work closely with policymakers to establish fair wage standards by categorizing industry and non-industry jobs. They should specify eligibility criteria, limiting the program to those incarcerated for non-violent crimes and who have been granted parole.¹⁷ This criterion ensures focus on individuals statistically less likely to reoffend, making the program safer and more justifiable in the eyes of the public. Second, DOCCS should establish an efficient payroll system that is integrated into NYS's correctional system and should coordinate with third-party labor agencies to conduct periodic inspections, ensuring wage disbursement accuracy and policy compliance. Additionally, collaboration with the ACA, a professional organization aiming to improve the justice system, and the NYS Department of Labor would align inmate work policies with industry standards, standardizing practices across facilities.^{18,19}

The proposed program requires investing in inmate livable wages through reallocations within the \$3.02 billion state correctional budget.²⁰ This investment could prove to be controversial. Yet, by reallocating resources and exploring federal grants, the state's budget would not be immensely burdened. Such resources would come from less essential, non-rehabilitative administrative functions and such grants would be those aimed at

reducing recidivism like those provided by the Second Chance Act.²¹ Approximately 20 to 30 percent of the 16,300 non-violent criminals in NYS will be granted parole and paid \$15 an hour for 30 hours of weekly work.²¹ Given that they work for an average of two months before their release, the program's cost ranges from \$12.62 million to \$18.92 million, representing only .42 percent to .63 percent of the NYS's current correctional budget.^{20,22}

Introducing the proposed program as law would require support from key lawmakers on criminal justice, labor, and budgeting committees. Such support could be gained by highlighting the potential to reduce the state's \$3 billion correctional budget through lower recidivism rates and improved post-release employment. Presenting concrete data on the success of pre-release programs in other countries, such as Norway, where the recidivism rate sits at 20%, along with testimonies from stakeholders would make a compelling case for the program.¹⁵

In the initial years following the program's implementation, its success should be monitored, by the DOCCS and independent research organizations, to identify any necessary adjustments. Quantitative data, including data collection on recidivism rates, post-release employment rates, and earnings of participants, should be analyzed to assess the program's effectiveness. Qualitative data from participants, correctional staff, and employers will also be essential to understanding the program's impact on individual lives.

Implementing a pre-release earnings program in NYS addresses the urgent need for financial

stability among incarcerated individuals and is a critical step towards reducing recidivism, fostering successful societal reintegration, and promoting a more equitable justice system.

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De-escalating the War on Terror: Governing “Secret Wars” and Expanding Veteran Treatment

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Amidst ongoing struggles to fund veteran rehabilitation needs at home, taxpayer dollars are instead funding secret proxy wars abroad. Heightened human rights and reporting standards are needed to limit violence abroad and divert funding toward American veteran care programs.

Background

Known as “secret wars,” at least 23 American proxy wars have been conducted as part of the War on Terror, the post 9/11 military campaign launched against international terrorist organizations.¹ Codified in 2016 but in use since 2004, 10 U.S.C. §127e is a section of the U.S. Code that allows funding of up to one hundred million dollars annually for foreign militaries, militias, or individuals to conduct military operations that align with American counterterrorism goals.² This support has been used to train, arm, and pay the salaries of non-American military actors.²

§127e is legally founded in the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), which enables counterterrorist actions against groups responsible for or associated with the September 11th attacks, including al-Qaeda, the Taliban, al-Shabaab, and ISIS. However, §127e has been used by the Department of Defence (DoD) to falsely justify operations against unassociated groups, including Boko Haram and the Islamic State - Sinai Province.³

Congress is unable to exercise effective oversight §127e operations. The DoD reports its operations to few congressional offices, does not produce many required reports, and does not report

to either foreign relations committee.⁴ Further, §127e operations are exempt from Leahy law, a provision that prevents support for military units that violate human rights.⁴

As the War on Terror continues, veterans at home are left with little support. In January 2023, over thirty-five thousand veterans were unhoused, an increase of 7.4% from the year prior.⁵ Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have been diagnosed with mental disorders at a rate of 58.1%, including a 23% rate of PTSD.^{6,7} Although the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides rehabilitation programs, they do not have sufficient funding to successfully address these crises.⁸

Policy Idea

The US Congress should amend 10 U.S.C §127e to require §127e operations to be subject to DoD Leahy law and mandate annual audits of Leahy law compliance. Funding provided to any operation found to violate Leahy law should be immediately terminated and diverted to the VA for rehabilitation programs of veterans who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan. In addition to current reporting to the Appropriations and Armed Services Committees, Congress should double their reporting requirements, mandating

DoD reports of §127e operations to all congressional offices at least 30 days prior to new initiatives. In order to ensure accountability and compliance, the DoD should also be held responsible for creating a biannual report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Failure to adhere to reporting requirements would be grounds for funding removal and reallocation to the VA.

Policy Analysis

The DoD Leahy law prohibits DoD assistance of foreign military units that have committed a gross violation of human rights, including torture, extrajudicial killing, disappearances, and rape.⁹ However, exemption of §127e operations from these regulations, combined with the use of force beyond what is authorized under the 2001 AUMF, essentially nullifies Leahy law. Although most details remain confidential, §127e operations have already violated Leahy law prohibitions, including the secret employment of a Cameroonian military unit known for torture and extrajudicial killings.¹⁰ Holding §127e operations to Leahy law standards recommit American resources to complying with international and human rights law and prevents unnecessary military engagements.

Additionally, diverting funding to VA rehabilitation programs would help alleviate immense fiscal shortcomings that prevent veterans from accessing the care they are entitled to. Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are entitled to lifelong free or low-cost medical treatment, which is estimated to cost the U.S. \$600 billion to \$1 trillion over the next 40 years.¹¹ However, the VA is extremely underfunded: in July 2024, the VA reported a nearly \$15 billion shortfall to Congress, \$12 billion of which is needed for healthcare provisions.⁸ Reallocating funding for §127e operations would enhance the VA's ability to provide healthcare treatment for veterans and deliver on their promises.

Lastly, enhancing reporting requirements for §127e operations ensures stricter congressional oversight of secretive US-sponsored violence, which subsequently holds the DoD accountable to public opinion and the law. In 2021, 68% of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America members want to repeal or reform the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs, and 62% of Americans viewed the Afghanistan and Iraq wars as not worth fighting.^{12,13,14} Oversight ensures that the DoD cannot use §127e funding for operations not authorized for attack under the 2001 AUMF.

Highlights

- 10 U.S.C. §127e currently allows the United States Department of Defense (DoD) to fund secret proxy wars across the world, subject to neither human rights standards nor effective reporting requirements.^{1,2,4}

- The rehabilitation needs of veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan include healthcare costs of up to \$1 trillion over the next 40 years, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is already operating on a funding shortfall.^{8,11}
- Requiring §127e operations to be subject to both Leahy law and increased congressional reporting standards would reduce American human rights violations and general involvement in proxy wars, which would, in turn, deescalate the unending and unpopular War on Terror. Defunding §127e operations that violate Leahy law or are otherwise stopped due to congressional oversight and diverting such funding to the VA would help alleviate the financial strains caused by veteran rehabilitation needs and ensure all veterans may access the healthcare they are entitled to.

Implementation

The Senate and House Armed Services Committees should introduce bills to amend 10 U.S.C. §127e and then refer them to each chamber's Committee on Veterans' Affairs and Committee on Foreign Affairs. This bill should hold all ongoing and future §127e operations to Leahy law standards, require an audit of ongoing §127e operations to be submitted to Congress, mandate biannual reports to the three committees in both chambers, update reporting requirements for new §127e operations, and require any funding

withheld from §127e operations to be directed to the VA.

To gain bipartisan support for successful bill passage, several hearings should be organized in each committee. These hearings should include DoD and military personnel witnesses that oversee and lead §127e operations, as well as testimony from investigatory organizations that may detail operative human rights violations. These hearings may be closed to the public in order to ensure witness honesty and transparency, avoid prioritization of media appearance from members of Congress, and prevent DoD backlash to witnesses. Strategic messaging surrounding the bill should emphasize the importance of congressional oversight and veteran rehabilitation in the country, both sufficiently bipartisan topics.¹⁵ Media outreach should serve to create public awareness and pressure congressmembers to reform DoD funding. This media campaign may be led by members of Congress in relevant committees, such as the Chairs of the Committees on Armed Services, and should emphasize visibility in national news outlets and social media.

Should opposition to the bill persist by pro-military members of Congress, non-governmental organizations should organize a grassroots lobbying campaign. Advocacy and research groups that have shown sufficient interest in human rights vetting and veterans' rights, including Amnesty International, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Brennan Center for Justice may work to spread awareness of §127e operations, promote lobbying efforts by constituents, and publicly pressure

Congress members to support human and veteran rights.^{2,16,17}

Upon the bill's successful passage, a DoD report on all current §127e operations should be submitted to the House and Senate Committees on Armed Services, Veterans' Affairs, and Foreign Affairs. In order to preserve security interests, closed hearings should be scheduled in each committee for expert witnesses from the DoD to testify on the reports, specify whether or not each operation adheres to an application of Leahy law, and present the operations' budgets. As required under the updated code and subject to the required notice of these committees, all operations determined to violate Leahy law will be directed to be safely and promptly terminated within 30 days. All remaining funds dedicated to each canceled operation will be added to the VA's budget in the next appropriations bill. Once in the hands of the VA, the money can be distributed between rehabilitation programs, providing veterans with the care they need and preventing future violence.

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The Right to Read: Combatting Book Bans in the Federal Prison System

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Book bans within the federal prison system are inconsistent across correctional facilities and lack transparency. Congress should mandate that the Federal Bureau of Prisons publish a list of banned titles and a justification for their restriction.

Background

US federal and state prison systems manage a population of 1.2 million inmates with disproportionately low literacy rates. However, many prisoners and academics emphasize how reading while incarcerated aids in emotional development and decreases feelings of isolation.^{1,2} Even though the large prison population may benefit from access to literature, the widespread use of prison book bans has not attracted the same attention as the over 10,000 individual book bans schools imposed across the nation during the 2023-2024 school year.⁴ Among the states' leading prison book bans is Florida, which alone bans 22,825 titles in its state prisons.⁵

Despite such frequent applications, only 28 states keep official records of the book titles banned behind state bars, and only 15 provide the associated reasons for doing so.⁶ Among states that do provide documentation, the practice is not standardized. Pennsylvania and North Carolina expunge and rebuild their lists annually, Oregon conducts the same process every three years, and Illinois publishes separate "banned" and "disapproved" book lists without defining the difference between the two.⁶ New York established a Facility Media Review Committee that sends monthly reports of

updated banned titles to a Central Office Media Review Committee to facilitate consistency across state correctional facilities.⁷ Federally, the Department of Justice currently mandates: "The Warden may not establish an excluded list of publications. This means the Warden shall review the individual publication prior to the rejection of that publication."⁸ This specific prohibition of a federal banned book list presents a promising opportunity to set new standards in the federal justice system. Yet, the inconsistency in book banning and the absence of sufficient documentation of the practice obscures the literary censorship experienced by inmates and warrants policy intervention.

Policy Idea

Congress should require the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to publish a centralized list of books banned from federal prison facilities by title with a justification for the bans. The BOP would specify the procedure and relevant criteria when adding new titles to the list, working through a committee process to regularly update the titles included and the reasons for their prohibition. This list would be readily available to mailroom managers in federal correctional facilities to evenly enforce bans while less authority is centralized

among individual staffers. The review committee would similarly oversee an appeals process for restricted materials through which prisoners can file for a reversal of a ban that restricted their access to a title.

Policy Analysis

Centralized lists of banned books promote proper standards of consistency and accountability across the many facilities within the federal prison system while safeguarding the security interests that motivate bans. The current BOP policy explicitly prohibits creating a central list of bans which may have resulted from arguments that lists indirectly promote increased censorship as books would not be re-reviewed each time they are received.⁸ This approach, however, ignores the importance of transparency in the censorship that already occurs. Inconsistent applications of bans across facilities make tracking book bans more complex, and the inmates' experiences vary. Mailroom staffers responsible for designating books as permissible or restricted are included in the correctional industry's high turnover rates in which 63% of staffers leave the prison correctional field in less than 2 years.⁶ This turnover presents problems for consistency in book

bans not only across facilities but over time as well.

Implementing a centralized banned titles list would standardize the enforcement of the practice within federal facilities irrespective of staff changes. Such legislation would be an incremental and alternative approach compared to previously introduced policies targeting access to literature in prisons, including the Prison Libraries Act of 2023, which sought to strengthen relationships between prisons and library services through grant programs.⁹ Working toward a more transparent book-banning process would provide a foundation for future collaborations with libraries and nonprofits and expand prisoners' opportunities to read without the same costs for implementation associated with similar proposals.

Highlights

- Only 28 states keep official records of the book titles banned in their prisons, and only 15 provide the reasoning for restriction.⁶
- The inconsistency in book banning and the absence of sufficient documentation of the practice obscures the literary censorship experienced by inmates and warrants policy intervention.
- The Federal Bureau of Prisons should publish and maintain centralized lists of banned books to promote consistency and accountability across the many facilities within the federal prison system while safeguarding the security interests that motivate bans.
- Such legislation would be an alternative approach to

previously introduced policies targeting access to literature in prisons but without the same costs for implementation, including the Prison Libraries Act of 2023, which sought to strengthen relationships between prisons and library services through grant programs.⁹

Implementation

Congress should mandate the BOP to centralize book ban lists in the federal prison system.¹⁰ While Congress can present numerous challenges, reforming the federal prison system is currently on the national agenda, and policymakers have demonstrated their willingness to support change. In July of 2024, President Joe Biden signed the Federal Prison Oversight Act, which mandates independent oversight of the BOP through facility inspections, complaints, and inquiry systems and prohibits BOP resistance to any investigative efforts.¹¹ The Federal Prison Oversight Act was referred to the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability and the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, making policymakers on these committees important supporters of the proposed book ban list policy.¹¹

Critics of book bans in schools would help strengthen the policy's likelihood of passing. Representative Jamie Raskin of Maryland and Senator Brian Schatz of Hawaii previously introduced resolutions to condemn school book bans and both would likely help garner valuable support to mandate a prison book ban list.¹² PEN America, a well-known non-profit organization that informed Raskin and Schatz's proposed resolutions,

would inform this effort through their extensive existing research on prison book bans.

The policy will likely face opposition from those fighting for stricter book bans and others advocating for the elimination of bans altogether. Content-motivated book bans across all federal facilities remain to maintain security, good order, and discipline.¹³ These priorities should not be completely abandoned, as many restricted titles include sexual content, violence, or anti-authority messages that threaten the security and safety of correctional staff and inmates. While many bans are rooted in valid security concerns, calls for stricter book bans ignore the lack of transparency surrounding the practice and its expansion would be irresponsible without sufficient information on its current use. To protect inmates' access to reading materials while recognizing the security concerns that motivate bans in the first place, mandating lists of banned titles provides an incremental solution that balances the two concerns while addressing the current lack of transparency and providing information that can inform future advocacy efforts.

Upon the policy's passage, the BOP would form and continually update the list. Given there are no existing lists in the federal prison system on previously banned books, the titles will be added on a case-by-case basis beginning from the activation of the policy based on the existing standards for prohibited titles.⁸ The BOP should give 30 days of advanced notice to all facilities and detail the new procedures to promote widespread compliance. The established BOP committee

would regularly update included titles, the reasons for their prohibition, and report to the Director of the BOP. Mailroom staff across all facilities would be able to access the up-to-date titles online, and the list will be made publicly available to optimize transparency and dissuade prohibited titles from being repeatedly received. With proper implementation, a centralized and continuous list of banned book titles in the federal prison system will tackle the current inconsistencies in literary censorship across facilities.

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Federally Mandating Insurance for Firearms

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To mitigate inaction from the federal government, firearm insurance should be mandated for all gun owners in the United States to incentivize owners to take adequate safety measures.

Background

In the US, the gun death rate is considerably higher than in most other developed nations (10.6 per 100,000 compared to 1-2 per 100,000 in 2016), and active shooter incidents in the US have risen from 3 in 2000 to 61 in 2021.¹ Furthermore, a 2023 survey found that 61% of Americans believe accessing a firearm is too easy.² However, despite public opinion, the federal government has continued to enact and enforce more lenient gun policies. For example, in 2023, a federal judge in Virginia overturned a statute that prevented people aged 18-21 from purchasing firearms.³ More recently, the Supreme Court overturned a ban on bump stocks, which are devices that allow semiautomatic rifles to fire faster.⁴ It is evident that not only are guns becoming easier for Americans to access, but the firearms themselves are becoming more powerful as well. Taking action against these rapidly changing dynamics is long overdue, and Americans cannot continue to wait for the federal government to catch up. Private insurance companies should supplement the government's gun safety measures by further incentivizing or requiring gun safety practices with firearm purchases.

Policy Idea

The federal government will shift gun control to a semi-privatized system where all gun

owners are required to insure their firearms, similar to requirements on car insurance or health insurance. Americans who currently own firearms are required to purchase firearm liability insurance, which would protect gun owners in the case of hunting or shooting accidents, lost or stolen firearms, and personal legal defense.⁵ However, the policy would include stronger requirements for aspiring gun owners looking to purchase their first firearm after a certain date. These requirements would include a mandatory 30-day waiting period between applying for gun insurance and being able to purchase the desired firearm and a mandatory gun safety course. Gun insurance wouldn't replace the need for government gun control, but would supplement its current shortcomings.

Policy Analysis

Although gun insurance does not cover intentional shootings, insurers are more incentivized to determine an individual's risk level when selling an insurance plan. Recently, New Jersey and San Jose, California have passed laws that require gun owners to purchase liability insurance. According to San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo, gun insurance with risk-adjusted premiums would promote safe gun ownership through gun safety classes, gun safes, and child locks.⁶ Risk-adjusted premiums could also

prevent high-risk individuals from purchasing a firearm, as insurance companies could raise prices or refuse to cover individuals they deem risky.⁷

Since gun insurance is a relatively new policy, there is not much data on the effectiveness of these mandates. Instead, we can evaluate the specific safety measures that insurers would incentivize or require. For example, in response to a mass shooting in 1989, Canada introduced gun laws such as mandatory waiting periods for gun purchases and mandated safety training courses.⁸ As a result, Canada's gun death rate began steadily decreasing throughout the 1990s, falling from 5.0 per 100,000 in 1989 to 3.3 per 100,000 in 1999, with the gun death rate estimate in Canada being 2.17 per 100,000 between 2016-2020. The US had a rate of 14.6 per 100,000 in 2021.^{9,10,11} Furthermore, a regression analysis on the effects of Canada's Bill C-17, which required background checks, safety courses, and a 28-day waiting period showed that the passage of Bill C-17 was associated with a decrease in suicide and homicide rates in Canada, supplementing earlier gun regulations.¹¹ The relationship between requiring waiting periods and safety courses and gun death rates suggests that implementing similar policies could reduce intentional gun deaths in the US. If gun insurance were mandated, aspiring and current firearm owners

would be strongly incentivized or required to take individual measures to improve our gun death rates.

Highlights

- In the US, the gun death rate is considerably higher than in most other developed nations (10.6 per 100,000 compared to 1-2 per 100,000).¹ If gun insurance were mandated, aspiring and current firearm owners would be strongly incentivized or required to take individual measures to improve our gun death rates.
- The federal government should shift gun control to a semi-privatized system where all gun owners are required to insure their firearms, similar to requirements on car insurance or health insurance.
- Practices that insurance companies would be required to implement under this policy, including waiting periods and gun safety courses, have been shown to lower gun deaths in Canada.¹⁰ However, it is important to note that these practices were viewed as supplemental to prior gun control policies.

Implementation

To enact this policy, the federal government would have to mandate that a certain level of insurance coverage be required to purchase a firearm. The mandate would pass through Congress, which could face opposition with a Republican House of Representatives and Senate. To

mitigate opposition, proposing a system with minimum statutes that other states could amend and add more protections to could appeal to them. Furthermore, it could garner support from Republicans because firearm regulation would be determined by private entities rather than the federal government.

Insurance companies and gun safety advocacy groups should aim to approach both Republican representatives who have voted for gun safety bills in the past and Democratic representatives who are passionate about gun safety. Potential points of contact for sponsoring or supporting a bill include Representatives Maria Salazar (R-FL), Tony Gonzales (R-TX), Mike Thompson (D-CA), and Sylvia Garcia (D-TX), who have supported or initiated gun control initiatives in the past.^{12,13,14} Also, the House Judiciary and Oversight and Accountability Committees could be key actors in implementing this policy, having supported similar policies in the past.^{15,16} After passing through the House of Representatives, the policy must pass through the Senate. While a conservative Senate may pose challenges for this policy, a 2021 bipartisan gun safety bill sponsored by Marco Rubio (R-FL) has been signed into law, strengthening many existing gun control policies.¹⁷

To gain support, companies that sell firearm insurance, such as Prime Insurance and Lockton Affinity Outdoors, should collaborate with gun safety advocacy groups to join in lobbying efforts and public awareness campaigns – including advertisements, social media postings, and public demonstrations to garner support for the policy. In these campaigns, insurance

companies and advocacy groups should not market this policy as a restriction on Second Amendment rights, but rather as a promotion of responsible firearm ownership to appeal to centrist and conservative Americans as well as gun control activists. Before pushing this policy to the federal level, these interest groups should target states that have been successful in the past with passing gun reforms, such as New York and California, to mandate firearm insurance statewide.

While there are concerns about this policy not being able to adequately mitigate gun violence, San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo explains that gun liability insurance will incentivize safety measures that will address gun deaths as a public health issue and from a harm reduction standpoint.¹⁸ Success at local and state levels would provide useful data on the policy's effectiveness for federal policymakers who may be on the fence. Policy research centers and state government agencies could compare gun death rates in the state before and after implementation, which researchers could use to determine the effectiveness of these policies. As the US faces comparably high gun death statistics, it is more important than ever to implement creative solutions to combat gun deaths. Placing a share of the responsibility on the private sector would be an effective way to promote safe gun ownership and use.

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Cutting the Head off the Snake: Decentralizing the House of Representatives

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To decentralize power from the House of Representatives leadership while promoting bipartisanship and legislative productivity, the House should radically revise its rules through a novel rules package that places power in the hands of bipartisan committees.

Background

House leadership sets the legislative agenda primarily by deciding which items members can vote on. As such, modern legislative clogging stems from House Leadership's reluctance to advance bills that lack saliency or anger intraparty minority factions.¹

One instance of the saliency issue is Republican Congressman Greg Steube's Federal Disaster Tax Relief Act, which would provide tax relief to natural disaster victims.^{2,3} After Speaker Mike Johnson failed to place Steube's bill on the agenda, Steube forced a vote via discharge petition—a rarely used tactic whereby a House majority signs a petition to consider a bill immediately.⁴ While Steube's bill would substantially affect millions of Americans, it lacked the salience of other popular issues such as immigration, foreign aid, and the economy prior to the focusing events of hurricanes Helene and Milton. For this reason and given negative partisanship, it was tabled by House leadership.^{5,6,7,8} Experts note that committee leadership follows this poor example and colludes with House leadership.⁹

The 118th Congress' repeated battles with continuing resolutions highlight fringe minorities' contributions to this inaction. Former Speaker Kevin

McCarthy was ousted for passing a bipartisan resolution, preventing a government shutdown despite sizable Republican opposition.^{10,11} Although the ouster was aided by loosened procedural rules, these rules themselves were the byproduct of threats against McCarthy by the Freedom Caucus, the most conservative caucus.¹² Speaker Johnson faced similar pressures over continuing resolutions and his push for Ukraine aid.^{13,14} The Ukraine bill notably failed the Hastert Rule, stating that a majority of the majority party, should agree to a bill before being brought to the floor.^{15,16}

This current system provides a target to be blamed, House leadership, who is discouraged from bringing bipartisan legislation to the floor by threats of retribution. Additionally, the diminished power of individual members prevents them from passing important bills lacking political saliency.

Policy Idea

The House should pass a rules package that shifts agenda-setting powers from leadership to committees. It is desirable to give individual members more power, but not so much that the legislative process is abused. As such, committees are the primary focus of this proposal.

First, committees would possess equal numbers of majority and minority party members. A bill would need to pass two 50% vote thresholds to (1) initiate the vetting process and (2) release the bill from the committee. If a bill is truly subpar, it would require bipartisan agreement to kill it in committee.

After being released, bills would automatically be placed on the House calendar in order of receipt, eliminating the primary source of leadership's agenda-setting powers. Finally, the vote threshold for future rules package adjustments would be increased to a two-thirds majority, thus hindering future undoings of these reforms.

Policy Analysis

Precedence for this proposal can be found both domestically and abroad. In the 1910s progressive Republicans, angered by the centralization and abuse of power under Speaker Joe Cannon, transferred agenda-setting powers from leadership to committees.¹⁷ The Rules Committee, controlling all aspects of the House floor, became bipartisan instead of possessing a majority party supermajority.¹⁸ This arrangement produced a record of bills passed and increased bipartisan interactions.¹⁹ The era of decentralized House rules largely ended when Democrats bypassed

the aforementioned Rules Committee in the 1960s. Decentralization's demise was finalized when the Democratic-majority House passed a rules package restoring centralization. This vote's narrow and partisan nature underscores the necessity of this proposed rules package's supermajoritarian safeguard.²⁰ This two-thirds majority requirement is based upon constitutional standards in cases where institutional resistance to change is desired, such as for impeachment convictions and constitutional amendments.²¹

Taiwan provides a foreign case study. In the late twentieth century, reforms equalized party representation and delegated power to individual members.²² There was a resulting increase in policymaking activity (including for matters previously lacking saliency) and a decrease in interparty antagonism.²² While the majority party's agenda faced increased hardships, one could argue that was more a result of veto powers being handed to minority parties rather than changes in committee structure. Contrary to the Taiwanese reforms, this proposal does not negate popular mandate, with final bill votes requiring a simple majority immune from minority vetoes. Secondly, the initial strain on Taiwanese legislative and executive bureaucracies appears to have diminished in the decades since the reform.²³ The proposed rules package counters possible inefficiencies through leadership's ability to enact closed rules, bypassing the amendment process.²⁴

One could argue the automated agenda placement of bills is unnecessary as discharge petitions already exist. However,

these petitions are inefficient due to their tedious requirements.²⁵

Highlights

- The current House leadership structure disincentivizes bipartisanship, fails to promote important bills lacking political saliency, and holds the Speaker hostage to intraparty minorities.^{1,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16}
- A rules package should be implemented that makes committees more bipartisan, eliminates leadership's formal agenda-setting powers via the automatic placement of bills on the agenda, and mandates a supermajority's approval to implement rules changes.
- Case studies of the 20th-century House of Representatives and Taiwan's Legislative Yuan showcase the potential of this policy to bolster legislative productivity and promote bipartisanship.^{17,18,19,22,23}

Implementation

The primary weakness of this proposal is its requirement for self-realization: actors outside of House leadership will need to incentivize leadership to cede their powers. The most likely impetus for such change is a continuation of current trends in which the House is gridlocked by the unproductive relationship between fringe minorities and helpless leadership, and the only solution is for leadership to free itself of its agenda-setting responsibilities. This phenomenon occurred in the

previously mentioned Taiwanese Yuan, where their reforms were the byproduct of frustrations over legislative inefficiencies.²²

Referring back to the 20th-century House of Representatives case study, progressive Republicans were able to decentralize the House by collaborating with Democrats to strip the Speaker of their power.¹⁷ It is necessary to gain support from the opposition party, as those in the majority who voted for the leadership team are less likely to strip power from their preferred candidates. The modern equivalent to these irate progressive Republicans would be the Freedom Caucus, suggesting they could instigate similar changes. However, the differentiating factor between these two groups is that the Freedom Caucus seeks to reshape leadership in its image as opposed to the progressive Republicans' desire to decentralize power.^{17,26} Additionally, the Freedom Caucus is averse to collaborating with Republicans, let alone Democrats; this reluctance to cooperate promoted the caucus' ouster of Speaker McCarthy.²⁷ As established earlier, collaboration with the opposing party is a necessary condition for this policy's implementation.

One possible incentive for this rules package could be voter backlash to congressional dysfunction. Polling by Gallup shows decreases in congressional approval ratings amid Kevin McCarthy's ouster (October 2023) and during Marjorie Taylor Greene's ouster attempt (May 2023).²⁸ Voters' negative perceptions of the institution are correlated with when fringe factions prevent leadership from putting forward bipartisan bills.²⁸ If one of

these transgressions were near an election, especially one with close races, it could sway voters to reject the party in power. The opposing political party would likely highlight congressional inefficiency and provide an impetus for the majority party to maintain order within the House.

Considering all these factors, it will be extremely difficult to implement this policy under current political conditions due to institutional resistance. There also appear to be no outside organizations currently focusing on this issue; instead, they are advocating for their policy preferences under the existing legislative framework. As such, the most likely source of change is from within the House. If a new group such as the progressive Republicans of the 20th-century forms, leadership could be pressured to enact these much-needed reforms.

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Reducing Recidivism Rates Through Mandatory Rehabilitation Programs

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While prison rehabilitation programs have been proven to reduce recidivism rates, these programs are not compulsory for inmates and, therefore, mitigating the potential benefits the programs result in. Recidivism rates can be reduced by mandating participation in such programs.

Background

Recidivism refers to the rate at which released prisoners return to prison. The United States has an astonishingly high recidivism rate, with nearly 49.3% of federal offenders being rearrested over an eight-year period.¹ Additionally, the stigma surrounding incarcerated individuals leaves released prisoners unable to secure employment and successfully rehabilitate into society, often leading them toward illicit activities.²

The high recidivism rate in the US is a consequence of its punitive rather than rehabilitation-based prison system.³ Prisoners are often stripped of their identity, lack a sense of community, and are exposed to an overly stressful and abhorrent environment that alters their mental health.⁴ Consequently, the lack of adequate social welfare support after incarceration can lead to incarceration.³ This vicious cycle of incarceration, release, and reoffense is compounded with racial and structural inequality. Black and Brown communities are more likely to be arrested due to stereotypes and unfair policing practices.⁵ This is further exacerbated by the generational discrimination and poverty minority communities face that add to the cycle structural inequality and incarceration.⁶

Furthermore, the annual cost of incarceration for one inmate costs American taxpayers around \$120.59 per day, making recidivism not only a social issue but also an economic challenge.⁷ Beyond these direct costs, recidivism also has macroeconomic consequences. For instance, recidivism is cited to decrease the US's annual GDP by \$65 billion a year due to the cost of housing inmates as well as the loss of productivity and tax revenue inmates would otherwise contribute to the economy.⁸ Additionally, this cost also does not include the economic and social cost incarceration has on families and communities.⁹ Reducing recidivism, therefore, is not just a criminal justice issue but also a critical economic and social priority.

Policy Idea:

To help reduce recidivism rates and support released inmates, state policymakers should implement a policy requiring inmates to participate in an educational or vocational training program within the prison as a part of their sentence. Through these programs, prisoners can acquire marketable and valuable skills that can help them rehabilitate into society.¹⁰ Skills such as interview etiquette, resume building, and financial literacy can be taught to help inmates search for and secure

employment after their release. Furthermore, certification and vocational programs should be provided so inmates can access sustainable employment.

Policy Analysis:

The current prison system is proving to be unsustainable, and rising recidivism rates add to the economic and social pressure to promote reform.¹⁰ Multiple studies demonstrate how educational and vocational programs directly reduce recidivism by decreasing criminogenic causes and alleviating financial burdens. A Research and Development Corporation (RAND) study finds that educational programs reduce recidivism by 13 percentage points.¹¹ The study also showed that inmates who participated in educational programs were 43 percent less likely to recidivate than those who didn't participate in the program.¹¹ RAND drew upon also estimated that the educational programs would cost around \$1,400 or \$1,744 per inmate.¹¹ Comparing this to the average annual cost of incarceration for an inmate being \$42,672, educational programs prove to be the most cost-effective solution than incarceration.⁷ Furthermore, RAND has also estimated that in order for educational programs to be cost-effective and break even, the recidivism rate only needs to

decrease between 1.9 and 2.6 percentage points, a relatively easy goal.¹¹

Similar policies such as California's Proposition 57 have successfully reduced recidivism.¹² A component of Proposition 57 allows convictions to utilize rehabilitation programs as a part of sentences.¹³ The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation published a report that showed after the enactment of Proposition 57, recidivism decreased by 2.7 percent.¹⁴

Furthermore, this proposed policy requires inmates to participate in a rehabilitation program. Current programs do not require inmates to participate in these programs and exclude them from vital resources that provide life-long skills.¹⁴ However, if programs are incorporated into sentences, inmates would be required to attend programs and leverage rehabilitation resources. Through this initiative, issues such as mental health disparities and financial illiteracy can be addressed while reducing criminogenic activities after release.

