

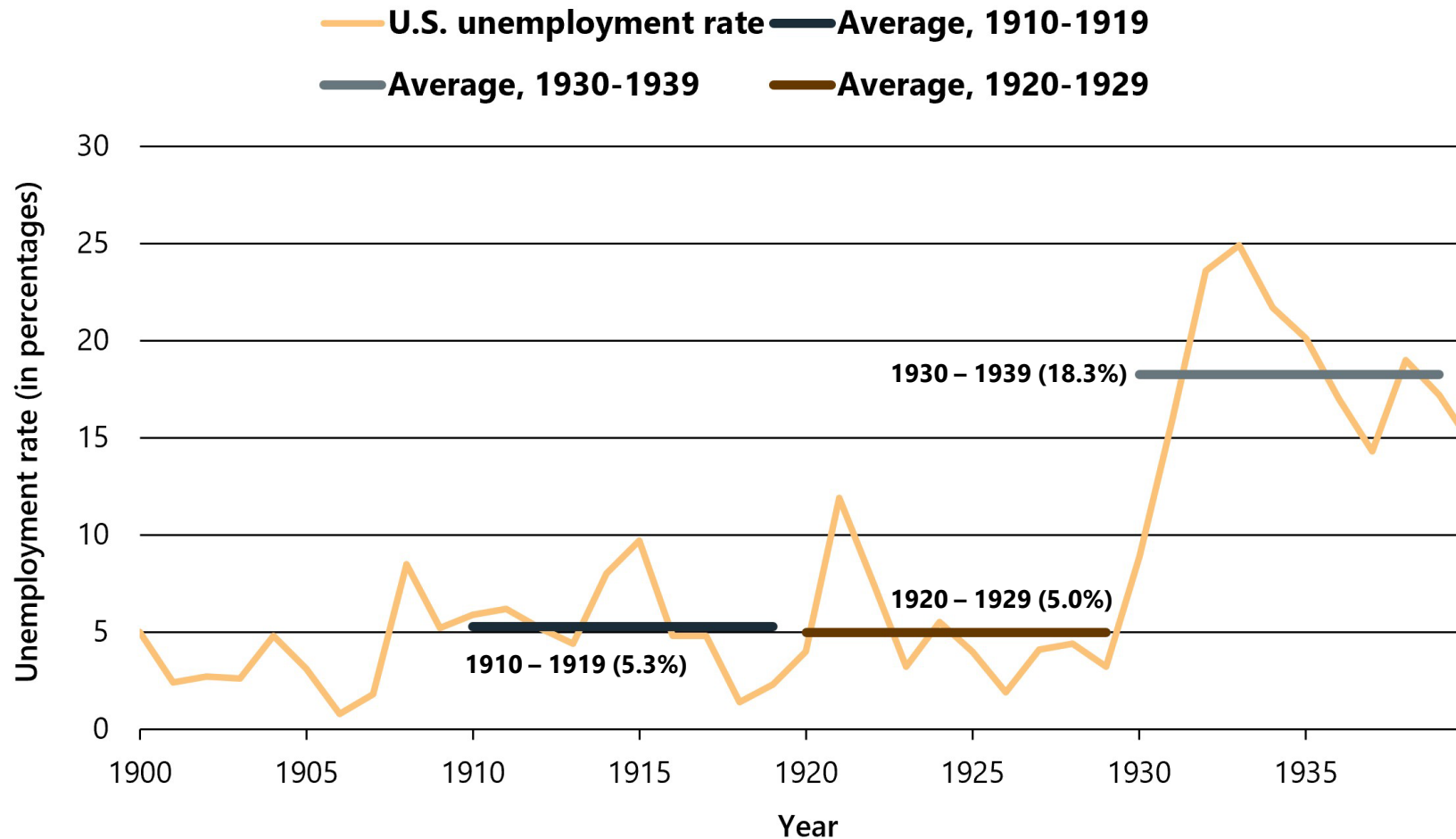
100 years of Idaho employment

Lisa Grigg, labor economist

July 14, 2026



U.S. unemployment rates, 1900 to 1940



Historical moments

- U.S. involvement in WW1: 1917 to 1918
- Spanish flu: 1918 to 1920
- Agricultural Depression: 1920 to 1921
- Great Depression: 1929 to 1939

Source: National Bureau of Economic Research, "Annual estimates of unemployment in the United States, 1900 to 1954."

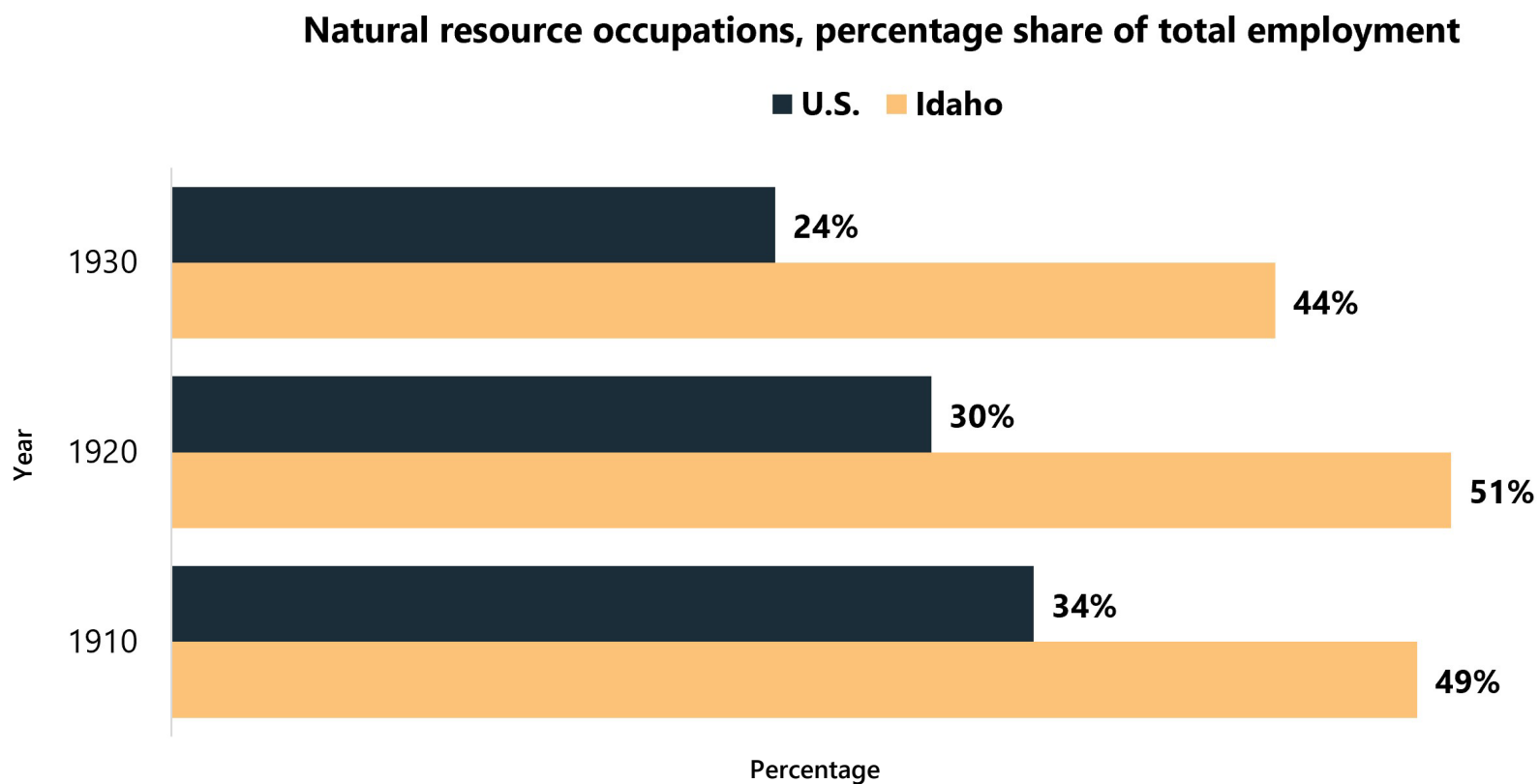
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Poll question

