

Another year with population loss in Massachusetts draws concern from Gov. Healey

By Colin A. Young.

The population of Massachusetts shrunk by nearly 8,000 people between July 2021 and July 2022, a drop of about 0.1 percent, but the newest estimate released in fresh data from the U.S. Census Bureau puts the state's population ahead of its revised 2020 Census level.

The bureau's "Vintage 2022 estimates of population and components of change" released Thursday estimated a total Massachusetts population of 6,981,974 as of July 1, 2022. That was a decrease of 7,716 people statewide from the estimate for July 1, 2021.

The new data puts numbers to some of the migration concerns that have fueled Gov. Maura Healey's push for changes to the state's short-term capital gains and estate taxes, and color the challenges that businesses of all types have been having as they try to hire people in Massachusetts.

"We can't be the outlier that we are because too many people leave – 100,000 people. More people will leave this week, this month. So we need to do something," Healey said this week when the Revenue Committee held a hearing on her tax package (H 42). On Wednesday, Housing and Economic Development Secretary Yvonne Hao said an average of 1,100 residents left Massachusetts per week last year.

The 2020 U.S. Census initially counted 7,029,917 people living in Massachusetts, but the bureau announced last May that it had actually overcounted by 2.24 percent and reduced its population count for the Bay State to 6,784,000 people.

Compared to that revised figure, the July 2022 estimate released Thursday would represent an increase of almost 200,000 people. The latest estimate is based on the 2020 Census and more recent data on births, deaths and migration.

Massachusetts experienced 70,019 births and 63,716 deaths between July 1, 2021 and July 1, 2022 – a net “natural increase” of 6,303 people. Over the same time, Massachusetts experienced a net outflow of 57,292 people to other states in the U.S., the UMass Donahue Institute said, and a net inflow of 43,880 people from other countries – resulting in net negative total migration of 13,412 people.

Area economists affiliated with the MassBenchmarks journal reported Thursday that Massachusetts has a “declining labor force and shrinking working age population” and needs to focus on competitiveness issues in the areas of housing, transportation, and high costs relative to other states.

“With little or no labor force or working age population growth, the state’s employers are having to draw on labor from elsewhere,” according to the latest MassBenchmarks bulletin. “Recent growth in the size of neighboring New Hampshire’s labor force (in contrast to the Massachusetts decline) may exemplify that Massachusetts is bringing in labor from other states, whether in-commuting or working remotely.”

The counties that saw the greatest population decline by number from July 2021 to July 2022 were Suffolk County (a loss of 5,384 people), Hampden County (a loss of 1,808 people) and Berkshire County (loss of 762 people). By percentage, the largest decline was in Duke County – Martha’s Vineyard lost 1.14 percent of its roughly 21,000-person population.

Norfolk County saw the largest increase in its population by number and percentage, gaining 839 people over the year, the Census said, a 0.12 percent increase. Worcester County was close behind with a pickup of 795 people, and Bristol County

grew by 173 people.

None of Massachusetts' 14 counties ranked in the top 10 nationwide for population growth or decline, either by total number or by percentage.

Whitman County, Washington, was the fastest-growing county between July 2021 and July 2022 (up 10.1 percent), with the remaining top 10 fastest-growing counties being in Texas (five of the top 10), Florida, Georgia and North Carolina.

"I don't want to see people going to Texas or to – I mean, Austin's cool, but whatever – or to Florida, you know, North Carolina. But this is the dynamic right now," Healey said in early March when she pitched her tax plan to business leaders.

Lassen County, California, declined at the fastest rate (6 percent) and Los Angeles County, California, lost the greatest number of people (about 90,700), according to the new data.

The Census Bureau said that just more than half (52.5 percent) of the nation's 3,144 counties grew between 2021 and 2022, down from 55.7 percent the year before. Meanwhile 47.1 percent of counties saw population declines and 0.3 percent saw no change.

"The migration and growth patterns for counties edged closer to pre-pandemic levels this year," Christine Hartley, assistant division chief for estimates and projections in the Census Bureau's population division, said. "Some urban counties, such as Dallas and San Francisco, saw domestic outmigration at a slower pace between 2021 and 2022, compared to the prior year. Meanwhile, many counties with large universities saw their populations fully rebound this year as students returned."

[Michael P. Norton contributed reporting]