

RESEARCH & POLICY

INSIGHTS



Indiana's Economic and Workforce Regions: Educational Attainment and Workforce

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INTRODUCTION

Governor Braun [confirmed](#) in 2025 the 15 READI regions¹ as Indiana's official economic and workforce planning framework. This confirmation was based on a [study](#) completed by the Indiana Business Research Center looking at labor force and commute sheds, particularly the proportion of residents employed within the same region. Now, other state agencies, such as the Department of Workforce Development, are [planning](#) to realign their existing regions. In other words, READI regions have become the official footprint for state-level regional development efforts.

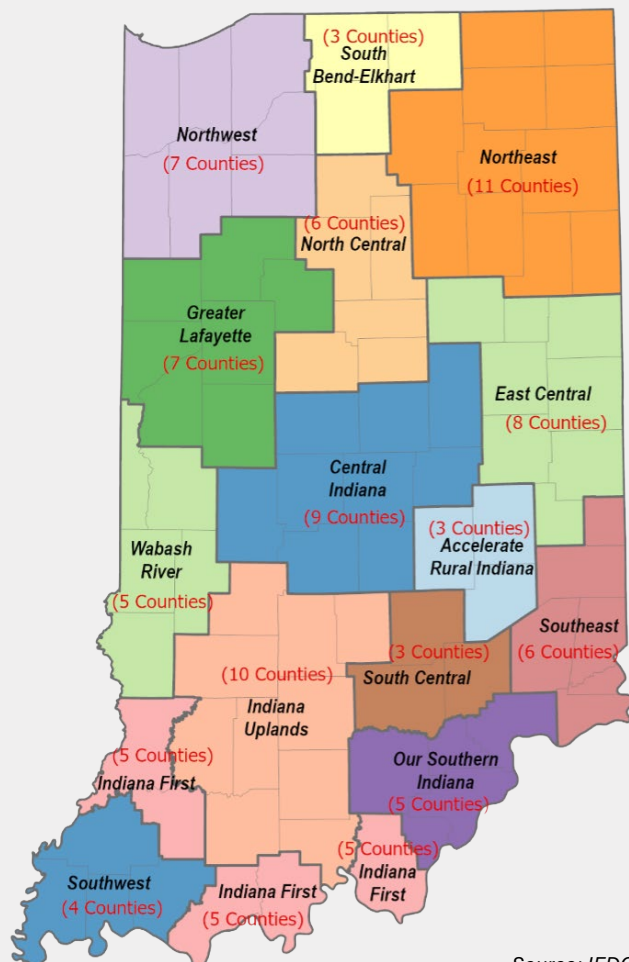
For this reason, the Purdue Center for Regional Development (PCRD), analyzed specific macro indicators of these regions to provide a much needed socioeconomic and demographic context. These can also serve as a baseline as stakeholders continue their READI work while additional state agencies align their efforts. The [first report](#) looked at six demographic variables. This report focuses on eight variables related to educational attainment and workforce.

Often, the larger socioeconomic and demographic context as well as trends over time are overlooked as policies and/or programs are drafted, implemented, and evaluated. While policymaking takes into consideration data and impacts, these tend to look at one point in time and/or focus on specific areas, overlooking the broader context and trends under which they take place.

The objective of this number-crunching is to better describe the regional socioeconomic and demographic landscape as well as better contextualize and help interpret progress and impact, or lack thereof, of regional development efforts.

Figure 1 shows a map of the regions, including the number of counties per region (in parenthesis). The largest region by number of counties is northeast with 11, followed by Indiana Uplands with 10, and Central Indiana with nine counties. The smallest region is a three-way tie between Accelerate Rural Indiana, South Bend-Elkhart, and South Central with three counties each.

FIGURE 1. Indiana's Economic and Workforce Regions



Source: IEDC

¹ Regional Economic Acceleration and Development Initiative, <https://indianareadi.com/>.

DATA & METHODS

County-level data was aggregated to the regional level while state and national data was included for comparison purposes. Descriptive analyses were completed. Two points in time (years) were used to identify trends². Most data were obtained from the 5-Year American Community Survey (ACS)³, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the Federal Communications Commission, and County Business Patterns, to name a few.

RESULTS

This report analyzed variables related to educational attainment, labor force participation rates, and workforce flows. **Figure 2** shows the percentage of the population age 25 or older in 2013 and 2023 with a high school degree, some college (including associate's degrees), and a bachelor's degree or higher. The share of high school only and some college show prime candidates for upskilling or reskilling due to labor market trends⁴, economic vulnerability⁵, and/or some employers demanding skills over degrees⁶.

