

UNRAVELING TENNESSEE'S LABOR PARADOX: BRIDGING PARTICIPATION AND EMPLOYMENT

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Executive Summary

Despite Tennessee's thriving economy, it has one of the lowest labor workforce participation rates in the country, and this has been a theme throughout its history. The labor workforce participation rate "measures the share of the population 16 or older that is working or actively looking for work". This is not to be confused with unemployment, which is "the number of unemployed people as a percentage of the labor force". Both are economic metrics economists use to gauge how well the economy is doing. Tennessee's current labor workforce participation rate is 59.5%, which means an astounding 40% of working age individuals are not participating in the workforce. Simultaneously, Tennessee's unemployment rate has hovered around an all-time low of about 3.3%, which is also comparatively low across the US. Unemployment portrays a healthy Tennessee economy, but labor workforce participation rates convey a different story. This is the paradox that will define Tennessee's economy for years to come.

At the heart of this anomaly lies multiple factors that are reflected in a number of states across the U.S. including an increase in childcare prices, an increase in housing prices, loss of farmland, lack of public transportation, and an imbalance between available jobs and unemployed people. What makes Tennessee unique in labor workforce participation rates is not necessarily differing causes in comparison to other states, rather it's the rate in which these factors affect the Tennessee labor force. Preventative measures have been taken by the state government regarding certain elements that affect the labor force,

particularly in education, as it is a well-known fact that Tennessee has always struggled in education, and this has helped lower unemployment rate, another area Tennessee has struggled in historically. But these steps do not seem to be affecting labor workforce participation rates. It is now time to build upon these policies and others to create an environment in which the obstacles of childcare prices, housing prices, lack of transportation, and farmland are no longer barriers to entering the workforce.

Key Recommendations:

- state government allocate TANF funds to government program participants
- state government incentivize businesses and corporations to provide childcare services for their employees
- state government incentivize more Tennesseans to work in construction to help build more homes
- state government place a cap on how much farmland can be turned into housing and business developments
- state government take funds from future infrastructure projects to create more transportation options

Recent Economic Downturn

Over the past couple of years, it is no secret the United States, as a whole, has struggled economically. The main issue that has led to economic downturn was the pandemic because it forced massive amounts of people out of the workforce for an extended amount of time. The prolonged impact of the pandemic has led to incredibly high levels of

of inflation across the US. Inflation has been especially devastating in Tennessee. In fact, the state has experienced the third highest rate of inflation in the country due to a lethal combination of pandemic induced inflation alongside state level inflation caused by a sudden influx of new businesses. In spite of this, the state is still excelling economically in comparison to most states across the US, but labor workforce participation rates are lower in Tennessee than almost every other state in the US. The current rate is 59.5%, which means about 40% of working age individuals are not participating in the workforce, but the unemployment rate is 3.3%, which is also incredibly low comparatively.

