



Poverty in Tucson: Why Does it Still Exist?

Professor Brian Mayer, School of Sociology
OLLI, May 11, 2026



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Tucson Poverty Project

1 in 3 (*108 million*)
earn less than \$55,000 a year

1 in 9 (*36.8 million*)
live below the poverty line

1 in 20 (*14 million*)
live in deep poverty



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in Tucson

1.9 in 10 adults
(105,000)

live below the poverty line

1 in 5 children *(21,500)*

grow up in households in poverty

~2,100 individuals

sleep unhoused



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TODAY'S PRESENTATION

AGENDA

- **How do we think about poverty?**
- **What do we know about Poverty in Tucson?**
- **What might we do to address poverty?**



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What is Poverty?

“Poverty is not simply a lack of resources.”

Matthew Desmond, author
Poverty, by America



Poverty is not a line. It is a tight knot of social problems that acts as a trap.

Government Assistance

only reaches
1 in 4
households
in need

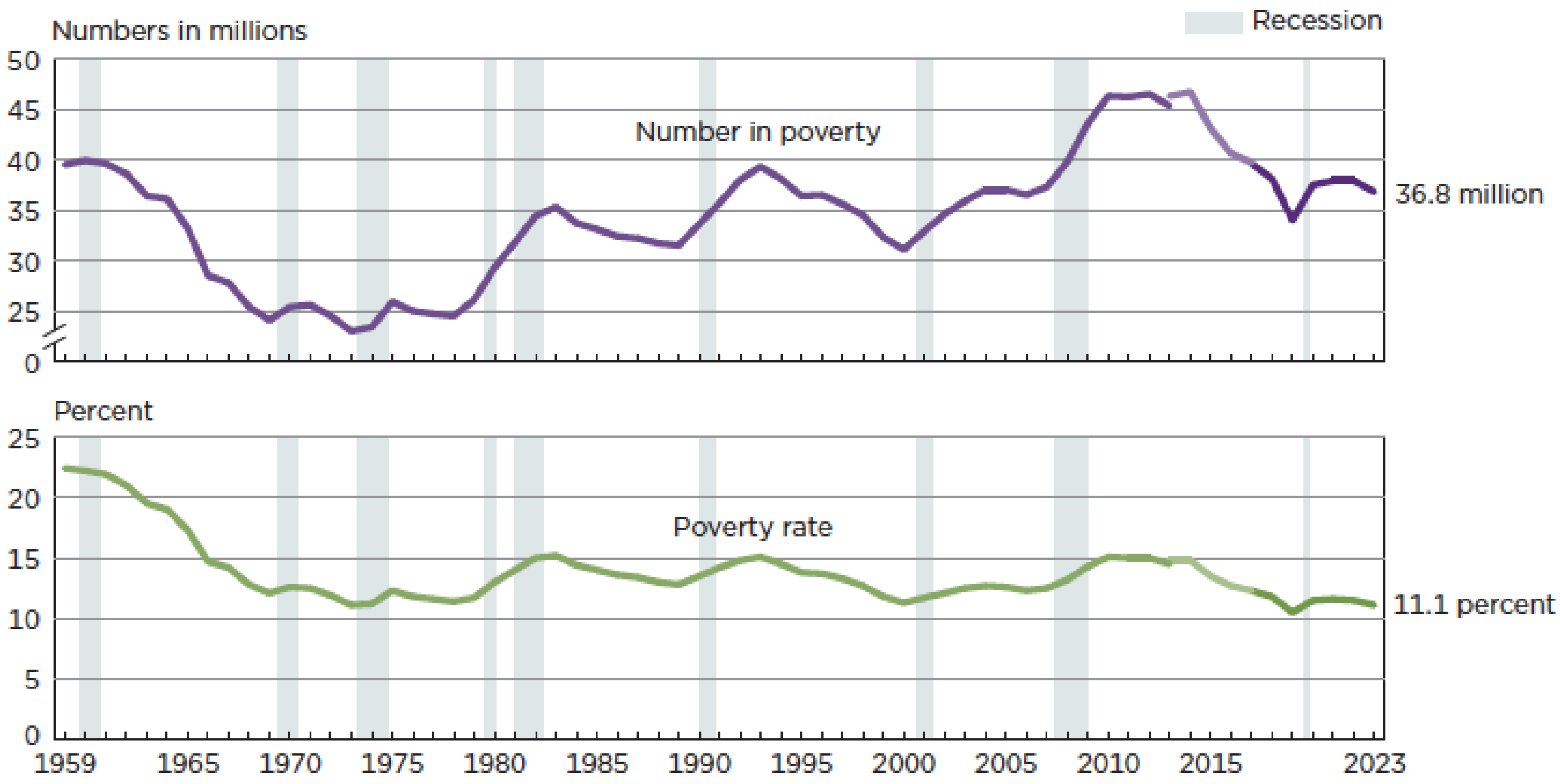
Housing Cost Burden

results in
poor
households
spending
70% of
income on
rent

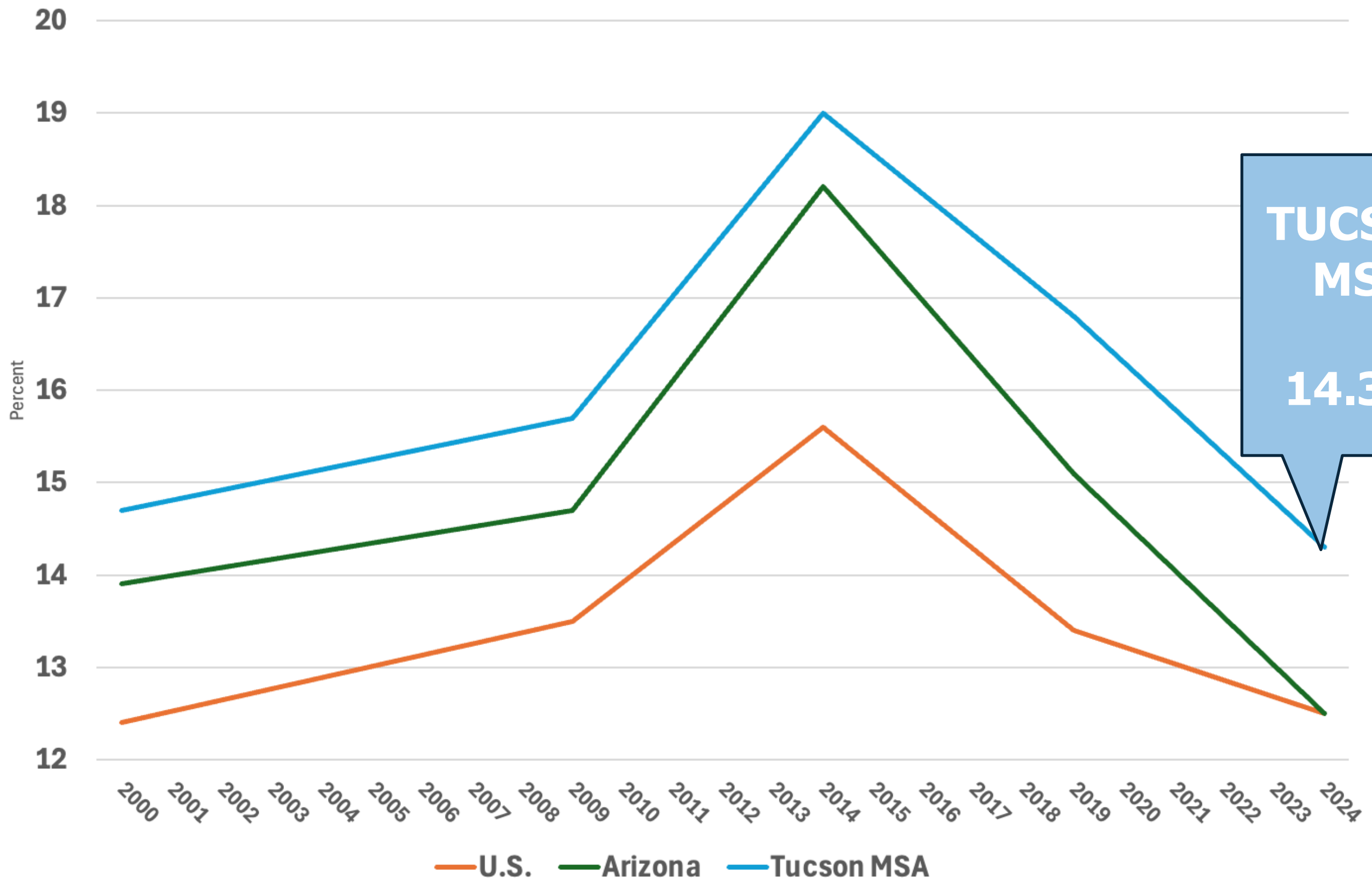
Poverty Makes Us

Sicker
where the
top 1% live
15 years
longer than
the bottom
1%

Number In Poverty and Poverty Rate Using the Official Poverty Measure: 1959 to 2023



Individuals in Poverty

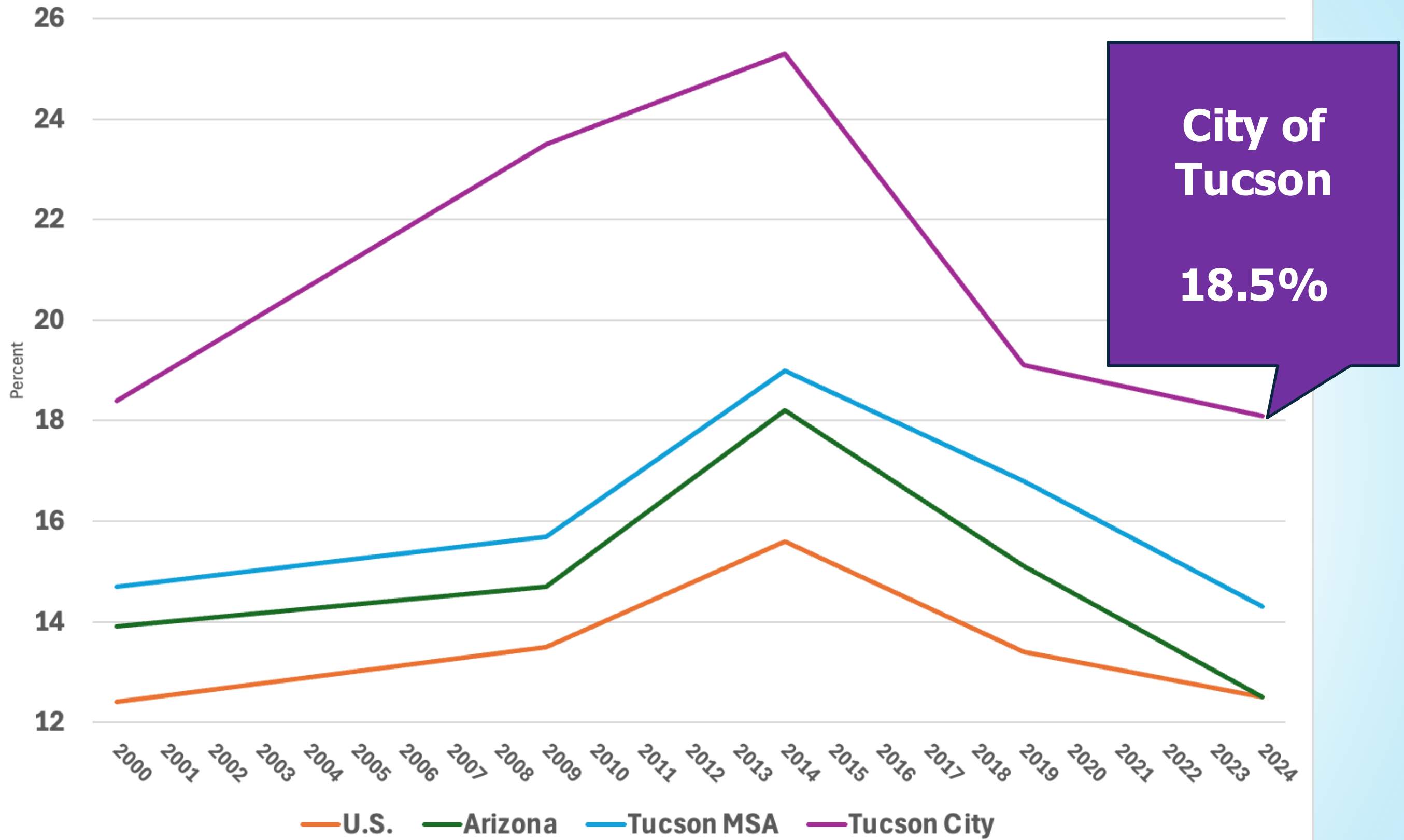


**TUCSON
MSA**

14.3%



Individuals in Poverty



HOW DO WE MEASURE POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES?

