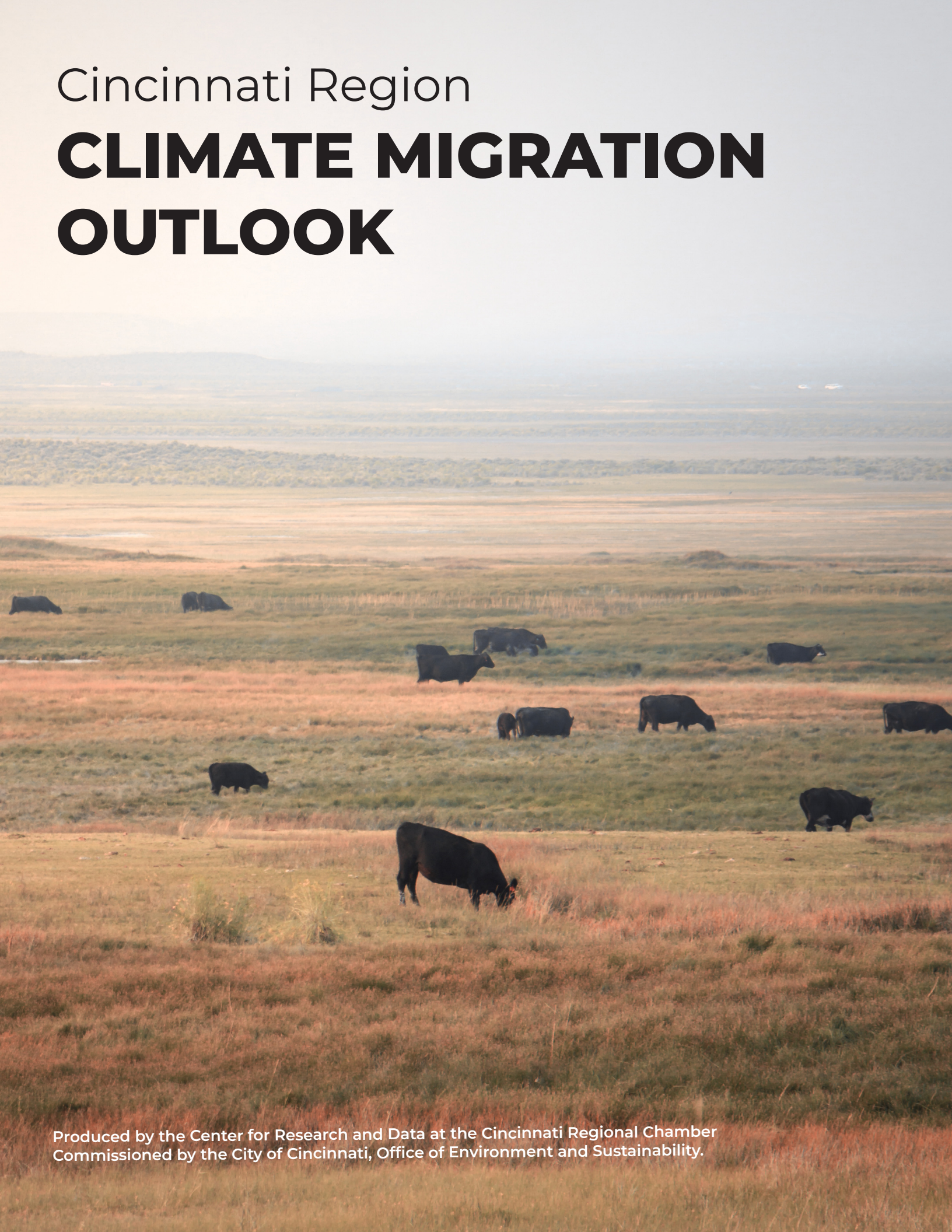
Cincinnati Region

CLIMATE MIGRATION OUTLOOK



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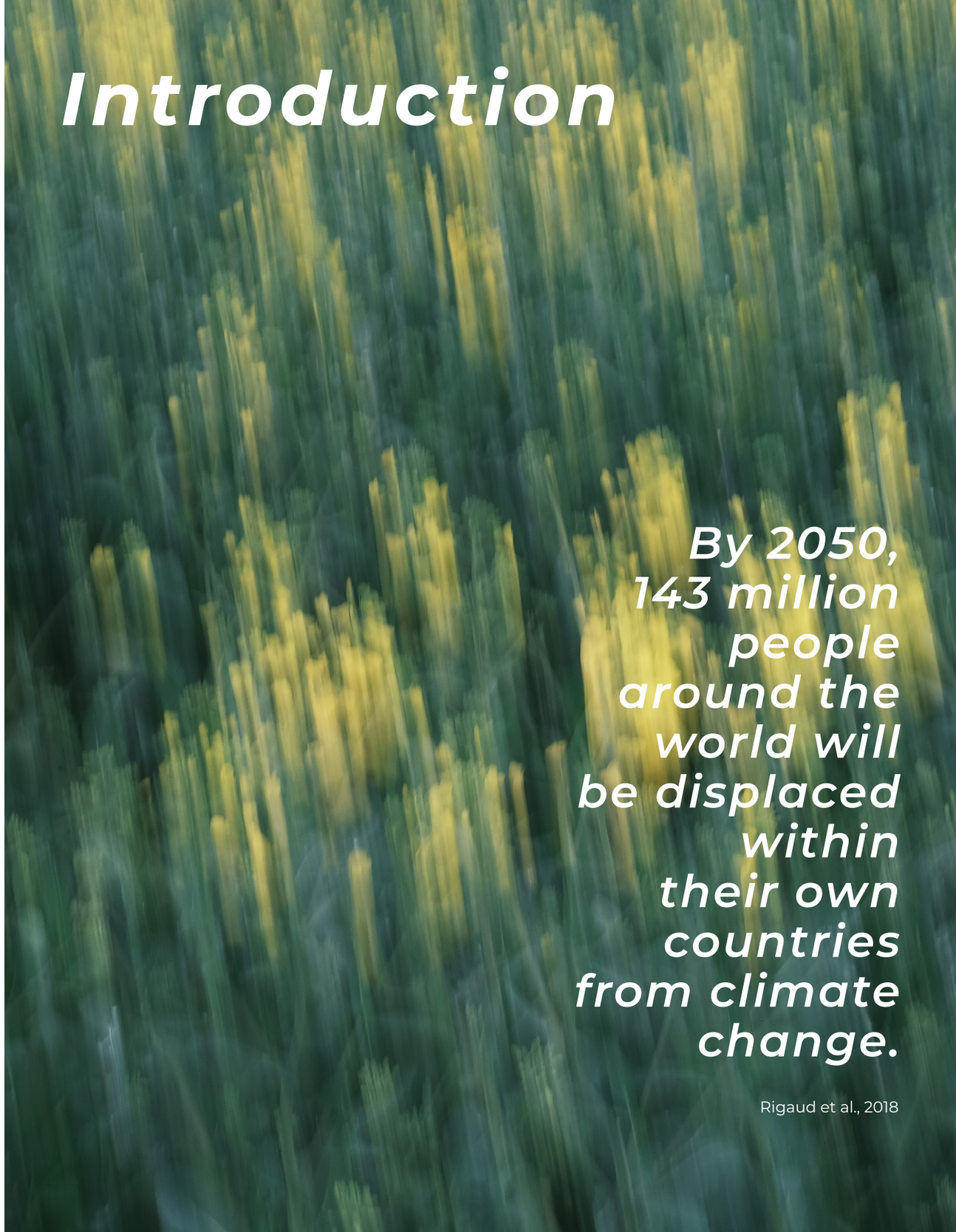


The Future of Migration

Nationally, researchers estimate that more than **13 million Americans will migrate due to sea-level rise alone by 2100** (Hauer 2017). This shift will likely trigger a wave of eastward migration, as people move inland from vulnerable coast and western regions of the United States. At the same time, the mainland United States will continue to receive migrants from places like Puerto Rico and Central America, where climate-related disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes are already displacing communities (Roy and Cheatham 2025).

Around the world, communities are beginning to confront how climate change will reshape their populations and landscapes. The communities that are proactively planning for these demographic shifts will lead the way in climate adaptation and preparation. The City of Cincinnati has proven itself to be a leader in sustainability and climate initiatives, and understanding and preparing for climate migration will continue the city's legacy of leadership on these issues.

This report examines and analyzes Cincinnati's position in this national and global shift. It explores potential population scenarios and outlines steps the region can take to adapt and ensure a more resilient, inclusive, and prepared future for the City of Cincinnati and the Cincinnati region.

Photo: Nick Murphy

The Cincinnati Region

The Cincinnati metropolitan area (referred to in this report as the Cincinnati region), is the 2.3 million resident, 15-county area that includes parts of Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana and is centered on the City of Cincinnati. Geographically, the region holds a significant advantage: it sits near abundant freshwater sources, faces relatively low risk from natural disasters, and is therefore well-positioned for long-term climate resilience (Xu, Speianu, and Hale 2024). These characteristics make Cincinnati a viable destination for those displaced by climate change.

