

Population Growth in the Chattanooga Region, 2020-2025

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Summary

This paper describes the latest population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau for the United States, the region surrounding Chattanooga, and the Chattanooga metro area. The population of the Chattanooga metro area grew at more than twice the national rate between 2020 and 2025, and should exceed 600,000 in the late summer of 2026. The main source of this growth was net migration from other areas of the country. As a group, the metro area's three Tennessee counties grew by 6.6 percent, with a 5 percent rate of domestic migration. The three Georgia counties grew by only 2.8 percent, but had a 4.5 percent rate of domestic migration. International migration was the main source of population growth for the country as a whole, but was a relatively minor factor in the Chattanooga region. Even so, the relatively small foreign-born population in the Chattanooga metro area grew by about 25 percent.

Introduction

The U.S. Census Bureau recently released its latest estimates of county-level population growth for the years since the most recent decennial census. In addition to estimates of population levels and changes, the data provides estimates of the broad components of the changes: natural change through births and deaths, international migration, and domestic migration. These components can reveal a lot about why an area is growing or shrinking. In particular, domestic migration can reveal how relatively attractive or unattractive an area is to live and work. And natural change is closely related to the age profile of an area. As we now have five years of data, it is worth looking at how Chattanooga and its wider region have been affected by national, regional, and local population trends. Our analysis looks first at the country as a whole and its four broad regions, then zooms in on the states, the metro areas relatively close to Chattanooga, and the 16-county region centered upon the city of Chattanooga and Hamilton County.

As shown by Figure 1 and reported in Table 1, the Census Bureau estimates that the population of the United States rose from 331.5 million on April 1, 2020, to 341.8 million on July 1, 2025, a 3.1 percent increase.ⁱ More than 80 percent of this increase was due to international migration, which is estimated to have added 8.3 million people on net. Natural population change—births minus deaths—accounted for about 1.9 million more people, or just less than 20 percent of the total increase. The flatter portions of Figure 1 indicate how changes in immigration affected population growth. Immigration nearly ground to a halt between 2020 and 2021 because of the COVID pandemic. Also, following the tightening of the border beginning toward the end of the Biden administration, and the increase in immigration enforcement at the start of the Trump administration, immigration and population growth slowed into 2025.

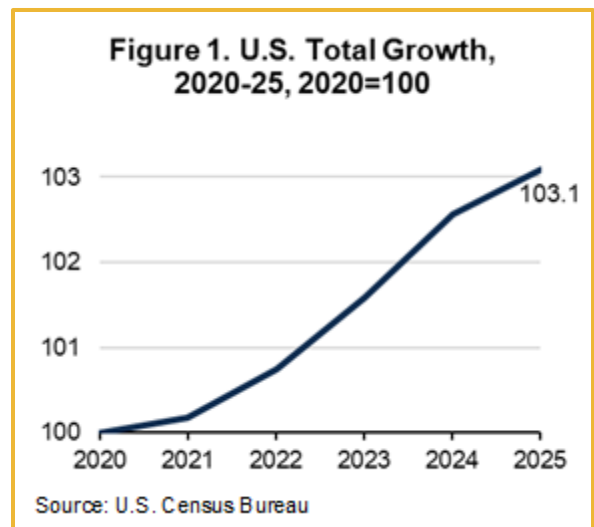


Table 1 also shows how population change and its components differed across the Census Bureau's four broad regions.ⁱⁱ Because of a high rate of domestic out-migration, the Northeast barely grew even though it had the highest rate of international migration. The South, on the other hand, had almost as much international migration as the Northeast, but also saw a large influx of people from the rest of the country. As a result, the South accounted for 73.5 percent of the country's population growth, nearly double its share

Table 1. Estimated Population and Components of Population Change, United States and Regions

Region	Total Population		Total Population Change		Natural Change		Net Domestic Migration		Net International Migration	
	4/1/2020	7/1/2025	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
United States	331,516,113	341,784,857	10,268,744	3.1	1,939,907	0.6			8,328,837	2.5
Northeast	57,617,560	58,042,054	424,494	0.7	158,161	0.3	-1,504,304	-2.6	1,792,061	3.1
Midwest	68,999,462	69,762,666	763,204	1.1	110,704	0.2	-512,765	-0.7	1,154,999	1.7
South	126,281,605	133,833,983	7,552,378	6.0	783,438	0.6	3,157,525	2.5	3,584,350	2.8
West	78,617,486	80,146,154	1,528,668	1.9	887,604	1.1	-1,140,456	-1.5	1,797,427	2.3

