

# **Where Y'all From? Chattanooga's Domestic Migration, 2021-25**

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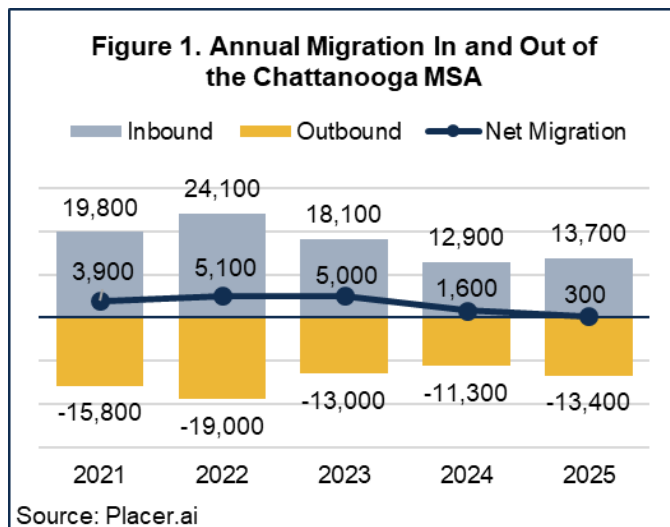
## **Summary**

This paper summarizes the geographic pattern of domestic migration in and out of the Chattanooga MSA for 2021-2025. About 86,000 people moved into the MSA and 69,000 moved out of it, resulting in net migration of 17,000. Nearly half of all in-migrants came from California or elsewhere in Tennessee. Florida and Georgia were the next largest providers of migrants. More than 41 percent of all people who migrated out of the Chattanooga MSA moved to Tennessee, and Florida and Georgia were the destinations of another 15 percent of Chattanooga out-migrants. Net migration was dominated by California and Illinois, which accounted for more than half of the net migration into the Chattanooga MSA.

## Introduction

Recent estimates indicate that the population of the Chattanooga Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) grew about twice as fast as that of the country as a whole between 2020 and 2025.<sup>i</sup> The main source of the estimated growth was migration from the rest of the country.<sup>ii</sup> The estimates, from the U.S. Census Bureau, provide no information on where the migrants came from, however. This paper fills that gap with data from Placer.ai, which uses mobile device locations and machine learning to estimate migration patterns at various geographic levels. Placer provides estimates of migration with a lag of a few months rather than several years, as is common with official data.<sup>iii</sup> It also provides geographic detail not available from official sources. See the inset at the bottom of the page for a comparison of the two data sources.

According to Placer.ai data, over the five-year period of December 2020 to December 2025, the Chattanooga MSA saw net migration of about 17,000 people from the rest of the United States. This net was the result of nearly 86,000 in-migrants and nearly 69,000 out-migrants. Migration was not steady over time, as shown by Figure 1. Overall and net migration peaked in 2022, with 43,100 total migrants and 5,100 net migrants. By 2025 net migration had fallen to just 300. This pattern mirrors the overall condition of the