As climate migration increases, the Midwest is likely to see population inflows, and the Cincinnati region has the potential to attract many new residents seeking stability. This reality comes with both opportunities and challenges. Population growth is correlated with economic vitality and a rising standard of living. However, limited housing supply and declining affordability could limit Cincinnati's ability to absorb growth without negative effects on current residents. Without bold reforms to expand housing and drive economic growth and development in an equitable manner, the Cincinnati region risks falling into either a cycle of stagnation or unmitigated growth.

Current trends are cause for concern. As illustrated by the projections in this report the region could see population decline if present patterns continue. Only about 38% of Cincinnati's population falls in the prime working age bracket (people ages 25 to 54 years old), lagging behind peer metro areas (Census ACS 2024). This lack of young professionals and aging demographic signals a deeper challenge: a shrinking labor force and slower economic momentum, which could create a vicious cycle of decline that is hard to escape. As climate migrants choose their new homes, they will be confronted with a wide array of choices; Cincinnati must work to demonstrate the value it can provide for people leaving their regions behind, while investing in the well-being of those already here.

If done properly and intentionally, Cincinnati can grow sustainably, offering safety, prosperity, and a sense of purpose for current and future generations.

Cincinnati's Climate Migration Outlook

As in any exercise looking into the future, there is uncertainty around the magnitude of possible climate migration outcomes. While sudden and large-scale influxes of climate migrants are unlikely in the near term, they are not out of the question. Most climate migrants urgently fleeing disasters move to areas close to their original communities (Junod et al. 2023), making gradual migration to the Cincinnati region the more probable scenario. However, the city must be prepared for all possibilities. Therefore, it is pivotal that Cincinnati has a clear, coordinated plan in place in the case of a larger population influx. More realistically, Cincinnati should anticipate and plan for steady population growth over time. This includes not only accommodating new residents, but also actively attracting them. Many of these people will be domestic transplants, but international migration will also play a significant role. In fact, over the past three years, the majority of the region's growth has been from international migration.

