Talent Attraction Scorecard 2026

A data-focused look at the US areas leading the way in talent attraction, workforce

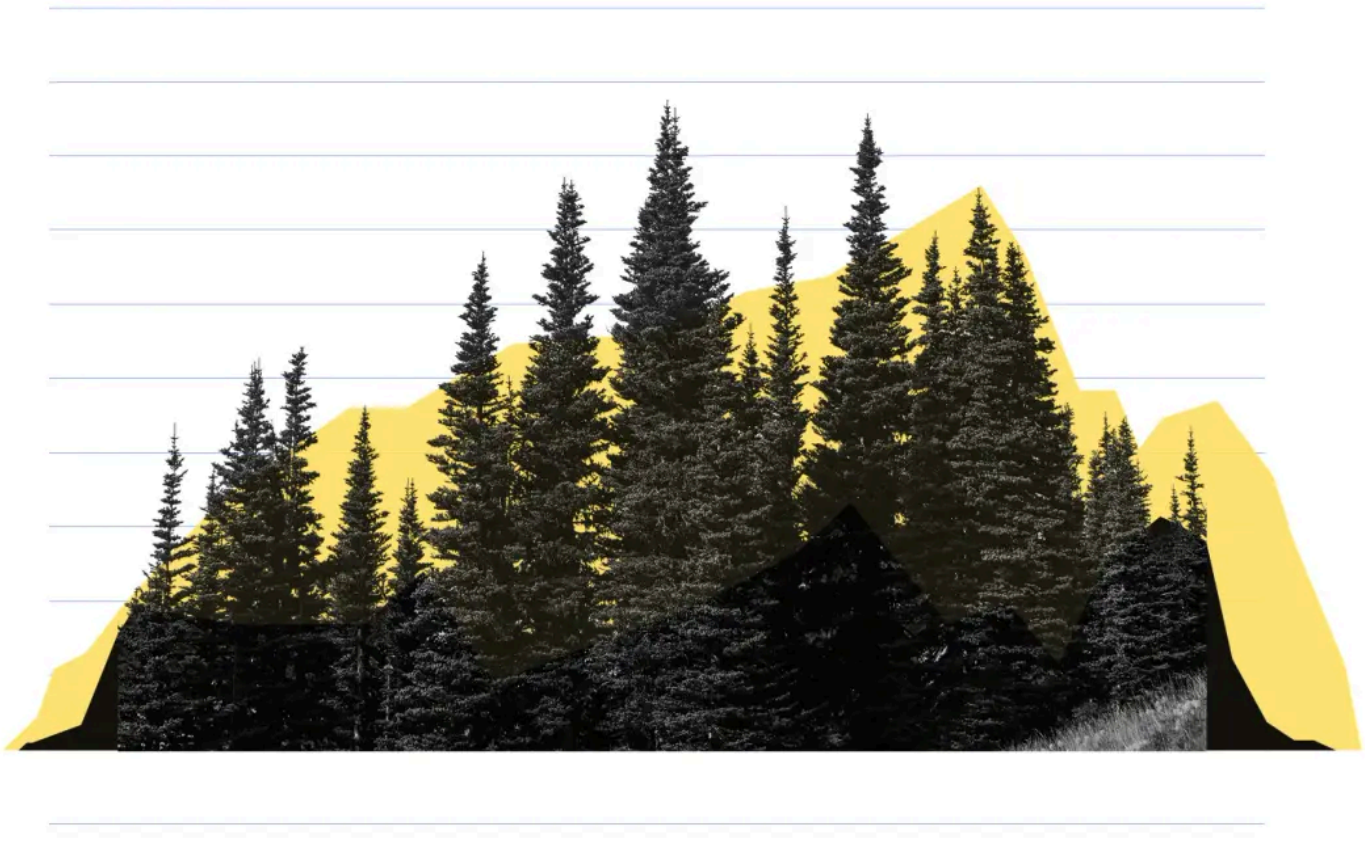


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Want to discuss the rankings, and how your region stacks up?

Let's talk →

Introduction

Strong regions do more than attract great talent.

Over our 11 years of producing the Talent Attraction Scorecard, we've occasionally considered renaming the annual ranking to something like the Talent Development Scorecard. That's because the states and regions that perform the best in the scorecard don't just focus on *attracting* workers to their areas. They prioritize talent retention and obsess over every step in the process of developing a thriving talent ecosystem — from K–12 career awareness to adult learner support.

At the same time, the attraction of prime-age people and earners remains a core part of our ranking and is vitally important to communities in an era of aging demographics and stubborn skills mismatches. No matter the hype or fears about AI, the battle for talent in the skilled trades, healthcare, and other sectors continues to rage. And as our partner DCI's survey-based research shows, relocation remains very relevant for those who can afford to move.

This year the Talent Attraction Scorecard — the name lives on! — looks at the same seven metrics we used in last year's revamped 10th anniversary edition to draw insights on the top-performing states and large, mid-sized, small, and very small MSAs. For the second straight year, Florida, Texas, and Idaho are our top three states in that order. But several states have vaulted up the rankings and we have a new No. 1 large metro to mint.

This Year's Top Tens

Hover to reveal the 2026 Talent Attraction Top 10 for each region category.



