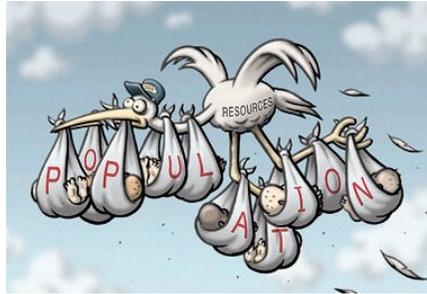


Overpopulation

Priests for Life, Canada



How many of us are there?

The world's population is currently 6.7 billion, and is likely to increase to 9.2 billion by 2050, after which it is projected to decline.[1] Huge as that number is, the Earth is even bigger (about 197 trillion square miles). To put it in perspective, the entire population of the world, if it agreed to live at the same density as New York City, could fit into the state of Texas. Of course, not all of us want to live in New York.

Population trends.

Rising life expectancy. This population growth is mainly due to an increase in life expectancy, combined with birthrates that exceed the 'replacement rate' high across the globe. The population 'replacement fertility rate' is 2.1 births per woman, which means that each woman has to have 2.1 children in her lifetime just to maintain the earth's current population. Worldwide life expectancy in 1970-1975 was 58 years; it is now 67 years in 2005-2010 and is expected to keep rising to 75 years in 2045-2050.[2] In 1950 just 8 percent of the world population was 60 or more years old. By 2005, that had risen to 10 percent, and is projected to reach 22 percent in 2050.[3]

Fertility Rates. In the past 30 years, the world's fertility rate has sharply declined. In the period from 1970-1975, the average woman had 4.47 babies in her lifetime. In 2005-2010, the rate declined to 2.55 births per woman.[4]

Total fertility rates (the expected number of children born per woman) are dropping in more than 90% of the world; the world total fertility rate has dropped from 2.8 in 2000 to 2.61 in 2008.[5] It is expected to drop to 2.02 in 2045-2050.

Since we are still slightly above replacement fertility rate of 2.1, the earth's population is still growing, but not nearly as fast as it was, say, in the late 1980s, when earth added 86 million inhabitants per year - the biggest incremental increase in recorded history[6]

These statistics shed an entirely different light on the population issue, because, while we must consider the consequences of the last century's explosive growth, we have to do so in light of current trends. And those trends point to some problems that most of us aren't even thinking about right now.

Once the fertility rate drops below replacement level, an obvious consequence is an aging population. Babies aren't born fast enough to balance the number of elderly people dying, so the average age of the population rises quickly. Then there aren't enough workers to support (either thorough government systems or family systems) the elderly population. China, for example, has experienced a rapid decline in fertility rates over the past quarter-century due to its one-child policy and the accompanying forced sterilizations and abortions. Analysts are now predicting that in 10 years, China will have a major work force shortage, but it will be 10 years too late to do anything about it. [7]

However, concern about overpopulation isn't a simple question of how many people are on earth. An area is overpopulated not because it has reached a certain density of population, but because it doesn't have enough food, water, shelter or resources to sustain its population.

Major Arguments

"But we already can't feed everyone - there are nearly a billion people starving." Hunger is not caused by too many people sharing the land. North Korea has more than twice the farmland per person than Japan, yet no one is saying that the Japanese are starving.[8]

Corrupt governments and unfair food distribution contribute enormously to hunger. Under the totalitarian mismanagement of Robert Mugabe, for example, Zimbabwe went from being a net exporter of food to now suffering from chronic food shortages, with an annual inflation rate of 165,000% and where just one in five adults has a regular job.

North Korea and South Korea have similar population densities, natural resources, and even parallel cultures sharing the same peninsular homeland. But North Korea is a poverty-stricken, totalitarian dictatorship where its people are suffering from widespread famine, and South Korea is a prosperous, capitalist country where the people are well nourished and materially/economically secure, despite the fact that South Korea's population is double that of North Korea. This suggests that it is bad economic policies, not "overpopulation," that causes famine.

In fact, a review of the Indices of Economic Freedom suggests that countries with a strong level of economic freedom avoid famines, regardless of how high their population densities.[9] (In economically free societies, governments allow labor, capital and goods to move freely, and refrain from coercion or constraint of liberty beyond the extent necessary to protect and maintain liberty itself.)

