

THE 2008 UTAH PRIORITIES SURVEY: THE TOP ISSUES AND CONCERNS OF UTAH VOTERS FOR THE 2008 ELECTION

THE 2008 UTAH PRIORITIES PROJECT

During this election season, Utah Foundation is working to focus political dialogue on the issues that matter most to Utah voters. This project begins with this survey to rank the major issues and set the agenda for Utah Foundation's research this year.

The Utah Priorities Project website (www.utahpriorities.net) will serve as a library of information on the top issues and will facilitate dialogue about these issues. For the first time, Utah Foundation will gather reader comments and answer questions from the public on each research publication. The Utah Priorities Project site will also host an online "town hall" in which policy experts and candidates will post brief essays on these top issues and will answer your questions and comments about their take on the issues.

The Utah Priorities Project will also feature live public forums and debates through a partnership with the Hinckley Institute of Politics and a number of media partners. To ensure you hear about these events and to receive each of our briefs and reports on these issues, sign up on our email list at www.utahpriorities.net.

The mission of Utah Foundation is to promote a thriving economy, a well-prepared workforce, and a high quality of life for Utahns by performing thorough, well-supported research that helps policymakers, business and community leaders, and citizens better understand complex issues and providing practical, well-reasoned recommendations for policy change.

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In this election year, Utahns remain confident that the state is heading in the right direction. Their concerns about some issues, like education and the economy, have eased since 2004. However, other issues have flared up, including the impacts of rising energy prices, immigration, and transportation concerns.

As the introduction to the 2008 Utah Priorities Project, this report provides a summary of the findings of a statewide survey by Dan Jones and Associates to assess which issues are most important this year and how voters feel about Utah's economy and society. The full report from the polling firm is available online at www.utahfoundation.org. The goal of this survey was to determine the most important public policy issues for voters, their level of concern about each issue, and to provide details about why voters care about each issue. The survey was not designed to gather voters' prescriptions for solving these problems but rather to provide a solid list of priority issues for candidates and voters to focus on through this election cycle.

HOW THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED

The process began with a pre-survey, asking a small sample of 200 people a simple question: "What would you say is the most important issue facing the state of Utah?" Those 200 open-ended answers were analyzed and grouped into 16 topic areas. Beginning with the open-ended question helped ensure that the final survey did not miss any important issues currently on the

Figure 1: Top 10 Issues, Statewide and Washington County

Statewide	Washington County
1. Energy Issues, Including Utilities & Gasoline Prices	1. Energy Issues, Including Utilities & Gasoline Prices
2. K-12 Education	2. Taxes and Government Spending
3. Taxes and Government Spending	3. Immigration
4. Healthcare	4. Water Supply and Quality
5. Immigration	5. K-12 Education
6. Crime and Security	6. Healthcare
7. Water Supply and Quality	7. Jobs and the Economy
8. Environmental Issues, Including Air Quality & Pollution	8. Crime and Security
9. Transportation and Traffic	9. Dealing with Utah's Growth
10. Dealing with Utah's Growth	10. Housing

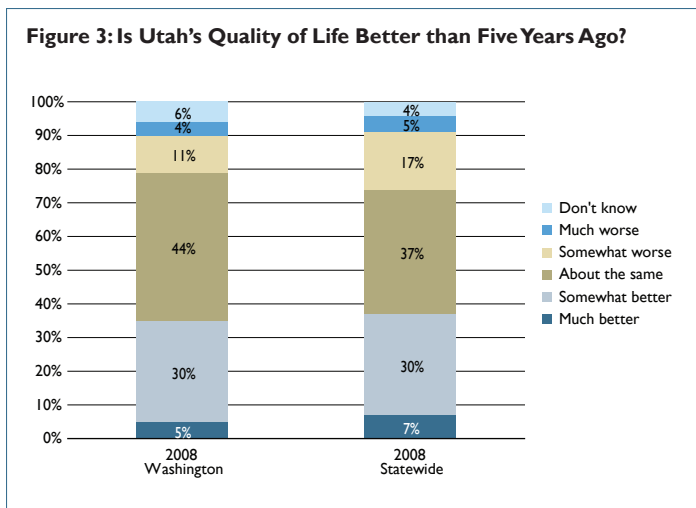
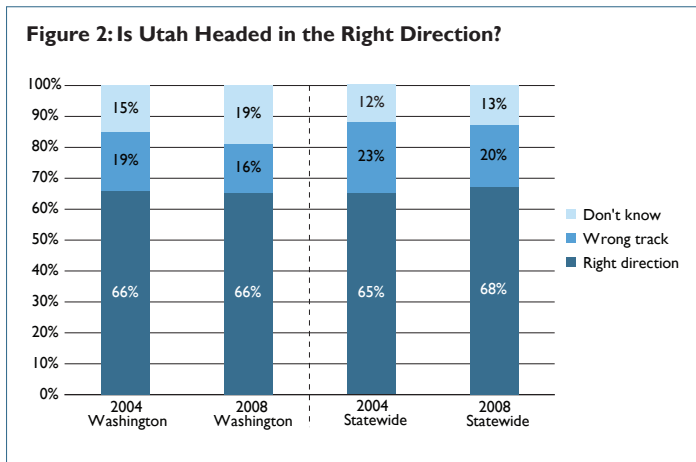
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minds of Utah voters. A few of the concerns expressed by respondents in the small survey focused on religious issues and politics; some were about the intersection of the two. Those two issues were included in the final survey but did not elicit a significant level of concern from most Utahns.

