

A SUTHERLAND INSTITUTE
POLICY PUBLICATION

Builders Needed: Assessing workforce shortages in construction

Written by Nic Dunn

August 2025





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Table of Contents

4	Introduction
10	Demographic Context
12	Purpose of this Report
13	Key Trends and Findings
19	Discussion and Recommendations
22	Conclusion
23	Endnotes

Introduction

In his 2025 State of the State address, Utah Gov. Spencer J. Cox drew on Utah’s pioneer history to articulate an aspirational vision for the state’s future.

“We stand on the shoulders of giants,” the Governor said before a joint session¹ of the Utah State Legislature in January 2025. “Our ancestors irrigated farms, excavated minerals, built homes and neighborhoods, powered cities, and connected this continent by rail. In the face of adversity, they built. They built here. And my friends and fellow citizens, if there is one thing you take away from my remarks tonight, please let it be this simple refrain: We must build.”

The governor’s call to “build” spanned a wide array of social, cultural, and policy domains, with particular emphasis on the need to build more homes to help address the severe housing affordability crisis the state faces.

Implied in this call to build is the essential need for hands ready and willing to do the work. Therein lies one of the most significant constraints on the American economy.

A few key data trends provide essential context for understanding this challenge.

In the years between recovery from the Great Recession and the economic shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and excessive inflation of the early 2020s, one of the most prevalent challenges facing the Utah and national economy became

widespread and sustained workforce shortages – a challenge that remains today.

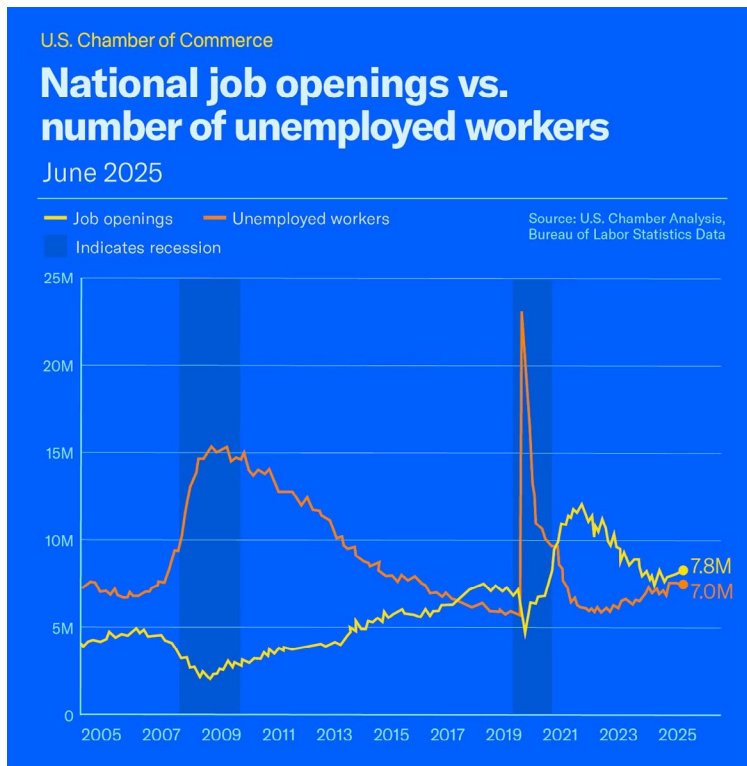
The best way to understand workforce or labor shortages is as a general concept rather than a strictly and consistently defined term. For example, past Bureau of Labor Statistics research has defined the concept² this way:

“Shortages occur in a market economy when the demand for workers for a particular occupation is greater than the supply of workers who are qualified, available, and willing to do that job. Jobs remain vacant as employers seek to hire more workers than are willing to work at the prevailing wage or salary.”

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce uses a Worker Shortage Index to measure the ratio of unemployed job seekers to job openings. Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data on job openings and potential workers who are “qualified, available, and willing” to work also offers a sound way to measure workforce shortages.

As of April 2025, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports approximately³ 7.4 million total job openings nationwide, with about 7.2 million people unemployed⁴ – indicating an extremely tight labor market.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has chronicled this national workforce shortage, drawing from BLS data, as part of its America Works Data Center.



The data shows two trendlines – job openings vs job seekers⁵ – over the past 25 years.

This long view shows that for most of the first two decades of the 21st century, there were more unemployed workers than there were jobs. From about 2017 onward, however, this trend reversed, marking the beginning of a new era in which workforce shortages have become a dominant trait of the modern economy.

Though the COVID-19-induced recession caused a sudden and sharp reversal, it was short-lived. America’s economy, beginning again from approximately 2021 to the present, has consistently provided more job opportunities than there are willing job seekers.

It may be reasonable to see the chart above and assume that, at least on the national level, labor shortages are becoming less of a problem. Though

that gap has been narrowing recently, employers still feel the tightness of the labor market and recognize limited workforce as a significant constraint.

In addition, June data from BLS shows there is continued variability in the metric of job openings to job seekers.

The BLS JOLTS (Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey) shows estimates for June⁶ 2025, listing roughly 7.4 million job openings, while the June 2025 employment situation⁷ report shows 7.0 million unemployed workers. Preliminary data published by BLS is subject to possible revision⁸ for one month after release, so it’s important to wait for additional months

to determine whether the workforce shortage gap is in fact widening again.

Although national shortages have shown significant improvement in recent months, as we will see later, focusing on state-level and industry-level workforce shortages shows the issue is more acute.

