

ALASKA INNOVATION SUMMIT

Forces at Work:

Alaska's Push-Pull Paradox

Migration, retention, and what the evidence actually says about growing a rooted community

Why People Move: Four Categories, One Pattern

Reasons for Moving between States in Last 12 Months

Current Population Survey, 1999-2025, Pooled

■ Employment (41%) ■ Housing (19%) ■ Family (29%) ■ Other (11%)

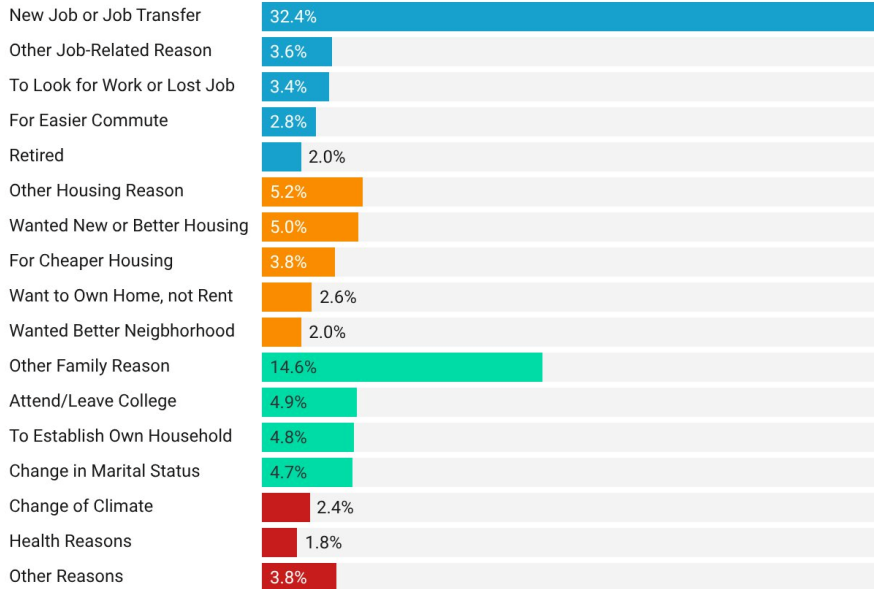


Chart: © Cooke Demographics, 2026 • Created with Datawrapper

17 stated reasons collapse into four clusters — each a mix of push and pull forces.

Employment — 41%

New jobs, transfers, job search, commute. The single strongest pull force in interstate migration.

Family — 29%

College, marriage, divorce, establishing a household. Life events that trigger geographic transition.

Housing — 19%

Cost, quality, ownership. Lower than expected for interstate moves — more decisive locally.

Other — 11%

Climate, health, retirement. Smaller overall but decisive for specific movers at specific life stages.

ENRICHING THE MODEL

Putting the Pieces Together

People pay premiums to live in expensive cities

Every corridor runs in both directions simultaneously

The same place loses some people while pulling others in

The Life Course Model

Migration is not driven by aggregate economic logic. It is driven by **who you are becoming** — and whether the place you are in can still serve that person.

Life events reset what you need. What you need determines where you go.

HOW THE LIFE COURSE MODEL RESOLVES EACH

✓ **People pay premiums for place**

because place utility — the non-market bundle — is part of the decision.

✓ **Both directions flow because**

different people at different life stages need different things from the same place.

✓ **One place, many outcomes because**

life events change what the person needs — not what the place offers.

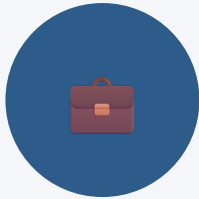
The next slides show exactly how life course events shape migration — and what that means for Alaska.

Migration Is Driven by Life Course Events

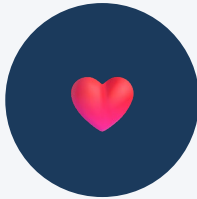
Migration is usually triggered by a life course event — a moment when the fit between a person and their place breaks down.