After compiling the list of issues from the small survey, Utah Foundation and Dan Jones and Associates created a longer survey, asking registered voters to rate each of the 16 issues by their level of concern about that issue. This longer survey was administered to 617 respondents statewide, plus an oversample of 208 from Washington County to allow statistically valid comparisons between Washington County and the rest of the state. Since Washington County holds the largest population of Utahns outside of the Wasatch Front, the survey was designed to see if their opinions are significantly different than statewide voters.¹

HEADED IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

Utahns are generally upbeat about the state, with 68% responding that the state is “headed in the right direction.” This is slightly higher than in 2004. Washington County results were very similar to the statewide findings. Twenty percent of respondents statewide felt that things “have gotten off on the wrong track.”



UTAH'S QUALITY OF LIFE

Respondents were asked to rate the overall quality of life in Utah compared to five years ago. Figure 3 shows mixed results; a minority of voters (37% statewide) felt that the quality of life was somewhat or much better, but an equal number felt that it was about the same. A smaller group (22% statewide) felt that it was somewhat or much worse. These findings are likely linked with the strains placed on the state from rapid economic and population growth in recent years. A later question in the survey shows findings on Utahns' attitudes about growth.

Figure 4: The Top Ten Issues Statewide

Issue	Not at all Concerned			Very Concerned		Mean Score
	1	2	3	4	5	
1. Energy Issues	2%	6%	17%	28%	46%	4.10
2. K-12 Education	3%	10%	17%	23%	44%	3.97
3. Taxes and Government Spending						
Government Spending	3%	8%	23%	28%	37%	3.90
Taxes	2%	8%	26%	28%	35%	3.87
4. Healthcare	4%	9%	19%	29%	39%	3.89
5. Immigration	6%	11%	20%	18%	44%	3.83
6. Crime and Security	3%	13%	22%	30%	32%	3.75
7. Water Supply and Quality	4%	11%	24%	29%	32%	3.75
8. Environmental Issues	4%	12%	25%	27%	31%	3.69
9. Transportation and Traffic	3%	9%	29%	33%	25%	3.69
10. Dealing with Utah's Growth	4%	10%	28%	30%	27%	3.66

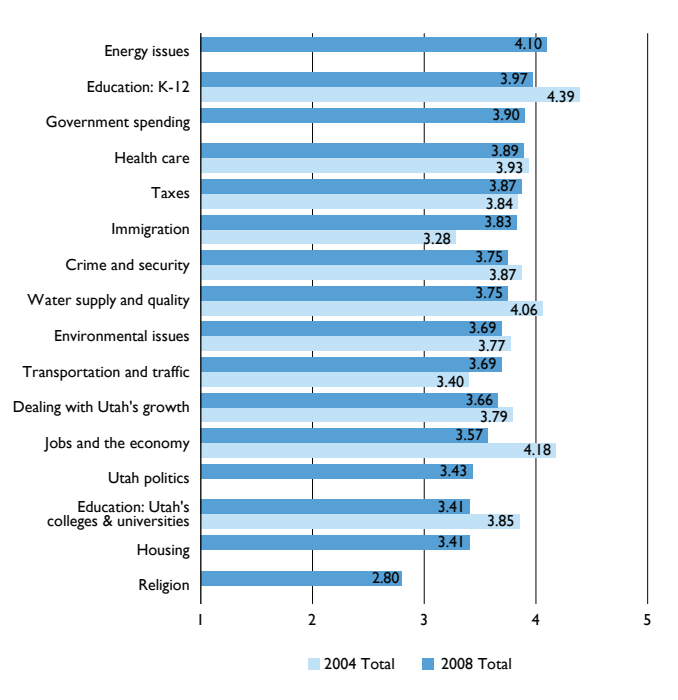
THE TOP 10 ISSUES FACING UTAH

In the initial pre-survey, education was the most common unprompted response for the most important issue. However, when respondents were provided the list of all 16 issues, their highest level of concern was about “energy issues, including utilities and gasoline prices.” Figure 4 illustrates how the top 10 issues rated, showing the percent of respondents who rated them at each level of concern, along with the overall mean score of the concern level.

In Washington County, respondents gave a different sense of priorities on many of the issues. Figure 1 (on page 1) shows the differences between the statewide results and the Washington results. Washington County voters were more concerned about taxes, government spending, immigration, water, the economy, growth, and housing than statewide voters. They were less concerned about K-12 education, healthcare, and crime. This is likely a reflection of the older population in Washington County, who are less likely to have children in school, more likely to have health insurance (including Medicare), and who experienced a greater “housing bubble” than the rest of the state (at least up to this date).

