

IN PRAISE OF POPULATION DECLINE

**An NPG Forum Paper
by Nathaniel Gronewold**

ABSTRACT

To most Americans, a falling birth rate is not viewed as a bad thing. Public opinion polling shows that most people on Earth want to live alongside fewer people, not more. Americans are no exception. But our country's leaders, the pundit class, its most myopic economists, and the press corps continue to insist that fewer births and eventual depopulation will deliver nothing but despair. They're wrong. They are blind to a central fact: life in an overcrowded world is the very thing sending birth rates plummeting in the first place. High population growth and overcrowding have delivered pain to the populace. Population decline will alleviate and eventually eliminate this pain. China, Japan, South Korea, Italy, Greece, Spain, and other depopulating countries will soon become some of the luckiest places on Earth, though it will take time and the correct policies for them to achieve this state. Meanwhile, the economic pain Americans are feeling today is only about to get worse unless population growth in the United States ceases – which we unfortunately won't see for decades to come as recent developments make clear.

A VISION OF A MORE HOPEFUL WORLD

I'm stunned by how many people fear the trend of falling birth rates taking hold nearly everywhere. Search for news on "birth rates" or "population decline" and the results are a long list of overwhelmingly negative articles. We're told that Italians may be going extinct, and the South Koreans could soon follow them. The last time I checked, there were more than 50 million South Koreans and nearly 60 million Italians, so it's perhaps a bit premature to put them on any endangered species lists. Nevertheless, the falling births trend is unequivocally deemed a crisis wherever it's occurring. I'm honestly taken aback by how thoroughly a media consensus has emerged on this topic. Clearly, the press corps has made up its mind: falling birth rates and falling population numbers are bad things that must be stopped. Perhaps I shouldn't be so surprised. In this world, one that has only known relentless population growth for centuries, many can't fathom what population decline might look like. I believe it will

usher in hope for a better future, and I'm not the only one. But we must be honest; there will be downsides.

A lot of infrastructure will become unused and eventually decay. Taxes could rise as unimaginative governments (including ours) refuse to explore other means of balancing spending with dwindling tax revenues. Healthcare systems could crumble under the weight of an older population that consumes their services more frequently. Retirement funding systems like Social Security may struggle to keep up with a rising number of retirees. All these scenarios are possible and even probable under population decline.

But look at the flip side: what has relentless population growth delivered to the world? Have we ever taken a serious accounting of the consequences as well as the benefits? We know the outcomes experts regard as positive; surging economic growth, for one. Let's focus for a moment on the less recognized negative consequences of unrestrained population growth, the problems that residents of the US and Canada are now suffering under. Hopefully, this reflection will put to rest once and for all the false

notion that population expansion is only ever good and pure and never has any downsides to it.

Once upon a time, a single-income earner could raise a family under a solid roof, afford to feed and clothe a household, send the kids to college, and then have that single-income earner and spouse retire comfortably. Population growth has put an end to all this. Because the human population will always expand faster than the housing stock, the cost of shelter has risen so dramatically that it now takes a minimum of two income earners to keep a roof over a household. Often, these two earners carry more than one job just to keep up. Higher education costs have soared so much that tuition can no longer be covered by a student's summer job; mass quantities of debt must be accrued instead, also thanks to relentless population growth. Outdoor recreation used to be a simple affair – you would just load up the family into the car and off you'd go. Today, the great outdoors increasingly requires reservations ahead of time. A handful of national parks now take advance summertime bookings and enforce "timed entry" protocols. The number of parks managed this way will only increase as the population continues to swell. Even spontaneously going out to a restaurant now involves advanced planning to skirt around the inevitable crowds, especially on weekends.

Once upon a time, prospective employers visited college campuses to recruit students to their companies or offices well before those students graduated; such was the state of workforce needs. Both my father and my wife's father earned their first careers this way – the jobs came to them, not the other way around, and a full year before their graduations. Today? This is a pipedream except for a few fields, namely professions that struggle to recruit new entrants due to low pay or high hurdles for entry. Youth unemployment and underemployment, such as recent graduates only finding work in lower-paying hospitality sectors, are harsh realities wherever you find a mass number of workers far outstripping workplaces' demand for them. A constant supply of abundant labor helps to keep wages and salaries down, even as population increase pushes the cost of living higher and higher. Workers struggle to keep up until they eventually can't anymore and decide that a family is not in their future.