Mollie Orshansky
Economist, SSA
Tasked in 1963 to
help 'define' poverty



2025 Poverty Threshold



\$32,150

Two 'Types' of Poverty

SITUATIONAL POVERTY

TIME-LIMITED AND DOES NOT PASS INTO NEXT GENERATION

Often triggered by temporary life events, such as:



Attending school



Loss of employment



Sudden illness



Divorce



Death of loved one



INTERGENERATIONAL POVERTY

LONG-TERM AND CONTINUES INTO NEXT GENERATION

May include these same life events, but is often compounded by deeper, systemic causes that can reinforce one another:



Inequality and "isms"



Lack of opportunity



Siloed systems



Poor outcomes

Entry Into Poverty

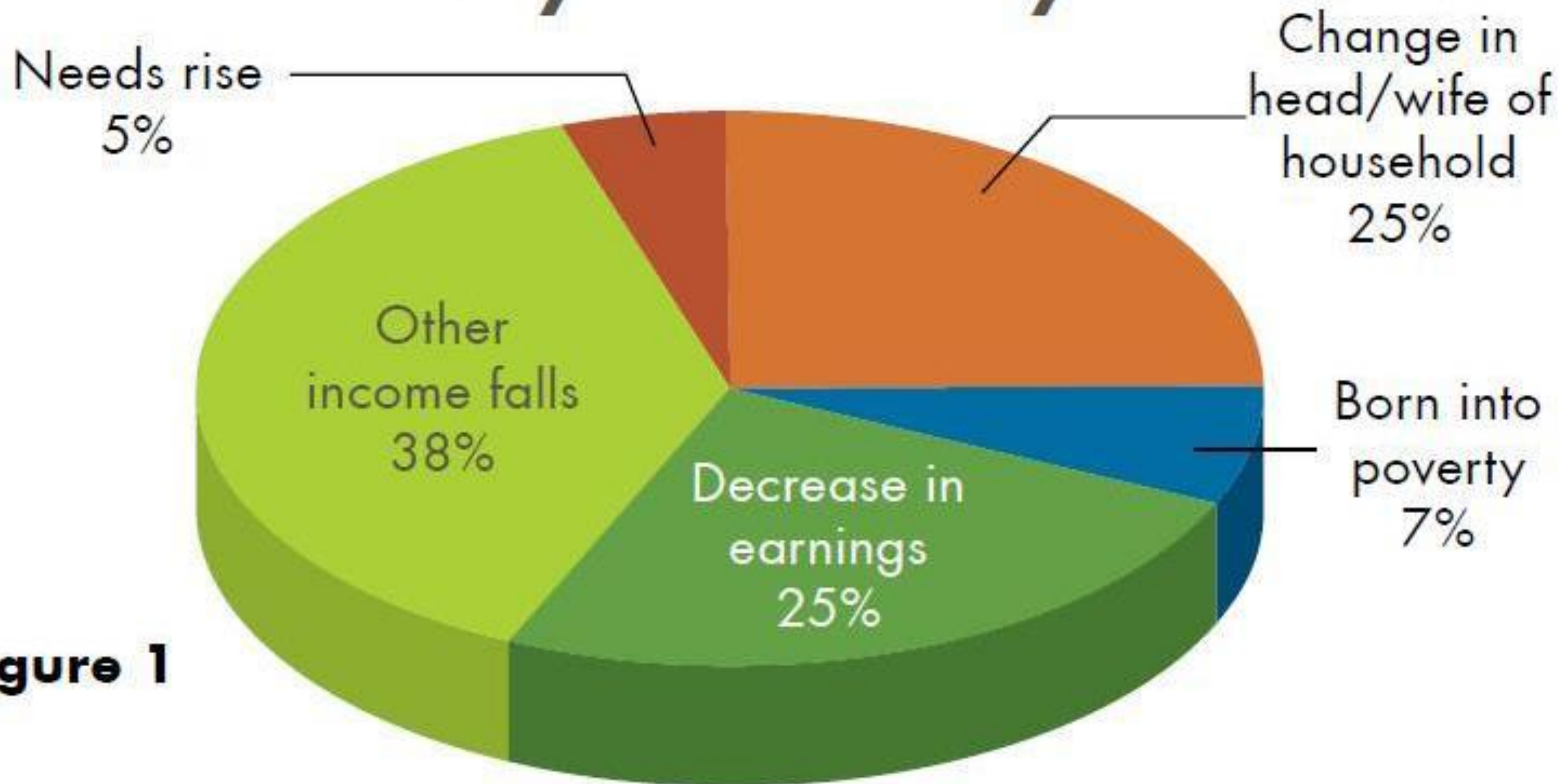
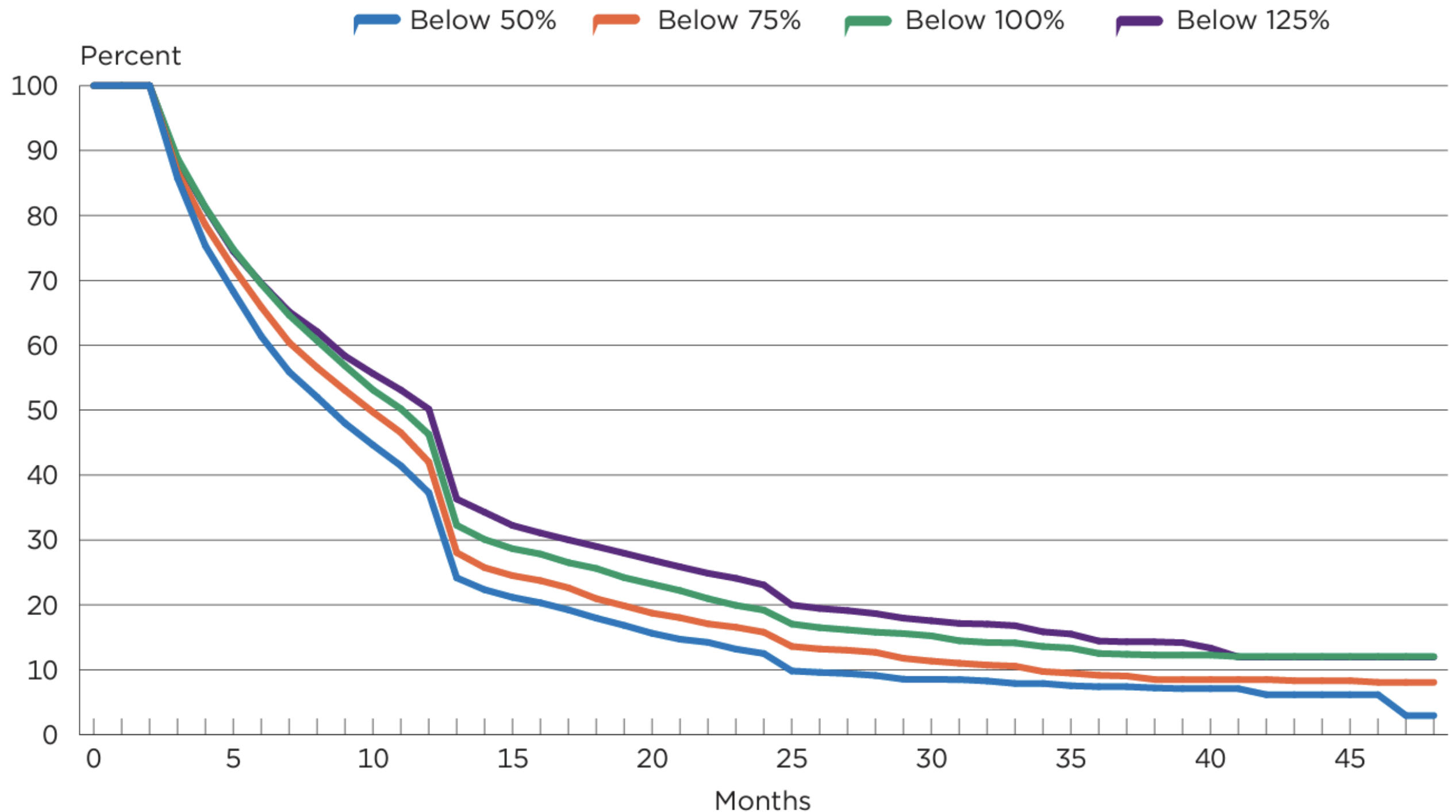


Figure 1

25% of All Poverty 'Spells' Begins with a Loss of Work-Based Income

Poverty Spells Are Usually Brief, on Average Lasting ~10 Months

Poverty Survival Rates at Different Levels of Poverty: 2013-2016



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2014 Panel.

**Do People
Choose to
Become
Poor?**

**Are Opportunities
Unevenly
Distributed?**



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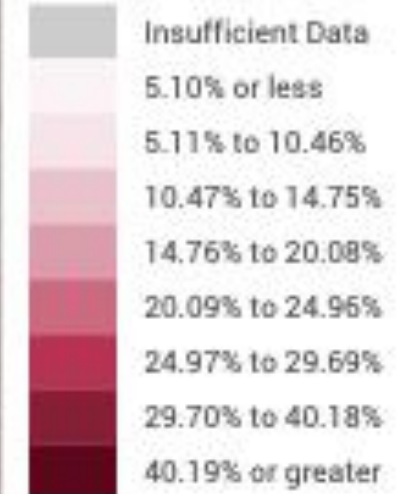
**Why is
Tucson's
Poverty
Rate
Persistently
Higher
Than Other
Cities?**

Estimated percent of all people that are living in poverty as of 2019-2023.

