



THE STATE OF THE UNIONS 2024

A Profile of Unionization in Chicago, in Illinois, and in the United States

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bipartisan public approval of labor unions remains near historic highs. Data shows that unions boost workers earnings, expand health insurance coverage, and improve access to paid leave.

Though the unionization rate fell nationally, the United States added union members in 2023 for the second consecutive year.

- The United States added 135,000 new union members in 2023, following a gain of 277,000 union members in 2022.
- Illinois and the Chicago area both experienced small declines in unionization in 2023.
- Overall employment has grown faster than total union membership, causing unionization rates both nationally and in Illinois to fall to their lowest levels in ten years.

Today, Illinois' union membership rate is about 13 percent, which is significantly higher than the national average (10 percent) and is the 13th-highest union density among the 50 U.S. states.

- Men (15 percent) are more likely to be union members than women (11 percent).
- 19 percent of Black workers are unionized compared to 13 percent of white workers and 9 percent of Hispanic workers.
- One-in-seven military veterans (14 percent) is a union member.
- Workers with master's degrees (21 percent) are more likely to be union members.

Between 2014 and 2023, Illinois' unionization rate declined by 2.3 percentage points due to several factors.

- The economy has been transitioning away from manufacturing towards highly paid but low-union-density careers like management, business, and financial occupations, which added 273,000 jobs.
- Public sector employment fell by 32,000 jobs over the decade, in part caused by inadequate pay and high vacancies.
- Illinois' workforce became more Hispanic, more Asian, and more foreign-born over the decade, and these demographic groups tend to have relatively lower unionization rates.

Despite declines, 2023 produced more successful union petitions in Illinois than any other year over the past decade.

- There were 86 successful union petitions newly organizing 4,400 workers in Illinois in 2023.
- The union success rate for new organizing drives in Illinois was 65 percent in 2023, the highest mark over the last ten years.
- Illinois organized more union members in 2022 and 2023 than the previous five years combined.
- Illinois' private sector unionization rate increased by 0.4 percentage points in 2023.

Labor unions promote strong outcomes for workers, businesses, and taxpayers.

- In Illinois, unions lift worker earnings by an average of 13 percent, the 3rd-highest union wage effect in the nation.
- Nationally, unions increase wages by 8 percent on average.
- Research has linked union representation with better job quality, including improved healthcare access, safer workplaces, and less reliance on government assistance programs.

Illinois workers fare better than their counterparts in four neighboring states that have weakened workers' rights by adopting so-called "right-to-work" laws—Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, and Wisconsin.

- Illinois' unionization rate is 5 percentage points higher.
- Between 2017 and 2023, average hourly earnings have grown 5 percent faster in Illinois.
- As of 2023, Illinois workers now earn 19 percent more per hour.

With Illinois voters guaranteeing the fundamental right to organize and bargain collectively by enshrining the Workers' Rights Amendment into the Illinois Constitution, these labor market advantages are likely to persist—and could potentially widen—over the next decade.

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INTRODUCTION

Public approval of labor unions remains near historic highs. Two-thirds of Americans approve of unions, including nine-in-ten Democrats, seven-in-ten independents, and half of all Republicans (Saad, 2023; GBAO, 2023). More than three-fifths of Americans say that unions improve the economy and four out of every five voters say that unions positively impact workplace safety, worker pay and hours, and the ability to afford and access healthcare (GBAO, 2023; Saad, 2023).

Research has long established a connection between unionization and good jobs (U.S. Treasury, 2023). Union households have earned an average of 10 percent to 20 percent more than nonunion households every year since the 1930s (U.S. Treasury, 2023; Farber et al., 2021; Schmitt, 2008). The U.S. Department of Labor reports that 95 percent of union workers have access to healthcare coverage, 95 percent have access to retirement plans, and 92 percent have access to paid sick leave. By contrast, just 71 percent of nonunion workers have healthcare access, 70 percent have retirement plan access, and 78 percent have paid sick leave (BLS, 2023a).

Union membership, however, has gradually declined. About one-in-four U.S. workers (24 percent) was a member of a labor union in 1973. Five decades later, just one-in-ten workers (10 percent) is unionized (Hirsch, Macpherson, & Even, 2024). A significant driver of the decline in union density has been the erosion of workers' organizing rights across the United States. In the last decade, five states passed so-called "right-to-work" laws allowing workers to "free ride," or receive all the services, benefits, and representation from unions without paying either dues or fees. A 5-4 Supreme Court decision in *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Council 31, et al.* overturned 41 years of precedent and permitted free-riding amongst state and local government employees nationwide. Allowing some workers to benefit from collective bargaining without contributing their fair share reduces the resources that unions have available to advocate for employees and organize new members, which weakens worker bargaining power and decreases union membership (Fortin, Lemieux, & Lloyd, 2022; VanHeuvelen, 2020; Stansbury & Summers, 2020; Hogler, Shulman, & Weiler, 2004; Davis & Huston, 1993).

Recently, there have been signs of a resurgent labor movement in some states. In February 2024, Michigan became the first state in six decades to repeal a so-called "right-to-work" law (Shumway, 2024; Cappelletti, 2023). In November 2022, Illinois voters approved a Workers' Rights Amendment to the state's constitution, guaranteeing the fundamental right of workers to unionize and bargain collectively, and effectively banning so-called "right-to-work" laws in perpetuity (Manzo & Bruno, 2023a).

FIGURE 1: UNION PETITION DATA, ILLINOIS PETITIONS AT NLRB REGION 13 (CHICAGO), 2014-2023

Year	Successful Petitions	Union Petitions	Closed Petitions	Success Rate (of Closed)	New Employees Represented
2014	62	155	155	40.0%	3,787
2015	56	128	128	43.8%	2,284
2016	42	95	95	44.2%	1,257
2017	38	92	92	41.3%	4,331
2018	35	77	77	45.5%	2,317
2019	51	112	112	45.5%	2,409
2020	25	76	76	32.9%	983
2021	60	100	98	60.6%	2,824
2022	67	133	130	51.5%	9,497
2023	86	142	133	64.7%	4,399

Source: "Recent Charges and Petitions Filings" from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB, 2024).

There has also recently been an uptick in union organizing activity in Illinois (Figure 1). Data on union petitions in Illinois assigned to the Region 13 Chicago office of the National Labor Relations Board are presented in Figure 1. In 2023, there were 86 successful union petitions at Illinois workplaces that newly

unionized about 4,400 workers. This represented a 65 percent union success rate at the 133 workplaces with closed petitions last year. Both the 86 successful union petitions and the 65 percent success rate were significantly higher than at any time over the past decade. Previous highs were 67 successful petitions in 2022 and a 61 percent success rate in 2021. The two largest workplaces to unionize in 2023 were McGaw Medical Center of Northwestern University, where 1,275 medical interns, residents, and fellows became members of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) after an 84 percent yes vote, and SCR Medical Transportation, LLC, where 750 drivers, dispatchers, mechanics, bus aides, coordinators, custodians, and janitors servicing Chicago Pace ADA, Chicago Public Schools, and Pace Taxi Livery contracts became members of Teamsters Local Union No. 727 after a combined 58 percent yes vote from two bargaining units (NLRB, 2023a; NLRB, 2023b). Overall, Illinois organized more new union members in the past two years (13,896 members) than the previous five years combined (12,864 members).

This report, conducted by researchers at the Illinois Economic Policy Institute (ILEPI) and the Project for Middle Class Renewal (PMCR) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, analyzes the course of unionization in Illinois, in the Chicago metropolitan statistical area (MSA), and in the United States from 2014 to 2023. It is the tenth annual report of its kind for union members in the Chicago area and in Illinois, with the previous release in September 2023 and the first release dating back to April 2014 (Manzo & Bruno, 2023b; Manzo, Bruno & Parks, 2014). The report tracks unionization rates and investigates union membership across demographic, educational, sectoral, industry, and occupational classifications. The study subsequently evaluates the impact that labor union membership has on worker wages in Illinois and across the United States. It also explores state and local government worker unionization before and after the *Janus* Supreme Court decision and assesses how workers in Illinois fare against their counterparts in states that have weakened workers' rights by adopting so-called "right-to-work" laws. The report concludes by recapping key findings.

DATA

This report utilizes data from the *Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Groups* (CPS-ORG). The CPS-ORG is collected, analyzed, and released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) at the U.S. Department of Labor. CPS-ORG data reports individual-level information on more than 20,000 respondents nationwide each month. The records include data on wages, unionization, hours worked, sector, industry, and occupation, as well as other demographic, geographic, and education variables. The data was extracted from Economic Policy Institute Microdata Extracts (EPI, 2024).

The 10-year dataset from 2014 through 2023 captures information on more than 2.8 million individuals aged 16 to 80 years old in the United States. These observations include 80,282 Illinois residents, of whom 48,178 were employed. In 2023, respondents with at least one job totaled 3,841 in Illinois and 2,700 in the Illinois portion of the Chicago-Naperville-Elgin metropolitan statistical area ("Chicago MSA"). No out-of-state residents who work in Illinois are included. For example, Indiana and Wisconsin residents are excluded from the Chicago area estimates.

There are limitations to using the CPS-ORG data, which have only worsened over time. In this analysis, the biggest limitation is that not every surveyed worker replies to the union membership question. For example, in 2023, union membership data was only available for 3,490 of the 3,841 surveyed workers (90.9 percent) in Illinois. While this does not impact unionization *rates*, estimates are likely underreported for both total union members and total nonunion workers.

Another major limitation is that U.S. resident response rates to BLS surveys such as the CPS-ORG have been declining over time. In September 2014, 88.8 percent of households responded to the *Current Population Survey*. By September 2023, only 70.1 percent did, a decrease of 18.7 percentage points (BLS, 2024). Declining response rates are occurring as a result of many factors, such as difficulty in reaching certain demographic groups, fewer individuals responding to surveys conducted over phone or by mail, and overall mistrust of surveys for political reasons (BLS, 2023b; Feldman & Mendez, 2022).

To correct for nonresponse bias, analytic weights are provided by the Department of Labor to match the sample to the estimated U.S. population between the ages of 16 and 80 years old. However, population estimates have *themselves* become problematic. Two groups that have historically been at the most risk of undercounts by the U.S. Census Bureau are foreign-born individuals and Hispanic individuals due to structural factors such as administrative barriers, lower homeownership rates, language barriers, reduced access to broadband internet, and lack of trust in the government because of their immigration status (Lou & Martin, 2022). In fact, in the 2020 Census, there was a record undercount of Hispanic residents, with the Census Bureau missing one-in-20 Hispanic people (Cohn & Passel, 2022).

