

Forget overpopulation. The world could soon face a population bust

By Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson, Feb 24, 2019 | 3:05 AM



(Ted S. Warren / Associated Press)

In Srinivaspuri, a large urban slum in southern Delhi, small groups of women gather in a one-room school lined with tattered alphabet posters on a pleasantly warm spring morning. They've come to discuss a delicate topic with us: how many children they plan to have.

The women are in their teens, 20s and 30s, some single, others married. But all of them say they want better lives than their mothers lived. They want to work, to have money and to be able to stand up to the men in their lives. Two children would be perfect.

This is remarkable. An Indian woman coming of age in 1960 would have had, typically, six children, according to United Nations data. If she came of age in the 1980s, she would have had four. Today, Indian women have just over two children on average.

It's a shift with profound implications, and one that doesn't fit most people's expectations. The U.N. Population Division predicts that 11.2 billion people will burden the Earth at the end of the century, almost 4 billion more than we have today. If it happens, it would trigger an overpopulation crisis that could lead to famine, war and environmental devastation. But a growing number of demographers and other authorities are beginning to doubt those predictions. They believe the future will be defined not by a population bomb, but by a population bust. And the young women of Srinivaspuri help explain why.

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To research the planet's population future, we talked about family size with people on six continents — academics and statisticians and government officials, but also young women and men who agreed to sit down for a chat about their futures. In addition, Ipsos Public Affairs polled people in 26 countries — developed and developing — asking how many children they wanted.

What we discovered is that almost everywhere women and men want about two children on average, a birth rate that will stabilize global population and may mean it will drop, rather than explode.

Rapid urbanization appears to be what's driving the trend. Fifty-five percent of the people on the globe now live in cities. As people in developing countries leave the countryside, women gain access to media, to education, to information from other urbanized women, and they choose to have small families.

Wolfgang Lutz, founder of Vienna's Wittgenstein Centre of Demography and Global Human Capital, puts it this way: "The brain is the most important reproductive organ. Once a woman receives enough information and autonomy to make an informed and self-directed choice ... she immediately has fewer [children]."

This has long been the case in the developed world, where almost every country has a fertility rate below the 2.1 children per woman needed to sustain the population. Japan lost almost 450,000 people last year. In Italy, where government statistics show the birthrate is 1.3 children per woman, the health minister in 2015 said outright, "We are a dying country."

But the real news comes from the developing world

The birth rate has dropped so low in China that the world's most populous nation will start losing people in the next decade, according to World Bank projections. Brazil, the fifth-most-populous

nation, will experience the same fate in the 2040s. In India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, South Africa, Malaysia and Mexico, the birth rate stands at or barely above replacement rate and is still falling.

Much of sub-Saharan Africa still struggles with overpopulation, but the even there, a woman in 1970 might have had seven or eight children; today, she has three or four.

These data suggest that by about 2050, the global population will stabilize at between 8 billion and 9 billion people, and then it will start to decline. In 100 years, it could be about what it is today, and even more heavily concentrated in urban areas.

The role of cities in all this is no mystery. In the country, a child is an asset — another pair of hands to work the fields. In the city, he or she is just another mouth to feed. Religion and family pressure are more powerful in rural areas, encouraging early marriage and childbirth, and discouraging even prohibiting contraception. But in the city, the bonds of religion and family often get replaced by friends and co-workers. When was the last time one of your co-workers urged you to have more children?

Our talking tour uncovered a myriad of rationales and mechanisms all aimed at the same low-birth-rate goal. At a dinner party in Brussels, thirtysomething couples said work was too consuming and rents too high for children, at least right now. Female graduate students at a Seoul university preferred to remain unmarried because South Korean men refused to do housework.

In Nairobi, there's an app to calculate the price that a man must pay for permission to marry a woman. As Kenyan women become better educated, the bride price increases, forcing the couple to delay marriage until the man has built up enough capital.

In Sao Paulo, women and doctors conspire to have babies delivered by caesarean section, with the physician performing a tubal ligation at the

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same time. It's called "shutting down the factory."

And in the U.S., Palm Springs construction workers — some in the U.S. legally, some not — talked about how in their home countries the priest urged women to provide welcoming homes for their husbands, and to give them plenty of children. In America, these men's wives and girlfriends go to school, hang out together, practice contraception and, in the words of one of the workers, "drink tequila like a man!"

There is much to celebrate about a global future with fewer people. Declining populations will ease the stress on land and water. Cities show a marked decrease in carbon emissions per person — New York state, for example, has the lowest per capita carbon emissions in the U.S., thanks to New York City.

Economically, however, the future could be more challenging, as societies struggle to cope with fewer young workers and taxpayers. Automation will help, but economic growth will stall:

Consumption powers economies, and robots don't buy refrigerators.

The United States is hardly immune. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the birth rate in America has been below replacement since 1971. However, the U.S., as a nation of immigrants, has a demographic advantage. A million newcomers a year arrive here, filling vacant jobs and paying taxes to sustain an aging population. Immigration, in fact, could make the 2000s a second American Century because of the population edge immigration gives us. But only if the nativist, anti-immigrant sentiment stoked by the White House can be prevented from taking deeper root.

Global population decline isn't a good thing or a bad thing. But it is a big thing. We can't know all the ways it will play out. The U.S., like many other countries around the world, must find a way to replace its missing babies. And if we are to grow into the future, we must begin to plan for a population bust now.

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