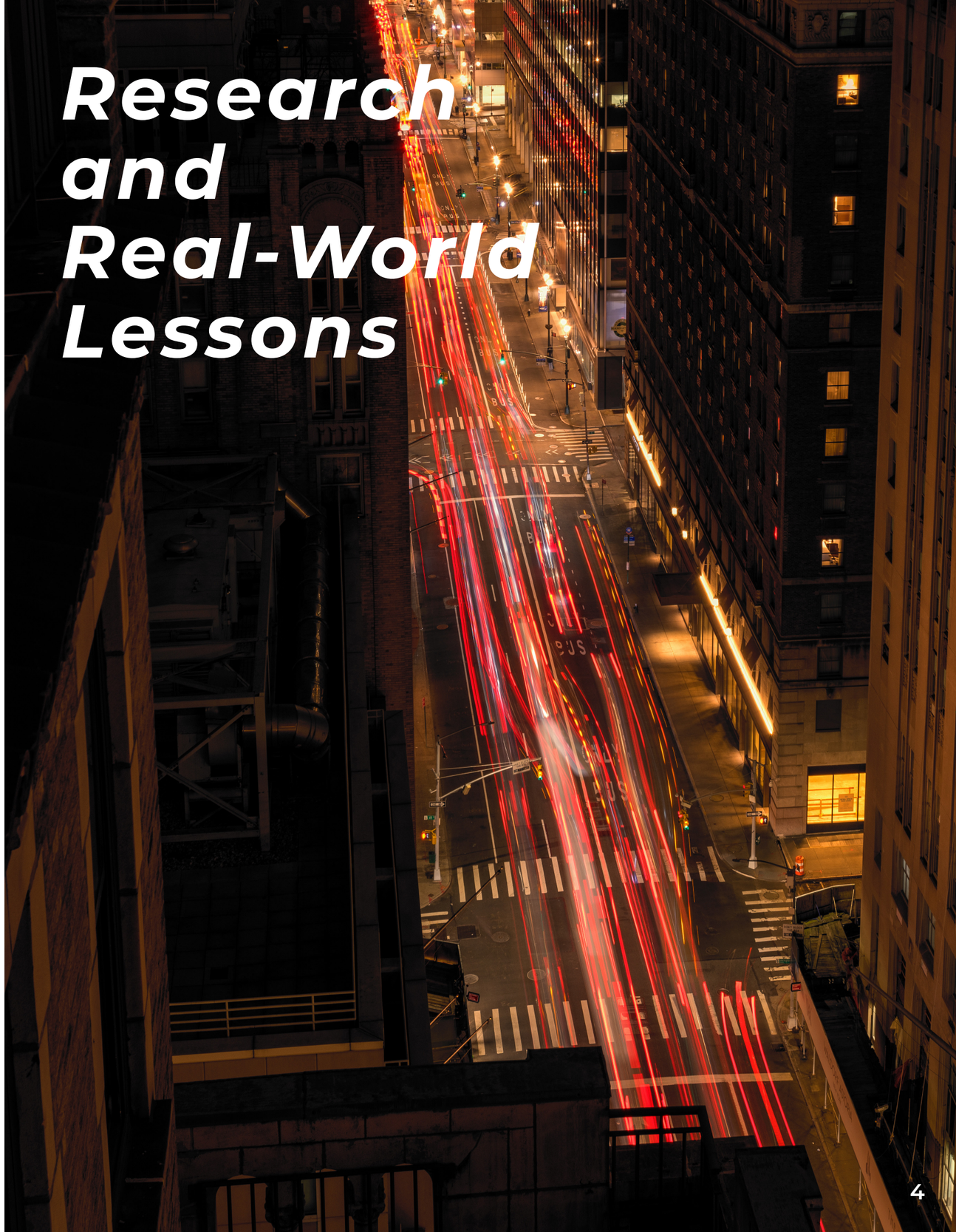
Importantly, not all climate migrants will move because their homes are at risk of extreme events like sea-levels rising or wildfires. In many of the U.S.'s poorest counties—particularly in the South and Southwest—climate change is expected to erode regional economies by harming industries like agriculture. In some cases, this economic disruption could reduce a region's GDP by up to one-third (Hsiang et al. 2017). As people move not just for safety, but for economic stability, Cincinnati has an opportunity to become a destination for those seeking a more stable and affordabile future. Preparing for that possibility means understanding who climate migrants are, what they value, and how to create a region that welcomes them while strengthening the community for

Planning for Climate Migration with a Focus on Inclusive Growth

It is imperative that as Cincinnati seeks to become a climate destination, it does so in ways that strengthen sustainability and advance equity. This means reducing its ecological footprint while preparing for growth that protects vulnerable communities. Climate change already disproportionately affects marginalized populations, and leaders must ensure migration does not worsen those impacts. Research suggests newcomers are more likely to be higher-income individuals (Clark, Nkonya, and Galford 2025). Without planning, this risks fueling climate gentrification, where wealthier arrivals displace long-term residents, drive up housing costs, and deepen inequality. Recommendations at the end of this report outline steps to maintain affordability. If housing and transportation fail to keep pace, climate gentrification and declining affordability become far more likely. Leaders must therefore expand access to affordable housing and transit to support inclusive growth. With thoughtful planning, population growth can reduce disparities rather than exacerbate them.

