



# ALICE ESSENTIALS INDEX TENNESSEE

Inflation is one of the most widely utilized indicators of economic health. When prices increase faster than wages and other sources of income, purchasing power decreases and households struggle to make ends meet. This is especially challenging for households that are **ALICE** – Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, with income above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) but below the cost of basics in the [ALICE Household Survival Budget](#). In Tennessee in 2021, 14% of households were in poverty and another 30% – more than twice as many – were ALICE, for a combined 44% of Tennessee households with income **below the ALICE Threshold**.

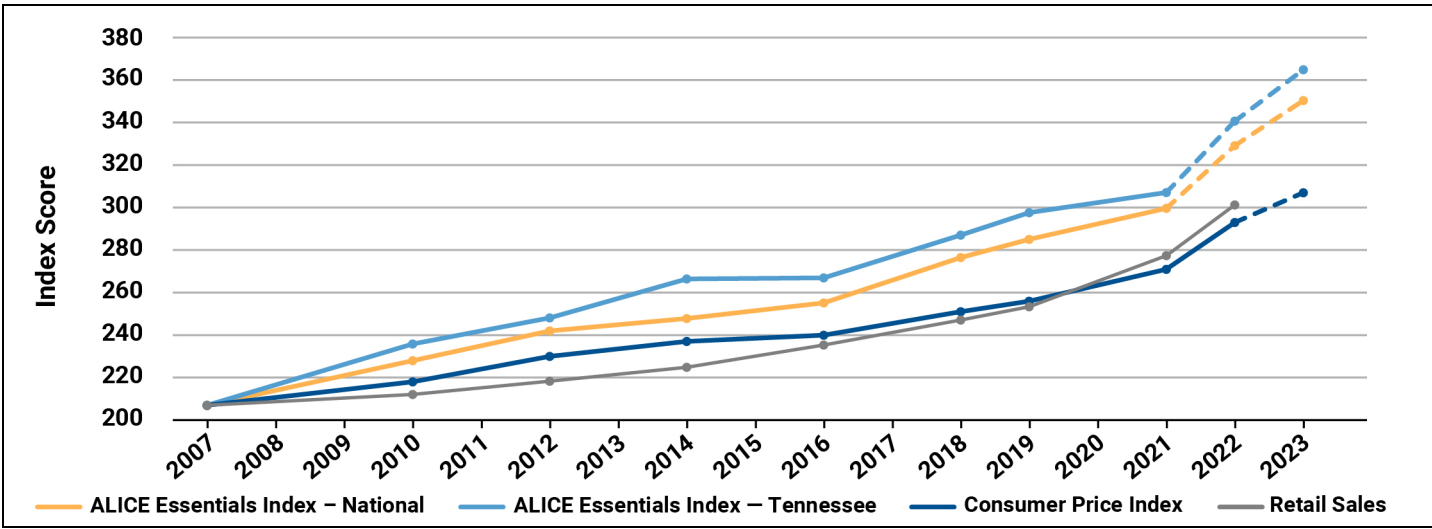
## UNITED FOR ALICE

[United For ALICE](#), a U.S. research organization on financial hardship, partners with [United Ways of Tennessee](#), local United Ways, and others across Tennessee to raise awareness about ALICE, inform policy, and develop innovative and equitable solutions for financially insecure households.

Learn more about ALICE in Tennessee at [uwtn.org/106/ALICE](http://uwtn.org/106/ALICE)

The **ALICE Essentials Index** measures change over time in the cost of the essentials that matter most to households below the ALICE Threshold: housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and a smartphone plan. The traditional measure of inflation, the Bureau of Labor Statistics' **Consumer Price Index (CPI)**, tracks a much larger basket of goods and services ([over 200 categories](#)), concealing the change in the cost of basics. The ALICE Essentials Index in Tennessee (3.6% average annual increase from 2007 to 2023) outpaced the rate of increase for the national CPI (2.5% average annual increase). For context, the median wage for a retail salesperson in Tennessee increased 2.5% annually from 2007 to 2022 (the latest data available). By 2021, the rate of increase for retail sales wages caught up to the rate for the CPI but was still below the rate for the ALICE Essentials Index. The sustained lag of wages behind the ALICE Essentials Index equates to a loss of nearly \$42,100 over the past 15 years for a retail salesperson – nearly two years' earnings.

**Figure 1. ALICE Essentials Index and CPI by Location, with State Retail Sales Wage, 2007–2023\***



\*Figure Notes and Sources: The ALICE Essentials Index was adjusted to match the CPI of 207 in 2007. ALICE Essentials Index rates for 2022 and 2023 are projections. CPI is actual for 2022 and uses 2023 Q1 data. Sources include ALICE Essentials Index, 2007–2023 and Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007–2023–CPI.





