

# MONTANA

## Economists track MT rebound

Recovery strong, but hurdles such as labor shortage still remain

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Montana ranked first in the nation last year for personal income growth and business startups hit a 10-year high, but the state remains challenged by COVID-19, limited workforce and child care and the rising cost of housing, a new state report says.

The Montana Department of Labor & Industry recently released the state's annual Labor Day report, providing analysis from state economists of a tur-

bulent year. The report examines wealth, business and worker trends as well as the factors driving them.

The pandemic-related recession was "deep, sudden, and quick," resulting in an 8.1% employment drop that bottomed out last April with more than 80,000 Montanans filing for unemployment benefits. After September, recovery stalled due to slowing economic stimulus and increasing infections that pushed down consumer spending, the economists wrote.

Due to a variety of factors including differing industries and school closures, women were more likely to file for unemployment compared with previous

years. Lower-wage workers and workers in urban areas were also more likely to apply than other segments.

"While the pandemic was difficult for everyone, the impacts fell hardest on lower-wage workers," the report says. "During the business closures in 2020, the brunt of the job losses were among jobs that require in-person contact, such as retail sales workers, waitresses, and hotel clerks, which hire lower-skilled workers and typically pay lower-than-average wages."

Workers where remote work was possible, such as engineers, researchers and accountants,



**THOM BRIDGE, INDEPENDENT RECORD**  
A masked waitress serves drinks and food outside the Western Cafe in Bozeman on August 27, 2020.

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### KASHMIR



Workers prepare dozens of fresh-cooked meals for delivery to needy families in Srinagar, the capital city of Kashmir, India.

[COURTESY TIFFIN AAW

## Regional instability doesn't stop food effort

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Beyond the Led Zeppelin song, above the K2 mountain-climbing exploits, Kashmir is becoming one of those faraway places in the world Americans better study up on.



**Masoodi**

"What's unfolding in Afghanistan has implications for Kashmir, all the way over to Bhutan and across the whole Himalayan border region," said University of Montana geography professor Sarah Halvorson.

"Kashmir is a flashpoint, but many Americans do not realize what the cause is," Halvorson said. "It's one of the most entrenched geopolitical challenges of our time. It's in between two nuclear powers, who've fought three wars against each other on the highest battlefield on the planet. Things are highly charged in the Kashmir conflict."

Officially known as Jammu and Kashmir, the region lies in the mountains between India and Pakistan. Both nations claim it, although India has the most physical control of the area. Its population of 13 million people is 60% Muslim, while India is 80% Hindu.

Residents there have waged a decades-long separatist campaign that has often turned violent. In 2019, the federal government led by Narendra Modi revoked Kashmir's constitutional autonomy and essentially demoted it from a state to a "Union Territory" without local elected leadership.

On the map, an odd-shaped tail of Afghanistan territory curls around Pakistan and touches its portion of Kashmir, while China has appropriated hunks of both Pakistan's and India's claims to the region.

The most contested area centers around Baltistan, which in more peaceful times drew mountaineers to its spectacular

## Despite COVID and conflict, Kashmiris keep food coming

**ASHWAQ MASOODI**  
For the Missoulian

**SRINAGAR, KASHMIR** — While much of India started starving under its self-imposed COVID-19 restrictions last year, one place facing both political and health-driven lockdowns kept people fed through home-grown resilience.

The whole nation went into lockdown on four hours' notice on March 24, 2020, as part of its attempt to stem the COVID pandemic. In Jammu and Kashmir, the mountainous region at the northern tip of India's diamond-shaped subcontinent, that came on top of a military occupation that paralyzed public life in 2019. The majority-Muslim population has been at odds

### About this story

Ashwaq Masoodi is an award-winning journalist based in Srinagar, India, and a Nieman Foundation for Journalism colleague of Missoulian reporter Rob Chaney. Masoodi and Chaney worked together this summer on the International Center for Journalists' Global Nutrition and Food Security Program.

for decades with the federal government in a nation that's 80% Hindu.

Yet Kashmir is among the top 10 in the country in terms of food security and nutrition. It is also among the bottom five when it comes to the burden of multiple malnutrition, according to the Indian government's own analysis.

So even when the main streets

have been vacated by army patrols and general fear of infection, Kashmiris found ways to keep one another fed. A crisis like COVID-19 was just one more trigger launching local community networks that have for years automatically become operational when any tragedy hits Kashmir.

### The mosque steps in

Nestled inside the bylanes

of Sonawar district in Srinagar city, where houses are locked in each other's reflections, stands Bonamsar mosque. The 59-year-old imam here, Nazir Ahmad, says despite COVID's difficult-to-follow protocols and the restrictions on movement due to the military lockdown, his mosque did what they always do — ensure that no Kashmiri in their locality slept on an empty stomach.

