



# Destination Montana

## Migration Patterns To, From, and Within Montana

by Christopher Bradley, Senior Economist

In the modern pursuit of the American Dream, people move around the country for jobs, education, or a different quality of life. In Montana, one in seven people moved in the past year, or roughly 15% of the population. While over half of movers stay within their own county, the remainder move long distances from other states or between counties in Montana.<sup>1</sup> Migration of people into and around Montana is important for labor force and economic growth. Montana's well-dispersed cities and large rural areas in between make moving necessary for many workers seeking jobs. Many employers also rely on workers' willingness to move to staff their businesses. This month's article explores the migration of workers into, out of, and within Montana to highlight its role in Montana's economy.

### Where do People Move to Montana From?

Movers who make long-distance moves from other states are an important part of statewide population and labor force growth. From 2010 to 2017 Montana's natural population growth was about 21,000 people. The remainder of population growth came from net in-migration, which contributed to 40,000 people added to Montana's population.<sup>2</sup> The volume of people moving to and from Montana in any single year is also quite large. An estimated 35,456 people moved to Montana from other states in 2017, while 28,012 people moved out of the state. Montana's net population gain in 2017 was 7,444 people, for a 0.7% rate of net in-migration.<sup>3</sup> Montana was 8th among all states in the U.S. for its in-migration rate. Seen in **Figure 1**, Montana had net in-migration similar to nearby states to the west while neighbors directly to the east and south experienced negative net migration.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 1-year Estimates

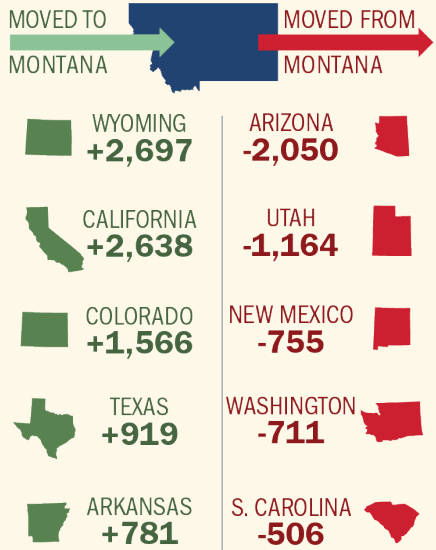
<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Estimates of the Components of Resident Population Change: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2017

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, State-to-State Migration Flows

### MONTANA 2017 MIGRATION QUICK FACTS

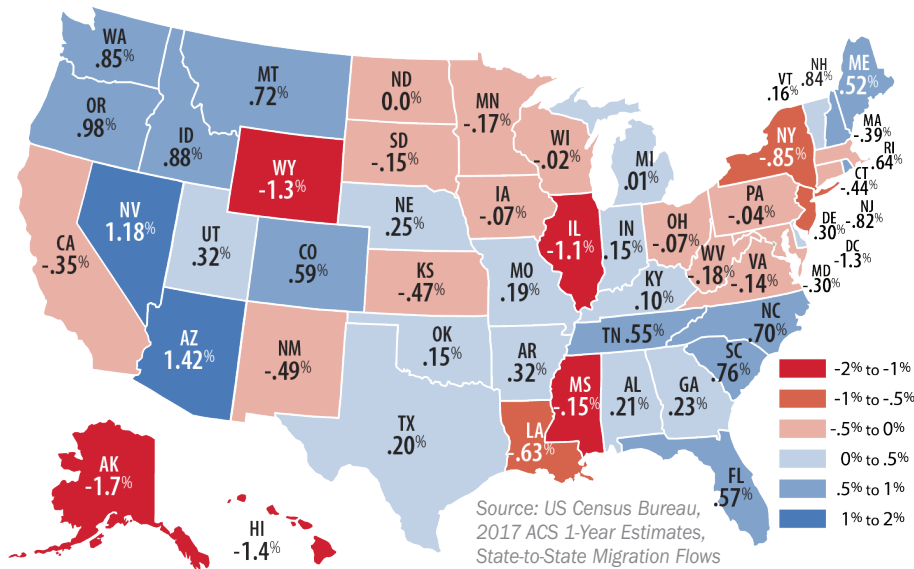
Migration to Montana:	<b>35,456</b>
Migration from Montana:	<b>28,012</b>
Net Migration:	<b>7,444</b>
County-to-County Migration:	<b>32,214</b>

