



State Population Profile

PEOPLE ARE DYING TO MOVE TO SOUTH CAROLINA... LITERALLY

An NPG Commentary
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

South Carolina is one of the fastest growing states in the country.

According to the US Census Bureau, South Carolina had a population of 5,478,831 on July 1, 2024. The 2020 Census put the state's population at 5,118,252, illustrating a growth rate of 7% (360,579 new residents) between Census day (April 1, 2020) and July 1, 2024.¹ The U.S. population grew by 2.6% over the same period.

BOTTOM LINE #1: In four years, South Carolina's population grew nearly three-times faster than the nation's.

The sources of SC population growth over this period are revealing. The Census Bureau says the state gained 375,644 residents through migration – 60,691 from immigration and 314,953 from other U.S. states. Natural increase was a negative 15,065 – as deaths have outnumbered births in recent years.

BOTTOM LINE #2: If people weren't moving to SC, the state's population would be falling.

But they keep coming. SC's population has been increasing by about 90,000 per year. The state

estimates that another million people will be added by 2042, pushing the statewide total to 6.4 million residents.²

The population gains are concentrated in coastal and metropolitan areas, with most counties seeing little, if any, growth. Just four of the state's 46 counties accounted for more than half of the gains: Horry, Greenville, Spartanburg, and Berkeley.

Horry County – the home to Myrtle Beach – saw the fastest growth, despite an estimated 1,409 more deaths than births.

Charleston County used to be the growth leader, but as **housing became more expensive and roads more crowded**, population growth slowed. Fewer people are **coming to Charleston County, but the new entrants are younger, more affluent, and more likely to have babies than die. As a result, natural increase is larger than any other county in the state – 1,218 more births than deaths in 2024.**³

SOUTH CAROLINA: THE GOLD COAST FACADE

Southern states overall continue to experience the highest population gains in the country. Myrtle

Beach. Hilton Head. Sea Island. Beaufort. And the list goes on and on. All blue-chip resort towns that draw thousands of retirees from other states seeking a year-round beach lifestyle.

South Carolina was the fourth fastest-growing state behind Florida, Texas, and Utah in 2024, with a 1.7 percent population increase and nearly 91,000 new residents, primarily driven by domestic migration. The state's population now exceeds 5.47 million.⁴

Is this a case of South Carolina exceptionalism? YES, YES, YES, say state officials and real estate industry PR types, citing **"...a thriving economy, a robust job market, and plenty of affordable living..."**⁵

New residents continued to pour into the Myrtle Beach and Spartanburg metro areas in 2024, putting both of those multi-county metro areas in the top ten for growth rates, nationally. Myrtle Beach has been in the top 10 for many years, while Spartanburg – located in the interior of the state – is new to the top ten list.

The contrasting attitudes toward growth in those two places are telling.

Newbie Spartanburg is charging forward: **"We need to be in the top five,"** Spartanburg County Council Vice Chairman David Britt said, adding: **"We actually need to be number one. That's what I'd like to see."**⁶

Myrtle Beach has been there, done that – and knows the downside of tremendous population growth: **"It's growing too fast,"** said Horry County Councilman Bill Howard, whose district includes the Myrtle Beach area. **"We don't want to be number one."**⁷

With an estimated 413,391 residents in July 2024, the Myrtle Beach metro area's population has doubled since 2009.

Over the past four years Myrtle Beach saw a **"whopping 12.9% cumulative net domestic**

migration," becoming **"the nation's fastest-growing city and most popular relocation hotspot."**⁸

SC: THE INTERIOR REALITY

South Carolina is a lot more than coastal gems like Hilton Head and Myrtle Beach. The state as a whole is **"one of the worst states to live and work in,"** according to a 2023 CNBC report. Each year CNBC, the nationwide business and finance organization, ranks states on how welcoming they are to workers and their families. The annual report includes quality of life factors like crime rates, health care availability, environmental quality and childcare. Inclusiveness in state laws, such as discrimination protections and support of voting rights, also help determine the ratings.

In 2023, South Carolina tied with Alabama for fourth place.

