NPG Negative Population Growth, Inc.

EMBRACING THE BIRTH DEARTH
PART 1: THE FUTILITY OF PRO-NATALISM

An NPG Forum Paper
by Dr. Nathanial Gronewold

ABSTRACT

The governments of 55 countries worldwide have policies in place aimed at encouraging women and couples in their societies to give birth to more babies. These administrations fear collapsing birth rates and the population declines that this trend is either already causing or will soon cause. Billions of dollars have already been spent trying to reverse the global collapse in birth rates, despite a mountain of evidence—gathered over decades—that conclusively shows these pro-natalist government policies simply don't work. And this is a good thing—we don't want these policies to work because the world's population needs to decline.

So far, the United States hasn't followed suit, but influential voices in government and popular punditry are increasingly expressing concern about our own American birth dearth. This may compel Washington to have a go at it. If it does, then our government will fail, just like all the other governments that have already tried and/or continue to try to stop this force of nature that can't be stopped.

AN EXERCISE IN FUTILITY

Broadly speaking, there are two types of experiments: controlled and natural. This is an oversimplification, of course, but I'm prone to doing this; it's a nasty habit of mine. Nevertheless, for the sake of what I'm about to show you, let's just agree that experiments can either be organized and controlled by researchers or they can just sort of happen, producing valuable data that we can use anyway even though there are no actual organized experiments involved.

I published my second book, *A Tale of Two Cranes: Lessons Learned from 50 Years of the Endangered Species Act*, in 2023. The entirety of this book is built around a natural experiment I stumbled upon while pursuing graduate degrees in Texas and Hokkaido, Japan. Independently, the American and Japanese governments orchestrated two endangered species recovery programs on opposite sides of the planet for almost 80 years (actually, longer—but I focused on 80 years). The whooping crane in southeast Texas nearly became extinct before the US government intervened. The red-crowned crane in southeast Hokkaido was believed to have already been driven to extinction before a surviving population was discovered by a Japanese government expedition in the early 1900s. These two remarkably similar species are so close in appearance and genetics that they can probably interbreed.

The natural experiment was this: the Americans protected the whooping cranes by protecting and managing their habitat. The Japanese did this for the red-crowned cranes, as well. They also managed that species' population through a sustained winter artificial feeding regimen that continued uninterrupted for decades. So, which strategy proved the most successful? That's the question I sought to answer and explain. The answer is: Japan's artificial intervention feeding led to a far greater population recovery than compared to the Americans' lighter approach. Case closed for this natural experiment, I think.

As it turns out, and unbeknownst to me at the time, between 1970 and 2010 several Arab-majority and Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and North Africa inadvertently undertook a natural experiment of their own, only this one was focused on their human populations and not on any populations of endangered species.

Of these Arab nations, half of these countries—Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Algeria—implemented what can best be described as anti-natalist policies, or policies aimed at encouraging women to have fewer children. They were likely doing this because they feared too-rapid population growth would make it difficult to grow their economies or keep their populations sufficiently fed. These are also autocratic states, so perhaps there was concern over a rising youth population, with poor economic prospects, possibly rebelling at some point in the future. The governments of the other half of this Arab nation group—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman—did precisely the opposite, by steadily or sporadically implementing pro-natalist (sometimes just called "natalist") policies, e.g., policies aimed at encouraging women to have more children. The approaches these eight Arab national governments took toward population growth from the 1970s to the 2010s are explained in some detail in a research paper published last year by Amos Nadan, a scholar at Tel Aviv University in Israel.[1]

As was the case with my study on cranes, Nadan wanted to analyze this natural experiment more thoroughly to determine how these two different policy approaches fared and what outcomes they produced many years later. It's a near-perfect natural socioeconomic experiment: pro-natalist policies versus anti-natalist policies in eight countries with similar cultural and linguistic heritages.

So, what do you think? Which policy direction is the most effective, according to Nadan's study?

I'm grateful for his efforts. This is because Nadan does us (pro-population decline advocates) a great service by demonstrating the utter uselessness of pro-natalist government policies, even for those governments that are arguably extremely capable of aggressively promoting or even strictly enforcing their pro-birth measures.

