

Census data shows Fla. is the fastest-growing state

For the first time in 65 years, it takes the top spot for population growth.



Photos by DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times
Visitors to Pier 60 tour booths of arts and crafts at Clearwater Beach on Wednesday in Clearwater.



Workers finish the exterior of new apartments on Wednesday in Clearwater, Florida, the nation's third-largest state, grew by 1.0% from July 2021 to July 2022.



Photos by DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times
Clearwater Beach is flush with visitors on Wednesday. Gov. Ron DeSantis says people flocked to Florida because the state has fewer COVID-19 rules and regulations.





Concrete work is finished by Florida Construction Co. to finish a driveway at a new home in the Silver Key subdivision on Leafwing Court in Palm Harbor on Wednesday.

BY IAN HODGSON
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It's not your imagination: People really are flocking to Florida.

The Sunshine State had the fastest-growing population in the country last year — the first time the state has taken the top spot since 1957, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates released last week.

The nation's third-largest state grew by 1.9% from July 2021 to July 2022 — netting over 400,000 new residents to reach an estimated population of 22,244,823. That's the second-largest numeric gain behind Texas, which has a larger overall population.

Florida's population has grown every year since the 1940s, often outpacing the U.S. average. But, like the rest of the U.S., that growth rate slowed to historic lows during the first years of the pandemic before bouncing back last year.

Gov. Ron DeSantis spokesperson Jeremy Redfern heralded the record-breaking increase in new residents as an indication of public approval for the governor's first term and of Florida's economic and social policies.

"People vote with their feet," Redfern said. "We are proud to be a model for the nation, and an island of sanity in a sea of madness." This year's jump in population is unusual for a state that typically sees 300,000 to 360,000 new residents per year, said Christopher McCarty, director of the University of Florida's Bureau of Economic and Business Research, which contributes to the Census Bureau's population estimates.

Florida's population growth is typically driven by more people moving to the state than leaving. The state's natural change — calculated as births minus deaths — is typically flat and was actually negative in 2020, McCarty said.

DeSantis has previously touted the state having fewer COVID-19 rules and restrictions as a reason tourists and new residents want to come to Florida.

Experts said the appeal of not having strict masking and other policies may have played a role.

But there's no one reason why so many people are moving to Florida. McCarty pointed to Florida's lack of income tax and business-friendly politics, as well as that this is "just a really nice place to live."

It was the weather that finally made Natalie Wolfe, 25, decide to move from Kansas City, Missouri, to Pinellas Park in July.

She fell in love with Tampa Bay's beaches and nightlife while visiting her boyfriend, who moved to the area a year earlier for work. When she got a job that allowed her to work remotely, Wolfe starting packing.

Despite arriving just months before Hurricane Ian, Wolfe — a lifelong Midwesterner — says she doesn't regret the decision.

"This the first winter that I haven't had to battle a blizzard," she said.

Unlike Wolfe, the majority of people moving to Florida last year were older U.S. adults at or near retirement age, said University of Florida demographer Stefan Rayer. Florida already has one of the oldest populations in the nation, and the influx of older adults only exacerbates the state's age imbalance.

Florida's economy is dependent on new residents who bring income and wealth with them, McCarty said.

The state had the nation's fourth-fastest growing economy between July 2021 and July 2022 — growing at an annual rate of 3.5%, according to federal data.

But betting on continuous net migration is not sustainable and growth may come at a cost, McCarty said. He said a growing population also contributes to many of Florida's economic woes, including inflation and housing shortages.

"We have all these (older) people coming in from out of state with new income that's been driving a lot of growth," said University of South Florida economist Michael Snipes. "But if you don't have workers available to meet that growth, that's going to put pressure (on the labor market) and cause prices to increase at a really high rate."

The same is true for the housing market, Snipes said. When new construction can't keep up with growing demand, housing prices will go up. Nearly 220,000 new residential housing units were approved from July 2021 to July 2022, according to federal data. That's the highest number of new building permits in the state since 2006.

"If you're a developer or work in the housing industry, or you're a wealthy retiree, you're loving this," he said. "But it's going to hurt prices for the

common man, and that's going to hurt working-class people.”

The last time Florida had the fastest population growth in the country was in 1957, when it grew by 8%.

The Sunshine State's population growth took off in the 1950s, likely in part because air conditioning became more prevalent in southern states, according to a Census Bureau statement released along with the new data. Since then, the state has consistently ranked near the top in population growth.

Smaller states like Nevada, Idaho, Arizona and Utah often outperform larger states like Florida and Texas in terms of percentage growth. Nevada was the fastest-growing state 36 times since 1946, according to Census data.

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