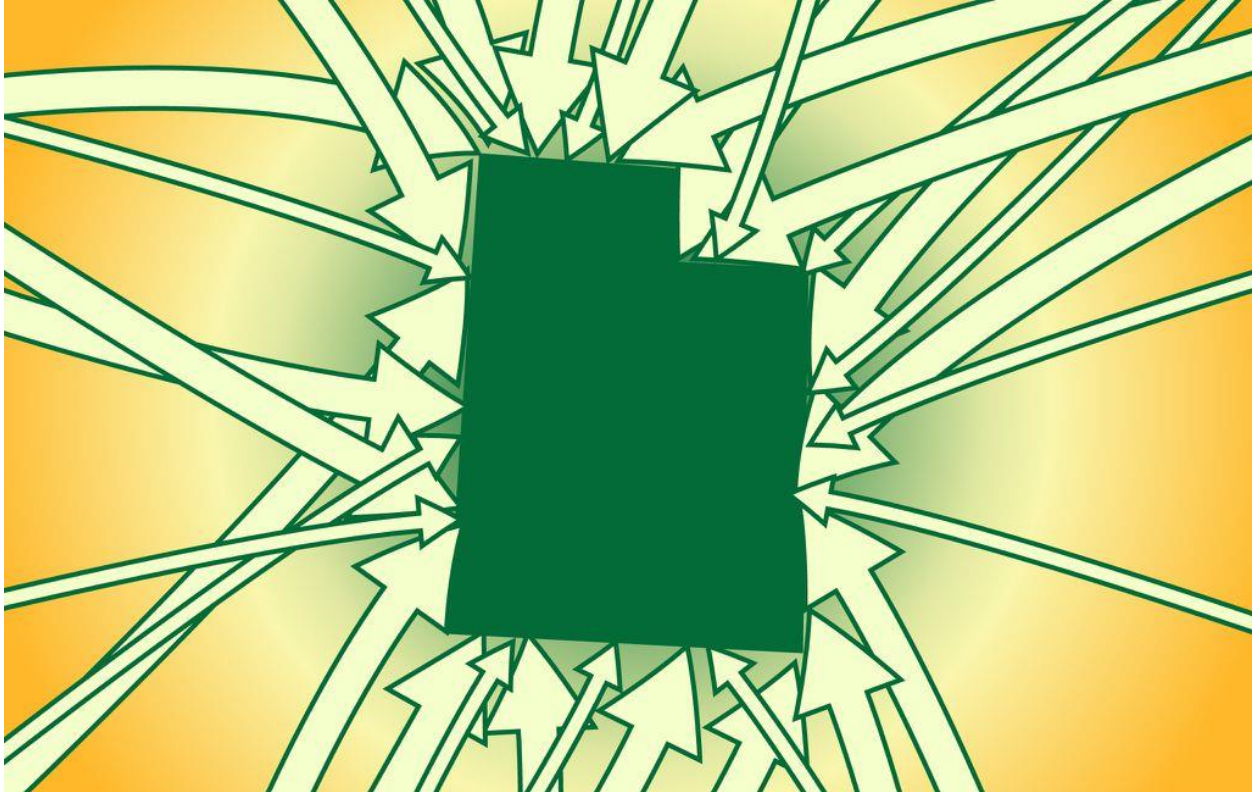


Bigger. Older. Richer. Here's how Utah is changing.

Census and demographic data reveal a changing Utah.



(Illustration by Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

By Shane Burke

| Oct. 13, 2021, 7:13 a.m.

<https://www.sltrib.com/news/2021/10/13/bigger-older-richer-heres/>

This story is part of The Salt Lake Tribune's ongoing commitment to identify solutions to Utah's biggest challenges through the work of the Innovation Lab.

[[Subscribe to our newsletter here](#)]

Utah is booming.

In the past ten years, the Beehive State has grown faster than any other, according to Census numbers. The population increased by 18% in the last decade. That's about half a million more people calling Utah home—or two and a half Salt Lake Cities. Drawn by a strong economy, access to nature and a more reasonable cost of living, they're coming from all over the country, especially the nearby West Coast and Mountain West.

With growth comes change—at least, some change. We're still the youngest in the nation on average, but are getting a bit older like everyone else. Utah remains overwhelmingly white, but its residents of Latino, Asian, Black, Pacific Islander, and Native heritage continue to make up bigger slices of the pie.

Many Utahns have cashed in on the state's boom, partially due to emerging industries and high tech opportunities around Silicon Slopes. The median Utahn makes 19% more income annually after accounting for inflation.

