

New 2024 Census Estimates

Surge in Humanitarian Migrants Leads to Population Growth

By Aidan Enright

After [new state population estimates](#) were released by the Census Bureau in December 2024, state leaders were quick to take a [victory lap](#) declaring that Massachusetts is once again moving in the right direction. At first glance, topline numbers support these statements, pointing to a significant influx of immigrants and a decrease in yearly domestic out-migration. The result was the largest population increase as a percentage of the state's total population [since 2013](#) and the largest gross population growth in 60 years, according to the UMass Donahue Institute. Yet, few have taken a more nuanced look at the data, including how a change in the Census Bureau's methodology significantly impacted their 2020–2024 estimates.

The primary change is to how net international migration is calculated. In the previous iteration of the estimates, the Census relied primarily on the American Community Survey (ACS), which asks foreign-born respondents if they lived abroad a year ago. However, the survey has two drawbacks: data are on a one-year delay and there are sample frame and coverage issues, particularly for “humanitarian migrants” who often don't answer surveys or are otherwise difficult to reach.

To account for this, the Census Bureau decided to incorporate Office of Homeland Security Statistics and U.S. Refugee Admissions Program administrative data on border encounters and refugees to supplement the ACS. The new data led directly to significant upward revisions for the 2020–2023 estimates made last year in the Vintage 2023 series and a historically high net international migration estimate for 2024. The difference between the Vintage 2023 and Vintage 2024 estimates was 54,000 for the years 2022 and 2023, a number that likely reflects the methodological change and roughly approximates the significant influx of humanitarian migrants into Massachusetts during those years.

Thus, beneath the surface of these optimistic population growth figures lies a less rosy reality. While humanitarian migrants may swell the state's total population numbers, they are not a direct replacement for the tens of thousands of highly educated young professionals, entrepreneurs, and affluent residents who continue to leave Massachusetts in elevated numbers each year. The state's escalating housing costs, crippling tax burden, and unaffordable cost of living have made it increasingly difficult for residents to stay. This population shift poses a real threat to the Commonwealth's economic future, as the state loses valuable talent and capital to more affordable states.

Humanitarian migrants are unlikely to fill the gaps in the highly skilled labor market that Massachusetts desperately needs to thrive. Fields such as healthcare, technology, education, and finance are already facing critical labor shortages, and these shortages are not being alleviated by the current influx of migrants. Moreover, firms that rely on top-tier talent are increasingly making decisions to expand or relocate to other states where the cost of living and business expenses are lower.

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In short, while the 2024 Census numbers may present an optimistic snapshot, they mask the deeper, more troubling trend that Massachusetts continues to hemorrhage its most valuable asset—its educated, wealthier, and more skilled population. The net effect? A temporary, surface-level population bump that obfuscates Massachusetts’ continuing out-migration issue and the diminishment of its competitive edge. The true economic health of Massachusetts remains deeply at risk, and state leaders’ optimism is no match for the growing, systemic challenges that still lie ahead.

The following brief will lay out exactly what the Vintage 2024 estimates are, the extent of the revisions from the Vintage 2023 series to the Vintage 2024 series, and what the data mean for the state going forward.