Overall, the share in Indiana with a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 23.2 percent in 2013 to 28.8 percent in 2023, or roughly 325,000 residents. Of these, 47 percent (or 153,000) were in the Central Indiana region. And while Indiana's share increased by 2023, it still lagged the nation's share, 28.8 versus 35 percent, respectively. The nation saw an increase in those with a bachelor's degree or higher of more than 20.3 million between 2013 and 2023.

The share of those with a bachelor's degree or higher increased across all Indiana's regions between 2013 and 2023. However, only three regions exceeded the state's share in both 2013 and 2023: Central Indiana (which includes the Indianapolis metropolitan area), Greater Lafayette (home to Purdue University), and Indiana Uplands (home to Indiana University). In 2023, only the Central Indiana (38.1 percent) region exceeded the national share.

Regarding the share of those with high school only or equivalent and some college, results are mixed. The share of those with high school only declined across all regions in the state as well as the state and the nation between 2013 and 2023. The share of those with some college increased in 9 of the 15 regions and declined in 6 of the 15 regions. The region whose only high school share declined the most was South Central (close to 5 percentage points), while the East Central region's share of those with some college increased the most by 3.5 percentage points. By 2023, the Indiana First region had the largest percentage (72 percent) of those with high school or some college.

² Most of the variables were analyzed using the 2013 to 2023 period. Different periods utilized, due to data availability, are clearly noted.

³ This dataset is based on surveys and therefore has a margin of error. We do not consider the MOE when interpreting results because the objective is purely descriptive. Also, county-level data is aggregated to larger regional data, which typically reduces the MOE. However, any percentage change results of one percentage point or lower may indicate no change.

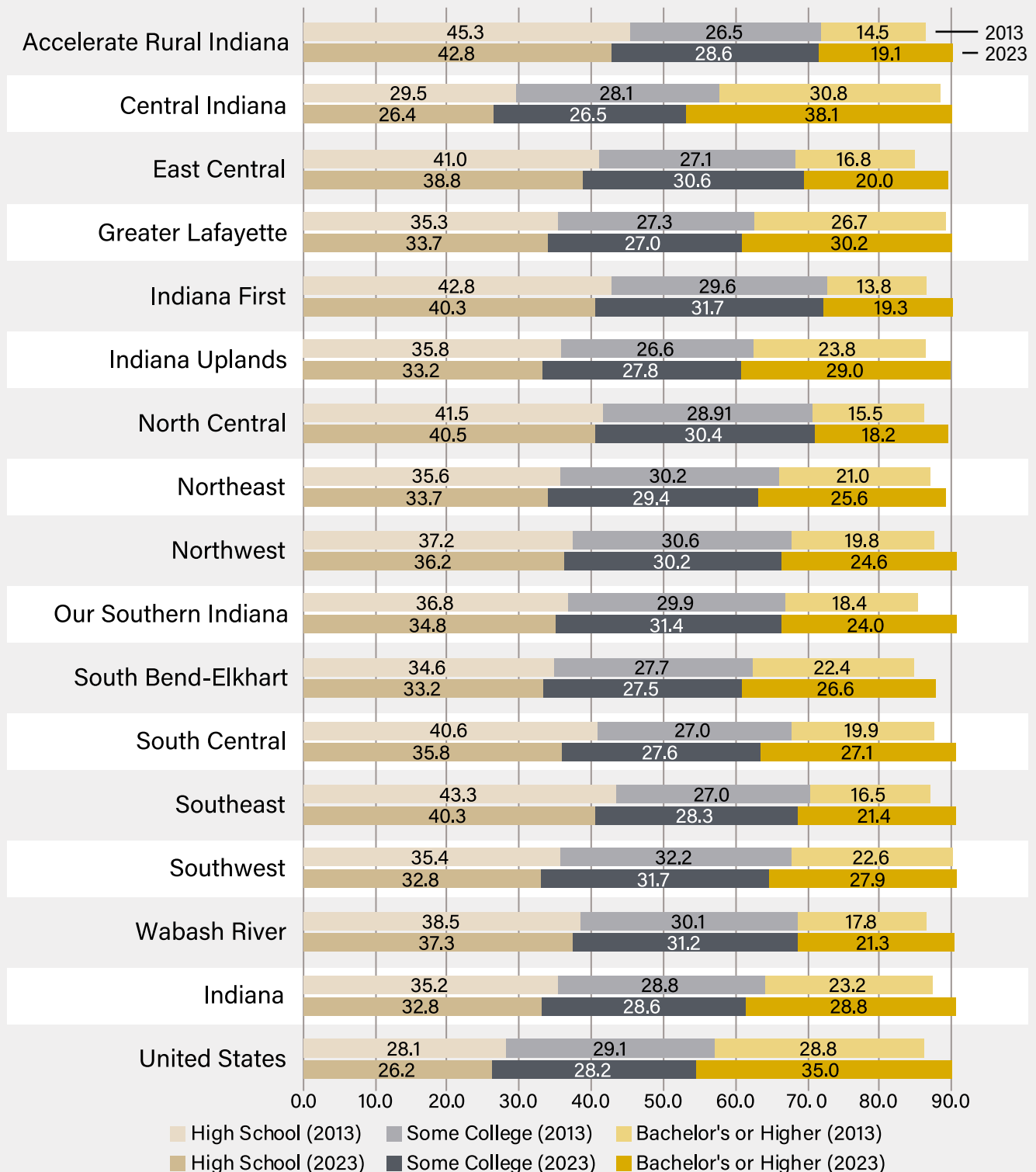
⁴ [Job market, economic trends for young adults by gender and education | Pew Research Center](#)