In 1920, nearly one out of three U.S. workers were employed in agriculture, livestock, forestry or mining.

Idaho overweight natural resource jobs

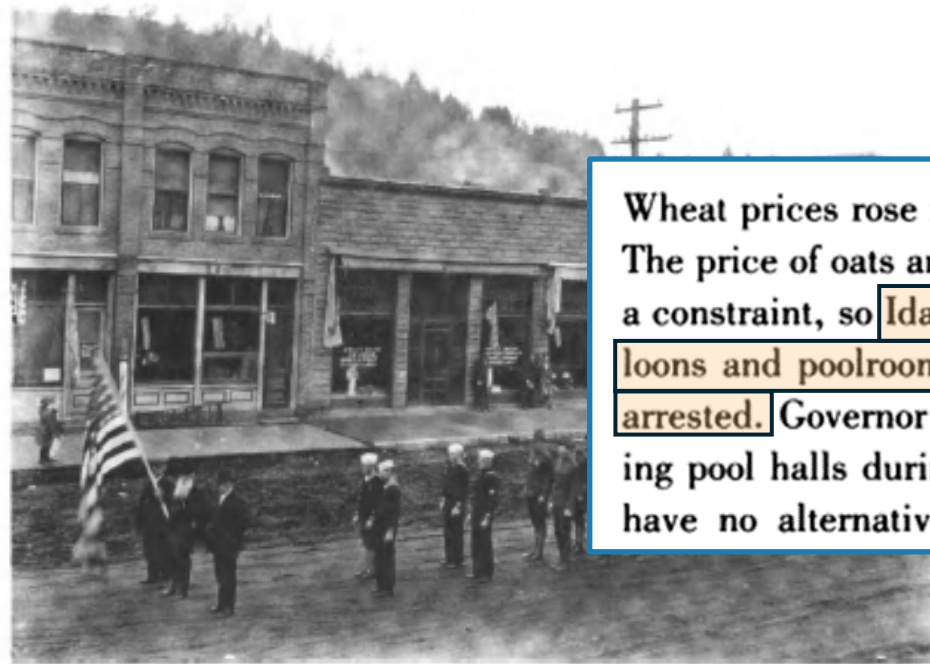
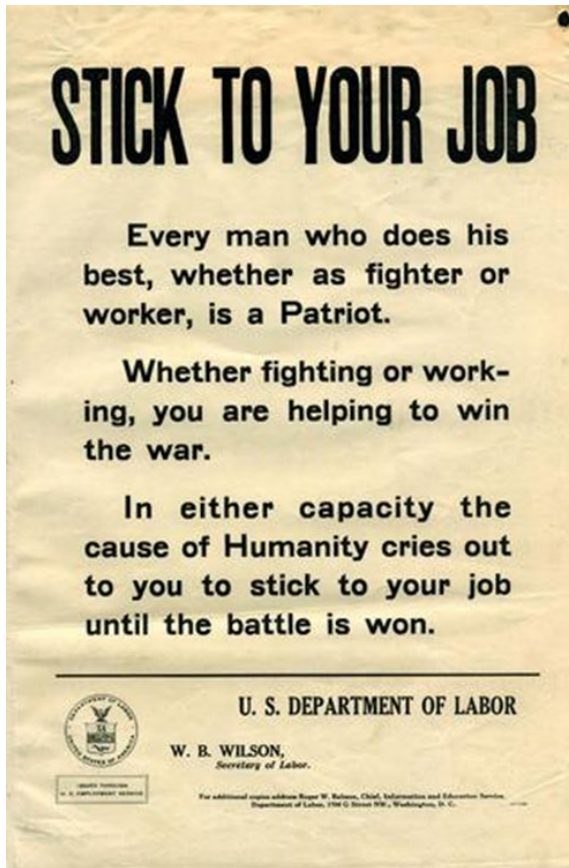


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Decennial Census, 1910 to 1930."

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Labor shortage during World War 1



Wheat prices rose from \$.72 a bushel in 1913 to \$1.98 in 1918. The price of oats and hay doubled. Still, the labor shortage was a constraint, so Idaho state officials went so far as to invade saloons and poolrooms where those men who spurned jobs were arrested. Governor Alexander even issued a proclamation closing pool halls during the day so that “pool hall loafers” would have no alternative but to work. Businessmen volunteers in

Job shortage during the 1930s

There were many such conspiracies. In Gem, Boise, Idaho, Valley, Adams, and Lemhi counties, arsonists systematically ignited fires in the forests in order to obtain employment as fire fighters. The situation became so serious that Governor Ross declared those counties to be in a state of insurrection, placed them under martial law, and ordered the National Guard to close off the forests to public access.⁴

Lumber production rose, then dipped and rose again in the 1920s. At its highest point, in 1926, the ten counties of North Idaho produced 950,000,000 board feet of timber. In 1932, it would dip to 200,000,000 board feet.



