

# Utah is doing better, one person at a time

By Daphne Chen

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SALT LAKE CITY — Autumn Hendrickson has never felt more upbeat. The 37-year-old single mom hit a low point in 2013. Drowning in debt and scraping by with food stamps, she struggled to compete against what appeared to be a cadre of applicants with college degrees for jobs that paid \$9 an hour.

But in recent years, Hendrickson said, she's been seeing more jobs — in construction, in customer service, in trucking — and at higher wages than ever before.

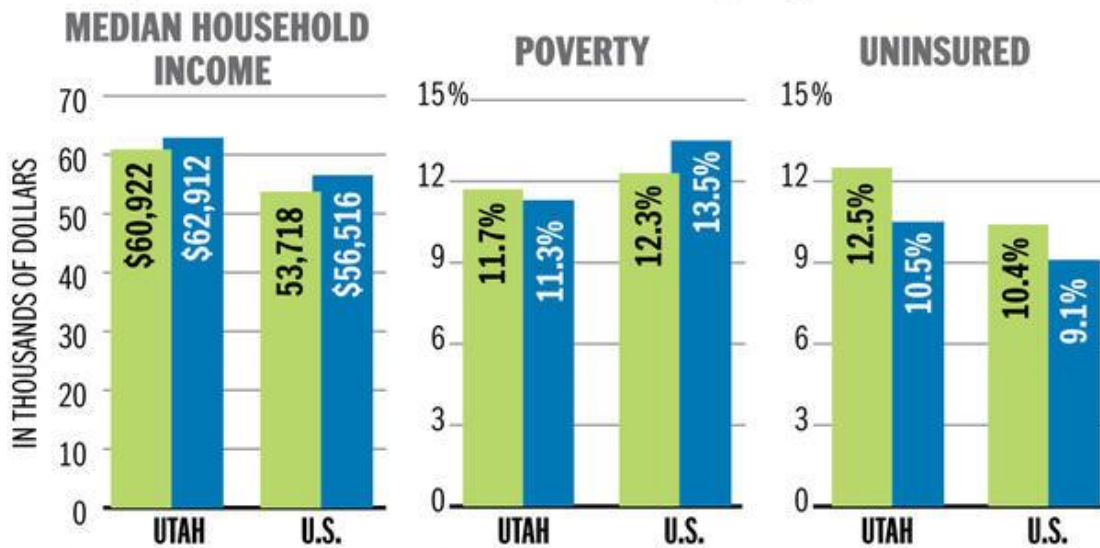
Now she works as a security guard for a construction company in a neighborhood that has seen nothing but "business after business, construction job after construction job" in the past few years. "With the influx of companies coming to Utah, I see a lot more jobs and they really want to entice Utahns to their company," Hendrickson said. And that means she's feeling good about her future — and that of her three kids.

"I'm ambitious," Hendrickson said. "I'm really out there to find a way to make it all work for me and my family."

New data released by the U.S. Census Bureau on Thursday shows that incomes are up, poverty is flat and uninsured rates are going down in Utah — a sign that the Beehive State is recovering from the recession despite impacts that continue to linger.

## Recession rebound

The latest census numbers seem to indicate that the U.S. economy is on the rebound — and that Utah is leading the pace



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey one-year estimates

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"All of these indicators are moving in the right direction," said Pam Perlich, director of demographic research at the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute at the University of Utah.

"We haven't recovered to recession levels by many metrics, but we're definitely recovering and we're recovering better than many other states are," she said.

The median household income rose from \$60,976 in 2014 to \$62,912 last year in Utah, according to the report.

Meanwhile, per capita incomes in Utah rose to \$25,816 from \$24,905 a year earlier, census data shows.

Utah's poverty rate remained flat, dropping from 11.7 percent to 11.3 percent, although the decrease is not statistically significant.

On top of that, employment is growing in Utah and migration is cranking back up, according to Perlich.

Taken together, Perlich said she is hopeful that "middle-income people are finally, finally, finally — after all of these years of stagnation — seeing some upward movement."

Signs of recovery in Utah were mirrored across the U.S. in national-level statistics released by the U.S. Census Bureau on Tuesday. Those figures showed a sharp reduction in poverty levels and the largest annual gain in median household incomes since the annual survey began in 1967.

The census figures also showed that the percentage of uninsured people declined across the U.S., a trend largely attributed to the Affordable Care Act.