Only one issue in the 2008 statewide survey received a mean score above 4.00 (energy issues, at 4.10). This is different than in 2004, when the three top issues had mean scores above 4.00: K-12 education (4.39), jobs and the economy (4.18), and water supply and quality (4.06). Figure 5 shows the differences between the 2004 and 2008 surveys, including the issues that did not make the top 10 list. The graph shows that voters' concerns about four issues have shifted appreciably since 2004. Concerns significantly diminished about K-12 education, jobs and the economy, and education at Utah's colleges and universities, while concern about immigration jumped. Immigration did not

Figure 5: Statewide Concerns, 2004 and 2008



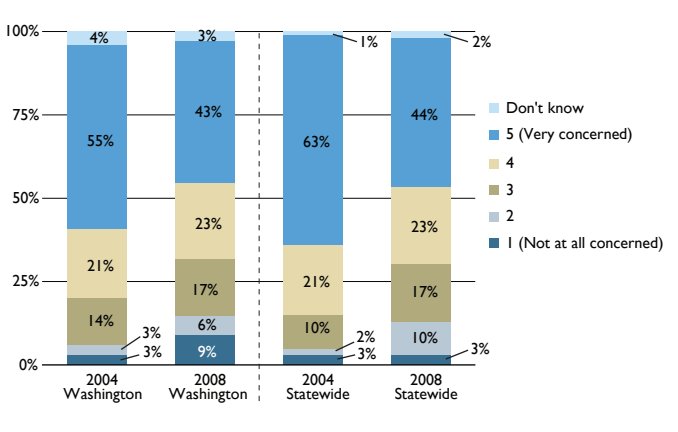
make the top 10 list in 2004, but clearly has become a high priority this year.

Figure 6 shows some of the nuances in the public's level of concern for K-12 education compared with 2004. The number of people "very concerned" about K-12 education has fallen dramatically since four years ago. In the statewide survey, the decline was 19 percentage points from 2004 to 2008. This may be the result of the well-publicized increases in education funding provided by the Legislature and Governor during the past three years.

DETAILS ON THE TOP ISSUES

Throughout the remainder of the survey, respondents were asked follow-up questions based on which issues they rated as moderate to high concerns. This provides insight on why each issue matters to voters. When a respondent rated an issue as a three, four or five (on a 1-5 scale of concern), they were asked follow-up questions about that

Figure 6: Concerns About Education, 2004 and 2008

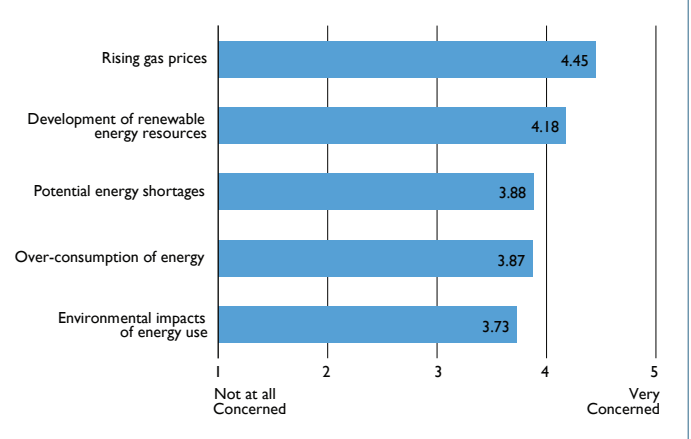


issue to gauge their level of concern about specific subtopics related to that issue. The following sections describe the results of those follow-up questions. Where significant differences were found in Washington County, they are noted in the text, though not in the graphs.

Energy Issues

Examining energy issues in more detail, rising gas prices are causing substantial statewide concern (4.45) on the 5-point scale. The concern was even higher in Washington County (4.53). Development of renewable energy sources also rates highly as a concern (4.18), followed by potential energy shortages (3.88), and over-consumption of energy (3.87). With a statewide score of 3.73 (still well above 3.00), the environmental impacts of energy use rates lowest of the five. Washington County residents place this issue even lower, at 3.49.

Figure 7: Concerns About Energy Issues

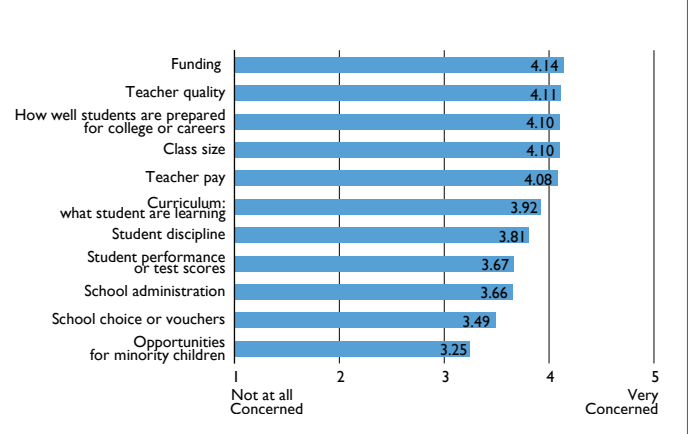


- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about energy issues include: age 65 or older; high school education or less; Catholics; have no children under age 18 living in home; have children in the public school system.