Highlights:

- Recidivism is not only a product of social inequality but is also a catalyst in driving inequality further. Structural inequalities and generational issues compounded with improper rehabilitation mechanisms further exacerbate criminogenic behaviors and environments.
- High recidivism rates are not just a social justice issue; it is also an economic issue. Taxpayers spend \$120.59 per day per inmate,

amounting to over \$60 billion total on prisons.^{8,16}

- Prisoners who engage in rehabilitation programs are 43% less likely to re-offend after release.¹⁵ These programs directly reduce criminogenic behaviors and causes by providing social safety nets, ultimately fostering safer communities and breaking cycles of crime that burden individuals, families, and society as a whole.
- Rehabilitation programs are also better economically: they cost around \$1,400 per inmate to implement these programs, which is considerably cheaper than the annual cost of incarcerating one inmate.¹¹

Implementation:

The implementation of such criminal justice reform would require cooperation from all government levels. Currently, 91% of the nation's incarcerated population is in local and state prison systems.¹⁷ This points to the bulk of programs that need to be concentrated at the local and state level to target the largest incarcerated population. State legislatures can pass criminal reform legislation that focuses on rehabilitation rather than punishment within the state prison system, which states can determine individually either through reallocating budgets or raising taxes. States can also apply for federal funding programs that incentivize criminal justice reform. Federal legislation, such as grant programs through the Department of Justice, can provide financial resources to states implementing evidence-based rehabilitation

programs. Federal incentives could also reward states for reducing recidivism rates and prison populations. Pilot programs and phased implementation of programs would also need to be implemented to identify key metrics, such as long-term effects on employment for incarcerated individuals, and issues to ensure efficiency and scalability. Local and state justice departments would run these programs.

Policymakers should also leverage the various non-profits and social justice institutions that can be included in implementing rehabilitation programs. Community outreach groups can reduce criminogenic activity by providing social safety nets for adults and children.¹⁸ Additionally, higher education institutions such as community colleges and universities can be utilized to provide support through programs. Cornell University's Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP) is one example of how academic institutions can provide for their community.¹⁹ Meta-analysis of inmates who participated in CPEP found that individuals who participated in two or fewer courses have a seven percent recidivism rate, while individuals who complete an associate's degree have a zero percent recidivism rate.²⁰

To gain support from conservative legislatures, reform advocates can frame rehabilitation programs as fiscally responsible measures that reduce the economic burden of incarceration. Highlighting the long-term cost savings associated with lower recidivism rates. Programs can also utilize volunteers and community spaces to offset costs. Ideological opposition may arise from those

who view rehabilitation as lenient, but this concern can be addressed by phasing in programs gradually and initially targeting non-violent offenders.

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Banning Checkpoint Stops to Reduce Racial Profiling and Enhance Privacy

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New York State should place a ban on checkpoint stops to protect the Fourth Amendment rights of drivers and prevent police discrimination against minority groups.

Background

Police set up checkpoint stops at predetermined locations where drivers who pass through are briefly stopped and questioned.¹ Officers may stop any vehicle passing through the checkpoint but must follow systematic and impartial procedures, such as stopping every third vehicle, to ensure objectivity.² These stops must be highly visible and are often publicized through billboards, radio announcements, and newspaper articles. While checkpoint stops are often brief, some result in searches or further questioning from the police, raising concerns about breaches of individual rights and privacy. The Fourth Amendment protects citizens against unreasonable search and seizure, which had its application to checkpoint stops debated in *Michigan Department of State Police v. Sitz* (1990), where the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of checkpoint stops.³ After this decision, checkpoint stops were determined unconstitutional in the Michigan, effectively banning their use within the state.³

Checkpoint stops set in specific areas can also lead to a disproportionate racial makeup of drivers stopped, as shown by the Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation into North Carolina's Alamance County Sheriff's Office.⁴

This investigation found that officers repeatedly selected predominantly Latino neighborhoods to set up checkpoint stops and were four to ten times more likely to stop Latino drivers than non-Latino drivers.⁴ Officers conducting these stops pulled over many Latino drivers without a specific cause, such as reasonable suspicion or a traffic violation, leading officers to question drivers and sometimes search vehicles after stopping them. Similarly, researchers found that New York Police Department (NYPD) checkpoints accounted for 12.1% of stops involving Native drivers, 10.9% involving Asian American and Pacific Islander drivers, 8.4% involving Black drivers, and 8.4% of stops involving Latino drivers. In contrast, only 6.5% of stops involved White drivers.⁵

Policy Idea

New York State should issue a ban on checkpoint stops. Once the ban is implemented, sheriffs would have six months to stop using checkpoints completely. Under the ban, sheriff's departments and police officers would be required to have a specific cause to make a stop, such as reasonable suspicion or traffic violations like speeding or a broken tail light.

The New York State Division of Criminal Justice

Services would work with sheriffs and police officers to reallocate resources that were previously used for checkpoints to other methods including saturation patrols and other related measures.⁶ The New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services would also train sheriffs and police officers to report key information about each stop, including the reason the driver was pulled over.

Policy Analysis

A ban on checkpoints would reduce racial discrepancies in policing by eliminating a policing method that often targets Latino and Black communities.^{7,8} Based on the research of several cities in California, checkpoints are often placed outside of Latino communities, leading to disproportionate arrests of Latinos and over-policing of Latino communities.⁷ Research in Chicago showed that checkpoints similarly target Black and Latino communities, resulting in nearly 20 unrelated citations per drunk driver arrested.⁸ Banning checkpoints would decrease disproportionate policing of Black and Latino neighborhoods, encouraging other police methods that do not over police Black and Latino communities.

While checkpoint stops may produce some social benefits, it is important to consider the costs

incurred. These stops are effective at decreasing alcohol-related crashes, but they are extremely costly.² Typical checkpoints use 15 or more officers and cost between \$5,000 and \$7,000.² Instead, police can use alternative methods with similarly effective reduction in driving under the influence.⁶ Although evidence for the effectiveness of saturation patrols in reducing alcohol-impaired driving is less established than for checkpoints, saturation patrols are frequently used by state patrols and local police departments along with other strategies.⁹ Combined, these methods are associated with a reduction in alcohol-impaired driving while operating at a lower cost.⁹ The main costs of saturation patrols are time and publicity, such as billboards and advertisements that promote awareness of the patrol, which are flexible in price depending on the resources of the department implementing them.⁶ Prior research on checkpoint stops has also cited saturation patrols as a similar yet more sensible alternative, lending an ethos to saturation patrols of inspiring public trust.¹⁰

Highlights

- Checkpoint stops raise concerns of racial profiling and privacy violations, shown by research into California and North Carolina cities showing disproportionate placement of checkpoints outside of Latino communities.^{4,7}
- Running checkpoint stops requires a lot of police resources that could instead be used for other tested anti-impaired driving methods

that would more fairly protect communities.^{2,6}

- Placing a ban on checkpoint stops and utilizing saturation patrols and related measures would protect Fourth Amendment rights, ensuring stops are based on a specific cause and reducing racial disparities in traffic stops.

Implementation

To ban checkpoints in the state of New York, the New York legislature would introduce a bill to ban checkpoint stops. Under this policy, sheriff departments would be required to have a specific cause to make a stop and The New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services would train officers to document key information about the stop, such as why the driver was pulled over. These measures protect privacy and increase transparency in law enforcement practices.

Upon transitioning away from checkpoint stops, the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services would instruct sheriffs on implementing saturation patrols and other methods and reassigning officers from checkpoints.¹¹ Redirecting funds from checkpoints would allow flexibility in spending on traffic enforcement and areas with different needs to implement less costly methods based on their needs. Training for saturation patrols takes roughly three months, which would give law enforcement time to implement substitute methods within the required time frame.⁶ Saturation patrols combined with other measures are proven to be effective in deterring drunk driving and reducing alcohol-impaired driving by 18-40%.^{6,9} If resources are properly allocated,

banning checkpoint stops should reduce spending for sheriff's departments while maintaining a low rate of drunk driving and accidents.

Based on similar policies in other states and preliminary research on checkpoint stops, adopting this policy in New York would garner support that would help secure its implementation. Several states already prohibit checkpoint stops based on violations of their state constitution or law.² In Michigan, checkpoints were deemed generally ineffective.³ Checkpoints also use a significant number of resources and police attention that could be used for other methods.² This policy would gain bipartisan support as a cost-saving method that effectively repurposes police resources. A typical checkpoint with fifteen or more officers can cost \$5,000 to \$7,000, along with media publicity costs of publicity through paid media such as road signs and advertisements.¹¹ Rather than spending these funds on checkpoints and publicity, officers could be trained for other methods, such as saturation patrols that have flexible costs based on the number of officers participating.⁶

Additionally, the increased police transparency as a result of this ban aligns with the platforms of organizations such as Communities United for Police Reform, Make the Road New York, and the New York Civil Liberties Union. Organizations like Communities United for Police Reform can publish articles and generate public support for legislation similar to a ban on checkpoints and could similarly advocate for this policy. Evidence of racial discrepancies in checkpoint stops would help gain

the support of these organizations, who could advocate for the bill to pass in the New York legislature. Representatives such as Bill Magnarelli, the chair of the transportation committee, have a history of supporting police transparency efforts and could help lead advocacy for a ban on checkpoints. Additionally, the New York legislature has historically passed bills with similar causes, with the current assembly generally representative of similar ideals.

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Family First: A Call for Mandatory Paid Family Leave

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The United States should enact a federal, mandatory paid family leave policy to strengthen its economy, improve public health, and promote equity.

Background

The United States remains the only high-income country without a national paid parental leave policy, despite strong evidence linking paid leave to improved health outcomes for parents and children.¹ The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is the only federal leave policy, offering up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave yearly for eligible employees.² This leave can cover childbirth, adoption, care for immediate family members with serious health conditions, and personal medical leave for a serious health condition.² The FMLA's eligibility criteria include that employees must have at least 12 months of tenure, have worked at least 1,250 hours over the past year, and be employed by companies with 50 or more employees within a 75-mile radius.²

Beyond this federal policy, some states have implemented unique paid family leave policies. Thirteen states and Washington, D.C. have enacted mandatory paid family leave, and nine states have voluntary policies using private health insurance.³ In most states with mandatory leave laws, the policies are funded through social insurance payroll taxes levied on employees and employers.³ Furthermore, employees can buy paid family insurance in some states with voluntary policies.³ New York

is an exception, where employees must purchase paid leave plans through private insurers.³ Parental leave laws across the U.S. are inconsistent, leaving many families without sufficient support.

Policy Idea

The U.S. should adopt a federal paid family leave policy with FMLA's eligibility standards. The funding model would align with President Biden's past proposals that use Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) as the administration tool, with the benefits funded through a payroll tax. The tax required would be a minimal 0.62% payroll tax split between employers and employees, according to Social Security actuaries.⁴ To ensure equitable access, benefits would be progressive, with low-income workers who earn minimum wage, receiving close to full wage replacement while on leave.

Policy Analysis

Paid family leave policies have positive economic, health, and equity implications. Economically, such policies stabilize incomes, reducing the need for employees to choose between job security and family needs.⁵ Paid leave improves employee retention, cutting turnover costs (estimated at 21% of an employee's annual salary).⁵ 90% of companies with paid leave report

neutral to positive effects on productivity and morale.¹ In the UK, companies with paid leave were 60% more likely to report better financial performance.¹

Paid leave enhances women's labor force participation, enabling them to remain in roles where they have built valuable skills, boosting productivity.⁵ It also correlates with improved maternal and child health. In low to middle-income countries, each month of paid maternity leave decreases infant mortality by approximately 13%.¹ In Norway, children of parents with extended leave exhibit better cognitive development, and are likelier to attain university degrees and earn higher wages.¹

The current FMLA disproportionately benefits wealthier workers because it guarantees only unpaid leave. Half of eligible workers cannot afford unpaid family leave, and two-thirds of those who take it, report subsequent financial strain.⁶ Paid leave improves access across socioeconomic groups. For example, California's paid leave law has particularly benefited minority women, less-educated workers, and single mothers.⁵ Maternity leave usage doubled, and mothers with young children increased their work hours by 6–9%, with corresponding wage gains.⁷

The equity implications are significant as paid family leave prevents bankruptcies for 25% of dual-income and 13% of single-parent families (predominantly single mothers) missing two or more weeks of work due to illness.⁵ It also reduces reliance on public assistance, as women returning from paid leave are 40% less likely to need welfare within a year of giving birth.⁵ Paid leave would provide underserved populations with essential support for their health and financial stability.

Highlights

- The U.S. is the only high-income country without a mandatory paid parental leave policy despite evidence of its substantial health benefits, for families, including improved maternal and child well-being.¹
- Current federal protections under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provide unpaid leave, leaving low-income families without adequate support. Beyond this policy, some states have adopted their own paid leave policies.^{2,3}
- A mandatory federal paid family leave policy, funded by the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), would foster economic and health benefits while promoting equity.
- This policy would stabilize incomes, enhance employee retention, improve productivity, and increase women's labor force participation.⁵ Additionally, it would improve access to underserved groups, like

minority women and single mothers, helping to prevent bankruptcies and reduce reliance on public assistance.⁵

Implementation

Funding this mandatory leave program would be straightforward, modeled after existing Social Security benefits with a 0.62% payroll tax split between employers and employees.⁴ Low-income workers would receive near full wage replacement to ensure equitable access, similarly to how many state programs currently operate. Typically, Republican lawmakers oppose tax increases; however, this proposed increase is minimal, and the resulting economic benefits far outweigh its modest impact.⁸ Additionally, maintaining the current eligibility requirements under the FMLA would strengthen political support for this policy, as the established guidelines have already garnered approval through their successful implementation.

The SSDI falls under the jurisdiction of the Social Security Administration (SSA) within the executive branch, but any changes require Congress to pass a federal law. Although bipartisan support exists for a policy like this one, legislative advocacy and public awareness are essential.⁹ The House and Senate Bipartisan Paid Family Leave Working Groups should expand outreach to more legislatures to secure broader support.⁹ Educating businesses and individuals on the policy's shared positive impacts can alleviate concerns about payroll taxes. Once Congress passes this policy, it could be enacted and funded in the next

fiscal year through minor tax adjustments.

Effective implementation requires widespread workforce awareness. Currently, many eligible employees remain unaware of state-level benefits, especially among marginalized groups. Five years after California's paid family leave program began, less than half of eligible workers knew about it, with even lower awareness among low-wage workers, immigrants, Latinos, and those without a high school diploma.¹⁰ Outreach should focus on social media campaigns to maximize awareness and involve employers, healthcare providers, community organizations, and government agencies.⁴ Medical providers can play a pivotal role by informing patients directly about eligibility.⁴ Overall, this federal mandatory paid leave policy, funded through the SSDI with a progressive structure, would provide substantial benefits to individuals, businesses, and the economy, with successful implementation relying on bipartisan support, public awareness efforts, and targeted outreach to marginalized groups.

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Guaranteeing Flexibility for Employees on Election Day

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To augment voter participation, the federal government should designate Election Day as a national holiday and mandate paid voting leave for workers.

Background

High voter turnout is the linchpin of any flourishing democracy, and failure to provide all American voters with flexible voting options compromises it. These options can include vote-by-mail, expanded early voting initiatives, and extended polling hours on Election Day. To improve our democratic system, the government must cultivate an electoral framework that accommodates the diverse needs of its electorate.

As of 2022, 21 states had no laws providing workers with time off to vote, while an additional 6 states had statutes requiring leave for voting without accompanying payment.¹ The lack of government involvement in promoting election participation leaves voters at the mercy of their employers. In states without paid leave, lower-income voters may deem the opportunity cost of voting to be higher than the benefit, opting instead to work an additional shift to accrue income. Furthermore, rapacious bosses in states without voter leave mandates may disregard their employees' voting aspirations and assign them exigent work on Election Day. These phenomena contribute to the disparities in voter turnout rates between socioeconomic strata.

The 2016 presidential election illustrated socioeconomic disparities in voter turnout, with

only 46% of individuals with family incomes below twice the federal poverty line voting, in contrast to 68% of those whose incomes exceeded that threshold.² Guaranteeing paid time off for workers would ensure that those living paycheck to paycheck have equal voting opportunities, helping bridge the divide in voter turnout between lower and higher-income individuals.

Policy Idea

The federal government should create a federal holiday on Election Day. To offset any productivity loss from an additional federal holiday, Veterans Day could be moved from November 11th to coincide with national elections on the second Tuesday of November.³ Finally, Congress should move to mandate a paid 3-hour leave period for workers on Election Day. In 2012, approximately 3.5 million voters endured queues exceeding an hour to cast their ballots, with minority voters being seven times more likely than white voters to encounter such delays.⁴ The 3-hour period would grant voters latitude in the event of distant polling sites or protracted wait times.

Policy Analysis

The absence of federally mandated paid time off on Election Day places the onus of determining

paid voter leave policies on individual states and, ultimately, on employers—resulting in significant disparities in voter turnout between socioeconomic groups. In 2021, 45% of large companies and 55% of small companies afforded their employees paid time off to vote.⁴ Accordingly, potential voters—particularly those who depend on hourly pay—are often at the mercy of their employers on Election Day. By requiring paid leave nationally, the federal government would seize this discretion from corporations, allowing more of its constituents to access the ballot box. Paid voter leave is hardly a pioneering initiative, as numerous democratic regimes worldwide, including Mexico, Belgium, and Argentina, have implemented a similar policy with corollary increased turnout.⁵ Additionally, 14 states have already made Election Day a public holiday.⁶ However, a Princeton University study found that making Election Day a holiday does not significantly increase voter turnout, emphasizing the need to implement policies like paid leave in tandem with the holiday to effectively enhance participation.⁷

According to Census Bureau data, approximately 27% of nonvoters in the 2022 midterm elections did not vote due to scheduling incompatibility.⁸ While making Election Day a federal holiday and granting paid leave to

frontline workers would not eradicate all scheduling problems, it would substantially reduce this barrier for many individuals, especially those in lower-income or hourly positions. Moreover, this policy would help level the playing field across socioeconomic groups, allowing more Americans to participate in the democratic process. Critics of efforts to make Election Day a national holiday often cite the costs, with some estimating a cost to taxpayers of \$4 billion.⁹ However, this proposal remedies this issue by moving Veterans Day to Election Day, ensuring more federal holidays do not financially burden employers.

Highlights

- The voting capabilities of many Americans are impeded by financial burdens and difficult working schedules, particularly in states without paid leave policies. In the 2016 presidential election, voter turnout was substantially lower among individuals with lower incomes, highlighting socioeconomic disparities in electoral participation.
- Establishing Election Day as a federal holiday and mandating paid voting leave would help level the playing field among voters across all demographics.
- By moving Veterans Day to Election Day, this policy would bear a net-zero cost and circumvent any productivity losses. Furthermore, the proposed policy aligns with practices in other democratic nations and would significantly

mitigate scheduling conflicts, facilitating greater participation in the electoral process.⁵

Implementation

The initiative to mandate voter paid leave and create a national holiday on election day would require Congressional sponsorship. To successfully change a holiday's date or add a new holiday to the Federal Register, Congress must pass a law approving the change.¹⁰ To lobby Congress to take action on this issue, extensive community support is necessary given the low likelihood of corporate involvement. Since 65% of US citizens agree with making Election Day a federal holiday, a grassroots campaign could fuel this issue's legislative success.¹¹ Building partnerships with established organizations such as the League of Women Voters, which has over 700 chapters across the country and has over 1 million members, would help corral support and amplify the campaign's reach and credibility. They have a proven track record of advocating for enfranchisement efforts and supporting voter registration initiatives.¹²

Public opinion polls on paid voter leave policies are scant, and this aspect of the legislation would create more of an uphill battle. Likewise, a lack of polls would require galvanizing support from labor activists as well. Labor groups, in particular, may see paid voting leave as an extension of workers' rights and potentially frame it as essential for ensuring fair and democratic access to voting. Furthermore, implementing this initiative would require partnerships with Congressmen who

have demonstrated interest in voting rights issues. In 2024, Representative Anna Eshoo (CA-16), for example, introduced the Election Day Holiday Act which aimed to make Election Day a federal holiday.¹³ Voter groups could partner with Representative Eshoo to include provisions to mandate federal paid leave across the US, citing the current obstacles for workers on Election Day. To move this idea through the legislative process, activists must build broad support across both sides of the aisle, especially from lawmakers who have championed labor rights and voting access in the past. Convincing Republicans to approve it would likely involve highlighting how the proposal would mitigate financial losses while boosting voter turnout. When meeting with conservative legislators, proponents of this legislation could emphasize the nonpartisan nature of it, as it will increase voter turnout for workers across partisan lines.

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ECONOMIC POLICY

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A Structure to Dig On: Transitioning to Underground Direct Current Power

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In partnership with East Coast state governments, the federal government should establish a structured tax incentive program to aid organizations like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and implement underground direct current powerlines to reduce costs associated with catastrophic natural disasters.

Background

Climate scientists have warned for decades of the looming effects of US greenhouse gas emissions. Rising Atlantic Ocean temperatures are directly linked to stronger and more frequent hurricanes and winter storms.¹ The effects of these storms on U.S. infrastructure are critical when determining the direction of future gridwork investments and enhancing U.S. power resilience.

A Rowan University research article analyzing Atlantic weather patterns (1971 to 2020) highlighted a dramatic recent increase in the intensification rates of hurricanes.² A weak Category 1 hurricane can develop into a Category 3 or stronger within 24 hours. Modern hurricanes (2001-2020) are 28.7% more likely to intensify rapidly, with wind speeds increasing by up to 57 mph over 24 hours.² With greater intensity and frequency, hurricanes devastate localities, imposing significant costs and leading to extended repair and reconstruction timelines. As of August 2023, tropical storms have caused an average cost of \$22.8 billion per event, totaling over \$1.3 trillion in lifetime costs.³ The increased frequency also means areas can face multiple hurricanes with shorter breaks, as seen with

Helene (late Sept. 2024) and Milton (early Oct. 2024).³

In addition to hurricanes, a warmer atmosphere holds more moisture, contributing to more frequent and intense precipitation.⁴ Although U.S. winters are getting warmer and shorter on average, blizzards are becoming more severe and prevalent.⁴ A state-by-state electric utility performance report by the Citizens Utility Board (CUB) found that northeastern states with high blizzard rates experience longer average power outages annually. Maine and Vermont are at the high end, with outages lasting 908 minutes and 444 minutes per customer per year, respectively.⁵ The New York Department of Public Service published a cost-benefit analysis estimating overhead transmission power lines cost anywhere from \$4,000 to \$37,000 per mile, with additional overhead distribution costs between \$1,700 and \$22,000 per mile.⁶ Intense snowstorm damage can amplify costs and prolong power outage times.

Currently, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assists declared natural disasters. However, as event intensity increased, FEMA spent over half its fiscal budget in just eight days. Without intervention, FEMA will be forced to reduce or

suspend aid to catastrophic events.⁷ Integrated policy solutions are essential to address infrastructure investments and implement preemptive measures to reduce long-term costs.

Policy Idea

A distributive tax credit structure should be implemented to promote the development of a direct current (DC) underground electrical grid. Incentives of this nature would increase the reliability and climate resilience of the eastern U.S. power grid. Partnered with this, tax credits will be established for utility companies, modeled after the individual homeowner credits outlined in the Inflation Reduction Act. This system would significantly reduce power outages, lower maintenance costs, and modernize infrastructure to accommodate future energy demands and renewable power integration.

Policy Analysis

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) recently announced a \$34 million pilot program to develop a dozen advanced technologies through the Grid Overhaul with Proactive, High-Speed Undergrounding for Reliability, Resilience, and Security (GOPHURRS) for the

implementation process of underground power lines including the creation of a worm-like digging tool.⁸ \$4 million was directed to improving an AI-driven digital subsurface obstacle detection system. An additional \$4 million grant was allocated to establish a sensing platform using radar and radio frequencies to locate existing utility lines. Investments like this are aimed at reducing construction costs for underground systems.⁸

Converting traditional alternating current (AC) powerlines to direct current (DC) systems can enhance transmission efficiency and decrease overall electrical consumption. Companies in industrial computing, LED technology, solar energy, and electric vehicles increasingly adopt DC power and develop methods to convert currents at various voltages.^{9,10} High-voltage DC (HVDC) lines transmit nearly double the voltage of AC lines and offer greater stability over long distances.¹¹ While High Voltage AC (HVAC) transmission has traditionally been cheaper, accounting for terminal converter station costs makes HVDC exponentially more cost-effective at distances greater than 600 km above ground or between 50 and 90 km underground.⁹

Using DC distribution systems in households with solar photovoltaic (PV) panels can reduce energy use by 9-20%, and up to 14-25% when combined with battery storage.⁹ Despite high initial implementation costs, HVDC infrastructure is a cost-effective long-term solution, particularly for East Coast development. New York State Assembly Bill 2330-A directed a feasibility study on underground transmission lines,

finding such projects economically viable in densely populated areas prone to extreme weather.⁶ Underground grids reduce FEMA's reconstruction costs and can pay for themselves after two damaging weather events.¹⁴ Studies indicate that upfront investments in underground powerlines lead to long-term savings by reducing fire damage and improving public health.^{12,13}

Highlights

- Catastrophic environmental events are becoming more intense and frequent with global warming, costing \$22.8 billion per event, creating an immediate need for climate-efficient grid enhancements.³
- High-voltage direct current (HVDC) power lines are cost-effective when implemented at distances greater than 50 to 90 kilometers underground, establishing economies of scale in long-term integration.⁹
- DC power is more reliable and resilient compared to alternating current (AC) power and expands the grid for renewable energy integration, leaving room for large-scale implementation.^{3,9}
- This policy would address upfront investments through an integrated tax system to incentivize the implementation of high-voltage direct current underground power by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, utility companies, and local and state government programs

like the Grid Overhaul with Proactive, High-Speed Undergrounding for Reliability, Resilience, and Security (GOPHURRS).⁸

Implementation

This policy proposes an incentive agreement among state governments, FEMA, and local utility companies, funded through tax incentives and small utility bill surcharges. Modeled after New York's Inflation Reduction Act homeowner credits, utility companies will receive up to 30% tax credits.¹⁵ A 2.35% state tax on electrical services will be implemented, with 15% of revenue allocated to FEMA, capped at \$20 million- the equivalent of the upfront aid provided by the Biden-Harris Administration in 2024.¹⁶ This funding will support DC underground powerlines as part of climate resilience efforts, minimizing financial burdens on residents.

A phased implementation would begin in areas most prone to storm-related outages, aligning with ongoing road construction and utility upgrades. Investments would initially focus on the northern and southernmost states along the East Coast, where immediate investments are required, and slowly work towards a midpoint. By enhancing grid reliance, HVDC power will mitigate catastrophic climate events and establish more stable energy prices for consumers in high-risk areas.

Cities like North Redington Beach, Florida, are implementing underground power supply systems in partnership with local power providers such as the Florida Power Corporation.¹⁷ Jacksonville, Florida, and surrounding areas are

using partnering groups like the Jacksonville Electric Authority (JEA) to study the cost-effectiveness and feasibility of underground power lines.¹⁸ Partnerships like these will be used to incentivize local stakeholders and businesses to invest in underground power infrastructure through government-subsidized contracts.

With the help of local policy think tanks, agencies will evaluate the effectiveness of this plan using proportional and integral (PI) simulation modeling. This sophisticated computational approach integrates control systems principles into the analysis of electrical networks.¹⁹ This method will enable a detailed evaluation of critical performance metrics—transmission efficiencies, voltage drops, and line losses—specifically within the context of implementing underground High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) systems.²⁰ The insights from this evaluation will inform targeted spending for future projects.

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Using Shared Appreciation Mortgages to Improve Homeownership Trends

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The housing landscape for young people is incredibly fraught, particularly for people of color, who have historically struggled with homeownership at disproportionate rates. Local governments should implement shared appreciation mortgage programs to combat the crisis.

Background

The current state of homeownership in the United States presents several challenges. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Housing Vacancies and Homeownership Survey, the homeownership rate in the second quarter of 2024 was 65.6%, falling below the 25-year average of 66.4%, marking the lowest rate in the past two years.¹ This decline is particularly concerning for younger Americans, who find it increasingly difficult to purchase homes. For individuals below the age of 35, the homeownership rate for the head of households fell to 37.4%, the lowest figure in four years.¹ This is primarily due to stricter lending practices and credit standards following the Great Recession.² Young adults lacking robust financial stability are unable to purchase homes. In addition, home prices have risen considerably in the past decade, which has made homeownership increasingly unaffordable.²

Racial disparities further complicate homeownership. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 74.3% of White individuals are homeowners, whereas 45.7% of Black people, 49.5% of Hispanic individuals, and 62.3% of Asian individuals are homeowners.³ Minority groups consistently face lower homeownership rates

compared to their White counterparts, and homes owned by minority groups tend to have lower appraisal values.³ These disparities are rooted in a long history of racial discrimination in the housing market, dating back to the early 20th century when exclusionary behavior such as redlining was commonplace.⁴

Municipalities across the country must address this via public policy to ensure a more equitable housing market going forward. Shared appreciation mortgages can make homeownership more accessible to those who need it the most.

Policy Idea

Local governments across the United States should leverage both federal and state funds to establish shared appreciation mortgage programs. It is ideal for local governments to tackle this issue, as there tends to be extensive variation in housing policies by state and locality. Shared appreciation mortgages, or loans, are typically structured as deferred loans.⁵ They are interest-free, with repayment deferred until the property is either sold or refinanced, at which the loan is repaid.⁵ This differs from a typical mortgage, which is repaid in monthly payments. Furthermore, the homeowner pays a percentage of

any property value appreciation gained over time.⁵ If a home depreciates, the buyer only repays the value of the loan, without interest.⁶ These programs allow for increased housing accessibility by lowering upfront costs for buyers, while also allowing lenders to recapture new property value gained over time. By financing mortgages with a combination of equity and debt, shared appreciation mortgages spread risk more evenly across lenders and borrowers, decreasing the risk of foreclosure if home prices fall.⁵

Policy Analysis

A 2019 study from the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University used data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to estimate the number of eligible households for shared appreciation mortgages across the country. The analysis found that 6.6 million potential homeowners could buy a home in their county with \$25,000 to \$100,000 in financial assistance, which the authors noted was typical of most shared appreciation programs.⁶ The study also found that an additional 8.6 million people could buy a home with financial assistance of \$100,000 or more.⁶ Furthermore, the study found that shared appreciation programs could ease racial disparities in

homeownership.⁶ The study found that if all 1.4 million potential Black homeowners became homeowners through shared appreciation programs in 2013, their homeownership rate would've increased by 10%.⁶ Moreover, if all potential Hispanic homeowners became homeowners through shared appreciation mortgages in 2013, their homeownership rate would have increased by 9.4%.⁶

A 2018 study in the *Housing Policy Debate* journal observed the short-term loan performance of homeowners participating in nine shared appreciation mortgage programs.⁷ Using a difference-in-difference analysis, the study compared the outcomes of shared appreciation mortgage holders with the outcomes of other first-time homebuyers in metropolitan areas.⁷ The results showed that shared appreciation mortgage purchasers had “significantly less mortgage debt” and were “less likely to have a home equity line of credit.”⁷ Furthermore, the study observed no significant difference between shared appreciation and non-shared mortgage holders when analyzing 90- to 180-day delinquencies.⁷ This demonstrates that shared appreciation mortgage holders were maintaining homeownership at a similar rate to those with non-shared appreciation mortgages, highlighting the longevity of the program's effectiveness.

Highlights

- Homeownership rates have declined for young adults due to strict lending practices following the Great Recession and high home prices over the past decade.¹

- Shared appreciation mortgages are structured as deferred, interest-free loans repaid upon sale or refinancing, with homeowners sharing a percentage of any appreciation.⁵
- Local and state housing authorities should utilize Community Development Block Grant funds to subsidize community financial institutions in providing shared appreciation mortgages to borrowers.
- Housing authorities should ensure that strict oversight is kept over financial institutions to ensure predatory lending practices do not occur.

Implementation

Local and state housing authorities should use Community Development Block Grant funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to “sponsor” certain financial institutions in providing shared appreciation mortgages. Local and state governments should prioritize collaborating with local community banks and credit unions for loan distribution, as local financial institutions are often more attuned to the unique needs of residents compared to larger financial institutions.⁸ Nevertheless, strict oversight is essential: local and state housing authorities must develop clear regulatory frameworks and monitoring practices to prevent predatory lending and ensure responsible loan distribution. This may include regular financial reports on the program's efficacy. Furthermore, if the necessary funds

are available, the government should contract an outside firm to evaluate the program's effectiveness.

