

**SPOILER ALERT: ‘SMART GROWTH’ WON’T SAVE THE DAY**

**The United States is on course to reach more than 400 million people by mid-century.  
That’s not sustainable, to put it mildly.**

**An NPG Forum Paper  
by Mark Cromer**

[Abstract: With more than 8 billion people now crowding a planet that continues to convulse with the conflict and corruption that drives mass migrations, the United States confronts its own steadily escalating population growth and the challenges it presents in both the short-term and over the long haul. Building blitzes, infrastructure expansions and zoning schematics designed to jack up population densities along with ever-increasing restrictions on resource consumption will not prove to be the panacea to population growth. If the demographic shockwaves that have left the population centers of the Global South (most of Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia) in chronic states of decay and despair are warning lights on our domestic policy dashboard, they signal that the U.S. must develop a coherent and consistent national policy to reign in and reduce population growth before it’s too late.]

It may seem hard to believe as this first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century draws closer to its end, but once upon a time in Southern California open space was abundant and not just in its wild land of mountains, foothills and expansive deserts. For much of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, open and often green space was still a prominent feature throughout the Southland’s suburban sprawl that radiated out from the urban cores of Los Angeles and San Diego and across the sweep of Orange County’s bedroom communities.

The region’s rich agrarian history was still very present in the farmland surrounding Ventura and Oxnard to the citrus groves that still could be glimpsed in the Pomona Valley and the ripe vineyards of Fallbrook and Temecula. If one took a sail out of Newport Beach down the coast to Dana Point, the coastal hillsides were still largely undeveloped.

In many places, ‘City Limits’ still meant open space ahead.

According to the Census, in 1980 California’s population had crested past 23.6 million people, a nearly 19% increase from 1970’s headcount, with the bulk of that growth anchored in the state’s south, but even still its arterials of asphalt remained largely free-flowing and freeways still had ‘rush hours’ that were mostly confined between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

to 6 p.m. respectively. Despite much mythologizing (and most of it courtesy of Hollywood and the music industry) surrounding the freewheeling 1970s and the gluttonous days of the Go-Go 1980s in California, there was still a semblance of harmony between residents and the environment in that era.

Central to that harmony was a sense of breathing room.

Forty-three years and 16 million more people later, and all the development required to accommodate them, well, as native Californians who are over 40 and still living in the Golden State are willing to attest: *those were the days*.

In the twilight of 2023, the impacts of California’s long metastasizing population growth are unmistakable and can be seen and felt across most facets of everyday life; from region-wide traffic that now slows and jams from before dawn to well after dusk to green spaces gone the way of the Gray Wolf, from ever-increasing resource restrictions to the incessant rise of noise pollution. The unfolding crisis of tens of thousands of homeless people crowded into encampments that can be found along the streets and parking lots and across public parks and civic plazas has a direct throughline to competition for affordable housing that is miniscule in the face of demand.

Widening freeways, building mass transit rail systems, mandating construction of multifamily housing units with many of them along so-called mass transit corridors and an exodus of workers to remote positions in response to the pandemic hasn't ameliorated much of the social ills that have grown as steadily as the population.

Yet has the state hit peak population far sooner than expected? Might the relentless flow of people into California have finally begun to recede?

In July, *Bloomberg News* reported on California Department of Finance projections that anticipate California will have the same population in 2060 that it does today, noting that since 2020 the state has lost population each successive year – the first ever net loss since statehood in 1850.<sup>1</sup>

The news agency did not address the issue of whether the slow bleed of population from California signifies that the state has long since maxed out its true carrying capacity or if those who can get out are doing just that.

But even if California has hit its population peak, the nearly 40 million people still calling the state home are facing the challenges that population growth has wrought, challenges that are now appearing across the nation as Californians and residents of other states continue to pull up stakes.

## **HOMES, HOMES ON THE RANGE (WHERE THE DEER & DEVELOPERS PLAY)**

The waves of internal migration in the U.S. have also highlighted the consequences when places that have long accommodated populations not typically seen as excessive suddenly experience significant influxes of people who, ironically, are usually seeking a slower pace in a less crowded place – say like California back in the good ol' days.