K-12 Education

Voters concerned about kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) education were asked to rate eleven additional aspects of Utah's K-12 education system. Of the eleven issues, five had mean scores above 4.00, indicating a very high level of concern. The highest concern is funding

Figure 8: Concerns About K-12 Education Issues



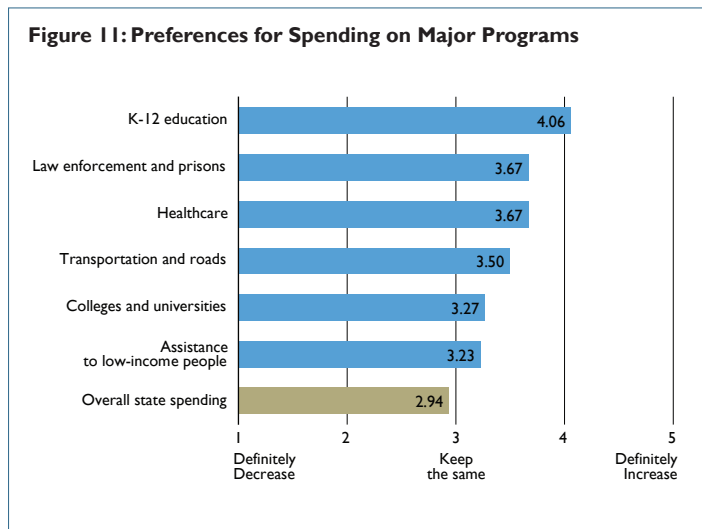
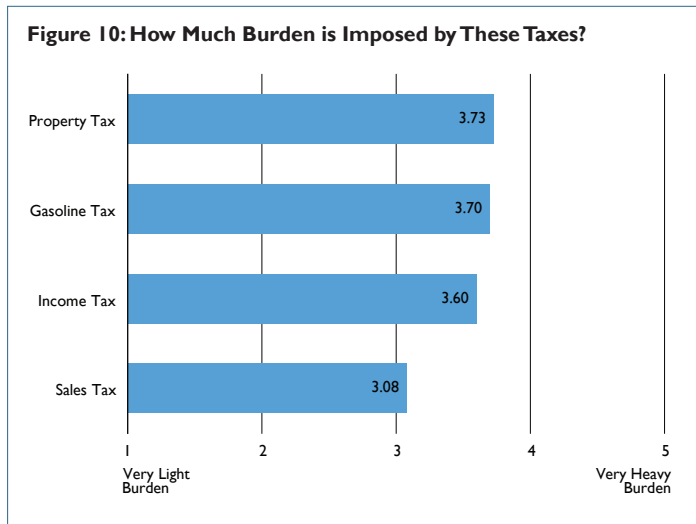
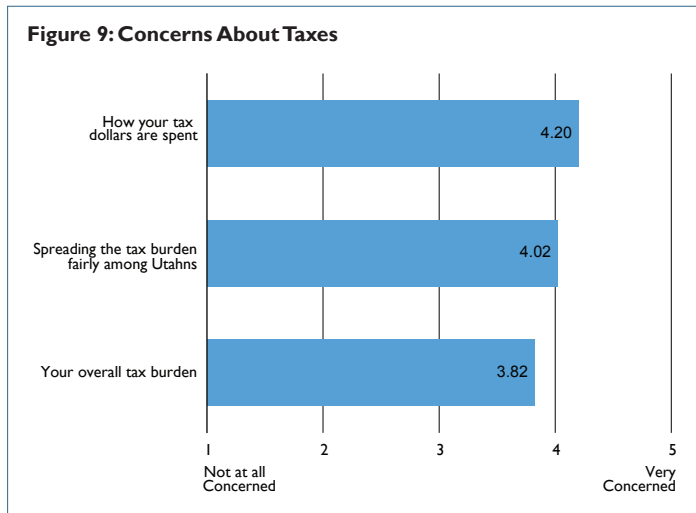
for public education (4.14). The next three have nearly identical mean scores: teacher quality (4.11), class size (4.10), and how well students are prepared for college or careers (4.10). Teacher pay (4.08) is the fifth issue rated above 4.00.

K-12 education tied with crime and security for having the most subtopics rated higher than 4.0. This indicates that despite a reduction in concern from 2004, education is still a very important priority for Utah voters.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about K-12 education include: age 18-54; have children under age 18 living in home.
- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **not concerned** about K-12 education include: age 65 or older; have no children under age 18 living in home.

Taxes and Government Spending

This is a combination of two issues that were asked separately in the survey. They were combined because there was much crossover in opinion about these issues. For example, when asked three follow-up questions about taxes, the highest-rated concern was “how your tax dollars are spent,” with a mean score of 4.20.



Voters also maintain a high level of concern about spreading the tax burden fairly among Utahns, with a statewide mean score of 4.02, although this is down considerably from 2004 (4.36). Finally, “Your overall tax burden” received a mean score of 3.82 statewide.

A separate set of question asks how heavy the tax burden is from each of four major taxes. Statewide, the property tax is perceived to cause the heaviest burden of the four taxes, with a mean score of 3.73. In Washington County, it ranks second, with a mean score of 3.76. There, the gasoline tax has a higher mean score (3.85). Statewide, the gasoline tax ranks second for burden (3.70), the income tax ranks third (3.60), and the sales tax ranks fourth (3.08).