Thus, the falling birth rates we're witnessing everywhere. A large and crowded population is the cause; an even larger population is not the cure.

Instead, it will only depress birth rates further. Here, I've just described the situation in Canada and the United States.

Now, imagine putting all of that into reverse. A tighter labor market results in rising wages and more bargaining power for workers. Youth unemployment and underemployment fall, and new graduates find it rather not too difficult to launch their careers. Employers return to campuses to offer jobs to students even one year out from graduation. Entertainment and outdoor recreation can be spontaneous and fun again, with the crowds manageable or even entirely avoidable depending on the location and day. Housing costs stop rising, and in some places rents and the costs of acquiring starter homes decline. These falling housing costs can prove to be substantial and even life-changing; even as wages rise, the cost of living stays the same or even falls a bit, making people wealthier per capita. Sustain these conditions long enough, and eventually individuals living in this reality may decide that supporting a family, even on one income, is actually attainable. More people may decide to start families as the conditions of survival amid a declining population begin to turn in their favor. They may also experience less anxiety and fear about the future, and more confidence in their status in society and their ability to raise a family happily and comfortably. All that above describes Japan, or will someday soon. But don't just take my word for it.

"While economic growth might be smaller with a declining population, it is considered to be more stable and sustainable compared to economic growth caused by rapid population growth," wrote Roos Van Keulen, a Dutch diplomat working in Tokyo, in a recent article she penned for Earth.org. "It still requires redefining the concept of economic growth: one that takes into account happiness, health, and sustainability, not only prosperity expressed in terms of money."

In her thought-provoking piece,¹ Van Keulen makes a convincing argument for why Japan and other nations, including the Netherlands, should cease fighting population decline and embrace it instead. She notes how countries with declining populations appear to be performing quite well economically in terms of innovation and technological sophistication. Indeed, Japan's electricity consumption has risen even as its population has declined due to an expanding edge in advanced technologies and automation.² Van Keulen acknowledges the

challenges that population decline delivers, but they are far from disastrous, she says. It all depends on how they are managed.

Most compelling of all, Van Keulen makes the case that the demographic challenges facing nations like Japan, South Korea, Spain, Italy, Sweden, Finland, and others stem not from younger generations' refusal to procreate, but from older generations' decision to have far too many children during the baby boom years. The baby boom, she argues, created a demographic imbalance in dozens of countries that is only going to be resolved with time, not by compelling an ever-larger number of human beings to come into existence. And it's a strain that can be managed by better public policy such as reformed retirement ages. "The root cause of the imbalanced old-age dependency ratio is the global baby boom of the 1950s," Van Keulen says. "The many babies that were born during that time are now leaving the workforce and retiring. Yet, in 2060, when the majority of the baby boom generation has passed on, the imbalance is expected to even out."³

Van Keulen's essay is worth reading, and she should be commended for her bravery. Her piece is a rare example of a thoughtful, evidence-based argument showing how and why pro-natalist policies are failing and why population decline should be embraced and managed constructively, especially considering how it is inevitable. No journalist that I know of would ever have the courage to put forth a similar argument.

Population decline and aging can be managed and harnessed to become positive things. Retirement ages can be adjusted upward. Older workers who want to work should be allowed and encouraged to do so – which means destroying age discrimination (a serious problem in Japan that's preventing that country from enjoying more of the fruits of population decline). Population decline is an opportunity to continue raising the status of women in the workforce and society at large. It's an opportunity to allow managed, common-sense, legal immigration pathways that plug workforce holes where they truly exist, not as an excuse to depress wages. Immigration can be allowed and thoughtfully managed in a way that accommodates and embraces the inevitability of population decline and lower population numbers year after year. It's an opportunity to incentivize innovation and a more efficient economic and societal order, a society that's more productive, more sustainable, and less unequal.