A related, yet equally critical, trendline for understanding workforce issues is the BLS measure of workforce engagement: the labor force participation rate, also a key component of the U.S. Chamber’s America Works Data Center.

Over the same 20-year period, the U.S. Chamber chronicles a downward trend⁹ in the LFPR, from its pre-Great Recession high point of between 66% and 67% to its current level, generally staying between 62% and 63%.

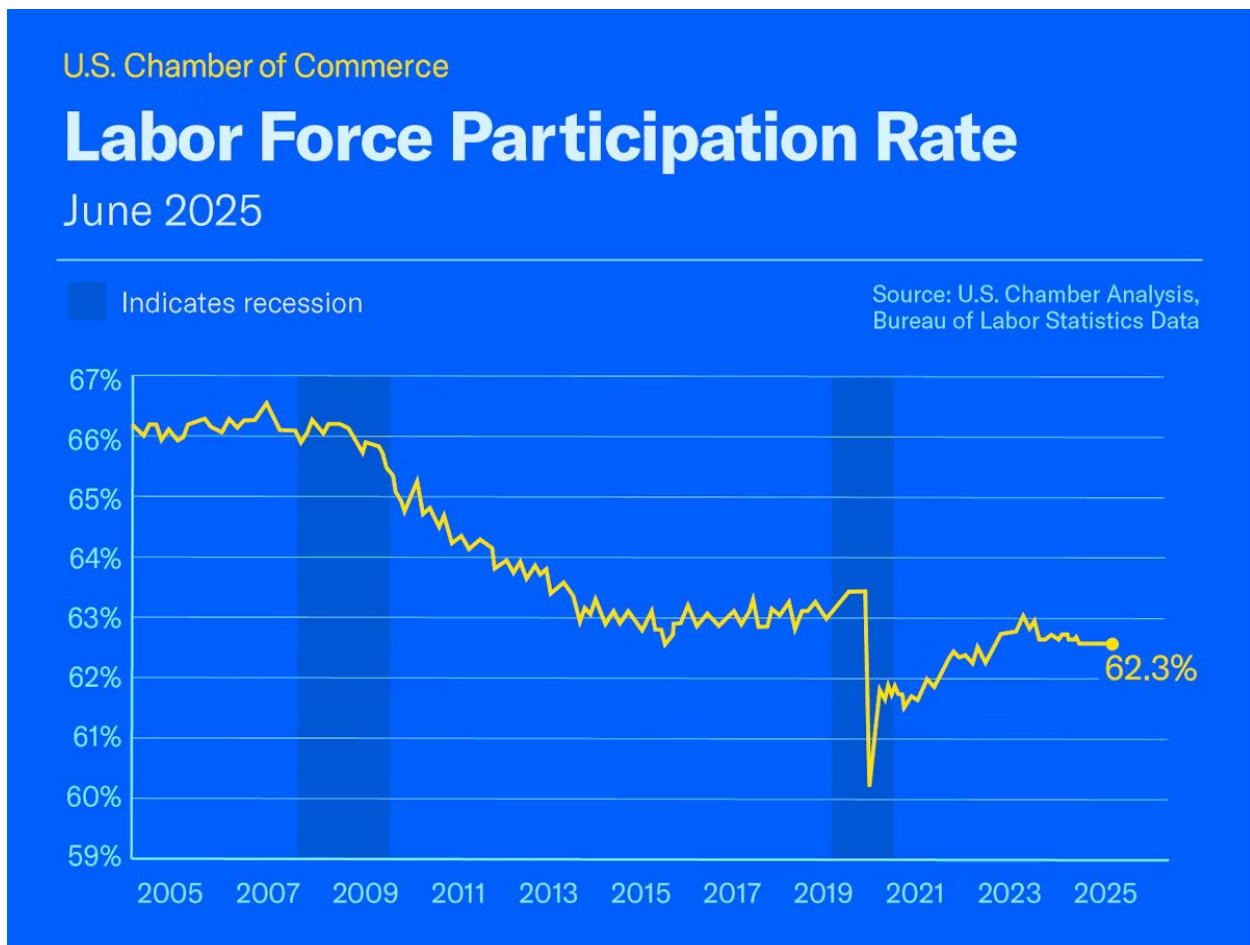
This metric is crucial for understanding our modern economy, as broad trends in how workers choose to engage, or not engage, in employment can affect specific jobs or industries.

The St. Louis Fed defines the LFPR¹⁰ as a measure that shows “the number of people who are either working or actively seeking work as a share of the working age population.”

Importantly, we should view the LFPR and rates of unemployed workers as crucially related, as the rate of the population that engages in the labor force will directly impact the number of available workers. Again from the St. Louis Fed:¹¹

“The labor force participation rate refers to the percentage of people age 16 and older who are in the labor force. The unemployment rate¹² refers to the percentage of people in the labor force who don’t have jobs but are actively seeking work.”

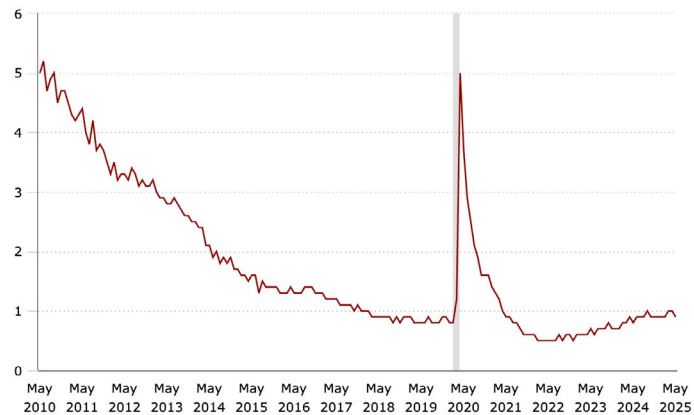
In other words, if we want more available workers to fill open jobs, one way to affect that is to pull more “disengaged workers” (people who have left the labor force entirely) back into participation in the economy, effectively increasing the LFPR and boosting the number of potential job seekers.