Source: Arrington, Leonard. "History of Idaho: Volume 2."

Image credit: Idaho State Historical Society. "Civilian Conservation Corps – Enrollees. Pocatello, Idaho Falls District."

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Changing the nature of work in the 1920s

Key elements impacting occupations in demand during this period:

- Agricultural Depression in 1920 to 1921 following the end of World War 1
- Adoption of the internal combustion engine for transportation and machinery
- Roll out of electrification
- Water rights and irrigation
- Formation of professional boards and licensing of nurses, attorneys
- Television and radio stations changed the speed of communication

Changing the nature of work cont. 2

Table 1

APPLIANCE DEVELOPMENT (PARTIAL LIST)²⁶

-1900	Lighting
1905	Electric Iron
1910	First Practical Electric Range, Electric Washing Machine
1915	Elevators, Water Pumps, Water Tank Heaters, Printing Presses

After WWI Vast Influx of Appliances
(partial list below)

Air Pump	Shredder
Churn	Drill
Cream Separator	Ice Cream Freezer
Cow Milker	Ice Machine
Feed Cutter	Refrigerator
Lathe	Meat Grinder
Circular Saw	Sewing Machine
Hay Press	Vacuum Cleaner
Thresher	Hay Hoist
Ensilage Cutter	Gristmill
Bone Cutter	Corn Husker
Drier	Sprinkler System
Corn Sheller	Curling Iron
Electric Truck	Electric Clippers

**USE 250 MEN IN
HARVESTING ICE**

Hazelwood Company Expects to
Begin Cutting at Blanchard
Next Week.

ICE IS 11 INCHES THICK

Start Season at Cocolalla Week
Later—Supply Own Needs.
N. P. and Milwaukee.

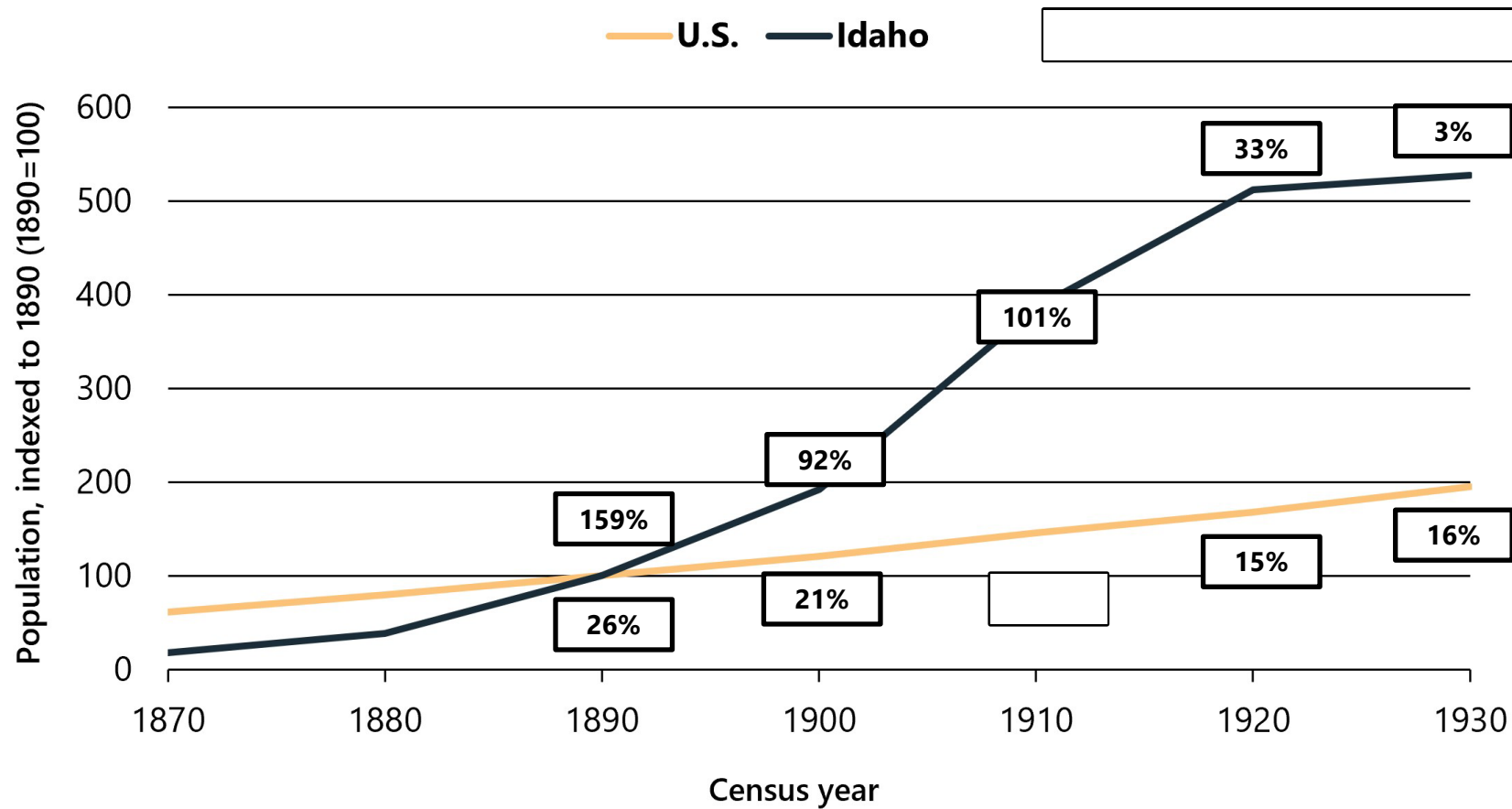
Harvesting of 100,000 tons of ice
at Bonanza lake, Blanchard, Idaho,
and at Cocolalla, Idaho, by the Hazel-
wood company, manufacturers of
dairy products, and a great deal will
also be used by the Chicago, Mil-
waukee & St. Paul railroad and a
lesser amount by the Northern Pa-
cific.

F. N. Martin, president of the Ha-
zelwood company, said yesterday that
the ice at Bonanza lake is 11 inches
thick and the harvest will start when
the lake freezes to 13 inches. The
harvest will begin at Cocolalla a
week or 10 days later.

Image credit: Williams, Keith. "The early electrification of Latah County, Idaho: Power goes rural." 1985

Image credit: "Use 250 men in harvesting ice." The Spokesman-Review, Dec. 22, 1924.

