

The Benefits of Higher Education to Utah

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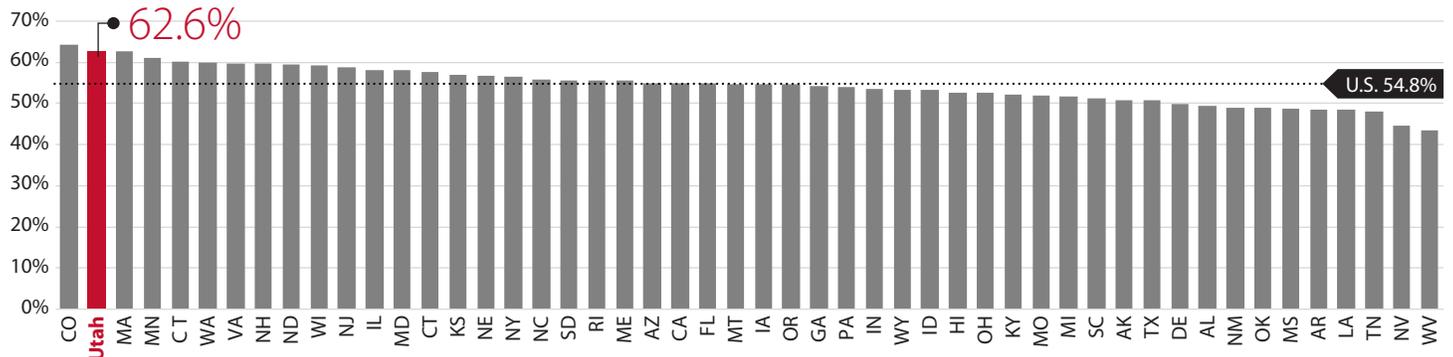
Forty-six years before Utah became a state, community leaders founded a university with the mandate to create a “perpetual increase in knowledge, science, and intelligence.”¹ Today, Utah reaps the benefits of sixteen public colleges and universities that prepare Utah’s workforce for gainful employment, educate its citizenry to support civil society, generate new discoveries that advance the human condition, and create jobs in local communities.²

Utah ranked second in the nation for postsecondary educational attainment (including certifications, certificates,

and degrees) in 2024, tied with Massachusetts (Figure 1). The state’s longstanding emphasis on higher education reflects Utah’s commitment to preparing individuals for personal growth, economic opportunity, and civic engagement. Utah’s public institutions enrolled nearly 250,000 students (about 7% of Utah’s population) in the 2024–25 academic year, providing education and training at comparatively low tuition levels (Figure 2). This education supports higher earnings, greater economic mobility, and a thriving state economy.

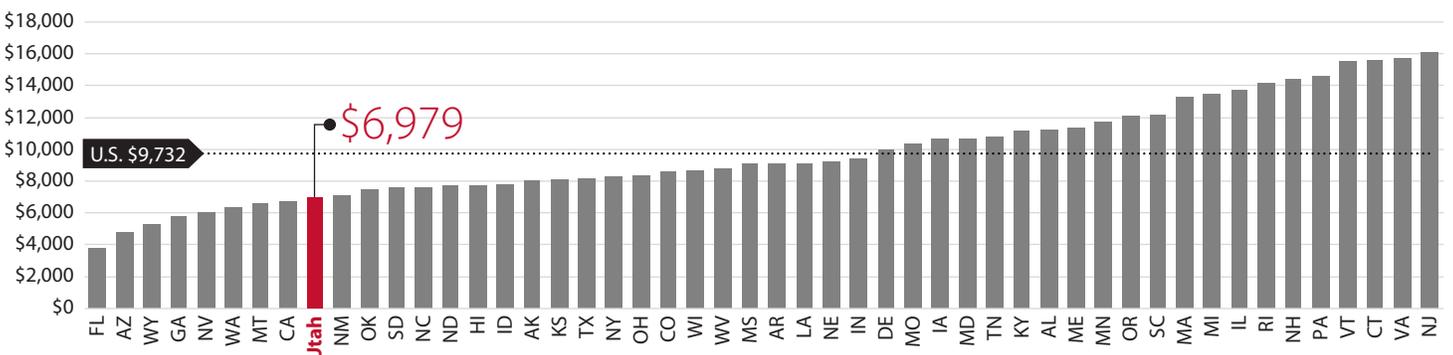
Figure 1: Postsecondary Educational Attainment by State, 2024

Percentage of Population Ages 25 to 64 with a Postsecondary Certification, Certificate, or Degree



Note: United States total includes the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, but rankings only include states.
Source: Lumina Foundation

Figure 2: Average Tuition and Fees for Full-Time In-state Undergraduate Students at Four-Year Public Postsecondary Institutions by State, 2024-25