These projections have led to “wildly erroneous” claims about Illinois’ population, which has been relatively stable over time (Miller, 2022). Research shows that between 2013 and 2022, migration from abroad—including foreign-born immigrants—almost entirely offset losses associated with “domestic net migration” and that Hispanic residents were the most likely to stay in Illinois over that time (Manzo & Bruno, 2023c). The Census’ struggles to accurately count these demographic groups led to flawed population projections in Illinois. Estimates were most inaccurate for the Chicago area, which was projected to have lost population but instead added both residents and taxpayers (Manzo & Bruno, 2023c). Moreover, a post-Census review found that Illinois’ population was likely undercounted in the 2020 Census by 2 percent (Hill et al., 2022; Ramos & Armentrout, 2022).

Between 2014 and 2023, the population between the ages of 16 and 80 years old in Illinois was estimated to have decreased by about 78,000 people (-0.8 percent), from just under 10.1 million to just over 10.0 million (Figure 2). However, this estimate is based on a rapidly declining number of respondents and an increasingly higher analytic weight applied per response. Over the 10-year period, the number of people from Illinois who responded to the survey decreased from 9,653 to 6,421, a drop of 33.5 percent (-3,232 people). Early in the decade, each respondent corresponded to approximately 1,044 estimated people in the state. By the end of the decade, each respondent was representing 1,557 estimated people in Illinois, a 49.2 percent increase. Finally, as a share of survey respondents nationally, Illinois residents have decreased from 3.1 percent in 2014 to 2.6 percent in 2023—a notable decline that could contribute to lower population estimates and lower employment estimates in this household survey than the actual reality across the state (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: ILLINOIS’ ADULT POPULATION ESTIMATES AND DECLINING CPS-ORG RESPONSES, 2014-2023

Population Estimates (Ages 16-80 Years Old) by Year	Estimated Illinois Population	Surveyed Individuals in Illinois	Analytic Weight Per Surveyed Person	Individuals Surveyed in United States	Illinois’ Share of Responses
2014	10,078,821	9,653	1,044	315,734	3.1%
2015	10,086,427	9,203	1,096	313,383	2.9%
2016	10,074,065	9,148	1,101	313,591	2.9%
2017	10,040,700	8,744	1,148	308,664	2.8%
2018	10,048,848	8,346	1,204	301,053	2.8%
2019	10,009,776	7,715	1,297	290,217	2.7%
2020	9,975,234	7,329	1,361	270,123	2.7%
2021	9,924,430	7,117	1,394	264,623	2.7%
2022	10,003,941	6,606	1,514	251,377	2.6%
2023	10,000,608	6,421	1,557	242,582	2.6%
2014-2023 Change	-78,213	-3,232	+513	-73,152	-0.4%
Percent Change	-0.8%	-33.5%	49.2%	-23.2%	-13.4%

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2014-2023 (EPI, 2024). Values may not sum perfectly due to rounding.

With these caveats in mind, it is worth noting that the CPS-ORG estimates of Illinois’ population ages 16 to 80 roughly track projections of Illinois’ population from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, which samples 5 percent of credit reports from Equifax to understand household debt, including mortgage, credit card, auto loan, and student loan balances (Figure 3). The CPS-ORG data suggests that Illinois has had between 9.9 million and 10.1 million people ages 16 to 80 years old each year since 2014. In comparison, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York has reported that between 10.3 million and 10.7 million Illinois residents ages 18 years and older have had credit files since 2014. While these sources assess slightly different groups of people, the CPS-ORG estimates have been between 2.6 percent and 6.6 percent lower than the Federal Reserve Bank of New York’s estimates (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: ILLINOIS’ ADULT POPULATION ESTIMATES, CPS-ORG VS. NEW YORK FED EQUIFAX, 2014-2023

Estimated Illinois Population by Year	CPS-ORG Estimated Population (Ages 16-80)	New York Fed Consumer Credit Panel / Equifax (Ages 18+)	CPS-ORG Difference
2014	10,078,821	10,345,780	-2.6%
2015	10,086,427	10,458,900	-3.6%
2016	10,074,065	10,517,100	-4.2%
2017	10,040,700	10,526,580	-4.6%
2018	10,048,848	10,503,020	-4.3%
2019	10,009,776	10,564,280	-5.2%
2020	9,975,234	10,567,240	-5.6%
2021	9,924,430	10,628,560	-6.6%
2022	10,003,941	10,699,920	-6.5%
2023	10,000,608	10,710,340	-6.6%
2014-2023 Change	-78,213	+364,560	-442,773

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2014-2023 (EPI, 2024); Quarterly Report on Household Debt and Credit: Household Debt Statistics by State, Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2014-2023 (New York Fed, 2024). New York Fed data sample 5 percent of Equifax credit reports in the fourth quarter of each year (i.e., October, November, and December). Values may not sum perfectly due to rounding.

POPULATION CHANGES IN ILLINOIS SINCE 2014

Union membership trends in Illinois may be influenced by changes in the state’s population over time. Figure 4 presents *estimates* on the age, gender identification, racial and ethnic background, foreign-born status, urban status, educational attainment, and employment status of Illinois’ residents in both 2014 and 2023. The data suggest that Illinois has become older, with the share of residents ages 55 years and older rising by 4.2 percentage points and their total number increasing by almost 398,000 (11.9 percent) while younger cohorts declined—which reflects an aging population both locally and nationally. Additionally, since 2014, the state added nearly 442,000 Hispanic residents (33.8 percent) and 117,000 Asian residents (22.4 percent), with foreign-born residents growing by 115,000 (7.3 percent) and increasing to 17.0 percent of the overall population between the ages of 16 and 80 years old. About 346,000 more residents lived in urban and suburban areas of the state by 2023 than they did in 2014 (3.8 percent) and 615,000 more had earned associate degrees, bachelor’s degrees, or more advanced college degrees (15.6 percent). The employment rate ticked up from 60.0 percent to 60.8 percent, resulting in a growth of 29,000 workers in 2023 compared to 2014 (Figure 4). These results are consistent with findings on Illinois’ migration patterns, which have made the state more Hispanic, more foreign-born, more urban, and more educated than a decade ago (Manzo & Bruno, 2023c).

LABOR MARKET CHANGES IN ILLINOIS SINCE 2014

Similarly, union membership trends will be influenced by shifts in the state’s labor market. Figures 5 and 6 show the changing dynamics of Illinois’ workforce. First, Illinois’ workforce became marginally older, aging by 0.5 years (1.3 percent) between 2014 and 2023. According to the data, it also added more jobs

for men than for women since 2014. Hispanic workers grew by 321,000 (39.3 percent) and Asian workers grew by 114,000 (34.7 percent), while the number of white and Black workers declined. The workforce also saw gains among the foreign-born (13.2 percent) and workers who live in metro areas (5.5 percent). Finally, the number of Illinois workers with college degrees increased by more than 367,000 (12.7 percent) while employment for those without at least two-year college degrees fell by nearly 339,000 (-10.7 percent). As a result, over half of Illinois' workers (53.8 percent) now have college degrees (Figure 5).

FIGURE 4: CHANGES IN ILLINOIS' DEMOGRAPHICS, CPS-ORG POPULATION ESTIMATES, 2014-2023

Population Ages 16 to 80	Share of Illinois Population			Estimated Illinois Residents			
	2014	2023	Change	2014	2023	2014-2023	Change
Total Population	100.0%	100.0%	±0.0%	10,078,821	10,000,608	-78,213	-0.8%
Age 16 to 34	33.4%	31.0%	-2.4%	3,362,624	3,100,979	-261,645	-7.8%
Age 35 to 54	33.4%	31.6%	-1.9%	3,370,684	3,156,316	-214,368	-6.4%
Age 55 or Older	33.2%	37.4%	+4.2%	3,345,512	3,743,313	+397,800	+11.9%
Female	51.7%	51.1%	-0.6%	5,210,498	5,114,860	-95,638	-1.8%
Male	48.3%	48.9%	+0.6%	4,868,322	4,885,748	+17,426	+0.4%
White	66.4%	61.5%	-4.8%	6,688,793	6,152,865	-535,928	-8.0%
Black	15.0%	14.2%	-0.8%	1,514,508	1,421,103	-93,405	-6.2%
Latinx	13.0%	17.5%	+4.5%	1,307,783	1,749,465	+441,682	+33.8%
Asian	5.2%	6.4%	+1.2%	522,575	639,805	+117,230	+22.4%
Foreign-Born	15.7%	17.0%	+1.3%	1,583,301	1,698,649	+115,348	+7.3%
In Metro Area	89.4%	93.5%	+4.2%	9,005,966	9,352,116	+346,151	+3.8%
College Degree	39.1%	45.6%	+6.5%	3,943,044	4,558,404	+615,360	+15.6%
No College Degree	60.9%	54.4%	-6.5%	6,135,776	5,442,204	-693,573	-11.3%
Employed	60.0%	60.8%	+0.8%	6,049,901	6,078,713	+28,813	+0.5%

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2014-2023 (EPI, 2024). Values may not sum perfectly due to rounding.

FIGURE 5: CHANGES IN ILLINOIS' WORKFORCE DEMOGRAPHICS, CPS-ORG ESTIMATES, 2014-2023

Workers Ages 16 to 80	Share of Illinois Workers			Estimated Illinois Workers			
	2014	2023	Change	2014	2023	2014-2023	Change
Total Population	100.0%	100.0%	±0.0%	6,049,901	6,078,713	+28,812	+0.5%
Average Age	--	--	--	41.9	42.4	+0.5	+1.3%
Female	47.9%	47.0%	-0.8%	2,895,988	2,858,886	-37,101	-1.3%
Male	52.1%	53.0%	+0.8%	3,153,913	3,219,827	+65,914	+2.1%
White	67.6%	61.5%	-6.2%	4,092,157	3,735,780	-356,376	-8.7%
Black	13.1%	12.2%	-0.9%	789,783	740,168	-49,615	-6.3%
Latinx	13.5%	18.7%	+5.2%	817,632	1,138,756	+321,124	+39.3%
Asian	5.4%	7.3%	+1.9%	328,965	443,199	+114,235	+34.7%
Foreign-Born	16.5%	18.5%	+2.1%	996,295	1,127,412	+131,117	+13.2%
In Metro Area	89.7%	94.1%	+4.4%	5,426,575	5,722,601	+296,026	+5.5%
College Degree	48.0%	53.8%	+5.8%	2,900,937	3,268,255	+367,318	+12.7%
No College Degree	52.0%	46.2%	-5.8%	3,148,964	2,810,458	-338,505	-10.7%

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2014-2023 (EPI, 2024). Values may not sum perfectly due to rounding.