Finishing education



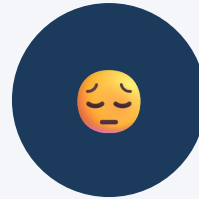
Starting a new job



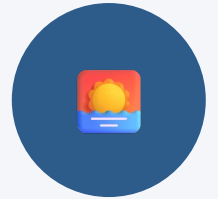
Forming a relationship



Having children



Losing a partner



Retiring

Staying is the rational default

Most people, most of the time, are already in a place that meets their needs. Moving is costly, uncertain, and disruptive. People stay until something forces a reckoning.

Life course events change what you need

A child changes the priority list overnight. A new job opens possibilities in another city. A partner lost makes a place feel wrong. The event reshapes what the place must offer.

Migration is clustered, not continuous

Migration rates peak at ages 22–24 (post-education), 28–34 (family formation), and 62–68 (retirement). These are not random — they map directly onto life events.

People move when they find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time in their lives.

The Life Course Event Changes Everything

Migration is not about places getting worse — it is about people changing faster than places can adapt to them.

1 — THE LIFE COURSE EVENT

A child is born. A job ends. A relationship forms or dissolves. The event is not gradual — it creates an immediate new set of needs.



2 — PLACE UTILITY RECALCULATED

The same apartment that worked at 25 is now too small, too expensive, too far from good schools. The place hasn't changed — but what you need from it has.



3 — THE GAP OPENS

The question becomes: can this place meet my new needs? If yes — stay. If the gap is too wide to bridge — move.

WHAT DETERMINES WHETHER MIGRATION HAPPENS



Family ties

Ageing parents, a partner's career, children's schools. Leaving is a real and often decisive cost.



Cost of moving

Financial and logistical costs fall unevenly. For many, simply too high to act on.



Information

People move to places they know. Social networks and prior connections determine where they look.



Uncertainty

Will the new place actually deliver? Doubt keeps many in place even when moving looks logical.

The same place can work for one life stage and fail the next

A rural community perfect for retirement — beautiful, peaceful, affordable — is impossible for a young family without reliable schools or steady employment. A place that attracts one group can exclude another entirely. Alaska lives this tension acutely.

Migration happens when the gap between what a place offers and what a person needs becomes too wide to ignore.

Preferred Destinations and Place Utility Change Across the Life Course

What people are willing to trade — and for what — depends entirely on where they are in their lives.

| Young Adults Early 20s | Family Formation Late 20s – 30s ▲ | Established Adults 40s – 50s | Later Life 60s+ |
|---|---|---|---|
| <p>→ Dense cities</p> <p>Economic penalty is an investment: networks, mentors, career density, partner market. The city pays future dividends that justify present sacrifice.</p> <p><i>Alaska gains in this stage. The real risk is what happens next.</i></p> | <p>→ Suburbs, smaller cities</p> <p>Schools, housing space, safety, and stability rise sharply in priority. The city bundle shifts from asset to liability. Affordability, not just cost, becomes decisive.</p> <p><i>Alaska's critical vulnerability: this is when it loses people — and when housing costs, school quality, and fiscal uncertainty are most damaging.</i></p> | <p>→ Rooted, selective movers</p> <p>Homeownership, career tenure, and deep community ties raise the cost of moving. Those who stayed through family formation are unlikely to leave. Mobility falls sharply.</p> <p><i>If Alaska keeps people through their 30s, it tends to keep them for decades.</i></p> | <p>→ Sun Belt, amenity towns</p> <p>Climate, healthcare access, walkability, and proximity to family dominate. Economic trade-offs matter less; quality of life and services matter more.</p> <p><i>Alaska's winters and healthcare gaps are significant deterrents at this stage.</i></p> |

A place that works for young adults may fail the same people a decade later. Retention requires matching what the place offers to what people need — stage by stage.