Local and state housing authorities should ensure their shared appreciation mortgages rely on diverse funding sources. While federal block grants, such as the Community Development Block Grant, can be the primary source of subsidies for these mortgages, governments should work with financial institutions to finance these loans via alternative means, such as through mortgage-backed securities or government bonds. Housing authorities can also consider reaching out to philanthropic organizations or private investors who may be interested in the housing market.

Clear eligibility requirements are crucial to ensure the program reaches its target demographic. For example, the shared appreciation mortgage program in Boulder, Colorado, mandates that enrollees have a family income at 80% of the area's median, enrollees must work within the city's formal limits, and enrollees must participate in a financial literacy class for buying a home.⁹ Programs can also create rules limiting the location, price range, and type of home that can be purchased with a shared appreciation mortgage. For example, Arlington, Virginia's program does not allow homes to be bought with a shared appreciation mortgage if its price exceeds \$500,000.⁹ This helps to finetune shared appreciation mortgage programs to align with housing market dynamics in a given location.

The application process should be as accessible and

streamlined as possible to encourage high participation rates. Multiple application pathways, including an online form and a paper application that can be mailed or submitted in person, will accommodate diverse applicant needs. It is imperative to conduct outreach in communities with low homeownership rates. Creating social media adverts, posting flyers in physical spaces, hosting informational town halls, and collaborating with other public entities to spread information are all potential methods of performing such outreach. By implementing these key strategies, local governments can create a more equitable homeownership environment for all.

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Future-Proofed! Federal Automatic IRA for an Easy Retirement

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Federal implementation of automatic Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs) helps address gaps in retirement savings access, particularly for marginalized workers. Making saving a default option can help secure millions of Americans' financial stability and contribute to the nation's economic success.

Background

Employer-based retirement plays a major role in securing financial welfare for American workers. However, according to the AARP Public Policy Institute, around 55 million employees in the private sector – equivalent to nearly half – work for an employer that does not offer a retirement plan.¹ Many employers, especially small businesses, face cost barriers when offering retirement plans.² About 32 million workers in small businesses did not have access to a retirement plan, compared to about 23 million in businesses with 100 or more workers.² Workers who are not provided with a retirement plan must open their own Individual Retirement Arrangement (IRA). According to research by Life Insurance Marketing and Research Association Secure Retirement Institute, only 34% of Americans know about IRAs, and 46% of those who do not own an IRA reported that they do not understand enough about IRAs.³ Given the lack of financial literacy, these populations are at a greater risk of financial insecurity in old age.

Marginalized individuals like low-wage workers, small businesses, part-time workers, and gig economy workers are typically the most affected by financial insecurity when entering older age. Without access to a retirement plan,

these workers are exposed to an increased risk of financial struggle, further contributing to the wealth gap. Such a deficit in retirement funds greatly affects the overall economy. PEW Charitable Trust data estimated that six states cumulatively faced a \$334.3 billion shortfall due to a lack of or inadequate retirement savings.⁴

Various policy efforts have attempted to address this gap. State-level automatic IRAs have been implemented across eleven states, and efforts have progressed, but national implementation has yet to occur. The implementation of federal automatic IRAs is urgently needed for the millions of Americans whose financial futures are in jeopardy.

Policy idea

The U.S. Department of Treasury and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) should implement automatic IRAs for employees whose company/employer does not offer a retirement plan. The Treasury would oversee the policy framework and manage the infrastructure of the program, while the IRS would handle the enrollment and compliance aspects. The structure of the program will be based on existing states' automatic IRA programs to ensure fluidity.⁵ Employers would enroll workers

into a government-managed IRA via social security numbers, with 3-8% of the employee's salary automatically deducted. Workers could opt out or adjust contributions for flexibility. Employers would facilitate enrollment and payroll deduction, lowering administrative barriers. Compliant employers would receive tax credits to encourage participation. Workers would retain accounts even if they change jobs, ensuring continued contributions.

Policy Analysis

Historically, research has consistently demonstrated that automatic IRA enrollment boosts participation. Research, including projections from the National Bureau of Economic Research, indicates that when eligible workers are automatically enrolled, participation rates climb significantly—from around 66% to 92%.⁶ These results suggest that this policy will dramatically enhance savings among workers without current access to employer-sponsored plans and ease the burden of establishing voluntary retirement plans.

This federal initiative takes inspiration from successful state-run programs, such as California's CalSavers. CalSavers automatically enrolls employees who do not have

retirement plans at work, making it easier for them to save through options with low administrative demands and portability across jobs. Evaluations of CalSavers show a rapid increase in assets under management, growing from \$595 million to \$858 million in just a year, which not only highlights its viability but also its potential benefits on a national scale.⁵

Expanding this model at a federal level could provide millions of lower-wage workers with a stable foundation for financial security in retirement, thereby reducing their dependence on future government aid, such as Social Security, to help stabilize governmental budgets.⁷

More importantly, automatic enrollment addresses behavioral inertia that can occur when saving is a voluntary choice. Many workers may procrastinate or feel overwhelmed by the process of setting up a retirement plan due to factors like complexity, lack of financial knowledge, and competing priorities. Automatic enrollment eliminates the initial burden of taking action and utilizes behavioral economics principles to help push individuals toward better financial strategy as AARP estimates American workers are 15 times more likely to save if they can save through automatic payroll reduction.^{8,9}

Highlights

- Nearly half of private-sector employees lack access to quality retirement saving plans, leaving millions at heightened risk of financial insecurity in old age and increasing economic inequality.¹
- Federal automatic IRAs address retirement access

barriers, especially for low-wage and gig workers lacking employer-sponsored plans.¹

- Automatic enrollment, overseen by the Treasury and IRS, ensures a seamless setup with payroll deductions, enabling easy contributions and portable accounts across jobs.
- Inspired by successful state models like CalSavers, federal IRAs aim to increase savings participation from 66% to 92% among eligible workers.⁶
- Expanding access to retirement savings reduces reliance on government assistance, enhances financial stability, and narrows the wealth gap, benefiting individuals and the economy.⁷

Implementation

Outreach efforts need to be led by state leaders and policymakers who have implemented similar initiatives in states like California, Oregon, Illinois, and others with a history of supporting similar financial programs to gain federal momentum. By engaging representatives from these states, the policy can gain credibility and utilize existing legislative frameworks for efficiency. Additionally, lobbying efforts should target representatives such as Congressman Richard Neal (D-MA), a prominent advocate for automatic IRAs and senior member of the Ways and Means Committee. Congressman Neal's experience with bipartisan retirement plans and his influence within the committee would be invaluable in shaping and

advancing the legislation for expedited passage through the House Committee on Ways and Means.¹⁰

With the new Senate dominated by Republicans coming in, framing the policy strategically is key. Senator Ron Wyden, a Democrat and Chair of the Senate Finance Committee, is a critical ally due to his history of bipartisan retirement reforms, including the bipartisan Enhancing American Retirement Act with Republican Senator Mike Crapo.¹¹ Wyden's role can highlight automatic IRAs as a fiscally sound initiative that reduces reliance on government aid while encouraging personal savings. Advocacy should focus on committees like the Senate HELP Committee and the House Education and Workforce Committee. Presenting automatic IRAs as a market-driven, low-regulation solution that supports economic independence for working families can appeal to conservative values. Building coalitions with business groups, think tanks, and community voices strengthen external pressure on legislators.

Given the significant changes this policy brings to the retirement structure, backlash from fiscal conservatives over high federal costs may arise. A study by AARP and the Retirement Research Center projected that 58% of workers with access to a similar model of universal auto-IRA would have saved more than \$100,000 for retirement, compared to only 9% of those without access. Meanwhile, 75% of workers without a payroll deduction program have saved less than \$10,000.¹² Policymakers should emphasize such long-term savings from reduced reliance on

government assistance during retirement, presenting data that shows how automatic IRAs can decrease dependency on federal welfare programs. Additionally, a phased rollout and capped initial incentives for employers could help address cost concerns while appealing to budget-conscious stakeholders.

For implementation, careful coordination must be made with the U.S. Department of Treasury and the IRS, which play critical roles in overseeing the policy's rollout. Upon enactment, the Treasury would develop the program's financial infrastructure by establishing secure and accessible platforms for account management and investment options, allowing employees to track their savings and manage accounts easily. To reduce administrative obstacles, especially for small businesses, the Treasury would unify processes like contributions and reporting into a streamlined, user-friendly system, simplifying participation and compliance.

Meanwhile, the IRS would manage compliance, enrollment, and tax-related oversight. This would include ensuring payroll deductions are implemented correctly and contributions are accurately reported. The IRS could also provide clear guidelines, digital resources, and support materials to help employers transition smoothly, as well as a dedicated support line to address questions, making the policy accessible and reducing administrative burden.

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Community Development Financial Institutions and Economic Growth in New York's I-90 Corridor

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The New York State Legislature should increase funding for Community Development Financial Institutions, stimulating growth in underserved areas along the Interstate-90 Corridor and fueling an economic revival backed by both state and federal resources.

Background

The Interstate-90 corridor is a key trade and transportation route spanning 385.5 miles across New York State, connecting major upstate economic hubs such as Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, and Albany.¹ In 2023, the corridor was selected as one of 31 national technology hubs under President Joe Biden's ambitious CHIPS (acronym of "Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors") and Science Act.² The initiative aims to foster domestic economic modernization by investing in the research and creation of American-made chips for machines like computers, medical devices, and vehicles.

Designation as a technology hub creates a federally-backed promise to bring jobs and industry to New York's I-90. Such action is desperately needed, considering the pandemic resulted in a net loss of nearly 13,000 New York businesses. In a post-Covid world, upstate New York has also had the second largest decline in businesses and is ranked 46 out of 50 states in "dynamism," a measure of economic mobility and growth.³ But the goals of the CHIPS Act appear as a remedy, aiming to offer \$40 million into the region to create semiconductor factories, support

preexisting chip manufacturers, and spark small-business development.⁴

However, the new project faces significant challenges. According to a July 2024 Urban Institute study, business growth in the I-90 corridor remains stagnant, hindered by insufficient government support. Additionally, minority business ownership in this area is minimal, with New York rates trailing other diverse states like Florida, California, and Texas.⁵ This is a bad omen as little businesses in New York can take advantage of the CHIPS program requirement that some grant money be allocated to minority groups.⁶ Without targeted financial investment in New York State's business growth, this federally funded initiative risks becoming a case study for economic mismanagement.

Policy Idea

New York State legislators should facilitate the expansion of loans for small businesses along the Interstate-90 corridor. To do this, they should fund and deepen access to Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), supporting future growth created by the CHIPS Act. Specifically, CDFIs are certified lending services required to offer a minimum of 60%

of their available finances to low, middle-income, or underserved Americans and offer fair, non-predatory interest rates.⁷ CDFIs receive grants from state and local governments and private donors, permitting them to offer more flexible lending terms to upstate New York businesses.⁸ This policy should be accomplished via specific grants given to CDFIs looking to expand their operations. The money can come from New York's budget surplus of \$2.2 billion, thus avoiding undue stress on taxpayers.⁹

Policy Analysis

The goal of this policy is to expand CDFIs to stimulate upstate New York's economy. New York currently has 80 CDFIs, but according to New York's Federal Reserve Governor Lisa Cook, this number is insufficient to drive significant economic growth.¹⁰ CDFIs are specifically important because their funds are earmarked for underserved communities and struggling businesses.¹¹ Governor Cook emphasizes that many existing CDFIs are focused on economic rebuilding from the destruction of the pandemic, with resources stretched too thin to foster new growth.¹² For New York to capitalize on CDFI funding as a tool for expansion, a policy passed by

the State Legislature and signed by the Governor's Office providing more focused funding via grants is essential.

While there were some positive byproducts of COVID-19 economic policies — such as the introduction of the Paycheck Protection Program Liquidity Facility and Community Reinvestment Act, which allowed CDFIs to build greater capital reserves — these measures only provided a baseline that underemphasizes development along the I-90 corridor.¹³ Without such growth, the related economic chaos may imperil the potential success of the CHIPS Act.

Additional government financial support is needed. The Governor of New York holds budgetary powers to inject fresh energy into the economy. For example, in early March, NY Governor Kathy Hochul passed the \$800 million COVID-19 Pandemic Small Business Recovery Grant Program to help floundering businesses.¹⁴ But the current policy must go beyond rescuing — it must actively bolster new businesses in underperforming areas, like the Interstate-90 corridor. CDFIs can work quickly in giving this boost, as typically smaller, struggling organizations now face fewer barriers to entry from CDFIs, whose jobs are intrinsically to save failing businesses.¹⁵ As such, a legislator-created policy to provide greater funding to CDFIs primarily providing their services to I-90 corridor businesses is required.

Highlights

- In 2023, the Interstate-90 corridor, a key trade and transportation route spanning New York State,

was selected as a national technology hub under the federal CHIPS and Science Act.^{1,2}

- Business growth in the I-90 corridor remains stagnant, hindered by insufficient government support that can diminish the impact of the CHIPS Act.^{3,4}
- New York should fund and deepen access to Community Development Financial Institutions by providing them with lump-sum grants carved from the state budget.⁷
- CDFIs target smaller businesses that serve underserved populations, revitalizing struggling businesses and areas.⁹

Implementation

The CDFI grant program will be application-based, requiring Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) to prove how they plan to support new economic development and outline a detailed funding roadmap. This approach builds on the successful model of New York's Small Business Seed Funding Grant Program (BSFG Program), which operated similarly.¹⁶ Both programs rely on an application-based system administered by the state, require the signature of the Governor to pursue their directives and give lump-sum funding to businesses in need. Grant sizes will vary based on each CDFI's previous gross payouts, ensuring larger institutions receive funding proportionate to their needs while smaller CDFIs obtain adequate resources to expand operations. This tiered structure avoids a one-size-fits-all approach, empowering institutions of all sizes.

Again, previous programs like the BSFG have operated exactly like this, proving the feasibility and giving a model for this program's success.¹⁷

Some business owners in upstate New York may be concerned about prioritizing CDFIs over other lending institutions. CDFIs often require additional steps to demonstrate community impact, like maintaining community partnerships and may be less accessible to business owners outside underserved areas.¹⁸ However, it is important to then articulate the primary reason for these grants: to grow small business operations, bring economic growth to underperforming areas, and help marginalized communities become more economically mobile. Past precedent proves that CDFIs are effective at reaching targeted demographics: while traditional banks often exclude marginalized communities because of ingrained mistrust, high collateral expectations, and inconvenient geography, CDFI recipients are 60% people of color, 50% women, and 28% rural residents.^{19,20} As such, CDFIs can provide for the most diversified overall growth, which is essential to revitalize an area in need of economic growth injections.

With CDFIs being a potential savior for underserved New York communities, it is important to utilize strict CDFI regulations that ensure the safety and efficacy of these institutions. The Department of Treasury outlines steps that states like New York can take to monitor their CDFIs, including expressed punishments for violations in the CDFI application, listed illegal and inconsistent practices and clearly

expressed ways that CDFIs must contribute to community-level goals.²¹ Following these standards will create an application system that is free, fair, and economically beneficial to all involved.

By enhancing the lending power of CDFI's, business growth along the I-90 corridor is expected. When semiconductor jobs come to the corridor as a result of the CHIPS Act, the local economies will already have a baseline for growth. They can appropriately reap the benefits of the federal grant program. By enhancing local economies before the federal grant money becomes available, the New York government can ensure I-90 cities and towns experience steady, upward growth instead of unstable economic swings that may come from an infusion of jobs and factories to areas vastly unprepared to serve them.

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Expanding the Internal Revenue Code to Foster Employee Ownership in Private Equity and Venture Capital

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The current, limited application of Section 1042 of the Internal Revenue Code restricts the opportunity for employee stock ownership plans (ESOP) in private equity (PE) and venture capital-backed companies. Reform is needed to allow these firms to defer capital gains taxes when selling controlling interests of these companies to ESOPs and reinvesting the amount in ESG-compliant qualified replacement properties.

Background

Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs) are the most common employee ownership corporate structure in the United States, with approximately 6,500 U.S. companies having an ESOP and approximately 14 million U.S. workers being participants.¹ They are considered defined contribution plans under the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA), as they function by holding stock through a trust fund that accrues money over time as companies contribute more stock.^{2,3} The goal of ESOPs is to encourage employee retention and motivation throughout their tenure, especially in an age where one in every two U.S. employees is open to leaving their current job.⁴ An ESOP tackles these issues by encouraging employees to have a stake in their company's success, which in turn allows for more productivity, effectiveness, and efficiency.⁵

Workers are not the only ones who benefit from ESOPs. There are incentives for specific corporations as well. Section 1042 of the Internal Revenue Code (IRC) provides a tax deferral mechanism for business owners who sell stock to an ESOP and reinvest the proceeds in a qualified replacement

property (securities issued by a domestic operating corporation) within twelve months of the sale.⁶ Specifically, business owners of C Corporations can effectively defer capital gains taxes on their sale of stocks if the sale of their stocks is to ESOPs. The federal government taxes long-term capital gains with preferential treatment at a maximum rate of 23.8%, which is still lower than the rate for other sources of income.⁷ Section 1042 allows ESOPs to play a significant role in motivating corporations to invest in the betterment of their employees while retaining more of their earnings overall.

Policy Idea

The United States Congress should expand Section 1042 of the Internal Revenue Code (IRC) by allowing private equity firms and venture capital funds, which are generally limited liability companies (LLC) or limited partnerships (LP), to defer capital gains taxes when they sell a controlling interest in a company to an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP). If a PE or VC fund sells 30% or more of its stock to an ESOP that complies with the Employment Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA), the firm can

defer capital gains taxes. The proceeds from these transactions must then be reinvested in qualified replacement properties (QRPs), specifically targeting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) related initiatives. Firms can defer the tax as long as they hold the QRP, with taxes only being implemented after the selling of those proceeds, continuing a capital allocation method that maximizes the firm's profits while ensuring the empowerment of other workers.

Policy Analysis

There are three key objectives that this policy attempts to achieve. First, this policy aims to align PE's best interests with employees. Job satisfaction grew as the attitudes of workers towards their managers and company performance, specifically in terms of sales growth, increased by 5.4% more than comparison companies with the establishment of ESOP plans. This makes them more likely to be efficient in the long-term.⁸

The second objective of the policy is to ensure the long-term success of PE-backed companies. ESOPs are connected to undeniable success.

73% of the ESOP companies have significantly improved their performance after setting up their plans.⁸ But in the PE industry, creating the ESOP plans in the first place is rare.⁹ Through this policy, PE-backed corporations will have an opportunity to improve performance and production output immensely, incentivizing PE firms to implement ESOP plans that produce the benefit in the first place.

The last objective of the policy is wealth building and promotion of concrete ESG initiatives. Although 87% of firms consider ESG factors only to decrease investment risk and potential litigation on a reputational basis, this policy creates two concrete contribution methods to a PE firm's ESG efforts.¹⁰ First, ESOPs themselves are found to have a significantly positive relationship with greater environmental protection, quality of environmental impact information disclosed, and ESG ratings.¹¹ Second, the proceeds are required to be reinvested in SMEs with ESG initiatives which are known to create jobs at a higher rate than non-PE-backed firms and to adopt sustainable business practices.¹² Both methods will ensure the PE industry maximizes shareholder value while simultaneously contributing to social welfare.

Highlight:

- This policy proposes that through an expansion of Section 1042 of the IRC, private equity (PE) and venture capital (VC) firms can defer capital gains taxes by selling a controlling stake in a company to Employee Stock Ownership Plans

(ESOP) and reinvesting the proceedings into a QRP from an operating corporation that is an SME with ESG initiatives as defined under this law.⁶

- This policy also encourages reinvestment into SMEs with specific ESG initiatives, increasing their influence in their respective industries to expand their social and environmental welfare impact.^{13,14}
- This policy will use the existing compliance frameworks for Section 1042 with adjustments to account for the QRP differences, documenting both the sale to ESOPs and the reinvestment in ESG-compliant QRPs. The IRS would partner with the Department of Labor to ensure all ESOP transactions meet ERISA standards.^{15,16}

Implementation

First, the United States Congress will need to introduce and pass a bill through both chambers, proposing amendments to Section 1042 of the IRC to allow private equity and venture capital firms holding a controlling stake in a company to defer capital gains taxes when selling to an ESOP. Within this bill, Congress must define controlling stake as at least 30%, QRP as any security issued by a domestic "operating corporation," SMEs as firms that employ fewer than 500 employees, and ESG as a metric used in business and investing to determine a company's performance across multiple areas of social responsibility like environment, social, and corporate governance.^{6,13,14} ESOPs must be

defined as a qualified defined contribution plan that is a stock bonus plan or a stock bonus/money purchase plan under IRC Section 401(a).¹⁷ These terms are important to define during the legislative process to ensure that the true meaning of the bill is held, especially with potential legal scrutiny.¹⁸

Assuming the passage of the bill in both chambers of Congress and the signing of the bill by the President of the United States, the IRS will have jurisdiction in enforcing the law. Prior to enforcement, the IRS will open a Public Notice and Comment Period to receive stakeholder input. Inputs have successfully led to the more effective and efficient enforcement of laws, as seen with the IRS Qualified Business Income Deduction in 2018 and its clarified definitions after the comments.¹⁹

To ensure compliance, the IRS will establish a framework to enforce the new tax code similar to the current compliance framework under Section 1042 of the IRC, with a few additional adjustments. Sellers must attach a written statement indicating their choice to apply for Section 1042 to their income tax return for the year of the sale.²⁰ This statement must include the following: a description of the corporation or qualified securities sold, the date of sale, the cost of the QRP purchased, and a justification for why the QRP is considered a part of an SME that can be measured under ESG standards.²⁰ Within 45 days of purchasing the QRP, sellers of the QRP are required to provide a notarized statement detailing the purchase, including the date and cost. Additionally, the statement must include their formalized ESG-

related initiatives, and their corporation size, declaring that the securities represent the QRP concerning the ESOP stock sale.¹⁵

Lastly, the IRS will work with the Department of Labor (DOL) to ensure that the ESOPs involved in all transactions comply with ERISA standards.¹⁶ The IRS and DOL will also collaborate to collect data regarding the success of the policy. Although the current Section 1042 does not have any provisions regarding data collection to measure its success, this law will encourage the DOL and the National Center for Employee Ownership to collect data regarding the welfare of workers in corporations involved in PE and VC transactions.

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Pathways to Mobility: Affordable Public Transportation for Low-Income NYC Residents

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The New York City Government and the MTA should provide half-priced subway and bus fares to those living at or below 200% of the federal poverty line in order to combat income inequality in New York City.

Background

Income inequality in the United States is a growing problem, with the top 10% of households holding 67% of the nation's wealth while the bottom 50% possess just 2.5%.¹ This disparity is particularly prevalent in New York City, where the wealthiest 20% of Manhattan residents earn, on average, 53 times more than the bottom 20%.² Statewide, the top 1% earn over 44 times more than the bottom 99%.³ States with higher income inequality have lower life expectancies and higher mortality and obesity rates.⁴

Public transit provides low-income individuals, who often cannot afford cars, access to jobs to bring themselves out of poverty.⁵ Residents of the 10 lowest-income city council districts in New York are 45% more likely to commute via bus than the average New Yorker.⁶ However, the affordability of public transit remains a significant barrier for many low-income households.⁷ In New York City, as of 2024, 20% of residents reported difficulty affording public transit, rising to 30% among those living in poverty.⁸ In response to these challenges, the MTA (Metropolitan Transit Authority) introduced the Fair Fares program, which offers half-priced transit for NYC residents living at or below 120% of the federal poverty level.

However, only 56% of eligible New Yorkers have enrolled due to a lack of advertising, public awareness, and potentially fare evasion as well.⁸ Many eligible residents were unaware of the program or unsure how to apply.⁷ Furthermore, many low-income workers do not qualify for the program because of the enrollment threshold.⁸ It is clear that expanded public transit assistance for low-income individuals is needed to address the high cost of transit for low-income New Yorkers, which will serve as a critical step in reducing the city's high income inequality levels.

Policy Idea

To address New York City's extreme levels of income inequality due to inequality in transportation access, the NYC government should expand the Fair Fares program to residents living at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, as the current 120% threshold still excludes some residents who cannot afford transit. This policy would make subways and non-express buses half-price for eligible residents, allowing them to access jobs to bring themselves out of poverty. Participants would apply for a special MetroCard, granting them half-price access to these services, and they would renew their eligibility annually to ensure

they still meet the income requirements. The program would be funded using the NYC congestion tax on cars, set to provide \$15 billion to the MTA from 2020-2024. Funding may also include federal government subsidies. The policy would be proposed through NYC Councilwoman Selvena Brooks-Powers, the Chair of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

Policy Analysis

The primary cost of expanding the Fair Fares program for low-income NYC residents would be the lost fare revenue from approximately 4.6 million NYC citizens who would no longer pay full fares.^{9,10} Assuming these individuals use the subway or bus twice daily over 262 workdays per year, this results in 2.41 billion rides annually.¹¹ At the current fare of \$2.90 per ride, this amounts to nearly \$3.495 billion in lost revenue each year.¹² Fares currently account for 23% of the MTA's \$19.38 billion budget, making this a substantial financial loss.¹³ To compensate for these lost fares, the MTA could tap into funds from the recently raised NYC congestion tax, which is projected to provide \$15 billion over 4 years to fund MTA expansion.¹⁴ This would eliminate

the need for fare hikes, as using congestion tax funds would allow the \$3.495 billion in lost fare revenue to be covered, given that the tax provides \$3.75 billion in increased revenue per year to the MTA.¹⁴

This increased access to public transit for low-income individuals from Fair Fares would support upward economic mobility for low-income individuals. Limited public transit expansion has been correlated with higher rates of unemployment, meaning that increasing public transit access would decrease unemployment rates for low-income individuals.¹⁵ This decrease in unemployment rates would bring lower-income individuals closer to higher-income NYC residents, thereby increasing chances for upward economic mobility.¹⁵ There is also a positive relationship between transit access and the wealth of a neighborhood due to job access.¹⁵

Fare reduction programs for low-income residents have proven to be successful in other cities. The Boston city government implemented a 50% fare reduction program for low-income residents, projected to increase low-income ridership by 30%.¹⁶

Highlights

- As of 2024, income inequality in the US is growing, with the top 10% of households holding 67% of the nation's wealth, while the bottom 50% holds only 2.5%.¹
- Access to public transportation has proven to be a powerful tool for reducing poverty, enabling individuals to reach job

opportunities quickly and efficiently.⁵

- Affordability remains a significant barrier, as approximately 30% of impoverished people struggle to afford public transportation.⁸
- The city government of Boston implemented a 50% fare reduction program for low-income residents in the summer of 2024, which is expected to increase low-income ridership by 30%.¹⁶
- In order to address this problem, the New York City Government should expand their current Fair Fares program to those living at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, giving them half-price fares on all MTA subways and non-express buses.

Implementation

The Office of NYC Councilwoman Selvena Brooks-Powers should sponsor the bill for this policy in the NYC Council, which would most likely pass due to the tendency of NYC residents and the City Council to support socially liberal policies such as this one. Councilwoman Brooks-Powers brings valuable experience in directing infrastructure funding and currently serves as the Chair of the Committee of Transportation and Infrastructure.¹⁷ Given their history of endorsing public transit improvements, advocacy organizations, including Transportation for America and the American Public Transportation Association, would also support the proposal by lobbying other NYC councilmembers.^{18, 19} The NYC Council would work closely with

the MTA to administer and oversee the expanded program.

The main challenge to implementing this expansion is the \$3.495 billion in lost fares.¹² Although the congestion tax hike would fully cover any lost fare revenue associated with the proposed Fair Fares expansion, only \$255 million remain per year for any subway and bus upgrades.^{12, 14} The MTA can apply for government subsidies from President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, which allocated \$8 billion to expand high-capacity rail and bus services in states across the US.²⁰ If federal funding falls through, the MTA can also increase revenue by combatting fare evasion. The MTA can station more officials in high-traffic subway and bus stations to discourage potential fare evaders.²¹ Although there would be an associated personnel cost, the increased revenue would be significant, given that fare evasion affects 14% of subway and 48% of bus rides in New York City.^{22, 23} Administrative adjustments associated with special MetroCards could be combated by utilizing infrastructure from the existing Fair Fares program, using any of the aforementioned funding sources to cover the costs associated with program expansion, including personnel and administrative costs.

Limited publicity was another issue with the original Fair Fares program. To address this, the MTA will partner with community organizations to significantly publicize Fair Fares. The campaign will include posters and advertisements in low-income neighborhoods and public housing projects. Publicity would cost roughly \$75-150 per advertisement, which could be covered by the 4 to

1 economic return increased public transportation provides.^{24, 25} The MTA will also put advertisements on buses and subways, directly reaching eligible riders. To gather community feedback, the MTA will collaborate with community-based organizations in low-income communities to run surveys to determine the effectiveness of advertising campaigns.

The Fair Fares expansion will coincide with the NYC congestion tax on January 5th, 2025.¹⁴ Advertising will start simultaneously and continue throughout 2025. The MTA will also conduct quarterly ridership and advertising effectiveness evaluations starting in 2026.

The success of this program will be measured using quarterly evaluations of ridership growth among Fair Fares users. Given that the MTA already tracks ridership using MetroCard swipes, those who swipe using the special Fair Fares MetroCard would be tracked separately to measure the success of this program specifically.

Overall, expanding the Fair Fares program would fight against New York City's income inequality by providing low-income individuals with increased access to jobs that can support their upward economic mobility.

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EDUCATION POLICY

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Eliminating Mandated Seniority-Based Teacher Layoffs in New York State to Ensure Educational Equity

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New York enforces a “last-in, first-out” policy by laying off new teachers first for firing public school teachers, threatening the careers of early-career educators and disrupting the classroom environment. Eliminating this mandate will maintain a diverse, supportive teacher workforce.

Background

Throughout the pandemic, states have spent a disproportionate amount of federal funds on hiring new teachers due to the influx of funding provided by the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER).¹ One estimate records that 20% of ESSER funds were spent on staffing. Despite the current teacher shortage, economists predict a sharp increase in layoffs as ESSER spending is cut off in the upcoming years.²

Ideally, teacher layoffs would not be necessary, allowing for an environment of mentorship between new and experienced educators. However, just as emergency funding created budget space for new educators, its absence leaves teacher reduction as the most commonly predicted budget cut among district leaders³. In the state of New York, this prediction has the potential for dire consequences. New York currently mandates a layoff policy in which teachers must be fired in the order of reverse seniority.^{4,5} However, this perspective is outdated and ignores current research.

Frequently laying off less experienced teachers produces equity issues through widening the achievement gap. People of color

are approximately 45% more likely to be early-career teachers, which disproportionately serve low-income communities and minority students.^{6,7} Students experiencing high teacher turnover score lower in both reading and math, especially if they were already low-performing.⁶ A diverse teacher workforce supports students across the board, with teachers of color significantly increasing math and reading scores alongside feelings of self-efficacy among students.⁸ New York threatens this potential by placing seniority at paramount importance in the face of a possible wave of layoffs while failing to consider that in doing so, they also remove teachers of color from the classroom.⁶

Policy Idea

To resolve issues stemming from seniority-based layoffs, the New York state government should modify existing legislation. Articles 2510 and 2588 of New York State education law require teachers with the least seniority, including years of substitute and paraprofessional experience, to be laid off first in the case of a position termination.^{4,5} State legislators should modify the sections of these statutes describing layoff policy to eliminate seniority as the first line of discretion in

determining which teacher to lay off in the case of a position termination. In order to replace this first consideration for termination, a task force should be assembled to find another consideration with more research backing from New York communities.

Policy Analysis

While the post-pandemic educational era is like nothing observed before, those working in school hiring policy can look to the Great Recession as a reference, since it was the latest period of mass layoffs to date.⁷ States and districts had to determine how to lay off teaching staff while limiting the impact on students, and this practice will likely continue following the ESSER financial cliff. States who did not use seniority-based layoffs were found to significantly increase high-school graduation rates in the long term, compared with those who did not¹⁰.