Percent of People in Poverty

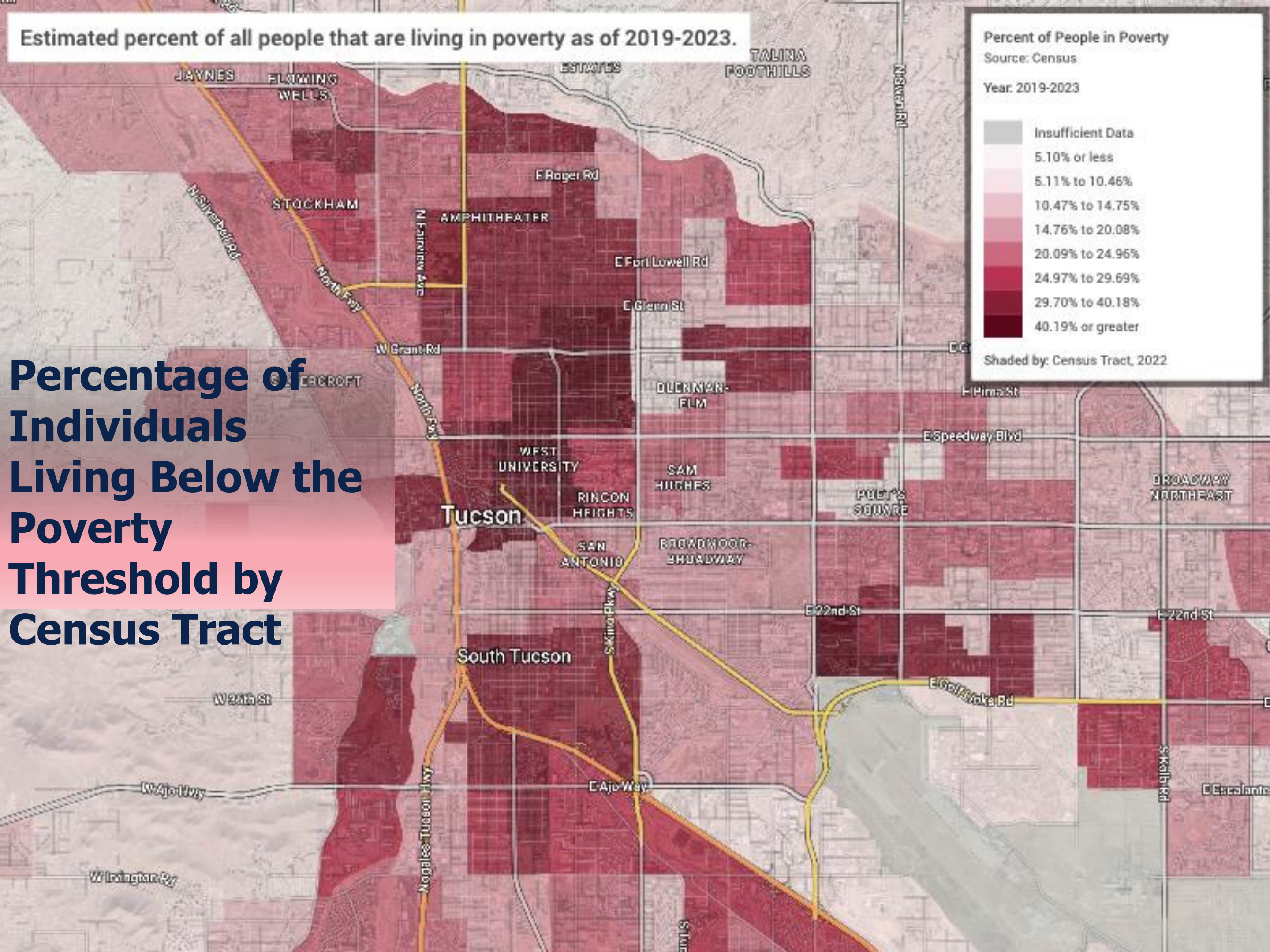
Source: Census

Year: 2019-2023



Shaded by: Census Tract, 2022

Percentage of Individuals Living Below the Poverty Threshold by Census Tract



What Drives Poverty in Tucson?



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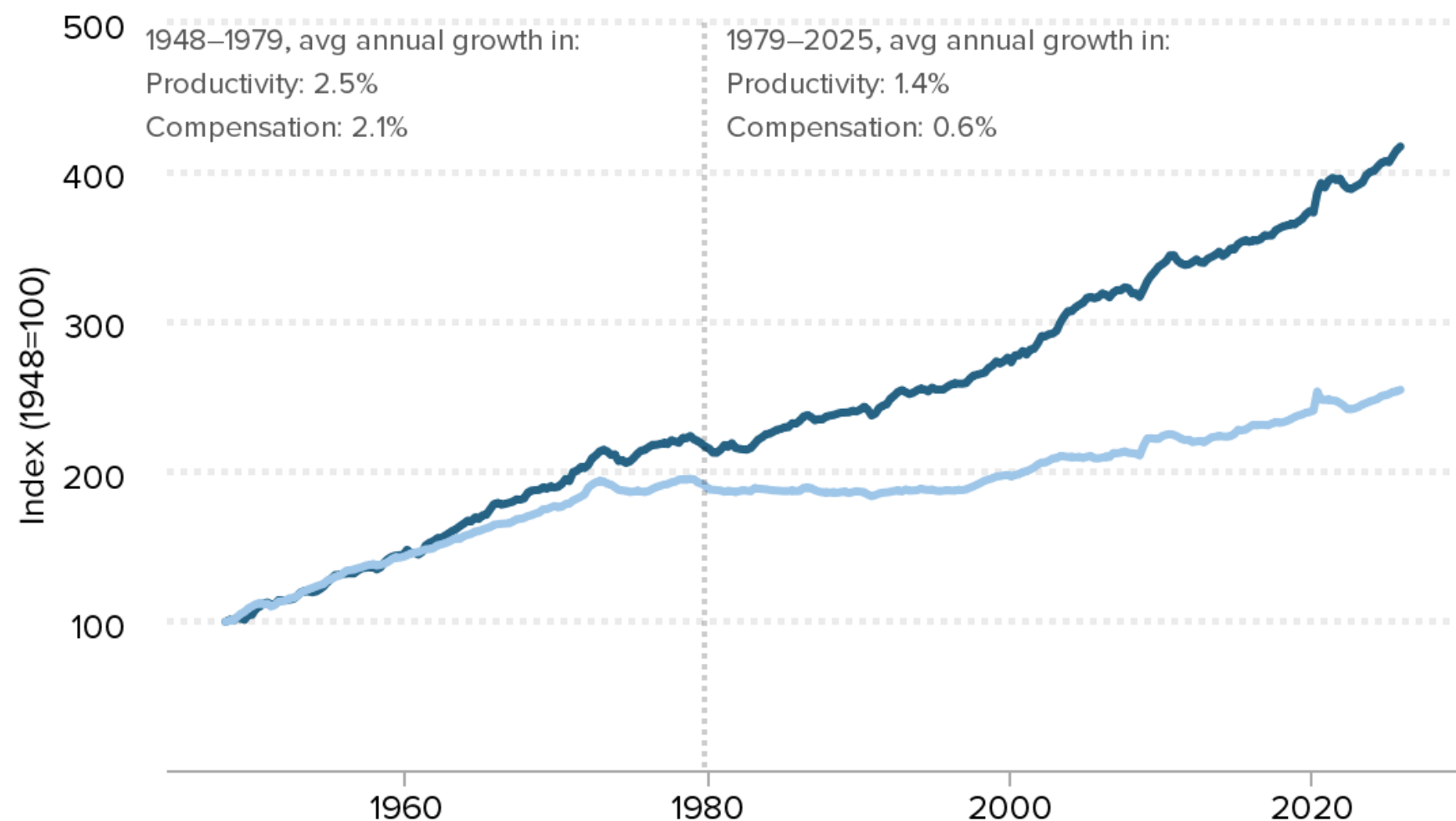
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Low Wages and the Working Poor



The gap between productivity and a typical worker's compensation has increased dramatically since 1979

Productivity growth and hourly compensation growth, 1948–2025



Economic Policy Institute

Notes: Data are for compensation (wages and benefits) of production/nonsupervisory workers in the private sector and net productivity of the total economy. “Net productivity” is the growth of output of goods and services less depreciation per hour worked.

Source: EPI [analysis](#) of unpublished Total Economy Productivity data from Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Labor Productivity and Costs program, wage data from the BLS Current Employment Statistics, BLS Employment Cost Trends, BLS Consumer Price Index, and Bureau of Economic Analysis National Income and Product Accounts.

Hard Work No Longer Guarantees Economic Security

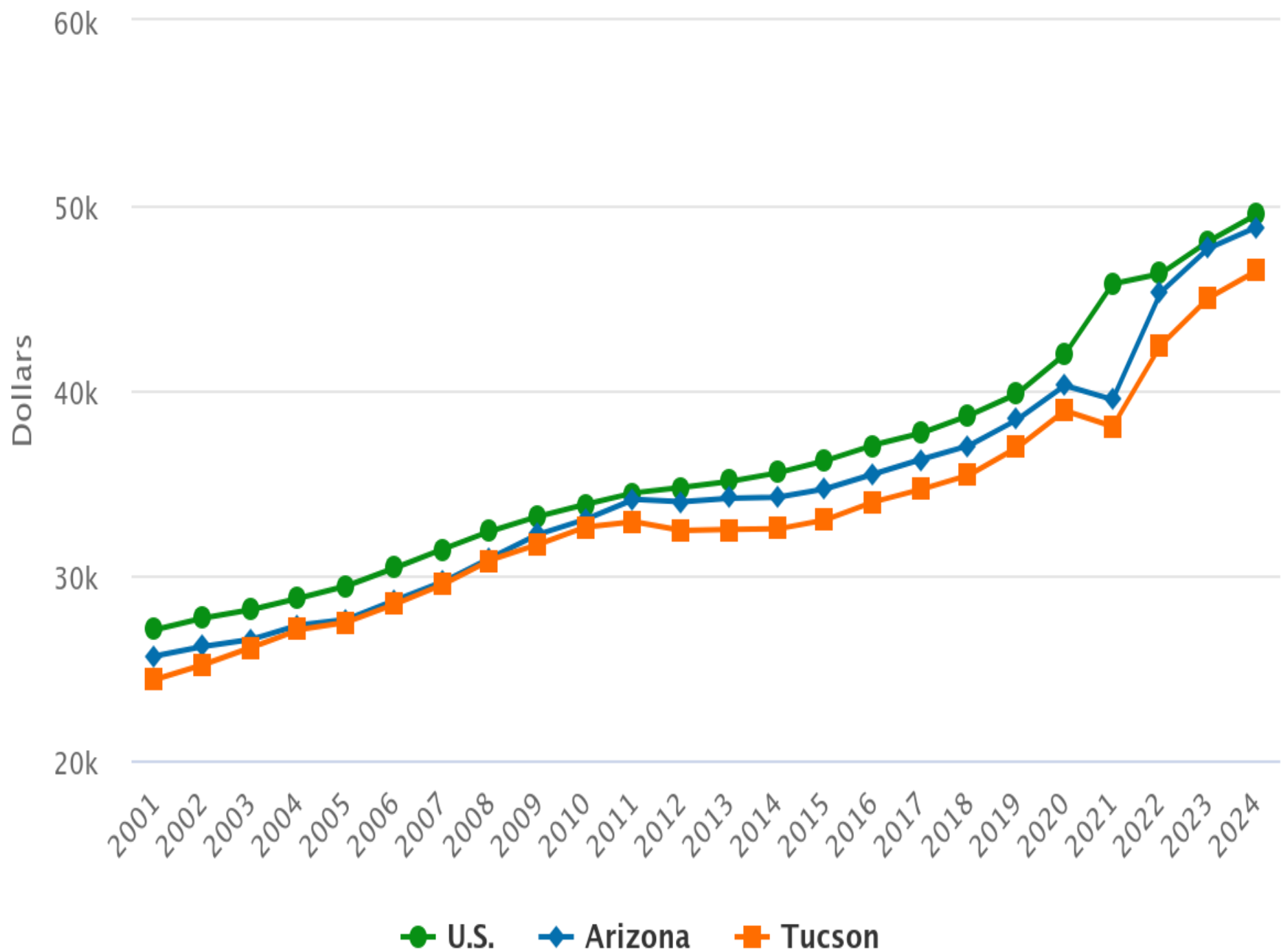
\$46,500

Tucson's Median Wage in 2024

Tucson's economy relies heavily on:

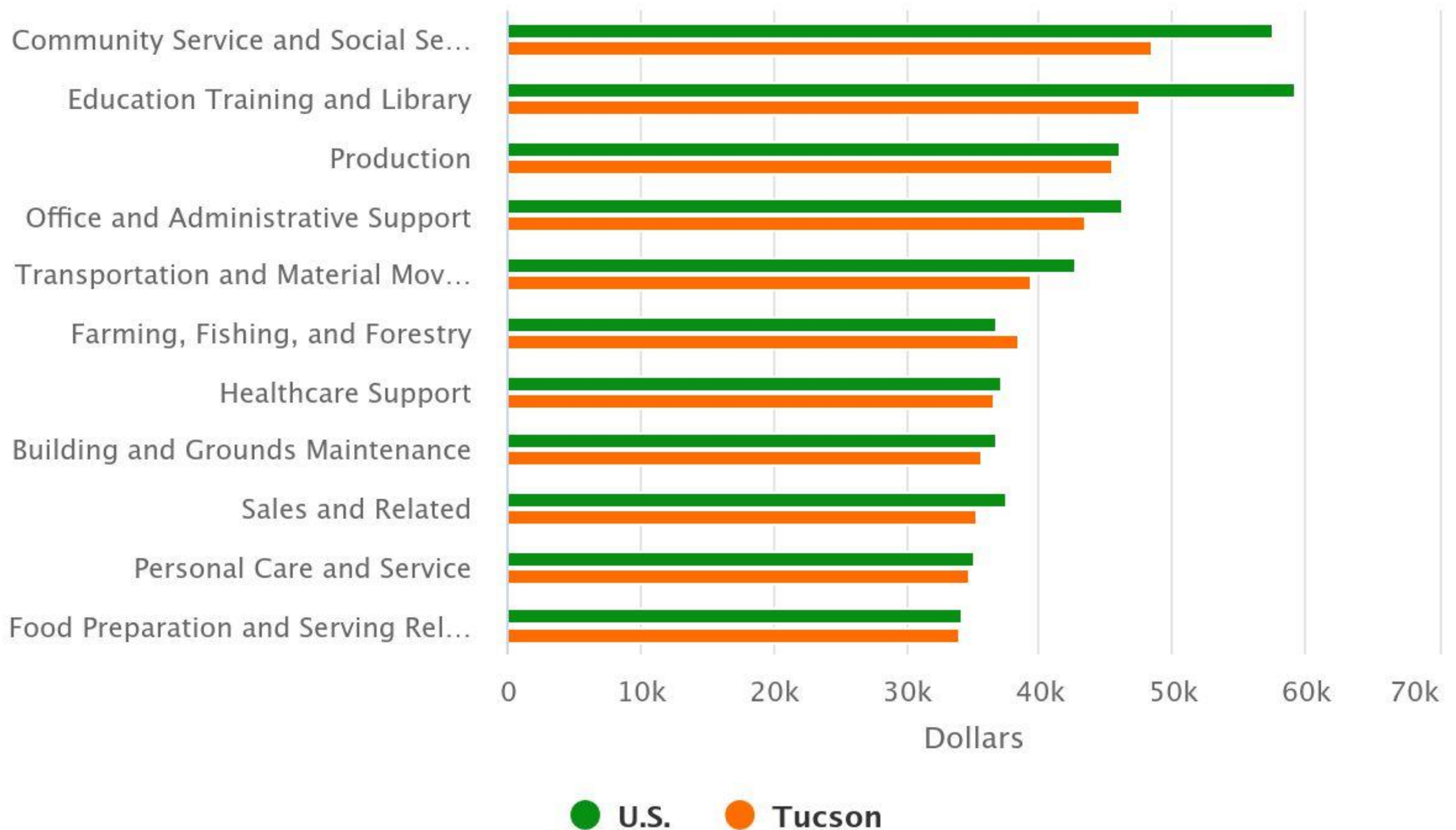
- **hospitality,**
- **retail,**
- **food service,**
- **& caregiving sectors.**

Median Wages



U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via MAP (mapazdashboard.arizona.edu)

Lowest Occupational Wages (2024)



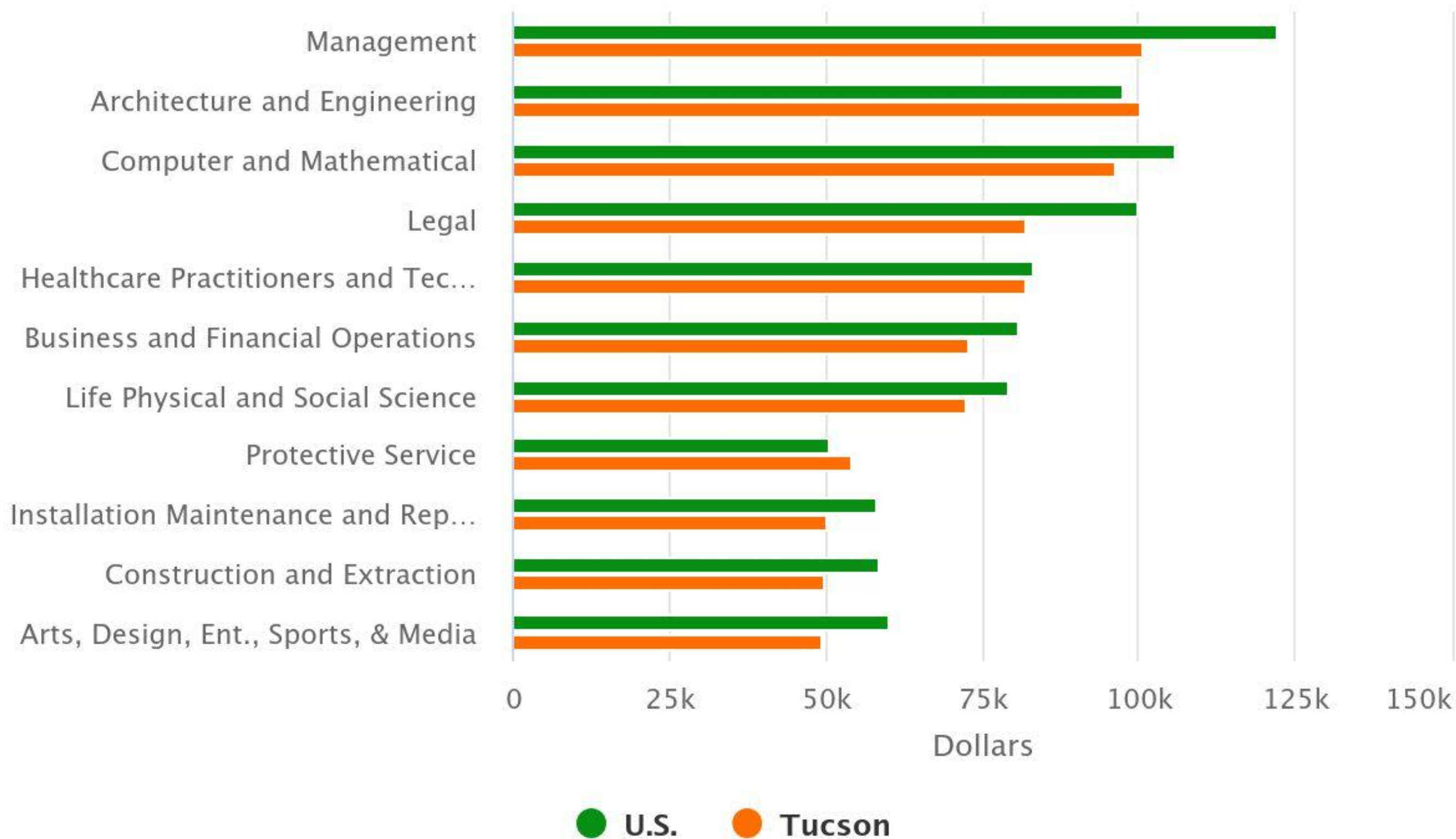
U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via MAP (mapazdashboard.arizona.edu)



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Highest Occupational Wages (2024)



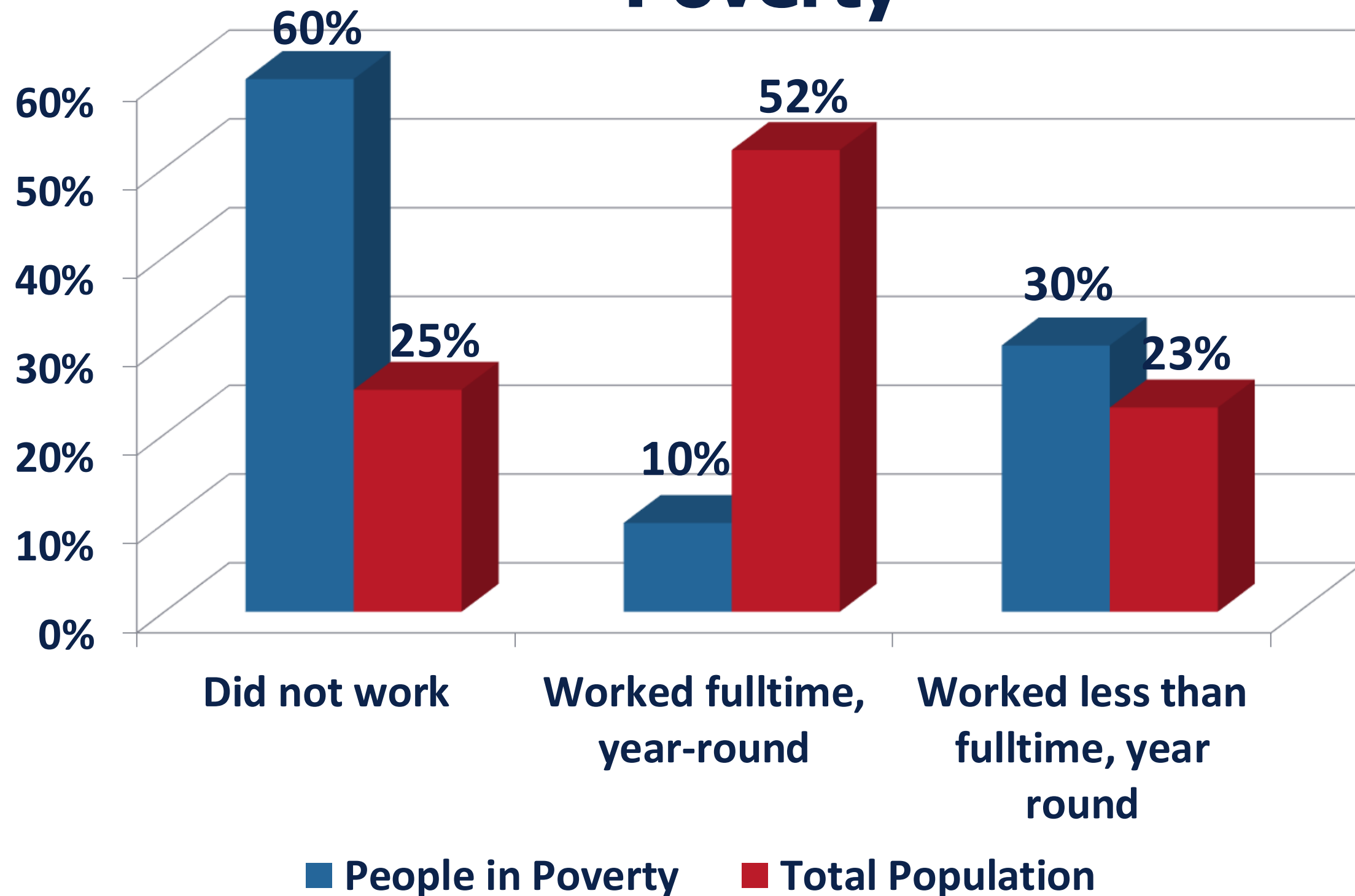
U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via MAP (mapazdashboard.arizona.edu)