Another helpful metric BLS provides to researchers and policymakers is a ratio measuring the number of unemployed persons per job opening¹³. A ratio of 1.0 would mean that there are roughly 100 unemployed people for every 100 job openings. So, anything less than 1.0 means there are fewer unemployed workers than there are jobs (a labor shortage), and anything higher than 1.0 indicates more job seekers than open jobs (a labor surplus).

Number of unemployed persons per job opening, seasonally adjusted

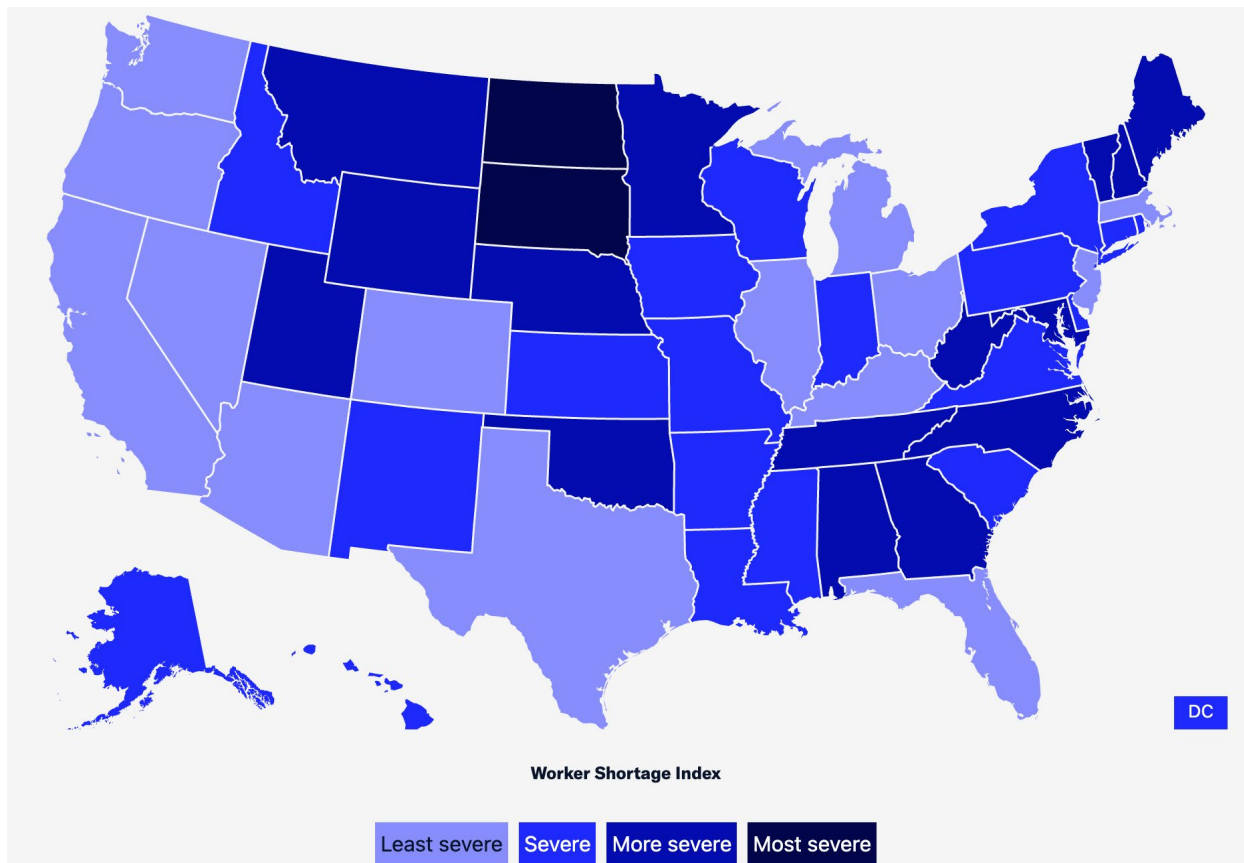
Click and drag within the chart to zoom in on time periods



