



Strengthening Alabama's Labor Force Participation

Overcoming the Barriers and Getting Back to Work

Celebrating Alabama's Progress
Certified Public Manager® Program
CPM Solutions Alabama 2023



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The research, findings, and recommendations presented in the white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from a diverse group of team participants in the Certified Public Manager® Training Program.

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Introduction

One of the most important metrics for gauging the strength of Alabama's economy is the percentage of the available workforce currently employed, or actively seeking employment. While much attention is given to the unemployment rate, it is not a true reflection of the health of an overall job market. A low unemployment rate is a positive indicator; however, it does not measure the percentage of Alabama workers who are in the labor force, but rather the percentage within the labor force that is currently without a job. The labor force participation rate is the percentage of the civilian noninstitutionalized population 16 years and older that is working or actively looking for work. It is an important labor market measure because it represents the relative amount of labor resources available for the production of goods and services (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). The labor force participation rate represents the number of people in the labor force as a percentage of the civilian noninstitutional population. In other words, the participation rate is the percentage of the population that is either working or actively looking for work. A high labor force participation rate indicates that workers are entering and re-entering the workforce and overcoming barriers and economic conditions that may preclude them from doing so.

In this white paper, the Strengthening Alabama's Labor Force Participation CPM Solutions Team aims to address the barriers that hinder Alabama workers from entering or re-entering the workforce. The primary objective is to provide recommendations to reduce these barriers, increasing the labor force participation rate and fostering economic improvement within the state. In this paper, the research team focuses on the following key areas:

- Comparison of Alabama's labor force participation rate with that of other states.
- Analysis of the demographics and factors contributing to workforce attrition in Alabama.
- Spotlight the Statewide workforce development programs and collaborative efforts aimed at increasing labor participation in Alabama.
- Highlight developmental training programs offered by the Alabama Community College System on labor force participation.
- Identification of barriers hindering individuals from re-entering the workforce.

- Investigation of strategies implemented by other states to improve labor force participation rates and our team's recommendations to enhance Alabama's labor force participation.

The labor force participation rate is influenced by a variety of factors that touch our daily lives, such as social dynamics, economic conditions, and demographic changes. These factors play a significant role in shaping the rate and determining its fluctuations over time. For instance, economic factors such as job availability and unemployment rates can affect people's decision to actively participate in the workforce. Similarly, choices made to prioritize family care or the age at which young individuals enter the job market after completing their education can impact this rate. Additionally, demographic factors like changes in the working-age population and retirement patterns also have an influence on the labor force participation rate. To strengthen and raise Alabama's labor force participation rate, it's crucial to address the barriers that prevent workers from entering or re-entering the workforce and to find ways to overcome the challenges associated with these factors. By addressing these issues, we can work towards creating an environment where more Alabamians can participate in the labor force, contributing to the state's overall growth and prosperity.

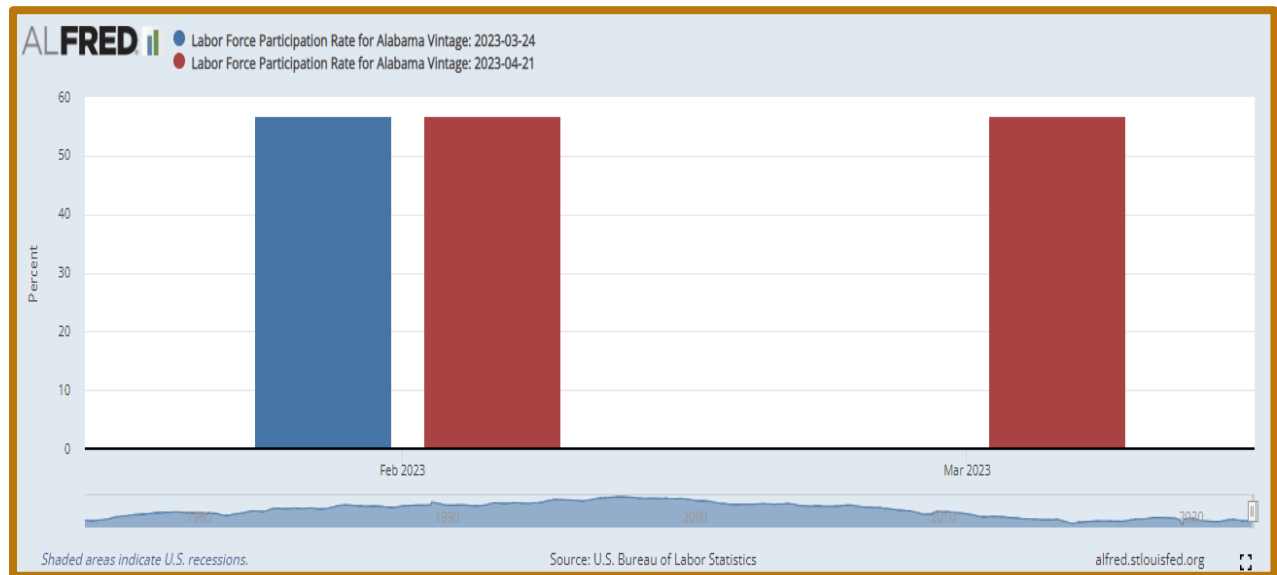
Despite Alabama's recently announced record-low unemployment rate at 2.6 percent, the state's workforce participation rate of roughly 57 percent is among the lowest in the nation, according to July data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Biertempfel, 2022).

State Representative Danny Garrett, in an interview with Alabama Today, expressed that reaching the national average for labor force participation would be a significant achievement and a transformative shift for Alabama.

Overview of Alabama's Current Labor Force Participation Rate and Its Ranking Compared to Other Regional States

According to new statistics from the Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED) for July 2022, Alabama had the sixth-lowest labor participation rate in the country, despite recently announcing record-low unemployment. The only states with lower labor force participation rates than Alabama were West Virginia, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, and Arkansas

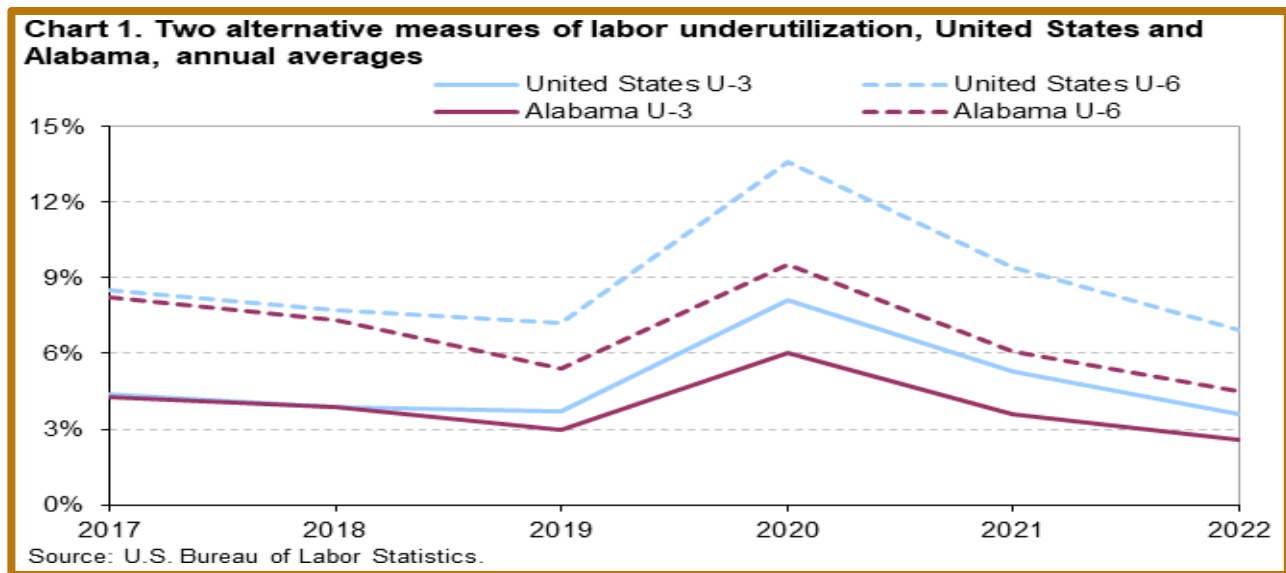
(Blakely, 2022).