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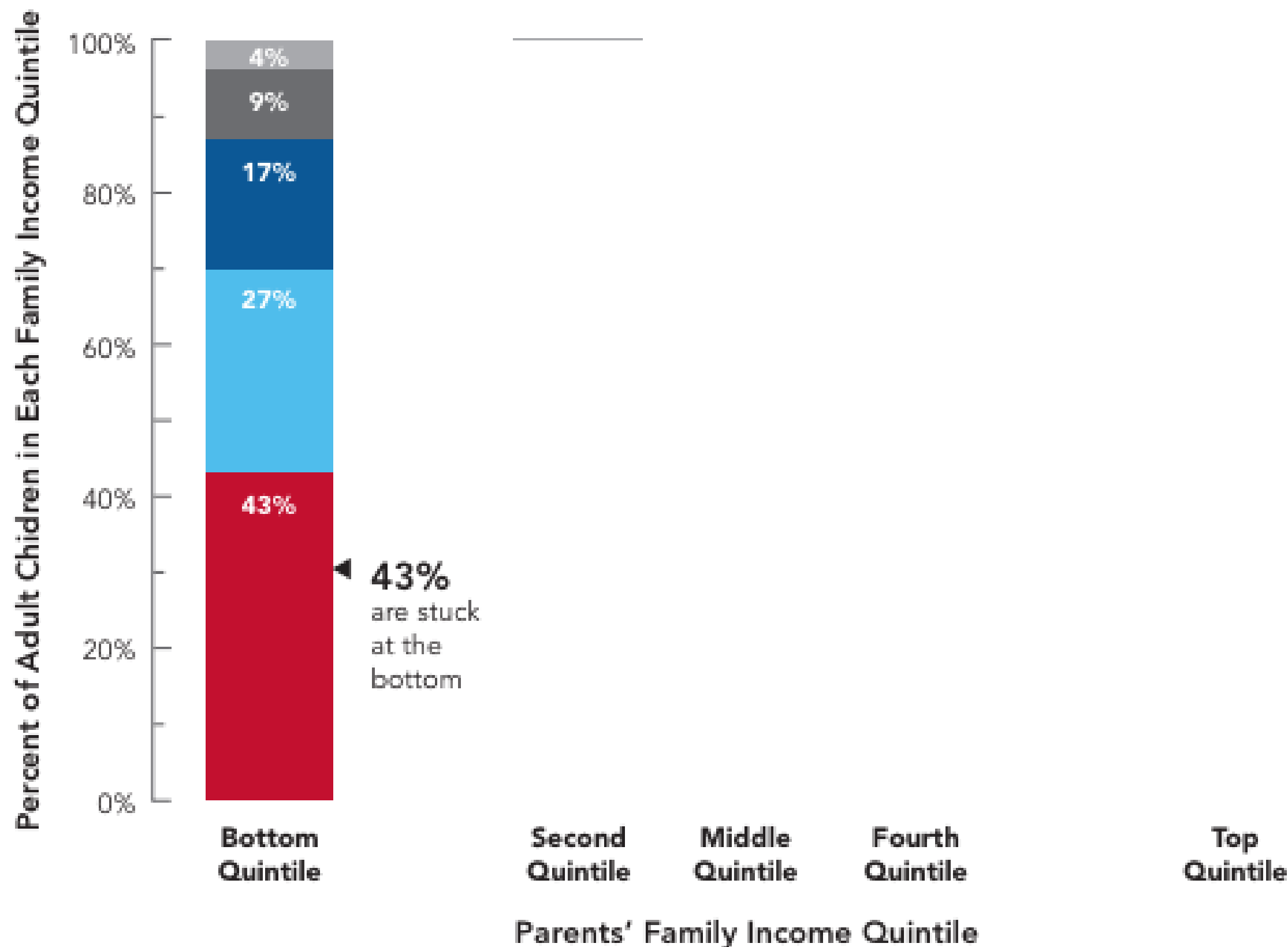
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Work Does Always Not Prevent Poverty



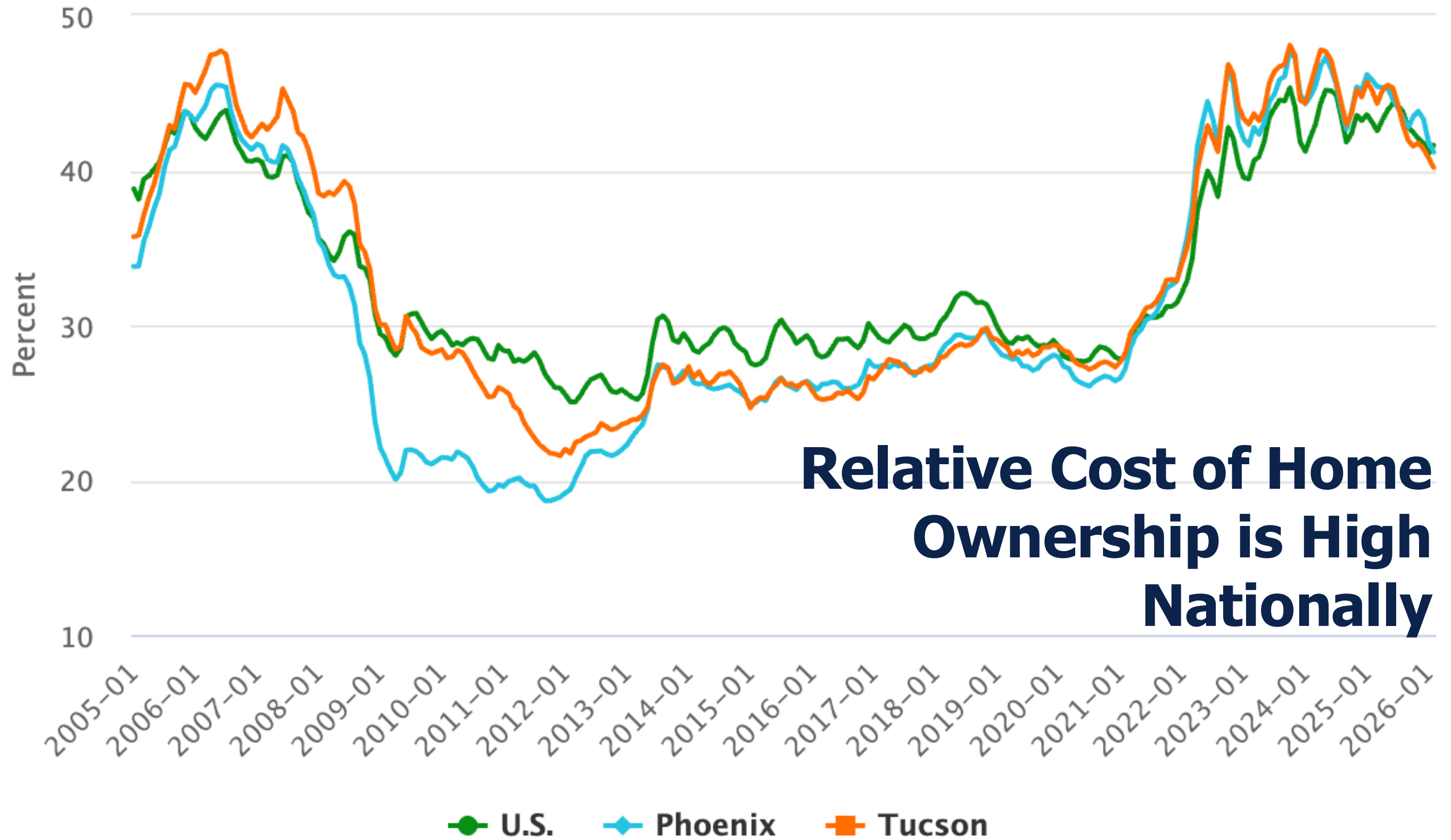
Americans Raised at the Top and Bottom Are Likely to Stay There as Adults

Chances of moving up or down the family income ladder, by parents' quintile



Housing has Become a Driver --- of Poverty

Homeownership Cost as a Share of Median Income



Relative Cost of Home Ownership is High Nationally

Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta via MAP (mapazdashboard.arizona.edu)