Population, irrigation and the Carey Act

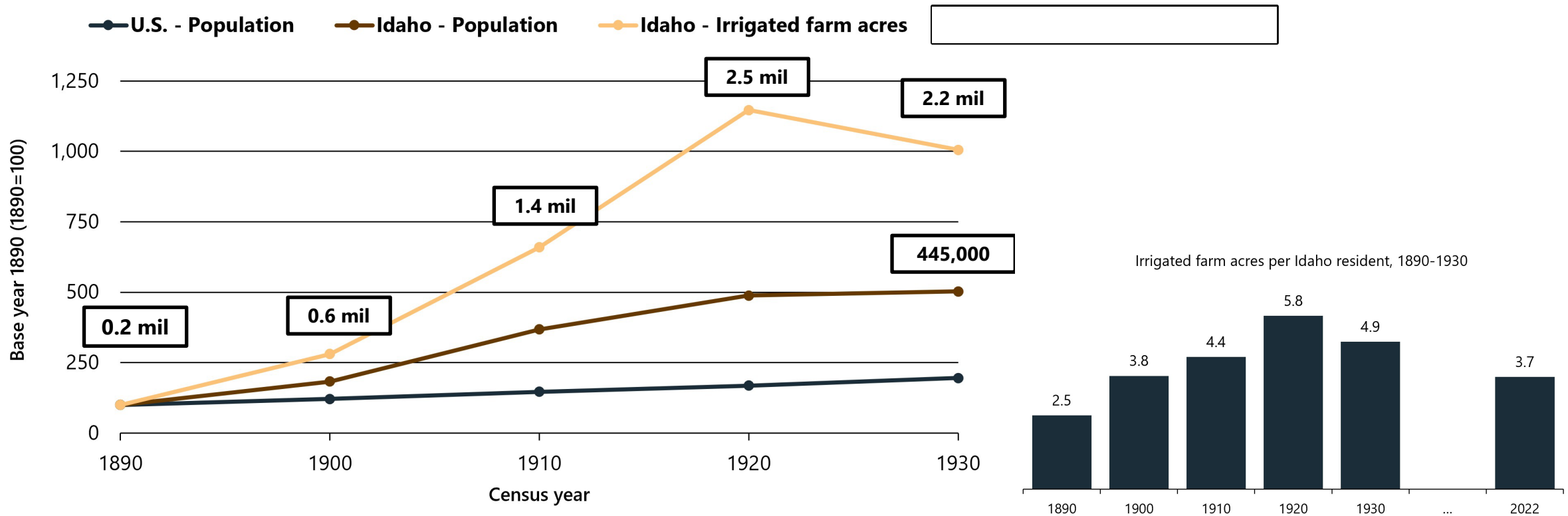


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "1930 Census: Volume 1. Population, Number and Distribution of Inhabitants."

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Population, irrigation, Carey Act cont.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1930."

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Idaho's natural resource economy

- **Irrigation** – 21% of national growth in irrigated acres from 1909 to 1919 occurred in Idaho (no. 1 was California and no. 2 was Idaho)
- **Farms** – Idaho added 11,000 farms between 1910 to 1920 and lost 400 farms between 1920 to 1930
- **Mining** – In 1925, Idaho was the No. 2 producer of lead in the U.S. behind no. 1 Missouri. 85% was from Shoshone County.
- **Timber** – Idaho and western Montana held 75% of U.S. western white pine inventories in 1920.
 - 1927 – Clearwater Timber Company opened the largest white pine mill in the world in Lewiston

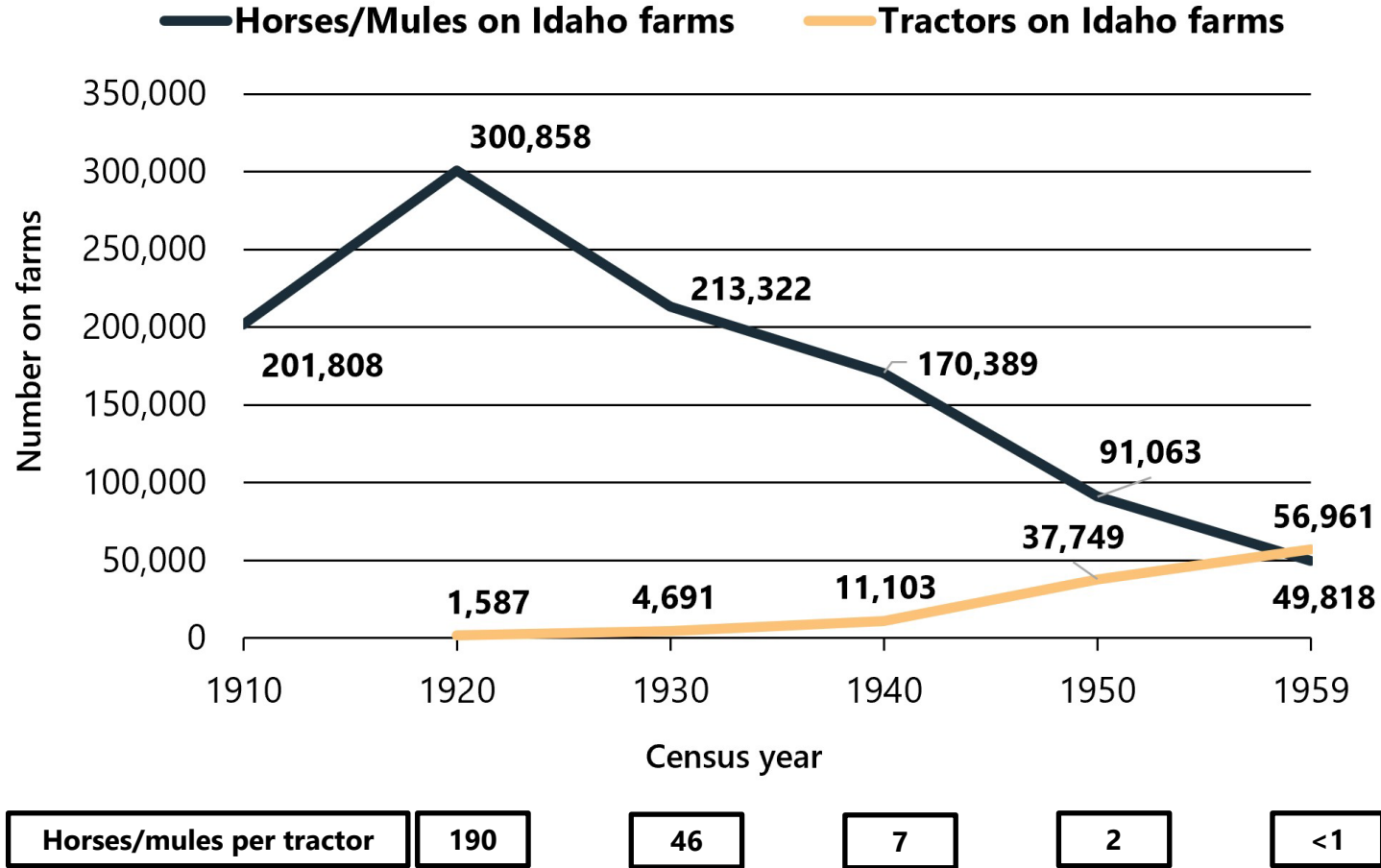
Idaho's natural resource economy cont.