The governments of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman were alarmed by their respective country's rapidly falling birth rates, and these governments sought to reverse this trend through incentives but also via coercive measures, like restricting access to contraception, among other steps. They probably did this to achieve greater economic growth and greater geopolitical stature—never for the benefit of the people, only for the benefit of these governments. Were they successful? Hardly. As Nadan shows, not only did the four pro-natalist Arab countries continue to experience declining birth rates, but their birth rates actually fell *faster* than their peers within the countries of the anti-natalist camp, i.e., the Middle Eastern and North African governments that were actively trying to suppress national birth rates.

"This is the opposite of what might have been expected if one believed in the effectiveness of

these policies, or even of only one of them, either pro- or anti-natalist," Nadan wrote.[2] No understatement there. He's right—the results were the exact opposite of the pro-natalist governments' goals.

Let's break this down a bit so we're clear as to what this natural experiment shows us. We started with eight countries. These eight countries are all very similar culturally, ethnically, and religiously—not identical, of course, but very similar. Four of them, Group A, tried to push their national birth rates lower from the 70s to the 2010s. The other four, Group B, tried to either keep their birth rates higher or at least slow or arrest the decline. Overall, what Group A and Group B wanted to achieve did not correlate to the outcome. In other words, their policies didn't matter. From roughly 1980 to 2000 the total fertility rate (TFR) in all these countries, the number of children born per woman, fell at about the same rate. From 2000 on TFR in Group B fell faster, for a total decline of about 69% for Group B versus 60% for Group A, per Nadan's results.

Again, this experiment wasn't planned; it just sort of happened. It's as if the universe itself is trying to tell us that governments cannot compel their citizens to have more babies, even if those governments try really, really hard, coercively or not.

Is there a lesson here for the world at large? Apparently not. Pro-natalism is still all the rage, and it's only gaining in popularity despite the mountain of evidence that these policies don't work.

Governments worldwide—representing vastly different histories, languages, religious heritages, and economies—have been running these programs for decades. They've virtually nothing to show for their policies. But they persist. Now, the government that rules my life, that of the United States, is starting to mutter about having a go at it, too, even though it's hardly needed here as the US population is expanding.

Those musing about or advocating for government-led pro-natalism in the USA have a huge volume of data available to them that proves it's pointless to pursue these policies. They have at their disposal evidence that shows how, in some cases, these actions at the government level can be harmful and are diametrically opposed to principles of freedom and personal choice. At a minimum, these policies are massively expensive and produce very little for the public spending that goes into them. And yet, the siren call of "We want more babies, and the government needs to do something about this!" persists in America. This is all very frustrating to me.

So, fair warning—what follows is the written rhetorical equivalent of me banging my head against a wall. This is me screaming into a pillow. I'm diving to the bottom of the deep end of the pool and then bellowing out as loudly as I can until I'm out of breath and forced to resurface. You get the idea.

From Portugal to Hungary, Russia to South Korea, Taiwan to even Australia at one point, and all places in between, national governments have encouraged their citizens to procreate via pronatalist legislation. And where governments haven't already put these policies in place, some of them are actively talking about doing so. The government of the United States is now starting to have this very discussion. Therefore, I thought it might be helpful to explain to readers, as definitively as I can, how and why national pro-natalist policies never work and why there is absolutely nothing any government can do to halt the long, long global trend in fertility declines. The same goes for America's government.

Of course, our national leaders may try anyway. If they do, they'll fail, so I am putting them on notice now of their impending failure.

Denmark wanted Danes to "do it for Denmark" in a clever ad campaign. I'm sure

Danish women and men are doing it more than ever, it's just that they're obviously using protection because Denmark's (low) birth rates haven't budged since the campaign launched. If anything, Denmark's birth rate is a bit lower now.

Vladimir Putin wants Russian women to return to the days of giving birth to six or seven children, each, on average. The women of Russia have not complied, not by a long shot. Russia's population was declining by hundreds of thousands of people per year even before Moscow launched its war with Ukraine. Today, there's plenty of immigration to Russia, but not enough Russian babies, so the population continues to fall.

