COMMON SENSE INSTITUTE

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WHERE ARE THE MEN?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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With over a decade of experience researching and advising lawmakers on tax and economic policy, Ben has contributed to key legislative and ballot issues at the state and federal level, including the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act and landmark state tax reforms. In addition to publishing regular research reports for CSI, Ben has been published in state and national outlets including the *Wall Street Journal, Real Clear Policy, the Corridor Business Journal, the Colorado Springs Gazette,* and others. Prior to joining CSI, Ben worked for a state-based think tank in Colorado and as a U.S. Senate aide for tax, budget, and economic policy.

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ABOUT COMMON SENSE INSTITUTE

Common Sense Institute is a non-partisan research organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of Iowa's economy. CSI is at the forefront of important discussions concerning the future of free enterprise and aims to have an impact on the issues that matter most to Iowans. CSI's mission is to examine the fiscal impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Iowans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI employs rigorous research techniques and dynamic modeling to evaluate the potential impact of these measures on the economy and individual opportunity.

TEAMS & FELLOWS STATEMENT

CSI is committed to independent, in-depth research that examines the impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Iowans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI's commitment to institutional independence is rooted in the individual independence of our researchers, economists, and fellows. At the core of CSI's mission is a belief in the power of the free enterprise system. Our work explores ideas that protect and promote jobs and the economy, and the CSI team and fellows take part in this pursuit with academic freedom. Our team's work is informed by data-driven research and evidence. The views and opinions of fellows do not reflect the institutional views of CSI. CSI operates independently of any political party and does not take positions.

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INTRODUCTION

The labor force participation rate (LFPR) is a key measure of economic health, reflecting the share of the working-age population employed or actively seeking work. Yet as of January 2025, U.S. labor force participation among men has declined 18.7 percentage points from its high during World War II.[1] In contrast, female labor force participation remains near record highs.[2] This long-term decline in male workforce participation reduces national productivity and slows economic growth. While Iowa's LFPR remains above the national average, the state is not immune to the trend. With an aging population and declining net births, additional declines in male labor force participation could intensify future labor force challenges and put downward pressure on economic growth. This report examines the decline in Iowa's LFPR and explores factors that may be contributing to that decline.

KEY FINDINGS

- The labor force participation rate among Iowa's men has been trending downward for five decades, following but outpacing the U.S. trend.
  - The LFPR trend for Iowa's 25- to 54-year-olds declined 6.5% from 1977 to 2024. The LFPR trend for U.S. 25- to 54-year-olds declined 6% from 1977 to 2024.
  - As of 2024, Iowa's LFPR for males ages 25 to 54 was 91% versus 88% for the United States.
- If Iowa's prime working age males participated in the workforce at the same rate as they did prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2025 the state would—
  - have a male LFPR of 94%, 3 percentage points above the actual current rate.
  - benefit from 77,000 additional Iowans employed.
  - produce nearly $10 billion more in GDP.
  - generate just over $4 billion more in statewide personal income.
- While many factors may contribute, CSI identified 6 key demographic characteristics linked to declining male workforce participation:
  1. College attainment
  2. Marital status
  3. Living arrangements
  4. Disability rates
  5. Deindustrialization
  6. Crime rates
- Common Sense Institute's binary logistic regression models indicate—
  - **(College attainment)** Iowa men ages 25 to 54 with less than an associate degree are 39% less likely to participate in the labor force compared to those with higher education attainment.
  - **(Marital status)** The average never-married man in Iowa is 51% less likely to be in the labor force than a married man.
  - **(Living arrangements)** Iowa men ages 25 to 54 living under relatives are 60% less likely to be in the labor force than those who claim to be heads of households.
  - **(Disability rates)** The average Iowa male ages 25 to 54 claiming any difficulty related to disabilities is 94% less likely to be in the labor force than a male with no difficulties.
- **Deindustrialization** has hit Iowa's male workforce especially hard. Manufacturing—which employs 20% of all employed Iowa men—has seen high initial unemployment claims. In 2024, manufacturing made up 40% of all initial Unemployment Insurance (UI) claims—up from nearly 30% the year prior.
- **Criminality** reduces this demographic's workforce participation. In 2023, males from age 16 to 40 made up 32.8% of Iowa's total population but were responsible for 46.4% of all criminal offenses.

MEN ARE EXITING THE WORKFORCE NATIONWIDE

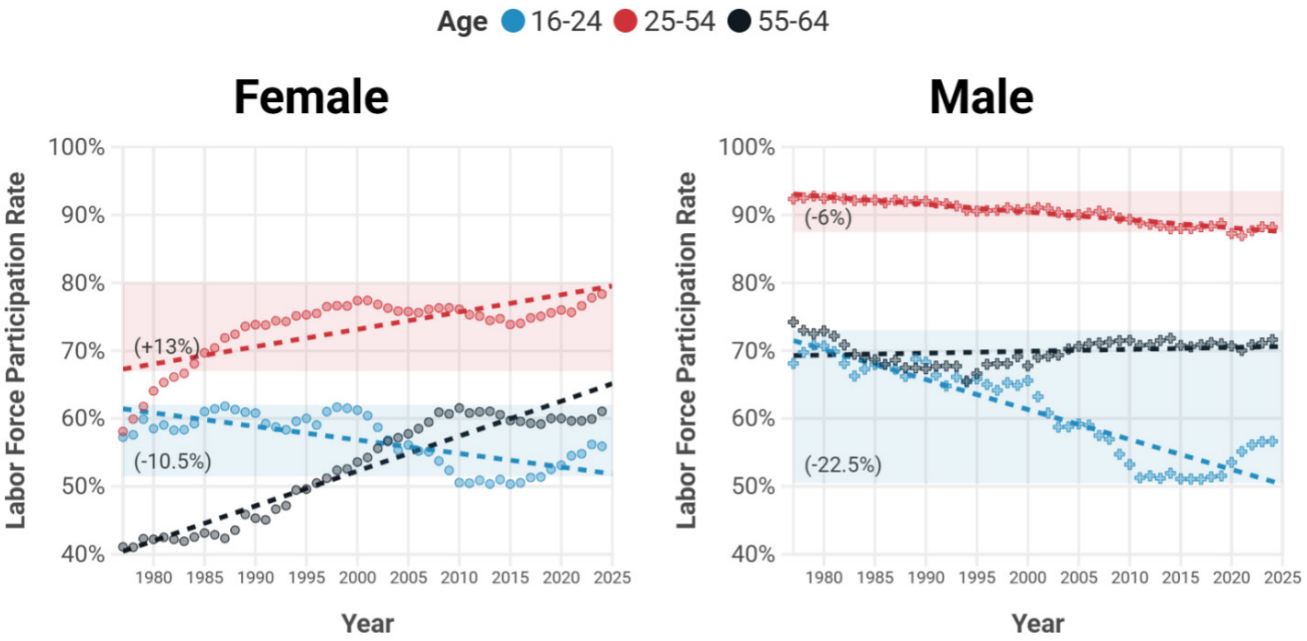
Male labor force participation has been in decline across the United States since the 1970s, but the trend has become especially pronounced among young men in the last 25 years. American Enterprise Institute scholar Dr. Nicholas Eberstadt has studied this issue extensively for over a decade.[3] In his 2016 book, *Men Without Work: America's Invisible Crisis*, Eberstadt argued that increased leisure time, reliance on disability benefits, support from relatives, the decline in marriages, church attendance, and community involvement, among other unnamed factors, have incentivized an ongoing withdrawal of prime-age men from the workforce.[4] He and others warn the rise of unworking men poses a threat to economic growth and the social fabric of American communities.

Eberstadt's concerns stem from a glaring change in the LFPR data over time. Only 68% of men in the United States participated in the workforce in 2024, down from a high of 86.6% in 1949. When fewer men work, overall economic output suffers. Economic growth slows, the available tax base shrinks, and the economy has fewer innovators. Fewer laborers can also bring about inflationary pressures as a reduction in the supply of labor pushes up labor costs.[5] Lower labor participation rates also affect the unemployment rate.

Economists generally consider a low unemployment rate, or "full employment," a sign of a strong economy.[6] However, when the rate falls because of low workforce participation, it may signal the opposite. The unemployment rate only accounts for those actively seeking work, meaning those dropping out of the labor force are not counted. That means the unemployment rate can fall because the previously unemployed found work or because more Americans left the workforce altogether.[7] When a low unemployment rate coincides with high labor force participation, one can expect a healthy and productive economy where those who can work do so. In such cases, the economy approaches maximum productivity. However, when falling workforce participation sends the unemployment rate lower, that could portend a reduction in productivity.[8] Therefore, understanding male labor force participation trends is crucial for determining the health of the economy.

Figure 1 visualizes national labor force participation rates among females and males across three age groups: 16 to 24, 25 to 54, and 55 to 64. The 47-year trend line spanning from 1977 to 2024 appears as the dotted lines.

FIGURE 1. U.S. LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES, FEMALE AND MALE, GENERAL AGE GROUPS, 1977-2024



Source: IPUMS
Note: Dotted lines indicate trend lines; trends for each line start at their respective year, 1977 or 2000, and end in 2024.

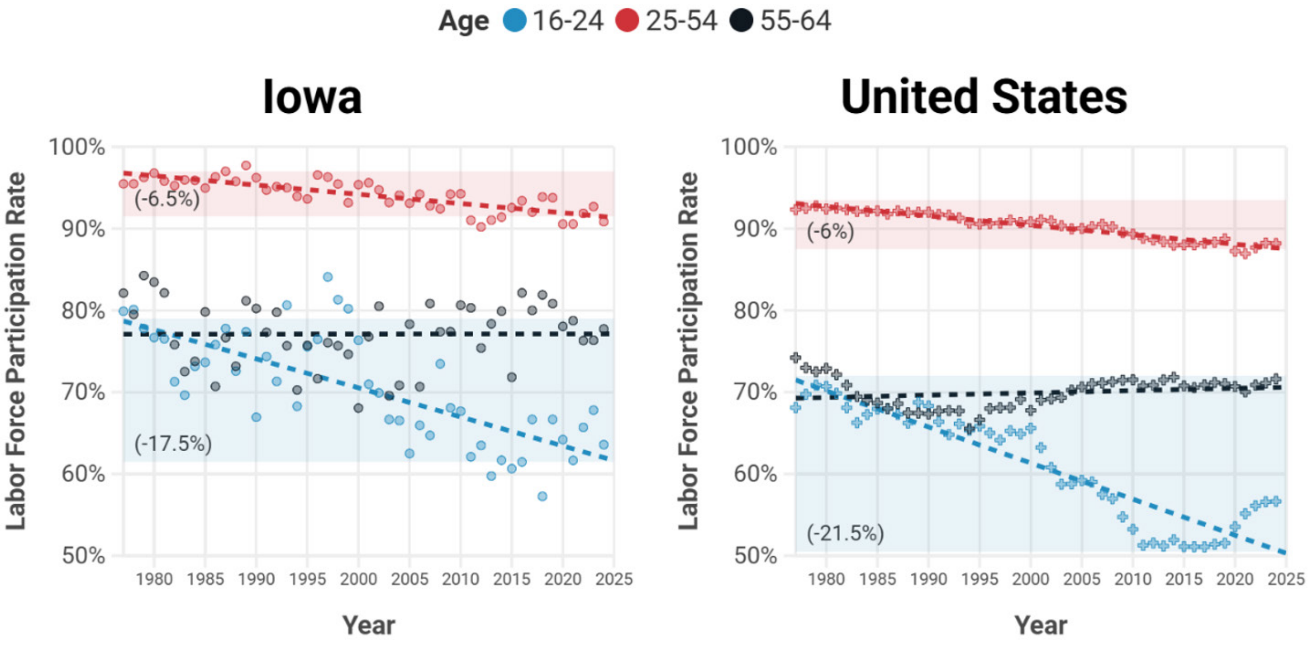
The data shows a clear and persistent downward trajectory in labor force participation rates among the two youngest male age groups. The 47-year trend line has declined by 22.5 percentage points for males 16-24, and 6 points for males 25-54. Similarly, the trend line has fallen by 10.5 points among the youngest female age group. The female 25-54 trend line has increased by 13 percentage points. Altogether, male Americans have exited the labor force at a far quicker pace than their female counterparts over the last five decades. Given the consistency in the data, this trend is not a statistical anomaly. Indeed, the data supports Dr. Eberstadt's understanding of the issue. Economic, social, and/or cultural shifts have resulted in steadily declining male labor force participation.

