

# OVERFLOW

## Heavy rains and aging sewers drive overflows in Maryland's most affected areas

By Steph Quinn

Not counting the City of Baltimore, the western Maryland cities of Cumberland and Frostburg were the sites of the most sewer overflows reported to the Maryland Department of the Environment's Water and Science Administration since 2012.

With the cities of Cumberland and Baltimore operating under consent decrees from the state and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, overflows have decreased overall in Allegeny County and Baltimore City during the past decade. But overflows spiked in years of high precipitation, and the potential impacts of climate change on sewer systems' ability to withstand strong storms are unclear.



Jerry Jackson | The Baltimore Sun

Baltimore City had more overflows than any county except Allegany. While Allegany County had 5,652 in the past decade, Baltimore had 5,487, according to Water and Science Administration data. The county with the next most reported overflows after Baltimore City - Baltimore County - had less than a fifth that number.

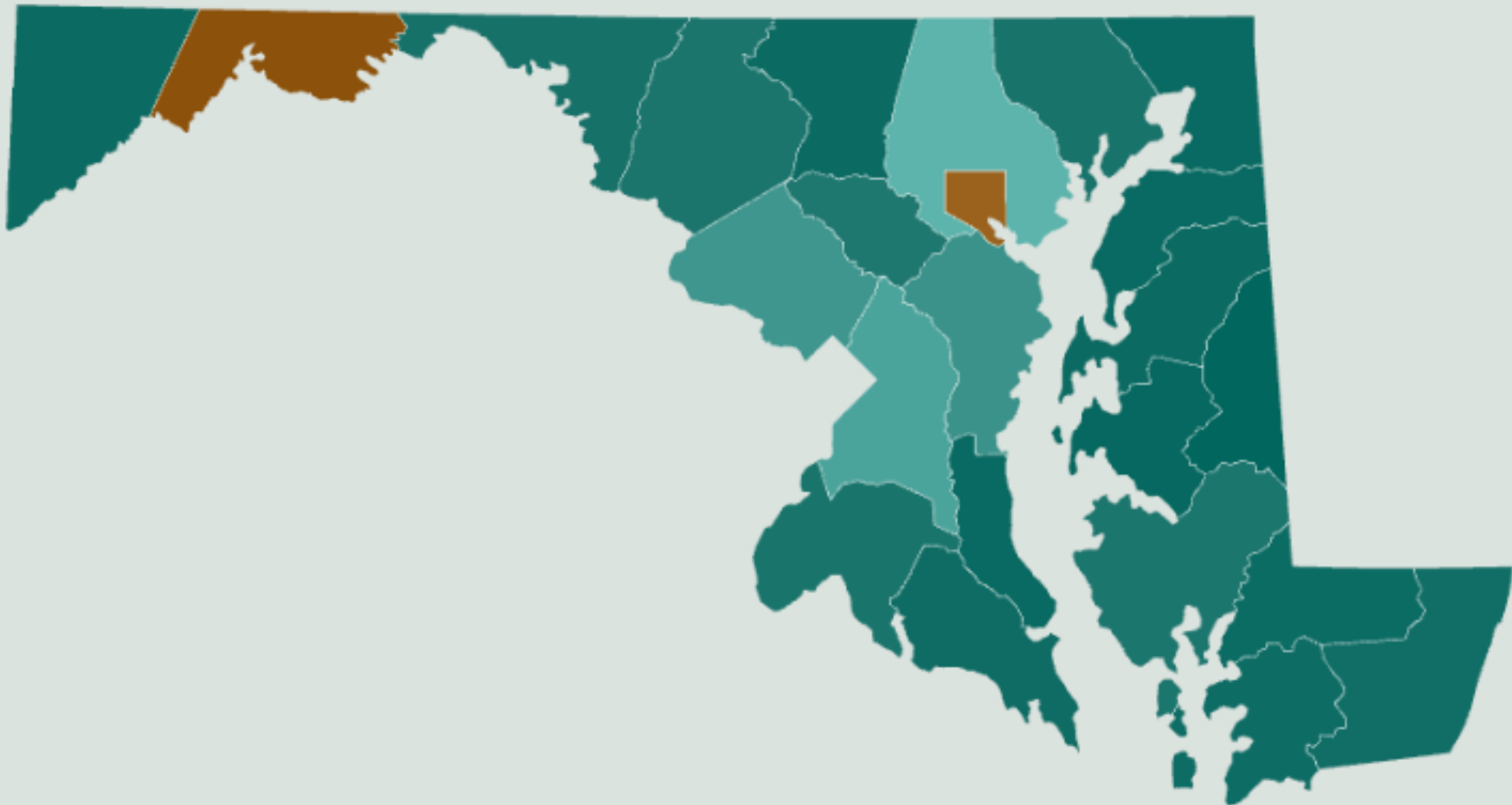
Baltimore City had more overflows than any county except Allegany. While Allegany County had 5,652 in the past decade, Baltimore had 5,487, according to Water and Science Administration data. The county with the next most reported overflows after Baltimore City - Baltimore County - had less than a fifth that number.