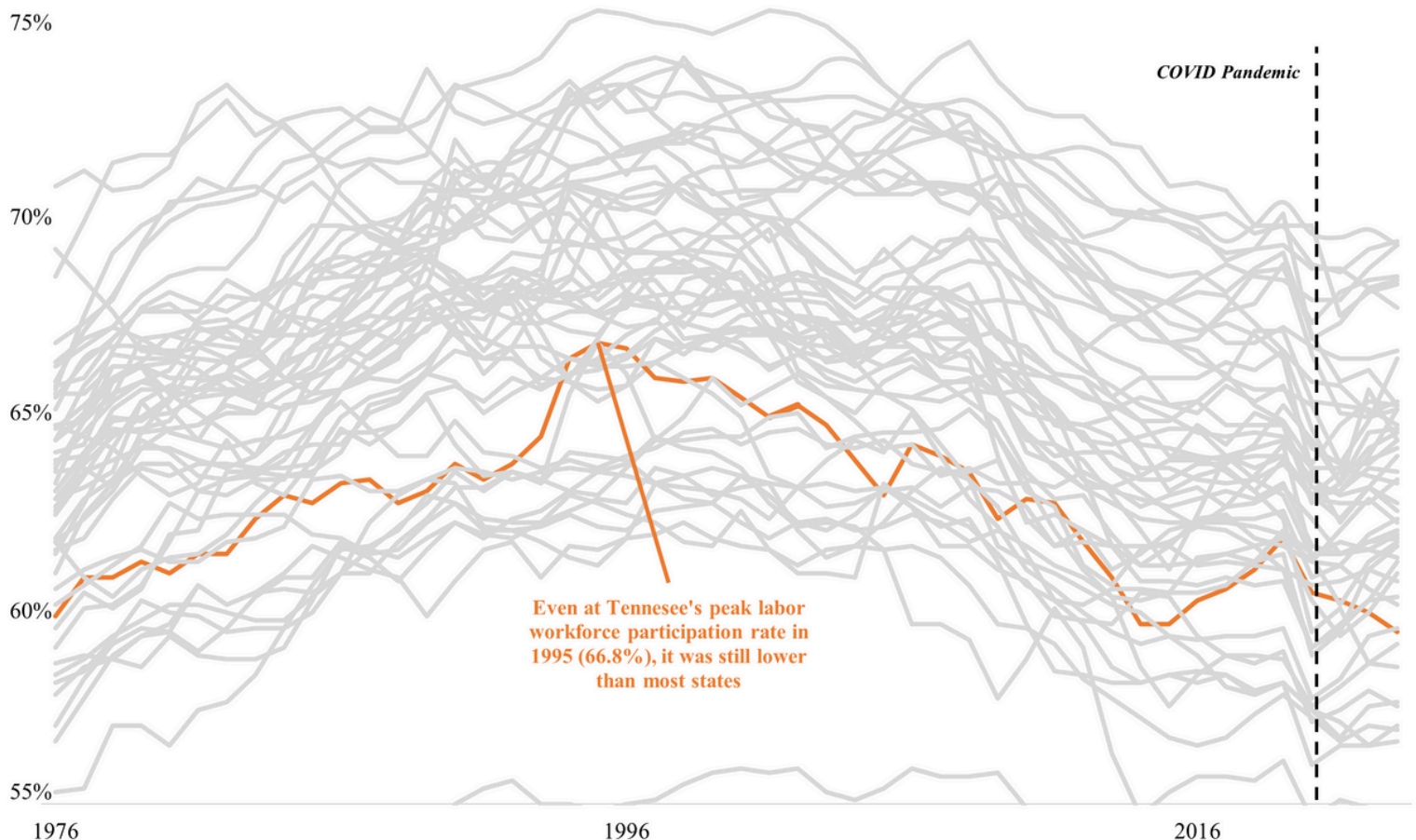
This is not only an anomaly. It is a problem, but it is not a new problem. As seen in the figure below, Tennessee has maintained low labor workforce participation rates throughout its history. Even at its peak, which was 66.8% in 1995, Tennessee was still much lower comparatively to other states across the US in almost every region.

In fact, there were multiple states in 1995 that had labor workforce participation rates in the upper seventies. Low labor workforce participation rates should raise alarm for policymakers in Tennessee because it will cause problems in the near future. One being slow economic growth. As the workforce steadily declines, there will be fewer goods and services produced because there will not be enough workers to continue to sustain an ever-growing populace. Simultaneously, the government aid provided via programs, such as Medicaid, will also decrease because there will be less revenue created. This will cause the government to increase taxes on the few workers left in the workforce to make up for a lack in revenue. Finally, as the economy declines, the new businesses that have flocked to Tennessee, might begin to leave resulting in heavier decline. To sum, low labor workforce participation rates could be catastrophic for the Tennessee economy because it indicates a lack of support as the economy continues to expand.

Labor Workforce Participation Rates (1976-2022)

Throughout its history, Tennessee has maintained Low Labor Workforce Participation Rates

Tennessee participation rates compared to all US state



Obstacles to Workforce Entry

Low labor workforce participation rates are an established problem, but what has caused these rates to be so low is not as clear. I conducted my research by looking for a singular factor that has led to current workforce participation rates, but I quickly realized this is a multifaceted issue with a variety of contributing factors that can be found across the US. What makes Tennessee unique in labor workforce participation rates is not necessarily differing causes in comparison to other states, rather it's the rate at which these causes affect the Tennessee labor force. In other words, each of the following elements discussed below are uniquely harmful in comparison to a majority, if not all, the states in the US.