The *Green Cincinnati Plan* and ongoing preparedness initiatives provide a foundation, signaling progress toward cutting emissions, building resilience, and centering equity. Building on these efforts ensures that population growth strengthens—rather than undermines—the region's vision for a sustainable, inclusive future.

Research and Real-World Lessons



Broad Migration Research

In conventional migration theory, migration is shaped by push factors that drive people away from a place and pull factors that attract them elsewhere (Lee 1966). Push factors include unaffordable housing, limited job opportunities, or environmental disasters. Pull factors include affordability, quality of life, strong job markets, and amenities such as transit, parks, or cultural opportunities. Climate can influence both: fires, floods, or drought may push people out, while climate resilience and sustainability can pull them in. A recent study found that **about 30% of Americans in 2025 considered climate change when deciding whether to move** (Allen 2025).

For Cincinnati, migration is more likely to be driven by pull factors. Research shows that people displaced by disasters often relocate nearby (Junod et al. 2023), making Cincinnati's inland location and lower disaster risk less likely to attract large numbers of evacuees. Instead, the region is well positioned to draw people making long-term, strategic moves to more stable climates.

Literature on climate migration emphasizes that climate and geography are just one set of pull factors among many (Black et al. 2011). Affordability, quality of life, access to transportation, and political or cultural alignment also matter. Cincinnati has distinct advantages here: a nationally recognized park system (Trust for Public Land 2025), a revitalized and walkable urban core, relatively affordable housing compared to peer metros, and one of the nation's most vibrant arts scenes (SMU DataArts 2024). Positioning itself as both climate-forward and quality-of-life–oriented strengthens its pull. Place-based marketing is one strategy that could enhance this positioning, as will be illustrated in the case studies that follow.

Case Studies

Houston, TX

The case of Houston provides a unique opportunity to examine the responses of local governments to large influxes of population following a disaster, and what lessons can be drawn for long-term planning. After Hurricane Katrina in 2005, more than 200,000 people from New Orleans, LA fled to Houston. Of these 200,000 people, between 25,000 and 40,000 people remained permanently (Junod et al. 2023).

This event provided an important turning point in climate migration research, as it allowed researchers to track disasters and migration flows. Eyer et al. established through the case of New Orleans and Houston that people are likely to relocate away from disaster prone places, in general, but that large-scale migration flows brought on by events like natural disasters may result in people moving to areas that are still vulnerable to climate impacts, like Houston.

Many of the variables in general population attraction will apply for the case of climate migration. This is significant to the case of Cincinnati because it suggests that climate resilience alone may not be the dominant factor in a migrant's decision to relocate. People fleeing disasters often prioritize short-term needs like shelter, support networks, and employment over long-term environmental considerations. For example, just as residents fleeing Hurrican Katrina relocated to Houston, someone fleeing wildfires in California might relocate to Arizona or Nevada, rather than moving across the country to the Midwest or East coast. As climate change impacts accelerate, national and global resources will become increasingly strained in supporting populations living in high-risk areas. Encouraging movement to more sustainable, climate-adapted regions will help relieve these pressures, but only if those regions are prepared and appealing to potential migrants (Lustgarten 2020).

The case of Houston also provides insight as to what challenges regions face when experiencing population growth. Researchers Drew and Jakabovics note that migrants faced initial challenges with housing and transportation accommodations. While they were able to find housing, they struggled with proper transportation to take them to employment opportunities or services they needed to access (2023). Eventually, many of these new residents were able to relocate to neighborhoods that better fit their needs; however, the study notes that housing continued to be a significant barrier for residents making their transition.

For Cincinnati, the lesson is clear: housing and transportation must continue to be developed in tandem. Expanding housing options without ensuring mobility will limit the effectiveness of growth strategies and risk excluding the very populations the city hopes to attract.

Orlando, FL and Buffalo, NY

Orlando and Buffalo provide valuable insights into how social networks and migration histories shape climate-related relocation, particularly from Puerto Rico, where climate change has intensified both short- and long-term push factors.

In 2017, Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico as a category 4 hurricane, causing widespread destruction and an estimated 5,000 deaths. Exact numbers are uncertain, but experts estimate that between 160,000 and 400,000 people left Puerto Rico as a result, with many relocating to Florida. These climate incidents continue to push migrants from Puerto Rico to Florida. From 2010 to 2018, it is estimated that Florida gained over 320,000 Puerto Rican residents (Junod et al. 2023). What scholars found with Orlando is that much of the growth in the region driven from climate migration was driven by pre-existing relationships and networks that already existed between Puerto Rico and Central Florida.

This case illustrates a key principle in climate migration: people are more likely to move where they already have ties. While Cincinnati may not have the long-standing migration pipeline that Orlando does, there is an opportunity to create networks to facilitate easy migration to an area that feels familiar, even if those connections don't currently exist.

Buffalo marks another case of climate migrants from Puerto Rico – fleeing due to hurricanes and earthquakes. While it is difficult to isolate climate as the sole driver, scholars believe that the 10,000 additional Puerto Rican residents that moved to Buffalo picked this destination because of the pre-existing Puerto Rican community there. As with Orlando, this suggests that established networks are key enablers of migration, especially in the context of international and climate-drive displacement.

Duluth, MN

The case of Duluth, MN illustrates a nuanced scenario in which place-based marketing draws significant attention to a region as a result of a perceived climate resilience. What began in Duluth as a lighthearted phrase coined by Harvard economist Jesse Keenan, quickly turned into a national sensation, marketing the city of Duluth as "climate-proof Duluth." (Sivula, Lynch, and Leslie 2021) This campaign idea was centered around attracting climate migrants to the region and fueling Duluth's economic growth.

