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AREA SPOTLIGHTS

How Michigan Engineered a Lightning-Fast Turnaround in its Talent Pool

by Ron Starner



Michigan is the state that produced the fastest production car in American automotive history. The Ford Mustang GTD recorded the first sub-7-minute time of any U.S. production sportscar on the famed Nürburgring racetrack in Germany. The GTD was developed in secrecy in a skunk works in Allen Park, Michigan, and then built at Ford plants in Dearborn

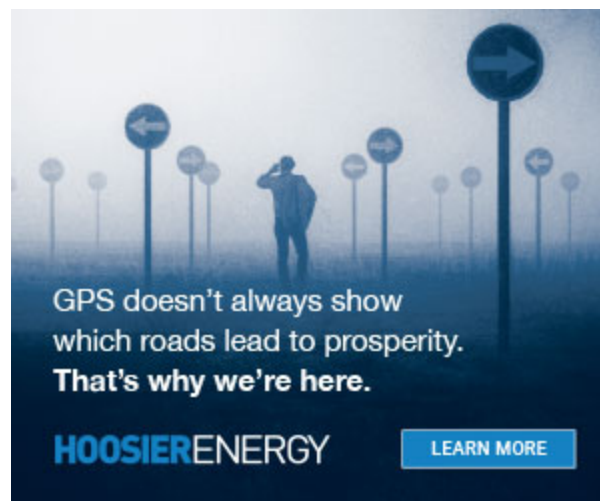
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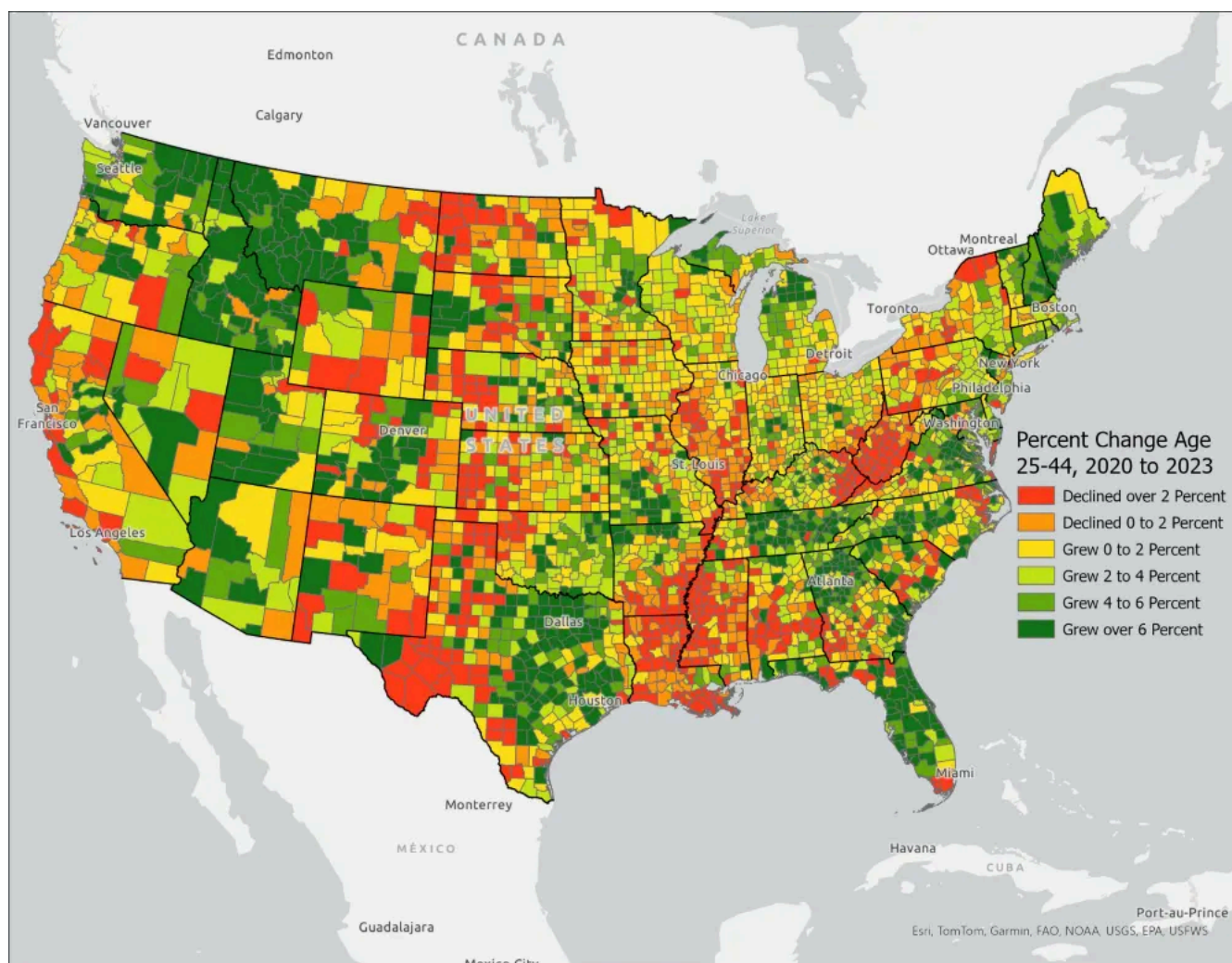
Could Michigan hold the key to reversing brain drain in the Upper Midwest? Time will tell, but population migration data from the early 2020s reveals that the answer to that question may well be a resounding “yes.”