When school districts were forced to look beyond seniority, they had to investigate other measures of teacher quality. New York State currently evaluates teacher performance through principal ratings, but research finds a positive slant too extreme to accurately determine real impact from most principal evaluations.¹¹

Value-added measures, uses changes in test scores to link the presence of a given teacher to a given student's improvement. These measures have strong research backing, with teachers who score highly on short-term value-added measures being linked to students' increased college attendance and socioeconomic mobility later in life.¹² However, policymakers must note that this measure is purely correlative and sensitive to external community factors outside of the teacher.¹³ A more sophisticated primary measure is necessary, but should be determined with thorough consideration. Through promptly beginning research on impactful teacher factors, New York can protect early-career and underrepresented educators and eliminate seniority as the foremost argument in personnel decisions sooner rather than later.

Highlights

- Approximately 20% of COVID-19 K-12 emergency funding, which will run out in the coming years, was allocated toward paying staff.¹ New York's "first-in, last-out" mandates unfairly impact disadvantaged schools by disproportionately increasing already-rampant teacher turnover.^{7,8}
- Removing reverse-seniority layoff mandates would protect early-career educators, and, in turn, protect the diversity of the teacher workforce.⁶
- Other estimates of teacher quality (such as value added measures and principal evaluations) are adequate, but this policy should also

include provisions for increased research on impactful teacher factors.

Implementation

New York State should pass a bill to amend education statutes to omit the mandate of seniority-based layoffs within the upcoming legislative session. This legislative change will limit the immediate disproportionate quantity of post-ESSER layoffs on newer educators. To convince lawmakers to reform the statutes, advocates can develop and present case studies based on the successes of any of the 20 states which restrict "last-in, first-out" policies.¹⁰

To best serve teachers and students alike, New York should pursue a more standardized approach. Prior to making any additional statutory change, the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) must analyze which aspects of teaching most accurately predict student outcomes. NYSED should launch a series of Randomly-Controlled Trials (RCTs) in schools across the state to analyze various factors of teacher performance, including short-term academic teacher value-added measures and teacher absenteeism. The exhaustive list of teacher effectiveness measures should be developed by a legislative task force composed of advocates for the aforementioned bill, with the input of teacher unions (to ensure fairness) and advocacy groups. Over the course of the next two years, NYSED should measure engagement-based student outcomes such as changes in student-reported self-efficacy to thoroughly measure how different teacher factors affect students' willingness to learn.

Following the data collection and analysis of this statewide study, NYSED or a separate legislative task force can determine impacts of specific agreed-upon teacher factors on student engagement outcomes. Legislators should pass an additional bill modifying New York Education Law articles 2510 and 2588 to prioritize factors with the strongest empirical proof in layoff situations, and districts should recommend these factors as ongoing accountability measures.

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Revamping Federal Mentorship Programs to Address ‘Hidden Curricula’ in Higher Education

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Hidden curricula – the unspoken social, cultural, and academic expectations – have increasingly disadvantaged first-generation and low-income students. The Department of Education should revamp federal mentorship programs, such as TRIO, to make hidden curricula explicit, providing all students with a clear understanding of higher education expectations.

Background

Students across the United States experience vastly different learning opportunities, as many minority and low-income students face unequal access to resources compared to their affluent peers. This disparity not only affects students’ K-12 experience but also limits avenues for higher education and college readiness. As students transition to higher education, the effects of this inequality persist. Students from wealthier backgrounds often come equipped with cultural capital, which helps them navigate the unspoken norms of higher education, like interacting with professors, understanding syllabi, and attending office hours.¹ These informal but crucial skills, known as “hidden curricula,” are assumed to be universal; however, many first-generation and low-income students have never been exposed to them.² As a result, hidden curriculum perpetuates educational inequities, putting these students at a disadvantage in higher education.

The federal government currently offers a series of eight mentorship programs, such as Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services (TRIO) Programs, to help students overcome economic, social, academic, and cultural barriers in

education.³ Three of these programs — Student Support Services, the McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, and Veterans’ Upward Bound — specifically focus on barriers in higher education; nevertheless, these programs do not address components of hidden curriculum. Instead, they concentrate on other elements such as tutoring, academic coaching, and supplemental coursework. Furthermore, the programs lack clear, measurable objectives, making it difficult to assess their effectiveness.⁴ Program outcomes are defined by long-term student success without considering the specific determinants of that success. This approach perpetuates inequality, as it fails to address one of the root causes — hidden curricula — and instead relies on academic support as a supplementary fix.⁵

Policy Idea

The Department of Education (ED) should revamp federal TRIO programs in higher education to address challenges associated with the hidden curriculum. This revamped approach would introduce targeted initiatives focused on key aspects of hidden curricula, such as financial literacy, networking, career readiness, and academic navigation.

These programs will enable students to learn practical strategies for interacting with professors, understanding syllabi, attending office hours, navigating campus resources, and more. Additionally, the revamped programs should incorporate specialized training for mentors to equip them with the tools needed to guide students effectively through the hidden expectations of higher education. The curriculum should be updated yearly to remain relevant and tailored to the norms of specific institutions, ensuring program effectiveness. The ED should also conduct annual reviews of the program content in collaboration with mentors and student representatives to take into account feedback from students about challenges and shifts in hidden curriculum.

Policy Analysis

Implementing a policy that addresses the knowledge gap between students of different socioeconomic backgrounds is essential to leveling the playing field in higher education.⁶ Without modifying federal mentorship programs to address hidden curricula, higher education opportunities for all Americans will continue to be limited by their financial constraints.

The structure of federal TRIO programs makes them ideal for implementing modules that address hidden curricula, as they effectively reach students who would benefit from them the most. Congress mandates that two-thirds of TRIO participants come from families with incomes at or below 150% of the federal poverty level and where neither parent has graduated from college. As a result, TRIO programs currently serve more than 880,000 first-generation and low-income students. Additionally, with \$48.8 million in annual funding, including 114 program grants and sponsorships from 50 historically Black colleges and universities coupled with funds from ED’s Higher Education Act, these programs have a proven track record of having the financial means to support underrepresented student populations and dismantle these hidden education barriers.⁷

In addition, research has shown that a simple, cost-effective intervention, such as a workshop, can effectively assess and address hidden curricula. The standardized workshop used in the study significantly improved students’ understanding of hidden curricula and successfully improved their academic performance.⁸ Making hidden curricula explicit also helps build cultural capital, which is proven to boost academic success in higher education.⁹ Given these successful results, implementing similar workshops administered by existing federal mentorship programs should expect to yield similar results. By focusing on hidden curricula, TRIO can enhance its existing initiatives, ensuring that students not only gain access to educational opportunities but also develop the skills and knowledge

needed to navigate the complexities and expectations of higher education.

Highlights

- Students from minority and low-income backgrounds face unequal learning opportunities and limited exposure to “hidden curricula” compared to their more affluent peers, perpetuating inequality in higher education.
- Federal government mentorship programs such as TRIO, which are designed to help students overcome economic, social, academic, and cultural barriers in education do not address key elements of the hidden curriculum.
- The federal government should revamp TRIO programs to focus on hidden curricula, offering targeted initiatives in financial literacy, networking, career readiness, and academic navigation to help students effectively engage with professors, syllabi, office hours, and campus resources.
- Expanding federal TRIO programs to include initiatives on hidden curricula could better prepare students for the expectations of higher education, ensuring that low-income and first-generation students can successfully navigate the academic system.

Implementation

There is currently substantial bipartisan support for

TRIO, demonstrated by the continuous support of increased funding by Congress. In 2023, a funding deal included a \$54 million (4.7%) increase for TRIO in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023.¹⁰ Additionally, the Senate Appropriations Committee recently approved a FY25 funding bill for TRIO, raising its budget by \$20 million over FY24. The bill passed with strong bipartisan support by a vote of 26-2.¹¹ This reinforces the commitment to expanding the programs’ impact and highlights the feasibility of revamping programs to address hidden curricula. Given this, there should be broad support for ED to revamp TRIO programs.

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, the federal government allocates Title I funds to educational facilities serving low-income student populations, determined primarily by federal census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state.¹² To cover administrative needs — such as developing specific program modules, maintaining relevant information, and training staff — the federal government should bolster Title I funding to support the enhancement of these existing programs. This additional funding should extend to public higher education institutions, with private institutions also eligible to apply, provided they demonstrate financial need.

To design the new initiatives, ED should first conduct a baseline needs assessment among higher education institutions currently offering TRIO programs to identify hidden curriculum challenges. ED should then collaborate with institutions to design curriculum modules, ensuring that program content

aligns with the norms, expectations, and resources of differing institutions. To minimize additional costs of module implementation, ED should encourage institutions to partner with local organizations such as nonprofits and to connect with on-campus groups for guest speakers and peer mentors.

Before nationwide implementation, ED should pilot these modules within an existing TRIO program to empirically validate the effectiveness of learning modules. Testing the modules at a single institution will allow for evaluation and adjustments, ensuring they are effective before expanding to widespread implementation. Following a successful pilot, TRIO funding from ED's Higher Education Act, along with additional Title I funding, will support expanding the program across high-need institutions.

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Combatting the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Removing Police Presence from New York City Public Schools

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In order to address racial inequities in K-12 education and enhance school safety, NYC public schools should remove NYPD school safety officers and implement restorative justice measures. By removing officers, responses to student behavior will be in the hands of school counselors who can handle situations through methods and diversion programs that reintegrate students into class rather than suspensions and expulsion.

Background

Since the 1970s, United States K-12 public schools have increasingly used on-site full-time police officers, increasing from fewer than 100 to 20,000.¹ While police presence aims to promote safety, increased policing only creates the illusion of security without addressing real issues.² New York is one of just seven states where over 50% of schools have a police presence. As of late February 2023, the number of active New York City Police Department school safety agents totaled almost 3,900.³ In fact, research shows that school policing exacerbates inequity through disproportionate arrests of disabled, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ students.⁴ From 2016 to 2020, 91% of all arrests at NYC schools are Black and Latinx young people, despite these students being only 66% of the enrolled population. Furthermore, the rise in school policing has come at the expense of other important school authorities. Almost one-third of American K-12 students attend schools with police presence, lacking sufficient nurses, counselors, or social workers.⁵

Instead of rehabilitative responses to misconduct, such as

peer mediating or using dialogue to resolve conflicts, many schools have taken a retributive approach. These retributive policing approaches result in suspensions and other disciplinary actions that disproportionately affect children of color.⁵ On average, 250 preschoolers face suspension or expulsion each day.⁶ More broadly, nearly 3 million K-12 students endure suspensions, and over 100,000 get expelled every year.⁷ These disciplinary actions have harmed educational outcomes. They lead to academic struggles, increased dropout rates, and feed into the school-to-prison pipeline, in which young students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to be jailed due to punitive policies that push students out of the classroom.⁸ For instance, a study from the University of California, Irvine found that high school students who experience suspension or expulsion are more than twice as likely to face criminal charges as young adults.⁹

Policy Idea

In order to address the issues of school policing, police officers should be removed from K-12 public schools in New York City. Instead, funds should be reallocated

to alternative safety measures, which may include mental health professionals, counselors, and restorative justice programs. Counselors and mental health professionals will be responsible for addressing student issues.

By focusing on root causes and addressing issues through dialogues, retributive approaches will not be necessary, even in violent interactions between students. The proposed approach prioritizes mental well-being and non-punitive approaches to student misconduct. There are many implemented models and blueprints for effective restorative justice models in schools. The NYCDOE will evaluate the funding needed using the money that they currently spend on police presence. Overall, this policy will reduce suspensions and expulsions, improve academic outcomes, and create a safer and more supportive learning environment for all students.

Policy Analysis

Transformative approaches to school safety have yielded positive results around the country. For example, in Chicago, removing School Resource Officers (SROs) led to a decrease in high-level discipline infractions.¹⁰ Schools

retaining SROs had a larger proportion of Black students and experienced higher suspension rates. Eliminating these officers would mitigate racial biases and keep more students in school. Furthermore, in Des Moines, Black students were six times more likely to have contact with police than their white counterparts.¹¹ When the Des Moines school board redirected funds from policing to restorative practices, student arrests decreased, and the sense of safety among students increased.¹²

These initiatives have yielded promising results, including reduced court referrals, reduced suspensions, and an increase in staff appropriately responding to behavioral crises.¹³ These results highlight that this policy is both effective and equitable. This policy is also cost-effective. The financial burden of employing police in schools diverts funds from other necessities that would address school safety without perpetuating inequities. In 2018, 26 states invested over \$960 million in enhancing SRO presence and school security, while 60% of public schools did not offer mental health services, and 18% had no paid school nurses.¹⁴ In schools where Black students were the majority, 20.7% had more security staff than mental health professionals, compared to just 2.5% in majority White schools.¹⁵ If police were removed, schools would be able to afford mental health staff.

Funding for restorative justice programs would be cheaper,¹⁶ as training existing educators and staff would not require paying additional full time salaries. Furthermore, redirecting funds into rehabilitative training

and mental health resources will have a positive effect, rather than continuing to spend millions of dollars on a system that fails to keep students safe. Restorative policies have been proven to improve the average GPA and reduce student gang membership, depression, and substance abuse.¹⁷

Highlights

- While the federal government has invested over \$1 billion to increase police presence in schools over the past 25 years, these institutions still lack adequate mental health resources and school nurses.
- Increasing school policing exacerbates inequity through disproportionate punishments with disabled, Black, LatinX, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ students.
- To address the inequities of school policing, New York City should eliminate police presence in public schools and resort to alternative safety measures that focus on mental health and dialogue between students and staff, ultimately leading to an environment where students aren't punished through suspensions and expulsions, but reintegrated into the classroom.
- Restorative justice programs around the country have been successful in over 40 school districts that have already transitioned from school policing to alternative and restorative methods.

Implementation

To successfully implement this policy, New York City should begin with a phase-out approach. The NYC Department of Education should start decreasing police presence in selected school buildings so schools can eventually transition away from NYPD presence. Fewer police officers will allow educators more opportunities to manage student behaviors. Cutting down on police presence will allow funds to be reallocated to extracurriculars, teaching and learning improvements, mental health resources, and counseling. Simultaneously, restorative school programs will be implemented at these schools.

In addition, increasing funding for restorative school programs should be a city priority. To successfully transition from school policing to rehabilitative and restorative approaches, New York City needs to significantly reallocate funds for restorative justice. In 2024, 6.5 million dollars was budgeted for restorative justice programs in comparison to over \$300 million dollars spent on NYPD School Safety Officers.^{1,2} Research indicates that the cost to implement restorative programs in the first year is about \$48,000 per school.¹⁸ A substantial reallocation in school safety funding would allow the development and implementation of safe and successful alternatives to policing in public schools.

Even without policing, safety within schools is paramount. The process of implementing alternative forms of school safety should include soliciting feedback and suggestions from school and community members, advocacy groups, students, and parents. These key agents should provide feedback

on safety protocols and mental health resources. Including school members, advocacy groups, students, and parents will effectively help develop and revise training programs that educators and counselors must complete at the start of every school year, using successful programs as a model for implementation.

A committee within the NYC Department of Education would oversee and implement training programs into schools, collaborating with community and advocacy groups. This committee would oversee school safety responses and ensure the prioritization of mental health and restorative practices over punishments and suspensions. Funding for this would be accounted for in the initial reallocation of funds.

Advocacy groups, including Integration and Innovation Initiative at NYU Metro Center, Dignity in Schools New York, and the NYCLU, can help support city policymakers in implementing new restorative justice programs. These organizations have specialized in understanding policing in schools and researching how to implement successful alternatives.

Addressing potential challenges and backlash from other policymakers is imperative for ensuring the feasibility of this program. Current NYC Mayor Eric Adams has increased NYPD school safety officers in his tenure, indicating that this proposal would face political backlash.¹⁹ However, research shows that students are not safer with police officers in schools. Furthermore, building a broad coalition of community leaders, educators, and parents will

strengthen the case for ending school policing. Previously, under community pressure, former Mayor DeBlasio agreed to move control of thousands of school safety agents to the education department from the police department.²⁰ It is time for an alternative that will not only work to combat racial inequities perpetuated by retributive policing in schools but that will keep students safe.

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How Universal Pre-K Threatens Child Care Accessibility: A Case for Mixed Delivery

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The implementation of universal pre-K programs in many states threatens the economic viability of childcare centers, exacerbating the childcare crisis. States expanding access to universal pre-K should be mandated to do so through a mixed delivery model.

Background

Advocates tout universal access to preschool as critical for accessibility and equality in early childhood care and education (ECCE). President Biden's 2021 American Families Plan called for universal access to preschool for all three- and four- year-olds, and many states have since begun implementing state-funded pre-K programs.^{1,2} However, these programs have had an unforeseen consequence, putting their benefits at risk and threatening to further degrade our already fraught early childhood system. As public pre-K expands, it drives childcare providers out of business, exacerbating preexisting childcare deserts and driving up childcare costs.^{3,4} One study found that implementation of public pre-K in NYC reduced one day care seat for every seven four-year-olds who enrolled in the program; alarmingly, every seat lost was in a high-poverty area. The quality of centers near public pre-K facilities also diminished.⁴

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, where 70% of four-year-olds are enrolled in public pre-K, 43% of all licensed ECCE providers have closed and ECCE costs have risen by an average of 33%.^{5,6} This issue occurs because private childcare providers derive nearly all of their profit from three- and four-year-olds —

providing infant and toddler care actually loses money due to the high staff-to-children ratio it requires.⁷ The rise of publicly funded pre-K has diminished the number of preschool-aged children in private care, despite the sustained demand for infant and toddler care. A study of nine states and Washington, D.C. found that for every slot of licensed childcare, there are more than five infants and toddlers, over three times the ratio when measuring preschool-aged children.⁸ Furthermore, 95% of counties studied were classified as childcare deserts, a deficit especially pronounced in rural and low-income areas. This absence of childcare forces parents out of the workforce, a burden falling largely upon mothers.⁹

Additionally, the earliest investments in children bear the highest returns, so inadvertently sacrificing the accessibility of childcare for that of preschool is likely to harm children's success.¹⁰

Policy Idea

To mitigate growing threats to already limited childcare accessibility, states implementing subsidization of preschool should utilize a mixed-delivery system that includes both private center-based and home-based care. Mixed-delivery systems enable state and federal funding to support preschool

programs in various settings — public schools, center-based care, federally-funded means-tested Head Start preschool programs, religious centers, and, in some states, family or home-based childcare.¹¹ Despite the fact that home-based care serves about three million children, only about half of states that implement mixed-delivery allow family childcare (FCC) providers to receive state funding.¹² Home-based care is most utilized by rural families, families of marginalized racial groups, and low-income individuals who prioritize affordability, convenience, and flexible scheduling.^{2,13} It is also disproportionately provided by women of color.¹⁴ The FCC inclusive mixed-delivery funding structure subsidizes the care of private and FCC providers along with public pre-K facilities, helping them retain their preschool-aged children and remain economically viable.

Policy Analysis

The implementation of a mixed-delivery childcare system that includes FCC providers would facilitate family access to local, high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive care, available even during non-traditional hours. Mixed-delivery has demonstrated to meet these goals. A report by the Virginia

Early Childhood Foundation found that the state’s mixed-delivery program successfully increased the accessibility of high-quality ECCE, particularly for low-income families.¹⁵ The study also found that the mixed-delivery program’s investment in ECCE providers enabled them to bolster program quality. Additionally, Colorado has mandated a family childcare inclusive mixed-delivery system for their universal pre-K program in order to prevent the loss of providers and consequent increase in costs and decrease in availability; leverage all existing childcare facilities to maximize accessibility; prioritize familial choice; and account for the diverse needs of distinct communities. The state has already seen success for these initiatives in Denver and Summit County.¹⁶

Enabling family childcare providers to access additional funding, such as that obtained through inclusion in preschool subsidization programs, has been demonstrated to prevent closures. In Minnesota, access to Child Care Stabilization Grants through the American Rescue Plan decreased the risk of family childcare provider closure — just 5% of providers who received funding closed during the pandemic, as opposed to 26% of providers who did not.¹⁷ This illustrates that the loss of FCC providers is rooted in inadequate funding, rather than disinterest in the field.

For underappreciated childcare providers, particularly those responsible for FCC, this mixed-delivery model would denote them as a legitimate facet of the childcare team. It would enable them to maintain financial viability by preventing the loss of profitable

three- and four-year-old children, preserving the jobs of a group disproportionately composed of racial and ethnic minority women.¹⁸

Highlights

- The implementation of public pre-K programs nationwide is putting private childcare providers out of business, exacerbating the lack of availability and affordability within the childcare market.⁴
- To resolve this issue, public pre-K should be subsidized through mixed-delivery systems, which fund preschool programs in many settings, including public schools, center-based care, Head Start programs, religious centers, and family or home-based childcare.¹¹
- Mixed-delivery systems provide parents with the agency to choose between a range of preschool options, enabling access to high-quality, local, culturally and linguistically appropriate care, available during non-traditional hours.¹⁶
- A mixed-delivery pre-K system is feasible due to bipartisan support, successful examples across the nation, and its efficient use of pre-existing childcare infrastructure.^{20, 21, 6}

Implementation

Due to high bipartisan support for the measure, the implementation of mixed-delivery funding for subsidized pre-K is very feasible.¹⁹ This ability to generate bipartisan support was exemplified during the 2024 vice presidential

debate, in which both candidates supported a mixed-delivery system in order to strengthen parent choice in childcare.²⁰ Additionally, as mixed-delivery pre-K utilizes pre-existing infrastructure, implementation is time- and cost-efficient.⁶

When implementing a mixed-delivery model, states should look to the models provided by previously established systems. Successful examples of mixed-delivery include Washington’s Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program, North Carolina’s Smart Start Network, and West Virginia’s WV pre-K.²¹ The methods adopted by these states vary, and those considering implementation should determine which model would work best for them by performing a comparative analysis of their demographics, political ideologies, and the availability of funding as compared to example states. Next, states should develop a clear and comprehensive legislative framework defining their mixed-delivery model, outlining eligibility criteria, funding mechanisms, and quality standards. States should ensure that both center- and home-based childcare providers are eligible for funding, ensuring the financial viability of FCC providers. As subsidization is chronically underutilized by FCC providers even when technically available, states should develop a mechanism for clearly communicating the funding opportunities available to these providers, and create a program to help assist them with the paperwork necessary for participating. Once the mixed-delivery model is established, the state should put a robust monitoring and evaluation system in place to

assess the system’s effectiveness and address any issues that may materialize. This system ought to measure and analyze enrollment numbers, child outcomes, and provider and family satisfaction, enabling the state to make adjustments to the program accordingly. States should implement mixed-delivery pre-K systems immediately. Until a change to the childcare landscape is made, providers will continue to go out of business, and families will continue to lose essential childcare services.

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Securing Financial Futures: A Proposal for Financial Literacy Education

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Students lack necessary financial skills to make smart life decisions. Therefore, New York should implement a financial literacy course that covers budgeting, investing, and other personal financial skills into the 12th-grade curriculum.

Background

The role of education is to provide students with the knowledge and skills to navigate life and become productive members of society. One skill crucial to becoming a successful adult and leading a happy, fulfilling life is financial literacy. Financial literacy is the ability to understand and use financial skills, such as budgeting, investing, understanding taxes and saving for retirement.¹ However, over half of teens report feeling unready to handle their finances.² A 2019 survey of 30,000 college students found 47% do not feel prepared to manage their money, with only 37% of Gen Z students planning to follow a budget and 47% planning to pay off their credit card on time.³ It is clear that students don't feel financially prepared for their futures. However, public schools have the ability to bridge this gap, and it is important they take all measures to educate and prepare their students.

More than half of states require high school students to take a semester-long financial literacy course before graduating.⁴ However, New York lags behind, only requiring an economics course, which is also its own graduation requirement.^{5,6} New York State (NYS) high school economics courses focus on large-scale market concepts, not practical financial

skills students can use in everyday life. The course recommended in New York has four main standards, and only one of the standards, "Individual Responsibility and the Economy," has sub-standards on personal finance.⁷ Within New York, only 20 high schools, about 1.3% of those in the state, require a semester-long personal finance course to graduate.^{8,9} Evidently, American students lack the financial literacy necessary for long-term success as adults, and NYS must do its part to improve its insufficient financial curriculum.

Policy Idea

Education should prepare students for life after graduation; therefore, schools must teach financial literacy skills that will be crucial to student well-being in life, regardless of the path they take after graduation. The NYS Legislature should create a graduation requirement that all high schoolers must complete a semester-long financial literacy course. This course will be taken in 12th grade and will teach students the fundamentals of financial literacy, including personal financial knowledge, investment skills, and basic budgeting skills. Students should graduate high school with an understanding of the importance of credit scores, savings accounts, and other practical financial skills.

Policy Analysis

Research consistently shows that financial literacy education improves financial behaviors and outcomes. States that offer financial literacy courses, such as Georgia, Texas, and Idaho, have reported higher credit scores and lower loan delinquency rates among students who complete these courses.⁸ Additionally, students who receive a financial literacy education tend to struggle less with debt and report a better quality of life as adults.¹⁰ Financial literacy education fosters a sense of security and independence, reducing stress and improving mental health, contributing to overall life satisfaction by equipping students with the knowledge to make informed financial decisions, manage their budgets, and avoid excessive debt.¹¹ Given the success of financial literacy courses in other states, implementing one in NYS is expected to yield similar results.

Now more than ever, college is becoming increasingly expensive, with the price increasing 3.63% every year, forcing more students to take out loans than in the past.^{12,13} Additionally, Gen-Z has the worst debt management skills out of any generation, proving their inability to handle these loans responsibly.¹⁴ As this trend continues, it is clear students need help managing their

debt, and a financial literacy course would provide significant support. Furthermore, studies show that students who received financial instruction in class were more likely to utilize low-interest college loans compared to their peers.¹⁴

Additionally, researchers found that financial literacy courses increased repayment rates among low-income and first-generation students.¹⁵ The ideal time to offer the course is 12th grade because students must be versed in financial literacy once they graduate high school, however the topic should be fresh in their minds as they become adults and begin to navigate their finances. The financial literacy requirement for NYS is extremely important, as students will not only be better equipped to finance their postsecondary education but will gain necessary financial skills that will help them lead happier, more successful lives.

Highlights

- Many teenagers feel unprepared to manage their finances, as about half of college students lack confidence in their money management skills.
- NYS does not mandate a dedicated financial literacy course, leaving most students without essential financial skills for everyday life.
- The NYS Legislature should require all high school students to complete a semester-long financial literacy course in 12th grade, covering crucial topics like budgeting, credit scores, and savings.
- Implementing this course would likely improve

students' financial behaviors, leading to better debt management, higher credit scores, and enhanced overall life satisfaction, as demonstrated by successful programs in other states.

Implementation

In 2023, the NYS Senate introduced Bill S4860A to the State Senate's Education Committee.¹⁶ This bill requires a stand-alone financial literacy course as a graduation requirement, mirroring the policy proposed above. State Senator Leroy Comrie sponsored the bill alongside eleven cosponsors, including two Republicans, indicating some bipartisan support. Although this seems like promising news, a version of this bill has been introduced in every legislative cycle for the past fifteen years. The bill has never managed to make it to the floor for a vote, likely due to a lack of political priority and sufficient advocacy. Therefore, more must be done to grow appeal among lawmakers and the public.

Financial education experts should back the proposal to help it gain support and reach the floor for a vote. Experts should work with school administrators, lawmakers, and other key stakeholders to form a comprehensive curriculum that covers crucial topics including budgeting, investing, saving, and credit. These experts could be compensated for their work designing the bill by nonprofit organizations focused on financial literacy, corporate sponsors with a vested interest in the bill's passing, or it could be conducted as pro bono work. A key stakeholder that is often overlooked are students, who can help the effort by demonstrating

their interest for financial literacy in their schooling.¹⁷ State Senator Leroy Comrie should incorporate students into a social media campaign advocating for the bill, growing public attention while connecting with a large younger audience. Testimonials from students who would welcome financial literacy education could be used to raise awareness and motivate the public.

After the New York State legislature passes the bill, it is important that it is implemented in a timely manner. Teachers should be required to attend professional development meetings with financial education experts who are well-versed in the curriculum to ensure the class is taught effectively. Once the policy is implemented, schools should monitor and evaluate the policy's success. Student and teacher concerns should be addressed on a school-by-school basis through administrative avenues. Researchers will assess the policy's efficacy by studying whether young New Yorkers are making better financial decisions after 10 years, measuring metrics including higher credit scores and lower loan delinquency rates.

Despite the potential for strong support, several obstacles must be addressed. Budget constraints may raise concerns about the costs associated with curriculum development and teacher training. To address this, NYS should partner with local financial institutions that are interested in helping the community. These institutions have incentive to aid financial literacy among students, and could help mitigate costs with funding and curriculum planning support.¹⁷

However, even without these measures, no changes to the education budget would be necessary due to the policy's low price, as there are minimal costs associated with curriculum design and a short training session.¹⁸ Additionally, concerns over another graduation requirement may be calmed by the widespread support for the course.¹⁹

In conclusion, despite possible implementation challenges, a financial literacy course in NYS high schools is feasible and would be extremely helpful for students. It is imperative to equip students with essential skills to confidently manage their financial futures, setting them on a path toward long-term stability and success.

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Incorporating Culturally Responsive Teaching into School to Increase Academic Success

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Over 25 states have introduced anti-DEI bills targeting higher education, which have put students of color at a disadvantage socially and academically. To counter these laws, culturally responsive teaching needs to be implemented.

Background

In recent years, party lines have reshaped America's education system. With anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) bills introduced in over twenty-five states, education differs heavily from state to state.¹ Of the 86 proposed bills, 14 have received final legislative approval and become law, which aims to restrict mandatory DEI training, DEI offices and staff, diversity statements, and identity-based preferences for hiring and admissions.² The start of 2023 marks the push by Republican politicians to limit and ban DEI initiatives, and with the Supreme Court's decision to ban affirmative action, the agenda was furthered.³ Polling found approximately 77% of Republicans believe discrimination against white and black people is equally problematic, which underscores why some lawmakers are pushing for DEI restriction.⁴

One of the main groups affected by DEI policies, bans, and restrictions is college students. When asked what they would do if their college abolished DEI initiatives, 55% of polled college students reported they would consider transferring schools.⁵ In addition, 59% of students stated that they would reconsider enrolling in their respective universities if they lacked DEI initiatives.⁶ While many

lawmakers believe establishing anti-DEI bills is better for the country, most college students clearly disagree. Beyond college students, around 61% of the American public support DEI programs.⁷ One of the main harms caused by banning or limiting DEI in schools is the threat to cultural competence and the undermining of the student community, which is why colleges need to continue supporting their students by developing alternative solutions to ensure equal representation.

Policy Idea

Colleges should implement culturally responsive teaching as an effective way to counter anti-DEI legislation, which creates an inclusive learning space by using student's diverse backgrounds to add cultural nuance to the curriculum.⁸ Through implementing culturally responsive teaching, inclusion begins in the classroom and focuses on building student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships. To allow the program to be implemented and sustained, qualitative and quantitative data must be consistently gauged. The quantitative way to determine if culturally responsive teaching is effective is by analyzing students' academic performance prior to and post-implementation. Additionally, the retention rates within classes

and majors should be used to determine if culturally responsive teaching effectively encourages students through engagement and participation. Adding these techniques into daily lessons will make individuals more empathetic and culturally informed inside and outside of the classroom.

Policy Analysis

Culturally responsive teaching has proven to improve academic outcomes and the development of ethnic-racial identity due to culturally responsive teaching being more effective than traditional teaching methods.¹⁰ Although teachers feel ill-prepared to lead conversations about race, a University of Pittsburgh study revealed that they would be willing to implement culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms if they received adequate training.¹¹ Furthermore, the ease of implementing culturally responsive teaching through simple curriculum changes, such as changing the literature being studied, makes universities more inclined to implement the program. The primary issue with traditional learning is that it does not address the realities of today's society and only supports a certain demographic: middle-class, white, and English-speaking families.¹³ A simple solution is increasing

diversity among teachers. Since 80% of full-time professors are white, conversations about race become easier when students of color feel connected to their teachers because of shared experiences.¹³ It has been noted that students are, in fact, not the blank slates they are made out to be; they start to develop their own understandings of the world very early on, and it is key to utilize this within classrooms rather than repress it.¹⁴

To counter the argument of the Republican lawmakers who do not find it beneficial to the economy to invest in DEI initiatives, research shows a correlation between attending a racially diverse institution and income earnings.⁵ Therefore, implementing culturally responsive teaching can counter the anti-DEI legislation and assist the future economy.

The qualitative measure of student participation increases active learning, therefore enhancing problem-solving and collaboration between students. Since DEI policies create equitable resources for all students and foster a sense of community where everyone feels valued, it is vital to create substitute programs amidst the recent legislation targeting DEI practices.

