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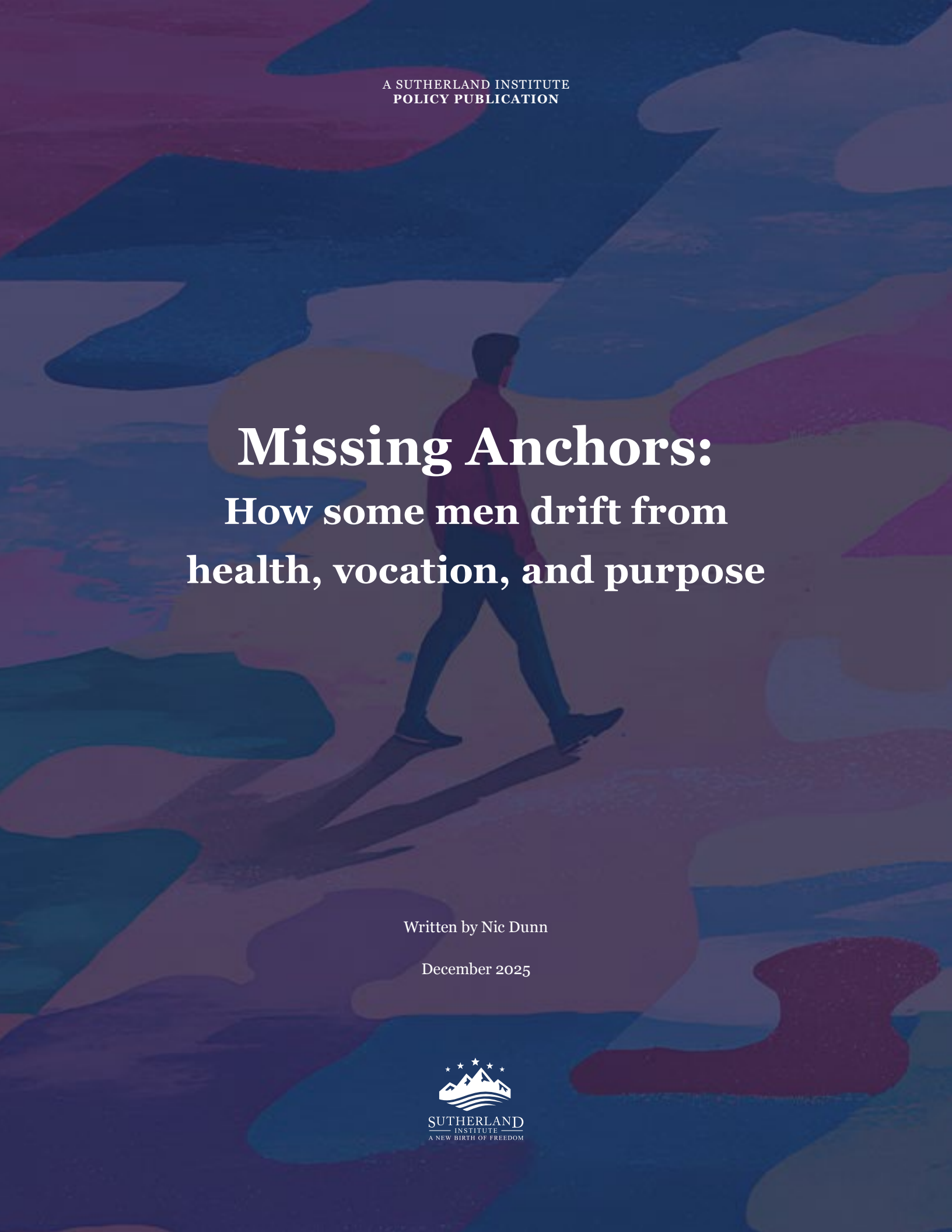

Missing Anchors:
How some men drift from health, vocation, and purpose

Written by Nic Dunn

December 2025

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How some men drift from health, vocation, and purpose

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“If a man knows not which port he sails, no wind is favorable.”

—Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius* (commonly quoted in Stoic literature)[1]

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Introduction/Executive Summary

While speaking with country music outlet All Country News, singer-songwriter Dax shared that "To Be A Man is the most important song I've ever written," adding that he is "praying this song reaches those who need it."[2] In the 2023 country/rap hybrid, Dax sings about men who grapple with challenges unnoticed by society:

> "Got so much weight that you've been holding but won't show any emotion
>
> As a man it goes unspoken
>
> That we can't cry when life gets hard
>
> Unconditional love's for women, children, and dogs
>
> We know that we just have to play our parts
>
> And don't nobody give a damn about our broken hearts."[3]

Soon after, a new version of the song featured a collaboration with country music star Darius Rucker, who, in his own verse, echoes Dax's sentiment:

> "I think about all the men out there who feel like I do now
>
> Who are screaming on the inside but won't ever make a sound."[4]

Popular music may seem an odd source from which to draw insights about timely social issues. But this song has starkly captured a phenomenon increasingly recognized by national scholars, elected officials, and the news media: the silent struggling of men across the nation.

National scholar Richard Reeves, in his book "Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It," chronicles the decline of men in education, mental health, and the workforce.[5] Sutherland Institute's weekly Defending Ideas show launched ongoing discussions with experts on these topics in spring 2025.[6] A 2023 Sutherland paper, *The Utah Family Miracle*, argued for a concerted effort to address these trends to support family stability in the state.[7]

Deseret News coverage of a Sutherland task force on the well-being of men and boys, in partnership with the Utah Office of Families, has further elevated the issue in Utah.[8]

The ability of men and boys to lead thriving lives in terms of health, vocation, and purpose continues to gain momentum as a priority issue for state and national leaders.[9]

To amplify that momentum, Sutherland Institute and Y2 Analytics surveyed cohorts of men in Utah and across the nation to capture robust experiential data that further defines the nature and scope of this issue. Building on a June 2025 Sutherland Impact Analysis[10] that briefly profiled initial topline nationwide findings, this paper provides policymakers, scholars, and community leaders with greater depth to understand the challenges faced by some men in our communities.

We found that most men in Utah and throughout the nation report general satisfaction with their health, work, family life, faith connection, and sense of meaning. Broadly speaking, work, family, faith, and community connection are often protective influences that contribute to men's internal sense of purpose and fulfillment. In other words, these civic institutions can serve as positive anchors that help men lead thriving lives. And for most men in Utah and throughout the United States, that holds true.

However, a significant portion of men struggle across these domains – all too often in ways that go unnoticed and unaddressed.

This silent, struggling subset of men ranges from 1 in 5 to 1 in 3 men across the nation, reporting poor marks when it comes to mental health issues, vocational prospects, or their sense of purpose. And though on average men in Utah do better than the national average on many metrics, the data uncovers unique challenges in the state worthy of understanding by elected and community leaders. Reviewing essential takeaways from this survey data in the three categories of health, vocation, and purpose illuminates the key problem areas.

When it comes to mental health, a number of men are isolated and experience stigma that discourages seeking help. Thirty percent of U.S. men and 15% of Utah men say they have no one to talk to about mental health. Twenty-two percent of men nationwide and 9% of men in Utah believe seeking professional help is a sign of weakness.

Though large majorities of both groups are employed, roughly 18% of men nationwide, and 13% of men in Utah, are dissatisfied with their current work situation. Nationwide, 17% of men do not believe their work is a significant source of meaning, while 18% of Utah men feel that way.

Self-reported feelings of purpose offer an important measure independently, and also have relationships with other areas in this survey, such as work, faith, family, and roles in the community. When asked about purpose broadly, 16% of men nationwide and 14% of men in Utah say they do not understand their purpose in life. Sixteen percent of men nationwide believe the things they do in life are not worthwhile, compared to 9% of Utah men. And thirty six percent of men across the country said they were struggling to understand their place in their community or wider society, compared to 24% of Utah men.

One of the starkest examples where Utah men actually report poorer measures than the national cohort is on perceptions of masculinity. Only 26% of Utah men believe there is a clear definition of what healthy masculinity looks like in society today, compared to 54% of men nationwide.

As the findings in this paper show, policymakers and community leaders who wish to help more men lead flourishing lives must begin by understanding the silent subset who struggle with mental health, vocational fulfillment, sense of purpose in life, and understanding of what healthy masculinity should be in the 21st century. Such an understanding provides an essential baseline for public discussions about how public policy reform and other community or societal interventions can make a positive impact.

The detailed findings below provide an essential starting point for such an effort.

Detailed Findings

In broad terms, most men in Utah and nationwide are doing reasonably well across these self-reported metrics. However, the findings below show that roughly 1 in 5 to more than 1 in 3 male respondents report struggling across one or multiple of the domains this survey covers.

As such, this report focuses on better profiling the silent, struggling subset of men whose difficulties often go unnoticed or underreported.

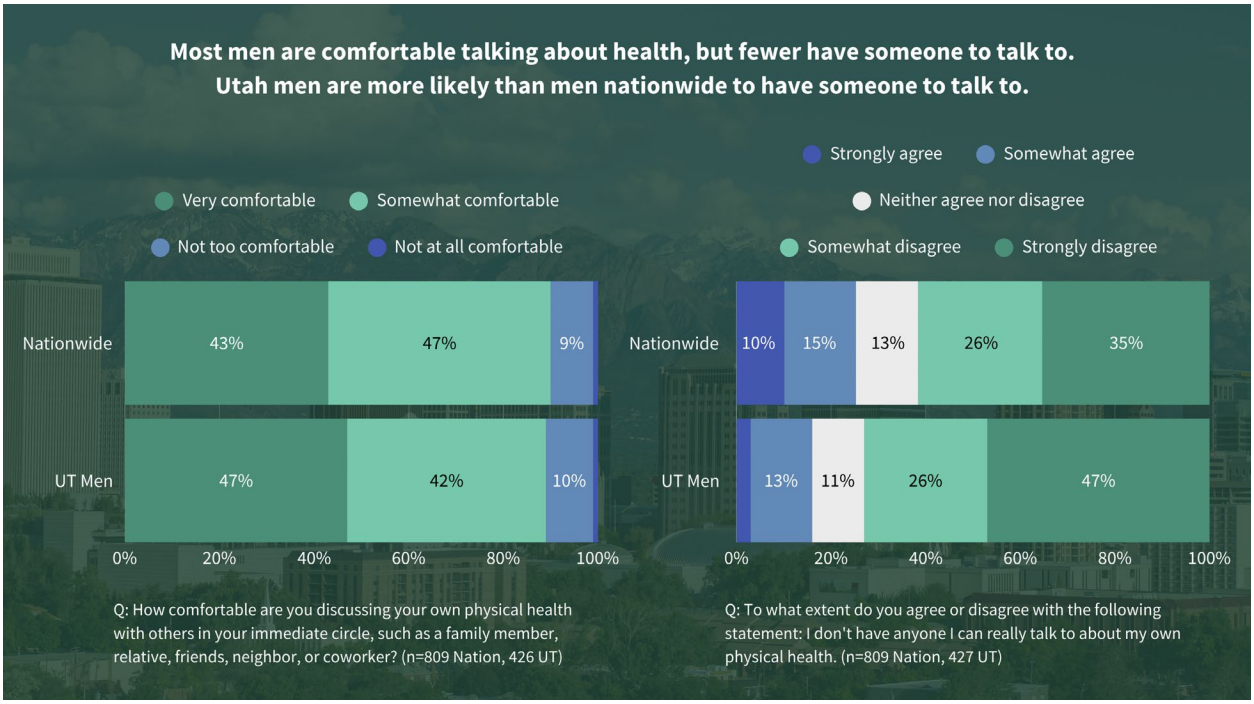
Health

When it comes to physical health, men in Utah and men nationwide report similar results. On a scale of 1 to 100 (100 meaning very good), men nationwide, on average, score their physical health at 72.55, and Utah men report an average of 73.48. The vast majority of respondents in both cohorts report being comfortable discussing their physical health with others. Smaller percentages (though still solid majorities) say they have someone they can talk to about their physical health.

Self-reported mental health is similar: Men nationwide report an average mental health score of 74.63, while Utah men report an average of 77.7.