The sectoral and occupational composition of Illinois' economy has been altered considerably since 2014 (Figure 6). For example, all the job growth occurred in the private sector. Private sector employment increased by nearly 61,000 workers between 2014 and 2023, while public sector jobs fell by almost 32,000—caused by numerous factors including depressed hiring from a two-year budget impasse at the

state-level followed by burnout, stress, and inadequate pay producing a post-pandemic public sector labor shortage (Manzo, 2024; Griffin, 2023; Ghosh, 2022; Mendoza, 2018).

FIGURE 6: CHANGES IN ILLINOIS' SECTORAL AND OCCUPATIONAL MIX, CPS-ORG ESTIMATES, 2014-2023

Workers Ages 16-80	2023 Share	Change	2023 Workers	2014-2023	Change
Overall	100.0%	±0.0%	6,078,713	+28,812	+0.5%
Private Sector	88.6%	+0.6%	5,388,335	+60,710	+1.1%
Public Sector	11.4%	-0.6%	690,378	-31,898	-4.4%
Management, Business, and Financial	20.5%	+4.4%	1,248,582	+273,364	+28.0%
Professional and Related	25.3%	+3.1%	1,537,090	+197,620	+14.8%
Transportation and Material Moving	8.3%	+1.2%	503,102	+77,112	+18.1%
Construction and Extraction	4.3%	+0.3%	259,260	+19,566	+8.2%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	2.6%	-0.3%	160,245	-15,974	-9.1%
Production	5.9%	-0.7%	356,476	-38,086	-9.7%
Service	15.5%	-1.9%	940,469	-110,332	-10.5%
Office and Administrative Support	9.8%	-2.4%	594,583	-144,219	-19.5%
Sales and Related	7.6%	-3.8%	461,403	-225,902	-32.9%

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2014-2023 (EPI, 2024). Values may not sum perfectly due to rounding.

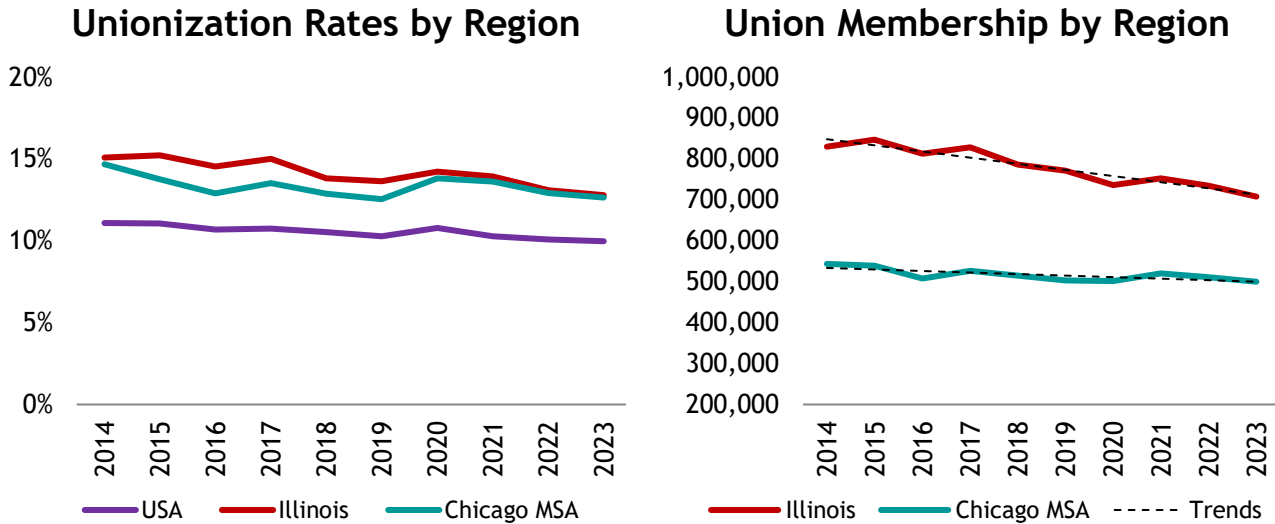
Illinois' labor market has also experienced growth primarily in high-paying but low-union-density careers (Figure 6). Between 2014 and 2023, the fastest-growing occupations in Illinois were management, business, and financial occupations, which added over 273,000 workers (28.0 percent), and professional and related occupations, which added nearly 198,000 workers (14.8 percent). Professional and related occupations include workers employed as engineers, architects, scientists, computer scientists, mathematicians, lawyers, doctors, dentists, teachers, librarians, and similar fields. Transportation and material moving occupations increased by about 77,000 positions (18.1 percent) as e-commerce and online purchases grew. Construction and extraction careers increased by nearly 20,000 (8.2 percent) as well, driven by the Rebuild Illinois state capital program and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) federal programs. On the other hand, jobs in production, office and administrative support, and sales have been shed as Illinois' economy has produced fewer manufactured goods, moved towards hybrid and remote work settings, and shifted away from physical retail locations (Figure 6).

UNIONIZATION RATES AND TRENDS BY DEMOGRAPHICS, GEOGRAPHY, AND EDUCATION

Nationally, there were 14.5 million union members in 2023 (Figure 7). While this represents fewer dues-paying union members than in 2014, it is 135,000 more than there were in 2022 (14.3 million). This means that the United States added new union members in 2023 for the second consecutive year, following a gain of nearly 277,000 members in 2022.

In Illinois, the unionization rate was 12.8 percent in 2023, the 13th-highest among the 50 U.S. states. However, Illinois' unionization has declined since 2014 (Figure 7). The total union membership rate was 15.1 percent in 2014 but fell to 12.8 percent in 2023. Chicago area's unionization rate also decreased between 2014 and 2023, from 14.7 percent to 12.6 percent. As of 2023, there were about 708,000 employed union members in Illinois. This is 27,000 fewer union members in Illinois than in 2022. It also represents 122,000 fewer dues-paying union members in the state than there were in 2014, including 44,000 fewer union members in the Chicago area and 78,000 fewer union members in Downstate communities. This broad-based decline in unionization in Illinois was primarily the result of an increasingly polarizing economy, due to long-run job losses in manufacturing, public sector jobs, and other unionized sectors towards knowledge-based occupations with low union densities over the last decade (Illinois Future of Work Task Force, 2022).

FIGURE 7: GRAPHS OF UNIONIZATION RATES AND TOTAL UNION MEMBERSHIP BY REGION, 2014-2023



Year	Illinois		Chicago MSA		USA	
	Members	Rate	Members	Rate	Members	Rate
2014	829,757	15.1%	543,428	14.7%	14,569,936	11.1%
2015	846,984	15.2%	539,036	13.8%	14,786,281	11.1%
2016	812,397	14.5%	508,058	12.9%	14,549,634	10.7%
2017	828,066	15.0%	526,875	13.5%	14,811,525	10.7%
2018	785,966	13.8%	514,629	12.9%	14,740,188	10.5%
2019	771,465	13.6%	503,086	12.5%	14,566,657	10.3%
2020	736,186	14.2%	501,209	13.8%	14,250,234	10.8%
2021	752,063	13.9%	520,254	13.6%	14,003,553	10.3%
2022	734,430	13.1%	510,982	12.9%	14,280,077	10.1%
2023	707,829	12.8%	499,878	12.6%	14,415,235	10.0%
Average	780,514	14.1%	516,743	13.3%	14,497,332	10.5%

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2014-2023 (EPI, 2024). Values may not sum perfectly due to rounding. NOTE: Illinois' 12.8% unionization rate ranks 13th in the United States.

Gender Identification

The unionization rate for employed men in Illinois has fallen from 16.8 percent in 2014 to 14.7 percent in 2023, a drop of 2.2 percentage points (Figure 8). The unionization rate of employed women has also decreased, from 13.3 percent to 10.8 percent, a drop of 2.5 percentage points. However, both men and women in Illinois continue to have significantly higher unionization rates than their counterparts across the United States. Illinois' male unionization rate is 4.2 percentage points higher and its female unionization rate is 1.3 percentage point higher than their comparable national averages (10.4 percent and 9.5 percent, respectively).

Racial or Ethnic Background

Black workers are the most unionized racial or ethnic group (Figure 9). The unionization rate for Black workers is 19.2 percent in Illinois, 21.4 percent in the Chicago area, and 11.9 percent in the United States. In comparison, white union density is 13.3 percent in the state, 12.5 percent in Illinois' largest metropolitan area, and 10.1 percent across the nation. Respective unionization rates for Hispanic workers are lower at 9.2 percent, 9.9 percent, and 9.0 percent. With the number of Hispanic workers growing but

having relatively lower unionization rates while white and Black workers have decreased as a share of the workforce, these dynamics have contributed to the overall drop in Illinois' union membership rate over the decade. However, Black workers in Illinois did also experience a 4.2 percentage point decline in union membership between 2014 and 2023 (Figure 9).

Age Cohort

Unionization rates are higher for middle-aged workers than for young workers and older workers (Figure 10). For example, the unionization rate of workers between the ages of 45 and 54 years old is 17.0 percent in Illinois. Similarly, workers aged 35 to 44 years old and those aged 55 to 65 years have unionization rates of 14.5 percent and 14.9 percent in Illinois. By contrast, for young workers aged 16 to 24 years old and those aged 25 to 34 years old, unionization rates are just 5.2 percent and 11.4 percent in Illinois. For those 65 years or older, the unionization rate is 8.6 percent in the state. Across all age cohorts, workers in Illinois and in the Chicago area are as likely or more likely to be union members than the national average.

Other Demographic Groups

Union membership varies across other demographic classifications as well (Figure 11). Among the most unionized groups are military veterans. About one-in-seven employed veterans is a union member in Illinois (13.8 percent) and in the Chicago area (13.6 percent). For the United States, 13.2 percent of employed veterans are unionized. The unionization rate for married workers, foreign-born workers, and native-born and naturalized citizens are all above the national average in Illinois and in the Chicago area. In Illinois, native-born and naturalized citizens (13.5 percent) are more likely to be union members than foreign-born workers (9.8 percent). While the recent rise in foreign-born workers has stabilized Illinois' population and expanded the state's economy, it has also lowered the state's unionization rate.