Curiously, these ratings are opposite to what statistics show about the actual tax burden on Utahns. A 2007 Utah Foundation research brief showed that Utah’s heaviest tax burden comes from sales taxes, with income taxes second, property taxes third, and gas taxes falling far behind in the actual burden placed on Utahns.² This survey seems to confirm the notion that more visible taxes are considered more burdensome.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about taxes include: age 45 or older; high school education or less; very conservative political ideology; have children in the public school system.

On government spending, respondents were asked to indicate whether they think state and local government spending in six areas should decrease, stay the same, or increase. A one-to-five scale is used, with one meaning definitely decrease, three meaning keep the same, and five meaning definitely increase.

This question shows a clear list of voter preferences for state spending. K-12 education is the only area with a mean score above 4.00, indicating that most voters feel that spending should definitely increase. Mean scores for the next two areas, healthcare (3.67) and law enforcement and prisons (3.67) are considerably lower. Even so, voters feel that there should be increased spending in these areas.

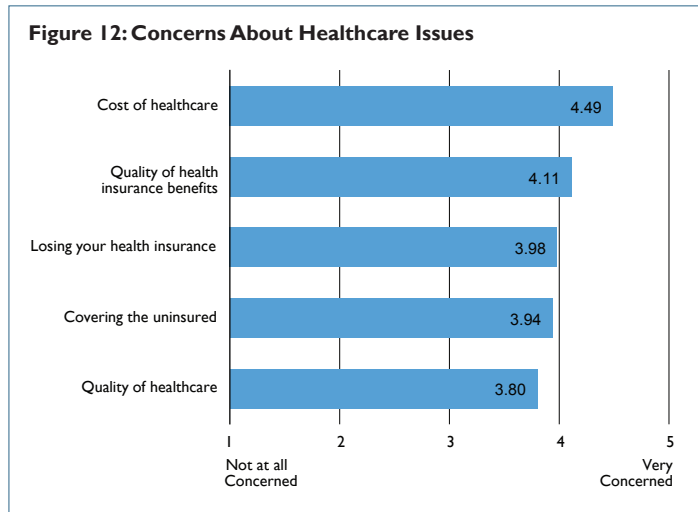
Statewide voters are looking for a higher degree of increased spending on transportation and roads (3.50) than are Washington County voters (3.30). On the other hand, Washington County voters are more likely to say spending for colleges and universities (3.54) should increase than statewide voters (3.27). Assistance to low-income people is also rated similarly, with a moderate desire for more spending (3.23).

Overall state spending receives a mean score just below but very close to the midpoint, indicating that more voters believe overall spending should decrease, but this sentiment is not very strong.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about government spending include: age 45 or older; high school education or less; Democrats; have children in the public school system.

Healthcare

The cost of healthcare evokes an enormous level of concern, as evidenced by the statewide mean score of 4.49. Surprisingly, this number was even higher in 2004 (4.56). The quality of health insurance benefits

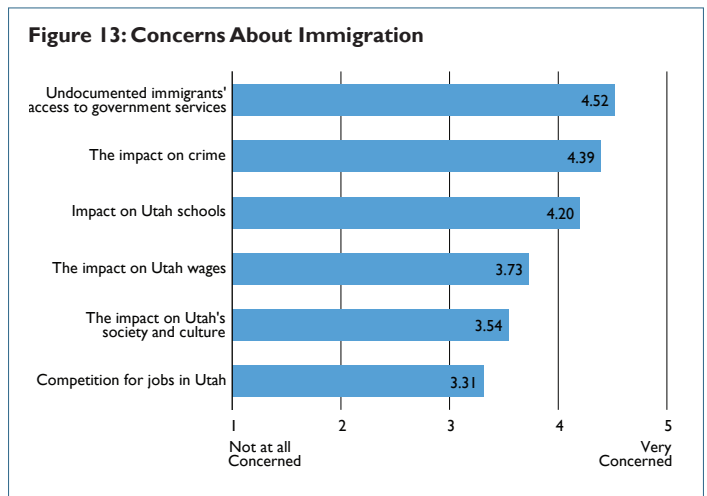


is also of high concern, but not significantly different than concerns about losing health insurance or covering the uninsured. The lowest concern in this list was about the quality of healthcare.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about healthcare include: age 45-64 or older; Democrats; liberal political ideology; Catholics or Protestants; somewhat active or not active in their religion.

Immigration

Three specific concerns about immigration, all with statewide mean scores of 4.20 or higher on the 5-point scale, trigger greater concern than the others. One issue, undocumented immigrants' access to government services (4.52), has the second-highest statewide mean score for any subtopic in the entire survey. For Washington County residents, this subtopic has the highest mean score in the entire survey