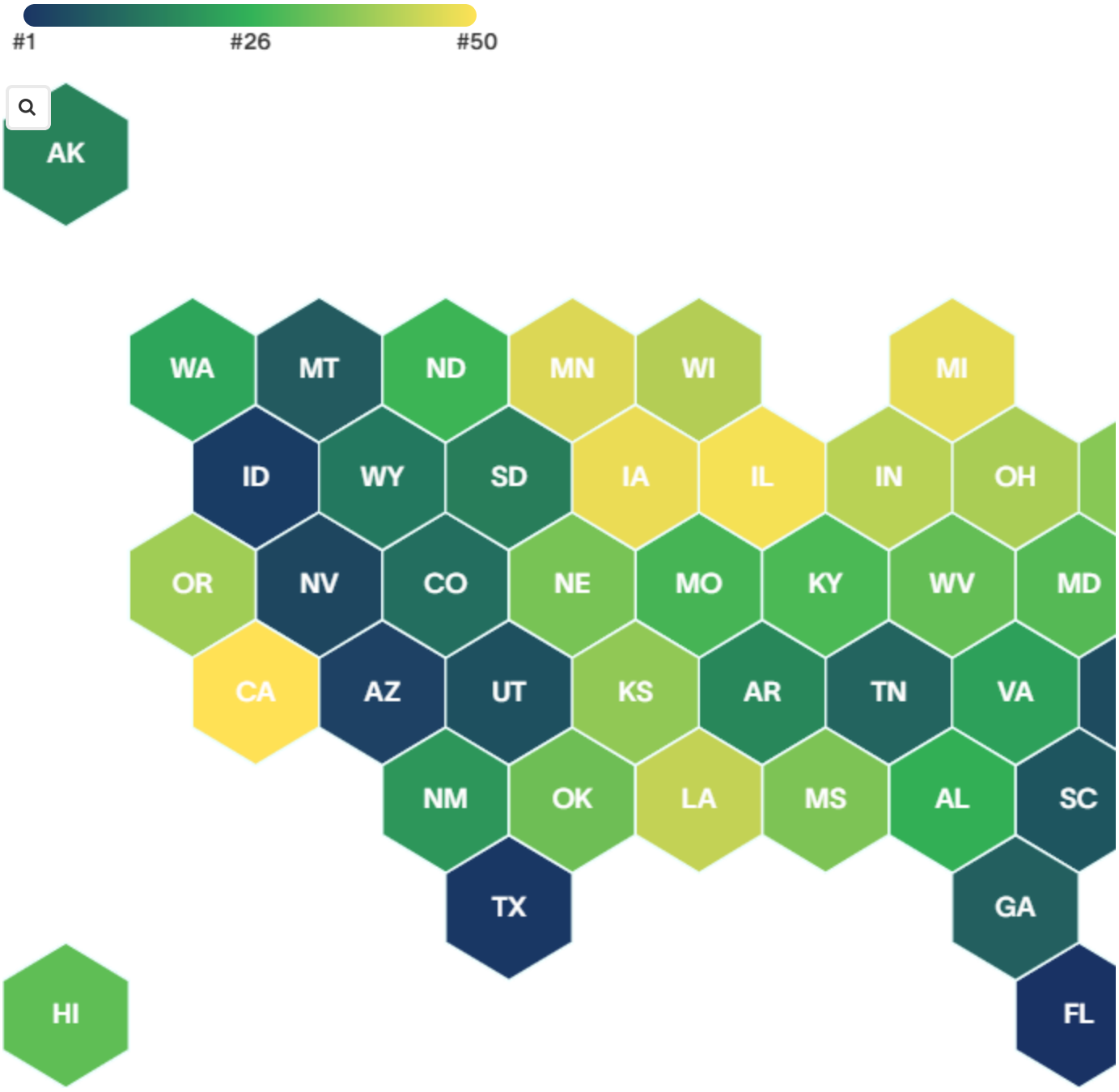
State Rankings

Idaho is the only state that ranks in the top 10 in every subcategory of the scorecard. The Gem State is No. 1 in overall job growth and blue-collar job growth and No. 3 in college-educated population growth.

The Carolinas had a breakout year for talent attraction, as both North and South Carolina moved into the Top 10.

Overall, this year's top states look similar to 2025, with Florida, Texas, and Idaho holding strong as the top 3.