Cumberland and Frostburg's 2,661 and 1,589 overflows since 2012 shrink in comparison to Baltimore's 5,487. But they're out of proportion with the relatively small populations of these Allegany County cities.

### Allegany County and Baltimore City led Maryland in reported sewer overflows since 2012

While Allegany County had 5,652 reported sewer overflows, Baltimore City alone had 5,487. Caroline County had the fewest at five, while Calvert County had 55.

Number of overflows  
5 5652



Map: Steph Quinn • Source: [Maryland Water and Science Administration](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Cumberland has spent \$59 million on improvements in keeping with the city's 2001 consent decree. A March 2022 report by the City of Baltimore projected that improvements to the city's sewer infrastructure to meet the requirements of its 2002 consent decree would total \$241.3 million by 2030.

The cause of these overflows? Rain and history, according to experts and state reporting.

Brad Metzger, the district manager of the Maryland Water and Science Administration's western field office, said Cumberland's frequent overflows happen because the city and its sewer system are old.

A modern map of Maryland highways shows a north-south artery between the state's two major urban metro areas, Baltimore and Washington.

But throughout the 1800s, U.S. Route 40, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad and the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal formed a thoroughfare threading westward across the state, Metzger said.

Cumberland has a combined sewer system. About 700 U.S. cities have combined sewers, where stormwater and sanitary sewage go into the same pipe, according to a January 2023 report by the Government Accountability Office.

"They weren't contemporaneous with modern expectations," Metzger said.

Combined sewers are designed to funnel stormwater and sanitary sewage to be treated before releasing it into local waterways. But during rainy spells, stormwater runoff overwhelms the system, flowing along with sewage into watersheds before it can be treated.

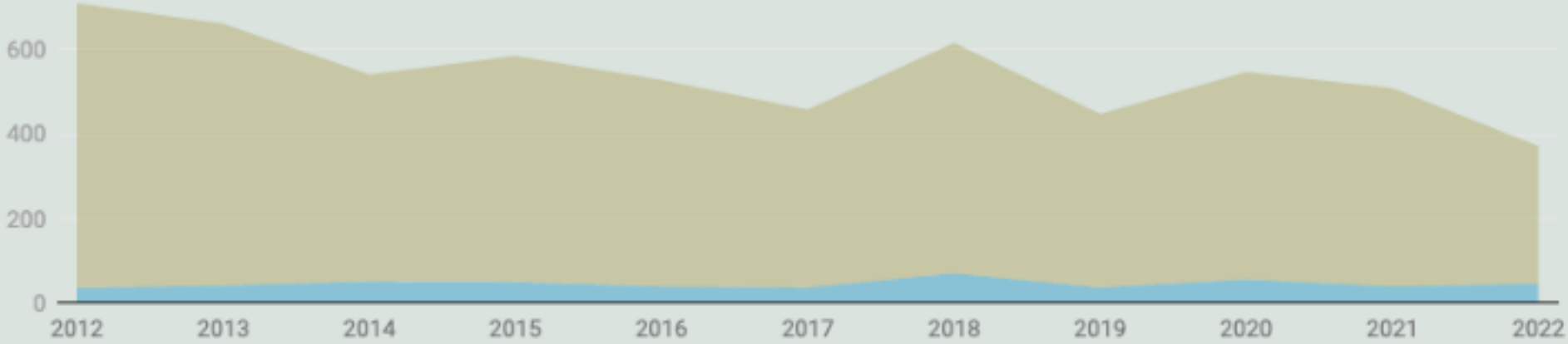
Baltimore separated its combined sewers and designed or completed 23 capital projects so far to meet state and federal requirements, according to the city's January 2023 plan for phase two of the consent decree.