TABLE 1.—GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF ACREAGE IRRIGATED IN 1919 AND 1909, AND OF THE INCREASE IN ACREAGE IRRIGATED, 1909 TO 1919.

STATE.	AREA IRRIGATED.				INCREASE. ¹	
	1919		1909		Acres.	Per cent of total. ²
	Acres.	Per cent of total.	Acres.	Per cent of total.		
Total.....	19,191,710	100.0	14,433,285	100.0	4,758,431	100.0
Arizona.....	467,565	2.4	320,051	2.2	147,514	3.0
Arkansas.....	143,946	0.8	27,753	0.2	116,193	2.4
California.....	4,219,040	21.9	2,664,104	18.5	1,554,936	31.7
Colorado.....	3,348,385	17.4	2,792,032	19.3	556,353	11.4
Idaho.....	2,488,806	13.0	1,430,848	9.9	1,057,958	21.6
Kansas.....	47,312	0.2	37,479	0.3	9,833	0.2
Louisiana.....	454,882	2.4	380,200	2.6	74,682	1.5
Montana.....	1,681,729	8.8	1,079,084	11.6	2,645	0.1
Nebraska.....	442,090	2.3	255,950	1.8	186,140	3.8
Nevada.....	561,447	2.9	701,833	4.9	-140,386	
New Mexico.....	538,377	2.8	461,718	3.2	76,659	1.6
North Dakota.....	12,072	0.1	10,248	0.1	1,824	(³)
Oklahoma.....	2,969	(³)	4,388	(³)	-1,419	
Oregon.....	986,162	5.1	686,129	4.8	300,033	6.1
South Dakota.....	100,682	0.5	63,248	0.4	37,434	0.8
Texas.....	580,120	3.1	451,130	3.1	134,990	2.8
Utah.....	1,371,651	7.1	999,410	6.9	372,241	7.6
Washington.....	529,899	2.8	334,378	2.3	195,521	4.0
Wyoming.....	1,207,982	6.3	1,133,302	7.9	74,680	1.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "1920 Census: Irrigation, general report and analytical tables and reports for states, with statistics for counties." 1922.

Horses and tractors on Idaho farms

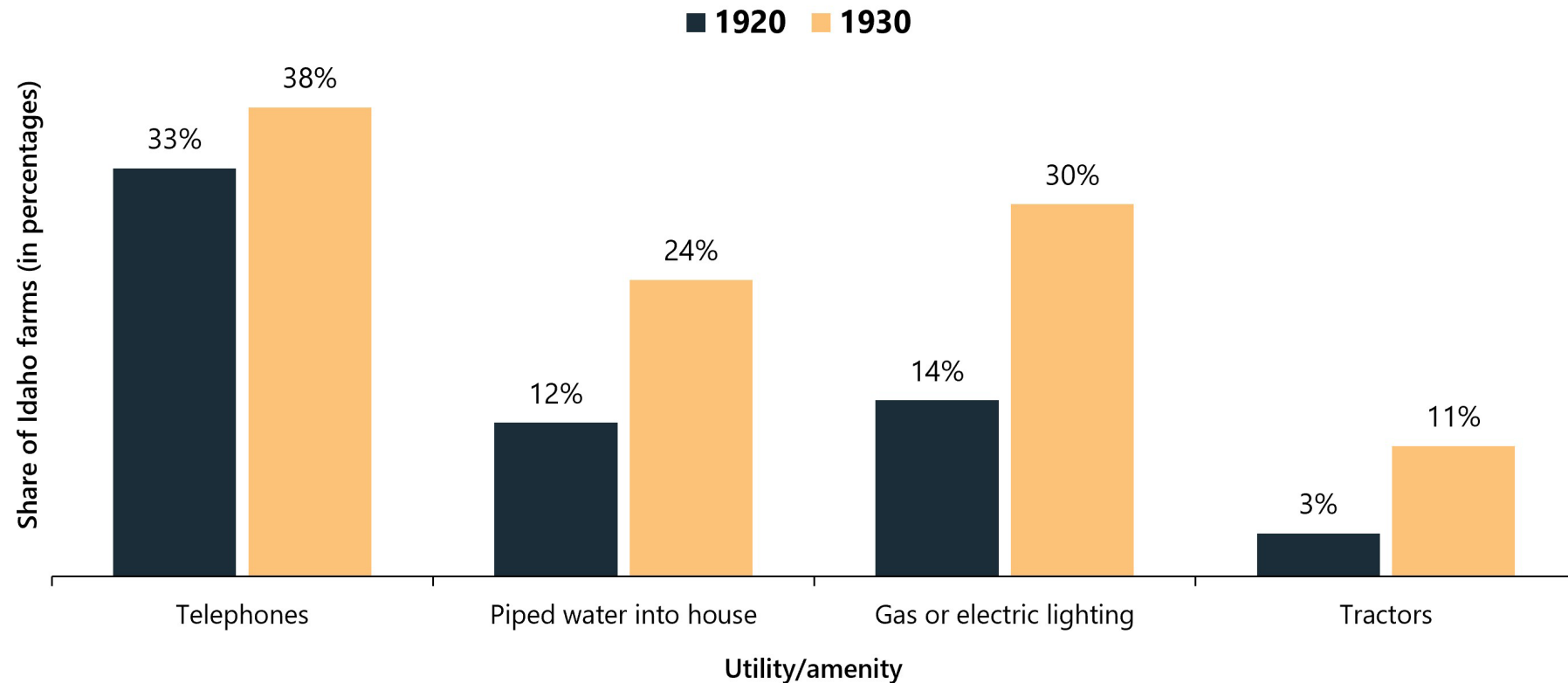


Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, "U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1920 to 1959."