The reason for that is a sudden and dramatic uptick in the number of 25-to-44-year-olds who are choosing to move to small, rural cities and counties in the middle to upper half of Michigan and to pockets of Metro Detroit.

According to U.S. Census Bureau and USDA data analysis provided by the Weldon Cooper Center’s Demographics Research Group at the University of Virginia, “Michigan has had one of the biggest swings in demographic trends since the 2010s among its younger adult (age 25 to 44) population.”



Demographer Hamilton Lombard, who works at the Weldon Cooper Center and studies migration patterns across the country, told Site Selection in an email that, “During the early 2010s, Michigan lost the sixth largest number of 25-to-44-year-olds among states, but since 2020, Michigan’s younger adult population has grown. Between the early 2010s and the first three years of the 2020s, Michigan has had the fifth largest acceleration in the growth of its younger adult population, just behind Georgia numerically.”



Map courtesy of Weldon Cooper Center, UVA

How big is this demographic reversal? Consider this: From 2010 to 2013, Michigan lost 52,836 people aged 25 to 44. From 2020 to 2023, it gained 87,638 adults in this bracket.

Lombard notes that “the Metro Detroit area has played a significant role in the state keeping and attracting more young adults, but nearly every part of Michigan is also keeping and attracting more young adults, particularly its rural areas. During the first three years of the 2010s, the 25-to-44 population shrunk in 73 of Michigan’s 83 counties. Since 2020, the 24-to-44 population has declined in only nine Michigan counties.”

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these rapidly growing communities have in common — and this is where the potential blueprint for the rest of the Upper Midwest comes into play.

According to Lombard, the two factors driving the migration of 25-to-44-year-olds to these growing Michigan counties are manufacturing jobs and relatively large recreation industries.

Using USDA county typology codes and maps, Lombard found that, “Each year since 2020, more Americans have moved to manufacturing counties than left — the first time this has happened since the mid-2000s. Michigan manufacturing-dependent counties have experienced a similar trend, particularly for younger adults, whose population has increased in all but three of Michigan’s 16 manufacturing counties. During the early 2010s, the 25-to-44 population fell in all of Michigan’s manufacturing counties.”

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On November 14, the State of Michigan announced a partnership with Electreon, a leader in wireless EV charging, and commercial electric vehicle manufacturer Xos Inc. to operate wireless charging solutions for electrified commercial delivery vehicles in Michigan. In partnership with Xos, Electreon’s wireless charging technology will be integrated into an

But the manufacturing counties aren't even the ones growing the fastest, says Lombard. "Many smaller, more rural Michigan counties with relatively large recreation industries have experienced the highest rates of in-migration since 2020," he notes. "All of the 20 Michigan counties with the highest domestic migration rates since 2020 were categorized as recreation counties by USDA. Since 2020, every Michigan recreation county has seen their 25-to-44 population increase."

Lombard says the fastest risers are in Northern Michigan. This part of the state, "particularly the area around Traverse City, stands out with some of the highest migration rates for both its total population and younger adults within Michigan and the Midwest."

He adds that "many Northern Michigan communities have well-established recreation industries, drawing vacationers to enjoy the region's natural amenities. Additionally, Traverse City Airport offers direct flights to several major U.S. cities, making the region especially appealing to remote workers. These workers, who have increasingly moved to recreation-focused areas since the pandemic, often seek locations within a convenient travel distance to their employer's main office."

As labor shortages mount nationwide, the implications of these findings for site selectors and employers are significant. Most companies today are engaged in a constant battle to find, hire and retain well-trained, highly educated talent.

New Campaign Yields

That is why the Michigan Economic Development Corp. last year launched "You Can in Michigan," a recruitment campaign that is one of the largest talent attraction efforts in the country. It aims to bring in and retain high-tech workers and bolster efforts to grow the state's population. I recently spoke with Hilary Doe, the state's chief growth officer, about this campaign. Here is what she had to say.

What was the impetus for Michigan launching the talent attraction campaign?

manufacturing, etc. Toward that end, Michigan has launched one of the most robust and ambitious talent attraction efforts in the country. To date, we have had over 600 million impressions and more than 4 million people visit our website. We have seen a 5% increase in the perception of Michigan's quality of life since the launch. We are also looking at how many folks are jumping on our jobs portal and indicating that they do want to consider moving to Michigan and working here.

What are some of the results you are seeing from that?

Doe: Out-of-state applicants are coming from Texas, California, New York and Illinois. Those are the top four states for job portal applicants. We have already placed 1,100 folks in jobs and training programs in Michigan. The campaign has successfully lifted Michigan's perception in career attractiveness by 7%. Nearly 17,000 registered users are now in the Michigan Career Portal, an AI-driven platform to help job seekers with career navigation, job training, education guidance and placement.

What else is Michigan doing to recruit talent to the state?

Doe: We are launching new workforce training for the semiconductor industry. Our talent team is expanding into K-12 schools and has already engaged over 7,000 students at that level. We are also working to retain

like New York and San Francisco. That has informed our talent and population growth strategies. We recently launched new funding to support more entrepreneurship and innovation in Michigan. Entrepreneurship has been instrumental in growing the Michigan economy, and we know that most new jobs come from small and medium-sized businesses. To do that, we need a strong and growing workforce. With this new talent attraction campaign, Michigan is making the investments necessary to make that happen.

Ron Starner

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