



UTAH'S GOVERNOR CLAIMS HE'S TOUGH ON ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION; DATA BEGS TO DISAGREE

An NPG Commentary
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

Utah is one of the fastest-growing states in the country. State population rose by 1.64% (from 2.76 million in 2010 to 3.45 million in 2024) making the Beehive State the fourth fastest-growing state in the nation. The largest source of new residents was net migration from other states, with California adding the most – 19,669 – in 2022 alone.

Utah Governor Spencer Cox seemed to discourage Californians from moving to Utah when asked at a news conference what the state was doing to attract new residents.

“Our biggest problems are more growth-related. We would love for people to stay in California instead of coming as refugees to Utah,” the governor said. Asked later in the news conference what he meant by saying people in California should stay there, Cox said, **“What I mean is, we’ve had a lot of people move from California into our state. Growth is our biggest issue right now. So, we would love to see California cutting taxes and regulations. I think that would be good.”**¹

Cox’s California concern may have resonated with many Utahns: Utah has historically prided itself for being a strong **“homegrown state.”** (An estimated 62% of the state population was born in-

state, versus 47% of Idaho’s residents, 39.6% in Arizona, and only 26.7% in Nevada.) But in recent years net migration from other states has risen while natural increase – births less deaths to people born in the state – has declined.

THE UTAH WAY: DO IT WHILE DENYING IT

Utah has a long history of welcoming immigrants and providing refuge and protection – i.e. sanctuary, regardless of their legal status. But all that came crashing down when Salt Lake City TV station KUTV reported that **“Denver is paying travel costs to send migrants to Utah – roughly 2,000 so far – even as the state, Salt Lake City, and Salt Lake County lack capacity to care for them, and as they urge asylum seekers to go someplace else.”**²

A day after the news broke, Governor Cox issued a statement on X: **“We recently learned that the Democrat mayor of Denver has been sending illegal immigrants to Utah without proper notification or approval. This is completely unacceptable.”**³

The Governor’s disavowal could have been taken straight from the movie *Casablanca*. In the

film, there is a scene in which a French gendarme (armed police officer), who knows full well that gambling is going on, but has orders to close down the nightclub where it is occurring, says: **“I am shocked, shocked, to find that gambling is going on in here!”** – as he pockets his gambling winnings and closes the club down.

Question: What are the odds that Utah's Governor – like the gendarme – has really been aware of the illegal shenanigans for quite some time but chose to remain silent until absolutely necessary?

Answer (based on data): Roughly 100%.

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY... ON ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

State officials insisted they had no data on illegal migrants, and were blindsided by KUTV's exposé. **But the number of new cases filed in the immigration court in Salt Lake City – a key indicator of the size of the Utah's illegal alien population – jumped nearly eight-fold between 2021 and 2023, to more than 21,000 from 2,676, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) at Syracuse University.**⁴ TRAC collects and publishes data on immigration court backlogs throughout the country.

Clearly, the Governor's office either made no effort to access readily available data on illegal entrants or simply chose to ignore what they learned. **“Interestingly, these are the same officials who take great pride in their data-driven policy decisions and who never tire of saying that you have to be able to measure something in order to effectively address it.”**⁵

Since the news story broke the only action taken by state officials has been to distribute a Spanish language flyer to new arrivals at the border. That flier tells them not to come to Utah unless they have family connections.⁶

The bright orange fliers from the state of Utah were blunt: “There is no room in shelters.” “No hotels for you.” “Housing is hard to find and expensive.” “Food banks are at capacity.” “... consider another state.”

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY...ON HOUSING

The influx of thousands of foreign nationals (combined with higher interest rates) is making Utah's housing shortage worse, according to Paul Smith, executive director of the Rental Housing Association of Utah. Record migration plus higher mortgage costs **“have sidelined many people from homeownership,”** Smith said, adding that **“The market was already struggling to meet the needs of native-born Utahns.”**⁷

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY...ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

State officials have not addressed the costs of providing English instruction to thousands of new immigrant children, or the negative impact on Utah children and their teachers that occurs when non-English speakers enter already overcrowded classrooms. A U.S. Supreme Court decision mandates public schools to provide K-12 education to all immigrants regardless of legal status, but does not specify how this should be funded.