PART TWO

The Changing Context

The Structural Shift Toward Staying

Americans are moving less — and the forces driving that shift are structural, durable, and consequential for Alaska

Americans Are Moving Less — Decades of Decline

50%

decline in interstate migration rate since the 1970s

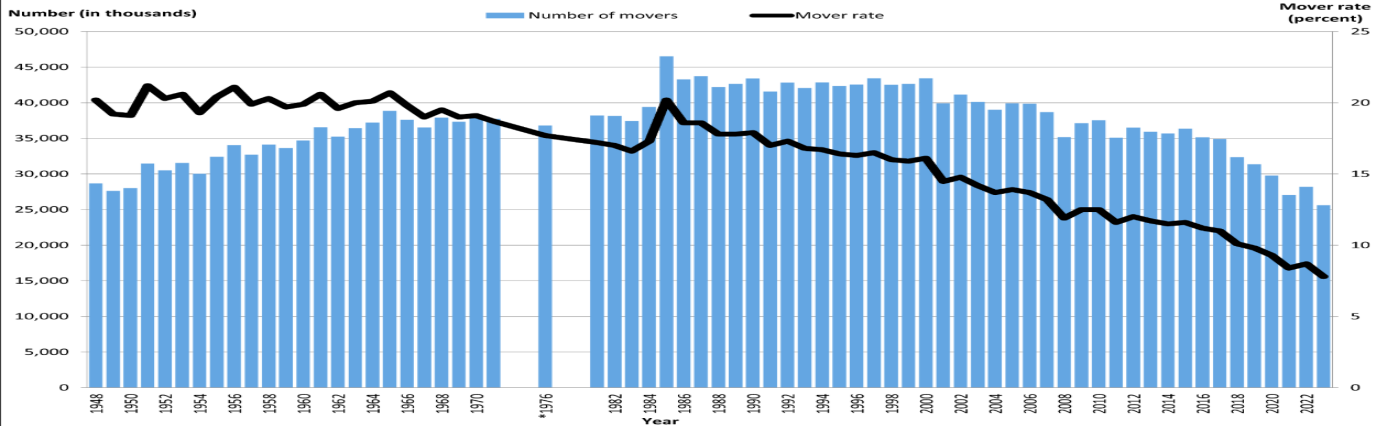
32%

of moves still driven by jobs — the #1 factor by far

8%

current annual mover rate — down from 20% in 1948

Figure A-1.1. Number of Movers and Mover Rate: 1948-2023



Notes: Data for the following years are: 2021 (2010 controls), 2020 (2010 controls), 2011 (2000 controls), 2010 (2000 controls), 2001 (SCHIP, 2000 controls), 1993 (1980 controls). * The migration question was asked differently between 1971 and 1980. Only 1971 and 1976 have a 1-year estimate comparable to all other years. Geographic Mobility User Notes: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/technical-documentation/user-notes/geographic-mobility-user-notes.html> Geographic Mobility Errata Notes: <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/migration/data/errata-notes.html> For more information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, refer to CPS ASEC technical documentation: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/technical-documentation/complete.html>. Percentages may be derived from numeric estimates rounded to the thousands place.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC) 1948-2023. Project No. P-7534374/Approval C8DRB-FY24-0423.

NOT A BLIP

The decline began in the 1970s, predates the 2008 recession, and has continued through every economic cycle since.

This is the ambient condition within which Alaska must operate.

Why People Stay — and Why That Is Becoming More True

THREE STRUCTURAL FORCES INCREASING ROOTEDNESS

Migration has become riskier

Greater economic insecurity means the promise of something better elsewhere is harder to trust. The safety net of a familiar place — family, community, local knowledge — has become more valuable, not less.

Alternatives to moving have increased

People increasingly adapt in place — absorbing disruptions without uprooting. Remote work decouples residence from employment. Staying has become a form of resilience, not resignation.

Constraints on moving have multiplied

Multi-earner households make moving a negotiation, not a decision. Population ageing deepens caregiving ties. Declining fertility shrinks the pool of highly mobile young adults.

FOUR ANCHORS THAT HOLD PEOPLE IN PLACE



Family ties

Ageing parents, a partner's career, children's schools. Leaving these is a real and often decisive cost.



Cost of moving

Financial and logistical costs fall unevenly — and for many households are simply too high to act on.