France is trying it. Finland, too. The Canadian province of Quebec even went for it. Germany is trying. Poland, as well. Singapore's government is still at it. Italy, Spain, Greece, Taiwan—yup, ditto. I could go on and on. The United Nations estimates at least 55 countries had policies in place trying to raise national fertility rates as of 2021.[3] All of these programs are probably still active and they will all fail, every single last one of them. We may see temporary blips of TFR increases here and there after the initial launch of some aggressive pro-natalist government policies, but TFR declines will inevitably revert to the mean and continue their downward slide until they hit rock-bottom. I don't know where that bottom is, but I know we haven't reached it yet.

Author Elizabeth Nolan Brown spells out the obvious in her 2023 essay published by *Reason*. "Over and over again," she wrote, "officials have demonstrated that government-led efforts to induce higher fertility produce weak results at best, and frequently fail entirely, often at high public cost."[4]

I'll go further to declare that these policies have all been unequivocal failures. It's a mystery why they're still attempted. It could be argued that some pro-natalist policies slow birth rate declines or at least raise birth rates very temporarily, helping to shore up future workforce shortages to some marginal extent. Where they have been seen, these "improvements" in TFR, if you want to call them that, have all been fleeting.

This is likely what we'll see in Hungary, which is now being touted as the model for pro-natalist governments to follow. Viktor Orban's government incentivizes Hungarian women to bear more children by offering cash grants, and even huge mortgage subsidies. After hitting a certain number of children, Hungarian women may even qualify for lifetime tax exemptions. Orban's government thinks these measures will see Hungary surpass France and Germany in birth rates, where similar aggressive pronatalist policies have only seen very modest, temporary successes. It won't.

Will we humans ever learn? Probably not. America may be about to start making its own way down this well-traveled road to nowhere.

In his first public address since assuming his new role at the White House, Vice President JD Vance told an audience, per media reports, "I want more babies in America!"[5] Getting Americans to give birth to more children is clearly a priority for the new administration. I don't know what precise policy prescriptions Vance and team have in mind, but I do know these potential policies, if implemented, will fail. Presently, the UN doesn't see America as being a pro- or anti-natalist government. This could change considering the rhetoric coming out of the new administration.

Will the US government succeed where every single other government on Earth attempting to raise birth rates to the magic TFR replacement level of 2.1 has failed? Will only America manage to crack this code? NO! Of course not. And yet, the new government may try. Whatever pro-natalist policies they may adopt, they'll all fail, just so you know.

I think I might need another pillow.

THE TREND IS OUR FRIEND

First, the crux of the matter—why are birth rates falling everywhere at the same time? Why is the decline accelerating in some countries? And why can't governments lift them back up even after huge spending campaigns?

Past readers of my NPG Forum papers already know my answer. For the newbies out there, I'll hold off explaining until the end but suffice it to say that it's a universal pattern, and the scholarly consensus seems to be that it's a combination of factors at play.

Falling birth rates roughly correlate to rising GDP and increasing national wealth. The one exception is China, where the government strictly enforced a one-child-per-couple policy for decades and China became wealthy while that policy was in place. For almost all other countries, this correlation between low birth rates and increased wealth is clear-cut. It's also known that birth rates decline when women attain higher levels of education and a higher status in society. Scholars argue that through higher education and greater participation in the labor force, women gain more autonomy and greater decision-making power over their reproductive health, and they're consequently choosing to have fewer children. Certain conspiracy-minded corners wonder whether some forms of pollution may be harming male fertility, causing declines that way, but I know of no clinical research that has found a firm connection between falling sperm counts and plastic residues or other types of pollution.

Beyond academia, there is an unsavory explanation for low birth rates floating around: women's liberation.

Marriage is occurring later in life. When marriages do happen, they often fray after only a few years. Divorce rates are high. Society is more tolerant of sexual liberty. The nuclear family model is breaking down—husband and father as the breadwinner, wife and mother as the caregiver to three or more children. Religiosity is also declining. Thinking along these lines tends to put most, but not all, of the blame for falling birth rates on women. Female pursuit of economic and societal independence is fracturing the 1950s Ozzie and Harriet model that delivered the world the Baby Boom, or so we're told.

In other words, some earnestly believe that radical 1960s counterculture and feminism are to blame. Several popular commentators explain the global baby bust this way and argue that what's needed is a return to a more patriarchal, masculine-energy dominated nuclear family model whereby the man brings home the bacon, the woman tends to the home and children, and the entire family regularly attends church services every Sunday where they learn to be fruitful and multiply.