Still, many Utahns are feeling the growing pains. Not everyone has felt the same prosperity as rising costs of living have quickly overtaken income gain, leaving more worried about their futures in the state.

Demographers project that Utah will continue to balloon in the coming years. The growing pains that come with it, like surging home prices, will require planning and solutions to ensure an equitable and comfortable future for Utahns new and old.

Here's a deeper look into what Utah is today and what its future holds.

Growing fastest

Population change in the past ten years

Though many states across the West and the South have experienced a rush of newcomers in recent decades, nowhere else has grown quite like Utah per capita. There are three times as many people here than there were fifty years ago, due to both migration and a high fertility rate.

But Utah's growth is nothing new. It follows a trend that has persisted since the 90s. In fact, it has slowed down a bit — Utah gained more population in the 90s and 2000s than in the past decade.

"The 90s were when migration became a stable component of the growth versus previous decades when it was really reliant on people having lots of kids," said Mallory Bateman, a demographer at the University of Utah's Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute.

Drawing people from all over

Utah is full of transplants. Four in ten Utahns were born somewhere else.

And it's true, a lot are Californians. About 20% of newbies in the past decade came from California, making them the largest group of newcomers. It makes sense — the state's got more people to offer.

When size is taken into account, people from nearby states like Idaho and Wyoming are more likely to resettle in Utah, according to Bateman of the Gardner Institute.

Still, Californian transplants might stand out because of cultural and economic differences.

"They could be from a small town, but their house can still be worth \$700,000," said Bateman. "So they might come in with a different approach to the market, and that's one of the big factors."

Nikki Madden, a 33 year old Murray resident, leaned into jokes about Californians. Upon seeing a TikTok video encouraging Californians to move to Utah, she decided to make her own.

"I know all of you Californians are so excited to come to Utah, so I figured I'd provide you guys with a nice easy map," she said. On the map, she circled Idaho.

The next day, her phone was flooded with hundreds of notifications. The comment section of her joke became a battleground between people from all three places on politics and housing prices. Idahoans even responded with their own videos, taking the joke further and redirecting Californians to Montana. A Montanan followed up, pointing to the Bermuda Triangle.

Madden's contentious video was truly a joke — she herself relocated from Oregon five years ago.

"We moved out here to get out of Portland, start a family, buy a house and settle down because Portland was growing like crazy, too," Madden said.

But now, she feels like what she saw in Portland is repeating itself, down to the banter about Californians.

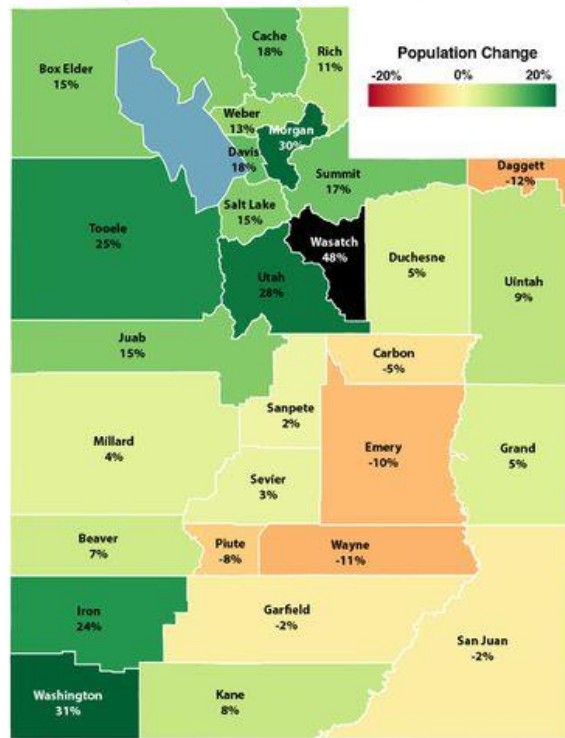
"When we first moved here, we bought an extremely affordable house," she said. "But in the last year, I started looking at houses here, and everything is flying off the market. I probably can't afford anything in this market."

Plenty of Utahns are coming from abroad too — almost one in ten residents have immigrated from another country, up slightly in the past decade. The majority were born in Latin America.

About half of states have a higher percentage of immigrants than Utah. In California, almost a quarter of residents were born outside of the United States. In West Virginia, Mississippi and Montana, just two in 100 residents were born abroad.

Wasatch, Washington and Utah Counties are ballooning

Population Change in Past Decade



Population change in past decade by county (source: U.S. Census Bureau)

Some areas have especially mushroomed. In the past decade, Wasatch County grew by almost half, due to increased development around Heber City. Washington, Morgan and Utah Counties have also grown by over a quarter. Salt Lake County added the most people in the state, but grew at a slower rate than other areas.

