Forget Fear of Overpopulation. Half the World’s Population Groups Are Declining

written by GEG | December 20, 2017

The UN estimates that almost half of the world’s population lives in countries with below replacement fertility rates. The main clusters of low fertility generally are found in advanced and industrialized regions. [This article speculates on the causes of this phenomenon but fails to mention that industrialized regions are more likely to have fluoridated their water systems. Fluoride is known, not only to increase cancer rates, but to reduce fertility rates. The big story here, however, is that all the hand-wringing over an overcrowded future planet is scientifically unfounded. If the current trend continues, it is even possible that mankind soon will be worried about population shrinkage and underproduction.] -GEG

According to the most recent UN estimates (United Nations 2017), almost one half of the world’s population lives in countries with below replacement fertility (BRF), i.e. with a total fertility rate (TFR) below 2.1 births per woman. Of these, one quarter have TFRs close to the replacement level, i.e. between 1.8 and 2.1; the other three-quarters have really low fertility, below 1.8 births per woman. Low-fertility countries are generally grouped into clusters. The main clusters are in East Asia, Southern Europe, the German-speaking countries of Western Europe, and all the former socialist countries of Central

Table 1 - Main clusters of countries with below replacement fertility (TFR around 2015 in parenthesis)

In East Asia: *very low fertility* in Japan (1.5), China (1.6), South Korea (1.3), Taiwan (1.2), Hong Kong (1.3), Singapore (1.3), and Thailand (1.5). Also some other Asian countries, *e.g.* Iran (1.6), Lebanon (1.7) and the United Arab Republics (1.7). *Moderately low fertility* in Bangladesh (2.1), Vietnam (2.0), Malaysia (2.0), Nepal (2.1), North Korea (1.9) and Sri Lanka (2.0) as well as three former Soviet Caucasian republics: Armenia (1.6), Azerbaijan (2.0) and Georgia (2.0).
In the Americas: Puerto Rico (1.5) and Canada (1.6) have the lowest fertility, followed by Brazil (1.7), Chile (1.8), Costa Rica (1.8) and Cuba (1.7). The United States (1.9), Colombia (1.8) and Jamaica (2.0) have *fertility close to replacement*, as do Australia (1.8) and New Zealand (1.9) **in Oceania**.
In Europe, all large Southern countries – Italy (1.5), Spain (1.4), Portugal (1.3), and Greece (1.3) – have very low fertility, as do the German-speaking countries, namely Germany (1.5) and Austria (1.5). North and West European countries tend to have *fertility close to replacement*: Sweden (1.9), Norway (1.8), Denmark (1.8), and Finland (1.8) as well as France (2.0), the United Kingdom (1.9), Ireland (2.0), Belgium (1.8) and the Netherlands (1.8).
In the formerly socialist Central and Eastern Europe, virtually all countries have very low fertility, such as Poland (1.3), Romania (1.5), Ukraine (1.6), as well as the Russian Federation (1.8) and Serbia (1.6).

Source: United Nations, 2017

and Eastern Europe (Table 1).

In fact, contemporary fertility around the globe is lower than it has ever been. Since the middle of the 20th century, childbearing has declined by 50 percent: 50 to 60 years ago women in developed and developing countries combined had on average 5 children, but now the world average is about 2.5 children per woman.

Why do so many countries have below replacement fertility?

Early in the 20th century it became obvious that family size was declining in countries experiencing substantial industrial and urban growth. A number of French, British and American social scientists set out to map and explain this change. Perhaps the most comprehensive and profound explorations were conducted by a team of scholars at Princeton University's Office of Population Research. Frank Notestein, its first director, outlined what had transpired by mid-20th century, including the main causes for the changing family size, in two papers dealing with what is now known as the "demographic transition" (Notestein 1945 and 1953). Much of the following summary applies even today:

The new ideal of the small family arose typically in the urban industrial society. It is impossible to be precise about the various causal factors, but apparently many were important. Urban life stripped the family of many functions in production, consumption, recreation, and education. In factory employment the individual stood on his own accomplishments. The new mobility of young people and the anonymity of city life reduced the pressures toward traditional behaviour exerted by the family and community. In a period of rapidly developing technology new skills were needed, and new opportunities for individual advancement arose. Education and a rational point of view became increasingly important. As a consequence the cost of child-rearing grew and the possibilities for economic contributions by children declined. Falling death rates at once increased the size of the family to be supported and lowered the inducements to have many births. Women, moreover, found new independence from household obligations and new economic roles less compatible with child-rearing (Notestein 1953:17).

Since then, fertility trends and levels, and their causes and consequences have been *the* most researched topics in population studies. However, despite the hundreds of published studies, it appears that Notestein's observation continues to be valid: "it is impossible to be precise about the various causal factors, but apparently many were important".

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