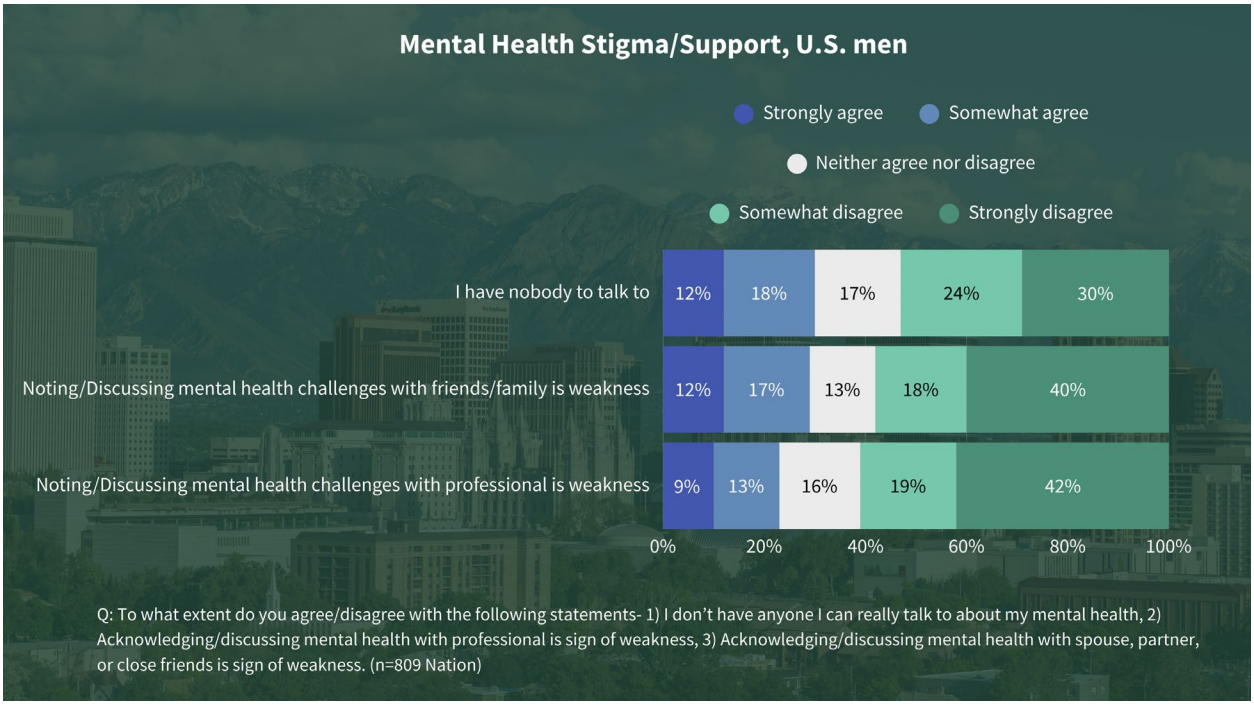
The survey asked respondents both in Utah and nationwide a series of questions to gauge the extent to which stigma is present, and whether social supports exist around male conversations about their own mental and emotional health.

> "I think men in general are problem solvers and so I just viewed therapy as kind of



something that… didn't apply to me necessarily or I didn't know how I would get benefit from it." *—Trevor, survey respondent and focus group participant (name changed for privacy)*

Here, the levels of stigma or social support reported by men nationwide and Utah men diverge. Nationwide, 30% of men say they don't have anyone they can really talk to about their mental health, while only 15% of Utah men say the same.



Mental Health Stigma/Support, Utah men

Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: (n=426)

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly Disagree
I don't have anyone I can really talk to about my own mental health	6%	9%	14%	28%	44%
Acknowledging and discussing mental health challenges with a professional is a sign of weakness	2%	7%	9%	16%	66%
Acknowledging and discussing mental health challenges with my spousem partner, family, or close friends is a sign of weakness	2%	7%	12%	19%	60%

Nationwide, 22% of men believe discussing mental health challenges with a professional is a sign of weakness. That perception actually increases to 29% when asked about discussing mental health challenges with someone in their immediate circle (like a spouse, partner, or close friend).

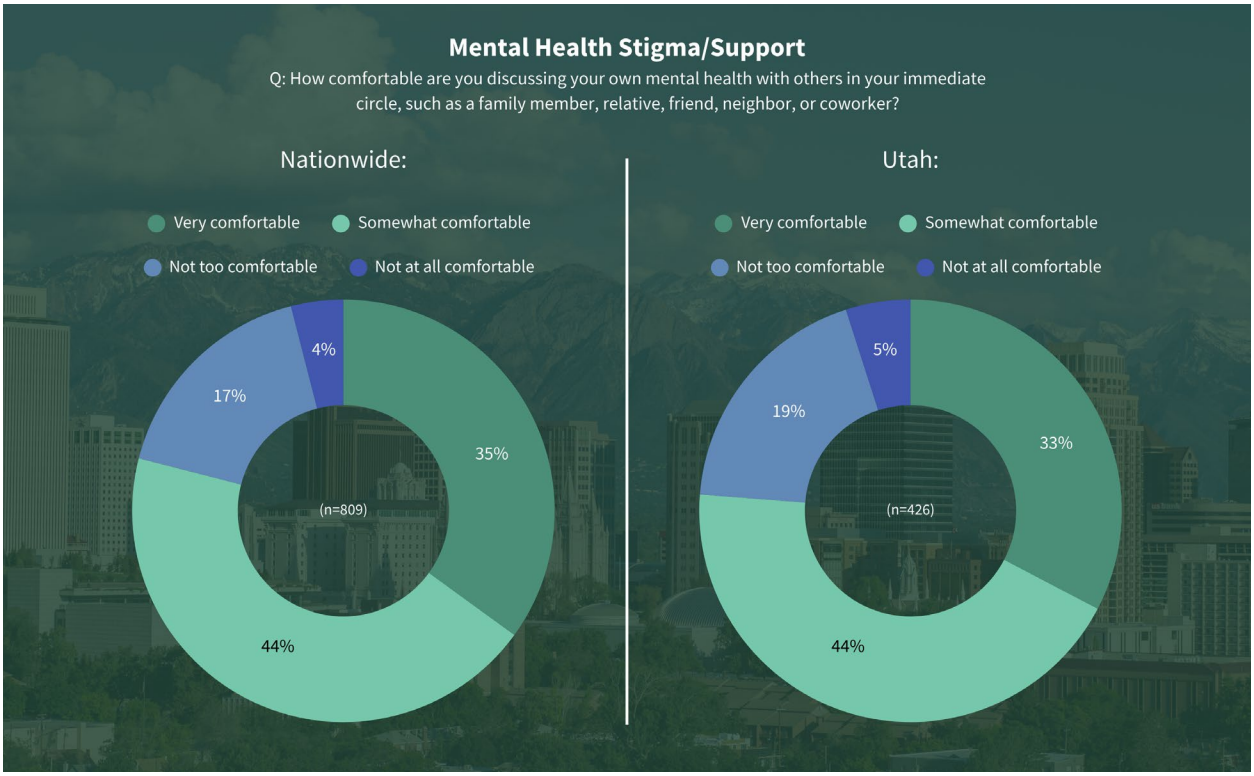
> "I cannot talk to my wife about almost anything other than the weather… it does get blown back in my face. I've learned to not talk to my wife about those things." *—Jason, survey respondent and focus group participant (name changed for privacy)*

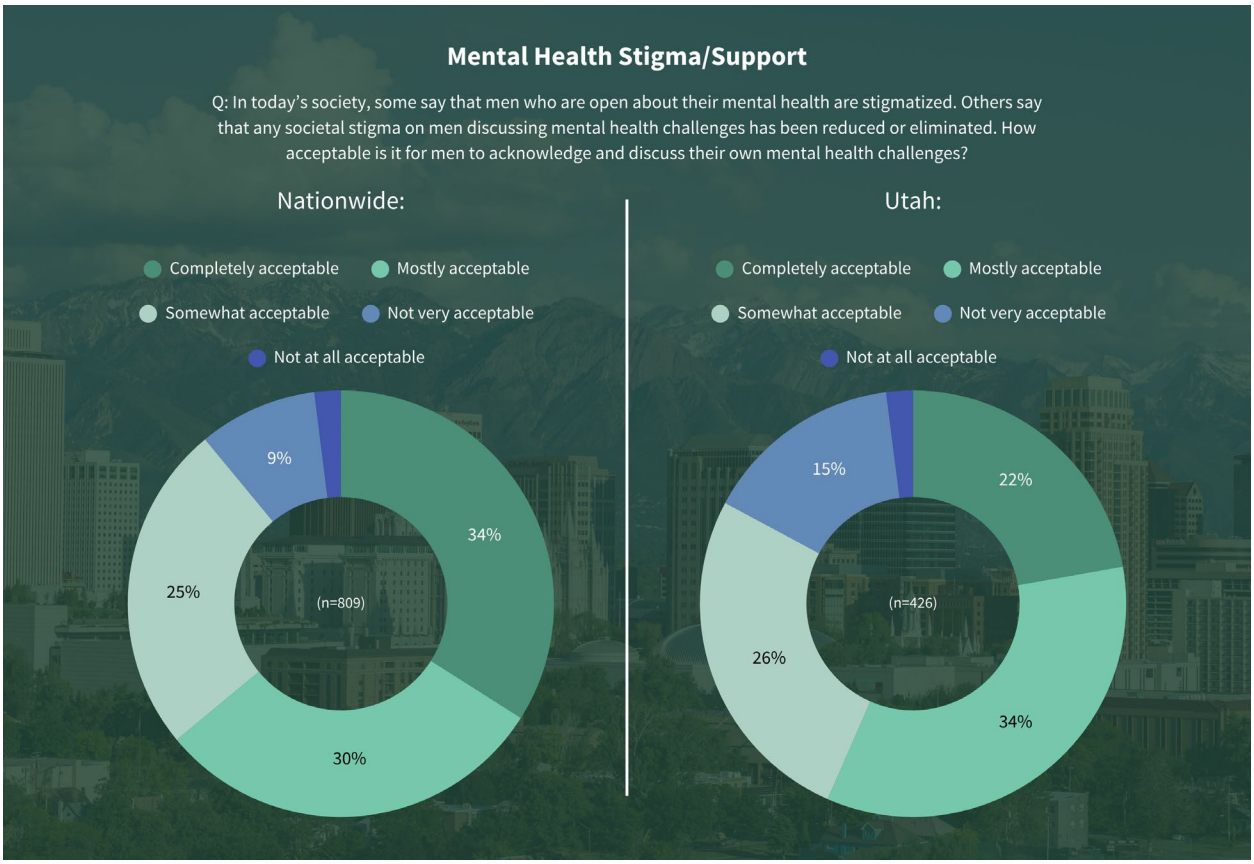
In Utah, only 9% of men believe discussing mental health challenges with a professional or a spouse/partner/friend is a sign of weakness.

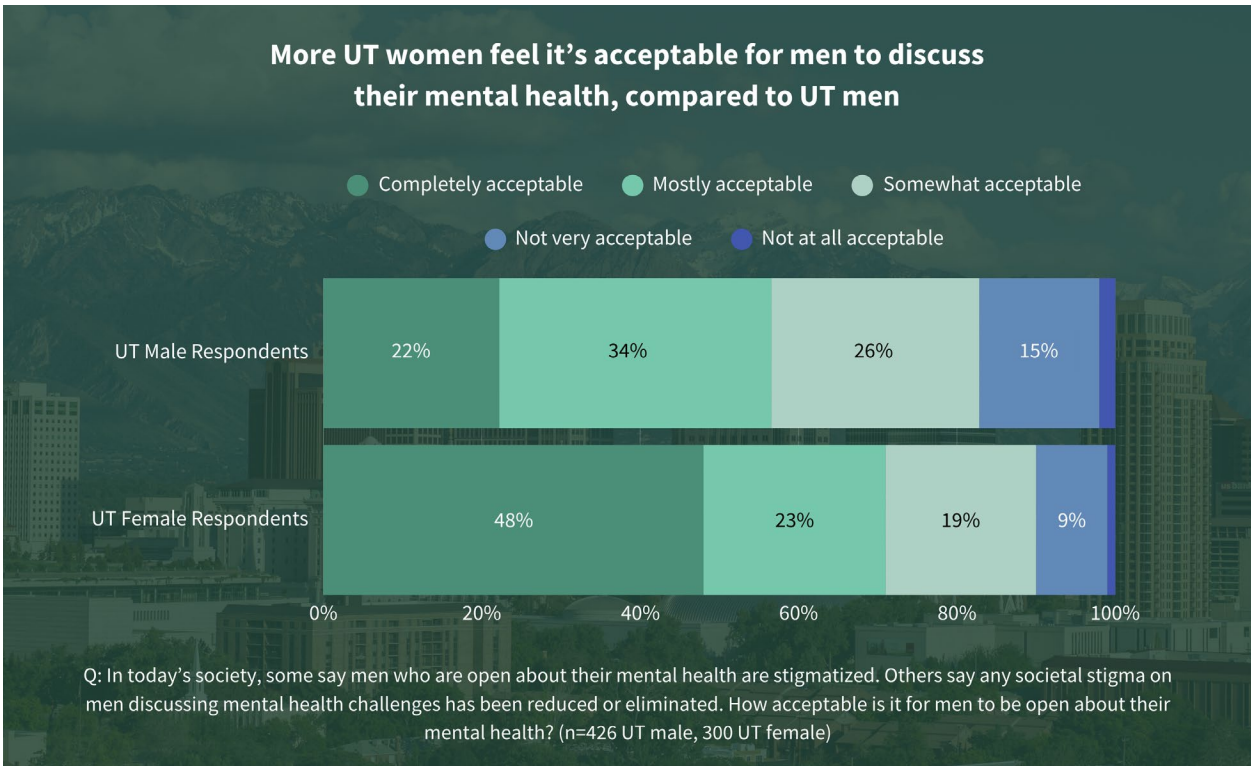
Despite these diverging trends between men in Utah and nationwide, both cohorts report similar comfort levels discussing their own mental health with others in their immediate circle.