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

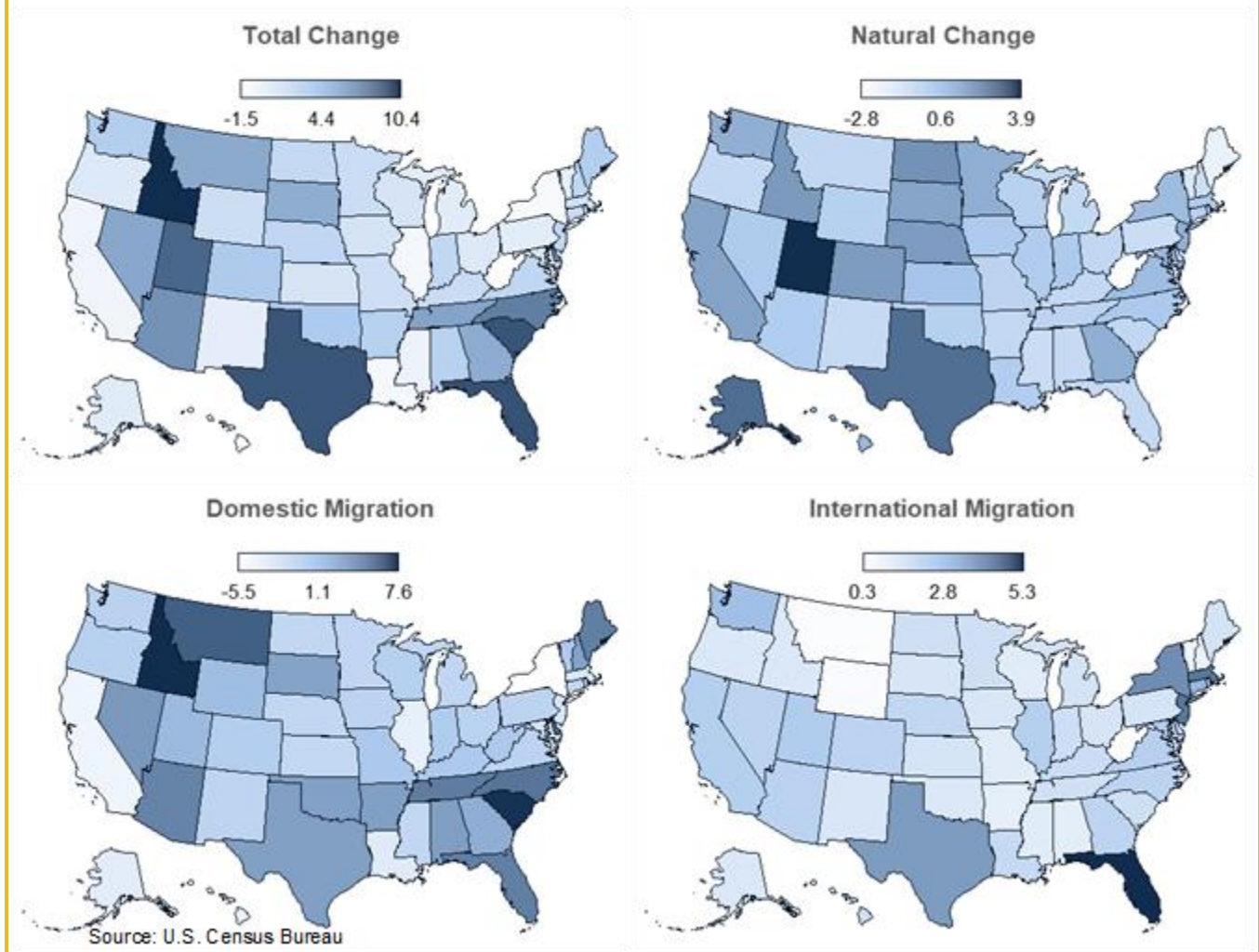
of the country’s 2020 population. Even the West languished relative to the South: It lost 1.5 percent of its population to other regions and grew by only 1.9 percent despite strong natural growth and an average international migration rate.

States and the District of Columbia

There was substantial variation in population growth across states within the four regions. As Figure 2 shows, each region had at least one of the seven states that saw its population decrease over the period, and the South had three of them (See the Appendix for the data for all of the states). Hawaii and West Virginia lost 1.5 percent of their populations; New York, Louisiana, and Illinois each lost between 0.8 and 1 percent; and California and Mississippi lost 0.5 and 0.2 percent, respectively. The twelve fastest-growing states were either in the South or the West. Idaho’s population increased by 10.4 percent while the populations of Florida, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah increased by more than 8 percent each. South Dakota, with 5.5 percent population growth, was the fastest growing state outside of the South and West. As for the Chattanooga-region states, Tennessee and Georgia were the 9th and 12th fastest growing while Alabama’s population grew just above average, putting it in 19th place.

Differences across states in natural population growth were largely a product of age: Lower median ages tend to mean more births than deaths. The five youngest states (Utah, Alaska, Texas, D.C., and North Dakota) saw the largest natural population growth, while the five oldest states (Maine, Vermont, West Virginia, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania) saw the largest natural population losses.ⁱⁱⁱ Tennessee and Alabama are both older than average, so their natural population changes were negative. Georgia, on the other hand, is younger than average and saw positive natural population growth.

