

Shifting from World Population Explosion to Global Aging

Joseph Chamie, former director of the United Nations Population Division, is research director of the New York-based Center for Migration Studies. He spoke at the recent Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas conference “Immigration Policy in an Era of Globalization,” taking time out during his visit to discuss world demographic trends.

Q. How is the world’s population evolving? What are the long-run trends in world population growth? What countries are growing, declining?

A. Two thousand years ago, world population was estimated at about 300 million. It reached the first billion mark at the beginning of the 19th century—the estimate is about 1804—when Thomas Jefferson was U.S. president. The second billion mark was reached in 1927. We had a tripling of world population from 1927 to near the end of the 20th century, when it reached 6 billion. We’re now approaching 7 billion people.

Why did that happen? It’s because we had this wonderful thing occur: a decline in mortality rates. This decrease in mortality is humanity’s greatest achievement. Every government wishes to see lower mortality and longer life. The world benefited from modern medicine and public health; antibiotics, of course; also better nutrition, better facilities, better working conditions. What lagged behind were changes in birth rates. This difference between birth rates and death rates gave rise to what is commonly called the population explosion. We reached a peak population growth rate of about 2.1 percent in the late ’60s, and we reached the peak annual increase of about 87 million people in the late ’80s. The latest United Nations projections show a world of about 10.1 billion people by the end of the 21st century.

Some regions and countries are growing slowly—such as Europe, Japan and Korea; others are growing rapidly—such as Africa, Niger, Mali, Uganda and many other sub-Saharan countries. And we have other countries growing moderately, but because of their vast size, such as India, they’re adding a great number of people, with India accounting for roughly 22 percent of the world’s annual growth. India alone will probably add half a billion people in the next 50 years,



making it far bigger than China. It will overtake China probably in 10 years and will continue growing. China’s population is projected to peak at 1.4 billion around 2025 and then begin slowly declining unless authorities change their one-child policy and fertility rebounds above the replacement level of two children per woman.

Q. What is behind the increasing population growth rate?

A. Historically, even before biblical times, if your community didn’t go forth and multiply, then disease and other factors would likely wipe you out. So every group had doctrines and principles advocating having many children. With the decrease in mortality, children survived and you didn’t have them dying in infancy or childhood. The general trend has been that birth rates lag behind death rates.

Fertility rates first started coming down

in Western Europe with the Industrial Revolution. A number of things push families to reduce their family size. First, death rates have to come down. Second, people move into cities, with smaller-size living arrangements. And they move to manufacturing from agriculture. That makes the children less valuable as a labor supply; they do fewer useful work-related activities in the city. On farms, they are valuable doing tasks even at ages 6, 7 and 8. Third, there is increasing education. We invest in the quality of the children rather than the quantity of the children. Fourth, with increasing education, we have people delaying marrying, delaying childbearing and then participating in the workforce. We have girls and women entering public schooling and college and subsequently being employed. This contributes greatly to decreasing fertility rates. With economic independence, women may choose not to get married and not to have families. We also have government programs now providing old-age assistance and social services, so you don’t need to rely on children in old age.

Q. What types of policies do governments enact to either encourage or control population growth? What is the future of China’s one-child policy?

A. All countries have population policies. For example, every country has a policy to improve health and decrease mortality. The example that comes to mind most often is fertility-related policies: Can we encourage people to have children; can we discourage people from having children? These are sensitive issues, and these are the issues that often catch the headlines of newspapers. With regard to China’s one-child policy, it has contributed to its population stabilization, or its projected stabilization. Fertility was coming down even before the one-child policy, and the one-child policy probably contributed to the decline. I believe that Chinese leaders are going to loosen the one-child policy, perhaps in gradual stages, mainly because of the rapid aging of the population and reductions in the size of its labor force. As the economy continues to expand, the benefit the Chinese have

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had of a very active labor force, a large labor force and a relatively small elderly population will change and there will be increasingly larger proportions of the population in the older age groups and a contraction in the size of the country's labor force.

Q. How does immigration policy interact with population trends? Do governments reach out to welcome immigrants to buttress their populations (Australia, Canada)? Or not (Japan)? Why not?

