



Immigration Drives Georgia Population Growth Above pre-Pandemic Levels

An NPG Commentary
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

Newly released Census figures show that Georgia's population grew by 124,847 between July 2021 and July 2022 – the fourth largest numeric gain of all states. The gain exceeded those of each of the last three years, including the pre-pandemic year of 2018-19, when the state's population rose by 108,531.¹

Georgia's population grew by 1.2% in this period – three times the national rate of 0.4%.²

Net international immigration was the fastest growing component of Georgia's population growth. It jumped by 27,285 from July 2021 to July 2022, a gain of 169% from the 10,160 gain recorded over the prior 12 months. Over the same period net domestic migration rose by 130%, and natural increase (births minus deaths) rose by 36%.³

In fact, the impact of foreign immigration is greater than these numbers suggest. Births and deaths of immigrants are included among statewide births and deaths. And among the hordes of Central Americans currently crossing the Rio Grande to Texas, a good number may move to Georgia, where they are counted as domestic migrants.

The impact of foreign immigration is best illustrated by the number of foreign-born people residing in the state. In 1990, 173,000 immigrants lived in Georgia, a mere 2.7% of total state population. By 2000 the immigrant population grew more than 3-fold, to 577,400, equaling 7.1% of the state population. In 2010 Georgia was home to 943,000 immigrants (9.7% of the state population) and data for 2021 show 1,083,000 people – 10.0% of the state's population – were born abroad.⁴

GEORGIA'S ILLEGAL ALIEN POPULATION DECLINED FROM 2010 TO 2018

The illegal alien population increased from 2010 to 2016, as the nation experienced a slow but steady recovery from the Great Recession of 2007-09. Trump's election quickly changed things. Many Mexicans left voluntarily to avoid deportation. This reverse migration was especially strong in sanctuary cities – like Atlanta.

While Georgia's immigrant population jumped significantly last year, most of the gain was due to increases in legal immigration following a period of government restrictions. The

number of illegal aliens in Georgia decreased by 53,000, or 13.4%, when comparing numbers from 2010 to those from 2018 when Trump-era barriers to entry were still in place. Nationally, the illegal population dropped 10% over this period.⁵

“The total undocumented population in the United States continued to decline in 2018, primarily because large numbers of undocumented residents returned to Mexico.”⁶ The reverse migration was huge: about 2.6 million undocumented Mexican nationals left the country in the 2010 to 2018 period – 45% of them voluntarily – to avoid deportation.

A state-by-state analysis found that “The [illegal alien] population dropped fastest in the 2010 to 2018 period in states that cooperate the least with federal immigration enforcement efforts...” Georgia is among those states:

“Atlanta has been a sanctuary city since the city council passed a resolution in 2017 declaring that the city is not responsible for ‘immigration affairs’ and that it would not participate in the 287(g) agreement program, which deputizes some local police to enforce federal immigration law.”⁷

In 2018, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms went further, ending the city's relationship with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and urging local police to ignore individuals detained by ICE.

THE DOWNSIDE OF METRO ATLANTA'S EXPLOSIVE POPULATION GROWTH

The city of Atlanta (population 498,715, according to the 2020 census) accounts for but a fraction of the region's population. More than 6 million people now live in the metropolitan area.

Even during the worst 12 months of the COVID pandemic, when most large U.S. metros lost population, Metro Atlanta chugged ahead, experiencing a net influx of nearly 20,000 new residents in 2020-21.⁸

Experts say the region's population grew by about 50% over the past 20 years.⁹

“It's a huge increase in population...” says Dan Immergluck,

professor of urban studies at Georgia State University, “...that has **taxed the region environmentally.**”¹⁰ And, we might add, it exacerbated the income and political gap between Atlanta and its suburban neighbors.

Here are some of the issues currently dividing Metro Atlanta:

Housing affordability: Demand for quality housing is fierce, particularly in the city center. Long-term city residents have been priced out of their own city. In September 2022, the median home in Atlanta was valued at about \$400,000 according to Zillow’s Home Values Index. That price is out of reach for the average Atlanta household, which made about \$64,179 annually in recent years. Rents have also ticked above the national median.¹¹

What to do?