I don't agree with any of those explanations, but it hardly matters what the correct answer is. What matters is that governments everywhere are deathly afraid of falling fertility rates in their populations. They want to put a stop to the trend as quickly as possible.

This trend is my friend. It's a great trend—the best news for global environmentalism that I've heard in a long time—but presidents, prime ministers, and parliamentarians think this is all terrible news and that it needs to end yesterday.

Nation-states have learned to associate population size with economic and military strength. This wasn't always the case. For most of my life, both China and India were massive but crushingly poor and weak. Now that's changing, and both of those nations are well on their way to becoming global superpowers (China is arguably already there or at the cusp of achieving this status). Today, it's generally true that nations with larger populations have larger economies. The governments of these nations are thus able to tap this greater wealth dividend to expand their

influence abroad and build formidable military forces featuring the latest weapons technologies. They become forces to be reckoned with. Except this all isn't necessarily true. One could argue that—as America's population has swelled and swelled—the country has only become relatively weaker on the global stage as other nations soared even higher economically. Nevertheless, modern governments see power in population size. A falling population is seen as a sign of waning power, and governments want to become stronger, not weaker.

There are real economic concerns independent of military and diplomatic considerations. Younger generations work and pay taxes, and a portion of this surplus is spent on older generations who are either less productive or can no longer work. A part of the population literally depends on the other part, and if the number of dependents far outweighs the number of active, productive workers, then the outcome could be a country weighed down economically as the young must work extra hard and bear an enormous tax burden to pay for the needs of the elderly.

This is what concerns the authors of a new McKinsey Global Institute study, titled "Dependence and depopulation? Confronting the consequences of a new demographic reality."

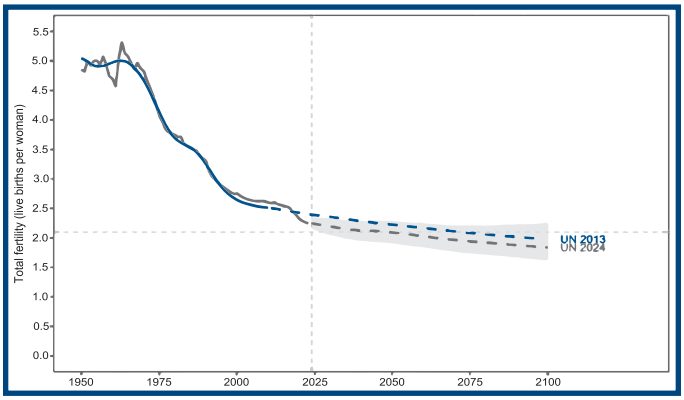
The authors' findings are bleak, to say the least. They say falling fertility is "propelling major economies toward population collapse in this century," and, of course, they're calling on governments to take action to reverse the trend—as if they haven't already been trying this for the better part of three decades.[6]

"The first wave of aging economies has started to feel the impacts on economic growth, labor markets, consumption, and public finances," they wrote. "Later waves of aging will hit emerging economies, which are expected to face a similar fate in just one to two generations."[7] They warn that younger working-age populations will have to work longer and harder to support top-heavy aging demographics and that spending on retired people could eat up as much as half of total government budgets. Taxes could soar, leaving the youth disenchanted and angry. All true.

Just how bad is this worldwide falling birth rate phenomenon?

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) estimates that the world average birth rate or total fertility rate has slid from a value of 3.2 children born per woman in 1990 to 2.2 by 2024, declining by more than 31%. That figure comes from DESA's latest advance unedited version of its World Fertility Report 2024 released last month. The figure was about 5 births per woman back in the 1960s, so global fertility has fallen by 56% since then. Fertility is already below the replacement value in 55 countries that hold more than two-thirds of the world's population.[8] Again, 2.1 is considered the replacement rate, so humanity is about to hit that, and we're well on track to dipping below the replacement rate on a global scale. I think this is great news, I only wish it could happen faster.