Highlights

- The increasing attacks on efforts to ensure minorities have an equal playing field makes culturally responsive teaching essential for creating an immediate impact.
- Over 100 bills in 30 states are working to limit or ban DEI policies such as DEI training, DEI offices and staff, diversity statements,

and identity-based preferences for hiring and admissions within higher education.²

- To counter anti-DEI legislation, culturally responsive teaching can be implemented to ensure equity remains at the forefront of education.
- Culturally responsive teaching fosters a more inclusive classroom by creating a space where individuals can learn from each other's backgrounds, become more informed, and therefore increase collaboration and problem-solving skills.⁸

Implementation

Implementing culturally responsive teaching is simple and has significant benefits. This teaching increases face-to-face communication, open dialogue, and integration of current world issues to better understand students' backgrounds into the curriculum.⁹ Therefore, culturally responsive teaching can work to create the same environment DEI policies promote by making students conscious of biases while increasing students' academic performance.

Implementing culturally responsive teaching should begin at higher education levels, as anti-DEI laws primarily target these institutions. It would be beneficial for school boards to look at New York City's framework that affirms racial, linguistic and cultural identities by preparing students for rigorous learning through making them aware of differing perspectives to adequately enact culturally responsive teaching.¹² Aiding students as well as teachers

is key to making sure the plan can be successful. To understand the benefits in the long term, student and teacher surveys should be sent out at the beginning and end of each academic year to evaluate the progression of culturally responsive teaching. Increasing teacher diversity through recruiting from Minority-Serving Institutions, such as HBCUs, not only helps students due to culturally responsive teaching but also counters backlash from states that are anti-DEI. This way, schools are still able to push for representation and bridging cultural divides amidst hostile states working to eliminate DEI.

To determine if culturally responsive teaching is effective, school boards should analyze students' academic performance prior to and post-implementation in addition to a survey to gauge qualitative and quantitative data about the program, therefore allowing for improvement. Additionally, the retention rates within classes and majors should be used to determine if culturally responsive teaching effectively encourages students through engagement and participation. By collecting data and highlighting success progress, the school board can allocate more money to increasing culturally responsive teaching.

Given the banning or limiting of DEI policies in higher education, the money spent on DEI can be reallocated to culturally responsive teaching. Typically, the widely accepted authors who have studied in traditional academic curricula are white. While there is the acknowledgment that there is nothing wrong with traditional readings, there is a push to incorporate more worldly

literature.¹⁴ Through teachers adding more multicultural works into the curriculum, students can make their own interpretations about today's society and become more informed citizens under culturally responsive teaching.

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Addressing the Special Education Teacher Shortage: Retention, Job Satisfaction, and Burnout

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The national shortage of special education teachers poses a significant threat to the success of students with diverse abilities. Using discretionary grants from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the government can address the issues that this field is facing.

Background

The increasing nationwide demand for special education teachers (SET) is a critical issue that demands immediate attention. Improving the low retention, job satisfaction, and burnout in this field is essential to meeting students' needs. While SETs are often assumed to work exclusively in schools, their roles extend beyond. Many serve in hospitals, residential facilities, and other settings, providing pivotal educational support to students with diverse needs in various environments.¹ SETs are essential in providing personalized instruction to students with diverse learning needs, ensuring they receive the tailored education necessary for success.²

In 2023 through 2024, more than 80% of states reported a shortage of SETs, and the number of students needing special education has risen due to improved identification and a deeper understanding of how to support those with learning differences.³ This shortage significantly affects the quality of education for students with learning differences, leading to larger class sizes, less individualized attention, and increased burnout among existing teachers.⁴ In 49 states, up to 50% of special education teachers face burnout within five years, and an

alarming 75% leave the profession entirely within ten years.⁵ Teacher burnout occurs when educators undergoing stress for a long period experience emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment.⁶

When looking at laws pertaining to special education, The U.S. Department of Education's Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that provides children with disabilities nationwide access to free public education, including special education.⁷ The IDEA oversees how states and public agencies deliver early intervention, special education, and related services to over 7.3 million eligible infants, children, and youth with disabilities.⁷ Besides this, Congress has yet to successfully introduce, pass, and send a comprehensive bill addressing the need to alleviate the shortage of SETs.

Policy Idea

The IDEA authorizes discretionary grants, providing states with the flexibility to allocate funding toward novel solutions that directly address the challenges faced by SETs. These grants offer a critical opportunity to develop targeted programs that can have a lasting impact on teacher burnout, job satisfaction, and retention rates. Congress should mandate individual

states to use their IDEA-authorized grants to create programs that teach SETs Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a promising practice for solving teacher burnout, and ensuring each SET has the administrative support needed to maintain the level of materials and resources needed to educate their students.⁸

By strategically utilizing discretionary grants, states can provide immediate relief to SETs while also creating a sustainable foundation for SETs to thrive long term. Moreover, the discretionary nature of these grants allows states to tailor solutions to their specific needs, taking into account factors like student population, regional differences, and current resources.

Policy Analysis

As the student population grows, policymakers often focus on the supply shortage of special education teachers.³ However, it is more important to first implement policies that help retain current teachers in the field before focusing on recruiting new ones. By directing public agencies to use discretionary grants for new programs, challenges with job retention, satisfaction, and burnout can become much more manageable.

When considering teacher burnout, research has shown that

burnout in special education stems from difficult student behaviors, insufficient support from administration, and overwhelming job responsibilities.⁹ The overarching goal of ACT is to emphasize staying in the present moment while simultaneously encouraging psychological flexibility that is in line with one's values and goals. If SETs can manage the inherent challenges of their work without facing mental exhaustion through programs funded by IDEA's discretionary grants, burnout will be greatly reduced. In employment settings outside of education, researchers have linked ACT to reductions in stress and burnout.⁸ For example, it was found that for a population of counselors with few resources and little agency support, ACT treatment was associated with a reduction of the symptoms of burnout.⁸

A lack of administrative support is one of the most common reasons that SETs consider or ultimately decide to leave special education.⁸ Insufficient support can include limited access to teaching materials and resources as well as inadequate assistance from central and building office personnel.¹⁰ A study of 391 SETs found that those reporting higher levels of principal support were more likely to demonstrate greater commitment and job satisfaction.⁸ By allocating additional funds and dedicated personnel to support SETs, schools could alleviate much of the pressure and stress that SETs face, leading to increased job satisfaction and job retention.

Highlights

- The growing number of students benefiting from

specialized and tailored education programs has led to a significant shortage of special education teachers.³

- Low job retention rates, rising job dissatisfaction, and heightened levels of burnout contribute to the shortage of special education teachers.
- Congress should enhance the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to help teachers manage burnout and increase administrative support.
- These programs should use Acceptance and Commitment Therapy because it alleviates burnout symptoms in other professions.⁸ Teachers who feel strong administrative support are more likely to report job satisfaction.⁸

Implementation

To effectively address the special education teacher shortage, this proposal leverages IDEA's discretionary grants to fund ACT training and enhanced administrative support. States must apply for these grants by demonstrating how their proposed programs align with the objectives of IDEA while simultaneously addressing the local needs of the individual state.

Each state should submit a comprehensive application to the US Department of Education detailing how they intend to use the discretionary grant funds to improve SET retention and job satisfaction and reduce burnout.¹¹ Each application will include a comprehensive needs assessment that identifies and elaborates on local challenges, such as teacher-to-

student ratios, retention trends, and existing resource deficiencies. The plan will also include ACT training and improvements to administrative support. States can develop a budget breakdown demonstrating efficient and targeted use of grant funds by employing structured budget templates, conducting thorough research and development to justify expenditures, and aligning the budget closely with the Grant Narrative.¹² This approach ensures that every dollar is accounted for, supports the proposed objectives, and addresses the specific needs highlighted in the application. By integrating clear, measurable goals into the financial plan, states can present a compelling case for how funds will directly benefit their constituents and achieve the desired outcomes.¹²

After administering discretionary grant plans for specific states, policymakers can tailor ACT programs to align with the needs of SETs. ACT training should emphasize mindfulness, value-driven action, and psychological flexibility to alleviate burnout in high-stress professions. This training can occur through professional development days, online platforms, or weekend workshops for SETs.¹³ In addition to a portion of the fund allocated directly to ACT programming, another portion should be allocated for an increase in administrative support, such as hiring instructional aides and support staff to assist SETs with non-teaching tasks and increasing classroom resources and teaching materials.⁸

Navigating the passage of these grants through Congress presents a significant challenge, especially when considering a GOP-dominated legislature. These

grants will receive funding by shifting the budget of the existing IDEA funds, but some lawmakers may view it as an expansion of federal spending or fear that it sets a precedent for budget increases. That said, it is crucial to present this policy initiative effectively, supported by a clear and detailed explanation of budget reallocation.

Furthermore, engaging stakeholders such as teachers, unions, administrators, and parents can greatly influence state policymakers to address infrastructure challenges affecting SET's poor work environments.¹⁴ Fostering a relationship between these groups and state policymakers strengthens policy implementation and ensures the inclusion of diverse perspectives when making significant changes to the status quo.¹⁴

The initial states that are granted the funds from the Department of Education should submit annual progress reports and data on teacher retention rates, job satisfaction, and burnout. These grants can receive funding by shifting the current IDEA budget to prioritize these changes. With real-world feedback, more and more states can implement the same steps followed, ultimately correcting the SET shortage throughout the country.

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Excellence, Equity, and Enrichment: Spreading the Schoolwide Enrichment Model in Broward County

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Gifted education is currently implemented in a variable, inequitable fashion, raising concerns about its effectiveness in enhancing student performance. Elementary schools in Broward County should end separated classes for gifted students and implement the SEM method coupled with accelerated instruction.

Background

Across the country, “gifted and talented” programs have received increasing scrutiny over both entrenching socioeconomic inequities through issues with racial diversity and ability to substantively influence student trajectories.¹ Thus, it is important to ensure that such programs are both effective and equitable in their selection of gifted students who need specialized learning resources of these resources.

At the elementary school level, Broward County, one of the largest districts in South Florida, currently implements a policy of creating “tracked” classes, which are separate classes created for children classified as “gifted” by an IQ test score.² When there are not enough gifted students to fill an entire class, they are combined with “high achieving” students who are not “gifted” but have the highest performance in their grade on state-standardized tests of the previous year. These classrooms must have “gifted specific programming” and “differentiated instruction,” leaving it up to individual schools to develop practices that vary from school to school.² Thus, differences in tax base (wealthier areas have more municipal money to draw from than poorer areas) may create differences, such as lack of gifted trained staff, lesser access to

specialized materials and resources, etc., following trends of lower quality programming for poorer children. A 2019 survey of 2000 elementary schools found that most 3rd grade level teachers were not using differentiated/accelerated instruction in gifted classrooms.²

Research shows that class separation may have minimal impact on gifted students’ learning, often showing little increase above grade-level math and reading achievement. National surveys find gifted students earning in the 75th to 80th percentile, which is within the average score range.³ Another study followed students from 3rd grade to 7th grade, comparing test scores of children just above the cutoff to be placed into gifted-tracked classes and just below this cutoff. They found weak associations between being in a gifted class and better performance on math and reading test scores.³

Policy Idea

Elementary schools in Broward County should replace tracked gifted and talented classes with integrated enrichment activities for all students, emphasizing accelerated instruction for specific subjects (math, reading, or science) through district administrative action. This enhanced, accelerated curriculum will produce more tangible,

replicable impacts on not only math and reading scores but also non-achievement metrics such as student engagement and enjoyment. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model, credited to the National Center for Research on Gifted Education, works through asking teachers to identify “gifted behaviors” including sustained interest in a particular subject, higher-order thinking, etc. Teachers would create enrichment clusters designed around certain areas, such as science, debate, literature, or math, which engage students in creative, critical thinking-oriented tasks. For instance, they create projects around advanced material to build synthesis and application-based problem-solving skills.⁴ Simultaneously, selected students may receive accelerated instruction to take advantage of their quicker learning curve.

Policy Analysis

Creating separate classes leads to inequality in learning resources and environments based upon very early demonstrated potential. By waiting to split classrooms until secondary school, there are more opportunities for children to learn from their peers at an elementary level. Studies have shown that while gifted children see insignificant gains in test scores from separating classrooms, there is

harm imparted to lower-achieving students.^{4,5} A literature review of various gifted education studies found that underperforming groups in 6 different studies had boosted student performance from “detracking”, or recombining classes.⁵ Thus, detracking rectifies some issues with creating separation at an age where socialization is as important a facilitator in development as tested IQ.

Additionally, models of accessible enrichment introduce critical thinking skills that do not explicitly cater to “state standards” but have longer term core development benefits for students. Together, these more comprehensive approaches can enhance educational quality for all students. For example, the “CLEAR” model out of the University of Virginia showed an advantage in achievement on ELA exams compared to the regular curriculum for gifted 3rd graders.⁶ CLEAR-mandated readings, including above grade level poetry, coupled with a research project, which forces synthesis of ideas, both of which emphasized analytical skills like structural understanding, main ideas, and rhetorical choice.⁶ Another study on SEM implementation found students reported “greater creative productivity” and generally more time spent in school on self-defined “topics of interest” after implementation.⁷ Such critical thinking skills carry through to all further education. For math, acceleration is clear-cut and could follow models employed in middle schools where state standards of 1.5-2 academic years are covered in one year instead. A 2013 study found that accelerated math

increased feelings of engagement and enjoyment among gifted students, while teaching content that was useful for advanced standardized testing.⁸

Highlights

- Gifted education is implemented in an inconsistent, inequitable manner across school districts and the country generally.¹
- Broward County currently provides separate gifted programming for students beginning in elementary school, which harms “lower ability” students while also not creating noticeable improvements in performance.^{2,7}
- Implementing a top-down Schoolwide Enrichment Model to all schools in BCPS and detracking will enhance education by standardizing strong enrichment practices.^{5,9}
- SEM remedies harms caused by early class separation, builds critical thinking skills, and increases student engagement and test scores.^{6,11}

Implementation

Following the Nation Council on Gifted Research and Education’s framework for bringing SEM to schools, Broward County should convene a committee of elementary teachers from each of 28 school zones, at least one teacher specializing in gifted and nongifted education for grades 3-5.⁹ This committee should assess current awareness of SEM methods and document which schools, if any, are

already using these enrichment methods in partial or full capacity. Parent-focused sessions, consisting of informational presentations and public forums, will be needed to build support and address any concerns parents may have. Next, a working group of curriculum experts, primarily teachers, will write specific grade-level guidelines for the SEM curriculum. These guidelines could include creating recommended book/activity lists for reading and a monthly schedule of higher grade-level math that should be covered by accelerated programming. This working group would also incorporate input on how students may socioculturally and academically receive specific materials from teachers around the county and present these findings to the school board, who’ll vote on whether to pass such a policy and begin allocating resources towards it.

To pass the policy, potential members of local government to target for endorsement include Dr. Barbara Sharief, an influential figure in local politics and former Mayor of Broward County. She is currently running for State Senate with the endorsement of the entire Florida Education Association, a prominent teacher’s union.¹¹

Following the example of the Washington DC school districts, certain schools that represent the spectrum of schools by average household income and letter grade should trial SEM.¹⁰ The district should appoint a task force, including the county Coordinator of Broward Gifted Services, who will work with school administrators and teachers to tailor their implementation of SEM to their school while ensuring county-wide standards are met. To verify the

impact of SEM, data on students' test scores and measures of classroom engagement, such as attendance and enjoyment, should be tracked over a 3-5 years. After this testing period, the school board and Coordinator of Broward Gifted Services can use these findings to decide whether and how to expand SEM into various elementary schools each year.

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ENVIRONMENTAL & TECHNOLOGY POLICY

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Agricultural Solutions to Water Resource Issues in the American Southwest

By William Dignam, wed45@cornell.edu

With wildfires and droughts becoming more common in the American Southwest as a result of climate change, developing sustainable agricultural practices and new technologies can help defend against the water issues the region will face.

Background

Agriculture practices use around 70% of global freshwater resources.¹ Current agriculture practices and water resource management face increasing pressure to meet the rising global demand for food sustainably while concurrently conserving water and protecting the environment. Furthermore, certain areas of the world are more prone to drought issues and weather events that affect water resources. The Southwestern United States is particularly vulnerable to drought and water scarcity due to its arid climate and reliance on limited water sources. According to a recent study published in the *Nature Climate Change* journal the 22-year drought affecting Southwestern North America has been the region's most severe megadrought since at least the year 800 AD.²

The Southwest is home to three main watersheds that stretch across Texas, Arizona, Utah, California, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming, and Nevada. The Colorado River watershed is especially significant as it provides water for millions of people, supports large agricultural areas, and sustains ecosystems.³ However, droughts and increasing water demands from urban and agricultural systems are decreasing the river's flow rates and depleting

its reservoirs.³ The intricate network of watersheds in the Southwest highlights the need for collaborative water management practices and technologies among Southwestern states to allocate water resources equitably and efficiently.

Innovative solutions, such as improving irrigation methods using analysis tools, utilizing AI and machine learning for resource efficiency, addressing water adoption, drought-resistant crop varieties, and investing in water recycling and desalination technologies, are essential to address the region's water challenges. Using these and other agricultural technologies in the Southwest and the rest of the United States will drastically improve water resources.

Policy Idea

Congress could enact a comprehensive *Southwest Agricultural Innovation and Resilience Program* (SAIRP), which combines federal and state efforts under a single, unified framework. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) would manage a \$5 billion federal loan and grant initiative to fund this program. It would provide federal backing targeting innovative companies in Silicon Valley, such as vertical farming start-ups like Plenty and Bowery Farming, and agri-tech

leaders like John Deere, as well as large agricultural ventures in the Southwest, including groups like Driscoll's Farms that specialize in water conservation.^{4,5} The program would allocate funding to businesses developing water-efficient irrigation systems, drought-resistant crop varieties, and advanced soil health monitoring technologies, supporting the development and implementation of innovative water-saving and crop-enhancing technologies. States can initiate pilot programs and demonstration projects that showcase the potential of agricultural technologies in real-world settings.

Policy Analysis

Specific technologies show potential in the Southwest. Solutions like N-Drip's gravity-powered drip irrigation system help farmers conserve water by replacing the outdated flood irrigation method still used in nearly 40% of the region's farms.⁶ This system can reduce water use by up to 70% without requiring pumps or energy, which is particularly suited to areas like California and Arizona where water scarcity is a more pressing issue.⁶ Digital tools, such as Acuity Agriculture's dashboard, provide farmers with real-time data on soil moisture and climate conditions to help them optimize irrigation

practices and meet strict water usage regulations. Additionally, indoor and vertical farming technologies, which use recycled water and AI-controlled systems, have emerged as key innovations for growing crops with up to 95% less water, helping reduce issues with the region's water supply draining. Together, these technologies are essential for adapting to the Southwest's rapidly changing water landscape, which is driven by both population growth and climate change.

The USDA and Congress could maximize the effectiveness of these technologies through SAIRP's joint loan program by providing essential funding for initial implementation and scaling. By backing innovations like N-Drip's energy-free irrigation and Acuity Agriculture's data-driven soil monitoring, SAIRP helps farmers transition from outdated methods without bearing high upfront costs. Additionally, USDA-led coordination ensures farmers have access to training and technical support, minimizing barriers to adoption. While initial costs are high, the long-term savings in water and increased crop yields can offset these expenses, investing in a sustainable solution for both the government and farmers.

Highlights

- Increasing droughts and wildfires threaten water resources in the Southwestern United States, highlighting the need for sustainable agricultural practices and new technologies to protect water availability.¹
- Agriculture uses roughly 70% of global freshwater.¹

The Southwest's reliance on limited water sources and vulnerable watersheds calls for innovative resource management and conservation.

- The Southwest Agricultural Innovation and Resilience Program (SAIRP) would provide \$5 billion in federal loans and grants through the USDA, targeting irrigation, drought-resistant crops, and digital monitoring technologies.^{4,5}
- With federal support, technologies like N-Drip irrigation and AI soil monitoring can reduce water use by up to 70%, improve crop yields, and adapt farming practices to the region's evolving climate challenges.⁶

Implementation

To implement SAIRP once approved, Congress and the USDA could model the initiative on existing green energy acts, such as the *Rural Energy for America Program (REAP - H.R. 5051)*, which provides grants and loan guarantees to agricultural producers and rural businesses for energy-efficient projects.⁷ Similar to REAP, SAIRP could offer grants and subsidized loans specifically targeting water-saving technologies and data-driven agricultural practices that align with the program's environmental goals. Additionally, SAIRP could draw on lessons from the *Inflation Reduction Act (IRA)*, which allocates funding for clean energy and sustainable farming practices, providing tax credits to incentivize eco-friendly investments.⁸ A portion of the IRA's clean energy and agricultural

sustainability funding could be redirected or earmarked specifically for SAIRP's objectives. Through SAIRP, USDA-led workshops, and outreach programs could help inform farmers about the economic and environmental benefits of adopting technologies like N-Drip's drip irrigation or Acuity Agriculture's soil monitoring dashboards mentioned previously.

SAIRP's success will depend on addressing several challenges. Reaching and educating farmers in the Southwest, where political ideologies vary widely, will require careful planning and community-based outreach. Farmers may be skeptical about adopting new practices, especially if they perceive them as government-imposed. Creating workshops for local needs and involving respected agricultural leaders in the process may help build trust. Workshops should focus on practical, actionable solutions to challenges faced by the community, such as improving soil health, managing water resources, or adopting sustainable farming techniques. Including agricultural leaders, who understand the unique cultural and economic aspects of the region, lends credibility to the initiative and creates a sense of collaboration. Second, the cost of advanced technologies may be prohibitive for lower-income farmers. Even with subsidies, upfront investments in tools like precision irrigation systems and digital monitoring may seem too high. The program would counter this by providing tiered financial aid options, such as higher grants for small farmers or long-term, low-interest loans that allow for gradual repayment. This approach would make SAIRP accessible to a broader range of

farmers, allowing access to water conservation solutions needed for the region.

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Unlocking the Potential of New York City's Vacant and Underutilized Lots

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New York City has one of the world's most expensive property markets since the housing supply is constantly strained. New York City should increase housing stock by building housing on vacant lots.

Background

In recent decades, New York City's housing market has skyrocketed in value. The average price per square foot in the city has doubled since the 1990s.¹

Combined with extremely high demand for housing, it is more difficult than ever for a populace with a median monthly income of \$5,344 per month to find their way onto the New York City property ladder.² At the same time, New York City is home to over 25,000 vacant and underutilized lots and tens of thousands of vacant properties. The number of vacant and underutilized lots could be even higher because the private housing system in New York City is not well studied.^{3, 4} In addition, massive potential exists within subdividing former single-family homes to create multiple-family dwellings.

Much of New York City's new construction comes from rezoning for increased density, a process called "upzoning."⁵ This practice, which started during the Bloomberg and De Blasio administrations, has proved to be extremely effective in creating new housing stock. A third of recent housing development has happened in upzoned areas.⁶ Despite upzoning's promise, New York City's vacant lots continue to lay fallow. If New York City repurposes all of its vacant and underutilized lots and properties to

their fullest potential, tens of thousands of new housing units could be built in neighborhoods where housing is most needed.

Policy Idea

The first part of this policy will direct the New York City government to jettison any vacant or underutilized lots in public holding. On the private end, New York City will impose a five percent property tax on vacant and underutilized lots and properties in private holding. This tax would not only generate revenue for the city government, but it would also incentivize private landowners to sell or develop their vacant lots. Development on the remaining lots within New York City will be exclusively multifamily units, and any new construction will be architecturally representative of the vacant lot neighborhoods. Building efforts on these undeveloped and underutilized lots will be concentrated on affordable housing initiatives.

Single-family homeowners will also be incentivized to subdivide or build onto their property through counseling the city will provide and generous tax credits for every extraneous unit added onto a respective parcel.

Policy Analysis

In a city with such a complicated public-private property

market, this policy could face considerable challenges from varying actors. Private property owners could object significantly against the mandatory property tax on vacant lots. Residents against neighborhood development could also push back against any initiatives to redevelop vacant lots into residences rather than repurposing vacant lots for other forms of community good. Architecture firms might also face difficulty trying to build homes on vacant lots because some of the remaining vacant lots in New York City have unique dimensions. At the same time, residents in more economically depressed New York City neighborhoods (where more vacant and underutilized lots tend to be) would benefit from new stocks of housing.

Vacant lot repurposing fits into the broader land use category of brownfield revitalization. Brownfields are areas of land that are currently fallow due to previous industrial activity. The revitalization of brownfields has a storied history in the Northeastern United States. Specifically in New Jersey, a state with a long industrial past, hundreds of brownfield sites have been revitalized for new residential and commercial uses. The Hovnanian Building Company has even specialized in turning New Jersey's brownfield zones into affordable and luxury housing units

for four decades.⁷ The Hovnanian company's success story should show that brownfield revitalization is a viable and scalable way of creating new housing.

Highlights

- New York City's housing market is one of the most expensive and congested in the world.¹
- At the same time, thousands of lots in New York City are laying fallow or being underutilized.^{3,4}
- This policy proposal aims to develop the existing undeveloped and underutilized lots in public possession and put pressure on private landowners to develop these lots through the implementation of a specialized 5% property tax on undeveloped and underutilized lots; building efforts will be concentrated on constructing affordable housing.
- In addition, single-family homeowners in New York City will be incentivized to subdivide or add to their lots through generous tax credits and free counseling from the city.

Implementation

This policy proposal has an exclusive focus on New York City, and as such will only need to be passed on the citywide level. This policy proposal will be proposed to the New York City Council. There might be potential pushback from certain council districts with higher-income residents due to this policy focusing on constructing affordable housing. Recently, within New York City, there has been fierce

local opposition to the construction of affordable housing within wealthy neighborhoods, as evidenced by recent disputes in Windsor Terrace.⁸ However, with effective advertising of the policy proposal's extremely pertinent benefits of increased housing availability and decreased property prices to New York City's Council Members, the Council floor will surely push the policy to be approved.

If passed, the first step of this policy proposal entails an extensive geographical survey (conducted by the New York State Geological Survey) of all the underutilized, unused, and single-family lots within New York City. Due to New York City's capacious area and diverse intra-district needs, such a survey will take well over a year to complete. After the survey is completed, neighborhoods with the highest number of underutilized and unused lots will be prioritized over neighborhoods with fewer underutilized lots. Empty neighborhoods must be prioritized because empirical evidence states that the neighborhoods with the highest number of unused lots in New York City are economically depressed.³ Conveying the funds from the five percent property tax on unused and underutilized lots to the most economically depressed New York City neighborhoods will allow New York City to perform directed residential development in the most in-need neighborhoods (based on numerical figures from vacantlandnyc.com).

Civil society organizations and advocates for affordable housing (such as the Metropolitan Council on Housing) would be the most ardent supporters of such a policy proposal. In fact, advocacy

from the aforementioned groups for this policy proposal would ensure that this policy proposal would pass on the Council floor, thereby ameliorating New York City's dire housing crisis.

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Growing Towards Equity: Tackling Food Desserts and Emissions through Community Gardens

By Alix Kerebel, ak2755@cornell.edu

Our current food production and distribution system leaves vulnerable Americans and our planet behind. The US government can close gaps in food security through new grants for community gardens in lower-income communities.

Background

Millions of Americans do not have access to the food necessary for a healthy lifestyle, a condition described as food insecurity. As of 2024, nearly 14% of Americans experience food insecurity.¹ This proportion has remained relatively constant since 2001, despite numerous advancements in agriculture and technology.¹ While food insecurity touches Americans across demographics, certain groups are disproportionately impacted. Namely, as of 2023, 23% of African American households, 22% of Latino households, and nearly 39% of impoverished households experienced food insecurity.¹

Many lower-income households live in so-called “food deserts”. Food deserts are communities in which there is a lack of grocery stores, and where traveling to the nearest grocery store is inefficient and difficult at best. The high prices of healthy food compound the effects of food deserts, causing detrimental health impacts on low-income individuals.^{2,3} Specifically, the lack of nutritious food in a food desert increases the risks of various health issues, leading to a 0.8-4.7 years shorter life expectancy.³

Simultaneously, food production as a whole faces serious sustainability issues. Food

production emissions (excluding those associated with land use) account for nearly a third of greenhouse gas emissions. Namely, the transportation of produce and its packaging in stores drive up food production’s environmental footprint.⁴ To protect both citizens and our planet, the US government should invest in sustainable and accessible food production methods.

Policy Idea

Congress should encourage the development of community gardens by providing application-based grants to USDA-designated Low-Access (LILA) neighborhoods (food deserts). To receive these grants, government leaders of towns must complete a simple application in which they outline their community’s eligibility for the program and their detailed plans to establish a community garden large enough for the demonstrated interest in the program. The application process should be made simple, but, if needed, government leaders should be encouraged to seek support from private corporations or the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (OUAIP). City leaders should reapply for this program every couple of years and be subject to various accountability measures.

Policy Analysis

Providing grants for community gardens provides the initial incentive needed to kickstart the efforts despite upfront administrative burdens.⁵ Gardens initiated through a grant program would reduce the effects of food desert inhabitation. Citizens participating in a community garden are 3.5 times more likely to eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables.⁶ Additionally, one study finds that those in food deserts could save approximately \$84 per month on food by utilizing community gardens.⁷ By increasing the consumption of healthy foods, community gardens were linked to improving physical and physiological health, helping close the health gap between citizens.⁸

Community gardens are also key in decreasing greenhouse gas emissions.⁹ A study published in the *Landscape and Urban Planning Journal* found that a kg produced in community gardens “had 2 kg lower emissions than one purchased.”¹⁰ However, a recent study by the University of Michigan found that, if implemented incorrectly, community gardens may increase food production emissions. Creating the material needed for opening and maintaining the garden releases greenhouse gases that are not offset if the garden doesn’t remain open for long enough.¹¹ The study

explains that to reduce overall greenhouse gas emissions, community garden programs should extend the lifetime of necessary infrastructure (raised beds, fabric nets, paths, etc.) and practice urban symbiosis.¹¹ Integrating these best practices into the grant program is essential to maintaining its long-term sustainability benefits.

Highlights

- Rates of food insecurity in the US are high, posing serious health consequences for vulnerable Americans.^{1,2,3}
- The food production process is not sustainable, with many emissions coming from transport.⁴
- The United States should provide an application-based grant program for food-insecure neighborhoods to create and maintain community gardens.
- The program would provide a crucial source of healthy nutrition while cutting emissions from obtaining food.^{5,6,7,8,9,10}

Implementation

The United States should implement an application-based grant program for American cities to support the creation and maintenance of community gardens, which should be administered through the OUAIP. These grants will help fund materials, land purchases, and crops, amongst other necessary purchases. Since the federal government is funding materials, the OUAIP should also restrict what materials should be purchased with the money to ensure high-quality infrastructure is used to lengthen the life span and, if

possible, local compost material is used for soil enrichment. Emphasizing these sustainable practices will amplify the gardens' environmental impact.¹¹

To qualify for the grant, cities must be a USDA-designated low-access neighborhood (a food desert) and submit plans for a community garden large enough to support interested residents—which they should measure through public polls. The community gardens must be available to all citizens free of charge and be created on public-owned vacant lots or public gardens to not limit other economic opportunities. While cities themselves should submit the grant applications, they will be encouraged to utilize the help of private corporations, which are currently helping manage community gardens and thus have more expertise. The grant process should be designed to be as simple as possible. However, if needed, the OUAIP should assist cities in the application process to overcome the initial application burden and ensure accessibility.⁵

The grants should be made available for application immediately, be valid for three years (before renewal is required), and be subject to regular auditing to ensure upkeep and maintenance. If the cities are not properly utilizing funds, the OUAIP should provide direct intervention and assistance to resolve obstacles. Funding for this program should come from general tax revenue.

Political opposition may stem from this funding mechanism, though, as some politicians may see the program as costly. To counter it, politicians should emphasize the fact that, since the program is application-based, the OUAIP can

decide to allocate funds to only the most needy cities, depending on available resources. The same can be argued against opponents who believe the job is already being done by nonprofits: the OUAIP can choose to allocate funding only in cities without preexisting gardens. To further address the issue of funding, politicians should emphasize that as public health outcomes increase thanks to the gardens, which may help reduce Medicaid and Medicare spending.^{6,7,8}

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Regulating Personalized Pricing in the Big Data Era: Toward a Fair Market Framework

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Personalized pricing—using personal information to set prices—is not a new phenomenon. In an age where data is everything, however, there is an urgent need for clear and proactive regulation to define acceptable data usage boundaries and protect American consumers.