Sparsely populated Montana, with 1.1 million people, saw a population surge in 2021-22 that left it with a net gain of 24,000 new faces. That rate of growth, according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, outpaced Florida's epic inflow during the pandemic, leading to social upheaval during the summer of 2020.<sup>2</sup> While 24,000 people may seem to be small potatoes – especially when contrasted against the millions of migrants who continue to cross America's southern frontier annually – the impacts can prove to be quite similar.

And this increase in population growth may just be the beginning. According to a recent *ABC News* report, Montana is now building more multifamily housing units than 38 other states, a surge that is being replicated across regions where apartment living was less prevalent than along the coasts. "Areas in the Midwest and West, traditionally characterized by average or below average concentrations of multifamily housing, have now ascended to the forefront in terms of the proportion of newly authorized multifamily units," the report states. "This includes states like South Dakota, Washington, Minnesota, Nebraska, Colorado and Montana, all of which now exceed the 50% mark."<sup>3</sup>

Across Montana, renters are finding themselves priced out of their homes and in places like Missoula the sudden lack of affordable housing has led to homelessness in Big Sky Country.<sup>4</sup> "Montana needs protecting as more and more people move here," Ben Eisinger, a fly-fishing shop owner outside Glacier National Park, recently told reporters. Eisinger and other residents said the squeeze on infrastructure and housing was unmistakable.<sup>5</sup>

Granted, the changing landscape with the incessant creep of development and the impacts on the quality of lives it brings in the United States is not yet – at least in most places – on such dramatic par with what occurred on the once idyllic Italian island of Lampedusa, whose 6,000 residents awoke this past September to find that more than 7,000 migrants had landed overnight on their tiny island.<sup>6</sup>

What they had the night before was simply gone by the dawn of the following day.

Yet across the United States, *symptoms* of surging immigration-driven population growth are very visible and indeed the stuff of high political drama; from the abject chaos of mass migration to the fierce competition for employment and housing it feeds in communities large and small across the country to the escalating homeless crisis. Yet for all the political stagecraft by both major parties, connecting all of those dots to the very fundamental *cause* of population growth remains missing in action.

To have a meaningful national dialogue that produces policy initiatives designed to reverse population growth simply appears beyond the reach of our present political leadership in the United States.

Which begs the question: Why is fostering a civil, thoughtful debate on the consequences of population

growth and producing a rational strategy to ensure a sustainable future beyond the apparent grasp of our leadership?

Is the subject of overpopulation really a sleep aid for the chattering class? On a nightly basis, networks program stunning images of the mass migration rolling across America’s southern frontier. If those same networks started following those vast trails of humanity back to their points of origin around the globe and diligently explored the facts on the ground prevailing there, would the viewing audience really reach for their remotes?

Or is there a bipartisan herd mentality at play in the U.S. among public officials and throughout the media that almost instinctively defaults to an assertion that population growth overall is a net benefit as long as its rough edges can be smoothed out over time?

Or is it just all of the above?

## **A RARE VOICE OF CLEAR-EYED COMMON SENSE IN A POLICY DEAD ZONE**

The keen social observer Bill Maher has been that rarest of voices in the midst of the popular media forest, unflinchingly raising the alarm in the face of overpopulation and its impacts on both the nation and the planet. On his weekly HBO dialogue show *Real Time with Bill Maher*, he noted that the release of the U.S. 2020 Census data indicated the slowest population growth in the nation in over a century, which he hailed as a small but encouraging sign.<sup>7</sup> He also anticipated the now canned critique from what might well be described as The Cult of GDP.