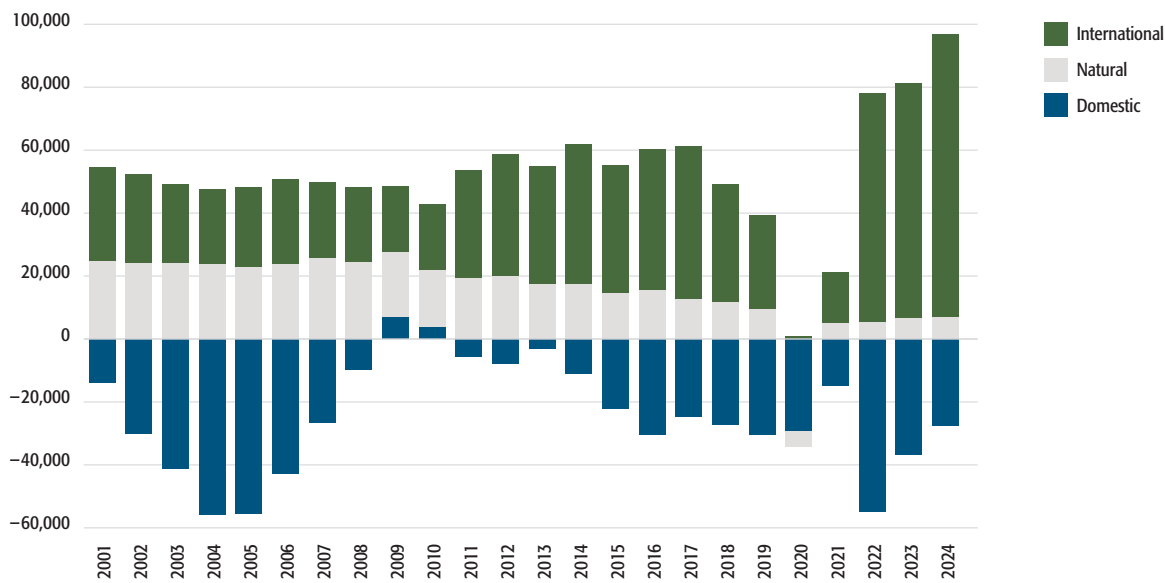
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What the Estimates Say

First, let’s dig into the content of the estimates. Between 2023 and 2024 the state gained a net 69,603 residents. That includes an astounding 90,217 net international migrants, a loss of 27,480 domestic residents and a gain of 6,718 from net natural population change (births-deaths).

The increase in net international migration dwarfs any other year for which data are available—2024’s total net international inflow is almost double the highest pre-pandemic year (2017), or a full 41,634 higher. That equates to new international arrivals accounting for 1.26 percent of the population in 2024. Only Florida (1.76 percent), New Jersey (1.38 percent), and the District of Columbia (1.78 percent) had a greater influx. Over the full 2020 to 2024 period 255,102 new immigrants came to the Bay State. Massachusetts’ intake of immigrants as a percentage of its 2020 population for the full period (3.63 percent) was more than double the average for all states (1.74 percent).

Figure 1: Components of Population Change, Massachusetts 2001–24



Source: Census Bureau [Population Estimates](#), 2000–2010; 2010–2020; and 2020–2024.

Across New England, there was a sharp contrast between states that attracted immigrants from 2020 to 2024 and those that didn’t. Connecticut and Rhode Island joined Massachusetts as top destinations, with growth of 2.59 percent and 2.42 percent as a percentage of their 2020 populations. On the other hand, New Hampshire (.79 percent), Maine (1.01 percent), and Vermont (.94 percent), were all among the bottom 11 states.

While the estimate for net domestic migration in 2024 (–27,480) was down about 9,000 from 2023 (–36,572), the number of residents leaving was still elevated compared to other states. Over

