



State Population Profile

GOOD NEWS: MISSOURI'S POPULATION IS GROWING SLOWER THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE.

BAD NEWS: STATE POLITICIANS WANT TO STOP – OR EVEN REVERSE – THE TREND.

An NPG Commentary
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

In each decade for the past 50 years, Missouri's population growth rate has trailed the nation's. From 2004 through 2023, Missouri had the 11th lowest growth rate. As a result of the 2010 census, the state lost one congressional seat (from nine to eight) and per the 2020 census, Missouri continues to maintain eight congressional districts.¹

Missouri's two biggest cities – the economic engines of the state – have also failed to grow. The city of St. Louis is emptying out, dropping from 622,236 in 1970 to 301,578 in 2020, though the surrounding metro area has absorbed much of the loss.

Kansas City saw dramatic population drops in the 80s and 90s, though recent growth has brought it up to over 500,000 – about where it was in 1970.

Where are they going? The top destination for outbound Missouri movers is Kansas – which is not surprising to people living in the eastern part of the Sunflower State. **“Kansas's suburbs offer better schools, better maintained infrastructure, and lower crime,”** writes Patrick Tuohey, a long-time KC, MO resident and senior fellow at the Show-Me Institute.² Second is Illinois – across the Mississippi River from St. Louis – with Texas, Arkansas, and Florida rounding out the top five destinations.

Tuohey adds: **“Yes, Florida and Texas have better climates than Missouri, but so do plenty of other states. Florida and Texas also have no income tax. The Tax Foundation reports that low-tax states usually have higher population growth rates than high-tax states.”**³

Missouri's portion of national GDP is also shrinking. The Show-Me State produced 2% of the nation's goods and services in 1997 versus only 1.5% today.⁴

Are state politicians alarmed? You bet they are. But political and economic power – especially when linked to population growth – often work against the interests of the residents that the politicians are supposed to serve.

This is one of those times.

ST. LOUIS'S POPULATION IS SHRINKING; IMMIGRATION TO THE CITY IS BOOMING.

By the early 2010s, the city of St. Louis, after booming with the growth of automakers and breweries through World War II, was in a state of advanced urban decline. Since peaking in the 1950s, it had lost more than half its population; it stood at 319,000 in 2010 and has shrunk still further – to 282,000 – by 2024.⁵

Residents left the city for better schools, safer streets, and more job opportunities; new highways that were bulldozed through inner-city neighborhoods hastened their flight. And while many went to nearby suburbs, the surrounding county's population has also stagnated in recent years, lingering at about 987,000.⁶

Shrinkage can be self-reinforcing. The consistent out-migration leads to schools closing and layoffs among city workers as the tax base contracts. Once-bustling neighborhoods empty out, fostering crime that repels potential newcomers. Employers can't find the workers they need, forcing many to relocate elsewhere.

In a 2012 study, city leaders identified the source of the problem: It wasn't that St. Louis was aging faster or losing more jobs than other places. **"We weren't getting our fair share of immigrants,"** said David Kemper, the head of Commerce Bank and a board member of Greater St. Louis, the city's main business group.⁷

A diverse group comprised of local politicians, business leaders, religious institutions, and philanthropists, have all bought into the notion that immigration is the "answer" to the city's population decline "problem."

They are not pro-immigration activists. Far from it. They are St. Louis's elites.

Their well-being depends on contributions from political groups, business organizations, and wealthy individuals. Conspicuously missing are ordinary workers, whose jobs and standards of living are threatened by refugees and immigrants crossing the southern border.

The pro-immigration elites cast a wide net, drawing in refugees and other immigrants from around the world, as well as international students and skilled "YES" workers – those who will agree to work in terrible conditions and for little pay simply to keep a job – sponsored by local employers.

They must be pleased. In 2023, the St. Louis metro

area added 30,000 foreign-born residents, a 23.2% increase in the immigrant population according to Census data. (By comparison, the NYC metro area added 88,000, only a 1.5% increase.) That was enough to offset the net loss of 34,000 native-born residents from the St. Louis metro area.⁸

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION COMES TO MISSOURI

The U.S.-Mexican border is approximately 1,000 miles from central Missouri at any point. Pew Research Center estimates that 75,000 illegal immigrants live in the state, representing only 1.1% of the state population. Yet the issue of illegal immigration is a major concern for state voters.