Since 2012, Baltimore's number of reported overflows has decreased overall and appears to more closely follow precipitation levels. For instance, 2012 - with 37.4 inches of rain, not an unusual rainfall year for the city - saw the highest number of overflows: 671. 2018, when it rained more than 70 inches of rain, had fewer overflows, and 2022, when precipitation was similar to 2013 levels, had the least number of overflows: 324.

### Baltimore City sewer overflows have decreased overall, may increasingly reflect precipitation

The number of Baltimore City sewer overflows reported to the Maryland Water and Science Administration more closely follows precipitation levels and has decreased overall during the past decade.

precipitation in inches sewer overflows



Precipitation data is for Baltimore City and is from the National Centers for Environmental Information's Climate at a Glance City Time Series.

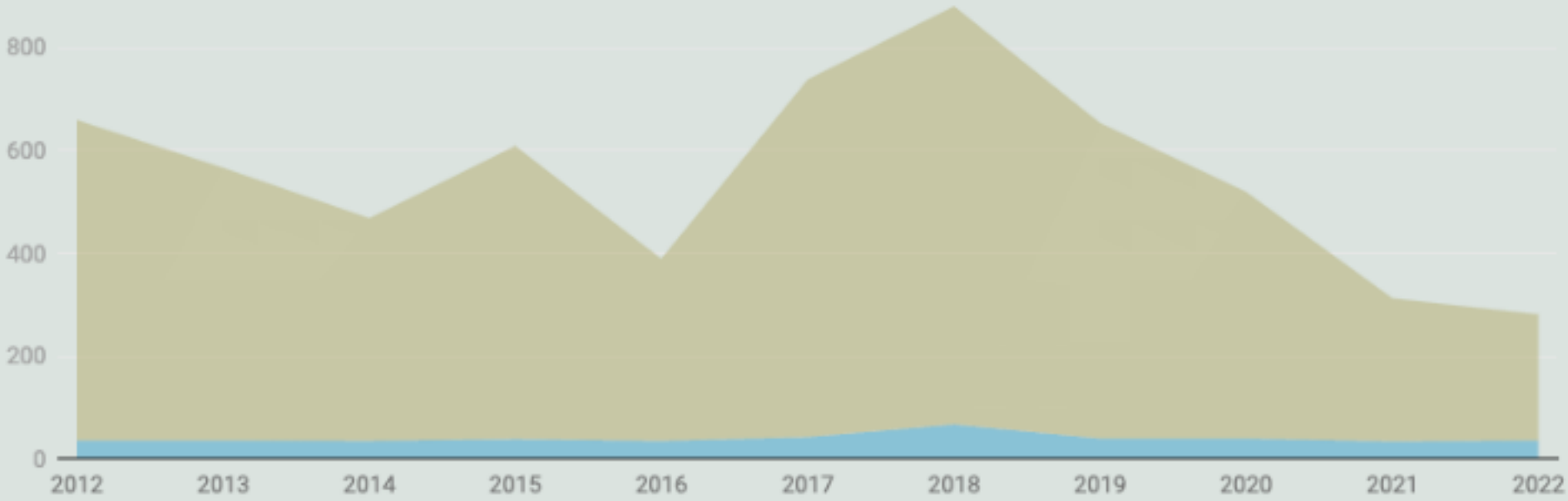
Chart: Steph Quinn • Source: [Maryland Water and Science Administration](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

In Allegany County, too, a wet 2018, with 68 inches of rain, saw 813 overflows, compared to 278 in 2021, the driest year.