Color the map by rankings for each metric → → Overall State Ranking



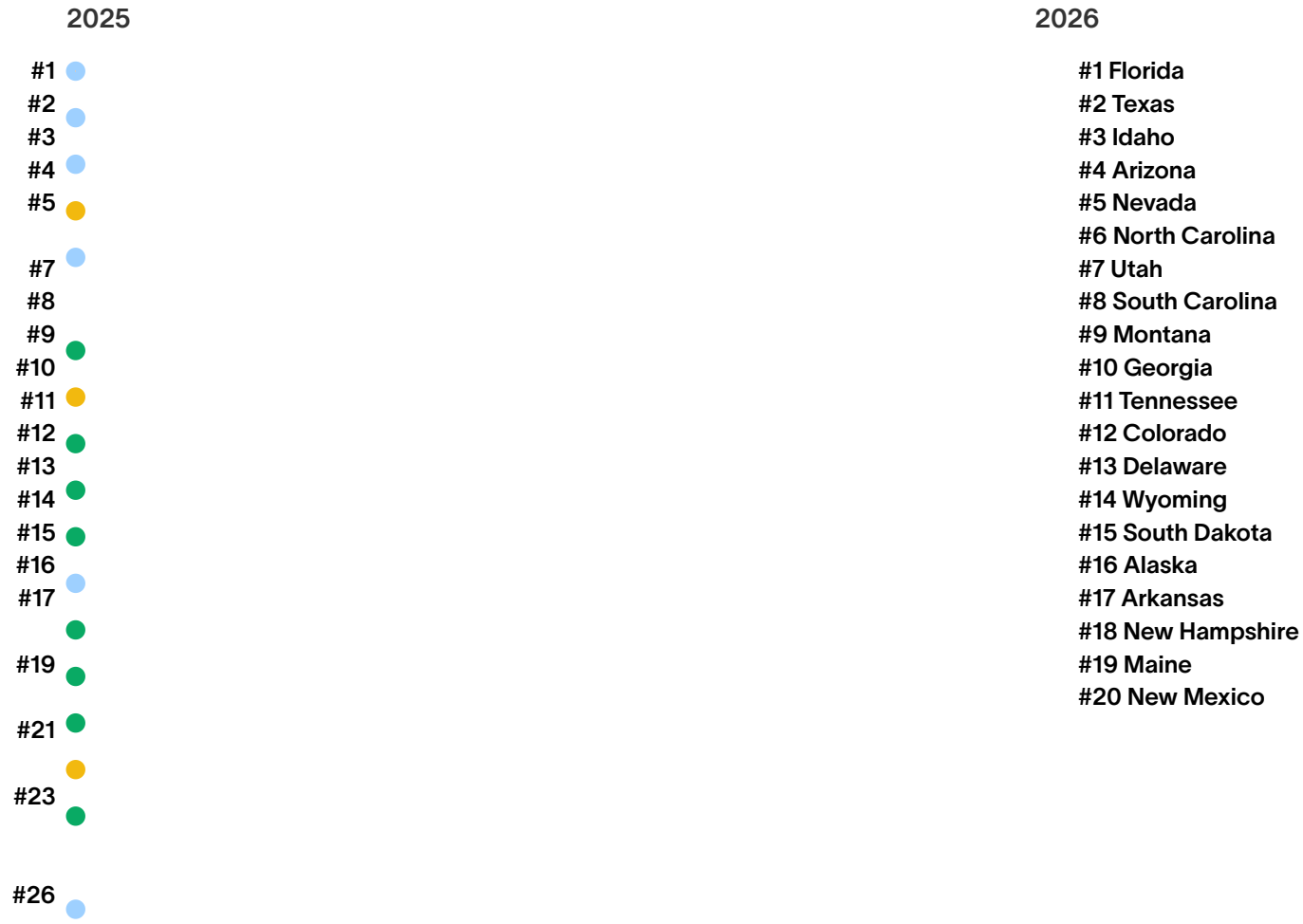
Source: Lightcast

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Six of 2025's top states held their spots in 2026, but Alaska, Arkansas, and New Mexico moved up to join the top 20 this year.

The biggest risers in our top 20 states were #8 South Carolina and #16 Alaska which both moved up 7 spots since last year.

2025-26 Change in Ranking: Same Up Down



Source: Lightcast

Lightcast

The Carolinas have come in strong this year, but **Arizona** is another emerging state. It moved up to No. 4 this year after ranking seventh last year. Phoenix also improved in the large MSA category, jumping up No. 4.

Large MSA Rankings

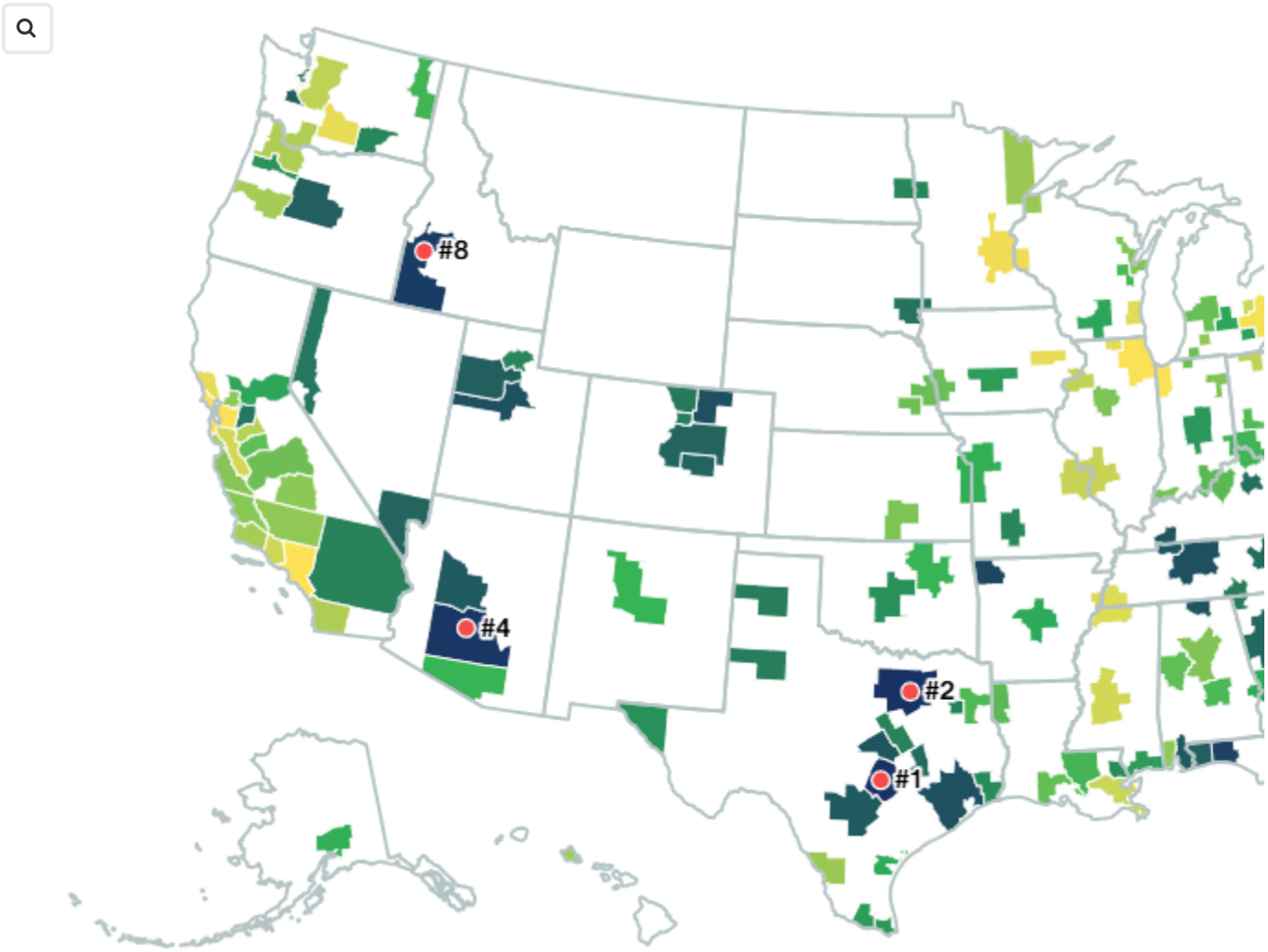
Austin is our top large metro for talent attraction, ranking in the top five in all but two of the seven subcategories.

