Fact Sheet
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Kem C. Gardner
POLICY INSTITUTE
THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
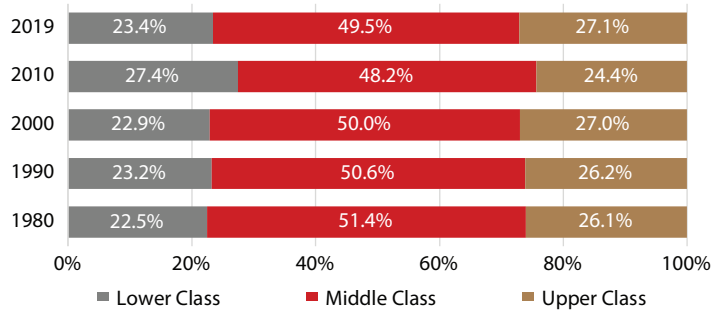
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Estimates for Utah's Middle Class in 2019

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute prepares regular estimates of the population size of Utah's middle class. The Gardner Institute bases its estimates on household income, compared with state medians and federal poverty guidelines by household size. This fact sheet provides Utah decision-makers with information about income classes in the state in 2019. After the U.S. Census Bureau releases 2020 data in November 2021, the Gardner Institute will issue a full report.
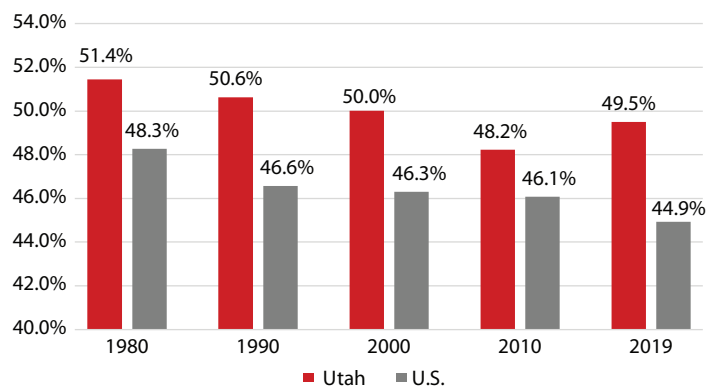
Key Findings

- **Middle class growth heading into 2020:** The share of Utah's population in the middle class swelled from 48.6% in 2016 to 49.5% in 2019 (see Figure 1). This measured improvement defied the pronounced nationwide trend since the 1980s of a shrinking middle class.

- **Less income polarization in Utah:** At nearly one-half of the state in 2019, Utah's middle-class share was 4.6 percentage points larger than the nationwide share of 44.9% of the population (see Figure 2).

- **Opportunity for racial and ethnic minorities:** Among most communities in Utah, the middle class embodies the racial and ethnic diversity of the state's population (see Figure 3). In contrast, Hispanic, Black, and Native American groups are overrepresented in Utah's lower class.

- **Am I in the middle class?** Varying by household size, the 2019 income range for Utah's middle class extended from $19,500 to $150,700 in 2020 dollars (see Table 1). The average lower and upper bounds for all household sizes were $45,600 to $111,600.

- **Rising income thresholds:** From 2016 to 2019, Utah's middle class became more prosperous. Meanwhile, the bar for reaching or maintaining middle class status rose, as did the cost of living in many parts of Utah. Lower and upper bounds increased by 7.1% and 5.8%, respectively, in inflation-adjusted dollars.

- **Income distribution in a strong economy:** In 2019, 1,515,000 Utahns belonged to the middle class, however established or tenuous their positions (see Table 2). In the

Figure 1: Utah Population by Income Class, 1980–2019

Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 2: Middle Class Population, Utah and U.S.
(Share of Total Population)

Note: Economic conditions in Utah and the U.S. varied during these window years. Recessions occurred during half of 1980 and half of 1990. The country was beginning its recovery from the Great Recession in 2010. Utah and U.S. economic performance were strong in 2000 and 2019.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, U.S. Census Bureau

upper class, 829,200 people earned even higher incomes. Meanwhile, the lifetime income trajectories of the 716,000 people in the lower class may bring many of them into the middle class at some point.

- **How many households?** The middle class lives in nearly 490,000 homes (see Table 3), representing Utahns of every age, health status, gender, and background. Families and individuals in over 248,000 homes do not presently enjoy this level of prosperity.