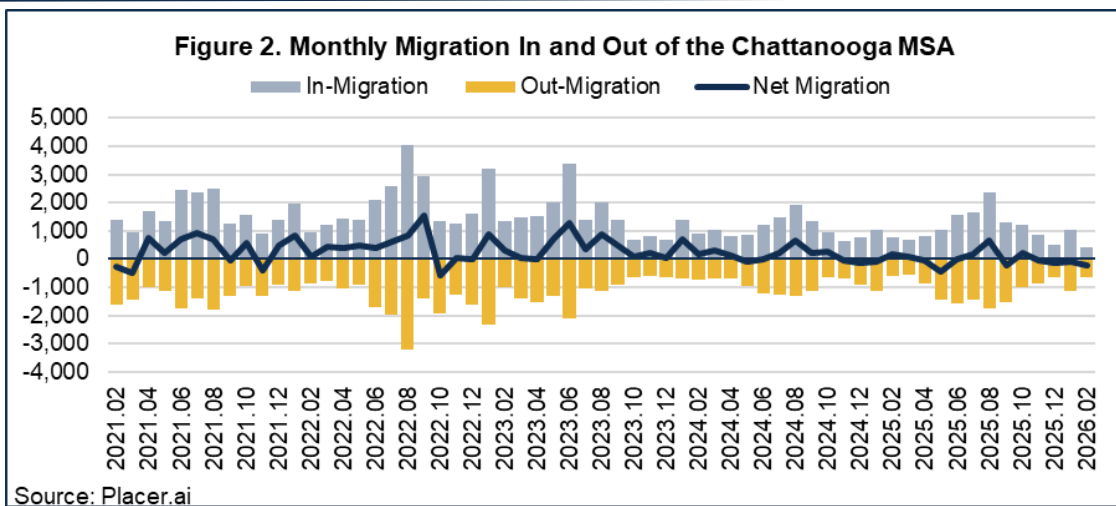


local labor market documented elsewhere.<sup>iv</sup>

Figure 2 provides monthly migration over the same period and shows a distinct seasonal pattern in which migration in and out of Chattanooga peaks in August as the new school year begins. This pattern wasn't as regular during the high-migration years when January and June migration was especially high, perhaps indicating flows of new college graduates in those years.<sup>v</sup>

### Placer.ai Migration Data vs. Census Data

In the Placer.ai data, if a person's mobile device changes its home location (where it spends its nights) for 5 months or more, then the phone and its owner have migrated. A sample of these migrations is collected, aggregated, and extrapolated to estimate the total numbers of migrants between counties, cities, and metro areas. The Census Bureau's migration estimates, in contrast, are derived from surveys asking where people lived a year earlier. Because of this difference, as well as differences in aggregation methodology, the two measures of migration should be considered estimates of different, but related, things: Census migration and Placer migration. It is probably safe to assume, however, that they are very similar in their geographic patterns and general trends over time. That is, if one measure says that twice as many people moved to Chattanooga from Nashville than from Knoxville, then the other would say something very similar, and if one measure rose by X%, then the other rose by something close to X%.

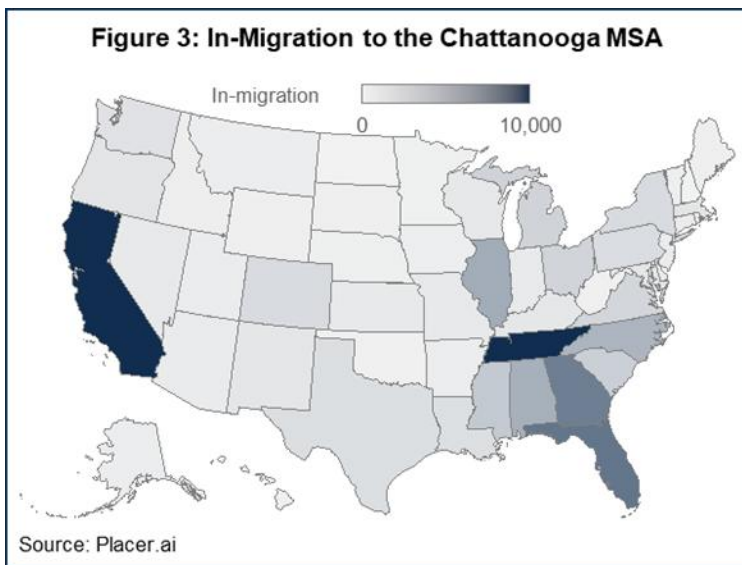


The focus of this paper is on the origins and destinations of this migration in and out of the Chattanooga MSA. It aggregates county-to-county migration estimates for the MSA's six counties to obtain estimates of migration to and from Chattanooga and the 50 states plus the District of Columbia. These state-level estimates are provided in an appendix and include the numbers of migrants as well as migration rates in terms of the states' population levels.