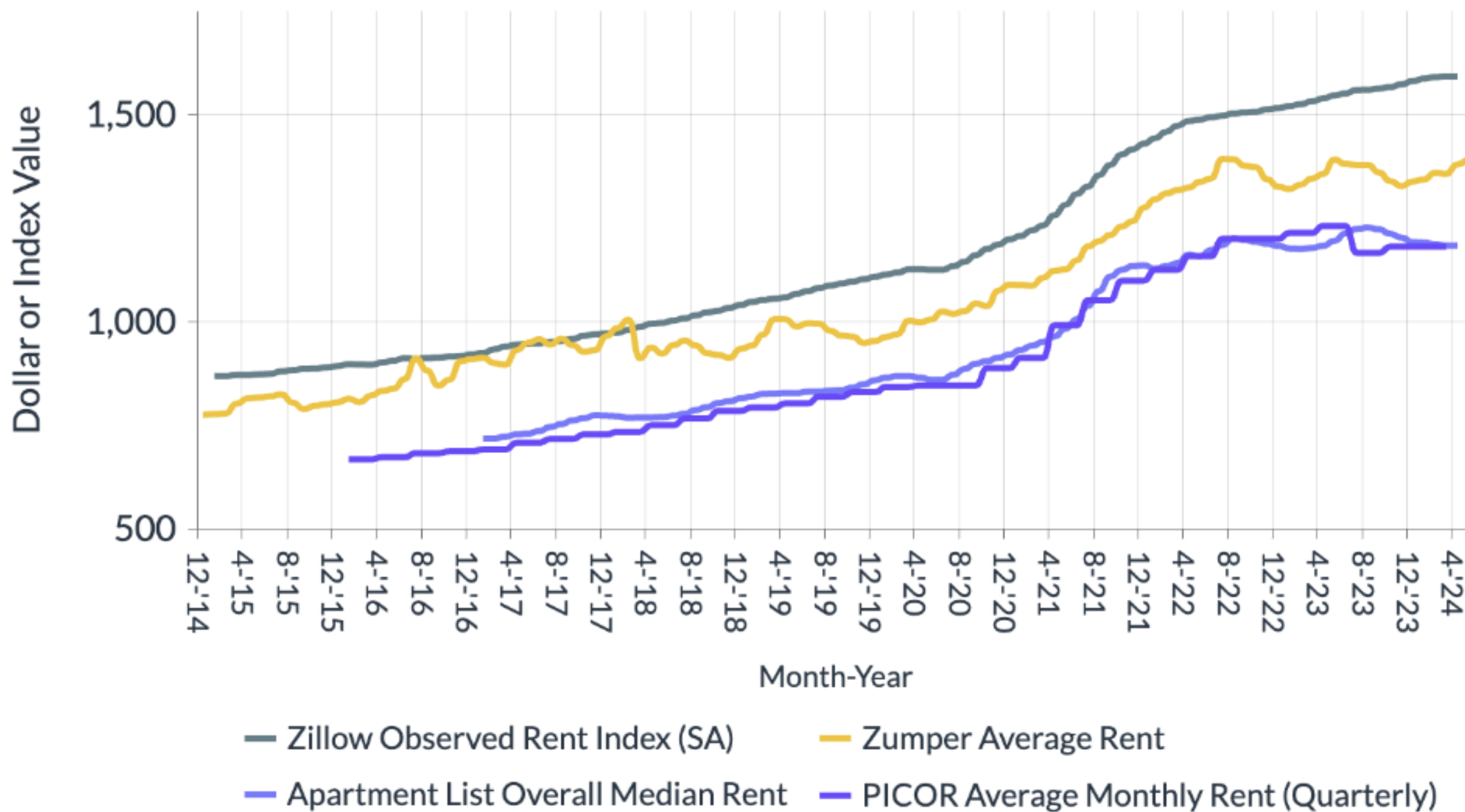
RENTS HAVE DRASTICALLY INCREASED

**50% of
Homes in
Tucson are
Rented**

**Average
Rents
~\$1,500**

Tucson Rent Prices

Average/Median Rent Price Indicators: Dec-2014 - May-2024



What Is an Affordable Rent?

Working at Minimum Wage

\$15.15/hour

each week you need to work

53 hours

to afford a modest 1 bedroom rental at Fair Market Value

Minimum Wage Worker

\$808

\$2,424

Median Wage Worker

\$1,290

\$3,875

One-Bedroom Fair Market Apartment



\$1,052

Two-Bedroom Fair Market Apartment



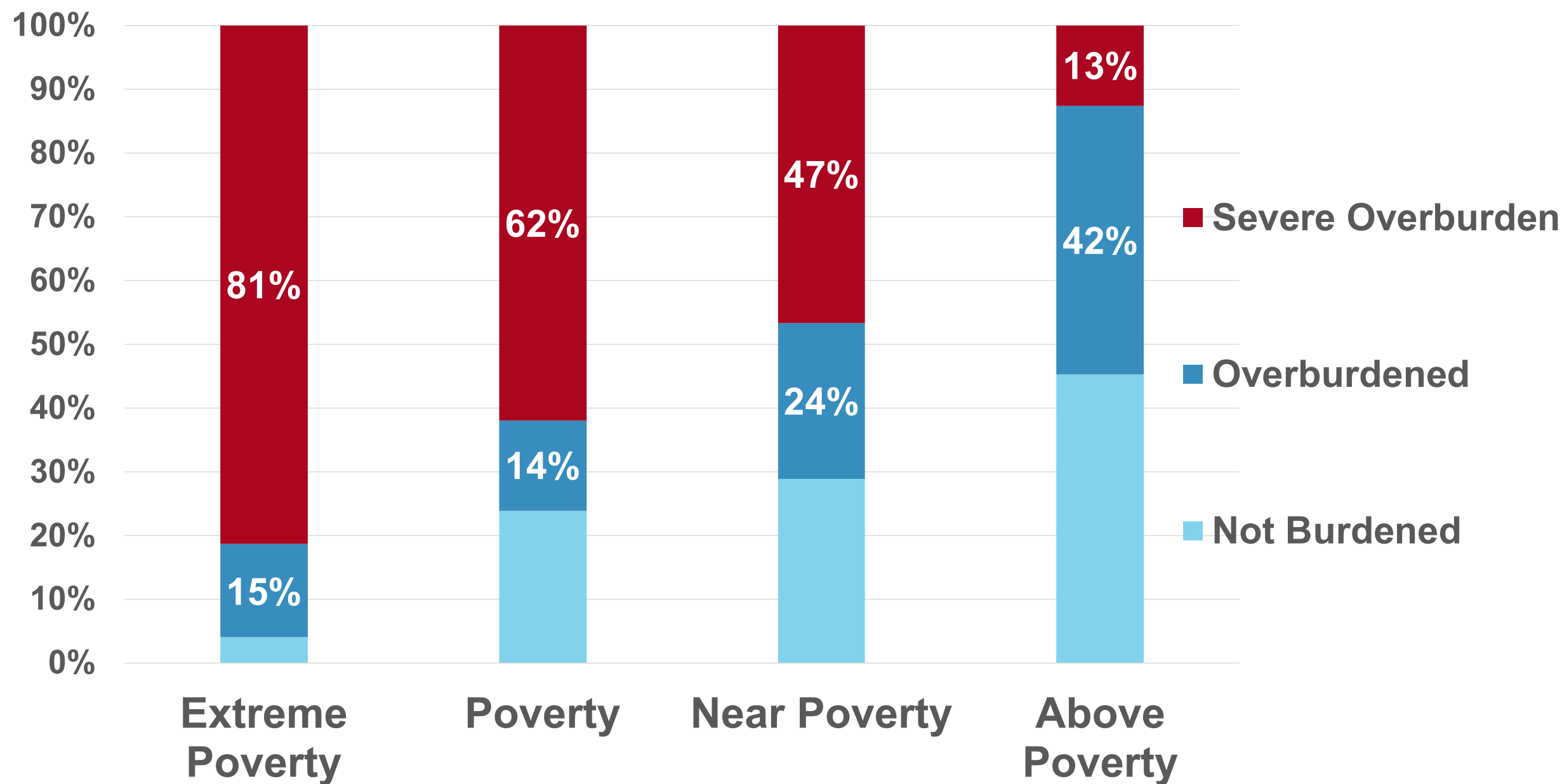
\$1,375

Lower & Middle Tier Rentals Are No Longer Affordable in Tucson

“For affluent households, housing builds wealth. For poor households, housing extracts wealth.”



Low Income Households Are Housing Cost Overburdened





**44% of Renters Felt
Pressured to Move**

**50% Experienced
Rent Increase**

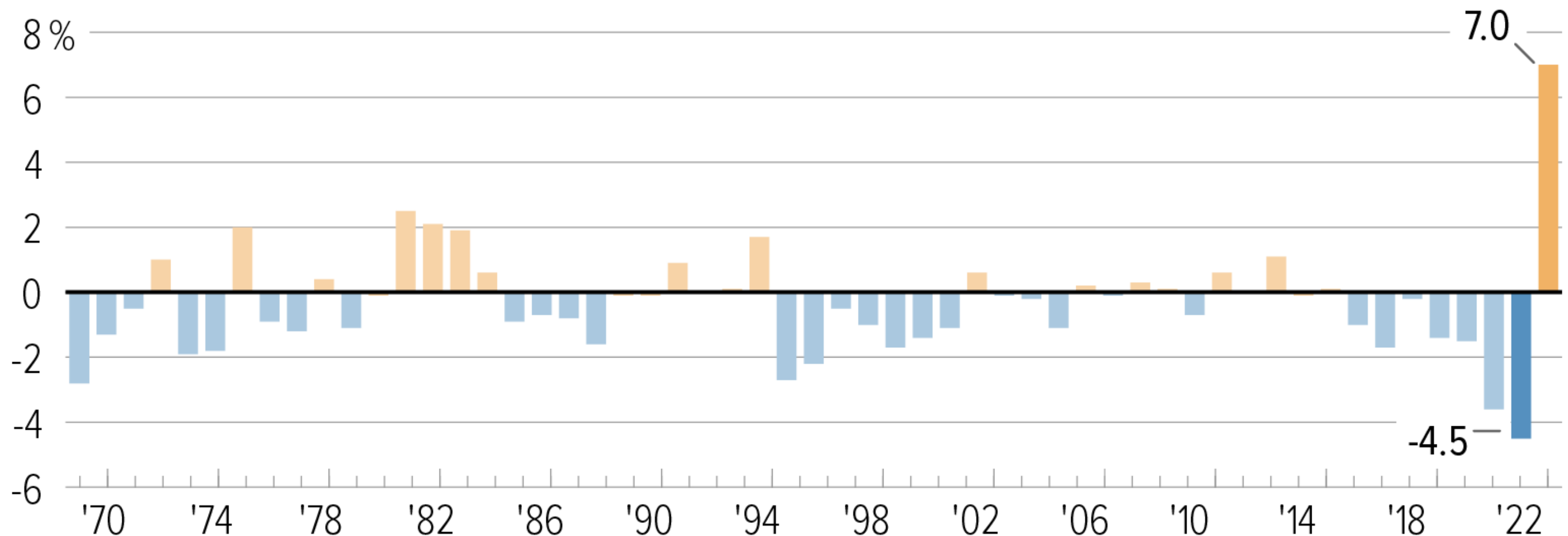
Average of \$200 / month

Poverty is a Policy Choice

In 2021, Child Poverty Was Cut to only 8% But in 2022, it rose back up to 12.5%

Record Increase in Child Poverty in 2022 Followed 2021's Record Drop

Percentage point rise or fall in poverty rate from previous year



Note: Figures use Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) and 2022 poverty line adjusted for inflation.

Source: CBPP analysis of SPM data from Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy (before 2009) and U.S. Census Bureau (2009 and later)

How Do Policy Choices Lead to Poverty?

Incentivization of Home Ownership

- Tax deductions
- Single Family Zoning
- Limited Funding for Affordable Housing

Adding Affordable Housing Is Challenging & Controversial

TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

Tucson's historic neighborhoods could see a major change in 'middle housing' rules

Bob Christie Capitol Media Services Feb 20, 2026 Updated Feb 24, 2026



A measure to exempt designated historic neighborhoods from a 2024 Arizona law requiring them to permit "middle housing" such as duplexes and townhomes within a mile of their city centers has advanced in the state Legislature.