"Because of COVID, we couldn't go to each house," Ahmad said, "But we knew an auto or sumo driver, a daily laborer, a vegetable vendor, or a painter, or migrant worker needed help."

All of them were given somewhere around 2,000-2,500

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## Kashmir

From A13

rupees (about \$30) per month in addition to a package of rice, wheat, spices and tea that would last two months in an average household of four. For those who needed immediate attention, the mosque sent kits with cooked food. At the peak of COVID here, in May and June, hundreds of people received these kits from the mosque.

As the pandemic advanced, mosque-based Bait-ul-Mals (Arabic for “house of wealth” or treasury) and other local organizations provided oxygen concentrators and nebulizers to hospitals and clinics. But these religious centers particularly focused on the most basic human need in a crisis – food.

Since early Islam, the concept of Bait-ul-Mal has existed in the society in varying forms. It mostly acts as an institution to pay for public works and charitable needs. Many Muslim-populated countries like Indonesia and Malaysia have government-supported Bait-ul-Mals in place. But in Kashmir, it is the common Kashmiris who donate to this institution.

In the Bonamsar mosque, every Friday, a box is kept for people to place contributions. On special holidays such as Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Azha, people donate more than they do otherwise. This May on Eid-ul-Fitr, the mosque collected 250,000 rupees (\$3,300) and spent it on food kits and ration packets for the deprived. About 350 households surround the mosque. During every crisis there are usually 30 to 40 families that are struggling.

“We have been preparing these kits for the last three years now,” Ahmad said. “First, it was the lockdown, then COVID.”

## The private sector adapts

Kashmir managed to stay isolated and safe during the virus’ first wave in 2020, but the second wave that summer shook the foundations of Kashmir society and its already scrambling health care.

By the end of August 2020, India was the second-most pandemic-affected nation in the world, with 4.2 million cases, according to the Global Report on Food Crises September 2020 report.

Kashmir incurred 326,000 COVID cases to date, with 4,411 deaths for a 1.3% fatality rate, compared with the capitol New Delhi’s 1.7% rate.

In 2019, Rayees Dar and his wife, Nida Rehman, started a food service called Tiffin Aaw (which roughly translates into *your meal is here* in Kashmiri) in Srinagar. A tiffin is the distinctive set of round tin containers popular throughout Asia as lunch boxes.

Initially, Dar’s mother was the primary cook. As the business grew, it hired two professional Kashmiri waza (chefs) who worked out of Dar’s house. The idea was to serve warm, healthy, home-cooked meals when everything else around was shut to working-class young people who didn’t have time to pack their own lunches. The business would also compete with the fast-food offerings attributed to a concerning rise in obesity and other diseases in Kashmir.

They launched in the middle of the peak lockdown in 2019 when the Indian government revoked Kashmir’s statehood and placed it under federal control enforced by thousands of armed troops. Because of frequent curfews and internet shutdowns, Kashmiri businesses lost over \$5 billion in revenue in one year after August 2019.

Tiffin Aaw faced a similar hit. Then came the COVID

pandemic. Even those who could move about now lived in fear of infection.

Dar and Rehman restructured their business to focus exclusively on COVID patients, their attendees, the medical staff, and all those who couldn’t afford to eat because of the pandemic.

Frantic calls from doctors who’d been his customers during the startup’s brief opening forced Dar to take a leap he was not sure would help his business. He started giving away food free of cost.

But he realized if he did all of this from his own pocket, he would not be able to help many in need. Because he wasn’t a registered trust or a foundation in 2020 (but is now), he couldn’t ask for donations.

Instead, his former customers and all those whom he had helped, jumped in to sponsor meals. At the peak of COVID here in May-June 2021, he collected 1.7 million rupees (\$23,000). Each day, Tiffin Aaw distributed food kits to between 500 and 850 people. Its kitchen employs 16 people, many college professionals who work part-time because they are blocked from their regular jobs.

“No matter the crisis, food is always what we need as humans,” said Dar, 30. “But it can’t be mere sustenance, or something that just fills your stomach. My food is clean, healthy, preservative- or color-free, filling and tasty.”

Rice is the staple diet here, and an average person in Kashmir consumes 400 grams (about 2 cups) of rice every day. So all Tiffin Aaw’s meals have rice. They also have most of the traditional foods consumed in a normal Kashmiri household: sun-dried vegetables, collard greens and meat.

That mixed diet has contributed to Kashmir’s overall high nutrition compared with the rest of India. As nutritionist Beenish Zehra says, “We tend to eat lot of

‘batta’ (rice) and as recent research has shown, Kashmir consumes 51,000 tons of meat every year.”