Migration data are sometimes used to indicate the relative desirability of different locations. Desirability is subjective and can be based on perceived quality of life, economic opportunity, etc. Individuals move because they prefer it to not moving, and they choose the location they think will make them best off given their constraints and opportunities. The level of migration is a count of the number of people who have made this decision. Economists say that migrants are voting with their feet and revealing their preferences for locations. That is, migration reveals which locations the average migrant finds desirable. If the people who moved are representative of the general population, then a more general claim can be made. This is a big if, however, because we don't know anything about these particular movers, and some age groups and education levels are more likely to move than others.

### State-to-Chattanooga Migration – Number of Migrants

Figure 3 illustrates the estimated levels of migration into the Chattanooga MSA from the states. The top 10 origins are listed in Table 1 along with the number of migrants and their shares of the total. California and the rest of Tennessee stand out as, by far, the most common origins of migrants into Chattanooga. More than one-third of domestic migrants into Chattanooga moved from elsewhere in Tennessee, and about one in eight moved from California. Florida and Georgia were the next most common origins, followed by Illinois, Alabama, and North Carolina.



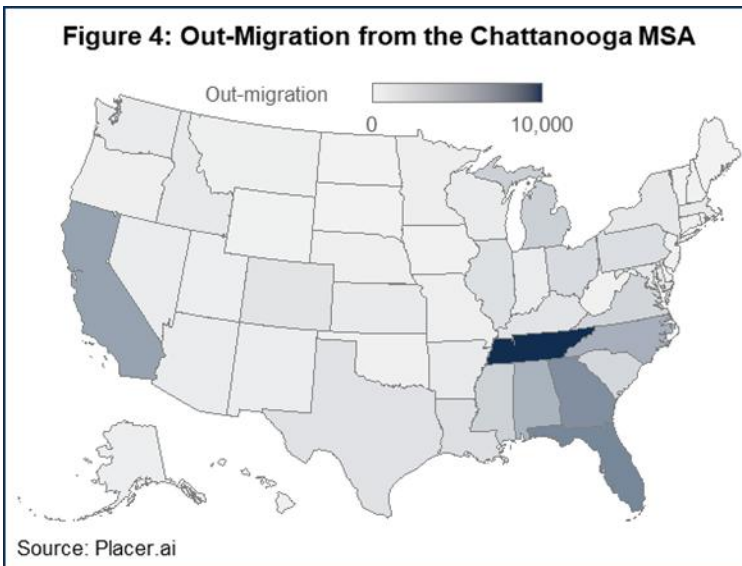
**Table 1. Top State Origins of Migrants into the Chattanooga MSA**

Rank	CBSA/County	In-Migrants	Share (%)
1	Rest of Tennessee	29,537	34.4
2	California	10,533	12.3
3	Florida	6,311	7.4
4	Rest of Georgia	5,875	6.8
5	Illinois	3,515	4.1
6	Alabama	3,331	3.9
7	North Carolina	3,133	3.7
8	Mississippi	2,053	2.4
9	South Carolina	1,759	2.0
10	Michigan	1,533	1.8

Source: Placer.ai

It's not surprising that Tennessee is the most common origin for Chattanooga in-migrants, but perhaps the scale is. Five times more people moved into the Chattanooga MSA from Tennessee than from Georgia, even though the rest of Georgia outside the MSA is as close to Chattanooga as is the rest of Tennessee and there are 50 percent more Georgians than Tennesseans. Another anomaly is the large number of migrants from California. Over this period, California and Florida had about the same amount of migration to the rest of the country, and Texas was not far behind. But thousands fewer people moved from Florida to Chattanooga than from California to Chattanooga, and fewer than one thousand people made the move from Texas. That is, the movement from California to Chattanooga was disproportionate even after adjusting for the total number who left the state.