The highest-ranked large MSAs (pop. 250K+) remain clustered in the Sunbelt and Mountain West.

But this year's Top 10 includes four newcomers from outside of Florida and Texas.

Color the map by rankings for each metric → → Overall Rank

Large MSA (250K+) Rankings: #1 #100 #198



Talent attraction rankings change over time, and several of this year's top 20 large MSAs jumped dramatically since last year.

The biggest risers in our top 20 were **#17 Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers, AR**, which rose 23 spots, from #40 last year, **Raleigh-Cary, NC**, which soared 20 spots to #3, and **#12 Charlotte-Concord-Gastonia, NC-SC**, and **#15 Durham-Chapel Hill, NC**, which both moved up 17 spots since 2025.



Source: Lightcast

Mid-Sized MSA Rankings

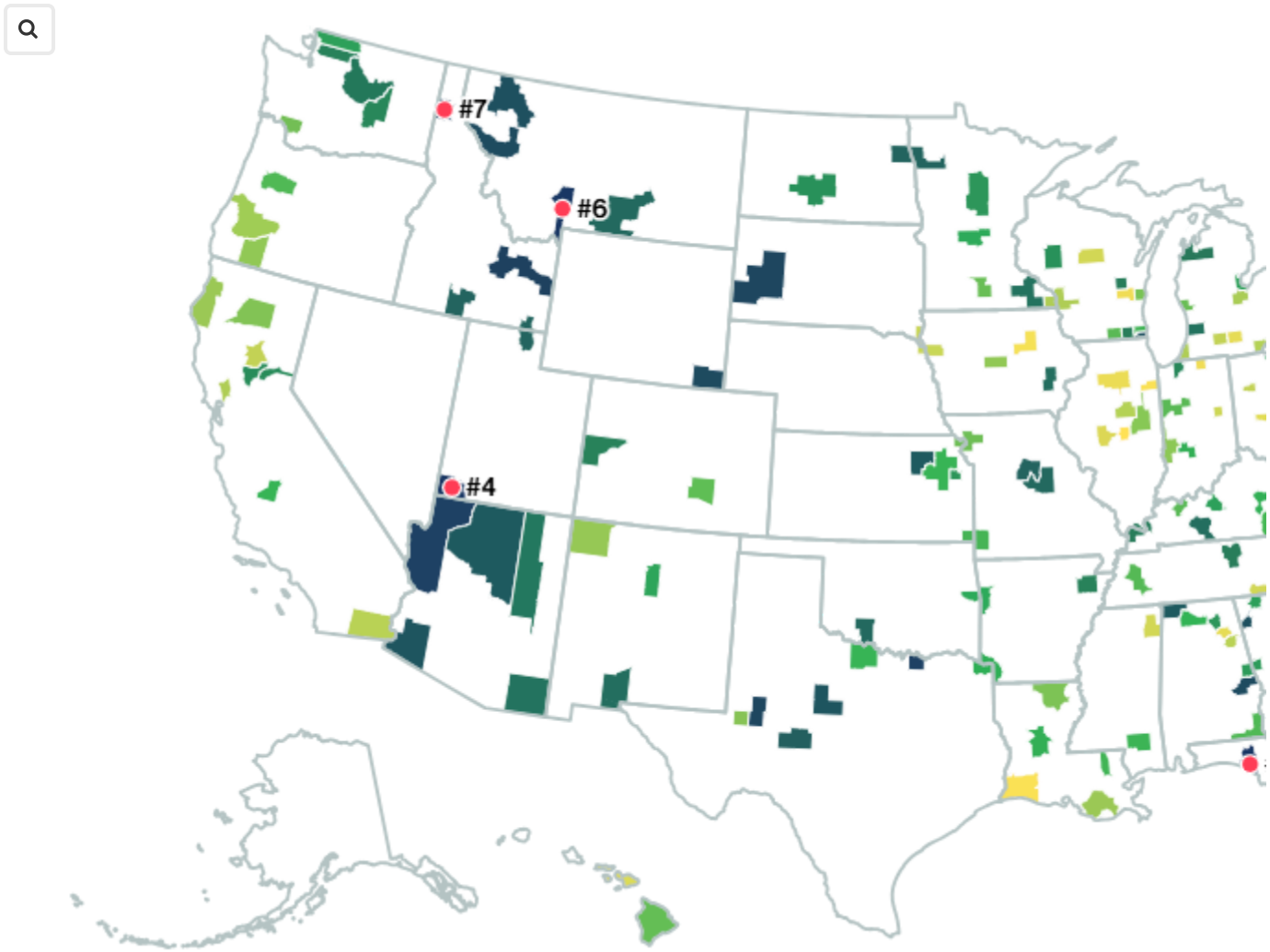
Keep an eye on Central Virginia: **Charlottesville**, home to the University of Virginia, moved into the top 10 of the mid-sized MSA ranking, at No. 9. And the neighboring **Staunton-Stuarts Draft** MSA leapt 35 spots to No. 20 in the same size category, driven by strong prime-age attraction.