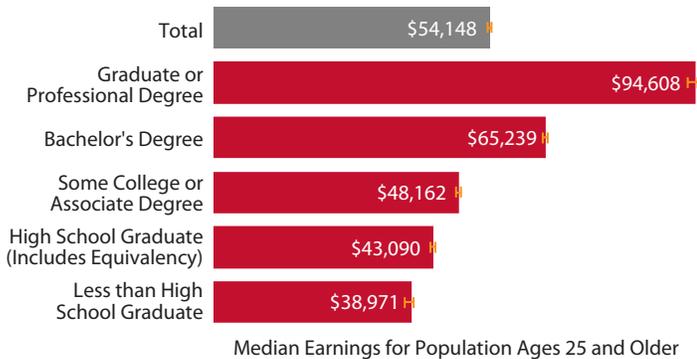
Source: National Center for Education Statistics

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Individuals with higher educational attainment enjoy greater incomes, economic stability, and life quality.

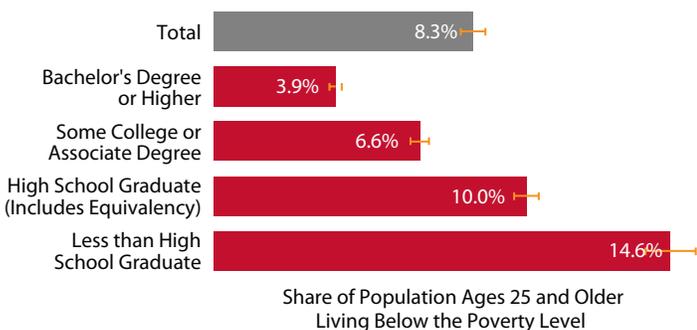
- Increased earnings** - Median earnings rise with educational attainment while poverty and unemployment rates decline (Figures 3-5). The earnings gap across educational attainment levels continues to grow over time (Figure 6). The typical Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) graduate earns 10% to 64% higher wages five years after completion compared to those who do not receive a degree or award.³
- Higher job satisfaction** - Individuals with higher educational attainment are more likely to work in occupations associated with better job satisfaction, autonomy, stronger workplace relationships, and greater job security (independent of income).⁴ They will also more likely receive benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, and paid leave.⁵
- Higher homeownership rates** - Homeownership promotes economic mobility through home equity, credit, and asset building.⁶ Individuals with higher educational attainment benefit from higher rates of homeownership (Figure 7).
- Better health outcomes** - Education influences health through multiple pathways including improved health literacy, greater access to employer-sponsored insurance, reduced participation in behaviors presenting a health risk, and stronger engagement in preventive behaviors.^{7,8} Utahns with higher educational attainment report higher rates of excellent, very good, or good health and higher rates of health care coverage (Figures 8 and 9).
- Improved outlook** - Individuals with a degree or certificate report being happier, healthier, and more confident in their future (Figure 10).

Figure 3: Utah Median Earnings by Educational Attainment, 2024



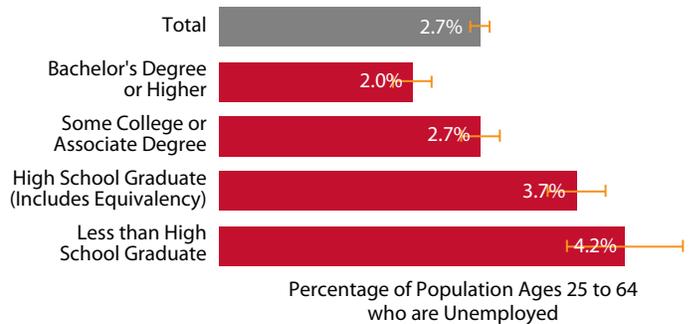
Note: Earnings include wages or salary from a job and self-employment income. These survey-based estimates remain subject to sample variation. Each estimate also shows its 90% confidence interval.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2024 5-Year American Community Survey estimates

Figure 4: Utah Poverty Rate by Educational Attainment, 2024



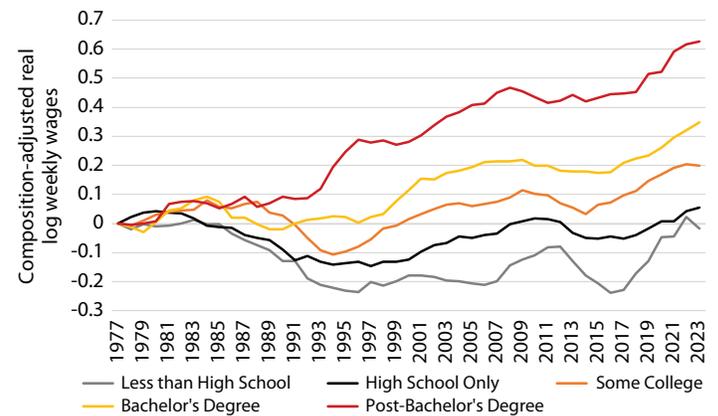
Note: These survey-based estimates remain subject to sample variation. Each estimate also shows its 90% confidence interval.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2024 5-Year American Community Survey estimates