⁵ [GAO-22-105159, WORKFORCE AUTOMATION: Insights into Skills and Training Programs for Impacted Workers](#)

⁶ [Degrees vs. Skills 2025: What Employers Really Value?](#)

In raw numbers, the number of residents with high school only declined by close to 4,500 while those with some college increased by a little more than 78,000 during this period in Indiana. This resulted in a net gain of residents age 25 or older with high school or some college of more than 73,000.

FIGURE 2. 2013 & 2023 Percentage Population 25 or Older by Selected Educational Attainment



Source: 5-Year ACS

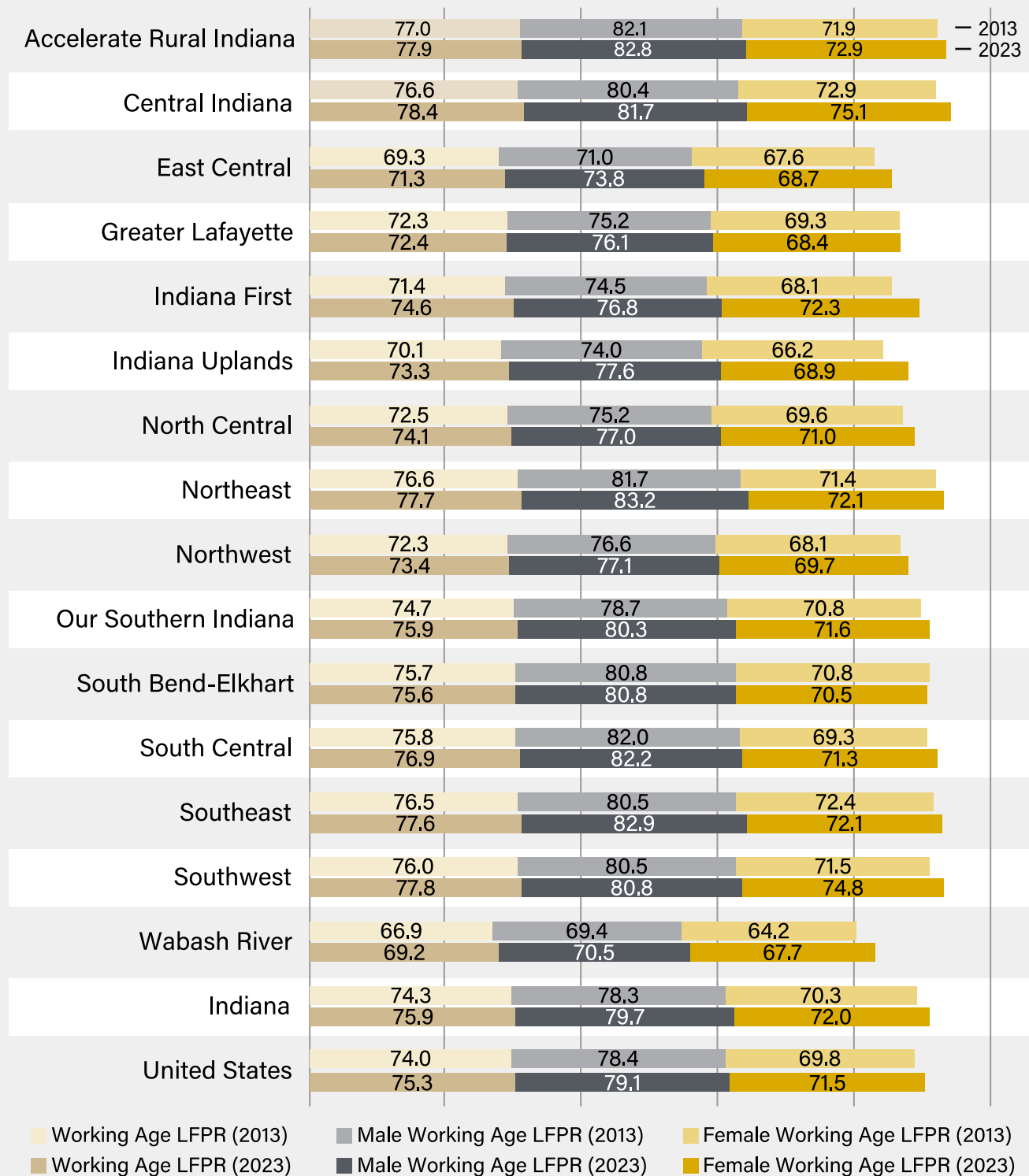
Next, **Figure 3** shows the overall working age (16 to 64 years) labor force participation rate (LFPR) as well as the male and female working age LFPRs in 2013 and 2023. The LFPR increased by roughly one percentage point in both Indiana and the United States, between 2013 and 2023 as well as in 14 of the 15 regions (South Bend-Elkhart had a slight decrease). As of 2023, Central Indiana had the highest working age LFPR rate with close to 80 percent followed by the Accelerate Rural Indiana, Southwest, and Northeast regions. The Wabash region had the lowest with less than 70 percent.

