

What population boom? We're facing a population bust

Fewer babies are being born, but fewer old people are dying.



[Lloyd Alter](#), March 21, 2018, 6:29 a.m.



The overall population is growing, but the decision by more families to have one or two babies — vs. six or seven — makes a difference in the long run. (Photo: Atstock Productions/Shutterstock)

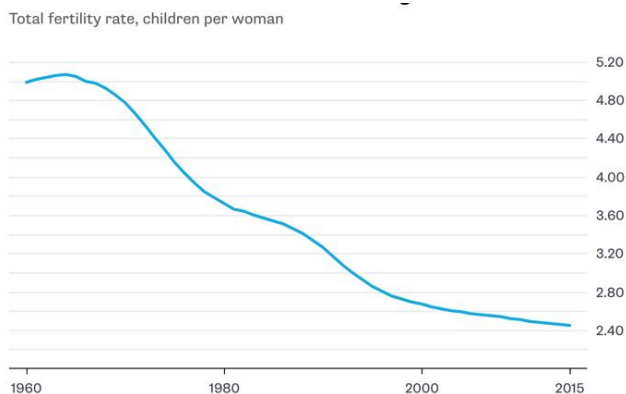
On the West Coast of the United States, there's an ongoing battle over zoning that might [allow more people to own homes near public transportation](#). At one such recent meeting, a woman protested a rezoning proposal, saying "we don't need more homes, we need fewer people," as if the world population was what was causing development pressures in Berkeley.

In fact, our world population bomb is a dud.

A few years ago, we looked at population statistics and asked [Are we facing a crisis of too few babies?](#) Many commenters thought we were nuts, saying things like "This makes no sense to me. Aren't we at 8 billion and counting?" Well, yes, we are, and the world's population is still increasing. But the fertility rate, the number of children women have, continues to slide, and it's getting awfully close to 2.1, which is where the

population stabilizes eventually. [According to Noah Smith in Bloomberg:](#)

The world is now approaching that magic level, thanks to a phenomenon known as the fertility transition. In most countries, total fertility falls from a high level of about six or seven children to two or below, and stays there. Once smaller families become the norm in a country or region, they very rarely go back up. There are a number of theories for why this happens. The shift from agriculture to urban life means less incentive for families to have kids to work on farms. Urban life also increases the cost of raising a kid. Higher education levels for women, freeing them from traditional gender norms, are probably a big factor as well. Importantly, none of these factors are temporary.



Source: World Bank

Going down: Fertility rates, just about everywhere certainly are. (Photo: World Bank via Bloomberg)

It's not just the western developed countries either. Fertility rates have dropped in majority Muslim countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and Indonesia. Even sub-Saharan Africa is following the pattern. World population will continue to grow thanks to what's known as Population Momentum, but it will level out around the turn of the century.

A different kind of population problem

In the meantime, one of the reasons the world population keeps growing isn't because of the kids being born, but because of the old people aren't dying. Taking care of them is going to

become one of the biggest industries in the country. While the recent imposition of tariffs are creating a few new jobs in the U.S., the country isn't exactly re-industrializing. According to [Derek Thompson in the Atlantic,](#)



Baby boomers have lots of time to protest things — and that can influence how policy battles play out. (Photo: Darren McCollester/Getty Images)

The fastest growing occupations of the next decade are all in health — personal care aides, registered nurses, and home health aides. These jobs couldn't be more different from the prototypical mid-century steel worker. Underpaid and without a strong union, home health aides make an average wage of about \$23,000, according to the New York Times' Binyamin Appelbaum. "Instead of white men who make stuff, the group is increasingly made up of minority women who serve people," he writes.

We don't have a population bomb anymore; as Smith notes, it's been defused. What we're going to have instead is a big bust in the number of people available to take care of the aging boomer generation, who insist on opposing immigration, fighting transit projects and objecting to new housing. And in 10 years, they're going to wonder why they're all alone with nobody to help them.

[Lloyd Alter](#) ([@lloydalter](#)) writes about smart (and dumb) tech with a side of design and a dash of boomer angst.