Source: ALFRED St. Louis Fed: Labor Force Participation Rate May 2023 through June 2023

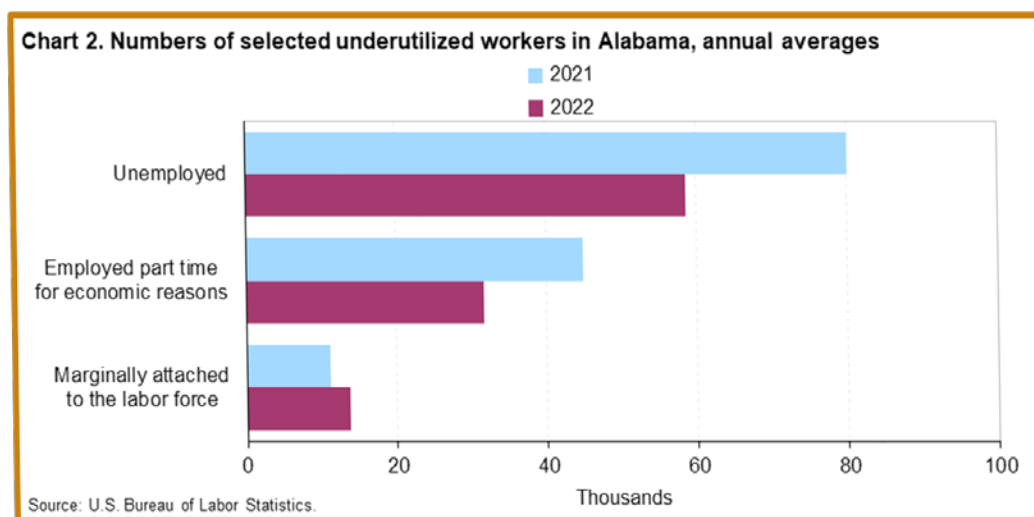
Labor underutilization contributes to the low labor force participation rate in Alabama. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, around 13,700 individuals in Alabama were considered marginally attached to the labor force in 2022. These are individuals who currently do not have a job but express a strong desire to work. They are available for employment and have actively sought job opportunities within the past year. In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that these individuals had not searched for work for reasons such as school attendance or family responsibilities.

It is important to note that this issue of labor underutilization extends beyond the United States. Approximately 1.48 million people were identified as marginally attached to the labor force in 2002, indicating a significant pool of individuals eager to contribute to the workforce but facing various obstacles (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). These challenges include the high cost of childcare, limited availability of affordable housing, a shortage of skilled and educated workers, and insufficient public transportation options. These factors collectively contribute to the underutilization of the labor force in the state (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Southeast Information Office, (Thursday, February 16, 2023), *Alternative Measures of Labor Force Underutilization on Alabama – 2023*

A higher labor force participation rate in Alabama would be a strong indication of an improving economy. It would signal that employers and small business owners are actively recruiting more workers to meet the rising demand for goods and services. This increased recruitment would have a positive impact on the state's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). With more Alabamians entering or re-entering the workforce, overall productivity would experience a significant boost statewide, leading to economic growth and development.

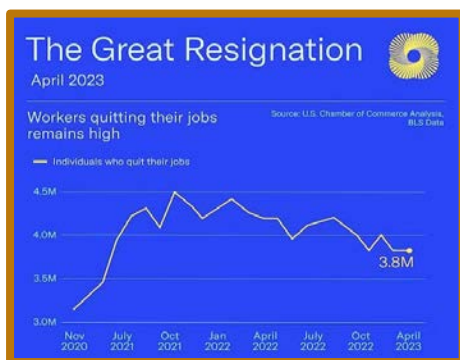


Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Southeast Information Office, (Thursday, February 16, 2023), *Alternative Measures of Labor Force Underutilization on Alabama – 2023*

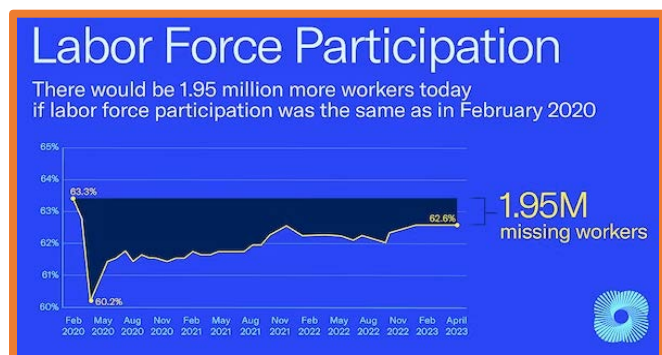
“Creating jobs helps the economy by increasing GDP. When an individual is employed, they are paid by their employer. This results in them having money to spend on food, clothing, entertainment, and in a variety of other areas. The more an individual spends, the more that demand increases. When demand for a product or service increases, companies increase their output to meet the increased demand. Companies do this by investing more and hiring more workers. More workers start the cycle over, with there being even more money spent in the economy, increasing demand further.” Investopedia

Demographic Analysis of Alabama’s Workforce

A major reason for Alabama's low labor force participation rate is the significant number of people who have chosen to leave the workforce. This departure is largely influenced by what has been widely referred to as the "Great Resignation." Nationwide, an estimated 3.8 million workers decided to leave their jobs in 2022. Alabama experienced the impact of this phenomenon within its own workforce, with 73,000 individuals leaving their jobs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).



Source: Alabama Works!, (2023), About | Overview



Source: Alabama Works!, (2023), About | Overview

According to ZIPPIA, on average, 4 million Americans were quitting their jobs each month in 2022. As defined by Wikipedia, The Great Resignation, also known as the Big Quit and the Great Reshuffle, is an ongoing trend in which employees have voluntarily resigned from their jobs *en masse*, beginning in early 2021 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the most cited reasons for resigning include wage stagnation amid the rising cost of living, limited opportunities for career advancement, lack of benefits, inflexible remote-work policies, and long-lasting job dissatisfaction. Most likely to quit have been workers in hospitality, healthcare, and

education (Flynn, 2023).

“According to the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 73,000 people in Alabama quit their jobs in March, the most recent month of available data – a 32% increase from one year earlier. The total number of monthly quits in the state accounts for 3.5% of the total workforce, higher than the 3.0% share of workers nationwide who quit their jobs in March.”
Bureau of Labor Statistics

As reported by Alabama Works and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, there are four primary reasons for this mass exodus:

1. Family Household Increase in Savings - Stimulus checks added \$4 trillion to U.S. workers' savings since early 2020, and enhanced unemployment benefits (which ended in September 21) provided substantial support to claimants, with 68 percent earning more than they did while actively working, leading to higher income and economic prosperity (Alabama Works!, 2023).
2. Early Retirement – Since the pandemic, over 3 million mature workers aged 55 and over have opted for earlier retirements at an increasing rate over time. Separations through retirement surged from 48.1 percent in Q3 of 2019 to 50.3 percent in Q3 2021 (Alabama Works!, 2023).
3. Lack of Access to Childcare – During the pandemic, many childcare providers shut their doors or scaled back services. As of Q4 2021, childcare industry employment remains 10 percent lower than pre-pandemic levels. Consequently, women’s participation rate in the labor force declined from 70 percent to 55 percent during this time, the lowest since the 1970s (Alabama Works! 2023).
4. New Business Starts – Many employees turned the challenges associated with the pandemic as an opportunity for entrepreneurship by leaving their employment to launch a business of their own. During the last two years alone, more than 10 million new business applications were filed, and 4 million new businesses were started in 2020 alone (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, The Education Trust, 2022).