The Childcare Crisis

Childcare costs have increased at a rapid pace over the past couple of years across the US, but federal government Covid funding helped many of these care centers keep their doors open. When this covid funding ceased about 70,000 daycare centers nationwide closed their doors permanently. This has had a massive effect on the national workforce, and the effects of childcare costs are felt in Tennessee as well. These costs have forced 80% of working parents to adjust their employment schedules, 26% have been fired, 30% had to reduce their work time from full to part time, 32% were forced to reject a job opportunity or promotion, and 20% had to leave the workforce. These numbers have led to a \$1.65 billion loss per year in income to parents and families, businesses have lost \$497 million per year, and tax revenue has dropped by \$413 million per year. Overall, the childcare crisis in Tennessee has resulted in \$2.6 billion in loss of revenue.

Simultaneously, it has become increasingly difficult to keep and hire staff to work at these dwindling daycare centers. In Tennessee, the average annual income for childcare employees is \$27,780. This is incredibly low. In fact, it is less than the salary of a parking attendant. This ranks Tennessee 46th in average annual income for childcare workers, nationally.

Too Much Housing, Not Enough Space

The housing market in Tennessee is currently booming like its economy because Tennessee is experiencing such a high inflow of people from across the US, but this has driven housing prices up. The median price for a house in Tennessee is \$240,000 higher than it has been in previous years, which is about 55% higher than the national average.

This makes it disproportionately more difficult for low-income individuals to afford a home. At the same time, mortgage interest rates have increased. The average rate was 6.9% in 2023, which is the most expensive it has been in over twenty years.

Despite the increase in housing developments, the demand continues to increase, and supply has not been able to match the demand. There are a multitude of reasons why supply is struggling to keep up, but one particularly important reason concerns a lack of construction workers. In 2022, Tennessee was in need of 200,000 more construction workers but contractors could not find people to fill these jobs. The exact numerical impact of the current housing market on the labor force is unforeseen, but an increase in prices and a lack of construction workers will result in an inability for the labor force to sustain a constantly growing population.

Loss of Farmland

Agriculture is a crucial sector in the Tennessee economy. In 2021, about 366,154 Tennesseans worked in agriculture/forestry, which was about 8.9% of the workforce. The sector imparted about \$89 billion to Tennessee's economy, which was 10.9% of the state's gross output. There were 69,500 farms, which took up 39.6% of the total land mass in Tennessee. This ranks Tennessee as the 22nd state in farmland mass, but it is ranked fourth in the amount of farmland it has lost and will lose, due to a massive influx of individuals into the state. This is not a new problem. During the years 1997-2017, 1.1 million acres of farmland, 4.2% of Tennessee land mass, was lost to a multitude of developments, mainly housing. More specifically, this was 55,601 acres per year, 152 acres per day, and 6.3 acres per hour. From 2017-2022, Tennessee farmers lost 432,941 acres. This was 86,588 acres per year, 237 acres per day, and 9.8 acres per hour. So, in just five years, Tennessee lost almost half of what it lost in twenty years. This trend seems to be moving at a very fast pace and will likely continue to accelerate as more people and businesses move into the state.

Lack of Transportation Options

In 2022, the Tennessee Department of Transportation "identified \$3.185 billion in transit and multimodal transportation needs". Over the past couple of years, the state has decided to invest in infrastructure projects rather than public

transportation systems like most other states. In fact, Tennessee has the “second lowest rate of state and local spending per capita” regarding transportation and is ranked 39th in the country for transit performance.

Even more concerning, is the fact that none of Tennessee’s metropolitan areas have devoted any revenue or funding from their budget for transportation. More specifically, out of the 50 urban areas in the US, 46 of those cities have dedicated resources to transportation. 2 of the 4 that have not allocated resources to transportation in the city include Nashville and Memphis, Tennessee’s two largest urban areas. Because there is so little funding dedicated to transit options in Tennessee, the state ranks “42nd for transit commuting, 48th for bike commuting, and 49th for commuting on foot”. This is an important issue regarding labor workforce participation rates because a lack of transportation could be keeping people from entering the workforce, or taking people out of the workforce, especially as more people continue to enter the state and its major industrial cities, which are experiencing the most growth.