As already mentioned, domestic migration was the source for most of the population growth in the South. South Carolina, Delaware, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Florida were all among the top ten states in their

Figure 2. States' Population Changes and Their Components: Percentage Changes, 2020-25

rates of domestic migration. In terms of the volume of domestic migration, Florida and Texas were well above the rest. Each netted more than 800 thousand people from the rest of the country. The Carolinas, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama were all among the top 8 recipients of domestic migrants. Arizona and Idaho were the only members of the top 10 not in the South. At the other extreme were California and New York, which each lost more than a million people to other states. Illinois, New Jersey, and Massachusetts rounded out the bottom five. In terms of rates of domestic migration, those five states plus D.C., Hawaii, Alaska, Louisiana, and Maryland were the bottom ten. These states were dramatically different from the others. Maryland was the 10th worst state by this criterion, losing 2.2 percent of its population to other states. The 11th worst state, Rhode Island, lost just 0.9 percent of its population this way.

Twelve states had above-average rates of international migration, with Florida, New Jersey, Massachusetts, D.C., New York, and Texas leading the way with rates of 3.5 percent or higher. In terms of the volume of

international migration, four states--Florida, Texas, California, and New York—took in at least 750 thousand international immigrants and accounted for just under half of the total for the country. Georgia stood out among the states in Chattanooga’s region. It netted 235 thousand international immigrants, which contributed 2.2 percent to the state’s population growth. Whereas Georgia had the 8th highest rate of international immigration, Tennessee had the 29th highest and Alabama had the 7th lowest.

Regional Metro Areas

Figure 3 illustrates the estimated population growth for the Chattanooga Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and the eleven nearest MSAs in Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia. The first row includes the four MSAs in Tennessee, the second row includes four of the five MSAs in Alabama, and the third row includes the Huntsville MSA and the region’s three MSAs in Georgia. Note that (1) All four of the Tennessee MSAs grew faster than the country as a whole; (2) except for Huntsville, the Alabama MSAs barely grew at all; (3) the Atlanta MSA’s growth was on par with the Tennessee MSAs whereas the other two MSAs in Georgia more slowly than the rest of the country; and (4) the Huntsville MSA saw remarkable growth over a short period of time, experiencing the 18th highest rate of population growth among the country’s 387 MSAs.

The details of the MSAs’ population growth and its components are provided by Table 2. Chattanooga saw mild population loss through natural change as it had about 2,700 fewer births than deaths, which is not

