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# WILL U.S. POPULATION FALL IN 2021?

## An NPG Forum Paper

by Edwin S. Rubenstein

Three key factors determine the fluctuations in a country's population: births, deaths, and net immigration. The coronavirus pandemic is disrupting all three in ways that could portend dramatic departures from "normal" population growth scenarios.

Every year for the past 100 years the population of the United States has grown. During most of that period, however, our birth and population growth rates have declined. Prior to the pandemic, most demographers expected this deceleration to continue for decades. A study published in *The Lancet* in July 2020, for example, projected that U.S. population would peak in 2062, and then start to shrink.[1] That study was completed before COVID-19.

**The last time the U.S. population shrank in size was 1918, also a pandemic year.**

Here, I'll summarize how the pandemic is altering those three variables, and the implications for U.S. population growth over the next few years.

## DEATHS

Of the three variables, you would think that measuring deaths would be the most straightforward. It isn't. Amid a pandemic it can be difficult to determine the exact cause of death, even with sophisticated diagnostic tools. So health professionals compare data for **"all-cause mortality"** – deaths from any cause – for pandemic months with typical deaths in those months of prior years. The difference is the **"excess deaths"** attributable to the pandemic.

From March 1st to August 13, 2020 there have been 200,000 more deaths than in a typical year, according to estimates from the CDC.[2] The official COVID death count over that period came to 166,700. The disparity between these two numbers suggests that official death counts substantially understate the overall mortality effects of the virus. The larger figure includes people who died at home of non-COVID causes rather than risk hospitalization at a time when hospitals were overwhelmed by coronavirus patients. They too are victims – albeit indirectly – of the pandemic.

"**I don't know of (and wouldn't particularly trust) any estimate of** [deaths] **by the 'end of the pandemic,' whenever that might be,"** Nicholas Reich, a biostatistician at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, is quoted as saying.[3]

Complicating the death count is evidence that COVID-19 is more than just a respiratory disease. When German researchers performed MRIs on 100 individuals, with median age of just 49, who had recovered from COVID-19, they found that 60% had heart disease.[4] Researchers are still trying to figure out whether the virus directly injures the heart, or if drugs used to treat it do.

Another wrinkle: there seems to be no relation between the severity of a patient's COVID illness and the severity of heart disease.

While the pandemic itself is a killer, efforts to mitigate it – quarantines, business closures, social distancing, mask mandates, restrictions on inter-state and international travel, etc. – should, in theory, save people who otherwise would have died.

During hard economic times death rates typically fall in wealthy countries. The decline is caused, in part, by a drop in work-related activity; deaths from commuter car crashes and workplace accidents fell during the Great Recession, for example.

But COVID has altered our lives so completely that prior patterns no longer apply. Traffic levels dropped more than 90% in some large cities after the pandemic, but deaths from car crashes surged. In March, fatalities nationwide from crashes rose 12%, in May it jumped 34%, and in June — the latest month of available statistics — it rose 23% compared with the same months last year, according to the National Safety Council.[5]

Automotive deaths have gone up apparently because more people are driving at higher speeds. With mass transit systems facing "doomsday" budget cuts in many parts of the country, an even greater spike in traffic fatalities seems likely.

The 1918 Spanish flu pandemic is the deadliest in modern history, killing an estimated 50 million worldwide, including about 675,000 in the U.S. Our population was only 103 million back then, so the raw U.S. death rate was about 10-times greater than COVID is today.

In some ways, however, the current pandemic is worse. Excess deaths – deaths relative to recent norms – jumped more in 2020 than in 1918. A new study published in the JAMA Network Open compares the worst two COVID months in New York City – when the city was the hottest U.S. hot spot – with the deadliest months of the 1918 calamity.[6]

Although death rates are lower now – an average of 202 per 100,000 city residents died in April and May 2020

compared to 287 in the worst months of the 1918 pandemic, the increase from the norm is considerably higher today.

