



NEWSLETTERS

Why U.S. Population Growth Is Collapsing

A country grows or shrinks in three ways.

By Derek Thompson



U.S. population growth has fallen off a cliff. (The Atlantic)

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The U.S. population grew at the slowest pace in history in 2021, according to census data released last week. That news sounds extreme, but it's on trend. First came 2020, which saw one of the lowest U.S. population-growth rates ever. And now we have 2021 officially setting the all-time record.

U.S. growth didn't slowly fade away: It slipped, and slipped, and then fell off a cliff. The 2010s were already demographically stagnant; every year from 2011 to 2017, the

U.S. grew by only 2 million people. In 2020, the U.S. grew by just 1.1 million. Last year, we added only 393,000 people.

What's going on?

A country grows or shrinks in three ways: immigration, deaths, and births. America's declining fertility rate often gets the headline treatment. Journalists are obsessed with the question of why Americans aren't having more babies. And because I'm a journalist, be assured that we'll do the baby thing in a moment. But it's the other two factors—death and immigration—that are overwhelmingly responsible for the collapse in U.S. population growth.

First, we have to talk about COVID. The pandemic has killed nearly 1 million Americans in the past two years, according to the CDC. Tragically and remarkably, a majority of those deaths happened *after* we announced the authorization of COVID vaccines, which means that they were particularly concentrated in 2021. Last year, deaths exceeded births in a record-high number of U.S. counties. Never before in American history have so many different parts of the country shrunk because of “natural decrease,” which is the difference between deaths and births.

Excess deaths accounted for 50 percent of the difference in population growth from 2019 to 2021. That's a clear sign of the devastating effect of the pandemic. But this statistic also tells us that even if we could had brought excess COVID deaths down to zero, U.S. population growth would still have crashed to something near an all-time low. To understand why, we have to talk about the second variable in the population equation: immigration.

As recently as 2016, net immigration to the United States exceeded 1 million people. But immigration has since collapsed by about 75 percent, falling below 250,000 last year. Immigration fell by more than half in almost all of the hot spots for foreign-born migrants, including New York, Miami, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

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Some of this reduction is a result of economic factors; immigration from Latin America has slowed as those economies have grown. Some of it is epidemiological; immigration declined around the world because of COVID lockdowns. But much of this is an American policy choice. The Trump administration worked to constrain not only illegal immigration but also legal immigration. And the Biden administration has not prioritized the revitalization of pro-immigration policy, perhaps due to fears of a xenophobic backlash from the center and right.

America's bias against immigration is self-defeating in almost every dimension. "Immigration is a geopolitical cheat code for the U.S.," says Caleb Watney, a co-founder of the Institute for Progress, a new think tank in Washington, D.C. "Want to supercharge science? Immigrants bring breakthroughs, patents, and Nobel Prizes in droves. Want to stay ahead of China? Immigrants drive progress in semiconductors, AI, and quantum computing. Want to make America more dynamic? Immigrants launch nearly 50 percent of U.S. billion-dollar start-ups. The rest of the world is begging international talent to come to their shores while we are slamming the door in their face."

Finally, yes, Americans are having fewer babies—like basically every other rich country in the world. Since 2011, annual births have declined by 400,000. Two years ago, I wrote that "the future of the city is childless," and the pandemic seems to have accelerated that future. Just look at Los Angeles: L.A. County recorded 153,000 live births in 2001 but fewer than 100,000 in 2021. At this rate, sometime around 2030, L.A. births will have declined by 50 percent in the 21st century.

Declining births get a lot of media coverage, with mandatory references to *Children of Men*, followed by mandatory references to *Matrix*-style birthing pods, followed by inevitable fights over whether it's creepy for dudes like me to talk academically about raising a nation's collective fertility. My personal opinion is that wanting and having children is a personal matter for families, even as the spillover effects of declining fertility make it a very public issue for the overall economy.

The fact that declining fertility is a global trend suggests that it's not something we can easily reverse by mimicking another country's politics or culture. Around the world, rising women's education and employment seem to correlate with swiftly

declining birth rates. In just about every possible way you could imagine, this is a good thing: It strongly suggests that economic and social progress give women more power over their bodies and their lives.

But I should stress that declining fertility isn't always a sign of female empowerment, as indicated by the large and growing gap between the number of children Americans say they want and the number of children they have. There are many potential explanations for this gap, but one is that the U.S. has made caring for multiple children too expensive and cumbersome for even wealthy parents, due to a shortage of housing, the rising cost of child care, and the paucity of long-term federal support for children.

The implications of permanently slumped population growth are wide-ranging. Shrinking populations produce stagnant economies. Stagnant economies create wonky cultural knock-on effects, like a zero-sum mentality that ironically makes it harder to pursue pro-growth policies. (For example, people in slow-growth regions might be fearful of immigrants because they seem to represent a threat to scarce business opportunities, even though immigration represents these places' best chance to grow their population and economy.) The sector-by-sector implications of declining population would also get very wonky very fast. Higher education is already fighting for its life in the age of remote school and rising tuition costs. Imagine what happens if, following the historically large Millennial cohort, every subsequent U.S. generation gets smaller and smaller until the end of time, slowly starving many colleges of the revenue they've come to expect.

Even if you're of the dubious opinion that the U.S. would be better off with a smaller population, American demographic policy is bad *for Americans who are alive right now*. We are a nation where families have fewer kids than they want; where Americans die of violence, drugs, accidents, and illness at higher rates than similarly rich countries; and where geniuses who want to found new job-creating companies are forced to do so in other countries, which get all the benefits of higher productivity, higher tax revenue, and better jobs.

Simply put, the U.S. has too few births, too many deaths, and not enough immigrants. Whether by accident, design, or a total misunderstanding of basic economics, America has steered itself into the demographic danger zone.