A. Immigration is a very important issue. If you move people from one part of the world to another, it might affect the fertility rates in both sending and receiving countries, but globally the effect is small. About 214 million people live outside of the place where they

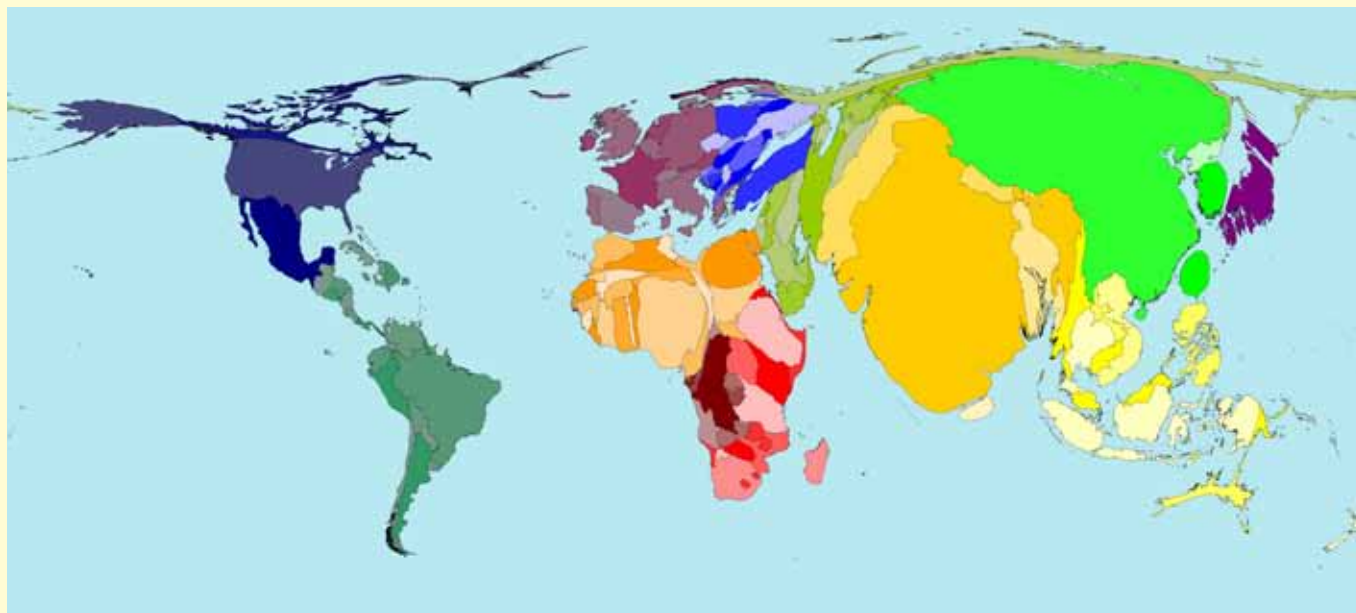
were born. It's a relatively small proportion: 3 to 4 percent of the total population of the world. But it has had a big impact in certain areas. If immigration to the U.S. had stopped at its founding, when it declared independence on July 4, 1776, and U.S. demographic growth depended on natural increases, the population would be half of what it is today. Between now and midcentury, something on the order of 70 percent of U.S. population growth will be due to immigration—the immigrants and their descendants. In some Persian Gulf countries, immigrants are 70 to 80 percent of the labor force. Of course, those foreign workers aren't supposed to stay; they're supposed to

return to their home countries. Similarly, in Europe, where the fertility rate is low, immigrants have a large impact on the growth of the population and the labor force. Without immigrants in many of these countries, their labor forces would decrease even more rapidly and their populations would shrink. You would also have a much more rapid aging of the population in countries such as Italy, Germany, Russia, Spain and Greece.

Q. You've said it would be helpful for people in the U.S. to see a map with relative-population sizes depicted. Why?

A. When you look at a regular map, it distorts things, especially the flat map. Many people start thinking Greenland is as big as South America. Most people often have difficulty seeing the total picture unless it's presented graphically. You would see America as a very large land mass that's very blessed with a lot of resources,

with a relatively small population compared with India and China and other densely populated areas. A map with relative-population sizes gives us more of a global appreciation of where we stand and what we could be doing.