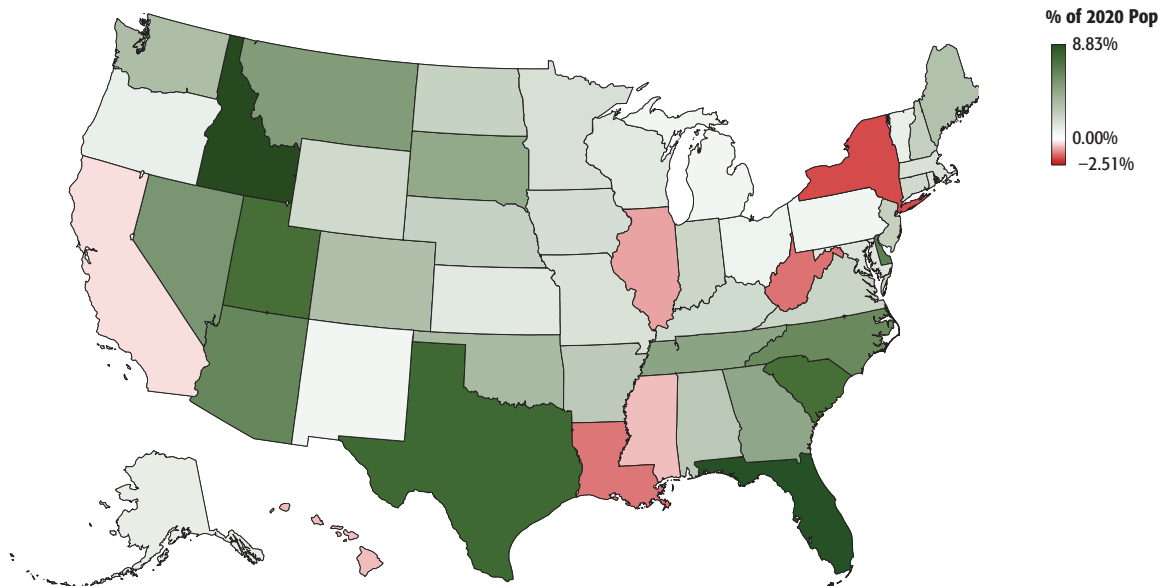
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the full 2020 to 2024 period, the Census Bureau estimates a net 162,751 domestic residents left the state, the fifth largest loss among all states and the District of Columbia—only New York, California, Illinois, and New Jersey had a greater number of net residents depart. That amounts to a loss of 2.31 percent of Massachusetts’ 2020 population. The average for all states was net-positive domestic in-migration of .52 percent.

Massachusetts fared better in natural population change, with a growth rate of .26 percent of its 2020 population from 2020 to 2024, or 18,267 net new residents. That is slightly above the national average (.21 percent) but far greater than regional peers Connecticut (.02 percent), Rhode Island (-.33 percent), New Hampshire (-.67 percent), Vermont (-1.06 percent), and Maine (-1.57 percent). New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine had such anemic natural population change that only West Virginia (-2.33 percent) was worse.

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Figure 2: State Population Change, 2020–24



Source: Census Bureau [Vintage 2024](#) Population Estimates. Estimates are the sum of population change from 2020 to 2024 as a percentage of a state’s total population in 2020.

Total population change from 2020 to 2024 was a net 103,139 in the Bay State, or 1.47 percent of its 2020 population. That ranks 33rd in the nation (including D.C.), and trails Connecticut (1.87 percent), New Hampshire (2.29 percent), and Maine (3.07 percent).

Just looking at 2024, Massachusetts’ growth as a percentage of its 2023 population ranks 15th, a significant improvement over previous years and ahead of all other New England states. However, this increase in growth is likely to be short lived when considering the Census Bureau’s methodology and long-term [predictions](#) related to international migration.

Methodological Changes to Net International Migration

As previously mentioned, methodological changes had a significant effect on this year’s estimates. Particularly the use of administrative data from the Office of Homeland Security Statistics and the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in estimating the number of humanitarian migrants. The Census Bureau had only adjusted its estimates once before using a similar method, in 2020 and 2021.