Background

Surveillance pricing refers to the use of algorithmic pricing systems, artificial intelligence, and related technologies to determine individualized prices based on consumer data including location, demographics, credit history, or browsing history¹. The practice of personalized pricing is not novel; product costs have historically been variable, with factors including overhead, customer desire, and competitor prices all contributing to historical examples of individualized pricing.² Studies additionally highlight potential consumer benefits, as personalized pricing profiles enable corporations to charge customers closer to their perceived willingness to pay, maximizing profit and market share.³

Personalized pricing schemes pose more harm than benefit, with these schemes often stifling market innovation, eviscerating consumer rights and privacy, and setting a dangerous precedent for how much control the public is willing to give algorithms over our daily lives. Potential risks include the exploitation of less knowledgeable consumers, the targeting of behavioral biases, violations of national discrimination law, and shifting market share towards corporations with the

resources to engage in large-scale data collection and analysis.⁴

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has recently issued an investigative probe requesting information regarding the use of surveillance pricing methods across four key areas: types of products and services offered, data collection and inputs, customer and sales information, and impact on consumers and prices.¹ This investigative probe is not intended to result in policy action, instead focusing on further establishing the current landscape of surveillance pricing.

Policy Idea

The FTC should implement the following initiatives: establish a dedicated algorithmic marketing investigative division within the Bureau of Consumer Protection (BCP) focused primarily on enforcement and consumer reporting, establish data disclosure requirements for corporations including specific details data collection practices and usage in pricing schemes, and create a third-party auditing and certification system for companies that adhere to consumer data

implementing this three-pronged policy approach, the FTC can effectively provide a sense of regulatory stability to the sphere of algorithmic consumer protection, set up a foundation for future data privacy standards, and place power back in the hands of individual consumers.

Policy Analysis

Establishing a dedicated algorithmic marketing investigative division within the BCP would allow the FTC to effectively leverage pre-existing administrative structures to enforce the second prong of this policy proposal, specifically data disclosure. The current focuses of the BCP include their work within the Division of Privacy & Identity Protection, which operates online assistance and a call center for victims of identity theft.⁵ Implementing a similar structure for algorithmic pricing schemes would increase the efficacy of the other two prongs of this proposal, as well as offer consumers an avenue for individual recourse and advisement. Additionally, the division's placement within the BCP would leverage already existing organizational structures, with divisions such as the Division of Financial Practices currently

focusing on emerging technology broadly.⁶

Establishing data disclosure requirements would similarly pressure corporations to adhere to equitable pricing schemes. Structuring a data disclosure requirement similar to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) would require companies to disclose what data is being collected and for what purpose.⁷ The efficacy of this policy is demonstrated by the effects of GDPR, with a survey of EU citizens finding that 60% of respondents were aware of their ability to access personal data held by public administrations, and 51% were aware of their ability to access data held by private companies.⁸ This requirement would check back against one of the major concerns regarding surveillance pricing: lack of transparency on how algorithms determine individual pricing.⁹ The benefits of data disclosure requirements extend beyond consumer protection.

Finally, creating a third-party auditing and certification system would help incentivize companies to adhere to new algorithmic pricing regulations by enabling the attainment of a displayable certificate. Additionally, a third-party auditing system would reduce the administrative load placed on the FTC: by focusing on certifying accrediting services rather than performing audits, the FTC would experience the same outcomes for a fraction of the workload. Third-party audits additionally increase consumer confidence, with a Deloitte report finding that 78% of respondents believe that third-party audits enhance the credibility of a company's financial and other disclosure practices.¹⁰

Highlights

- The creation of algorithmically determined individualized prices poses potential risks to consumer welfare, including violating national discrimination laws, exploiting unaware consumers, and creating monopolies.
- Personalized pricing models are not necessarily predatory; fair and balanced pricing systems can maximize profit margins, increase accessibility to goods and services, and enhance market competitiveness. Achieving this balance requires government oversight and safeguards to ensure transparency, anti-discriminatory development, and consumer privacy.
- Through a three-pronged approach including the founding of a new algorithmic marketing investigative division, the creation of data disclosure requirements for algorithmic pricing schemes, and the introduction of a third-party accrediting system for consumer data usage, the FTC can effectively provide clarity to the field of algorithmic pricing models.

Implementation

A multi-phased and chronological approach is necessary. The FTC should first establish the proposed surveillance pricing investigative division within the BCP. This division would leverage resources from existing divisions, particularly the Office of

Technology given its established focus on advising the FTC on policy and research initiatives in the fields of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and human-computer interaction.¹¹ To ensure the success of this new division, the BCP should allocate additional funding and personnel, recruiting experts focused on algorithmic transparency, consumer privacy, and data ethics. The division would become responsible for monitoring emerging algorithmic pricing practices, enforcing the data disclosure standards outlined in prong two of this policy, and providing an accessible reporting system for consumers affected by discriminatory pricing practices. Given the upcoming administration's focus on deregulation and reducing expenditures, the FTC may need to first begin with voluntary partnerships and industry collaboration, gradually expanding enforcement as market conditions and administrative interest evolve.

The second stage of this proposal is the development of a standardized data disclosure framework for corporations using algorithmic personalized pricing models. To achieve this, the FTC must first complete its ongoing probe into surveillance pricing practices. Without a deeper understanding of the current landscape of algorithmic pricing models the FTC risks hampering market competition, with a 2018 joint report between the DOJ and the FTC finding that equitable personalized pricing models enhance market competition, efficiency, and welfare.¹² An additional intermediate step to help determine effective requirements would be a period of public

comment, inviting feedback from consumer advocacy groups, algorithmic justice experts, and industry representatives. Finally, before fully implementing the data disclosure requirements, the FTC should provide a grace period for companies to prepare; hasty implementation could put a massive strain on businesses, particularly smaller organizations without dedicated privacy teams. Given surveyed costs of GDPR compliance ranging from \$1.7 million for small to medium-sized businesses and up to \$70 million for larger corporations, immediate implementation of this data framework would have major economic impacts.¹³

The third prong, the third-party auditing and certification program, involves developing a transparent auditing process to certify organizational adherence to the new data disclosure requirements outlined in the second prong. Mirroring existing FDA third-party certification programs, where the FDA officially recognizes accreditation bodies, the FTC would offload enforcement and investigative responsibilities, thereby reducing additional strain on the agency.¹⁴

To ensure the efficacy of these policy changes, the FTC should engage in a targeted communications campaign to ensure consumers are aware of their rights. Additionally, the FTC should provide guidance documents and host workshops to assist businesses in complying with new data disclosure requirements, particularly smaller to mid-range companies that may experience financial difficulty. These three prongs will likely succeed under the Trump administration, with

incoming FTC Chair Andrew Ferguson having already expressed support for increased scrutiny of surveillance pricing methods.¹⁵ By implementing this policy, the FTC will set a global precedent for responsible algorithmic pricing, ensuring consumer rights are safeguarded in the evolving digital economy.

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Unmasking the Digital Deception: Combatting Deepfake Misinformation in Politics

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As deepfake technology blurs the line between fact and fiction in politics, implementing mandatory labeling for AI-generated content safeguards democracy by ensuring transparency, enabling informed decision-making, reducing misinformation, and holding creators accountable for deceptive or altered media.

Background

In the past few years, there has been an exponential increase in the use of deepfakes, AI-generated videos and audio clips that look and sound incredibly real but are not. In fact, deepfake content grew by 900% between 2019 and 2020, with forecasts predicting up to 90% of online content could be synthetically generated by 2026.¹ They have caused a growing concern over the distortion of truth and have blurred the lines between fact and fiction.² In 2023, Reuters found that roughly 500,000 video and voice deepfakes were shared on social media around the world.³ By 2025, we can expect to see 8 million deepfakes shared online, consistent with the rate of doubling deepfakes every six months.³

AI-generated misinformation is already impacting elections. Just two days before Slovakia's recent parliamentary vote, social media was flooded with a fake audio clip of a prominent party leader allegedly discussing plans to buy votes.⁴ This incident resulted in a significant loss for the implicated party, spotlighting the risks of AI-powered misinformation.⁴ The problem is borderless: in January 2024, during New Hampshire's presidential primary season, a deepfake audio of President Joe Biden, which falsely

claimed that primaries did not matter was widely circulated.

The risk is clear: the next generation of voters may eventually lose faith in not only what we read and see but in the political system itself. About 63% of Americans believe that altered or fabricated videos and images cause significant confusion around the facts of current events and issues.⁶ At a time when political polarization is high and civic engagement is low, the rapid development of AI-driven disinformation threatens to overwhelm our ability to discern what is real, eroding the very essence of our democracy.⁷

Policy Idea

To combat misinformation and increase trust in the electoral process, an AI-Generated Content Disclosure Law is necessary. This law would require all media platforms—social media sites, news outlets, and streaming services—to label content created or significantly modified by AI. The label must be visible and state that the content was generated or altered using artificial intelligence (defined as advanced AI systems capable of generating or altering content that misleads audiences). Enforcement would involve private companies implementing detection tools internally, under government oversight, to monitor and flag

content. This ensures consumers can engage with online content more transparently and confidently.

Policy Analysis

The ease with which these technologies can now create hyper-realistic content creates a massive political liability.⁸ This aforementioned AI-Generated Content Disclosure Law addresses the root of this problem by increasing transparency for the public when they engage with this media. Instead of just restricting this content, the policy focuses on educating viewers and building trust. When viewers know whether AI created something, they can engage more critically and responsibly with the media, as suggested by President Biden's executive order last fall.⁹

Additionally, there is existing precedent. For example, the European Union's Digital Services Act includes provisions for flagging disinformation, though it fails to specifically address AI-generated content specifically.¹⁰ Similarly, some platforms have voluntarily introduced their own labels for AI content, but these efforts are often inconsistent across media platforms.¹¹ By mandating such a labeling initiative across platforms across the US, this law would create a more unified approach to resolving the issue.

Enforcing this policy would require platforms to develop or obtain advanced detection tools for identifying AI-generated content, leading to increased administrative and operational costs.¹²

Additionally, funding for these efforts would need to come from both government and platforms, potentially with support from media literacy grants, which would be challenging.

However, studies have shown that disinformation costs the global economy over \$78 billion annually, and AI-generated deepfakes pose growing threats to political stability and trust.³ Hence, by investing in detection and transparency tools, both platforms and governments can reduce these costs by contributing to a more informed and engaged electorate, mitigating the spread of harmful AI-driven misinformation. In the long run, these savings, combined with increased public trust, make this a worthwhile investment for safeguarding media integrity.¹³

Highlights

- AI-generated misinformation poses a threat to the strength of democratic institutions.¹
- Any piece of media (i.e., images, videos, audio) produced or altered by AI must carry a label similar to “This content was generated using artificial intelligence.”
- Platforms would be responsible for identifying AI-generated content through AI detection tools, ensuring that the proper labels are applied.
- If a platform fails to flag AI-generated content appropriately, penalties

ranging from fines to content removal would be imposed by a regulatory agency, such as the Federal Communications Commission.

- Ensures that consumers can easily identify AI-generated or AI-altered content, thereby reducing misinformation and enhancing the legitimacy of online information.
- Implementing the AI-Generated Content Disclosure Law requires bipartisan support, public outreach, FCC incentives for compliance, and transparent success metrics like reduced flagged AI content, with penalties funding media literacy programs and input from a community advisory board to refine guidelines.

Implementation

Implementing the AI-Generated Content Disclosure Law would require coordinated legislative efforts and public outreach to ensure compliance and build public trust in political media. Platforms should be mandated to label all AI-created or altered media with clear disclaimers, ensuring users are informed about the nature of the content they interact and engage with online.

However, since public trust is at an all-time low, platforms may initially resist compliance, citing increased costs and operational burdens.^{14,17} In response, the FCC should create incentive programs or grants for smaller platforms to adopt detection tools, reducing financial barriers to compliance.¹⁵ If additional funding becomes necessary, penalty revenue from

non-compliant platforms and grants from public-private partnerships would help sustain the program. If funding falls short, additional measures like increased public-private partnerships, reallocation of FCC resources, or supplemental government appropriations would be necessary to sustain the program. Additionally, early-stage outreach to nonprofit media literacy organizations and advocacy groups would help raise awareness of the need for transparent labeling practices, preventing the companies from framing the policy as excessively burdensome.

Considering resistance from tech companies and political lobbying, securing bipartisan support would be essential. Pre-committee support can be garnered by engaging bipartisan caucuses like the Problem Solvers caucus and hosting stakeholder roundtables with legislators, industry leaders, and public interest groups. Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Chair of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, could introduce the bill due to her prior leadership on tech issues, in alignment with existing federal efforts around AI regulation, such as Biden’s executive order.⁹ Given that this issue directly affects the elections for sitting lawmakers, who are at risk of being deepfaked themselves, conversations have already been widespread.¹⁸ These existing discussions help set the foundation for strong legislative support. Once introduced, hearings would feature AI ethics experts, media representatives, and technology researchers who can testify on the urgency of managing AI-driven misinformation. The Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation would

then refine the bill, paving a smoother path through a potentially polarized legislature.

Measuring success would involve several metrics, such as reducing flagged AI-generated content, improving public trust in media, and the efficacy of the compliance rates amongst platforms. Monthly compliance reports would be submitted to the FCC, with third-party audits ensuring detection tools are working effectively.¹⁶ Platforms failing to comply would face fines, with the revenue generated from these fines back into social media literacy programs that train consumers to engage with information more carefully.

The FCC would gather public feedback throughout the rollout, with a community advisory board established to collect input from users, advocacy organizations, and technology companies. This feedback would allow the FCC to adjust implementation guidelines as needed, ensuring the policy remains relevant and effective as the technology evolves.

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Dual-Use Solar for New York: a Win-Win for Energy Development and Agriculture

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Establishing a dual-use solar policy for New York State will allow for the expansion of solar energy infrastructure needed to meet existing goals, promote the protection of agricultural land, and diversify farmer's incomes.

Background

Dual-use solar also known as agrivoltaics is the practice of using the same land for solar energy and agricultural production. Solar grazing is the practice of raising livestock, mostly sheep on solar land. Policies are expanding solar and renewable energy, yet solar array sites need to be maintained through fossil fuels to run lawnmowers and the spraying of pesticides.^{1,2,3} By 2030, New York State must source 70% of its electricity through renewable sources and, by 2040, commit to a zero-emission electric grid per the 2019 New York Climate Act.^{1,4}

In 2021, there were 2,113 farms in the state raising sheep, and as of January 1st 2024, there were 86,000 sheep in the state.² Currently, contracting farmers with solar providers is challenging due to small herd sizes in the state; developers would rather talk with one entity that can represent several different farms rather than having to coordinate with many farms to manage solar sites.² Additionally, solar panels for agricultural purposes have higher upfront costs for developers, which can discourage investment in agrivoltaics. In 2021, New York ranked second to last in average farm real-estate value per acre compared to other northeastern states.⁵

In 2013, the state established the New York Sun Act to expand solar energy in New York by offering incentives for installations, lowering energy costs, and creating jobs.⁶ However, New York State has no policies to specifically address or incentivize agrivoltaic production, despite the benefits and the region's high demand.

Amending New York's renewable energy policies to include agrivoltaics is crucial for reaching clean energy goals while preserving farmland—an opportunity New York cannot overlook.

Policy Idea

Amend the New York Sun Act to establish a program that promotes dual-use solar. The program should directly target farmers and solar providers for maximum impact. Solar companies should be incentivized to build agriculturally focused projects through a payment on top of the base rate. The program will grant preservation status to farms that join, preventing future land development. As farmers cannot often establish relationships with other farms interested in agrivoltaics and with solar companies, the Department of Agriculture and Markets and Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSDERA) should involve staff to manage the

initiative. New York State should begin with a two-year, multi-phase pilot program featuring quarterly assessment and input sessions. Then, the policy should be adapted, such as alterations to budget and staff allocation, before being turned into permanent legislation. The ten-year goal of this policy is for 5% of all NY solar acreage to be dual-use.

Policy Analysis

Solar grazing offers diverse benefits that solve climate problems, such as managing the landscape without fossil fuels, increasing biodiversity, improving soil health, and promoting local sheep farmers.¹ The policy mitigates small-scale farmers' limited access to solar sites by providing agency support staff to bridge the gap between farmers and energy providers. In addition, strong incentives for solar providers ensure that their sites become dual-use and they can lease the land for minimal cost. The program should be similar to the structure of the Solar Massachusetts Renewable Target (SMART) Project, which has achieved high levels of success and public perception.⁷ In Massachusetts 15%, of solar sites (7 sites) are incentivized by the SMART program to have dual-use solar, and there are additionally 14 more sites that are on their way to use the program to adopt agrivoltaic

practices.⁸ The SMART program has received strong support by both policymakers and its stakeholders, which will lead to its continued funding.⁹ It is important to note the slow progress the SMART program had, implementing support staff will increase the number of farms joining the agrivoltaic initiative. Unlike policies in other states, this policy will have an agricultural focus in addition to an energy-based focus. As farms join the project, the land will become conserved, with the ability to conserve hundreds of thousands of acres of New York farmland in just the first decade of implementation. This could lead to the creation of more jobs, a stronger local economy of farmers, and more resilient farms.

Highlights

- A dual-use solar policy will conserve agricultural land and diversify farmers' incomes.²
- The role of designated staff at NY Ag and Markets and NYSERDA will be vital to connecting farmers with energy companies.
- The adoption of solar grazing practices will lead to increased carbon sequestration, biodiversity, pollinator populations, and soil health.¹
- Agricultural producers can help meet New York state's goals in switching to renewable energy.²

Implementation

This policy would likely get strong bipartisan support. For example, the New York Sun Act S8415 passed the New York State Senate with 59 votes in favor and only three against.⁶ An additional

program would probably get as good or greater support from New York policymakers due to their similar goals. As solar infrastructure rapidly expands across the state, now is the ideal time to address dual-use solar incentives. In 2021, two bills were proposed to address solar grazing in New York State.¹⁰ However, both failed, as the policy was likely too small to gain broad support. Coupling the bill with the NY Sun Act could attract enough attention for support from the New York state legislature.

A key legislator could be State Senator Rachel May.¹¹ She is the Chair of the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources and has co-sponsored a bill (S7081) focused on providing funding for dual-use solar research. The American Farmland Trust would also likely be a main actor in having this bill pass.¹² They could use their national resources to promote the bill, contact legislators, and get farmers to give testimonies. They have done work around the country in supporting policy that promotes dual-use solar and could potentially partner with the American Farmland Trust, which has several staff members in New York.

In the pilot, NYSERDA and NY Ag and Markets will establish focus groups with farmers and solar providers to address viability concerns. The first year of the pilot would focus on education and awareness, with both agencies hosting workshops to explain how to form relationships and fair contracts between farms and solar providers. The second year of the pilot will aim to resolve conflicts between farmers and energy providers and continue to limit barriers. The policy would be funded through a joint budget

between the New York Department of Agriculture and Markets and the Department of Energy Research and Development. This project appears to be very feasible with their budgets and aligns with both of the agency's missions. Funding would mainly come from the state through rate-payer funding. Utility companies collect money from customers' monthly electricity bills to support various state energy programs. Unlike in the broader funding for the NY Sun Act, this project's budget would be managed by NY Ag and Markets, in addition to NYSERDA. The project would also rely on public-private partnerships with energy companies that own the solar array sites. The policy would result in increased relationships between agricultural producers and energy companies. Legislators should view this act as a way to conserve agriculture while recognizing its benefits in expanding solar energy infrastructure. This approach will also help gain the support of legislators who may be resistant to expanding solar array sites in rural landscapes.

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Essential Car Service: Renewing America's Commitment to Rural Communities Through EV Charging

By Jack Turner, jt797@cornell.edu

The US spends billions of dollars on subsidies for gas cars, air service, and farmers. Though all are undoubtedly crucial services, the lack of direct subsidization of charging infrastructure has hampered the transition to renewable transportation, particularly in rural America.

Background

Rural America produces upwards of 36% of all domestic CO₂ emissions.¹ Many of these communities are based around agricultural practices where adaptation to climate-friendly practices is slow.² An excessive urgency exists to make changes so that electric vehicles can be affordable to drive without seeking out chargers in distant locations. Rural drivers consume 25.6% of all light-duty gas (typically smaller cars) despite only constituting 18.8% of drivers in the US, and only 17% of rural Americans live within a mile of an electric vehicle charger.³ Even worse, rural drivers who drive the most—roughly 3.6% of the US population—consume around 1,950 gallons of gas annually, or nearly 13% of total gas consumption in the United States.⁴ This consumption, in turn, leads to a lack of vertical equity in gas purchasing. Rural “superusers”—many of whom earn below the national median income—are spending roughly a quarter of their income on gas alone.⁴ In rural America, where incomes are often below the national median, electric vehicles save families upwards of \$1,900 to \$2,800 a year.⁵

The United States has been relatively aggressive under the

Biden Administration in transitioning towards a decarbonized transportation sector. The Inflation Reduction Act allotted hundreds of millions of dollars towards electric vehicle initiatives, and earlier this year, the Biden Administration announced grants upwards of \$623 million to construct new electric vehicle charging stations.⁶ This is progressive but does not sustain charging in extremely sparsely populated communities. The public investment from federal dollars has so far not spread deep into rural America though it has still only been three years since the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act. Rural drivers have a 40% lower adoption rate of electric vehicles than non-rural counterparts, and this divide continues to grow.⁷

Policy Idea

Using the Essential Air Service program as a template, the United States Federal Government should expand upon the initial spending of the Biden Administration and fully subsidize the construction and long-term usage of electric vehicle chargers in rural areas more than 20 miles from a public electric vehicle charger.

The program will primarily involve implementing charging

stations in areas currently not served or near chargers, and the funding will continue to subsidize chargers in areas that are not commercially viable in the long term. Similar to the Essential Air Service, states should condition continued deployment of charging on minimum usage thresholds that can vary depending on distance from the next closest existing, non-subsidized charging station.

Policy Analysis

The success of charging stations in rural America is built around the greater adoption of electric vehicles and a sustained reduction in carbon emissions from motor vehicles more broadly. Access to an electric vehicle charger is the greatest factor in an individual's decision to switch from gasoline cars; according to the Pew Research Center, 49% of those who live within a mile of an electric vehicle charging station support switching their car to electric.³

The greater density of chargers in rural America potentially tackles the extremely pressing range issue that EVs face: drivers are hesitant to use electric vehicles for long drives out of fear that there will be long gaps without access to chargers. A Harvard Business study found that the

largest concern over electric vehicles among drivers today is the insatiable pricing at charging stations driven by the inconsistent supply of electricity and charging infrastructure.⁸

This program will have lasting economic benefits for rural drivers. Switching to electric vehicles is estimated to save rural drivers, who drive the most, upwards of \$4,000 a year in gasoline costs.⁹ The return on investment for the subsidies will likely take time as demand for electric vehicles grows with the program. That said, a recent study found that drivers spending money at local businesses while waiting for their vehicles to charge boosted local revenue by 0.8 percent from January 2021 to June 2023 for an average charging location, and this number is higher for chargers near a greater density of businesses.¹⁰

Highlights

- A lack of electric vehicle charging capacity in rural America has stalled an otherwise quick transition from gas-guzzling cars to carbon-friendly transport in the U.S.
- Congress should increase direct subsidies to states for the implementation of electric vehicle charging stations that are unprofitable.
- Access to charging stations increases the propensity of drivers to switch to EVs. A 2022 Consumer Report survey found that 61% of drivers choose not to switch because of charging logistics and 55% choose not to switch due to range anxiety.¹¹

Implementation

This policy has political appeal to both moderate Republicans and Democrats.¹² The environmental and economic benefits that the policy targets would be broadly popular among liberals and progressives owing to their prior support of similar components of the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure law. Moreover, the key target demographics are rural, gas-car-owning Americans who typically skew conservative.¹³ While some initial reluctance to switch is expected given prior trends, the gradual switch among those in rural America prior to the implementation of this policy is encouraging. There is still a sizable portion of Republicans in Congress including Senator-Elect John Curtis (R-UT) who are members of the Conservative Climate Caucus, and several key elements of this proposal will address needs of their districts/states.

To obtain the money for subsidization, the best course of action is for Congress to shift federal funds for highway expansion and, instead, invest in EV fast chargers. The US has historically invested heavily in highway expansions that, while necessary for many smaller cities, often increase traffic in large cities.^{14 15} While this policy is likely to be broadly popular among constituents, who will not be taxed additional money for its implementation, hardline conservative Republican lawmakers may have a difficult time supporting an initiative that caves into people they view as climate change alarmists. The Republican caucus is highly fractured on support for

climate change legislation, but Democrats will not have to win over each one to push the new legislation across the finish line. As many major automakers are now well-established in the electric vehicle market, they will likely support the policy too, as it might induce non-car owners to purchase an EV as their first car. A bipartisan group of senators, akin to the legislative process for the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill, could be highly effective at working out a comprehensive framework that appeals to conservatives invested in climate solutions.

The implementation of the policy can follow the existing legislation signed into law by President Biden subsidizing EVs (the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law), but this new legislation will have to be more spatially targeted. The legislation will have to target communities of concern, namely those that are not located near any existing charging stations, and the legislation language will have to be strict that funds are conditional on being spent in said communities.

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Building Resilience through a Climate Change Superfund

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New Jersey is warming faster than any other state in the Northeast United States. It is time for the New Jersey State Legislature to pass a climate change superfund law to hold corporations accountable for climate change.

Background

While most states around the US have seen increases in temperature around 2.5°F since 1970, New Jersey has seen a rise of 3.5°F.¹ Dense urban development creating an urban heat island effect is particularly responsible for this vast increase.¹ Studies have found that Newark, the largest and most densely populated city in New Jersey, has the second worst urban heat island effect in the US, with an average temperature increase of 8.4°F, in comparison to what the temperature would be without the effect.²

As a small coastal state that sees jobs and tourism generate \$40 billion each year at the shore, increases in temperature uniquely jeopardize New Jersey. While the state generates revenue through the pharmaceutical and financial services industries, New Jersey is most widely recognized for its shore.⁴ A study by Climate Costs 2040 found that the safeguarding of homes, businesses, and livelihoods under a moderate sea level rise scenario would cost the state \$25 billion by 2040.⁵ This sea level rise would not only affect those at the shore, but also harm communities along the Delaware River and New York Bay as well. Moreover, private insurance companies only cover a small fraction of the damage of climate change, leaving the American taxpayer to pay three

times the amount of private insurance to cover the costs of extreme weather events.⁶

Unless New Jersey starts to invest now, there is no clear way for the state to raise \$25 billion to safeguard our cities without causing harm to its citizens. Yet, the top five US-based oil and gas companies have seen record profits since 2021, making more than \$250 billion combined.⁷ This disparity shows the urgent need for policy action to build resilience in our communities.

Policy Idea

The New Jersey State Legislature should pass a law that creates a Climate Change Superfund under the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP). The law will require companies that significantly contribute to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to pay into a fund that will support climate change resilience and infrastructure initiatives, like flood resistance. It will be the responsibility of the agency to determine who is “responsible” for the damages caused, and how much they will owe. The NJDEP must also proliferate methodologies to calculate how much and who will owe the money to the state. The state must only collect compensatory payments from companies who have emitted more than 1 billion global GHG

emissions from 2000 to 2024, and have a physical or economic connection with the state.

Policy Analysis

This type of policy is novel, and currently, most implementations across states and nations are either in infancy or currently in legal trouble.⁸ To ascertain the effectiveness of this type of policy, lawmakers should look to the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) passed by the US Congress in 1980. This law created a tax on the toxic waste industry to be put into the Superfund so that the EPA could act when something happened that threatened public health or the environment.⁹ When these events occur, the EPA is given the power to seek out potentially responsible parties and compel them to perform the cleanup or pay for the cleanup to be done.⁹ This allows the EPA to quickly contain the contaminated area once identified and provide restitution to those who need it. In 2023 alone, the EPA sought out more than \$900 million in responsible party commitments, showing that 44 years later, the policy is still effective.¹⁰ In application to my proposed policy, this framework from CERCLA shows that this type of policy is effective in collecting funds and providing restitution to

those who are affected by negative events, such as in my case, from extreme weather.

Other research has found that after the cleaning of a Superfund site, homeowner's property values rose by 14.7% if they lived within 3 blocks of the site.¹¹ Superfunds have a quantifiable positive impact on the local communities' health, by cleaning up a toxic site, and helping them economically by raising their land prices.

Highlights

- The New Jersey State Legislature should pass a law allowing the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to collect funds and damages from oil and gas companies to help pay for damage associated with climate change.
- Research has found that it would take nearly \$25 billion by 2040 to safeguard the livelihoods of New Jerseyans under a moderate sea level rise scenario, given New Jersey's increased susceptibility to climate change.⁵
- A similar federal policy in the US, called the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, has collected funds from toxic chemical companies to aid with cleanup when they were responsible for toxic contamination and has seen extensive success.
- This policy should act as a model for potentially interested lawmakers to see

the positive effect the Superfund has had on local communities. After a Superfund site had been cleaned up, homeowners saw their property values rise by 14.7%.¹¹

Implementation

The law's passage is contingent on a simple majority vote by both the Assembly and Senate, followed by the New Jersey Governor's signature. Incumbent Governor Phil Murphy has supported climate action and has set a goal of reducing emissions by 100% by 2035. Democrats also hold solid majorities in both chambers of the legislature, which bodes well for the policy.

In the NJ State Legislature, a similar version of this bill has been introduced (S3545/A4696), which recently passed out of the Senate Environment Committee and was referred to the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee. The author of the bill, Senator John McKeon, said in an interview that he believes that his version of the bill will definitely make it out of committee and the Assembly will most likely pass it, but he was unsure about the Senate.¹² To rally support, important state environmental organizations and lobbyists, such as the New Jersey League of Conservation Voters and the New Jersey Environmental Lobby, should reach out to lawmakers and help organize civic action. Significant effort must be put into organizing support for the bill among lawmakers within the NJ State Legislature to ensure that the votes are there to pass the bill. The bill has not seen any significant opposition yet because it is in committee, but there is a possibility

that as the bill progresses, it will see opposition from industry associations and trade groups about its potential impact on the oil industry. A common critique of the bill is that the oil and gas industry will pass on the price to the consumer, increasing prices. The Fiscal Policy Institute analyzed the similarly structured New York bill and found that the policy would not lead to fossil fuel companies increasing prices for consumers.¹³ The bill would punish them for previous behaviors, which would not influence current or future decisions from fossil fuel companies. If a specific large emitter were to raise its prices in response to being charged by the Superfund, other companies would simply outcompete them.

Once the law is passed, the state of New Jersey should direct the DEP to create specific guidelines detailing how a party's responsibility is evaluated and how to calculate their emissions. The DEP will have to create a set of regulatory guidelines that allows the state to collect money proportionally to the amount of GHG emissions and the costs incurred by the state from the event. The DEP should also specifically define what makes a "responsible party" and have guidelines to ensure that this party has the necessary economic or physical ties to the state. These guidelines ensure that the laws will be applied equally to companies, enabling quick and accurate application.

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FOREIGN POLICY

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Foreign Doctors Can Save Italy's Vulnerable Healthcare System

By Zaki Ahmad, zmaa4@cornell.edu

Italy currently faces a shortage of doctors that increasing student enrollment alone cannot solve. Therefore, Italy should introduce a Skilled Workers Act to directly recruit foreign doctors and advertise the new streamlined bureaucracy to them.

Background

Italy's rapidly aging population, with 22.8% of its people over the age of 65—the second-highest percentage worldwide—has led to a growing demand for healthcare services.^{1,2} Meanwhile, 31% of general practitioners are estimated to have left the industry since 2021, while funding and planning issues have prevented those positions from being filled.^{1,3,4} Healthcare provider shortages are associated with increased wait times and poorer quality of care for patients, and grueling shifts and limited benefits for providers.^{5,6,7} The severity of the current situation was seen during a doctors' strike in 2023 over working conditions.⁶ While population aging and increases in health expenditures are potent challenges across the European Union, Italy's unique circumstances make its healthcare system extremely vulnerable.^{8,9}

The Italian government has now allocated 3.3 billion euros for healthcare worker contract renewals after years of underinvestment; however, this funding fails to fully address the healthcare shortage.⁴ Only one-third of contracts were filled between 2023 and 2024, despite increased training contracts over the past three years.⁴ Current residents' criticisms of the Italian residency system may

disincentivize the already small population of Italian students from entering the industry.⁶

Many European countries have implemented specific policies to recruit doctors to alleviate shortages.^{8,10,11} In contrast, Italy has not introduced a comprehensive plan to do so and has one of the lowest percentages of foreign doctors, at 0.9%.¹² The Italian government is generally anti-immigration and has not taken cohesive action to recruit migrant workers.¹³ Further, language barriers, slow recognition of foreign degrees, and the complex process for obtaining a visa are barriers for interested migrant doctors.^{14,15,16} Italy should consider taking cohesive steps to recruit foreign doctors to address its current healthcare shortage.