“Urban areas grew, and the areas neighboring the urban areas, too,” said Bateman of the Gardner Institute.

“Wasatch is within an hour drive, as is Morgan.”

These areas had more open space for development, too.

“The cities in southern Salt Lake County and northern Utah County had humongous growth, but part of that is because there was room to develop them out because they were farm fields ten years ago,” she said.

Matt Parsons grew up in Utah County but moved away for ten years. Now 33 years old, he recently came back and is constantly surprised at the new place to which he’s returned.

“When I grew up, Lehi was a little country town with open land,” said Parsons. “It’s not even recognizable.”

He chuckled as he thought about the new cultural markers he sees around — Teslas, luxury stores, brunch spots with cocktail menus and even billboards for medical marijuana. Parsons enjoys the changes. They’re part of what brought him back.

That and the opportunity. Many companies moved into the area, including technology firms that have branded it “Silicon Slopes.”

“We were running out of opportunities in California,” he said. “The middle class seems to be dying out there. There are people with a lot of money and people struggling to get by. It felt like there was so much more room for growth here.”

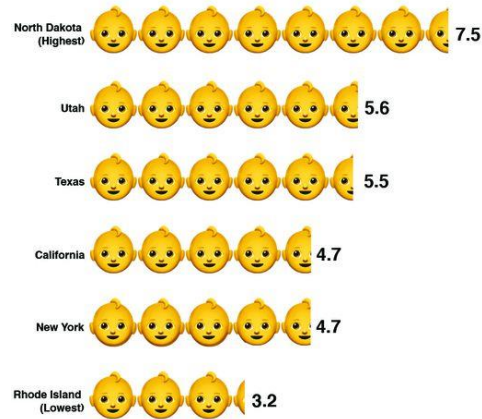
Though Utah’s growth has been unparalleled, some rural areas have been left behind in the rush, losing residents. Daggett County, a sparsely populated area in the Uinta Mountains, shrank the most, losing one in ten residents, partially because of a corrections facility that closed.

The youngest in the nation

Utah remains the youngest state in the nation, but we’re getting a little older.

The median Utahn is just over 31 years old, almost four years younger than the next youngest state, Alaska, and almost 14 years younger than the oldest state, Maine. The average American is seven years older.

Annual Fertility Rate Per Hundred Women, Selected States (2019)

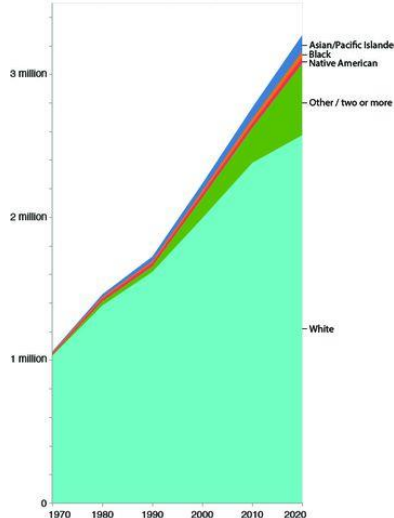


Annual fertility rate per hundred women, selected states (2019)
(Source: U.S. Census Bureau)

That figure owes to Utah's especially high fertility rate, which was the highest in the nation until this decade, according to Mallory Bateman from the Gardner Institute. Mothers in Utah could expect to have more children than most other states, partially due to cultural factors. But there's nothing wrong with getting a little older.

The median Utahn is two years older than they were ten years ago, and a whopping five years older than in 1990. That rise isn't much different than that of the median American, though, who has aged at about the same rate.

Utah Population by Race, Past 50 Years



Getting a bit more diverse

Utah population by race, past 50 years (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)
Utah continues to get more diverse, but remains overwhelmingly white. Four in five Utahns identify as white.

The second most represented racial categorization is "Other," chosen by many Latino Americans who might not feel accurately captured by the options provided by the Census. Just over 15% of Utahns identify as Hispanic, compared to 13% in 2010.

More identify as two or more races than ever, almost three times as many as a decade ago. Nationally, this trend holds. This segment of the population at least doubled in every state but Hawaii and Alaska.

Utah has the third highest Pacific Islander population after Hawaii and Alaska.

Though Black Utahns make up just 1.2% of the state, they're a rapidly growing segment of the population.

James Jackson III, founder of the Utah Black Chamber, has sought to ensure Utah's growing Black population is represented in business. The organization hosts mixers and workshops to build connections and skills. The chamber has doubled in membership the past year, now working with over 250 businesses and 70 corporate partners.