### Allegany County sewer overflows have decreased overall, spiked with 2018 precipitation

Sewer overflows in Allegany County, where combined sewer systems are more common, follow precipitation levels.

precipitation in inches sewer overflows



Precipitation data is for Allegany County only and comes from the National Centers for Environmental Information's Climate at a Glance City Time Series.

Chart: Steph Quinn • Source: [Maryland Water and Science Administration](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Rainfall and precipitation were by far the most commonly cited causes of overflows in Baltimore City and Allegany County.

Precipitation patterns may be set to change. According to the U.S. Global Change Research Program, a federal program researching environmental change, extreme precipitation events across a swath of the northeastern U.S. including Maryland increased by 38% between 1901 and 2016, second only to 42% in the Midwest.

The benchmarks for Baltimore's compliance with the requirements of its consent decree are informed by historical precipitation data, according to the January 2023 city plan.

And Cumberland officials expressed their uncertainty how climate change may interfere with their plans, according to the GAO report.

State data from the past decade suggests a complicated picture for sewer overflows. Though the wettest years have seen the most overflows in places most affected by sewer woes, overflows have decreased overall alongside state and city infrastructure improvements.



# DON'T CALL IT A COMEBACK



via Yahoo News

## The Real Statistics Behind 'The U.S. Labor Boom'

by Mathew Schumer

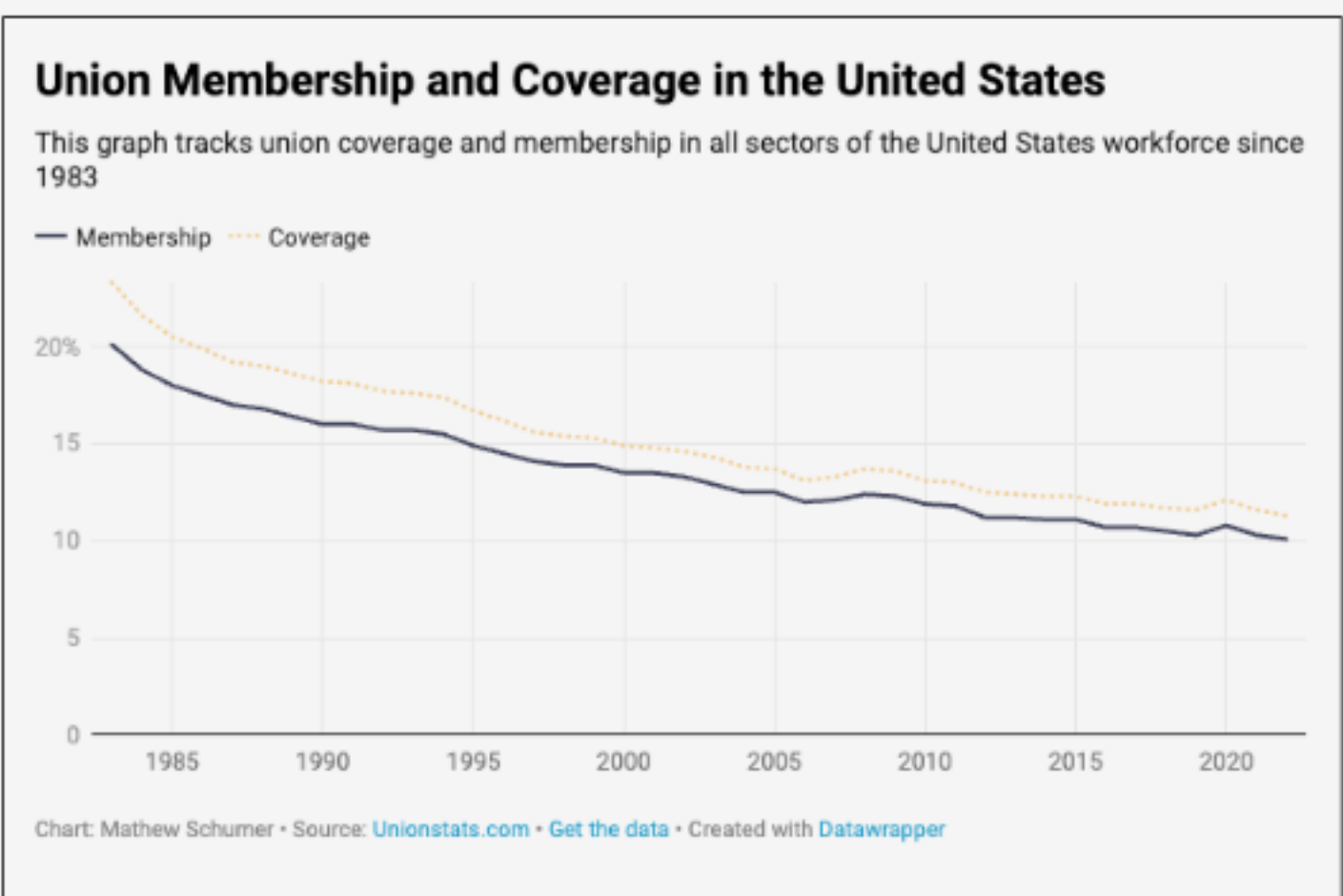
Unionization is in the midst of a comeback in the American lexicon. High-profile labor movements among workers at companies like Starbucks and Amazon are becoming the subjects of popular news segments. An oft-cited Gallup poll suggests that public approval of labor unions in the U.S. is on its way to an all-time high.