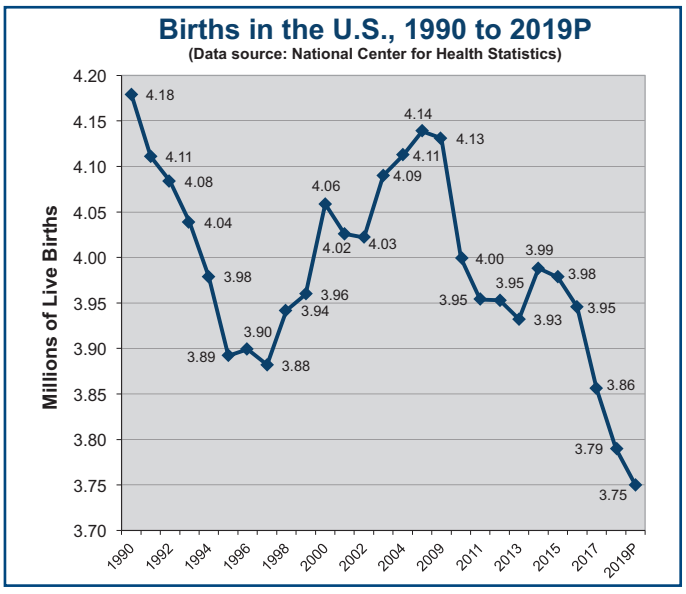
About 100 New Yorkers per 100,000 died from all causes in the three years before the Spanish flu, a figure that nearly tripled in October and November of 1918. This time around, with COVID-19, deaths per 100,000 have quadrupled – from an average of 50 in April and May in the three years prior to 2020, to 202 in April and May of this year.

Summarizing the two pandemics, Dr, Jeremy Faust, an ER physician at Brigham and Woman's Hospital in Boston and the lead author of the JAMA study, says **"They're comparable events in terms of magnitude."**

**"I think maybe we imagine pandemics and plagues and other calamities to be the sort of historical events where the streets are lined with dead bodies and there's pestilence and filth,"** Dr. Faust notes, **"but what our numbers show is that what happened in New York was pretty similar to what happened in the greatest modern pandemic."**[7]

## BIRTHS

Pandas aren't the only mammals that find it hard to procreate in captivity. The notion that humans will copulate when left with nothing to do – dubbed the blackout baby theory – surfaces in the immediate aftermath of disasters. Early on in COVID-19, some pundits predicted a baby bump nine months down the road. Yet for decades Americans have been having fewer children, and preliminary data for 2019 show no signs of a turnaround.




The number of babies born in the U.S. hit its lowest level in more than three decades last year, continuing a five-year downward trend. In all, 3.75 million babies were born in the country last year.

For most of the past 50 years birth and economic cycles moved in tandem: Fertility tended to fall during recessions, and then bounce back when the economy recovered. Demographers expected that to happen after the Great Recession of 2007-09, which was the deepest since the Depression.

But the pattern broke. A post-recession rebound never materialized even as the economy staged the longest recovery on record. Birthrates for women in their 20s, which had dropped 25% or more during and shortly after the recession, kept falling, and they stayed flat for women in their 30s.

The current recession, we'll call it the Pandemic Recession, is much worse. And the future is doubly uncertain. Potential parents are worried both about their (and their children's) future health, as well as their future finances.

When the Guttmacher Institute surveyed 2,000 American women in late April and May of this year, it found that about one-third wanted to delay pregnancy or have fewer children as a result of the pandemic. That outweighed the 17% who said they wanted children sooner or more of them.[8]

In June, the Brookings Institution released a study predicting the onset of "**a large, lasting baby bust**." Its researchers estimated there could be 300,000 to 500,000 fewer births in 2021 than if there had not been a pandemic. Ironically, that could put 2021 babies in an enviable position later in life. Being born into a small cohort means less competition getting into college or landing the first job.

But a spike in births in 2022 is probably not in the cards either. "**It strikes me as unlikely that there will be a date when everybody feels like everything has returned to normal, which implies that there isn't going to be this surge,**" says Tom Vogl, a development economist at UC San Diego.[9]

Women will try to delay having their next child. If they make up for lost time by having more children later, the decline in birth rate will be short-lived. But demographers predict that many, if not most, postponed births will never be made up. The major reason? Lack of time.