“Now all economists will say this is a terrible thing, because every economy, no matter what it is, is built on this idea that you have to keep replacing workers. I don’t know how long we can keep pretending that we can keep adding people because it is good for the economy,” Maher posited to applause from his studio audience. “We already do not have enough resources for the people who are here now. This is great news that the population is going down. Great news, full stop.”<sup>8</sup>

Some of Maher’s guests appear somewhat sympathetic, at least conceptually, to Maher’s sounding the overpopulation alarm and pounding out

a Malthusian-rooted beat on his show, but others have made a candidly strident case for vastly *increasing* the human population on the planet.

Scott Galloway, a Clinical Professor of Marketing at New York University’s Stern School of Business, was interviewed on Maher’s show on March 24, 2023, and appeared to make the case – with a straight face – that the sustainable human population ceiling on the planet was in the neighborhood of 120 billion people.<sup>9</sup>

Yes, you read that correctly: *120 billion people*.

“Is there any limit to the number of people who can be on the Earth?” Maher incredulously asked Galloway, who replied in deadpan: “At some point, when we hit kind of the max, which is supposed to be about 110 or 120 [billion], it probably makes sense to think about not having policies to encourage more kids. Until then, do you want not only population decline but denigration?”<sup>10</sup>

Such whimsical musings by Galloway can perhaps be dismissed as the intellectual endzone of academic hubris, a place that has been stripped of all contact with actual reality and where hypothetical abstracts are passed off as viable policy initiatives to ease social ills. How else can one explain a college professor who maintains a straight face as he asserts Earth can sustain a human population *fifteen times* the size of its present number of more than 8 billion people?

And Galloway is merely one of many voices in the media singing the surreal praises of exponential population growth.

Katherine Mangu-Ward, the longtime editor of *Reason* magazine, a Libertarian outfit that ostensibly advocates for ‘free minds and free markets’ and a frequent guest across the spectrum of cable and broadcast news outlets often makes the case for open borders and mass migration as a means to explode the U.S. population and propel its economy.<sup>11</sup>

“If we had a billion people in America,” Mangu-Ward said during a debate on *Fox News Channel’s* ‘Tucker Carlson Tonight,’ “(then) America would be unstoppable. That would be amazing.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Galloway and Mangu-Ward were essentially just channeling the conclusions of an argument that writers at *National Geographic* published over a decade ago as the planet surpassed 7 billion people. The storied publication (which laid off the last of its staff writers this summer and ended print

operations after 135-years) effectively sounded something more of an 'all clear' than a worrying alarm. If 7 billion humans crowding the planet sounded like a whole lot of people, veteran scientific journalist Robert Kunzig's cover story for *NatGeo* reassuringly explained that every man, woman and child on the planet could fit – were they to stand shoulder-to-shoulder – within a 500-square-mile area, or as *NatGeo* phrased it: "How about the City of Los Angeles?"<sup>13</sup>

Kunzig expanded on the formula, noting that he attended the 2010 annual conference of the Population Association of America in Dallas, where one of his demographic takeaways was that if we wanted to give the entire population of the planet a little more breathing room than the City of Angels, everyone would still fit rather comfortably into Texas. As such, Kunzig determined that by mid-century, with six continents to work with, a population of 9 billion-plus people would amount to no more a human density level than that of France, a European country which he duly noted, "...is not usually considered a hellish place to live."<sup>14</sup>

Such musings are a sly deception based on a journalistic sleight of hand that conflates empirical geographic space and the human physical footprint with 'best case' hypothetical projections surrounding resource availability and consumption rates among a bevy of other basic quality of life metrics.

"People packed into slums need help," Kunzig wrote, acknowledging the obvious. "But the problem that needs solving is poverty and lack of infrastructure, not overpopulation."<sup>15</sup>

While more than a decade old, Kunzig's epic and quite intentional disconnect – asserting that poverty and 'lack of infrastructure' are problems for people but not associated with human population growth – still speaks very much to why overpopulation has remained largely ignored or glossed over by governments, policy makers and agenda setters.

