

A Big Civilian Climate Corps is Vital for the Economy and Appalachia

By Ted Boettner and Stephen Herzenberg

Momentum is growing for creating a 21st century Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) that would reduce carbon emissions, grow jobs, and restore our natural resources and environment. At least seven bills have been introduced in Congress this year to revive the CCC. More than [80 members](#) of Congress are pushing for the inclusion of a new CCC in the budget reconciliation package moving quickly toward a vote, and several House committees have included funding for a CCC in their markups of bills in the budget reconciliation process.

A large-scale CCC program is vital for the Appalachian region and the country. Altogether, the U.S. economy has lost 5.7 million jobs in the pandemic, including over 755,000 in the Ohio Valley of Appalachia. By building on the successful legacy of the New Deal CCC and other corps programs, a new CCC could employ thousands of out-of-work people—including formally incarcerated citizens, young adults, and unemployed and underemployed workers—in carbon farming jobs planting trees to reforest the region and restore wetlands, growing small farms using regenerative agricultural practices, and other innovative economic development areas.

It is imperative that a big CCC is included into the budget reconciliation bill and that it is well designed to meet the significant challenges of the region and nation. This means ensuring that a revamped CCC primarily serves under-resourced communities and those with damaged lands left behind by absentee corporations in the extractive industries that it provides job opportunities for people without college degrees; enables corps members to earn a living wage with benefits; and offers pathways to union membership and careers via direct program links to union apprenticeship opportunities.



New Deal-era Civilian Conservation Corps workers.

The Civilian Conservation Corps: Yesterday and Today

The original CCC was created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the height of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl in 1933. From 1933 to 1942, the CCC employed 3 million workers, planted 2 billion trees, improved 40 million acres of farmland, constructed 800 new state parks, nearly 50,000 bridges, and 10,000 reservoirs, and transformed nearly 120 million acres of land (bigger than the size of California). By providing opportunities for America's youth, the CCC was successful at [increasing lifetime earnings](#) for participants and [improving](#) health. Altogether, CCC workers earned the equivalent of [\\$10.5 billion](#) in today's dollars (most of which was sent home to enrollees' families by law) and the program boosted local economies by more than [\\$486 billion](#).

Today, there are various programs in states and at the national level that undertake some of the same kinds of work as the original CCC, but many are small, grant-funded programs managed by non-profits. For example, the [CORPs Network](#) (TCN), which is sometimes described as a descendant of the New Deal CCC, is an association of [133 government and nonprofit conservation and service corps](#) that engages with young adults and veterans up to age 35 in service projects that "address recreation, conservation, disaster response, and community needs." The National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), which some also consider a successor of the New Deal CCC, is run by AmeriCorps and is a member of the Corps Network. Other corps programs at the federal level include the [Youth Conservation Corps](#), run by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, and the [Public Land Corps](#) run by the Dept. of the Interior. Some states and cities also have local conservation corps, such as the [California Conservation Corps](#).

Congressional Proposals for a Civilian Climate Corps

At least seven bills in 2021 have been introduced in Congress to create a new CCC. Some are better than others. As Table 1 (Page 3) highlights, the legislative proposals range in funding, program design, eligibility, types of CCC activities, scope, administrative structure, and benefits for corps members. Most of the proposals create a new CCC program under AmeriCorps and allocate grants to state and local agencies and nonprofits that have corps programs, while some would create a new CCC program within other agencies such as the Department of Interior.

The amount of funding in the bills ranges from unspecified to between \$8 billion and \$130 billion allocated over a set number of years. Some of the proposals, such as the Civilian Climate Corps for Jobs and Justice Act, prioritize funding for “front-line communities” and allocate federal funding based on “under-resourced communities”. Eligibility for corps members also differs. Most of the proposals adopt eligibility standards from existing corps programs, while some carve out new eligibility rules to include veterans, justice-involved youth, returning citizens, and those from environmental justice communities and from diverse backgrounds. The latter is a better approach.

Pay and benefits for corps members ranges from a minimum of \$15 an hour with healthcare insurance and childcare assistance to the adoption of the same pay and benefits of current low-wage programs. Educational awards also include a broad range, from \$5,000 to \$50,000, or adopt awards prescribed in existing programs. The permissible activities for corps members all focus on traditional conservation and natural resource restoration, but some are aligned specifically with reducing/absorbing carbon emissions or addressing a backlog of deferred maintenance at national parks.