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Idaho farms by amenity utilization, 1920 to 1930

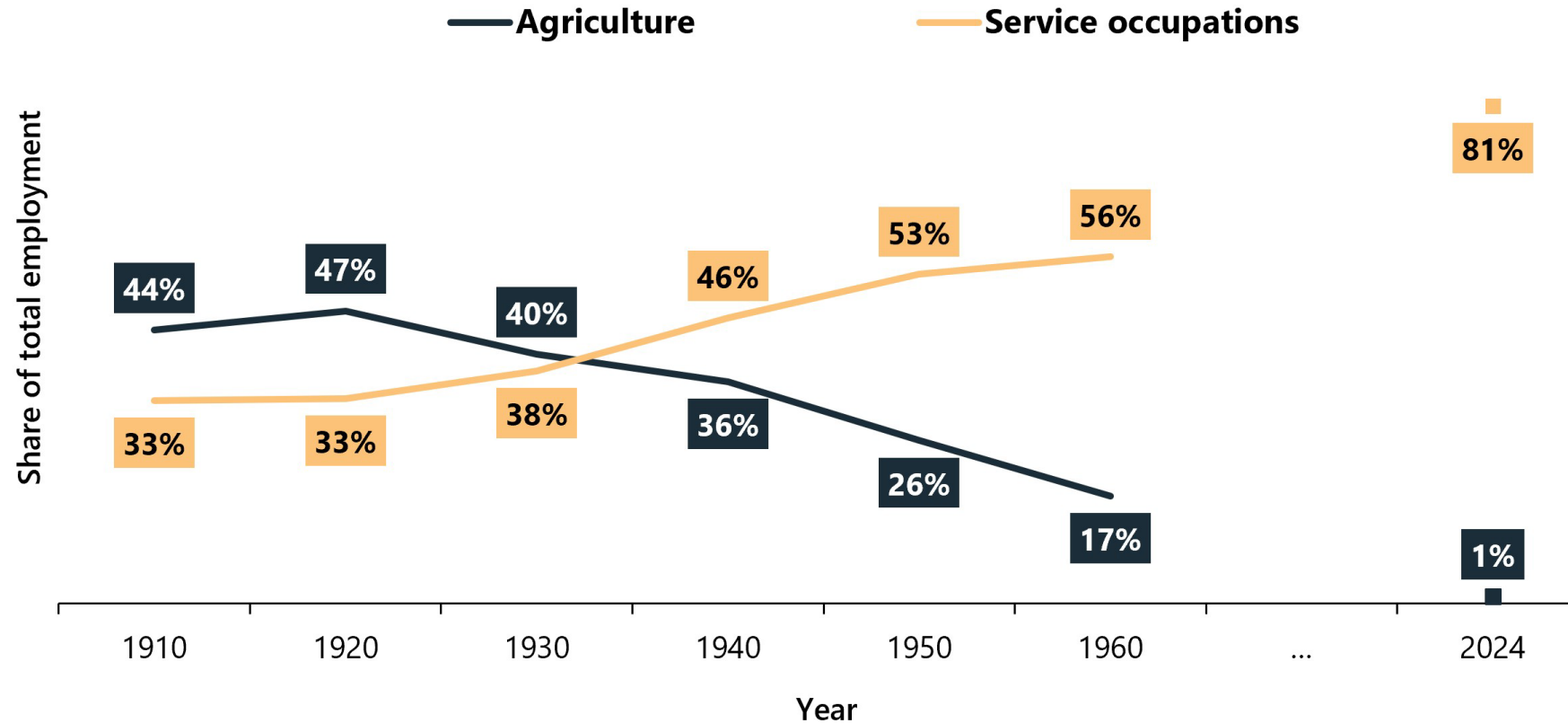


Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, "U.S. Census of Agriculture, 1930."

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Job shift from agriculture to services

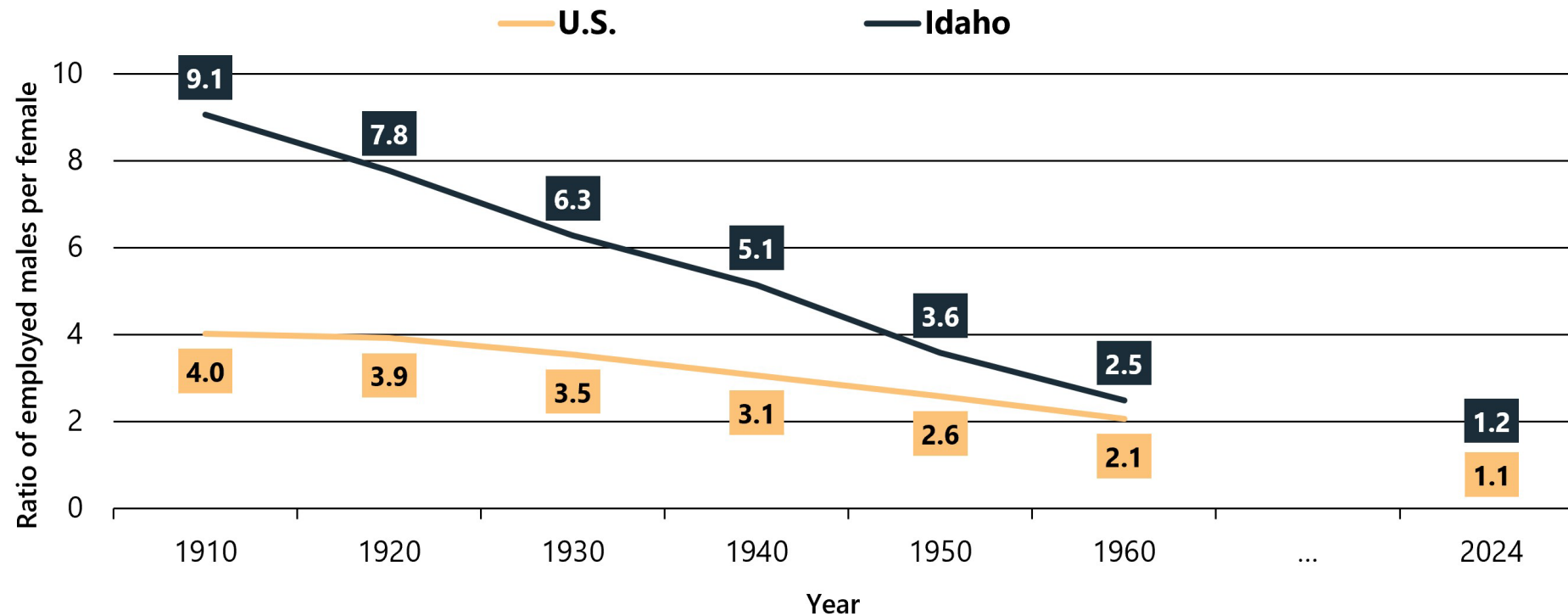


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Decennial Census, 1910 to 1960."