Florida claimed the top three spots in the Mid-Sized MSA rankings.

Our #1 for talent attraction is also the top MSA for retirees in the US: **Wildwood-The Villages, FL**, where 57% of the population is aged 65+.

Color the map by rankings for each metric → → Overall Rank

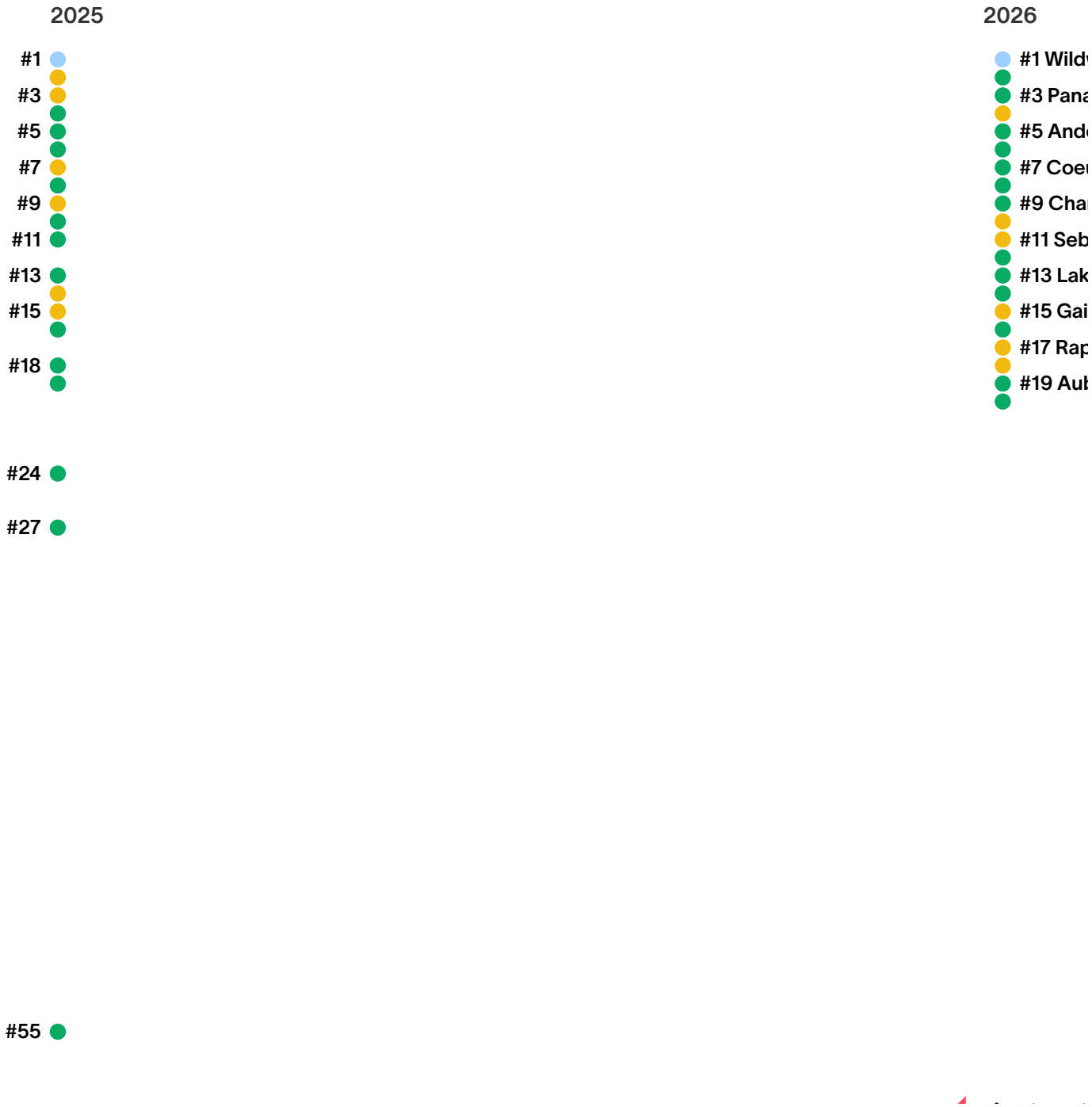
Mid-Sized MSA (100K–250K) Rankings: #1 #101 #200



Led once again by high-performing Florida towns, the Mid-Sized MSA category still saw some significant shifts—both up and down—in our rankings.

By far the biggest riser in our top 20 Mid-Sized MSAs was #20 Staunton-Stuarts Draft, VA, followed by Midland, TX, which moved up to #16 this year.

2025-26 Change in Ranking: Same Up Down



Want to talk about your ranking?