### TOP 5 STATES FOR IN-/OUT-MIGRATION



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2017 1-Year Sample, State-to-State Migration Flows

**FIGURE 1**  
**Net Migration of U.S. States**



The greatest traffic for movers to and from Montana is between other western states. Job opportunity is a major reason for moving to Montana. For example, in 2017 Wyoming had the most net movers into Montana with almost 2,700 more people moving from Wyoming to Montana than vice versa. Although migration between Montana and Wyoming is usually higher than other states because they are neighbors, this change was larger than normal flows. Wyoming has experienced economic hardship recently, with 15,000 jobs lost between

2014 and 2018.<sup>4</sup> Montana’s relatively stronger economic growth during this period suggests many people moved from Wyoming to Montana for jobs. Other states with large net inflows to Montana were California, Colorado, and Texas, while the states with large net outflows from Montana were Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Washington. Oregon, Idaho, and North Dakota had large volume of migration with Montana, but net-migration came out close to even.

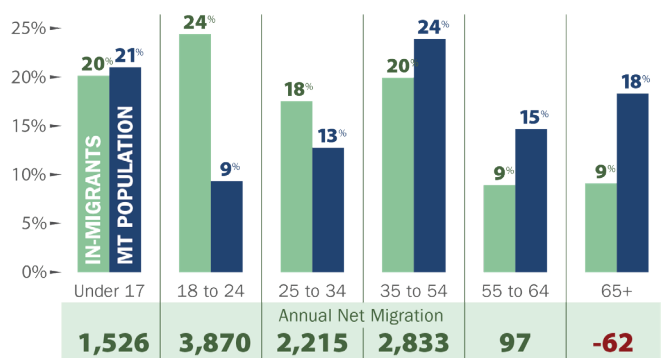
## Characteristics of People who Move to Montana

People moving to Montana are distributed younger than the population of the state. Many young people make long-distance moves as they start or finish school. On top of that, young people are less likely to be homeowners or have an established career that can reduce mobility. Seen in **Figure 2**, only 18% of people who moved to Montana were 55 or older, compared to 33% statewide. People 18 to 24 years old are the largest group of in-movers at 24%, despite being the smallest portion of the statewide population at only 9%. Children under 17 make up 20% of movers to Montana, suggesting that many of Montana’s older movers into the state are parents with families moving with them.

As a graying state, positive net in-migration among younger age groups bolsters current and future population growth. Montana’s status as the 9th oldest

state in the country by median age makes in-migration at younger ages important for the replacement of retiring workers.<sup>5</sup> From 2013-2017, average annual net in-migration to Montana was almost entirely attributable to people under 55, seen in **Figure 2**.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Age Distribution of In-Migrants vs. Statewide Population and Net Flows 2013-2017**



<sup>4</sup> Wyoming Dept. of Workforce Services, LAUS, accessed at: <https://doe.state.wy.us/lmi/LAUS/1015aa.htm>

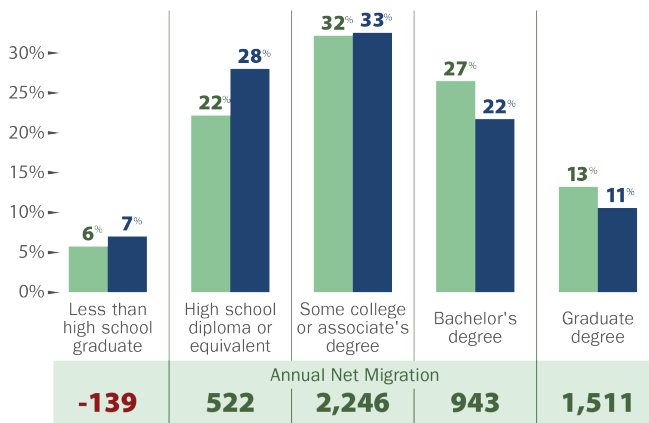
<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey, accessed from American FactFinder table S0101

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2017 1-Year Estimates; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org). 2013-2017 ACS Sample

For movers 55 and up, net in-migration was only 35 people, with the over 10,000 remaining people under 55. The largest net-gains are among 18 to 24 year-olds, suggesting that more students come to Montana for postsecondary schools and remain than leave. Net gains among 25 to 34 year-olds as well suggest that Montana’s economy offers sufficient economic opportunities to attract and retain young talent.