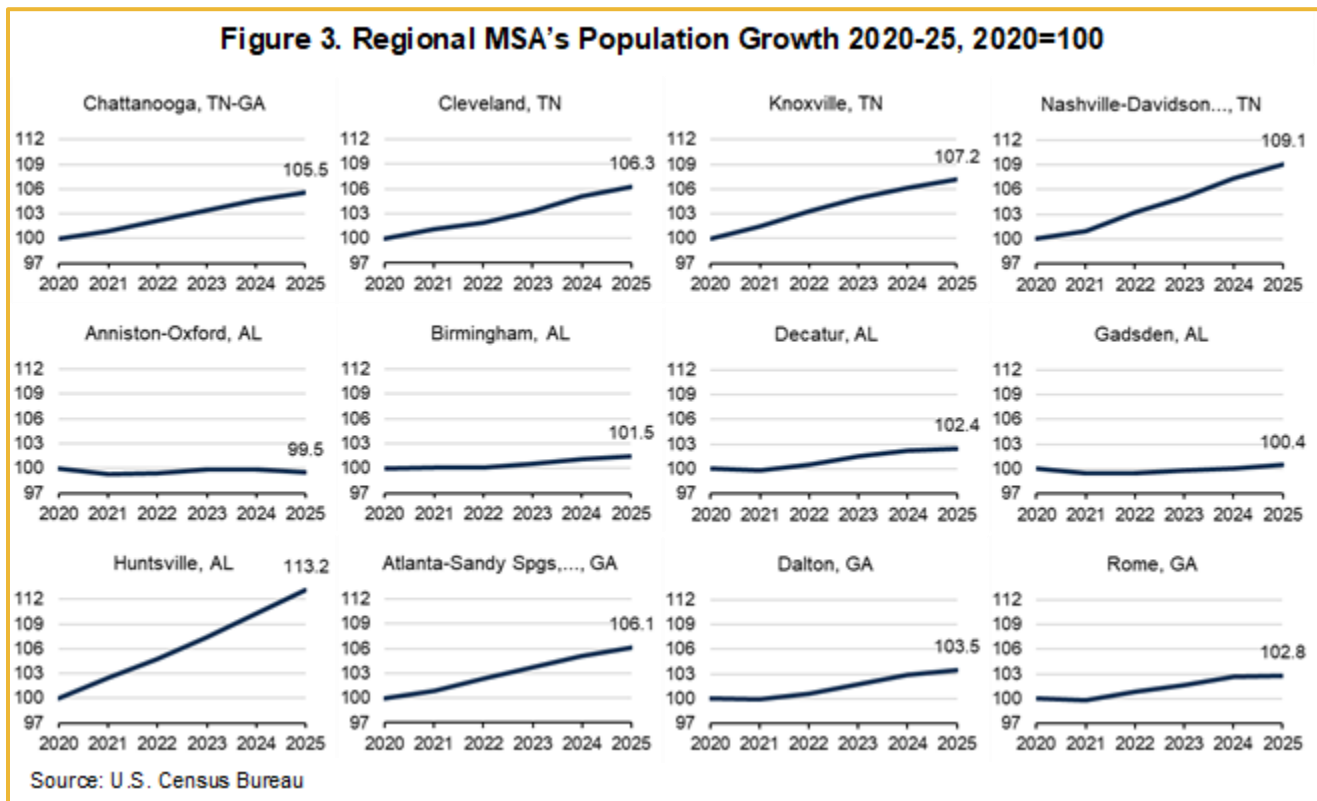


Table 2. Estimated Population and Components of Population Change, Regional MSAs

Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)	Total Population		Total Population Change		Natural Change		Net Domestic Migration		Net International Migration	
	4/1/2020	7/1/2025	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Chattanooga, TN-GA	563,291	594,530	31,239	5.5	-2,732	-0.5	26,881	4.8	6,465	1.1
Cleveland, TN	126,156	134,057	7,901	6.3	-1,769	-1.4	7,671	6.1	1,928	1.5
Knoxville, TN	903,474	968,137	64,663	7.2	-11,934	-1.3	66,133	7.3	9,526	1.1
Nashville, TN	2,014,440	2,197,416	182,976	9.1	36,185	1.8	89,086	4.4	57,804	2.9
Anniston, AL	116,439	115,834	-605	-0.5	-2,493	-2.1	1,497	1.3	334	0.3
Birmingham, AL	1,180,632	1,197,766	17,134	1.5	-3,056	-0.3	6,005	0.5	13,986	1.2
Decatur, AL	156,510	160,326	3,816	2.4	-1,390	-0.9	3,432	2.2	1,669	1.1
Gadsden, AL	103,423	103,886	463	0.4	-2,508	-2.4	2,308	2.2	588	0.6
Huntsville, AL	491,721	556,444	64,723	13.2	3,411	0.7	53,903	11.0	7,221	1.5
Atlanta, GA	6,106,816	6,482,182	375,366	6.1	118,291	1.9	74,640	1.2	181,339	3.0
Dalton, GA	142,839	147,819	4,980	3.5	781	0.5	1,784	1.2	2,353	1.6

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

surprising given that the area's median age is just above 40, more than a year higher than the national median age. For the other MSAs in the region, natural population change was mostly negative, with Anniston and Gadsden the most prominent in this regard. Nashville and Atlanta, on the other hand, saw their population grow significantly through natural means.

The biggest difference between the Tennessee MSAs and the MSAs in the other two states was the influx of domestic migrants. Chattanooga is estimated to have netted almost 27,000 people from the rest of the country, which meant a domestic migration rate higher than Nashville's but lower than Cleveland's and Knoxville's. Note also that the main source of Huntsville's very high growth was domestic migration, which accounted for more than 80 percent of its additional people. Domestic migration into Atlanta, on the other hand, was fairly weak after decades of it being among the top destinations in the South. Among the regional MSAs, its domestic migration rate was only higher than Birmingham's.

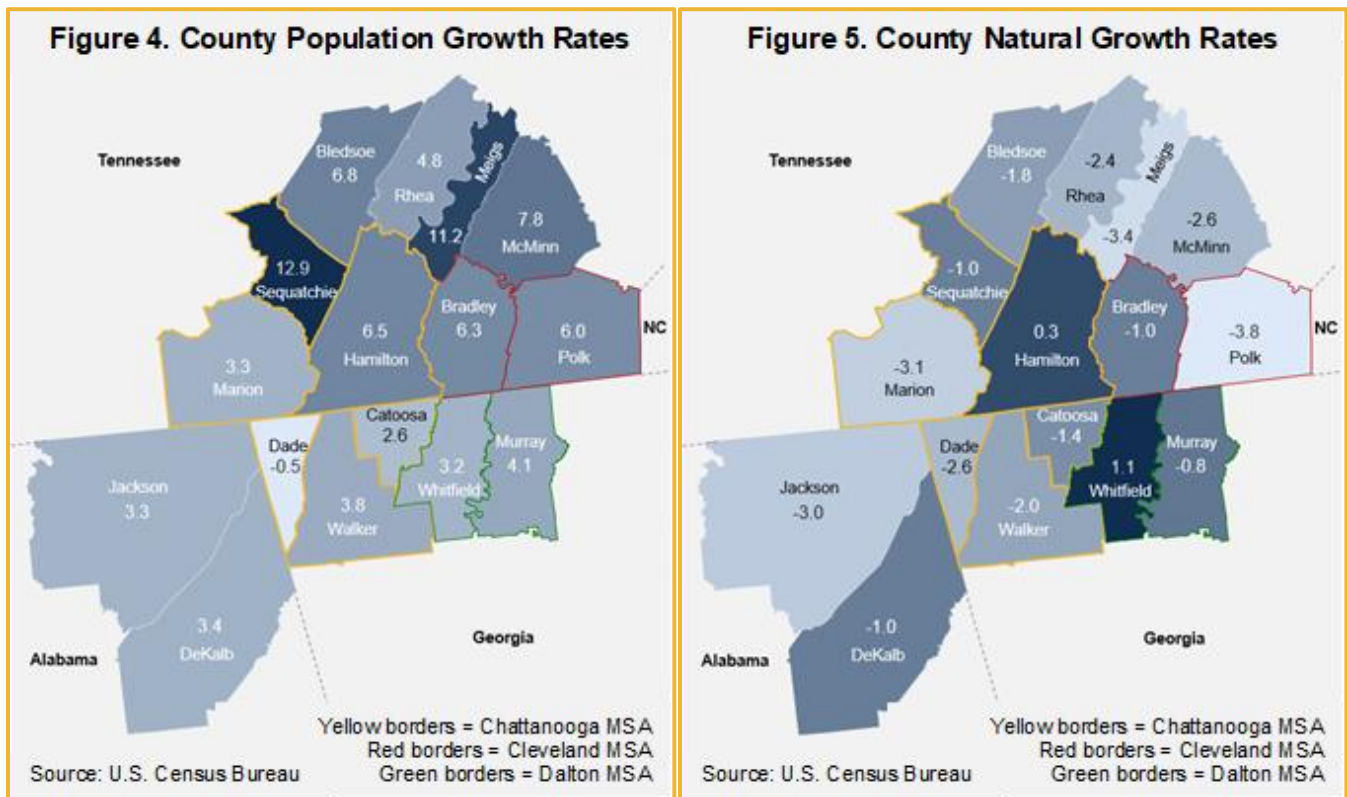
International immigration has not been a very large part of population growth in the Chattanooga MSA. The 6,500 or so new residents due to international migration accounted for a population increase of about a 1.1 percent. Even so, given that the Chattanooga MSA's foreign born population was about 23 to 25 thousand in 2020, this represents a significant increase of maybe 25 percent in the number of foreign born residents.^{iv} Nashville and Atlanta were the only two of the region's MSAs for which international migration contributed above-average amounts to population growth.