Contact Us

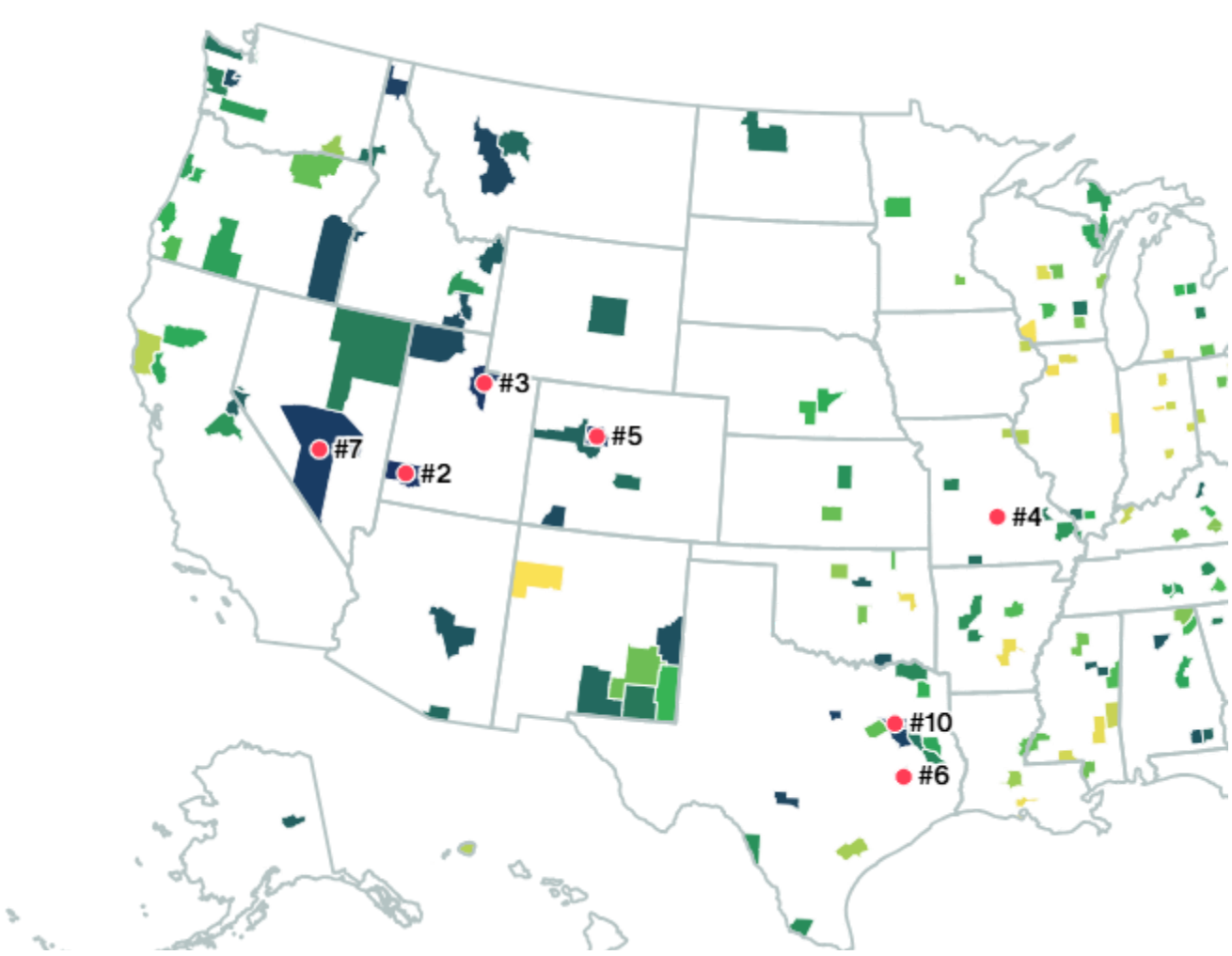
Small MSA Rankings

Utah and Texas each snagged two of the Top 10 rankings for small MSAs.

Our #1 small MSA is **Jefferson, GA**, which ranks in the top 10 for 6 of our 7 metrics.