Van Keulen calls it an opportunity to embrace "quality above quantity." I couldn't agree more. "If socio-economic challenges caused by population decline can be solved, could population decline and economic prosperity coexist?" Van Keulen asks. I already know the answer: of course they can. Population decline is inevitable, she says, and "as such, it should be seen as an opportunity, rather than an economic crisis."

"In any case, pushing women to make more babies does not seem like the way to go," she says. Of course, it doesn't.

Van Keulen isn't a lone voice of reason here.

Wolfgang Lutz, a prominent demographer based in Vienna, has put forth a new article praising population decline, putting an overwhelmingly positive spin on it. He sees evidence that societies are increasingly pouring resources into better female education and empowerment as their birth rates fall, which is unequivocally good, he argues. Ultimately, population decline will compel countries to develop "better institutions and social values that are less obsessed with material consumption and violent nationalism and more concerned with cooperation, care, and wellbeing," Lutz says.⁴ In an April 2023 Vancouver TED Talk, Jennifer D. Sciubba echoes Lutz and Van Keulen's arguments.⁵ "Our demography is our destiny, yes," Sciubba says, "but how we react to that demography is not preordained." In other words, population decline can be a net positive thing. It's an opportunity, not a crisis. And it's inevitable. All that matters is how we respond to this inevitability.

Sadly, the United States won't experience the wonders of population decline for decades to come, I fear. The current population influx into the United States that we're witnessing today shows that America's leaders are determined to see it this way. They demand that the US population must grow and grow relentlessly until it hits at least 400 million and beyond. Some are pushing for the US to achieve a population of 1 billion, putting the nation in the ranks of China and India. If our leaders achieve these goals then, unfortunately, this will ensure ample population-related challenges for generations of Americans to come.

POOR CANADA, POOR AMERICA

Canada says it has a problem: too much immigration.

Ten years ago, most Americans and most Canadians would've found themselves instantly

appalled after reading that sentence. Too much immigration? Who would say that? Blasphemy! Surely, there is no such thing as too much immigration, the commentators would've quickly snapped back in disbelief and in the most condescending tone they could muster. Flash forward to today, and lo and behold, that line is simply a statement of fact: most Canadians now agree with that sentence and the sentiment it communicates.⁶ However, that previously jarring sentence is still misplaced. In a sense, yes, the plurality of Canadians who say their country is allowing in far too many immigrants too quickly is right to be concerned. Canada – supposedly vast, empty Canada – is among the least affordable housing markets in the world and good-paying jobs are increasingly scarce. Canadians' cost of living is soaring while their health care is deteriorating under the strain of more people. Their problem isn't immigration per se, but rather population.

Immigration is perfectly fine. It's relentless, excessive population growth that's the problem. Canada's population is expanding far too quickly; some media reports suggest it grew by 1 million people in just nine months. I promise you, Canada did not add new hospitals, schools, police stations, fire departments, and houses at the same scale and in the same amount of time as Ottawa's politicians greedily expanded their country's population by the equivalent of the city of Edmonton in less than a year, all in service to their insatiable god of economic growth. The result is Canadians are growing more anxious about the future and poorer – landlords and banks are commanding more and more of their hard-earned cash, pushing their standards of living lower.

No, Canada doesn't have an immigration problem. Ottawa is famously strict with illegal immigrants, and border jumpers are offered few if any legal protections there; deportation proceedings are swift and brutal. Canada's government is choosy about the immigrants it accepts, and for decades it has only accepted the best through a ranked point system that benefits applicants with advanced educations and skills. But Canada definitely has a population growth problem, and Canadians' record low birth rates are the clearest sign yet that the people already living there are buckling under the strain of rapid population growth. Canada's leaders are now taking cosmetic steps to stem the influx, but it may be too late. America is next. Our nation's birth rate will plummet to new lows and the government's open borders

policy won't alleviate this fertility freefall—on the contrary, the mass population influx we're witnessing will only exacerbate the nation's declining birth rate. Rapid population growth and its concentration in urban centers are the forces driving the US birth rate lower and lower.