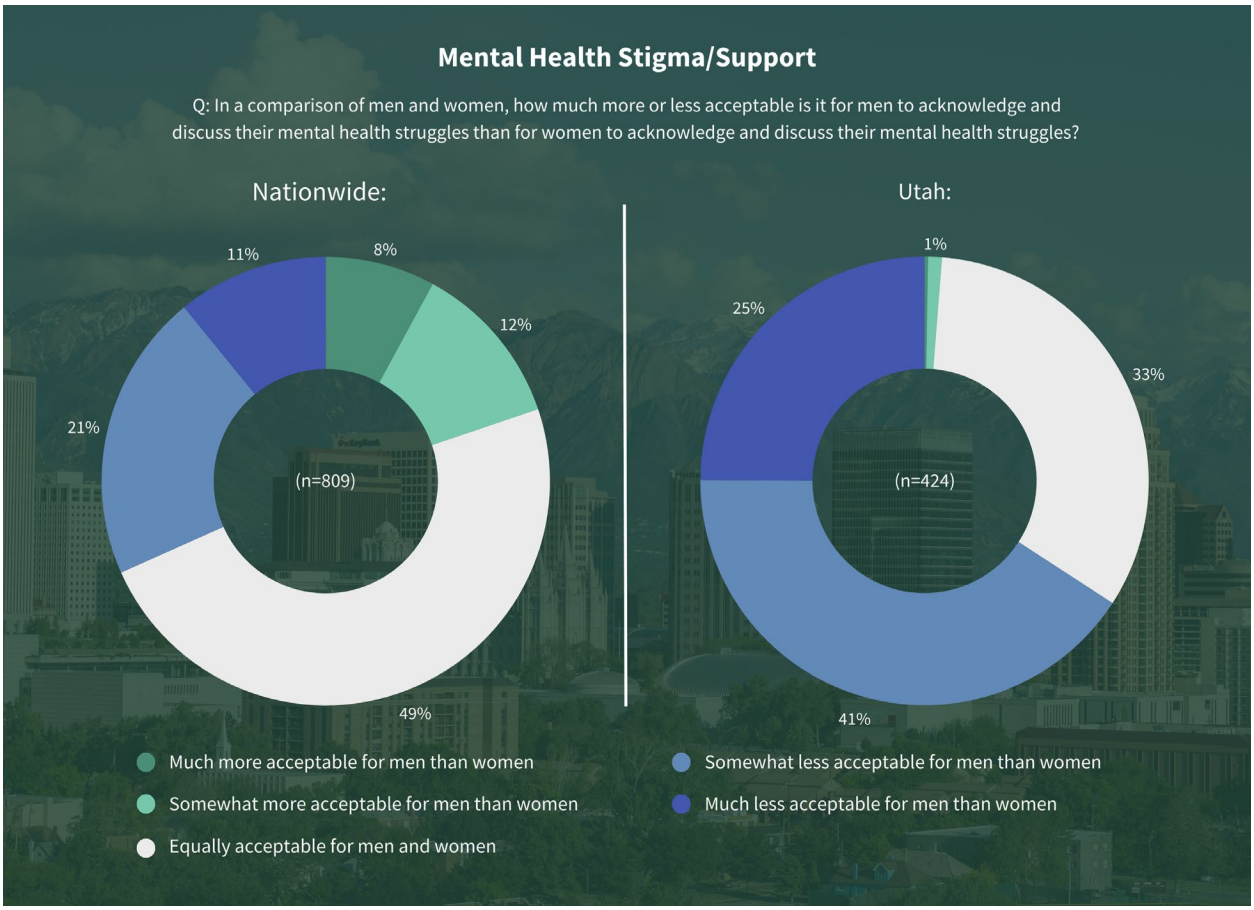
Men in Utah and nationwide also respond somewhat similarly to broad questions of whether it is societally acceptable for men to discuss their own mental health challenges. Solid majorities of both cohorts (64% of men nationwide and 56% of Utah men) say it's acceptable for men to discuss their own mental health challenges.

An important comparison to note here is the fact that Utah women are much more likely than Utah men to say it's acceptable for men to discuss mental health.




Mental Health Stigma/Support
Q: In today's society, some say that men who are open about their mental health are stigmatized. Others say that any societal stigma on men discussing mental health challenges has been reduced or eliminated. How acceptable is it for men to acknowledge and discuss their own mental health challenges?
Nationwide:
Completely acceptable
Mostly acceptable
Somewhat acceptable
Not very acceptable
Not at all acceptable
34%
30%
25%
9%
(n=809)
Utah:
Completely acceptable
Mostly acceptable
Somewhat acceptable
Not very acceptable
Not at all acceptable
22%
34%
26%
15%
(n=426)


More UT women feel it's acceptable for men to discuss their mental health, compared to UT men
Completely acceptable
Mostly acceptable
Somewhat acceptable
Not very acceptable
Not at all acceptable
UT Male Respondents
22%
34%
26%
15%
UT Female Respondents
48%
23%
19%
9%
0%
20%
40%
60%
80%
100%
Q: In today's society, some say men who are open about their mental health are stigmatized. Others say any societal stigma on men discussing mental health challenges has been reduced or eliminated. How acceptable is it for men to be open about their mental health? (n=426 UT male, 300 UT female)



Another stark difference emerges between the cohorts in Utah and nationwide when asked about societal acceptance of men discussing mental health challenges compared to women discussing mental health challenges.

Nearly a third (32%) of men nationwide believe it's less acceptable for men to discuss mental health struggles than for women, while 66% of Utah men hold that view.

> "I think society is working towards getting over the stigma, but being a guy is hard. You know, because you're expected to be the breadwinner and you're expected to, you know, be the rock, be able to solve all the problems and everything else."
>
> *—Brian, survey respondent and focus group participant (name changed for privacy)*

A few noteworthy takeaways are apparent in the mental health survey data.

- Close to 90% of men in both cohorts are comfortable talking about physical health
- 79% of men nationwide and 77% of Utah men are comfortable talking about mental health
- Utah men are about half as likely (15%) as men nationwide (30%) to say they don't have anyone they can talk to about mental health

- Utah men are also much less likely (9%) than men nationwide to believe talking about mental health with a professional (22%) or spouse/friend (29%) is a sign of weakness
- Utah men are significantly more likely (66%) than men nationwide (32%) to believe it's more acceptable for women, than for men, to discuss mental health challenges.

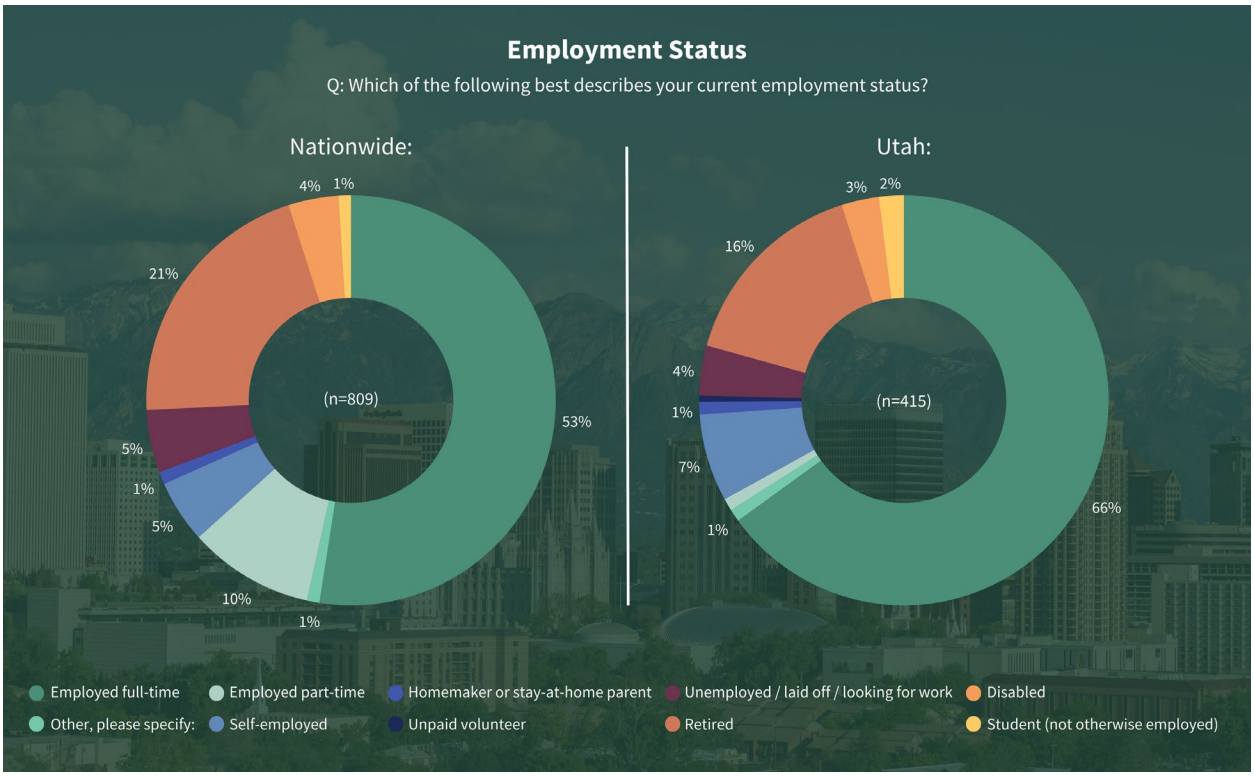
Vocation

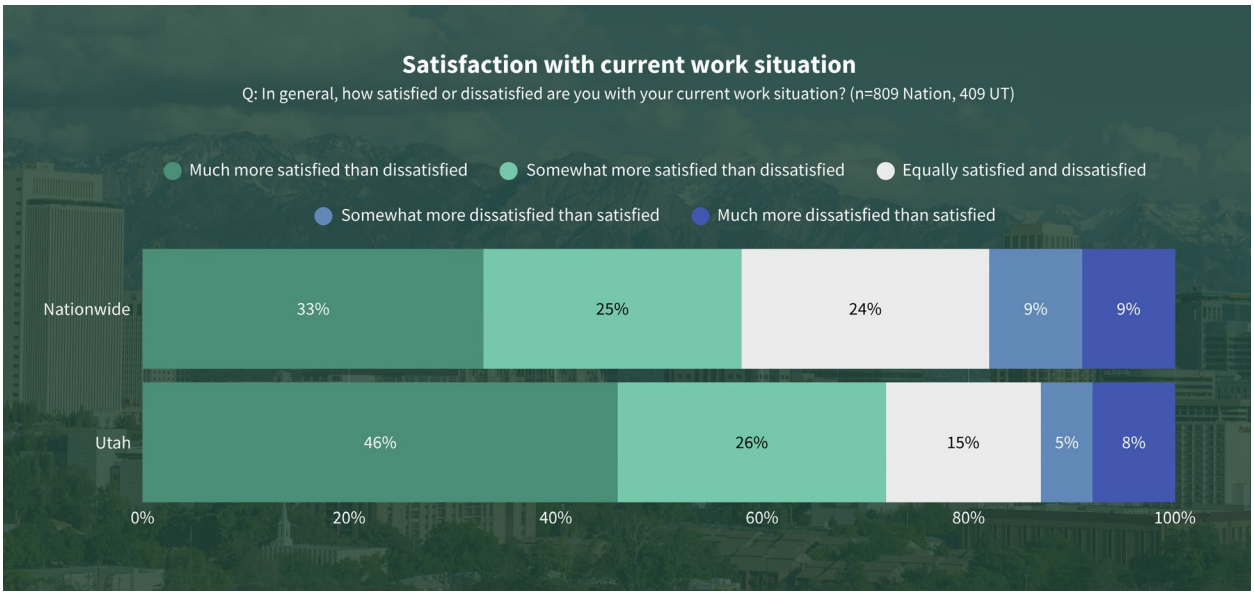
The employment-related responses show similar patterns, with majorities of both cohorts employed full-time and generally satisfied with their work situations. Utah men are employed full-time (66%) at higher rates than U.S. men (53%).

