



U.S. national policies undermine state and local governments' ability to protect human rights

Summary of the [Human Rights Cities Alliance](#)
Stakeholder reports to the Fourth Cycle

UN Universal Periodic Review of the United States, 2025/2026

All levels of government in the United States have international obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights within their jurisdictions, and state and local legislators are most directly responsible for implementing these obligations. But national level policies often systematically undermine sub-national governments' authority and capacity to protect the rights of residents in their jurisdictions. Strengthening U.S. compliance with international law requires efforts by state and local governments as well as civil society to ensure that they have the resources and authority to fulfill their international obligations. Our reports focus on the areas of revenue generation and on the protection of social and economic and on civil and political rights of immigrants and refugee populations.

Taxation policies¹

Taxation policies have operated to systematically reinforce inequitable distributions of wealth and prevent governments at all levels from generating the revenues they need to meet international human rights obligations. Inequitable tax systems and intensify racial disparities in both income and access to basic needs such as housing, education, and health care. They fuel social resentment, undermining social cohesion and trust in government. Meanwhile, the scarcity narrative has long been used by U.S. public officials to pit people against one another and to justify failures to fulfill human rights responsibilities. Fairer tax policies can strengthen democratic governance and community resilience.

The growth of nonprofit corporations operating in health and educational sectors has allowed these entities to prioritize profits over the provision of basic human needs. Their economic and political influence in state and local contexts distorts democratic governance and hinders local and regional governments from carrying out human rights obligations.

Recommendations: Human rights advocates have put forward promising proposals for addressing inequities in taxation. We urge our elected officials at all levels of government to:

- Strengthen state and local government efforts to raise revenues needed to fulfill human rights obligations;
- Reform tax laws and strengthen tax collection procedures to ensure greater fairness and reduce structural inequalities;
- Develop policies to capture tax revenues from investments by nonprofit corporations and other tax-exempt entities in non-charitable enterprises such as university athletics, real estate, and endowments;
- Implement and support [human rights budgeting processes](#) at all levels of government.

Economic rights, environmental protections, and rights of immigrants²

Following our UPR Fourth Cycle stakeholder submission in April 2025, the U.S. federal government has enacted policies that obstruct state and local government implementation of human rights obligations in multiple areas. Our update to our 2025 submission focused on how these policies impact protections related to economic and social rights, the environment, and the rights of immigrants.

Since January 2025, the U.S. federal government has made drastic cuts to congressionally mandated funding for vital welfare and climate change mitigation programs, disproportionately impacting marginalized groups, including children and racialized minorities. These cuts were implemented in ways that discriminate against Democrat-led states and against sub-national governments that enact strong human rights protections, undermining sub-national authority and democracy and preventing U.S. human rights compliance. Moreover, they keep the U.S. from upholding its obligation to ensure the progressive realization of human rights. Although litigation has overturned some of these policies, the lapses in funding bring significant, direct, and lasting harm to individuals, families, and communities.

¹ Full report: [Discriminatory Taxation Policies Obstruct the Realization of Economic and Social Rights in the United States](#), 2025 UPR Stakeholder Joint submission from Human Rights Cities Alliance & Partners.

² [U.S. federal policies undermine state and local government authority and capacity to protect human rights in the areas of welfare, environment, and immigration](#) 2026 Updated UPR Stakeholder Joint submission from Human Rights Cities Alliance & Partners

Federal funding cuts have dismantled state public health and climate infrastructure, with disproportionate harms to discriminated groups. These cuts not only worsen climate change and its impacts, but also weaken state and local support for clean energy and basic public health infrastructures in important areas such as injury prevention and control of infectious diseases like HIV and measles. The revocation of the 2009 Environmental Protection Agency Endangerment Finding by U.S. authorities prevents federal and state governments from meeting climate obligations and protecting residents from adverse climate harm.

In the previous UPR cycle the U.S. received several recommendations addressing access to welfare programs such as health care.³ Specifically, that the U.S. should “combat all forms of discrimination by guaranteeing equitable access to justice, medical care and quality education”. Many countries reiterated the call for the U.S. to improve its attention to healthcare and ensure support for marginalized groups in these programs. Numerous recommendations called for stronger action against climate change, calling for “intensif[ied] efforts to develop and strengthen the necessary legislative frameworks that address cross-sectoral environmental challenges.”