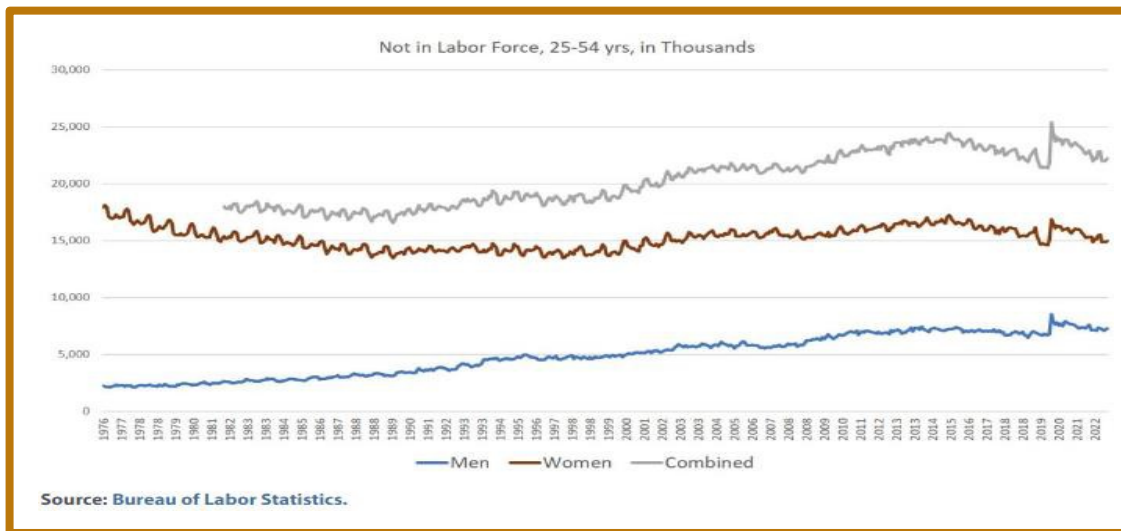
Based on the Strengthening Alabama’s Labor Force Participation CPM Solutions Team’s

research, one of the main demographics that has left Alabama's workforce are men aged 25-54. As reported by 1819 News, ninety-eight percent of men aged 25-54 participated in the 1950s versus 87 percent in 2021. Their departure can be attributed to a variety of factors, but several key reasons have surfaced:

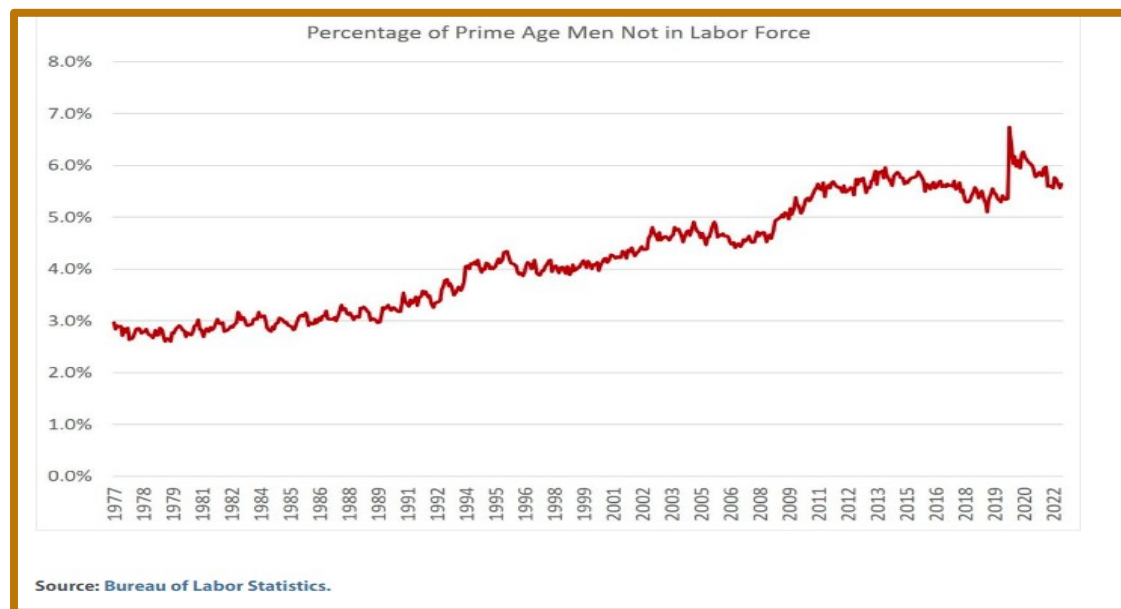
- Early retirement
- Pay disparities
- Lack of opportunities for advancement
- Inability to afford childcare
- Inadequate public transportation

Alabama's labor force participation rate among men aged 25- 54 is ranked 42nd nationally and has shown a downward trend like the national average (McCartney, 2022). Another challenge faced by prime age men re-entering the workforce in Alabama is the issue of benefits drop-off, also known as the Benefits Cliff. According to Fed Communities, almost one in five employers responded that they had seen employees refuse raises or promotional job offers because of cliff concerns. In 2020, a survey of unemployed and underemployed people in Alabama revealed that nearly 38 percent of respondents turned down a job or promotion due to benefits cliff (Chiarenza, 2022).

According to the Alabama Daily News, women make up around half of Alabama's workforce, but are three times more likely than men to hold minimum-wage jobs (McCartney, 2022). On average, women earn 67 cents for every dollar earned by men. In Alabama, the issue is compounded by unaffordable childcare and its effects on women in the workforce. When it comes to describing reasons that people are prevented from participation in the workforce, Alabama women are more likely to cite family responsibilities than men (Swetlick, 2022). Closing the gender pay gap alone could lead to the creation of nearly 59,000 new jobs and generate \$15 billion in additional income. Removing barriers such as limited access to affordable childcare and skills training would add approximately 209,767 women to Alabama's labor force. Additionally, creating fair access to occupations is essential since women in Alabama often find themselves in lower-paying roles, including food preparation and childcare (McCartney, 2022).



Source: McMaken, Ryan, (12/21/2022), *Why Are So Many Men Leaving the Workforce?* MISES WIRE



Source: McMaken, Ryan, (12/21/2022), *Why Are So Many Men Leaving the Workforce?* MISES WIRE

Overview of the Industries with the Highest Demand for Skilled Labor in Alabama

As Alabama's workforce transitions into a high-skilled market, a significant challenge arises from the current lack of qualifications and proper training among many individuals in the state. Mature workers, who have established themselves in their current occupations, often hesitate to pursue further education or retraining in more advanced fields that offer higher earnings and benefits. The rural demographics of Alabama, coupled with barriers like limited public transportation and unaffordable childcare, further impede workers from seeking

employment in high-skilled sectors. Without changes in workforce training, it is projected that Alabama will face a shortage of approximately 200,000 highly skilled workers by 2025 through 2026 (Thornton, 2020). As such, urgent implementation of training initiatives is vital to bridge this skills gap and meet the emerging demands of Alabama's evolving workforce.

“A new report out today warns that Alabama faces a frightening shortage of skilled workers within the next five years if there isn’t more collaboration between businesses, education and career tech training programs.” AL.com

Under Governor Kay Ivey’s direction, Alabama has set a goal of preparing 500,000 highly skilled workers within five years (by 2025) to meet the demands of new industries and replace retiring workers. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has identified the following ten occupations as the most in-demand in Alabama between 2020 and 2030:

Profession	Projected Employment in AL, 2030*	Percentage Growth*
Nurse Practitioners	6,250	54%
Epidemiologists	900	50%
Occupational Therapy Aides	30	50%
Cooks, Restaurant	18,390	39%
Occupational Therapy Assistants	510	38%
Physical Therapist Assistants	2,230	37%
Physician Assistants	940	36%
Mechanical Door Repairers	230	35%
Electrical and Electronics Installers and Repairers, Transportation Equipment	240	33%
Orthotists and Prosthetists	780	33%

Source: *CareerOneStop from the DOL

Source: BestAccreditedColleges, (Sep 09, 2022), Source: *CareerOneStop from the DOL, Alabama Job Outlook: Overview of the Fastest Growing Careers

Barriers Preventing Individuals from Re-entering Alabama’s Workforce

Cliff Effect Dependency

The Cliff Effect occurs when a pay raise at work triggers a disproportionate loss of government assistance. Even a small raise can “push people off the cliff” when it comes to benefits. Suddenly ineligible for subsidized food, housing, healthcare, or childcare, the family is worse off than before receiving the raise (Circles USA, 2023). This perpetuates a cycle of dependency, forcing difficult decisions like declining job promotions or leaving the workforce to

maintain eligibility for programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). In Alabama, the issue is compounded by unaffordable childcare and its effects upon women in the workforce. When it comes to describing reasons that people are prevented from participating in the workforce, Alabama women are more likely to cite family responsibilities than men (Swetlick, 2022). This not only impacts individual households but also has broader implications for the labor force participation rate.