The seven CCC proposals are significant steps forward toward recreating a new CCC. However, most of the proposals could be more accurately characterized as “AmeriCorps Plus,” since they build more on the AmeriCorps model and less on the original CCC. Unlike the New Deal CCC that was a job relief program operating on federal lands and state forests, most of these 2021 CCC proposals build on existing programs and services under AmeriCorps that utilize nonprofits and public agencies throughout the country as a national service program. This is understandable since AmeriCorps was born during a time of “reinventing government,” or outsourcing public jobs, with the government’s role seen as more “catalytic” within a non-profit public-private partnership model.

Unlike the New Deal CCC, where CCC members were federal employees, most, if not all, of the new CCC legislative proposals do not explicitly allow corps members to be federal employees. The Civilian Climate Corps for Jobs and Justice Act, however, appears to create a new, large-scale direct employment program with regional campuses and housing accommodations. While AmeriCorps’ NCCC also has campuses and housing, the program is small, with [enrollment under 2,000](#). So the CCC for Jobs and Justice Act, if adopted, would be a massive expansion of the NCCC or other current, smaller-scale corps programs. In contrast, a recent [proposal](#) by Representative Conor Lamb would develop a pilot program for the federal government to [directly employ veterans](#) in conservation and resource management under the Departments of Agriculture and Interior.

Unlike AmeriCorps, several of the 2021 program proposals are also designed to provide a living wage, teach skills for high-demand industries, and build career pathways. The visibility and cultural connections created from a large, stand-alone direct employment CCC—attributes of the original CCC—are important for several reasons. They not only foster camaraderie among corps members and build hope for a brighter future; they also provide an iconography of accomplishment that builds trust in the public good.

One shortcoming of AmeriCorps is that it has difficulty being recognized by the general public because it is such a decentralized and complex program that utilizes a myriad of non-profits instead of a single government entity with a clear purpose. On the flip side, the low visibility of the program has made it difficult to attack by opponents, and its hundreds of state and local partnerships have provided a large advocacy structure to ensure its survival. Another key difference is that the original CCC had a single focus of promoting natural infrastructure and accessible greenspace, while national service programs like AmeriCorps work in a plethora of programmatic areas.



West Virginia's Watoga State Park, developed by the New Deal-era Civilian Conservation Corps.

Table 1: Congressional Proposals for a Civilian Climate Corps (2021)