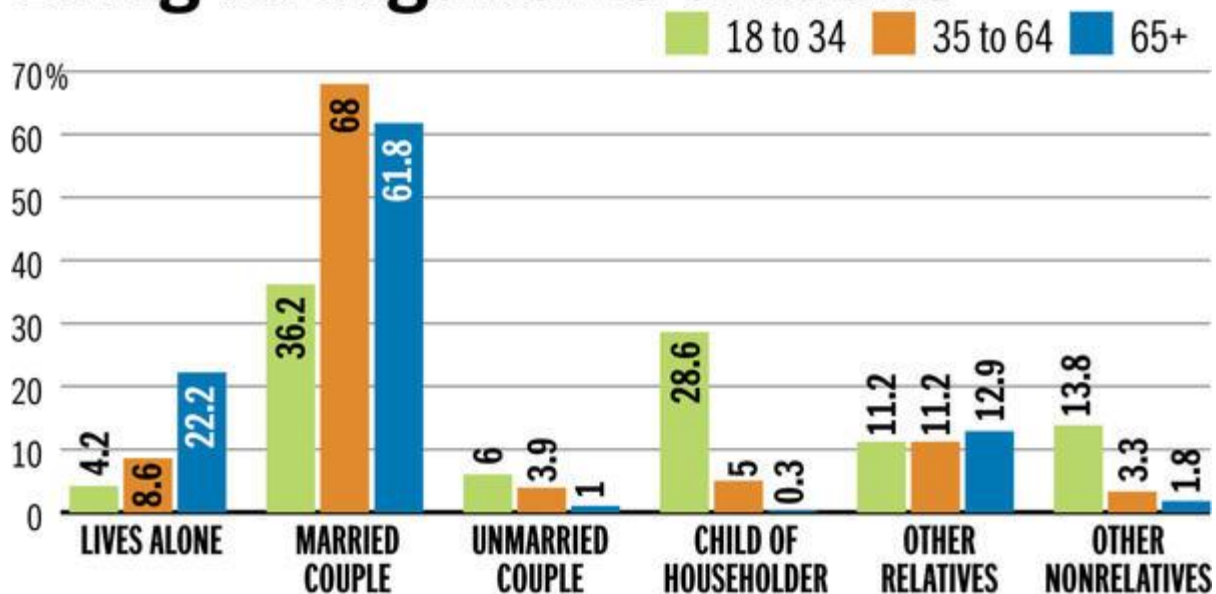
In Utah, the percentage of people without health insurance decreased from 12.5 percent to 10.5 percent — a drop that was larger-than-expected but still lagged behind the rest of the nation, said Jason Stevenson of the Utah Health Policy Project. Utah, which has not expanded Medicaid, went from 20th in the nation for uninsured people to 16th.

Despite positive signs, lasting impacts from the recession continue to blur the narrative of economic recovery, according to Perlich.

The fertility rate in Utah appears to be continuing its downward decline. Income distribution in Utah and across the nation is becoming more unequal. And many families are continuing to live in combined households as they weather the aftershocks of the recession, she said.

According to census data, 29 percent of adults ages 18-34 years old in Utah — some 216,000 people — live with their parents.

# Living arrangements of adults



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey one-year estimates

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In that same age group, 36 percent are living as married couples and 11 percent are living with other relatives.

Nissa Newton, the executive director of Community Action Partnership of Utah, said progress can also be uneven around the state.

In oil-rich areas of Utah that have suffered from the decline in prices at the gas gump, or for those who work in seasonal or tourism-related jobs, economic recovery can seem far from reality, Newton said. Meanwhile, many families who no longer meet the Census definition of "poverty" are nevertheless struggling to get by.

"It's encouraging to see that there's some improvement in the financial position for people in Utah," Newton said. "But that doesn't mean that they don't still need support."

But there may be an upside to growth being more "slow and steady," according to Perlich.

"We're not returning to the rip-roaring growth that we saw in the 1990s or approaching the bubble that burst in 2007 and 2008," she said. Which means "the growth that's happening is more sustainable — it's not based on a bubble."

As for Hedrickson, she decided on Tuesday that she's going to get her trucking license.

"I know it's kind of uncommon for a woman to do that, but I found out that there were a lot of companies really needing drivers," Hendrickson said.

It's so close she can taste it: She's eight months away from paying off her last debts, moving the family out of her dad's place, finding a little condo somewhere, getting piano and dance lessons for the kids like she always wanted.

She says she would never leave Utah now.

"It's just a great opportunity all around, so I decided this is the right place for me," Hendrickson said. "I just gotta figure out how to make it work."

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