

Post-COVID population trends

After the disruptions, Alaska returned to previous patterns

By DAVID HOWELL

COVID briefly disrupted Alaska's population trends, driving up deaths for about two years and slowing migration losses as people stayed put. As we've moved further from 2020, though, pre-pandemic demographic patterns have resumed.

Net migration losses continued over the past two years and natural increase — births minus deaths — was just enough to generate a tiny amount of overall population growth (about 0.04 percent last year). The population is changing, however, as we continue to age in place.

Surge in deaths eased but will continue to rise; births decline

Deaths surged during the pandemic, rising by about 800 in 2020-21 from the previous year and

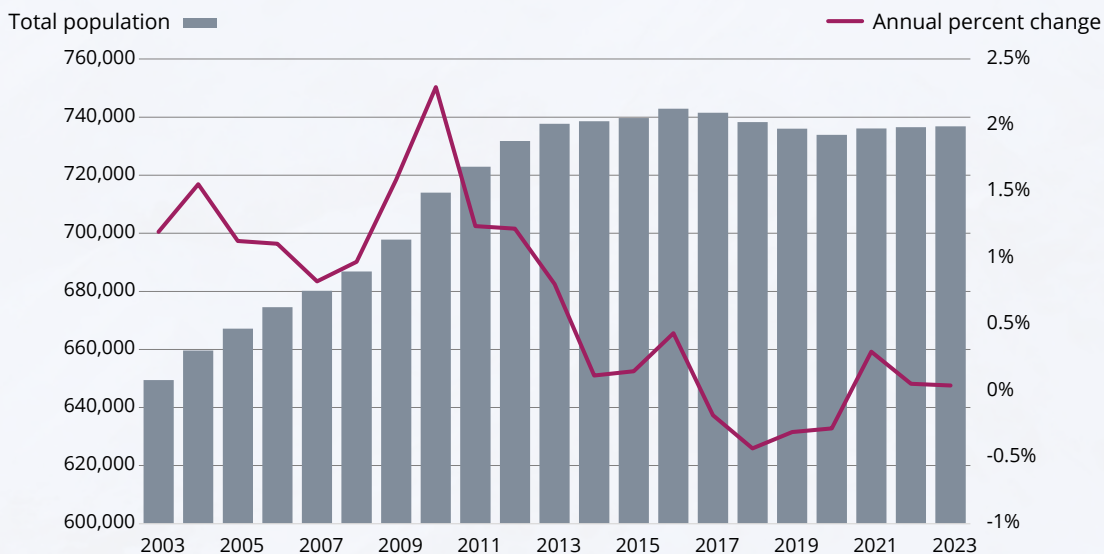
by 1,000 the year after that. During the most recent year, 2022-23,¹ deaths came down slightly but were still roughly 1,000 above the last pre-pandemic year. Deaths may decline a bit more in the short term but will climb again with more Alaskans entering the oldest age groups.

Unlike deaths, the pandemic had little effect on births. The number of annual births continued to decline, but not as rapidly as it had during the last decade. Much of the decline came from the decreasing number of Alaskans in their prime child-bearing years.

Alaska's birth rates have stabilized in recent years — that is, the average number of children per woman — after bottoming out in 2020 and then ticking up slightly, to 1.9. The U.S. fertility rate was 1.7 in 2022, also about the same as the year before. Both are below what's needed to replace the current population, which is 2.1 children per woman.

¹Population data span one year but are measured from July to July. 2022-2023 is the most recent year available.

Total Alaska population and yearly percent change, 2003 to 2023



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Alaska currently gains about 3,500 residents a year from natural increase, which is less than half the natural increase of a decade ago.

Fewer people are moving to Alaska

Migration also appears to be returning to its pre-pandemic patterns. Some moves were put on hold in 2020 and 2021, reducing migration both into and out of Alaska, but once COVID restrictions were lifted, both increased.

Over the most recent year, however, fewer people left Alaska than they had pre-pandemic. In-migration was on par with the three years leading up to 2020.

While Alaska has lost population for 11 straight years to net migration (in-movers minus out-movers), the drivers of the losses have changed over time.

When the negative streak started, it was mainly more people leaving Alaska. Many who moved here during the Great Recession of the late 2000s left when the economy improved in the Lower 48, and that outflow continued from 2012 to 2017.