In raw numbers, the state gained a little over 108,000 residents ages 16 to 64 in the labor force between 2013 and 2023, of which 106,000 were in the Central Indiana region. Nine of the fifteen regions experienced a decrease (close to 22,000) in their working age labor force. The East Central region lost the most, with more than 7,200.

The male and female working age LFPR also increased in both Indiana and the U.S. during this period. The male working age LFPR increased across all 15 regions while the female working age LFPR increased in 12 and slightly declined in three (Greater Lafayette, South Bend-Elkhart, and Southeast).

In raw numbers, the state gained close to 64,000 males in the working age labor force and a little more than 44,000 females. However, eight regions lost collectively a little more than 9,500 males in the working age labor force, with the Wabash River region losing the most (a little more than 2,000). Regarding females, 10 regions collectively lost a little more than 14,000, with the East Central region losing the most with around 5,500.

FIGURE 3. 2013 & 2023 Selected Working Age Labor Force Participation Rates (LFPR)



Source: 5-Year ACS

To provide a better understanding of workforce flows between counties, we looked at the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES) dataset as well as geographic mobility variables from the 5-Year American Community Survey.

The LEHD-LODES dataset provides information on the share of workers that commuted in or out of counties within a region, as well as those workers that lived and worked in the same county. The geographic mobility variables from the ACS provide information on the share of residents that moved from within the same county, different county, different state, or abroad.