Note: Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

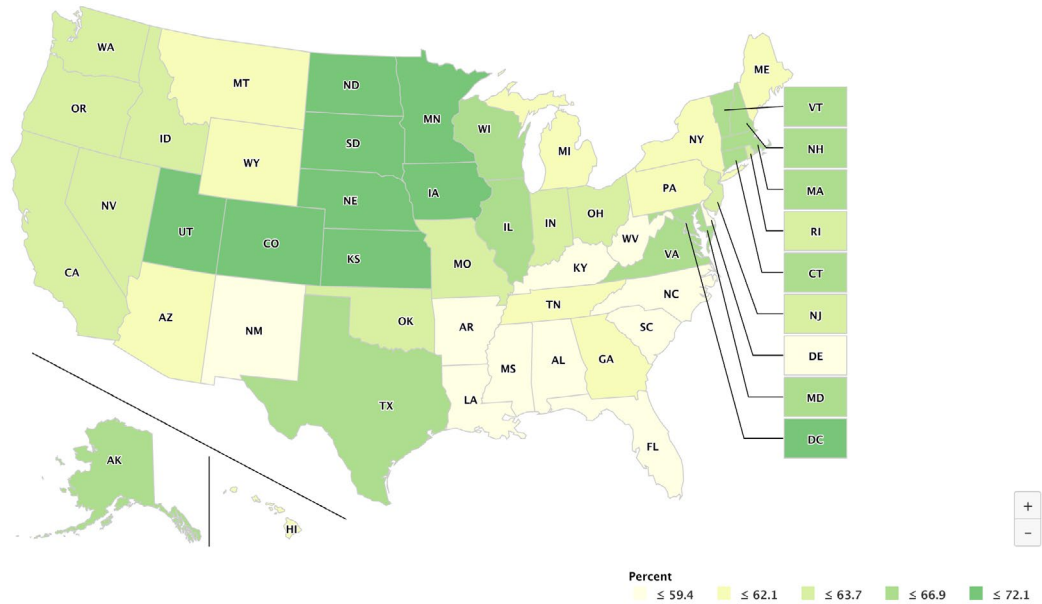
In May 2025, the nationwide ratio was 0.9, indicating a tight labor market that still falls short of having enough potential workers to fill open jobs.

The U.S. Chamber uses this data as part of its Worker Shortage Index. As of May 2025, Utah had a Worker Shortage Index¹⁴ of 0.72, meaning that there are 72 available workers for every 100 open



“America Works Data Center,” U.S. Chamber of Commerce

FRED 2025 June Labor Force Participation Rate by State (Percent)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via FRED®

jobs. As the U.S. Chamber visualization indicates, Utah is experiencing one of the more severe workforce shortages among the states.

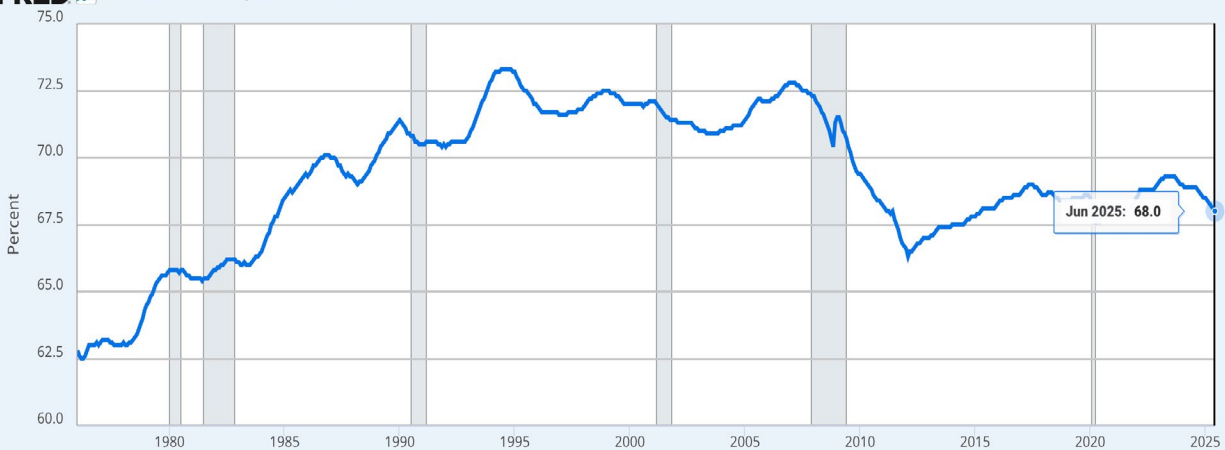
And this labor shortage is not a new phenomenon for the Beehive State.

In 2022, Utah reportedly had¹⁵ about 40 unemployed workers for every 100 jobs. And a 2017 Utah Foundation report notes¹⁶ that in 2015,

“71% of 151 major local employers reported some level of difficulty finding enough skilled or qualified employees. One-third claimed the worker shortage was the single greatest factor impeding their growth.”

Utah experiences these workforce shortages despite having a labor force participation rate that outpaces the national average, measuring at 68.1%

FRED Labor Force Participation Rate for Utah



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via FRED®
Shaded areas indicate U.S. recessions.

for May 2025, according to data¹⁷ from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

Using the same 20-year window, we see that Utah's LFPR tracks similarly with the national average trend – moving from a high point of about 73% in early 2007 to its current 68.1% in May 2025.

These data trends collectively tell a story of Utah's economic strength relative to other states and the nation, while highlighting the recognition that workforce constraints constitute a significant factor impacting the state's economic success. Utah's economy tends to follow similar trends to the national average, but with overall better performance across a range of metrics. That positions the Beehive State well, relative to other states, to address the challenges of the modern economy.

The Governor is correct that, to strengthen Utah's families, civic institutions, and our economy as a whole, "we must build." A central question to accomplishing this objective remains whether our workforce is up to that task.

Widespread and sustained workforce shortages should be a critical area of focus for Utah's

policymakers and business community, worthy of ongoing research and interventions to improve the connection between available opportunities in our economy and job seekers hungry for those opportunities.

This paper explores one aspect of that issue, focusing on the current state of the workforce in the construction industry. This industry is worthy of special attention for multiple reasons, not the least of which is its intrinsic role in solving our housing crisis.

A 2023 legislative audit¹⁸ found that Utah needs to build roughly 28,000 homes each year just to keep up with demand, and the Governor has called for¹⁹ the creation of 35,000 starter homes specifically over the next five years.

As this report helps illustrate, there are opportunities for the state to strengthen the pipelines that connect willing workers with construction employers eager to hire them and continue doing what they do best: building.