Within the past month, a strike of workers affiliated with the Writers Guild of America has made front-page news, due to its potential implications. The last strike of this nature occurred over a decade ago and lasted over 100 days with significant economic effects.



via Los Angeles Times

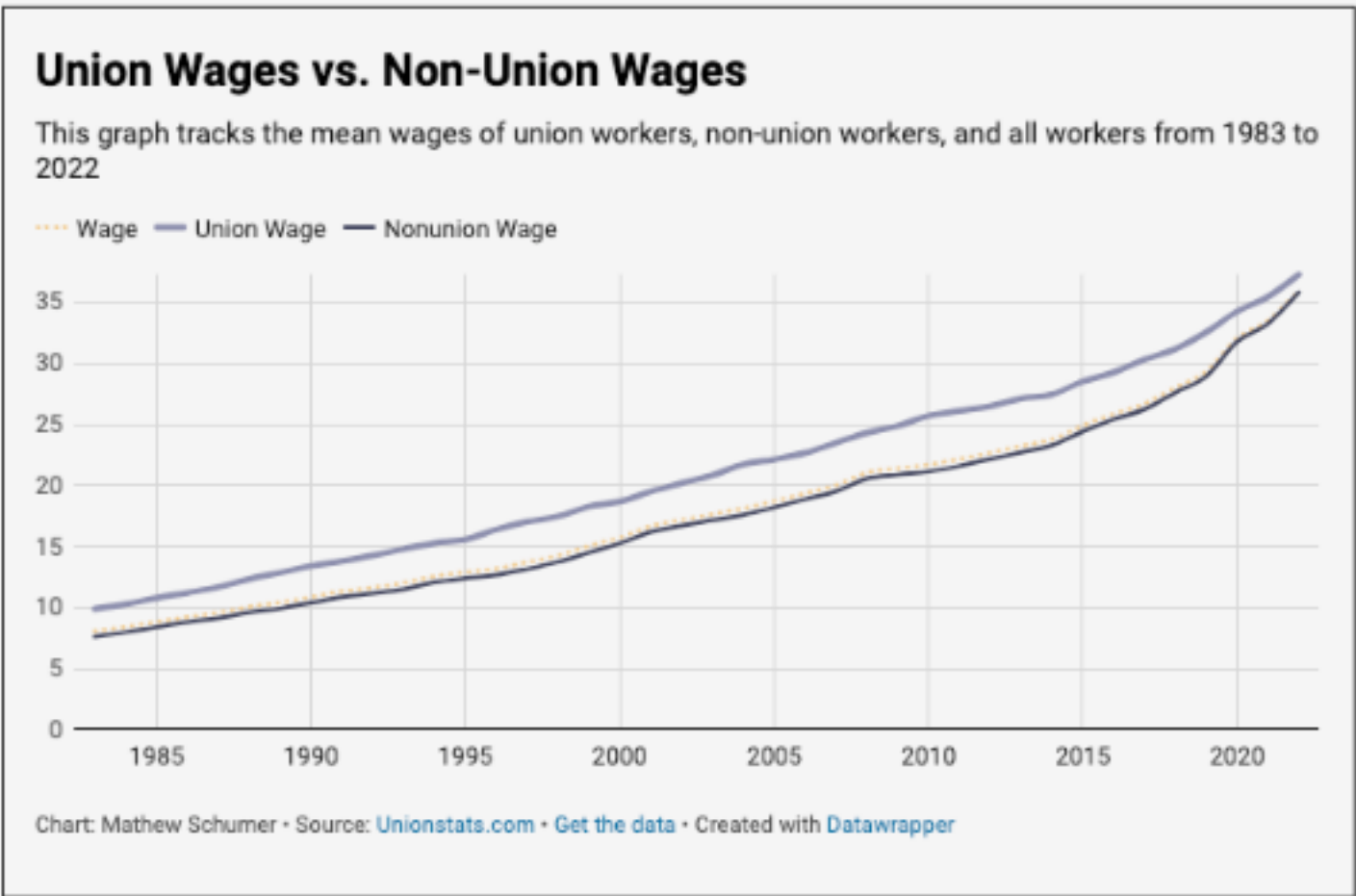
"What's gonna have to happen in this country is a general strike... Hopefully one day- hopefully soon- all the unions in the country can come together on the same accord," said Amazon Labor Union president and founder Chris Smalls during a livestream in 2022. Despite the optimism of organizers like Smalls, labor unions still face an uphill battle when it comes to successfully covering the American workforce.