So for all COVID meals, Tiffin Aaw deliveries have some mutton or chicken included. The plan now is to set up a booth at each hospital, with its newly launched trust, to ensure free food gets delivered to everyone who can’t afford it.

A “Hunger Watch” survey by India’s Right to Food Campaign in fall 2020 found two-thirds of the respondents from India’s poorest households were eating less nutritious food than they had before the pandemic lockdown. In particular, people were less able to buy fruits, eggs, fish and meat.

“The intense humanitarian crisis that resulted from this almost immediately was a massive explosion of hunger countrywide, beginning with cities and towns,” Right to Food noted

in its 2021 report, which blamed the crisis on policies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. “This eruption of mass hunger was an inevitable outcome of the harsh lockdown, because nine out of 10 workers in India continue to be informal, millions amongst who eat what they earn each day.”

A separate survey of 20,000 migrant workers in Bihar found that close to 60% were unable to ensure two square meals a day for all members of the family in June 2020, with a similar proportion in July. Bihar state is on India’s eastern border at the edge of the Himalaya Mountains, and routinely sent workers to Kashmir before the pandemic lockdown.

“Quarantine measures have disproportionately affected internal (rural-to-urban) migrants in countries such as India, where lockdowns and travel restrictions have created a huge mass of stranded, un-

employed internal migrants struggling to return home,” the Global Report on Food Crises noted in its “In Times of COVID-19” report. “The income of informal workers was estimated to have fallen by 22% in the region in the first month of the COVID-19 crisis, causing relative poverty rates of this vulnerable group to rise from 22% before the crisis to 36%.”

Despite being one of the world’s largest food producers, ironically, India is also home to the largest population of hungry people and one-third of the world’s malnourished children. But clearly the issue isn’t availability of food, but access, and centers like Bait-ul-Mal or startups like Tiffin Aaw do help fill this gap.

But charitable food assistance is not a sustainable answer to hunger. As Tiffin Aaw’s Nida says, “at most, we can adopt families, but not the entire society.”



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**Food**

From A13

ice fields and peaks, including the Karakoram Range's K2 and Trango Tower and the six-glacier intersection known as Concordia. Lower-elevation portions of Kashmir were often referred to as "India's Switzerland" for their scenic beauty and tourist activity.

The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan makes matters more volatile, according to UM history professor Mehرداد Kia. The incoming Taliban government there has strong ties to Pakistan, and India blames Pakistan for pushing violence in Kashmir.

"This is not about Islam," Kia said on Wednesday.

Until the 1970s, Afghanistan was developing into a successful and open Islamic culture before a palace coup overthrew its constitutional monarchy. A subsequent socialist revolution ran so out of control that the Soviet Union invaded the country in 1979. The United States covertly supported the Afghan rebels, known as mujahedin, against the Soviets.

But in the chaos, according to Kia, Arabic terrorists including Osama bin Laden of Saudi Arabia

and Ayman al Zawahiri of Egypt established bases in Afghanistan, and started developing a group of radical fighters that became the core of the Taliban. Kia argued those fighters organized around a particularly repressive form of Islam that was foreign to most of the rest of Afghanistan culture and history.

The result was an essentially mercenary army willing to do the bidding of others wanting to keep the United States and other economic powers from getting established in the region, including Pakistan, Iran and Russia, Kia said.

Lacking administrative governing skills, the Taliban also wound up making most of its revenue by selling opium on the illegal drug market.

But far below the geopolitical maneuvering of national governments, local religious institutions around the world continue to provide help to needy people. Today's story by Kashmiri journalist Ashwaq Masoodi recounts efforts by Islamic and private leaders to help their neighbors get food despite both political and COVID-related lockdowns in Kashmir's capital city of Srinagar.

So while the Roman Catholic Church can be embroiled in accusations of pedophilia or abuse of



COURTESY TIFFIN AAW

Delivery workers haul a heated container of food to a needy household in Srinagar, Kashmir. The Muslim-majority region in northern India has relied on a network of private businesses and mosque-based charities to keep people fed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Native American children, and Buddhist leaders in Myanmar have been implicated in that country's military repression, those institutions still run soup kitchens and clinics that do good on a person-to-person level.

"The mosque and the religious communities

help fill the void, especially when it comes to government shortfalls in the region," Halvorson said. "It's really important for us to understand importance of these faith-based organizations that help provide social services, just as it's fundamental for us to understand the geography of

those places."

Hearing about the Tiffin Aaw food charity in Masoodi's reporting, Halvorson added it is a relief to see examples of grassroots help.

"It seems really hopeful," Halvorson said, "and Kashmir needs hopeful stories."

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