

Did More People Move During the Pandemic?

MARCH 2023 | RIORDAN FROST



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After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States in March 2020, there was a spike in the number of people moving—both permanently and temporarily—and a subsequent increase in popular narratives about a mass urban exodus or even a ‘Great Reshuffle.’ It was not uncommon to see media stories about flight from large, dense cities like New York and San Francisco, or about the explosive growth in vacation towns and rural areas.ⁱ However, these narratives conflicted with emerging data on residential mobility, which showed that after the spike in moves in early 2020 mobility levels reverted to pre-pandemic trends and continued a long-term decline. In this research brief, I use several data sources to illustrate the nuances of changes in mobility over the past several years. I conclude that there was an acceleration of the pre-pandemic trend of moving to lower-cost states, as well as the trend of moving to suburban counties and smaller metropolitan areas. However, mobility rates fell overall during the pandemic due to a continued decrease in local mobility rates.

The Basics of Pre-Pandemic Residential Mobility

In 2019, 13 percent of Americans moved, which is to say they lived in a different house than one year prior, according to American Community Survey (ACS) person-level data. Young adults, renters, college graduates, and people in lower-income households were the most likely to move. One-quarter of adults aged 18–24 moved in 2019, which was four times the mobility rate of adults age 65 and over. The renter mobility rate was 23 percent in 2019, much higher than the 8 percent homeowner mobility rate. 14 percent of adults with a four-year college degree moved in 2019, compared to 12 percent of adults with less than a four-year degree. The mobility rate of people in households in the lowest income quartile was 16 percent in 2019, compared to 10 percent for people in the highest income quartile households.

By race and ethnicity, the highest mobility rate in 2019 was among people identifying as more than

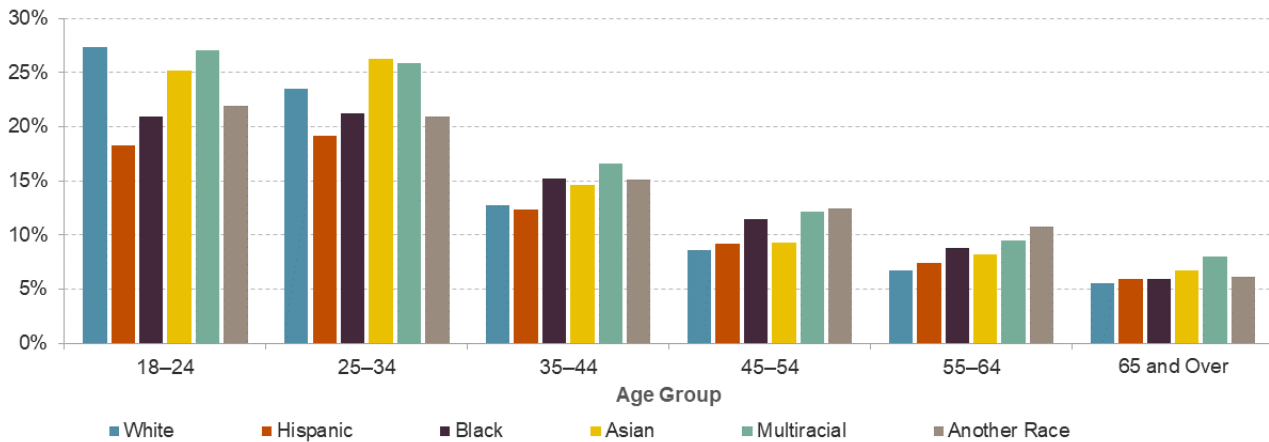
one race at 17.5 percent, compared with lower but similar rates for Black (14.5 percent), Asian (14.4 percent), Hispanic (13.1 percent), and white (12.1 percent) people, according to ACS data. People of all other races than those listed had the second highest mobility rate at 14.9 percent.ⁱⁱ For some racial groups, these relative differences change by age. Non-Hispanic white adults, for example, have the highest mobility rate among adults aged 18–24 but the lowest mobility rates among adults age 45 and over, contributing to lower mobility rates overall for this group (Figure 1).

Most movers do not go very far. According to Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-ASEC, henceforth CPS) data, 65 percent of movers relocated within the same county in 2019, while 17 percent crossed county lines but stayed within the same state, 14 percent crossed state lines, and 4 percent moved from abroad. This means that over four-fifths of moves in 2019 were within the same state, and that interstate migration—while important for population change—constitutes a minority of overall moves.