Figure 4 and Table 2 show the state destinations of the 69,000 migrants out of the Chattanooga MSA. Forty-one percent of these migrants moved elsewhere in Tennessee. Florida and the rest of Georgia were a



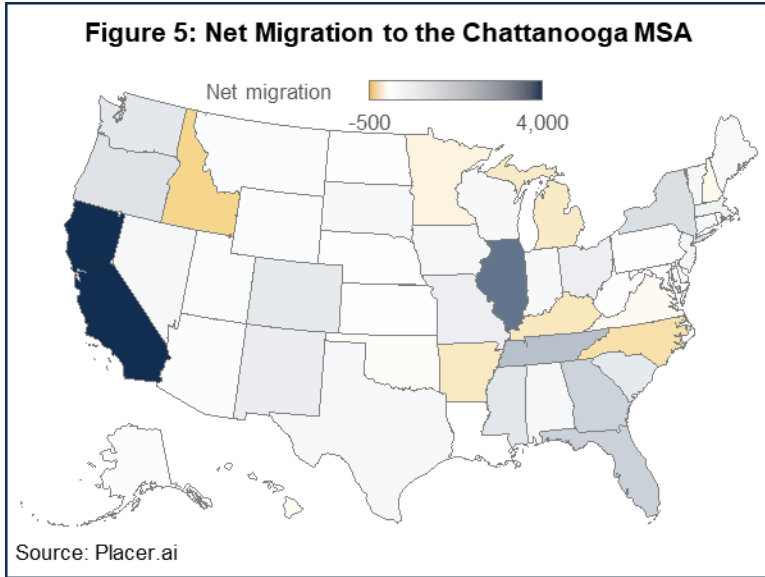
**Table 2. Top State Destinations of Migrants from the Chattanooga MSA**

Rank	CBSA/County	In-Migrants	Share (%)
1	Rest of Tennessee	28,352	41.2
2	Florida	5,432	7.9
3	Rest of Georgia	5,039	7.3
4	California	4,055	5.9
5	North Carolina	3,345	4.9
6	Alabama	3,181	4.6
7	Michigan	1,669	2.4
8	Mississippi	1,586	2.3
9	Virginia	1,433	2.1
10	South Carolina	1,339	1.9

Source: Placer.ai

very distant second and third most popular destinations, followed by California. Notably absent from the top 10 is Texas, which was second only to Florida in the number of people who moved there from the rest of the country, but was only the 15<sup>th</sup> most popular destination for Chattanoogaans.

In terms of net migration, California and Illinois were easily the largest net contributors of migrants to the Chattanooga MSA (see Figure 5 and Table 3). Almost 6,500 more people moved from California to



Chattanooga than moved in the opposite direction. And more than 2,600 more moved from Illinois to Chattanooga than vice versa. Chattanooga was also a net recipient of migrants from the rest of Tennessee, with a net of 1,185 people. While notable, this is not a particularly large net gain given the scale of migration in both directions. Chattanooga experienced net out-migration with fourteen states, although for eight of them it was less than 100 migrants. Idaho

**Table 3. Top State Origins of Net Migration to the Chattanooga MSA**

Positive net migration			Negative net migration		
Rank	CBSA/County	Net Migrants	Rank	CBSA/County	Net Migrants
1	California	6,478	1	Idaho	-287
2	Illinois	2,634	2	Dist. of Columbia	-230
3	Rest of Tennessee	1,185	3	North Carolina	-212
4	Florida	879	4	Kentucky	-161
5	Rest of Georgia	836	5	Arkansas	-147
6	New York	621	6	Michigan	-136
7	Oregon	536	7	Minnesota	-76
8	Mississippi	467	8	New Hampshire	-45
9	Washington	459	9	Virginia	-34
10	South Carolina	420	10	Hawaii	-30