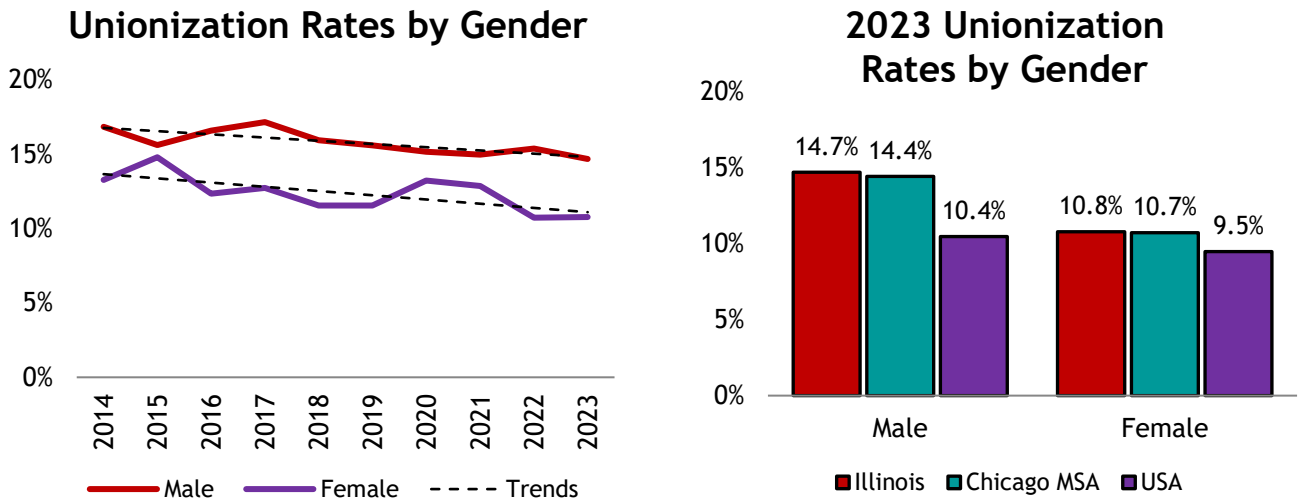
Geography

Figure 12 reveals that unionization is generally higher in the metropolitan areas of Illinois. The union membership rate is 12.9 percent in metropolitan areas like Chicago, Rockford, and Springfield, while it is 10.4 percent in rural portions as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Both are more unionized than their national counterparts. Illinois' urban and suburban areas are 2.8 percentage points more unionized than the comparable national average (10.4 percent) and its rural areas are 1.8 percentage points more unionized than the comparable national average (8.6 percent).

Educational Attainment

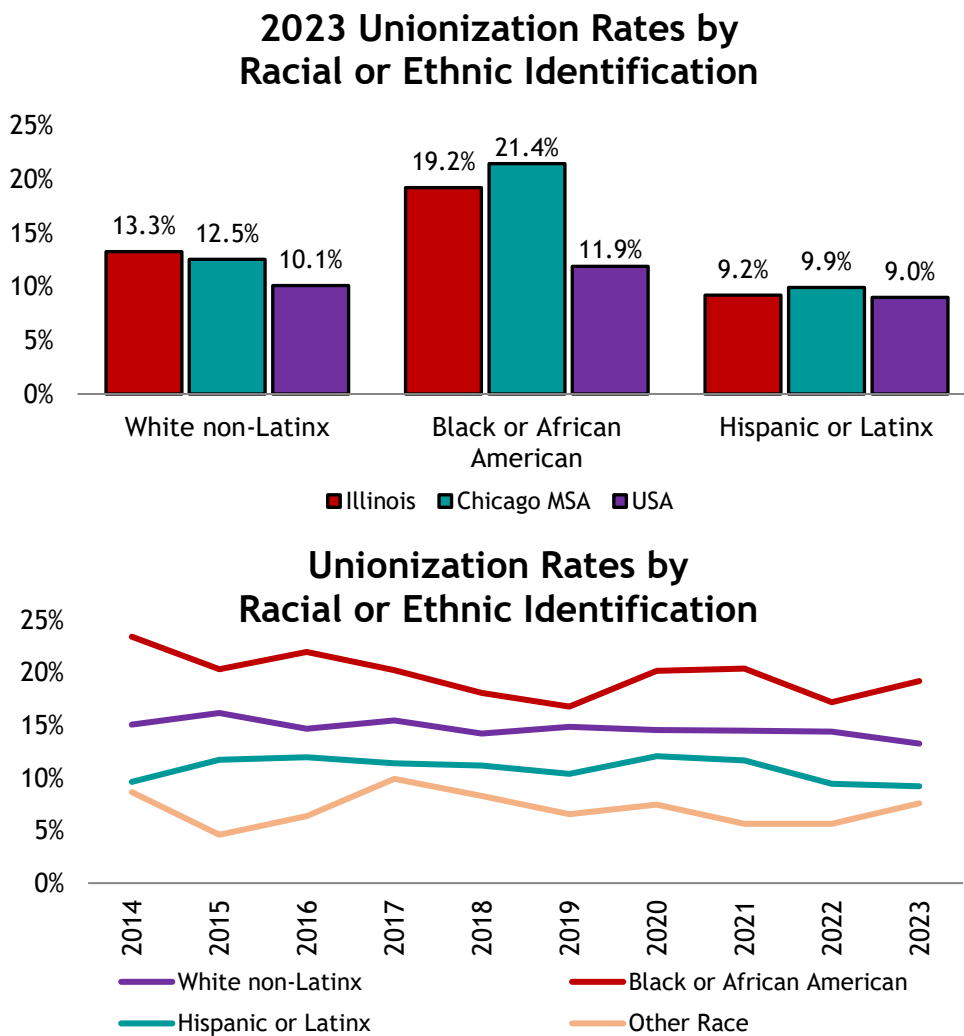
Workers with master's degrees are the most unionized educational group (Figure 13). Nationally, one-in-six master's degree holders is a union member (16.0 percent). In Illinois, more than one-in-five workers with master's degrees is a union member (21.1 percent), including 21.5 percent in the Chicago area. Workers with associate degrees also have relatively higher unionization rates, at 18.9 percent in Illinois, 15.1 percent in the Chicago area, and 11.4 percent in the United States. Workers without high school degrees and workers with professional or doctorate degrees comprise the two least-unionized educational groups in Illinois. Except for workers with professional and doctorate degrees, unionization rates are higher in Illinois than the national average across all levels of educational attainment.

FIGURE 8: GRAPHS OF UNIONIZATION RATES BY GENDER IDENTIFICATION, 2014-2023



Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2014-2023 (EPI, 2024).

FIGURE 9: GRAPHS OF UNIONIZATION RATES BY RACIAL OR ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION, 2014-2023



Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2014-2023 (EPI, 2024).

FIGURE 10: UNIONIZATION RATES BY AGE COHORT BY REGION, 2023

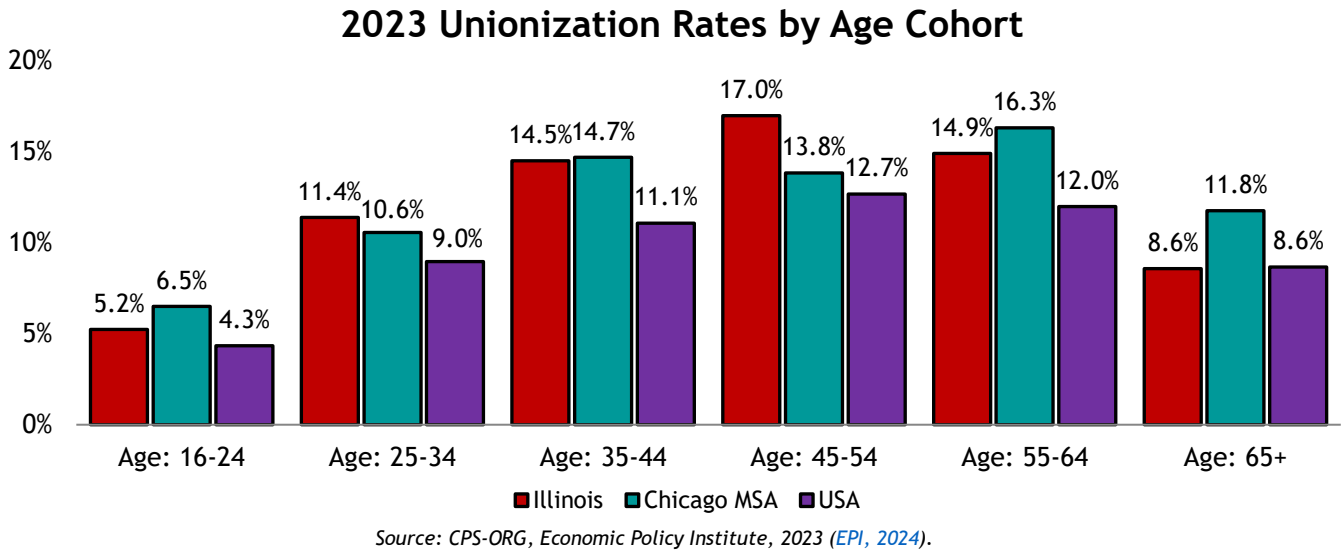


FIGURE 11: UNIONIZATION RATES OF SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS BY REGION, 2023