Demographic Context

The broad decline in labor force participation rates, along with the past decade of workforce shortages, should also be understood in the context of another phenomenon of America's modern economy: the reduction in the labor force participation rate for men specifically.

Scholar Nick Eberstadt chronicles this issue excellently in his book *Men Without Work* (initially released in 2016, then updated in a post-pandemic 2022 edition).

As of his writing in the 2022 edition, Eberstadt writes:⁴²

“Today in 2022, American men suffer Depression-era employment rates—even though they inhabit the wealthiest and most productive society ever known. Millions of men in the prime of life languish in a state of economic activity and financial dependence, neither working nor looking for work.”

Lest we attribute blame for this phenomenon solely to the COVID-19 pandemic, the introduction from Eberstadt's 2016 edition is no more hopeful:⁴³

“Over the past two generations, America has suffered a quiet catastrophe. That catastrophe is the collapse of work—for men. In the half century between 1965 and 2015, work rates for the American male spiraled relentlessly downward... America is now home to an immense army of jobless men no longer even looking for work— more than seven million

alone between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-five.”

During a May 2025 episode²⁰ of Sutherland's *Defending Ideas* podcast, Eberstadt described how this phenomenon remains largely unchanged today.

“What we've seen is a... disquieting drop in work rates and a retreat not just from the labor force but from society more broadly, by a growing proportion of this group,” Eberstadt said during the interview. “The monthly job report for April 2025... suggests that the work rate for these prime age men is essentially the same as it was the very first time it was measured with our modern employment statistical framework, which was in the 1940 census.”

According to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis²¹, using BLS data, the national labor force participation rate for men was 67.7% in May 2025. Though there are seasonal variations, this number has seen an incredibly consistent decline from 85% in January 1948 (as far back as this dataset goes). If we use the 20-year time frame to match the US Chamber data trends we discussed earlier in the report, the male labor force participation rate has dropped from roughly 73% in 2005 to an annual average of 68% in 2024.

Women, on the other hand, have seen their labor force participation²² rate rise from approximately 31% in January 1948 to a peak of roughly 69%

in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Female LFP percentages have stayed in the mid to high 50s since then, accounting for a drop and slow recovery due to the COVID-19 pandemic-induced recession.

The gender breakdown of these workforce engagement trends is particularly relevant for the construction industry, as it employs a disproportionately large number of male workers. According to 2020 BLS data, approximately 90%²³ of the national construction workforce was male.

At the state level, the Utah Department of Workforce Services Industry Employment Profile²⁴ for construction shows that from 2009 to 2023, the share of male employees in the construction sector went from roughly 82% to about 78%.

In recent years, there have been concerted efforts²⁵ to recruit women into the construction industry. And

while the data shows that the gender breakdown of Utah's construction industry continues to change, for the time being, the industry's jobs – especially labor positions²⁶ – are still most often filled by men.

The extent to which broad societal trends tied to rates of male engagement in the workforce impact the construction sector specifically exceeds the scope of this report. However, a workforce shortage in construction is mostly a male phenomenon, simply given the gender breakdown of the industry.

As such, given the LFPR decline among men outlined above, and the acute workforce shortages now being felt by an industry that largely employs men, we should consider these related trends as important context.

Purpose of this Report

The goal of this report is to draw on data and analysis at the national and state levels, combined with insights from some of Utah's major construction firms, to provide state-level policymakers with an additional perspective on the nature and scope of workforce-related challenges and potential interventions in the construction workforce.

Any reforms that policy leaders pursue should strive to address the construction industry's ability to hire and retain workers, thereby creating additional housing stock, keeping pace with major infrastructure needs, and fostering opportunity and upward mobility for Utahns in a vital and opportunity-rich industry.

Although discussions about workforce shortages transcend industry and geographic boundaries, this paper primarily focuses on the construction and skilled trades, which have experienced tight labor markets in recent years.

In spring 2025, we conducted outreach to a combination of Utah construction firms, industry

representatives, and state leaders working at the intersection of workforce education and training alignment, as well as employer needs. We held six focus group-style informational interviews to elicit insights from these representatives. These interviews offer valuable anecdotal insights into the perspectives and experiences of some of Utah's construction and workforce policy leaders.

Key takeaways from these discussions are summarized in the key findings, with compelling quotes included to accentuate key points in the data.

This report is not intended to be a comprehensive review of existing education and training pipelines, nor does it cover every aspect of construction workforce issues. Rather, it offers an important current snapshot of the intersection of national and state data trends, construction firm perspectives, and state opportunities to strengthen this essential sector.

Key Trends and Findings

To gain an understanding of current dynamics in the construction workforce, we examine the issue through three complementary lenses: **1)** Utah construction labor market data from the Utah Department of Workforce Services, **2)** National construction firm survey data, and **3)** Anecdotal insights from Utah-based construction firms for added context.

These findings are presented below in sections, describing the nature and scope of construction labor shortages first, followed by observations on the industry impacts of these shortages and potential solutions.

Nature and Scope of Construction Labor Shortages – State and National Data

Construction is a major part of Utah’s economy. Over the last year, from May 2024 to May 2025, DWS reports²⁷ that construction was the second-fastest-growing industry in Utah, with employment in the sector increasing by 5.6% – adding 7,800 jobs. Only education and health services grew faster, at a rate of 7.5%.

We can gain a recent snapshot of the size and types of job openings in the construction sector using state data.

