

## Birth Dearth Eclipsed by Population Explosion

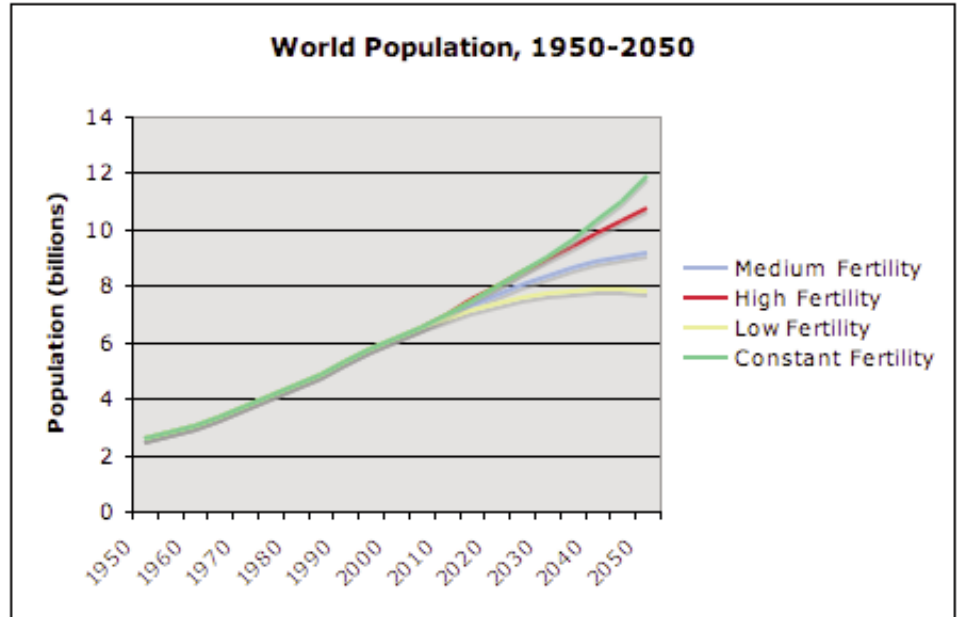
**H**umans are going extinct! Hardly. Population decline has recently been grabbing headlines in a variety of news outlets in response to the concerns of several governments in Europe and Japan over low fertility.<sup>1</sup> While decrying the woes of a shrinking population makes for a good story because of the financial and cultural challenges it presents, these stories fuel worry over an issue that is completely overwhelmed by the rapidly growing population in the rest of the world.

The global population is careening toward 9.1 billion people by 2050 (from 6.8 billion today), and that's assuming that fertility will decline in countries with weak family planning infrastructures. A population of 9.1 billion will mean that programs have done an excellent job of lowering fertility rates around the world; if they are not successful, the population could be closer to 11 billion by 2050.

### Premature Concerns

Population decline due to low fertility (rather than famine, war, or disease) is a new phenomenon. As a result, we do not yet know what consequences it may bring or if and when the trend may reverse. Only a few countries have shrinking populations, most of them in the former Soviet Union. Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Japan have recently begun or are about to enter the stage of population decline. Although population growth rates are slowly falling in several countries, on the whole, Europe is still growing in a positive direction and will continue to do so for many years.

Higher investment in each child (i.e. more money spent) is largely responsible for low fertility in wealthy countries. Surveys in the twenty-five member nations of the European Union in 2004, however, report that women's ideal number of children is at least two.<sup>2</sup> This implies that the decline will be temporary



The J-curve above depicts the four population projections that the UN updates every year. Only under the lowest fertility scenario will world population begin to decline after 2050, and that's assuming that every country reduces fertility to 1.85 children per woman. This is an unlikely scenario in countries with fertility rates as high as five or six children per woman.

and that as women figure out how to be mothers *and* remain in the labor force, total fertility will approach replacement level. Replacement level is the number of children a woman must have to replace herself and her partner and keep the population stable—in the developed world that figure is 2.1.

In France, fertility rose from 1.71 in 1995 to 1.89 in 2008. Although some claim that immigrants have superficially inflated this figure, France's National Institute of Demographic Studies concluded that immigrants are accountable for only five percent of this increase, and that fertility of the "native" population was largely responsible.<sup>3</sup> Sweden's fertility rate has increased as well, from 1.56 in 1998 to 1.87 in 2008. Both countries have made concerted efforts toward family friendliness in terms of parental leave and flexible work schedules, allowing women to be mothers while also engaging in the workforce.<sup>4</sup> Thus, they are able to attain their desired fertility more easily than are women in countries that force them to choose one lifestyle over the other.

The experiences of both France and Sweden suggest that low fertility in some countries will not last forever. Such fluctuations indicate that alarmist claims—such as Robert J. Samuelson's warning that "[b]y not having children, people are voting against the future—their countries' and perhaps their own"<sup>5</sup>—are early or unwarranted.