While the slogan took off, residents of Duluth shared their opinions on the idea, and the city became divided over the concept. Some residents were concerned with the ethical implications of "profiting" from climate change, while others were concerned about that population growth would affect their community's identity, infrastructure, and housing market

A key concern for Duluth residents was the impact of new residents on factors like housing costs and affordability. Residents feared that an influx of high-income migrants could drive up housing costs, especially in desirable neighborhoods already facing housing pressures. Without an increase in housing supply, demand-driven price spikes could displace long-time residents or erode affordability. Before the "climate-proof Duluth" campaign, Duluth had succeeded in marketing itself as an outdoor capital of the Midwest, attracting outdoors-oriented and environmentally conscious residents to the region. Residents of Duluth worried how cultural values of the region would shift with an influx of new residents, despite the likelihood that these residents would be passionate about the environment, given their decisions to move due to climate.

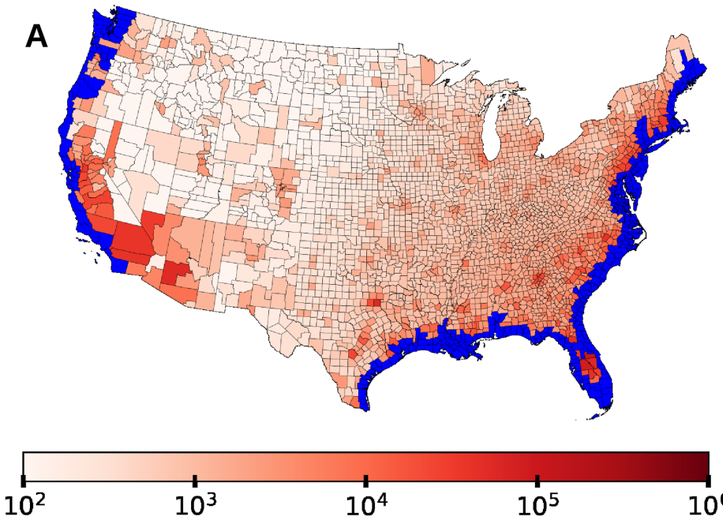
Duluth illustrates how the prospect of climate migration can be complicated for residents. To succeed, the Cincinnati region's leaders must present a clear, organized, and purposeful case that emphasizes the benefits of welcoming new residents while also supporting existing communities. Leadership must be proactive in addressing and demonstrating how climate migration can strengthen the region for everyone.

Climate Migration Modeling and Projections

Research reveals that quantifying climate migration is challenging, especially at the regional or metro level. While national and international projections are more widely available, local-level estimates are limited by unpredictability and lack of data. Nevertheless, high quality projections using various projection modeling systems have produced similar results showing a general shift moving eastward from the West Coast, visualized below.

Researchers frequently use gravity-based models to project where people might move in the US, based on factors like climate change or urban development. These models are called “gravity” models because they operate on the principle that people are “pulled” to areas that are larger, more economically dynamic, or more accessible. Factors that pull people to areas include, infrastructure, livability, climate safety, and job availability, among others.

Gravity models have been used to project the migration of people moving from the West Coast towards the eastern parts of the United States. However, they are less precise at the metro-level, as many localized factors influence a person to move. Climate migration patterns also intersect with other forms of migration such as moves driven by job changes, affordability, or family ties, which can obscure climate-specific reasons.



The above map demonstrates the projected effect of sea-level rises on counties in the United States. Counties in blue are those directly affected by sea level rises, and the pink represents those being affected by these rises - indicating levels of migration (Robinson and Moreno-Cruz 2020).

To help the Cincinnati region prepare, the Center for Research and Data has produced a series of projections which detail the population shifts that could occur under three possible scenarios grounded in current migration patterns which include climate trends. These scenarios explore how climate migration might affect population growth in Cincinnati under varying assumptions about regional pull factors, infrastructure readiness, and national trends.

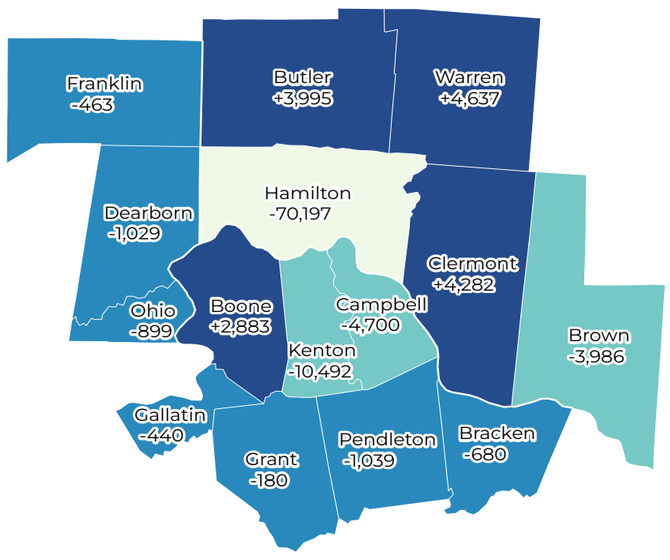
Importantly, studies show that climate migration has been eliciting a pattern of rural-to-urban migration, indicating that many migrants coming to Cincinnati will likely resettle in the region’s urban areas. Therefore, Scenarios 2 and 3 both reflect this pattern by modeling population shifts that concentrate in the region’s urban core.

