



Demographic Change : Population Growth

Are We too Many? Part 2: The Lifestyle Crisis

By 2050 the world's population will have grown by another 3.5 billion, the same number as lived on the entire planet in 1950. Can a depleted planet support population growth or is it time to cut back? We look at both sides of the debate.



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See the national ecological footprint relative to the biocapacity available in the respective country (Image: Living Planet Report 2006, WWF)

Question: Can the world deal with more people?

Answer B: Yes, because we are actually facing a lifestyle crisis, not a population crisis.

Looking back at the last century, historians and economists find that despite the quadrupling of the world's population, the health and wealth of the majority has improved dramatically. The rate of population growth is falling, even in the developing world. The real threat to the environment, they say, is not more poor people but the lifestyles of the rich.

During the 20th century, the number of people jumped from 1.6 to over 6 billion. Average life expectancy, income available per capita, and other measures of the standard of living, however, also increased significantly

"It [20th century population growth] was not because people suddenly started breeding like rabbits –rather, it was because they finally stopped dying like flies," says U.S. economist Eberstadt. "The 'population explosion'...was really a 'health explosion.'"

The benefits of the demographic dividend are exaggerated, says Matthew Connelly, author of *Fatal Misconception*, a history of population control programs. Good governance, education, and infrastructure are more effective weapons against poverty than population reduction.



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Nor does Connelly believe that population reduction is necessarily a good thing. By 2050, 140 countries – or four fifths of humanity – will have birth rates below ‘replacement level,’ and these nations will struggle to replace aging workers and fund social security systems. The only reason that developed nations’ populations are not in freefall now is immigration.

Connelly is skeptical about population control programs, noting that while these programs accompanied falling birth rates in China and India, in countries that had no such programs, like Brazil and Turkey, birth rates also fell.

As for the environment, reducing population might harm the planet because fewer people and greater affluence means more single households and greater per capita consumption.

“China says there are 300 to 600 million fewer people thanks to the one-child policy,” writes Connelly. “But hundreds of millions of Chinese aspiring to middle class lifestyles has far more impact than 300 million more subsistence farmers.”

WWF figures show that between 1992 and 2003, the ecological footprint of people in low- and middle-income countries changed little, while in high-income countries, it increased by 18 percent. This was neatly encapsulated at the July 2008 G8 summit in Japan when UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown scolded the British public for throwing away too much food just before he sat down to an eight-course banquet.

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Perhaps the real question for demographers, environmentalists, and gaffe-prone politicians alike is not how many people the planet can or cannot support, but how many eight-course banquets it can support.

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Part 1: The Population Crisis

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