2021 CCC Legislation	Funding Level & Allocation	Program Design & Administrative Structure	Corps Activities	Wages / Benefits
<p>The 21st Century Conservation (21CCC) Act (Summary) House (Neguse): H.R.1162 Senate (Wyden): S.487</p>	<p>\$9 billion for CCC and an additional \$35.2 billion for other agency programs</p>	<p>Administration: Department of Labor. Provides grants to youth and conservation corps to carry out CCC projects. Eligibility: Unspecified. Other: Provides additional funding to Dept. of Interior, Forest Service</p>	<p>Conservation, outdoor recreation, or other environmental matters.</p>	<p>Unspecified</p>
<p>The Restore Environmental Vitality and Improve Volatile Economy (REVIVE) by the Civilian Conservation Corps Act (Summary) Senate (Casey): S.2414</p>	<p>Unspecified. No more than 10% for administration. Buy American.</p>	<p>Administration: AmeriCorps. Local host sites include higher ed, states, and farmers. Eligibility: Unemployed/ underemployed, recent high school/college grads, returning citizens; prioritizes minorities, low-income, indigenous, disabled, and EJAs. Other: Creation of state Community Advisory Boards/ Environmental Equity Resources Centers/ Environmental Justice standards/ and Corporation Advisory Board (evaluation)</p>	<p>Environmental restoration and conservation, park infrastructure, regenerative agriculture, remediation of natural resources, workforce prep, and apprenticeships.</p>	<p>\$15 an hour, health insurance, apprenticeship reward of \$5,000</p>
<p>The Civilian Climate Corps for Jobs and Justice (CCCJ&J) Act (Summary) House (Ocasio-Cortez): H.R.2670 Senate (Markey): S.1244</p>	<p>\$132 Billion: 2/3 for CCC under AmeriCorps and 1/3 for grants for local corps. 50% for "under-resourced communities".</p>	<p>Administration: AmeriCorps. Two tracks include a new direct employment national service program (CCC) and a grant program to local corps (Partner Corps) Eligibility: Anyone. 50% of members from under-resourced communities and 50% Partner Corps programs; no age limits Other: Creation of "units", unit leaders, campuses, prevailing wage contractor requirement</p>	<p>Clean energy, climate resilience, conservation, environmental remediation, sustainable infrastructure projects, education, workforce development (4 weeks training), and career pathways to participants, including pre-apprenticeships.</p>	<p>\$15 an hour, childcare + health insurance coverage + right to organize + \$50K college grant</p>
<p>Cultivating Opportunity and Recovery from the Pandemic through Service Act (CORPS) Act (Summary) Senate (Coons): S.1165</p>	<p>\$8 billion</p>	<p>Administration: Expands AmeriCorps, 21st Century Conservation Corps, and AmeriCorps Seniors. Eligibility: Ages 16-30, up to 36 for veterans, and people 45+ for senior programs. Other: Establishes pilot program in rural and high-poverty communities and with community-based organizations</p>	<p>Assisting educators in helping students overcome learning loss, expanding throughput at food banks and delivery services that combat nutrition insecurity, supporting outreach efforts to those experiencing homelessness, and promoting conservation, environmental resiliency, and natural resource preservation</p>	<p>Minimum pay is 175% of federal poverty level and a grant for college or student debt.</p>
<p>The Civilian Climate Corps Act (Summary) House (Neguse): H.R. 2241 Senate (Coons): S.1057</p>	<p>Unspecified</p>	<p>Administration: Operated by Secretaries of Dept. of Agriculture and Interior with coordination with federal agencies and NGOs Eligibility: Unspecified (same as existing crops programs) Other: Direct resources to disadvantaged communities.</p>	<p>Conservation and restoration on public lands, assistance for frontline communities adapting to climate change, natural climate solutions, replacement of vulnerable infrastructure, protection of biodiversity and ecological resilience.</p>	<p>Unspecified</p>
<p>Restore Employment in Natural and Environmental Work (RENEW) Conservation Corps Act (Summary) House (Rush): H.R. 3220 Senate (Durbin): S.1370</p>	<p>\$55.8 Billion: Formula funding based on unemployment (2/3rds) and population (1/3rd). No more than 20% for admin, 14% education, and 8% for equipment.</p>	<p>Administration: Established in Dept. of Agriculture and Interior Eligibility: 16+, "opportunity youth" aged 16-24. Requires participants to reflect project area demographics. Other: Creates RENEW national council</p>	<p>Address back log of deferred conservation projects, training and apprenticeships, environmental restoration including brownfields, construction projects, tree planting, and other projects.</p>	<p>\$15 an hour (inflation adjusted), and \$5,000 education credit.</p>
<p>National Climate Service Corps and Careers Network Act (Summary) House (Chu): H.R. 4220 Senate (Masto): S.1928</p>	<p>\$10.25 Billion: \$10 billion for National Climate Service Corps and \$200 million for Climate Careers Network.</p>	<p>Administration: Established under AmeriCorps Eligibility: Ages 16 to 30, veterans under age 36, emphasis on people that are disadvantaged people or have environmental justice backgrounds. Other: Creates Climate Careers Network to help corps grads find work in green industries.</p>	<p>Establishes pilot program in rural and high-poverty communities and with community-based organizations assessing community resilience to climate change, emergency preparedness, promoting sustainable, resilient communities and supporting climate adaptation and mitigation of the negative effects of climate change.</p>	<p>Follows AmeriCorps</p>

Why We Need a Big CCC – in Appalachia and Beyond

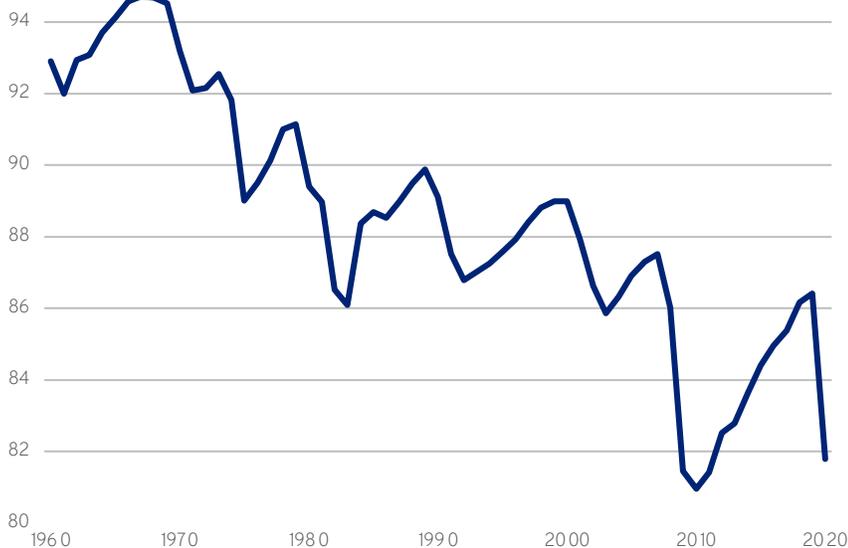
Having provided an overview of the original CCC and the different CCC bills introduced in the U.S. Congress, this section highlights three main reasons why the United States would benefit from creating a big CCC. Two relate to the jobs we desperately need, in the economy as a whole and for targeted populations. One relates to the very simple idea that CCC is a powerful tool for reducing carbon emissions.

