

CAL MATTERS

COMMENTARY

California's shrinking population has big impacts



BY DAN WALTERS APRIL 10, 2022



People walk on a beach path as evening winds kick up sand in Long Beach on April 18, 2021. California's population has declined for the first time in its history and is now just under 39.5 million. AP Photo/Ashley Landis

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IN SUMMARY

Expansive projections of California's population growth have been proven wrong and if anything, the state is now losing population with serious social and economic impacts.

Although California's population growth began to slow in the 1990s after exploding in the previous decade by 6 million people, both official and independent demographers continued to see relatively strong growth for decades to come.

In 2007, then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's in-house demographers projected that California would have 39.9 million residents by 2011. It didn't happen.

Five years later, then-Gov. Jerry Brown's 2012-13 budget projected that the state's population would be "over 39.6 million" by 2016. That didn't happen either.

In 2016, with the state's population estimated at 38.7 million, the [Public Policy Institute of California declared](#) that "California will continue to gain millions of new residents in each of the next two decades, increasing demand in all areas of infrastructure and public services – including education, transportation, housing, water, health, and welfare."

"By 2030, PPIC said, "California's population is projected to reach 44.1 million."

That's not going to happen either.

The 2020 census pegged the state's population at [39.5 million](#) and a recent report from the Census Bureau says California had a net loss of more than a quarter-million residents between July 1, 2020, and July 1, 2021.

“California appears to be on the verge of a new demographic era, one in which population declines characterize the state,” PPIC demographer Hans Johnson writes in [a new analysis](#). “Lower levels of international migration, declining birth rates, and increases in deaths all play a role. But the primary driver of the state’s population loss over the past couple years has been the result of California residents moving to other states.”

Since 2010, Johnson continued, “about 7.5 million people moved from California to other states, while only 5.8 million people moved to California from other parts of the country. According to Department of Finance estimates, the state has lost residents to other states every year since 2001.”

Instead of zooming past 40 million to 45 and then 50 million by mid-century, as earlier projections indicated, California may remain stuck just under 40 million indefinitely.

That said, [a stagnant](#) population doesn’t mean a lack of demographic change. Declining birth rates, the aging of the large baby boom cohort and rising death rates – three other components – mean, for example, that as a whole, California’s population is growing older. We’re already seeing sharp declines in public school enrollment from the state’s baby bust.

The state-to-state migration patterns Johnson cites also affect the composition of an otherwise stagnant population. Overall, he says, those leaving the state tend to have low to moderate incomes and relatively low levels of education while those moving here have higher levels of education and income.

“Most people who move across state lines do so for housing, job, or family reasons,” Johnson writes. “Since 2015, among interstate movers who cite housing as the primary reason, California has experienced net losses of 413,000 adults (according to the Current Population Survey).

“Net losses among those who cite jobs as the primary reason totaled 333,000 and among those who cite family 239,000. The PPIC Statewide Survey finds that 37% of Californians have seriously considered leaving the state because of housing costs.”

While the differences between incomers and outgoers would seem, at least superficially, to be a net positive for California, they have some very negative effects, including a worsening shortage of workers and widening the state’s already immense economic divide.

“The state’s high cost of living, driven almost solely by comparatively high housing costs, remains an ongoing public policy challenge – one that needs resolution if the state is to be a place of opportunity for all of its residents,” Johnson concludes.

Amen.



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