This sustained decline in male LFPR poses serious economic consequences for the nation's economy. Whether driven by education attainment, shifting industry growth, higher crime levels, or declining health, a shrinking male labor force creates a strain on the economy. As men continue to exit the workforce—regardless of their reasoning—long-term economic growth and stability weaken.[9] If Iowa mirrors these national trends, the state must confront the reality of a shrinking workforce and the economic consequences that come with it. Failing to address this decline risks not only reduced productivity but also a fundamental disruption to the labor market's future. The next section establishes whether Iowa's male LFPR data follows the national trend.

IOWA'S MALE LFPR FOLLOWS THE NATIONAL TREND

Iowa has historically outperformed the United States in labor force participation.[10] As of December 2024, Iowa boasted the 9th highest labor force participation rate in the nation at 67% and the 13th lowest unemployment rate at 3.3%.[11] This compares with a 62.6% LFPR and a 4% unemployment rate in the United States. However, while Iowa enjoys stronger topline employment and labor force numbers than the U.S., it shares the same trends in male workforce participation rates among the three major age groups. Figure 2 compares male LFPR across the three main age groups since 1977 in Iowa and the United States.

FIGURE 2. IOWA AND U.S. LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES, MALE, GENERAL AGE GROUPS, 1977-2024



Source: IPUMS
Note: Dotted lines indicate trend lines; trends for each line start at their respective year, 1977 or 2000, and end in 2024.

As in the broader U.S., Iowa's two youngest age groups have seen a consistent decline in labor force participation while the oldest has remained mostly stagnant. Only since 2000 has the oldest age group grown in labor force participation rates. Previous CSI research found this uptick in the 55 to 64 labor force participation can be attributed to the growth of Iowa's aging workforce, which has delayed retirement to earn more income.[12] However, while older Americans and Iowans are returning to work, more younger people continue to exit the workforce. According to the declining trend lines in figure 2, labor force participation rates are declining faster among male Iowans ages 25-54 relative to the national trend. Conversely, LFPR is declining slower among male Iowans ages 16-24. The relatively quicker decline among the prime working age population is especially concerning for Iowa. This population makes up a substantial portion of the total labor force, so an ongoing decline in this population's willingness to work can translate into declining economic productivity. The following section outlines the economic impacts attributable to the persistent decline in male labor force participation.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF IOWA'S DECLINING MALE WORKFORCE

Male labor force participation in Iowa has been on the decline for decades. As shown in figure 2, the trend line for males 25 to 54 has declined 6.5 percentage points from the late 70s and shows no signs of slowing down. While the trend is clear, it does not quantify the economic impacts of a declining male labor force in Iowa. This section utilizes REMI dynamic modeling to estimate how Iowa's economy might look today if Iowa males still participated in the workforce at rates seen in the past.

The REMI model adjusts current labor force participation rates among men ages 25 to 54 in Iowa upwards by 3, 4.5, and 6.5 percentage points to capture the economic benefits lost from men dropping out of the workforce. The simulation also adjusts the employment level depending on the rate of change in labor force participation. A strong relationship exists between labor force participation and employment, as shown in table 2 in the appendix. Common Sense Institute employed a panel vector autoregressive model (VAR) to estimate the rate of change in employment per percentage point increase in labor force participation. More information on the model is available in the "Methodology" section.

In short, the model states that for every percentage point growth in LFPR, employment increases by 0.79%. If the labor force participation rate for Iowa males ages 25 to 54 never fell from its pre-pandemic levels, equivalent to being three percentage points higher today as shown in figure 2, the economic benefits would be substantial. But even a return to the pre-pandemic LFPR for this demographic would have a large positive impact on Iowa's economy. Table 1 outlines the economic impact of increases in the LFPR among Iowa males ages 25 to 54 under three hypothetical scenarios.

Based on CSI's economic simulation in the REMI model, if the LFPR returned to its pre-pandemic level 3 percentage points above where it is today, this year the state would have over 77,000 additional Iowans employed, produced $9.57 billion more in GDP, and generated $4.16 billion more in personal income. If the LFPR were 4.5 points higher, the same level as before the Great Recession hit in December 2007,the added benefits would grow. New employment would increase by 115 thousand, GDP by $14 billion, and personal income by more than $6 billion. In a more extreme scenario where LFPR were 6.5 points higher, or simply never declined since 1977, employment, GDP, and personal income would be even higher. While returning to a labor force participation level seen in the 1970s or even 2007 may seem unattainable, returning to the pre-pandemic level is not unreasonable.

If the downward trend in male labor force participation does not reverse, the state should expect further losses in employment and GDP relative to what it could have had. The following section outlines possible factors contributing to the persistent decline in male labor force participation. Some solutions are easier to address and more impactful than others.

TABLE 1. ECONOMIC IMPACT OF AN INCREASE IN MALE 25 TO 54 LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION, IOWA, 2025

2025			
Item	+3% LFPR	+4.5% LFPR	+6.5% LFPR
Employment	+77,000	+115,000	+167,000
Gross GDP (billions)	+9.57	+14.2	+20.6
Personal Income (billions)	+4.16	+6.2	+9.08

Source: REMI, CSI Calculations

SIX FACTORS IMPACTING MALE LFPR IN IOWA

While countless factors may impact the rate of workforce participation among Iowa's male population, this section explores a few of the most closely linked factors. Labor force participation is a complex issue shaped by economic shifts, social dynamics, and individual circumstances, making it essential to examine a range of demographic and structural characteristics that may contribute to the observed trends. These topics range from a variety of demographic characteristics:

1. College attainment
2. Deindustrialization
3. Marital status
4. Living arrangements
5. Disability rates
6. Crime rates

These topics aim to provide additional context to major contributing factors affecting male labor force participation trends. The sections employ a binary logistic regression model to compare the trends within each characteristic in Iowa with LFPR trends. The regression analysis isolates the effects of these variables, helping to clarify their contributions to workforce engagement. By isolating these effects, these models help clarify the relative importance of education, industry shifts, social structures, and other factors in determining labor market outcomes. Understanding these trends is critical for policymakers and business leaders seeking to develop strategies that bolster labor force participation and sustain Iowa's economic vitality. More information on the model and detailed regression results seen in this section are available in the "Methodology" section.

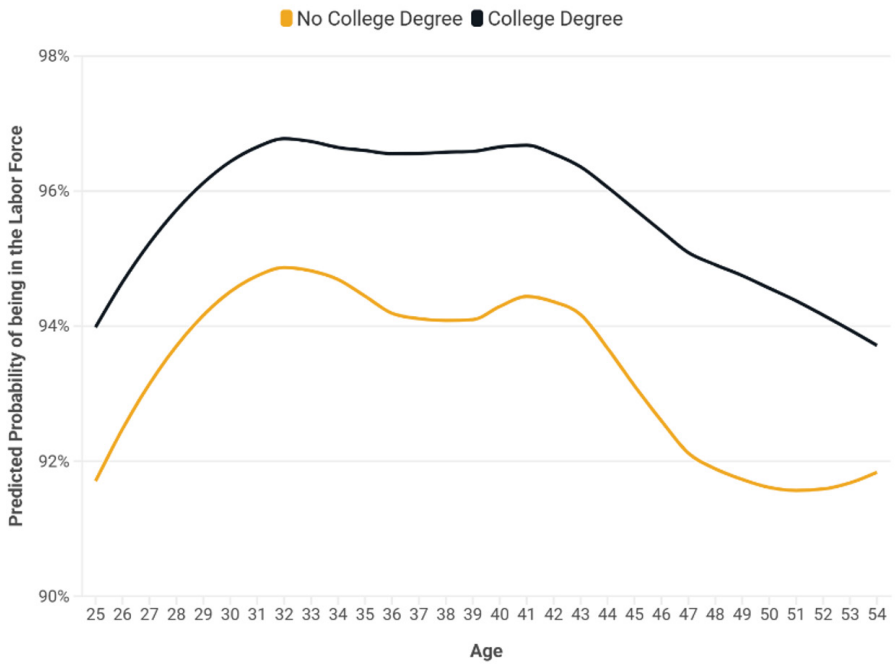
Iowa's educated population is leaving the state and its workforce

Most Americans do not hold a postsecondary degree.[13] However, that is changing, especially among young Americans ages 18 to 24. In 2023, 52% of this age group were either studying for or had already obtained at least an associate degree.[14] This rate was greater in Iowa, where over 54% of residents ages 18 to 24 were either enrolled in higher education or already had a degree. This is the only age group with most of its population in or done with college. As younger generations continue to make up a larger share of the total population, college attainment will become the new norm. This shift has major implications for the future makeup of our labor force.

College attainment is linked to higher rates of labor force participation. A 2024 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) news release shows 92.2% of men with a bachelor's degree participate in the labor force versus 81.6% of all men.[15] Iowa data mirrors this trend. In Iowa, the college educated are more likely to participate in the labor force than those not college educated, as seen in figure 3. Figure 3 confirms this trend by visualizing the predicted probability of being in the labor force for men ages 25 to 54 by educational attainment. In the absence of comparable BLS data for Iowa, the model uses microdata—available from IPUMS—and a binary logistic regression to estimate the likelihood of labor force participation as a function of college attainment. Later sections will use different independent variables in their respective models. More information on how this regression works is available in the "Methodology" section.