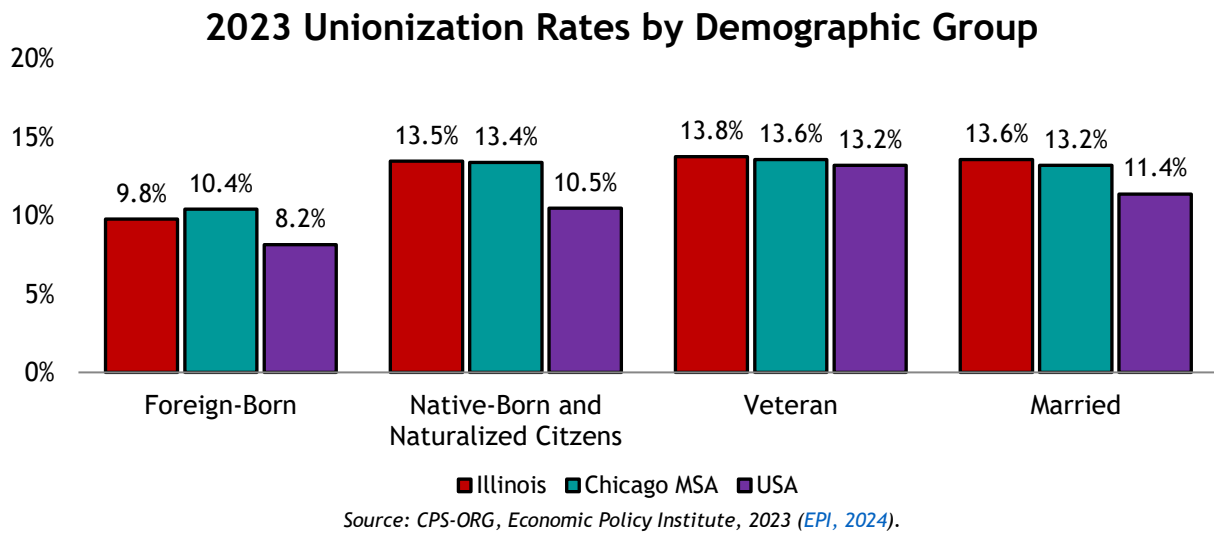


FIGURE 12: UNIONIZATION RATES BY URBAN STATUS IN ILLINOIS AND THE UNITED STATES, 2023

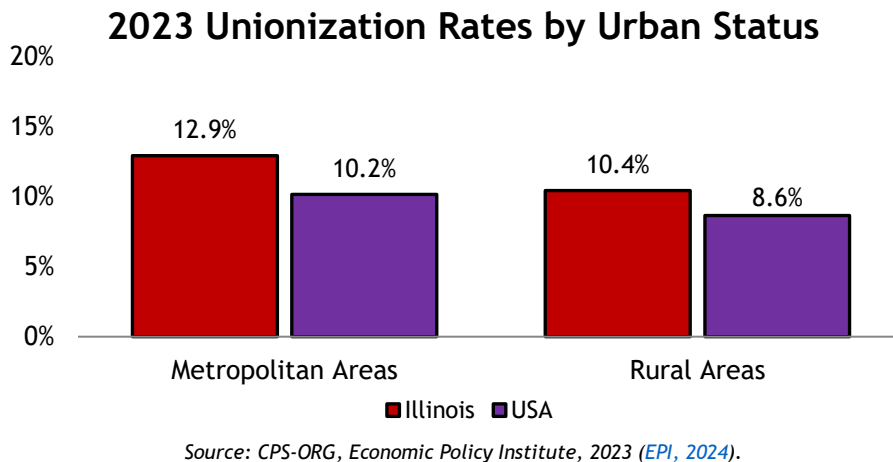
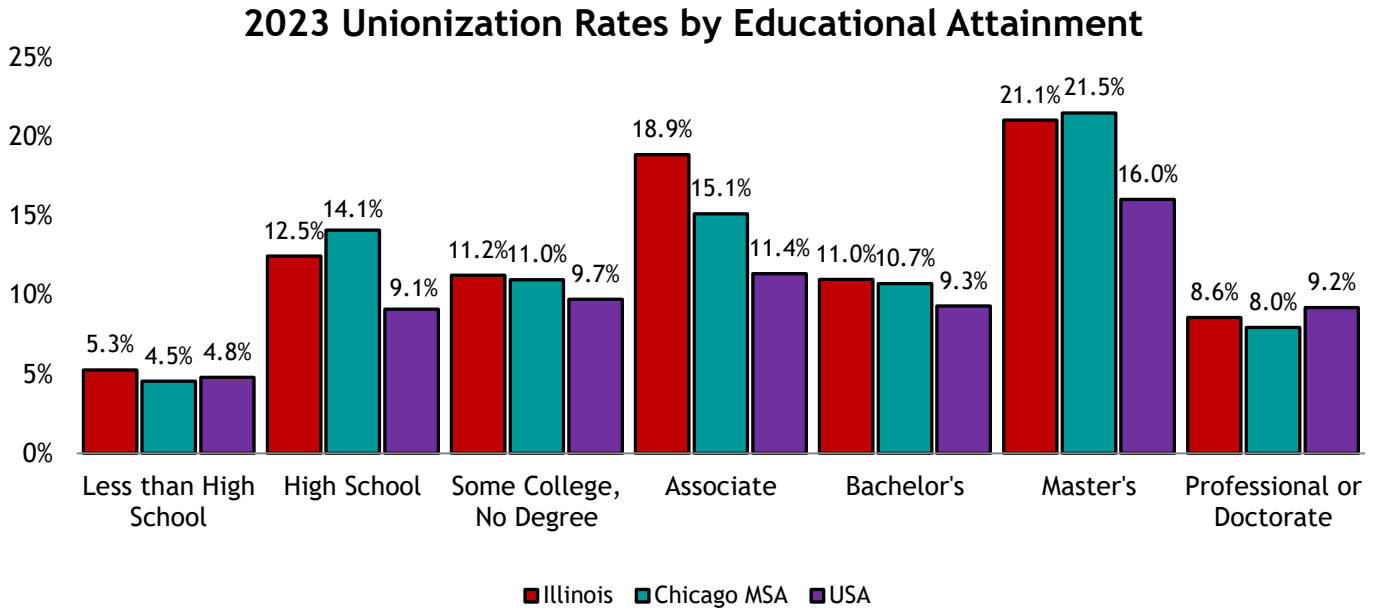


FIGURE 13: UNIONIZATION RATES BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OR STATUS BY REGION, 2023



Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024).

UNIONIZATION RATES BY SECTOR, INDUSTRY, AND OCCUPATION

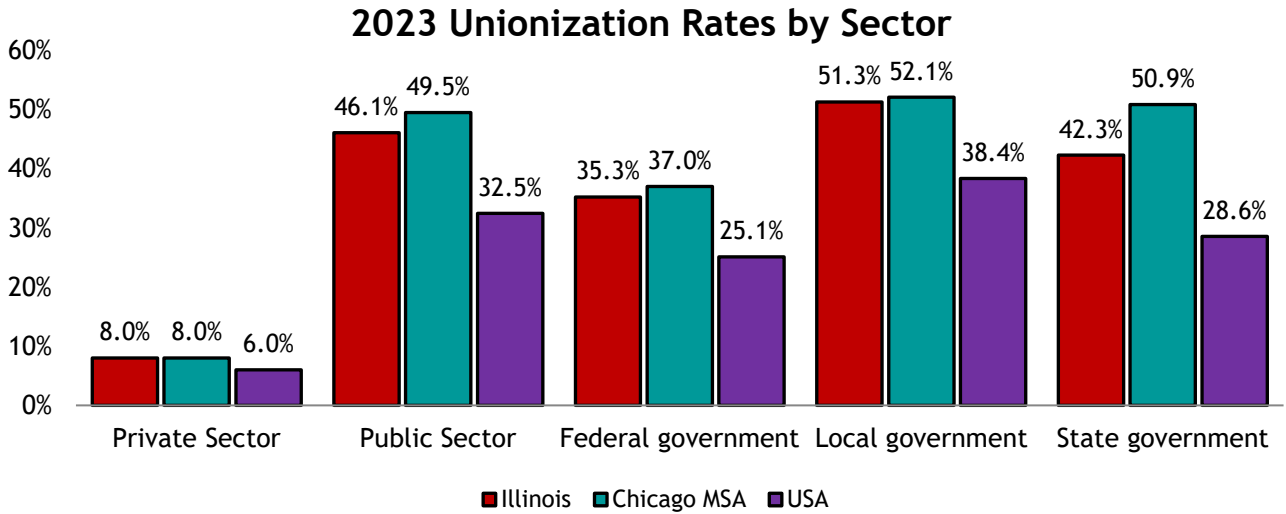
Sector

While fewer than one-in-twelve private sector workers is now a union member in Illinois (8.0 percent), the Chicago MSA (8.0 percent), and the United States (6.0 percent), Illinois’ private sector unionization rate increased over the year—up 0.4 percentage point from 7.6 percent in 2022 (Manzo & Bruno, 2023b) (Figure 14). Unionization rates are significantly higher for public sector workers. About half of all public sector workers are unionized in both Illinois (46.1 percent) and the Chicago area (49.5 percent), as are about one-third nationwide (32.5 percent). The most unionized public sector group is local government employees in Illinois (51.3 percent) and nationally (38.4 percent), which includes teachers, police officers, and firefighters. About four-in-ten state government employees, including workers at public universities, are unionized in Illinois (42.3 percent). It is important to recall that private sector employment increased in Illinois by nearly 61,000 workers between 2014 and 2023 (1.1 percent) while public sector employment decreased by about 32,000 workers (-4.4 percent), which led to lower overall unionization rates over the decade (Figure 14).

Industry

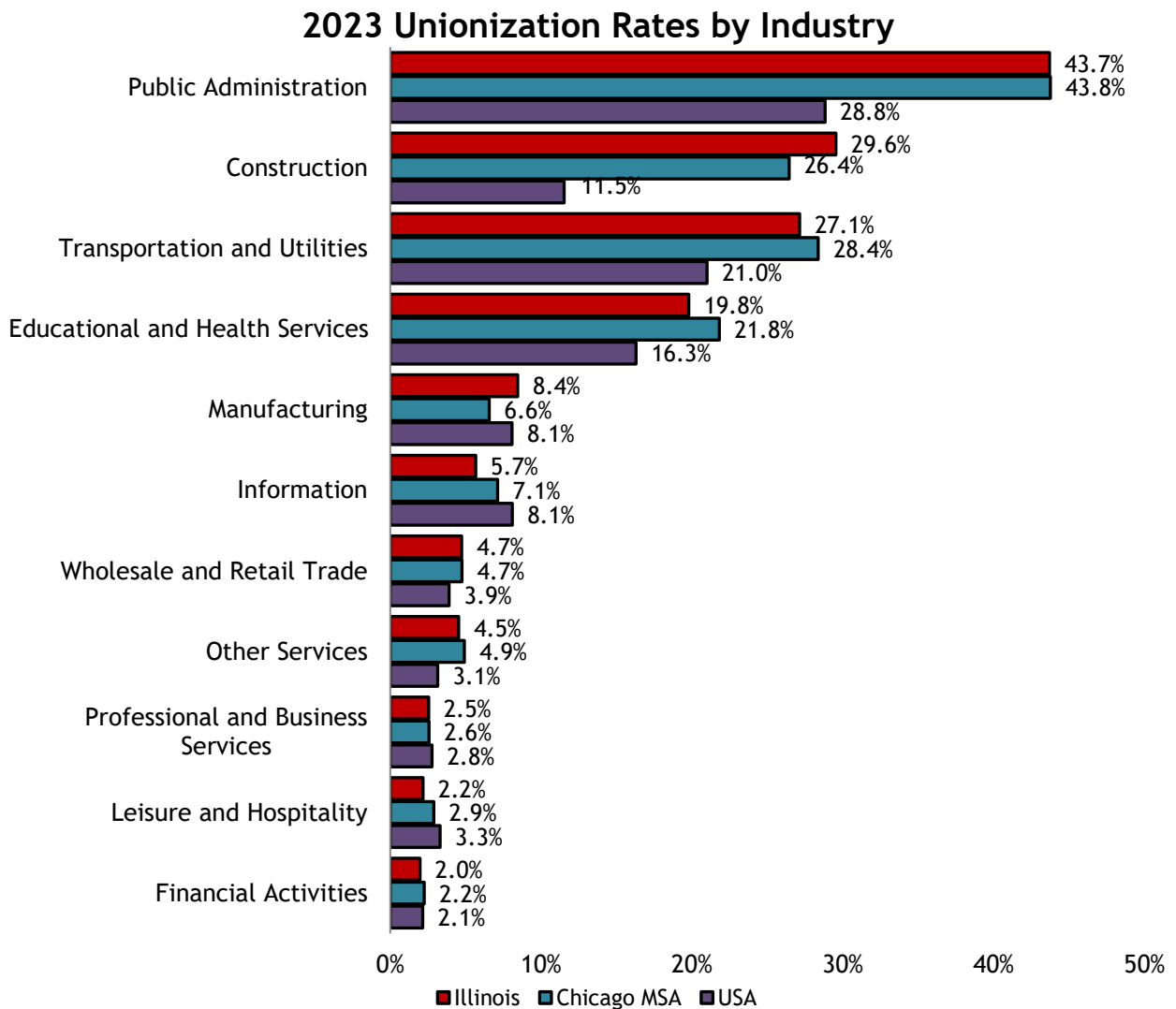
Union membership varies significantly by industry (Figure 15). The top four industries by unionization rates in Illinois are public administration (43.7 percent), construction (29.6 percent), transportation and utilities (27.1 percent), and the combined educational and health services industry (19.8 percent). The manufacturing workforce, associated historically as a leader in industrial unionization, is now only 8.4 percent organized in Illinois, just 6.6 percent in the Chicago area, and 8.1 percent nationally. The least-unionized industries generally are financial activities, professional and business services, and leisure and hospitality.