Here's what CNBC says about SC's low rating:

"South Carolina is an unhealthy state, both at home and on the job. The state has the nation's fifth-highest rate of occupational deaths and it finishes in the top 10 for frequent physical and mental distress overall. Legal protections for workers are limited and the state's violent crime rate also finishes in the top ten."⁹

South Carolina's own statistics confirm that **homicide rates** are higher – and growing faster – in the state than in the nation. The same pattern is reported for **"Unintentional Injury Deaths,"** a category that includes motor vehicle crashes, workplace fatalities, and unintentional drug overdoses. Unintentional overdoses have been on the rise in SC and nationally due to increases in illicit fentanyl.¹⁰

ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT? YOU'RE NOT WELCOME IN SC

"Our cities are open to all who follow our laws, but are not sanctuaries for those who

ignore them,” Governor Henry McMaster said. **“South Carolina is a special place, but it’s also a place that values law and order...”**¹¹

McMaster made those remarks in October 2017, during President Trump’s first term. Back then, ICE trained local police officers to contact them following an arrest if there were reasons to suspect the arrested individual was an illegal alien.

Today, newly signed task force agreements between the state and ICE give local police more authority: they can arrest people during their routine **“day-to-day”** duties.¹² **Whether investigating a loud party, a parking violation – or just patrolling a street – local police officers in SC can arrest people for immigration violations.**

There is push back. Sue Berkowitz, founder of the South Carolina Legal Justice Center, says her main concerns surround the mixed legal status of some immigrant families in SC.¹³

“It could mean that some family members have naturalization or their green cards, some are U.S.-born children who are citizens, and some are at risk of being deported,” Berkowitz explains.

Many undocumented people are fearful right now, and Berkowitz encourages them to have a plan. **“They may want to think about is there somebody who they could give their children to if they find themselves no longer able to stay in this country...”**¹⁴

SC’S POPULATION GROWTH CREATES CLIMATE CRISIS

South Carolina is growing, but not all growth is good.

At least that’s what Leon Kolankiewicz, an environmental scientist with NumbersUSA and author of *From Sea to Sprawling Sea*, a study of how U.S. population growth drives rural land loss, says.

From 1982 to 2017 South Carolina lost 2,126

square miles to **urban sprawl** – the loss of rural land to urban development. To put this into context, while SC ranks 40th among all states in land area, it was 11th in the amount of area that was destroyed by urban sprawl.

Kolankiewicz explains: **“Rural land lost to urban sprawl can cripple the environment: wildlife loses natural grazing land, farmers lose farmland, and deforestation only adds to dramatic drops in air quality.”**

“The pace of development is accelerating,” Kolankiewicz says, **“and this leaves states like South Carolina, Florida, and Texas – areas that have seen tremendous growth in the last decade – with an inescapable question: What can we do?”**¹⁵

Answering his own question, Kolankiewicz gave two areas to focus on – population stabilization and more efficient land use.

He wants SC to control net migration from other states. He also wants low-density land usage to end, finding alternatives to mini-malls and single-family housing developments that are profligate wasters of land, energy, and other resources.

SUMMARY

When politicians, including Governor Henry McMaster, praise South Carolina’s population growth, and parade it around as proof of a **“booming”** economy, they ignore several inconvenient truths. For most SC residents record growth has diminished accessibility to public health care, made housing less affordable, and crippled the natural environment. Clean air and water – once taken for granted – are increasingly rare, and the low cost of living that attracted many current SC residents to relocate there from other states is suddenly not as low as once thought.

Politicians are stuck in a **“growth is good”** rut that seemed to work well in the 20th century but is inappropriate – and outright dangerous – for this one.

NOTES:

1. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/SC/PST045224>
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. <https://www.flochamber.com/2025/01/06/south-carolina-was-the-4th-fastest-growing-state-in2024/>
5. <https://www.placer.ai/anchor/articles/domestic-migration-and-population-growth-strong-currents-off-the-carolina-coast>
6. Slade, op. cit.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. <https://www.thestate.com/news/state/south-carolina/article277442253.html>
10. South Carolina State Health Assessment, 2023.
11. <https://governor.sc.gov/news/2017-10/gov-henry-mcmaster-announces-effort-ban-sanctuary-cities-south-carolina>
12. Tim Henderson, *ICE lets local officials stop immigrants on the streets as task force program is back*, scdailygazette.com, February 24, 2025.
13. Clara Faith, *Trump's immigration focus stirs fears in South Carolina's mixed status families*, abcnews4.com, November 12, 2024.
14. Ibid.
15. <https://abcnews4.com/news/local/south-carolinas-population-growth-creates-climate-crisis-says-environmental-scientist-environment-wciv-abc-news-4-2024>

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