



BAD NEWS: WASHINGTON WAS THE ONLY WEST COAST STATE TO ADD POPULATION LAST YEAR

An NPG Commentary
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

Washington saw a population increase of 45,041 people, or 0.58%, in 2022. By comparison, California lost 113,649 residents, a 0.29% reduction, while Oregon's population shrank by 16,164 – a decline of 0.38%.¹

For the nation as a whole, population grew by 0.38% last year – so Washington state grew considerably faster than the nation. When evaluating net gain, the state ranked 8th in total population growth.

This was music to the ears of groups that – mistakenly, in our view – see population growth as a sign of economic strength and higher standards of living for state residents. These promoters include state and local Chambers of Commerce, real estate developers, and the business community.

Equally significant (to the pro-growth crowd) is the primary driver of last year's growth: **Net domestic migration (NDM) – people moving to Washington from other states minus people moving out.** From 2021 to 2022 this totaled 83,300 – more than double the 40,500 recorded in 2021.

Why does NDM matter? Washington's NDM is regarded as a measure of the state's relative attractiveness to job seekers from other states.

The mainstream media buys into the notion that Washington can do no wrong. *U.S. News and World Report* gushed:

“...The Seattle area's quality of life combines with large tech employers such as Amazon and Microsoft to draw a huge amount of tech talent to the area and retain those educated at the University of Washington...

“Washington's low-carbon energy system and

robust secondary education system continue to rank among the nation's best, as does the state's economy, the fastest growing in the nation.

“For the second time, Washington has been named No. 1 in the U.S. News Best States ranking and is the first state to earn the top spot twice in a row.”²

REALITY CHECK #1: THE STATE'S POPULATION GROWTH IS NOT SUSTAINABLE

More people? Where will they live?

Washington is second only to California when it comes to the number of homeless people living outside with no shelter, according to U.S. HUD's latest annual homelessness assessment. Among urban areas, only New York City and the Los Angeles metro had larger total homeless populations than Seattle and King County in 2022.³

For the entire state, the one-night point-in-time count found a total of 25,211 homeless people in 2022 – an increase of 10% from 2020. Meanwhile, more than 250 homeless people died in King County last year – a record number according to KUOW (Public Radio), with hypothermia the most common cause of death.⁴

Homelessness is the tip of a much larger iceberg: the long-term housing crisis, as acknowledged by Governor Jay Inslee himself earlier this year:

“For the 1 million new residents the state welcomed over the last decade, only 300,000 new units were built. As a result, well-paid beneficiaries of the state's powerful economy compete for housing (and more often prevail) over lower-income residents.”⁵

The state's high-tech success is indisputable, but it comes with problems. Seattle is one of the most expensive cities in the U.S., thanks largely to out-of-sight housing costs. The median sale price in Seattle in January 2023 was \$760,000, compared to about \$383,000 nationwide.⁶ Only in Colorado, California, and Hawaii is housing less affordable.⁷

Even potential new home buyers find expenses beyond their means:

“Seattle was crazy, absolutely, absolutely insanely expensive,” Garret Lyon, a 40-year old brand strategist said when he and his wife considered buying a home. They could have afforded a home an hour outside the city but moved to Nashville instead.⁸

Garret probably made the right choice. **By shunning Washington, he avoided a slew of new housing regulations, all championed by Governor Inslee, that would make housing even more expensive.** We refer to updates to the state energy code that will require homes and apartments to install electric heat pumps.⁹

The switch to electric power (from natural gas) will reduce energy costs and greenhouse gas emissions. But it will also add an average \$14,150 to the cost of every new home built in Washington, according to Building Industry Association of Washington data.¹⁰

Washington's high-tech elites – managers recruited by Microsoft and Amazon, for example – may grumble, but most will eventually suck it up and pay those exorbitant prices. Low income residents, however, don't have that option as many of them are seeking publicly subsidized housing. The Vancouver Housing Authority, a major provider of the city's low income housing, has had to cut back on units to stay within its budget.

There are for-profit developers that cater to low income buyers, but they typically cannot pass the added energy costs down to their customers. The added costs simply mean fewer affordable buildings on the ground.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES ALERT: Home buyers aren't the only ones feeling the pinch. Local real estate developers – even those catering to the high-end market – are also pulling back:

“Sometimes we won't even move forward on a project because it's unaffordable to do so,” Ryan Hurley, president of Hurley Development, a Vancouver, WA- based developer, said. His latest project is the Adera, a new 186-unit waterfront development.¹¹

“We are concerned not only about the environment, but also about making affordable product and making it in a timely manner,” Nicole Lovern, Clark County's Building Industry Association's government affairs director said, adding, **“We can't have affordable housing if we can't build affordably.”**¹²

REALITY CHECK #2: GLOBAL WARMING IS KILLING WASHINGTON RESIDENTS

Looking for a worst-case environmental scenario? You'll find it in Washington's agricultural sector. Farmers long accustomed to rain, clouds, and lush harvests, woke up to wildfires and triple-digit heat in late June 2021. Roads buckled, large amounts of snowpack melted, and 78 Washingtonians died in that episode.