FIGURE 1

PRE-PANDEMIC MOBILITY RATES WERE HIGHEST AMONG MULTIRACIAL ADULTS, BUT THE BREAKDOWN DIFFERED BY AGE

Share of People Who Moved in the Past Year (Percent)



Note: Person-level data for persons 1+ years old. Excludes group quarters. White, Black, Asian, Multiracial, and Another Race adults are non-Hispanic. Hispanic adults may be of any race.

Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates via IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota.

PRE-PANDEMIC MOBILITY RATES WERE IN A LONG-TERM DECLINE

Residential mobility rates have been in a long-term decline for the past four decades.ⁱⁱⁱ According to the US Census Bureau, mobility rates hovered around 20 percent from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s before dropping to less than 10 percent by 2019.^{iv} The steepest declines in mobility have been among the most mobile groups: young adults and renters. The mobility rate for adults aged 18–24 was 32 percent in 1989, which fell to 29 percent in 1999, 25 percent in 2009, and 18 percent in 2019, according to CPS data (Figure 2). The person-level renter mobility rate similarly fell from 35 percent in 1989 to 33 percent in 1999, 29 percent in 2009, and 20 percent in 2019. Recent research has pinned the sharp decline in mobility rates among renters in the past decade on the housing shortage that followed the Great Recession.^v Local (within-state) moves remained much more common than long-distance moves, but the local mobility rate fell from 14.2 percent in 1989 to 8.0 percent in 2019, as the long-distance

(interstate or from abroad) mobility rate fell from 3.5 to 1.7 percent.

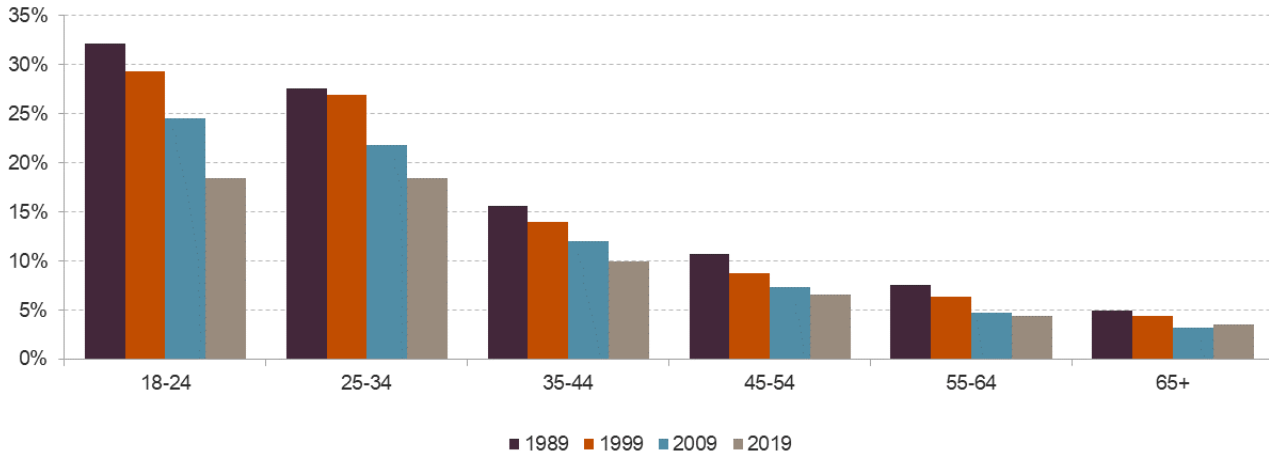
HOUSING AND FAMILY MOTIVATED MOVES BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

Prior to the pandemic, moves were most commonly motivated by housing, according to CPS data. Fully 42 percent of movers relocated due to housing-related reasons in 2019, compared to 27 percent who moved for family-related reasons, 20 percent for job-related reasons, and 11 percent for other reasons. Housing-related reasons include wanting better housing, becoming a homeowner, and wanting less expensive housing. Family-related reasons include getting married (or divorced) and establishing one’s own household, and job-related reasons include getting (or losing) a job, retiring, and moving for an easier commute. Other reasons are varied, and include attending college and moving in with an unmarried partner or friends.