Policy Idea

While Italy is increasing medical school enrollment, they cannot fill all vacant positions with students alone.¹⁷ To address the immediate shortage of doctors and mitigate the associated risks for providers and patients, the Italian government should implement a modified version of Germany's Skilled Workers Act (SWA). This centralized policy would increase the recruitment of foreign doctors to fill vacant positions that students

are unable or unwilling to fill. Italy would directly recruit foreign doctors, which is not currently part of the German SWA, and advertise the advantages of their new streamlined migration process. These advantages include reducing language training barriers, recognizing degrees from abroad, and increasing access to EU Blue Cards.

Policy Analysis

Italy recognizes that increasing migration and expanding its workforce are necessary to reverse the migratory trend that began with a surplus of doctors.^{18,19,20} Italy has an interest in bolstering the medical industry and, despite its anti-immigration stance, has taken steps to increase migrant doctors, raising the likelihood of an Italian SWA.^{18,20}

Development-oriented partnerships that recruit foreign workers by promoting location and settlement program advantages are effective, leveraging existing initiatives without incurring additional costs.^{21,22,23} This recruitment would give Italy an edge, as countries like Germany do not recruit directly.²¹ Recruitment benefits Italy, as policy shifts alone do not trigger migratory pull effects.²⁴ The lack of pull effects would alleviate concerns about

illegal immigration from the policy, allowing directly recruited migrant doctors to fill roles that students and current doctors avoid due to their unattractiveness.^{25,26}

Recruitment would be effective because the SWA tackles obstacles disincentivizing skilled worker migration. The SWA would increase funding for teaching Italian abroad and supporting Italian abroad upon arrival.^{13,27}

Furthermore, more foreign degrees would be recognized faster, and vocational training would fill gaps to meet Italian standards.^{13,27} Once foreign doctors are in Italy, access to the EU Blue Card would be expanded by adding eligible jobs and lowering salary requirements to 45% of the annual pension insurance contribution, allowing family unification for Blue Card holders.²⁸

Employing migrant doctors is also a low-cost option that could help achieve Italy's recommended 7% of GDP spending on health.²⁹ The low cost would alleviate the economic concern that immigrants can trigger a recession, a primary reason for Italian opposition to immigration.²⁶ The SWA would be a centralized policy, enabling Italy to address regional healthcare inequities by strategically placing foreign doctors.^{30,31}

Highlights

- Italy's pressing shortage of doctors, which causes a decrease in quality of care, must be addressed to care for its rapidly aging population.^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7}
- Italy should implement a Skilled Workers Act to directly recruit foreign doctors from abroad to strategically fill vacancies

nationwide that current doctors and students find unattractive.^{14,15,16,17,18,20,24,26}

- Recruiting foreign doctors is cost-effective and would enable Italy to achieve their recommended 7% of GDP on public health.²⁹
- During recruiting, Italy should advertise the streamlined bureaucratic process that makes migrating to Italy more efficient and attractive.^{13,27,28}

Implementation

To engage public opinion and key stakeholders, the Italian government should emphasize the SWA's potential benefits for patients and healthcare providers. Outreach through media and healthcare advocacy groups could foster community support.³² This support is important to overcome potential objections to the current relatively anti-immigration climate in Italy.³³ To gain buy-in from healthcare unions, the government should demonstrate how the SWA complements initiatives that alleviate burdens on current doctors and improve working conditions through the German example. Furthermore, since the policy enables strategic alignment with EU objectives to tackle illegal migration while promoting necessary and legal migration, Italy could receive funding for the SWA through the EU's Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund.²⁹ EU funding would further reduce cost-based opposition to the policy.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has strong approval ratings and is known for a tough stance on illegal immigration. However, she has shown the ability to advance moderate reform proposals without

alienating her anti-immigration supporters.^{29,34} Meloni has specifically decried immigration while simultaneously taking steps to expand skilled workers in other industries.³⁶ Thus, Prime Minister Meloni and Minister of Health Orazio Schillaci, should use their political capital to introduce the bill in the Chamber of Deputies. Through individual meetings, they should appeal to the left-wing Democratic Party and the centrist Five Star Movement, which collectively accounts for 120 members of the Chamber of Deputies, to increase support. Furthermore, Meloni and Schillaci should encourage young doctors who went on strike to stage rallies in favor of the bill to demonstrate popularity. Young doctors would likely do so because the bill addresses many of the concerns that caused them to strike. To address criticism of immigration, they should emphasize that the policy specifically targets a doctor shortage that Italians alone cannot resolve. By emphasizing this aspect, the Italian government can reduce opposition to the plan and limit hostility towards foreign doctors.³² Additionally, they can highlight how Germany has implemented similar policies while increasing border controls, demonstrating that passing the SWA does not signal weakness in immigration policy. Another potential criticism is that hiring foreign doctors may strain resources. Prime Minister Meloni and Minister Schillaci should emphasize the policy's cost-effectiveness and how migrant doctors would contribute economically by filling positions left vacant by locals.³³ Although Italy's right-wing government may be more inclined than others to pass

a Skilled Workers Act, no right-wing government with anti-immigration rhetoric has yet passed a pro-immigration bill. Thus, the bill is unlikely to pass in the near future but could pass if a more centrist or left-wing government was elected.

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Instability and Insecurity in Pakistan: Addressing Police Brutality and Corruption

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The police force is perceived to be the most corrupt institution in Pakistan, broadly accused of bribery, intimidation, torture, and extrajudicial killings. Reforming training standards, oversight, and constructing new cultural and legal frameworks in policing would build trust in police and government.

Background

Abusive policing in Pakistan traces to the Colonial Police Act of 1861, designed to form a repressive police force for the British Empire, and the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1998 (ACA), designed to address violence by enabling violations of citizen's constitutional rights by law enforcement.^{4,5,6} Calls for reform eventually resulted in Police Order 2002, which aimed to standardize and modernize policing by introducing new standards of oversight, accountability, training, and conduct.⁷ The implementation of this act has been limited due to the lack of political will and opposition by police leadership.^{6,8,9}

The lack of urgency can be partially attributed to widespread internal security threats.¹⁰ Police often justify torture and staged killings as necessary to maintain order, combat terrorism, and out of fear of suspects escaping punishment.¹¹ The first half of 2023 saw 27 reported cases of deaths from police torture.¹² Former Inspector General of Sindh explained the prevalence of extra-judicial killings as an expected side-effect of an ineffective judicial system.¹³ This militarized attitude is conspicuously advertised on province police websites where officers killed in the line of duty are referred to as “shuhada” or martyrs. This wartime rhetoric is echoed by

leaders like President Zardari, who honored fallen officers for fighting on a “frontline” against criminals and terrorists.¹⁴

The most consequential aspect of policing in Pakistan is the broad and deep-rooted “thana” culture. Thana culture—“thana” meaning “police station”—is a catch-all term for police abuses ranging from verbal abuse to illegal detention and torture.¹⁵ This has resulted in polls showing that 92% of residents disagree that the Lahore police are trustworthy.¹⁶ Despite recognition of the issues by police leadership and the public, inadequate training, a culture of physical force, and ineffective grievance processes have persisted, undermining both police effectiveness and public trust in the Pakistani government.¹⁷

Policy Idea

Reforms must be conducted at the provincial and district levels to implement cultural changes, change training curriculums, and complaint processes. These reforms should include:

- Revising police recruitment to emphasize community service and de-emphasize militaristic culture, while reforming the training curriculum to allocate at least half of instruction to de-escalation, conflict

resolution, human rights, investigative standards, and community engagement.

- Create opportunities at home and abroad for current officers to be retrained and gain advanced skills in areas like policing, forensics, and criminology to overcome established norms in police leadership and incentivize policing reform at lower levels.
- Creating transparent independent civilian oversight boards (COBs) at the district level with broad investigative and disciplinary powers.
- Creating a publicly accessible national database of police officers, including all investigated complaints against them.

Policy Analysis

The thana culture in Pakistani policing significantly shapes public perceptions of the government and undermines trust in the justice system. Addressing this culture is key to rebuilding trust, starting with recruitment and initial training as well as additional training opportunities for junior officers. Recruits trained in a more academic, non-stress environment perform better in the field, report higher job satisfaction, and improve

public satisfaction.^{18,19} In contrast, stress-based training creates defensive, impersonal officers, reinforcing problematic and entrenched cultural norms.^{17,18,20} Some police departments in the US have used similar frameworks to build trust and create community programs such as ‘Ceasefire,’ which resulted in a 37% reduction in homicides in Oakland, CA.²¹ Recruitment strategies and advertisements also influence the type of candidates who apply, shaping their motivations and expectations for the profession.^{22,23}

COBs provide numerous benefits to improve policing, such as helping complainants feel heard, holding police departments accountable, creating means for mediation, increasing transparency, and educating the public on police work.^{24,25} However, they can be expensive, depending on the size and expertise of the staff, and localities must have the flexibility to consider cost as they form COBs. Trust and effectiveness of COBs vary and often are seen as inconsistent when they lack authority, access, or transparency in their processes and rulings. Government leadership should preserve these elements, regardless of cost to preserve their effectiveness.^{25,26,27}

A national database of officers would help increase accountability, improve tracking of abuse data, and highlight regions’ highest complaints and abuse rates. Making this information fully public comes from the necessity of building trust in an institution that is seen as untrustworthy.¹ Pakistan mobile application. “Pakistan Citizen’s Portal” (PCP), centralizes complaints by citizens, but has only 1.7% participation.²⁸ While the data

collected tracks the number of complaints for a broad range of government and private actors, there is no focus on tracking individual police officers and departments. Tracking this data may help hold police accountable and improve citizen awareness.²⁹

Highlights

- Despite the Police Order of 2002, reform efforts in Pakistan's police force have been hindered by poor implementation. A legacy of colonial practices, combined with modern security challenges, has fueled corruption, abuse, and violence, leading to deep mistrust and fear among the public.
- Overhauling training and recruitment standards that emphasize community service, professionalism, and advanced investigative skills would start building a new culture around policing with each successive cohort of junior officers.
- Civilian Oversight Bodies (COBs) would allow the civilian population to express grievances and file official complaints. These reports would be investigated by civilians independent of the police force and would act as an investigative body to determine fault and enforce punishments.
- A national database would create a transparent avenue for the public to review the performance of their local police force and hold police and political leaders accountable for hiring or

retaining poor-performing officers.

Implementation

The focus must start at the recruitment and training stage to shift police culture. Recruitment efforts, developed at the provincial level leadership, should highlight civilian protection, professionalism, and high standards while downplaying crime-fighting and counterterrorism.³⁰ Expanding job marketing can also attract a broader range of quality candidates and improve selectivity. Police training centers should reformulate training standards to reduce stress and address key issues of “thana culture.” For example, de-escalation techniques would help officers avoid unnecessary violence, while community engagement training would foster professionalism and strengthen trust between police and communities. Both strategies should emphasize the importance of effective policing and community relations.³¹

Police training programs should give junior officers opportunities to develop investigative skills, reducing the reliance on higher-ranking officers to implement modern policing practices from the top down.³² Efforts should also be made to expand training partnerships with foreign police forces, such as the NYPD and Karachi Police, and broaden their scope to community policing.³³ Additionally, officers should be encouraged to apply for international programs like the UK’s Chevening Scholarship, which offers valuable opportunities for officers to pursue advanced studies in forensic investigation, policing, or criminology.³⁴ These efforts,, alongside creating new exchange initiatives, can help

cultivate a cohort of professionally educated officers.

Strong enforcement mechanisms will hold police officers accountable and reinforce the culture shift. Civilian oversight boards (COBs) at the tehsil, or county, level should have independent review powers, full-time staff, investigative access, and the authority to issue punishments. To ensure impartiality and avoid the perception of bias or corruption, COB members should be elected locally and prohibited from having close family ties to law enforcement or political parties. Investigative and sanctioning authority is essential for accurate case reviews and appropriate punishments. To prevent challenges to COB authority, police leadership should face administrative or criminal consequences for failing to comply with COB decisions and respect their investigative authority. Additionally, COB positions should offer competitive wages relative to local income to reduce the risk of bribery.³⁵

Lastly, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) should create a database that tracks all police officers and members of the Civil Armed Forces, a paramilitary internal security force. The FIA would require regular reports on police complaints investigated by COBs and resulting punishments. This data should be published annually and made publicly available. While a similar application exists for government services, a dedicated system for the police force is needed.

Stakeholders must prioritize local changes since enforcement of the Police Order 2002 at the federal level has been anemic. Organizing citizens at the district and provincial

levels through NGOs like the Human Rights Council and Human Rights Commission of Pakistan can pressure local leaders and circumvent national political challenges. Efforts should focus on regions with the greatest potential for success and support, such as Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where reform efforts have made progress despite challenges and setbacks.^{36,37,38} Collecting data from these areas will help demonstrate the effectiveness of the programs, motivating change in other regions and gradually improving police professionalism and broader institutional reform at the nationally.

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Restoring ASEAN Principles: Why Expelling Myanmar Could End the Junta's Oppressive Reign

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) must suspend Myanmar's membership to uphold its commitment to human rights and regional stability, leveraging economic exclusion and a coordinated arms embargo to pressure the junta into halting violence against the Rohingya population.

Background

The ongoing military junta's persecution of the Rohingya people is a grim illustration of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar. In 1974, Myanmar's military government, led by a Buddhist nationalist group, revoked the citizenship of the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority group.¹ Over the past 50 years, the Rohingya have endured relentless violence, including the burning of villages, sexual violence, mass killings, and loss of rights.¹ This persecution peaked in 2017, when military-led violence forced over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, leaving 9,000 dead.¹ Despite the Rome Statute from the International Criminal Court requiring countries to prevent and address genocide, and the United Nations labeling the Rohingya crisis as genocide, ASEAN's response has been unacceptably poor.^{2,3,4}

ASEAN's mission emphasizes promoting peace and upholding the rules and standards of the United Nations.⁵ However, ASEAN's failure to effectively address Myanmar's atrocities has violated these core principles. While ASEAN barred Myanmar from participation in certain summits and signed a five-point consensus with Myanmar in 2021 to end violence, Myanmar has continued its violent repression.⁶

Currently, 914,000 Rohingya live in overcrowded refugee camps in Bangladesh with no path to citizenship.¹ Another 630,000 remain in Myanmar in extreme danger and are unable to escape to Bangladesh, which has forcibly returned 6,000 Rohingya since August 5, unable to support the refugees.⁷ If decisive action is not taken now, this entire ethnic group risks losing their homeland and chance to preserve their identity.

ASEAN's failure to expel Myanmar reflects their deep economic ties with Singapore-based companies that supplied Myanmar with \$254 million in arms between 2021 and 2022, placing ASEAN members among the top arms providers to Myanmar's junta.⁸ Allowing Myanmar to resume participation in ASEAN summits signals that ASEAN tolerates human rights abuses.⁹ Expelling Myanmar from ASEAN is an essential prerequisite to ending the authoritarian regime in Myanmar.

Policy Idea

Given Myanmar's failure to adhere to ASEAN's five-point consensus — particularly its disregard for the ceasefire agreement, commitment to peaceful resolution, and worsening human rights abuses against the Rohingya people — ASEAN should suspend

Myanmar's membership.⁶ This suspension aligns with ASEAN's foundational principles of mutual respect, peaceful cooperation, and human rights and serves as a crucial step toward mitigating the conflict. To reinforce this stance, ASEAN should implement a region-wide arms embargo on Myanmar, with a clear mandate that member states who continue trading arms with Myanmar risk their own membership status. This coordinated approach would underscore ASEAN's commitment to upholding human rights and regional stability and exclude Myanmar from the crucial economic benefits of membership, pressuring the regime to reduce hostilities and align with ASEAN's standards of governance and peace.

Policy Analysis

ASEAN has mainly hesitated to expel Myanmar because doing so would eliminate crucial communication channels for diplomatic dialogue, humanitarian aid, and negotiation.¹⁰ However, these channels are failing to mitigate Myanmar's violence: since ASEAN's five-point consensus, the military junta has killed at least 5,000 more Rohingya.^{11,12,13} ASEAN's current approach is ineffective and there is an urgent need for more drastic action.

Removing Myanmar would deny it the economic benefits of ASEAN membership, weakening its military capacity. Southeast Asia's GDP is expected to grow at an annual rate of 5.1%, outpacing China, the US, and Europe.^{14,15,16} This is largely due to ASEAN initiatives, such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), which enables tariff-free trade, protects investments, and secures market access among members.¹⁷ ASEAN has also invested \$34 billion in research, sharing advancements among members through programs like the One-Shot Campaign, which provides vital vaccination, and invest in environmentally sustainable development.¹⁴ Myanmar's exclusion would remove its access to these critical resources, pressuring the junta to change course.

This approach aligns with historical precedent: London's government cited South Africa's forced withdrawal from the British Commonwealth during apartheid as pivotal in catalyzing global sanctions and isolation, essential for eventual change.¹⁸ Similarly, expelling Myanmar would signal that arms deals and economic ties with the junta are unacceptable. Removing Myanmar alongside a clear declaration of removal from the association for member states that partake in trade with Myanmar would affirm ASEAN's stance against human rights abuses and strain the junta's resources.⁸

Highlights:

- Since 1974, the Rohingya have faced brutal repression, peaking in 2017 when over 700,000 were forced to flee Bangladesh due to military-led violence.¹

- ASEAN's failure to effectively address Myanmar's atrocities violates its core mission to uphold regional peace, stability, and adherence to international law.⁵
- Myanmar's access to ASEAN's economic benefits, including tariff-free trade and regional investments, strengthens its regime and undermines ASEAN's credibility.¹⁷
- ASEAN must suspend Myanmar's membership and implement a region-wide arms embargo to underscore a commitment to human rights while pressuring Myanmar's regime to reduce violence.

Implementation

The rotating ASEAN chair position provides significant influence over the association's agenda, with Malaysia's upcoming chairmanship in 2025 poised to play a pivotal role in advancing a more assertive stance on Myanmar.¹⁹ With increasing pressure for decisive action against Myanmar's military junta, Malaysia would drive a coordinated approach to suspend Myanmar's membership, promoting ASEAN's commitment to human rights and regional stability.¹⁹

As chair, Malaysia could bring the proposal for Myanmar's suspension to a formal vote within ASEAN. While this would require unanimous consent, Malaysia can leverage ASEAN's foundational principles of peace and human rights to build consensus.⁵ Notably, five of nine ASEAN member states currently support the UN-led arms embargo on Myanmar, including

Singapore who is most economically tied to Myanmar.⁸ Despite Singapore's economic ties to Myanmar, its vote on the embargo highlights a prioritization of international credibility over complicity in genocide. If a suspension vote is called, Singapore and other ASEAN member states with lesser economic ties are likely to support the measure to avoid international condemnation or isolation as the sole dissenting vote.

Malaysia's former foreign minister Saifuddin Abdullah set a progressive president by openly addressing the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar and building cabinet support for such initiative, laying the groundwork for the current foreign minister, Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan.²⁰ Hasan has emphasizes ASEAN's responsibility to act decisively on Myanmar, framing the oppression of Muslims in Myanmar as a crisis that transcends internal affairs and demanded unified regional action.²¹ Malaysia's theme for its chairmanship "Inclusivity and Sustainability" reinforces its commitment to addressing Myanmar's genocide, positioning the country to lead efforts to demand accountability from the Myanmar's junta, opening to door for ideas such as removal of the state from ASEAN. Additionally, the newly established Troika mechanism, comprising Indonesia, Malaysia, and Laos—the previous, current, and future ASEAN chairs—provides a coordinated platform to address the Myanmar crisis.²² This mechanism signals ASEAN's intent to strengthen its response to the junta's violations and explore solutions beyond the ineffective five-point consensus.

Advocating for Myanmar's suspension aligns with ASEAN's historical principles and enhances its credibility on the global stage. A suspension would signal ASEAN's intolerance for human rights abuses and restrict Myanmar's access to arms and economic resources. This unified regional stance would exert significant pressure on the junta, challenging its ability to sustain the oppressive regime and advancing efforts to resolve the humanitarian crisis.

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Mexico President Claudia Sheinbaum Must Reform Her National Guard

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Mexico's Congress should lobby for President Claudia Sheinbaum to adhere to the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' propositions regarding implementing accountability reforms in Mexico's National Guard.

Background

Mexico's National Guard's commitment to human rights remains unsatisfactory. Despite former President Andres Manuel López in 2019 proposing that the National Guard would be a 60,000-member joint civilian-military organization to tackle cartel violence, the majority of Mexico's National Guard are former members of the federal police, known for their incompetence and human rights violations.¹ Nevertheless, sitting Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum has affirmed her support for her predecessor's militarization of the National Guard, stating that the military has acted within the law and can respond to violence in whatever way seen fit.² Since its creation, the National Guard has been highly problematic in adhering to human rights.

Furthermore, the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) revealed that Mexico has largely not adhered to its human rights suggestions. In 2022, the IACHR recommended that Mexico ensure investigations into cases of forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, and torture involving the National Guard, holding both the direct perpetrators and those in the chain of command accountable.³ The IACHR report noted that no senior civilian or

military officials were sentenced by Mexico for torture or forced disappearances in 2020 or 2021.³ Moreover, military and government figures allegedly tried to manipulate legal outcomes for favors during the Tlatlaya massacre in which Mexican soldiers killed 22 suspects in a grain warehouse, including 12 to 15 who were executed after surrendering.^{3,4} IACHR's report conveys that Mexico's militarization of the National Guard has enabled armed forces to operate without transparency or accountability, leading to more human rights violations.

Policy Idea

Mexican senators and deputies not aligned with Sheinbaum's Sigamos Haciendo Historia political alliance should lobby President Sheinbaum to implement accountability measures in Mexico's National Guard, pressuring her to implement long overdue public security measures outlined by the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). First, deputies should lobby for the state to report civilian casualties and prosecute national guardsmen or their superior officers involved in any human rights abuse cases. Next, Mexican senators should raise the same concern with the president, urging her to comply

with the IACHR's policy recommendations that Mexico has yet to address, such as establishing an independent body to oversee public security operations to ensure accountability within the National Guard.

Policy Analysis

Mexico adopting IACHR recommendations will help combat human rights abuses by establishing a framework for Mexico to implement accountability reforms. For example, in 2019, the IACHR ruled that Mexico must adopt a law regarding the use of force per international human rights standards.³ In the same year, Mexico adopted the National Law on the Use of Force, which requires detailed reporting and accountability measures for superiors in cases of unlawful force.³ IACHR concluded that Mexico has fully adhered to their suggestion ever since.⁵ While Mexico implemented this IACHR recommendation, Sheinbaum's fervent support for militarization conveys that the Mexican Senate and Chamber of Deputies should lobby for the president to implement more IACHR reforms to address the National Guard's human rights abuses, given that they are the direct channel between communities experiencing human rights violations and the

government. Although Mexico has adopted some IACHR reforms, further action is needed to hold the National Guard accountable.

IACHR's involvement in the Barrios Alto case in Peru demonstrates how their reforms can hold Latin American militaries accountable. On November 3rd, 1991, Peruvian military officials killed 15 people in the Barrios Alto neighborhood on false suspicions of terrorism.⁶ Later, the Peruvian Congress adopted an amnesty law that exonerated army members who committed human rights violations between 1980 and 1995.⁶ In 2001, the IACHR ruled that Peru's law violated the American Convention on Human Rights.⁶ Following the ruling, Peru created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) to monitor human rights violations, and in 2005, the CVR formalized the Comprehensive Reparations Plan which compensates individuals who were subjects of human rights violations.⁷ Given Mexico's ongoing inability to hold its National Guard accountable, oversight from the IACHR is a logical approach to convince Sheinbaum to implement more accountability reforms.

Highlights

- Mexico has struggled to balance militarizing its National Guard and addressing the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' concerns over human rights abuses in the military.
- Mexican senators and deputies who are not members of Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum's Sigamos

Haciendo Historia political alliance should lobby the President to implement IACHR's reforms to hold the National Guard accountable.

- Mexico has successfully implemented some IACHR reforms relating to human rights in the past, such as the National Law on the Use of Force, which Mexico has consistently been adhering to since its implementation in 2019.
- IACHR's involvement in the Barrios Alto case in Peru, which saw Peru create the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to monitor human rights violations in 2001 after military officials killed 15 people on false suspicions of terrorism in 1991, demonstrates its ability to hold Latin American military officials accountable to human rights.

Implementation

Implementing reforms to the National Guard will require deputies from different parties not affiliated with Sigamos Haciendo Historia, such as Víctor Manuel Pérez Díaz of the National Action Party and Laura Hernández García of the Citizens' Movement, to begin lobbying support in Mexico's lower house. During the September general Chamber of Deputies session that put the National Guard under military oversight, Pérez Díaz voiced his opinion against the reform, citing that when the military assumes civilian functions, they violate rights and increase repression.⁸ Much like Pérez Díaz, Hernández García stated that in

regards to the National Guard, the Mexican government neither has the capacity nor will to create a civil authority with the ability to address Mexico's security problems. Although the militarization reform did pass, Pérez Díaz and Hernández García can mobilize their respective parties to push for accountability reforms, such as those that IACHR has recommended, in a completely new multipartisan effort to increase the likelihood of building future support for reforms when Sheinbaum's term is up in 2030. Having deputies from multiple parties lobbying for accountability reforms is the first step to making the National Guard accountable.

Building on the Chamber of Deputies' work, Mexico's senators also not aligned with Sigamos Haciendo Historia, such as Senator Cristina Ruíz Sandoval of Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party, should pressure Sheinbaum directly to implement accountability measures. Like her deputy counterparts, Sandoval opposed militarizing the National Guard, stating that Mexico will risk international sanctions by permanently militarizing its armed forces without adhering to the IACHR ruling that the use of armed forces in public security must be exceptional and temporary.⁹ Given that Sandoval is on the Senate Human Rights Commission, she is best suited to gather support from like-minded senators and lobby Sheinbaum to implement IACHR reforms. Gathering Senate support to convince the president to implement IACHR reforms remains key to improving accountability in the National Guard.

Given Mexico's failure to fully enforce accountability within its National Guard, Sheinbaum's

unwavering support of militarization, and a unified government dominated by Sheinbaum's party, MORENA, Mexican legislators should not lobby for accountability reforms in the National Guard during the next six years of Sheinbaum's presidency. On November 11, 2024, Mexico's Senate approved Sheinbaum's constitutional reform to empower Mexico's Secretariat of Security and Citizen Protection (SSPC).¹⁰ Approving this reform expands powers of criminal investigation oversight to the SSPC and National Guard.¹⁰ Sheinbaum's reform likely allows the National Guard to continue denying human rights violations, obstructing the IACHR's call for independent accountability mechanisms in public security operations. Despite the need for reform to ensure the National Guard upholds human rights, the current government's support for militarization suggests that efforts to push for accountability reforms will likely yield minimal substantive progress. To increase the chance of success, legislators should wait until this sexenio (the six-year single term a Mexican president serves) expires and begin to lobby members today to hold the National Guard accountable.

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Breaking the Cycle: Strengthening Police Response to Domestic Violence in Kyrgyzstan

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The Kyrgyz government should implement mandatory, specialized police training to enhance law enforcement's effectiveness in protecting domestic violence victims, increasing reporting rates, and building trust to ensure justice is served.

Background

Kyrgyzstan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997, committing to uphold women's rights and combat discrimination.¹ However, the country has struggled to meet these obligations, particularly in addressing domestic violence.^{2,3} Police often focus on reconciliation rather than victim protection, and families commonly pressure victims to reconcile instead of pursuing legal action.^{4,5,6} This lack of enforcement leaves victims vulnerable and without proper legal recourse.

In rural areas, cultural stigma and a strong emphasis on family unity deter women from approaching law enforcement, which limits forensic evidence collection and prevents many cases from reaching court.⁷ Sexual violence crimes are often only prosecuted when physical injuries or biological evidence are present, reflecting a narrow interpretation of "violence" in Kyrgyz law that excludes psychological or economic harm.⁸ Consequently, many forms of abuse remain unaddressed.

Moreover, the legal term "helplessness" in cases of sexual assault lacks a clear definition, leaving victims without legal recourse if they cannot physically

resist. Approximately 86% of domestic violence cases are retracted, often due to police inaction, financial dependency, and a lack of shelter—factors that leave victims with few options but to return to unsafe situations.⁹

Alarmingly, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported a 20% increase in domestic violence cases in 2023 compared to the previous year, while the number of domestic violence victims increased by 5.1 times from 2010 to 2021.^{10,11} Women in rural areas are most affected due to the legal and cultural barriers. Children also suffer under this system, with 104 cases of child violence documented in 2021, many of which were prematurely closed.¹²

Current policies, such as the Law on Domestic Violence, still have weak law enforcement that fails to provide adequate protection through restraining orders and prioritizes reconciliation.¹³

Policy Idea

To improve law enforcement's response to domestic violence in Kyrgyzstan, the government should implement a mandatory, ongoing specialized training program that includes the following:

1. Mandatory training for all law enforcement officers on domestic violence, focusing on recognizing

psychological and economic abuse as well as physical violence.¹⁴

2. Regular refresher courses are held annually to ensure officers stay up to date on best practices and are fully equipped to handle domestic violence cases effectively.¹⁵
3. Comprehensive curriculum covering the enforcement of restraining orders and prioritizing victim safety over reconciliation, emphasizing rural areas where enforcement is weakest.¹⁶
4. Accountability mechanisms to assess officers' performance and ensure compliance with the training, including routine evaluations.¹⁷
5. Collaboration with local and international organizations, such as UN Women and Bir Duino (a human rights organization protecting civil liberties and advocating for marginalized groups) to provide resources and support for the training program.¹⁸

Policy Analysis

The implementation of mandatory, ongoing specialized training for police officers in Kyrgyzstan would enhance law

enforcement's ability to respond to domestic and sexual violence cases. A study by the Australian Institute of Criminology demonstrates that training focused on recognizing coercive control (a pattern of controlling behaviors that create an unequal power dynamic), psychological abuse, and economic violence has led to more effective handling of cases, resulting in higher arrest rates and better enforcement of restraining orders.¹⁹ Additionally, such training enhances officers' ability to identify the primary aggressor in complex domestic violence situations, helping to reduce repeat offenses and prevent further harm.¹⁹

Practical, scenario-based training, including mock interviews and real-life simulations, has been shown to enhance police skills in managing domestic violence cases.¹⁹ This training equips officers to navigate the complexities of these situations, leading to higher prosecution rates and more accurate investigations. Incorporating trauma-informed approaches—which emphasize understanding and sensitivity toward survivors' experiences—further improves interactions, reducing victim-blaming and increasing victims' willingness to report abuse.

A study by the National Policing Institute found that procedural justice training not only reduced crime but also improved public perceptions of the police, which is crucial for building trust with vulnerable populations.²⁰ This model is essential for Kyrgyzstan, where interviews indicate that only about 10% of domestic violence cases are reported to the police via 102. Distrust in law enforcement, cultural stigma, and financial

dependence often lead survivors to seek support elsewhere.²¹

By partnering with organizations like Bir Duino and utilizing resources from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Kyrgyzstan can lower the costs of developing and maintaining police training programs.²² These collaborations provide access to expertise, training materials, and funding that reduce the need for Kyrgyzstan to invest heavily in creating its own training infrastructure.²³

Highlights

- Since ratifying CEDAW in 1997, Kyrgyzstan has struggled to meet its obligations, with weak enforcement of domestic violence laws leaving victims unprotected and many cases dismissed.²⁴
- Kyrgyzstan should implement a mandatory, nationwide police training program to ensure accountability and improve protection and support for domestic violence victims.²⁵
- Addressing cultural and structural barriers, particularly in rural areas, is vital to building trust and encouraging reporting through sensitive, victim-centered approaches.²⁶
- Drawing from successful international models, Kyrgyzstan should adopt scenario-based and trauma-informed training to equip law enforcement with the skills needed for effective and compassionate interventions.²⁷

Implementation

While past legislation, such as the *2017 Law on Protection and Defense Against Domestic Violence*, expanded protections on paper, its enforcement has been inadequate.²⁸ Between January 2019 and April 2021, only 14% of reported cases reached the courts, with most dismissed due to ineffective intervention.²⁹ This policy aims to close these gaps by introducing a comprehensive framework that prioritizes victim safety over reconciliation, addressing both structural and cultural barriers.