We Have Lost 5.7 Million Jobs in the Pandemic

The most widely recognized need for job creation currently is to bring the number of U.S. jobs back to pre-pandemic levels. While the COVID-19 pandemic unemployment crisis has waned over the last few months, the United States still had [5.7 million fewer non-farm jobs](#) as of July 2021 than in February 2020. Employment in the four-state region of Appalachia in the Ohio Valley—including Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky—is also far below pre-pandemic levels. Altogether, the four states of the region had 755,800 fewer nonfarm payroll jobs in July 2021 than they did in February 2020.

The pandemic recession has also increased the number of young adults neither working nor in school. A recent [study](#) found that there were over 3.8 million adults aged 20 to 24—nearly one in five—not working or in school during the first three months of 2021. This was an increase of over 740,000 from the first quarter of 2020. Black young adults experienced the largest percent increase in this sub-group over this period, with nearly one in four Black young adults not working or in school in the first quarter of 2021.

Fig. 1: Employment Rate, U.S. Males Aged 25-54, 1960-2020



Source: Federal Reserve Economic Data (2020)

Long-Term Trends Have Cut Prime-Age Male Jobs by Millions More, Especially in Appalachia

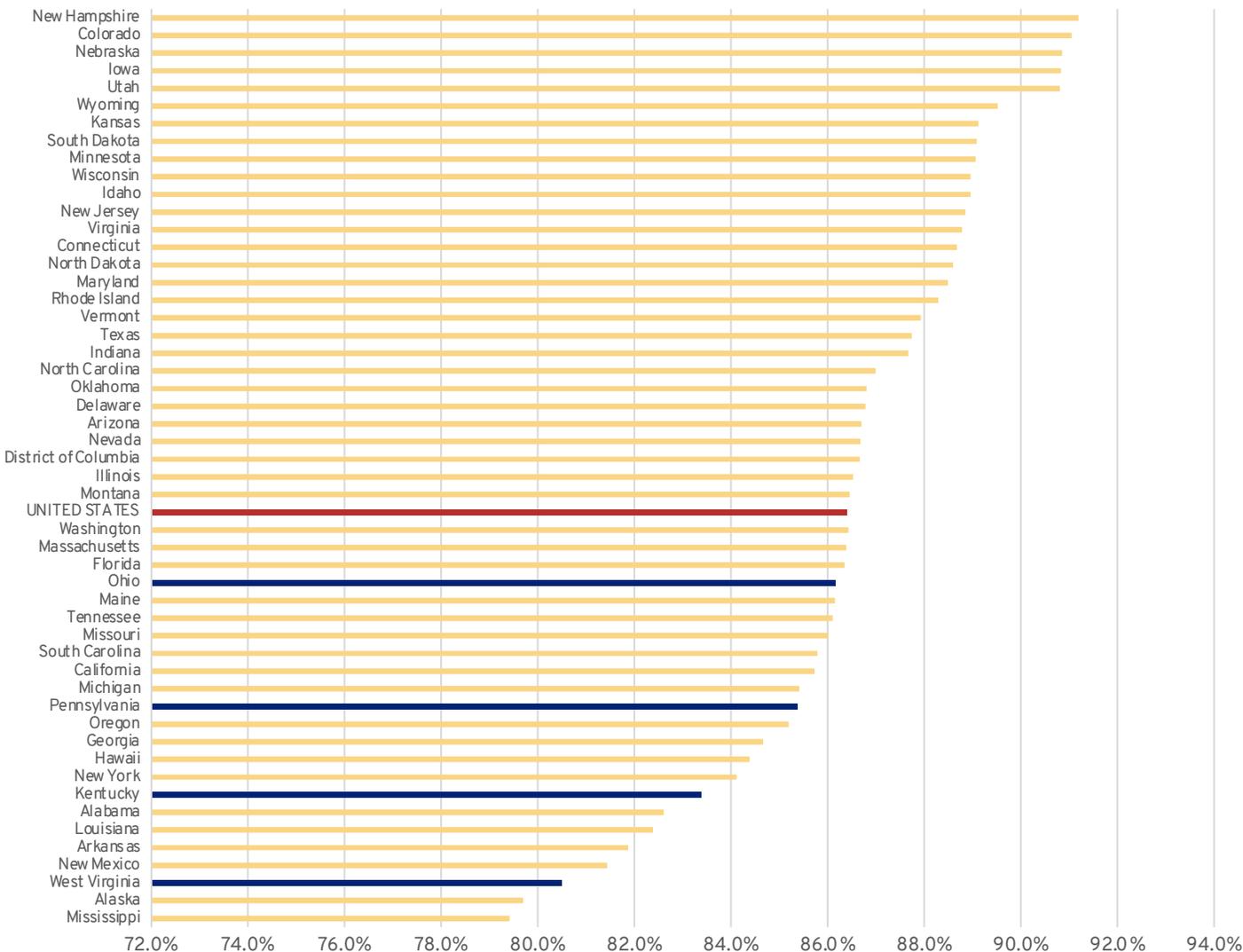
Much less widely recognized, but as important, we need millions of additional jobs even before the pandemic—and still need those jobs today. And the CCC is well-suited to create these desperately needed jobs. The additional jobs we need are required to reverse the long-term decline in employment, especially among men with lower educational attainment, since the late 1960s (Fig. 1). The U.S. employment rate for prime-age males (ages 25-54) was nearly 95 percent in the late 1960s. In 2019, before the pandemic, the prime-age employment rate had declined to 86 percent. Black males have [experienced](#) a similar trend. The [opioid epidemic](#), which has hit the Appalachian region especially hard, has also lowered participation in the job market and created significant barriers to future employment for folks with a criminal record.

