

# The big bounce-back: Survey captures post-pandemic rebound in Utah's community well-being

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Communities in Utah seem to have recovered, mostly, from pandemic disruptions, according to survey data from the Utah Wellbeing Project. But there are still a few places, and a few issues, that have room for improvement. Credit: Pricilla du Preez

When Courtney Flint launched the Utah Wellbeing Project, her timing couldn't have been more serendipitous. A global pandemic would soon disrupt many aspects of daily life in Utah—from school schedules to global supply chains to access to toilet paper. But in early 2020, Utahns were still going about maskless, working in offices, shaking hands, and going about their day-to-day routines with air-sharing ignorance of what was to come.

Flint, from the Department of Environment and Society in Utah State University's Quinney College of Natural Resources, had set out to better understand whether people in Utah [communities](#) had access to things like adequate cultural opportunities, [leisure time](#), [mental health resources](#), and how they rated the importance of things like connection with nature and education. What she ended up collecting over the next four years would, by chance, capture an incredibly unique snapshot of Utah communities as they traversed an unprecedented episode in history.

The dip in the data results is obvious. In 2021, the third year of the survey, satisfaction slumped across survey categories, reflecting impacts of the pandemic to [mental health](#), social connections, and cultural opportunities. It was the height of the shutdown, and the abrupt shifts required hit Utah communities hard, Flint said, socially, mentally and practically.

But now, things are finally looking up in Utah, for the most part. Communities across the state have bounced back from their pandemic slump. Of the 23 cities participating in the project in multiple years, 17 are again reporting pre-COVID levels or higher in overall personal well-being and across most well-being categories.

"It's been heartening to see these places we love, both urban and rural, begin to bounce back from the tough days of social isolation and uncertainty," Flint said. "It was such an abrupt shift for these complex

community systems, a lot of people wondered what recovery would look like, and how long it would actually take. It's good to feel like it's actually happening in most places."

On the other hand, well-being for a few cities remains flat or has declined—including places like Moab, North Logan, Sandy, Santaquin, East Carbon and Saratoga Springs—although some of these had remarkably high scores to begin with.

"Not all communities are the same," Flint said. "That's why with this survey we focus at the community level to pick up on these variations. Pressures are clearly taking a toll on well-being in some places more than others, from economic constraints to rapid population growth and other local challenges."

There are two more exceptions to the big well-being rebound of 2022: Many Utah communities are reporting lower satisfaction with local environmental quality, and some feel the pinch with their standard of living. In many places these variables aren't just flat, they are headed on a downward trajectory.

"We don't define the term 'environmental quality' for people responding to our survey questions, so there are some unknowns about what, exactly, they are responding to," Flint said, "but open comments suggest that we are picking up on the impacts of rapid growth and development."

In comments submitted through the survey, issues about traffic, the loss of open space, air quality and water supply come up again and again, she said.

"People in Utah are looking around them and seeing their environment change and are feeling uncomfortable with those changes."

And then there are other confounding factors, such as the economy, Flint said.

"Things have gotten tougher for a lot of people in Utah communities," she said. "Between inflation, housing costs and an unsettled job market, there is a lot of uncertainty in the air. In a handful of cities, the perceived standard of living remains low, even after the pandemic rebound."

But that is the exception rather than the rule, Flint said. In the big picture, Utah communities are well on their way to pre-[pandemic](#) well-being, which is good news for everyone.

"If we don't see a boost in our local environmental quality and living standards, however, we may see those issues creep into other areas and overall well-being. This project provides resources for Utah cities to help them navigate local issues and changes," she said.

**More information:** [Utah Wellbeing Project](#)

Provided by Utah State University

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