Source: Placer.ai

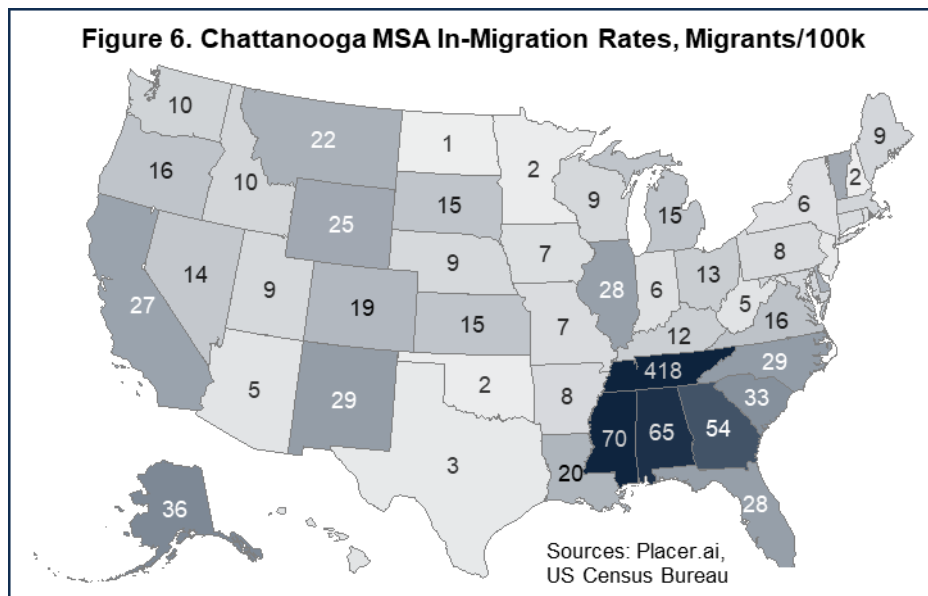
was the biggest net recipient of movers from Chattanooga, followed by the District of Columbia and North Carolina. The main takeaway from the figure and table is that more than half of the 17,000 net migrants into Chattanooga can be accounted for by the net gains just from California and Illinois.

### State-to-Chattanooga Migration – Rates of Migration

The data described above indicate that large shares of migrants into the Chattanooga MSA originated from a small number of states, with California and the rest of Tennessee accounting for nearly half of total in-migrants, and California and Illinois accounting for more than half of net in-migrants. Similarly, migrants out of Chattanooga have tended to move disproportionately to a few states led by the rest of Tennessee,

neighboring southern states, and California. One of the reasons that California accounts for so many migrants, despite being so distant, is its sheer size. It would be expected to be the origin or destination of many Chattanooga migrants given that it accounts for more than 10 percent of the country's population. On the other hand, Texas is nearer to Chattanooga than California is but has provided fractions of the migrants to and from Chattanooga that California has. Migration rates can help make sense of the flows of migrants by accounting for the number of potential migrants and locations.

Figure 6 provides Chattanooga's state in-migration rates—the number of migrants to Chattanooga per 100 thousand people in the state. Whereas the number of in-migrants tells us how represented each state is