LOOKING THE OTHER WAY...ON PRESERVING WHAT'S LEFT OF THE GREAT SALT LAKE

Utah is one of the fastest growing states in the fastest growing region of the country. It is also one of the driest. Over two decades of western megadrought, the amount of water diverted from rivers that feed The Great Salt Lake has increased in order to satisfy the needs of farms and rapidly growing cities. A recent scientific report from

Brigham Young University warns that if no action is taken, The Great Salt Lake could go completely dry in five years.⁸

A dry lake could lead to an environmental and economic collapse.

A majority of Utah's population lives near the lake, just to the east along the Wasatch Mountains. The lake is about nine feet lower than normal – and locals are already complaining about dust storms.

“We need to put more water in the lake now, we cannot let this wait,” said Dr. Brian Moench, president of the group Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment.⁹

“A lot of people think that dust is pretty benign because it's quote – natural,” he adds. “Well that's not the case, and in the case of dust from the Great Salt Lake, it is particularly toxic, because we know that it is laced with high concentrations of heavy metals.”

Issues like housing and public education intersect along the lakeshore. Glendale, a working-class neighborhood in Salt Lake City's west valley, is also one of the last bastions of affordable housing. Prospects for new housing are bleak: much of the area is zoned for manufacturing, and is already hemmed in by two freeways, an international airport, and it's close to Utah's largest oil refinery.

Researchers have found higher rates of asthma and cardiovascular disease in neighborhoods like Glendale. One University of Utah study showed that students in Glendale schools scored low on tests during bad air days.¹⁰

Governor Cox, in a recent state of the state address, pondered declaring a state of emergency.

Moench says the state should have declared an emergency years ago.¹¹

EVEN CALIFORNIANS ARE BETTER AT FIGHTING CLIMATE CHANGE

What's your carbon footprint? It varies widely depending on where and how you live.

According to 2021 data from the Federal Energy Information Agency, the average Utahn generates more than 18 tons of CO-2 annually. That's about 3½ tons more than the average American, and 10 tons more than the average Californian.¹²

Why so much? Lazarus Adua, a professor at the University of Utah whose research focuses on the human factors behind energy usage, identifies three sources of Utah's oversized carbon footprint: coal-powered electricity, a lack of adequate mass transit, and a penchant for large vehicles.¹³

International data ranks Americans 10th highest on per capita carbon generation. Those higher on the list were all major petroleum producers, including the Persian Gulf states.

If Utah were a country, it would rank sixth on that list, between the United Arab Emirates and Oman.¹⁴

SUMMARY

Utah's unique demographic profile features a large bloc of religious adherents (The Mormon Church of Latter-day Saints) that view immigration in Biblical terms. The Church provides a wide range of assistance to all immigrants regardless of legal status. As far as domestic politics are concerned, however, the state is staunchly conservative.

Mitigating the disparity between the two cultures presents an enormous challenge for state politicians. It explains why some observers call Utah **“America's reddest (and stealthiest) sanctuary state.”**

NOTES:

1. Dennis Romboy, People are still Moving to Utah. Where are they coming from?, Deseret Evening News, December 19, 2023.
2. Robert W. Mortensen, *America's Reddest (and Stealthiest) Sanctuary State – Not So Stealthy Now*, CIS, July 24, 2024.
3. Ibid.
4. Miriam Jordan, *More Cities Feel Strain as Migrants Move In Seeking Better Prospects*, NYT, June 17, 2024.
5. Mortensen, op. cit.
6. Ibid.
7. Romboy, op. cit.
8. <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/03/1153550793/climate-change-and-a-population-boom-could-dry-up-the-great-salt-lake-in-5-years>
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Tim Fitzpatrick, Utah ranks among worst in the world in this critical climate change metric, The Salt Lake Tribune, March 18, 2024.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

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