



CAUSE AND EFFECT?

VIRGINIA'S IMMIGRANT POPULATION TRIPLES AS NUMBER OF RESIDENTS MOVING OUT-OF-STATE INCREASES

An NPG Commentary
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

Virginians are continuing to vote with their feet – and their moving vans – and they are increasingly voting against the wishes of state government leaders.

Needless to say, many political “leaders” see population growth as an unmitigated positive, validating their political agendas. Ordinary folks, on the other hand, are generally skeptical.

NPG, long dedicated to reducing U.S. and global population, shares the skepticism of ordinary Virginians.

The Good News (Relatively Speaking) First: In 2023 Virginia’s population grew by less than half a percentage point – **the slowest rate since the Civil War** – according to data from the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia.¹

The Bad News: Increasingly, Virginia natives are being pushed out to other states due to high housing costs:

“We had more people moving out of Virginia to other states, that was heavily driven by people leaving Northern Virginia going to lower cost areas in the south, like Raleigh and Charlotte,” reports Hamilton Lombard, a demographer at the University of Virginia.²

“Housing for almost everyone is the biggest cost pushing natives to leave,” Lombard notes, adding **“On the East Coast, Arlington and Fairfax have the most expensive housing for any county except Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard.”**³

Fairfax, the most populous of Virginia’s 95 counties, continued to lose population due to out-migration in 2023.

In nearby Loudoun County, once Virginia’s fastest growing and still its wealthiest, only 11 more people moved in than left last year. A decade ago, net domestic migration to Loudoun was running at about 10,000 per year.

Meanwhile, over three-quarters of Virginia’s rural counties experienced positive net domestic migration in 2023 – the highest share since 1975.⁴ So far this surge has been masked by the high death rates that rural counties’ older populations suffered during the pandemic.

But housing prices are already rising faster in rural Virginia than in other parts of the state, and state demographers forecast that the ten fastest growing school districts over the next five years will be in rural areas. Older rural residents who survived the pandemic – the vast majority without school age children – now face a difficult choice: either move, or pay soaring school property taxes for other people’s children and grandchildren.

The same migration pattern seen in Northern Virginia is occurring in most of the country’s large metro areas, indicating that a wider demographic shift is taking place. The rise of remote work, Lombard suggests, has fueled the shift.

Remote work, which affected 6 to 7% of the labor force before the pandemic, jumped to a third of the state, and 50% in northern Virginia.

“The explosion in remote work during the pandemic and its persistence since then,” Lombard says, **“is shaping up to be the most impactful demographic trend since the expansion of suburbs and exurbs after World War II.”**⁵

IMMIGRATION DRIVES VIRGINIA POPULATION

In 1990, the state's immigrant population was about 300,000 and constituted 5% of the population. By 2020, the immigrant population was more than 1 million and represented 12.6% of the population. This is consistent with the national growth of the immigrant population.

These figures also show how Virginia is becoming more like the rest of the nation. In 1990, immigrants were 7.9% of U.S. population, so Virginia's 5% was below the national average. By 2021, the national figure was 13.6%, so Virginia was still below – but much closer to the national average.⁶

Northern Virginia has the state's highest population of immigrants. In Manassas Park, with more than 17,000 residents, the foreign-born population constitutes 36.1% of the city's population. In Fairfax County, home to more than 1.1 million, 31.1% of the population is foreign-born. They are the two most immigrant-heavy localities in the state.

Since 2020 Virginia *lost* nearly 30,000 people through net domestic migration but *gained* nearly 53,000 from net international immigration.

Perhaps the most interesting population figures for the state tell us where new residents are coming from, and where Virginians are moving to. That most recent state data was published in Old Dominion University's 2023 State of the Commonwealth report on the Virginia economy.⁷

LOOKING MORE LIKE NEW JERSEY EVERY DAY

People moving to Virginia in 2021 came mainly from the northeast, with New Jersey ranking first among states sending people to the state. In 2021 the number of New Jersey residents moving to Virginia exceeded the number of Virginians who moved to New Jersey by 6,109. Massachusetts, at 6,045, ranked second, while New York – despite its large population, was a distant third, at 4,284.

More remarkable are the states Virginians are moving to. They are mainly in the south. Florida (of course) was the top destination – attracting a net gain of 8,550 Virginians. But how do we explain the net migration of Virginians to Alabama (4,668), Mississippi (2,063), and West Virginia (4,638) – states not on most people's list of economic powerhouses?

Virginia population blogger James Bacon suggests:

“The loss of population to West Virginia might be explainable by Northern Virginians’ search for affordable housing. But when a net 5,000 people chose Alabama and Mississippi over Virginia in a single year, something is seriously amiss in the Old Dominion.”⁸

Would they rather stay? Are they leaving out of desperation?

Case in point: Arlington County, Virginia.

ONE OF AMERICA'S “BEST PLACES TO LIVE” CONSIDERING HANDOUTS FOR ILLEGALS

Just across the river from Washington, D.C., Arlington is known for being welcoming. The county is home to many national monuments and tourist attractions, and is routinely rated as one of America's best places to live (as well as one of the most expensive).