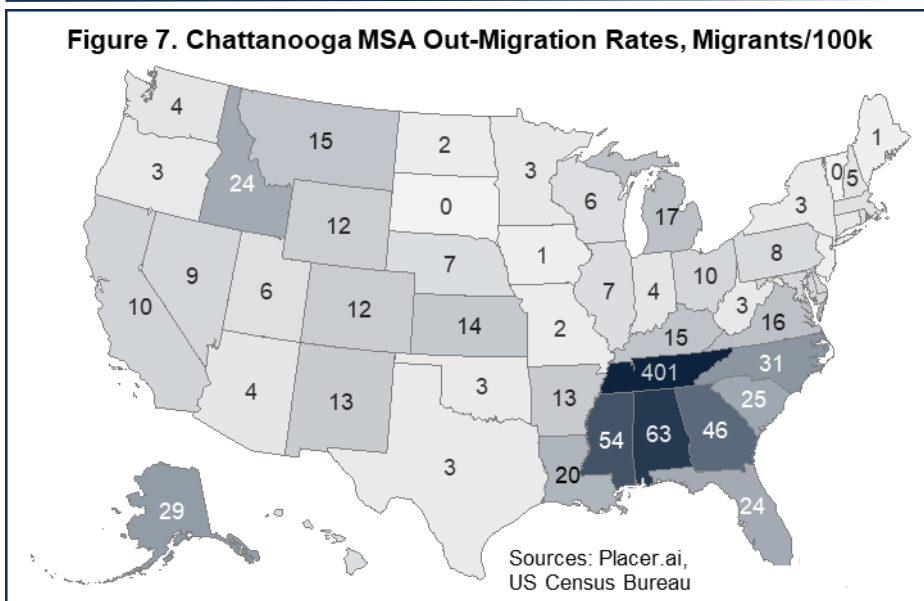


among in-migrants, the migration rate tells us about the likelihood that a person from a state will move to Chattanooga. The difference between this figure and Figure 3 is that California doesn't stand out nearly as much whereas states in the Southeast stand out much more. The in-migration rate from California was on par with those of Florida and

Illinois and less than half those of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. In short, residents of Southeastern states were most likely to move to Chattanooga, especially those just south of Tennessee. Residents of California, Illinois, Alaska, New Mexico, Wyoming, Vermont, and Montana had similar and relatively high likelihoods of moving to Chattanooga. At the other extreme, Texas, Oklahoma, and most states in the northeast were much less likely to have made the move.

Figure 7 provides Chattanooga's state out-migration rates—the number of migrants from Chattanooga per 100 thousand people in the state. This migration rate accounts for the size of the destination state in that states with a lot of people have a lot of locations to move to. From the perspective of the state, it measures the importance of Chattanooga as an origin for migrants and is akin to the chances that someone in the state has a neighbor who has moved there from Chattanooga. Compared to Figure 4, which shows the number of migrants from Chattanooga to each state, California is much less prominent and Alaska, Idaho,

**Figure 7. Chattanooga MSA Out-Migration Rates, Migrants/100k**

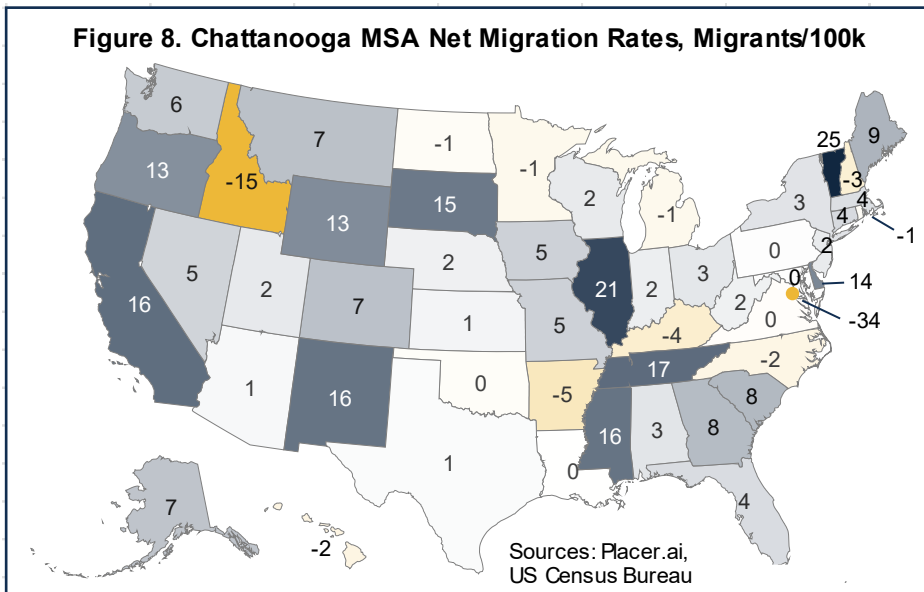


and the states of the Southeast are more prominent. The large number of Chattanoogaogans moving to California was more a product of the state's size than its desirability. Note also that nearly every state in the Midwest, Plains, and Northeast had very low out-migration rates. That is, except for Michigan and Kansas, the

states of these regions were not desirable locations for Chattanoogaogans to move to. More surprising though is that Texas can be characterized this way even though it has been one of the most popular destinations for domestic migrants from around the country.