The DWS Job Openings by Occupation data viewer shows that²⁸, in Utah, from March 2024

to March 2025, there were 5,230 job openings in construction/extraction. The occupation with the highest number of openings in this industry was construction laborers, followed by first-line supervisors/managers, electricians, plumbers/pipefitters/steamfitters, operating engineers and other construction equipment operators, construction and building inspectors, and carpenters, among others.

Examining the same data from January 2020 to March 2025 reveals that construction laborers and first-line supervisors/managers continue to be the top two open positions in this sector – a data point that aligns with feedback from construction firms and is consistent with national survey data.

A 2024 report²⁹ from the Associated General Contractors of America offers a thorough national review of construction firms’ experiences with hiring and retaining workers. The report summarizes an annual national survey of construction firms to assess the labor market.

Key findings in this report corroborate some of the trends in the construction labor force that we observe in Utah.

“What this year’s survey makes clear is that our nation’s failure to invest in construction workforce education and training programs is having a real, measurable impact on the country’s ability to build infrastructure and other construction projects,” the report states³⁰.

“These impacts include higher costs, longer construction schedules and a significant number of delayed and/or canceled projects.”

In the AGC national survey³¹ of firms, 94% report having open positions for craft workers, an increase from 85% in the 2023 survey. Seventy-nine percent have open salaried positions, an increase from 69% the year prior. Of the construction firms with open jobs, 94% say it is difficult to fill craft (labor) positions, while 92% say it’s difficult to fill salaried positions.

Labor positions are a particular focal point of the workforce shortage. Recall that Utah’s construction employment data show that construction laborers were consistently the occupation within the sector with the highest number of openings over the last five years.

The 2024 AGC survey found that³², among employers who hire labor positions across 18 different specific job types, “More than 60 percent of respondents whose firms employ that craft report it is difficult to fill. The most widely reported difficulty was for mechanics and cement masons; in both cases 83 percent of firms that employ those occupations say they are hard to find. Close behind were plumbers (which were reported as difficult positions to fill by 80 percent of firms); carpenters, electricians, and pipefitters/welders (79 percent each).”

This national data has some overlap with the specific occupations with high opening rates at the state level in Utah, including laborers, alongside carpenters, electricians, and others.

Eighty-three percent of firms in the AGC national survey attempting to hire superintendents report difficulty filling those openings. An additional 81% of firms cited project managers/supervisors as difficult to fill.

In the Utah data from DWS, first-line supervisors/managers are consistently among the most frequently reported open occupations over the last five years, aligning with these national findings.

When AGC asked firms about why these workforce shortages exist, responses focused on the nature and quality of the applicant pool.

- 62% said available candidates lack needed skills
- Half said new hires don’t show up, or quit soon after starting the job
- 43% report that potential hires don’t have necessary credentials (driver’s license, work permit, clean background check)
- 37% said job candidates can’t pass a drug test

Despite these constraints, 73% of the firms surveyed by AGC said they anticipated adding employees over the next 12 months.

Two broad takeaways stand out from the state and national data: **1)** there are many job openings in construction at both the state and national levels, and **2)** construction laborers and first-line supervisors (such as superintendents) are some of the most difficult positions to fill.

The reported experiences of Utah construction employers and workforce policy leaders show important parallels with these trends in the data.

Nature and Scope of Construction Labor Shortages – Industry Representative Perspectives

For the informational interviews, we spoke with representatives from four construction firms, two trade associations, and one state entity that focuses on workforce development and pipeline initiatives. Participants included: Jacobsen Construction, Ivory Homes, Clyde Companies/Sunroc, Cole West, Associated General Contractors of Utah, Talent Ready Utah, and the Utah Homebuilders Association.

Though these findings should be interpreted as anecdotal, a few broad takeaways from these conversations highlight consistent themes, many of which corroborate the national survey data and provide context for the local experiences of construction firms in Utah.

Patterns in difficult-to-fill positions

Utah firms and industry representatives confirmed that when hiring is difficult, it often occurs in licensed/skilled trades, labor positions, and supervisory roles (like superintendents).

“Definitely the biggest workforce gap right now is skilled labor.” – Annee Farner, Workforce Development Specialist, AGC of Utah

“They’re somewhat desperate to get workers, but they’re not hiring just anybody. They’re looking for that skilled labor. That’s really where they’re having the challenge or the struggle.” – Joey Gilbert, President, AGC of Utah

“Direct supervision of our trades and labor, like superintendents, those are in high demand and low supply in the talent marketplace.” – Julie Caldwell, Executive Vice President of Human Resources, Jacobsen Construction

“I still have people within my circle that I talk to that turn jobs down every single day because they don’t have the workforce to do it.” – Ross Ford, Executive Vice President, Utah Home Builders Association

High turnover creates retention challenges

Firms reported that retaining laborers in the long term can be challenging, with some citing a common duration of 1-2 years due to high attrition. They attribute this in part to the reality of the job – construction labor positions are

physically demanding and often require working outside in intense weather. They also articulated that new or potential hires may lack clarity about what a career trajectory in the industry looks like when starting in a labor position.

“Getting to the year mark is where we lose a lot of people in the trades, we have a lot of churn in that segment of our workforce.” – Julie Caldwell, Executive Vice President of Human Resources, Jacobsen Construction

“We want to bring people in and have them stay, but it is a high turnover industry, and it is partly because of the physical nature of the work.” – Jake Hinckley, Director of Talent Acquisition, Sunroc (a Clyde Company)

Cultural stigma and misperceptions

A strong theme emerged around the idea of cultural stigma – that our society biases young people’s perspectives against careers in construction and trades. This stigma is often attributed to elected and educational leaders, as well as young people themselves. This, coupled with misperceptions about the kinds of opportunities in construction, is viewed as an important contributing variable that limits the talent pipeline.

