Hawaii's Changing Economy

Report: Hawai‘i’s Population Has Been Rebounding Thanks To Locals Returning Home

A University of Hawai‘i economist says the data belies common beliefs about population trends.

By Stewart Yerton / April 2, 2025

The state’s years long population decline turned a corner in 2023, boosted by a net gain in Hawai‘i-born residents returning home, a University of Hawai‘i economist reported on Wednesday.

The report based on census data shows more people moved to Hawai‘i from the U.S. mainland than moved away from the islands in 2023. It's a marked reversal of a trend that began in 2018.

But what's more notable are the people who the report says drove the change: among them, Hawai‘i-born adults in their prime working and child-bearing years.

Economists, demographers and sociologists for years have expressed concerns not just because of Hawai‘i's multiyear quantitative population drop. The prevailing narrative is that the bulk of those leaving are the people who could most drive economic productivity and generate tax revenue needed to support the state's growing population of seniors.

But the report's author, University of Hawai‘i Economic Research Organization economist JoonYup Park, said the data belies that narrative.

He's familiar with the story of young people leaving the islands for greater opportunity or due to the high cost of living. The data, he said, suggests those who are leaving are 18 to 24 years old, including college students.

"Whereas people who are in their prime working age — so those between 25 and 44 — we actually see more people coming into the islands than people in the same age group leaving the islands," Park said, noting that's at least what the census data shows.

Park's study rebuts another prevailing theme: that younger people from Hawai‘i are leaving, never to return, to be replaced by people from elsewhere. The report shows that Hawai‘i has had a net gain in Hawai‘i-born residents since 2021. A large share are those in the 24 to 44 age range.

That rings true to Kevin Mukai, who now works as chief operating officer of Hohonu, which creates systems to monitor coastal flooding for cities like Boston and Annapolis, Maryland.

Born and raised in Honolulu, Mukai went to Punahou School and went on to earn an engineering degree from the University of Southern California. He stayed in Los Angeles after graduation and worked with startups including the Bird scooter company.

Working from Honolulu during the pandemic, Mukai met his wife, Katie Lee, who was also back home working remotely for Amazon. The pandemic had an enormous impact, Mukai said.

"For a lot of us who were raised here, it was the first time we could spend real time back home while still staying connected to our careers on the mainland," he said in an email. "Being here for an extended stretch during that time reminded me of all the things that make Hawai‘i special — things that are easy to miss when you’re only visiting.”

The couple eventually moved back to the mainland, to Seattle, but returned to Honolulu in February. Lee landed a job with a venture capital fund that supports remote work from Hawai‘i.

“Post-Covid, we’ve seen more friends either move back or seriously consider it,” Mukai said. “Most of them grew up here or have close ties, and they’re making real sacrifices to come back. Not necessarily just for the beaches/weather, but for the culture, the people, and a deeper sense of community.”

Skeptic Questions Report’s Findings

But not everyone is convinced, including Karl Eschbach, a retired university demographer who served as the Texas State Demographer.

Now living in Hilo, Eschbach digs into population data in his free time. He recently found data showing the Big Island is suffering what’s known as a “natural decrease” in population, in which more people are dying than being born.

Eschbach blamed the natural decrease in part on older people and retirees moving to the island, while younger adults are moving away and not coming back — ideas that Park's report rebuts. Eschbach says Park lacks sufficient data to support some of his findings.

Park's report includes a three-paragraph disclaimer acknowledging the report is based on data subject to large margins of error, especially in Hawai'i. But Eschbach said that's not enough given some of the post's attention-grabbing findings.

"It says it's a non-refereed blog post, and I'd have to agree with that," Eschbach said. "It says some provocative things that might go past the data."

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