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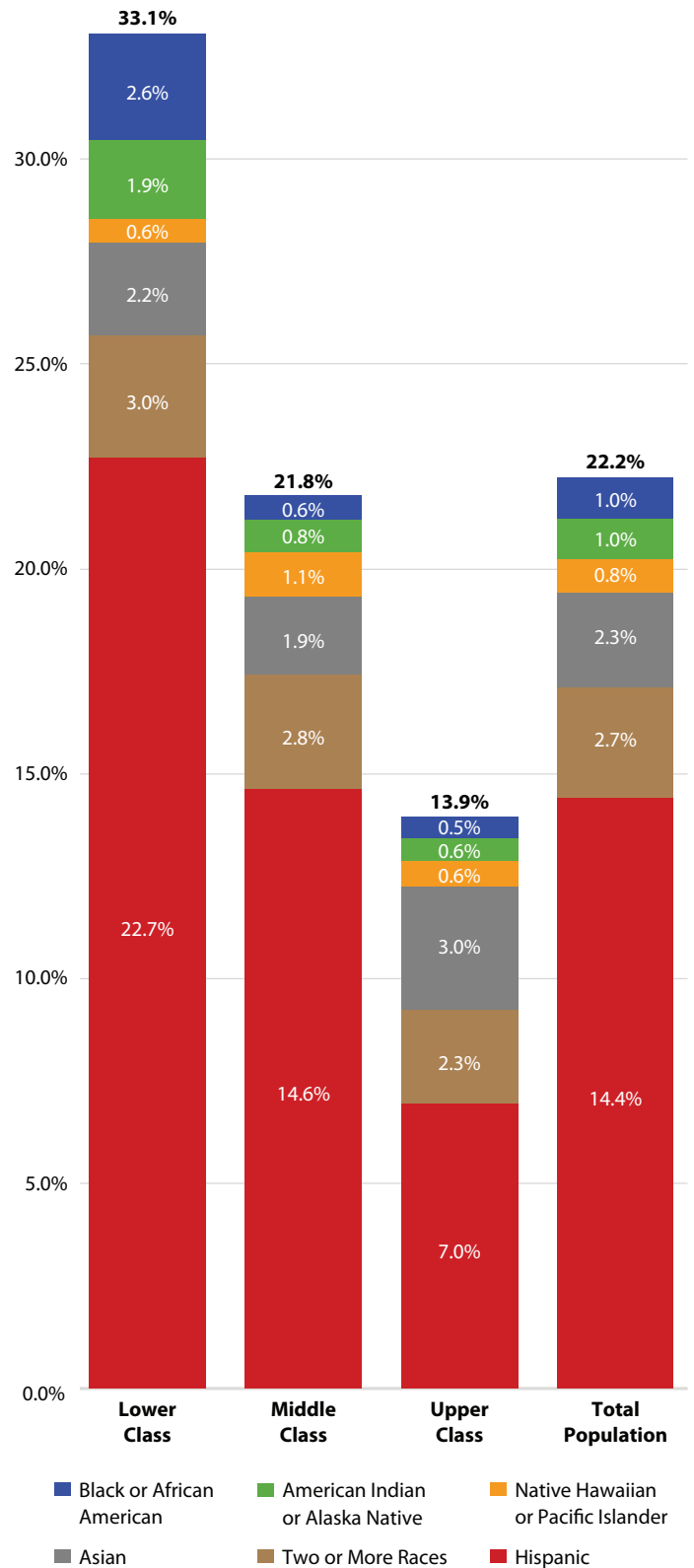
Defining Utah's Middle Class

"Middle class" is a multifaceted identity tied to opportunity, quality of life, and financial stability. In the absence of a standard definition, researchers make this malleable concept operational with criteria such as income, wealth, occupation, educational attainment, and self-identification. A person's income often aligns with these other markers of achievement and well-being. In contrast with more permanent personal or group traits, income-based measures take into account social mobility as people move across class boundaries.

The Gardner Institute divided Utah's class continuum into three broad income categories: lower class, middle class, and upper class. Researchers focused on the income distribution in the state's population, as well as people's cost of living to cover basic consumption needs and participate in society. Key metrics were federal poverty guidelines, median household income, and income percentiles above and below the median—all of these calibrated by household size and changing over time. The Gardner Institute also analyzed results by race and ethnicity in Utah.

To define the middle class, the Gardner Institute incorporated leading income-based methods. Two particularly insightful sources are representative of related approaches adopted by other researchers. A report by the Pew Charitable Trusts defines the middle class as the 30th to 70th percentile of an income-to-needs ratio equal to household income divided by federal poverty guidelines (Acs, 2011). Alan Krueger, former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, offers an alternative construct: households that earn between 50% and 150% of the median income for their household size (Krueger, 2012).