Color the map by rankings for each metric → → Overall Rank

Small MSA (50K–100K) Rankings: #1 #106 #211



Very Small MSA Rankings

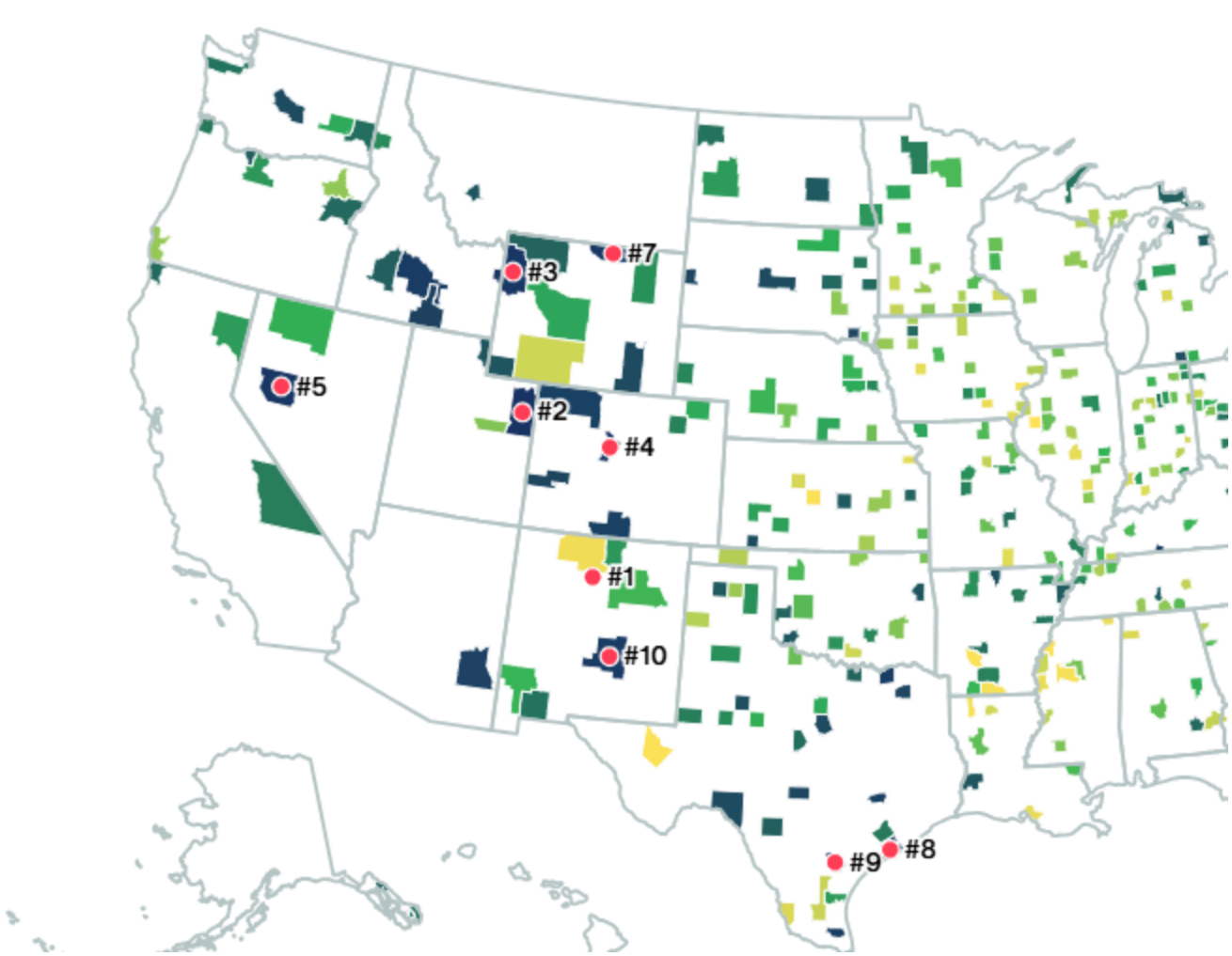
The Mountain West dominates the top Very Small MSAs for talent attraction.

But **Vineyard Haven, MA**, the main port town for high-profile vacation spot Martha's Vineyard, is the one northeastern MSA to break into the top 10 across all size categories.

Color the map by rankings for each metric → → Overall Rank

Very Small MSA (10K–50K) Rankings:

#1 #159 #316



Takeaways and Themes

Last year we laid out six key trends that helped shape the 2025 rankings. Those trends still hold true this year, with a few slight twists, so we're not going to address all six. But here are our main

takeaways and themes from the 2026 results.

#1: The Sunbelt and Mountain West Still Dominate

Just how dominant are the **Sunbelt and Mountain West**? They make up the top 10 states, the top 20 large MSAs, and nine of the top 10 mid-sized MSAs.

The Sunbelt and Mountain West also show up strong for blue-collar job growth because of the industrial investment flowing into these states.

There are some exceptions, and it's worth noting the Miami and Houston MSAs, while still in the top 25 large metros, saw fairly significant drops from 2025 to 2026.

#2: Affordability and Quality of Life Are More Important Than Ever

#3: Most Prime-Age Talent Magnets Still Aren't Adding Blue-Collar Jobs

Conclusion: The Common Ingredients

Eleven years in, the Talent Attraction Scorecard — nicely complemented by DCI's *Talent Wars* — paints a clear picture. The states and regions that consistently perform well in our rankings have geographic advantages, sure (see takeaway #1 on the Sunbelt and Mountain West). But they have

other common ingredients, too. They think long-term. They drive new business investment. They focus on retaining the talent they have first and foremost. They care deeply about quality of life, safety, and other community attributes. And they start with a foundation of data and research.

Full Rankings Tables

1 of 5

STATE RANKINGS
Click through the 5 tables to view the full rankings for **all states** and **all MSAs** by **size category.**

The top 3 states remain the same from 2025, but others have shifted up or down.

State Rankings for Talent Attraction

▲CLICK▼ on each column heading below to sort rankings by category.

Search for your region

State	2026 State Rank	2025 State Rank	Overall Job Growth	College-Educated Pop. Growth	High-Earning Job Growth	Blue-Collar Job Growth	Competitive Effect	Attraction of Earner	Prime-Age Pop. Growth
Florida	#1	#1	#4	#2	#2	#6	#2	#17	#14
Texas	#2	#2	#5	#4	#1	#12	#1	#34	#30
Idaho	#3	#3	#1	#3	#9	#1	#9	#8	#6
Arizona	#4	#7	#6	#12	#5	#2	#4	#9	#15
Nevada	#5	#5	#3	#21	#27	#4	#7	#5	#2
North Carolina	#6	#11	#7	#6	#4	#21	#3	#18	#20
Utah	#7	#9	#2	#11	#10	#3	#6	#29	#28
South Carolina	#8	#15	#8	#10	#12	#19	#10	#12	#17
Montana	#9	#10	#9	#24	#3	#15	#13	#13	#15
Georgia	#10	#14	#10	#13	#18	#13	#5	#27	#25
Tennessee	#11	#13	#11	#8	#26	#14	#8	#21	#22
Colorado	#12	#12	#16	#17	#32	#35	#12	#3	#4
Delaware	#13	#8	#15	#9	#44	#8	#17	#6	#12
Wyoming	#14	#4	#34	#36	#14	#23	#23	#4	#5
South Dakota	#15	#17	#13	#22	#25	#5	#15	#22	#26
Alaska	#16	#23	#30	#49	#31	#10	#21	#2	#1
Arkansas	#17	#21	#14	#16	#7	#17	#14	#38	#36
New Hampshire	#18	#16	#29	#34	#19	#25	#26	#7	#7
Maine	#19	#19	#21	#5	#23	#34	#20	#24	#29
New Mexico	#20	#26	#22	#15	#37	#7	#24	#23	#19