## **TODAY'S GLOBAL URBANIZATION: A GRIM WARNING FOR AMERICA**

The scope and scale of the crisis of overpopulation in the developing world was captured rather succinctly by the late author Mike Davis in his 2005 opus *Planet of Slums*, which focused on the sordid fact that more than a billion people were, by then, living in almost unimaginable squalor that stemmed from the sprawl

of 'megacities' (8 million-plus inhabitants) and 'hypercities' (20 million-plus inhabitants), a phenomenon of contiguous human density on a previously unseen scale that emerged in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as human migration from rural areas into urban centers reached its tipping point.<sup>16</sup>

"The earth has urbanized even faster than originally predicted by the Club of Rome in its notoriously Malthusian 1972 report *Limits to Growth*," Davis wrote. "In 1950, there were 86 cities in the world with a population of more than one million; today there are 400 and by 2015 there will be at least 550. Cities across the Global South [a different designation than the Southern Hemisphere, the Global South includes most of Africa, Asia and Latin America] have absorbed nearly two-thirds of the global population explosion since 1950 and are currently growing by a million babies and migrants each week."<sup>17</sup>

Davis contrasts the ongoing growth of the developing world with the historical arc experienced in Europe, noting: "The scale and velocity of Third World urbanization, moreover, utterly dwarfs that of Victorian Europe. London in 1910 was seven times larger than it had been in 1800, but Dhaka, Kinshasa and Lagos today are each approximately *forty* times larger than they were in 1950."<sup>18</sup>

While proponents of population growth without end – such as the likes of Galloway and Mangu-Ward – enjoy holding forth on the miraculous benefits that arrive when there are more workers than dependents, the stark reality is that runaway population growth has produced more slums and human misery than an equitable shot at a decent quality of life.

As Davis drives home repeatedly in *Planet of Slums*, the reproductive freight train across Africa and South Asia is out of control and the rural to urban mass migrations it has provoked have grown into a perpetual phenomenon in the years since the book was first published. Mass migration borne of desperation can act as something of a release valve from the regions worst impacted, but as humanity from all across the globe continues to march into the United States, Americans can't escape the fact that our destinies are intertwined.

As such, development to accommodate millions of immigrants and their U.S. born children – *all of them more water and electricity consumers* – has accelerated to a breakneck pace in some areas, while building to accommodate an aging population that is

living longer is expanding in others. A recent study of population growth and migration patterns in New Mexico and Arizona that was published by the Population Reference Bureau, a Washington D.C.-based think-tank, offered a telling account of the explosive growth witnessed in Arizona.<sup>19</sup>

“While job growth and the entrepreneurial spirit in Arizona may have their appeal, the state’s population growth is perpetuating increasingly urgent concerns about water availability amidst extensive residential development. Despite the current megadrought depleting the Colorado River – the primary source of water for Arizona and all the states surrounding it – development continues without slowing,” authors Jenin Abu-Hashem and Sara Srygley report. “As the population grows and the water supply dwindles, Arizona is walking the limits on growth.”<sup>20</sup>

In the downtowns of major cities across the country, many commercial buildings constructed to house offices – not people – have been left nearly deserted in the wake of the pandemic shutdowns and the rise of remote work. Housing advocates along with developers have sought to convert business space into living space. However, it’s easier said than done, with some renovations resulting in windowless bedrooms or ‘homes’ with windows that don’t open.<sup>21</sup>

Las Vegas has been a gambling town since its modern inception, but there is a lot of money riding on the increasingly risky bet that the population growth that made Sin City one of the fastest growing metro areas dating back to the 2000s can continue. Over the past decade, Las Vegas has grown nearly 20%, putting its metro population at more than 2.3 million people, according to a recent article in *Vegas Magazine*.<sup>22</sup>

Attributing much of the growth to a strong job market, low cost of living and a steady influx of retirees, the magazine also noted the darker linings to that silver cloud: “However, as the city’s population has increased, so too have some of the challenges that come with rapid growth. Traffic has become more congested, affordable housing has become scarcer and the demand for public services has risen.”<sup>23</sup>

The magazine then notes that one of the very draws of Las Vegas – a low cost of living – is rapidly evaporating with the population growth. Scarcity of resources is driving up prices.

