



State Population Profile

The second in a new series by NPG.

Florida: A Great Place to Visit, but...

An NPG Commentary
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

With national population growth at a record low – just 0.1% in 2021 – domestic migration is now the key component of Florida’s population expansion. Between July 2020 and July 2021, Florida added 221,000 more people (net) through domestic migration. Only Texas, with net domestic migration of 310,288, experienced a larger influx.

State economists predict Florida’s population – currently 21.78 million – will reach 24.47 million in 2030. They project average growth of 309,867 a year, or 849 a day, from 2021 to 2026.

“These increases are analogous to adding a city about the size of Orlando every year,” according to a state panel known as the Demographic Estimating Conference.¹

Domestic migration - the movement of Americans from one state to another - has been the salient feature of U.S. life since the end of World War II. This trend is particularly common as retirees from northern states are drawn to Florida for the weather and the absence of a state income tax. During the pandemic younger workers, able to work remotely, joined them – albeit in smaller numbers.

Immigration from abroad? That has long been considered a Federal responsibility. While state officials may have sparred with the Feds over border security, sanctuary cities, or the wall, their actions were mainly aimed at challenging federal policy through litigation.

Enter Governor Ron DeSantis.

Florida Sends Immigrants North

In September 2022, DeSantis arranged for 48 Venezuelan asylum seekers to be flown to the elite vacation island of Martha’s Vineyard. Was it political theater? Of course it was.

Expensive? You betcha. Florida, which hired a videographer to document the transports, paid \$615,000 for the two flights, at a cost of \$12,800 per migrant. State taxpayers paid for all of it.

Worth it? You betcha again. By dramatizing the problem DeSantis may have forestalled the immigration-related problems that wracked his state in earlier decades.

Did it work? The stunt resonated with voters: the Governor won re-election by an astonishing 19 percentage points.

Too Many Floridians

The Florida of orange groves, grasslands, marshes, pine scrubs, and pristine beaches, continues to disappear thanks to constant new development. In the 2000-2010 decade, despite a sharp recession near the end, Florida’s urban areas sprawled out and destroyed an additional 1,200 square miles of surrounding farmland and undeveloped habitat. (About the size of Broward County.)²

A 2014 research paper identified two interrelated drivers behind environmental losses:

1. Population Growth: “**The chief finding of this study is that one factor – population growth – far outweighed all consumption factors in Florida’s loss of open space during the last decade.**”³
2. Immigration: “**New immigrants and births to immigrants during this decade totaled about 1.9 million, equal to two-thirds (67%) of Florida’s total population growth.**”⁴

At its peak (2003 to 2004), Florida’s population grew by 4.7% – a rate that would have doubled population in fifteen years. That was a faster rate of growth than Pakistan (2.3%), India (1.5%), and Mexico (1.4%) recorded that year.⁵

It was about this time that some state officials started talking about “limits to growth.” **Biologists and land use planners put Florida’s sustainable population at six or seven million, given the average resident’ lifestyles and rates of consumption.**⁶

Today population is north of 20 million, and the infrastructure required for clean water, energy, transportation, schools, and housing, is in short supply.

Illegal Immigrants

The Migration Policy Institute, a liberal-leaning think tank, estimates that 772,000 illegals live in Florida – 7% of the national illegal population.⁷ This figure is undoubtedly too low, as it is based on data collected in 2019, when Trump’s **Remain in Mexico Policy** was still in place.

Under Biden, Border Patrol apprehensions have soared. The vast majority of those apprehended are released into the country

– and many end up in Florida. In fact, the largest group of illegals in Florida are from Mexico, according to the MPI paper.⁸

A Florida-based researcher estimates that 119,300 new illegals entered the state during Biden’s first year alone – an average of 325 per day – and they estimate that by the end of his administration, a total of 1.2 million state residents will be here illegally.⁹ By comparison, the entire population of Duval County, the sixth most populous in the state, is one million.

Miami-Dade County Fails Its Students

Florida’s most densely populated county is the traditional gateway for immigrants wishing to put down roots. About 56% of the county was foreign-born in 2006; since 1994, an estimated 12,000 to 24,000 new immigrant students were enrolled annually.¹⁰

The unintended consequences abound.