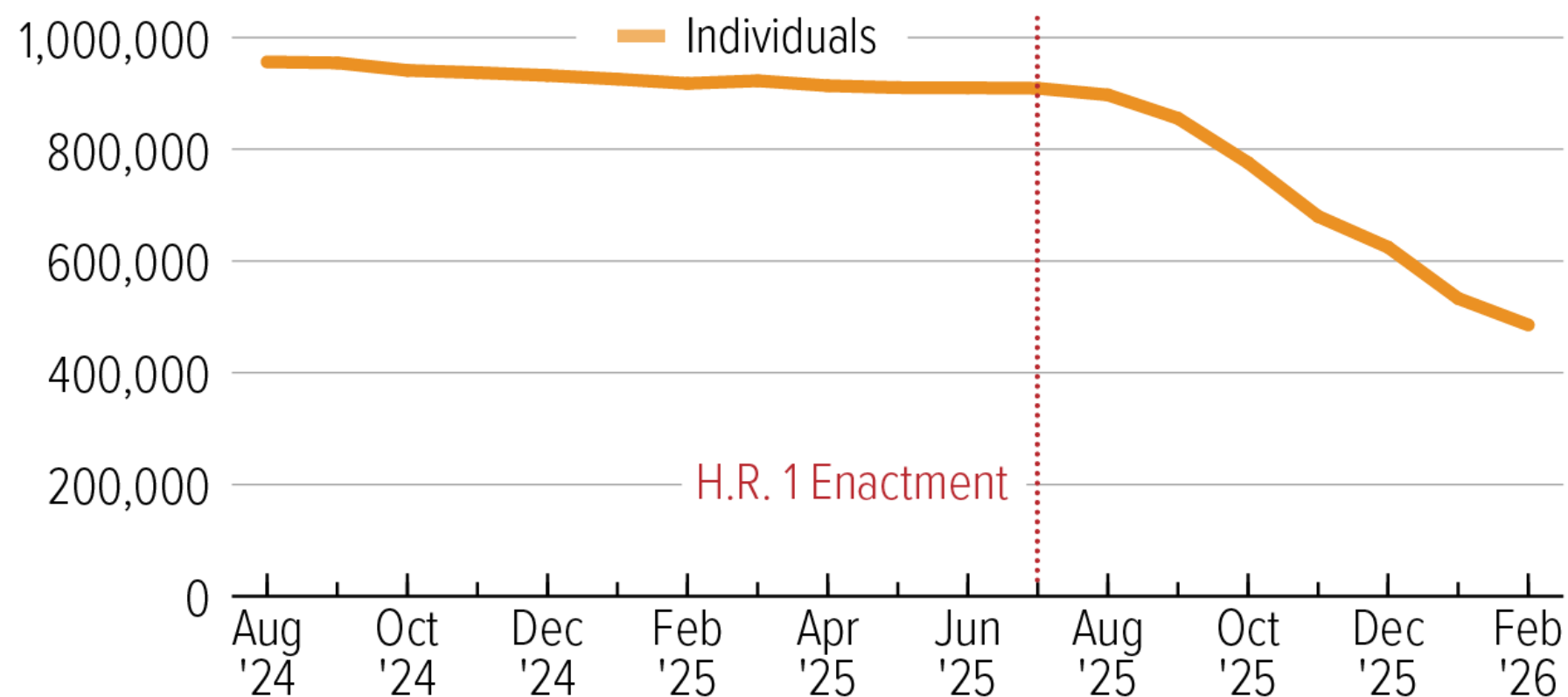
City of Tucson

How Do Policy Choices Lead to Poverty?

Limiting the Social Safety Net

- **Challenging Applications Processes**
- **Eligibility Tightening**
- **Criminalization of Poverty & Homelessness**

SNAP Participation Down Dramatically in Arizona as It Implements Harmful Megabill



Source: Arizona Department of Economic Security program data

CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES | CBPP.ORG

424,000
FOOD STAMP
RECIPIENTS
HAVE BEEN
CUT OFF

H.R.1 (2025)
enacts new
work
requirements
for many social
services &
demands states
pay greater
shares

How Do Policy Choices Lead to Poverty?

Tying Education to Geography

- **School funding based on property taxes**
- **Unequal access to early childhood education**

INDICATOR	HOW ARE WE DOING?	HOW DO WE COMPARE?	RECENT CHANGE
COLLEGE MAJOR	48.8% SCIENCE, ENG. OR RELATED		
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	36.8% BA OR BETTER		
GRADUATION RATES	77.3% FOR ARIZONA		
PRE K-12 ENROLLMENT	40.4% IN EARLY EDUCATION		
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT	269.7 AVG MATH SCORE IN AZ		
TEACHER WAGES	\$49,050		

 Ranked in Top 1/3
  Ranked in Middle 1/3
  Ranked in Bottom 1/3
  Ranked Last

MAP Scorecard “How Do We Compare?” Rankings Are Relative To The Following Peer Metropolitan Areas:

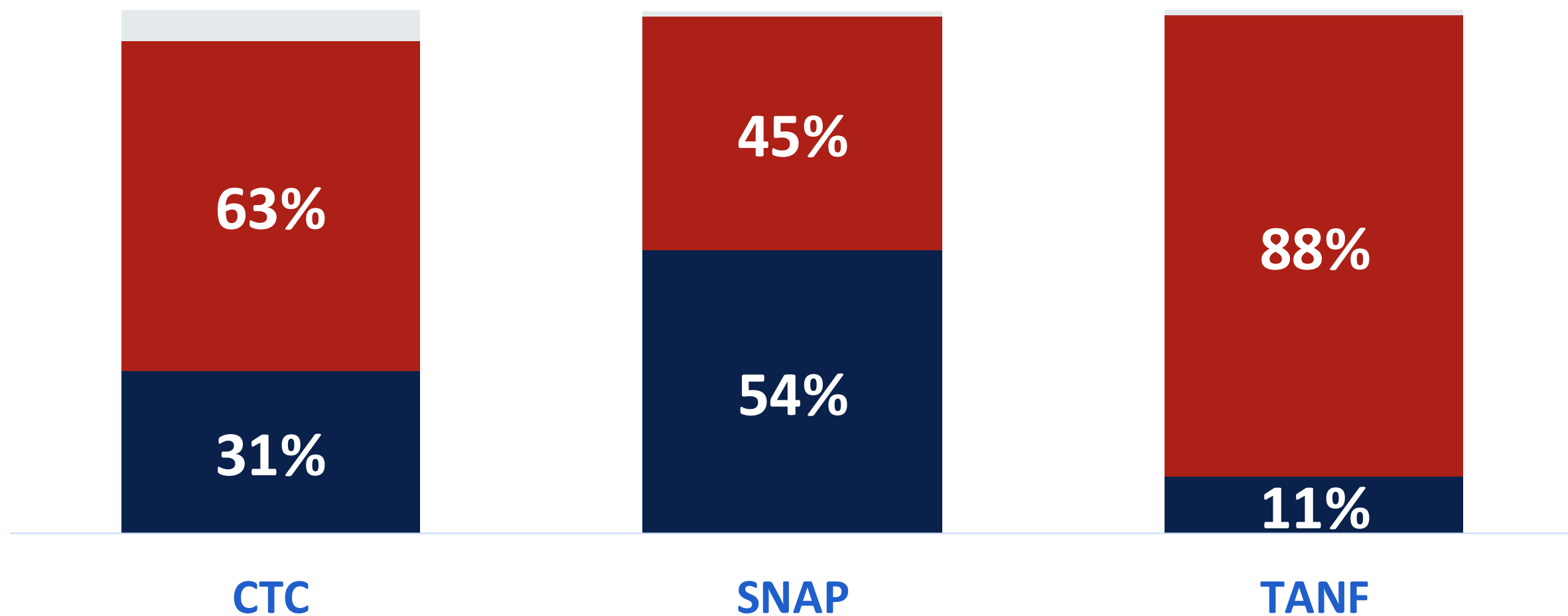
Albuquerque, Austin, Colorado Springs, Denver, El Paso, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Portland, Salt Lake City, San Antonio, and San Diego

mapazdashboard.arizona.edu

The Service Gap

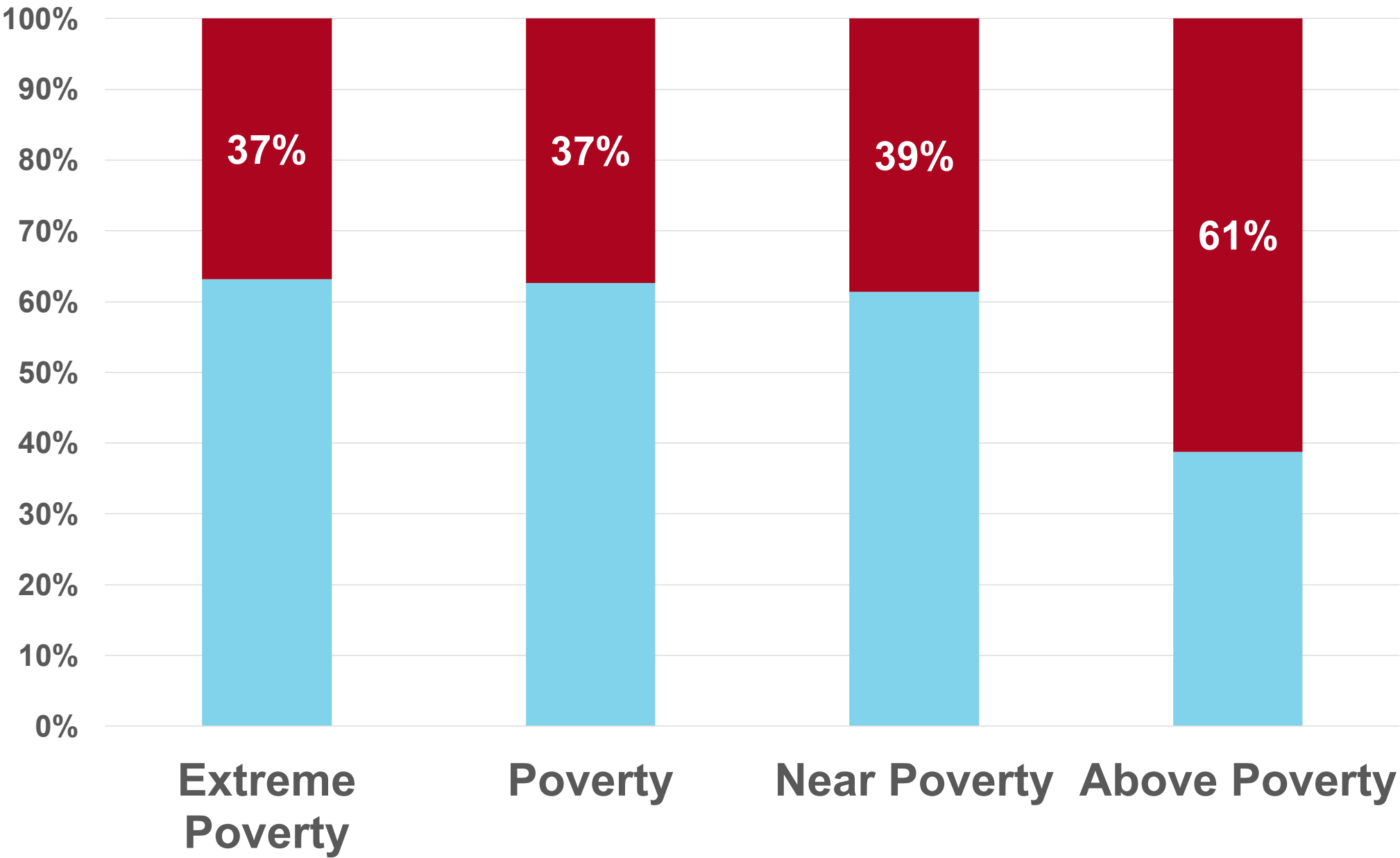
Each year, we see a gap between household needs and utilization of social services limits households' ability to prosper and find stability.