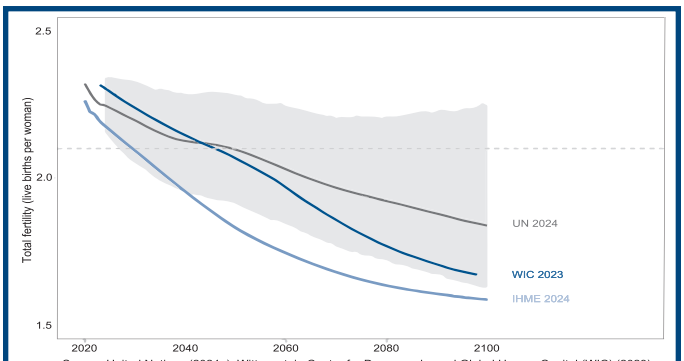
Here's how the United Nations shows the drop-off graphically:



The line labeled "2013" reflects UN DESA's projections made in 2013. The "2024" line is where the global body sees things trending today.[9]

Some organizations project steeper declines

in fertility ahead, beyond what the UN is predicting. Notice how DESA's lines sort of level off. Why wouldn't they keep angling downward? The UN recognizes other projections that make this point and considers them credible enough to include them in its new report. Here they are:



Source: United Nations (2024a); Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (WIC) (2023); Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) (2024). United Nations has been abbreviated as UN.

This graph is how the UN measures its forecast against those made by the Wittgenstein Center for Demography and Human Capital (WIC) and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME).[10]

The birth rate is falling everywhere, even in countries where it's still above the ideal minimum 2.1 replacement rate. "The ongoing decline of births in countries and areas that still have relatively high levels of fertility is likely to continue, and thus the uncertainty is related mostly to how fast or slow this process will unfold," the UN says.[11]

DESA's new report shows the United States' TFR was 1.99 back in 1994. It clocked in at 1.62 in 2024, a fall of about 17.6% in 30 years. Too bad it's not dropping faster.

So, yes, this phenomenon is very real. It's very powerful. And governments are trying to stop this force of nature with money, as governments tend to do.

THE DEFINITION OF INSANITY

To their credit, the authors of the McKinsey study recognized the abject failure of several governments' pro-natalist policies. They argued that governments need to start thinking about ways to improve and tap the productivity of older workers. Incredulously, they still cling to the hope that pro-natalist policies will eventually work; that continuing to tweak public spending toward encouraging larger families will fail and fail and fail until it finally starts working somehow.

You know the saying: What's the definition of insanity? Trying the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

South Korea's president, now under arrest for his attempt at instituting martial law, famously said that his country's government has spent well over $200 billion over the past two decades trying to raise its TFR only to see it sink lower and lower. Japan's government has almost quadrupled its spending on programs to promote larger families. Japanese families are now smaller than ever.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that the money Hungary, France, and Germany are spending just on tax breaks for larger families is costing those countries about 0.5% of their GDPs annually.[12] Total annual spending on all pro-birth tax exemptions, childcare, pro-family services, and cash grants for births amounts to nearly 3.5% of France's GDP, 3.3% of the GDP of Hungary, and about 3.4% of GDP for Germany, according to OECD data.[13] To put it into perspective for you, please consider this: that's more money than these countries spend on national defense. Their pro-natalist policy spending is about double their military spending.

The trend holds. Birth rates are still drifting lower. This is all one very expensive lesson in futility.

United Nations data shows Hungary did manage to boost birth rates from 2010, but its TFR has stalled and dipped a bit again between

2021 to 2022. Today, Hungary's TFR is 1.56, down from 1.9 in 1990. It's been the same story in Germany. Berlin managed to boost Germany's TFR to 1.6 by 2016. It's now closer to 1.45. France's TFR is 1.64—it was 1.67 in 1994.[14,15]

Pro-natalist government policies have been the subject of rigorous scientific scrutiny for decades. And the results are in: they don't work.

There's Nadan's study from the Middle East and North Africa published just last year. A 2022 study looked at Russia, Poland, and Hungry. Those authors reached the same conclusion as Nadan. "All three governments have concentrated monetary and rhetorical investments in pro-natalism, traditionalism, and familialism, imploring women to have more children and to remain at home raising them," they wrote. "These efforts have failed to produce substantial or sustained increases in fertility; demographic decline continues in all three cases."[16]

These findings all echo results already reached 20 years ago.