The chamber has found strength in partnering with similar organizations serving the Hispanic, queer, Pacific Islander and Asian American communities. Altogether, they are called "Living Color Utah."

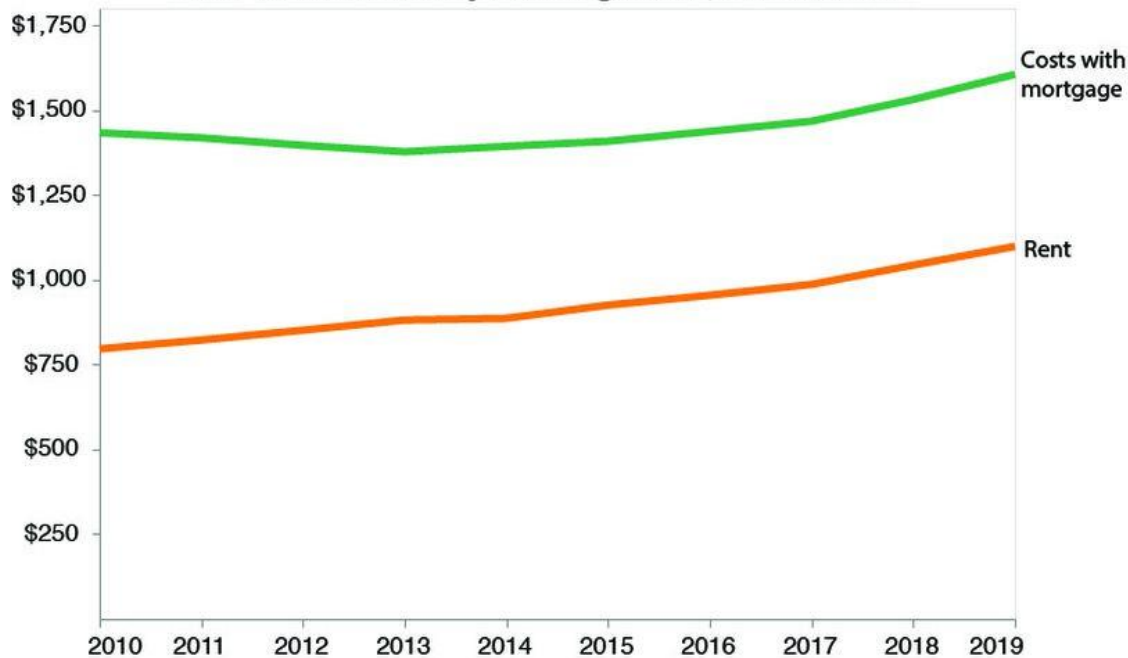
Utahns are making more money, but they're forking it over on rent

The median income rose between 2010 and 2019. It is up 18% compared to inflation. About a third of Utah families make over \$100,000 annually.

Much of this increase is because of new job opportunities in Utah. It had the [highest job creation rate in 2019](#). This summer, the Labor Department reported it to have [the second lowest jobless rate in the country, at just 2.6%](#).

But cost of living increases have followed closely behind.

Utah Median Monthly Housing Costs, 2010 to 2019



Mortgage and housing costs in Utah rose dramatically between 2010 and 2019 (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)

When inflation is taken into account, rent prices are up 17% compared to where they would otherwise be if they stayed steady. In Salt Lake City, rent rose by over a fifth in the 2010s.

More than 150,000 units of housing were built across Utah between 2010 and 2019 according to the 2019 American Community Survey, but that does not seem to be enough to keep up with demand in the growing state. In fact, there was a bit less construction than in the previous decade. Many longtime residents worry that the growth happening here will price them out of their plans of buying a home and living comfortably. The poverty rate decreased in the past 10 years, but 9% of Utahns still live below the poverty line, including 1 in 10 children.

What does the future hold?

Utah's rapid changes show no signs of stopping.

Analysts from the Gardner Policy Institute at the University of Utah project the population to at least double within the next 50 years, following similar geographic trends to present growth. They expect Utah County alone to grow by over a million people.

To make it through these growing pains and ensure a more equitable future, some believe the state will have to be intentional about planning its growth.

James Jackson III, founder of Utah Black Chamber, is hopeful the state will figure it out.

"Change is coming," said Jackson. "Enough conversations are happening that we will over time retain. We can attract diversity all day long with the opportunities that we have — it's retaining diversity where the challenge is. The more that companies and diverse organizations work together, we will become a stronger, more welcoming community for everybody."

This is the first in a series of stories that will dive deep into arriving Census data and what it tells us about a changing Utah.