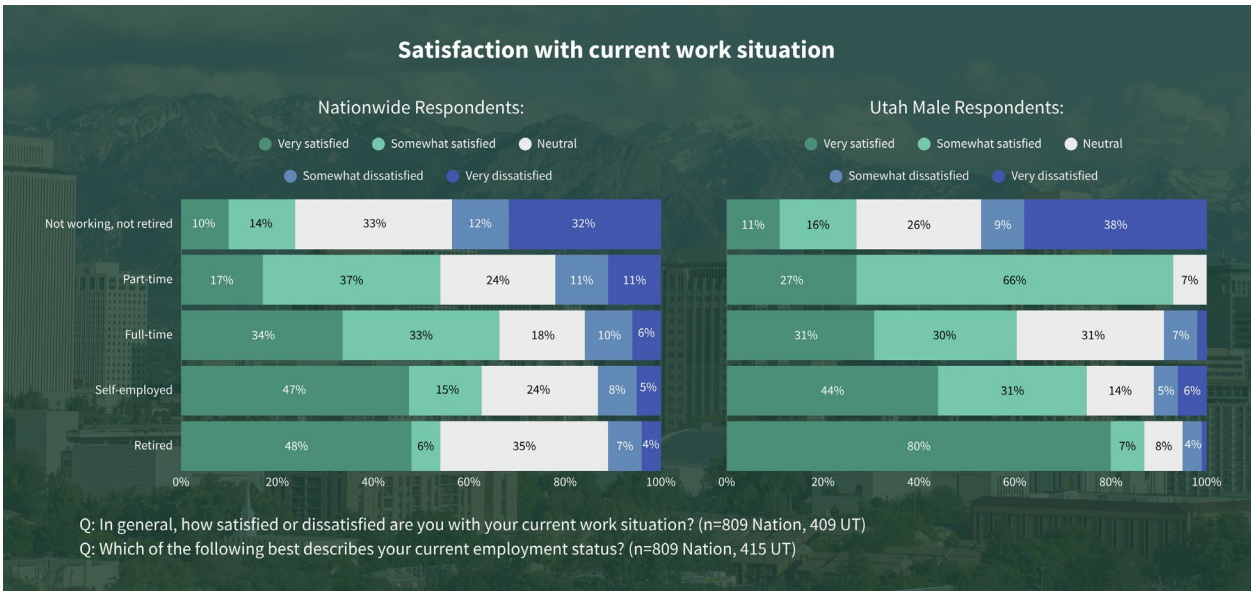
Overall, Utah men report higher satisfaction with their current work situation than men nationwide, but some differences emerge depending on the exact nature of the work situation.

The least satisfying work situation for men nationwide and in Utah was, not surprisingly, being neither working nor retired. Working, especially full-time or self-employed, appears to correlate with greater satisfaction with one's employment arrangement for both groups, while retired men in Utah were by far the most satisfied group.

Majorities of both groups, whether employed full-time or part-time, agree that work is a source of purpose, meaning, and life satisfaction. The effect is stronger for men employed full-time, with significantly higher percentages of full-time employed in both cohorts strongly agreeing compared to those employed part-time.

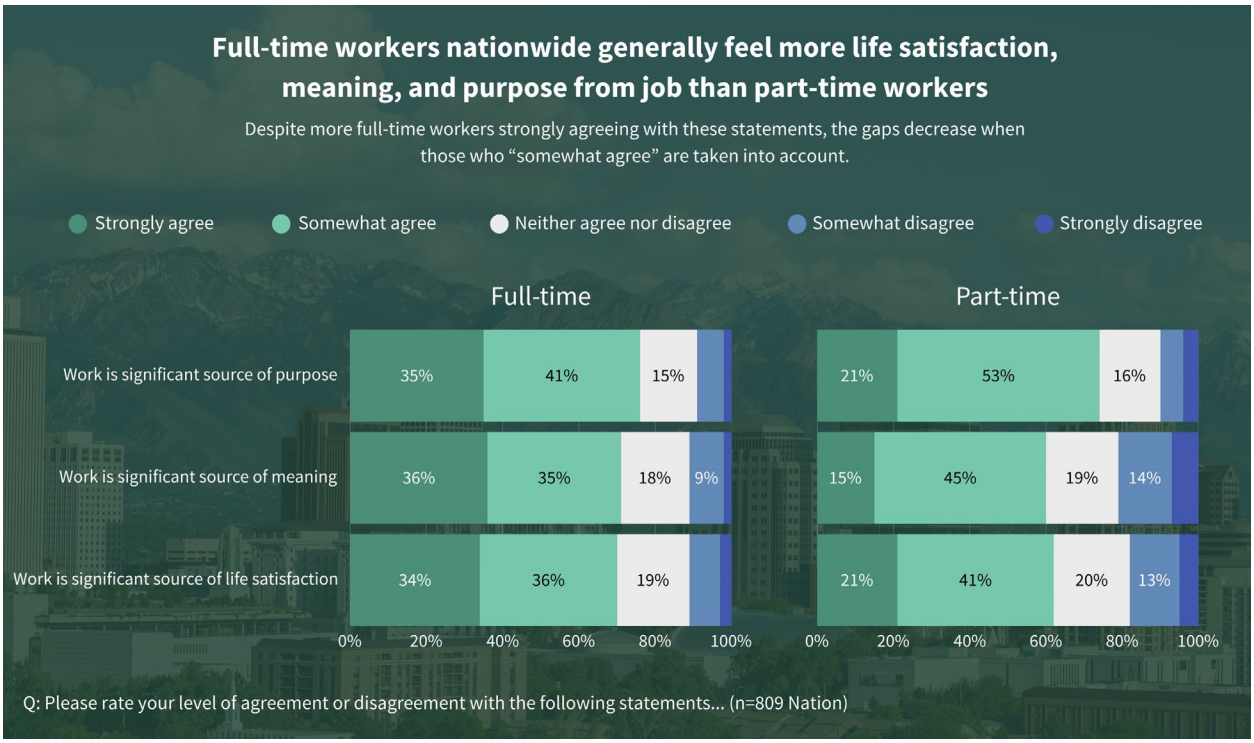


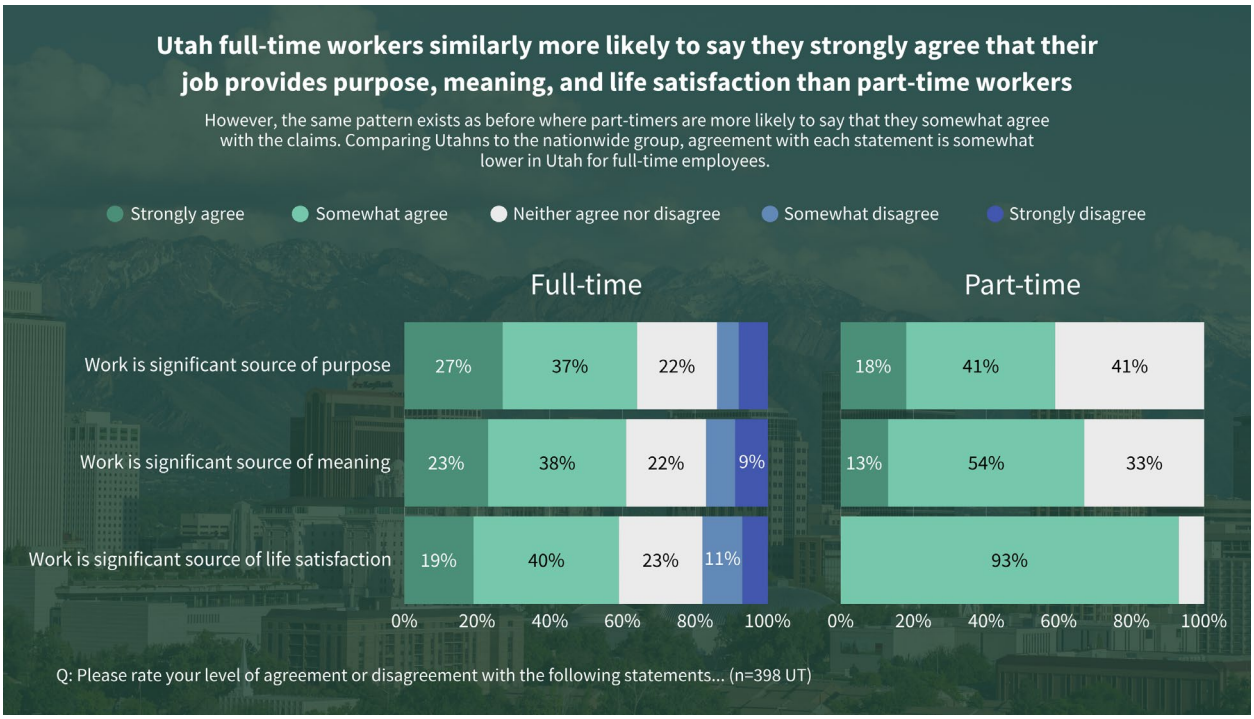




Several notable takeaways are evident in the vocational survey data.

- Most men in Utah and nationwide are employed and generally satisfied with their current work situation.
- There is a relationship with employment and overall work satisfaction, as men move from being unemployed to working part-time, then full-time, then self-employed, each successive employment situation prompts higher satisfaction.
- Retired men, especially in Utah, have some of the highest rates of satisfaction with their work situation.
- Most respondents believe that work is a source of purpose, meaning, and life satisfaction, with the effect more pronounced for full-time workers.





Purpose

The third category the survey explored – purpose – is perhaps the most subjective, but in some ways the most important. Self-reported metrics that indicate whether the respondent has a strong sense of purpose are essential. These metrics also have meaningful relationships with other domains in this survey data.

The purpose section of the survey gauged respondents' self-reported well-being in terms of overall life satisfaction, happiness, connection to family and faith, among other variables.