To achieve this, amendments to the 2017 Law will be introduced through the Zhogorku Kenesh (Parliament of Kyrgyzstan) by partnering with progressive legislators and advocacy groups. Leveraging committees on human rights and gender equality, the policy will be framed as a measure aligning with Kyrgyzstan's international obligations under CEDAW, emphasizing societal stability and the importance of addressing domestic violence as a public safety issue. This strategic framing will help navigate opposition rooted in traditional norms.

Moreover, sustainable funding will be secured through government allocations and international grants, with support from organizations such as the UNDP, UNODC, and Bir Duino.³⁰ Drawing on successful international models, this policy incorporates practices like Mexico's CRIMJUST program, which improved officers' skills by 28% and increased victim cooperation and trust in law enforcement.³¹ These approaches highlight the effectiveness of linking funding to measurable outcomes, such as higher victim reporting rates and more effective

law enforcement responses. In Kyrgyzstan, where only 10% of domestic violence cases are reported due to fear of inaction, similar training programs could raise reporting rates and foster a supportive environment for survivors.^{32, 33} Tailoring these strategies to Kyrgyzstan's cultural and institutional context will help ensure practical implementation and long-term impact.

The proposed training curriculum will emphasize trauma-informed, scenario-based learning, including mock interviews and real-life simulations to strengthen practical skills and empathy among officers.³⁴ This approach has proven effective in the U.S., where a four-hour victim-support training led to a 32% increase in positive victim interactions and improved report accuracy.³⁵ By equipping officers to handle cases sensitively, the policy seeks to reduce victim-blaming and encourage survivors to report abuse. Additionally, implementation will begin with pilot programs in urban and rural areas, allowing for iterative improvements before scaling nationwide.

Beyond skill-building, the policy includes sustained engagement with local religious and community leaders to address cultural resistance, particularly in rural areas where family unity is often prioritized over victim safety.³⁶ Recent initiatives provide a model for success: in August 2023, the UNDP and the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs conducted field training as part of the SDG Partnership to address gender-based violence.³⁷ Expanding this training nationally through a continuous program is essential to ensure lasting change.

In essence, by establishing these practices as standard within law enforcement training, this policy would foster a sustainable, systemic response to gender-based violence across Kyrgyzstan, embedding trauma-informed, community-centered practices within the country's policing framework.^{38, 39} Moving beyond temporary solutions, it aims to transform domestic violence response into lasting protection for survivors.

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HEALTHCARE POLICY

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Care for Colorectal Cancer: Establishing Self-Service FIT Kiosks to Diminish Racial Inequities

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The rates of colorectal cancer are considerably disproportionate for minority populations compared to their white counterparts. To address this disparity, the federal government should implement a policy establishing self-service testing kiosks as an effective alternative to traditional screenings.

Background

In 2020, the World Health Organization reported that there were approximately 1.9 million new cases of colorectal cancer (CRC) and over 930,000 resulting deaths, making it the second-leading cause of cancer-related mortalities in the world.¹ However, for minority populations in the US, this number is significantly greater. African Americans have a 20% higher incidence and a 40% higher mortality rate for CRC compared to other racial groups.² This inequality can be attributed to structural barriers, including mistrust, maltreatment, and the lack of access to health insurance or a primary care provider.³

Despite its alarming prevalence in the US, CRC is among one of the most preventable cancers through proper screenings and early detection.⁴ The most common screening modality is a colonoscopy; however, these methods tend to be invasive and lower quality for minority individuals.^{5,6} Mistreatment and biases inflicted on by physicians contribute to inferior screenings coupled with discomfort, lack of social support, cultural norms, and socioeconomic factors that notably enhance the reluctance of minorities to participate in CRC screenings.⁵ The negative perceptions and lack of education on CRC screenings

form a glaring racial disparity that needs to be addressed by establishing comfortability and different screening methods.

The advent of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010 served to increase CRC screening rates, yet Hispanic, African American, and Native populations remain disproportionately underserved.⁷ With minimal movement aimed at improving overall CRC screening rates, there has been even less implemented legislation for minority groups.⁸ To improve CRC-related outcomes among minority populations, different screening approaches need to be put in place to overcome the systemic obstacles minorities face.

Policy Idea

To address the disparities in CRC treatment, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Colorectal Cancer Control Program (CRCCP) should implement a policy to enhance CRC screenings by administering self-service kiosks that distribute at-home stool-based Fecal Immunochemical Test (FIT) kits to residents in the recommended age range of 45 to 75.⁹ These kiosks should be placed in high-traffic, non-clinical settings to optimize accessibility for minority populations. The FIT kits should be culturally tailored

towards those minority groups, containing instructions and educational materials to address language barriers, discomfort, and any negative perceptions towards screenings. Along with these materials, a return envelope should be provided to mail the FIT kit to its respective testing site with a follow-up process for individuals that test positive to receive a colonoscopy. In accordance with these kiosks, community outreach groups will be constructed to advise how to improve distribution and other aspects of the screening process.

Policy Analysis

A policy implementing self-service kiosks that distribute FIT kits would require commitments from the CRCCP, community outreach groups, and participants. Placing automated kiosks in high-traffic areas would be practical and can be modeled on the administration of prior self-service COVID-19 and Influenza testing kiosks.^{10,11} This innovative approach to CRC screening increases convenience for residents and does not require access to health insurance or a primary care provider. Automated kiosks can be applied to various public health initiatives, such as screenings for HIV, to provide more equitable access to minority populations.¹²

At-home stool-based tests serve as viable substitutes to conventional screening methods in both their efficacy and distribution. The FIT kit is a unique method of screening that tests for occult blood in the stool with an overall 95% accuracy.¹³ Pilot trials conducted by the National Cancer Institute have shown improved completion of CRC screenings by distributing FIT kits through a mailing process, finding higher and quicker response rates with FIT kit outreach compared to colonoscopy distribution.¹⁴ Other private or state-level initiatives present a pragmatic approach to distributing low-cost testing kits, including FIT implementation guides that demonstrate the feasibility of their use and return.^{15,16} In addition, the FIT kit is a noninvasive alternative to colonoscopies that is currently underutilized among all populations.¹⁷

The community outreach program associated with the screenings will help ensure that the distribution methods are culturally competent, inclusive, and accessible to minority populations. A study that implemented a culturally tailored navigator intervention program found increased screening rates led by multilingual navigators that educated patients on CRC, addressed barriers to screening, translated information, and organized appointments.¹⁸ Using a hands-on approach to understand the perceptions and accommodate for the individual circumstances of participating community residents can enhance overall screening outcomes.¹⁹

Highlights

- Colorectal cancer (CRC) is the second-leading cause of

cancer-related deaths; however, the rates of diagnoses and mortalities are substantially amplified for minority populations.^{1,2}

- CRC is one of the most preventable cancers through adequate early screenings.⁴ However, typical screening methods, such as colonoscopies, are invasive and lower quality for minority individuals and lead to reduced screening participation among these groups.^{5,6}
- To address disparities in CRC treatment, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Colorectal Cancer Control Program (CRCCP) should administer self-service kiosks in high-traffic areas for minority populations that distribute culturally tailored Fecal Immunochemical Test (FIT) kits.
- Establishing self-service kiosks that distribute FIT kits should be feasible and convenient based on prior implementation of screening kiosks for other diseases and the employment of past FIT kit initiatives; the introduction of community outreach programs should help ensure accessibility for minority populations.^{10,14,15,16,18,19}

Implementation

Congress should enact the CRCCP’s proposed policy for self-service kiosks. With the CRCCP’s mobilized support from Congress and current funding to “20 states, 8 universities, 2 tribal organizations, and 5 other organizations,” the

CRCCP already serves a substantial portion of the general public and diversifies its support coalition.²⁰ Furthermore, its partnerships with various healthcare organizations allow the CRCCP to improve CRC screening strategies and promote the federal administration of self-service kiosks.²⁰ These pre-existing support networks can be pivotal in promoting the policy through federal avenues. The policy can receive added assistance from the American Cancer Society National Colorectal Cancer Roundtable, an organization that supports policy action in key issues surrounding CRC by increasing public awareness and sharing implementation strategies from healthcare organizations.²¹ Additionally, congressional support for federal screening services, such as the House Ways and Means Committee’s unanimous passage of multi-cancer early detection bill H.R. 2407 that continues to gain momentum to potentially be passed in Congress, demonstrates such policies’ viability.²²

To ensure proper allocation of the self-service kiosks, the CRCCP should conduct pilot trials to determine which high-traffic areas are optimal and convenient for their target populations; the CRCCP can further place machines in prior kiosks’ locations, such as “food banks, transit stations, churches, schools, and libraries.”²³ In addition, these pilot programs should develop culturally competent FIT kits that minimize language barriers, are comprehensible for a wide audience, and provide simple instructions for comfortable screenings. The aforementioned community outreach groups can also play a vital role in highlighting community residents’ perceptions

and potential methods for improving screening outcomes, leading to the program's overall expansion and refinement. Healthcare organizations can assist in forming advisory boards by directly hosting meetings in local communities and engaging minority residents, ensuring that their input is applied to the screenings and will benefit those specific areas.

There are several other practical considerations for the program's operation. If modeled off of prior testing kiosks, the maintenance of automated CRC screening kiosks should be minimal given the high proportion of FIT kits in each machine and few costs associated with the actual tests.²³ In addition, the kiosk administration should coordinate with laboratories that already process FIT kits or create new centralized laboratory settings to process incoming stool samples.¹⁶ After the kit has been tested, creating a follow-up process that minimizes participants' potential emotional strain in the case of positive results will be crucial. Therefore, trained community health workers from partnered health organizations should deliver positive FIT results in the manner most preferred by the participant and inform them of accessible colonoscopy options if necessary.¹⁶ Overall, proper implementation of this policy through a wide array of constituent support will lead to diminished CRC racial disparities.

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Addressing Florida's Hidden Epidemic in Polypharmacy

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The Florida Department of Health should implement a Polypharmacy Reduction Initiative (FPRI) to reduce polypharmacy risks in elderly populations through pharmacist-led reviews, and deprescribing protocols. This would improve health outcomes, lower costs, and enhance quality of life statewide.

Background

Polypharmacy, the use of five or more medications simultaneously, is common among older adults managing multiple chronic conditions.¹ While comprising only 14% of the United States population, individuals 65 years and older account for over one-third of outpatient prescription medication.² Polypharmacy is a growing concern with negative health consequences such as increased risk of adverse drug reactions, higher hospitalization rates, healthcare costs, and lower quality of life.³ For example, in conditions like heart failure, certain medications may offer little benefit or cause harm while increasing the risks of cognitive impairment, falls, and drug-disease interactions (instances where a drug prescribed for one condition exacerbates another).¹ Inappropriate use of medications increases the risk of complications and places financial burdens on patients and caregivers. A 2017 Medical Expenditure Panel Survey found that polypharmacy was associated with nearly double the total healthcare costs (198%) and almost triple the pharmacy-related costs (287%) compared to patients without polypharmacy.⁴ Adjusted data show patients with polypharmacy incur average annual costs of \$19,068, versus \$8,815 for others.⁴ Medicare and Medicaid

shoulder much of this financial strain as polypharmacy increases the risk of medication-related problems (MRPs). An NIH study reported that patients on 11+ medications under Medicare are nearly twice as likely to experience MRPs, with each additional medication raising the risk by 10%.⁵ However, Medicare's Medication Therapy Management services demonstrate the potential to reduce costs and adverse outcomes through improved medication adherence.⁵

Florida's elderly population is the second largest state in the United States, with over 36.9% over 50.⁶ Yet, no comprehensive statewide programs specifically address polypharmacy management for elderly residents. The lack of a standardized mechanism to deprescribe unnecessary or harmful medications leaves patients vulnerable to the detrimental effects of inappropriate drug use and financial burden.

Policy Idea

To mitigate and prevent the adverse effects of polypharmacy, the Florida Department of Health should implement a Florida Polypharmacy Reduction Initiative (FPRI). This program addresses the risks of polypharmacy, particularly in elderly residents of long-term care facilities across Florida, who

face a heightened risk for harmful drug interactions with multiple prescription medications.² FPRI will prioritize pharmacist-led medication reviews, where pharmacists conduct quarterly assessments, utilize their expertise in drug interactions, engage patients in discussions about side effects and treatment goals, and with prescribing doctors providing final oversight.

The initiative will use a multi-faceted publicity strategy for effective outreach. It incorporates mandatory Medication Therapy Management services, standardized deprescribing protocols, and statewide public awareness campaigns. Provider-directed financial incentives would encourage deprescribing only when healthcare providers, such as physicians or pharmacists, determine that medications may be unnecessary or harmful. This approach safeguards low-income elderly patients from any pressure to stop beneficial treatments.

Policy Analysis

Mandatory pharmacist-led medication reviews every three months are crucial for identifying and removing unnecessary or harmful medications, particularly for elderly patients in long-term care settings. A UPMC study found that over four years, integrating

pharmacists into primary care teams improves medication management and fosters trust among healthcare providers and patients.⁷ Pharmacists enhance patient outcomes by identifying and resolving medication therapy problems, including nonadherence, which accounts for up to \$289 billion in U.S. healthcare costs annually.⁸ This interprofessional approach promotes coordinated care among providers, patients, and caregivers while promoting improved care for elderly patients who can advocate more consistently for their medication treatment plan.⁹ Mandatory Medication Therapy can include financial incentives for healthcare providers who prescribe unnecessary medications, further promoting safer prescribing and more collaboration between pharmacists and providers.¹⁰

Deprescribing is a patient-centered approach tailoring medication regimens to individual needs. Standardized deprescribing guidelines, developed by a task force of geriatricians, pharmacists, and specialists, would offer providers safe pathways for reducing unnecessary medications. A statewide public awareness campaign would inform seniors and caregivers about the risks of polypharmacy and offer resources for advocating medication reviews. FPRI is comparable to programs established in other states, such as New York. The United Hospital Fund, supported by the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation and TD Bank Charitable Foundation, has collaborated with seven nursing homes in New York City, where participants implemented quality improvement interventions to reduce polypharmacy.¹¹ Their work proved

effective in deprescribing practices and decreasing inappropriate medication use, ultimately improving health outcomes for elders in nursing homes.¹¹ The program has begun the next phase based on the first phase's success. By expanding these evidence-based practices statewide, the different initiatives outlined in FPRI can mitigate the dangers of polypharmacy and improve healthcare outcomes for Florida's elderly population.

Highlights

- Polypharmacy, defined as the use of five or more medications at once, is common among older adults, who account for over one-third of outpatient prescriptions in the U.S. This practice is linked to increased adverse drug reactions, hospitalizations, and healthcare costs, which ultimately lower the quality of life.^{1,2,3,4,5}
- To address these issues, the Florida Department of Health should implement the Florida Polypharmacy Reduction Initiative (FPRI), which includes quarterly pharmacist-led medication reviews, mandatory Medicare Medication Therapy Management, standardized deprescribing protocols, and public awareness campaigns to educate seniors about polypharmacy risks.
- Pharmacist intervention in healthcare teams can significantly reduce inappropriate prescribing and adherence to manageable healthcare

treatment. Studies have shown that integrating pharmacists into patient care can reduce prescribing errors by 25% and enhance patient outcomes, demonstrating improvement in efficiency in managing polypharmacy.¹²

Implementation

The Florida State Department of Health must engage various stakeholders to implement the FPRI, including pharmacists, healthcare providers, geriatricians, long-term care facility administrators, legislators, and patient advocacy groups. In the first six months, the initiative should focus on an awareness campaign across multiple channels—local news outlets, senior centers, and healthcare facilities—to educate the public and healthcare providers on the benefits of polypharmacy reduction and safe deprescribing. This initiative will involve developing educational materials for seniors and caregivers about the risks of polypharmacy. Throughout the next six months, the FPRI will be a pilot in high-need areas with dense elderly populations, such as Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties.¹³ Pharmacists in these regions would begin quarterly medication reviews with prescribed oversight by primary care physicians. Pilot findings will guide further expansion.

This program would initially be funded through state healthcare grants and additional support from Medicare and Medicaid program funds to cover pharmacist-led services. Developing a supplemental grant proposal to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) can further

financial support, specifically for regions with high elderly populations.¹⁴ Additionally, reallocating a portion of state healthcare funds can be used to provide reimbursements when incentivizing deprescribing when appropriate.

There are several possible obstacles to implementing the FPRI. One significant obstacle would be opposition from medical professionals, some of whom might be worried about patient safety or the potential loss of income linked to deprescribing. Therefore, policy development talks should involve workshops to educate providers on the long-term benefits of polypharmacy reduction, such as improved patient outcomes, fewer adverse drug events, and reduced healthcare costs. Highlighting how deprescribing can lead to better health outcomes for patients and decrease hospitalization rates will be vital in shifting provider perspectives. Furthermore, offering training sessions on safe deprescribing can ensure providers and pharmacists only prioritize hazardous or unnecessary prescriptions. Technical difficulties with Electronic Health Records (EHR) integration present another obstacle because thorough integration can be expensive and complicated.¹⁵ Thus, the initiative will begin with a trial phase. If complete EHR integration is not feasible, records will be maintained and shared via a centralized, secure medication-sharing platform. Furthermore, recognizing that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities are frequently disproportionately impacted by polypharmacy issues, the FPRI would work to guarantee that these communities have fair access to

deprescribing resources and assistance, especially in areas where they are more likely to encounter obstacles to healthcare access.¹⁶

A decrease in the average number of drugs per patient, fewer adverse drug responses (tracked by hospitalization rates), and reduced healthcare costs, particularly those associated with Medicaid and Medicare, are the specific measures to gauge FPRI's performance. Furthermore, patients' and caregivers' quarterly questionnaires will evaluate gains in quality of life and satisfaction with the deprescribing process. They will also track cost savings and hospitalization rate reductions yearly to assess the program's effectiveness. The FPRI will reduce the hazards of polypharmacy, improve life quality, and increase healthcare equality for Florida's senior citizens through this stepwise strategy, focused outreach, and established measurements.

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Creating an International Recruitment Program to Increase Clinical Specialist Return to Ireland

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Specialists often leave Ireland for fellowships abroad, but their emigration is becoming concerningly more long-term. To encourage specialists to return and increase their retention, the National Doctors Training and Planning Unit (NDTP) must coordinate outreach to update them on available consultant positions and healthcare system improvements.

Background

Ireland is in a “paradoxical situation” involving medical students and healthcare workforce composition.¹ Its numerous *clausus* policies allow unlimited international students to enter Irish medical schools, yet conflictingly provide little opportunity for their further clinical training.¹ Consequently, the majority of these students leave after graduation.¹ This loss, and the failure to retain medical graduates, classified as non-consultant hospital doctors (NCHDs) in later clinical training, contribute to Ireland’s reliance on foreign doctors. Ireland thus produces “relatively more medical graduates” than any other OECD country, yet recruits more “foreign-trained doctors than any other EU country.”¹ This reliance contradicts its commitment to the World Health Organization Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel, requiring the pursuit of “a sustainable health workforce.”²

For context, NCHDs emigrate at all training stages, but the loss of NCHDs at later stages creates a striking “brain drain” problem. In Ireland, physicians receive a Certificate of Satisfactory Completion of Specialist Training (CSCST) after specialist training following medical school. CSCSTs,

besides general practitioners, typically complete subsequent fellowship training abroad.⁴ Traditionally, NCHDs temporarily emigrate to better advance in their career and then return to Ireland to work as consultants.^{1,4} Despite this historical “temporary emigration” pattern among CSCSTs, some researchers worry that long-term emigration has increased.¹

Although physicians are encouraged to gain specialty experience abroad, there are also negative factors driving their departure, including “stressful working conditions” with insufficient time allocated to training and a shortage of both “suitable consultant posts” and “career progression opportunities.”³ In particular, there are insufficient “post-CSCST fellowships available in Ireland”: in 2022, there were only 68 such fellowships but 452 CSCST graduates.⁴ In 2015, researchers found that doctors working abroad were interested in returning if “working conditions in Ireland” improved substantially.³

Policy Idea

In their *Annual Medical Retention Report 2023*, the National Doctors Training and Planning unit (NDTP) of the Health Service Executive emphasized that there are “no formal structures to maintain

contact with CSCSTs who leave Ireland” and suggested “targeted recruitment strategies” could encourage their return.⁴ The NDTP should create an international recruitment program for doctors who received CSCSTs in Ireland. The NDTP helps run the Doctors Integrated Management E-System (DIME) database, which records information about NCHDs working in the Irish public healthcare system and can be used to document when doctors “leave and return.”⁴ The NDTP should use the NCHD contact information stored in DIME to contact those who receive their CSCSTs in Ireland but are not actively registered with the Irish Medical Council (IMC) when (1) there are recruitment opportunities for consultants and (2) improvements are made in the Irish healthcare system to encourage their return and retention.

Policy Analysis

No similar policies are known to exist in other countries. Ireland has a unique culture of migration among those in their 20s, including doctors.^{1,4} Most specialties even “encourage trainees to migrate to achieve career progression.”⁴ Ireland requires culturally conscious policies, such as this recruitment program built

around the migrational culture of CSCSTs.

While the Irish government did not substantially implement previous policy reports proposing solutions to Ireland's healthcare workforce issues, it is implementing the 2017 National Strategic Framework for Health and Social Care Workforce Planning (NSF).¹ As the recruitment policy would fall under the "revising recruitment strategies" objective of "policies to address inflows and outflows" outlined in the NSF's Health Labour Market Framework, it would align with current workforce planning goals.²

For the 2016-2019 CSCST recipients, retention rates (measured by the number of recipients working as consultants in Ireland in 2023) were lower in "Radiology, Medicine and Anaesthesiology," so the recruitment program should prioritize connecting with CSCSTs in these disciplines.⁴ Additionally, "retention rates of Irish cohorts are on average 12-13% higher than the EU/UK and non-EU cohorts," so the program should prioritize communication with Irish CSCSTs whose increased retention may result in increased receptivity to outreach.⁴ Lastly, a 2016 research study found that "the longer a health professional remained abroad, the less likely they were to return to make their careers in Ireland."³ The recruitment program should increase outreach "during the 'critical period' in the early years" following emigration.³

While factors such as career prospects lead Irish-trained physicians abroad, throughout postgraduate training, "the lack of substantive improvements in conditions back in Ireland ...keeps them abroad."³ The Irish healthcare

system could better increase CSCST return by also using the recruitment program to update CSCSTs as NSF implementation results in developments.

Highlights

- Ireland currently has a surplus of medical students yet an inadequate healthcare workforce.¹ Ireland's dependence on foreign-trained doctors is problematically drawing doctors away from low and middle-income countries.¹ Despite the historical pattern of CSCSTs emigrating for fellowship training and subsequently returning to Ireland, some researchers worry that their emigration is becoming more common and more permanent.^{1,4}
- The NDTP should create an international recruitment program for doctors who received their CSCSTs in Ireland. It should contact those who receive their CSCSTs in Ireland but are not actively registered with the IMC when (1) there are recruitment opportunities for consultants and (2) there are improvements made in the Irish healthcare system to encourage their return.
- As the NDTP monitors the DIME database for workforce planning, it should monitor the recruitment campaign's targets and conduct surveys of those who return to determine whether the outreach influenced their decision.

Implementation

The NDTP, which maintains DIME, could implement an international recruitment program. Gaining the support of the NDTP's Medical Workforce Planning Lead, Dr. Roisin Morris, and of DIME Project Managers, Orla Smith and Aoife Nolan, would be instrumental in creating this program.⁶ As the NDTP, the IMC, postgraduate medical training bodies, and clinical sites collaborate to collect DIME data, critical officials in these other organizations must also champion this policy for it to be successful.⁵ DIME's utility for tracking physicians leaving and returning from Ireland hinges on using each doctor's IMC number as a "unique identifier" because it does not change as they migrate.⁴ As such, ensuring the IMC's support in using this information and physician contact details to organize outreach is critical. In particular, obtaining encouragement from the IMC's Registration and Continuing Practice Committee could facilitate the fastest possible implementation of the program.⁷ In addition, one avenue to ensure the aforementioned training bodies' support could be to contact the Forum of Irish Postgraduate Medical Training Bodies, which could promote the policy to all such bodies together.¹ In particular, establishing a connection with the Forum Trainee Subcommittee, which aims to improve the "standards of postgraduate training," would be beneficial.⁸ As this subcommittee distributes information to trainees across all bodies, promoting the program through its avenues could increase awareness among trainees and encourage their future engagement with the outreach. Engagement with the aforementioned organizations

will most likely lead to engagement with clinical sites.

The first step of implementing this policy will be engaging with these four critical organizations which collaborate on DIME. Upon their approval, the NDTP should create the outreach program for CSCSTs abroad. Personnel involved in DIME would assume the extra responsibility of keeping the contact information of CSCSTs abroad up to date and maintaining connections with them. For updates on available consultant positions that CSCSTs may apply to, DIME administrators would coordinate with the Consultants Division of the NDTP, which regulates such job postings.⁹ At the same time, all four organizations would contribute updates on improvements in workplace conditions.

As the NDTP monitors the DIME database for workforce planning, it should also monitor the recruitment campaign's targets and conduct surveys of those who return to Ireland to determine whether the outreach influenced their decision. If personnel involved in DIME at the NDTP determine the workload associated with the recruitment program requires more support, they should form a CSCST Recruitment Committee with members across the organizations that contribute to DIME. This committee, led by the NDTP personnel who would initially establish the recruitment program,

would communicate with CSCSTs abroad and conduct the return surveys to determine the program's effectiveness. The committee would also continue to develop the program as new ideas arise.

With support from the organizations which collaborate to maintain the DIME database, the NDTP can introduce and monitor an outreach program to increase the return and retention rates of physicians who move abroad after obtaining their CSCSTs in Ireland.

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Audit for Equity: Enhancing Accountability Across New Jersey's Harm Reduction Services

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Misallocation of Opioid Settlement Fund grants in New Jersey exacerbates disparities in harm reduction access. Abuse of community-distributor portals necessitates the implementation of audits to protect the integrity of harm reduction and ensure equitable allocation of resources to underserved communities.

Background

The State of New Jersey's Department of Health (DOH) grants agencies across the state harm reduction licenses and funding to enable them to buy and distribute services in their respective communities.¹ On February 15, 2024, the DOH's Division of HIV, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, and Tuberculosis Services (DHSTS) made funds available for harm reduction in NJ as per the Opioid Settlement Fund.² To mitigate harms related to drug use, executive action supports harm reduction services in areas of unmet needs.³ In 2023 alone, the New Jersey Harm Reduction Coalition (NJHRC) distributed 10,000 doses of naloxone, effectively used in over 140 overdose reversals.⁷

Qualifying agencies are awarded funding if they can attest to their capabilities to provide the core suite of harm reduction: preventative care supplies, trauma-informed education, and access to drug-checking equipment.¹ Providing these services is costly, and the maximum award per 12-month period to qualifying institutions is \$350,000.⁴

Similar to organizations applying to receive funding from the DHSTS, persons looking to become community distributors must apply through forms specific to the needs of the population they

intend to serve.⁵ Individuals in contact with drug users are encouraged to request anywhere from a few dozen to a hundred kits of various harm reduction supplies like smoking kits, safer injection kits, and naloxone kits.⁶

The obligation of harm reduction agencies to fulfill requests on behalf of community distributors is a central aim of the expanding harm reduction mailing services. However, the lack of verification standards and processes makes resources liable to misallocation. Given the lack of current-day regulations on request portals, unassuming mailing service coordinators at harm reduction agencies are prone to abuse. There currently are no preventative measures against the very likely possibility of similarly funded agencies depleting supplies through another agency's community distributor portal.

Policy Idea

NJ's DOH should impose distribution audits for all state-registered harm reduction agencies to address the lack of accountability for misallocated funds that drive programs to deplete similarly funded harm reduction agencies for supplies under the guise of a community distributor. Distribution audits would aim to report information about their resource

procurement, distribution, and finances to the NJ DOH. In this manner, the tracking would lead to the reprimanding of agencies procuring resources through other organizations' community distributor allocations. The internal auditing system will work to impede excessive burden on providing organizations and straighten expectations for those responsible for the abuse. Should organizers who are provided the same funding under the designation of harm reduction agencies by the DOH wish to place requests to other agencies for harm reduction supplies, it should be a disqualification of their grant of \$350,000.

Policy Analysis

The notice of funds availability for New Jersey harm reduction expansion is partially an effort to address the unfortunate reality that over one-third of NJ counties have a harm reduction agency within their jurisdiction.¹ The \$350,000 annual grant per agency could be better spent if monitored effectively, addressing the gap between the available funds and the actual delivery of services in underfunded areas.

By creating a clear and enforceable auditing system, the state can increase the reach and impact of its harm reduction

programs. The proposed penalties for non-compliance, including disqualification from grant renewal, would deter potential abuses and incentivize agencies to maintain their commitment to equity and the core suite of harm reduction. This policy shift would foster a culture of greater accountability, ensuring that funds reach their intended recipients, and enhance the overall effectiveness of the Opioid Settlement Fund’s reparative efforts across New Jersey.

Should issues arise during the auditing process, harm reduction agencies should be made ineligible for renewal of funding.

Concurrently, scrutiny of grant allocation and corrupt practices has arisen in the private sector of addiction rehabilitation, for which the State of New Jersey Commission of Investigation emphasizes the need to monitor public investments and ensure public funding in their February 2024 report.⁸ The case for safeguarding harm reduction agencies granted the Opioid Settlement Fund against abuse is clear: The appropriate use of resources will work to ensure that qualifying harm reduction agencies receive grant renewals and can continue the invaluable services they provide to people who use drugs and their communities. Ultimately, audits would force the reinstatement of said funding into communities where they are due.

Highlights

- The New Jersey Department of Health (DOH) grants harm reduction licenses and funding to agencies to enable them to buy and distribute essential supplies. Organizations can receive

\$350,000 annually if they qualify for the designation.¹

- A lack of verification processes for community distributor requests can lead to potential resource misallocation, which makes meeting demands for supplies, such as naloxone and safer injection kits, difficult.
- NJ’s DOH should impose distribution audits for all state-registered harm reduction agencies to prevent community distributor request portals’ abuse by warning against inappropriate retrieval and distribution of supplies other agencies have paid for and protecting harm reduction’s integrity.
- Through state monitoring of public investments and appropriate fund usage, audits would ensure affected communities receive support and further grant renewals for qualifying harm reduction agencies.⁸

Implementation

NJ’s DOH should impose distribution audits for all state-registered harm reduction agencies to enhance accountability and ensure proper allocation of resources. This policy aims to prevent funds’ and supplies’ misallocation, particularly by addressing the misuse of community distributor request portals. The audit policy should be introduced through the New Jersey State Legislature, ideally in collaboration with invested state legislators Assemblyman Conway, Assemblywoman Jaffer, and Assemblywomen Speight quoted

supporting legalization of fentanyl test strips and bolstered naloxone distribution as proposed by Senator Cory Booker.^{1,9} Stakeholders in this matter include harm reduction agencies, verified community distributors, the DOH, and New Jersey’s greater population.

Implementing distribution audits statewide would require establishing verification standards for community distributor requests. This policy proposes the creation of metrics that directly evaluate the success of audits imposed, such as performance monitoring for distribution. As outlined in the Commission of Investigation, multiple government agencies oversee separate components of the addiction rehabilitation industry and participating operations.⁸ To tackle this fragmented framework, a unified task force incorporating a diverse board of industry experts and professionals was proposed to effectively identify problems and or complaints.⁸

The DOH would ideally implement the auditing system before the next grant application or reapplication cycle. Furthermore, in the context of competing budget priorities, legislators might oppose the dedication of additional funds to harm reduction audits. However it should be emphasized that these are to be a mere reallocation of a population of existing resources. Funding for the anticipated expenses associated with auditing can be obtained through existing harm reduction grant funding as part of the Opioid Settlement Fund. There is confidence in securing adequate funding for this process as it is in the settlement’s tenets to provide a bridge for people using drugs to social support services, which are integral aspects of harm

reduction agencies.^{1,3} Long-term benefits associated with reallocating funding to the auditing process will outweigh any initial monetary loss.

The DOH can increase satisfaction among agencies and previously underserved clientele through the successful implementation of the policy. Furthermore, the DOH can then develop access to a statistically observable move towards equitable resources in the form of overdose reversal rates and quantifiable decreases in healthcare costs associated with drug-use-related hospitalizations. Effective implementation of distribution audits will protect the integrity of harm reduction and ensure equitable allocation of resources to underserved communities.

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