The long-term decline in employment and labor force participation has been driven by [several factors](#). Most important was the [rapid deindustrialization](#) and loss of manufacturing and mining jobs over the last 40 years. In the context of a steep decline in unionization, a falling federal minimum wage, and declining infrastructure spending, men who lost good manufacturing and extraction jobs often struggled to find equivalent new jobs, sometimes experiencing declines in wages on the order of 50 percent. Some men who lost good jobs became permanently detached from the formal job market, losing their sense of place in the economy and in society. This detachment, in turn, has likely contributed to higher suicide rates and opioid addiction, and to the increase in [“deaths of despair”](#) most pronounced among white men. The steep rise in [incarceration](#), which makes it difficult for men and women to get jobs upon release, has also contributed to the declining employment rate.

The decline in U.S. employment rates among non-college men has also been reinforced by the lack of U.S. labor market policies that give workers both a decent income for a year or two (unemployment benefits, health insurance, etc.) while they acquire new skills and training that connects to new jobs. Finding themselves stuck in low-wage labor markets, without support from policies that allow them to get unstuck, more men detached from the formal job market.

The long-term decline in the employment rate for prime-age men has been particularly acute in West Virginia and, to a lesser degree, in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. This is not surprising given the high dependence of these states on high-paid manufacturing and extraction jobs, the number of which declined sharply since the 1960s. The employment rate for prime working age males (aged 25-54) in all four states is below the national average (Fig. 2). In 2019, West Virginia had the third-lowest prime-age male employment rate in the nation at 80.5 percent, nearly 6 percentage points lower than the national average of 86.4 percent. Meanwhile, Kentucky ranked 8th lowest in the country.

Fig. 2: West Virginia Had the Third-Lowest Employment Rate Among Prime-Age Men
Employment Rate by State, U.S. Males Aged 25-54, 2019



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics (2019)

A Big CCC Can Reduce Carbon Emissions

On top of creating thousands of jobs, a large-scale CCC program would play a vital role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. By employing thousands of workers in reforestation, wetland restoration, and urban tree canopy and green space construction, this would [absorb more carbon dioxide](#) and allow for a smoother transition away from fossil fuel use and emissions. This would be especially true in Appalachia. The states of Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia make up 25 percent of the nation’s coal production and 30 percent of the country’s natural gas production. They also have a disproportionate amount of coal-burning electric power plants.