Eligible Households Underutilize Available Services

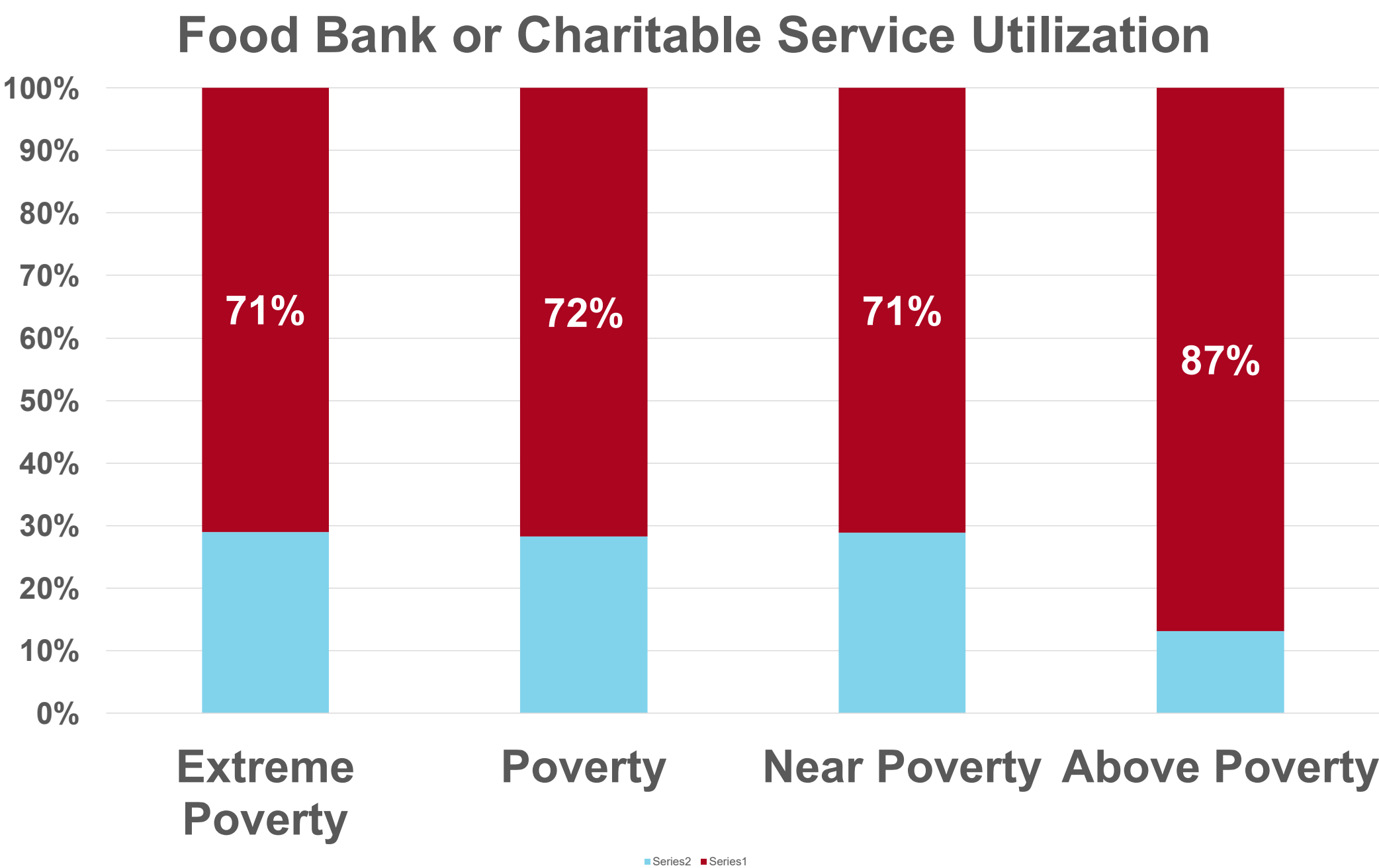


A Persistent ‘Service Gap’ Continues To Limit Prosperity

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Participation

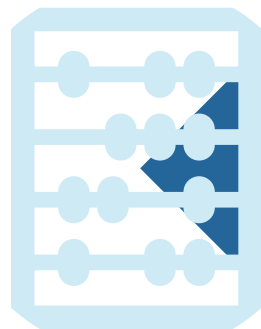


A Persistent 'Service Gap' Continues To Limit Prosperity



**If Poverty is
a Policy
Choice,
What Can We
Do
Differently?**

What Do Our Data Suggest?



Reducing
Administrative
Burden



Rental & Utility
Assistance



Promoting
Available Social
Services



Monitor &
Regulate Rental
Market



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**What would
Tucson look like if**

**we treated
poverty as
solvable?**

For More Info & Reporting
Visit:



povertyproject.arizona.edu





Prosperity Initiative

Reducing generational poverty and
improving community wealth

Prosperity Initiative Timeline

April 19, 2022: Tucson City Council Member Lane Santa Cruz invited Bonnie Bazata, Pima County's Ending Poverty Now Program Manager to speak to Mayor and Council on poverty emerging from the pandemic.

Unanimous vote for a City/County Task Force focused on reducing poverty.

June 7, 2022: Presentation to Pima County Board of Supervisors.

Request for a detailed plan.

Nov. 1, 2022: Plan provided to the Board of Supervisors and approved.

Dec. 5, 2023: Pima County Board of Supervisors approved.

Jan. 9, 2024: City of Tucson's Mayor and Council approved.

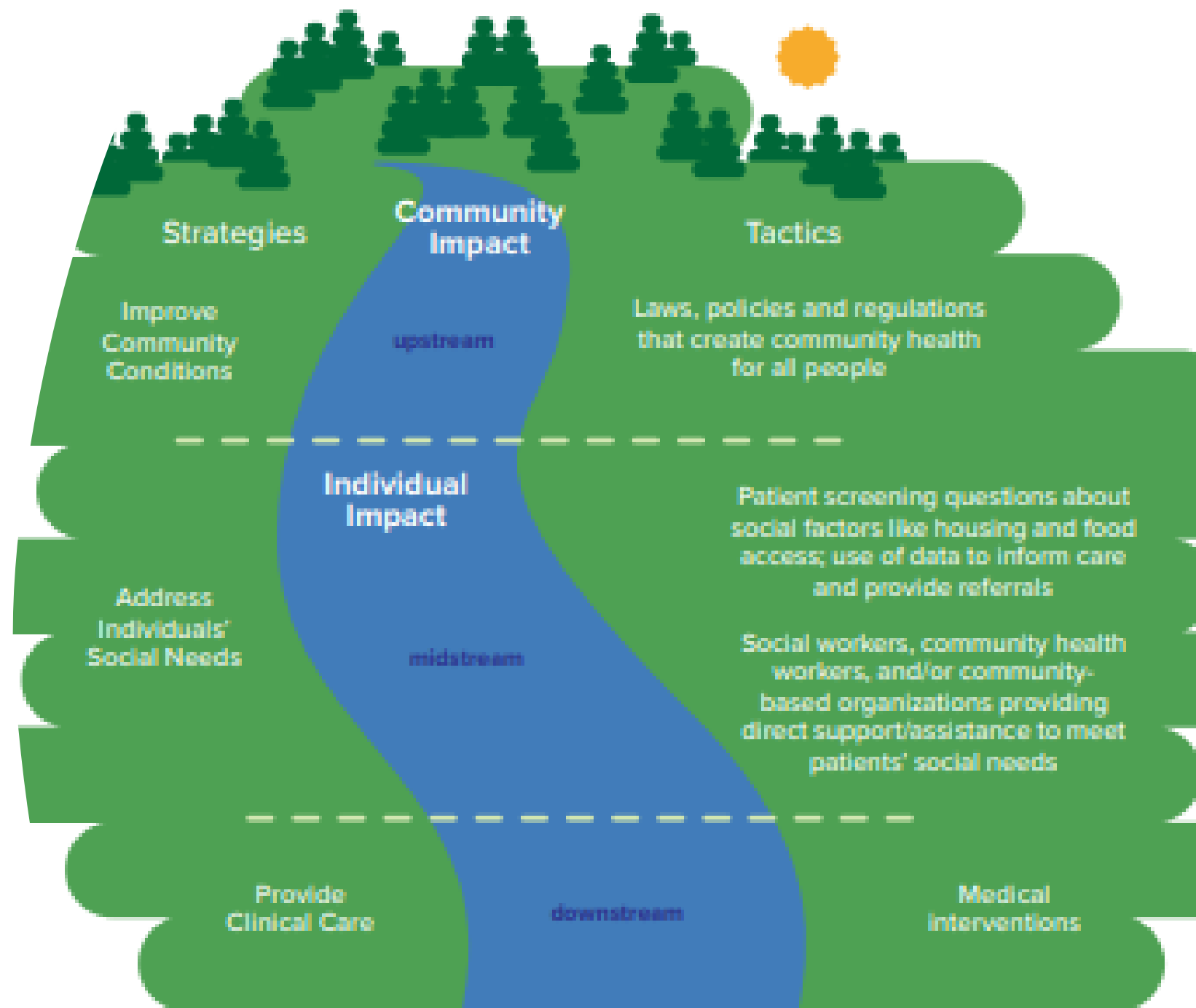


The Prosperity Initiative's mandate was to work regionally to develop a set of policies

That guide **long-term** efforts to create community wealth by addressing generational poverty and improving opportunity
Are based on evidence-based research
Also address the immediate needs of those currently experiencing poverty
For adoption or adaptation by local governments

“Upstream Solutions”

1. **Preventing** poverty
2. **Alleviating** suffering
3. **Aiding** transition to economic stability
4. **Addressing** structures in a community





A Pima County and City of Tucson collaboration with representation from Marana, Oro Valley, Sahuarita, South Tucson and the Tucson Indian Center.

- ❖ The 36 member **Working Group** meets monthly.
- ❖ Prosperity staff **Nicole Fyffe** and **Bonnie Bazata** meet **bi-weekly** with the City of Tucson led by Assistant City Manager **Liz Morales** and Housing & Community Development Community Services Manager, **Alison Miller**

4 Policy Areas



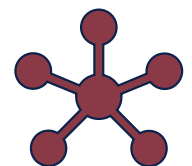
Education



Critical Family Resources



Asset Building & Infrastructure Priorities



Cross Policy Strategies

Cross Policy Strategies

Center a 2GEN Approach

Center family voice and participation in the development of policies, programs, and practices.

Address Climate Resilience & Environmental Justice

Build a more climate resilient community while reducing the potential harm to low-income areas from hazardous waste and contaminants, air pollution, environmental degradation, resource extraction, and other land uses.

Prevent & Reduce Crime

Reduce and prevent crime in neighborhoods, as well as reduce and prevent youth involvement in crime and the criminal justice system.