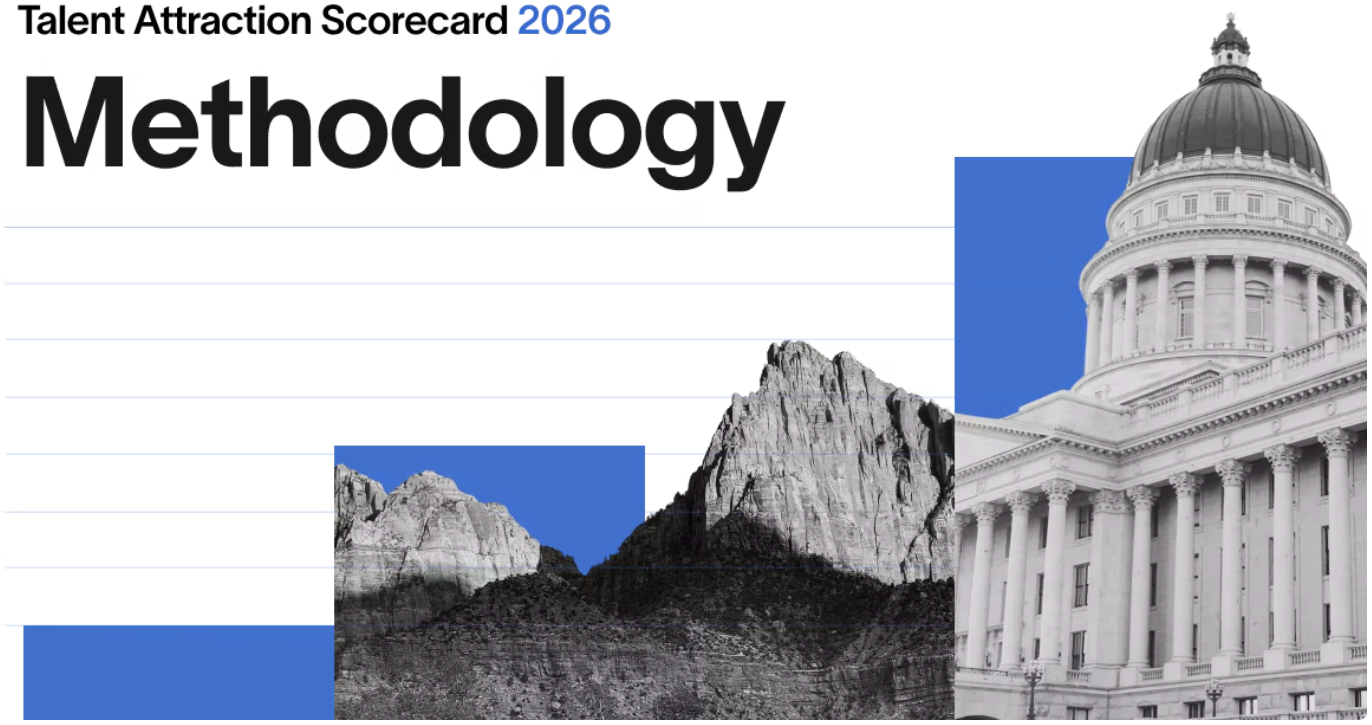
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Note: Washington, DC, was included in the 2025 State Rankings as #6. We have removed it for 2026 but kept the other 2025 ranking numbers from last year in this table.

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Talent Attraction Scorecard 2026

Methodology



The Talent Attraction Scorecard evaluates how effectively states and metropolitan and micropolitan areas attract talent and grow economic opportunity. The 2026 Scorecard ranks 50 states, as well as 925 metropolitan and micropolitan areas plus Washington, D.C.

Data Sources

Job and occupation measures come from Lightcast's Core Labor Market Information series. Population and migration measures come from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year Detailed Tables. *Note:* The Talent Attraction Scorecard typically measures change over a five year period, but the 2026 rankings use 2019-2025 change to preserve a pre-COVID baseline.

Scorecard Metrics

The scorecard uses the following components:

Overall Job Growth: Percent change in employment.

College-Educated Popuation Growth: Change in the population with an associate's degree or higher, including both count growth and percentage-point change in share.

Blue-Collar Job Growth: Change in selected occupations in trades, installation, manufacturing, production, and protective services.

High-Earning Job Growth: Change in the 200 occupations with the highest national average earnings.

Competitive Effect: The local portion of job change after accounting for broader national and industry trends. Positive values indicate growth above expectation; negative values indicate growth below expectation.

Attraction of Earners: Gross in-migration of people with reported income of at least $25,000, expressed per capita.

Prime-Age Attraction: Gross in-migration of adults ages 25–54, expressed per capita.

Ranking Calculations

Overall rankings are calculated from combined Z-scores—which measure how much a region differs from the median for each metric—rather than from combined rankings.

All of Austin's Z-scores are high but evenly distributed, while the Dallas metro scored so high for Competitive Effect (9.9x the median), that this one metric helped push DFW into the #2 spot overall.

Z-Scores by Metric for the Top 3 Large (250K+) MSAs

Rankings by Metric for the Top 3 Large (250K+) MSAs

FARGO MOORHEAD
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

"As a region, it is one of our top metrics to measure how the Fargo metro is doing in comparisons to other markets. Instead of just tracking our progress against internal measures, we know having a third party validated comparison across markets is important. We also use it in marketing when doing business and workforce attraction."



Joe Raso, Greater Fargo Moorhead EDC
PRESIDENT & CEO

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