

NEGATIVE POPULATION GROWTH

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NPG President's Column Series

“Business-As-Usual” Population Projections Show a World of 12 Billion by 2100

Despite global media attention on the problem, there is still no acknowledgment of the clear solution: widespread access to contraception, and smaller family sizes.

On October 27th, two biologists at Australia’s University of Adelaide shocked the global media with their article “[*Human population reduction is not a quick fix for environmental problems*](#),” which was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS). At first glance this report would seem to see futility for those advocating prompt population reduction, such as NPG. However, upon closer inspection, the study’s findings echo what NPG has advocated for decades: we must adopt policies and practices which work to first halt, and eventually reverse population growth – and in the meantime, we must reduce our unsustainable consumption. Sadly, this summary is where most media outlets stopped their coverage – another repetition of the “reduce, reuse, recycle” mantra. However, this was far from the end of the story told by the data.

As [reported by Science magazine](#), the study was born when population biologist Corey Bradshaw and climate biologist Barry Brook decided to explore which scenarios might dramatically slow population growth within the next few decades. According to *Science*, “Their goal was to assess how sensitive human population growth is to changes in mortality, life span, family size, and a mother’s age when she has her first baby.” The team explored most plausible scenarios in the study, creating population projections to reflect everything from “business-as-usual,” to “the imposition of a global one-child policy,” to “catastrophic deaths due to war or pandemics.” Their findings were instructive.

Even with an imaginary global catastrophe claiming up to 5% of the world’s population – up to a loss of half a billion people – the team’s model still showed robust growth, resulting in a population of roughly 10 billion by 2100. NPG’s first concern is population reduction in the high-consuming U.S. This high-volume world population growth will inevitably spill over into America and other western countries through mass immigration from high-fertility nations.

It seems the late (and great) [Professor Al Bartlett](#) was absolutely correct: the sheer momentum of mankind’s exponential growth – even in small percentages – is enormous. The study also inadvertently addressed the tired argument of pro-growth economists: “shrinking populations create an unsupportable burden of elderly dependents that leads to economic collapse.” According to Bradshaw, data from his study proved “the idea that shrinking populations cannot support older adults is a ‘fallacy.’”

Perhaps the most important result of the study is the one receiving the least amount of media attention. Of the multiple scenarios that scientists fed into the model, only two had any significant impact in reducing population growth: eliminating unwanted pregnancies (which represent roughly 16% of all live births),

and the worldwide adoption of a one-child policy. Individually, those two factors produced nearly identical results: a global population of roughly 8 billion in 2050, dropping down to 7 billion by 2100. Out of all the possibilities, these two were the most effective at actually reversing population growth.

At the very mention of a “one-child policy,” the immediate reaction of most Americans – and rightly so – is a demand for the defense of civil liberties. The concept of “eliminating” unwanted pregnancies also evokes one of our nation’s most divisive issues. However, these models were designed to illustrate the effects of extreme policies – their actual implementation is highly unrealistic. It is the results – the value of attaining much lower fertility rates and the concept of *preventing* unwanted pregnancies – that are important. NPG has long held that the U.S. – by its democratic foundation, its Constitution, and its very culture – should never enact coercive legislation for the sake of reducing population size. But the results are clear: the only real hope we have for a significant and humane reduction in population growth is if we work to greatly lower fertility rates and to prevent the millions of unintended pregnancies each year.

After the article’s publication, critics of the population reduction movement could hardly contain their enthusiasm. It seemed that Bradshaw and Brook had supplied all of the fuel necessary to stoke their pro-growth fire. The article makes very plain – as did the authors’ interviews in several publications after its release – that, for the short- and intermediate-term future, there is essentially nothing mankind could do to significantly reduce the momentum of our population’s exponential growth. In a way, that ship has sailed. There is no going back – there have been, and will inevitably continue to be, serious environmental consequences for our past decisions to grow with reckless abandon. We cannot emerge unscathed.

But the certainty of these consequences do not equate to humanity’s unavoidable demise. While accepting the reality that we cannot quickly reverse the environmental damage we have done through overpopulation, we must not abandon our mission. We must continue to advocate a much smaller, truly sustainable U.S. and world population – and we must entertain every possible option for conserving and preserving our dwindling natural resources, as well as curb our insatiable consumption. Rather than closing the door on the population debate, this study should instead open a wide avenue for global dialogue – one that is sorely missing from the media spotlight.

We read countless headlines and feature stories on “going green,” the everyday decisions we make that impact global climate change, teaching our children the importance of protecting the environment... Why are we not giving equal air time to presenting the benefits of smaller family sizes, promoting rigorous public education on family planning and contraception, and advocating for increased education and employment opportunities for women? There is, in fact, a critical “middle ground” between invasive national policies that violate human liberty, and the present lack of *any* global discourse on the impact of large families on our environment, economies, natural resources, and quality of life.

America – and, in fact, the world itself – *does* have options beyond just: 1) no policy at all, or 2) mimicking the dogmas of China. By broaching the subject publicly, each nation can engage in a dialogue regarding the impacts of individual choices on society as a whole. We can begin to educate ourselves on the pros and cons of those critical decisions. Each individual nation can work with experts to determine its optimum population size, and agree upon the policies which would work best to reach that level. Only by removing the taboo surrounding the conversation can we begin to move towards a solution.

Since 1972, NPG has advocated policies and practices which: encourage families to make an educated and pre-planned decision on the timing and number of their children, provide widespread access to effective and affordable contraception for all who request it, promote the benefits of having fewer children, and

abandon the fiscal and social policies which are incentives to larger family sizes. With all data demonstrating the efficacy of these principles, we will continue our mission. We stand firm in our long-held belief: only by greatly increasing public awareness regarding the dangers of population growth – and by avidly promoting real solutions – do we stand any chance of changing the trajectory of a future population crisis.

We encourage all concerned Americans to get involved in creating momentum for a national dialogue on U.S. population growth, and our [vast online library](#) of resources is available to all *absolutely free of charge*. For more information on the link between family size and U.S. population growth, we suggest Lindsey Grant's NPG Forum paper [The Two Child Family](#), or the recent NPG Commentary [The Choice to be Childfree: An Increasing Factor in U.S. Population Growth](#).

Founded in 1972, NPG is a national nonprofit membership organization dedicated to educating the American public and political leaders regarding the damaging effects of population growth. We believe that our nation is already vastly overpopulated in terms of the long-range carrying capacity of its resources and environment. NPG advocates the adoption of its [10 Principles for a Responsible U.S. Population Policy](#), with the goal of eventually stabilizing U.S. population at a sustainable level – far lower than today's. We do not simply identify the problems – we propose solutions. For more information, visit our website at www.NPG.org.