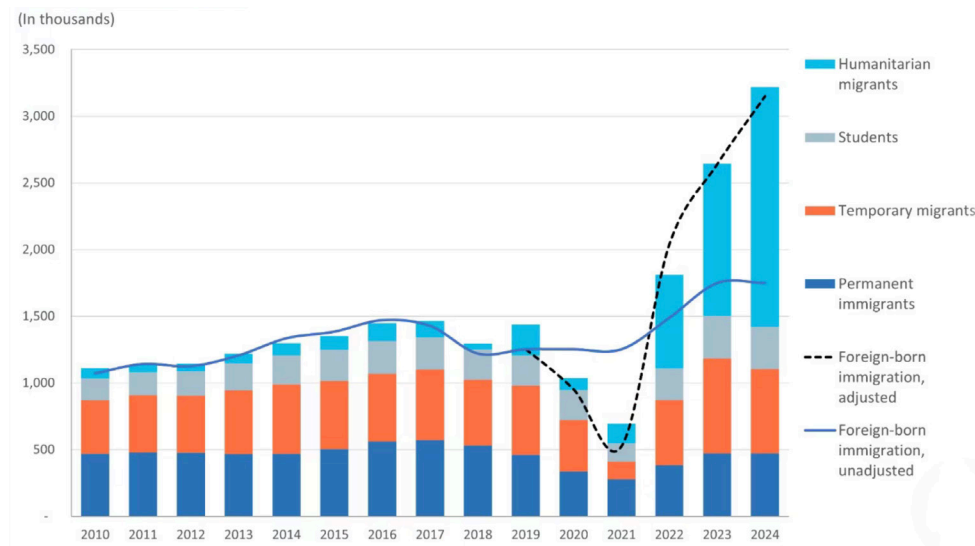
Before then, the primary method for estimating immigrant flows had principally been through the ACS. The survey has a large sample size, about 3.5 million households, and asks whether

a foreign-born respondents' residence was abroad one year ago. However, the Census considers there to be two main limitations to this method. The survey data is a year behind—2023 data are used to estimate net international migration for 2024—and recent immigrants are not fully represented because of the sampling frame and coverage issues. Surveys do a particularly poor job of picking up humanitarian migrants: refugees, asylum seekers, and others who are on humanitarian parole or are in the country illegally.

This, among other reasons, is why net international migration is considered the most difficult to accurately estimate among the components of change, according to the Census Bureau's [explanation](#) of its methodological changes. In their words “international migration is difficult to estimate because of its complexity and dynamic nature. The data available to measure international migration are often limited and the methods used to produce them require a number of assumptions.” Humanitarian migrants and estimating the number of foreign-born who left the country and now have their permanent residence abroad (since they can't be surveyed) are among the most difficult aspects.

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Figure 3: Foreign-Born Immigration Estimates and Benchmark Data by Categories, 2010–24



Source: US Census Bureau. (2024). *Census Bureau improves methodology to better estimate increase in net international migration.* [Census.gov](https://www.census.gov)

With a [surge](#) in humanitarian migrants and border encounters, the Census Bureau decided to adapt its methodology to more accurately incorporate that particular demographic into its' estimates. In consultation with immigration experts, the foreign-born immigration estimates were revised upwards to account for 75 percent of the humanitarian migrants in the Census' Benchmark Database—a percentage likely chosen as a result of duplicates in administrative records.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the methodological change significantly impacted the number of immigrants in the estimates. Nationally the 2022 estimate was revised from 998,983 to 1,693,263, the 2023 estimate was revised from 1,135,220 to 2,289,938, and the new 2024 estimate came in at a whopping 2,785,517—easily dwarfing any previous year.

The Census Bureau then used these national administrative records to extrapolate how many of those new migrants landed in each state based on pre-existing trends, and a number of other [assumptions](#) and supplemental data points. The result for Massachusetts was a revision in immigrant numbers that entirely changed population estimates for the last few years. As seen in Figure 4, net international migration numbers for Massachusetts were revised upwards by 29,920 in 2022 and 23,963 in 2023.

Figure 4: Comparison of Vintage 2023 and Vintage 2024 State Population Estimates, Massachusetts

Components of Change	Estimates	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total Population	Vintage 2023	-35,220	-5,762	-9,211	18,659	X
	Vintage 2024	-38,534	5,875	21,994	44,100	69,603
	Difference	-3,314	11,638	31,205	25,441	X
Net International Population	Vintage 2023	908	16,477	42,932	50,647	X
	Vintage 2024	908	16,475	72,892	74,610	90,217
	Difference	0	-2	29,920	23,963	X

Source: [Census Bureau Population Estimates](#)

These changes were responsible for shifting population estimates for the Bay State from negative in 2022 and relatively anemic in 2023, to strong positive growth. A revision that, based on 2023 state population, was the fourth largest in the country for the 2020 to 2023 period. Only Florida, the District of Columbia, and New Jersey had larger upward revisions. The revised numbers placed Massachusetts' 2020 to 2023 gross population growth as 28th in the country, as opposed to 44th before the revisions.