Information gaps

People move to places they already know. Social networks and prior connections shape destinations heavily.



Uncertainty

Will the new place actually deliver? Doubt keeps many in place even when the case for moving seems strong.

Staying is not inertia — it is a rational, active decision

Most people are already in a place that meets their needs. Migration happens when they are not — and when the gap becomes too wide to bridge.

Attachment to place is not a soft concept — it is one of the most powerful predictors of whether someone stays or goes.

Staying Is the New Normal

The longer a person remains in a place, the deeper their attachments become — to neighbours, institutions, landscapes, routines, memories. Staying makes staying more likely.

Place attachment is built, not given — through institutions that endure, schools that work, and years of shared experience that accumulate into genuine belonging. A community that invests in those conditions earns rootedness. One that does not will lose people at exactly the life stages that matter most.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ALASKA

The goal should not be to reverse a migration stream — it should be to build the conditions where staying becomes the **obvious, rational, and emotionally preferred choice** — year after year, life stage after life stage.

PART THREE

Taxes and Migration

The Most Overstated Factor in the Debate — and Why It Matters for Policy

WHY WE COVER IT

This topic dominates policy debates about Alaska out of all proportion to what the evidence shows. It is a distraction — but a persistent one that deserves a direct, evidence-based answer.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

Taxes don't appear in migration surveys even when directly asked. Housing costs alone outweigh tax savings by 3–4×. The rigorous research confirms: tax-driven migration is real but marginal.

Three lenses: what the general evidence shows, why place matters even for the wealthy, and what the low-tax narrative actually obscures.

Taxes Don't Appear — Even When Asked Directly

Current Population Survey, 1999–2025 (Pooled) — All Stated Reasons for Interstate Moves

JOB-RELATED

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| New job or job transfer | 17.0% |
| Closer to work / easier commute | 5.0% |
| Other job-related reasons | 5.8% |
| To look for work or lost job | 2.3% |
| Retired | 2.1% |

FAMILY-RELATED

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------|
| Other family reasons | 14.2% |
| To establish own household | 5.5% |
| Change in marital status | 4.5% |

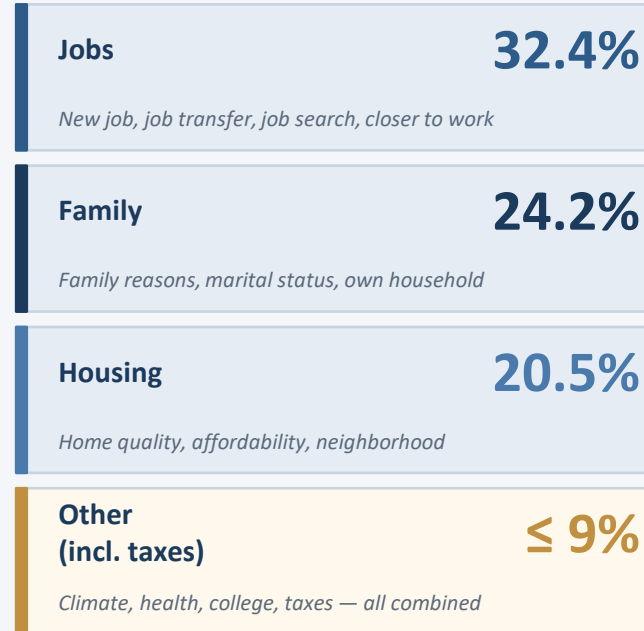
HOUSING-RELATED

| | |
|--|------|
| Wanted new or better home/apartment | 7.1% |
| Wanted to own home, not rent | 5.0% |
| Wanted better neighborhood/less crime | 3.5% |
| Wanted cheaper housing | 2.8% |
| Other housing / foreclosure | 2.1% |

OTHER REASONS ← taxes buried here (see →)

Climate, health, college, disaster, taxes: all combined ≤ 9%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1999–2025 (pooled). Note: Taxes have no category of their own — survey designers did not consider it worth listing separately.