Regarding immigrant rights, federal policies systematically constrained sub-national governments from upholding their human rights obligations by conditioning funding on participation in immigration enforcement by state and local authorities. Such fiscal and other policy coercion contradicts U.S. law and denies states’ and municipalities’ abilities to carry out their own human rights obligations by stripping them of the fiscal resources, legal autonomy, and practical tools needed to serve their populations.

One consequence is the devastation of local resettlement infrastructure. By eliminating legal pathways and stranding approved refugees in dangerous conditions abroad, the federal government has made it structurally impossible for local resettlement partners and governments to fulfill the reception, protection, and integration obligations they are positioned—and in many cases legally contracted—to provide to vulnerable populations. This undermines local compliance with the prohibition on refoulement under Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture (CAT) and the ICCPR, which prohibit return to places where an individual face the risk of serious harm, torture, or arbitrary deprivation of life.

During the last UPR cycle, the U.S. received multiple recommendations in regard to migrant human rights.⁴ Instead of upholding its commitment to support these recommendations, it has intensified immigrant rights violations and actively obstructed state and local authorities’ efforts to comply with international human rights laws and standards.

Recommendations:

State and local governments ***should work together to:***

- Develop and promote legislation and good practices that protect and preserve local authority and capacity to fulfill international human rights obligations;
- Oppose federal funding cuts that undermine sub-national governments’ compliance with human rights obligations;
- Combat restrictions on sub-national government’ abilities to regulate and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and develop and strengthen legislative frameworks that address cross-sectoral environmental challenges, including climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts;
- Preserve local authority to regulate business practices that violate international human rights protections.

[Links to Human Rights Cities Alliance stakeholder reports & resources:](#)



³ Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, United States of America. UN Human Rights Council forty-sixth session, February - March 2021.

⁴ A/HRC/46/15/, March 2021. Para. 327.

Human Rights Cities Alliance UPR stakeholder reports & other resources

The **Human Rights Cities Alliance (HRCA)** established in 2015, is a network of activists, advocates, and scholars dedicated to promoting the implementation of human rights principals in cities throughout North America. The HRCA encourages local communities as well as municipal and state leaders to use international human rights law/standards to address all aspects of human rights and end racial and other discrimination, particularly regarding economic, social, and cultural rights.

Human Rights Cities Alliance stakeholder reports (Fourth Cycle, 2025/2026)

- [*Discriminatory Taxation Policies Obstruct the Realization of Economic and Social Rights in the United States*](#) 2025 UPR Stakeholder Joint submission from Human Rights Cities Alliance & Partners
- [*U.S. federal policies undermine state and local government authority and capacity to protect human rights in the areas of welfare, environment, and immigration*](#) -2026 Updated UPR Stakeholder Joint submission from Human Rights Cities Alliance & Partners

Human Rights Cities Alliance stakeholder report (Third Cycle, 2019)

- [*“The Growth of Corporate Influence in Sub-National Political & Legal Institutions Undermines U.S. Compliance with International Human Rights Obligations”*](#) (2019) [*Executive Summary and Key Recommendations*](#)

How UPR recommendations apply to state and local governments

- [*Bringing Human Rights Home: Local policy recommendations from the UPR report to the U.S. Government*](#), A summary of selected UPR recommendations as they apply to sub-national governments, by the Human Rights Cities Alliance.

Other documentation on local human rights implementation

- [*A Cross-City Report on Obstacles to U.S. Implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination & how Human Rights Cities Can be a Remedy*](#), Human Rights Cities Alliance Shadow Report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (July 2022).

More resources for state and local leadership on human rights

- [*Realizing Human Rights through Government Budgets*](#), UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
- [*Cities, local and regional governments and human rights*](#) | OHCHR, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
- [*How global human rights can help cities challenge state preemption*](#), By [*Tina Kempin Reuter*](#) & [*Gamze Ozker*](#) & [*Lisa Borden*](#), *Open Global Rights*, June 12, 2025
- [*City Rights in an Era of Preemption: A State-by-State Analysis*](#), National League of Cities, 2017