Takeaways

It is important to note that these numbers are *estimates*, and as estimates they are subject to change—sometimes significantly—as new data become available. Much could shift when Vintage 2025 numbers come out in December of this year, especially as 2023 IRS migration numbers are set to be released in late spring or early summer. Unlike much of the data included in the estimates, they analyze actual tax returns and are considered to be the gold standard for tracking migration. The new dataset releasing later this year will cause the Census to revise its numbers from 2023 and could change trendlines affecting its estimates for 2024 and 2025.

It should also be noted that net international migration estimates were national estimates that were extrapolated to create state-level estimates. The Census Bureau is still refining its methodology to more accurately distribute humanitarian migrant estimates to each state. Thus, these numbers could face significant revisions when the Vintage 2025 series is released.

State leaders should be cautious about reading too deeply into the trendlines created from the estimates. With the new Trump administration cracking down on immigration, and humanitarian migrants in particular, net international inflow is likely to revert back to historical norms in the coming years. A lack of movement on state affordability and competitiveness will leave Massachusetts exposed to continued out-migration of [domestic residents](#).

The loss of domestic residents in Massachusetts has significant economic consequences. Departing residents tend to be higher-income, well-educated, and often people who are deeply integrated into their communities. The recent influx of humanitarian migrants does not replace the human capital and skill base of departing residents, even as it adds pressure to an already strained housing market and shelter system.

As a point of context, revised population growth estimates did little to help the state's fiscal picture. Consider that even with population growth of 22,000 people in 2022, according to the Census estimates, the IRS still [found](#) that Massachusetts lost nearly \$4 billion in adjusted gross income (AGI) from net out-migration that year.

The state's success is a function of attracting and retaining individuals who can fill available jobs, particularly highly educated professionals, in order to maintain a dynamic and diverse economy and sustain the Route 128 innovation corridor. It is also a function of attracting capital to invest here.

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This means increasing the supply of housing, improving infrastructure, and addressing the rising costs of living and doing business so that Massachusetts is attractive to current residents and newcomers. Also critical, policymakers need to dramatically rethink workforce development programs for lower-skilled residents and immigrants, so that they are able to fill jobs in industries with high demand.

While there have been some “bright spots” of progress, Massachusetts’ policy environment over the last decade has left a lot of room for improvement. A short-term surge in low-skilled migrants, many lacking legal status or the ability to work in regulated sectors, is no reason for policymakers to think they have solved the out-migration crisis, which has always been about losing wealth to invest here and the talent that makes economic success possible.

In all of this, it’s important to note that not all immigrants are humanitarian migrants, and also that immigrants play a key role in Massachusetts’ economy. As numerous Pioneer Institute reports have made clear, immigrants start businesses, revitalize communities, and fill essential jobs. However, the type of immigrants the state attracts and the continuing loss of domestic residents will shape Massachusetts’ future. Relying solely on humanitarian migration while losing a higher percentage of residents than nearly every other state in the nation is not a sustainable path to success.

Data Note

Estimates are subject to change as new information becomes available. The Census Bureau uses a combination of surveys and administrative data in making its estimates. For 2024 that includes the 2023 American Community Survey, 2022 National Center for Health Statistics births and deaths data, 2022 IRS tax data, Medicare enrollment records, and administrative data from the Office of Homeland Security Statistics and U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Thus, estimates are not new data but rather extrapolations from (often) older data sets using built in assumptions about trends. Estimates do not refer to a single year but rather a span across years, thus the Vintage 2024 estimate for 2024 includes the period from July 1st, 2023 to June 30th, 2024, for example.

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