Marek Louzek, a researcher at the University of Economics in Prague, published a report in 2003 that analyzed data through a historical lens. His study reviewed pro-natalist policies in France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden that were established before World War II. He also analyzed policies pushed in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and East Germany during the communist period of Eastern Europe. Louzek's abstract is blunt: "Pro-natalist policies, according to this study, are not too effective."[17]

Notably, Louzek's study included communist Romania. This country is famous for a draconian ban on abortions and contraception imposed by its former despot during its communist past. It's widely assumed that these policies led to a baby boom so robust that it resulted in thousands of unwanted children being raised in orphanages. At least, that's the popular story—that the draconian pronatalist laws of Nicolae Ceausescu boosted Romania's birth rate. Louzek doesn't see it that way. These policies may have led to a surplus of unwanted babies born to young women and men, but it didn't do much to lift the country's overall birth rate according to the data.

Louzek's 2003 assessment of pro-natalist efforts in nine European countries (two of which no longer exist) left the author disdainful of the very concept that governments should try to manipulate the reproductive habits of their populations. "The pro-natalist policy means that either the government must force people to have more children than they want to have, or must increase the wishes of people to have children, e.g., by decreasing the costs on children," he wrote. "The first method is, in a democratic country, problematic. The second method is less problematic, but it may not be effective."[18]

But why doesn't it work?

There are several theories. The one most supported by the available data is generally referred to as the "crowding-out hypothesis" and it's the one Louzek and other scholars find quite compelling.

Take your average young married couple. Happily newlywed, they launch their lives together—firming up their employment situations, trading up for better housing in a better neighborhood, and planning for their future together. They have children in mind in that vision of a future together. But not quite yet. Best to save up some money and ensure that they both have good job security first.

But then the government announces a "baby bonus" program promising a $8,000 cash reward for the first baby born to any couple and $10,000 for each subsequent child born. There are also generous provisions for paid parental leave and support for the medical expenses associated with

childbirth. Couples will even get a congratulatory gift basket from the government, it's reported. Hearing this, our hypothetical couple says "Hey, this seems like a good deal. We want to have children anyway. And what if the policy is later rescinded? Maybe we should take advantage of this?" And so, the couple does, starting their family much earlier than they were initially planning for.

They give birth to two children and, indeed, receive $18,000 and other benefits in return. But they are still young, and their combined income is still limited given they are still in the early years of their adult lives. Meanwhile, their costs continue to climb. They quickly find that $18,000 doesn't even begin to cover the full cost of raising two children in their city. School fees mount. Food and clothing bills mount. They must take the kids to the doctor. Daycare costs especially bite. With its pro-natalist policies, the government was hoping to get this young happy couple to begin having children earlier on the assumption that they would continue to do so until they had three or even four. But our hypothetical couple weighs their options. "What do you think, dear?" the young wife asks her husband. "Another baby and $10,000 richer? Or we stop at two and try our best to save for their futures?"

Guess which choice they're making?

This is the crowding-out theory. There's pretty good data showing that if these pro-natalist policies do anything at all, it's that they perhaps move the dates of births up by a few years but don't change the overall numbers. Some scholars even think they can conversely lower birth rates; young couples are enticed to have a first child, and then they are quickly stunned by how expensive and taxing it is to raise a single child even with state support, so they stop at one.

A 2021 study out of Russia achieved similar results.

In that review, two researchers, Svetlana Biryukova and Oksana Sinyavskaya, put pro-natalist policies pushed by Vladimir Putin from 2007 onward under the microscope. Under Putin, that year Russia's government began offering lump-sum grants to women who have children. The grants must be spent on housing or childcare expenses, or the money can be put into the mother's retirement fund. The government also increased the level of pay new mothers are entitled to during their paid family leave periods. Subsidies on daycare expenses were also increased. Then came a generous "maternity capital program" that dramatically boosted the value of grants offered to women who give birth to a second and third child. Biryukova and Sinyavskaya acknowledge that this set of pro-natalist reforms is significant. "Altogether, these four major novelties of Russian family policy substantially lower childbearing costs and thus constitute a 'critical juncture' that might cause changes in fertility behavior," they said.[19]

These policies that the Russian government put in place "constitute a critical juncture." They are considered to be super generous and completely game-changing in the realm of pro-natalism. They're also utterly and catastrophically ineffective.