A proposal in Atlanta’s regional plan would allow homeowners in some neighborhoods to subdivide their property and sell pieces for additional dwellings.

More housing? Great. But more affordable housing? Ah, there’s the rub.

About 80% of the growth in the metro population since 2000 has been Black, Latino, and Asian households.¹² Affluent suburbs at the northern end of the Atlanta metro area are in full pushback mode against such growth.

A Civil War brewing in Atlanta? That idea is not that far-fetched. One of the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods – Buckhead – is seriously considering seceding from the city. Advocating for the union forces is Atlanta’s Planning Czar, Tim Keane:

“You have people that are actively trying to confuse everybody,” Keane says. **“I mean, the people in Buckhead make up a lot of the energy around this opposition to [zoning reform]. As you know, they’re interested in having their own city, and so everything that they’re doing is related to pushing this narrative that Atlanta is terrible, and we’re trying to destroy Buckhead – whether it’s about crime or single-family neighborhoods...”**¹³

One indisputable data point: Atlanta would lose about 38% of its tax revenue if Buckhead were to leave.¹⁴

That kind of money talks, and says – actually SCREAMS – that the proposed zoning reform is probably dead on arrival.

But money is not everything. There are other ways to create affordable housing, **“... things that local governments do in other states that Georgia localities are not allowed to do – things like having their own fair housing laws, enacting rent stabilization, or requiring landlords to accept housing vouchers. These things are all prevented by Georgia state laws.”**¹⁵

CLIMATE CHANGE

“They are growing citrus in south Georgia, they didn’t use to be able to do that. They are growing olives in south Georgia. Corn is getting hard to grow in some parts of the state because it is just too hot,” says Dr. Patricia L Yager, professor and oceanographer at the University of Georgia.¹⁶

Climate related anecdotes, no matter how many, no matter

how true, do not make the case for climate change in Georgia. Only hard data can do that:

Average annual temperatures in Atlanta have risen about 3 degrees since 1930, and the city experiences roughly six more heat waves (heat index of 100 degrees or more) **each year than it did in the 1960s**, according to an analysis of federal data from the First Street Foundation, a nonprofit climate research group.¹⁷

By 2053 some metro counties are expected to experience more than six weeks of triple-digit heat per summer, the report shows.

With smart planning, local governments can adapt to a hotter Atlanta, says Brian Stone, the director of the Urban Climate Lab at Georgia Tech.

Stone’s research shows that cities like Atlanta are warming more rapidly than surrounding areas because of land use and development, which drives the **“urban heat island”** effect. Excess heat is generated whenever trees and grass, which remove greenhouse gases via photosynthesis, are replaced with man-made materials like concrete and asphalt, which absorb and retain heat.

Stone says that protecting and replacing the tree canopy is **“By far the most effective thing we can do”** to lower the temperature in urban Atlanta. He also called for making the city more reflective with white roofs, reflective streets, and parking lots.¹⁸

Stone is well aware that his “shady” tree agenda conflicts with efforts to make the city more walkable, bike-friendly, and affordable.

Recent proposals to replace green space with a police training center – a so-called “Cop City” – have spurred protests among environmentally-minded Atlantans. Those protests are surely good news for Stone and his plans.

“I wouldn’t pretend there’s not a tension there – there is. Largely what we want to do ...is to raise density where you have density.” That means increasing density near mass transit and existing bike and pedestrian infrastructure.

When asked to rank Atlanta’s attitude toward environmental planning, Stone replied:

“I would say, of the most populous cities in the U.S., which Atlanta is, at least on a metro level, we have the least ambitious sustainability and resilience goals.”¹⁹

It seems that Professor Stone could not have chosen a metro area less amenable to his sensible suggestions.

SUMMARY

Georgia is a victim of its own success. The red-hot Metro Atlanta economy has drawn population from other states, pressuring infrastructure, housing and the environment. Foreign immigration, most of it legal, has also increased dramatically, with 10% of current state residents born abroad.

Ironically, sanctuary policies enacted in Georgia during the Trump years have reduced the state’s illegal alien population, as many returned to Mexico voluntarily to avoid deportation.

Will they return under Biden? Stay tuned.

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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