FIGURE 2

LONG-TERM MOBILITY RATE DECLINES WERE SHARPEST AMONG YOUNG ADULTS BUT OCCURRED ACROSS AGE GROUPS

Share of People Who Moved in the Past Year (Percent)

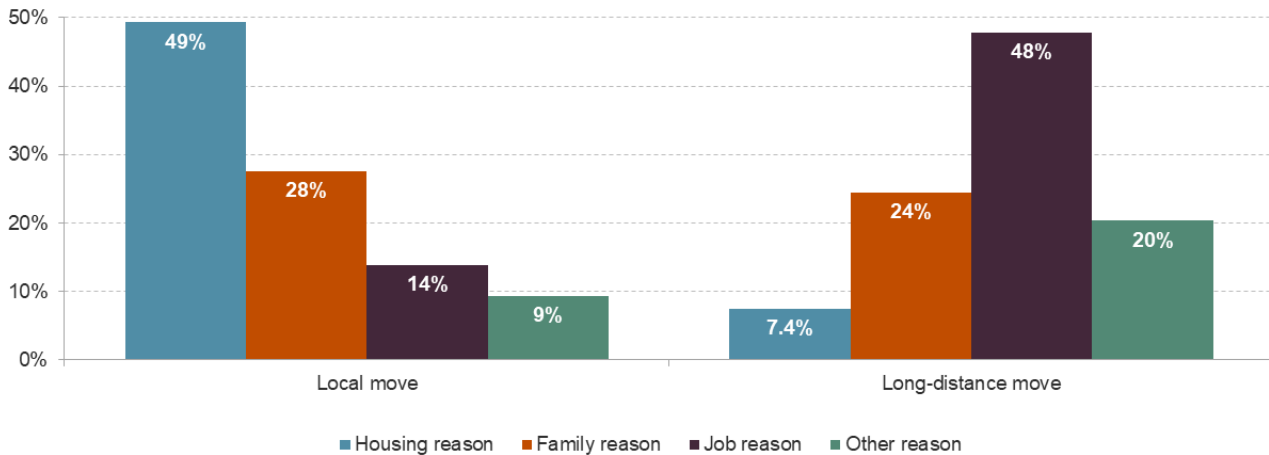


Notes: Person-level data for persons 1+ years old. Excludes group quarters and imputed mobility values.
 Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys via IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota.

FIGURE 3

REASONS FOR MOVING DIFFERED BY TYPE OF MOVE IN 2019

Share of Moves (Percent)



Notes: Data are based on the reported primary reason for moving (i.e. no individual reported more than one category). Person-level data for persons 1+ years old. Movers are defined as those who moved in the past year. Local moves are defined as within county or within state; long-distance moves as between states or from abroad.
 Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, 2019 Current Population Survey via IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota.

The composition of reasons for moving differs by distance of move, however. About half of local moves were motivated by housing reasons, while half of long-distance moves were motivated by job reasons, according to 2019 CPS data (Figure 3). This is largely true across age groups, with a notable exception. Only 20 percent of adults age 65 and over who made a long-distance move in 2019 did so for job-related reasons (including retirement), while 35 percent did so for family-related reasons and 36 percent did so for other reasons.

MOVERS WERE DRAWN TO SUNBELT STATES AND SUBURBAN COUNTIES

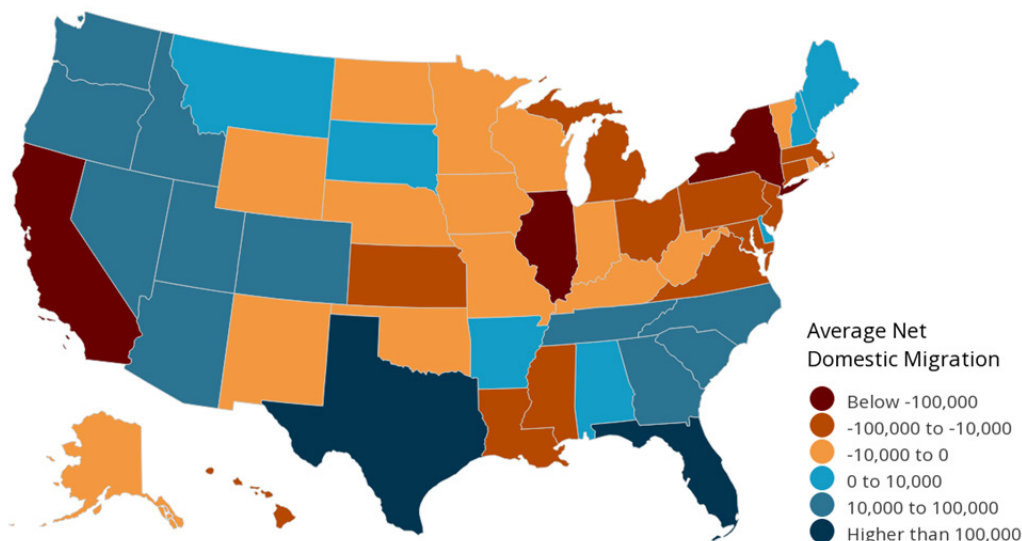
Some states proved particularly attractive to those who moved across state lines before the pandemic, especially states in the Sunbelt. Averaging net

domestic migration levels in Census Population Estimates Program (PEP) data from 2015–2019, the states with the highest net inflows were Florida, Texas, Arizona, North Carolina, and Washington state. The states with the highest net outflows were New York, California, Illinois, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania (Figure 4).