Union popularity has yet to translate into any meaningful change for unionization numbers at-large. Since the early 1980s, unionization and union coverage have seen a significant decrease in the United States- a trend that shows no sign of slowing down.

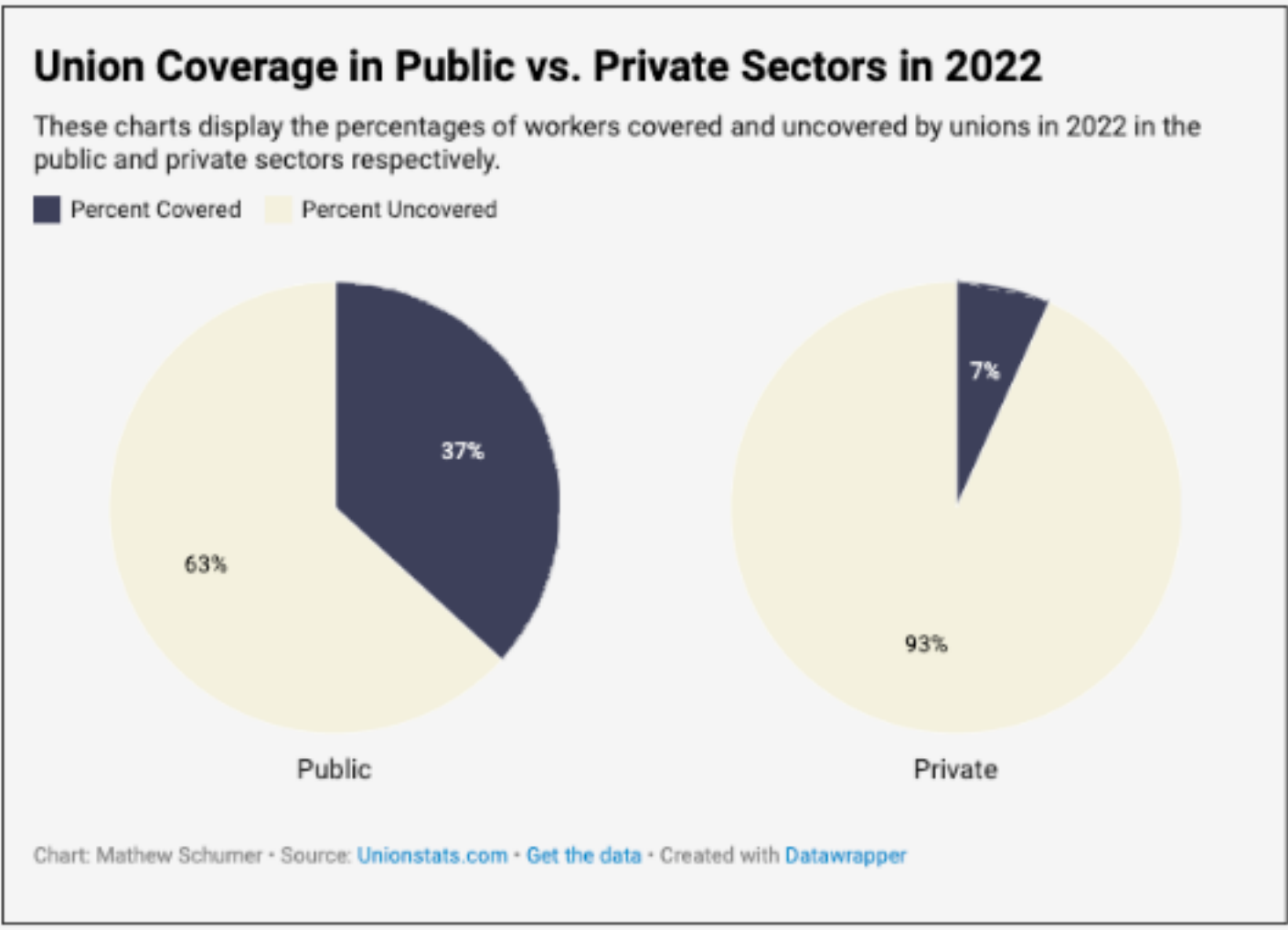
According to [Unionstats.com](#), a website that aggregates data from the Current Population Surveys (CPS), Unionization in the U.S. is currently seeing its lowest rates in recorded history. Union coverage among workers was at 11.3%, while membership was only at 10.1%.

Even the gap between union membership and coverage has been thinning slowly, given the introduction of right-to-work laws at the state level. These laws, enacted primarily in midwestern Republican-led states, ban unions from covering workers who aren't explicitly affiliated with them and obfuscate the process of collective bargaining.