The total food available per person in the world rose by 11 percent between 1970 and 1990, but the number of hungry people in the world increased by more than that. The problem then is not a larger population - the problem is unequal access to food and food-producing resources. [10]

"Overpopulation is a problem because it keeps some countries from developing economically." As recently as three or four generations ago, fertility and mortality rates in the United States were as high as they are now in most third world countries.[11] Opportunities for women to work outside the home were limited. And ours was largely an agrarian society in which every family member was needed to work on the farm.

Faced with scarcity, poor families needed many children to help with work on the farm, and because of high infant-mortality rates, they needed many more pregnancies and births to achieve the necessary family size.

In the United States, the move to two-children families took place only after a society-wide transition that lowered infant death rates, opened opportunities to women outside the home, and moved from an agrarian economy to an industrial one. No longer relying upon their children's labor, American birth rates fell, well before the advent of sophisticated contraceptive technologies, even while the government remained actively hostile to birth control. (Until the *Griswold v. Connecticut* case in 1965, selling contraceptives was still illegal in some states.)[12]

"Overpopulation is a problem because humans are destroying plant and animal life and destroying the environment." In many parts of the world, once productive lands are now deserts, forests have been clear cut, and soil erosion is rampant, but most of the damage is not caused by food production. Blaming the victims (the hungry) doesn't solve the problem.

The tradeoff between our environment and the food we need is a false either-or situation. Alternatives do exist, and more are possible. Environmentally sound alternatives can be even more productive than environmentally destructive ones. The issue again is unequal access to these techniques and technologies.

But what about birth control and abortion?

Birth control isn't the answer to the questionable overpopulation argument. Most studies conclude that birth control programs alone account for only 15 to 20 percent of overall fertility decline, with largely social and economic factors accounting for the rest. [13]

And justifying abortion by the population-control argument boils down to saying that we should encourage the use of abortion as birth control. Among the women who had abortions, none of them, at that terrible point in their lives, cared about over-population. The Alan Guttmacher Institute (the research arm of Planned Parenthood, named after Planned Parenthood's first president) has published several studies examining reasons for

abortions in the United States. The latest was conducted in 2004 and published in 2005. [14]. Over 92% of all abortions were done were because of socio-economic reasons. Concerns over the environment or population growth aren't mentioned at all.

Women have abortions because they feel cornered, abandoned, hopeless, scared, manipulated. It's the cheap way out. What abortion does is pressure the most vulnerable - scared pregnant women - into "getting rid of the problem" so that society doesn't have to deal with it.

A society that forces the weak, the frightened, and the vulnerable to shoulder the burden of a social problem is a society that isn't meeting the needs of its citizens.

Notes:

1 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2007). World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision, Highlights, Working Paper No. ESA/P/WP.202, p. 1

2 *Ibid*, p. 5.

3 *Ibid*, p. 2.

4 *Ibid*, p.9

5 The CIA World Factbook, URL: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2127rank.html>

6 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2007). World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision, Highlights, Working Paper No. ESA/P/WP.202, p. 10

7 Wang Feng, "Can China Afford to Continue its One-Child Policy?" *Asia-Pacific Issues*, No. 77 (March 2005), p. 9.

8 Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO Food Balance Sheets

9 2009 Index of Economic Freedom, the Wall Street Journal/the Heritage Foundation. URL: <http://www.heritage.org/Index/>

10 Moore Lappe, Frances, et al., "World Hunger: Twelve Myths", *Institute for Food and Development Policy*, 1998, page 61.

11 Haines, Michael. "Fertility and Mortality in the United States". *EH.Net Encyclopedia*, edited by Robert Whaples. March 19, 2008. URL <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/haines.demography>

12 *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965) URL: http://www.oyez.org/cases/1960-1969/1964/1964_496/

13 Moore Lappe, Frances, et al., "World Hunger: Twelve Myths", *Institute for Food and Development Policy*, 1998, pg 42. 14 *Finer, Lawrence B., Lori F. Frohwirth, Lindsay A. Dauphinee, Susheela Singh, and*

Ann M. Moore, "Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives," Sept. 2005, *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 37(3): 110-118.