On the county level, movers focused on suburban counties—and not just those in the Sunbelt—in the latter half of the past decade. The counties with the highest net domestic inflows from 2015–2019 were on the fringes of large metropolitan areas, followed by smaller metro area counties. Urban counties in large metro areas as well as non-metropolitan counties (which are largely rural) had net domestic outflows during that time period.^{vi}

FIGURE 4

DOMESTIC MIGRATION GAINS WERE CONCENTRATED IN THE SUNBELT AND NORTHWEST BEFORE THE PANDEMIC



Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, 2015–2019 Population Estimates Program.

What Happened to Residential Mobility During the Pandemic?

The most detailed residential mobility data sources are annual Census surveys, namely the ACS and the CPS. While data collection was severely impacted by the pandemic for both surveys, there were fewer issues with 2021 data for the ACS and 2022 data for the CPS (see **Appendix 1**). As such, these survey datasets can provide information on how mobility rates changed after the first year of the pandemic. To explore what happened during the earlier part of the pandemic, two other data sources can provide more detail. The United States Postal Service (USPS) started publicly releasing monthly Change-of-Address (CoA) data in 2021, with data dating back four years. Additionally, PEP data contains estimates on migration as a component of population change on the state and local levels from July 2020 to July 2021, which provides further insight into geographic changes during the first year of the pandemic.

ANNUAL SURVEYS FIND CONTINUED DECLINE IN MOBILITY RATES

Overall person-level mobility rates continued their long-term decline during the pandemic, falling from 12.9 percent in 2019 to 11.9 percent in 2021, according to ACS data. This was driven by a decline in within-state mobility rates, which fell from 10.2 percent in 2019 to 9.3 percent in 2021. In contrast, interstate migration rates rose slightly from 2.1 to 2.2 percent, which fits into the relatively stable trend of the past decade.

Mobility rates among adults aged 18–24 fell from 24.1 percent in 2019 to 23.1 percent in 2021 and fell by a similar degree among all other age groups, according to ACS data. Renter mobility rates declined sharply before the pandemic, and this trend continued: 23.2 percent of renters moved in

2019, compared to 20.8 percent in 2021 (**Figure 5**). In contrast, the homeowner mobility rate increased slightly from 7.7 to 7.9 percent. While mobility rates fell for people with less than a four-year degree from 12.3 to 11.1 percent, they stayed steady for college graduates at 13.9 percent. Mobility rates fell among all income groups, with the notable exception of people in households in the highest income quartile, for whom mobility rates inched up from 10.3 to 10.5 percent. Mobility rates declined among all racial and ethnic groups—across age groups—from 2019 to 2021.

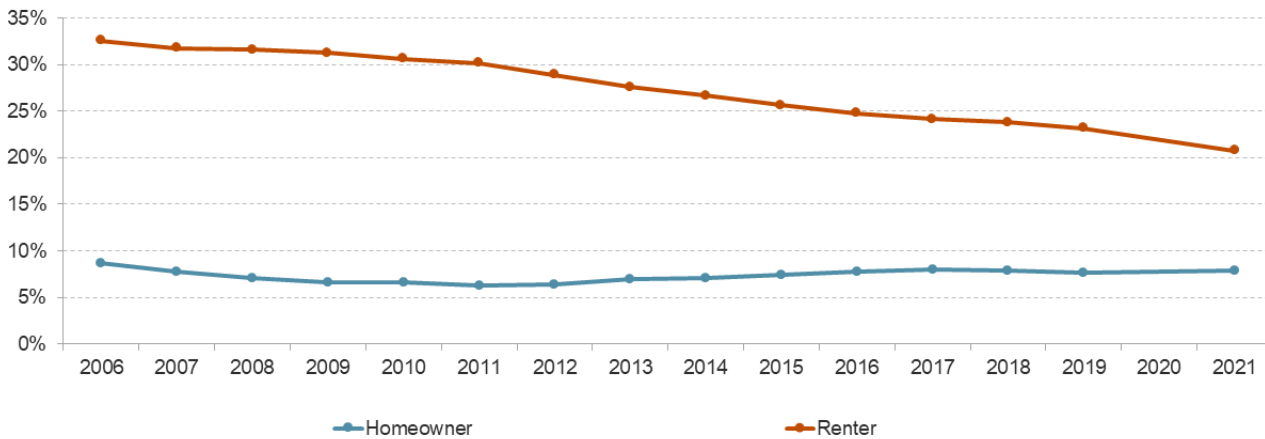
The mobility rate trends in ACS data were mirrored in CPS data between 2019 and 2022. The overall mobility rate in 2019 was 9.7 percent according to CPS data, which fell to 8.6 percent in 2022.^{vii} The within-state mobility rate fell from 8.0 percent in 2019 to 6.9 percent in 2022, while the interstate migration rate held steady at 1.4 percent. Mobility rates fell among all age groups except for adults aged 55–64 for whom it inched up from 4.5 to 4.8 percent. Unlike in ACS data, mobility rates declined regardless of four-year degree attainment or household income quartile—with the exception of those in the 3rd-highest quartile households for whom mobility rates rose slightly from 8.5 to 8.6 percent. The homeowner mobility rate rose from 4.9 percent in 2019 to 5.1 percent in 2022, while renter mobility rates fell from 19.8 to 16.3 percent. As in ACS data, mobility rates fell among all racial and ethnic groups in CPS data.