The education level of people 25 and over is higher for movers into the state than for the statewide population. The in-flow of highly educated people makes skilled workers available for Montana’s labor market. For in-movers, 40% have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to only 33% for existing residents. People with higher education levels move at higher rates, which explains why in-migration to Montana is skewed towards people with more education. Montana has a positive net gain of workers for all education levels except for those with less than a high school education. Annual net in-migration for people with a graduate degree was 1,500 people from 2013 to 2017, compared to almost 1,000 with a bachelor’s degree, and over 2,200 with some college or an associate degree (Figure 3). In-movers with postsecondary education are important for filling the gap between the number of workers graduating from Montana’s colleges, universities, and high schools and the number of job openings that require postsecondary education. Additionally, it suggests that there is a demand for skilled labor that employers are satisfying with out-of-state recruitment.

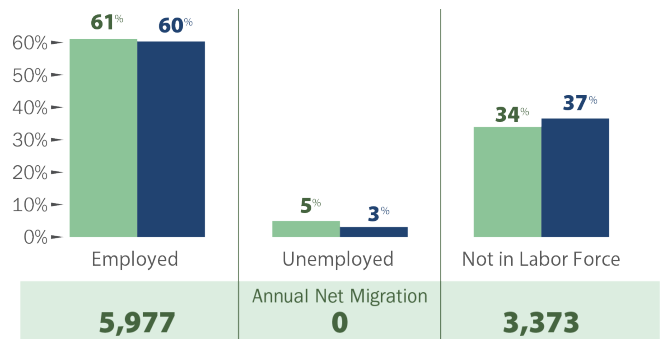
**FIGURE 3**  
**Education Level of In-Migrants vs. Statewide Population, and Net Flows, 2013-2017\***



Source: US Census Bureau, 2017 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates; IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. 2013-2017 ACS Sample  
 \* Educational achievement data available for the population over age 24 only.

People moving into Montana are also more likely to be in the labor force, either working or seeking work, than Montana’s general population. On net, Montana gained nearly 6,000 employed workers every year from 2013-2017, while the number of unemployed people was unchanged after considering out-migration. Shown in Figure 4, about 66% of in-movers are employed or seeking work compared to 63% of Montanans overall. This is in part because in-movers have fewer people over 55 on average, therefore have higher labor force participation rates. In-movers are unemployed at a higher rate, reflecting that not all people who move to Montana have a job lined up before they move, but seek work once arriving. With many young in-movers as well as families, some workers may move for school or with a spouse and seek work after arriving.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Labor Force Status of In-Migrants vs. Statewide Population, and Net Flows, 2013-2017**

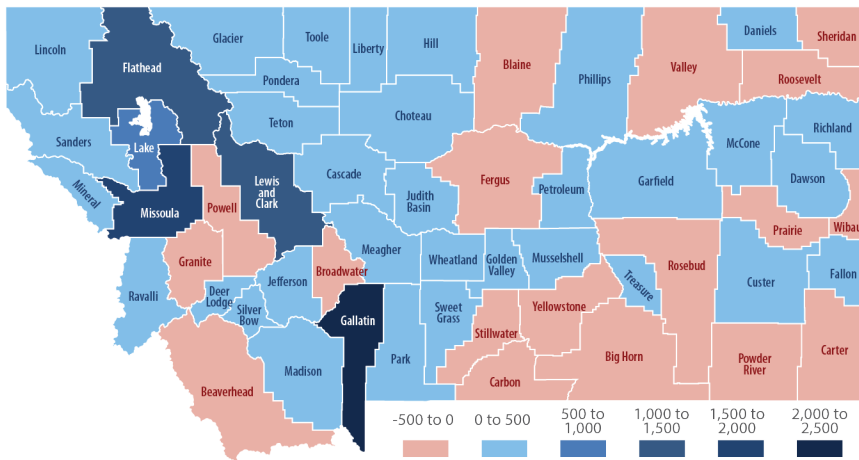


Source: IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. 2013-2017 ACS Sample