Even If You Move for Taxes — Housing Costs Swamp the Savings

For a household earning \$75,000, the mortgage cost increase on moving typically exceeds tax savings by 2–4x

Move CA → TX

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------|
| Tax savings/yr: | −\$3,516 |
| Mortgage increase/yr: | −\$14,307 |
| Housing÷Tax ratio: | 4.1x |

Move NY → TX

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------|
| Tax savings/yr: | −\$3,645 |
| Mortgage increase/yr: | −\$11,319 |
| Housing÷Tax ratio: | 3.1x |

Move IL → TN

| | |
|-----------------------|----------|
| Tax savings/yr: | −\$2,890 |
| Mortgage increase/yr: | −\$7,400 |
| Housing÷Tax ratio: | 2.6x |

Move CT → SC

| | |
|-----------------------|----------|
| Tax savings/yr: | −\$2,210 |
| Mortgage increase/yr: | −\$5,800 |
| Housing÷Tax ratio: | 2.6x |

"Income tax" is often just a proxy for overall cost of living — and housing alone overwhelms any tax advantage.

Source: CBPP calculations using DC Office of the Chief Financial Officer data, c. 2018. IL→TN and CT→SC estimates calculated using same methodology.

Connecticut 1992: The Cleanest Test We Have

Went from no income tax to a 4.5% flat rate — with neighboring states as a perfect control group

Why This Is Such a Clean Test

- CT switched from zero to 4.5% flat tax overnight
- Neighboring states (MA, NY, RI) had similar profiles and didn't change rates — a perfect comparison group
- Researchers separated inflows and outflows, not just net
- *"If taxes tip the scale anywhere, it should be here"*

Effect of 1992 CT Income Tax on Net Migration

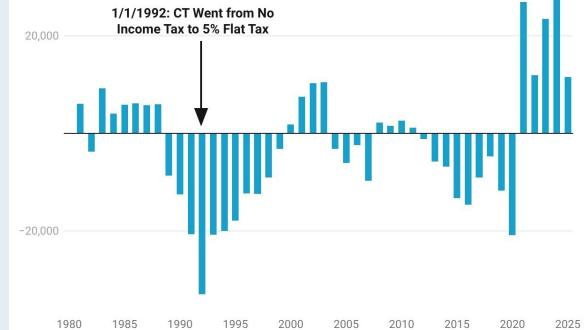


Chart: © Cooke Demographics, 2026 • Created with Datawrapper

Revenue increased. Fiscal stability improved.

Note: CT's subsequent fiscal and migration path was bumpy — which is precisely why it remains instructive. A tax increase in a low-tax state can ease fiscal instability and improve the conditions for migration, even if the transition is not smooth.

Even Millionaires Stay: The Power of Place

Young et al. (2016) — the most comprehensive study of millionaire migration ever conducted. The finding cuts against the tax-flight story and points to something more fundamental: place holds people, even when they can afford to leave.

Study Design

- Every \$1M+ tax return filed in the U.S., 1999–2011
- 3.7 million earners, 45 million tax returns
- State-of-the-art causal methods
- Tracks moves before & after tax-rate changes

Finding

"Millionaire tax flight is occurring, but only at the margins of statistical and socioeconomic significance."

A typical state: 1 tax rate increase = loss of 23 millionaires out of 9,000 (0.26%)

Alaska Application:

Alaska has approximately 750 households with AGI above \$1M. A 1% income tax, applying the same effect size, would cost roughly 2 of those households. Revenue gains would vastly outweigh the loss. Alaska's high earners are embedded — their wealth is tied to the state's industries, networks, and institutions.

| Study | Revenue Gained | Lost to Out-Migration | Revenue Retained |
|------------------|----------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| NJ (Young, 2011) | \$1B / year | \$17M / year | 98.3% |
| CA (Rauh, 2022) | \$5B / year | \$200M (one-time) | 95.8% |

The Bottom Line: Eight Findings from the Research

1

Housing costs dwarf taxes

Housing = 30–50% of income. Taxes = 7–12%. People move for mortgages, not marginal rates.

3

Massive counterflows undermine the story

50–90% of every high-to-low tax move is replaced by someone moving the other way.