In this 2021 study, Biryukova and Sinyavskaya find that this state support was enormously helpful to Russian families with children, but it did nothing to reverse Russia's low birth rate. "Based on our data, we can assume that there is no or only weak positive effect of 2007 family policy changes on temporal shifts in fertility." In other words, the report finds only weak evidence that the generous state support Putin is throwing at mothers is, *maybe*, encouraging couples to have babies earlier than they had initially intended—the crowding-out effect.[20]

Russia's 2024 fertility rate stands at 1.46 per

UN data.[21] It was 1.5 in 2020 according to the World Bank.

PRAISE BE TO THE BIRTH DEARTH

To the pro-natalists out there, I beseech thee: Yield.

You must stop. You must yield. You must give up. You must end this exercise in futility and embrace a glorious future of population decline. Expect and prepare for a future with a smaller working-age population, a higher percentage of older and elderly adults, and all the challenges that will bring. Meanwhile, prepare to reap all the benefits that will come, as well. Yield. I have pinned your arm firmly behind your back and I'm twisting it hard. You're immobilized. Cry "uncle" now. Please. This is starting to get uncomfortable for both of us.

Mass immigration won't save these governments, either. The immigrant source nations are experiencing the same birth rate declines and population declines will eventually follow in those countries. Meanwhile, new arrivals simply adopt the low fertility habits of their adopted homes by the second generation. Immigration just kicks the can down the road.

Pro-natalist policies simply won't work. It may look like they are working for a little while, but then the trend will shift towards the downside again. Government policies cannot reverse the global, universal trend of declining birth rates and the worldwide population declines that will inevitably result from this. It's like trying to outlaw gravity. You can't.

That's because the falling birth rate phenomenon is natural. It's happening because there are too many human beings on the planet. The collapse in birth rates in every country is the clearest sign that our planet is overpopulated.

So here comes my explanation for the newbies, the one I promised earlier.

Read the first Forum paper I wrote for NPG a few years ago. It's titled "Don't Call it a Crisis: The Natural Explanation Behind Collapsing Birth Rates" and was published in 2021. In it, I explain mounting evidence that shows rising human population density is the force pulling birth rates lower and lower. It's a phenomenon that's been discovered again and again in nature and the animal kingdom, of which we are a part.

In short, as our population swelled, we felt compelled to cluster into the cities and urban centers that dominate human civilization. This crowding has its advantages but also disadvantages. A big disadvantage is that it makes life more stressful. The cost of living becomes very high. Survival becomes a bit more tenuous as there is great competition for jobs, especially for the high-paying sort that would permit families to live comfortably in these crowded situations. This causes us to feel a lot of stress. Couples become uncertain of whether they can secure their own futures in these conditions, let alone the futures of their offspring. So, more couples choose to have fewer offspring or none.

That's it in a nutshell. But please, check out that early paper of mine to learn more. Everything is explained there.

How can we be so sure that this is a force of nature beyond our control? Well, for starters, practically all the money in the world can't stop it. South Korea has tossed $200 billion at it. France shovels twice its military budget at it every year while trying to turn this thing around. There's no telling how much money Putin's Russia is throwing at it. Japan quadrupled its spending on families and children, and the birth rate only fell lower there. It's natural and inevitable.

Here's another way to look at it. Pro-natalist governments are urging their citizens to have

more sex. Many of them are actually *paying* couples to have more sex. And it's *still* not working. The extra babies aren't being born.

There's no stopping this.

I get their anxiety. I really do. At least, I get the anxiety that some in the pro-natalist camp are feeling.

Children are wonderful. They are a joy. They can completely change the mood of a room. Someone in the grumpiest, most depressed of moods can easily be lifted out of their doldrums by a child's laughter. There's absolutely nothing wrong with having children. There's nothing wrong with *not* having children, either. If you value true freedom, independence, and autonomy you would agree with this sentiment. Women and men everywhere are making the free choice to have smaller families, or to not have children at all. It is their right and their choice. Let freedom ring.

Unfortunately, there's another side of the pro-natalist camp whose campaigners are motivated by more cynical, decidedly anti-democratic aims. They simply worship national power. More people = more power—that's as deep as their thinking gets. And because these people believe national economic and military power matters more than individual liberty and individual choice, they're willing to put in place policies to entice, bribe, cajole, and pressure couples to deliver more babies to the government. They'll even try tricking and shaming them.

