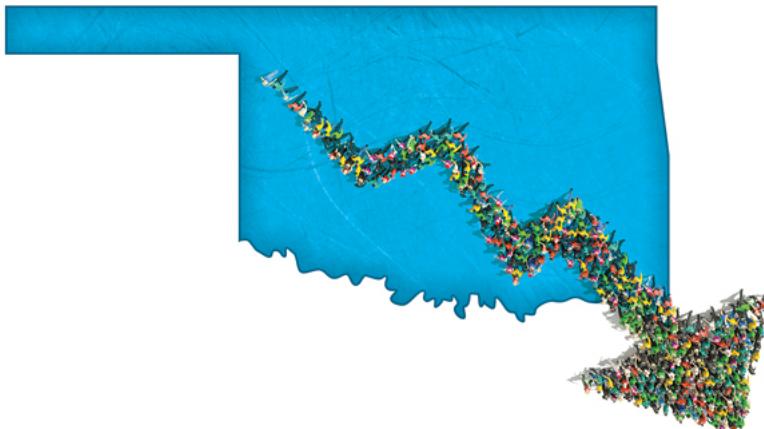


Report points to an Oklahoma exodus

By: Steve Metzer The Journal Record ⚒ April 9, 2019 0



(Graphic by Bryan M. Richter)

OKLAHOMA CITY – More people have moved out of Oklahoma in recent years than have moved in from other states, an indication of better job prospects in other parts of the country.

The troubling shift has been noted especially among people of prime working age and with college educations, according to Chad Wilkerson, an economist and vice president at the Oklahoma City branch of the Federal Reserve Bank in Kansas

City. Wilkerson and research assistant Courtney Shupert reported on the trend in the latest issue of *Oklahoma Economist*. They found that declines were most notable in rural parts of the state, especially in western Oklahoma.

The state's metro areas continue to grow in population because of international immigration and higher birth versus death rates, the researchers found. But the metro growth rate since 2016 has declined to its lowest level since 1990, they added.

"We focus on identifying the who and where of this outflow of people in recent years, with the who being prime-aged workers and college graduates and the where being mostly western Oklahoma and indeed all areas outside of the Oklahoma City metro, although even OKC had as many people move out as move in during 2017, for the first time in a long time," Wilkerson said in an email.

According to Eric Long, a research economist at the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber, the Oklahoma City area has averaged a 1.5% annual growth rate since 2005, though the rate dipped to 0.8% in 2016 and 2017. Growth is anticipated to rebound to 1.4% in 2019. The multicounty OKC metro area has added nearly 250,000 people since 2005, he said.

According to a Tulsa Regional Chamber report, that city's multicounty metro area has added about 131,000 people since 2000.

As a whole, the trend in Oklahoma since 2016 has been a reversal of what was experienced from 2005 to 2015, when the state attracted more new U.S. residents each year than it lost. Wilkerson and Shupert reported that in the last three years even in metro areas people 25 to 34 have been more likely to move out than to move in. They attributed that to fewer jobs connected to the oil and gas industry.

As the state's economy improves, it will likely begin to attract more new residents again from other states, but the *Oklahoma Economist* article's authors project that growth will continue to lag in rural areas.

"Residents of some geographic areas and in some education categories have had longer-term out-migration trends," they report. "In particular, much of western Oklahoma has seen population losses since 1990, (and) even prior to the state's economic recession in 2015-16, Oklahoma already was losing more college graduates than it was gaining."

Retaining and attracting younger people and college graduates should be a primary goal of local leaders and state policymakers, Wilkerson said.

In Lawton, Brenda Spencer-Ragland, president of the Lawton Fort Sill Chamber of Commerce, said local leaders recognize the difficult challenges but feel that quality of life and other factors, like good schools and health care, play in the city's favor.

"Quality of life is an important element of retention of our residents," she said. "(And) we stand firm in our commitment to grow opportunities for our residents, with a specific focus on high-tech jobs."

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