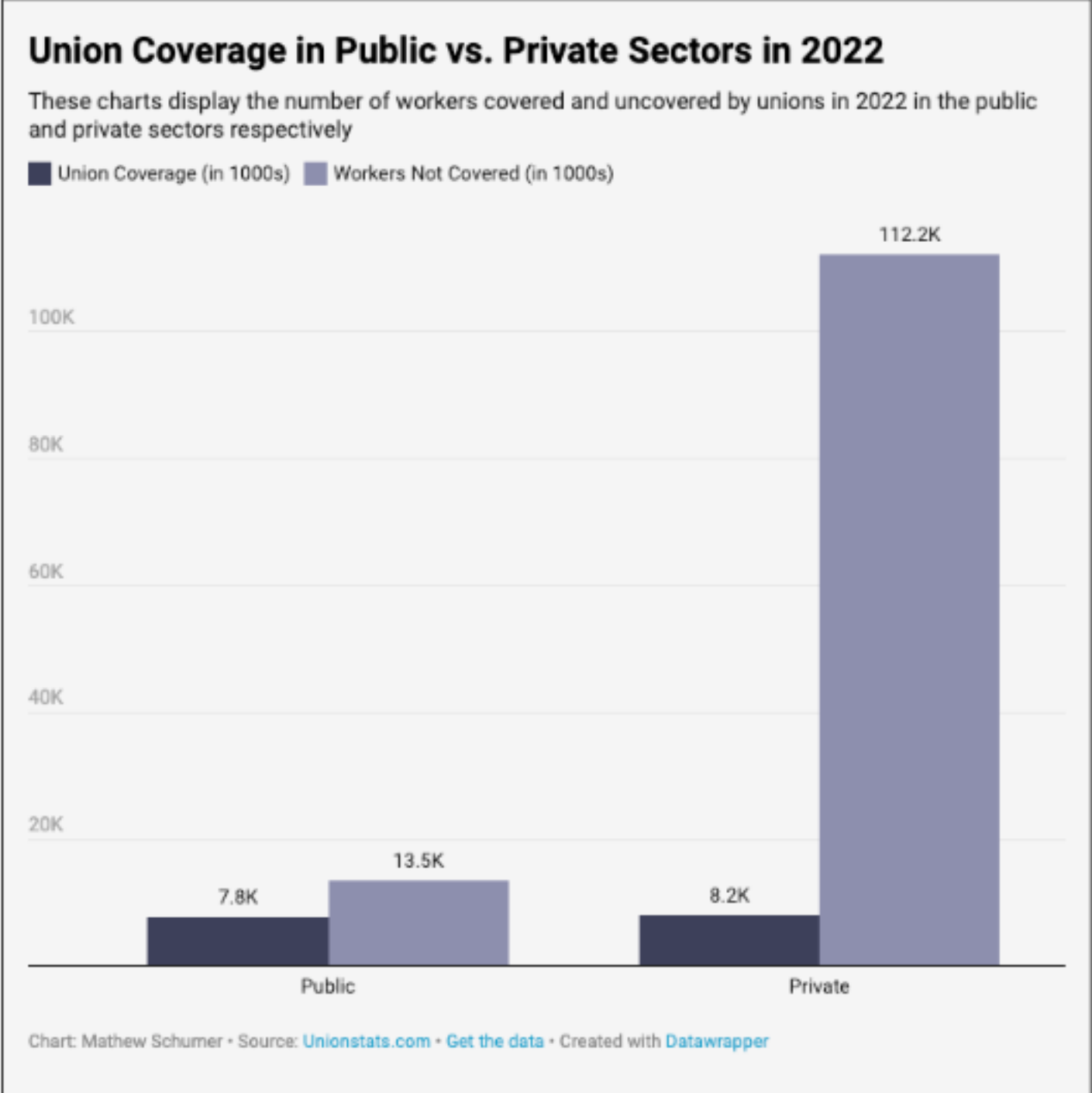
In line with the downward trend in unionization, the overall wage of American workers has begun to trend closer to that of the nonunion wage. Historically, the (albeit slight) influence of higher union wages has skewed the average wage of all American workers higher than nonunion workers; but the numbers suggest that as unionization numbers decrease, so does this influence.

That has also resulted in the closing gyre between the union and nonunion average wages. In 2012, the average union wage was \$26.48, whereas the nonunion average was only \$22.15- a difference of \$4.33. The difference in 2022 was only \$1.46, which is even less when adjusted for inflation.



To understand these trends, it's important to look at the breakdown of union coverage by sector. In the public sector, 37% of workers were covered by unions in 2022, compared to only 7% of workers in the private sector. A report published in 2020 by the Economic Policy Institute attempted to determine the causes of this disparity.

The report found that there are "structural weaknesses in the law, exacerbated by anti-union amendments to the NLRA in 1947 and aided by a series of rulings by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and courts, have allowed employers to interfere in and defeat efforts by their workers to organize unions and to face no real consequences for doing so."



Putting these statistics in the scope of the American workforce at large only serves to emphasize their severity. As exhibited by this graph, the number of nonunionized workers in the private sector far exceeds any other category- accounting for almost 75% of the entire American workforce.

Rep. Robert C Scott (D-VA) introduced the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act in 2019 to address those numbers and aid the efforts of workers attempting to unionize, as well as making it harder for employers to retaliate against unionization. The bill initially passed in the House but stagnated in the Senate, prompting Rep. Scott to introduce a second PRO Act in 2023.



While Democrat-backed bills like this aren't likely to pass in a Republican-majority House, they do indicate that efforts are still being made to change the tide. Public opinion remains in favor of labor organizers, and if that trend continues for a few more years it could hit a critical mass and lead to tangible change. That, however, remains to be seen.