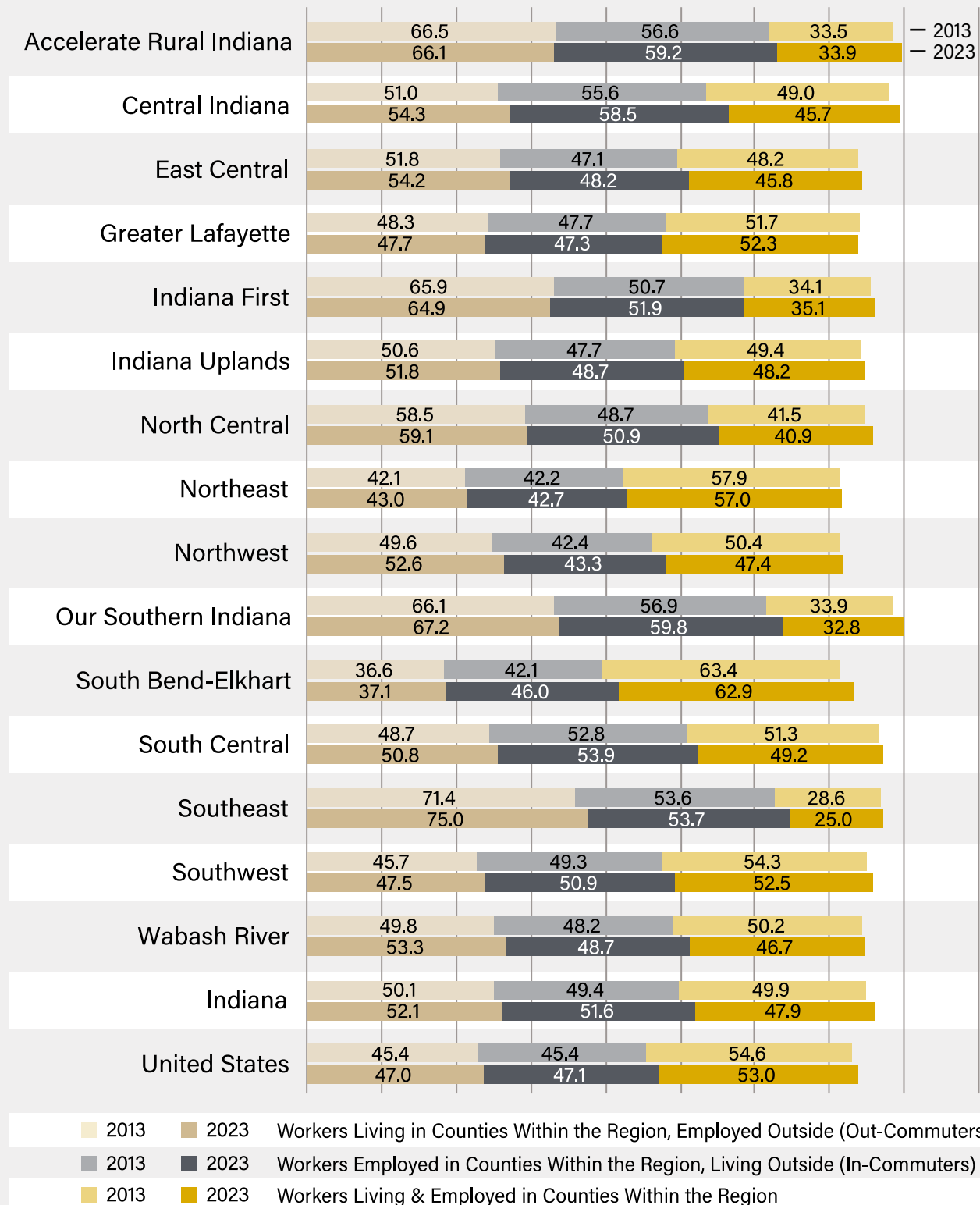
Figure 4 shows the percentage of workers in 2013 and 2023 that lived in the county but were employed elsewhere (out-commuters), the percentage of workers that worked in the county but lived elsewhere (in-commuters), and the percentage of workers that lived and worked in the county. Note that national shares do not include Alaska, Michigan, and Mississippi due to data availability.

The southeast region had the highest percentage of out-commuters of all 15 regions in the state in both 2013 and 2023. The South Bend-Elkhart region had the lowest in both years. The percentage of out-commuters increased between 2013 and 2023 in all but in the Accelerate Rural Indiana, Indiana First, and Greater Lafayette regions.

Regarding in-commuters, Our Southern Indiana region had the highest percentage in both 2013 and 2023. The South Bend-Elkhart region had the lowest percentage in 2013 while the Northeast region had the lowest percentage in 2023. This percentage of in-commuters increased in all but the Greater Lafayette region between 2013 and 2023.

The region that was able to capture the highest percentage of workers that lived and worked in their counties was South Bend-Elkhart in both years. The region that least captured workers was the Southeast region in both years as well.