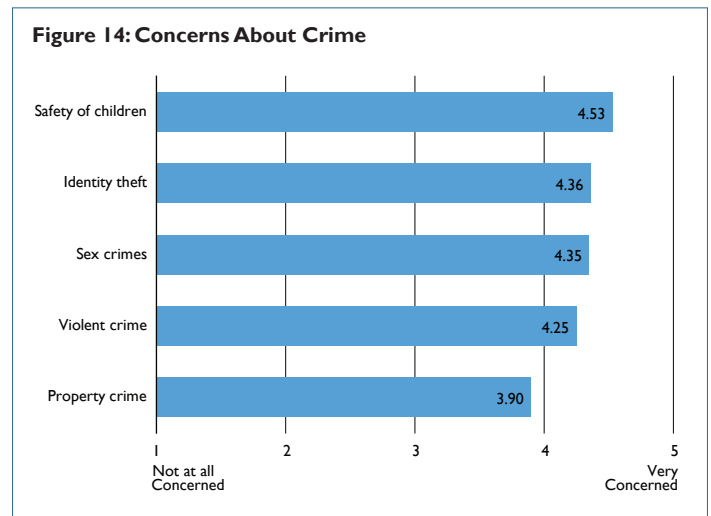
(4.62). The other top concerns about immigration are its impact on crime (4.39) and its impact on schools (4.20).

A concern for Dixie respondents that is not as troublesome for their statewide counterparts is the impact on Utah wages. In Washington County, this gets a mean score of 4.09, while statewide it renders a mean score of 3.73. The lowest-concern issue is competition for jobs in Utah. However, with mean scores of 3.69 for Washington County, and 3.31 for the entire state, this is still an important concern.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about immigration include: age 65 and older; lower educational attainment; lived in Utah more than 20 years; very conservative political ideology.
- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **not concerned** about immigration include: age 55-64; post-graduate education; Democrats; liberal political ideology.

Crime and Security

Concern about various types of crime against individuals is quite high. Statewide, nearly three out of five say they are very concerned (response of 5) about identity theft (58%) or sex crimes (59%), and two out of three (67%) give that response about their concern for the



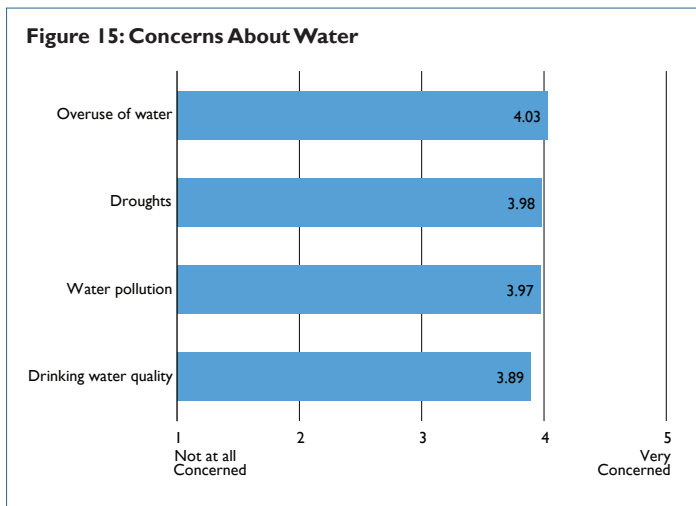
safety of children. When responses of 4 and 5 are combined, concern about both identity theft and sex crimes reaches 83%, and concern for children’s safety reaches 89%.

The mean score for safety of children (4.53) is the highest statewide mean score for all the subtopics in the entire survey. Concern about violent crime (4.25) is also very high. Of note, the first three items in the graph were phrased differently than in 2004, when the questions asked about their concern for being a victim of each type of crime. The 2008 survey therefore measures more general concern about each issue, and is not directly comparable to the 2004 results.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about crime and security include: age 65 and over.
- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **not concerned** about crime and security include: age 18-34.

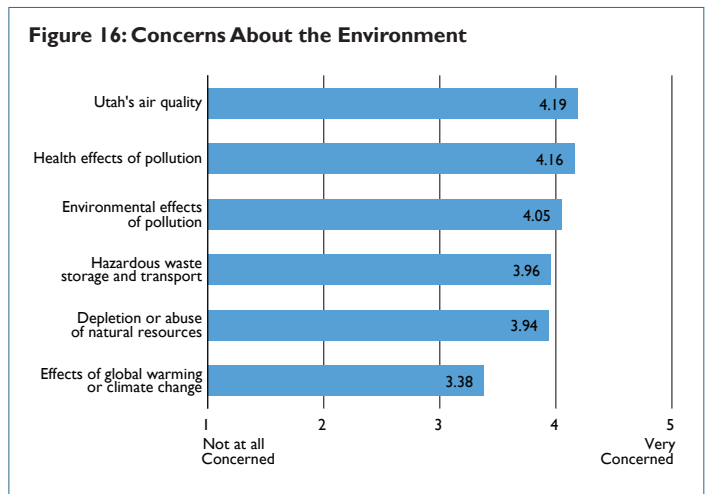
Water Supply and Quality

Statewide concern for the four water issues places it near the middle of the 16 issues. In Washington County, however, it measures noticeably higher. Its mean score ties with K-12 education (3.89) and is the fourth most pressing concern.



Among the four water issues in this section, the overuse of water ranks highest, at 4.03 statewide. Collectively, Washington County voters rate it even higher, at 4.10. They view droughts (4.15) as an even higher concern (compared with the statewide 3.98). Although the scores are very closely grouped, if a difference exists between Dixie voters and those from the entire state on this issue, it is that Washington County respondents are more likely than their statewide counterparts to focus on the quantity of water, while statewide voters statewide are more concerned about the quality of water.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about water supply and quality include: age 45-64; Democrats; liberal political ideology; Catholics; somewhat active in their religion; annual family income below \$40,000 or above \$100,000.