## Where in Montana are people moving?

Although in-migration was experienced in areas all over the state, as seen in figure 5, western Montana had the highest net in-migration from other states. The Bozeman and Missoula areas had the highest gains from migration, suggesting the presence of universities provides a destination for young movers and a job market for movers with postsecondary educations. Flathead and Lewis & Clark counties also had net in-migration over 1,000 people per year from out-of-state. Yellowstone County (including Billings) is the only county with a large city to experience net out-migration to other states, following the overall trend of net out-migration in the southeastern counties of

**FIGURE 5**  
**Where in Montana Out-of-Staters Are Moving**  
*Annual Net Interstate Migration by County, 2013-2017*

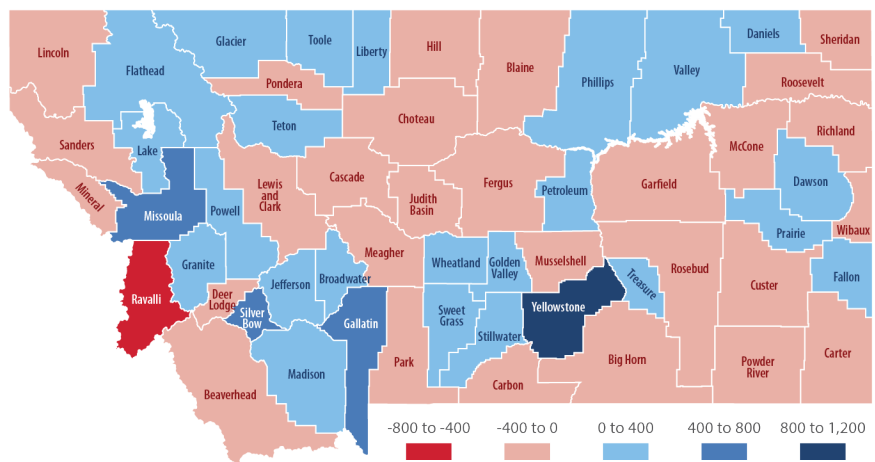


Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2013-2017 County-to-County Flows

the state. Fergus County had the highest net out-migration in the state. The county with the most net-outflow of people to other states was Fergus County. Otherwise, positive in-migration was widespread across Montana, including in some of Montana’s more rural and less populated areas such as along the hi-line. Eastern Montana had large in-migration from out-of-state relative to the population of those counties due to the economic opportunities in the oil industry.

Montanans who move within the state are moving to different places than out-of-state movers. **Figure 6** shows annual net migration by county for in-state movers from 2013-2017. Yellowstone and Silver Bow counties, which had negative or low net migration for out-of-state moves, are the two highest net gainers from county-to-county moves. In central Montana, especially around Cascade County, there are net losses in county-to-county moves even though the areas had gains from out-of-state gains. This trend suggests that some areas’ populations are buoyed by in-migration from out-of-state. In general, there is more of a trend of Montanans moving from rural to urban areas among in-state movers. With Montana’s aging population, people may be moving closer to Montana’s cities as they age to have better access to medical services. Alternatively, young people may be moving to the cities after high school to attend the colleges and universities in the cities.

**FIGURE 6**  
**Annual County-to-County In-state Migration**  
*Montana, 2013-2017*



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2013-2017 County-to-County Flows

**Conclusion**

Montana’s economy benefits from migration into and around the state, with worker mobility helping match people to jobs and providing needed labor to fuel continued economic growth around the state. With over 35,000 people moving to Montana from other states in 2017 alone, there are not only newcomers to the state but also many Montanans returning after moving away. Unemployment rates are projected to become even lower than their current 3.3%, future economic growth will rely on Montana continuing to have positive net migration. Recent trends indicate that economic opportunities in Montana do attract and retain people from out-of-state and should continue to going forward.