The vast tracts of single-family homes in such unlikely and unforgiving areas as Victorville, California, once a lonely outpost in the Mojave Desert which had become the second-fastest growing city in the U.S. during the mid-2000s,<sup>24</sup> became symptomatic of the Wild West financing schemes that were rife through the subprime markets. Finally collapsing in the fall of 2008, the blast radius of those developments is now surpassed by the explosion of cookie-cutter, multistory-multifamily housing that is the hallmark of today’s private equity driven development.<sup>25</sup>

Traditional mid-century multifamily housing complexes with such features as single-story units sporting vaulted ceilings and surrounded by lush greenbelts have been literally labeled ‘obsolete’ by developers and activists alike who see mutual interests in maximizing densities by tearing down and then building up and building out to the street. In order to shoehorn supersized buildings into neighborhoods long defined by far more quaint characteristics and quality of life metrics that spoke to the ‘American Dream,’ states like California, already the nation’s most populous, have legislatively defanged local zoning ordinances.<sup>26</sup>

In Claremont, California, a college town nestled along the foothills on the eastern edge of Los Angeles County, city officials and an increasingly restive populace have wrangled throughout this year in the face of the state’s requirement that the city add more than 1,700 new housing units over the next six years.<sup>27</sup>

Simply put, the city can’t meet the state’s housing mandate without irrevocably altering many if not most of its fundamentally defining characteristics, jacking up population densities in a scandalous urbanizing effort that will further impact everything from already terribly congested roadways to ongoing parking nightmares.

## **WE PASSED EASY A LONG TIME AGO: SOLUTIONS ARE GOING TO BE TOUGH**

**S**o what’s to be done?

Warren Johnson, the San Diego State University professor and a Fulbright research scholar who authored the seminal work *Muddling Toward Frugality* in 1978, opined bluntly at the time that the

solution to overpopulation this late in the game may be out of humankind’s hands.

“As heartless as it may sound,” Johnson wrote, “The merciful thing may be for some catastrophe to come quickly in the half-dozen or so countries that are hopelessly overpopulated. A catastrophe that will drop population below where it is at present, ease the pressure on the surviving population and provide undeniable evidence to encourage changed attitudes toward large families. Even that might not be adequate...”<sup>28</sup> [Note: NPG would certainly not wish for a catastrophe to help reduce human numbers, but we do find it interesting that Dr. Johnson had such a sharp view of population matters more than 40 years ago.]

In 1978, Johnson’s assessment was interestingly seen as a sometimes harsh but clear-eyed take on the situation. He earned a pleasant write-up in *The New York Times* and an invitation on the *Today* show.<sup>29</sup>

It’s not difficult to discern what sort of reaction such an unflinching assessment from Johnson’s acclaimed work would inspire today – 45 years and 4 billion more people later – not only on the pages of the Old Gray Lady (the journalistic nickname of *The New York Times*, our nation’s 172-year-old newspaper of record) but throughout the mainstream media ecosystem.

Dave Gardner, a Colorado-based filmmaker who helmed the 2011 documentary *Growth Busters: Hooked on Growth*, a film that has since turned into a podcast and much more all dedicated to reducing population growth, said he does see some reasons to be encouraged.

“I’m seeing positive signs. I think we’re seeing the erosion of the longstanding taboo on discussing overpopulation and population growth, on reluctance to attribute problems and crises to population growth, and on avoiding consideration of action to move the world into population contraction. It’s happening slowly, but it’s definitely underway,” Gardner said during an interview in late 2018. “Of course,” he added, “that must accelerate if we’re to have any hope of a bright future.”<sup>30</sup>

But the gravity of the situation is as inescapable to Gardner in 2018 as it was to Johnson in 1978.