Iowa men ages 25 to 54 with less than an associate degree are 39% less likely to participate in the labor force compared to those with higher education attainment. As shown in the predicted probability results in figure 3, this gap persists across all ages. These findings mirror research already established at the national level, which indicates higher education attainment leads to higher employment rates.[16] A variety of factors might contribute to this trend, but the most likely is wage

FIGURE 3. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF BEING IN THE LABOR FORCE BY COLLEGE ATTAINMENT, IOWA, MALE 25 TO 54



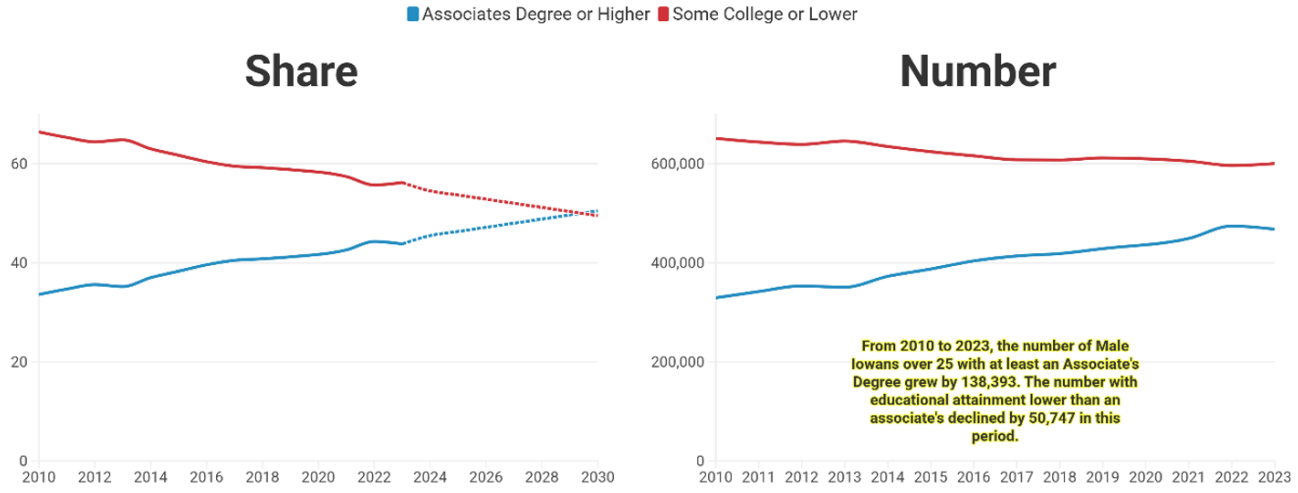
Source: IPUMS, CSI Regressions

opportunity. In 2023, Iowans holding an associate degree earned roughly $6,000 more at the median than those with just a high school diploma.[17] This gap in income growth becomes even more pronounced at higher attainment levels. Nonwage benefits, such as health insurance and retirement income, also significantly favor degree holders.[18]

Given the income disparity at different education levels, changes in college attainment have consequences for Iowa's labor force. According to Census Bureau data illustrated in figure 4, the share of male Iowans over 25 with at least an associate degree grew by 10.2 percentage points between 2010 and 2023, from 33.6% to 43.8%. This translates to a nominal increase of 138,393 Iowans. Conversely, those with an education attainment below an associate degree declined by 50,747 during this period. While those without a post-secondary degree still make up most of the population today, that is on track to change within a few years. Based on the current 14-year trend, college-educated males over 25 will comprise the majority of Iowa men over 25 by 2030.

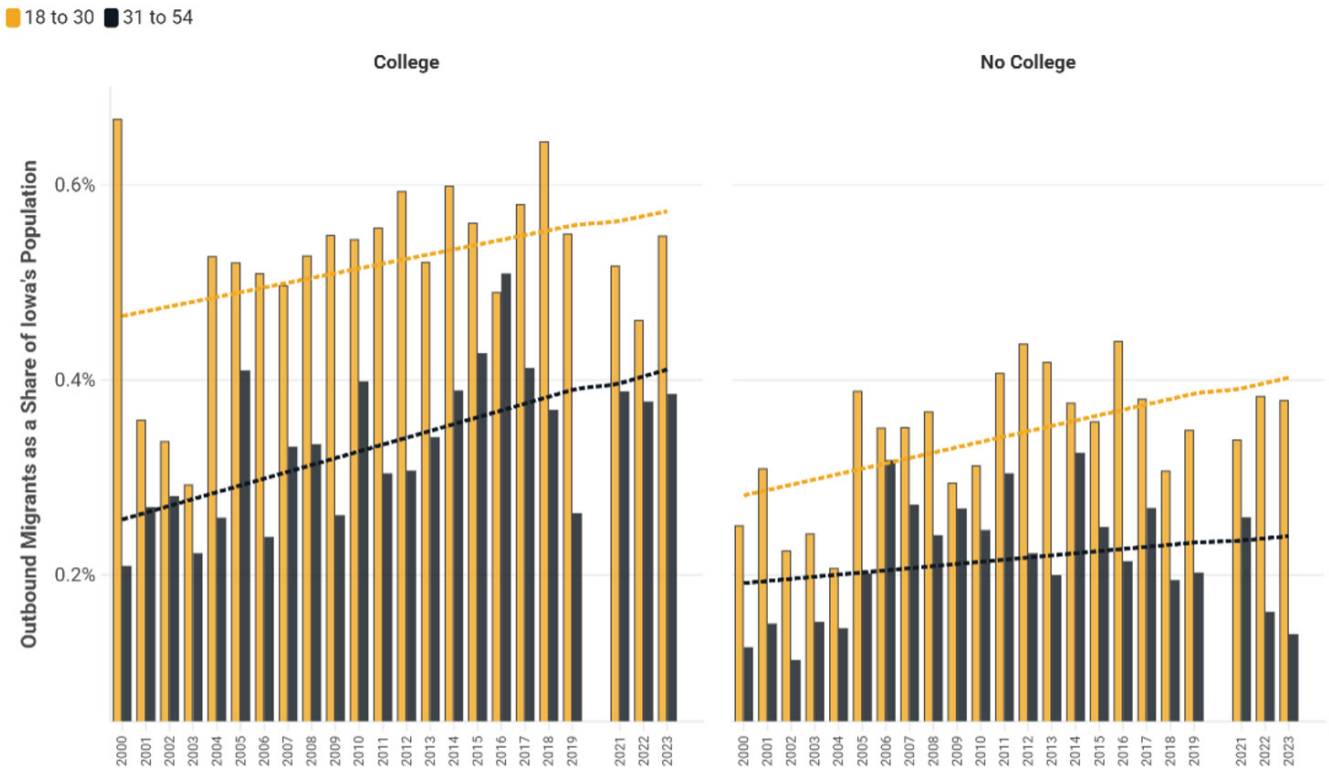
Despite a rise in post-secondary education attainment, the gap in LFPR based on college attainment does not bode well for Iowa when considering domestic migration trends. In a recent report, "Demographics are Destiny," CSI highlighted a concerning trend: young, college-educated Iowans are leaving the state quicker than any other major demographic. The report found, "Degree holders are leaving the state at nearly twice the rate of residents who do not hold a college degree."[19] Indeed, as of 2021, Iowa ranked 10th worst in the U.S. in retaining its college graduates.[20] If those contributing most to the labor force are leaving the state, the participation trends among those staying—who are experiencing a declining LFPR—could exacerbate declining labor force trends. Figure 5, also printed in CSI's recent report on demographics, illustrates the disturbing trend.

FIGURE 4. SHARE AND NUMBER OF MALE IOWANS OVER 25 BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, 2010 TO 2023.



Source: Census Bureau
Note: "Some College or Lower" includes (1) Some college, no degree, (2) High school graduate, (3) 9th to 12th Grade, No Diploma, and (4) Less than 9th Grade. "Associate degree or Higher" includes (1) Associate Degree, (2) Bachelor's Degree, and (3) Graduate or Professional Degree.

FIGURE 5. OUTBOUND MIGRANTS AS A SHARE OF IOWA'S POPULATION, MALES AGES 18 TO 30 AND 31 TO 54, EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, 2000-2023



Source: IPUMS

Figure 5 shows young people are leaving the state in greater numbers than middle-aged residents, and the college educated are leaving at a greater rate than those without a college education. Of the four groups included in figure 5, young college educated Iowans are by far the most likely to leave the state. This group is also most likely to remain in the labor force and thus important to the vitality of a state's economy. Research has found a direct correlation between higher education attainment and economic productivity.[21] That notion is confirmed by the labor force participation gap shown in figure 3. Additionally, young people have more years of productivity ahead of them, so they will generally contribute more to the future economy. The exodus of young college educated males from Iowa bodes poorly for future economic growth. Policymakers should consider policies that will help retain this demographic. Policymakers should weigh the direct costs of proposed policies against the cost of a declining male labor force, shown in table 1.

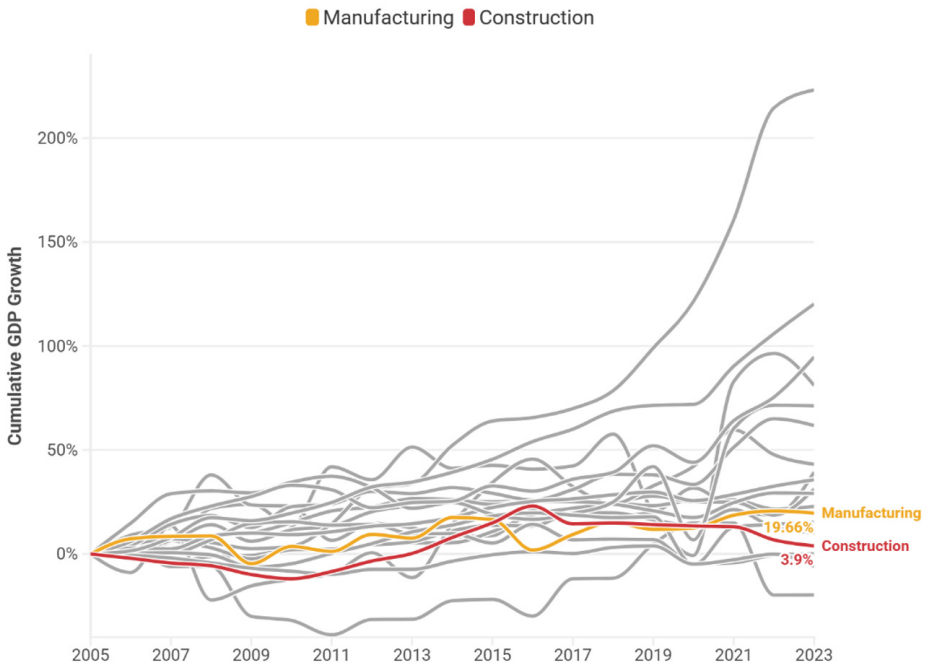
Deindustrialization disproportionately impacts Iowa's male workers

The nation has experienced deindustrialization since the 1970s.[22] Employment in manufacturing, construction, and other related sectors has declined for decades, creating economic instability for workers in those sectors.[23] This decline has hit non-college-educated workers the hardest, especially in the Midwest and Rustbelt regions that have traditionally relied on well-paying industrial jobs that do not

require higher education. Manufacturing and construction, two of Iowa's largest sectors by GDP, have grown much slower relative to other sectors in the state. Of 19 total major sectors, construction experienced the fourth slowest GDP growth followed by manufacturing at 7th slowest over the last 20 years. Iowa's male population—especially the non-college-educated males staying in the state—relies on these types of sectors for employment at a higher rate. Thus, when these sectors struggle, Iowa's male workforce experiences outsized negative outcomes. Figure 6 visualizes these sectors' cumulative growth since 2005. Figures 19 and 20 in the appendix visualize employment going back to 1990.