“The Cliff Effect is one of the biggest yet hidden barriers keeping people stuck in poverty. While a pay raise or new job should be cause for celebration, too often for low-income households, earning more is a risky move that can result in having less. The Cliff Effect disincentivizes economic growth, a strong workforce, and job retention.” CIRCLESUSA

Low-income households in Alabama face the challenge of balancing the need for public assistance with the desire for career advancement. Addressing the Cliff Effect Dependency is crucial to empower low-income workers breaking the cycle of dependency and addressing these challenges is essential to empowering low-income workers, fostering economic mobility, and creating a more inclusive and prosperous society.

In March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic reached Alabama, the state implemented a series of protective measures that had a significant impact on businesses and industries statewide. These measures included statewide health orders, city-wide state of emergency orders, school closures, non-essential business closures, stay-at-home orders, city-wide curfews, public gathering restrictions, and occupancy restrictions.

As a result of these measures, many Alabama workers were deeply affected. Businesses had to close their doors, and numerous employees were laid off or had to adjust to working from home. Recognizing the financial struggles faced by workers during this unprecedented time, the state implemented various financial assistance programs to provide support. These programs included expedited access to SNAP with increased benefits, special unemployment benefits with higher weekly payments, direct stimulus payments, extended paid sick leave to cover children affected by school closures, and expanded Medicaid coverage for children.

Interestingly, many of these financial assistance programs, which aimed to support

workers during the pandemic, align with the programs considered to be barriers to Alabama workers re-entering the workforce due to the Cliff Effect. In the state of Alabama, there are several benefits cliffs that individuals may encounter as they earn more income such as (benefitscliffs.org):

- Alabama's TANF Cliff
- Alabama's Child Care Subsidy Cliff
- Alabama's Medicaid Cliff.

These programs did not have an income threshold for eligibility, allowing workers and families to benefit from them without the fear of losing assistance by accepting higher-paying jobs or promotions. This creates a unique challenge for individuals striving to transition back into the workforce while also needing financial support.

Inadequate Public Transportation

One significant barrier for Alabama workers reentering the workforce is the lack of public transportation in the state. As reported by Alabama Political Observer, Alabama is one of only three states with no state funding for public transportation. Public transportation is an investment in people, communities, the economy, and the environment. Many older adults, individuals with disabilities, and people with low income need public transportation to get to work, seek medical care, buy groceries and more, says Alabama Arise. As reported by Alabama Arise, The Alabama Legislature created the Public Transportation Trust Fund in 2018, but no state funds have been provided. As a result, the trust fund's capacity to provide desperately needed state matching funds for federal transportation dollars has languished. This inaction has left Alabama with a truncated and inadequate public transportation system. Nearly all money for public transportation in Alabama comes from federal dollars administered by ALDOT (Burdeshaw 2022).

“Public transportation is an investment in people, communities, the economy, and the environment. Many older adults, individuals with disabilities and people with low incomes need public transit to get to work, seek medical care, buy groceries and more.” Alabama Arise

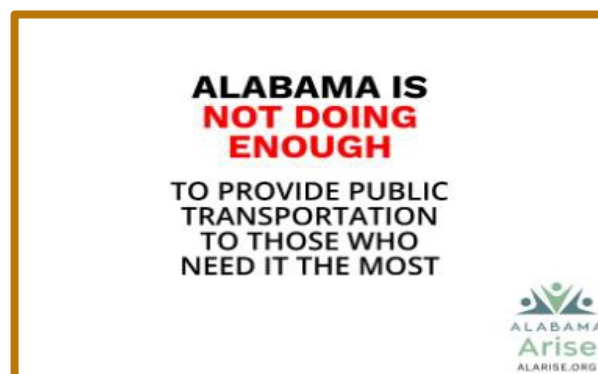
To enable Alabama's low-income workers to actively participate and thrive in the

workplace, they must be provided access to job opportunities beyond their immediate vicinity without incurring significant financial burdens. Currently, public transportation in Alabama is underutilized, with only 1 in 300 residents utilizing these services, primarily in urban and metro areas (Burdeshaw & Griffin, 2022). To effectively raise the labor force participation rate, public transportation must be expanded, improved, and made available to workers in all counties within the state.

Most of the funding for Alabama's public transportation system comes from federal sources administered by Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT). Temporary funding has been obtained through COVID-19 recovery programs, but these funds are not sustainable in the long term. There is an ongoing need for a state-funded public transportation system in Alabama to meet the needs of the essential low-income workforce and benefit the state's economy (Burdeshaw, 2022).

Many counties do not offer public transportation services after 4 p.m., and just as many do not begin providing transportation until 8 a.m. This scheduling creates a gap for people who need transportation to and from work for shifts ending after 4 p.m. or starting at or before 8 a.m. Almost no public transportation systems in Alabama provide services past 6 p.m., so night-shift workers are unable to get a ride to and from work.

Counties in Alabama should not bear the sole burden of funding the public transportation systems, which should be accessible to all citizens of the state. The establishment and operation of a comprehensive and efficient public transportation system should be a statewide endeavor, aimed at improving the lives of all Alabamians and contributing to the state's development. The Alabama Public Transportation Trust Fund was established to address these issues and ensure the creation of an effective and efficient public transportation system accessible to all residents of Alabama.



Unaffordable Childcare

One of the primary barriers preventing Alabama workers from entering or re-entering the workforce is the high cost of childcare, according to research conducted by the Solutions Alabama's labor force participation team. The inability to afford childcare puts a significant strain on low-income households, often leading one income earner to drop out of the workforce to provide childcare at home. The data from the Bipartisan Policy Center reveals that Alabama has a 40 percent childcare gap, with over 214,000 children having both parents in the workforce, indicating a substantial need for childcare (Swetlik, 2022). However, the available slots in legally operated and state-recognized care providers only cover a fraction of this demand, leaving tens of thousands of children without access to care. Additionally, Alabama ranks second in the percentage of children with both parents in the labor force living in poverty (Swetlik, 2022).

Another issue exacerbating the problem of unaffordable childcare in Alabama is the low wages and lack of benefits for childcare workers themselves. Many childcare workers are severely underpaid, with an average annual salary of \$24,230, and a significant portion of them rely on public assistance programs (Swetlik, 2022). Linda Smith, the Director of the Early Childhood Development Initiative at the Bipartisan Policy Center, explains that an aging workforce and inadequate compensation contribute to the childcare gap. Furthermore, this barrier is linked to the Cliff Effect Dependency, where low-income households are forced to rely on public assistance for essential needs like childcare, often resulting in a decline in labor force participation rates among women nationwide.

“When it comes to describing reasons that people are prevented from participating in the labor force, Alabama women are more likely to cite family responsibilities than men, said Alexander Ruder of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta”

When we consider the cost of childcare, the national average comes to a staggering \$14,760 per year. In Alabama, however, the average annual cost is comparatively lower at \$6,001 (Swetlik, 2022). While this may seem like good news, it still represents a substantial portion of the gross earnings for low-income households in the state, amounting to about 11.9 percent (Swetlik, 2022).

The financial burden of childcare has far-reaching effects on families. It forces them to

make difficult choices, such as cutting back on essentials, restructuring their work-life balance, and facing numerous challenges as parents. These obstacles have a very real impact on the lives of many hardworking individuals and their families across Alabama.