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Professional service roles and women's labor force participation

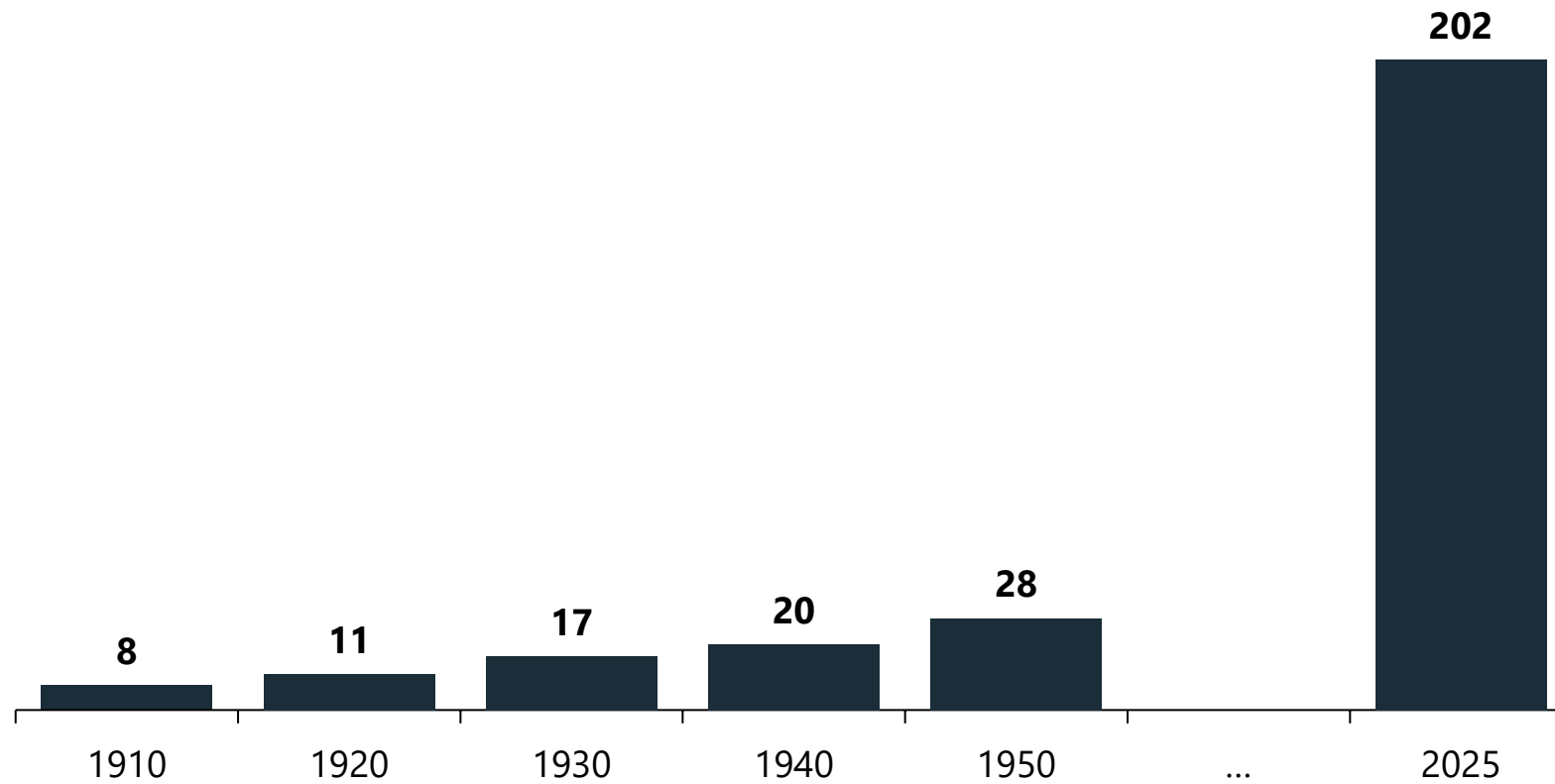


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Decennial Census, 1910 to 1960."

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Trained nurses per 10,000 Idaho residents



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "U.S. Decennial Census, 1910 to 1960."

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Fast rate of technological change, labor's future looked grim in 1930

In 1930, British economist John Maynard Keynes penned the following observations in his "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren:"