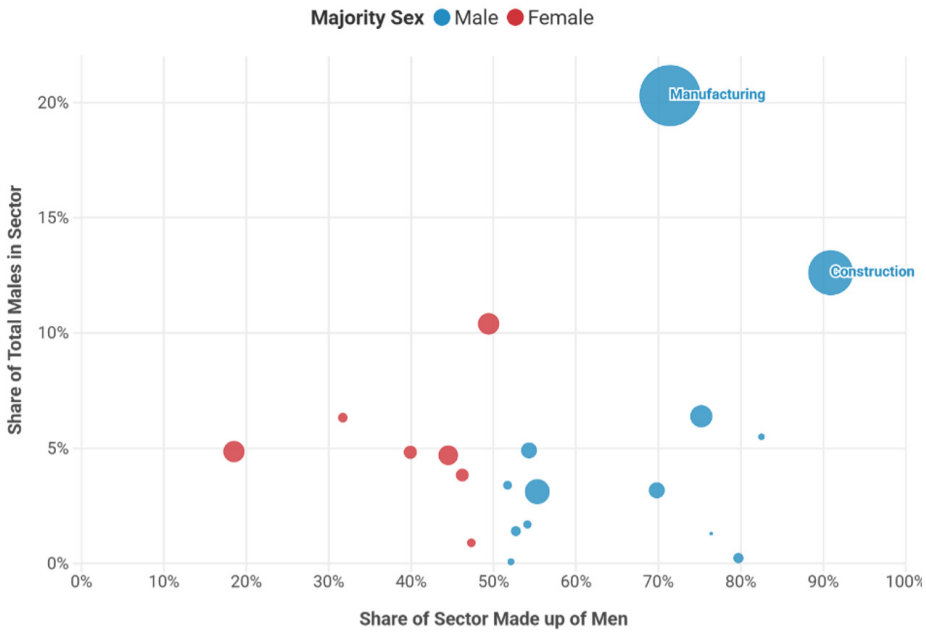
Between 2005 and 2023, Iowa's manufacturing sector grew 19.7% and its construction sector grew just 3.9%. While the GDP of these sectors grew, they remained some of the lowest-performing sectors during the period. Using the U.S. industry share of GDP by sector as a benchmark, one could say Iowa's

FIGURE 6. CUMULATIVE GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT GROWTH AMONG MAJOR SECTORS IN IOWA, 2005-2024



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis

FIGURE 7. IOWA SECTOR SHARE OF EMPLOYMENT BY GENDER, 2023



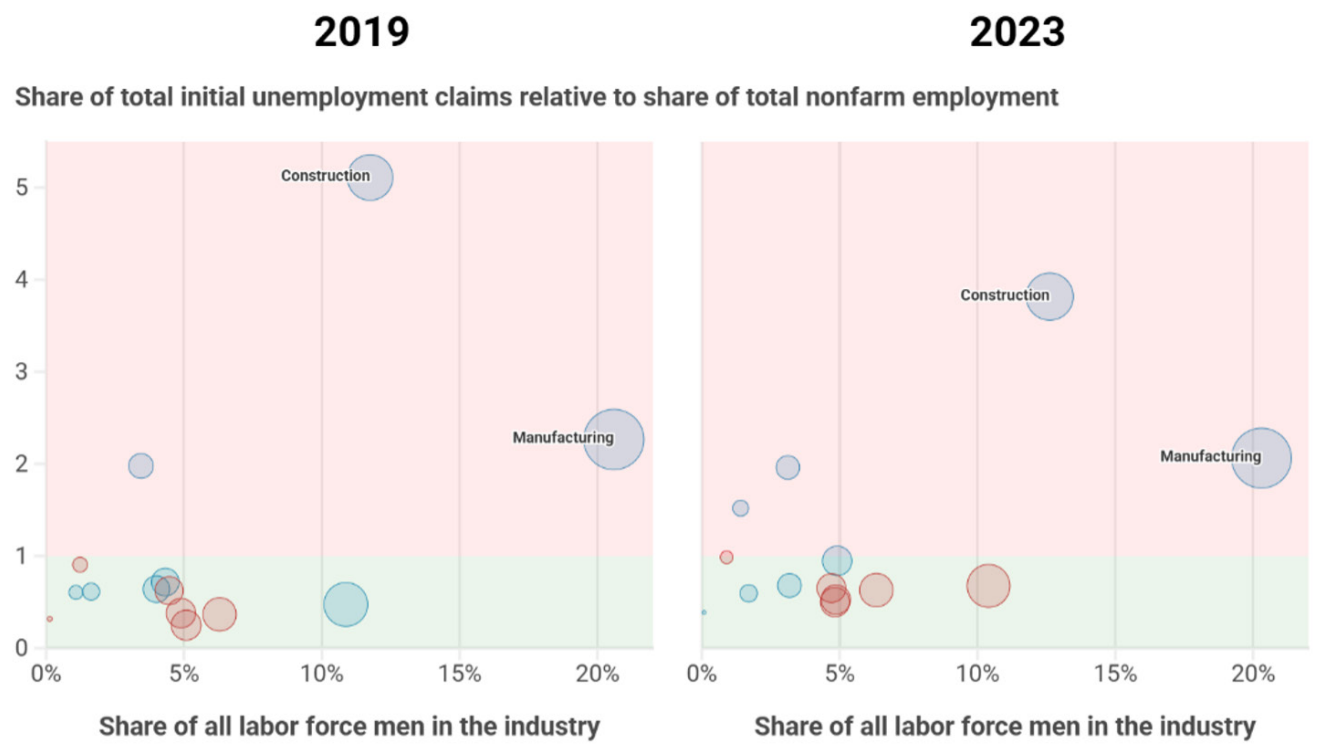
Source: Iowa Open Data
Note: Sector dots are colored by majority sex and sized by their share of all initial unemployment claims in 2024.

economy was "overweight" underperforming sectors. In general, the workers in these sectors likely had diminished employment and wage growth prospects relative to workers in other sectors. To determine whether males comprise a disproportionate share of these underperforming sectors, figure 7 visualizes the share of male and female employment for each major sector in 2023.

In both 2019 and 2023, male-dominated sectors accounted for the largest shares of unemployment claims relative to total employment. Construction and manufacturing maintained high ratios of claims to employment, with construction accounting for over 20% and manufacturing nearly 30% of all initial unemployment claims in 2023. This is despite the two accounting for only 5% and 14% of the total workforce, respectively. Relative to total employment share, UI claims were 3.8 times larger in the construction sector, and 2.06 times larger in manufacturing, meaning these sectors comprise more of initial unemployment claims than their relative employment share. The trend continued to worsen in 2024, as manufacturing's share of claims surged to 40%, underscoring the disproportionate impact of economic challenges on these sectors.

Given the outsized representation of males in these sectors, persistent job instability in these sectors may contribute to the broader trend of declining male labor force participation. Economic uncertainty coupled with repeated cycles of unemployment may discourage men from reentering the labor force, leading to a decrease in male LFPR. The structural decline in traditionally male-dominated sectors due to automation, offshoring, and shifts in consumer demand may also limit reemployment opportunities for displaced workers.

FIGURE 8. SHIFT IN TOTAL INITIAL UNEMPLOYMENT CLAIMS RELATIVE TO SECTOR SHARE OF TOTAL NONFARM EMPLOYMENT, 2019 AND 2023



Source: Iowa Open Data, BLS
Note: Dot sizes represent each sector's share of labor force males; colors represent the dominant sex in the sector—blue for men and red for women. Areas shaded red indicate UI claims are higher than their relative share of nonfarm employment. Green shading indicates relatively lower UI claims.

Men without a postsecondary degree may face challenges transitioning into emerging sectors such as technology, healthcare, and professional services. These sectors demand advanced skills or credentials that non-college-educated workers may not possess, leaving a significant portion of the male workforce at a disadvantage. Therefore, the shift away from traditional blue-collar work has contributed to a growing economic divide based on educational attainment, with college-educated men adapting more easily to the evolving job market while those without higher degrees struggle to find stable employment.

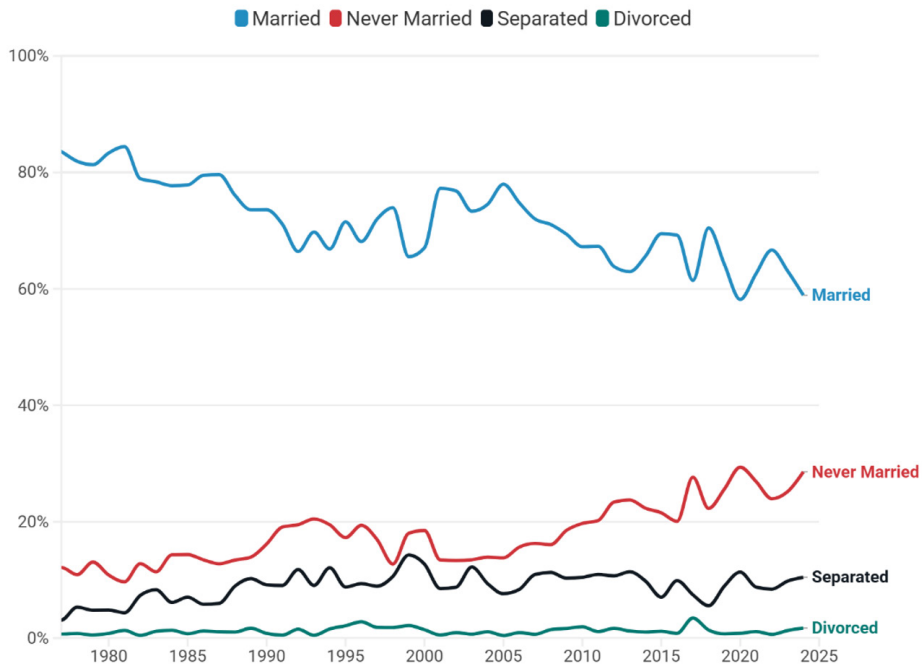
Policymakers should recognize the long-term implications of deindustrialization on Iowa's male workforce; however, they may have a hard time affecting change through state-level public policy. Iowa lawmakers have little power to reverse decades of U.S. deindustrialization that led to a decline in employment among some of the state's leading male dominated sectors. Instead, focusing on re-skilling initiatives and creating pathways to stable employment in emerging sectors could be a crucial alternative in mitigating further declines in male labor force participation.

Marriage rates and male workforce participation rates fall in tandem

Personal lives outside the workplace contribute to projected labor force participation. Research has found married men tend to secure higher paying jobs and are more likely to be promoted than their single counterparts.[24] Many factors impact this trend, but the most probable researchers point to is the need to financially provide for the household.[25] Individuals typically take on additional financial obligations when they get married and have children. These obligations encourage married men to remain in or enter the workforce and advance their careers. Yet, the share of married men is dropping in Iowa. If this trend continues, it may contribute to a continued decline in male workforce participation.