Courtesy of Benjamin D. Hennig, University of Sheffield.



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Japan and South Korea have been reluctant to bring in immigrants because they feel there are certain benefits to having a relatively homogeneous population. As a consequence, they face population decline and rapid population aging. There has also been a surge in groups trying to limit immigration to European countries, such as the U.K. and Germany, from outside the European Union. You may have heard [French President Nicolas] Sarkozy, [German Chancellor Angela] Merkel and also [British Prime Minister David] Cameron say multiculturalism has failed in their countries.

Q. What can nations that face declining populations do? What is replacement migration?

A. There are few models of sustained economic growth without a growing population. If you have a population that's either stable or declining, you may start going abroad seeking a larger market. If you're concerned about the labor force, you may find that the labor force is getting smaller and, therefore, you'll move your operations overseas. Some countries are concerned about those matters and are trying to raise fertility—Japan, Korea, Singapore, Italy, Greece, Spain—and they're providing incentives to couples to have children. You get cash bonuses; others have said we'll get you an advance in the queue for housing, or we'll give you better loan rates. Others talk about incentives such as free preschool, afterschool and day school. Some of the fertility rates are almost half of what's needed for replacement—1.2, 1.3 as opposed to 2.1

children per woman. Some countries are even closer to 1, meaning a single child per couple.

Because of the pressure on the economy, some of these countries are bringing in foreign workers, some on a temporary basis. We're talking about South Korea, Singapore, Japan, Italy, Spain, Germany and Russia, where population will be declining. But the number of immigrants they would

have to bring in to offset the population decline would likely overwhelm the country. It's far beyond what the political system in these countries could tolerate. We're talking about millions of migrants every year for decades because the deficit in the number of births is very large.

Q. What are the greatest challenges posed by populations continuing to relocate to urban areas? What are the benefits of the shift?

A. The world's population became predominantly urban several years ago. This change has enormous implications for the world—economic activities, services, culture, politics and family size. It will also have an impact on the interactions of people. It particularly benefits women, who, by moving to cities, find greater economic, cultural and political freedoms. It also produces other benefits, such as concentrations of museums and libraries. It's not problem-free. It means redesigning lifestyles. You have to understand you're living in crowded areas, you need public transport, public safety, public health systems, sewers and so on.

Also, urban centers have a dramatic impact on political life. In rural areas, if you object to something and you start marching in a field, you might get the attention of a couple of cows. If you're marching in a city like New York, London or Calcutta—however outrageous your poster is—there will be some people who agree with you and start marching with you. This means tremendous changes in the political chemistry in parliaments and congresses.

Q. How important is the evolving role of women in global demographic shifts? What other trends are particularly notable?

A. For centuries, women have been relegated to the home, doing domestic chores including, of course, bearing children and rearing them. Starting in the 19th century and accelerating in the second half of the 20th century, women have acquired political rights, they've joined the labor force in increasing numbers and they've begun interacting socially on equal levels with men. These important changes are spreading around the world and have profound consequences for our lives. Not only is this appropriate in terms of human rights, it's also benefiting the world because we are increasing the talent, the brainpower, the skills and the knowledge we have to deal with the world's problems.

While the 20th century was the century of demographic growth (and this growth will continue through the 21st century—we are likely to add 2 to 3 billion people), the world's population is aging. Very soon, we will see a reversal where the number of children, which has historically been more than the number of people above 65, will become less than the elderly. The aging of the world's population will be pervasive; it will affect every household. It will affect the economy, social interactions, voting patterns, lifestyles.

Finally, we are seeing changes in the family. In the past, most people's image was father, mother and children living together. This classic image, portrayed so effectively in the past on television and in movies, is now changing. We are seeing more people cohabitating, not getting married, especially in the developed world. We are seeing increasing births out of wedlock; we are seeing increasing levels of divorce and separation in many countries. And we are seeing a spread of same-sex marriages, which prior to the 21st century was unthinkable.