

Joe Mathews: Why the poor keep moving to the Valley

By Joe
Mathews

Fresno is one of the poorest metro areas in the United States. So why do people keep moving there?

The short answer: Fresno is in California. And there is something very different about our state's poor cities.

Joe Mathews Zocalo Public Square

In other parts of America, people have abandoned cities labeled poor – because of high poverty rates and low rates of education among residents – in big numbers. Detroit's population fell from 1 million in 1995 to 688,000 today. Cleveland's population dropped from 500,000 in 1999 to less than 390,000 today. I cut my teeth as a reporter at the Baltimore Sun, and my main job was watching people flee; Charm City's population, once more than 900,000, is down to 620,000.

But in California, our poor cities are magnets, drawing new people and maintaining strong population growth. Fresno, our poorest large city, had 392,000 people in 1995; it has 520,000 now. Stockton and San Bernardino grew in population even as they slid into bankruptcy. The dynamic extends beyond cities to rural places; California's poorest counties, Imperial and Tulare, have doubled their populations since 1978.

This growth is particularly noteworthy given the slower gains in the state's population in the past two decades. The conservative Manhattan Institute marveled that to examine various city populations, "one would never guess that it was San Bernardino and Stockton, not Akron and Cincinnati, that recently went bankrupt."

The success of these underappreciated cities may surprise Californians, who hear constantly that the people leaving California are disproportionately poor. The two contrasting narratives around poverty – California as a place that the poor are fleeing, and California as a place with the highest percentage of poor people of any state in the country – may further confound. Is California attracting the poor, or repelling them?

The answer, of course, is both.

Poor people are leaving our expensive, crowded coastal counties in search of places where they can improve their standard of living. The basket case known as Los Angeles County – with its perfect storm of high poverty, high housing prices, and lagging job growth – has become particularly adept at driving people away. While many people leave the state entirely, many head, at least at first, to our inland cities.

There they are joined by migrants, some of them doing seasonal labor on farms, and by Californians from smaller, rural communities. There are many reasons to stick it out in some part of California. Our universities are still good and our community colleges provide good value. If you're poor, California offers services that are more generous than those of many other states. California's poor cities also offer another amenity: warm weather. Research shows that warm January weather is among the most reliable predictors of urban growth.

The escape-valve role that these cities play hasn't won them much respect. The leaders of this supposedly progressive state too often see poor people – and the places where they live – more as burdens than potential assets. Listen to Sacramento Democrats lament the 12 million people on MediCal as a budget burden, instead of celebrating



this expansion of health coverage and doing more to provide timely, high-quality health care.

This is a very old fear in California: We are being over-run by the poor. Hollywood famously sabotaged Upton Sinclair's 1934 gubernatorial campaign with phony movie reel ads of "poor people" declaring they were heading to California if Sinclair won and established cash payments for the needy. We are overdue for an attitude shift, as median income is down in California from its 2007 peak.

We should start by treasuring our growing poor cities. Municipalities all over the country are all chasing the same narrow swath of creative college-educated hipsters with tech skills. Might it be more advantageous, in this age of American inequality, for a state to champion cities that attract poor people, and to figure out ways for those cities to do better by their residents?

In California, a focus on poor people and poor places feels like an imperative. Many of our wealthiest places are rapidly aging; these growing poor cities are almost all younger than the state average. And by measures of well-being, their poor residents are just as happy as their wealthier counterparts.

You may think it's odd to focus efforts on attracting, retaining, and nurturing the less fortunate, but I can think of at least one nation that did pretty well by positioning itself as a mecca for the poor. Perhaps someone could erect copies of the Statue of Liberty along Highway 99 outside Fresno, alongside signs with the famous sonnet of Emma Lazarus, transported from New York Harbor to a new California context:

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore."

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