5

Low-tax states lose people too

Alaska & Wyoming: net out-migration. New Hampshire loses net households to Maine.

7

Climate trumps taxes

Low-tax Indiana lost more residents to Florida than high-tax Wisconsin — people move for sun, not rates.

2

Jobs + family drive 68% of moves

Taxes don't appear in Census surveys — not even as a named category.

4

The Sunbelt shift was never a tax story

Sunbelt growth was driven by air conditioning, federal spending, cheap land, and regional investment — not tax rates.

6

Tax cuts didn't stop out-migration

Kansas (–29%), Ohio (–47%), New Mexico (–40%) all cut rates — departures barely moved.

8

High-tax states grow richer faster

CA, MA, MN all outperformed FL and TX on per-capita income growth 2010–2020.

PART FOUR

What the Evidence Demands

Findings, strategy, and the question that should organize the next decade

CONCLUSION

Not a Recruitment Problem — A Retention Problem

13

consecutive years

of net out-migration — the longest streak on record, not tied to a single event

34K

working-age residents

lost since 2013, as the 18–64 population fell from 483,403 to 449,171

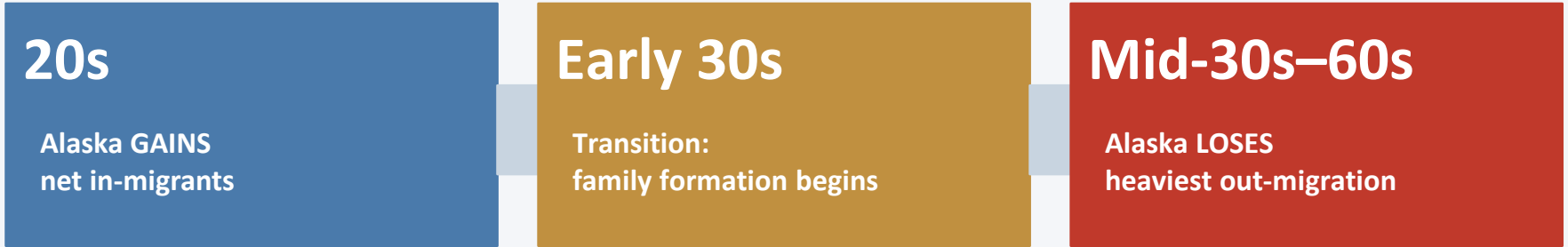
Last

in the nation

Alaska ranks last in net migration rate over 1 year, 5 years, and 10 years

Alaska gains people in their 20s and loses them in their 30s — precisely when family formation, home purchase, school enrollment, and civic commitment happen. This pattern is structural and consistent across every period studied. What we have not yet done is respond to it with equal consistency and structure.

Migration Decisions Cluster at Predictable Life Moments



What the research says people need at the family-formation stage:

- Housing they can afford**
New construction stuck below 2,000 units/year since 2008; affordability at historic worst in 2024
- Stable public services**
Budget-driven cuts are active push factors for exactly the adults Alaska most needs
- Schools that work**
The primary reason families choose — or leave — a community
- Economic opportunity**
Jobs, wages, and a sense that staying makes sense professionally and financially

Why the Family-Formation Stage Is the Highest Stakes



They stay much longer

Adults who stay through family formation are rooted by mortgages, schools, relationships, and community investment — they don't leave on short notice.



They build the social fabric

They fill the tax base, enroll children who become the next generation's workforce, coach teams, run for school board — they are the connective tissue of a functioning community.



They anchor the next wave

Children raised in Alaska are far more likely to return as adults. Each retained family multiplies its long-run contribution to Alaska's population.



The pipeline is nearly empty

In 1990: ~7,100 Alaskans turning 18, ~2,100 turning 65. By 2024 those numbers have converged — ~9,500 entering adulthood, ~9,000 entering retirement in the same year.

Note: The economic contribution of married couples with children — through housing, education spending, civic engagement, and long-term tax base — typically exceeds "creative class" singles in long-run community stability.