When it comes to reasons for moving, CPS data reveal interesting shifts during the pandemic. The relative ranking of each category of reasons remained the same: housing reasons motivated moving the most, followed by family, job, and then other reasons. However, the share of moves motivated by job-related reasons fell during the pandemic, from 20 percent of moves in 2019 to 17 percent in 2022. This share was largely replaced by the Census Bureau’s ‘other’ category of reasons—

FIGURE 5

RENTER MOBILITY CONTINUED TO DECLINE DURING THE PANDEMIC WHILE HOMEOWNER MOBILITY STAYED STEADY

Share of People Who Moved in the Past Year (Percent)



Note: Person-level data for persons 1+ years old. Excludes group quarters, and data from 2020.

Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates via IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota.

one of the most common of which is moving in with an unmarried partner—which rose from 11 to 16 percent of moves. For long-distance moves, job-related reasons were still the most common motivation for moving, but they fell from 48 percent of long-distance moves in 2019 to 42 percent in 2022. This share was largely replaced by moving for housing-related reasons, which rose from 7 to 12 percent of long-distance moves, as well as other reasons, which rose from 20 to 25 percent of long-distance moves—making this category more common than family-related reasons, which fell from 24 to 20 percent of long-distance moves.

JUMP IN CHANGE-OF-ADDRESS REQUESTS EARLY IN PANDEMIC

CoA requests compiled by the USPS offer a rare picture of monthly trends in temporary and permanent moves during the pandemic for individuals and families (for details on this data source, see [Appendix 1](#)). These data show that CoA requests spiked immediately after the onset of the

pandemic in March 2020. After this initial increase, however, all types of CoA requests declined to match or fall below pre-pandemic trends by the end of 2021.

In March 2020, there were 2.2 million CoA requests by individuals, which was 22 percent higher than March 2019. This higher level of moving continued during April 2020, when moves were 14 percent higher than April 2019. After this, however, the number of individual moves hewed to pre-pandemic monthly trends, staying at or below typical levels until the turn of the year. At that point, in December 2020 and January 2021 combined there were nearly 500,000 more individual moves than one year prior, a 14 percent increase.

By the end of 2021 and throughout 2022, individual moves were again tracking below pre-pandemic levels. Annual counts confirm this: in all of 2020 there were 23.7 million CoA requests for individuals, which was a five percent increase from 22.6 million in 2019. In 2021, however, there were 22.4 million

CoA requests for individuals, a five percent decrease from 2020, and in 2022 there were 20.2 million CoA requests, fully 10 percent lower than in 2021.

Family moves also increased at the onset of the pandemic but to a lesser degree than moves by individuals. In March 2020, there were 817,000 family CoA requests, five percent more than in March 2019. Family moves then matched or fell below pre-pandemic levels except for a slight elevation in December 2020. Overall, family CoA requests fell by 7 percent from 10.0 million in 2019 to 9.3 million in 2020, by another 2 percent to 9.0 million in 2021, and by 10 percent more to 8.2 million in 2022 (Figure 6).

