



## Demographic Change : Population Growth

### Who's Afraid of Thomas Malthus?

**None of the troubling predictions about overpopulation and global starvation have come to pass. So should we still be worried about too many people on Earth?**



While it may sometimes be an inconvenience, like in this crowded Mumbai train station, not everybody agrees that there are too many people on the planet (Photo: Reuters)

The specter of too many people and not enough food has haunted scientists and philosophers since at least the time of Aristotle. The most famous is Thomas Malthus, who in 1798 grimly predicted that population growth would outpace food production, resulting in human death and misery. The Industrial Revolution and new agricultural techniques during the 19th century, however, helped prevent a major global starvation.

Over 150 years later, Paul R. Ehrlich published a bestselling book called "The Population Bomb," in which he projected the starvation of hundreds of millions during the 1970s-80s. While the world saw some devastating famines during those decades - in Bangladesh and Ethiopia, for example - they were not on the global scale that Ehrlich had predicted.

But even after history proved Malthus and Ehrlich wrong, theories about the dangers of overpopulation still capture the public interest. Jared Diamond, author of "Collapse" (another bestseller), says humanity still faces a perilous "population explosion" in the coming decades. His book describes the bloody events in Rwanda, one of the world's most densely populated countries, during the 1990s to illustrate what can happen when population growth converges with problems like environmental degradation and food shortages.

#### Diffusing the population bomb

Malthus, Ehrlich, and Diamond all have their critics, mainly economists and theorists who deny that population growth negatively affects quality of life. One of them is U.S. political economist Nicholas Eberstadt, who argues that overpopulation alone is not to blame for poor living conditions. Global living standards, he notes, have improved dramatically during the 20th century despite a near-quadrupling of the human population.

"In most people's minds, the notions of 'overpopulation,' 'overcrowding,' or 'too many people' are associated with images of hungry children, unchecked disease, squalid living conditions, and awful slums," writes Eberstadt. "But the proper name for those conditions is human poverty."

Countries like Taiwan, South Korea, or the Netherlands show that densely populated countries can prosper as well. Nonetheless, concerns that population growth obstructs development have inspired large-scale family planning measures since the 1950s. In 1969, the UN created the UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), which supports family planning initiatives worldwide.



### Picture Gallery (click the image to start)

Really Crowded: The World's Biggest Metropolitan Areas

In the late 1970s, the Chinese government introduced its famous one-child-per-family policy. While many question whether such schemes are humane, the policy clearly slowed down Chinese population growth to the extent that India will soon be the world's most populous country.

### Up on population peak

While overall population will keep on growing, growth rates around the world have decreased during the last decades. The steep increases in human populations that so worried demographers during the 1970s-80s are beginning to flatten out. In fact, in some countries like Japan, Italy, Russia, and China, birth rates have fallen well below replacement rates. This is cause for serious concern for governments looking to fill military ranks or plan pension schemes.

This stabilization of the world's population is slower and less noticeable in developing countries, especially Africa, but the UN expects average fertility in the developing world to drop to around 2.1 children per woman, which is approximately replacement level.

As developing countries like India attain higher living standards, fertility rates will likely fall as they have elsewhere in industrialized societies. For now, the world population is still growing, but demographers expect a peak population - somewhere around 9-10 billion people - by mid-century, probably followed by a gradual decline.

### Carry that weight

For many, overpopulation might mean being stuck in rush-hour traffic or in a crammed subway train. Scientists, however, measure it using concepts such as carrying capacity - how many humans the Earth can support.

Experts from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization believe that with the political will and existing technology, there is enough food to sustain the current global population of 6.6 billion and even more. But it is unclear if the Earth's basic biological systems - such as water resources, forests, fish stocks, and climate - can support another 3-4 billion people

Shivar Shankar of the University of Bangalore says that in some places, it will not. Despite the improvements in irrigation, seeds, and fertilizer during the 1960s-80s, the so-called Green Revolution, Shankar says that irrigation and agricultural productivity have peaked in India and will decline in the future. Other factors, such as a lack of water, as is the case in India or parts of Africa, will also significantly decrease a region's ability to sustain large populations.

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Most demographers see future population growth as happening primarily in developing countries. For a poor country without proper infrastructure, however, population growth can be more than just an inconvenience. Even in the 21st century, too little water, food, and medicine can still be deadly.

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### **Readers' Comments:**

I think that you may be breathing a sigh of relief far too quickly. Malthus was about the whole package of essential resources, not just population growth and food supplies, so let's take a wider view.

The 'green revolution' of the 60's and 70's staved off a crisis then, but has now petered out. This means that food production is at, or near its peak, but the world population is set to grow for at least another 40 yrs.

This population growth is concentrated mostly in third world / developing countries where power, nutrition and water supplies are already a major problem. I would suggest that from a Malthusian point of view we are about to enter a period that supports, not disproves his predictions.

I repeat Malthusian theory wasn't just about food; it was a prediction about resources using food production as a model. He just couldn't imagine water being one of those issues, because the poisoning of the water tables had not really started in his times, and let's be honest, he lived in England where rain is not lacking.

Let's wait and see if we should be afraid of Malthusian theory.

**Andy Kelly**

<http://no-pc.blogspot.com/2007/03/malthus-and-four-horsemen.html>

There is no real shortage of energy, food or other basic resources. There is just a shortage of common sense among the world's political-financial establishment.

As long as banks issue negative-value debt-based currency, rather than positive-value currency such as Renewable Energy Credits (RECs) or TEA "dollars", the world will continue suffering from "profitable" wars, terrorism, poverty, environmental degradation and other deleterious effects.

**Anonymous Reader**

To me. it is not a question of how many people the earth can support, but rather what kind of lifestyle people live. Would the earth sustain 6 or 7 billion people living a wasteful consumer driven lifestyle like that of the USA?? Global warming, habitat loss, species extinction, toxins, pesticides, garbage, sprawl etc. I don't think so!

**Anonymous Reader**

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