Unfortunately, that rating seems to have gone to the County Board's head. The Arlington County Board is **“re-evaluating” the possibility of extending taxpayer-funded housing grants to illegal aliens, in defiance of both state law and the wishes of its own citizens who would foot the bill.**⁹

The county currently offers grants to some low-income renter households, paying a significant share of their monthly rent with taxpayer funds. Until now, those grants went to **U.S. citizens and “lawfully present” individuals**, as required by Virginia law. But these restrictions do not sit well with activist groups like the **Legal Aid Justice Center (LAJC)**. They want to extend eligibility to all **“lawfully present” individuals** like those with Temporary Protected Status or DACA protections – who are, in fact, **illegal aliens.**¹⁰

Even Arlington's own study¹¹ acknowledges the crushing financial burden this change portends for its citizens. Adding just 50 new illegal alien families to the rent subsidy would cost a whopping \$421,800 per year – \$8,400 in taxpayer funds per illegal alien family. LAJC and its activist defenders claim that publicly funded need-based grants are **not “public assistance”** and therefore the usual state restrictions do not apply.

More telling is LAJC's other proposal: simply give the program's funding and administrative responsibilities to a nonprofit like **(surprise, surprise)** LAJC itself.¹²

The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) has uncovered many other examples where NGOs that support illegal aliens receive federal funds – and this scenario is repeating itself across the country in places like Arlington with local taxpayer funds.

Ironically, Arlington's high housing cost is one of few things shielding this **"sanctuary county"** from the worst consequences of illegal immigration. Free housing for illegals in NYC and Massachusetts has been a financial disaster for middle class citizens in those places.

And it's not just about money. Based on FBI data the rate of violent or property crime in Arlington is 30.37 per 1,000 residents. Only 24% of American cities are more dangerous.

Relative to Virginia, Arlington has a crime rate that is higher than 82% of the state's cities and towns.¹³

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION: VIRGINIA IS THE ASYLUM CAPITAL OF THE NATION

"Miguel Estramera entered the new immigration court in Sterling, Virginia on February 23. He was an undocumented immigrant arriving from Peru in 1998. But after marrying, having two children – all U.S. citizens – and becoming a construction site safety inspector, it took him several years to get this court hearing.

"After so many years of...waiting for status in the U.S., I consider myself a citizen," said Estramera.

"He was excited because he was granted the ability to stay, and not forced to return to Peru and leave his family."¹⁴

So begins a story by Nathan Baca, an investigative reporter for WUSA channel 9, Washington, DC's CBS affiliate. Baca has covered Virginia's immigration courts for five years.

An emotional, happy moment, for the Estramera family, for sure.

Is Estramera's struggle finally over? Not exactly. While Estramera was not forced to return to his native Peru, he "still can't get a visa because of the limited numbers available."¹⁵

To complicate things even further, there is no statute of limitations for individuals who enter the country illegally.

Unlike Estramera, most visa applicants do not show up for their court dates. They stay in the country for years, working in the shadows. Native-born Americans often lose jobs to the undocumented foreign-born.

The University of Syracuse tracks immigration court backlogs nationwide. As of early 2023, it placed Virginia at the top of the list for the average number of days it takes for immigrants and asylum seekers to get a hearing: 1,106 days, or three years.¹⁶

As a sign of just how backlogged Virginia immigration courts are, despite winning his case, Estramera still can't get a visa. His immigration lawyer – motivated (at least in part) by professional self-interest – suggests an increase in visas would help: **"Each year, there's only 4,000 visas available for this type of application, and because we have so many new judges, those visas are being taken a lot quicker than in the past."¹⁷**

To us, this is utter nonsense. The visa "shortage" is more about demand than supply. Arlington and other liberal enclaves in northern Virginia have created an unsustainable demand for immigration and asylum visas among the state's undocumented immigrants. In essence, the severe disconnect between the number of visas available and the number of applicants hoping to receive one creates a new class of immigrant: not dangerous enough to be deported (the overwhelmed courts tend to focus on illegal aliens committing serious crimes), but still not legal.

SUMMARY

In 2023, people continued to move out of Northern Virginia, a trend driven by high living costs and remote work. Fairfax County, the state's most populous, was the biggest net loser – down by 12,000. Then Norfolk, Arlington, and Alexandria – each lost between 4,000 and 5,000 people. Many of these people stayed in Virginia, with the Richmond metro area recording the greatest influx of new residents in its history.

In percentage terms, the biggest population gains were in rural counties. In 2023 over three-quarters of rural counties had more people move into them than out.

NOTES:

1. Luke Lukert, *Why Virginia is growing slower than anytime in over 150 years*, January 31, 2024.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
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5. Ibid.
6. Dwayne Yancey, *Eight things to know about the growth of Virginia's immigrant community*, cardinalnews.com, December 27, 2022.
7. James A. Bacon, *Looking More Like New Jersey Every Day*, baconsrebellion.com, February 1, 2024.
8. Ibid.
9. Michael Capuano, *Arlington County Considering Handouts for Illegals Despite Resident Opposition*, fairus.org, March 12, 2024.
10. Ibid.
11. <https://www.arlnow.com/2024/03/04/arlington-considers-removing-immigration-status-requirements-for-low-income-housing-grants/>
12. Capuano, op cit.
13. <https://crimegrade.org/safest-places-in-arlington-va/>
14. Nathan Baca, *Virginia most backlogged immigration court in country, study shows*, WUSA channel 9, March 29, 2023.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.

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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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