Scenario 1: Stagnation

Under Scenario 1, the Cincinnati region does not strive to attract residents to this region and continues on its current trajectory of growth without making the necessary adjustments to be a more attractive region. This would result in a population **decline of about 78,307 people** by 2050, taking the region from a 2,302,815 person metropolitan area according to the 2024 Census Estimates to a 2,224,508 population metropolitan area.

This scenario is more likely to occur if the region does not embrace innovative housing and transportation policies and strive to be a welcoming region for new residents. In the past five years, international migration has been the sole driver of population growth in the Cincinnati region (Census ACS 2023). A projected slowing of international migration will severely affect Cincinnati's economic growth.

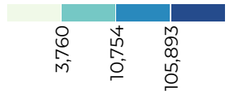
This scenario is a cautionary projection. It underscores the importance of proactive policy around housing affordability, transportation infrastructure, and inclusive growth. The map below illustrates which areas of the Cincinnati region may see growth and decline.

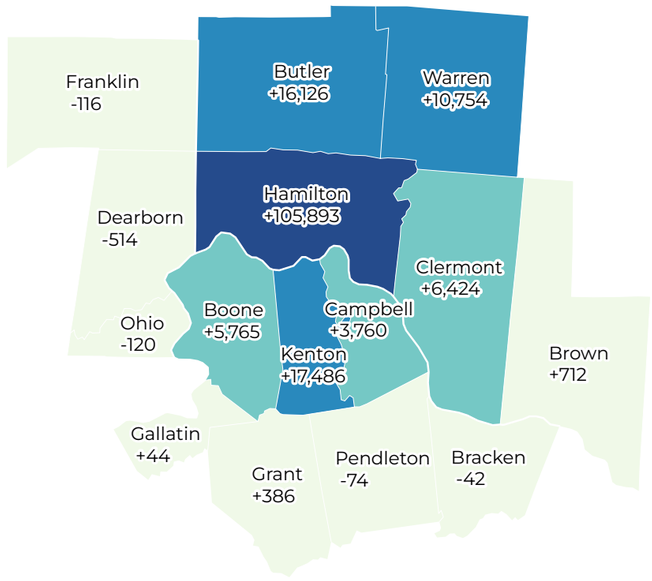


Scenario 2: Modest Growth

Scenario 2 reflects a moderately aspirational future in which Cincinnati implements strategic improvements to housing, transportation, and overall livability, enabling it to become a more vibrant, welcoming region and accommodate a population increase. Under this scenario, Cincinnati would add **166,484 new residents** to the region by 2050, with approximately 63.6% moving into Hamilton County. The region would also need to add **73,387 new housing units.** Expanding transportation infrastructure will also be essential to support current and new residents. This could require up to 3,054 new daily bus service miles, 2,020 roadway lane miles, and 101 highway lane miles, depending on where people choose to live. Growth in the urban core would call for more public transit investment, while suburban or exurban growth would demand additional roadway capacity. This balance is important because public transit moves more people efficiently, has lower lifetime public costs, and reduced environmental impact, whereas auto-oriented development requires larger public investments, higher maintenance, and produces greater per capita emissions.

Remaining infrastructure improvement requirements will be minimal. Historically, the City of Cincinnati supported a population of 503,998 in 1950 (Decennial Census 1950). Today, the city's population is closer to 300,000, meaning much of its core infrastructure, including roads, sewers, and public facilities, was designed for a significantly larger population. By returning closer to historic population levels, Cincinnati can spread infrastructure costs across more residents, making city services more efficient and financially sustainable.



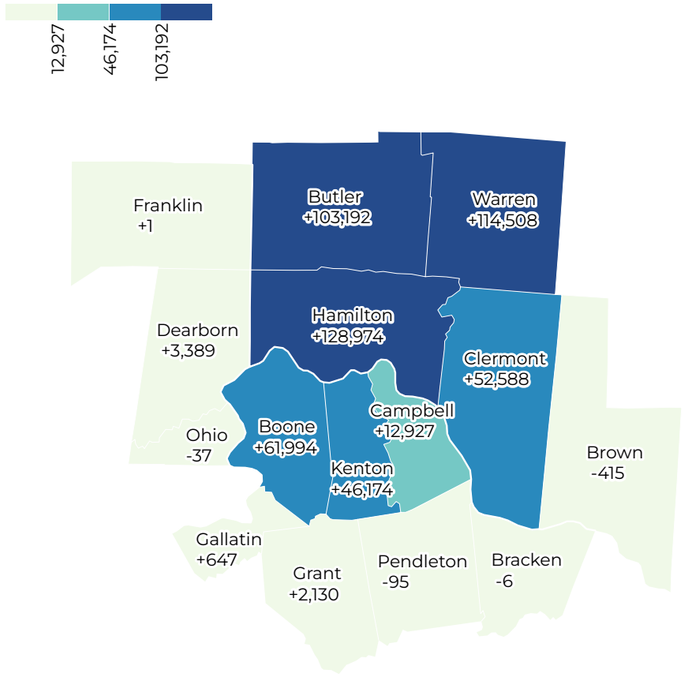


Scenario 3: High Migration Influx

While less likely than Scenario 2, this scenario outlines a plausible high-growth future for the region. This future would be driven by intensified climate migration and broader domestic relocation trends. Scenario 3 reflects the highest projected migration inflow into the Cincinnati region, with an additional **525,971 new residents** by 2050.

