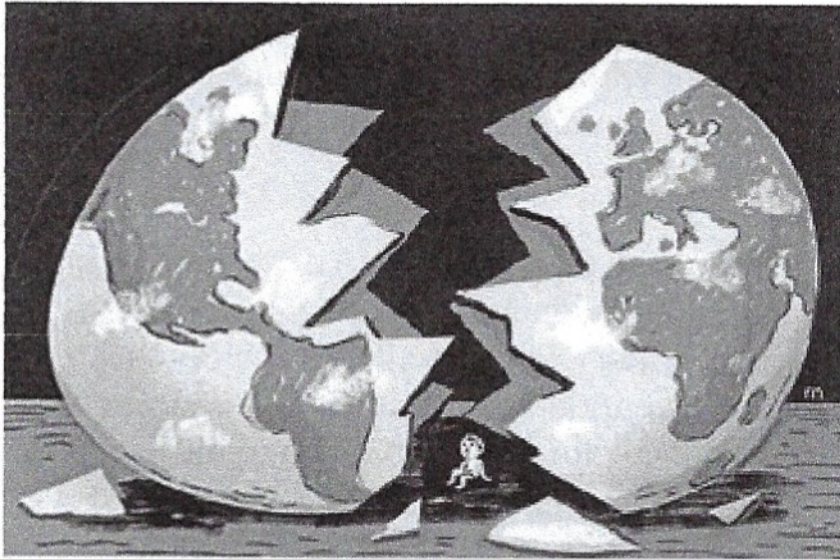


## WSJ Print Edition

*There's no shortage of explanations, but there's a strong counterargument against each of them.*



ROBERT NEUBECKER

**Falling Birthrates Are a Mystery**

By Louise Perry

When I first encountered the data on falling fertility rates, I was confident that I could explain them. The problem, surely, was that other people had failed to embrace my preferred political program. As both a conservative and a mother, I assumed that if we all embraced a culture that was more pro-family—and particularly pro-motherhood—then birth rates would shoot up. It all aligned perfectly with my ideological commitments. How neat.

I've since realized that this is how most people respond to this issue because the data on fertility rates tend to function as a Rorschach test. Conservatives blame the collapse of marriage rates and the rise of feminism. Progressives blame a lack of affordable child care and fathers' failing to do enough housework. Housing advocates blame property prices. Environmentalists blame the climate crisis. Everyone has an explanation that supports a pre-existing political agenda. Note

Meanwhile, the apolitical people I speak to in the real world always offer one of two explanations for why they personally haven't had children, or don't intend to have any more: Either children are too expensive, or they haven't yet found the right spouse. Note

There are serious problems with all of these explanations.

The first thing to know is that fertility rates are falling almost everywhere. More than half of all countries and territories were below the population replacement level as of 2021, including all sorts of countries that aren't especially rich. Southeast Asia and Central and South America have seen particularly dramatic drops in fertility, with some countries now at the ultralow fertility level that was once seen only in the richest parts of Northeast Asia.

You might be surprised by some of the countries that are now below the replacement threshold. Did you know, for instance, that Iran is a low-fertility country? Between 1980 and 2000, Iran experienced the largest and fastest fall in fertility ever recorded. This is a country in which women are subject to compulsory veiling and homosexuality is strictly criminalized, and therefore presents a challenge to those in the West who try to pin falling fertility rates on feminism or liberalism.

For every parochial or partisan explanation there is a compelling counterexample to be found overseas. If you think that expensive child care is the problem, then you need to explain why the statefunded child care available in the Nordic countries hasn't remedied their low fertility. And contrary to some feminist complaints, American fathers have been (1)

spending more time on child care and housework than ever before at exactly the same time that the fertility rate has fallen to historic lows.