Public polling shows that most people in the world, including those living in the United States, believe the populations of their countries are far too high and need to stop expanding and perhaps even fall a bit.⁷ But the people in control of the levers of power don't see it that way. In the minds of people at the extreme end of the pro-immigration camp (the lot that says, "Lift all restrictions on immigration and allow any and all people who want in right away, now, this very instant!") one unit of housing magically and instantaneously materializes out of thin air every time a new migrant crosses a border or steps off an airplane. And thanks to this magic, they fervently believe, housing supply and housing demand stay perfectly aligned. Thus, rents stay stable and house prices never rise because of population expansion, both on a local and national scale. Unfortunately, this isn't how the world works. Explaining this to the pro-growth crowd would usually prove to be a near impossibility, but luckily, we now have a real-life example of how untrue their magical thinking is and what reality actually looks like. This is playing out in what has arguably been the most pro-immigrant country on Earth for decades: Canada.

Still, denial is a powerful tendency. I can find scant evidence that America's political leadership and the mainstream media outlets that serve it understand that there could be a connection between soaring housing costs and soaring population numbers. Well, to those American policymakers and influential thinkers who insist that the immigration floodgates must be swung wide open and that any and all current takers – at least 160 million by *The Economist's* recent estimate⁸ – must be let in immediately, all I have to say is: you think the rent is expensive *now*?

COGS IN THE MACHINE

Advocating for ever higher and faster levels of immigration, legal or otherwise, to address falling birth rates is like prescribing cigarettes as a treatment for lung cancer. Again, the problem isn't immigration per se, but rather population. Immigration can be a very positive thing, and it usually is. A quickly swelling, crowding, increasingly congested

population is not; this is the very root cause of the world's plummeting birth rates.

In an earlier NPG Forum paper,⁹ I described why birth rates are declining nearly everywhere. The phenomenon is best explained as an ecological response that naturally sets in for a population when that species' population is nearing the limits of its habitat's carrying capacity. The pressures of the limits to growth aren't necessarily what's causing it; rather, a species' tendency to see its members cluster together as a resource acquisition and sharing strategy increases that species' average population density. This then amplifies the stress factors that individuals in that population must deal with. In these more crowded conditions, the "cost of living" for individuals increases. It takes more time and effort to acquire resources competitively. It becomes more difficult to find available or adequate nesting grounds. Organisms tend to cluster together because this makes life easier initially, but eventually, the crowding becomes too much and life becomes more difficult instead – something works until it doesn't work anymore.

As population density increases, these stress factors compel those individuals, both behaviorally and biologically, to give birth to fewer offspring in an effort to alleviate this stress. Ecologists call this density dependence, and this force has been found to influence population dynamics for nearly all organisms on Earth. There is an expanding body of evidence that shows density dependence – simply put, rising population density – is the force behind globally collapsing birth rates.¹⁰ That is the ecological reason for falling birth rates.

Here are the sociological explanations: stress, fear, and anxiety about the future.

In this world that we live in, where humans exist in service to the economy, those humans are working longer and harder for this "growth first and foremost" model economy, and for far less pay when weighed against inflation. Their cost of living – especially housing – soars and soars with each passing year, especially in jurisdictions where population expansion is stripping home construction, as it always does and always will. This is what's occurring in Canada today, and it's been happening in the United States for some time now. Competition for employment, especially for the good-paying kind, is so fierce that people fear the sudden loss of jobs and income. People are anxious about the future and their

ability to afford a home, let alone raise a family in one without having to worry about catastrophic future unemployment. And the larger and more crowded the city, the stronger this anxiety and stress becomes; and the lower the birth rate goes.

This is the reality that the economists' growth-first model has delivered. It is the very cause of the global birth rate collapse. The forces driving reproduction lower are doing so because there is only one possible direction the future human population can sustainably go: down. The "growth first at all costs and consequences" model is coming to an end. Some argue that Canada, the United States, and other countries must strive to become massive in population and not only in size. They reason that larger countries are wealthier and more powerful. Again, their premise is that humans exist in service to some larger machine. This argument falls flat in the face of overwhelming data showing that smaller countries generally enjoy better per capita wealth, health, and happiness. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund both agree that tiny Luxembourg and Liechtenstein top the charts in per capita economic well-being. Even in terms of per capita or median wealth, bigger is not better.