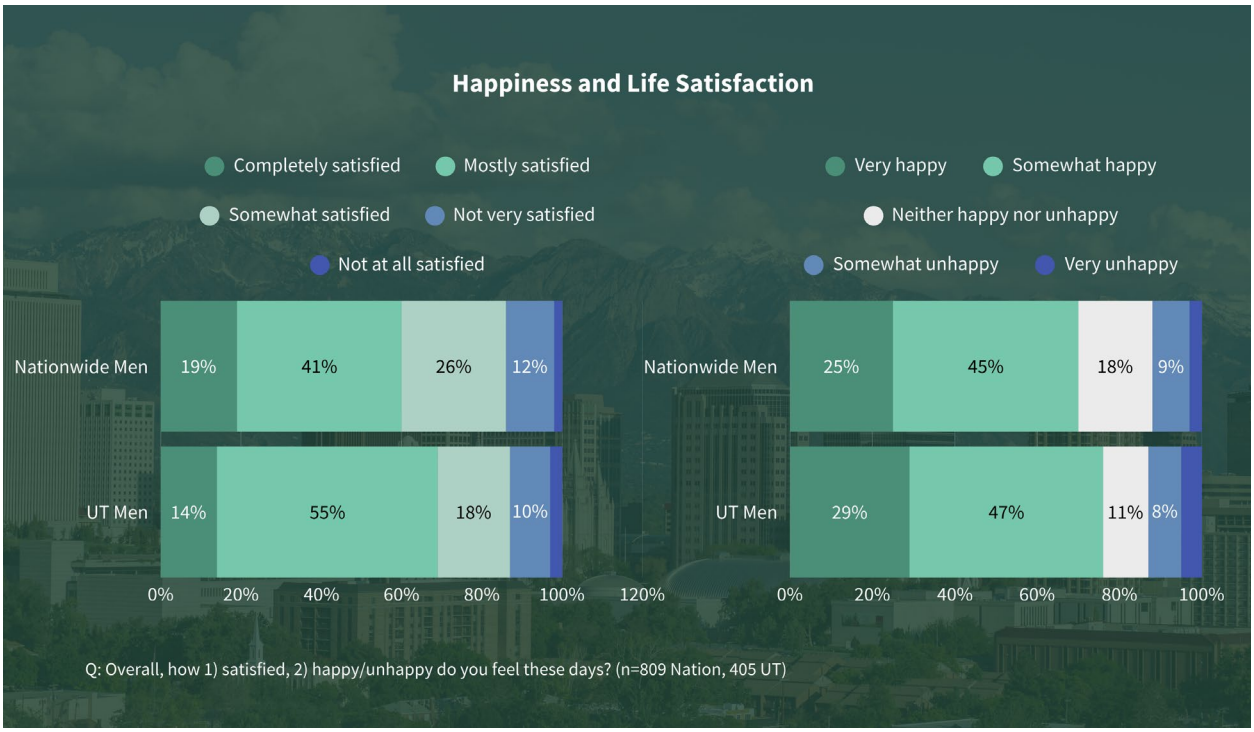
> "Men are expected to be the breadwinners, problem solvers, thinkers, the leaders. With how society is changing, again due to social media, a lot of men are being told that is not ok... I feel like that [is] a big factor with the rise of why men don't feel like they know their purpose anymore." *—Jason (survey respondent and focus group participant, name changed for privacy)*

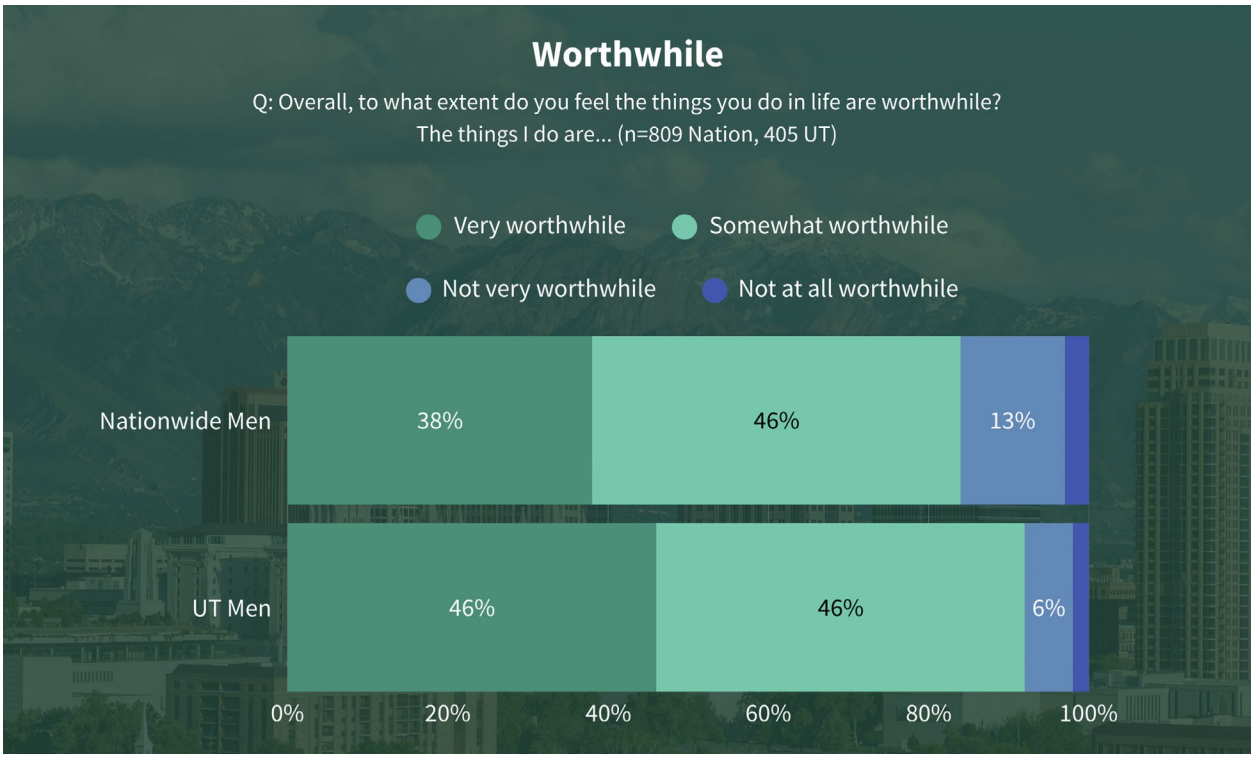
In broad terms, questions about life satisfaction and happiness showed similar positive patterns between respondents in Utah and nationwide.

Sixty percent of men nationwide and 69% of Utah men say they are completely or mostly satisfied "with life as a whole." Asking about happiness yields similar results, with 70% of men nationwide, and 76% of Utah men, saying they are very or somewhat happy.

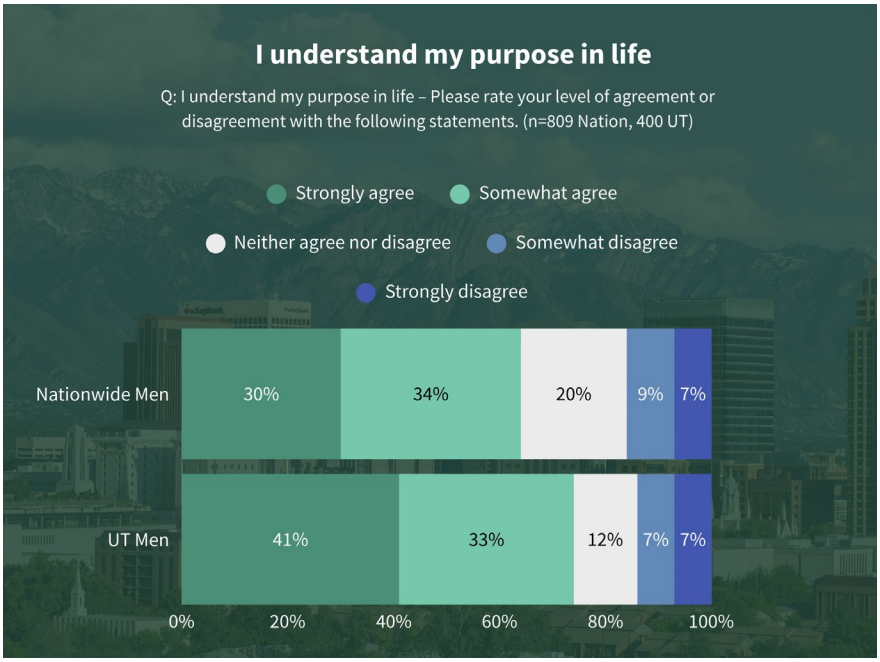
Large majorities of both cohorts believe the things they do in life are worthwhile, though the view is slightly more pronounced among Utah men. Nationwide, men have a higher rate of believing the things they do are not worthwhile (16%) compared to Utah men (9%).

Most men in Utah and nationwide agree with the notion that they understand their purpose in life, with similar trends for both cohorts.



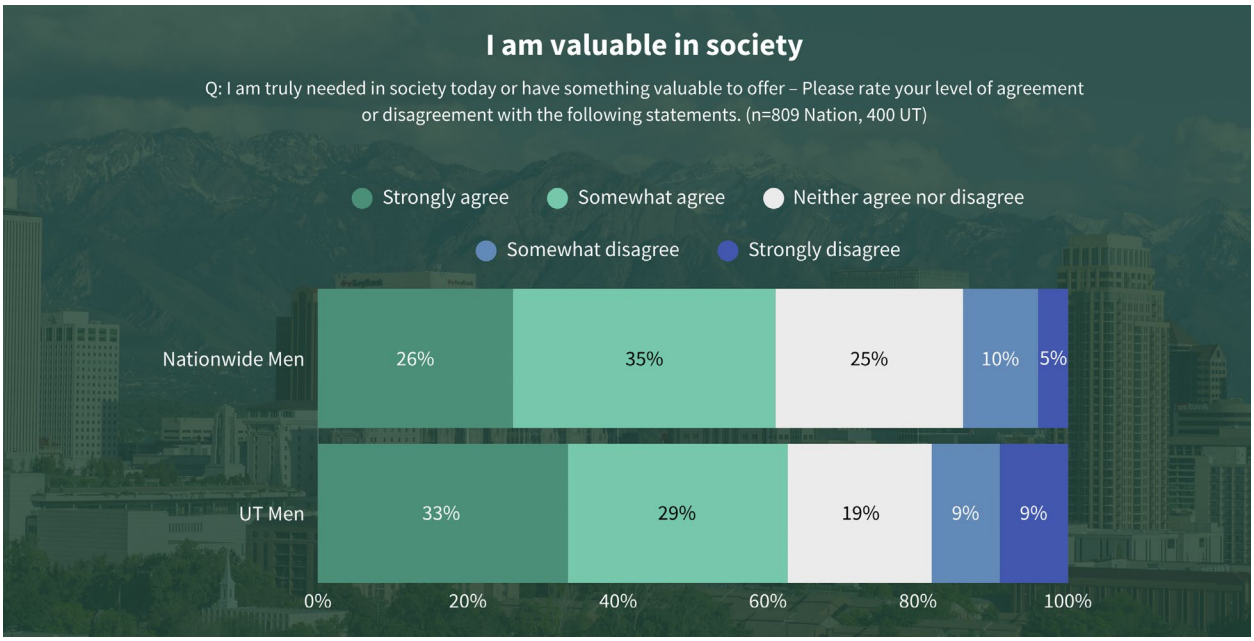


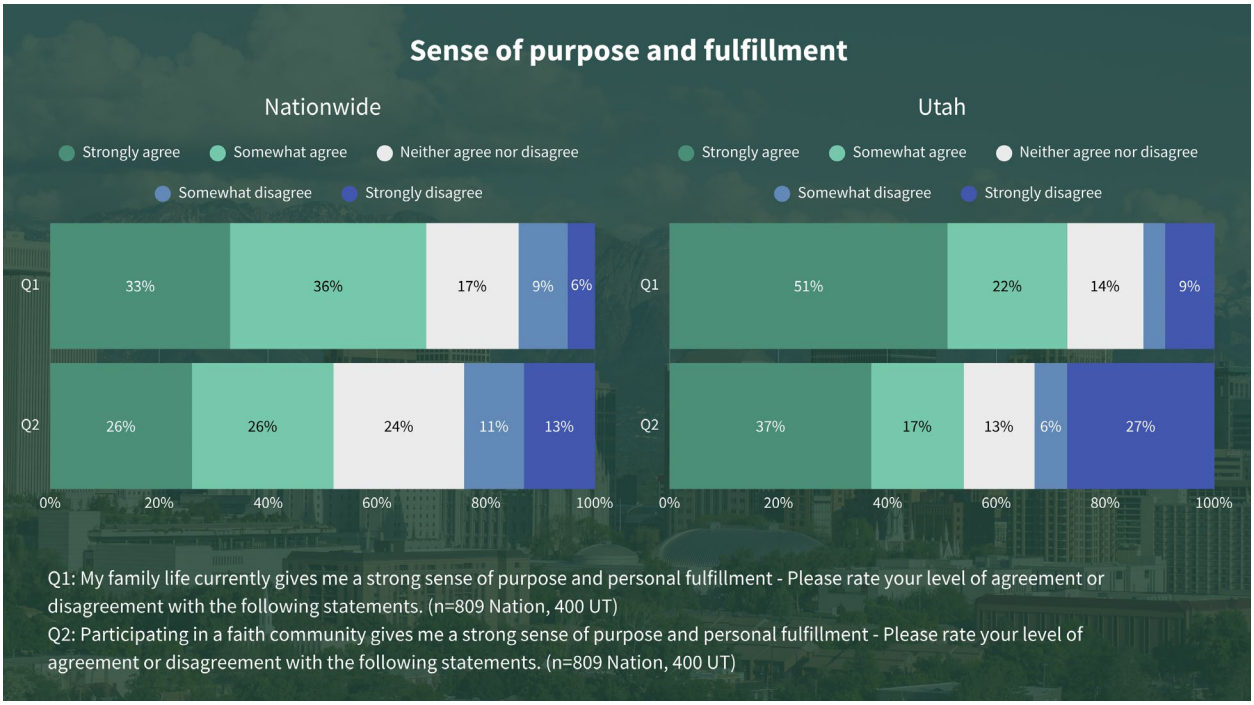
In the next section of findings, we group responses by respondents' relationships with people or broader society and compare the Utah and nationwide cohorts. These questions measure respondents' perceptions of their role in relation to aspects of daily life, including family, faith, societal expectations of male behavior, and more. Each of these can be interpreted as closely related to the overarching question of purpose.