What a Retention Strategy Actually Looks Like

Focus + Target + Invest

- Focus on family-formation adults (roughly ages 28–42) in specific regions and sectors — not a statewide marketing campaign
- Housing supply is the linchpin: construction stuck below 2,000 units/year since 2008, affordability at historic worst in 2024
- Invest in the conditions that make staying rational: K–12 schools, childcare and pre-K, public safety, healthcare cost, post-secondary pathways
- ISER research identifies the levers: immigration pathways, childcare, education investment, and attractive lifestyle infrastructure
- This is not a new idea — some cities are beginning to try it; Alaska has an advantage in data and specificity

Boise: An Emerging Model

Among the first US cities to explicitly treat family retention as economic policy — 2026 Youth Roadmap, childcare as infrastructure, family-centric zoning, free transit for under-18s. Early days, but worth watching.

No State Has Done This

No state has a true, coherent migration retention policy. Nearly all attention goes to attraction — marketing, recruitment, incentives — rather than the conditions that make people stay. Alaska can be the first.

Fiscal Instability Is Itself a Migration Deterrent

"Harder choices lie ahead... Until we act, the uncertainty will continue to dampen the state's economy... policy uncertainty costs the state between \$200 million and \$600 million a year in private investment."

— Alaska Dept. of Labor & Workforce Development, seven years ago. The structural gap remains unresolved.

Uncertainty as push factor

People making long-horizon decisions — buy a house, start a business, raise a family — require a reasonable expectation of stability. Unresolved fiscal questions undermine that calculation.

Service cuts as push factor

Budget-driven cuts to schools, public safety, and agency services are active deterrents for mid-career professionals and families — exactly the people Alaska most needs to retain.

The low-tax trap

Tax cuts in Kansas, Ohio, and New Mexico didn't stop population loss — they just cut the services that make staying worthwhile. Alaska and Wyoming: no income tax, persistent net out-migration.

Resolving long-standing fiscal questions is not just budget policy — it is migration policy.

CONCLUSION

The question that should organize the next decade of demographic policy:

"How do we become a place where the right people, at the right stage of life, find it rational — and meaningful — to stay?"

Not: "How do we attract more people?"

- Alaska has unusually rich, agency-level data on who is leaving, when, from where, and why
- No state has built a true retention policy — Alaska can be the first
- The data points the way. What remains is the coalition and the will to act on it

So — What Does This Mean for Alaska?

Short-Term Impact

- No meaningful change in migration patterns
- Any out-migration effect is statistically negligible
- Revenue gained vastly exceeds revenue lost to the handful who leave
- CT precedent: 600 out of 3.5M — and revenue increased

Long-Term Opportunity

- Tax revenue invested in public goods actually improves migration outcomes
- What people move for: jobs, safety, schools, infrastructure
- High-tax states with strong services attract and retain more high-earners over time
- "Elites are embedded": Alaska's high earners built their careers, networks, and wealth here — place matters profoundly to them

The Real Risk of Inaction

- Fiscal instability is itself a migration deterrent
- Underfunded services — schools, safety, infrastructure — drive people away
- Low-tax states with weak services still lose population (Alaska, Wyoming)
- Tax cuts in Kansas, Ohio, NM didn't stop departures — they just cut services

01. Economic Opportunity

New jobs and job transfers account for nearly a third of all moves — but the category is more nuanced than it appears.