Under this scenario, the City of Cincinnati and surrounding communities would need to adapt their physical infrastructure, investing in key systems such as water, sewer, energy, and digital infrastructure. It would also require **219,466 new housing units**, and transportation infrastructure that is dramatically scaled up in terms of coverage and frequency. Major transportation investments would include up to 9,650 new daily bus service miles, up to 6,382 roadway lane miles, and as many as 318 highway lane miles. While the overall trade-offs remain the same—transit-oriented growth versus auto-oriented growth demanding greater public investment and producing higher emissions—the mix of infrastructure needs would adjust to reflect where people choose to live.

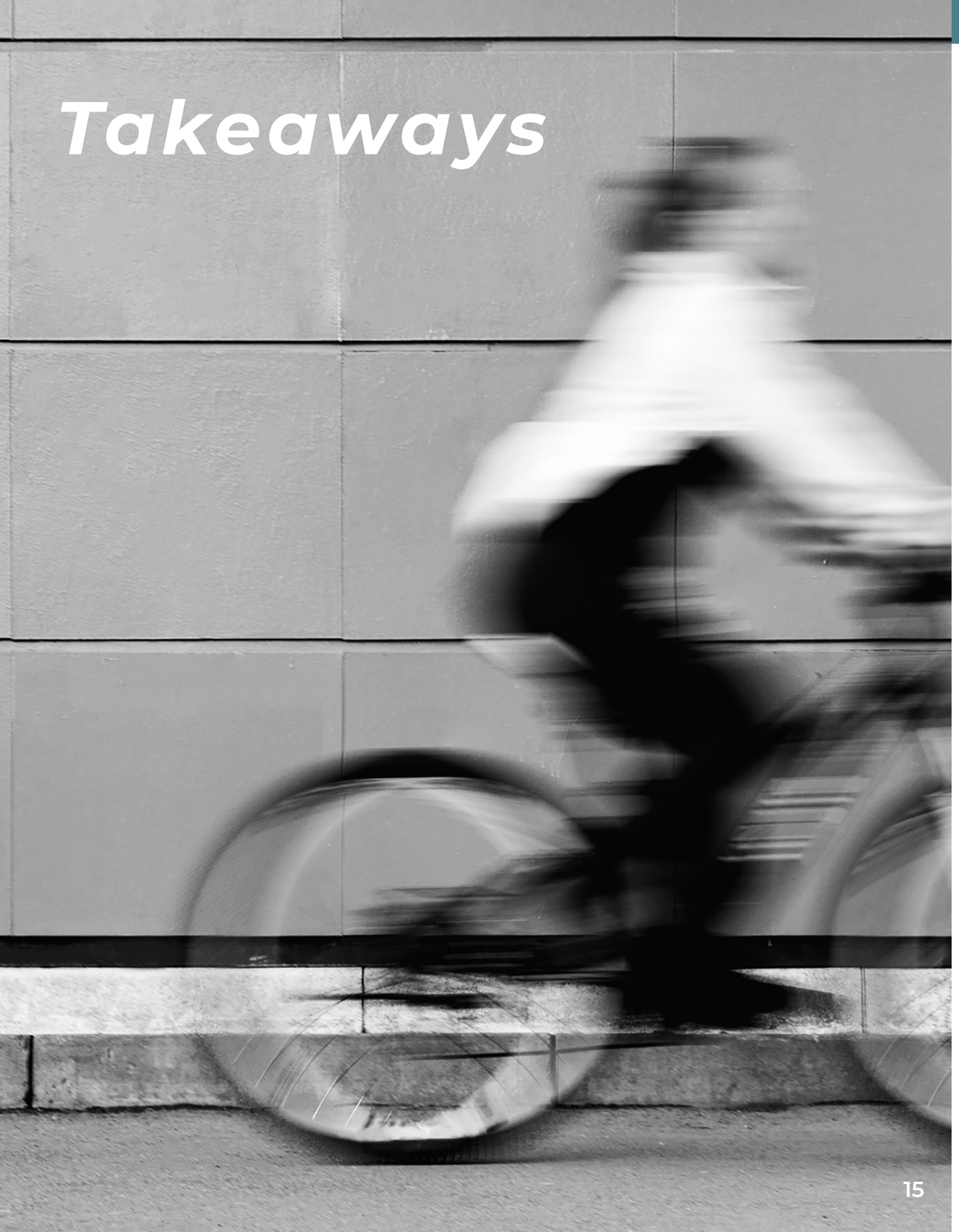
This scenario provides Cincinnati the opportunity to be at the forefront of climate resilience and inclusive urban growth. To succeed, local governments, regional stakeholders, and the private sector must work together to ensure equitable access to housing and services, support existing residents, expand transit and multimodal infrastructure, and focus on creating a welcoming culture as population grows and demographics change rapidly. By planning for this scenario now, the region can maximize its climate advantage, harness migration as a tool for revitalization, and ensure new and existing residents all benefit from growth.



Scenario Summary Table

Scenario	Description	Population Change	Key Assumptions	Infrastructure Needs and Outcomes
Scenario 1: Stagnation	Cincinnati continues its current path with no attempt to attract new residents.	-78,307	No new efforts to attract migrants, international migration slows, outmigration continues	Minimal investment, risk of underutilized infrastructure, economic stagnation
Scenario 2: Modest Growth	Cincinnati adopts moderate housing, transportation, and livability improvements.	+219,484	Proactive housing policy, expanded transportation options, region positions itself as a climate haven	73,677 new housing units, 3,054 mile increase in transit service, optimization and update current infrastructure where necessary
Scenario 3: High Migration Influx	Cincinnati becomes a major climate migration destination.	+578,971	National migration accelerates, climate conditions worsen elsewhere	219,466 new housing units, 9,650 mile increase in transit service

Takeaways



Cincinnati has not attracted migrants at the same rate as other regions, illustrated by the region's comparatively low foreign-born population (Census ACS 2024). This has contributed to the lack of prime working age population and demographic challenges mentioned at the beginning of this report. The Cincinnati region's advantageous geographic location provides an opportunity to change this trend. As residents are re-thinking their location along coasts or disaster-prone regions, Cincinnati's geographic position, away from disaster and extreme climate, puts it back on the map for migrants. However, to compete with other similarly-sized Midwestern cities, Cincinnati must become a more attractive and competitive destination.