“The progress I’m seeing, slow as it is, keeps me energized and requires that we double our efforts to amplify those conversations,” Gardner said. “At the same time, I’m afraid it’s highly unlikely we’ll give

up our economic growth obsession soon enough to avoid large-scale collapse of human civilization.”<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the past half-century, much of U.S. society has lived something of a double-life; on the one hand advocating for ever more environmental protections and often leading preservation efforts (here and abroad), but on the other hand indulging a seemingly insatiable appetite for more and bigger things. From TVs-turned-Home Theaters to cars-turned-tanks and homes turned McMansions, a powerful and perpetual desire for ‘more’ and the instinctive sense that the party is about to end, one way or the other, has been evident for the better part of the past half-century.

A sliver of that mania, that competition between the wanton lust of consumption and the cold calculus of sober reasoning, can be glimpsed in *The New York Times Book Review* just a few years before it praised Johnson’s *Muddling Toward Frugality*.

In response to the Club of Rome’s *The Limits to Growth*, *The New York Times* published a seething rebuke of its conclusions in its *Book Review* section penned by Peter Passell, Marc Roberts and Leonard Ross.<sup>32</sup> (Note: the ‘club’ was compromised of self-described technocrats and business leaders who funded the study and its resulting 205-page report published in 1972, which was researched and written by a team of M.I.T. scholars.)

Deriding the report as “an empty and misleading work,” the trio accused the team who conducted the study of seeking to conceal structural flaws in their calculations by chicanery in order to rig the outcome.<sup>33</sup>

“Its imposing apparatus of computer technology and systems jargon conceals a kind of intellectual Rube Goldberg device – one which takes arbitrary assumptions, shakes them up and comes out with arbitrary conclusions that have the ring of science,” they wrote. “Less than pseudoscience and little more than polemical fiction, *The Limits to Growth* is best summarized not as a rediscovery of the laws of nature but as a rediscovery of the oldest maxim of computer science: ‘Garbage In, Garbage Out.’”<sup>34</sup>

Passell, Roberts, and Ross insisted the M.I.T. team had rigged the study for a pre-determined outcome that asserts unchecked growth can only lead to collapse. Yet they also conceded, rather begrudgingly, that the scenario presented in *The Limits to Growth* legitimately highlighted a need for

“continued scientific progress to sustain current levels of prosperity...[and] to a lesser extent, our willingness to limit population growth.”<sup>35</sup>

But what a difference a half-century and 4 billion more people (115 million more in the U.S.) makes.

Davis’s *Planet of Slums* offered an unflinching assessment – and *validation* – of the consequences that explosive population growth throughout the Global South had led to by 2005, the very dividend of misery that *Limits to Growth* had effectively forecast in 1972. By 2016, the UN estimated that there were 436 cities with populations over 1 million people and 31 with populations over 10 million people, numbers that align closely with the projections Davis echoed in 2005.<sup>36</sup>

By the fall of 2023, the numbers of people jammed into the vast sprawls of megacities and hyper-cities are truly staggering, among them Delhi is estimated to have 33 million people inside its metro area and then there is Karachi, which is estimated to have more than 17-million people crowded into its teeming streets. Kinsasha, the largest city and extended metro area in Africa – and also the fastest growing city on the continent – has more than 16 million people, most of whom are living in slums.

And on and on and on.

While the urban population centers of the United States, many of them now overrun with seemingly intractable homeless populations, have yet to reach such stunning numbers – in 2023 New York City clocked in as the most populous U.S. city at 8.5 million people<sup>37</sup> – the nation is projected to hit more than 400 million people before 2060.<sup>38</sup>

A study published by the Pew Research Center in 2008 projected a population of 438 million in the United States by 2050, but the study’s authors, Jeffrey S. Passel and D’Vera Cohn, also offered an alternative projection calculated with higher rates of immigration.<sup>39</sup> Pew followed that study with another published in 2015 that projected by 2065 immigrants will account for nearly one in every five people in the U.S. and, along with their children, will make up 36% of the population.<sup>40</sup>

In 1965, the foreign-born population of the U.S. was just five-percent. Pew’s 2015 report noted that more than half of the 131 million people added to the U.S. population between 1965 and 2015 were the result of immigration and births to immigrants.<sup>41</sup>

More recent projections estimate the population will number more than 400 million by 2060,<sup>42</sup> but given the explosive pace of mass migration into the U.S. that number may well fluctuate significantly as well in the years ahead.