The marriage rate among Iowa men from age 25 to 54 has been declining since the 1970s. Many factors may contribute. Economic challenges and financial instability stemming from increasing costs for housing, childcare, birthing, and

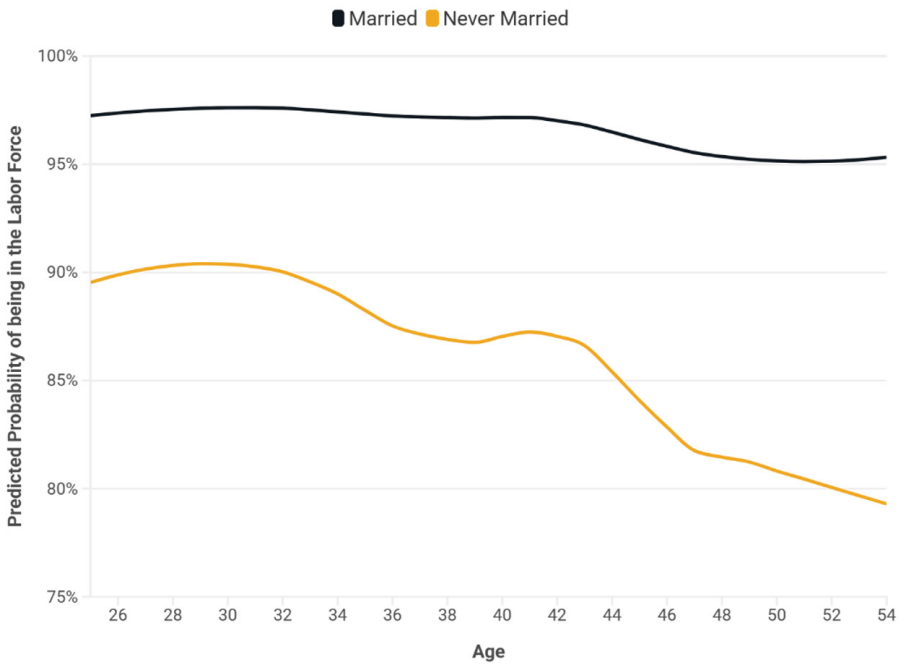
FIGURE 9. SHARE OF MALE IOWANS 25 TO 54 BY MARITAL STATUS, 1977 TO 2024



Source: IPUMS

most other daily necessities is a popular explanation, especially for young Iowans just entering the workforce. If an individual can barely afford their own livelihood, adding a family may increase those concerns. This issue has been even more prevalent following record inflation levels in the post-pandemic era.[26] Changing societal norms also suggest a cultural shift away from marriage. Survey data from 2010 suggests that nearly 40% of all respondents believed marriage was becoming obsolete. Figure 9 visualizes the shift in marital status among men ages 25 to 54 in Iowa.

FIGURE 10. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF BEING IN THE LABOR FORCE BY MARITAL STATUS, IOWA, MALE 25 TO 54



Source: IPUMS, CSI Regressions

From 1977 to 2024, the share of Iowa's men who are married declined from 83.6% to 58.9%. Over the same period, the share of never married men grew from 12.1% to 28.6%. This decline in marriage coincides with a steady decline in Iowa's male LFPR over the same period shown in figure 2. Correlation does not necessarily imply causation, but the reduction in the share of married men might contribute to the decline in Iowa's male LFPR. Figure 10 shows the predicted probability of labor force participation among Iowa's married and never-married males.

The model indicates the average never-married man in Iowa is 51% less likely to participate in the labor force than a married man. This gap becomes wider as individuals age, reinforcing the conclusion that marriage can drive individuals to seek and maintain employment. In contrast, never-married men may face fewer economic pressures or lack the same level of motivation to participate in the workforce as married men. Taken together, the model's results, trends in male the LFPR, and existing outside research suggest marriage encourages men to pursue employment.

A decline in marriage rates also means changes in living arrangements. As fewer men marry, more are likely to remain living alone or move back in with parents or extended family. The economic pressures stemming from post-pandemic inflation are likely exacerbating this trend.[27] These shifts in living situations can further impact labor force participation, as men living with family may have reduced financial pressures or lack the incentive to seek full-time employment. The next section explores how living arrangements influence labor force engagement and how the trend of more men living at home with parents affects Iowa's labor market.

Men who live with relatives work at lower rates

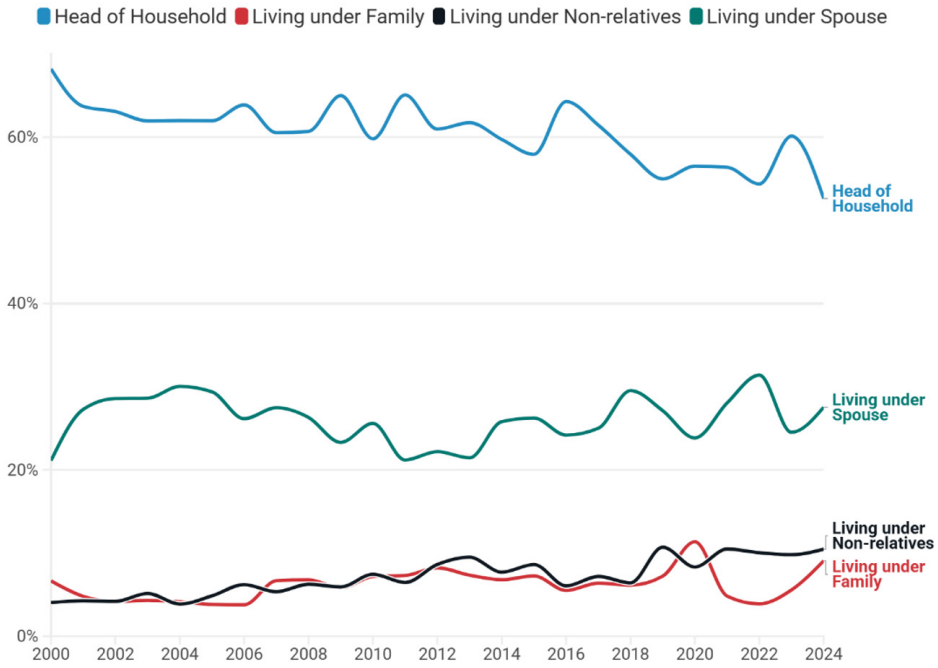
Researchers have found a correlation between male workforce participation and living arrangements. Young Americans entering the labor force often stay at a parent or relative's home to mitigate labor market risks.[28] Younger adults generally have lower savings rates, are less skilled, and are less willing than older workers to remain in the same job for long. This combination of low savings, job insecurity, and free housing may make young Americans less inclined to remain in the workforce than those living on their own. Post-pandemic inflation has led to large cost-of-living increases for Iowans, possibly contributing to the rise in cohabitation.[29] Figure 11 illustrates the trend in living arrangements among Iowa men ages 25 to 54 since 1977.

While most prime working age men in Iowa continue to live alone or with a spouse, the share of total Iowans within these two groups is falling. From 2000 to 2024, these two groups together fell from about 90% to 80% of the total. Of these groups, the share of men living under a spouse increased while the share of men as heads of households dropped precipitously from 68.2% in 2000 to 52.6% in 2024. Meanwhile, the share of Iowa's men ages 25 to 54 living under either relatives or non-relatives rose from about 10% to 20%. The share of Iowans living with a relative peaked at 11.36% in 2020 and has since fallen to 9.06%. This still exceeds the pre-pandemic peak of 8.22% seen in 2012.

The rise in Iowa males living with relatives or non-relatives, rather than as heads of households, may have contributed to the decline in male labor force participation. This makes sense given the trend among married men. As with that population, heads of households have more responsibility and pressure to retain their position in the labor force. Consequently, those who can live under a relative, presumably for a lower housing cost, generally face less economic pressures. Figure 12 makes this evident. It shows the predicted probability of being in the labor force for men ages 25 and older, broken down by whether they live under a relative's roof or not.

The gap in labor force participation between heads of households and those living under relatives is extreme. Iowa men ages 25 to 54 living under

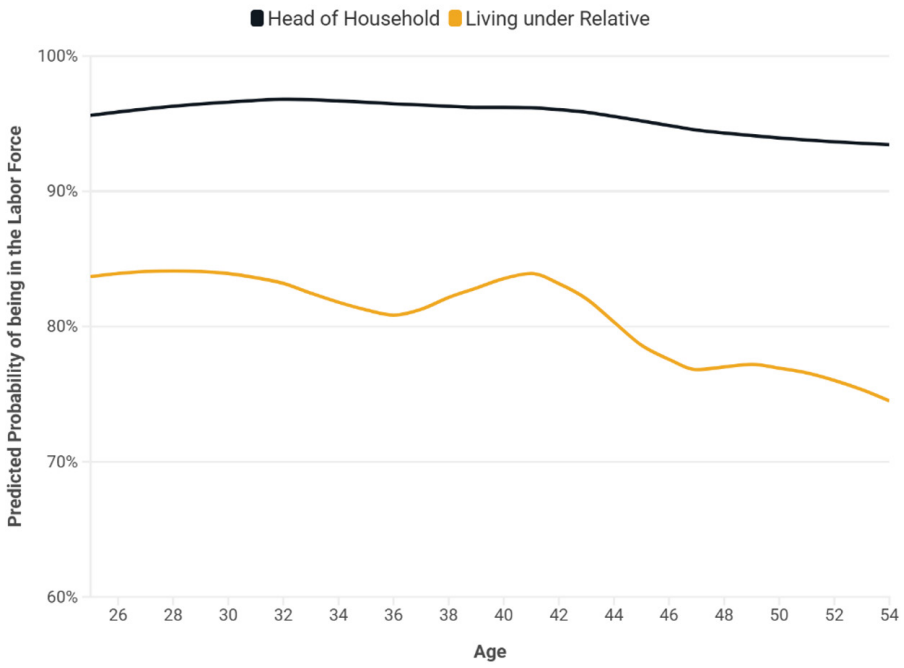
FIGURE 11. SHARE OF MALE IOWANS 25 TO 54 BY LIVING ARRANGEMENT, 1977 TO 2024



Source: IPUMS

relatives are 60% less likely to participate in the labor force than those who claim head of household. A mix of factors could contribute to this outcome. The most common contributing factor is economic stability, especially among youth. Research suggests young adults in the workforce are more susceptible to turnover and have little in savings to keep themselves afloat.[30] However, cultural conditions may also contribute.