Figure 5: Utah Unemployment Rate by Educational Attainment, 2024



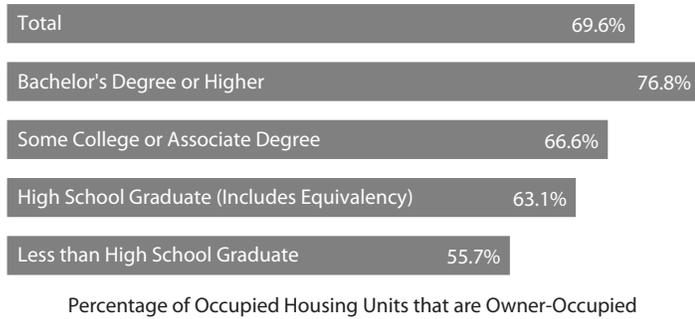
Note: These survey-based estimates remain subject to sample variation. Each estimate also shows its 90% confidence interval.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2024 5-Year American Community Survey estimates

Figure 6: Wages for Full-Time, Full-Year Utah Male Workers, 1977-2023 (5-year Moving Average)



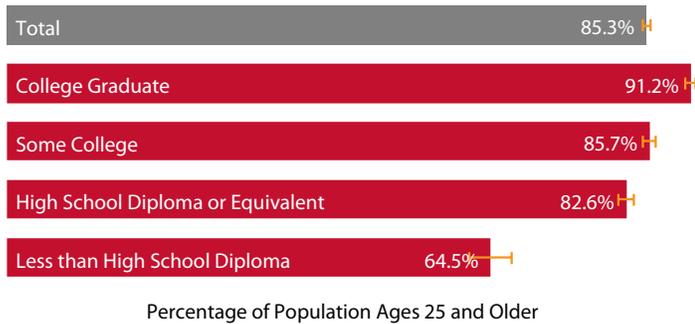
Note: This graph uses male full-time workers for simplicity but illustrates the widening of the wage gap between higher and lower educational attainment levels over time.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey; based on Acemoglu and Autor (2010)

Figure 7: Utah Homeownership by Educational Attainment, 2024



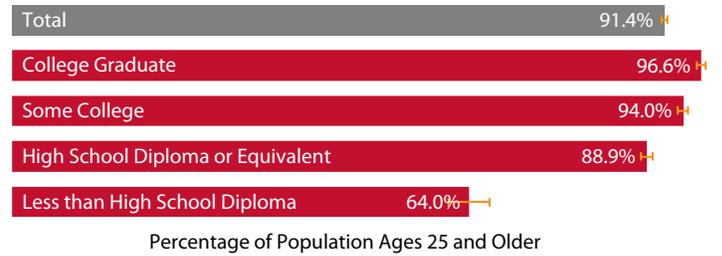
Note: These survey-based estimates remain subject to sample variation. The analysis calculated the homeownership rate as the number of owner-occupied housing units divided by the total number of occupied housing units, by educational attainment of the householder. Estimates include all occupied housing units and are not restricted by age. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2024 5-Year American Community Survey Estimates

Figure 8: Share of Utah Adults Who Report Excellent, Very Good, or Good General Health by Educational Attainment, 2024



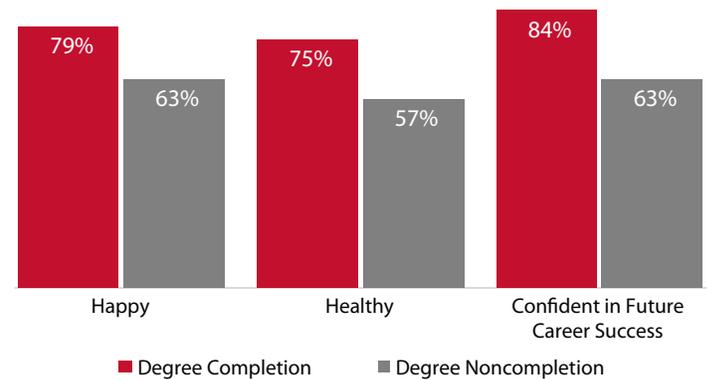
Note: Age-adjusted. Estimates based on data from 2022-2024 combined. The survey asked respondents if they would say that their health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor. These estimates remain subject to variation. Each estimate also shows its 95% confidence interval. Source: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, Office of Public Health Assessment, Center for Health Data and Informatics, Utah Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved 10 February 2026 from the Utah Department of Health and Human Services, Indicator-Based Information System for Public Health website: <http://ibis.health.utah.gov>