Regional Counties

The new data allow us to zoom in at the county level to reveal the differences in population growth and its components in the region surrounding Chattanooga. Figures 4-6 and Table 3 show these differences for the 16 counties of the Greater Chattanooga region. The region includes nine counties in Tennessee, two in Alabama, and five in Georgia. There are three MSAs in the region: Chattanooga, TN-GA; Cleveland, TN, and Dalton, GA. In the figures, the borders of counties in the MSAs are color-coded.

The region is populated by more than 1.1 million people, about 35 percent of whom live in Hamilton County, the location of the city of Chattanooga. Nearly 20 percent of the region’s people live in either Bradley or Whitfield counties, the locations of Cleveland, TN, and Dalton, GA, respectively. The region’s population is 5.3 percent higher than it was in 2020, primarily due to a domestic migration rate of 4.9 percent. The region’s population growth rate exceeded that of the nation, but was lower than the rest of the South’s.

Hamilton County is estimated to have seen a 6.5 percent increase in its population, which is more than twice the national growth rate and a half point above the South’s. Most of the region’s counties in Tennessee grew by at least as much as Hamilton did. As illustrated by Figure 4, only two of the counties in the region—



Catoosa and Dade—had population growth rates below the national average. Further, except for Marion and Rhea, every Tennessee county in the region grew by more than the average for the South, and Meigs and Sequatchie counties grew at double-digit rates. Typical for the South, every county in the region except for Hamilton and Whitfield had negative natural population growth (Figure 5). Natural growth was below negative 2.0 percent for eight of the counties.

Figure 6 illustrates the counties’ domestic migration rates, and it is very similar to Figure 4. That is, the main driver of the counties’ population growth was domestic migration, particularly the very strong growth seen by the regions’ outer ring of counties from Sequatchie to Polk in Tennessee. Notably, the core counties with the largest cities—Hamilton, Bradley, and Whitfield—were not especially prominent in their domestic migration rates, particularly Whitfield. These counties were the main recipients of international migration.

These figures reveal a significant imbalance among the six counties of the Chattanooga MSA, most notably by state. As a group, the three Tennessee counties grew by 6.6 percent between 2020 and 2025, with no natural growth, but with a 5 percent rate of domestic migration and a 1.5 percent rate of international migration. The three Georgia counties grew by 2.8 percent, with a -1.8 rate of natural growth, a 4.5 percent rate of domestic migration, and very little international migration.