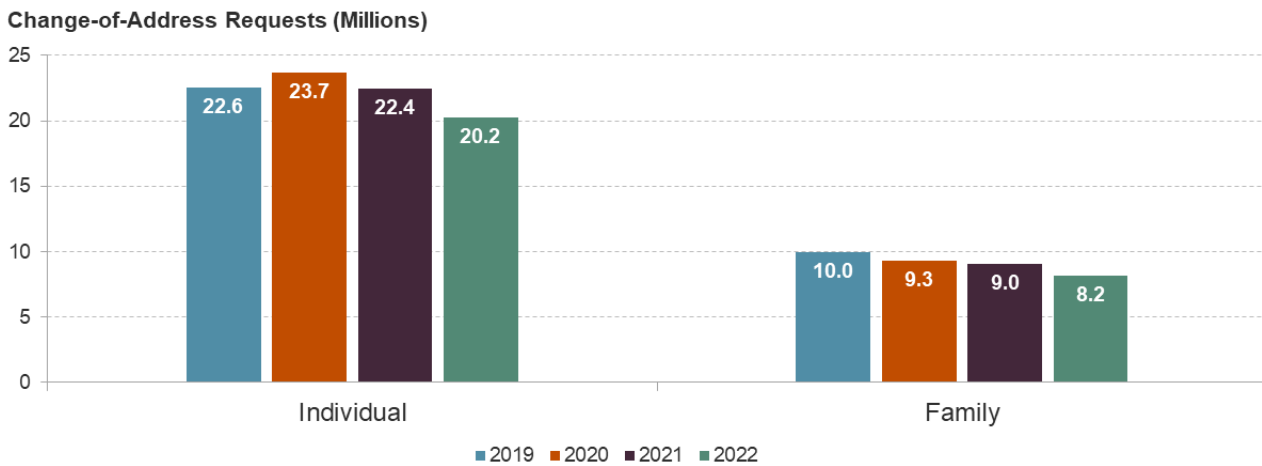
Permanent moves were elevated slightly during 2020 but fell in 2021 and 2022. In March 2020, there were 2.9 million permanent CoA requests, a 12 percent increase from March 2019. In December 2020 and January 2021, there was another increase in permanent CoA requests with nearly 550,000 more requests compared to one year prior, a 12 percent increase. This coincided with the months in

which individual and family moves increased and permanent moves then followed the same trend of matching or falling below pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2021 and throughout 2022 (Figure 7). In total, there were 31.7 million permanent CoA requests in 2019, which rose by less than 1 percent to 32.0 million in 2020, fell by 4 percent to 30.7 million in 2021, and fell by 10 percent more to 27.8 million in 2022.

Temporary moves saw the most disproportionate increase at the start of the pandemic. There were 340,000 temporary CoA requests in March 2020, fully 225,000 more than in March 2019, which was a substantial 188 percent increase. In April 2020, there were 320,000 temporary CoA requests, 36 percent more than in April 2019. After that, temporary moves returned to pre-pandemic patterns but remained slightly elevated. Overall, there were 2.5 million temporary CoA requests in 2019, which rose by 18 percent to 2.9 million in 2020, fell by 13 percent to 2.5 million in 2021, then fell by 10 percent to 2.3 million in 2022.

FIGURE 6

CHANGE-OF-ADDRESS REQUESTS INCREASED FOR INDIVIDUALS BUT DECREASED FOR FAMILIES IN 2020



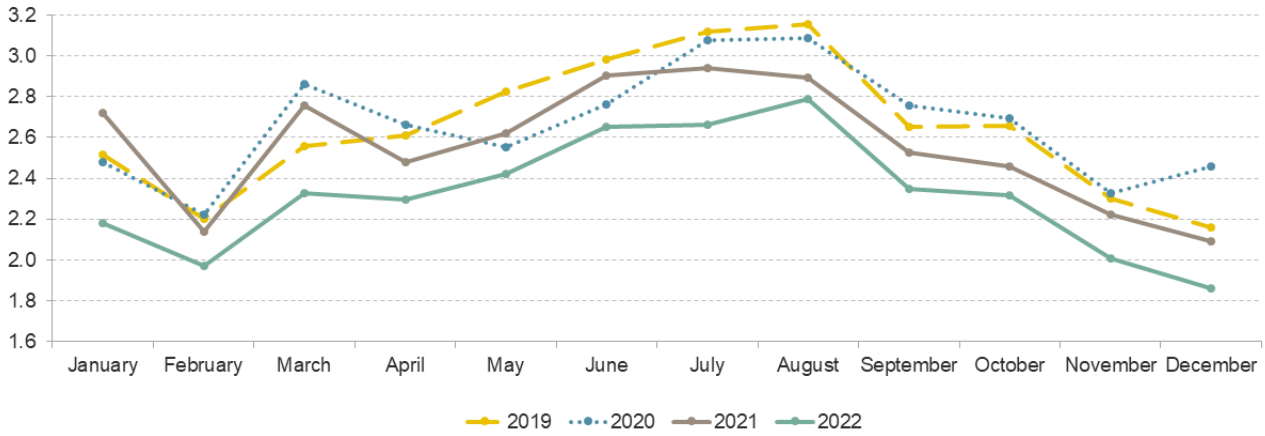
Notes: Includes permanent and temporary change of address requests. National trends were calculated by aggregating moves from every ZIP code provided. 'Moves from' and 'moves to' trends are similar, with 'from' move totals slightly higher due to data suppression.