Figure 9: Share of Utah Adults with Health Care Coverage by Educational Attainment, 2024



Note: Age-adjusted. Estimates based on data from 2022-2024 combined. The survey asked respondents if they have any kind of health care coverage, including health insurance, prepaid plans such as HMOs, or government plans such as Medicare. These estimates remain subject to variation. Each estimate also shows its 95% confidence interval. Source: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, Office of Public Health Assessment, Center for Health Data and Informatics, Utah Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved 10 February 2026 from the Utah Department of Health and Human Services, Indicator-Based Information System for Public Health website: <http://ibis.health.utah.gov>

Figure 10: Self-Reported Life Quality Metrics for Utah Adults by Educational Attainment, 2023



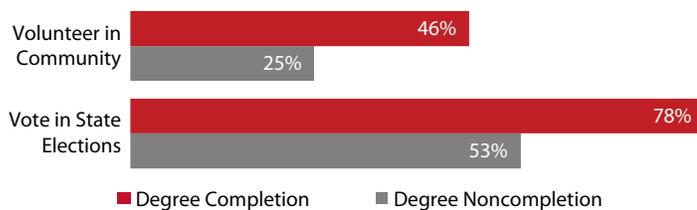
Note: Measures reflect self-reported responses to survey questions on happiness, health, and confidence in future career success. Degree completion includes those who have received a certificate or associate, bachelor's, or postgraduate degree. Degree non-completion includes those who discontinued high school, earned a high school diploma/GED, or attended some college. Source: Cicero Higher Ed. (July 2023). Utah System of Higher Education Qualitative Benchmark Findings

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Society derives broad and lasting benefits from an educated citizenry.

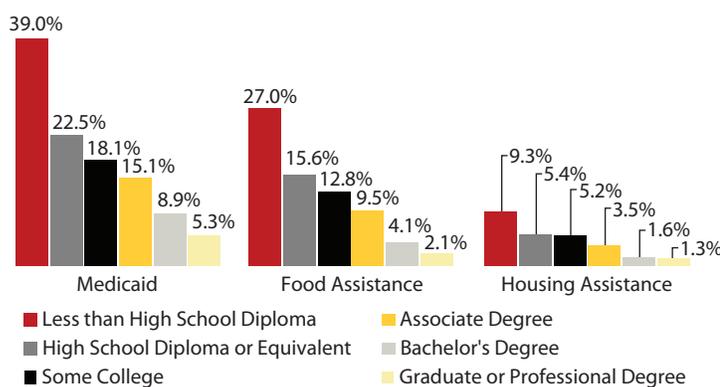
- **More civic engagement** - Individuals with more education engage in their communities with higher volunteer rates and voter participation than those without a degree (Figure 11). This helps strengthen Utah’s social capital and democratic institutions.
- **Spillover effects** - Communities with higher average education levels offer more opportunities for civic participation, foster trust among neighbors, and promote a stronger sense of shared responsibility. This generates positive spillover effects that extend to individuals living in those communities regardless of their education level.^{9,10}
- **Decreased reliance on public assistance** - As educational attainment rises, participation in public assistance programs declines. Individuals with higher levels of education are substantially less likely to rely on programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, and housing assistance, easing demands on public resources (Figure 12).^{11,12}
- **Greater tax contributions** - The increased earnings associated with higher educational attainment result in larger income tax payments and greater sales tax revenue.^{13,14} Higher earners are also more likely to own homes and higher-value properties, leading to bigger property tax payments.¹⁵ Consequently, workers with bachelor’s and advanced degrees contribute substantially more to public revenues over their working lives.
- **Intergenerational opportunity** - Utahns with parents who completed a degree are far more likely to earn a postsecondary credential themselves (Figure 13). Long-term national research that tracks parents and their adult children over time finds that individuals who complete postsecondary education are significantly more likely to surpass their parents’ income as adults (Figure 14). This evidence underscores the role of education in supporting upward mobility across generations.