What is certain is that fulfilling the energy needs for a future population of 400 million or even 500 million Americans will prove to be an enormously daunting challenge. This task, as now envisioned, will result in massive alterations to the American landscape.

According to an investigation conducted by Real Clear Politics (RCP), a media aggregator, the sheer volume of open space necessary to meet the Biden Administration’s clean energy goals by the end of this decade, as well as its 2050 benchmarks, is frighteningly revealing. The windfarm footprint alone would consume a geographic mass the size of Kentucky, Tennessee, Illinois and Indiana while the seas of photovoltaic solar panels would cover an area the size of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut combined.<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION: WE CAN’T APP OUT OF THIS (BUT WE CAN TAP OUT)

In conclusion, it should once more be noted that while conditions in the United States, however horribly deformed and dystopian they have become throughout many districts in America’s once Great Cities, we still remain in better shape than many other places across the planet. It is time to recognize, however, that we are not somehow protected by providence from a fate similar to that which has already befallen every corner of our shared world if we do not stop population growth and then reduce our overall numbers to sustainable levels that comport to available domestic resources.

More than energy, arable land and viable living space, reliable access to freshwater for nearly a half-billion people here is going to be chief among the resources that should guide population sustainability decisions in the years ahead.

On a cautionary note, it’s worth recalling a dispatch published in the national edition of *The New York Times* from journalist Michael Kimmelman in 2017 that offered a stark portrayal of the day-to-day reality of water scarcity for many of the then 21 million people who were jammed into the crumbling megalopolis of Mexico City.<sup>44</sup>

Kimmelman’s story offers vivid snapshots of just how bad daily life can become when population outstrips the availability of a can’t-live-without resource like water. Kimmelman reported that around 5 million residents of Mexico City – or a population larger than that of today’s Los Angeles – did not have access to clean water *at any given time*. The dwindling supplies of drinking water have forced many among the impoverished masses in the capital to devote much of their daily lives improvising ways to acquire water.<sup>45</sup>

Their plight is highlighted by that of Diana Contreras Guzmán, a young single mother in the Xochimilco district who shares a single-room cinder-block shack with five other adults and four children. While the five other adults all work fulltime to earn a combined monthly income of \$600, Guzmán is responsible for obtaining several hundred gallons of water each week that is brought into the neighborhood by delivery trucks and donkeys. She’s also tasked with guarding whatever water is on hand at their shack since water theft is daily threat in the district.<sup>46</sup>

The absence of such utterly dire daily circumstances for people in the United States *today* shouldn’t be taken for granted.

This past spring Professor Reed Maxwell at Princeton University, who has studied the freshwater resources with a focus on stresses created by humans,

told *ABC News* that “the American West is certainly in a water crisis...Even with the record high precipitation in the 2022-2023 winter season for parts of the West, the decadal pattern is for continual aridification of the West.”<sup>47</sup>

A study of 204 freshwater basins across the United States by researchers at Colorado State University determined that almost half of them may not be able to meet monthly consumption demands by 2071.<sup>48</sup>

So just as Davis forecasted in *Planet of Slums* nearly two decades ago, far from being pulled out of the abject misery that constitutes daily subsistence ‘living’ in so many of the urban population centers around the globe today – including the imploding urban cores of the once Great Cities in the U.S. – billions of people find themselves mired in a nauseating squalor that is boiling over with “pollution, excrement and decay.”

That level of misery has yet to appear on such a scale in the United States, but insect bars, electric scooters and microhomes aside, we’re not going to App our way out of such scenes of brutal reality without a serious and sustained effort to slow, reduce and then reverse our population growth.

Smart growth initiatives and new zoning laws will do nothing to help us. We simply have too many people, no matter how we arrange the pieces.

References for this Forum paper are available at <https://npg.org/forum-papers2.html>



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**NOTE:** The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPG, Inc.



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