

# The benefits of a stable, slow-growing population

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Back in 1969, President Richard Nixon warned Congress against the rapid growth of the American population: “When future generations evaluate the record of our time, one of the most important factors in their judgment will be the way in which we responded to population growth.”



If the American headcount continued rising at the current rate, Nixon said, the nation’s “social supplies -- the capacity to educate youth, to provide privacy and living space, to maintain the processes of open, democratic government -- may be grievously strained.”

Since 1969, America’s population has boomed by about 202 million to today’s 343 million, a 69% jump.

But today’s most prominent discussions on population trends rarely focus on the loss of “social supplies.” Quite the contrary. Even though the country is still adding people at about replacement level, population alarmists are painting falling birthrates as an economic disaster in the making.

As economist Nicholas Eberstadt, a leading advocate for higher birthrates, wrote in Foreign Affairs magazine, “For the first time since the Black Death in the 1300s, the planetary population will decline.” There is precious little to be said in defense of a plague that wiped out one-third of Europe’s population. But it did sharply raise workers’ wages as landowners had to compete for muscle in a much-reduced workforce.

As for today’s concerns, a drop in the numbers could ease the housing crunch for obvious supply-demand reasons. And as artificial intelligence takes over thinking jobs and autonomous vehicles end the need for taxi and truck drivers, our economy may demand fewer workers.

Let’s be clear about one thing: Children are a joy. May Americans continue to build families. We certainly don’t want a population collapse as seen in Russia. At the same time, we don’t have to measure a

nation's well-being by how crowded it can get.

Furthermore, a stable or modestly falling population could take pressure off our natural world. "Anyone who believes in indefinite growth on a physically finite planet," said nature filmmaker David Attenborough, "is either mad or an economist."

When Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency, he explained that federal programs were needed to guard "the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land that grows our food."

Leading environmental groups back then made "zero population growth" their rallying cry with a focus on birthrates.

The massive baby boom generation was in its childbearing years, so the specter of its launching another baby boom seemed plausible. By 1970, however, birthrates were already falling. They had dropped to about 18 per 1,000 people, down from about 24 births per 1,000 people in 1950.

Much of the population growth in the '70s was driven by immigration. But environmental groups, the Sierra Club, for example, steered clear of advocating reduced immigration for fear that could be read as hostile to Latinos.

It seems a bit hysterical to use the term "population crash" or even the loaded word "depopulation" regarding today's birthrates. A major factor in our growing population was Americans having longer, healthier lives. That's a positive development, right?

In any event, things change. Americans might decide to have more children. IVF treatments -- fertilizing eggs outside the womb -- are now routine. And the prospect of growing babies in the lab from start to finish now seems a matter of time. There already exists artificial wombs for very premature babies. Meanwhile, I don't recall thinking, as my car crawled in traffic through Rocky Mountain National Park, "Gosh, I wish there were more people on this road."

Was America a sad place in 1958, when it had half as many inhabitants as now? Historians refer to its decade as the "Fabulous Fifties." Think about it.

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