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Rates for leaving state on the rise

Colorado fifth in U.S. for departures; those fleeing older, wealthier

BY ALDO SVALDI

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Once considered a place to run to, not run from, Colorado has started giving off a different vibe. It now ranks fifth in the country for its share of outbound moves, according to the country's largest moving company.

Repeat, outbound, not inbound.

The UniGroup Cos., parent of United Van Lines and Mayflower, has measured the ratio of inbound moves to outbound moves for states since 1977. And for the vast majority of those years, Colorado has had a higher share of moves in than moves out. From 2013-17, not counting 2016, it was a "high inbound" state, with 55% or more of its moves inbound.

"2025 is the first year that Colorado has been listed as a high outbound state since 1990," said Eily Cummings, vice president of corporate communications at United Van Lines. *Note*

In 1990, the state was dealing with the aftermath of an oil and real estate boom that got out of hand and resulted in massive job losses. Today, the jobs remain, but housing costs have greatly outstripped incomes, chewing away at affordability for new and old residents alike, in both urban and rural areas.

Colorado is now running with a different crowd demographically. *Note* New Jersey leads the country with nearly 70% of its moves outbound. New York, with its larger and older population and high living expenses, had the second-highest outbound ratio at 57.8%. Retirees are a big part of the outbound moves in both states.

California matched New York's outbound rate. Historically, it has been a more balanced state, but it has shifted to the high outbound camp as workers follow corporate relocations. Tesla, SpaceX, McKesson, Chevron, Charles Schwab, Oracle, Hewlett-Packard Enterprises and Toyota North America are among the bigger names that have relocated from California to Texas.

A little bit ahead of Colorado was North Dakota, which has both one of the smallest populations in the country and one of the most extreme climates. It is hard to blame people for leaving a state where the record temperatures have ranged from a high of 121 degrees to a low of 60 degrees below zero, both in the same year, and where the economy is prone to boom and bust cycles.

"This report provides some interesting information, and the data may suggest there are challenges in some areas. I think outmigration is a big issue that has economic development implications. Those issues will likely be part of the 2026 elections," said Broomfield economist Gary Horvath after reviewing the report.

Compared to 2019, Horvath notes that a higher share of people aged 55-plus and households with incomes above \$150,000 are moving out. As for the state's job opportunities and lifestyle, they have lost some of their drawing power. Whether that is temporary or a trend will determine the state's future.

So, where are the former Colorado residents headed to? Texas, Arizona, North Carolina, Virginia and nearby states like Kansas are where most of the moving trucks leaving Colorado stop to unload, Cummings said. *Note*

Looking at moves nationally, Oregon is the top state for its ratio of inbound moves at 64.5%. Jobs, especially in tech and health care, are drawing workers. But secondary cities like Eugene, not Portland, are the ones that are benefiting. *Note*

West Virginia, South Carolina, Delaware, Minnesota and Idaho, North Carolina, Arkansas, Alabama and Nevada are the other "popular" states in terms of inbound moves, at least by United Van Lines counts. For Colorado, Alabama's presence is noteworthy, given that the Trump administration plans to shift U.S. Space Command headquarters from Colorado Springs to Huntsville. *Note*

One of the arguments for keeping the headquarters in place is that people want to live here, not in Alabama. But the United Van Line numbers are telling a different story.

Family has become the top reason for moving nationally, nudging out jobs, which were the main motivator before the pandemic, Cummings said. About 3 in 10 of Colorado movers, in either direction, cite family as the primary reason for relocating.

The largest age groups moving in both directions are 65-plus, followed by 55- to 64-year-olds.

Combined, they accounted for six in 10 outbound moves and about 54% of inbound moves.

It is important to note the survey's limitations. Although United Van Lines examined more than 100,000 moves, its customers tend to be established homeowners with families who can afford a full-service mover. A recent college graduate or young professional would be more inclined to rent a U-Haul trailer or borrow grandpa's pickup truck and move themselves.

Colorado's migration picture looks more balanced in a separate survey from U-Haul released Tuesday. The state moved into the 23rd spot for inbound moves by do-it-yourself movers last year after ranking 40th in 2024. Last decade and during the pandemic, the state was a regular visitor on the top 10 list for inbound moves.

Outbound moves surpassed inbound moves in 2024, but last year 50.1% of the moves were inbound. Metro Denver ranked 20th overall for inbound moves.

Texas, Florida and North Carolina were the three most popular inbound states, per the U-Haul study, while California, Illinois and New Jersey were the three states with the highest share of outbound moves.

Former state demographer Elizabeth Garner, in explaining the state's shrinking domestic migration counts, said that Colorado continues to attract young adults on the move, but is seeing an increase in older households moving out.

A majority of movers captured in the United Van Lines had household incomes above \$150,000 — about six in 10 of those moving in and 55% of those moving out. Some of those moves might reflect highly-paid remote workers who relocated during the pandemic being called back to the home office. But it could also be a signal that even \$150,000 a year isn't enough to afford Colorado.

About 5% of those leaving Colorado cited living costs as the primary reason for the move. That may not seem like a lot, but it is one of the highest shares cited in any state, given that people don't like to admit they can't afford the place they once called home.

"A lot of people don't choose cost of living. That is telling. The only states that are higher on that are California, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Montana," Cummings said.

Within Colorado, Fort Collins is the only "strong inbound" metro area left. Boulder and Grand Junction are balanced. Denver and Colorado Springs are at 57% outbound, higher than the state average, while Greeley matches the state average at 55%.

And then there is Pueblo, where three people moved out for every person moving in. Its 75% outbound ratio was third-highest in the country of any city. If there is a bright side to that dire number, it is that things have improved from 2024, when 81% of the moves were outbound.

About the only thing supporting population growth in Colorado the past couple of years has been international migration, but that is slowing sharply. If the United Van Line numbers are right, the state can't expect domestic migration, already weak, to fill in the gap.

Cummings notes that there is a discernible shift nationally of younger adults leaving large metro areas for smaller- to medium-sized metro areas that are more affordable. If families, not jobs, remain the biggest driver of moves, and if the state's young adults have to move elsewhere to afford a home, then outbound flows could continue.

Colorado's population is younger than that of other outbound states, but aging, and the lure of being closer to grandchildren or living in a milder climate, could fuel more departures in the years ahead.

And in that regard, Colorado risks heading down the path of New Jersey, which has been a high outbound state for the past 15 years. Like Colorado, it is considered a "launch" state able to attract young professionals. But it has become a state where its oldest residents are symbolically raising the unofficial New Jersey state bird in the rear view mirror as they head out on the turnpike.