Along similar lines, most men in both cohorts report that they feel needed or have something valuable to offer (61% of men nationwide and 62% of Utah men).

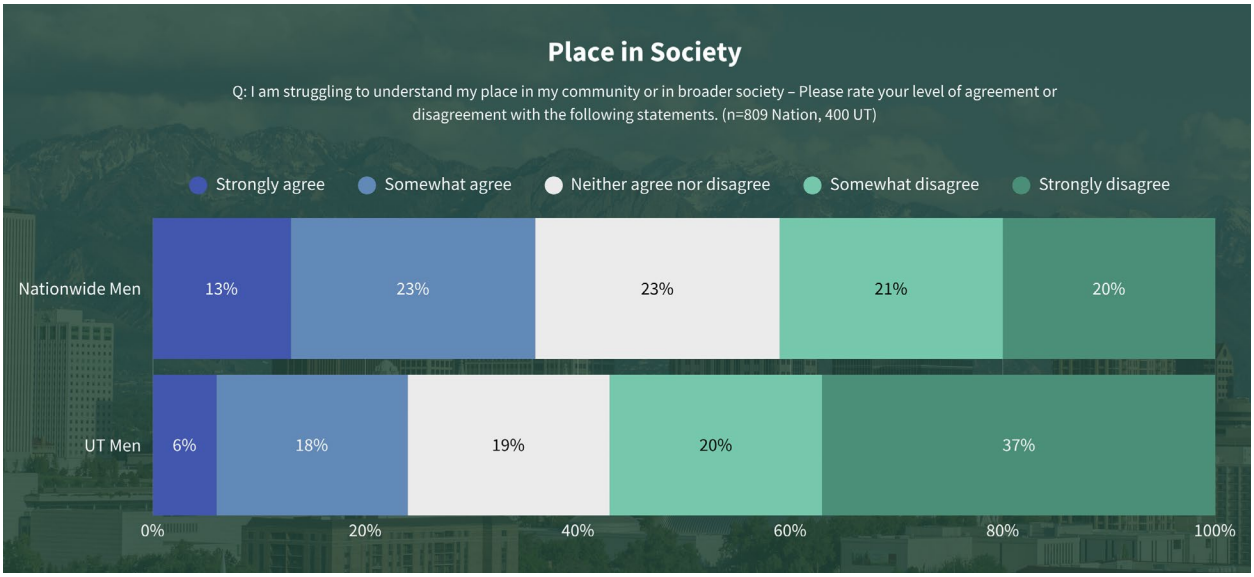
Family and faith are both supporting factors for purpose or fulfillment, with 69% of the nationwide cohort and 73% of the Utah cohort citing family as a positive support. In comparison, 51% of nationwide respondents and

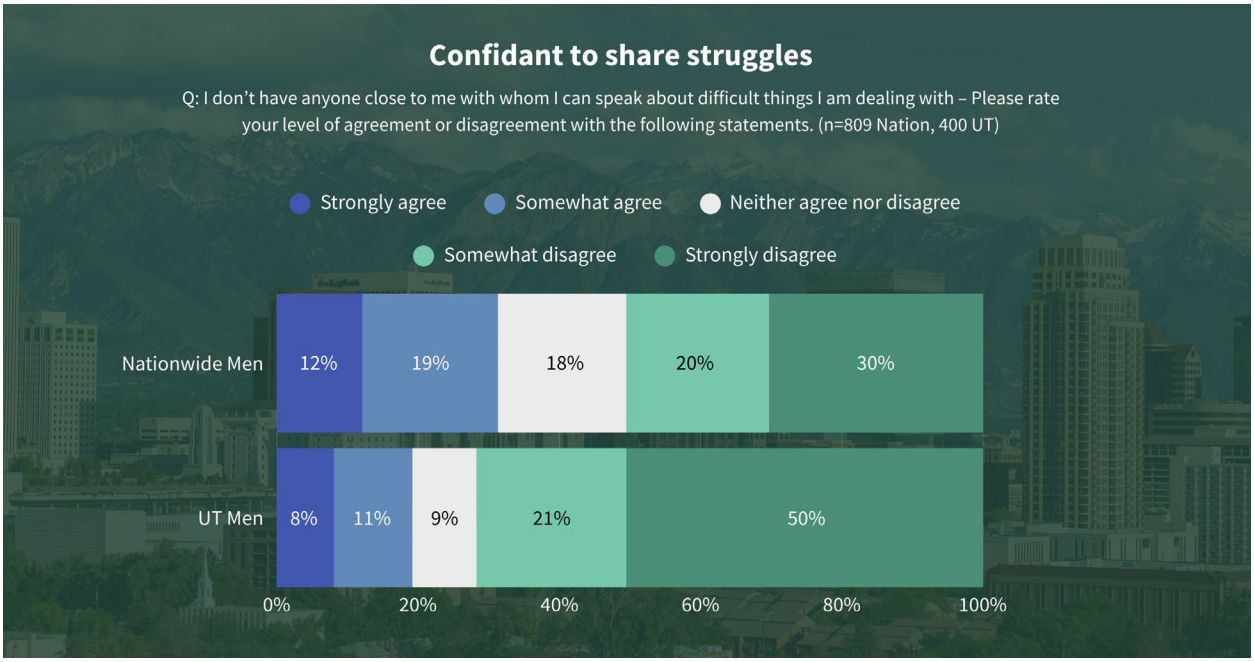




54% of Utah respondents cite faith as a positive support.

To explore the concepts of purpose and place within a community or society, we asked respondents a different question: whether they agreed with the statement, "I am struggling to understand my place in my community or in broader society." Utah men were significantly more likely to disagree with this idea (57%) than men nationwide (41%). Alarmingly, 36% of men across the country said they were struggling to understand their place in their





community or wider society, compared to 24% of Utah men.

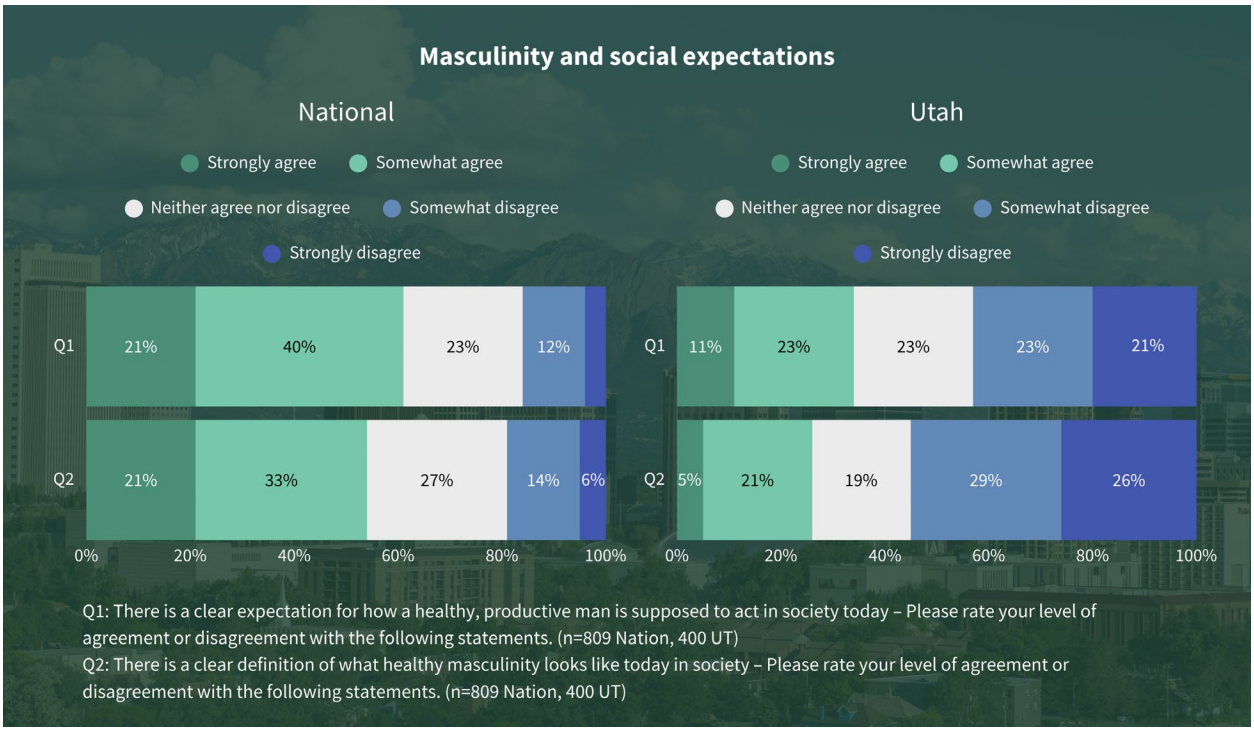
In the same vein as measuring the feeling of connection to family, a faith community, or society by a sense of purpose – and associated positive effects – respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement, "I don't have anyone close to me with whom I can speak about difficult things I am dealing with."

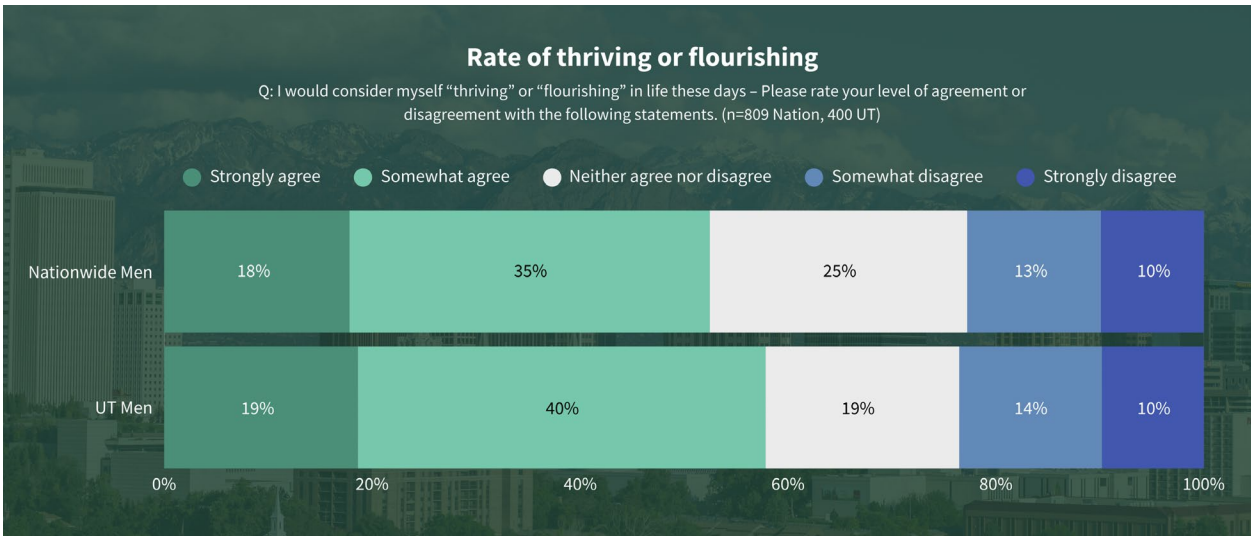
Nationally, 31% of men agreed with the statement while 50% disagreed. In Utah, the gap was wider: 19% of men agreed with the statement and 71% disagreed.