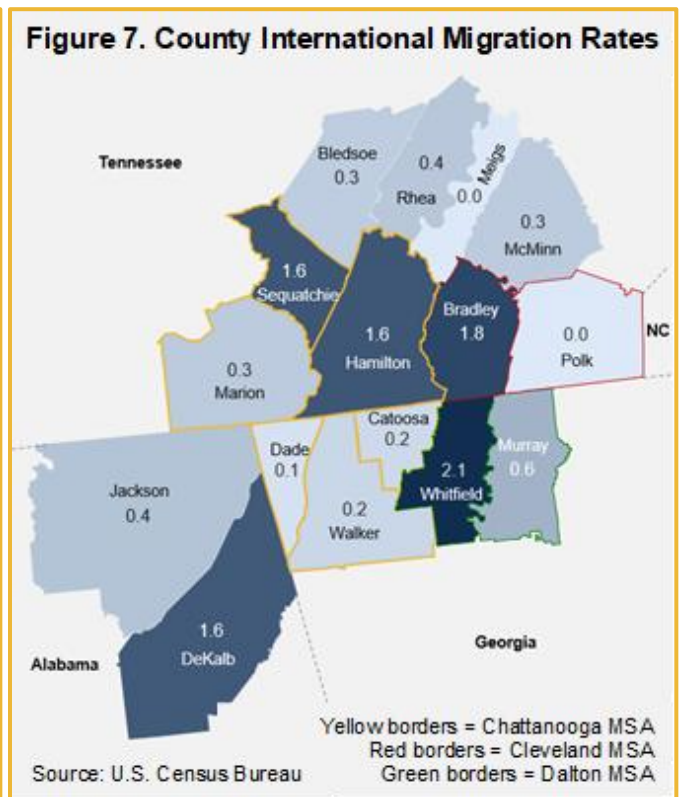
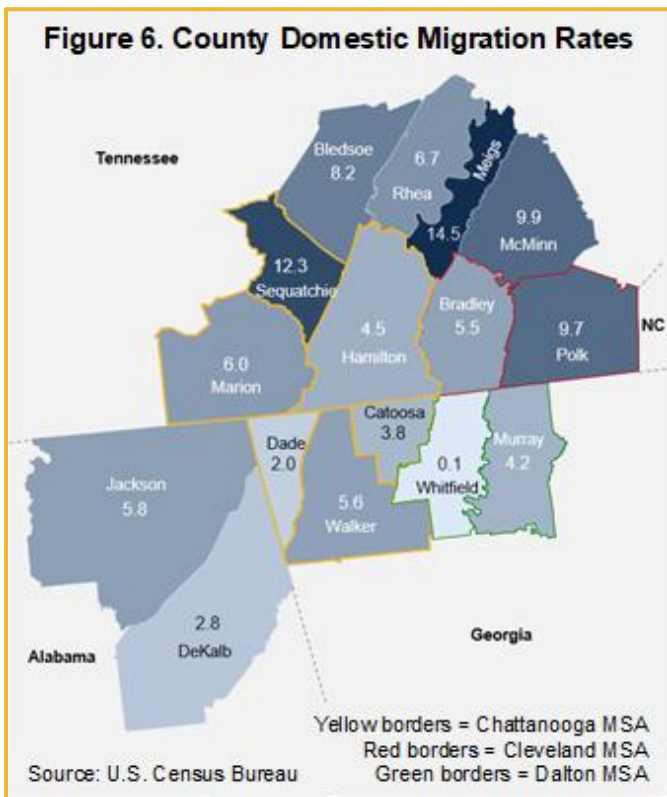


Table 3. Estimated Population and Components of Population Change, Regional Counties

County	Total Population		Total Population Change		Natural Change		Net Domestic Migration		Net International Migration	
	4/1/2020	7/1/2025	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Bledsoe, TN	14,907	15,920	1,013	6.8	-272	-1.8	1,226	8.2	45	0.3
Bradley, TN	108,620	115,465	6,845	6.3	-1,110	-1.0	5,972	5.5	1,930	1.8
Hamilton, TN	366,840	390,833	23,993	6.5	1,101	0.3	16,480	4.5	5,879	1.6
Marion, TN	28,841	29,804	963	3.3	-893	-3.1	1,728	6.0	93	0.3
McMinn, TN	53,272	57,404	4,132	7.8	-1,364	-2.6	5,263	9.9	168	0.3
Meigs, TN	12,756	14,186	1,430	11.2	-436	-3.4	1,848	14.5	-1	0.0
Polk, TN	17,536	18,592	1,056	6.0	-659	-3.8	1,699	9.7	-2	0.0
Rhea, TN	33,235	34,844	1,609	4.8	-808	-2.4	2,240	6.7	122	0.4
Sequatchie, TN	15,826	17,861	2,035	12.9	-165	-1.0	1,948	12.3	254	1.6
DeKalb, AL	71,620	74,085	2,465	3.4	-706	-1.0	2,017	2.8	1,122	1.6
Jackson, AL	52,569	54,281	1,712	3.3	-1,561	-3.0	3,027	5.8	211	0.4
Catoosa, GA	67,879	69,628	1,749	2.6	-980	-1.4	2,584	3.8	102	0.2
Dade, GA	16,240	16,154	-86	-0.5	-418	-2.6	326	2.0	10	0.1
Murray, GA	39,969	41,607	1,638	4.1	-327	-0.8	1,671	4.2	236	0.6
Walker, GA	67,665	70,250	2,585	3.8	-1,377	-2.0	3,815	5.6	127	0.2
Whitfield, GA	102,870	106,212	3,342	3.2	1,108	1.1	113	0.1	2,117	2.1
Region Total	1,070,645	1,127,126	56,481	5.3	-8,867	-0.8	52,935	4.9	12,413	1.2