FIGURE 14: UNIONIZATION RATES BY SECTOR OR LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT BY REGION, 2023



Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024).

FIGURE 15: UNIONIZATION RATES BY MAJOR INDUSTRY BY REGION, 2023



Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024).

Figure 16 presents total union membership in Illinois for selected industries, organized in descending order by unionization rate. Note that the estimates include all occupations within an industry. The construction industry, for example, includes white-collar workers who typically are not union members, such as engineers and architects. The top five industries with the most union members are educational and health services (281,000 members), public administration (106,000 members), transportation and utilities (99,000 members), construction (83,000 members), and manufacturing (59,000 members) (Figure 16).

FIGURE 16: ILLINOIS INDUSTRY UNIONIZATION RATES, EMPLOYMENT, AND UNION MEMBERS, 2023

Selected Industries (2023)	Unionization Rate	Total Employment	Total Union Members	Total Sample
Public Administration	43.7%	242,000	106,000	152
Construction	29.6%	282,000	83,000	181
Transportation and Utilities	27.1%	364,000	99,000	224
Educational and Health Services	19.8%	1,420,000	281,000	892
Manufacturing	8.4%	694,000	59,000	449
Information	5.7%	95,000	5,000	58
Wholesale and Retail Trade	4.7%	613,000	29,000	396
Other Services	4.5%	218,000	10,000	133
Professional and Business Services	2.5%	679,000	17,000	423
Leisure and Hospitality	2.2%	481,000	10,000	297
Financial Activities	2.0%	419,000	8,000	264

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024). All estimates rounded to the nearest thousand.

Occupation

Figure 17 depicts the unionization rates of major occupational groups in Illinois. The highest unionization rates are among blue-collar workers in construction and extraction careers (39.6 percent) and in installation, maintenance, and repair jobs (22.9 percent). On the other hand, the lowest unionization rates are for those in sales and related jobs (2.8 percent) and white-collar professionals in management, business, and financial careers (3.9 percent) (Figure 17). Over the decade, the considerable growth of these high-paying but mostly nonunion management, business, and financial jobs has reduced Illinois’ unionization rate. Losses in relatively higher union density occupations like installation, maintenance, and repair have contributed as well.

FIGURE 17: UNIONIZATION RATES BY MAJOR OCCUPATION BY REGION, 2023

Selected Occupations (2023)	Illinois	Chicago MSA	USA
Management, Business, and Financial	3.9%	3.6%	4.1%
Professional and Related	18.2%	19.2%	14.6%
Service	10.9%	10.1%	9.2%
Sales and Related	2.8%	3.3%	2.9%
Office and Administrative Support	7.5%	8.0%	8.9%
Construction and Extraction	39.6%	36.2%	16.2%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	22.9%	25.8%	13.3%
Production	14.2%	12.8%	11.6%
Transportation and Material Moving	18.1%	19.4%	13.3%

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024).

Figure 18 breaks the occupations down further. Education, training, and library careers (43.3 percent); protective service occupations (41.4 percent); construction and extraction workers (39.6 percent); installation, maintenance, and repair workers (22.9 percent); and community and social service workers (21.5 percent) all have relatively high levels of unionization exceeding 20 percent. Compared to the

nation, unionization rates in these five occupations are significantly elevated in Illinois. Union membership in construction and extraction occupations, as an example, is 23.4 percentage points higher in Illinois than the comparable U.S. average. More specifically, essential workers like public pre-K through 12 teachers are 79.0 percent unionized and police officers and firefighters are 78.8 percent unionized in Illinois (Figure 18).

FIGURE 18: UNIONIZATION RATES BY DETAILED OCCUPATION BY REGION, 2023

Selected Occupations (2023)	Illinois	Chicago MSA	USA
Education, Training, and Library	43.3%	47.5%	32.6%
Protective Service	41.4%	43.0%	32.0%
Construction and Extraction	39.6%	36.2%	16.2%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	22.9%	25.8%	13.3%
Community and Social Service	21.5%	21.4%	14.3%
Transportation and Material Moving	18.1%	19.4%	13.3%
Life, Physical, and Social Science	15.2%	13.7%	10.6%
Production	14.2%	12.8%	11.6%
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	10.9%	10.5%	9.1%
Healthcare Support	9.8%	4.8%	7.6%
Healthcare Practitioner and Technical	9.6%	11.4%	11.6%
Architecture and Engineering	9.5%	8.9%	5.9%
Office and Administrative Support	7.5%	8.0%	8.9%
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	5.6%	6.7%	8.3%
Business and Financial	4.7%	4.6%	4.0%
Computer and Mathematical Science	4.7%	3.8%	3.8%
Management	3.4%	2.9%	4.1%
Personal Care and Service	3.2%	4.1%	4.3%
Sales and Related	2.8%	3.3%	2.9%
Legal	2.5%	0.0%	5.1%
Food Preparation and Serving Related	2.1%	2.5%	3.2%

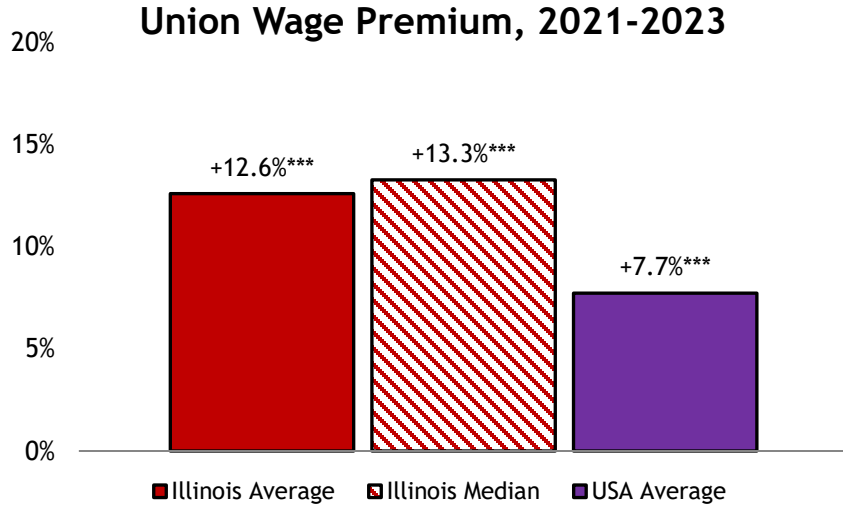
Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024). NOTE: Pre-K through secondary education teachers employed in the public sector had a unionization rate of 79.0% and police officers and firefighters employed in the public sector had a unionization rate of 78.8 percent.

THE IMPACT OF UNION MEMBERSHIP ON WORKER WAGES

Union workers earn more than their nonunion counterparts (Figure 19). Many factors can influence a worker’s earnings, including age, level of educational attainment, occupation, geographic location, and demographic characteristics. Statistical models called “regressions” are utilized to account for these and similar factors to isolate the independent effect of union membership on wages. After accounting for these variables, union membership statistically increases a worker’s hourly earnings by 7.7 percent in the United States.

The union wage premium is even higher in Illinois (Figure 19). Union membership boosts Illinois workers’ hourly earnings by an average of 12.6 percent. Furthermore, a unique analytical tool called a “quantile regression,” permits evaluation for the median worker. While union membership is statistically associated with a 12.6 percent increase in the *average* Illinois worker’s wage, the wage premium is 13.3 percent for the median worker. All results are statistically significant at the 99-percent level of confidence. The data show that unionization boosts earnings for Illinois’ middle class.

FIGURE 19: REGRESSIONS OF UNION WAGE PREMIUMS FOR THE UNITED STATES AND ILLINOIS, 2021-2023



Three asterisks (***) indicate significance at the 1-percent level. Two asterisks (**) indicates significance at the 5-percent level. Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2021-2023 (EPI, 2024). Statistics are adjusted by the outgoing rotation group earnings weight to match the total population ages 16 to 80 years old. Regression outputs are converted to percent changes using correct adjustments to interpret natural logarithms (Kennedy, 1981; IDRE, 2024). For more, see the Appendix.