Figure 11: Utah Rates of Civic Engagement by Educational Attainment, 2023



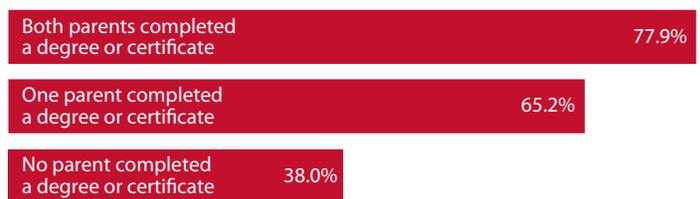
Note: Degree completion includes those who have received a certificate or associate, bachelor’s, or postgraduate degree. Degree noncompletion includes those who discontinued high school, earned a high school diploma/GED, or attended some college. Source: Cicero Higher Ed. (July 2023). Utah System of Higher Education Qualitative Benchmark Findings

Figure 12: U.S. Public Assistance Participation by Educational Attainment, 2023



Note: Includes adults ages 25 and older. Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2024 Survey of Income and Program Participation data

Figure 13: Utah Postsecondary Degree Completion by Family Educational Attainment, 2023



Percentage of Individuals Completing a Postsecondary Degree

Note: Degree completion includes those who have received a certificate or associate, bachelor’s, or postgraduate degree. Degree noncompletion includes those who discontinued high school, earned a high school diploma/GED, or attended some college. Source: Cicero Higher Ed. (July 2023). Utah System of Higher Education Qualitative Benchmark Findings

Figure 14: U.S. Economic Mobility by Child’s Education Level



Percentage of Children with Family Income Above their Parent’s Family Income

Note: Data reflect the parental generation of the 1960s and 1970s and their adult children. Source: Haskins, R. (2016). Education and Economic Mobility. Brookings Institute

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Higher education benefits Utah’s economy through workforce development, job and business creation, and research and innovation.

- **Workforce development** – USHE institutions enrolled nearly 250,000 students and awarded more than 70,000 degrees and certificates in the 2024–25 academic year, adding to a large and consistent pipeline of educated workers for Utah’s economy.
- **Skilled workforce** - Utah employers consistently report skilled labor as a top need. An estimated 76.3% of USHE graduates earned high-yield degrees tied to high-demand occupations in 2025, helping address workforce needs (Figure 15).
- **Major employer** - Utah’s public higher education system directly employed about 73,000 Utahns and indirectly supported another 65,000 jobs, for a total of 138,000 (representing 5.7% of jobs statewide) (Table 1).
- **Substantial economic contribution** – Public higher education contributes \$14.0 billion in GDP to Utah’s economy. Utah’s public research universities (the University of Utah and Utah State University) generate 83.1% of this economic contribution (Table 2).
- **Research and innovation** - Utah’s research universities bring in outside research funding, fueling innovation and leading to the creation of new companies, high-impact innovation, and field-changing discoveries (Figure 16). Utah’s innovation index ranks highest among states (Figure 17).

Figure 15: Share of High-Yield Degrees Awarded to USHE Graduates, 2025



Note: High-yield degrees and awards map to high-wage/high-demand jobs as defined by the Utah Department of Workforce Services’ biennial four-and-five-star jobs publication. Source: Utah System of Higher Education

Table 1: Public Higher Education’s Estimated Economic Contributions to Utah’s Economy, 2025

Economic Indicator	Direct Contribution	Total Contribution
Jobs	~73,000	~138,000
GDP	~\$6.6 Billion	~\$14.0 Billion
Output	~12.0 Billion	~\$25.6 Billion

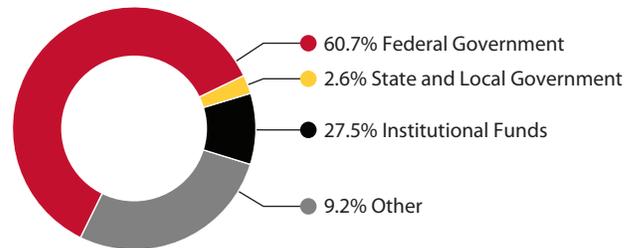
Note: Conservative estimates based on operating expenses. Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute using IMPLAN 2024¹⁶

Table 2: Public Higher Education Institution’s Estimated Economic Contributions to Utah’s Economy, 2025

Institution Type	Direct GDP	Total GDP Supported	Share of USHE Total
Research	\$5.4 Billion	\$11.6 Billion	83.1%
Regional	\$0.8 Billion	\$1.6 Billion	11.4%
Community College	\$0.3 Billion	\$0.5 Billion	3.5%
Technical College	\$0.1 Billion	\$0.3 Billion	2.0%
USHE Total	\$6.6 Billion	\$14.0 Billion	100.0%

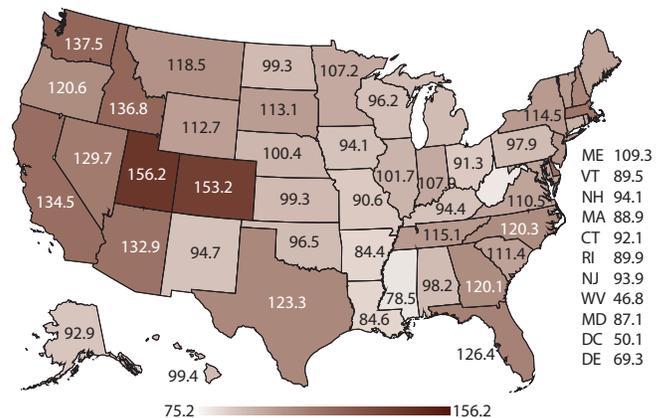
Note: Conservative estimates based on operating expenses. Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute using IMPLAN 2024