FACING REALITY

Nothing grows forever – please shout those three words out loud the next time you're at a pub or waiting in line for something or otherwise out in public and happen to overhear someone fretting over the latest news on falling birth rates. Be polite about it, of course, but please iterate this basic fact of physics loudly and proudly and without hesitation, hammering the point home to everyone within earshot. If you happen to find yourself being interviewed by, say, journalists such as Chris Pollard and Emily Stearn of the *Daily Mail* on the same topic, please grab them by their lapels, pull them in close, and repeat this line as sternly as possible: "Nothing, absolutely nothing, grows forever, not even the human population, so stop echoing the 'experts' and get over it." You may not get very far with this intervention, but it's worth a shot. Keep it simple and straightforward, however, as further elaboration is pointless.

Most journalists these days regurgitate. They don't research or consider alternative perspectives, especially if the popular narratives are found to be more or less settled. Dissenting opinions are dismissed before they are even considered. This is

how the press treats humanity's demographic destiny today. Population decline, even slight? Obviously terrible, right? A nightmare. It will deliver nothing but pain and misery. We all know this. Strong population expansion? Blessed and good and always beneficial, never detrimental. The more the merrier, and the quicker the better. We all know this too, right? This is the air reporters at the *Daily Mail*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Economist*, and elsewhere breathe.

That's the base level of understanding that Pollard and Stearn start from in their coverage of a new study published in *The Lancet* predicting a horrible fate for our planet because (gasp!) birth rates are falling nearly everywhere. "Terrifying threat of underpopulation is laid bare" is how the two writers subtly begin their excessively wordy headline.¹¹ Not too long ago, the United Nations reported that the world's human population now stands at 8 billion and rising, but horrifying "underpopulation" is what concerns these writers. *The Lancet* study predicts that population declines will take hold in 75% of all countries by 2050, and possibly 97% by 2100.¹² As one reads Pollard and Stearn's article, it becomes clear that the implications of falling human populations are characterized by these authors as "terrifying" because of the threat posed to the economy. Naturally.

After all, humans exist to serve the economy, not the other way around. Don't you already know this? This is Economics 101 in every American university. You and your kin belong to the economy, to serve the economy as units of consumption and production, and this economy that you and your children belong to must continue to grow, quickly and relentlessly, forever and ever until the sun explodes and even beyond then. That's also Econ 101 – perpetual, eternal, never-ending growth on a finite globe with finite resources. Fewer people mean this ever-expanding-into-eternity economy is deprived of the units it's entitled to, fewer cogs to turn the wheels. Ghastly, indeed. Shame on you for not procreating more. Think of the poor economy!

Let's play Devil's Advocate for a moment.

Imagine, if you will, a world where we don't serve the economy, but rather one in which the economy serves us. Crazy, I know, but stay with me here.

Now, imagine that in this world, a world where the economy exists in service to humans (not the

other way around), we are free to orient our economy and society in ways that maximize welfare and minimize harm and suffering. Should we determine that the best way to achieve this is to strive for a balanced, sustainable economy where population growth ceases and even goes in reverse, then in this world we are perhaps free to do so. Impossible as it may be to imagine this world, especially to the business press, we may already be living in it.

Lutz agrees with *The Lancet* study that the trend of falling birth rates and population declines will become a global phenomenon. He predicts the world's population will fall to between 2 to 4 billion people by 2200.¹³ It stands at more than 8 billion today. Whereas the authors of *The Lancet* study see this as a disaster, Lutz characterizes it as a blessing. "As this smaller population will be well-educated, they should be healthy and wealthy enough to be able to cope fairly successfully with the already unavoidable (moderate) effects of climate change," Lutz wrote. I would add that this future, less crowded, wealthier, and smarter population should have no trouble dealing with any of the challenges that population decline poses locally, nationally, and globally.