They don't care that people are stressed out and fearful of the future. They don't care that couples have no confidence in their ability to maintain a decent quality of life for themselves given the mounting uncertainties society poses. They don't care. These cynics simply want more babies now! Don't worry about the cost, they say. Don't worry about the future. Who cares? It will work itself out.

They'll say it's necessary because of the rising population of elderly dependents. We need more children in society to shore up pension funds and lift economic growth so that we can take care of this growing population of elderly dependents, we're being told. Except this reasoning makes no sense, because children are dependents, too. If the pro-natalists succeed in their attempts to engineer societal demographics they may end up simply squeezing the working-age cohort of their populations from both ends—workers will have to toil extra hard to take care of both the children and the elderly.

I don't know what pro-natalist policies our government is mulling or is about to put forth in the coming months or years. Whatever they are, they won't work.

Let me try it without the pillow muffling my face: GOVERNMENT PRO-NATALIST POLICIES DON'T WORK!!

I'm glad I got that all off my chest. I feel better now, I think.

But let's be honest, this all begs the question of what to do about the profound demographic changes that are coming. The population will become top-heavy with older people. Pension systems will be stressed, practically to the breaking point. Healthcare services will be taxed far more than they are today. Workers will bear the brunt of this unprecedented burden. Meanwhile, falling populations will lead to towns emptying, stores shuttering, home values declining, and infrastructure decaying. Population decline will be very visible, without question.

It will also be a beautiful blessing in disguise, but only if we play our cards right. That's the topic for my next paper, part two of this series.

Here, I laid out as clearly as I could how and why government efforts to boost birth rates have been a miserable failure. Next, I'll show you the policies they should be pursuing.

NOTES:

1. Nadan, Amos. "Are population policies in Arab countries largely ineffective? Past and present perspectives." *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 2024; 33, pp 385-409.
2. Ibid.
3. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. World Population Policies 2021.
4. Brown, Elizabeth Nolan. "Stork don't take orders from the state." *Reason*, June 2023.
5. Eaton, Sabrina. "'I want more babies in America,' JD Vance says in his first public address as vice-president." Cleveland.com, January 24, 2025.
6. Madgavkar, Noguer, Bradley, White, Smit, and Radigan. "Dependency and depopulation? Confronting the consequences of a new demographic reality." McKinsey Global Institute Report, January 15, 2025.
7. Ibid.
8. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *World Fertility Report 2024*. January 2025.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. OECD Public Database, PF1.1: Public spending on family benefits. February 2023 update.
13. Ibid.
14. World Bank Group data: Fertility rate total (births per woman).
15. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *World Fertility Report 2024*. January 2025.
16. Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova, and Kozlov. "Trying to reverse demographic decline: Pro-natalist and family policies in Russia, Poland, and Hungary." *Social Policy & Society*, 2022.
17. Louzek, Marek. "Can pro-natalist policy be effective?" Prague Economic Papers 3, 2003, pp 265-281.
18. Ibid.
19. Biryukova and Sinyavskaya. "More money—more births? Estimating effects of 2007 family policy changes on probability of second and subsequent births in Russia." *Family and Demography* 2 (162), March-April 2021.
20. Ibid.
21. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *World Fertility Report 2024*. January 2025.

Ω

Nathanial Gronewold is the author of *Anthill Economics: Animal Ecosystems and the Human Economy* and *A Tale of Two Cranes: Lessons Learned from Fifty Years of the Endangered Species Act*. He holds a Ph.D. in environmental science from Hokkaido University and teaches journalism and media operations as a faculty member at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

NOTE: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPG, Inc.

Negative Population Growth

Negative Population Growth, Inc.
2861 Duke Street, Suite 36
Alexandria, VA 22314

Phone: (703) 370-9510
Fax: (703) 370-9514
Email: npg@npg.org

SIGN UP TODAY AT WWW.NPG.ORG TO RECEIVE NPG COMMENTARY ONLINE!

Board of Directors
June Bauernschmidt, *Chairman*
Josephine Lobretto, *Secretary/Treasurer*
Frances Ferrara
Sharon Marks
Diane Saco

NPG Executive Office
Craig Lewis, *Executive Director*

© 2025, Negative Population Growth, Inc. Permission to reprint is granted in advance. Please acknowledge source and notify NPG.
All NPG publications are available online at www.NPG.org.