Net migration rates per 100 thousand state residents are provided by Figure 8. They reveal that the much of outsized migration between Chattanooga and most Southern states was due to proximity rather than large differences in desirability. This was not true for Mississippi and the rest of Tennessee, however, with net migration rates similar to California's. Other states' migration flows are also put into perspective by Figure 8.

**Figure 8. Chattanooga MSA Net Migration Rates, Migrants/100k**



For example, Illinois and Vermont have much higher net migration rates than other states, although Vermont's might be the result of low migration flows. In addition, Idaho stands out as having a net migration rate that is negative and comparable in absolute size to California's. Finally, the District of Columbia has the lowest net

migration rate of all, which might be due to significant idiosyncrasies that match the place with the people who move there.

## Summary and Concluding Remarks

This paper summarized and illustrated estimates of domestic migration in and out of the Chattanooga MSA for 2021-2025. The estimates are from Placer.ai and derived from changes in the “permanent” locations of personal devices. According to this data, about 86,000 people moved into the MSA and 69,000 moved out of it, resulting in net migration of 17,000.

- Nearly half of all in-migrants came from either the rest of Tennessee or California, with nearly three times as many coming from the former as the latter. Florida and the rest of Georgia were the next largest providers of migrants to Chattanooga, accounting for a combined 14 percent of all in-migrants.
- More than 41 percent of all people who migrated out of the Chattanooga MSA moved to the rest of Tennessee. Florida and the rest of Georgia were the destinations of another 15 percent of Chattanooga out-migrants.
- Net migration was dominated by California and Illinois, which accounted for more than half of the net migration into the Chattanooga MSA. Net migration from the rest of Tennessee was relatively small, less than half that from Illinois.
- Although California provided the most non-Tennessee migrants to Chattanooga, Southern states had the highest in-migration rates. Alaska, Illinois, California, New Mexico, Wyoming, and Montana also had notably higher in-migration rates than the rest of the country.
- Out-migration rates were highest for states in the Southeast plus Idaho and the District of Columbia. This translated into very low negative net migration rates for Idaho and the District of Columbia.
- Net migration rates reveal that much of outsized migration between Chattanooga and Southern states was due to proximity. Vermont and Illinois had the highest rates of net migration into Chattanooga, followed by the rest of Tennessee, Mississippi, California, and New Mexico.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> The six-county Chattanooga MSA includes three counties in Tennessee (Hamilton, Marion, and Sequatchie) and three in Georgia (Catoosa, Dade, and Walker).

<sup>ii</sup> "[Population Growth in the Chattanooga Regions, 2020-2025](#)," CRER White Paper Number 15, April 2026.

<sup>iii</sup> Traditional migration data from the Census Bureau uses self-reported surveys and are considered to be very accurate because demographic data about the sample is known. Data are not released for years after the surveys are collected, however, and no longer include county-to-county nor metro-to-metro migration flows. The most recent state-to-county data are for 2018-2022 while the most recent state-to-state data are for 2024. Placer data is available with only a 2-month lag.

<sup>iv</sup> "[From Modest Gains to Modest Losses: Chattanooga Employment Revised Downward](#)," CRER White Paper Number 16, May 2026.

<sup>v</sup> The Census Bureau measures changes in population since the most recent decennial census to July 1 of each year, so the time frame for Census net migration is April 1, 2020, to July 1, 2025. According to those estimates, net migration into the Chattanooga MSA over the period was just short of 27,000. The difference between this and Placer migration is fairly large and is partly due to the difference in time frame as the Census data includes 3 more months and covers more of the high-migration period. The definitional and methodological differences account for most of the variation between the two sources, however.