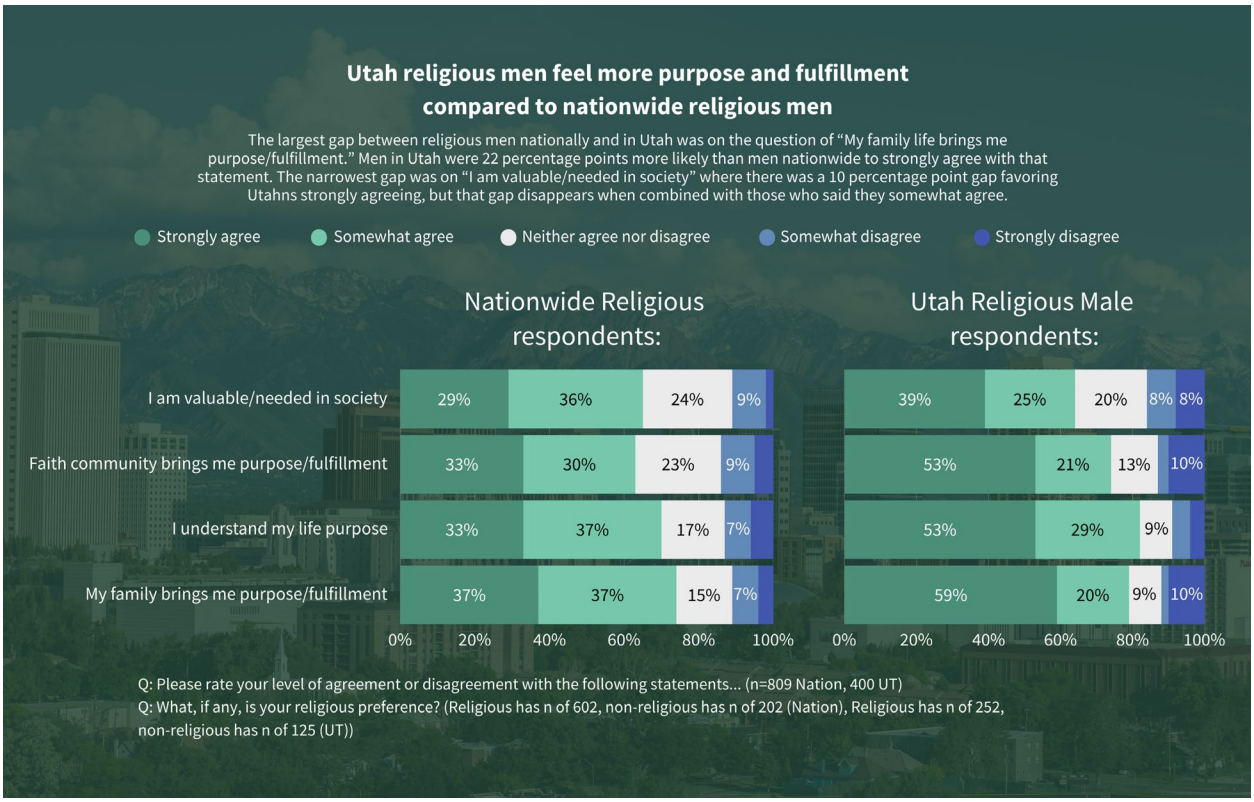
Perceptions of societal definitions of masculinity and expectations for male behavior reveal some of the starkest differences between Utah and nationwide respondents.

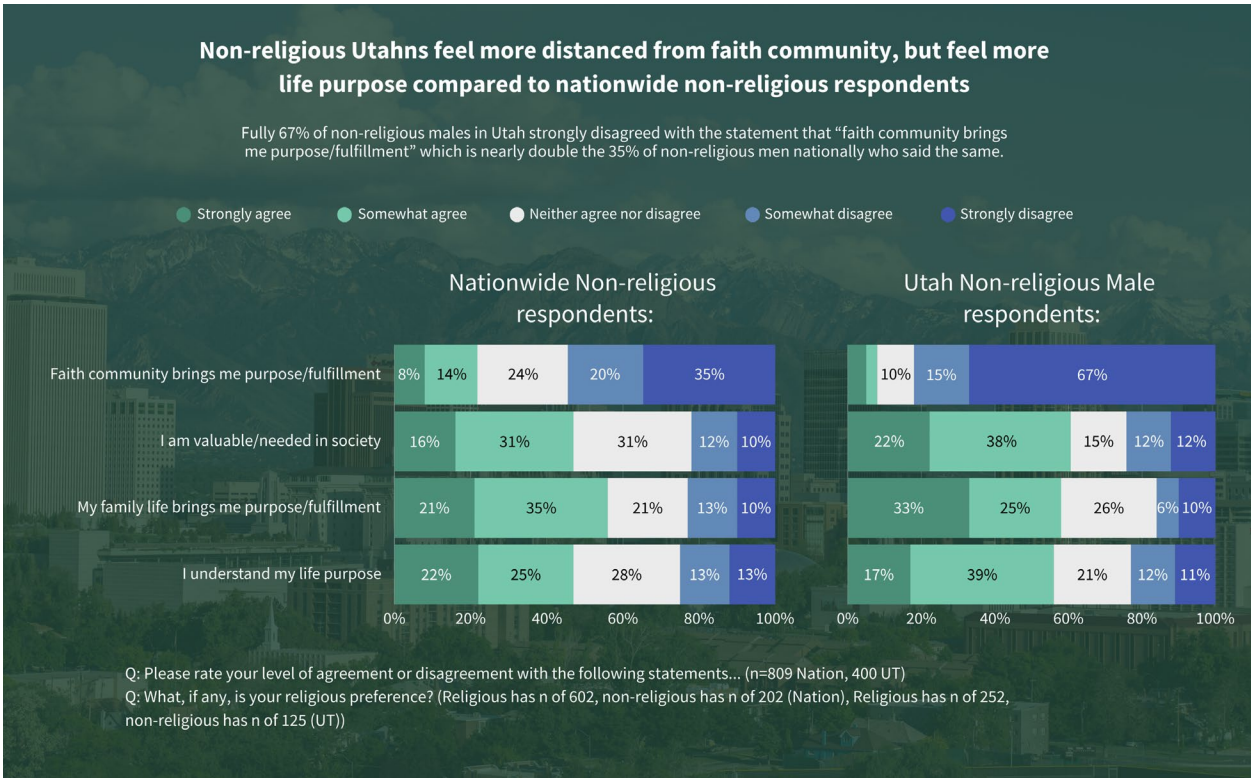
Only **26%** of Utah men believe there is a clear definition of what healthy masculinity looks like in society today, compared to **54%** of men nationwide. Similarly, just **34%** of Utah men believe there are clear expectations for how a healthy, productive man is supposed to act in society today, compared to **61%** of men nationwide.

All the major findings highlighted thus far can be reviewed through the lens of this hypothetical exchange: Imagine that every elected official, scholar, or community leader who cares about men leading thriving lives could ask how men are doing in broad terms.






Utah religious men feel more purpose and fulfillment compared to nationwide religious men
The largest gap between religious men nationally and in Utah was on the question of "My family life brings me purpose/fulfillment." Men in Utah were 22 percentage points more likely than men nationwide to strongly agree with that statement. The narrowest gap was on "I am valuable/needed in society" where there was a 10 percentage point gap favoring Utahns strongly agreeing, but that gap disappears when combined with those who said they somewhat agree.
Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree
Nationwide Religious respondents:
Utah Religious Male respondents:
I am valuable/needed in society
29% 36% 24% 9%
39% 25% 20% 8% 8%
Faith community brings me purpose/fulfillment
33% 30% 23% 9%
53% 21% 13% 10%
I understand my life purpose
33% 37% 17% 7%
53% 29% 9%
My family brings me purpose/fulfillment
37% 37% 15% 7%
59% 20% 9% 10%
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%
Q: Please rate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements... (n=809 Nation, 400 UT)
Q: What, if any, is your religious preference? (Religious has n of 602, non-religious has n of 202 (Nation), Religious has n of 252, non-religious has n of 125 (UT))


Non-religious Utahns feel more distanced from faith community, but feel more life purpose compared to nationwide non-religious respondents
Fully 67% of non-religious males in Utah strongly disagreed with the statement that "faith community brings me purpose/fulfillment" which is nearly double the 35% of non-religious men nationally who said the same.
Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree
Nationwide Non-religious respondents:
Utah Non-religious Male respondents:
Faith community brings me purpose/fulfillment
8% 14% 24% 20% 35%
10% 15% 67%
I am valuable/needed in society
16% 31% 31% 12% 10%
22% 38% 15% 12% 12%
My family life brings me purpose/fulfillment
21% 35% 21% 13% 10%
33% 25% 26% 6% 10%
I understand my life purpose
22% 25% 28% 13% 13%
17% 39% 21% 12% 11%
0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%
Q: Please rate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements... (n=809 Nation, 400 UT)
Q: What, if any, is your religious preference? (Religious has n of 602, non-religious has n of 202 (Nation), Religious has n of 252, non-religious has n of 125 (UT))

Such a question may be formulated by asking men whether they agreed with the following statement, as it was posed to both state and national cohorts in our survey: "I would consider myself 'thriving' or 'flourishing' in life these days."

Surely, thriving or flourishing is the ultimate goal of understanding and potentially intervening to address the challenges men may face.

Nationwide, 53% of men agreed with the statement, while 23% did not. In Utah, 59% agreed and 24% disagreed.

The survey data also indicate that religiosity is positively associated with other measures of purpose. Of religious men across the country, 65% say they are valuable or needed in society, and 70% say they understand their life purpose. Those measures drop for non-religious men nationwide, to only 47% saying they are valuable or needed in society, and 47% saying they understand their life purpose.

There are some parallels at the state level. Among Utah men who are religious, 65% say they are valuable or needed in society, while 82% say they understand their life purpose. For non-religious men in Utah, 60% say they are valuable or needed in society, and 56% say they understand their life purpose.

Discussion

Reviewing these key findings is, in some ways, encouraging. Solid majorities of men in Utah and across the country respond favorably when asked about their mental health, employment, family life, faith connection, support structures, sense of purpose, and much more.

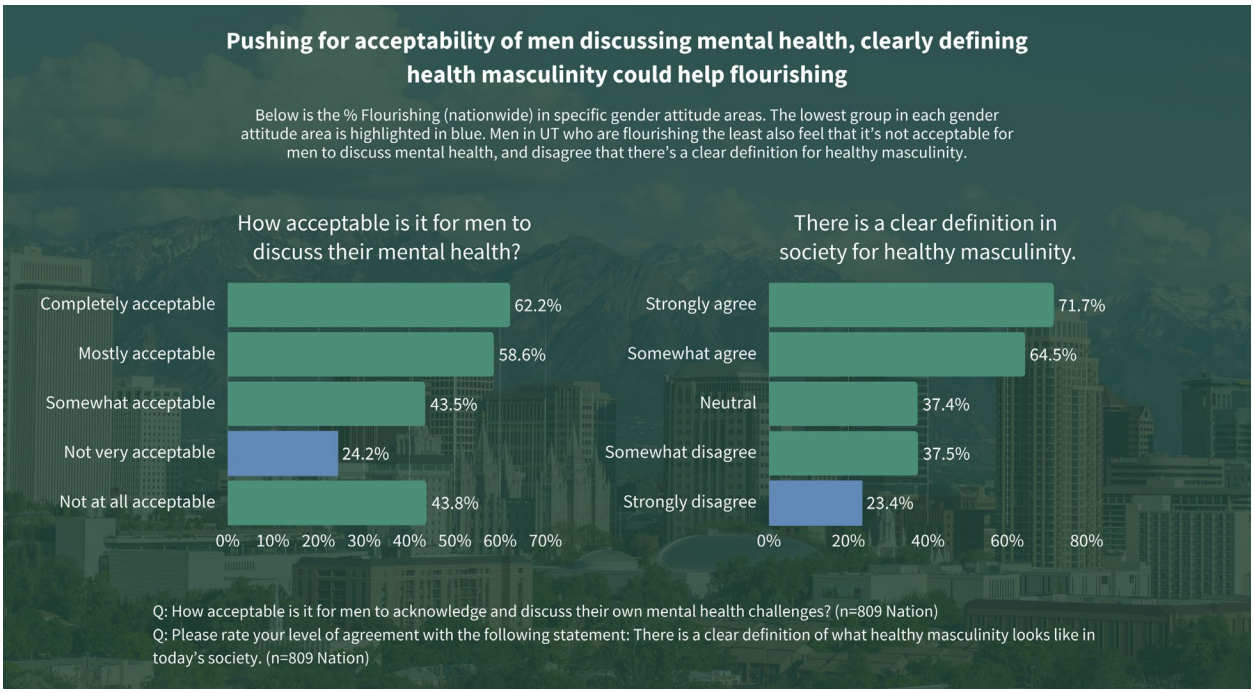
However, the evidence is clear that a sizable subset of men, both in Utah and across the nation, struggles in these domains.