While nobody enjoys that kind of heat, few see their livelihoods threatened as quickly as farmers. Extreme heat can destroy some crops – like corn – and accelerate the ripening of others – like cherries. The latter scenario is equally disastrous, according to John Stuhlmiller, CEO of the Washington Farm Bureau:

“So instead of being ready next week, they're ready this week, and you got to get a crew and you can't get a crew in time to pick them,” Stuhlmiller said shortly after the June 2021 debacle, adding **“And then they're junk, they can't make it to market, so that those kinds of things are happening now.”**¹³

The Pacific Northwest heat wave startled climate scientists throughout the world. They were blindsided. A quick analysis by an international team of 27 scientists calculated that the late June 2021 event would never have happened without global warming. Even in today's warming world, they said, the heat was a once in a millennium event.

“But that once-in-a-millennium event would likely occur every five to 10 years once the world warms another 1.4 degrees...” the study from World Weather Attribution said. **“That much warming could be 40 to 50 years away if carbon pollution continues at its current pace...”**¹⁴

One of the authors of the study was Kristie Ebi, a professor at the Center for Health and Global Environment at the University of Washington. **“The study is telling us climate change is killing people,”** said Ebi, who endured the blistering heat in Seattle. She says it will take many

months before a death toll can be calculated from the June 2021 event, but it is likely to be hundreds or thousands. **“Heat is the No. 1 weather-related killer of Americans.”**¹⁵

Six scientists unaffiliated with the World Weather Attribution analysis say the climate models used in the study probably underestimated the impact that climate change would have on the heat wave.¹⁶

QUESTION FOR CLIMATE SCIENTISTS:

WHY DO YOUR MODELS ROUTINELY UNDERESTIMATE GLOBAL WARMING?

NPG’S POSITION:

YOUR MODELS ROUTINELY UNDERESTIMATE GLOBAL POPULATION GROWTH.

GLOBAL POPULATION GROWTH AND GLOBAL WARMING ARE FLIP SIDES OF THE SAME COIN.

SEATTLE: THE SAD-EST CITY IN THE NATION?

In the Pacific Northwest, where rainy darkness defines much of the year, **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)** is common.

SAD is essentially a depressive disorder that follows a seasonal pattern. Episodes spike in fall and winter months, and usually end in the spring. “During the winter months people typically spend more time indoors, and it can feel like you are hibernating,” according to Dr. Heidi Combs, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington School of Medicine.¹⁷

Many Seattleites already experience SAD-like climate trauma during the darker, rainier months from October to July, so much so that some have come to call it **“The Big Dark.”** As the old adage goes, summer in the city doesn’t start until July 5 when the gloom of winter finally gives way to long streaks of mid-70s sunshine.¹⁸

But Seattle summers are not what they used to be. Traditionally, the Seattle area recorded only about three days a year that were above 90 degrees; in the past decade that has risen to about six, says Nick Bond, Washington State’s climatologist. **A city where weather stations in the past century have recorded only three days that have**

exceeded 100 degrees recorded three more in just the first week of July 2001.¹⁹

Bond also tracks nighttime low temperatures, which have risen noticeably in recent years. That, he says, is an even clearer marker of climate change.

Seattle’s typically light rains have also become heavier because of climate change. As the atmosphere warms, it’s able to hold a greater amount of water, retaining it like a sponge. When met by strong winds, that water falls fast and hard.²⁰

The past 20 years have also brought a tendency for drier summers, and climate models indicate the same is likely for the future, according to the Office of the Washington State Climatologist.

Heavier rains during the rainy season plus drier summers are a perfect storm for wildfires. Some of the worst have occurred in the past two years. **“The dusty smoke in the air fills our lives with a smoke-like fog which makes it hard to do daily routines, even when the routines are involved in the outdoors, such as construction or daily exercises.”**²¹

Between the **“Big Dark”** and the **“Summer Smoke”** Seattleites are spending more time indoors. For some, that means canceled plans and isolation from family and friends. Beyond their own personal loss, people also feel saddened by the deterioration of the natural world they once knew. This is especially true for people who moved to the city specifically for the outdoorsy lifestyle.

SUMMARY

Can too much of a (supposedly) “good thing” be bad? The unintended consequences of Washington state population growth scream **YES.**

One million new residents entered the state over the past decade. Housing prices are out of sight, homelessness is up, summers are so hot that wildfires – once a rarity – are common. Roads and public transportation are overwhelmed by demand.

Local politicians are trying to put the genie back in the bottle – unsuccessfully so far. They are addressing the symptoms, like carbon emissions, rather than root causes, like population growth.

By failing to plan for population reduction they are planning to fail.

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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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