Writing in *Real-World Economics Review*, researchers Randall Wray and Yeva Nersisyan agree. "Rethinking aging and population decline from a real resource perspective," they wrote, "leads to solutions more in line with our biophysical limits since the focus is on doing more with less (raising productivity) and the distribution of resources (improving equity)." These two authors acknowledge the threats to pension systems but argue that there are common-sense policy solutions. Wray and Nersisyan take issue with reporters' dire warnings over falling birth rates and their calls for government measures to address them. It's better to focus our attention on ordering life in a world facing population decline, Wray and Nersisyan say. "Since the environment is better off with a smaller global population, policy should focus not on changing the demographic trends, but on taking measures to ensure adequate provisioning for all."¹⁴

Remember, nothing grows forever. And we have a choice.

We can continue fighting this gravity as many governments have been attempting for the better part of two decades. Or we can accept the fact that the "must grow at all costs" global economy is perhaps coming to an end. Meaning, the model of humans as units in service to the economy could be coming to

an end, whether we like it or not. The only path forward, perhaps, could be to flip this situation on its head – put the economy in service to the people and accept, once and for all, that slower or no economic growth amidst a declining global population can be made to be a wonderful thing, but only if we play our cards right.

Lutz, Van Keulen, and Sciubba are among the few voices brave enough to speak out on the benefits of population decline. As more observers and scholars come to see it as an inevitability (and it is) more may be willing to step forward to defy the myopic economists who would do their utmost to inflict more misery on the existing population by convincing politicians that the human population must swell and swell further and forever, lest the economy be denied its human cogs.

As Lutz, Van Keulen, and Sciubba argue convincingly, a smaller human population can and will be better for people everywhere. It will especially be better for the environment.

“The global human population is still growing such that our collective enterprise is driving environmental catastrophe,” warns a new study published in *Frontiers in Public Health*.¹⁵ The authors of this new report point to strong evidence that all the major environmental problems humans are struggling to reign in – climate change, ocean plastic waste, mass extinction, air pollution, chemical accumulation – can be directly tied to a world that’s adding 84 million new people to its surface every year. Saraswati et al. note how a rising human population puts increasing pressure on economic activities that extract non-renewable resources and overexploit renewable ones. They argue, compellingly and in my opinion irrefutably, that rising consumption caused by a rising number of consumers is pushing greenhouse gas concentrations higher and higher.

Saraswati et al., the international team behind this groundbreaking study, offer one overarching recommendation on how to face these mounting environmental problems, but their suggestion would no doubt cause most economists, pundits, politicians, and mainstream journalists to shriek in horror. “The common denominator for all these issues is population growth,” they wrote definitively, adding, “the most effective individual action in addressing the emission and consumption issue is to have one fewer child.”

JAPAN AS THE PIONEER

Many years ago, millions of Japanese reacted to the stress caused by the baby boom effect of high population growth and urban crowding by having far fewer children than the prior generation. The transition to a falling national population has been steady and slow, and not without its negative consequences, I’ll admit. But now, they are poised to reap the rewards. Wages in Japan are now rising.¹⁶ Average national housing costs are stable or falling. Japan is still far too crowded, as are South Korea, Italy, Spain, and Sweden, along with a host of other countries where the populace is feeling compelled to reproduce at sharply lower rates. People in the US and Canada are now being compelled to make the same choice. *Why?* Because population expansion and the exacerbating population density it’s causing lead them to have no confidence in the future. Policymakers determined to expand the number of individuals living on US and Canadian shores at a rate far greater than the ability to accommodate this exploding population with new houses, apartment blocks, schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, parking lots, and other infrastructure and services are forcing people already living in Canada and the United States to eke out an increasingly precarious existence as their costs of living skyrocket.

As shown by the brave and insightful authors I’ve highlighted throughout this paper, population decline can be a wonderful thing. It all depends on how it’s managed, but a smaller, less stressful, and more sustainable population will deliver innumerable benefits to the nations that will be lucky enough to experience them: China, Japan, South Korea, Italy, Spain, etc. etc. It will take time, but they’ll arrive at this destination sooner than we in North America will.

Unfortunately, the United States and Canada won’t be among the group of lucky depopulating nations for quite some time. Their day will eventually come, as well. After all, nothing grows forever. But as the ongoing migrant crisis shows, North America’s leaders, commentators, intellectuals, and policymakers are determined to continue piling on the misery being felt by the people already living here for some time to come. And there is no convincing them to stop and change course. It’s really too bad.

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