FIGURE 4. 2013 & 2023 Percentage Workers Selected Commuting Categories

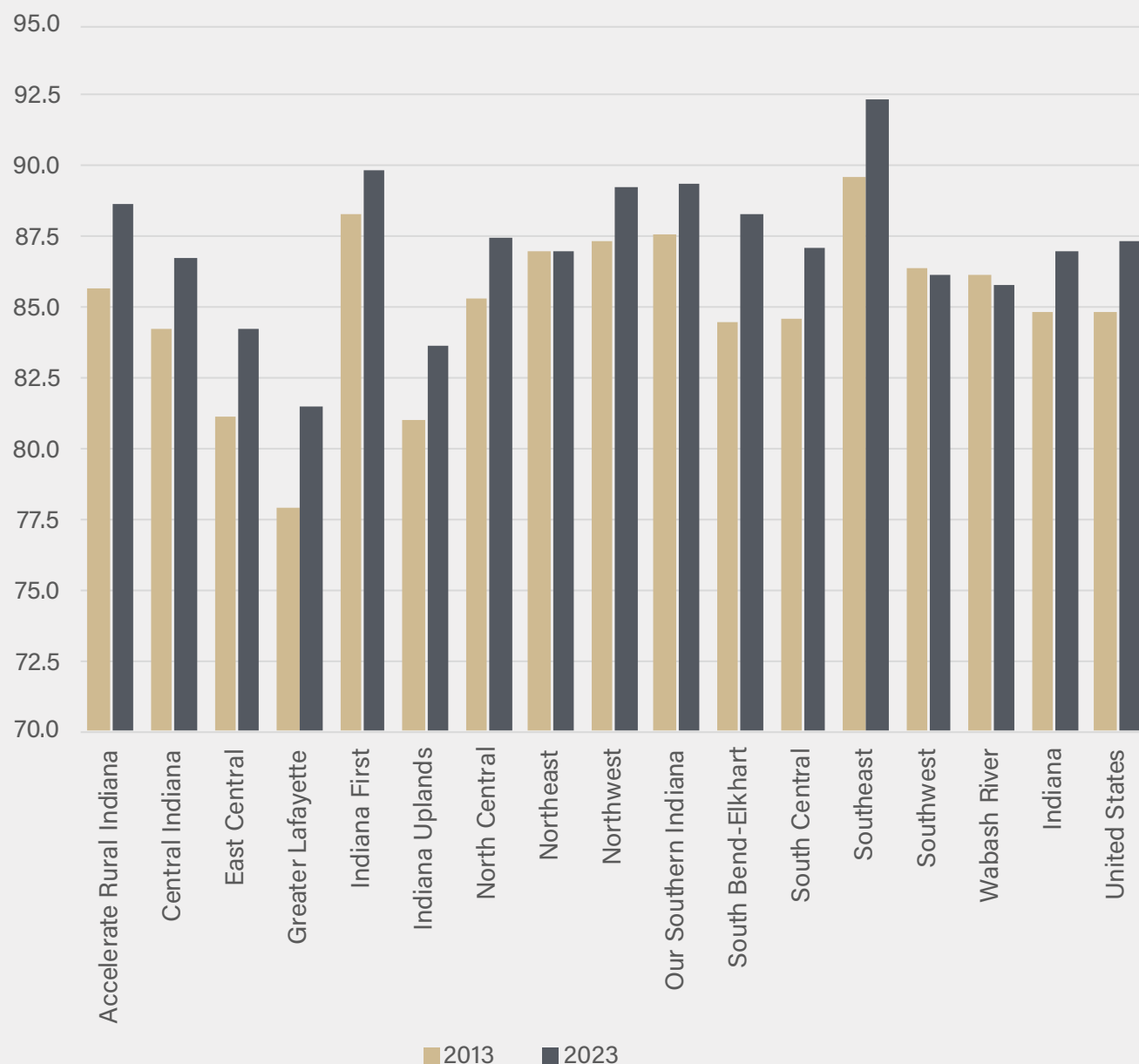


Source: 5-Year ACS

Lastly, we looked at the share of residents by geographic mobility. According to the 5-Year American Community Survey, the share of residents in Indiana living in the same house (did not move) the previous year was close to 85 percent in 2013, increasing to close to 87 percent in 2023 as shown in **Figure 5**.

The largest increase between 2013 and 2023 among those not moving was in the South Bend-Elkhart region followed by the Greater Lafayette region, increasing 3.8 and 3.6 percentage points, respectively. The Southeast region had the highest share of non-movers with 92.3 percent as of 2023. Conversely, the two regions with the largest share of residents that moved (not shown) were the Greater Lafayette region with 18.5 percent in 2023 followed by Indiana Uplands with 16.4 percent. Remember, these two regions are home to Indiana's largest public universities.

FIGURE 5. Share of Residents that were in the Same House (did not move) the Previous Year