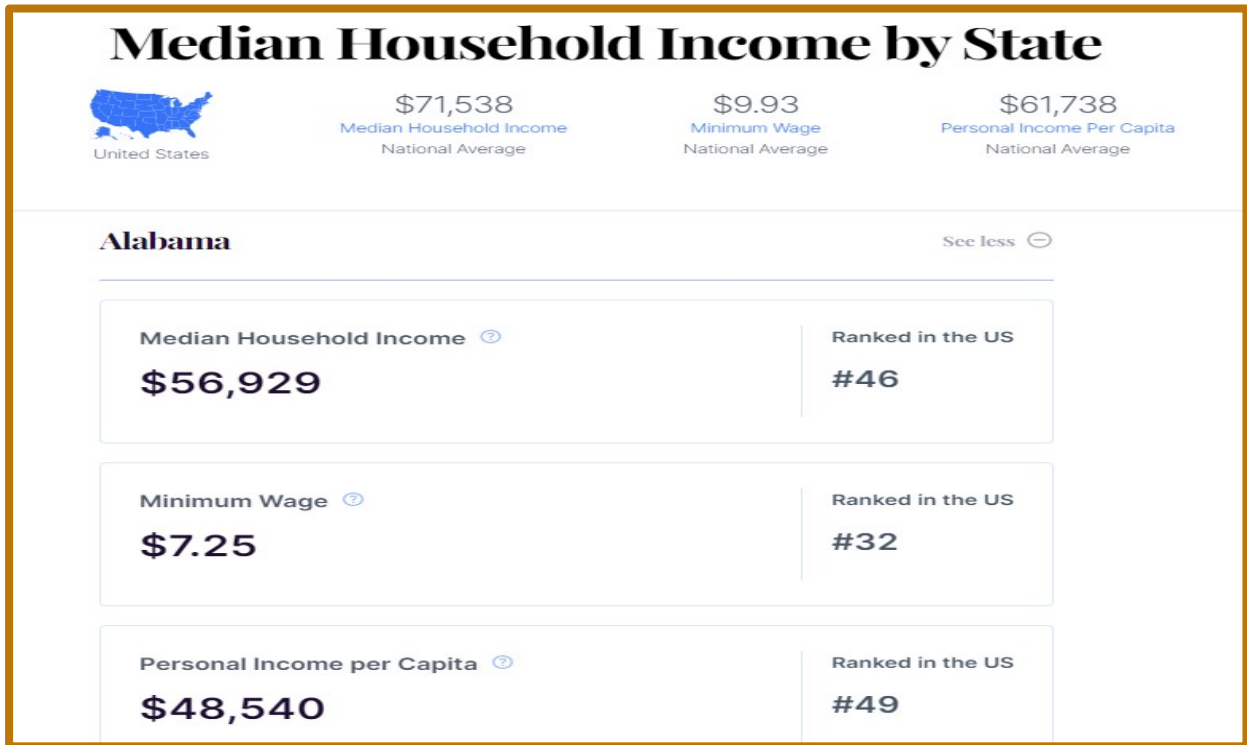
Lack of Affordable Housing

The inability of low-income households to afford housing has a profound impact on Alabama's labor force participation rate, as it restricts income earners from pursuing higher-paying jobs in different areas of the state. Consequently, this leaves them trapped in their current economic situations with limited opportunities for improvement. The lack of accessible public transportation further compounds the issue, as it keeps individuals from capitalizing on better employment prospects.

Key statistics reveal that the cost of renting a two-bedroom home in Alabama, based on HUD's Fair Market Rent, exceeds the annual income of a four-person extremely low-income household. This disparity affects approximately 29 percent of Alabama's extremely low-income workforce, severely impacting the overall economy (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2023). The lack of affordable and available housing is not unique to Alabama but is a nationwide challenge that affects labor force participation rates across the country.

“Across Alabama, there is a shortage of rental homes affordable and available to extremely low-income households, whose incomes are at or below the poverty guideline or 30% of their area median income. Many of these households are severely cost burdened, spending more than half of their income on housing. Severely cost burdened poor households are more likely than other renters to sacrifice other necessities like healthy food and healthcare to pay the rent, and to experience unstable housing situations like evictions.” (National Low, 2023)

Alabama ranked first in the nation for affordability, including housing costs, median annual property taxes, cost of living, median household income and ownership, according to AL.com. However, it is important to approach this ranking with a grain of salt, as it fails to consider the affordability of housing for low-income workers at minimum wage in comparison to the national average (Gore, 2023).

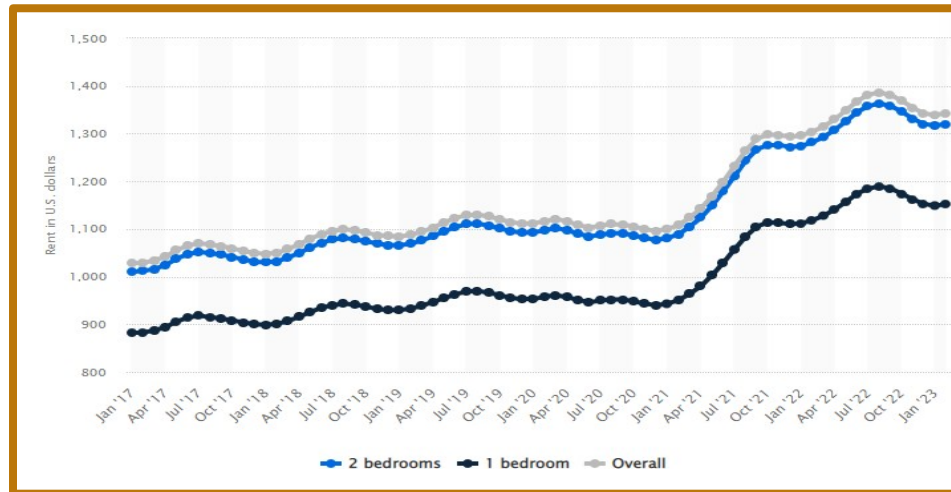


Source: National Low Income Housing Coalition, (N.D.), View State Data, Alabama

This can lead to longer commutes, reduced job stability, and ultimately impacts overall workforce engagement.

According to a report by the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, the rising cost of housing in the United States has outpaced wage growth in recent years, compounding the challenge for low-income individuals and families in finding suitable and reasonably priced homes near their jobs. This shortage of affordable housing not only limits access to decent housing, but also affects other aspects of life, including employment opportunities. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, affording a modest two-bedroom apartment without experiencing financial burden requires a full-time worker to earn over \$20 per hour—an eye-opening reality that unveils the daunting financial challenges faced by many Americans (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard, 2020).

The Alabama Housing Finance Authority reports that around 71 percent of extremely low-income households in the state spend over 30 percent of their income on housing, leaving them burdened by high costs (National Low Income Housing coalition, N.D.). Additionally, rural areas often lack necessary infrastructure, including affordable housing, further hindering labor force participation. As rent prices continue to rise nationwide, finding affordable housing becomes a daunting challenge for low-income workers and their families.



Source: National Low Income Housing Coalition, (N.D.), View State Data, Alabama

Alabama's Workforce Development Programs

Overview of Governor Kay Ivey's Alabama Works! Success Plus Initiative and its Goals

Our mission is to recruit, train, and empower a highly skilled workforce driven by business and industry needs.

In the fall of 2015, the Alabama Workforce Council undertook a statewide effort to understand the structure, function, organization and perceptions of the Alabama workforce system. The results showed that Alabama has numerous workforce-development organizations, but they could be more effective if organized under a unified brand.

AlabamaWorks! stands for opportunity, innovation, accountability and inclusion with the vision of a better future for Alabama in which communities, business, and industry are supported in a collaborative process to build prosperity through the opportunity of meaningful work and a growing economy.

Source: Alabama Works! (2023), About | Overview

One of Alabama's most successful advocates for the strengthening of Alabama workforce is Governor Kay Ivey. Ivey's efforts in conjunction with the Workforce Development Division have been crucial in garnering Alabama national recognition in the areas of the training and recruiting of a skilled workforce. Governor Kay Ivey's leadership has contributed to Alabama achieving one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation. However, to address the need to increase the labor force participation, Governor Ivey's Office of Education and Workforce Transformation (GOEWT) is taking some proactive measures. The Governor's ambitious goal of adding 500,000 skilled workers to Alabama's workforce by 2025, along with her determination to exceed the national labor force participation rate, reflects her unwavering commitment to the well-being and growth of Alabama's workforce.