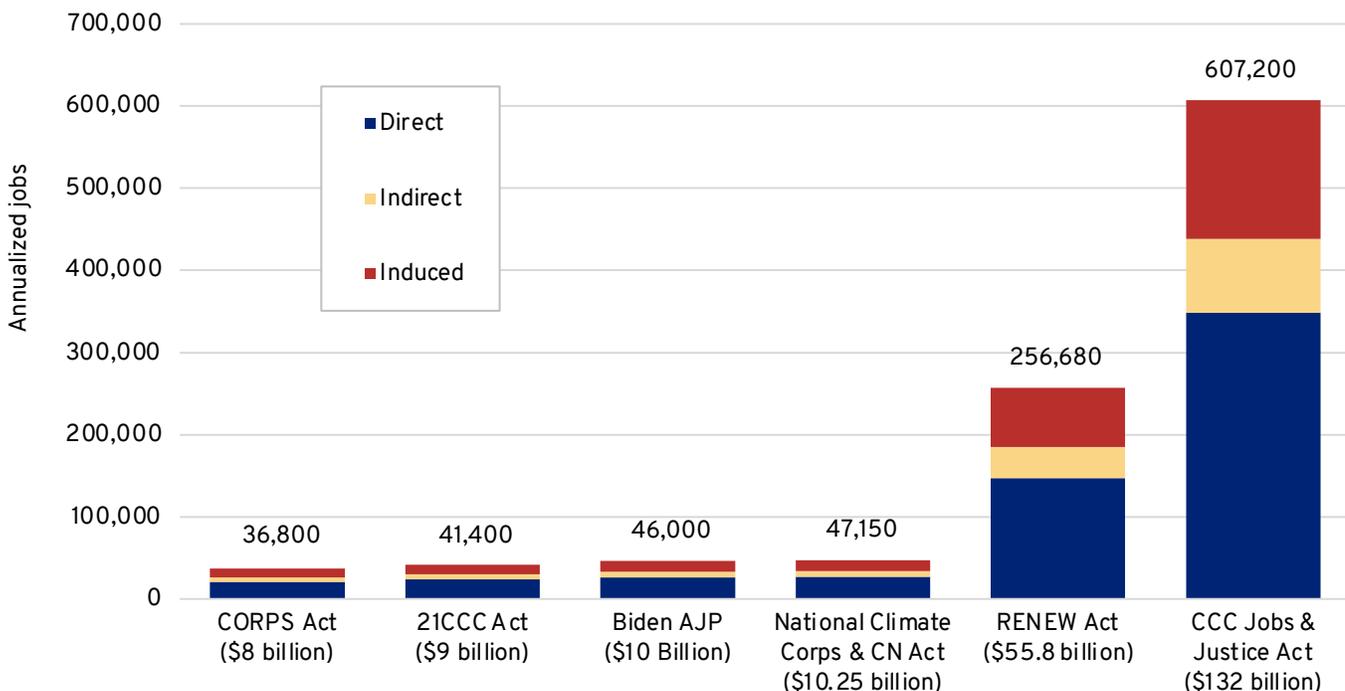
Estimates of the Jobs a Revamped CCC Could Create

There is a clear need to boost jobs nationally and especially in Appalachia. A large-scale, revamped CCC could play a significant role in addressing short- and long-term structural employment decline, especially among men, Blacks, the formally incarcerated, youth, and those without a college degree.

The number of jobs created by a new CCC depends heavily on the amount of investment and compensation. A 2020 [analysis](#) of job creation estimates by the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) write out explores various proposed economic stimulus measures, including the creation of a “Stewardship Corps” to “protect and restore forests, wetlands, and other ecosystems.” PERI estimates that a \$1 million investment in a Stewardship Corps that works on ecosystem restoration would create 23 total jobs, including 13.2 direct jobs, 3.4 indirect jobs, and 6.4 induced jobs.

Fig. 3 uses these jobs estimates from PERI to estimate the number of jobs created by CCC proposals that included funding. The estimates annualize the estimated job creation based on the level of investment and assume the program lasts for five years. For example, the RENEW Act included \$55.8 billion in funding for a new CCC program. Based on the PERI job multipliers, the RENEW Act would create 147,312 direct jobs per year for five years, or 736,560 job years over the 5-year period. Total job creation from the RENEW Act—including direct, in-direct, and induced—would be 256,680 per year over five years.