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Conclusions

The population of the six-county Chattanooga MSA is estimated by the Census Bureau to have grown by 5.5 percent between April 1, 2020, and July 1, 2025, to nearly 595,000. At the most recent annual rate of growth, the MSA's population should cross the 600,000 threshold sometime in the late summer of 2026. This five-year period saw significant international migration into the United States that resulted in about a 25 percent increase in the size of the foreign-born population in the Chattanooga MSA. Even so, it was domestic migration from other parts of the United States rather than international migration that was the driving force of local population growth. About 26,900 of the additional 31,200 or so people in the MSA were because of net migration of people from the rest of the country. The Chattanooga MSA's rate of population growth, as well as the sources of that growth, were fairly typical for the South and, more specifically, the nearby metro areas in central and eastern Tennessee.

Appendix. Estimated Population Levels and Components of Population Change, States and D.C.

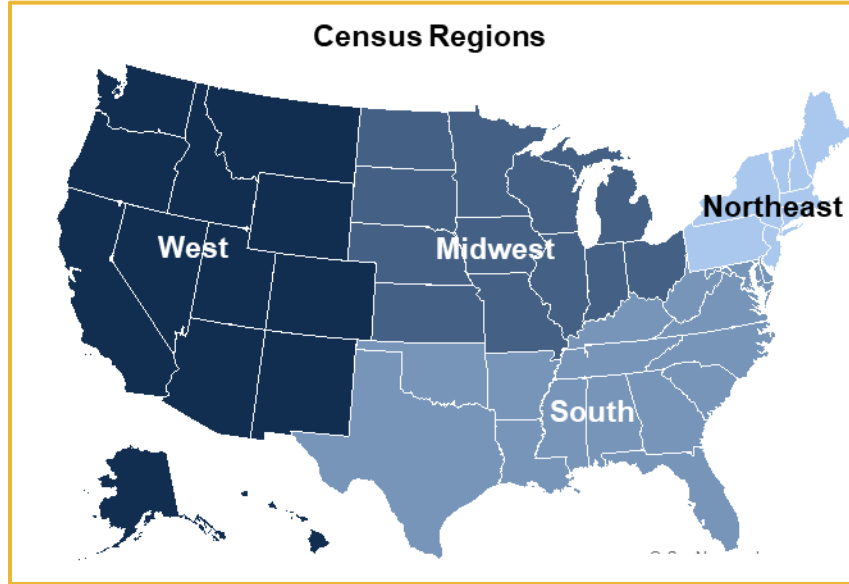
County	Total Population		Total Population Change		Natural Change		Net Domestic Migration		Net International Migration	
	4/1/2020	7/1/2025	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Alabama	5,025,437	5,193,088	167,651	3.3	-27,563	-0.5	141,048	2.8	54,002	1.1
Alaska	733,383	737,270	3,887	0.5	18,405	2.5	-24,270	-3.3	9,814	1.3
Arizona	7,158,104	7,623,818	465,714	6.5	19,241	0.3	282,626	3.9	163,650	2.3
Arkansas	3,011,530	3,114,791	103,261	3.4	-12,691	-0.4	83,544	2.8	31,766	1.1
California	39,555,703	39,355,309	-200,394	-0.5	531,304	1.3	-1,691,867	-4.3	973,812	2.5
Colorado	5,775,326	6,012,561	237,235	4.1	87,669	1.5	17,729	0.3	130,218	2.3
Connecticut	3,607,750	3,688,496	80,746	2.2	2,610	0.1	-27,919	-0.8	110,143	3.1
Delaware	989,950	1,059,952	70,002	7.1	-3,150	-0.3	53,212	5.4	19,687	2.0
District of Columbia	689,544	693,645	4,101	0.6	14,157	2.1	-33,903	-4.9	27,402	4.0
Florida	21,538,207	23,462,518	1,924,311	8.9	-102,970	-0.5	890,348	4.1	1,133,327	5.3
Georgia	10,713,861	11,302,748	588,887	5.5	117,082	1.1	232,849	2.2	235,345	2.2
Hawaii	1,455,267	1,432,820	-22,447	-1.5	12,812	0.9	-59,402	-4.1	24,479	1.7
Idaho	1,839,123	2,029,733	190,610	10.4	28,510	1.6	139,784	7.6	24,146	1.3
Illinois	12,821,741	12,719,141	-102,600	-0.8	37,108	0.3	-456,378	-3.6	313,691	2.4
Indiana	6,786,605	6,973,333	186,728	2.8	26,122	0.4	41,968	0.6	117,923	1.7
Iowa	3,190,582	3,238,387	47,805	1.5	12,433	0.4	-10,148	-0.3	45,014	1.4
Kansas	2,937,986	2,977,220	39,234	1.3	18,332	0.6	-24,277	-0.8	44,277	1.5
Kentucky	4,506,287	4,606,864	100,577	2.2	-18,600	-0.4	35,818	0.8	81,789	1.8
Louisiana	4,657,894	4,618,189	-39,705	-0.9	12,073	0.3	-143,806	-3.1	90,755	1.9
Maine	1,363,218	1,414,874	51,656	3.8	-26,514	-1.9	56,775	4.2	21,143	1.6
Maryland	6,181,640	6,265,347	83,707	1.4	56,788	0.9	-134,770	-2.2	159,113	2.6
Massachusetts	7,033,112	7,154,084	120,972	1.7	26,617	0.4	-182,145	-2.6	286,765	4.1
Michigan	10,079,362	10,127,884	48,522	0.5	-44,601	-0.4	-65,699	-0.7	156,577	1.6
Minnesota	5,706,733	5,830,405	123,672	2.2	63,075	1.1	-37,202	-0.7	96,812	1.7