Available Jobs vs. Qualified People

Tennessee has more available jobs than qualified workers. Tennessee’s current worker shortage index is 0.56, which means there are 56 working age individuals per 100 open positions. In other words, there are 189,000 jobs available, and only 105,102 unemployed people to fill those jobs. One of the main contributing factors to this incompatibility between job openings and qualified workers is an increased number of retirees. The baby boomer generation, people born between 1946 and 1964, make up a large percent of the US population, and they are now retiring en masse. This is especially the case in Tennessee. To put this into perspective, the current dependency rate in Tennessee is 26.6%, which means for every 100 people, there are about 26 retirees. This dependency rate includes not only lifelong Tennesseans, but a massive influx of retirees who have moved into the state over the past couple of years. This compounds the retiree issue that every other state is experiencing because these new retirees did not spend their life investing in the Tennessee economy and systems that would eventually take care of them.

Another factor that has contributed to this issue is a lack of college degrees. It is a well-known fact that throughout its history, Tennessee has struggled in education.

According to the job finding website, *Indeed*, almost all of the top thirty jobs posted the most on this website require at least a bachelor’s degree, but only 29% of Tennesseans 25 years or older have earned their bachelor’s degree. So, over seventy percent of working age individuals in Tennessee do not have the qualifications to even apply for the open positions within the workforce. That being said, education is an issue that is bound to improve in Tennessee over the next couple of years because the state invested in projects like the Tennessee Promise Program in 2015 and the most recent \$9 billion investment by the current administration. This is an issue that led to the current low rates but will help increase rates in the future.

Additional Issue: Gig Work

Gig work has been a growing phenomenon in Tennessee over the past few years, but according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a majority of gig work jobs are excluded from labor workforce participation rates. This is an issue for every state but could be especially problematic in Tennessee. Currently, about 33% of the workforce in Tennessee participates in gig work. At most, a small fraction of these workers are included in labor workforce participation rates, which means there is a large percentage of people not included in Tennessee’s labor workforce participation rates, who are in fact working and contributing to the state economy. This could play a major role in why labor workforce participation rates in Tennessee are incredibly low. Tennessee might actually have more people working than the numbers convey because a large percent of individuals who are working are not included in that number.

Recommendations

There are a lot of moving parts to labor workforce participation rates in Tennessee. Therefore, there are several policy recommendations for the obstacles discussed previously. One policy recommendation addresses many of these obstacles. In 2019, a report came out stating the state government had kept “\$730 million in unused federal block grant funds” reserved for the federally mandated program Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF in a rainy-day fund. In response, the state promised to disperse these funds to people who needed it, but half a decade later there is still \$717 million dollars in that fund. **I recommend the state government disperse those funds to government program participants, such as work development programs. These funds can then be used to address issues like childcare, housing, transportation, etc.** Below are my remaining policy recommendations regarding each obstacle discussed.

1

I recommend the state incentivize businesses and corporations to provide their own childcare for their employees by offering a tax break to said businesses and corporations.

2

I recommend the state incentivize Tennesseans to enter the construction workforce by providing the training it takes to become a construction worker along with benefits such as free childcare, which can be funded by the previously mentioned TANF dollars or similar funds.

3

I recommend the state place a cap on the amount of farmland that can be converted into new business and housing developments.

4

I recommend the state shift a certain percentage of the funds allocated to some of the infrastructure projects in the state budget to providing more public transportation. I recommend Tennessee’s largest metropolitan areas, particularly Nashville and Memphis, to do the same.

5

I recommend the state incentivize employers to provide transportation for their employees by offering a tax break to said employers.

6

I recommend the state and major metropolitan areas allocate funds to build more sidewalks and clean up existing sidewalks to allow people to walk or bike to work, if that is the best option.

7

I recommend the state generate a way in which it can collect more gig work data that would allow the Bureau of Labor Statistics to include gig work numbers into labor workforce participation rates.

It is our responsibility to provide **considerate and efficient policy solutions to the **many obstacles** keeping thousands of Tennesseans from entering the workforce each year.**

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