American women are getting married, and having their first child, later than ever. In 2019 birth rates for women 40 to 44 years old grew faster than those of any other age bracket.[10]

While 20-somethings will have plenty of time to reach their family size targets, older ones will need to space births tightly to reach their targets in their remaining fertile years. For many, biological clocks will run out before the danger posed by the pandemic abates.

"**Every time that people decide to push back when they're going to have their first kid or their next kid, some proportion will end up not having the child at all,**" says Karen Guzzo, a sociology professor at Bowling Green State University and acting director of the Center for Family and Demographic Research. For couples who are already parents, Guzzo notes, **"the longer you wait to have a second or third child, the harder it is to, say, 'Oh, I'm ready to have babies again.' They say, 'You know what? My family's complete, I'm happy with what I have.'"**[11]

Comparisons with the 1918 pandemic are useful. Births in the U.S. fell by an astounding 13% from 1918 to 1919.[12] We are unlikely to see anything like that in 2021. Unlike the Spanish flu, COVID affects older people more than other age groups. Therefore, deaths of potential parents will not be nearly as important in reducing births in 2021 as they were in 1919.

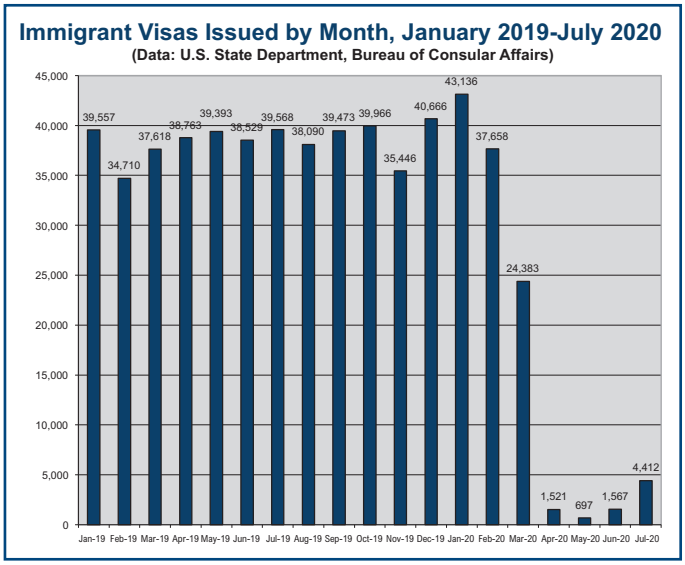
Similarly, a spike in births such as what occurred in 1920 may not be in the cards today. Researchers disagree on whether the 1920 baby boom was due to the end of the pandemic, the end of World War I, or a mixture of both. Peace led to a spate of marriages postponed by the war, and childbearing after couples re-united. But the economy was booming in the 1920s. We are at Depression-era unemployment levels today. A post COVID-19 baby boom is hard to imagine.

Before the pandemic American women could "have it all" – babies and a career – by outsourcing parental oversight to pre-school childcare and schools. In 2020 that model imploded: prolonged school closures and mandated physical distancing obliterated it. Childcare and K-12 education are now largely home-based. Even when both parents work at home, juggling time among these responsibilities is burdensome. Future fertility trends will depend on how well parents cope with this problem.

## IMMIGRATION

Just as the pandemic has reduced travel between U.S. cities and states, it has slowed the rate at which people enter and leave the country. **"We've seen almost a complete shutting down of immigration,"** says Julia Gelatt, a senior policy analyst at the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute. "**That's because our consulates abroad aren't interviewing people for visas; it's because we've basically shut down the borders to asylum seekers."**[13]

State Department data document the collapse of visa issuance:




In July of last year 39,588 immigration visas were issued in consular offices worldwide, but in July 2020, the latest month of available data, only 4,412 were issued. During April, May, June, and July of this year a total of 8,197 visas were issued. That is a whopping 95% reduction from the 156,253 issued during the same months of last year.

In 2019 net migration added nearly 600,000 people to the country's population, according to the Census Bureau.[14] A 95% reduction in that figure, if sustained through 2021, would mean 570,000 fewer immigrants added to U.S. population next year than in 2019. Prospects for negative population growth next year would be rosy indeed.