After 2017, the outflow began to slow but the number of people moving in also decreased. During the most recent period, 2018-2023, Alaska had a much lower-than-average number of out-movers but saw even fewer people coming in.

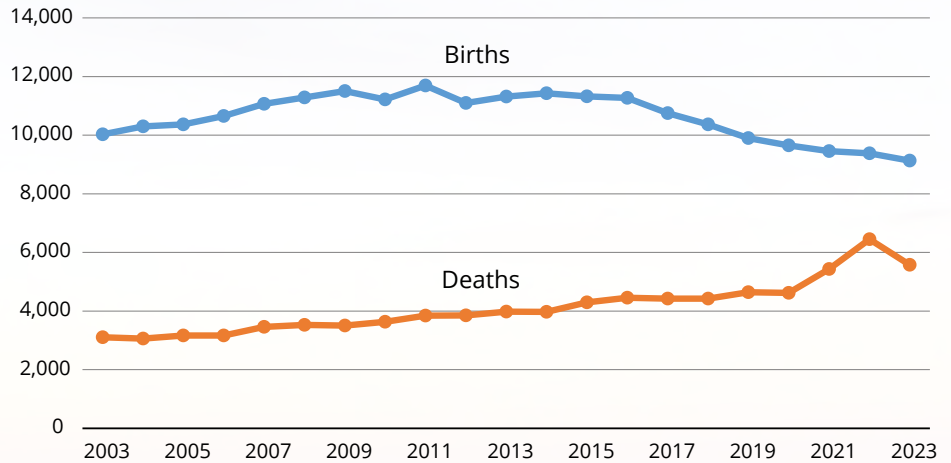
While we can't say for certain why fewer people are moving to Alaska, we do have an idea who they are.

The loss at working ages and how the age structure is changing

Working-age people have historically kept Alaska's net migration positive, especially the younger ones. In the past, Alaska has usually gained migrants aged 20 to 39, but from 2018 to 2023 only the 25-to-34 group was positive and the gains had gotten smaller.

The lack of working-age in-movers also meant

Rise in deaths and a decline births, 2003 to 2023



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

fewer children relocated to Alaska.

Overall migration for ages 40-plus has been fairly steady over time, and it has always been negative, especially post-retirement age. Some losses at older ages are bigger numerically now because Alaska has more people in those age groups.

Alaska's age structure has changed drastically over the past decade, primarily through the large baby boomer generation getting older. In the 1980s and 1990s, many boomers moved to Alaska for work and stayed. This group started turning 65 in 2010, more than doubling Alaska's senior population between 2009 and 2023 (from 52,100 to 110,500).