Source: JCHS tabulations of USPS, Change of Address data.

FIGURE 7

PERMANENT CHANGE-OF-ADDRESS REQUESTS SPIKED BEFORE FALLING BELOW PRE-PANDEMIC TRENDS BY 2022

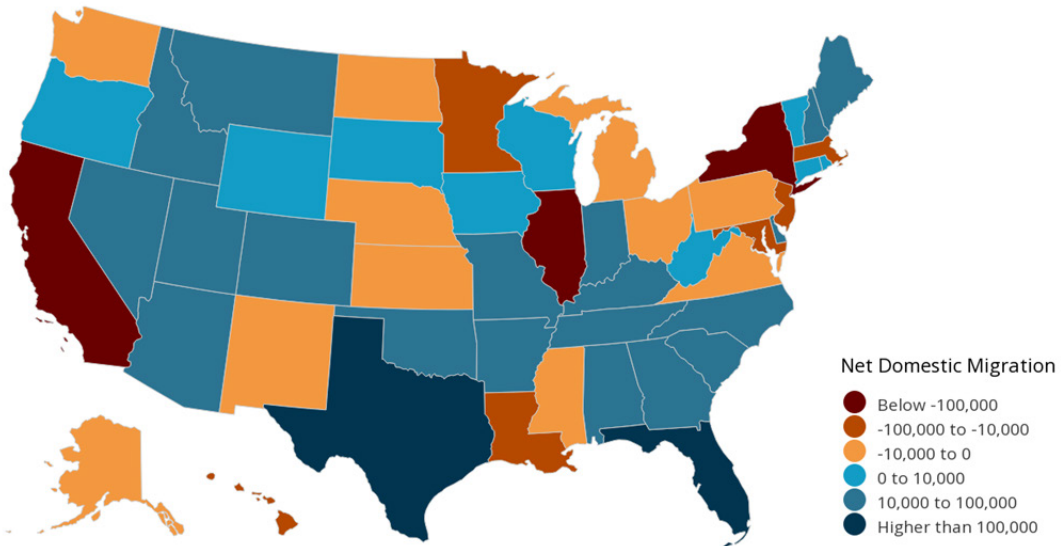
Number of Permanent Change-of-Address Requests (Millions)



Note: Monthly numbers are the sum of 'moves from' every ZIP code in that month.
Source: JCHS tabulations of US Postal Service, Change-of-Address data.

FIGURE 8

GAINS FROM DOMESTIC MIGRATION IN 2021 WERE NOT LIMITED TO THE SUNBELT STATES



Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, 2021 Population Estimates Program.

MOVERS FOCUSED ON SUBURBS, SMALLER METROS, AND RURAL AREAS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Data from the PEP show that domestic migration played a key role in population change on the state and local levels from 2020–2021, and that this migration focused the most on suburbs, smaller metropolitan areas, and rural areas (for further discussion of PEP data, see **Appendix 1**).

There are three components of population change in PEP data: net domestic migration, natural population change (births minus deaths), and net international migration (henceforth immigration). The latter two fell to record low levels in 2021. In the past decade, immigration peaked on the national level at 1.07 million people in 2016 before declining to 569,000 in 2019 and 245,000 in 2021. Natural population change, on the other hand, peaked at 1.46 million people in 2011 and gradually declined to 923,000 in 2019 and a mere 148,000 in 2021. As a result, net domestic migration was the largest component of population change for 42 states between July 2020 and July 2021, whether it was positive or negative.^{viii} For example, New Jersey had a net domestic migration outflow of 28,000 people, immigration of 10,000 people, and a natural population increase of 4,700 people. Despite the nearly 15,000-person population gain from immigration and natural change, New Jersey lost population because of its large net domestic outflow.

Regionally, pre-pandemic trends were perpetuated by ongoing preferences for the Sunbelt. Florida had the highest net inflows, with 221,000 more people moving in than out between July 2020 and July 2021, followed by Texas and Arizona. The Mountain West was also fairly attractive to domestic migrants in 2021. Idaho, Utah, and Nevada had the 8th, 9th, and 10th highest levels of net domestic migration, respectively, ranging from 25,000–50,000 people. Though it is a departure from historical trends of out-migration, parts of the Midwest and New England also proved attractive to domestic migrants.

