



MIGRATION ACCOUNTS FOR MORE THAN HALF OF COLORADO'S POPULATION GROWTH

An NPG Commentary
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

Population data released in December brought good news and bad news:

The good news: after growing by an average of 74,000 per year during the previous decade, Colorado added “**just**” 28,629 from July 2021 to July 2022.¹

The bad news: the state's population still grew by 0.5% last year, exceeding the national rate of 0.4%.²

The really bad news: State Demographer Elizabeth Gardener expects the Colorado population growth rate to jump back up in the next few years, with most growth centered on the already-overpopulated “**Front Range**” – the band of large cities that sit on the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains.³

With natural increase (births minus deaths of state residents) falling, net migration accounted for 55% of Colorado's population growth last year. Two-thirds of state migration was from abroad; one-third was from other states.

Ten percent of Colorado's population – and 12% of Denver's – are immigrants.⁴

DENVER WELCOMES ILLEGALS; NO QUESTIONS ASKED

Denver made itself a sanctuary city in 2014, when the Sheriff's Department rescinded a longstanding agreement to enforce federal immigration laws. Three years later, in 2017, the city council codified the city's sanctuary city status with a law that prohibits “**city employees from collecting information on immigration or citizenship status [and] prohibits the sharing of any other information about individuals for purposes of immigration enforcement.**”⁵

The downside of Denver's sanctuary city status quickly emerged when city authorities released criminal suspect Jose Armento-Vazquez from three ICE detainees. After his third release, the illegal immigrant stabbed and nearly killed the federal judge who ordered him detained.⁶

Amazingly, “**After the stabbing, [Denver] authorities released Vazquez in defiance of a fourth immigration detainer.**”⁷

This and other policies placed Denver among the 10 largest sanctuary cities, according to the Federation for American

Immigration Reform.⁸

By December 2022, the city had attracted so many illegals fleeing failed states in Central America that Mayor Michael Hancock took action: **The city bought 1,900 Greyhound bus tickets to send immigrants to 35 other states and Washington, D.C.** The majority were bused to Chicago and New York City.⁹

States and cities along the southwestern border have cared for illegal immigrants for years. Their location made it unavoidable.

But Denver politicians are in a different category: **they asked for it.** They have signaled their virtue. Now they must prove it.

WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE, BUT...

Three hundred and seventeen. That's about how many gallons of water the average Coloradan uses in just three days, according to the U. S. Geological Survey Water Science School. It's also what the average one-bedroom apartment in Denver costs to rent for just five days, according to Trulia.com. And it's the name of a bear that was put down for roaming too closely, in too many residential areas, in Boulder County a few years back.¹⁰

The common cause? Too many people.

To this long-time easterner, the water shortage is particularly puzzling. The state is blessed with several major rivers, including the Colorado, the Blue River, the South Platte River, plus a snow melt that streams west.

So, what's the problem? Answer: **Location, location, location.**

Eighty-percent of the state's population lives on the “**wrong side**” of the mountains, i.e., on the aforementioned Front Range. Their water has to be siphoned from rivers, then moved up and over the continental divide, a process which takes enormous amounts of energy. Local water companies then store untreated water in vast reservoirs, running it through energy intensive treatment and filtration systems, before testing it and – if all goes well - piping it to residences.

Melting snowpack still furnishes 70% of the state's drinking water. But this source has been clobbered by climate change –

and scientists expect snowpack will drop 50% this century.¹¹

The Colorado River's flow, that Colorado shares with Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, and Wyoming, has already declined by nearly 20% from its 1960s level – prompting federal officials to declare an emergency water shortage for the first time in 2021.¹²

“Water and agriculture are critical for the rural economy to flourish,” the then Governor John Hickenlooper said when interviewed by NPG a few years back.¹³ **“Unlike many other states, and even some nations, we have the potential in Colorado to provide a sustainable food supply that is local and not imported.”**¹⁴

Unfortunately, Hickenlooper's vision for Colorado seems increasingly unlikely. The shortage of affordable water has forced many farmers to sell their water rights to real estate developers. A vicious cycle ensues, as urban sprawl changes the most lucrative crop for farmers from food to houses.