There is consistently between roughly one-fifth and one-third of men who report some variation of mental health stigma or lack of social support to discuss challenges they're facing. More than 1 in 10 men in Utah and nearly 1 in 5 men nationwide aren't satisfied with their work situation. Over a third of men nationwide, and a quarter in Utah, struggle to understand their place in their community or broader society.

These findings uncover what we might call a silent, struggling subset of men in Utah and across the nation. These men quietly drift from the anchors of work, family, faith, and purpose that ground an internal sense of meaning and flourishing that drives and sustains a socially productive and individually happy life.

This naturally prompts the question of what to do next, as a state and as a nation.

This paper does not include the customary recommendations section because Sutherland's Men & Boys Wellbeing Initiative will include subsequent publications with specific policy recommendations,



created in conjunction with the Task Force on the Wellbeing of Men and Boys.

However, a helpful place to start for policymakers and community leaders is to push for more widespread acceptability and social expectations of men discussing mental health, while also striving to better define 21st-century masculinity.

Poor flourishing is associated with unfavorable views about the acceptability of discussing mental health, as well as with the belief that there isn't a clear definition of healthy masculinity in society today.

In other words, addressing the stigma around men discussing mental health while bolstering community definitions of healthy masculinity could both be impactful in raising self-reported rates of flourishing among men who currently struggle.

Conclusion

This paper is not intended to be exhaustive in answering each element of men's struggles, nor in providing a roadmap to solutions. Rather, it offers an essential step forward in better comprehending the silent, struggling subset of men in America and here in Utah, who grapple with challenges related to their mental health, employment, connection to family, faith, and community, and broader sense of purpose.

This data, along with subsequent conversations drawing on these findings, coupled with ongoing dialogue about the role public policy reforms and civic institutional engagement can play, will meaningfully advance this effort in Utah.

Returning to the singer/songwriter whose work helped set the stage for this paper's findings offers a fitting close:

> "That's why we feel
> We can't hide ourselves
> We don't expect you to understand
> We just hope we can explain
> What it's like to be a man"

For too long, the struggles some men in modern society face have gone unmeasured, unreported, and unaddressed. This report sheds essential light on what it's like "to be a man," for those men in Utah and across the nation who struggle in the domains of health, vocation, or purpose.

Moving forward, it is essential that policymakers, scholars, community leaders, and all who wish to bolster the ability of men to lead thriving lives incorporate these findings into public discussions of how to help.

Appendix: Report Framework and Methodology

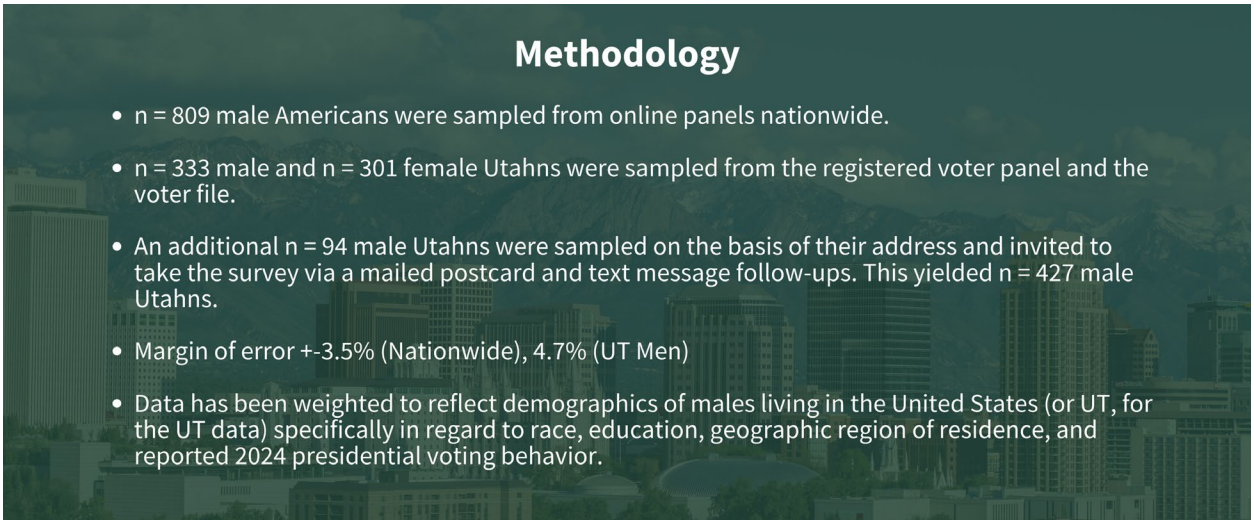
Public discussions of timely social issues benefit from the wealth of statistical or administrative data available to experts, but too often overlook the value of experiential data. Gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the subject of this area of study is essential to properly defining the problem we hope to solve.

Sutherland Institute frequently partners with Y2 Analytics, a Utah-based research and analytics firm, to field public opinion surveys on timely topics. For this project, Sutherland engaged Y2 to survey a cohort of men in Utah, a cohort of men nationwide, and an additional cohort of Utah women. This multi-cohort sampling yielded valuable cross-comparisons, many of which are highlighted in this report.

Following a similar structure to the three-pronged focus of the work of the Task Force on the Wellbeing of Men and Boys, this survey asked respondents about their self-reported well-being in three broad categories: (1) health (mental and physical), (2) vocation (education and work), and (3) purpose.

Similarly, in September 2025, Sutherland conducted a series of discussions with select survey respondents to yield deeper, anecdotal insights. These discussions included a series of one-on-one phone interviews, and a combined virtual focus group meeting. Where names have been changed to protect the personal identities of participants who share sensitive information, this is noted explicitly.

To access additional resources associated with this report, such as full survey questionnaires and results, visit the publication page for this report on Sutherland's website at sutherlandinstitute.org.



Appendix: Focus Group Themes

In September 2025, Sutherland conducted a virtual focus group discussion with five men who responded to the survey. These men were selected from a list of respondents who expressed willingness to participate in focus groups and provided contact information. Where quotes are used in this report, names have been changed to respect privacy and in recognition of the sometimes sensitive nature of the discussion. Below are key themes from the focus group discussion that underscore findings in the survey data.

Mental Health and Social Isolation

Participants confirmed that men at times are reluctant to discuss mental and emotional health challenges, due to a fear that they will be judged by others for admitting that they are struggling. In particular, there was a worry that such admissions would be "thrown back" at them, with one participant saying he felt uncomfortable talking about it with his wife due to fear that she would use it to criticize him.

Participants emphasized feelings of social isolation that they believe men can experience, especially when men's day-to-day lives are dominated by family and work responsibilities. They said that creating friendships with other men is a challenge, and expressed a limited number of male friendships that offer socialization opportunities as well as emotional support. Modern technology – social media in particular – was cited as a negative contributor to social isolation and loneliness. There was broad agreement that social media has had a largely negative effect on men's wellbeing, citing it as a cause of stress and source of division in society and even within the home.

Work and Financial Life

The discussion in some ways mirrors the survey findings that older retired respondents report high marks in this category. Younger or middle-aged participants expressed concerns over inflation, housing costs, job security, and their ability to achieve the American Dream. They see professional success as important and valuable, but said that doesn't always translate to success or respect in the home. Some said that the opportunity to work remotely is a positive, but also can lead to stronger feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Purpose and Connection

Participants said that men today are told that their traditional instincts – to protect, provide, and lead – are no longer societally acceptable. This correlates with survey findings of lack of clarity of modern societal expectations for men. They also cited the purpose-related benefits of family, volunteering, and faith connection.

Endnotes

[1] https://dailystoic.com/stoic-quotes/

[2] https://www.allcountrynews.com/post/country-innovator-dax-teams-up-with-darius-rucker-to-share-a-universal-message-in-to-make-a-man

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHxip2x-PLc

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuyisGsNr4g

[5] https://www.amazon.com/Boys-Men-Modern-Struggling-Matters/dp/0815739877

[6] https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPoDVd2yIgAa2wmYMPLCCY153nFla-NeG

[7] https://sutherlandinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/DOWNLOAD-Utah-Family-Miracle.pdf

[8] https://www.deseret.com/family/2025/09/08/men-boys-struggle-mental-health-utah-task-force-sutherland-office-families/

[9] https://www.gov.ca.gov/2025/07/30/governor-newsom-issues-executive-order-to-support-young-men-and-boys-address-suicide-rates/

[10] https://sutherlandinstitute.org/the-silent-struggling-subset-of-american-men/

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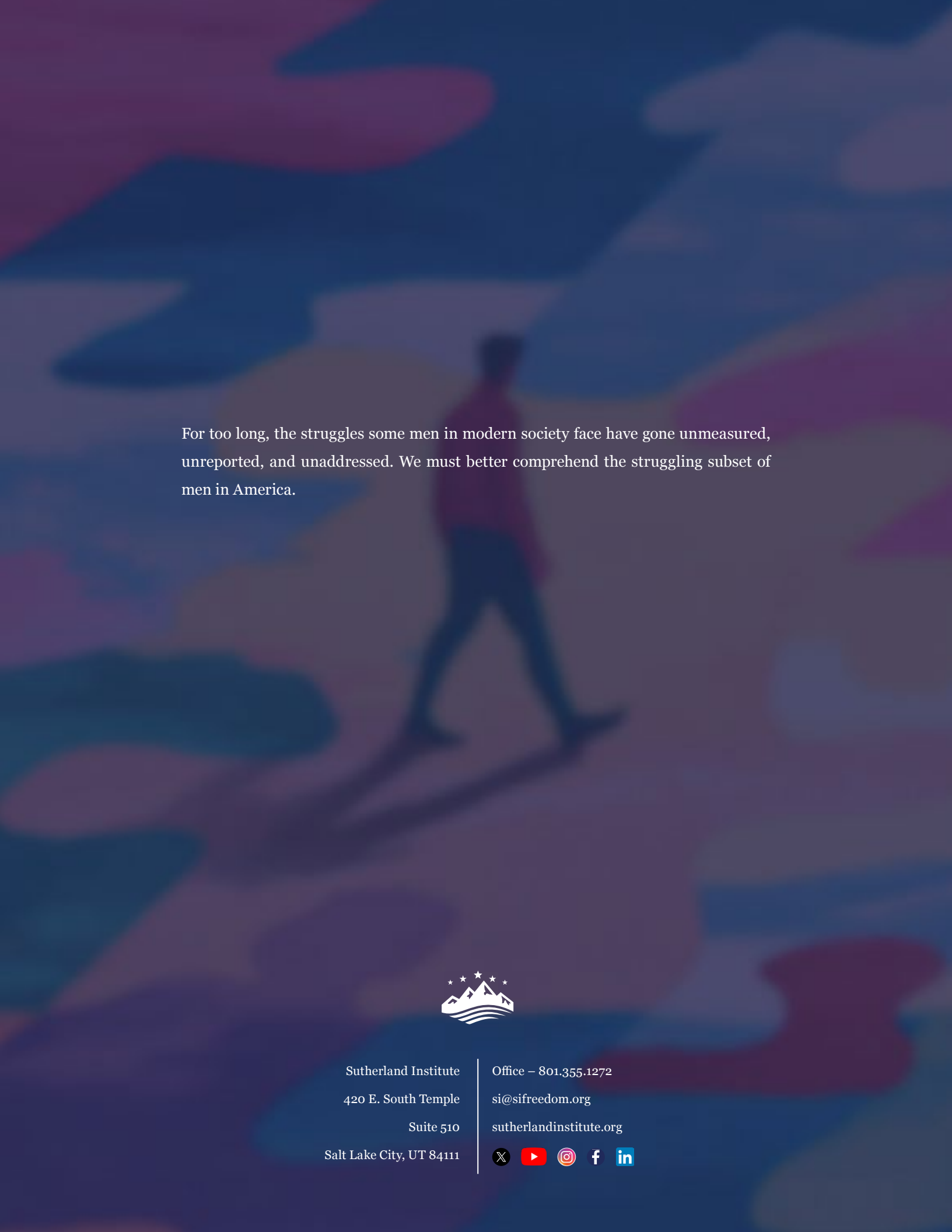

For too long, the struggles some men in modern society face have gone unmeasured, unreported, and unaddressed. We must better comprehend the struggling subset of men in America.

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