“The Workforce Development Division is dedicated to strengthening and improving our State’s public workforce system by helping place Alabamians into high quality jobs and careers and enabling employers to hire and retain the skilled workers they need to sustain and grow their career operations.” MADE IN ALABAMA

Under Governor Kay Ivey's leadership, the following Employer Resources are actively engaged with Alabama's workforce development programs (Alabama Works, N.D.):

- Alabama Technology Network
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Programs
- Rapid Response Team
- Youth Programs
- Employment and Disability Information
- Hiring Veterans | VETS
- Work Opportunity Tax Credit
- Federal Bonding Program

Role of the Alabama Community College System

Information provided to the Strengthening Alabama's Labor Force Participation CPM Solutions Team by Deans and Directors with the Alabama Community College System indicates that the Alabama Community College System plays an integral role in the education and training

of the Alabama workforce by offering numerous programs geared to increasing the labor force participation in Alabama. These programs are available to a diverse range of individuals, including high school dual enrollment students, recent high school graduates, and non-traditional students aged 25 and over. Additionally, individuals under the age of 25 who shoulder the responsibilities typically associated with non-traditional students are also eligible to participate. The community college programs are open to all students regardless of education or employment status. By offering outreach programs to explain and educate students about job opportunities, the community college system equips them with the necessary skills for employment. One of the most important aspects of the community college programs is the relationship they have fostered with local businesses and industry partners to align the curricula with the demands of the workforce and the specific needs of local communities.

The Alabama Community College System recognizes the barriers thwarting workers from entering and re-entering the workforce and strives to overcome these barriers with education-based initiatives that streamline the credentials. These initiatives allow students to receive certifications or credentials in weeks rather than months, as well as offering competency-based apprenticeships that allow students to earn credentials while working simultaneously. One of the most beneficial offerings of the community college system is the outreach to the Hispanic workforce and tuition waivers to students over the age of 60. This outreach targets a key segment of the Alabama workforce by offering College Adult Education programs, English Language Learner classes, and citizenship classes to those who are involved in the citizenship process. Continued and increased funding of grants for the state community college system benefits the workforce by providing meaningful training to individuals facing economic and social barriers. Funding for the Alabama Community College System enables it to implement, coordinate, and embrace programs such as stipends for attending training, and industry-required hiring for training incentives. While Alabama colleges and universities currently have restrictions on educating non-citizens, permitting non-citizens to enroll in technical coursework while they work towards obtaining citizenship would expedite their entry into the workforce. The Alabama Community College System plays an integral part in the overall training and re-training of the Alabama workforce by providing grants and scholarships to qualified applicants, as well as offering apprenticeship programs that lead to job placements immediately upon completion. The Alabama Community College System uses the Perkins Act Performance Report and a metric

known as the Core Indicator 4P1 in conjunction with a “Targeted Level of Performance” as an indicator of acceptability and progress. The community college system remains committed to the advancement and continued training of the Alabama workforce and remains a critical asset in the strengthening of the State of Alabama’s labor force participation rate.

Role of Incarcerated Rehabilitative Services

The state of Alabama does not include incarcerated individuals in its calculation of the annual unemployment or the labor force participation rates. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, as of 2021, Alabama ranked sixth in the nation with an incarceration rate of 938 persons per 100,000 citizens (Turner, 2021). This figure represents a large portion of the potential Alabama workforce, which is considered underutilized while these persons are incarcerated. Recognizing the importance of this future resource in the Alabama workforce, the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) has implemented a program of personal education devices (PEDs), which prepare incarcerated Alabamians with the education, training, and skills necessary to re-enter society, and thus, the workforce and contribute to the lowering of Alabama’s labor force participation rate.

“Historically, the prison population has not been included when counting the number of unemployed citizens. In other words, there’s no trace of an inmates’ existence in the labor force while they are behind bars. “Prism Reports (Ansari, 2019).

All ADOC inmates will be provided free and direct access to PEDs from which they can utilize available programming resources customized to their unique needs such as K-12 programs, GED preparation content, post-secondary and college courses, vocational training programs, job search programs, personal finance programs, spiritual/religious resources, self-help and re-entry resources, eBooks, and more.” ADOC (Turner, 2021)

The implementation of PEDs furthers our progress against the Department’s multi-faceted strategy to transform Alabama’s correctional system and make the important shift from warehousing criminals to rehabilitating returning citizens by best preparing inmates to reenter society successfully.” ADOC Commissioner Jeff Dunn (Turner, 2021).

Private, non-profit, services such as Hope Inspired Ministries (HIM) based in Montgomery are also an integral part of the effort to rehabilitate formerly incarcerated individuals in Alabama. These organizations are dedicated to equipping and supporting these individuals in their journey to re-enter the workforce, thus contributing to the reduction of Alabama's labor force participation rate.

Hope Inspired Ministries (HIM) is a faith-based, non-profit designed to train chronically unemployed men and women to obtain and maintain employment. Through a rigorous 9-week job training program, each student participates in 360 hours of training which includes soft skills, employment skills, financial management, problem solving, conflict resolution and so many other critical dexterities. Each student participates in an internship with a local business. "We conclude the course with a cap and gown graduation where every student offers a 3-to-5-minute speech regarding lessons learned in the course." (HIM)

The joint efforts of the state of Alabama and private agencies to rehabilitate formerly incarcerated individuals, enabling them to reintegrate into the workforce and contribute to the state's economy, showcase their dedication to lowering Alabama's labor force participation rate.

Existing Initiatives Geared Towards Increasing the Labor Force Participation Rate in Alabama

In addition to Governor Ivey's Alabama Works! Success Plus Initiative program, the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship and FuelAL, a program of the Economic Development Partnership of Alabama has placed a greater emphasis on enhancing the education and training of the Alabama workforce, equipping them with the necessary skills to successfully reintegrate into a dynamic and technologically advanced labor market. Ensuring the stability of Alabama's talent pool and addressing the declining working-age population within the 25-64 years demographic are vital components of these ongoing efforts.

Alabama needs a skilled labor force to compete with other states in attracting more business operations to the state, as well as growing the workforce by providing more technical skills in a highly competitive market. Continued economic growth is dependent upon a developing workforce, and the initiatives and programs put forth by the state as well as the Governor, are instrumental in achieving this growth.

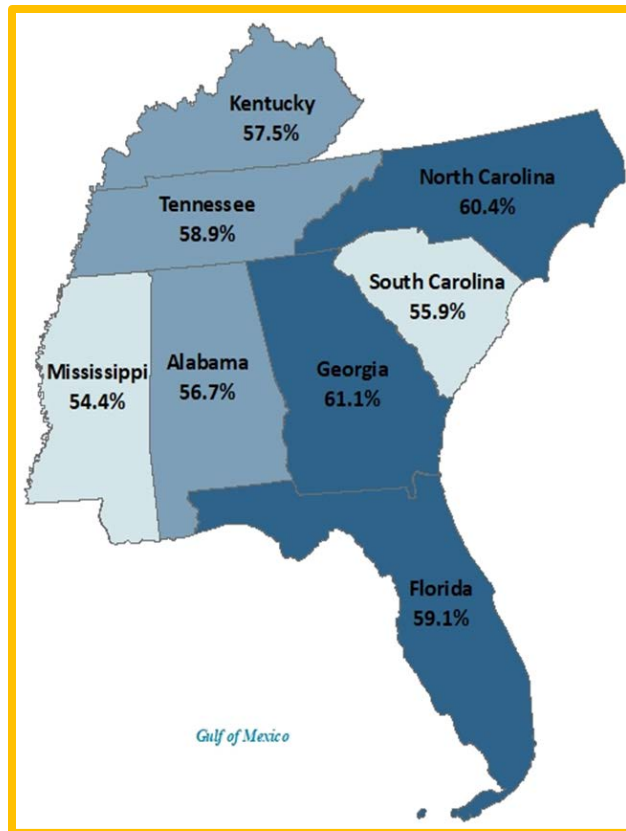
“Alabama needs to continually cultivate skilled workers and attract talent from other places if we want to encourage our existing employers to expand and to increase our attractiveness to employers looking to locate business operations Alabama.” Dr. Matt Ulmer, Alabama Cooperative Extension System at Auburn University

Governor Kay Ivey's commendable leadership and forward-thinking approach to Alabama's workforce have garnered widespread acclaim. Her unwavering commitment to adding highly skilled workers has yielded significant benefits for both the citizens and businesses of Alabama. This encompassing endeavor includes collaboration with not only businesses, but also high schools, community colleges, and adult education programs throughout the state.

In an ever-changing labor market, the cultivation of a highly skilled workforce is paramount for delivering increased prosperity and economic growth. Changes in demographics, workforce barriers, and an aging population create unique challenges in the effort to raise the labor force participation rate in Alabama.