“There’s just been a 30-year attack on the trades. ... They look down on the trades as a viable career option.” Jake Hinckley, Director of Talent Acquisition, Sunroc (a Clyde Company)

“I think sometimes careers in manufacturing and construction are viewed as a last resort, rather than a destination occupation,” Vic Hockett, Associate Commissioner of Talent Ready Utah

“We shouldn’t view construction as a path of last resort.” Joey Gilbert, President and CEO, AGC of Utah

Severity of labor shortages tempered by high interest rates, softened demand

Interestingly, some comments suggested that, at the current moment, hiring needs in some respects are being met, which is attributed to the softened demand for housing resulting from high interest rates in recent years. Indeed, a 2023 analysis from the Utah Department of Workforce Services found that³³ “construction activity declined in 2023 as high interest rates increased project costs. The number of dwelling units declined by 15%... compared to 2022.” It is essential to recognize

that this relaxed demand for housing is artificially suppressed, as high interest rates persist well into 2025, and actual, organic demand for housing remains present. Firms stated a concern about “shocks” to the housing and real estate market in either direction, such as interest rates that suppress demand, or stimulus that boosts demand. In other words, they seek certainty and steadiness, which allows them to better meet demand and calibrate their workforce pipelines accordingly.

“I think the current environment is masking the underlying problem... There still aren’t enough workers when it comes to operating in a normal environment.” Dave Broadbent, COO, Ivory Homes

“If we had a change in the rate conditions, we would immediately have an influx of projects, and then we’d be right back to being short-staffed.” Bryce Willardson, President of Commercial Construction, Cole West

Support for work-based learning to build pipeline and strengthen alignment, concern that schools aren’t equipping young people

Participants expressed broad support for – and described current efforts in – work-based learning interventions to both bolster talent pipelines and address skills gaps. In particular, apprenticeships were commonly cited as an effective way for firms to help address hiring needs while equipping future talent with needed skills. This is in the context of concern that schools (K-12 in particular) are not adequately equipping the next generation with

soft and technical skills to be ready for careers in construction.

“Apprenticeships help with retention too. If a company puts someone through a program, there will be loyalty.” Rich Fullmer, Director for Apprenticeships, AGC of Utah

“We are a strong advocate of apprenticeships.” Vic Hockett, Associate Commissioner of Talent Ready Utah

“If I could make any change, I’d say, bring the trades back into the schools.” Joey Gilbert, President and CEO, AGC of Utah

“The upward mobility in the construction sector, I don’t think is talked about enough.” Vic Hockett, Talent Ready Utah

Construction Workforce Roundtable findings

Sutherland Institute partnered with Associated General Contractors of Utah to host a July 2025 event titled “Construction Workforce Roundtable.” This informal gathering of roughly a dozen construction firms yielded discussion and feedback from representatives of the industry, offering many similar findings as those outlined above. Four key takeaways from that roundtable are worth sharing, some of which reiterate earlier points.

1. There is a broad belief in a cultural bias toward college and against the trades, which predisposes young people against viewing the trades as a viable, debt-free path to good wages and career opportunities after high school. Construction firms view parents and

school counselors as highly influential and expressed a desire for better awareness of the opportunities that construction and the trades provide among these two groups.

2. Firms recognized that new or potential employees often don't comprehend a clear trajectory from entry-level construction jobs to higher-skilled, higher-paid positions. In other words, they acknowledge the need to better outline the career path for young people who may consider the industry.
3. Firms shared strong concerns about immigration policies and their impacts on

the construction workforce. There is a strong worry that, given the construction industry's significant portion of immigrant labor (20% in Utah as of 2023³⁴), federal immigration policies will negatively affect the labor supply in this industry that already struggles to hire and retain workers.

4. Firms expressed frustration that federal and state resources typically favor college over the trades, and suggested redirecting some resources to bring different post-high school options into better balance.

Discussion and Recommendations

In broad terms, the national survey data, state labor market data, and conversations with Utah construction firms and industry leaders converge on a few key takeaways for policymakers.

Although artificially softened demand due to high interest rates has alleviated some of the severity of labor shortages, real problems still remain with hiring and retaining workers, particularly in skilled labor and supervisory roles. The skills deficit among applicants is another genuine concern, and what is perceived as a cultural stigma or bias against construction as a field worthy of pursuit also constrains the potential talent pipeline.

This suggests that a combination of efforts addressing skills gaps – technical skills for potential craft labor applicants and other skilled positions, and soft skills/leadership skills for supervisory positions – along with changes to social perceptions and stigma surrounding construction, would be fruitful.

“We have convinced ourselves as a country that the only path to success lies through college and a job that once took place in an office,” states a 2023 AGC report³⁵. “This is a viable path for many, but there are many other paths, including construction.”

Elevating multiple post-high school pathways to a successful vocational life is, fortunately, a focus of Utah policymakers. An example of this effort is Talent Ready Utah, which is housed within Utah’s System of Higher Education and sits at

the intersection of employer needs and education offerings, focusing on strengthening Utah’s talent pipeline.

A vital contribution to the analysis of how the state can continue to improve in this regard, Talent Ready Utah and the Utah System of Higher Education commissioned a report from Cicero: the Utah Workforce Alignment Study, in December 2024.