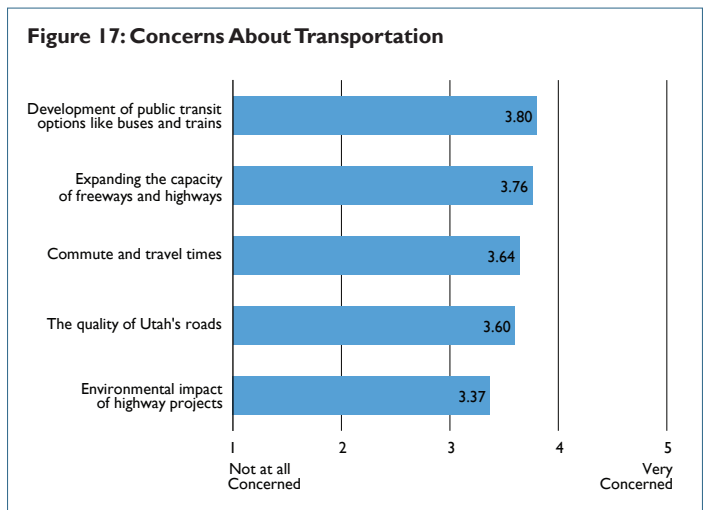


- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **not concerned** about water supply and quality include: Republicans; very conservative political ideology.

Environmental Issues

The results of the survey indicate that environmental issues are of significant concern to voters, with half of the mean scores in this section over 4.00 on the 1-to-5 scale of concern. Air quality and the health effects of pollution take prominent places as issues of pressing concern. Hazardous waste storage and transport generates more concern for Washington voters than for voters from across the state, where it gets a mean score of 3.96, compared with 3.79 statewide. The subtopic of global warming or climate change scores significantly lower than the others and is among the lower scores for any of the subtopics in the entire survey.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about environmental issues include: age 45-54 or 65 and older; Democrats and independent voters; liberal political ideology; Catholics or no religious affiliation; somewhat active in their religion; have no children under age 18 living in home; annual family income below \$40,000 or above \$100,000.
- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **not concerned**



about environmental issues include: Republicans; very conservative political ideology; 2nd Congressional District.

Transportation and Traffic

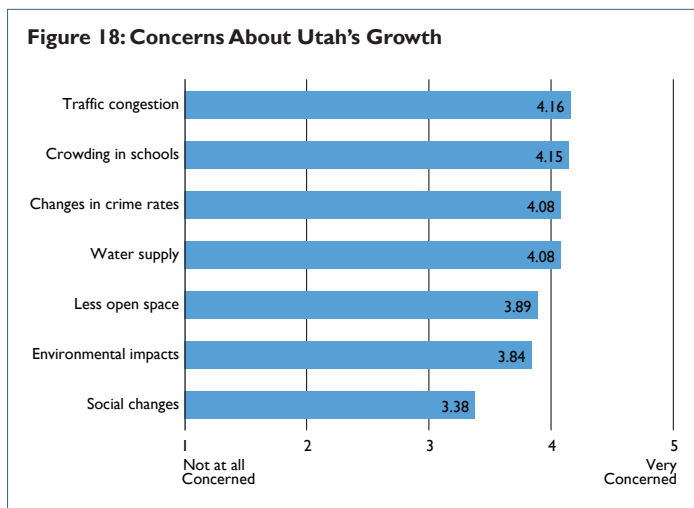
Transportation made the top 10 list this year; in 2004 it was the eleventh-ranked issue. Statewide, the top concern in this area, development of public transit options like buses and trains, is probably statistically tied with expanding the capacity of freeways and highways. Among Washington County voters, the top concern this year is the quality of Utah's roads (3.64).

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about transportation and traffic include: age 55 and older; lived in Utah more than 20 years; moderate political ideology; have no children under age 18 living in home.
- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **not concerned** about transportation and traffic include: somewhat conservative political ideology.