Unfortunately, in recent months the Trump Administration has voluntarily canceled, or been forced by Federal courts to cancel, several initiatives that would have cut immigration levels still further. For example:

**FOREIGN STUDENTS**: On July 14th the Trump administration rescinded a policy, enacted only weeks before, that would have stripped U.S. visas from foreign students if their courses were entirely online. Pressure from universities, who stood to lose millions in tuition, and technology companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter, that hire the cheap labor of foreign students when equally talented American citizens are available, forced the change. Absent from the discussion are the national security risks: if foreign students are working exclusively on-line, their presence and location will be unknown to immigration authorities. They already have the highest visa fraud and overstay rates of any foreign population.[15] Every year about one million foreign students enroll in American universities.

**IMMIGRANT WELFARE RECIPIENTS**: On February 24th the Administration enacted a "**public charge rule"** denying green cards to immigrants deemed likely to need public assistance. Around two-thirds of immigrants who entered the country legally from 2012 to 2016 would have been denied entrance had this rule been in effect, according to a study by the Migration Policy Institute.[16] On July 29, 2020, a federal judge blocked the administration from continuing to enforce the rule while the United States is under a national public health emergency due to the coronavirus pandemic.[17]

**LEGAL IMMIGRATION**: On August 17th U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced plans to furlough two-thirds of its foreign embassy staff at the end of the month, a move that would effectively bring legal immigration to a halt.[18] Eight days later USCIS cancelled the plans, explaining that the layoffs will "… increase backlogs and wait times across the board, with no guarantee we can avoid future furloughs..."[19] The move is good for government bureaucrats, but bad for minorities, high school dropouts, and the disabled, i.e., the groups most likely to see their wages fall due to competition from legal immigrants in the U.S. workforce.

Even if the U.S. were issuing visas at pre-pandemic levels, our high COVID rate and economic turmoil would make this country a less enticing destination. All of this portends less immigration to the U.S.

## THE VIEW FROM 2021

The three variables that determine population change are all shifting: Deaths are rising, immigration is falling, and birth rates will, in all likelihood, start dropping at the end of the year. **"Between births and deaths, we're talking about more than half a million people missing from the U.S. population next year**," Tom Vogl says.[20]

From the beginning of the pandemic to the end of 2021, the combination of more deaths, fewer births, and fewer immigrants could lead to something like 500,000 to 1 million fewer people in the U.S. That would be a large drop, and it would likely reduce America's population growth to its lowest level in 100 years. But it probably would not be enough to produce negative population growth. The reason? Natural population growth – the excess of births relative to deaths – was running at roughly 1 million per year before the pandemic. So, in the absence of a pandemic, we would expect the population to grow by nearly 2 million from early 2020 to the end of 2021. Even in the "worst case scenario" - a loss of 1 million lives due to the pandemic - the population would still grow.

That said, there is an outside chance that U.S. population could shrink in 2021. Say the coronavirus is not contained, the economy remains depressed, and immigration is cut further. That could produce a situation where U.S. population is smaller at the end of next year than at the beginning – something that demographers did not expect to happen for several decades.

Another potential avenue to negative population growth is the deteriorating employment situation for women. In April women accounted for 55% of the 20.5 million jobs lost, pushing the unemployment rate for adult women to 15%. The biggest reason for these losses is that industries hardest hit by the pandemic – leisure, hotels, education, and child care, are disproportionately female.[21]

## SUMMARY

Is 2020 merely a pause that refreshes? Or is it the onset of the sustained decline in U.S. and world population long advocated by NPG? At this point no one knows, but the early demographics are encouraging. U.S. population growth will surely decline next year, and may well go negative. This trend may continue for years.

Never in our lifetime has the world faced three simultaneous environmental calamities: the coronavirus, record wildfires and their attending pollution, and floods. Both population growth and overcrowding are implicated in each of these current scenarios.

Of all the mitigation strategies available, having fewer children is the best thing people can do for the environment. That message may finally be getting through.

## NOTES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