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Oregon's jobs recovery bypasses many rural counties

Labor Day arrives as Oregon enjoys one of its strongest job markets in years, but scars from the Great Recession still linger. A new study by the Oregon Center for Public Policy shows that almost half of all Oregon counties — nearly all of them rural counties — have yet to regain the jobs lost during the downturn.

“As much as Oregon’s labor market has bounced back, there is still room for improvement,” said Tyler Mac Innis, a policy analyst with the Center. “That is particularly true for many rural counties bypassed by the jobs recovery.”

In the spring of this year, Oregon’s unemployment rate dipped below 5 percent, a level not seen since the mid-1990s, according to the Center. The unemployment rate ticked back up to 5.2 percent in July 2016, the month with most recent available data.

“The low unemployment rate does not necessarily mean Oregon has enough jobs,” Mac Innis said. He explained that a better measure comes from the ratio of jobs per working-age Oregonian. The higher the ratio, the more plentiful jobs are, helping workers bargain for better wages.

By that measure, jobs were still not plentiful enough as of 2015, the year with the most recent annual data. Last year, Oregon had 71.0 jobs for every 100 working-age Oregonians. That was below the peak of 72.7 in 2007, just before the Great Recession, and even further below the peak prior to the 2001 recession (75.4).

Jobs certainly remain scarce in many rural counties. The Center’s paper showed that as of July of this year — about nine years after the start of the Great Recession — 17 of Oregon’s 36 counties had yet to regain the number of jobs lost during the economic downturn. Of those 17 counties, 14 are rural counties.

The Center recommended that lawmakers make targeted investments that further strengthen the economy and help workers that are still struggling. These include expanding access to affordable child care, investing in education, and making needed repairs and improvements to Oregon’s infrastructure.

The Oregon Center for Public Policy (www.ocpp.org) is a non-partisan, non-profit institute that does in-depth research and analysis on budget, tax and economic issues. The Center’s goal is to improve decision making and generate more opportunities for all Oregonians.

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Note to editors and reporters: Read Oregon’s Labor Market: Still Room for Improvement, August 31, 2016.