Analysis of Successful Strategies Implemented by Regional States to Increase Labor Force Participation

After studying the strategies employed by regional states to enhance their labor force participation rates, the labor force participation team has identified common barriers that obstruct individuals from re-entering the workforce in these states, echoing the challenges faced by Alabama's workforce. Recognizing the significance of these barriers, each state is taking proactive measures to increase their labor force participation rates.



Source: Alabama Department of Labor, Labor market Information Division

Georgia that is ranked number 32 nationally has established programs that lead to the completion of degree equivalencies and developed service strategies to address barriers to employment. Tennessee is also ranked number 32 nationally and has attracted new businesses to the state by promoting their right-to-work status as being business friendly, capitalizing on the increase in teen labor force participation, addressing the departure of adults from the labor force due to lack of childcare, and resisting raising the minimum wage to avoid destroying jobs and increasing government dependency. Florida ranked number 41 nationally replaced declining slow-growth occupations by technological advancement and addressed the “benefits cliff” of low-income workers. Louisiana, ranked number 42 nationally has grown and diversified the economy to attract more skilled workers, reduced the barriers to increase reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals, and eliminated employment licensing regulations. South Carolina, ranked number 46 nationally, has addressed the issue of low paying wages and improved public transportation. Mississippi ranked number 49 nationally has promoted more workforce training programs, increased high school graduation rates, and improved public transportation for low-

income workers.

Economic Benefits of Increasing the Labor Force Participation Rate in Alabama

A strong and healthy labor supply is essential to the economic growth for the state of Alabama. The presence of more workers in the labor market leads to increased production of goods and services, bolstering the state's gross domestic product (GDP) and driving economic growth. This positive momentum brings about various benefits, such as lower costs and higher wages, thereby improving the overall standard of living for the residents of Alabama. As more Alabamians re-enter the workforce and benefit from increased wages, their standard of living improves by benefiting from lowered costs. As Alabama's labor force participation rate rises because of more individuals re-entering the workforce, Alabamians also reap the advantage of lower taxes due to increased labor force participation, as a larger workforce contributes to a higher tax base with more people actively contributing to the production of goods and services. As the standard of living of Alabamians increases, they are in a much better position financially to pursue home ownership and begin to overcome the barriers preventing them from succeeding, such as unaffordable childcare and the pitfalls of the benefits cliff dependency. Increased financial independence and household stability are the cornerstone of a vibrant workforce. For Alabama workers, these key elements afforded by an increase in the labor force participation rate result in financial security, increased tax benefits, and a sense of belonging within the community.

Since the labor force participation rate is affected by social, demographic, and economic factors it can be quite dynamic and subject to variable swings both upward and downward. Sustained economic growth in Alabama relies on attracting new businesses, and a high or increasing labor force participation rate serves as an encouraging factor for businesses to invest in the state. The U.S. Census Bureau has reported that "By 2035, Americans aged 65 and over are expected to outnumber those under age 18" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). As the U.S. Census Bureau predicts a significant shift in age demographics, with older Americans outnumbering younger ones by 2035, Governor Kay Ivey's ambitious goal of adding 500,000 highly skilled workers to Alabama's workforce by 2025 becomes even more vital to raising Alabama's labor force participation rate and securing the state's competitiveness in the dynamic labor market. Nationally, the labor force participation rate has begun to rise after the sharp

decline during the period of the COVID-19 epidemic, and for future economic growth to continue, it is important that Alabama's labor force participation rate also continue to rise.



Source: ALFRED St. Louis Fed: Labor Force Participation Rate May 2023 through June 2023

Summary of Key Findings

In summary, the labor force participation rate serves as a critical barometer for assessing the overall vitality of Alabama's economy. This metric directly reflects the size of the available workforce actively engaged in the production of goods and services, thus driving the economic engine of the state. As the workforce landscape continues to change and skills demand a shift with advancement in technology, the labor force participation rate takes center stage as a key indicator of Alabama's potential labor pool and future workforce. A robust participation rate brings numerous advantages to businesses and the overall economy. It attracts investments, drives the production of goods and services, and encourages companies to expand their workforce. As for individual Alabamians rejoining the workforce, this means an improved quality of life and greater ability to support their families.

A strong and engaged workforce not only contributes to Alabama's economic success but also fuels increased spending power, benefiting the entire community. With fewer individuals relying on economic assistance, the tax burden is reduced, generating higher tax revenues for the state. The elevated labor force participation instills a sense of pride and accomplishment among Alabama workers, fostering a thriving and self-sustaining economy. Ultimately, a high labor force participation rate signifies that more Alabamians are actively participating in the state's economic prosperity. Their contributions not only bolster the bottom line but also shape a

brighter future for individuals, families, and communities across Alabama.

Alabamians are known for being hard working, dedicated, and extremely proud to serve and represent their state. Regardless of their skill level, Alabamians wholeheartedly strive to be productive and support their households and families, driven by their unwavering determination to enhance their quality of life. The CPM Solutions Alabama Labor Force Participation Team recognizes that addressing and mitigating the barriers that hinder Alabamians from reentering the workforce is a complex task. However, by taking necessary actions and implementing targeted initiatives, significant progress can be made in reducing these barriers and creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for Alabama workers. Whether through agency initiatives or legislative actions, it is essential to provide Alabama workers with the opportunities they deserve to thrive in the workplace and contribute to the state's economic prosperity. The team is confident that by removing these barriers, the untapped potential of the workforce will have an immeasurable impact on Alabama's economy, propelling its labor force participation rate to the highest ranks in the nation. A vibrant labor force participation will position Alabama to effectively compete with other states in attracting new businesses, fostering investment, and meeting the evolving demands of the market. According to Brookings, the significance of skilled labor availability in investment location decisions is widely recognized by executives, with approximately 95 percent of them rating it as "very important" or "important". This emphasizes the critical role that a skilled workforce plays in attracting and retaining businesses in a region.

Recommendations

Based on research completed by the Strengthening Alabama's Labor Force Participation CPM Solutions Team, we have consolidated our findings into four key recommendations: addressing the cliff effect dependency, improving public transportation, increasing accessibility to childcare, and enhancing affordable housing options.

Cliff Effect Dependency

Addressing the cliff effect for low-income workers in Alabama requires collaboration among stakeholders, agencies, and legislatures. Our CPM Solutions team supports solutions from other states outlined by aha! PROCESS, INC. (N.D.). These include gradually reducing benefits with rising salaries; adopting a two-generation approach that focuses on forging opportunities to

address the needs of both children and adults; creating self-sufficiency calculators that alert social services staff and their customers when income thresholds could cause an abrupt reduction in services; maintaining Alabama's current asset test elimination so that families can continue to open savings accounts as well as harmonizing eligibility procedures, gradually decreasing benefits, and providing warnings and hearings so that there is a gradual decrease in benefits over a period of at least one year. These strategies, as cited in Perez, P.'s (N.D.) study, "Examining, Understanding, and Mitigating the Benefits Cliff Effect," could lead to smoother transitions and improved support for low-income individuals in Alabama.

In addition to the remedies proposed by Mr. Perez, another recommended measure is to exempt working-age adults without children from mandatory work activities to maintain their assistance benefits. Furthermore, we recommend eliminating asset tests that can often hinder individuals from qualifying for assistance programs. Removing these tests would provide individuals with the opportunity to open bank accounts and own countable assets, including vehicles. By eliminating asset tests, the focus can shift towards evaluating the individual's current financial situation and their need for assistance, rather than placing undue emphasis on their existing assets.

Promote work and income growth by revising how earnings and assets are considered for individuals receiving assistance benefits, ensuring that increased income or assets do not result in penalties or loss of benefits. One of the main pitfalls of the benefits cliff is the dilemma where the less an individual earns, the more benefits they receive. Instead, gradually reduce the assistance benefits as individuals secure higher paying jobs or experience increases in income. Many assistance programs become inaccessible to low-income workers once they reach a certain income threshold, which is the paradox of the cliff effect dependency. Set realistic income thresholds that lead to self-sufficiency, rather than government assistance.