Migrants typically seek places with existing networks and support, affordable housing, robust transportation networks, an affordable cost of living, and ample employment opportunities –areas in which the Midwest as a whole already performs well overall. If Cincinnati wants to stand out and attract climate migrants, it will need to step up its

Prepare

Literature reviews demonstrate the importance of preparing for many different scenarios. It is easier to prepare for population increases before they happen, and this will further attract more residents. This preparation, detailed in the recommendations below, will improve the lives of current Cincinnatians and make it a more appealing destination for newcomers. To ensure a thriving future, Cincinnati's leaders must proactively prepare for a range of potential population scenarios.

Perception and Place-Marketing

Research indicates that many people moving from West Coast locations may be more inclined to relocate to East Coast cities (Duncan and Lanthan 2025)– assuming they offer similar amenities to what they might be accustomed to, and not aware of or interested in the benefits of moving to the Midwest. If the Midwest were to present itself as an opportunity for this population, Cincinnati would simply become one of many other mid-sized metropolitan options in this region. Therefore, Cincinnati must find a way to stand out to people looking to move.

Cincinnati does not need to market itself as "Climate-Proof Cincinnati." Marketing the region in an opportunistic manner could be insensitive and unhelpful. In fact, the Duluth mayor herself even rejected the notion of climate-marketing to attract climate refugees into their region (Sivula, Lynch, and Leslie 2025). Instead, Cincinnati should focus on improving quality of life as a more robust strategy for attracting migrants. Most residents are moving with climate as one factor among many, and the same principles of population attraction apply – affordability, values, and vibrancy. Cincinnati's messaging should focus on these principles for maximum effectiveness.

Continue to Focus on Being a More Welcoming Region

Noted both in Orlando and Duluth case studies, cultural characteristics of the relocation cities play a large role in where migrants move. Orlando, and Florida as a whole, continue to receive many Puerto Rican migrants due to preexisting networks and cultural dynamics. Following the decline of the steel industry, Duluth rebranded itself as an outdoor recreational haven. This existing respect for the environment resonates with incoming residents who prioritize sustainability. In alignment with a values-based migration theory, residents are more likely to move to places that align with their values. For Cincinnati, this means fostering inclusive networks and building a welcoming, environmentally conscious regional identity.

Improve Affordability

Even as it remains affordable compared to many other large metropolitan areas around the United States, affordability in the Cincinnati region has been declining as housing costs rise. Not only does this make the region less attractive for prospective new residents, but it hurts current residents, and not addressing this issue would exacerbate the situation. An increase in population could result in an increased cost of living if not met with expanded housing, transportation, and job opportunities. On the other side of this coin, research indicates that a lack of population growth could fuel economic decline and stagnation. Therefore, it's pivotal that inclusive economic growth is at the forefront of goals driving Cincinnati forward.

Housing

To meet rising housing demand, the Cincinnati region, including the City of Cincinnati, must reform development and land use policies to make construction easier and encourage a variety of housing types, especially in walkable neighborhoods and near public transit. For more detailed strategies, see the Chamber's Embracing Growth housing report, which draws on national research on affordability.

The report calls for a "yes-to-all" approach to housing, with greater density near job hubs and public transit, reforms to costly rules like parking mandates and height limits, and better alignment of transit and housing through transit-oriented development. It also urges streamlining approvals across jurisdictions to reduce delays, lower costs, and improve affordability.jurisdictions to reduce delays, lower risk, and improve affordability.

Transportation

Research suggests that many climate migrants move without a car (Junod et al. 2023). Therefore, having a robust transportation system that includes strong public transit and accessible active transportation infrastructure will be key for both affordability and attracting new residents to this area. Public transportation will need to be expanded in both coverage and frequency of bus service. In addition, it will be improtant to continue to invest in infrastructure and systems that support multimodal transportation, such as trails, sidewalks, and bikelanes will attract and support new residents, and enhance the quality of life for current Cincinnatians.

Conclusion

The Cincinnati region's population is aging and at risk of long-term decline if international migration declines. At the same time, millions of people nationally will be seeking new homes as climate change forces them to reimagine their futures in their current home regions. Cincinnati has to choose whether to passively absorb the consequences of this shift, or to proactively prepare.

If not met with diligent preparation, climate-induced population influxes may overwhelm existing systems, decrease quality of life for current Cincinnati residents, and deepen divides that already exist within a stratified community. But with deliberate, forward-thinking preparation centered on inclusive economic growth, housing reform, expanded transportation access, and a commitment to welcoming newcomers, Cincinnati can seize this moment.

Climate migration, paired with intentional and inclusive planning, could be the engine that drives renewed prosperity for the region. Done well, it can strengthen the economy, improve life for current residents, and position Cincinnati as a national model: a vibrant, affordable, and welcoming home for those forced to leave theirs behind.

Photo: Madeleine Hordinski

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