FIGURE 20: UNION WAGE PREMIUMS BY STATE, OLS REGRESSIONS, 2021-2023

Rank	State	Union Premium	Rank	State	Union Premium
--	United States	+7.7%	26	Oregon	+7.1%
1	Nevada	+15.4%	27	New Hampshire	+7.0%
2	North Dakota	+13.0%	28	Minnesota	+7.0%
3	Illinois	+12.6%	29	California	+6.9%
4	Wisconsin	+12.5%	30	Washington	+6.6%
5	Georgia	+12.1%	31	Rhode Island	+6.5%
6	Delaware	+12.0%	32	New York	+5.9%
7	Montana	+10.9%	33	Ohio	+5.9%
8	Arizona	+10.5%	34	Massachusetts	+5.5%
9	Maine	+10.5%	35	Alabama	+5.1%
10	Wyoming	+10.4%	36	Colorado	+5.1%
11	Texas	+8.7%	37	Tennessee	+4.9%
12	Missouri	+8.6%	38	Nebraska	+4.7%
13	Kansas	+8.5%	39	Mississippi	+4.7%
14	Connecticut	+8.4%	40	Alaska	+4.4%
15	Hawaii	+8.3%	41	Florida	+3.8%
16	Idaho	+8.2%	42	South Carolina	No effect
17	South Dakota	+8.1%	43	North Carolina	No effect
18	Maryland	+7.9%	44	Kentucky	No effect
19	Michigan	+7.8%	45	Virginia	No effect
20	New Mexico	+7.8%	46	Utah	No effect
21	Indiana	+7.5%	47	Iowa	No effect
22	New Jersey	+7.5%	48	Vermont	No effect
23	Louisiana	+7.3%	49	West Virginia	No effect
24	Pennsylvania	+7.2%	50	District of Columbia	No effect
25	Oklahoma	+7.2%	51	Arkansas	No effect

All estimates are statistically significant unless noted. Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2021-2023 (EPI, 2024). Statistics are adjusted by the outgoing rotation group earnings weight to match the total population ages 16 to 80 years old. Regression outputs are converted to percent changes using correct adjustments to interpret natural logarithms (Kennedy, 1981; IDRE, 2024). For more, see the Appendix.

How does the average Illinois union earnings difference of 12.6 percent compare to the wage premium in other states? Similar 2021 through 2023 regressions are run to assess each of the 49 other states plus the District of Columbia against Illinois. The results, reported in Figure 20, reveal that Illinois has the 3rd-highest union wage premium in the nation, behind only Nevada (15.4 percent) and North Dakota (13.0 percent). In total, 20 states have union wage effects that are higher than the national average of 7.7 percent. Importantly, the union wage premium is either positive in every state or the result is statistically insignificant from zero (Figure 20).¹ Research has also linked union representation with better job quality, including improved access to healthcare plans, safer workplaces, lower worker turnover, and less reliance on government assistance programs (Banerjee et al., 2021; Ford & Freund, 2022; Bach & Kinder, 2021; Sojourner & Pacas, 2018; Manzo, 2022).

ILLINOIS PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONIZATION BEFORE AND AFTER THE 2018 JANUS DECISION

In June 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a 41-year precedent in the 5-4 *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Council 31, et al.* decision (Oyez, 2018). The *Janus* ruling effectively imposed a national “right-to-work” regime on state and local government workers, permitting and incentivizing free riding among workers in bargaining units.

This section explores 10 years of data from 2014 through 2023 to assess the impact of the decision in Illinois. Union membership rates and hourly earnings for state and local government employees are compared to those for private sector workers, who were unaffected by the ruling (Figure 21). The data shows that the union membership rate for Illinois’ private sector workers decreased from 9.8 percent in 2017, the year prior to the ruling, to 8.0 percent in 2023, a 1.7 percentage point drop. By contrast, the union membership rate for state and local government employees fell from 52.1 percent in 2017 to 48.0 percent in 2023, a 4.1 percentage point drop. The unionization rate has thus fallen 2.3 percentage points further for state and local government workers than it has for private sector workers since the *Janus* decision (Figure 21).

FIGURE 21: UNIONIZATION RATES OF STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES IN ILLINOIS, 2014-2023

Illinois Unionization Rate by Year	State and Local Government Employees	Private Sector Workers
2014	55.8%	9.1%
2015	56.1%	9.6%
2016	52.6%	9.7%
2017	52.1%	9.8%
2018*	47.3%	8.7%
2019	47.3%	8.9%
2020	57.5%	8.5%
2021	49.9%	8.6%
2022	52.4%	7.6%
2023	48.0%	8.0%
2017-2023 Change	-4.1%	-1.7%
State and Local Difference		-2.3%

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024). *The *Janus* ruling occurred mid-2018 on June 27, 2018. As a result, 2017 was the last full year prior to the decision and 2019 was the first full year following the decision. Values may not sum perfectly due to rounding.

¹ Statistically insignificant effects—in which values are not significant at least at the 90-percent level of confidence—occur in nine mostly small states, eight of which are so-called “right-to-work” states, as well as the District of Columbia. The lack of statistical significance is most likely due to small sample sizes, which have been decreasing in the CPS-ORG dataset over time. Future editions of this report may increase the number of years for this analysis from three to five or more.

Moreover, in the four full years prior to the *Janus* decision, the unionization rate for Illinois' state and local government employees exceeded 50 percent four times (100 percent of the time). In the five full years since the decision, that threshold has only been crossed twice (40 percent of the time) (Figure 21).

The wages of state and local government employees have fallen behind their counterparts in the private sector since the *Janus* decision (Figure 22). The hourly earnings of state and local government employees in Illinois averaged \$33.92 in 2023, up 25.9 percent since 2017 (\$26.93 per hour). In comparison, private sector workers in the state earned \$37.16 per hour in 2023, an increase of 41.1 percent since 2017 (\$26.33 per hour). Accordingly, state and local government employee wages grew 15.2 percent slower between 2017 and 2023, or -2.0 percent annualized over six years.

FIGURE 22: AVERAGE EARNINGS OF STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES IN ILLINOIS, 2017-2023

Illinois Average Hourly Earnings by Year	State and Local Government Employees	Private Sector Workers
2017	\$26.93	\$26.33
2018*	\$28.80	\$27.79
2019	\$27.89	\$29.15
2020	\$29.91	\$30.63
2021	\$30.61	\$32.75
2022	\$33.82	\$35.74
2023	\$33.92	\$37.16
2017-2023 Change	+\$6.98	+\$10.83
Percent Change	+25.9%	+41.1%
State and Local Difference		-15.2%

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024). *The *Janus* ruling occurred mid-2018 on June 27, 2018. As a result, 2017 was the last full year prior to the decision and 2019 was the first full year following the decision. Values may not sum perfectly due to rounding.

By weakening the bargaining power of state and local government employees, the *Janus* Supreme Court decision may have made it more difficult to attract and retain qualified workers in public sector positions. By fall of 2023, Illinois had more than 4,000 unfilled teaching positions, which was double the vacancies reported in 2017 and amounted to five missing teachers per public school district (ISBE, 2024). An annual survey of Illinois' school leaders found that nine-in-ten deemed teacher shortages to be a serious issue, with half of the respondents reporting that teachers could find "better compensation in another profession" (IARSS, 2024). Similarly, Illinois' police chiefs said that recruitment and retention was their top challenge as recently as 2022, with suburban police offices continuing to report dozens of unfilled positions (Wojcicki, 2022; Keeshan, 2023).

ILLINOIS FARES BETTER THAN STATES THAT HAVE WEAKENED WORKERS' RIGHTS

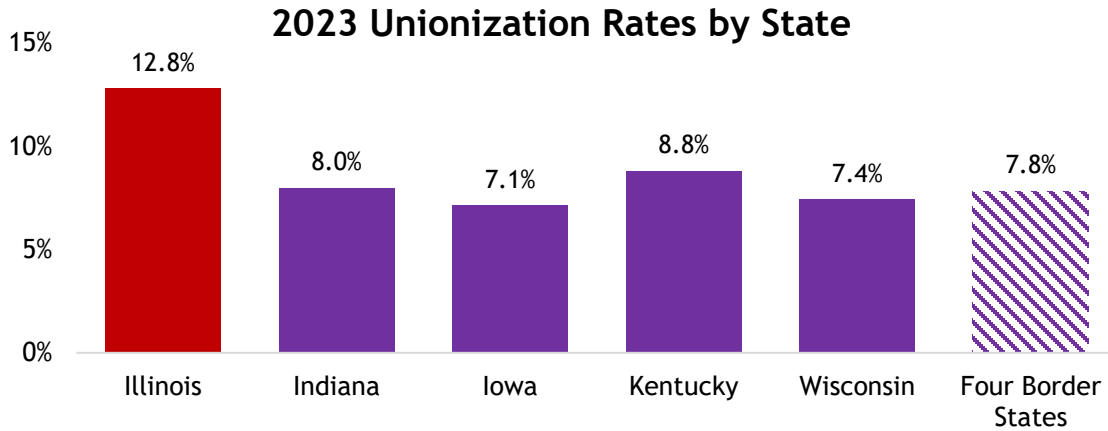
In November 2022, voters approved the Workers' Rights Amendment, adding Section 25 to the Illinois Constitution. The Amendment declares that "no law shall be passed that interferes with, negates, or diminishes the right of employees to organize and bargain collectively over their wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment and work place safety" (ILGA, 2023). The Amendment guarantees the fundamental right of workers to unionize and bargain collectively, effectively bans in perpetuity so-called "right-to-work" laws, and blocks any future legislation that would limit the items over which public sector employees can bargain in Illinois.

This recent policy change warrants an updated analysis of labor market outcomes in Illinois compared to neighboring states that have weakened workers' rights by adopting so-called "right-to-work" laws. Between 2012 and 2017, five states—including bordering Indiana in February 2012, Wisconsin in March 2015, and Kentucky in January 2017—enacted "right-to-work" laws (NRTWC, 2024). Neighboring Iowa has

always operated with “right-to-work” regulations, while Missouri protects workers’ rights to collectively bargain.

While union membership has declined in Illinois over time, unionization continues to be significantly higher in Illinois than in neighboring states that have weakened workers’ rights (Figure 23). The union membership rate in Illinois (12.8 percent) is 5.0 percentage points higher than the aggregate union membership rate in its four neighbors that have weakened workers’ rights (7.8 percent).² Illinois’ unionization rate ranges from 4.0 percentage points higher than Kentucky’s to 5.6 percentage points higher than Iowa’s (Figure 23).

FIGURE 23: UNIONIZATION RATES IN ILLINOIS AND STATES WITH WEAKENED WORKERS’ RIGHTS, 2023



Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024).

Not only are average hourly earnings considerably higher for Illinois’ workers, but they have also grown faster (Figure 24). In 2017, when Kentucky became the last bordering state to adopt a so-called “right-to-work” law, average earnings were \$26.40 per hour in Illinois and \$22.86 per hour in the four neighboring states that weakened workers’ rights. By 2023, average hourly earnings had increased to \$36.82 per hour in Illinois, or by \$10.42 per hour, and \$30.82 per hour in the four border states, or by just \$7.97 per hour. Average worker earnings grew by 39.5 percent in Illinois, which was 4.6 percent faster than the four neighboring states that weakened workers’ rights (34.8 percent). Over six years, average hourly earnings increased by between 2.0 percent more (versus Indiana) and 13.1 percent more (versus Iowa) compared to neighboring states. As a result, Illinois workers now earn 19.4 percent more per hour than their counterparts in the four neighboring states that weakened workers’ rights—ranging from 15.6 percent more than those in Wisconsin to 27.8 percent more than those in Iowa (Figure 24).