FIGURE 12. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF BEING IN THE LABOR FORCE BY LIVING ARRANGEMENT, IOWA, MALE 25 TO 54

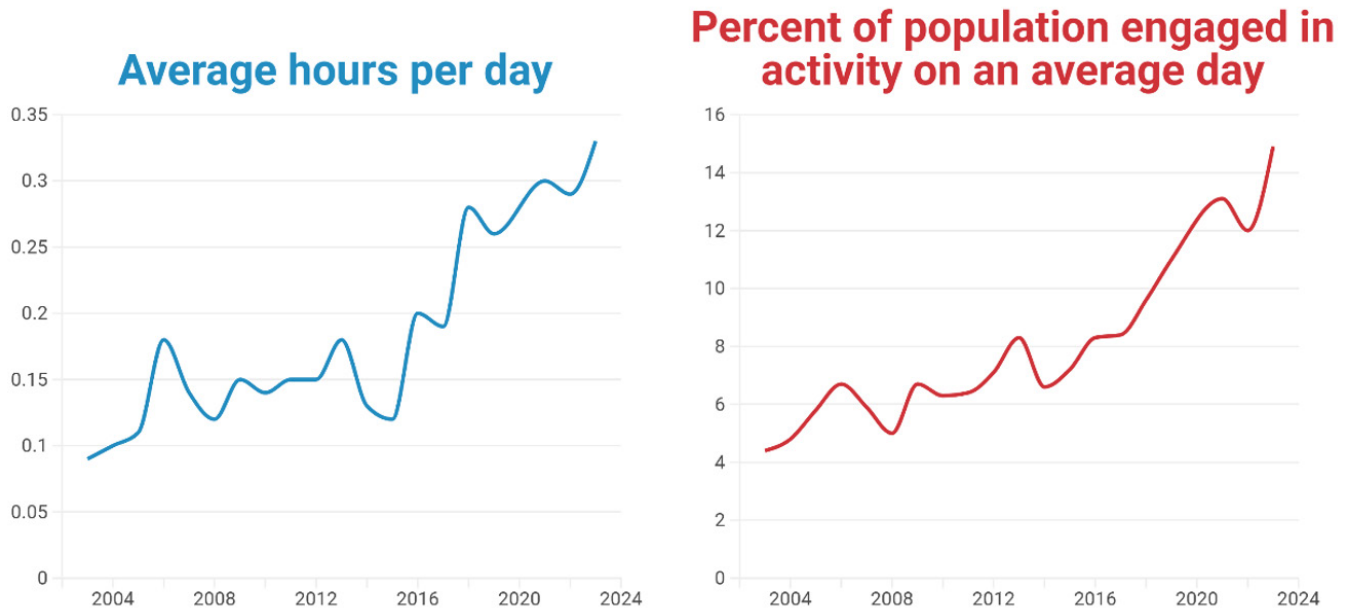


Source: IPUMS, CSI Regressions

Behavior during and after the pandemic suggests a possible shift in the culture of comfort and leisure over employment. In late 2021, the U.S. saw what many deemed to be a "great resignation" movement, where millions of Americans quit their jobs to seek more flexible work schedules.[31] The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a record 4.47 million Americans quitting their job in November 2021—a 37% increase from a year prior. Iowa was not immune to this cultural shift. Also in November, 46,000 Iowans quit their jobs—a 43.7% increase from the year prior. Except while the nation's level of quitting cooled down following the spike, new quitting in Iowa continued and reached a record high of 52 thousand quits in April 2022 before finally declining back to pre-pandemic levels. Many eventually returned to the workforce with or without their concessions for more leisure or comfort achieved, but the sudden surge in quits that year may signal a shift in attitude around work. While leisure may include various activities, video game consumption has risen among young men in particular.

Research has shown at least a partial link between increased leisure time and reduced labor supply with improved quality in video games.[32] Additional research has found video game addiction leads to mental health concerns like emotional dependence and depression.[33] These effects surely do not inspire workforce participation. While the extent to which video game consumption contributes to declining male LFPR remains uncertain, a relationship clearly exists. Figure 13 visualizes video game consumption by average hours per day and percentage of population engaged in the activity among all males ages 25 to 54 in the United States. As of this report's release, data specific to Iowa is not readily available.

FIGURE 13. VIDEO GAME USAGE IN THE UNITED STATES, NONHOLIDAY WEEKDAYS, MALE 25 TO 54, 2003 TO 2023



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Since at least 2003, video game consumption by American males ages 25 to 54 on nonholiday weekdays has been on the rise, growing steeply in the last decade. In 2003, the average time males spent on video games per day was around 0.1 hours, but by 2023, it had surpassed 0.3 hours. It more than tripled. Similarly, the percentage of American males ages 25 to 54 playing video games on an average day has tripled, rising from about 4% in 2003 to over 14% in 2023. This sharp increase in gaming activity has coincided with a steady decline in male LFPR, but causality cannot be determined from these trends alone. Rather, the parallels suggest the growing shift towards leisure away from work.

Policymakers have two potential paths to address the lower LFPR among Iowans living with relatives: economic relief and cultural influence. On the economic front, easing the burden of housing and basic living expenses could help. One approach is to incentivize and reduce barriers to new home construction, increasing supply and potentially lowering costs. Addressing the cultural shift toward comfort and leisure presents a more complex challenge. It may be worthwhile for policymakers to explore how the accessibility of leisure activities, such as video games, might impact labor force participation. Promoting alternative forms of engagement—such as community programs, skills development opportunities, or active recreation—could provide healthier and more productive options. Additionally, policymakers might consider the mental health and addiction struggles related to excessive gaming. Policies that improve access to care for those struggling with Internet Gaming Disorder may help improve labor force participation within Iowa's male population.

Disabilities are linked to a reduction in workforce participation

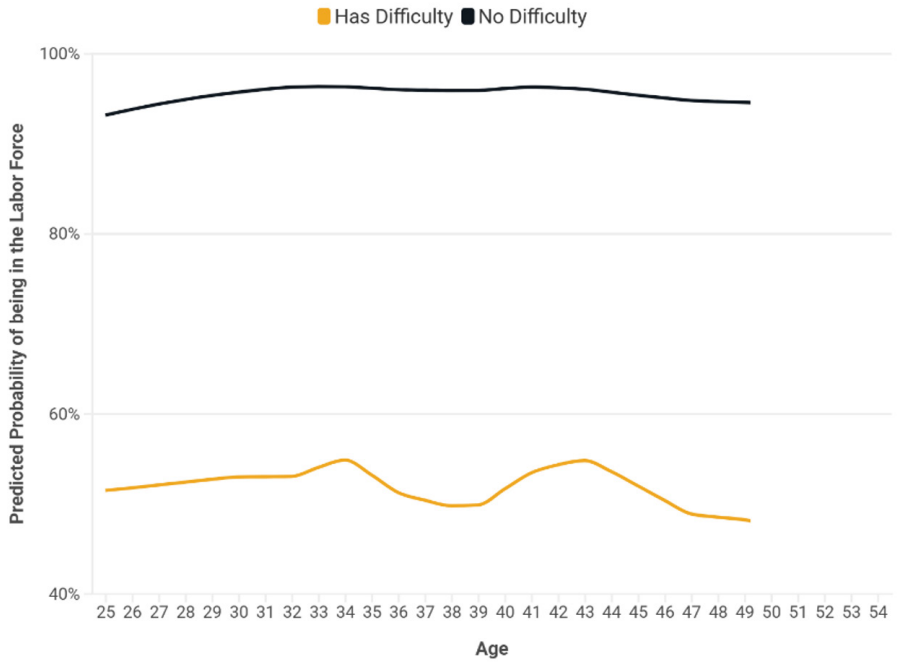
Disabilities may impact labor force participation, as mental and physical impairments can create a barrier to employment. While disability claims are most common among older Iowans, they also impact some younger males. Figure 14 shows a clear link between the presence of some form of disability and labor force participation in Iowa among prime working age males.

The average Iowa male ages 25 to 54 claiming any difficulty with disabilities is 94% less likely to be in the labor force than a male with no difficulties. Across all ages, there is an understandable drop in labor force participation predictability if any difficulty is present. Thus, if disability rates increase, one might expect labor force participation to respond inversely. The data bear that out. Figure 15 visualizes the number and share of disabled Iowans, indicated by solid and dotted lines, respectively. Men are colored blue and women are colored red.

Both the number and total share of Iowans experiencing a disability have been on the rise since at least 2010, but the upward trend has accelerated since the pandemic. Since 2010, the share of disabled men grew 1.7% with 70% of this increase occurring after 2019. The pandemic likely played a significant role in this spike, contributing to a greater share of men opting out of the labor force due to health concerns. Yet, despite the pandemic occurring over three years ago, there is no indication disability claims have slowed down. Data released by the CDC also confirms this trend. The number of Iowans claiming any disability broke the pre-pandemic trend following 2020, as seen in figure 21 of the appendix. Figure 16 charts disability claims among men with a breakdown of four detailed age groups.

From 2010 to 2023, the share of men with a disability grew significantly for all men over 5-years- old. However, the rate of increase accelerated in recent years for men ages 5 to 34. Just as with the broader male population, the share of disabled men ages 18 to 34 grew 2.87% from 2010 to 2023. Of that growth, 68% occurred after 2019. This age group did not single-

FIGURE 14. PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF BEING IN THE LABOR FORCE BY DISABILITY STATUS, IOWA, MALE 25 TO 54

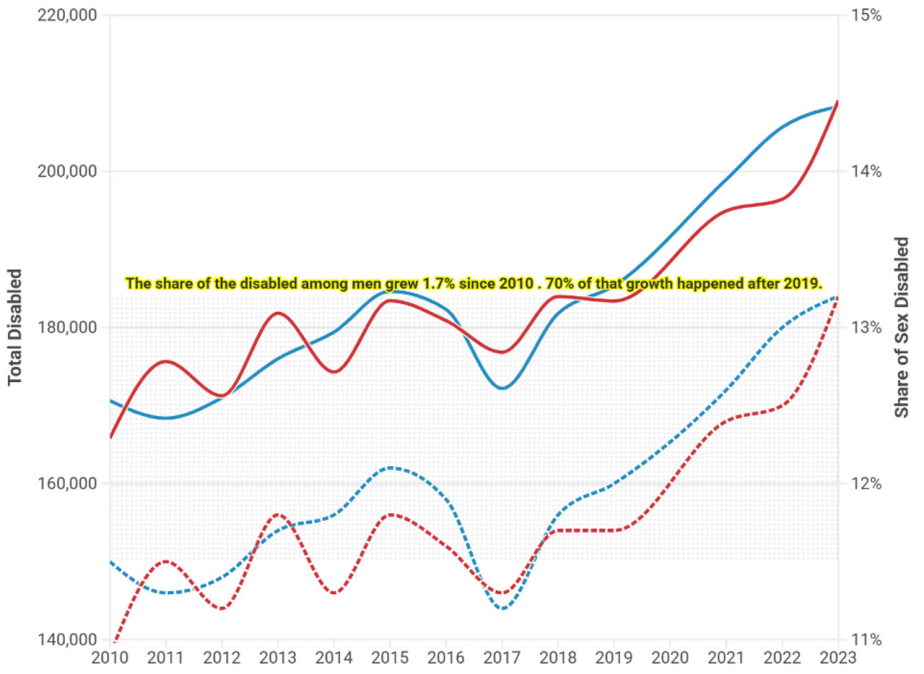


Source: IPUMS, CSI Regressions

handedly inflate overall male disability rates, as the over-65 age group also experienced a sizable jump in the share of disabled. However, older individuals are more likely to exit the workforce as retirees regardless of disability status. Youth disability and LFPR data are more indicative of a relationship between the two.