Pinning the blame on marriage is also difficult. The average Turkish couple is still getting married in their 20s, yet Turkey has a fertility rate lower than the U.S., suggesting that the age at which people get married isn't the deciding factor. And besides, arguing that a surge in singleness is the cause of low fertility is a little like arguing that the reason people are no longer cycling is because they're no longer buying bicycles. If someone doesn't own a bicycle, it might be because bicycles are prohibitively expensive, or because of some other serious impediment to bicycle ownership. More likely it's because acquiring a bicycle would demand a modest amount of cash, time and effort and, in the end, he just doesn't care enough about cycling to make these sacrifices. Note

You might think that contraception and abortion had an obvious role to play in falling fertility rates. After all, breaking the link between sex and babies is the whole point of these practices. But, again, the evidence suggests not. In Britain, the first country to industrialize, the fertility rate started falling in the early 19th century and actually fell below the replacement threshold in the 1930s, decades before the arrival of hormonal contraception or legal abortion. People of the past were able to control their fertility, but they mostly did so through strategic abstinence, rather than contraception and abortion.

In Europe, the countries with the most restrictive laws on abortion are also some of the countries with the lowest fertility. In Malta, where abortion is legal only when the pregnant woman's life is at risk, the average woman gives birth to only one child across her lifetime. After Poland introduced tighter restrictions on abortion in 2020, its already low fertility rate dropped even further. It seems that when people don't have access to abortion, they adjust their sexual behavior rather than give birth to more children.

OK, what's left? Well, the housing factor may have a small role to play. One cross-country study looking at data from 1870 to 2012 found that a 10% increase in house prices is associated with 0.01 to 0.03 fewer births per woman. But this is hardly an earth-shattering figure, and fluctuations in housing costs are difficult to disentangle from other factors associated with industrialization and urbanization, which are also associated with low fertility. Note

Plus the claim that young people nowadays can't afford to have children doesn't pass the sniff test. Yes, a lot of young people may be downwardly mobile compared with their parents—certainly in Britain, much less so in the U.S.—which may induce a feeling of deprivation.

But in material terms, modern people are vastly better off than almost all of their ancestors, even when we account for increased housing costs. As recently as 1971, when the British fertility rate was still above replacement, 34% of Britons didn't have a washing machine, 9% didn't have hot running water in their homes, and 11.5% didn't have an indoor toilet. And this was before the mass adoption of disposable diapers.

Between 1911 and 2011, the population of England and Wales doubled while the number of rooms tripled, which is to say that houses became significantly less crowded. Modern people may not *feel* rich, but objectively our ability to keep our children clean, warm and fed has never been more assured.

One more factor has been the subject of recent speculation, including in an article last week by John Burn-Murdoch in the Financial Times. Mr. Burn Murdoch points to what he describes as "the population threat in your pocket"—that is, the smartphone. It seems that there is some correlation between the adoption of these devices and a drop in fertility rates, which could intuitively be explained by smartphone overuse causing social isolation. It is possible that smartphones, television and other forms of entertainment play a role in accelerating falling fertility, since there is some suggestive data from countries including Brazil, Malawi and China. But the wider trend long predates the invention of the TV, let alone the smartphone. Fertility rates in the U.S. started falling 200 years ago, and fell below the replacement threshold in 1972. This can't be explained by 21st-century technology.

The truth is that we don't really know what is going on, and we certainly don't know when the fertility decline might end. This uncertainty ought to alarm us. As the political scientist Samo Burja pointed out in a conversation we had last year, it's as if we knew the earth was getting warmer, but we had no idea that the cause was greenhouse gas emissions. The study of humans is much more difficult than the study of climate, and unfortunately the social sciences are in bad shape right now, having been corrupted by fashionable political ideas that impede the search for truth.

Whatever is going on, my hunch is that it doesn't fit neatly into any mainstream political ideology. When—or if—we work out the answer, I expect that we will find it strange, surprising, and quite possibly unwelcome.

*Ms. Perry is a Free Expression columnist at WSJ Opinion.*

Peggy Noonan is away.

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