FIGURE 24: AVERAGE HOURLY EARNINGS IN ILLINOIS AND SELECTED NEIGHBORS, 2017 VS. 2023

Average Hourly Earnings	2017	2023	Change	Growth	Illinois Difference
Illinois	\$26.40	\$36.82	+\$10.42	+39.5%	--
“Right-to-Work” Border States	\$22.86	\$30.82	+\$7.97	+34.8%	+4.6%
Indiana	\$22.98	\$31.57	+\$8.60	+37.4%	+2.0%
Iowa	\$22.81	\$28.82	+\$6.01	+26.4%	+13.1%
Kentucky	\$21.99	\$29.59	+\$7.60	+34.6%	+4.9%
Wisconsin	\$23.32	\$31.84	+\$8.52	+36.5%	+2.9%

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024). Wages are in nominal dollars (i.e., they are not adjusted for inflation). Numbers may not sum perfectly due to rounding.

² In fact, despite having about 3.9 million fewer total workers than Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, and Wisconsin combined, Illinois has 1,000 more union members.

While some proponents of so-called “right-to-work” laws assert that they attract businesses and increase employment, the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service found that “existing empirical research is inconclusive” and other research shows that they have no impact on job growth, the unemployment rate, or the number of business establishments (Collins, 2014; Wexler, 2022; Jones & Shierholz, 2018; Eren & Ozbeklik, 2011). Nevertheless, both employment and usual hours worked per week performed marginally better in the four border states from 2017 through 2023 than in Illinois (Figure 25). In Illinois, the number of workers increased by 0.1 percent and their usual hours worked per week declined by 0.8 percent. By contrast, the number of workers increased by 0.3 percent and usual hours worked per week declined by 0.2 percent in the four states that weakened workers’ rights. These 0.2 percent employment and 0.6 percent hours advantages over Illinois were not enough to overcome Illinois’ large 4.6 percent earnings improvement. When multiplied together, total worker earnings increased by 38.5 percent in Illinois between 2017 and 2023 compared to an analogous gain of just 34.9 percent in neighboring Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, and Wisconsin—a 3.5 percent relative expansion for Illinois workers overall (Figure 25). Overall, Illinois workers have higher unionization rates, earn higher wages, and have experienced stronger earnings growth than their counterparts in neighboring states that have weakened workers’ rights.

FIGURE 25: TOTAL LABOR MARKET CHANGES IN ILLINOIS AND SELECTED NEIGHBORS, 2017 VS. 2023

State	Labor Market Outcome	2017	2023	2017-2023
Illinois	Estimated Workers	6,073,058	6,078,713	+0.1%
	Average Hourly Wage	\$26.40	\$36.82	+39.5%
	Hours Worked Per Week	39.3	39.0	-0.8%
	Total Worker Earnings	\$327,600,543,510	\$453,602,267,378	+38.5%
Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, and Wisconsin	Estimated Workers	9,940,085	9,968,511	+0.3%
	Average Hourly Wage	\$22.86	\$30.82	+34.8%
	Hours Worked Per Week	39.3	39.2	-0.2%
	Total Worker Earnings	\$464,206,900,406	\$626,279,925,438	+34.9%
Illinois Difference	Estimated Workers	--	--	-0.2%
	Average Hourly Wage	--	--	+4.6%
	Hours Worked Per Week	--	--	-0.6%
	Total Worker Earnings	--	--	+3.5%

Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2023 (EPI, 2024). Wages are in nominal dollars (i.e., they are not adjusted for inflation). Numbers may not sum perfectly due to rounding.

CONCLUSION

Today, about 13 percent of all workers are unionized in Illinois. Black workers, men, military veterans, and workers with master’s degrees have the highest unionization rates across the state. The data reveal that unions continue to promote job quality and increase hourly earnings. Illinois has the 3rd-highest union wage premium in the nation, with unions raising wages for the average and median worker by 13 percent.

However, since 2014, unionization has declined by about 122,000 members in Illinois. This decline is due to a number of factors but includes an economy that has transitioned away from manufacturing towards highly-paid knowledge careers like management, business, and financial occupations—which have very low union densities—and a decrease in public sector union membership caused by reduced employment and high vacancies. It is also partially the result of changing population and workforce dynamics. Over the past decade, Illinois’ population and workforce have become more Hispanic, more Asian, and more foreign-born. These demographic groups tend to have lower unionization rates than those for white, Black, and native-born workers.

Despite long-term challenges, workers still fare better in Illinois than they do in neighboring states that have weakened workers’ rights. Compared to the four border states with so-called “right-to-work” laws

that erode worker bargaining power—Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, and Wisconsin—Illinois’ unionization rate is 5 percentage points higher and worker earnings have grown 5 percent faster since 2017. As a result, Illinois workers now earn an average of 19 percent more per hour than their counterparts in these four neighboring states. With the Workers’ Rights Amendment now enshrined into the Illinois Constitution, these labor market advantages are likely to persist—and could potentially widen—over the next decade.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A: ROBUST OLS AND QUANTILE REGRESSIONS OF THE IMPACT OF UNION MEMBERSHIP ON THE NATURAL LOG OF HOURLY WAGES, 2021-2023

Ln(Nominal Wage)	(1) USA Mean		(1) Illinois Mean		(2) Illinois Median		(3) Indiana Mean	
	Coefficient	(St. Err.)	Coefficient	(St. Err.)	Coefficient	(St. Err.)	Coefficient	(St. Err.)
Union member	0.0744***	(0.0032)	0.1185***	(0.0164)	0.1245***	(0.0183)	0.0723***	(0.0215)
Age	0.0325***	(0.0004)	0.0328***	(0.0024)	0.0237***	(0.0022)	0.0302***	(0.0027)
Age ²	-0.0003***	(0.0000)	-0.0003***	(0.0000)	-0.0002***	(0.0000)	-0.0003***	(0.0000)
Female identity	-0.1661***	(0.0022)	-0.1763***	(0.0119)	-0.1439***	(0.0102)	-0.1858***	(0.0142)
White	0.0355***	(0.0095)	0.1492*	(0.0877)	0.1357***	(0.0286)	0.1009	(0.1081)
Black/African American	-0.0574***	(0.0099)	0.0703	(0.0893)	0.0614*	(0.0315)	0.0201	(0.1088)
Hispanic/Latinx	-0.0377***	(0.0098)	0.0719	(0.0884)	0.0638**	(0.0299)	0.0567	(0.1096)
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.0608***	(0.0104)	0.1823**	(0.0901)	0.1499***	(0.0334)	0.0716	(0.1154)
Veteran	0.0218***	(0.0047)	0.0251	(0.0326)	0.0056	(0.0316)	-0.0151	(0.0303)
Married	0.0707***	(0.0021)	0.0811***	(0.0120)	0.0848***	(0.0108)	0.0709***	(0.0132)
Citizen	0.0627***	(0.0048)	0.0747***	(0.0239)	0.0587***	(0.0182)	0.0605	(0.0440)
Foreign-born	-0.0342***	(0.0040)	-0.0287	(0.0204)	-0.0586***	(0.0169)	-0.0692*	(0.0370)
Metro Area	0.0703***	(0.0027)	0.0853***	(0.0192)	0.0963***	(0.0185)	0.0644***	(0.0153)
Federal government	0.0243***	(0.0064)	0.0142	(0.0416)	0.0120	(0.0337)	-0.0085	(0.0588)
State government	-0.1287***	(0.0047)	-0.2166***	(0.0308)	-0.2129***	(0.0270)	-0.1067***	(0.0366)
Local government	-0.1149***	(0.0041)	-0.1386***	(0.0235)	-0.1683***	(0.0218)	-0.1670***	(0.0257)
Usual hours worked	0.0038***	(0.0001)	0.0040***	(0.0006)	0.0053***	(0.0005)	0.0042***	(0.0007)
Less than high school	-0.1221***	(0.0034)	-0.1045***	(0.0196)	-0.0724***	(0.0145)	-0.1375***	(0.0207)
Some college	0.0404***	(0.0027)	0.0527***	(0.0151)	0.0519***	(0.0131)	-0.0011	(0.0174)
Associate's	0.0800***	(0.0031)	0.0853***	(0.0177)	0.0813***	(0.0155)	0.0770***	(0.0193)
Bachelor's	0.2992***	(0.0030)	0.3378***	(0.0165)	0.3274***	(0.0162)	0.2493***	(0.0195)
Master's	0.4289***	(0.0041)	0.4441***	(0.0221)	0.4544***	(0.0200)	0.3556***	(0.0277)
Professional/Doctorate	0.5958***	(0.0069)	0.6638***	(0.0348)	0.7132***	(0.0413)	0.6060***	(0.0580)
Year: 2022	0.0673***	(0.0022)	0.0777***	(0.0124)	0.0522***	(0.0109)	0.0608***	(0.0124)
Year: 2023	0.1151***	(0.0022)	0.1342***	(0.0122)	0.1227***	(0.0110)	0.1192***	(0.0122)
Industry Variables	Y		Y		Y		Y	
Occupation Variables	Y		Y		Y		Y	
State Fixed Effects	Y		N		N		N	
Constant	2.0431***	(0.0152)	1.8164***	(0.1046)	1.9353***	(0.0585)	2.0475***	(0.1296)
R ²	0.4125		0.4078		0.2737		0.3912	
Observations	362,162		10,333		10,333		6,248	
Weighted	Y		Y		Y		Y	

Three asterisks (***) indicate significance at the 1% level, two asterisks (**) indicates significance at the 5% level, and one asterisk (*) indicates significance at the 10% level. Source: CPS-ORG, Economic Policy Institute, 2021-2023 (EPI, 2024). The data are adjusted by the outgoing rotation group earnings weight to match the total population 16 to 80 years old.

Robust ordinary least squares (OLS) and quantile regression models account for other variables to parse out the actual and unique causal effect that union membership has on hourly wages on average. The analyses control for a host of demographic, work, sector, industry, occupation, and education variables that could also have an impact on a worker's hourly earnings. In the U.S. model, state indicator variables are included to factor in unmeasured state-specific characteristics. The sample, in all cases, is weighted to match population estimates. Regression (1) compares the impact of union membership on wages for Illinois compared to the nation from robust OLS analyses, regression (2) provides the median regression from a quantile regression for Illinois, and regression (3) uses Indiana as an example of robust OLS results from another state.

NOTE: In this report, regression outputs are converted to percent changes using correct adjustments to interpret natural logarithms (Kennedy, 1981; IDRE, 2024). The correct interpretations of these results are $e^{(\text{coefficient})} - 1$.