For its synthesis definition, the Gardner Institute calculated lower and upper bounds for middle-class income in Utah and the U.S. under both the Pew and Krueger definitions. Income thresholds in Table 1 are midpoints from the two definitions for 2019. People in the lower class that year earned less than the lower bound, and people in the upper class earned more than the upper bound. To estimate how many households and individuals were in each class in a given year, the Gardner Institute averaged results from the Pew and Krueger definitions. The policy brief, "Defining Utah's Middle Class," provides further methodology discussion (Pace, 2018).

Figure 3: Race and Ethnicity by Income Class, Utah 2019
(Minority Share of Total Population)

Legend:
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Asian
- Two or More Races
- Hispanic

	Lower Class	Middle Class	Upper Class	Total Population
Total	33.1%	21.8%	13.9%	22.2%
Black or African American	2.6%	0.6%	0.5%	1.0%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.9%	0.8%	0.6%	1.0%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.6%	1.1%	0.6%	0.8%
Asian	2.2%	1.9%	3.0%	2.3%
Two or More Races	3.0%	2.8%	2.3%	2.7%
Hispanic	22.7%	14.6%	7.0%	14.4%

Note: Hispanic ethnicity includes persons of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, regardless of their race. Hispanic persons are not counted in the mutually exclusive race groups. All race groups except Two or More Races are limited to people claiming only one racial identity. White shares are not shown due to space limitations. Total minority shares atop each column represent everyone who is Hispanic or whose race is not White.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, U.S. Census Bureau

Table 1: Utah Middle-Class Income, 2019

(Annual Household Income in 2020 Dollars)

Persons per Household	Federal Poverty Guideline	Median Income	Middle Class Income	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	$12,700	$36,600	$19,500	$55,000
2	$17,200	$73,300	$44,300	$106,400
3	$21,700	$90,700	$52,700	$129,100
4	$26,200	$94,200	$57,500	$133,400
5+	$34,700	$104,300	$64,600	$150,700
All Households	**$21,700**	**$76,300**	**$45,600**	**$111,600**

Note: Lower-class incomes are less than the lower bound amounts shown, and upper-class incomes are any amount above the upper bounds. Except for federal poverty guidelines, amounts are estimates from a 1% sample of Utah households surveyed about their income in 2019. Values for all households and those with five or more members are weighted averages, accounting for Utah's population for each household size. Amounts rounded to the nearest $100.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of data in the American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau

Table 2: Utah Population by Income Class, 2019

Persons per Household	Total Population	Lower Class		Middle Class		Upper Class	
		Number	Share	Number	Share	Number	Share
1	198,000	55,400	28.0%	82,400	41.6%	60,200	30.4%
2	642,800	151,600	23.6%	308,000	47.9%	183,300	28.5%
3	483,000	121,100	25.1%	229,800	47.6%	132,200	27.4%
4	603,600	135,800	22.5%	306,100	50.7%	161,700	26.8%
5+	1,132,800	252,100	22.3%	588,800	52.0%	291,800	25.8%
All Households	**3,060,200**	**716,000**	**23.4%**	**1,515,000**	**49.5%**	**829,200**	**27.1%**

Note: Shares equal the number of people in each category divided by the state's total population for each household size. Population estimates rounded to the nearest 100 people. Totals may not match due to rounding.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of Utah data in the 2019 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau

Table 3: Utah Households by Income Class, 2019

Persons per Household	Total Number of Households	Lower Class		Middle Class		Upper Class	
		Number	Share	Number	Share	Number	Share
1	198,000	55,400	28.0%	82,400	41.6%	60,200	30.4%
2	321,400	75,800	23.6%	154,000	47.9%	91,700	28.5%
3	161,000	40,400	25.1%	76,600	47.6%	44,100	27.4%
4	150,900	34,000	22.5%	76,500	50.7%	40,400	26.8%
5+	192,400	42,800	22.3%	100,000	52.0%	49,600	25.8%
All Households	**1,023,700**	**248,300**	**24.3%**	**489,500**	**47.8%**	**285,900**	**27.9%**

Note: Shares equal the number of people in each category divided by the state's total number of households for each household size. Household estimates rounded to the nearest 100 people. Totals may not match due to rounding.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of Utah data in the 2019 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau

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Authored by: Levi Pace, Senior Research Economist

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