



## Why lower birthrates aren't always worth celebrating

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Easter is almost upon us. Traditionally, Easter is a celebration of new life and fertility, replete with rabbit imagery — a symbol of fecundity. Both globally and in the United States, birth rates are falling, and there is considerable debate as to whether that is a good or bad thing.

On one side of the argument are overpopulation alarmists, urging people to have fewer children. Generally, they believe that declining birth rates are a good thing, particularly from an environmental perspective.

The overpopulation alarmists are wrong.

Their views are certainly in vogue. Earlier this month, HBO host Bill Maher said, “I can’t think of a better gift to our planet than pumping out fewer humans to destroy it,” and he claimed that the world is “too crowded.”

He is not alone in that belief. More than a third of U.S. millennials worry about the environmental effect of childbearing, including Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who recently questioned the ethics of producing more children.

Some anti-natalists even call for government action to make birth rates fall even faster than they already do. Many prominent environmentalists — from Johns Hopkins University bioethicist Travis Rieder to entertainer Bill Nye “The Science Guy” — support tax penalties or other state-imposed punishments for having “too many” children. Bowdoin College’s Sarah Conly wrote a recent book advocating a “one-child” policy — like the one China once had and had to abandon.

These alarmists see a population decrease as an urgent necessity, primarily because they believe that population growth leads to resource depletion. But new research, inspired by the famous wager between economist Julian Simon and biologist Paul Erhlich, has found just the opposite. Consider the amount of time it takes a typical worker to earn enough money to buy commodities — the “time price” of those items, so to speak.

The recently published “Simon Abundance Index” found that, for each 1 percent increase in the world’s population, the average time price of 50 commonly used commodities declined by 0.934 percent. In other words, for each 1 percent increase in population, the cost of commodities has fallen by almost 1 percent. Each child born today eventually grows up to make resources less scarce, on average, by contributing to innovation and the global economy.

So, worrying about overpopulation makes little sense. Moreover, fertility rates are falling already.

In developing countries, falling fertility rates are driven by fewer infant and childhood deaths, allowing for smaller family sizes. More women in education and the workforce also result in lower birth rates. In developed countries, unrealistic social and cultural parenting expectations are making childbearing more burdensome than was the case for previous generations.

Economist Bryan Caplan, for example, has argued that, in the United States, parents overestimate the work needed to be a successful parent and have fewer children than they otherwise would have as a result of that misconception.

It is also true that the education, child care and health care sectors have been heavily distorted by government over-regulation, such as the District of Columbia's ridiculous mandate that child care workers hold college degrees — making child rearing more expensive.

In fact, falling fertility rates could have far-reaching negative economic consequences, as countries face aging and the working population shrinks. With fewer people to innovate, the pace of progress could slow down. As the authors of the “Simon Index” noted, “In addition to more labor, a growing population produces more ideas. More ideas lead to more innovations, and more innovations improve productivity. Finally, higher productivity translates to better standards of living.”

And the more new people in the world engaging in cooperative exchange and putting their minds toward solving problems — including environmental problems — the better off we will all be. Because, as Julian Simon put it, human beings truly are the ultimate resource. Whatever problems we face in the future, it is human ingenuity that will need to rise to the occasion.

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