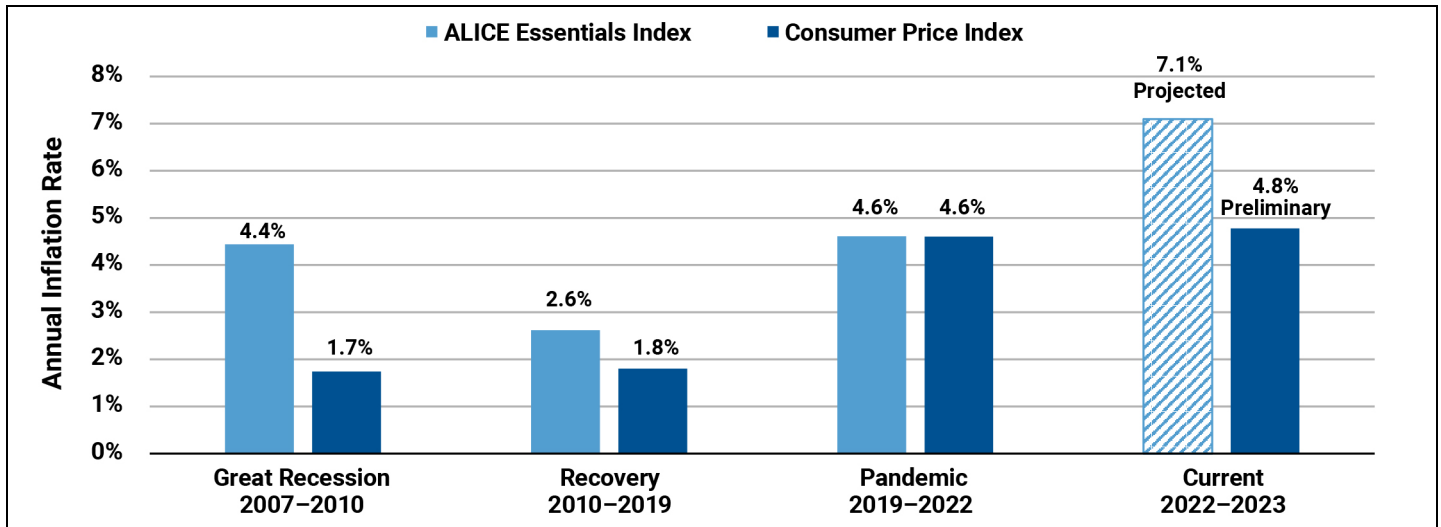
While the annual rate of inflation has fluctuated over the last decade and a half in Tennessee, the ALICE Essentials Index has continued to outpace inflation during nearly every time period since the Great Recession (Figure 2). The largest gap was during the Recession (2007–2010), when the average annual rate of increase for the ALICE Essentials Index in Tennessee was 4.4% compared to a 1.7% average increase for the national CPI. But even when inflation was deemed “low” during the Recovery (2010–2019), the ALICE Essentials Index was increasing at an average rate of 2.6% in Tennessee. During the pandemic (2019–2022) the state ALICE Essentials Index and the national CPI increased at the same rate (4.6%). For the most recent period (2022–March 2023), the CPI increased at an average rate of 4.8%, and we are projecting that the state ALICE Essentials Index increased by an average of 7.1%.

### ALICE DATA ONLINE

Download the national *ALICE Essentials Index* Report and view interactive state data at [UnitedForALICE.org/Essentials-Index](https://UnitedForALICE.org/Essentials-Index)

Explore additional interactive state and local ALICE data on financial hardship over time, ALICE demographics, household budgets, and the labor landscape at [UnitedForALICE.org/Tennessee](https://UnitedForALICE.org/Tennessee)

**Figure 2. Annual Inflation Rate, Tennessee ALICE Essentials Index vs. National CPI, 2007–2023\***



## Policy Implications

Because the CPI forms the basis for many aspects of public policy, when it conceals actual increases in the cost of household basics, the reach and effectiveness of policy is diminished, resulting in tangible hardship for recipients of public program benefits. This is especially true for the programs most relevant to ALICE households, including inflation strategy; tax brackets and credits; the annual increase of benefits in a range of programs from Social Security to pensions for veterans and civil servants; and the annual increase of the FPL (as well as programs with eligibility based on the FPL, like SNAP and Medicaid).

Inflation in Tennessee has long contributed to a structural economic problem: Wages for jobs essential to the running of the economy are not high enough for workers to afford the household basics they need to support their families. Yet relying on the CPI alone conceals the disproportionate increase in the cost of basics and the added stress it places on struggling households. The ALICE Essentials Index provides a tool to track this important subset of goods, and the ALICE Threshold provides a measure to track progress in better aligning wages with the basic cost of living. By increasing the accuracy of data on hardship, these ALICE measures are designed to help lift all boats: Improving conditions for ALICE families will in turn fuel economic growth, benefiting all households, communities, and businesses in the state.