When evaluating employer needs (across industries) compared with education and workforce training offerings, the report found³⁶ the following:

“Work-based learning stands out as the most common and impactful form of collaboration, with 74% of employers identifying it as extremely valuable and 53% actively offering such opportunities.”

Additionally, the report found that 61% of employers said apprenticeships are “very successful,” and another 25% said they are “somewhat successful” at “preparing graduates for the workforce.” Despite this, only 50% of employers report using apprenticeships.

The report also bolstered the skills-focused mindset that is common among construction firms. The Cicero report³⁷ found that 63% of employers agreed with the statement “I prefer to hire candidates with job skills over educational credentials.”

These findings should orient policymakers toward the following principles when pursuing policy

interventions to strengthen our construction workforce.

First, there is still a need for a cultural or societal rebalancing of emphasis on skilled trade and non-degree pathways after high school as a viable option.

Second, skills – both technical and “soft” skills – need to be prioritized, which can be accomplished through greater prioritization of work-based learning, and requires a mindset shift to go beyond degrees as the sole measure of workforce preparedness.

Third, reforms should not be limited to one educational sector. Rather, to truly address the workforce needs in Utah’s construction industry, we should continue to strengthen partnerships among industry, K-12 education, higher education, and non-traditional post-high school pathways.

As such, the following policy recommendations are worthy of consideration by Utah policymakers and industry leaders.

Expand apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are an underutilized tool that addresses both skills gaps and talent pipelines. The state should explore ways to expand and enhance apprenticeable positions across occupations in construction and the skilled trades, as well as other industries. These apprenticeship opportunities should be available to both young people who pursue higher education in degree-granting institutions and those who graduate from high school and seek alternative pathways.

As part of this objective, state and industry leaders should rigorously assess why 86% of overall employers view apprenticeships as a good tool, but only 50% actually use them. Identifying any obstacles that stand in the way of more employers using apprenticeships successfully, and assessing to what extent those obstacles exist in construction, would be helpful for this goal.

Further, policymakers should consider whether state tax incentives would be an appropriate and effective tool to aid in the utilization of apprenticeships.

According to Apprenticeship.gov³⁸ from the U.S. Department of Labor, many states offer various forms of tax credits to employers who hire apprentices. For example, Alabama offers employers a \$1,250 income tax credit per apprentice, and an additional \$500 for each qualified high school apprentice.

There are currently some tax credits available to Utah employers that could serve as a model.

The Work Opportunity Tax Credit is a federal credit administered by DWS available to employers who hire³⁹ “individuals from certain target groups who have consistently faced significant barriers to employment.” And, in 2019 the Utah Legislature passed a bill⁴⁰ that provides a tax credit to employers who hire someone who is homeless.

Utah policymakers and industry leaders should consider a targeted tax credit that helps ease the financial burden on construction firms for hiring and training apprentices.

Support funding for work-based learning

State leaders should continuously evaluate legislative appropriations and how those funding streams support strengthening education and workforce pipelines, with a specific eye towards funding support for work-based learning programs. Ensuring there are resources and funding at the state level and within districts to support work-based learning programs that facilitate engagement between K12 institutions and private industry should be an essential priority for local and state leaders.

Strengthen Industry Partnerships in K-12

Construction firms and local schools and school districts should explore ways to enhance and expand partnerships, with a particular focus on work-based learning opportunities. The state should explore how to best facilitate these partnerships.

One way to accomplish this is by considering amendments to “Talent Connect,” a statewide talent portal for high-demand jobs that was created in the 2025 legislative session⁴¹. As enrolled, the legislation that establishes this portal is intended to connect Utah employers in high-demand sectors with qualified talent from Utah’s higher education institutions. This program could be refined to include K-12 institutions, especially for soon-to-be graduating high school students who are participating in apprenticeships. Lawmakers should consider amending this program in the 2026 session to expand to K-12 schools.

Concerted education campaign/cultural shift in favor of trades

Industry, educational, and elected leaders should engage in concerted communications efforts to educate young people and their families on the opportunities for upward mobility that exist within the construction industry. Central to this effort should be the goal of rebalancing cultural and societal influences about viable pathways to vocational success after high school. Industry leaders, in particular, should communicate specific benchmarks of vocational progress to prospective workers, closing information and perception gaps about what upward mobility looks like in the industry.

Industry self-assessment for occupational licensing

The construction industry should conduct a thorough and thoughtful self-assessment of any occupational licensure or credentialing requirements in the trades, with the goal of streamlining unnecessary requirements that constrain the talent pipeline while improving outcomes to bolster the technical skills of candidates completing these requirements. This self-assessment should then be shared with the Utah Office of Professional Licensure Review to aid in the state’s regular review of state licensure requirements that impact construction and the trades.

Conclusion

Utah Gov. Spencer Cox’s call, “we must build,” is well-suited to the challenges and opportunities facing the State of Utah in 2025. It is worth adding to his charge that, to accomplish the goal to build, “we must work.”

If our state’s future rests on our ability and commitment to build – houses, families, communities, and opportunities – then we must first ensure we have willing hands to do this work. We cannot achieve this without a skilled and sufficient construction workforce.

The unique labor market trends of the past decade, along with the associated strain on an essential

industry, call for thoughtful solutions that elevate work-based learning, expand apprenticeships, and broaden cultural norms to restore skilled trades as valued and honorable career paths.

Utah is well-positioned to advance such interventions, building on recent successes and an ongoing commitment to strengthening all pathways to vocational success for its residents.

Doing so will ensure thriving not just for the construction sector, but for all Utahns who benefit from a vibrant and growing free enterprise system that builds for our future.

Endnotes

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