Principals have had to cut classrooms designed for one grade in half to accommodate immigrant students. A 2002 report found custodial closets, computer labs, staff rooms, book storage rooms, alcoves, and even locker rooms, have been converted to classrooms.¹¹

Florida law limited class size to no more than 18 students from kindergarten to 3rd grade.

Florida also set the maximum classroom size for forth through eighth graders to 22. Highschoolers have the highest maximum number of students, now set at 25. Miami-Dade County never met those standards. A report presented to a grand jury found pervasive teacher shortages had affected the quality of education and deprived **“...the students of their right of individual attention by the teacher.”**¹²

The winners? Manufacturers of portable classrooms. In the early 2000s, Miami-Dade schools pressed 50,000 of them into service.

The losers? Native-born students competing for school facilities and staff increasingly channeled to immigrant students.

Florida’s Mistake: Putting Growth Ahead of Sustainability

Blame Hurricane Ian. The September storm dropped at least 10% more rain than any climate model deemed possible. That may not seem like a lot, but even two added inches translates to another 54,000 gallons over just one acre.¹³

Researchers who study flooding, development, and climate change, were horrified – but not surprised. For years they warned that new residential development wasn’t sustainable, especially with a warming climate supercharging rainfall.

Florida has been here before. After Hurricane Andrew in 1992 the state adopted a universal building code, mandating that new construction be able to withstand hurricane-force winds. (Before Andrew, 400 local building codes created a different sort of havoc.) Structures built under the unified code seem to hold up well. Apparently, Florida’s real estate experts know **how to build**.

But Ian exposed a different, and as yet unresolved, question: **where to build next?**

Several factors constrain the state’s decision.

Geography: Florida’s flatness and low elevation make the drainage of runoff difficult. The topography also allows storm surges to move further inland. This basic gravity must be taken into account in land use decisions.¹⁴

Overpopulation in low-lying coastal zones: “We’ve seen high rises built on barrier islands, which are the first to be affected by hurricanes. We’ve seen developers take out marsh and swamp land and fill it in, and create areas of dry land to build homes...All this [increases the odds of a disaster] because we shouldn’t be in these locations,” explains science journalist Annie Sneed.¹⁵

In a perfect world, people wouldn’t live on the coast – we’d live a mile or two inland.

Unfortunately, about three-quarters of Florida’s population lives in a coastal county.¹⁶

“Mother Nature keeps telling us homes don’t belong where we built them, yet we continue to build homes where they don’t belong,” says John Dickson, president of the Aon Edge Insurance Company.¹⁷

The DeSantis administration is cool with that. Real estate moguls were major contributors to his Gubernatorial campaign.¹⁸

“It will be interesting to see if Ian’s massive flooding prompts the kind of rule changes for floodplain development that Hurricane Andrew’s destruction... prompted in building code improvements,” Chad Berginnis, executive director of the Association of State Floodplain Managers, says.¹⁹

Summary

It is said that demography is destiny. Past and present demographic behavior has produced 22 million Floridians by 2021, according to Census data. Only Texas added more people that year.

Florida’s future depends on its ability to reduce – or ideally, reverse – population growth in a way that minimizes any adverse effects on persons already here. State citizens must consider the impact of future growth on resources and quality of life, so that these may be passed on to the next generation with no diminution.

How to accomplish this? There are only two real options – reduce fertility, or reduce migration. While state policies can enable continued reductions in fertility and discourage migration from other states, only the Federal government can enact meaningful reductions in immigration from abroad.

If Florida is to have any hope of achieving a sustainable population, it must see to it that illegal immigration is halted, and that legal immigration is reduced sharply by Federal action.

To do nothing is not an option.

NOTES

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Edwin S. Rubenstein, president of ESR Research, is an experienced business researcher, financial analyst, and economics journalist. He has written extensively on federal tax policy, government waste, the Reagan legacy, and – most recently – on immigration. He is the author of two books: *The Right Data* (1994) and *From the Empire State to the Vampire State: New York in a Downward Transition* (with Herbert London, 1994). His essays on public policy have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *Newsday*, and *National Review*. His TV appearances include *Firing Line*, *Bill Moyers*, *McNeil-Lehr*, *CNBC*, and *Debates-Debates*. Mr. Rubenstein has a B.A. from Johns Hopkins and a graduate degree in economics from Columbia University.



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