There is another factor at work here called the tempo effect. As women delay childbearing until later in their lives, there will naturally be a period where birth rates indicate that women are having fewer children than in the past. Once these women start their families, total fertility will gravitate toward replacement level. Indeed, the United States saw its fertility rate fall to a low of 1.79 in 1975 before rising back to replacement level in the late 1980s.<sup>6</sup> John Bongaarts, Vice President of the Population Council, says that the tempo effect typically understates total fertility rates by about one quarter of a birth.

## The Good News

One reason to celebrate low birth rates is that our current population is already stressing the earth's resources and the vast array of wildlife with which we share the planet. Stanford professor and author of *The Population Bomb*, Paul Ehrlich, cautions that "we have certainly passed the earth's long-term carrying capacity."<sup>7</sup> A little population decline—which even alarmists are not forecasting until near the end of the century—would help bring humanity back to a sustainable level.

Many positive effects have followed low fertility in countries from East Asia to Europe to Australia and New Zealand. These are hardly the places that come to mind when thinking of regions in strife. With more investment in each child and fewer children to care for, parents and governments have been able to raise the "quality" of their populations. People are now more highly educated, productive, and physically healthy on the whole than they were when families were large.

## The Bad News

The attention paid to low fertility in a few regions threatens to draw public concern away from the more pressing issue of global population growth. Some go so far as to declare the population movement dead. Mike Nahan of the *Herald Sun* gleefully concludes, "The population bomb has turned into a dud."<sup>8</sup> Ben Wattenberg, who coined the term "birth dearth," now refers to the state of the world population as being in "free fall."<sup>9</sup> In reality, the population continues to rise by 78 million people every year.

Such statements distract from the real demographic problem we face. This diversion has harmed population programs in terms of lost funding over the past decade. Some foundations mistakenly view population growth a problem of the past and have therefore discontinued support.

In fact, fewer than five percent of the poorest young people in the world use modern contraception.<sup>10</sup> While the average woman in a developed country bears 1.6 children, the average woman in a less

developed country has 4.4.<sup>11</sup> Already 2.6 billion people worldwide have no access to sanitation facilities. Schools are overcrowded and cannot absorb the increased class sizes of each year. Food and water shortages will continue to intensify, as will rates of unemployment, especially with the economic downturn. All of these factors keep the people at the bottom of society trapped in a cycle of poverty.

## The Solution

Although population may seem difficult to address, ultimately the best way to confront it is simple: trust women. Women who have access to family planning and who are able to work and be mothers generally have the number of children they desire. This number tends to hover around replacement level.

Pronatalist policies that ignore women's right to make their own reproductive choices are dehumanizing and counterproductive. Iran implemented such a policy and it backfired. Shah Reza Pahlavi instituted a population program in 1967 and Iran became one of the first Muslim nations to offer widespread family planning to its citizens. Low fertility alarmed a new leader, however, and in 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini forbade modern methods of contraception in an attempt to force women to have more children and supply "soldiers for Islam." Although the birth rate rose, "their record population growth was burdening the economy, destroying the environment, and overwhelming schools," and eventually the Ayatollah backed down and reinstated family planning services.<sup>12</sup> Iran now has a fertility rate of 1.83.

Studies examining the discrepancies in fertility rates between different European countries show that those in northern Europe generally have higher fertility (1.82) than those in the south (1.44). The common denominator is that the northern countries have more symmetrical gender roles in society. "[M]any countries with greater gender equality have a greater social commitment to day care and other institutional support for working women, which gives those

women the possibility of having second or third children."<sup>13</sup> While it is harmful to give incentives to women to have more than their desired number of children, programs that allow mothers to participate in the work force are just as important as programs that allow women to limit their childbearing.

Women understand the benefits of having smaller families and investing more in each child. Even in societies where the cost of raising children can be prohibitively high, women want an average of two children. They will have a better shot at achieving that desired size when they have all the tools available, including modern contraception and flexible employment options. Rather than bemoan the slowly shrinking populations of a few countries, we should use all the resources we have to allow every woman in every country to achieve her ideal family size.

### Sources

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<sup>3</sup> Walker, Martin. "Walker's World: French Births Soar." *United Press International*, April 30, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Hoem, Jan M. "Why does Sweden's have such high fertility?" *Demographic Research*, 2005: 13 pp. 559-572.

<sup>5</sup> Samuelson, Robert J. "Behind the Birth Dearth." *Washington Post*, May 24, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> GapMinder.com. Information visualization of world trends. <http://www.gapminder.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> Francis, David R. "Birth Dearth' Worries Pale in Comparison to Overpopulation." *Christian Science Monitor*, July 14, 2008.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Nahan, Mike. "All is Positive on the Population Front." *Herald Sun*, December 22, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Wattenberg, Ben J. "Rise and Fall of Nations." *Washington Times*, April 7, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Sibonney, Claire. "U.N. urges family planning ahead of World Population Day." *Reuters*, July 10, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> World Population Prospects: 2008 Revision, UN Population Division, 2009.

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<sup>13</sup> Shorto, Russell. "No Babies?" *New York Times Magazine*, June 29, 2008.

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*Population Connection is America's largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth's resources.*