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# The Empty Cradle–Falling Birth Rates and the Human Future

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For decades, Americans have been warned of an impending population explosion that would threaten world happiness, human health, and perhaps even threaten the end of the human species. The prophets of a population explosion have issued regular books and bulletins that paint a depressing picture of a planet running out of both room and resources. Now, it turns out that these Cassandras got the picture almost entirely backward.

Though the population of the planet continues to increase incrementally, long-term demographic trends point not to a population explosion, but to something of a population implosion by this century's end. The real threat to human welfare is more likely to be a precipitously falling birth rate, rather than anything like a population explosion.

The latest evidence of what some now call the “birth dearth” comes from Phillip Longman of the New America Foundation. His new book, *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity, And What To Do About It* should prompt immediate reflection and a change in both planning assumptions and governmental policy.

In *The Empty Cradle*, Longman presents convincing evidence that there is no “population bomb” in our future—at least not the way the prophets of population explosion presented it. To the contrary, the falling human birthrates now spreading across the planet point to a future with too few, not too many, human beings.

“Today, global fertility rates are half what they were in 1972,” Longman reports. But that statistic doesn't come close to telling the whole story. As Longman illustrates, “No industrialized nation still produces enough children to sustain its population over time, or to prevent rapid population aging. Germany could easily lose the equivalent of the current population of East Germany over the next half-century. Russia's population is already decreasing by three-quarters of a million a year. Japan's population meanwhile is expected to fall by as much as one-third—a decline equivalent, the demographer Hideo Ibe once noted, to that experienced in medieval Europe during the scourges of the plague.”

Longman first presented his arguments in the May/June 2004 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. In that article, Longman presented his case that a “global baby bust” would have dramatic consequences in the world's economies and national destinies. The rate of the world's population growth has fallen by more than 40 percent since the late 1960s. Specialists at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis predict that the total human population will reach its climax at 9 billion humans by 2070 and then begin to shrink. As Longman comments, “Long before then, many nations will shrink in absolute size and the average age of the world's citizens will shoot up dramatically.”

Furthermore, “forecasts by the UN and other organizations show that, even in the absence of major wars or pandemics, the number of human beings on the planet could well start to decline within the lifetime of today's children.”

The dramatic decrease in human birthrates is one of the products of the modern world. As the populations of industrialized nations gravitated into cities and professional occupations, the number of children born to each woman went into something of a free fall. The average woman in the world today bears half as many children as did her counterpart just 30 years ago. As Longman argues, “Although many factors are at work, the changing economics of

family life is the prime factor in discouraging childbearing. In nations rich and poor, under all forms of government, as more and more of the world's population moves to urban areas in which children offer little or no economic reward to their parents, and as woman acquire economic opportunities and reproductive control, the social and financial costs of childbearing continue to rise."

A nation's future is found in its children. A look at the average American playground will show a large number of children at play and most metropolitan communities continue to build new schools for an expanding student population. How can America's population of children be shrinking?

Other demographic trends also come into play. Not only are native-born Americans failing to reproduce themselves in the population, vast improvements in human health have extended the life cycle so that a burgeoning population of the elderly adds an entirely new dimension of stress to the society.

Longman has collected a vast array of statistics to prove his point. It took half a century for the median age of Americans to rise just five years, from 30 to 35. By 2050, the median American age is projected to be 39.7. During that same period, the median age of Mexicans will rise a full 20 years.

Researchers have noted the phenomenon of falling birthrates in industrialized nations for many years, as children were no longer needed for manual labor on the farms and as child-labor laws prevented children working in factories. Under these economic conditions, children became a net economic liability in sheer financial terms. The U.S. Department of Agriculture projects that the cost of raising a middle-class child born in 2004 through age 18 will exceed \$200,000—and that does not include college. The total social expense of child-rearing must also include what economists project as "foregone wages" the parents would otherwise have earned. Some economists estimate that cost to be more than one million dollars per child.

Even as birthrates have been falling in Western nations, many observers had expected birthrates in much of the world to rise, at least throughout the next century. Instead, the reverse is taking place. "Fertility rates are falling faster in the Middle East than anywhere else on earth," Longman reports, "and as a result, the region's population is aging at an unprecedented rate." As an example, Longman points to the experience of modern Iran. "Post-revolutionary Iran has seen its fertility rate plummet by nearly two-thirds and will accordingly have more seniors than children by 2030."

The economic impact of falling birthrates is both immediate and long-term. Longman rightly observes that falling birthrates in advanced economies came only after the precipitous rise in personal income and wealth. The opposite is happening in much of the rest of the world. "Countries such as France and Japan at least got a chance to grow rich before they grew old," Longman comments. "Today, most developing countries are growing old before they get rich."

China's fertility rate indicates that its working population will begin to shrink by 2020, and a full 30 percent of its population could be senior citizens by mid-century.

In the United States and much of the industrialized world, the immediate economic impact is likely to be determined by a shrinking labor pool and a monumental escalation in the costs associated with senior citizens.

"Population aging is . . . likely to create huge legacy costs for employers," Longman projects. "This is particularly true in the United States, where health and pension benefits are largely provided by the public sector." These "legacy costs" will be passed on to the next generation, and any reasonable economic analysis would question whether the economy can sustain such costs as the work force and consumer base is shrinking.

From a Christian perspective, the economic issues are important, but not paramount. Phillip Longman's new book is a prophetic warning about falling birthrates and a population implosion. He makes his case with skill and authority, and his book serves an important purpose in punching holes through the arguments put forward by "population explosion" theorists.

The Christian conscience should be primarily directed at the consequences of an anti-natalist worldview that sees children as economic liabilities, rather than as gifts to be received with joy. The prejudice against babies and children is evident in America's public life, especially among the elites.

Falling birthrates point to spiritual, as well as economic causes. The population implosion the world seems soon to experience will be due to the confluence of materialism, human ambition, self-interests, and secular ideologies.

Longman is bold to identify ideological feminism as one of the precipitating causes of falling birthrates, and he seems intent on sending a signal to social progressives that they may well be out-numbered by conservatives before long. "Today there is a strong correlation between religious conviction and high fertility," Longman comments. "In the United States, for example, 47 percent of people who attend church weekly say that the ideal family size is three or more children, as compared to only 27 percent of those who seldom attend church."

Longman offers several "secular solutions" to the population decline, and his policy proposals deserve careful attention. Nevertheless, the most interesting dimension of his argument comes back to theological roots.

"Does this mean that the future belongs to those who believe they are (or who are in fact) commanded by a higher power to procreate?" Longman asks. "Based on current trends, the answer appears to be yes." His research is certain to spark fierce debate and spirited discussion. In the final analysis, doesn't it make sense that those who see children as gifts from God would have more children than those who see children as economic cost units? How could anyone be surprised?

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