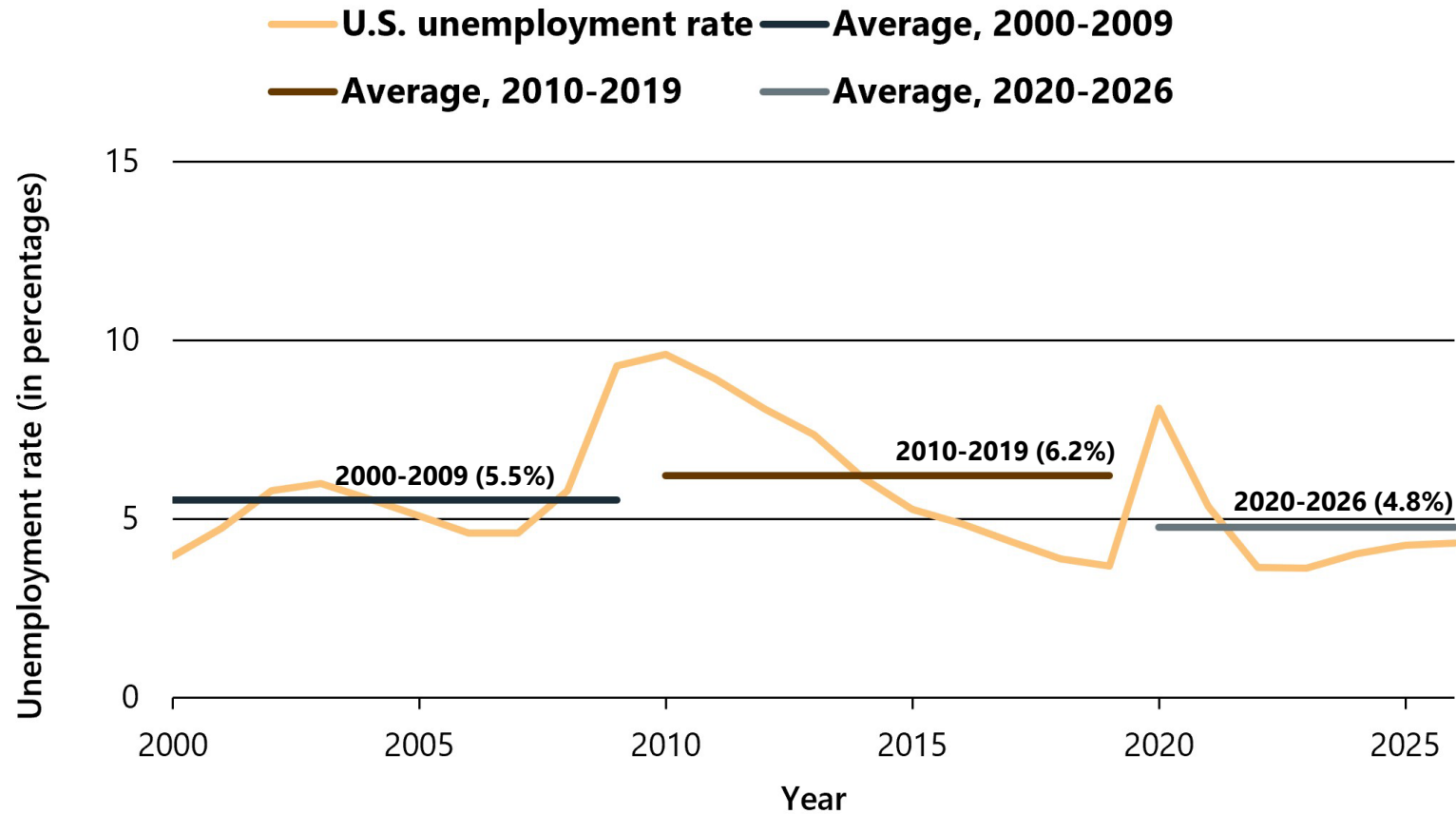
"We are being afflicted with a new disease...namely, **technological unemployment.**"

"The improvement in the standard of life has been a little too quick..."

"For the moment the very rapidity of these changes is hurting us and bringing difficult problems to solve...but this is only a temporary phase of maladjustment."

"A 15-hour (work) week may put off the problem for a great while."

Changing the nature of work in the 2020s



Historical moments

- Great Recession: 2008 to 2009
- COVID-19 pandemic: 2020

Source: St. Louis FRED, "Unemployment Rate, 1948 to current."

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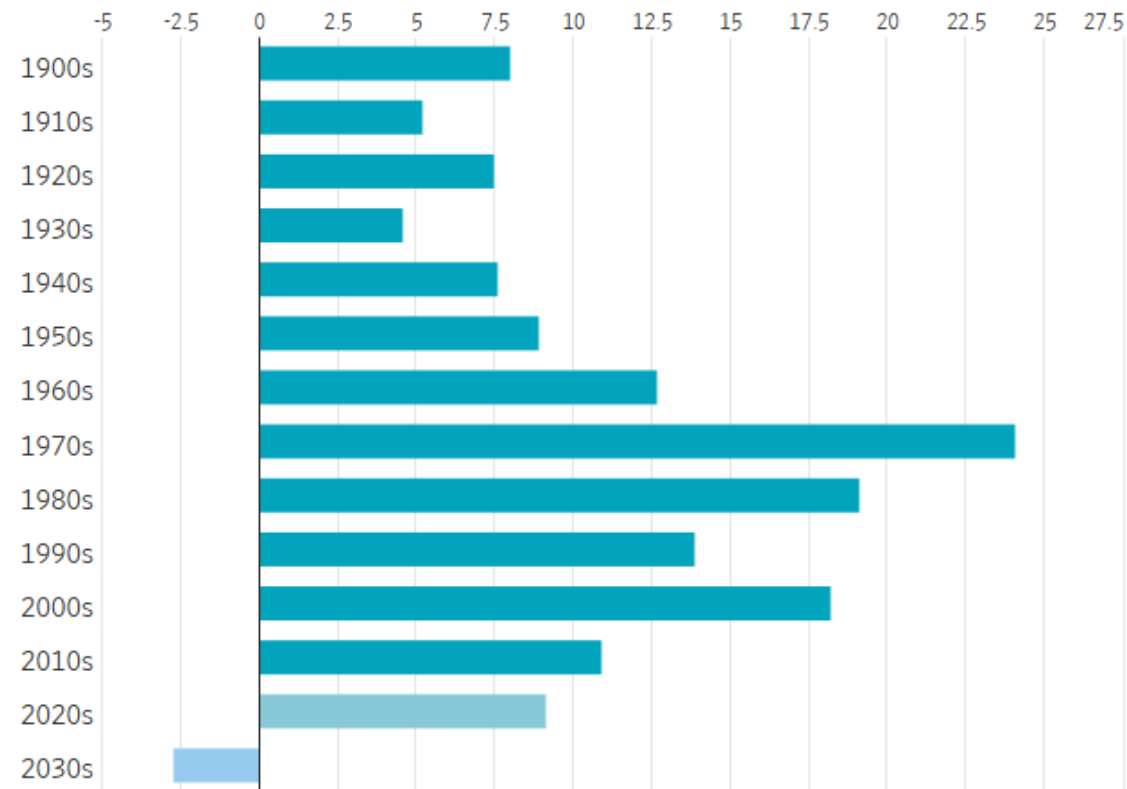
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Changing the nature of work in the 2020s cont.

- Key elements impacting occupations in demand during the current period:
- COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 forces employers to re-think how and where work is done.
- Fast in-migration population growth to Idaho results in an increased need for labor amidst the tightest unemployment rates of modern times.
- Incredibly fast development speed of Artificial Intelligence and its unknown effect on the labor market.

U.S. net labor force entrants by decade

Net entries into the labor force, in millions, by decade



Source: Steven Ruggles

Source: Wall Street Journal, "Why AI might actually help solve the next labor crisis," July 13, 2026.

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Thank you. Any questions?

Need more information?

Contact: **Lisa.Grigg@labor.idaho.gov**