Figure 16: Research Expenditures for Utah Higher Education Institutions by Source of Funding, FY 2024



Note: Federal government includes funding from agencies such as the Department of Health and Human Services (which includes National Institutes of Health funding), the Department of Defense, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Department of Energy, the National Science Foundation, and the Department of Agriculture. “Other” includes funding from businesses, nonprofit organizations, and all other sources. Utah institutions include the University of Utah, Utah State University, Weber State University, Southern Utah University, Utah Valley University, and Brigham Young University. Source: National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, Higher Education Research and Development Survey Public Use Data Files

Figure 17: Innovation Index, 2023



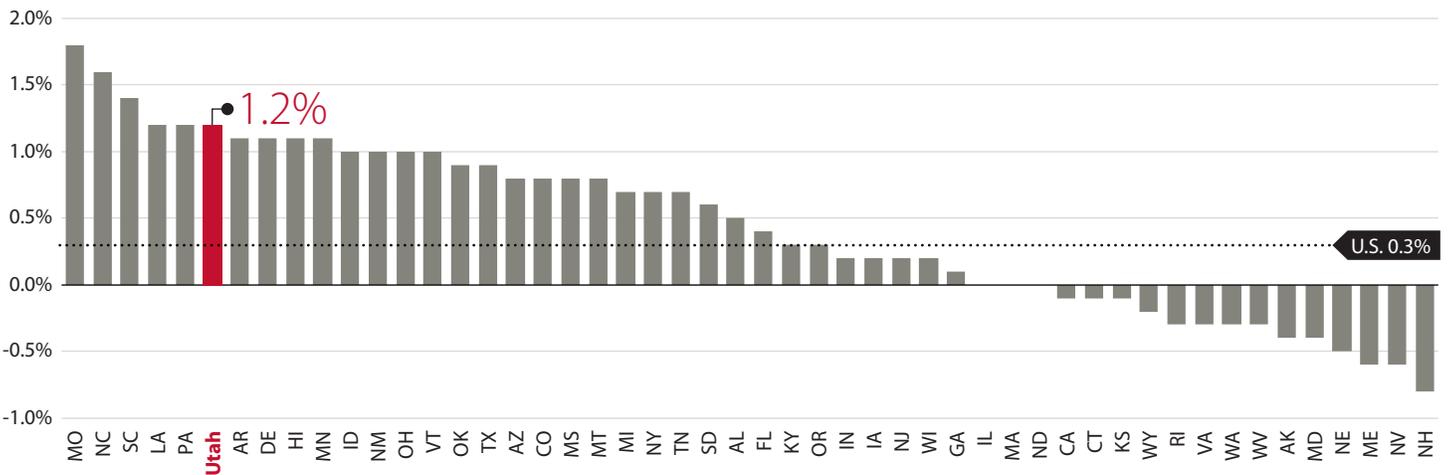
Note: The headline innovation intelligence index measures innovation inputs and outputs using five core indices: human capital and knowledge creation, business dynamics, business profile, employment and productivity, and economic well-being. Source: Indiana Business Research Center, 2024

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Higher education helps generate many of Utah's most acclaimed characteristics.

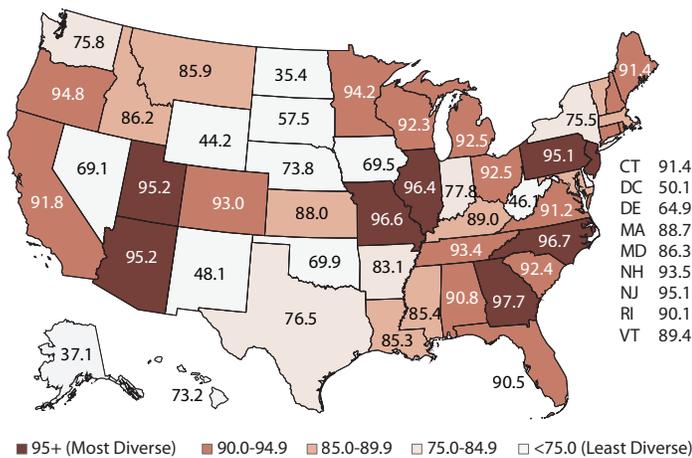
- **Economic performance** - Utah generally outperforms the nation on economic measures. For example, Utah ranks in the top ten states nationwide for job growth as of December 2025 (Figure 18).
- **Economic diversity** - Utah benefits from a diverse mix of industries that contribute to its economic stability. Utah ranked as the sixth most economically diverse state in the nation in 2024 (Figure 19).
- **Upward mobility** - Utah ranks among the top states for upward mobility. In nearly every Utah county, children born to parents who earned income in the 25th percentile earn more than their parents as adults (Figure 20).
- **Social capital** - Utah ranks highest nationally on measures of social capital, reflecting strong civic engagement, social trust, and community participation (Figure 21).
- **Middle class** - Utah leads the nation in the share of middle-class households, reflecting broad-based economic opportunity and income stability across the state (Figure 22).
- **Income inequality** - Utah ranks first nationally for income equality, with the lowest Gini coefficient among states (Figure 23).
- **Volunteerism** - Utah maintains a strong volunteerism culture, ranking first for both formal volunteerism and informal helping among all 50 states (Figure 24).