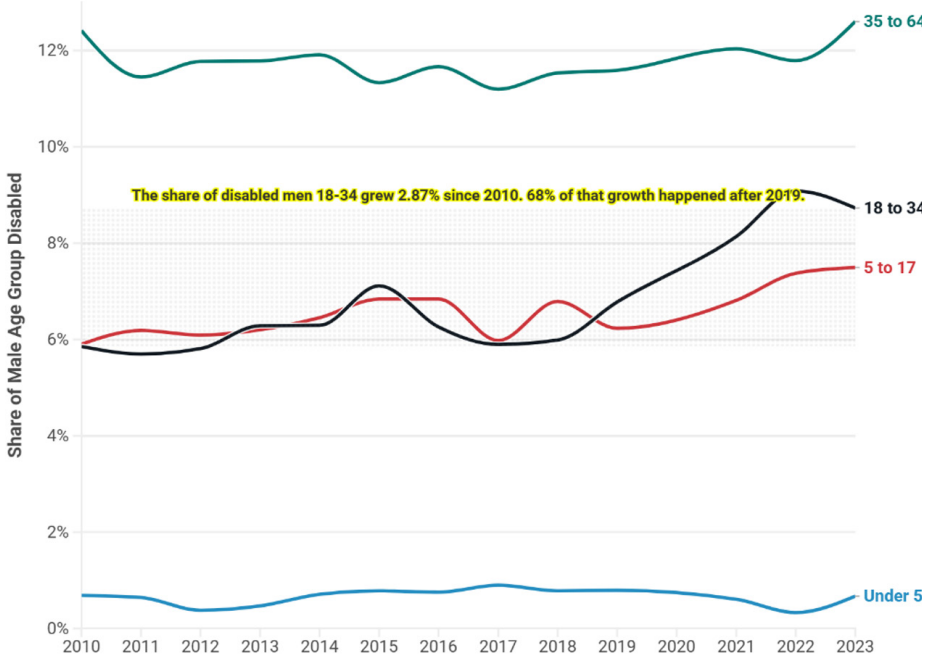
Based on recent trends, a continuation of the rise in disability rates may put additional downward pressure on labor force participation. This concerning trend has especially impacted Iowa's male youth—particularly those 18 to 34. For some Iowans, insufficient access to appropriate, quality healthcare could increase the barrier to work imposed by a disability, decreasing the likelihood they enter or remain in the workforce. Common Sense Institute highlighted concerns surrounding mental health and rural healthcare accessibility in its August 2024 report, "Iowa's Healthcare Landscape."[34] Reversing the trend of rising disability rates among working age males will require addressing

FIGURE 15. TOTAL NOMINAL AND SHARE OF DISABLED IOWANS BY SEX, 2010-2023



Source: Census Bureau
Note: Blue lines denote male; red lines denote female. Solid lines represent total number of disabled by sex. Dotted lines represent disabled share within respective sex.

FIGURE 16. SHARE OF DISABLED MALE IOWANS BY AGE GROUPS, 2010-2023



Source: Census Bureau

healthcare challenges so Iowans can receive the care they need to prevent and treat disabilities. Workplace incentives that make work more accessible and attractive to disabled Iowans could help to counteract the tendency of people with disabilities to participate in the labor force at lower rates.

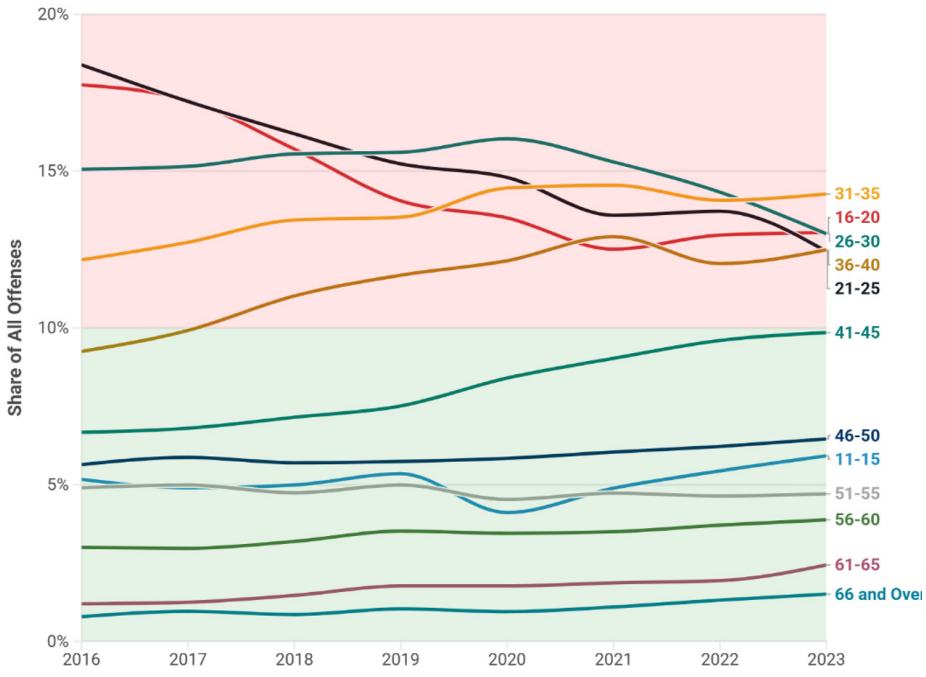
Crime is concentrated in Iowa's male youth

In a December 2024 report, CSI estimated that in 2023 Iowa's relatively low crime rate led to $3.8 billion in savings to the state's economy relative to a state with average rates of crime.[35] However, the state nonetheless experiences some level of criminality, which can impact the state's workforce. The BLS excludes individuals in prisons, jails, and other correctional institutions from their LFPR data. Present incarceration obviously reduces workforce participation.[36] Formerly incarcerated individuals participate in the workforce, but they do so at lower rates.[37] Since Iowa's males commit crimes at a higher rate than its females, crime has an outsized impact on the state's male workforce. Figure 17 visualizes the share of total offenses in Iowa committed by men broken down by detailed age groups.

Since 2016, the five male age groups making up 16- to 40-year-olds each committed over 10% of the state's total offenses each year. In 2023, this broader age group made up 65.2% of all offenses committed by males and 46.4% of all offenses across both sexes. Yet, they make up only roughly 65.4% of the male population and 32.8% of the total population.[38] However, this represents an improvement from past years. In 2016, they were responsible for 72.6% of male crimes and 52.9% of all crimes. While trending in the right direction, Iowa saw a slight increase in male criminality from 2022 to 2023.[39] If Iowa's young men continue to commit crimes at disproportionate rates, that demographic will continue to see the resulting negative effects on workforce participation rates. Figure 18 delves deeper into the age breakdown of offenses related to drug and narcotic violations since 2016.

In 2023, the 16- to 40-year-old male population committed nearly 70% of all male drug-related crimes and nearly 50% of drug-related crimes across both sexes. This is a major improvement from 82.1% and 61.3% in 2016, yet the impacts from prior

FIGURE 17. SHARE OF ALL OFFENSES BY MALES, IOWA, DETAILED AGE GROUPS, 2016 TO 2023

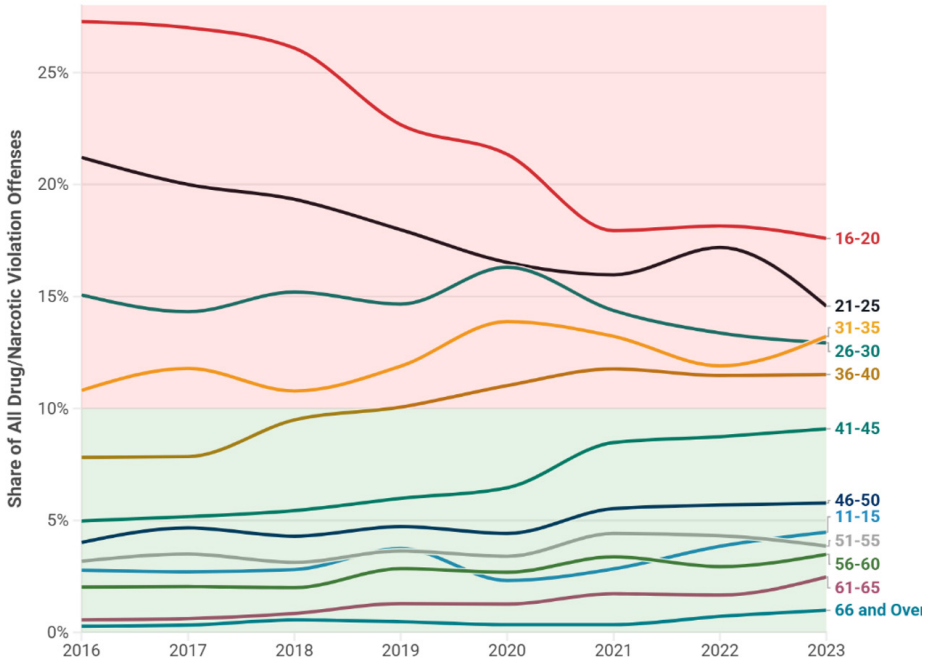


Source: Iowa Department of Public Safety

years continue to weigh heavily on this population. Thankfully, there has been a stark decline among the greatest contributors to drug crimes: 16 to 25-year-old males. In 2016, this age group committed nearly 50% of all male drug-related crimes and 36.1% of total drug crimes. Today, these values have fallen drastically to 32% and 22.8%, respectively. Despite the improvement, drug-related crime concentration among Iowa men 40-years-old and younger poses a direct threat to their labor force participation.

Crime has been concentrated within the male population for decades. While rates have been on the decline, generations of young Iowa men have disproportionately involved themselves in crime. A criminal record severely limits employment opportunities, as many employers are reluctant to hire individuals with prior convictions, even for non-violent offenses. As of February 2024, only Des Moines and Waterloo have passed "Ban the Box" legislation, preventing employers from inquiring applicants about criminal history during the initial hiring process.[40] These laws covered roughly 8.5% of all Iowans in 2023, leaving the remaining 91% to face possible employment barriers for prior arrests or convictions.[41] Even as Iowa trends in the right direction by reducing the concentration of crime among young men, the repercussions of past crime will continue to suppress male labor force participation into the future.

FIGURE 18. SHARE OF ALL DRUG/NARCOTIC VIOLATION OFFENSES BY MALES, DETAILED AGE GROUPS, 2016 TO 2023



Source: Iowa Department of Public Safety

BOTTOM LINE

Iowa's male workforce is shrinking and disengaging. The exodus of non-college graduates from the workforce, employment volatility in male-dominated sectors, high youth crime concentration, and rising disability rates point to more than just a cyclical downturn in male labor force participation. The data from each of these factors attest to a structural breakdown in economic opportunity for Iowa's men. The consequences of this breakdown impact men directly, but they indirectly impact the entire state. A reduction in an economy's workforce can reduce economic output, reduce personal income, and put upward pressure on consumer prices. Policymakers and business leaders must adapt Iowa's public policies and economy to reengage men in the workforce or prepare for the long-term consequences of a shrinking labor force.

METHODOLOGY

Panel VAR

The section "What are the Economic Implications if this continues" uses the methodology explained under this section. The analysis uses a Panel Vector Autoregression (VAR) model for cross-sectional analysis of available employment and labor force statistics data across all Midwest states from 2000 to 2019. This statistical method is used to understand how multiple variables influence each other over time across different groups. This helps determine the rate of employment growth depending on the specified rise in LFPR.

$$EPR_{it} = \alpha_1 + \beta_{1,LFPR} LFPR_{it} + \beta_{1,UNR} UNR_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

$$LFPR_{it} = \alpha_2 + \beta_{2,EMP} EMP_{it} + \beta_{2,UNR} UNR_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

$$UNR_{it} = \alpha_3 + \beta_{3,EMP} EMP_{it} + \beta_{3,LFPR} LFPR_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

In the Panel VAR model specification, α_1, α_2, α_3 represent the intercepts for each of the three equations. The coefficients, like $\beta_{1,LFPR}$ and $\beta_{1,UNR}$, measure the effects of the labor force participation rate and unemployment rate on the employment per population ratio, respectively. The exact measured effects depend on the combination of coefficients. The model includes fixed state and year effects to account for unobserved effects across states over time. Table 2 outlines the regression results.