Lest we forget: there is one crop that is bucking the trend: **recreational marijuana.** Corporate growers dominate the legalized industry: **“These million-dollar growers...are using millions of gallons of water...They're pumping directly out of the river...”** small marijuana grower Chuck Lyon reported to Weed Rush News.¹⁵

The big pot growers spend lavishly on pesticides, leaving a trail of non-biodegradable waste that threatens local wildlife, plants, and drinking water.¹⁶

Any gains that Colorado makes by legalizing marijuana could well be overwhelmed by environmental losses.¹⁷

POPULATION GROWTH DESTROYS THE STATE'S EFFORTS TO CONTROL CLIMATE CHANGE

Senate Bill 23-16 has been touted as the **“holy grail”** of state climate regulations. Introduced in January 2023, it would commit Colorado to zero net emissions for the first time by revising its 2050 target to zero.¹⁸

Is a zero net emissions future possible in the state of Colorado?

Reality check: Even under a **“best case scenario”** this outcome is highly unlikely.

Let's conveniently forget that the state's own data show roughly 120 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) were emitted in 2020.¹⁹ Or that current law is virtually toothless, with few legal consequences awaiting those who miss their targets. Or – more importantly – that state population is expected to grow.

“As bad as the impact of population growth is on the reported GHG emissions,” writes scientist and environmental activist Gary Wockner, **“there's an elephant in the room that makes it worse – emissions that are hidden and not reported.”**²⁰ The “elephant” is what climate scientists call **“embodied emissions”** which are ignored in state GHG reports, and may completely overwhelm the emission figures published by the state.

Wockner explains: **“When you buy a new car, a lot of energy was spent, and GHG emissions were created, to manufacture the car as well as to ship it here to Colorado. However, neither the energy nor the emissions are counted in state [environmental reports].”**²¹

“So, as a million people have moved to Colorado over the past 15 years, they've bought, or brought with them, a few hundred thousand more cars. Every additional new gas-powered car bought in Colorado,” Wockner notes, **“completely negates the emissions reductions of switching to an all-electric car fueled by a zero-carbon energy grid.”**²²

And cars are not the largest source of Colorado's embodied emissions problem. The commercial construction industry – with cranes towering over Denver and Boulder – is a large source of embodied emissions for local communities that are almost never reported in local emissions data.

Wockner calls out Boulder and Fort Collins: Both are growing rapidly – with the office buildings generally pricy and the homes generally affluent. But there is no cement plant, no steel plant, and no lumber mill, inside either city's boundary.

“And here's the kicker,” Wockner continues, **“— both cities publicly claim that their GHG emissions have decreased over the past 10 years, but the cities are not even counting or reporting any of the embodied emissions generated by the booming construction industry as well as the increasing number of cars.”**²³

For those Coloradans who still don't get it, Wockner offers this overview:

“We've been trained to think of ‘climate change’ when we see smokestacks and oil and gas wells, but there's another image that's equally accurate in fast-growing places like Colorado — condos, new cars, and shiny office buildings.

“The Front Range of Colorado is turning into a ‘Concrete Metropolis’ and it's this construction boom, all caused by explosive population growth, that is creating a large increase in GHG emissions, many of which are completely hidden and not reported at all.”²⁴

SUMMARY

A quality lifestyle. That is why young people still come to Colorado. Sadly, that is why long-time Coloradans are so dismayed.

They have watched their once beautiful state be overrun by humans seeking the **“good life.”** Mass migration has triggered inflation in housing and water prices, plus infrastructure shortages ranging from highways, to schools. Once pristine national parks in the state are overcrowded.

Many natives can no longer afford to enjoy the mountains as often as they once did. They can't afford a concert ticket. The wait at their favorite restaurant is just too, too long.

The bottom line: Colorado has been sold to the wealthy moving in, while the people who made the state unique – and livable – are moving elsewhere.

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.



Negative Population Growth, Inc.

2861 Duke Street, Suite 36
 Alexandria, VA 22314
 Phone: 703-370-9510 • Fax: 703-370-9514 • Email: npg@npg.org

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