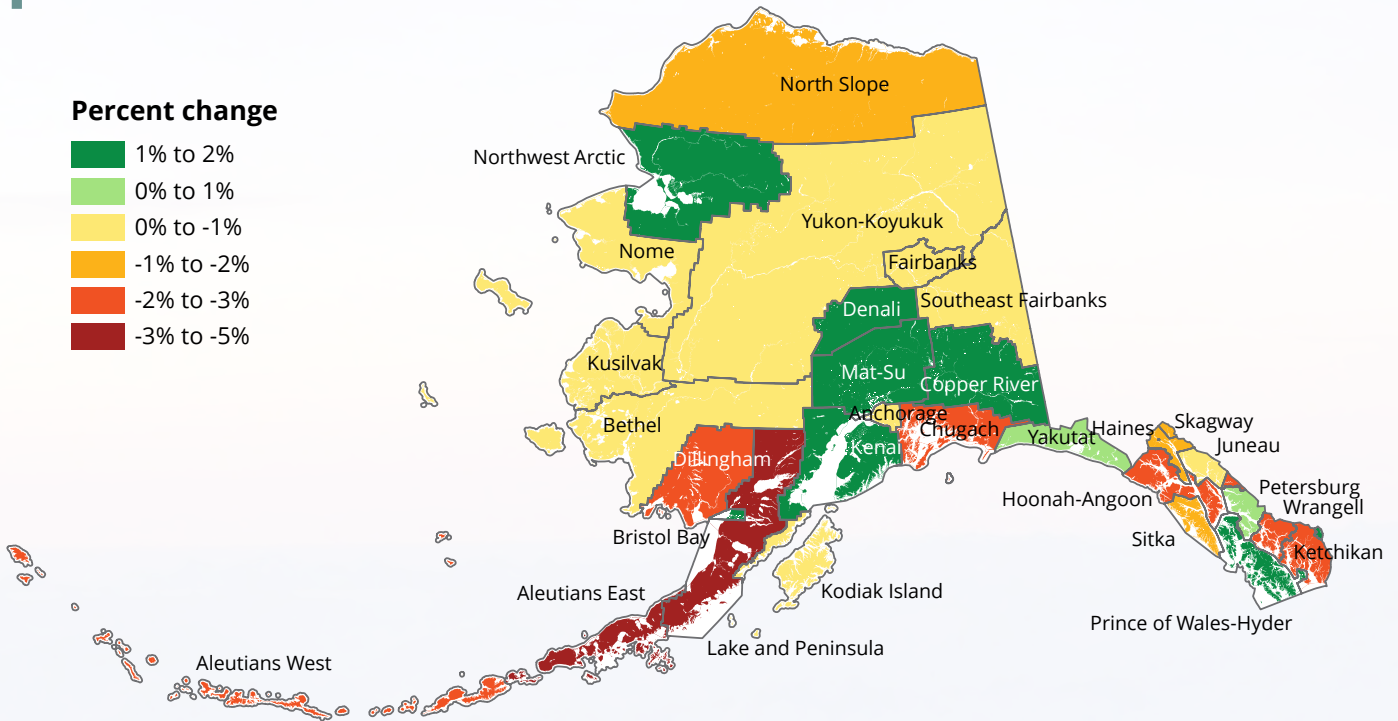
Early in the last decade, baby boomers aging out of their working years were replaced by millennials maturing into them and others moving to Alaska for work. However, that shifted as our net gain of working-age migrants stopped, leading to a decrease in working-age people.

Similarly, with fewer people in the age groups having children, the youth population has decreased.

Multiple factors will continue to shrink the school-age population

In addition to the working-age group, the school-age and younger population is on a downswing. Because births have been declining for nine years, the school-age population won't grow through kids aging into it any time soon. The youth population was buoyed for a while by millennials having

Percent gain or loss in population by Alaska area, 2022 to 2023



children, but as their children continue to graduate high school, the school-age population will continue to fall unless migration trends change.

In 2023, Alaska had 51,200 teens between 13 and 17 and 44,600 children from birth to age 4, meaning fewer young kids will replace those teens in the coming years. Alaska’s school-age population is projected to decline by 5 percent, or 6,600, over the next five years as the oldest school-age kids are replaced by those who are now younger than 5. If current migration trends continue, the decline will be even bigger, as Alaska lost population at all ages under 18 last year.

While birth rates have stabilized, as explained earlier, birth counts continue to decrease with fewer people in their prime child-bearing years than Alaska had 10 years ago. This could change in the coming years as larger cohorts start entering their high-fertility years, but that will also depend heavily on migration patterns.

Growth is concentrated in Southcentral

Although Alaska grew slightly overall during the last three years, most parts of the state lost population. From 2022 to 2023, only the Anchorage/Matanuska-Susitna and Gulf Coast regions grew.

Kenai and Mat-Su both grew through natural increase, but most

Area	Growth rate
Lake and Peninsula Borough	-4.4%
Aleutians East Borough	-3.4%
Dillingham Census Area	-2.4%
Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	-2.2%
Wrangell, City and Borough	-2.2%
Ketchikan Gateway Borough	-2.2%
Aleutians West Census Area	-2.1%
Chugach Census Area	-2.1%
Haines Borough	-1.8%
Skagway Borough, Municipality	-1.7%
Sitka, City and Borough	-1.5%
North Slope Borough	-1.1%
Kodiak Island Borough	-0.9%
Juneau, City and Borough	-0.9%
Fairbanks North Star Borough	-0.9%
Nome Census Area	-0.6%
Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area	-0.5%
Kusilvak Census Area	-0.5%
Southeast Fairbanks Census Area	-0.1%
Bethel Census Area	-0.1%
Anchorage, Municipality	-0.1%
Petersburg Borough	0.3%
Yakutat, City and Borough	0.6%
Denali Borough	1.0%
Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area	1.1%
Bristol Bay Borough	1.1%
Kenai Peninsula Borough	1.5%
Northwest Arctic Borough	1.5%
Copper River Census Area	1.8%
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	1.9%

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Continued on page 18

INFLATION

Continued from page 7

lower fuel prices alleviated shipping costs more for remote places. Urban Alaska and Urban Hawaii had the two lowest inflation rates in 2023 for food at home.

