

THE DIGNITY PROJECT

West Virginians pride themselves on being industrious, hardworking people. The story we tell ourselves is one of resilience and grit.



We've mined the coal that built and powered much of America. We carved homes and lives out of hillsides and hollers considered inhospitable. We've embraced the gritty work that always needs doing, seldom asking for recognition, and rarely getting it.

But the numbers tell a harder truth:

West Virginia's labor force participation rate (LFPR) sits below 55%, the lowest in the country, compared to a national average above 62%. Our poverty rate is among the highest in the country, and the median household income here trails the U.S. average by more than \$20,000.



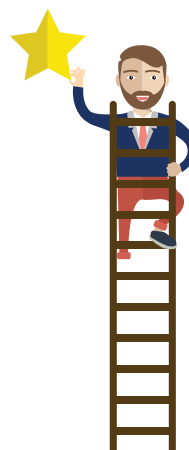
The Human Cost Behind the Numbers

The downstream effects of the state's low LFPR manifest in a multitude of unfortunate ways beyond the dollars & cents previously mentioned. A rich literature of peer-reviewed studies provides evidence that employment is positively related to health. Work is not just about wages, it's also about well-being.

And so it's no coincidence that a state struggling to get people back to work also falls near the bottom in comprehensive health rankings. We suffer mortality rates for diabetes and COPD that are over 50% higher than the national rate. Over 35,000 children in our state are being raised by their grandparents. Tragically, the Mountain State leads the nation in overdose deaths.

The Moral Weight of Work

In West Virginia, where faith and family still form the spine of daily life, the dignity of work carries moral weight. A job is more than income. It's identity. It provides responsibility, pride, and service to others. Without this, we lose something sacred for the human spirit.



What We Are Losing

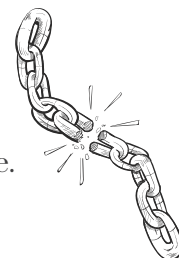
We aren't simply bearing witness to economic potential withering on the vine. We're bearing witness to a tremendous loss of both quality and quantity of West Virginia life. Reclaiming the dignity of work is about rekindling a sense of purpose within our people, enhancing the quality and quantity of life, and an economy that better empowers Mountaineers to be the authors of their own destinies.

Policy Barriers to Work

Part of the explanation for West Virginia's low LFPR is rooted in policy decisions that make it harder for people to earn an honest living. Such policies include requirements for prospective employees to hold an occupational license or an unnecessary college degree. Individuals with a criminal record face higher barriers to employment and, in some cases, interacting with occupational licensing rules, may be entirely shut out from certain professions.

Disincentives in the Safety Net

There are more disincentives embedded within the poorly structured social safety net itself. This manifests along three major dimensions. First, some programs offer overly generous material assistance, providing a clear disincentive for work. The interactions among separately designed programs can and do lead to benefit cliffs, where income gains are outstripped by losses in assistance. Finally, the lack of coordination among safety net and workforce programs in holistically addressing the challenges of individuals seeking those services to put them on a sustainable pathway to self-sufficiency blunts the effectiveness of the program intentions.



Progress and Remaining Challenges

West Virginia policymakers have made progress along several of these policy-specific margins. Other challenges remain unaddressed. Ultimately, there is room for improvement until the Mountain State is at least the model state for policies that remove barriers to work and minimize any distortions of the relationship between work and income.



Beyond the Numbers

Ultimately, this isn't just about GDP or labor statistics. It's about whether the next generation of West Virginians will inherit not only the land of their families but also the dignity of their work ethic.

The Heart of the Dignity Project

This is the heart and soul of the Dignity Project. The initiative combines policy, storytelling, and data analysis in a mission wholly focused on improving the lives of West Virginians today and far into the future. The work of the Dignity Project unlocks the restraints of our past and frees us to walk boldly into an opportunity-rich future where every Mountaineer is proud of themselves, their work, and justly rewarded for that work.



1. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6567908/>

2. <https://assets.america'shealthrankings.org/app/uploads/allstatesummaries-ahr24.pdf>

3. <https://www.arc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WVHealthDisparitiesKeyFindings8-17.pdf>

4. <https://healthygrandfamilies.com/>

5. [https://stateline.org/2024/10/14/surge-in-overdose-deaths-has-moved-westward-even-as-they-fall-nationally/#~:text=Alaska%20now%20has%20the%20nation's,Oregon%20\(45%20per%20100%2C000\).](https://stateline.org/2024/10/14/surge-in-overdose-deaths-has-moved-westward-even-as-they-fall-nationally/#~:text=Alaska%20now%20has%20the%20nation's,Oregon%20(45%20per%20100%2C000).)