The model suggests that a 1 percentage point increase in the LFPR is associated with a 0.515 percentage point increase in the employment-to-population ratio, holding other factors constant. This is significant to the p<0.001 level. The adjusted R square of 0.57 also indicates a relatively strong fit, with 57% of the variance in EPR explained by the model.

TABLE 2. PANEL VAR REGRESSION RESULTS OF LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES FOR MIDWEST STATES, JANUARY 2000 TO DECEMBER 2019

Variable	EPR
Labor Force Participation Rate	0.515***
Unemployment Rate	-0.541***
Observations	2,880
Adjusted	0.57

Source: CSI Calculations, Bureau of Labor Statistics
*Note: p<0.001 ***, p<0.01 **, p<0.05 **

To assess the impact on employment, not just EPR, the analysis assumes constant population, implying that changes in EPR directly translate to changes in employment. Under this assumption, a 1-to-1 relationship exists between changes in EPR and employment, meaning the percentage change in employment is equal to the percentage change in EPR. Using the Iowa EPR value of 64.7%, published in December 2024, the percentage change in employment can be estimated by dividing the coefficient 0.515 by this EPR value. This calculation indicates that a one percentage point increase in LFPR results in a 0.79% change in employment. In the "What are the Economic Implications if this continues" section, CSI applied this 0.79% figure and multiplied it by 3 and 5 to project the potential percentage changes in employment under the section's scenarios.

Binary Logistic Model

References to predicted labor force participation involve the model used in this section. This model analyzes demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of Iowa men ages 25 to 54 to determine which are most prone to drop out of the labor force. For this analysis, Common Sense Institute used a binary logistic regression model. This model type estimates the likelihood of labor force participation as a function of various independent variables: education attainment, marital status, living arrangements, and disability status. The dependent variable is a binary indicator of labor force participation, where 1 equals being in the labor force, and 0 indicates not being in the labor force.

P(LF = 1|X) is the probability of being in the labor force given the independent variables X. To capture additional factors that may influence labor force participation, the model also controls for age groups and year using continuous and categorical variables respectively. The independent variables included in the model are derived from IPUMS data as follows:

1. Education Attainment (EDUC)
2. Marital Status (MARST)
3. Living Arrangement (RELATE)
4. Disability Status (DIFFANY)
5. Age Group (AGE)

The coefficients β represent the log-odds of labor force participation associated with each independent variable. To determine the likelihood of an individual with a given characteristic being in the labor force, CSI calculates the odds ratio taking the exponent of the respective coefficient. For example, an odds ratio greater than 1 indicates a higher likelihood of labor force participation compared to the reference group, while an odds ratio less than 1 indicates a lower likelihood.

According to the results presented in table 3 below, the McFadden's R-square of the model was 0.187. In general, values falling between 0.20 and 0.40 are considered excellent fits, so being slighly below this threshold indicates a reasonable model fit. This means the model provides valuable insights into these specific demographic characteristics, even if it does not capture all possible infleunces.

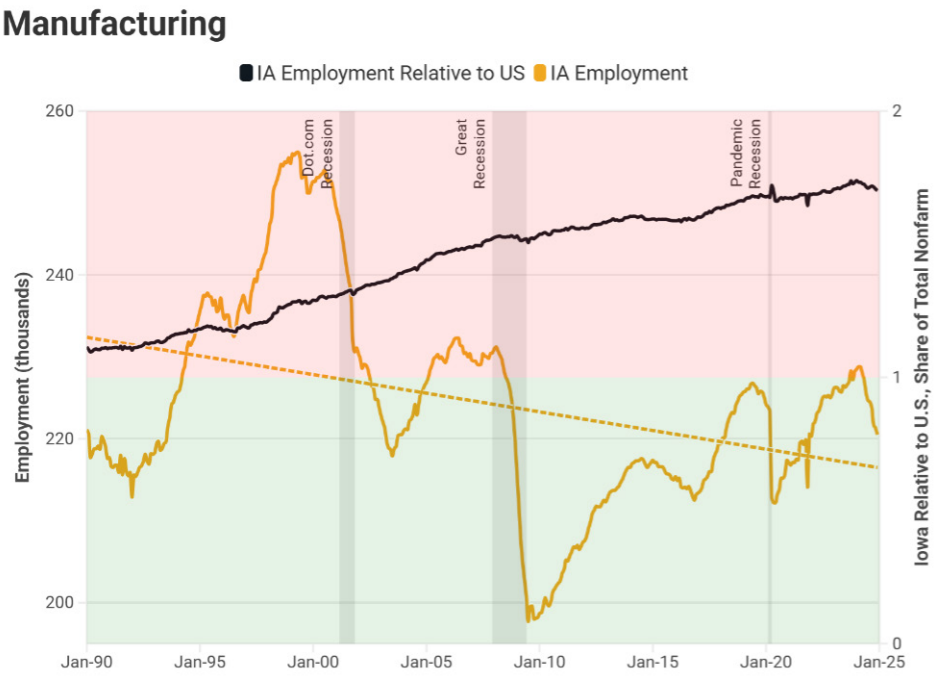
TABLE 3. BINARY LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS OF LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES FOR MALES 25 TO 54 IN IOWA, 1977-2024

Variable	Labor Force Participation, Binary	LFPR Likelihood Relative to...
Intercept	27.830	
Age Group, 35 to 44, Relative to 25-34	-0106	-10%
Age Group, 45 to 54, Relative to 25-34	-0.279*	-24%
No College Degree, Relative to Degree	-0.495***	-39%
Never Married, Relative to Married	-0.701***	-51%
Living under Relative, Relative to Head of Household	-0.905***	-60%
Living under Non-relative, Relative to Head of Household	-0.032	-3%
Living under Spouse, Relative to Head of Household	0.153	+15%
No Difficulties, Relative to Difficulties	-2.742***	-94%
Year	-0.011	-1.2%
Observations	24,458	
McFadden's	0.187	

Source: IPUMS, CSI Research
*Note: p<0.001 ***, p<0.01 **, p<0.05 **

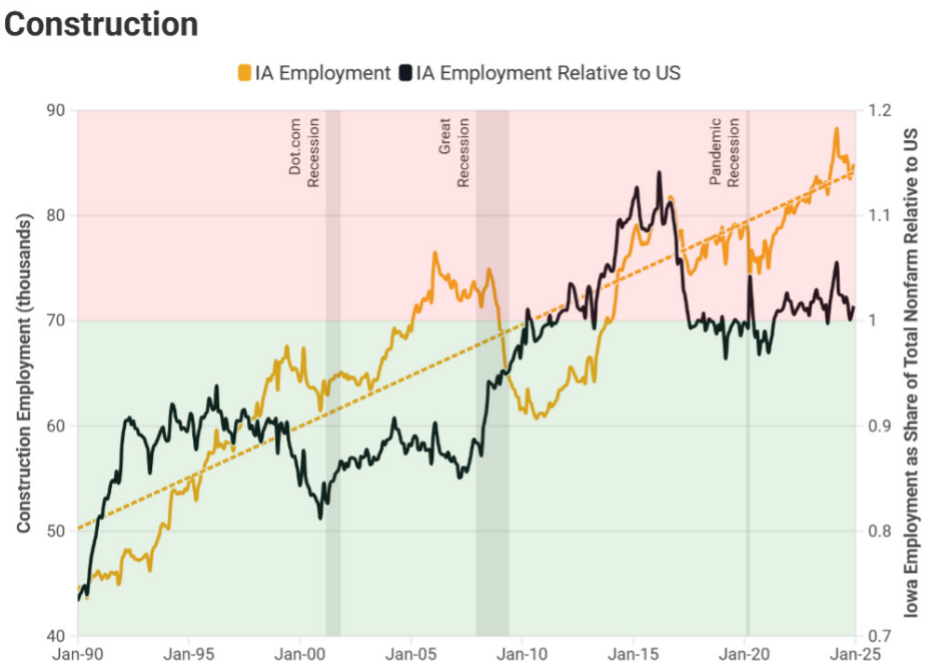
APPENDIX

FIGURE 19. IOWA MANUFACTURING EMPLOYMENT, JANUARY 1990 TO DECEMBER 2024



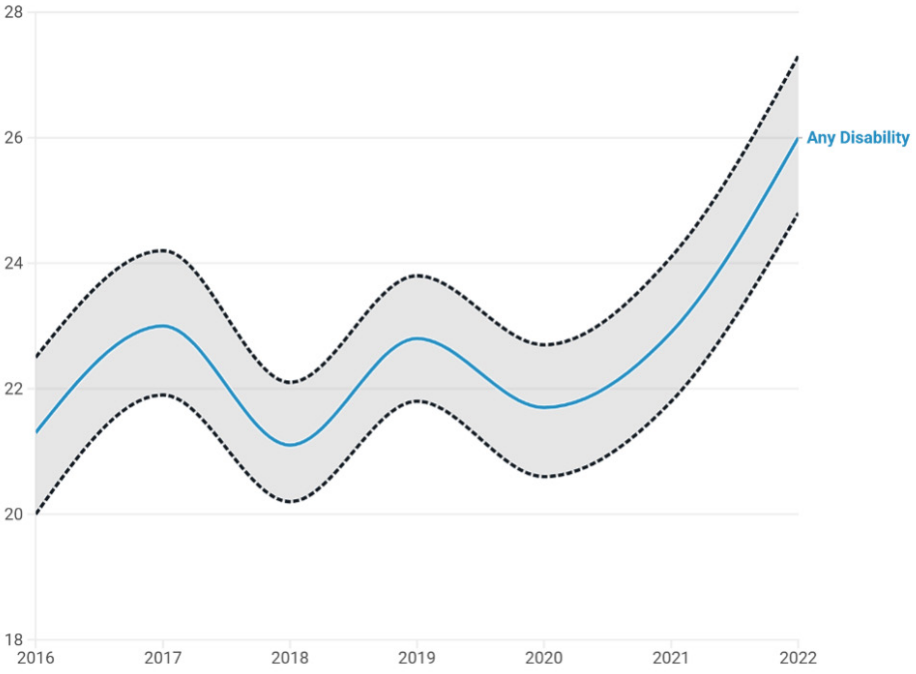
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics
Note: Shading correlates with the right y-axis and indicates weight of sector employment relative to the U.S. Red area indicates overweight; green area indicates underweight.

FIGURE 20. IOWA CONSTRUCTION EMPLOYMENT, JANUARY 1990 TO DECEMBER 2024



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics
Note: Shading correlates with the right y-axis and indicates weight of sector employment relative to the U.S. Red area indicates overweight; green area indicates underweight.

FIGURE 21. PREVALENCE OF DISABILITY STATUS, IOWA, 2016 TO 2022



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Note: Shaded area indicates the range in confidence, from low to high.

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