Housing inflation also topped the overall rates in 21 of the 22 other metro consumer price indexes (Urban Hawaii was the exception) and was the biggest driver of differences in inflation rates across these areas. (See the exhibits on the previous page.)

Urban Alaska was at the low end of the inflation spectrum, ranking second-to-last for housing cost increases in 2023 (tied with Minneapolis) and lowest for overall inflation.

Like Urban Alaska, some of the other metro areas where housing costs rose less than they did nationally were in states that lost people to net migration in 2023, including New York, California, Hawaii, and Illinois.

In contrast, the two metro areas with the highest housing and overall inflation rates were both in Florida, which had the second-highest migration inflow in percent terms among states in 2023.

Gunnar Schultz is an economist in Juneau. Reach him at (907) 465-6038 or gunnar.schultz@alaska.gov.

POPULATION

Continued from page 13

of their growth came from migration. Their in-movers typically come from elsewhere in Alaska, especially from Anchorage, so these areas' gains usually come at the expense of other parts of the state.

Migration has been the main cause of recent population loss in rural areas. In the Northern and Southwest regions, natural increase has historically made up for net migration losses, but that hasn't been the case over the last few years. Within those regions, only the Northwest Arctic and Bristol Bay boroughs grew.

Rural areas' migration has turned increasingly negative so far this decade. From 2020 to 2023, the Northern Region lost more population to net migration (-1,900) than it had the entire previous decade (-1,400). The Southwest Region's net migration losses have also accelerated. Southwest lost 3,750 people to net migration from 2010 to 2020 and another 2,850 in just the last three years.

Within the Interior, the Denali Borough grew but Fairbanks' losses were steep enough to bring the entire region down. Fairbanks' population is still larger than it was in 2020, but it decreased in the few years that followed the boost from the F-35 transfer to Eielson Air Force Base. Before 2020, the Fairbanks North Star Borough's population had mostly been declining since 2012.

In Southeast, three boroughs grew in 2022-23 but the broader region shrunk through both net migration and natural decrease, or deaths outnumbering births. Juneau was the only Southeast area with more births than deaths.

This was the first time a region has recorded natural decrease. Southeast is considerably older than the rest of the state, though, so natural decrease likely won't happen to another region any time soon.

David Howell is the state demographer. Reach him in Juneau at (907) 465-6029 or david.howell@alaska.gov.

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SAFETY MINUTE

Requirements for housing in temporary labor camps

As spring approaches, many businesses throughout Alaska are preparing for the influx of seasonal workers, many of whom will be provided housing on or near their worksite. Employers should keep the following in mind when establishing temporary labor camps.

Alaska requires that each room used for sleeping contains at least 60 square feet of floor space for each occupant and at least a 7-foot ceiling. Each of these rooms must also have a window that is no less than one-tenth of the floor area, and the windows should be screened and at least half openable for ventilation.

Employers must provide an adequate supply of hot and cold running water for bathing and laundry, and the building must have equipment capable of maintaining a temperature of at least 70 degrees during cold weather.

Other requirements surround kitchens, dining halls, and

feeding facilities. Employers are required to provide a properly constructed kitchen and dining hall adequate in size, separate from the sleeping quarters of any of the workers or their families, in connection with all food handling facilities. Living and sleeping quarters may not directly open into a kitchen or dining hall.

Temporary and seasonal workers provide valuable labor, skills, and support to many industries throughout Alaska. The value they bring should be reciprocated with adequate living and dining facilities. For additional standards — including toilet, privy, and water closet requirements — see Alaska's [8 AAC 61.1040](#) or the federal OSHA standard [1910.142](#).

This Safety Minute was written by Lauri Bitz, safety consultant for the Alaska Occupational Safety and Health Consultation and Training Section of the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development.