

The Population Implosion

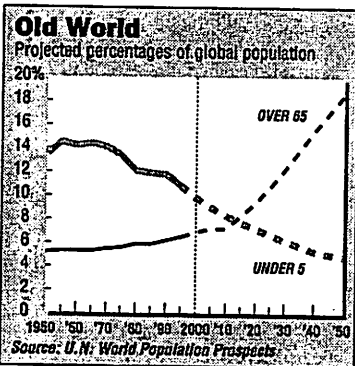
By NICHOLAS EBERSTADT

Most of the news from this week's 23rd General Population Conference in Beijing has focused on the threat of overpopulation. But this danger may be a myth. Over the past several years, some of the world's best demographers have begun a dramatic reassessment of the world's demographic future. They are now seriously considering the possibility that the world's population will peak in our lifetimes, and then commence an indefinite decline.

The "depopulationist" scenario has been set out most recently in the United Nations Population Division's 1996 revision of its biennial compendium, "World Population Prospects"—the oldest, largest and most intensive of various contemporary attempts to outline likely future demographic trends, and a good starting point to outline the demographic revolution that may be in store.

Fertility Trends

All population "projections"—these are not predictions—are built on assumptions. The U.N.'s "low variant" model assumes that life expectancy at birth will rise in "more developed regions" to 81 years in 2050 from roughly 75 today. For the "less developed" regions, average longevity



will reach 76 by 2050, vs. 64 today; in the "least developed countries" (mostly in sub-Saharan Africa), it is seen as rising to 72 from 52.

The most important assumptions in the "low variant" model concern future fertility trends. By the U.N.'s estimate, total fertility rates (lifetime births per woman) for the more developed regions have already fallen to about 1.5 from about 1.7 in the early 1990s, and, if this model were to prove accurate, would settle in another decade at about 1.4. For the less developed regions, the rate is thought to have averaged 3.3 in the early 1990s and fallen

slightly since; the model projects its declining to about two in 2020 and 1.6 in 2050. For the "least developed countries," where the estimated total fertility rate is estimated to have been over five this decade, it is posited to drop below four by 2010, below three by 2020 and below two by 2035.

With these assumptions about the future—none of them implausible on their face—global depopulation would commence in a little over four decades. Between 2040 and 2050, the world's population would fall by about 85 million. From then on, world population would shrink by roughly 25% with each successive generation. To put the matter another way, future world fertility patterns would be sim-

ilar to those in the "more developed regions" today, where the "net reproductions rate" is already down to about 0.7 (meaning that the next generation, under present patterns of childbearing and survival, and not accounting for immigration, would be about 30% smaller than the current one).

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any rate, among those we would consider elderly today). In the less developed regions, there would be three times as many older people as young children; in the more developed regions, the ratio would be 8 to 1. In Italy, which serves in these projections as the extreme instance of demographic aging, barely 2% of the population in 2050 would be under five years old, but more than 40% would be 65 or older.

Such a gerontological drift raises basic questions about the health of the societies of this imagined future. Would a depopulating world be a world of wheelchairs—of increasingly infirm senior citizens whose escalating demands for medical services and care seriously burden the rest of soci-

ety? Or would the revolution in longevity be accompanied by a revolution in health that effectively extends the scope for active, vigorous and productive existence?

On a whole, the evidence seems to argue that improvements in "disability-free" life expectancy can occur nearly as rapidly as improvements in life expectancy itself. At the same time, the quality of life for older people may at times hinge upon discrete, but expensive, medical treatments—interventions more available in rich countries than in poor ones.

Negative population growth would have major implications for government, especially for the nationwide, tax-financed, pay-as-you-go pension programs that are the central feature of the modern welfare state. In virtually all of today's industrial democracies, such programs were established in periods of relatively high fertility and relatively rapid population growth. With below-replacement fertility and increasing longevity, the arithmetic of these schemes changes unforgivingly. As the ratio of employees to retirees falls, such programs have only three options for preventing bankruptcy: reduce pension benefits, raise taxes or restrict eligibility.

One way to begin restructuring such programs is with later retirement ages, as populations make greater productive use of their extended active life spans. But depopulation would almost necessarily presuppose a change from pay-as-you-go financing to self-financing of retirement benefits by individuals over the course of their own lives. Though such a change could involve a full privatization of social

insurance, it is also possible to imagine the reformed pension systems operating under the aegis of government. But it is hard to see how self-financed pensions could lend themselves as readily to redistributive or other nonmarket objectives as the pay-as-you-go arrangements have done.

Finally, it is interesting to ponder how the demographic revolution to come will affect the family as most of us have experienced it. The U.N.'s projections imagine a world in which the only biological relatives for many people will be their ancestors.

Consider the possibilities for Italy, currently the country with the world's lowest fertility level. If Italy's current regimen is extended for two generations, almost three-fifths of the nation's children will have no siblings, cousins, aunts or uncles; they will have only parents, grandparents, and perhaps great-grandparents. Under those same assumptions, less than 5% of such a future Italy's children would have both siblings and cousins.

Social Atomization

Projecting the fertility rates for the entire European Union forward two generations only slightly alters the Italian scenario. In time, under "low variant" assumptions, families in the less developed regions would move in this direction. Within another generation or two, a family consisting of siblings, cousins, uncles and aunts would be anomalous throughout the entire world. For many if not most people, "family" would be understood as a unit that does not include any biological contemporaries. The nuclear family may have marked a radical departure from previous sorts of family arrangements. But, as we have seen, the nuclear family does not begin to approach the limits of social atomization that may await us in a depopulating world.

All this represents merely a sketch of a future whose social, political and economic outlines promise to break sharply with anything in recorded experience. Yet as opaque as these changes may appear today, we may yet manage to discern them very carefully. A good number of us could eventually experience them firsthand: In the U.N.'s "low variant" projections, in fact, half of the world's current inhabitants would still be alive at the time that global depopulation commences.

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