Mississippi	2,961,264	2,954,160	-7,104	-0.2	-18,670	-0.6	-22,888	-0.8	34,204	1.2
Missouri	6,154,913	6,270,541	115,628	1.9	-11,801	-0.2	56,671	0.9	69,708	1.1
Montana	1,084,221	1,144,694	60,473	5.6	-3,631	-0.3	59,510	5.5	4,792	0.4
Nebraska	1,961,980	2,018,006	56,026	2.9	29,523	1.5	-14,092	-0.7	40,453	2.1
Nevada	3,105,593	3,282,188	176,595	5.7	11,343	0.4	96,046	3.1	68,974	2.2
New Hampshire	1,377,573	1,415,342	37,769	2.7	-11,368	-0.8	36,247	2.6	12,303	0.9
New Jersey	9,289,024	9,548,215	259,191	2.8	101,219	1.1	-222,194	-2.4	379,828	4.1
New Mexico	2,117,492	2,125,498	8,006	0.4	-11,473	-0.5	-10,540	-0.5	29,745	1.4
New York	20,203,696	20,002,427	-201,269	-1.0	167,522	0.8	-1,106,013	-5.5	749,337	3.7
North Carolina	10,441,392	11,197,968	756,576	7.2	48,219	0.5	476,921	4.6	231,980	2.2
North Dakota	779,136	799,358	20,222	2.6	13,465	1.7	-6,050	-0.8	13,088	1.7
Ohio	11,799,445	11,900,510	101,065	0.9	-45,739	-0.4	-30,482	-0.3	176,953	1.5
Oklahoma	3,959,354	4,123,288	163,934	4.1	3,973	0.1	107,244	2.7	51,694	1.3
Oregon	4,237,282	4,273,586	36,304	0.9	-19,463	-0.5	-670	0.0	56,736	1.3
Pennsylvania	13,002,753	13,059,432	56,679	0.4	-89,333	-0.7	-54,290	-0.4	196,721	1.5
Rhode Island	1,097,357	1,114,521	17,164	1.6	-3,923	-0.4	-10,150	-0.9	30,927	2.8
South Carolina	5,118,250	5,570,274	452,024	8.8	-17,705	-0.3	379,062	7.4	87,086	1.7
South Dakota	886,656	935,094	48,438	5.5	11,765	1.3	23,257	2.6	12,842	1.4
Tennessee	6,912,319	7,315,076	402,757	5.8	-9,876	-0.1	292,727	4.2	115,541	1.7
Texas	29,149,498	31,709,821	2,560,323	8.8	723,693	2.5	812,735	2.8	1,017,836	3.5
Utah	3,271,601	3,538,904	267,303	8.2	126,873	3.9	54,893	1.7	85,137	2.6
Vermont	643,077	644,663	1,586	0.2	-8,669	-1.3	5,385	0.8	4,894	0.8
Virginia	8,631,419	8,880,107	248,688	2.9	68,140	0.8	-29,169	-0.3	207,685	2.4
Washington	7,707,519	8,001,020	293,501	3.8	85,478	1.1	-12,979	-0.2	223,256	2.9
West Virginia	1,793,759	1,766,147	-27,612	-1.5	-49,462	-2.8	16,553	0.9	5,138	0.3
Wisconsin	5,894,323	5,972,787	78,464	1.3	1,022	0.0	9,667	0.2	67,661	1.1
Wyoming	576,872	588,753	11,881	2.1	536	0.1	8,684	1.5	2,668	0.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

ENDNOTES

ⁱ These are the relevant dates throughout our analysis. April 1 is the date for the decennial census and July 1 is the date for the annual population estimates.

ⁱⁱ For reference, the map below shows the Census Bureau’s four regions. Each of these includes [two or three divisions](#).



ⁱⁱⁱ West Virginia was an outlier even after accounting for its median age. Its natural population loss was more than twice that of Vermont and 4.5 times that of New Hampshire even though the three states had nearly identical median ages in 2020.

^{iv} Because of the COVID pandemic, the Census Bureau did not publish the results of its 1-year American Community Survey (ACS) for 2020, so we don’t have estimates of the size of the local foreign-born population for that year. According to the 5-year ACS for the year, however, there were 22,950 foreign-born residents of the Chattanooga MSA during 2016-2020, or about 4.1 percent of the total population. Their main source regions were Latin America (47.7 percent), Asia (30.7 percent), and Europe (13.1 percent).