Figure 18: Year-over Job Change by State, December 2025



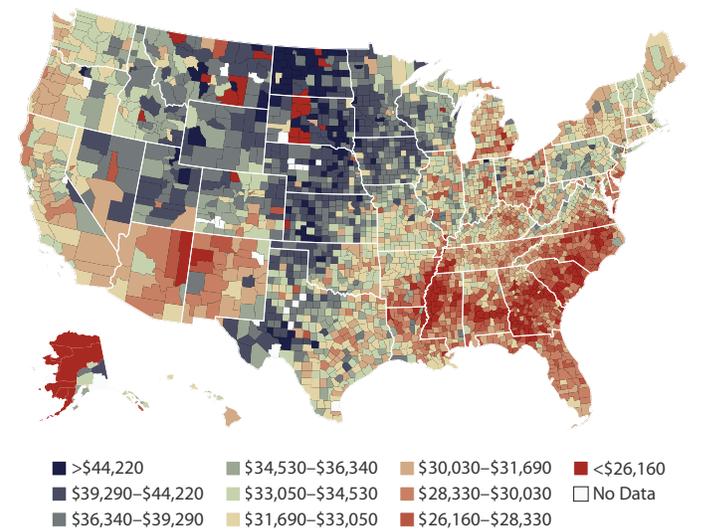
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Figure 19: Hachman Index Scores by State, 2024



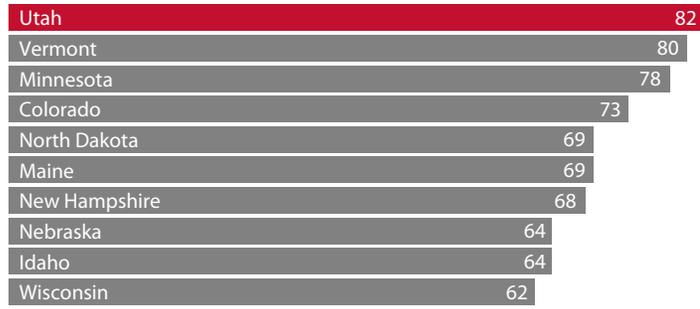
Note: The Hachman Index measures economic diversity by comparing each state's mix and relative size of industries to the United States, a diversified reference region. The Hachman Index normalizes scores from 0 to 100, with a higher score indicating more similarity to the U.S.
 Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis GDP data

Figure 20: Upward Mobility by County



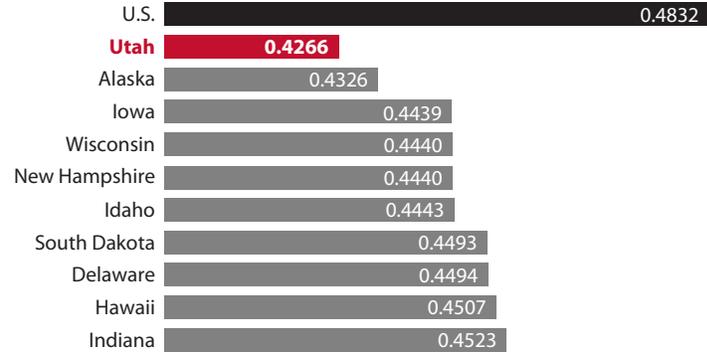
Note: Data reflect average income for children born from 1978 to 1992 to parents earning income in the 25th percentile (~\$33,000 in 2023 dollars).
 Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of Opportunity Insights data (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, Porter)