Fig. 3: Estimated Job Creation from 2021 CCC Proposals
Jobs per year for five years of program



Source: Boettner analysis of PERI Job Estimates (2020)

Note: The bills vary in how many years funding is allocated for the CCC program. For simplicity, the author uses a five-year funding period for all estimates.

The “direct jobs” would be mostly front-line “CCC” jobs and some jobs for supervisors, managers, and other program staff. The indirect jobs are those associated with the industries that supply intermediate goods (supply chain), while the induced jobs are the expansion in employment that results when people paid by the program spend money earned on other products in the economy.

To put these job creation numbers in context, the largest proposal—the Civilian Climate Corps for Jobs and Justice Act— would create about 607,200 total jobs per year over five years. This represents less than 12 percent of the 5.2 million people in the country that don’t have a job but want to work and less than 16 percent of the 3.8 million young adults who are not in school and not working. Looking at the Appalachian region of the Ohio Valley, even a five-year, \$132 billion CCC program would not create enough jobs to make up for the decline in jobs since the pandemic began in February 2020. The original CCC directly employed a total of 3 million people over the course of a decade, or about 300,000 per year. Since the workforce has more than tripled since the 1930s, 300,000 then is the equivalent of 1 million today. This far exceeds the job creation of even an investment of \$132 billion over five years today and is over 20 times the job creation from the \$10 billion in the American Jobs Plan.

Recommendations

The creation of a big CCC program should be a vital part of a large-scale infrastructure or budget package enacted by Congress this year. A revamped CCC would bring enormous benefits to the nation and region of Appalachia, including putting a significant number of people to work, reducing carbon emissions, cleaning up environmental damage and restoring natural beauty and resiliency. A new CCC would also restore hope by breaking down employment barriers, building workforce skills and career pathways, and building a culture of national purpose toward the public good.

To ensure that the CCC meets the needs of Appalachia, it is imperative that any CCC proposal includes the following:

- **Focus on non-college people:** Most of the CCC proposals direct funding and authority to AmeriCorps, where volunteers are predominantly people with four-year bachelor's degrees. One recent [analysis](#) found that at least 77 percent of the 118,872 AmeriCorps volunteers in 2020 had a bachelor's degree or higher, with most working in the nonprofit sector. In 2019, only [36 percent](#) of Americans over age 25 had a bachelor's degree or higher. It is imperative that non-college educated people—who have much higher unemployment and underemployment rates—make up the bulk of CCC members. This could include requiring that at least 50 percent of all corps members not have a bachelor's or higher.
- **Pay a living wage:** A minimum wage of at least \$15 hour is needed to ensure that these jobs can pay enough to support people and families so they can meet basic needs and so corps jobs can attract people from all backgrounds. This should also include funding or stipends for health care insurance coverage and childcare expenses.
- **Include a targeted re-entry program for formerly incarcerated people:** Reductions in the number of incarcerated Americans will create additional need for employment for hundreds of thousands of men who are disproportionately non-college educated and could be candidates for CCC jobs.
- **Have a funding formula prioritizing frontline, under-resourced communities:** As proposed in the Civilian Climate Corps for Jobs and Justice Act, at least half of corps members and funding allocations should go to under-resourced communities, especially areas where there is or has been fossil fuel extraction and power plants, former steel and large industrial facilities resources, and areas of persistent poverty or “labor surplus areas”.
- **Create defined pathways to union membership:** Corps members should qualify for pre-apprenticeship programs as a pathway to union membership and developed in partnership with union apprenticeship programs.
- **Offer a public works option:** Most of the CCC proposals build on AmeriCorps programs where corps members are not directly employed by the federal government or carrying out traditional public works projects like the New Deal CCC. In fact, it is difficult to discern how much of the funding attached to proposals will go toward capital projects, like installing solar installations, building or retrofitting shelters at state parks, bridges, and other infrastructure, and how much of the funding will go to the hundreds of organizations (mostly nonprofits) that host AmeriCorps volunteers today. The inclusion of a public works option that would include building and training corps members to update and build new, publicly owned infrastructure at public parks and forests would help align the program more with the New Deal CCC. This could also include the creation of regional, state, or local campuses where corps members would live and work.



A big Civilian Climate Corps could create thousands of jobs in hard-hit areas, such as Appalachia.