In 2024, incumbent U.S. Senator Josh Hawley, a Republican from the KC metro area, squared off against Democrat challenger Marine veteran Lucas Kunce. Both campaigns focused on illegal immigration and border issues, though neither candidate will have direct influence on the matter. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has the authority to actually deport undocumented immigrants.⁹

In September of 2024, KOMU 8, a Columbia, Missouri TV station, looked into the degree to which illegal immigration affects people in central Missouri.

"I don't know about the border, I don't have experience," Columbia, Missouri resident Jose Rojas said. He and his wife own and operate Como Arepas, a Venezuelan restaurant and coffee shop in Columbia.

Rojas and his family left Venezuela in 2019 due to political instability.

(Note: Como Arepas appears to be closed as this State Profile goes to print. The Supreme Court has also allowed the Trump administration to revoke protected status for many Venezuelans now living in the U.S., so the fate of Mr. Rojas and his wife is unknown at this time.)

"I fill every paper," Rojas said. **"I sent (them) to the immigration department and was approved. It**

was a good way to do everything.”¹⁰

Rojas said he and his family are here on temporary work permits until they obtain green cards, adding: **“I don’t think we have a lot of problems with immigration here.”**¹¹

Senator Hawley begs to disagree.

“Oh, it’s huge,” Hawley said at a campaign rally in Boonville in early August. **“Listen, we’ve had illegal immigrants, migrants (who) stabbed people in our state. We’ve had multiple people who’ve been victims of homicide.”**

He also mentioned the case of 12-year-old Travis Wolfe, who died when the car in which he was a passenger was involved in a head-on collision in St. Louis County in December 2023. The person driving the other car – a Venezuelan immigrant living in the U.S. illegally – was charged with involuntary manslaughter.

Of course, anecdotes alone cannot make the case that crimes committed by illegal aliens are a systemic problem in Missouri.

KOMU reached out to the Missouri State Highway Patrol, the agency charged with compiling statewide crime rates. MSHP had no data on illegal immigrant crime and referred KOMU to the FBI. The FBI’s Kansas City Bureau shrugged off the request, suggesting that the station contact the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Crime Statistics in DC. DOJ also had no information on the matter, and sent KOMU to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

BOTTOM LINE: KOMU followed every lead, and **“...still hasn’t received any statewide data on crimes committed by illegal immigrants.”**¹²

While both Hawley and Kuncie were horrified by the anecdotal evidence, on November 5th, Missouri voters cast the decisive vote: **Hawley 56%, Kuncie 42%.**

COULD MISSOURI BE THE NEXT ARIZONA?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports that Missouri’s climate is changing. Most of the state has warmed one-half to one degree F. in the last century. In the coming decades, the state will have more extremely hot days, which will erode public health in urban areas and corn harvests in rural areas. The *Washington Post* reports that **“by the end of the century, temperatures in Missouri could be a lot like they are in Arizona right now – with between 46 and 115 days per year above 95 degrees.”**¹³

Missouri’s steamy future is the latest chapter in an old story. Since the Industrial Revolution, population growth means more greenhouse gases warming the lower atmosphere of the planet.

SUMMARY

As birth rates decline, immigration is forecast to be the only source of the nation’s population growth. Cities with rapidly aging demographics – St. Louis and Kansas City, for example – are fighting for their share of the foreign inflow.

Now the Trump administration is upending that strategy by taking away refugee resettlement funding, revoking the temporary legal status of other recent immigrants, and constricting the issuance of employment-based visas.

Missouri’s Republican Governor, Mike Kehoe, has signaled that those without legal status should be worried, directing state law enforcement to pursue illegal migrants and to establish the immigration status of those charged with crimes.

For elected officials in St. Louis and Kansas City, aversion to immigrants at the state and national levels creates a barrier to measures that would make their blue enclaves in a red state welcoming to new residents.

And if statewide election results are any indication, that’s just fine with most Missouri residents.

NOTES:

1. <https://themissouritimes.com/a-look-at-what-the-new-census-apportionment-data-means-for-missouri/>)
2. Patrick Tuohey, Missouri is Shrinking, showmeinstitute.org/blog, January 22, 2025.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Lydia DePillis, They Had an Answer to Their City's Decline. Then Came the Immigration Crackdown. NY Times, March 16, 2025.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. John Murphy, Investigating the politics and effects of illegal immigration in Missouri, komu.com, September 5, 2024.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Chris Mooney, The Midwest's climate future: Missouri becomes like Arizona, The Washington Post, January 23, 2015.

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