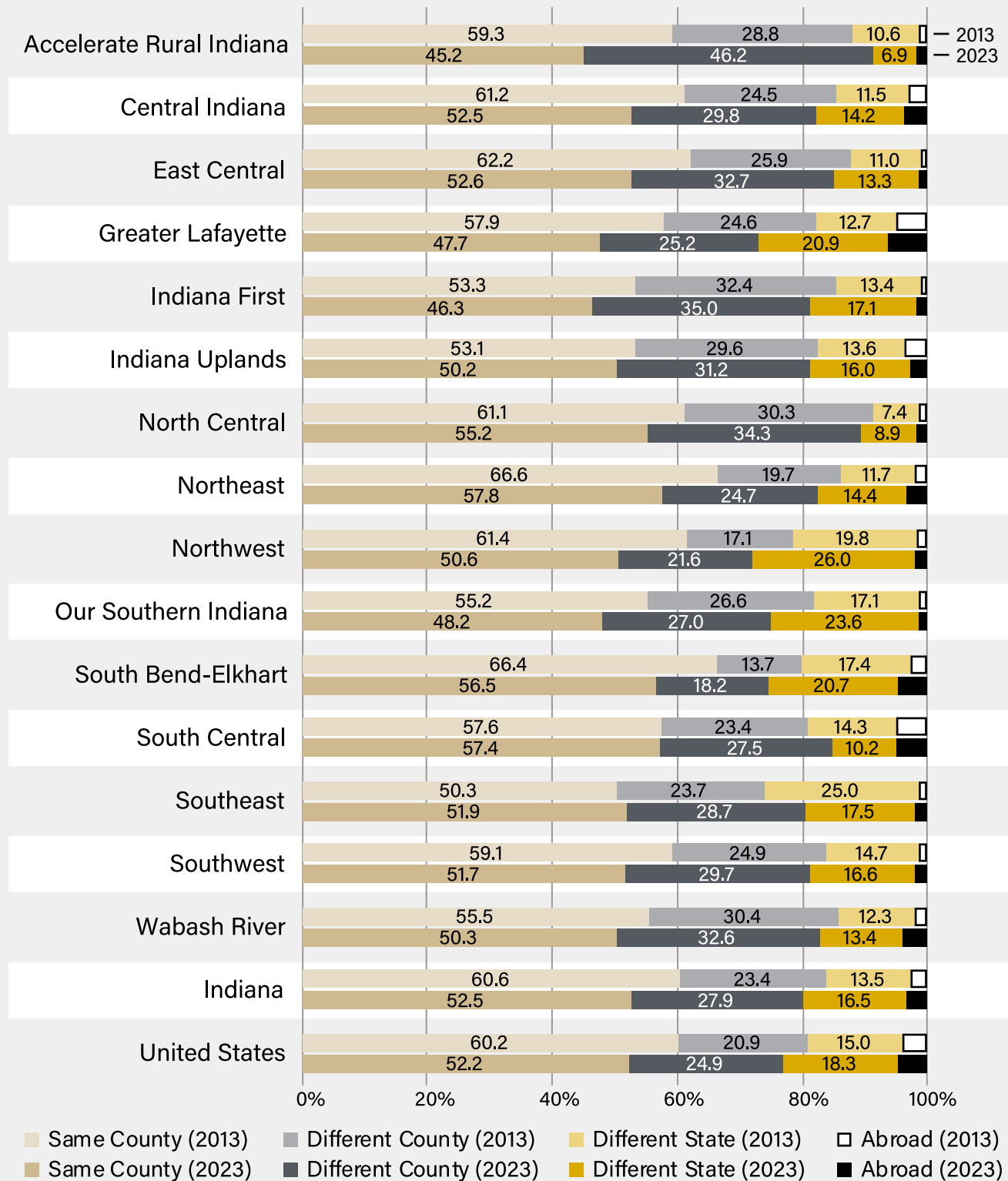
Source: 5-Year ACS

The share of residents that did move and where they came from are shown in **Figure 6**. As of 2023 and of those who did move, 80 percent moved from within the state, either the same county or a different county, down from 84 percent in 2013. The share of those who moved from another state was 16.5 percent in 2023 (up from 13.5 percent in 2013) followed by 3.1 percent from abroad (up from 2.4 percent in 2013).

The highest percentage of those moving from the same county was in the Northeast region with 57.8 in 2023, down from 66.6 percent in 2013. Indiana First had the lowest share of people (46.3 percent) who moved within the same county in 2023. The percentage of those moving from a different county in the same state was highest in the Indiana First region with 35 percent in 2023. The share of those moving from a different county in the state of Indiana was higher compared to the nation in both years.

Regarding the percentage of movers moving from a different state, the Northwest region had the highest with 26 percent followed by the Our Southern Indiana region with 23.6 percent. The Greater Lafayette region had the highest increase in the share of those moving from a different state, going from 12.7 percent in 2013 to 20.9 percent in 2023. On the other hand, Southeast Indiana had the largest decrease in the share of those moving from a different state from 25 percent in 2013 to 17.5 percent in 2023. Note that the percentage of movers moving from abroad was five percent or less in both years (except for the Greater Lafayette region with 6.2 percent in 2023).

FIGURE 6. 2013 & 2023 Share of Residents that Moved by Origin Compared to the Previous Year



Source: 5-Year ACS

To summarize, **Table 1** below shows the difference (percentage points) between 2013 and 2023 across all Indiana regions, the state, and the nation for most of the variables analyzed in this report. As noted previously, the share of those with a bachelor's degree or higher increased in all 15 regions. The working age labor force participation rate increased in all but the South Bend-Elkhart region between 2013 and 2023.