Figure 21: Ten States with the Highest Social Capital Index, 2025



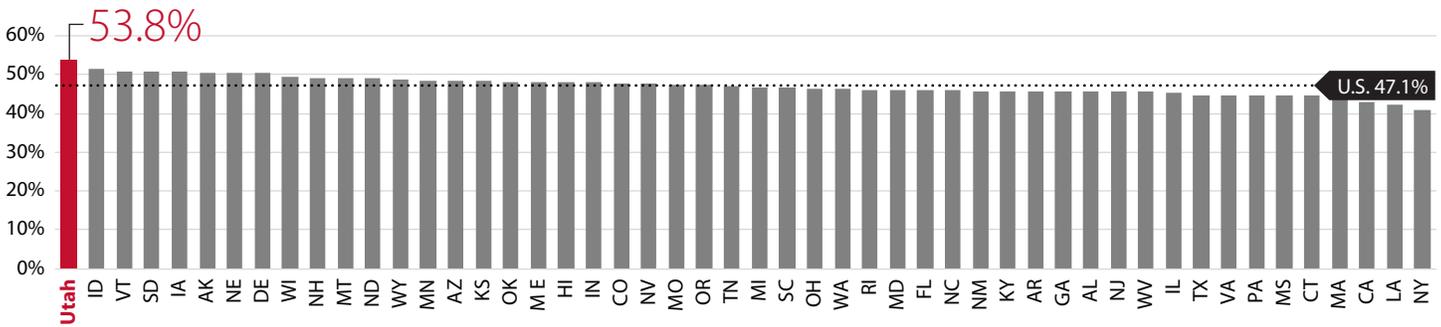
Note: Utah Foundation's Social Capital Index combines multiple indicators of civic engagement, community participation, social trust, and family and institutional connectedness to measure the strength of social networks within a state. Higher values indicate stronger social capital relative to other states.
Source: Utah Foundation

Figure 23: Ten States with Lowest Gini Coefficient (Income Inequality), 2024



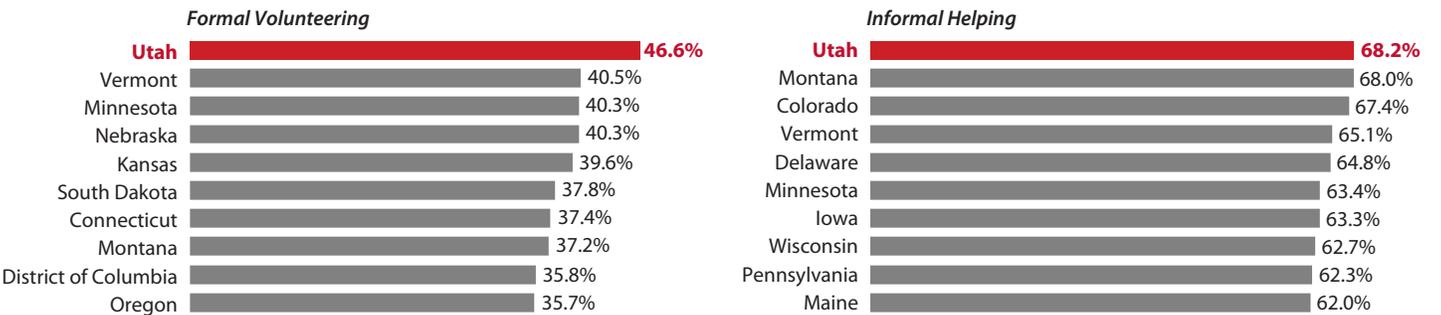
Note: A higher Gini coefficient indicates greater income inequality. Axis starts at 0.4 to show differences.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2024 5-Year American Community Survey estimates

Figure 22: Share of Middle-Class Households by State, 2024



Note: This analysis defines middle class as the percentage of households that make between two-thirds and double the median household income.
Source: Utah Foundation analysis of U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey data

Figure 24: Ten States with Highest Rates of Formal Volunteering and Informal Helping, 2023



Note: "Formal volunteering" indicates the estimated share of residents who spent any time volunteering for any organization or association in the past year. "Informal helping" indicates the estimated share of residents who exchanged favors with neighbors such as house sitting, watching each other's children, lending tools, and other things to help each other at least once in the past year.
Source: AmeriCorps

Endnotes

1. Chamberlin, Ralph V., The University of Utah, University of Utah Press, 1960, p. 72.
2. Educators distinguish between training and education. Training refers to specific and applied knowledge and skills used in the workplace. Training is task-oriented and skill-based and can be thought of as a subset of education. Education includes a much broader umbrella of intellectual and personal development deemed essential to support civil society.
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14. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Expenditure Survey.
15. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey.
16. IMPLAN® model, 2024 Data, using inputs provided by the Utah System of Higher Education and IMPLAN Group LLC, IMPLAN System (data and software), 16905 Northcross Dr., Suite 120, Huntersville, NC 28078 www.IMPLAN.com.