Lack of Public Transportation

To address these challenges, the labor force participation team recommends increased funding for public transportation in Alabama, moving away from heavy reliance on ALDOT. While acknowledging the feasibility challenges in rural areas, expanding, and enhancing public transportation in urban areas would greatly benefit households with limited access to vehicles but multiple workforce members. Currently, service gaps, limited operating hours, and lack of

accommodation for individuals with health conditions or disabilities hinder the effectiveness of public transportation. To address these issues, investment in an expanded service fleet, 24/7 operational schedules, and improved accessibility for riders with different needs are urgently needed.

Improvements in public transportation technology, such as downloadable apps for ride scheduling and payment, are crucial. Additionally, it is essential to enhance the compensation packages for public transportation fleet drivers to attract and retain skilled drivers, enabling the state to compete with the private sector. Having a reliable, state-funded, public transportation system in areas where it is feasible would drastically improve the ability of Alabamians to get to and from work in a safe and efficient manner. This essential public service would not only empower Alabama workers to enhance their households and quality of life but also eliminate another obstacle preventing their reentry into the workforce, thus contributing to the improvement of Alabama's labor force participation rate.

Inability to Afford Childcare

Recognizing that the inability to afford childcare is a significant barrier preventing Alabamians from reentering the workforce, every effort must be made to foster workforce participation and support Alabama's working families. The labor force participation team applauds Governor Kay Ivey and the state of Alabama for their commendable efforts and investments in expanding the nationally recognized First-Class Pre-K program. This invaluable initiative significantly eases the financial burden on working families by offering state-funded childcare through high-quality Pre-K education for 3- and 4-year-old children. By prioritizing early childhood education, Alabama is not only supporting the development and well-being of its young learners but also empowering working parents to pursue employment opportunities with peace of mind. According to WSFA 12 News, Alabama's highly regarded First Class Pre-K program is set to expand once again, bringing its quality early childhood education to more children across the state. Recognized as the nation's top-ranked state pre-K program for 17 consecutive years, this expansion will add 69 classrooms in 30 counties, benefiting an additional 1,200 children (WSFA News Staff, 2023). Ivey's commitment to education initiatives, including addressing high needs areas and reducing wait lists, has paved the way for this growth. The labor force participation team recommends further expansion of this program to encompass all

67 counties in Alabama, ensuring that every pre-K-aged child can participate and relieving some of the financial strain on their parents.

It is recommended that the state of Alabama also modify its eligibility requirements for subsidized daycare services which provide low and moderate-income level families with access to affordable childcare so that these services can be made available to more working households. The Initial Eligibility Monthly Income Scale should be re-examined to ensure that it is equitable and remains in line with cost-of-living increases. It is recommended that tax incentives be studied that would encourage private businesses to fund and operate their own childcare facilities as a benefit to their employees and as a recruiting incentive for new employees. Childcare service providers in Alabama face similar challenges as other businesses:

- Struggling to hire and retain qualified staff due to low wages.
- Limited benefits.
- The impact of the benefits cliff as many of these dedicated workers rely on public assistance programs.

To support them and boost the labor force participation rate, the CPM Solutions Alabama team emphasizes the importance of supporting and incentivizing childcare service providers. This includes measures such as improving wages, expanding operating hours, and establishing new locations to ensure access to quality childcare for Alabama's working households. Investing in these areas will benefit Alabama's working families and contribute to a stronger workforce.

Lack of Affordable Housing

In Alabama, the availability of affordable rental homes and apartments for low-income households at the poverty guideline is alarmingly scarce, further exacerbating the burden on those already struggling to make ends meet. While the labor participation team recognizes that the development of commercial rental properties is done primarily by the private sector, there are certain things that are recommended for examination by the state:

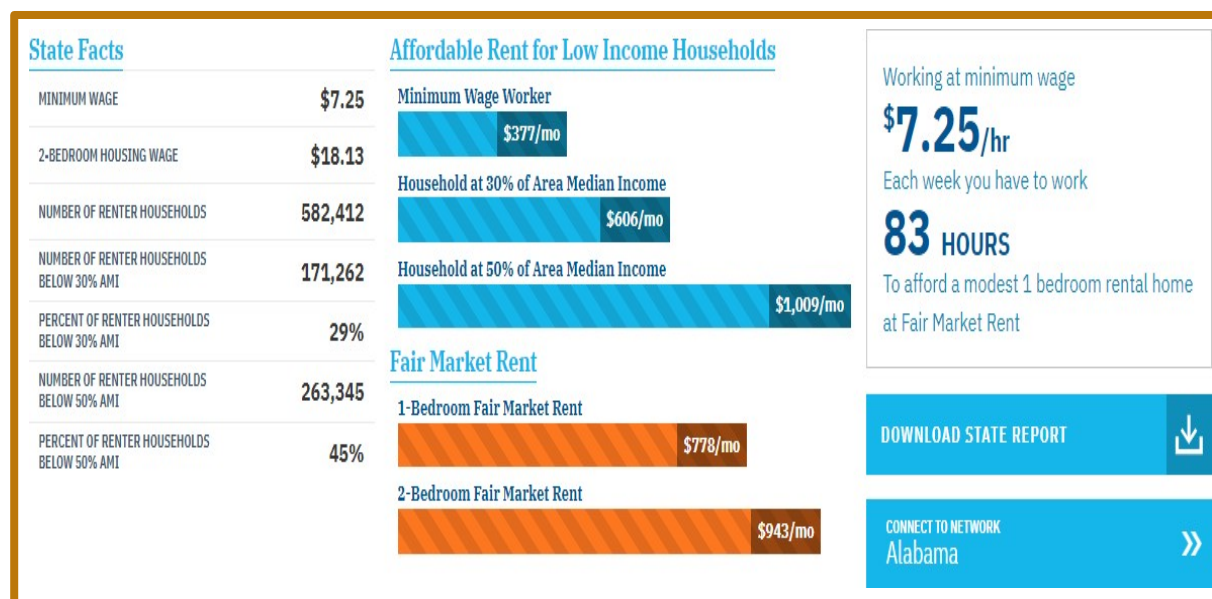
- Provide tax incentives to developers to encourage the construction of affordable rental properties in areas characterized by high living costs and a strong commercial presence, where there is a significant demand for employees earning minimum to medium wages. By incentivizing the

creation of such housing options, it will help alleviate the affordability crisis and provide much-needed relief to low-income individuals and families in these areas.

- Encourage developers to design and construct commercial rental properties to prioritize affordability by designing rental properties without excessive amenities that drive up monthly rental prices, thus ensuring that low-income families have access to suitable and affordable housing options.
- Increase funding for housing initiatives and services that cater to those most affected by affordability challenges.
- Improve basic infrastructure in rural counties to encourage developers to invest in affordable commercial rental properties

As with the other three barriers preventing individuals from reentering the workforce, lack of affordable housing is directly dependent upon wages earned by low-income workers. At Alabama's current minimum wage rate of \$7.25 an individual would need to work 83 hours per week at that rate to afford a modest one-bedroom rental home at fair market rent.

The average minimum wage necessary for an Alabamian to afford a two-bedroom rental home would be \$18.13 per hour, or \$37,710 annually.



Source: National Low Income Housing Coalition, (2023), *Why do affordable homes matter? Record-breaking numbers of families cannot afford a decent place to call home.*

The labor force participation team recommends that a new examination of the state's current minimum wage versus housing affordability for low-income workers be undertaken. To promote the success and productivity of Alabama's low-income workers, it is vital to prioritize their fundamental need for affordable housing. For Alabama's low-income workers to succeed and become productive members of the economy, the basic need of an affordable home for them and their families must be a top priority. Accomplishing this will go a long way towards increasing Alabama's labor force participation rate.

Final Thoughts

In closing, the labor force participation team has identified key barriers and presented a range of recommendations to increase Alabama's labor force participation rate. By addressing the challenges of childcare affordability, benefits cliff dependency, limited access to public transportation, and the shortage of affordable housing, Alabama can create an environment where individuals have greater opportunities to reenter the workforce and contribute to the state's economy. These efforts will not only empower individuals to reenter the workforce, but also foster economic growth and enhance the overall well-being of communities across the state. Let us come together, prioritize these initiatives, and build a future where every Alabamian has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the success of Alabama's economy.

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