The share of workers that reside and are employed in the same county decreased the most in the Southeast and Wabash River regions. This share increased the most in the Indiana First region between 2013 and 2023. The share of out-commuters increased the most in the Southeast and Wabash River regions.

TABLE 1. 2013-2023 Key Variable Comparisons Across Indiana Regions, the State, and the Nation

Region	HS + SC	Bach+	LFPR	Male LFPR	Female LFPR	Out	In	Work & Live	Same St.	Diff. St.
Accelerate Rural Indiana	-0.4	4.6	0.9	0.7	1.1	-0.4	2.6	0.4	-14.1	-3.7
Central Indiana	-4.7	7.3	1.8	1.3	2.2	3.3	2.9	-3.3	-8.7	2.8
East Central	1.3	3.2	2.0	2.8	1.1	2.4	1.1	-2.4	-9.6	2.3
Greater Lafayette	-1.8	3.5	0.1	0.9	-0.9	-0.6	-0.4	0.6	-10.2	8.2
Indiana First	-0.4	5.4	3.2	2.3	4.1	-1.0	1.2	1.0	-7.0	3.7
Indiana Uplands	-1.5	5.2	3.2	3.6	2.7	1.2	1.0	-1.2	-3.0	2.4
North Central	0.4	2.7	1.6	1.9	1.4	0.6	2.2	-0.6	-5.9	1.5
Northeast	-2.7	4.6	1.1	1.5	0.8	0.9	0.5	-0.9	-8.9	2.7
Northwest	-1.4	4.7	1.1	0.5	1.6	3.0	1.0	-3.0	-10.8	6.2
Our Southern Indiana	-0.6	5.6	1.2	1.6	0.8	1.1	2.9	-1.1	-7.0	6.5
South Bend-Elkhart	-1.6	4.1	-0.1	0.0	-0.2	0.4	3.9	-0.4	-9.9	3.3
South Central	-4.3	7.2	1.1	0.2	2.0	2.1	1.1	-2.1	-0.1	-4.1
Southeast	-1.7	4.9	1.1	2.4	-0.3	3.5	0.2	-3.5	1.6	-7.5
Southwest	-3.1	5.3	1.8	0.2	3.3	1.9	1.6	-1.9	-7.4	2.0
Wabash River	-0.1	3.5	2.2	1.0	3.5	3.5	0.5	-3.5	-5.2	1.1
Indiana	-2.6 	5.6 	1.6 	1.4 	1.7 	2.0 	2.2 	-2.0 	-8.1 	3.0
United States	-2.8 	6.2 	1.3 	0.7 	1.7 	1.6 	1.7 	-1.6 	-4.0 	3.3

Source: 5-Year ACS; Author's Calculations

CONCLUSIONS

The state of Indiana has increased its percentage of those with a bachelor's degree or higher, though it still lags the nation by about seven percentage points. However, this increase took place primarily in the Central Indiana region. Most regions in the state not only lag the national average, but also the state average.

A larger concern is a "regional divergence" taking place, where primarily the Central Indiana region is rising "with the tide" while all other regions are not. Regional divergence refers to affluent regions becoming more affluent whereas distressed regions becoming more distressed. Economic and regional developers as well as state and local policymakers need to brainstorm and come up with creative ways to counteract these "agglomeration" forces so that the raising tide does indeed lift all boats (regions), while at the same time preserving local community values and identities.

There is a significant pool of workers ripe for upskilling and reskilling across the state. These residents completed high school or some college. As a percentage, this group represented at least 50 percent of residents age 25 or older. Investments and changes in workforce development programs should be made to ensure that upskilling/reskilling is effective and timely, particularly given the large pool of workers that can be upskilled/reskilled. An even stronger partnership with industry and businesses as well as trust are pre-requisites for these investments and changes.

The workforce flows indicate a very dynamic state and regional economy. While most of the residents did not move from the same house as of 2023, there is a very dynamic inflow and outflow of workers across counties and regions. Some regions were more successful around quality of place in that a higher percentage of their workers worked and lived in the same county. The impact of place-based programs and investments remains to be seen on ensuring more workers live and work in their communities. Other counties and regions had a higher percentage of workers working in one county but residing in another. This is a critical indicator to monitor to assess if the "regional divergence" is being addressed.

At the end of the day, workforce and economic development policies need to consider the larger region. For example, identifying not only industrial clusters but also skills clusters, and how these can be strengthened by tapping into a larger, regional pool. Otherwise, narrow-focused policies may inadvertently weaken these clusters. On the educational attainment front, the state should focus (which it already is) more on brain gain or retention. This will help Indiana catch up with the nation when it comes to the percentage of those with a bachelor's degree or higher.

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