Dealing with Utah's Growth

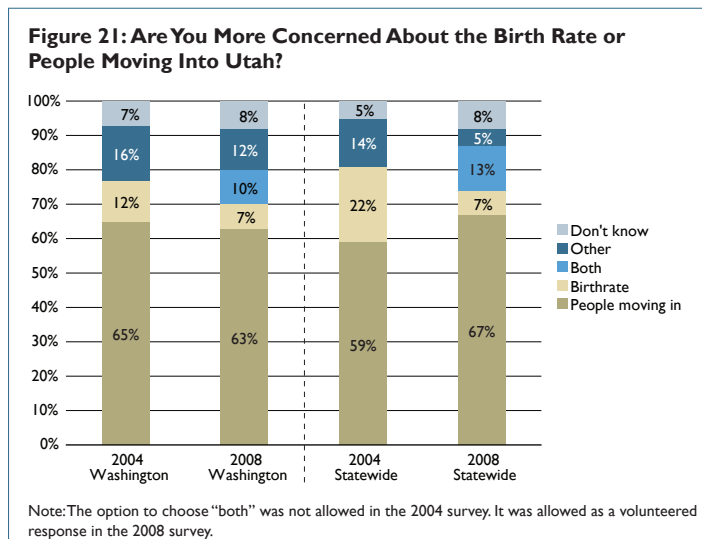
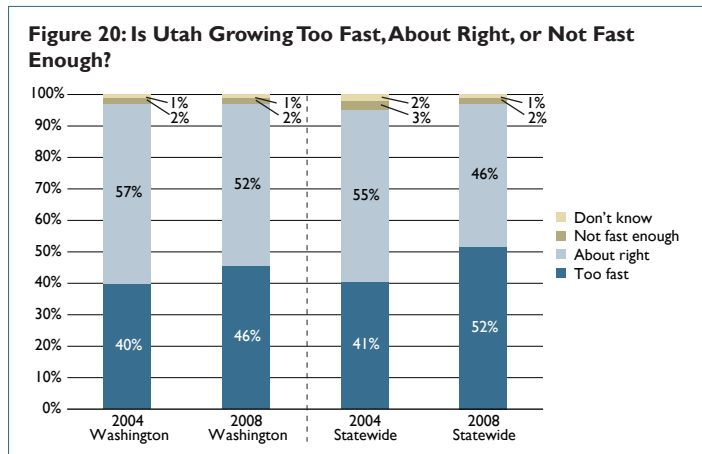
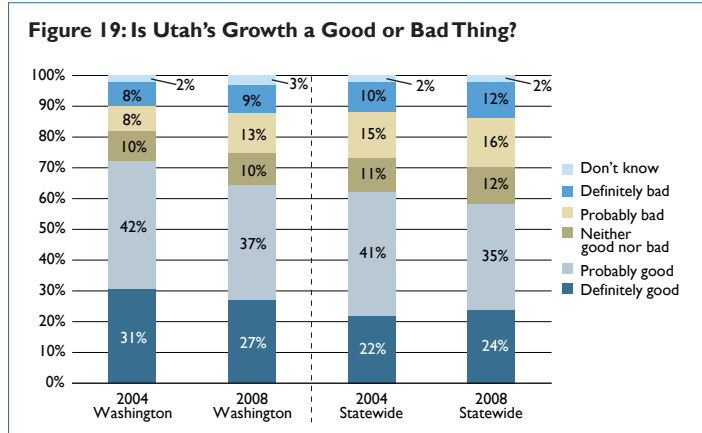
The topic of growth was the subject of several sets of questions in the survey. Seven questions deal with specific concerns associated with growth. Statewide, four attained mean scores above 4.00, on the 5-point scale. The highest, traffic congestion (4.16) is followed closely by crowding in schools (4.15). Among Washington County voters the effects of growth on water supply (4.07) and its effects on changes in crime rates (4.06) emerge as the top growth concerns. Of least concern to both groups (although still above the midpoint of 3.00) are the social changes attendant with growth (statewide: 3.38 and Washington County: 3.27).

In another question, respondents were asked "Overall, would you say that growth in Utah is a good thing or a bad thing?" Opinions have changed since 2004, most notably in Washington County, where fewer voters say growth is definitely or probably good (2004: 73% and 2008: 64%, down 9 percentage points). A similar, although not as pronounced, trend is apparent in the statewide voting population (2004: 63% and 2008: 59%, down 4 percentage points).



Participants were also asked whether they feel the state is growing too fast, about right, or not fast enough. More than half (52%) of statewide respondents say that it is growing too fast, while slightly fewer than half (46%) believe the rate is about right. Washington County respondents have the reverse opinion, with 46% saying the state is growing too fast, and 52% indicating it is growing about right. The percentage of voters saying the state is growing too fast is up from 2004, when about two out of five people held this position (statewide: 41%, Washington County: 40%).

When asked whether their concern about growth is from people moving into the state or from the birth rate, opinions also appear to



have changed, with the statewide concern about the birthrate falling from 22% in 2004 to just 7% in 2008, while concern about people moving in rises from 59% to 67%. A new category, "both," was available this year if respondents volunteered it (it was not read to them). The category, with 13% of voters statewide, probably accounts for a portion of that change.

- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **very concerned** about dealing with Utah's growth include: age 45-54 or 65 and older; Democrats; liberal political ideology; Protestants; have children in the public school system.
- Demographic groups more likely to say they are **not concerned** about dealing with Utah's growth include: somewhat conservative political ideology.

ENDNOTES

1 Surveys were conducted by phone during January 11-25, 2008. The statewide survey has a margin of error of +/- 4.0%, and the Washington County sample has a margin of error of +/- 7.0%.

2 Utah Foundation research brief, "Utah's State and Local Tax and Fee Burdens," May 24, 2007. http://www.utahfoundation.org/briefs/2007_01_tax_burden.html.

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The mission of Utah Foundation is to promote a thriving economy, a well-prepared workforce, and a high quality of life for Utahns by performing thorough, well-supported research that helps policymakers, business and community leaders, and citizens better understand complex issues and providing practical, well-reasoned recommendations for policy change.

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