Net domestic migration exceeded 10,000 people in Maine, Missouri, Indiana, and New Hampshire in 2021. The states that stand out with the largest levels of net domestic outflows are California and New York, both of which lost more than 300,000 migrants, followed by Illinois with a net outflow of 122,000 people (**Figure 8**).

On the county level, domestic migration was negative in most large urban counties and positive in the suburban areas surrounding these counties, as it was before the pandemic. However, there is evidence that this pre-pandemic trend accelerated during the pandemic. Of the 68 central counties of large metropolitan areas (those with at least 1 million people), fully 58 counties (85 percent) had net outflows in 2021, a marked increase from 52 counties (76 percent) in 2019. In stark contrast, 295 counties (80 percent) on the fringe of these large metro areas had net inflows in 2021, compared to 259 counties (70 percent) in 2019.

While this pattern played out in large metro areas, smaller metro area and non-metropolitan counties generally gained migrants. In total, 511 counties (70 percent) in metro areas with fewer than 1 million people had net inflows in 2021, a substantial increase from the 401 counties (55 percent) with net inflows in 2019. Additionally, 1,246 counties (63 percent) outside of metropolitan areas had net domestic inflows in 2021, which was a notable shift from 772 counties (39 percent) with net inflows in 2019. This difference is especially notable in parts of Appalachia and the Northeast, where non-metropolitan counties were generally more likely to attract migrants in 2021.

Conclusion

More people did move during the pandemic—at least, parts of the pandemic. The available data indicate that there was a spike in moves both at the onset of the pandemic and in early 2021. By

the end of 2021 and throughout 2022, however, mobility rates resumed their long-term decline and fell for almost everyone, with a few exceptions—most notably including homeowners and people in higher-income households. There was a slight increase in interstate migration, but it was easily surpassed by the ongoing decline in local mobility. Motivations for moving trended away from job-related reasons during the pandemic, which may be a result of increased flexibility of work location or simply the way in which the pandemic shifted people’s priorities. When people did move during the pandemic, their location decisions largely reflected pre-pandemic preferences, though the movement away from large urban areas seemed to accelerate, benefitting suburbs of these areas as well as smaller metropolitan and rural areas.

The paradigm-shifting nature of the pandemic makes it hard to assess whether and how mobility patterns will change in coming years. Trends that bucked pre-pandemic norms, such as the shift in reasons for moving, may prove to be a temporary result of the pandemic or a more lasting change. Similarly, there may be a ‘settling’ or reversion to the norm after the acceleration of pre-pandemic trends, including the out-migration from large urban areas, but these patterns could also continue in kind. There are many factors that imply a continued decline in mobility rates overall,^{ix} but the effects of new work and home arrangements on residential mobility may also take years to fully materialize.

Endnotes

- i See, for example: Marc Fisher, Paul Schwartzman, and Ben Weissenbach, “The Great American Migration of 2020: On the Move to Escape the Coronavirus,” *The Washington Post*, March 28, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/coronavirus-great-american-migration/2020/03/28/b59d4d44-6f6f-11ea-a3ec-70d7479d83f0_story.html; and Ben Popken, “Millions of Americans Moved during the Pandemic — and Most Aren’t Looking Back,” *NBC News*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/millions-americans-moved-during-pandemic-most-aren-t-looking-back-n1252633>.
- ii Hispanic people may be of any race(s), all other racial groups listed are non-Hispanic.
- iii Riordan Frost, “Are Americans Stuck in Place? Declining Residential Mobility in the US,” (Cambridge, MA: Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2020), <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/research-areas/research-briefs/are-americans-stuck-place-declining-residential-mobility-us>.
- iv Kristin Kerns-D’Amore, Joey Marshall, and Brian McKenzie, “Pandemic Did Not Disrupt Decline in Rate of People Moving,” US Census Bureau, March 7, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/03/united-states-migration-continued-decline-from-2020-to-2021.html>.
- v Dowell Myers, JungHo Park, and Seongmoon Cho, “Housing Shortages and the New Downturn of Residential Mobility in the US,” *Housing Studies* (2021): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2021.1929860>.
- vi These county typologies are from the urban-rural county classification from the National Center for Health Statistics. See PEP discussion in Appendix 1.
- vii Note that CPS mobility rates are lower than ACS mobility rates but the trends are historically similar.
- viii Riordan Frost, “Domestic Migration Drove State and Local Population Change in 2021,” *Housing Perspectives* blog, Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, August 25, 2022, <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/domestic-migration-drove-state-and-local-population-change-2021>.
- ix See Emily Badger, “When the Best Available Home Is the One You Already Have,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/27/upshot/housing-market-slow-moving.html>.

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