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A possible new culprit in the decline in birth rates

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Note

If you attend a high school graduation this spring, you will witness something special: not just fresh-faced younglings being launched into the maelstrom of the adult world, but the number of them. America may never see so many graduates again. The United States hit a peak number of high school seniors in 2025, and now the country is entering a period of rapid decline. The class of 2041 is projected to be about 13 percent smaller than the class of 2025.



The drop in U.S. birth rates is well known, as are the problems that demographic change will cause: closing schools, slower economic growth, climbing budget pressures, and a politics that is increasingly locked into zero-sum intergenerational battles – something evident as established homeowners vote to exclude new housing that young people need.

What's less understood is that this isn't just America's future. It's everyone's. Sometime between 2008 and 2015, birth rates worldwide hit an inflection point. They had been decreasing in most countries for a while as societies got richer, women got more educated and infant mortality fell. But during that period the decline sped up, and some places that had comparatively high birth rates – such as Latin America – are now declining faster than in the U.S. - Note

The fact that low- and middle-income countries are no longer producing so many eager young people complicates the usual answer to worries about American birth rates: let in more immigrants to bolster our shrinking workforce. It also complicates the stories that try to explain why birth rates are falling. Whatever your pet explanation is for the U.S. birth dearth, it probably doesn't account for why fertility has plunged in Tunisia or Sri Lanka.

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In a recent essay for the Financial Times, John Burn-Murdoch suggests that the culprit is smartphones. The devices could be causing birth rates to decline in several ways – accelerating the spread of Western norms about female empowerment, pitting the sexes against each other as feminists on social media take on the manosphere, or simply substituting for the social activity that leads to babies. I'm suspicious of monocausal explanations, and Burn-Murdoch isn't saying phones are the only reason people might be having fewer kids. But the trend is sufficiently widespread, and the timing sufficiently suspicious, to justify adding the decline in fertility to the long list of the smartphone's unwanted side effects.

If you think having too few kids is a problem (and I do), that leaves us with what to do about it. I'm not casting aspersions on anyone's life choices – I married at 37 and never had kids. But I don't want America to become a sort of continent-scale retirement village.

Unfortunately, if Burn-Murdoch is correct, naming a policy fix is difficult. Every argument about birth rates founders on this point: Even if people can acknowledge the problem and agree about the cause, it's hard to find solutions that aren't laughably unworkable or hideously expensive, especially with old-age entitlements already squeezing out the fiscal space that could otherwise pay for beefier family benefits.

But smartphones present an even more challenging problem than usual. Is the answer to ban them? Sue TikTok to make its content less compulsively scrollable? Force single young people to attend mandatory speed dating?

Obviously not. So what, then?

One option is that we could change the culture around smartphones to limit their harm. And by "we" I don't mean public officials or other authorities. I mean you and me. Communities could collectively decide to give kids dumb phones rather than smartphones, to discourage people from taking them out in adult social settings, and to generally treat the infinite scroll as something like smoking – if you're an adult, you have a right to do it, but it's bad for you and kind of déclassé.

If that seems fanciful, just remember that social sanction can be much more effective than the law at deterring destructive behavior. Few people shoplift, cheat on their taxes, vandalize public property, run through red lights or shout at strangers even when they could probably get away with it. That's because they'd be ashamed to violate the social contract – and even more ashamed to have the neighbors find out.

It is possible to rewrite that social contract, constructing new social norms to handle new kinds of destructive behavior. Humans have evidently done so many times throughout history, since none of the offenses I named existed among our hunter-gatherer ancestors. But though it can be done, it takes a lot of work, because the social sanctions that reinforce the norms have to be applied (consistently!) by ordinary people going about their daily lives.

No one wants to fight with their kids about smartphones, fight with their boss about the expectation to be available at all times, or fight with their friends when phones appear at the dinner table.

It's much easier to go along, especially because that means you can enjoy your own guilt-free hours of scrolling.

But sitting passively and waiting for something to happen got us into this mess – or, at the very least, has made the mess much worse. Complaining and hoping someone else will do something won't stop

the downward spiral in birth rates. If we actually want something done, we're going to have to do it ourselves.

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