California Could Lose Most Populous Status in 20 Years, Caltrans Predicts Population Decline Through 2050

A person wears a protective mask as he walks in front of the skyline on Bernal Heights Hill during the coronavirus pandemic in San Francisco, Calif., on Dec. 7, 2020. (Jeff Chiu/AP Photo)

By Travis Gillmore

May 20, 2023   Updated: May 20, 2023

Print

Estimates released by the California Department of Transportation show the exodus out of the state continuing, with the population expected to decline from about 39 million today to approximately 35.7 million by 2050.

The transportation department began analyzing populations to guide road and highway planning and development in 2000.

Orange County's population is expected to slide from more than 3.1 million in 2023 to less than 2.8 million by 2050, and planning for Los Angeles County includes an anticipated drop of 1.2 million residents over the same time, the largest loss by county.

Projections for San Francisco are unique in that Caltrans forecasted the population to decline to 836,000 residents by 2050, but due to significant outflows since the pandemic, the city's population is already far below—at 807,000—this year.

If the Caltrans numbers prove accurate, Texas could surpass California as the nation's most populous state in 2042, when the Lone Star State anticipates approximately 37.6 million residents compared to a projected 37.1 million Californians.

'California Can't Be Fixed': Former State Senator

Hidden taxes inflating energy prices and restrictive regulations impeding business activities, combined with the nation's highest state income tax, are motivating factors driving people to leave, according to Nevada state Sen. Jeff Stone (R-Henderson).

"It's all the collective insults that have caused people like me to say California can't be fixed," Stone told The Epoch Times. "Until it crashes and burns, California is going to be an embarrassment to this country."

Stone is a former California state senator who moved his real estate business to Nevada five years ago.

"It was the best decision I've ever made," he said.

Thousands of others have made similar moves over the last three years, with the state losing more than 800,000 people since the pandemic, according to state finance department data.

The Caltrans estimates are notably lower than others provided by state agencies, including the California Department of Finance, but the latter's latest projections released in 2021 were based on data before the exodus became statistically evident. A new report from both agencies will be released in the coming months, according to officials.

Caltrans Projections 'Too Pessimistic' but a 'Wake-Up Call': Policy Analyst

But some say the outlook for the state is not so dire.

"Over the longer term, I think the Caltrans projections may be too pessimistic," Marc Joffe—public policy analyst at the Cato Institute—told The Epoch Times. "Even with high cost of living and urban quality of life issues, California remains an attractive destination for many both abroad and domestically."

The transportation department's forecasts show anticipated significant declines for major metropolitan areas in California, but Sacramento County was a notable exception with an anticipated steady climb in population topping out at more than 1.9 million in 2050.

Additionally, the report indicated some rural regions are also expected to grow.

Riverside County is another area Caltrans analysts see drawing new residents, predicting numbers to climb from 2.5 million people in 2023 to approximately 2.7 million in 2050.

According to Joffe, the future of California is likely to include increased immigration and a slowing of outward migration, leading to stagnant population growth. But he and other analysts suggest the agency's projections are reason to reassess projects that rely on population growth.

"Even though I am more optimistic than Caltrans, I think their projections are an important wake-up call," Joffe said. "Bullish population projections from earlier this century have been used to justify costly projects like High-Speed Rail and [the Bay Area's proposed multi-billion dollar passenger rail network]. The lack of population growth recently and in the future seriously undermines the case for these projects."

Differences in approaches to spending, governance, and oversight are leading some to look for other options around the country, according to Stone, the former California state Senator.

"You would think the leaders of California would get the message," he told The Epoch Times. "They just don't have the right priorities, and people are getting sick of it that have any common sense, and they're leaving the state."

Traffic moves along Interstate 80 in Berkeley, Calif., on Feb. 16, 2022. (Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

For years, California was a magnet for families looking to improve their quality of life —known for mild weather, diverse geography, picturesque landscapes, and a uniquely talented and diverse population—but things have changed, as reported in Epoch TV's "Leaving California" documentary.

Recent declines are unprecedented in the state's history, with data showing growth every year from 1900 until 2020—when nearly 1 percent of residents chose to leave during the height of pandemic restrictions—and declines have persisted since.

The state's population dipped 0.4 percent from January 2022 compared to the same time this year, falling below 39 million residents for the first time since 2015, according to the California Department of Finance's recently released data.

Internal Revenue Servise (IRS) also recently reported that $29.1 billion evaporated from California's personal income tax base in 2021, following a loss of $18 billion in 2020, after approximately 332,000 more taxpayers left the state than entered in the year following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to IRS, more people left for Texas than any other state, with Arizona, Nevada, Washington State, and Florida the next most chosen destinations for ex-Californians.