Reasons for Moving between States in Last 12 Months

Current Population Survey, 1999-2025, Pooled

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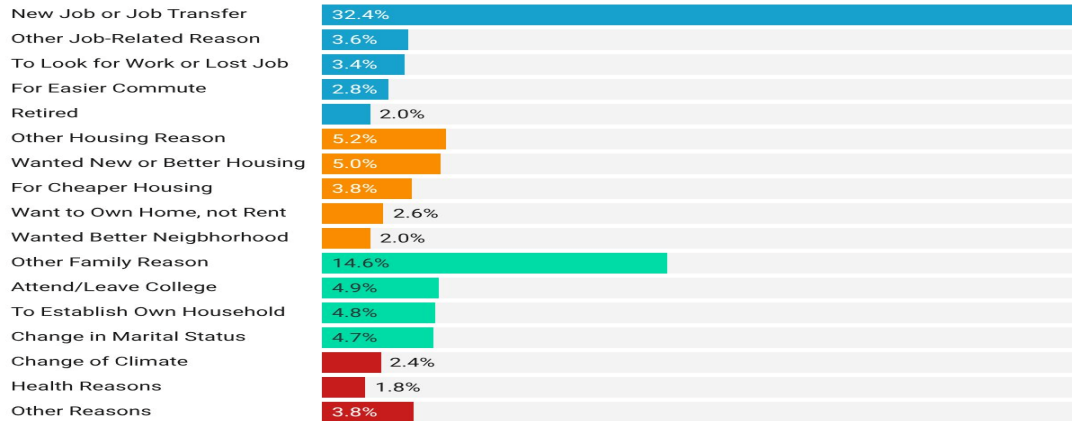


Chart: © Cooke Demographics, 2026 • Created with Datawrapper

Key Insights

- 32% cite new job or job transfer — the single largest reason
- But another 9% of job-related moves are more complex: easier commute, job search, unemployment
- ~300,000 employer-assisted interstate moves per year — possibly 16% of all moves or 50% of job-related moves
- Migration research rarely thinks in terms of "forced" moves in developed countries — but employer decisions shape where people go

02. Housing

This is for interstate moves — if we looked at local moves, housing would be much higher. Lower than you might expect given current emphasis on housing costs and housing lock-in.

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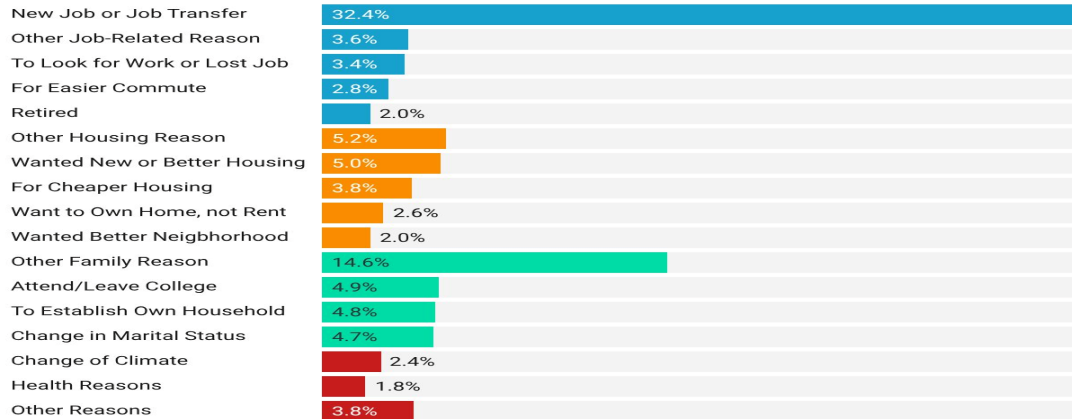


Chart: © Cooke Demographics, 2026 - Created with Datawrapper

What "Housing" Captures

- New or better housing: 5.0%
- Cheaper housing: 3.8%
- Want to own, not rent: 2.6%
- Better neighborhood: 2.0%
- Other housing reasons: 5.2%

This wraps up the "American Dream" of homeownership, upgrading, and moving to better neighborhoods — but notice it accounts for less than 1 in 5 interstate moves

03. Quality of Life: Schools, Safety, Environment, Community

People move toward places that fit how they want to live — and this often means accepting trade-offs that defy pure economic logic.

Schools, environment, safety, community, and climate draw people toward places that fit how they want to live.

But not all trade-offs are economic. People accept salaries that don't fully cover the cost of living in San Francisco or Miami Beach because proximity to the ocean is worth the financial strain. Families choose modest incomes in Boulder or Bend because the mountains are not negotiable. These are not failures of calculation — they are expressions of how deeply the value people attach to place resists being reduced to a spreadsheet.