## Appendix: Chattanooga Migration and the States, 2021-25

State	In-Migrants	Out-Migrants	Net Migrants	Total Migrants	In-Migrants per 100,000	Out-Migrants per 100,000	Net Migrants per 100,000
Alabama	3,331	3,181	150	6,512	65.5	62.5	2.9
Alaska	264	215	49	479	35.9	29.2	6.7
Arizona	354	294	60	648	4.8	4.0	0.8
Arkansas	253	400	-147	653	8.3	13.1	-4.8
California	10,533	4,055	6,478	14,588	26.8	10.3	16.5
Colorado	1,140	729	411	1,869	19.4	12.4	7.0
Connecticut	286	135	151	421	7.9	3.7	4.2
Delaware	230	91	139	321	22.5	8.9	13.6
District of Columbia	49	279	-230	328	7.2	41.0	-33.8
Florida	6,311	5,432	879	11,743	28.2	24.2	3.9
Rest of Georgia	5,875	5,039	836	10,914	53.7	46.1	7.6
Hawaii	70	100	-30	170	4.8	6.9	-2.1
Idaho	184	471	-287	655	9.5	24.4	-14.8
Illinois	3,515	881	2,634	4,396	27.7	6.9	20.7
Indiana	423	292	131	715	6.2	4.3	1.9
Iowa	211	44	167	255	6.6	1.4	5.2
Kansas	447	411	36	858	15.2	13.9	1.2
Kentucky	541	702	-161	1,243	11.9	15.5	-3.6
Louisiana	943	945	-2	1,888	20.4	20.5	0.0
Maine	130	12	118	142	9.4	0.9	8.5
Maryland	586	573	13	1,159	9.4	9.2	0.2
Massachusetts	688	432	256	1,120	9.8	6.1	3.6
Michigan	1,533	1,669	-136	3,202	15.2	16.6	-1.3
Minnesota	115	191	-76	306	2.0	3.3	-1.3
Mississippi	2,053	1,586	467	3,639	69.7	53.8	15.8
Missouri	455	132	323	587	7.3	2.1	5.2
Montana	245	166	79	411	21.9	14.9	7.1
Nebraska	170	137	33	307	8.6	6.9	1.7
Nevada	452	297	155	749	14.2	9.3	4.9
New Hampshire	23	68	-45	91	1.6	4.9	-3.2
New Jersey	322	111	211	433	3.4	1.2	2.3
New Mexico	611	275	336	886	28.8	13.0	15.8
New York	1,177	556	621	1,733	5.9	2.8	3.1
North Carolina	3,133	3,345	-212	6,478	29.2	31.2	-2.0
North Dakota	11	16	-5	27	1.4	2.0	-0.6
Ohio	1,486	1,159	327	2,645	12.6	9.8	2.8
Oklahoma	83	103	-20	186	2.1	2.6	-0.5
Oregon	664	128	536	792	15.6	3.0	12.6
Pennsylvania	1,051	1,018	33	2,069	8.1	7.8	0.3
Rhode Island	68	75	-7	143	6.2	6.8	-0.6
South Carolina	1,759	1,339	420	3,098	33.2	25.3	7.9
South Dakota	138	0	138	138	15.2	0.0	15.2
Rest of Tennessee	29,537	28,352	1,185	57,889	418.0	401.2	16.8
Texas	969	818	151	1,787	3.2	2.7	0.5
Utah	290	207	83	497	8.5	6.1	2.4
Vermont	159	0	159	159	24.6	0.0	24.6
Virginia	1,399	1,433	-34	2,832	16.1	16.5	-0.4
Washington	806	347	459	1,153	10.3	4.4	5.9
West Virginia	91	62	29	153	5.1	3.5	1.6
Wisconsin	520	377	143	897	8.8	6.4	2.4
Wyoming	145	69	76	214	24.9	11.8	13.0

Sources: Placer.ai, U.S. Census Bureau