

---

THE POPULATION CRISIS IS HERE

Author(s): Roy O. Greep

Source: *Ekistics*, APRIL 1968, Vol. 25, No. 149, POPULATION DYNAMICS (APRIL 1968), pp. 208-210

Published by: Athens Center of Ekistics; all rights currently held by the Constantinos A. Doxiadis Archives

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43614661>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org)

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

and are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ekistics*

COMMUNITY SCALE	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
EKISTIC UNITS	MAN	ROOM	DWELLING	DWELLING GROUP	SMALL NEIGHBOOD	NEIGHBOURHOOD	SMALL TOWN	TOWN	LARGE CITY	METROPOLIS	CONURBATION	MEGALOPOLIS	URBAN REGION	URBANIZED CONTINENT	ECUMENOPOLIS
NATURE															
MAN									1	→	→				
SOCIETY									1	→	→				
SHELLS															
NETWORKS															
SYNTHESIS															

## THE POPULATION CRISIS IS HERE

Roy O. Greep

The author is John Rock, Professor of Population Studies in the School of Public Health, and Director of the Laboratory of Human Reproduction and Reproductive Biology in the Medical School, Harvard University. This article is abstracted from *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, December 9, 1967, pp. 14-23.

I should like now to touch on some of the cardinal consequences of the excessive prevalence of people. They are:

1. *Marginal subsistence.* The world is replete with examples of overcrowded peoples suffering from malnutrition and high infant mortality. They endure with passive resignation the frustrations of poverty, hopelessness, and despair.

2. *Failure of economic growth and development.* Capital is a requisite for industrialization, and industrialization is essential to economic development and productive labor. Where excess population exists, it has proven difficult and usually impossible to accumulate enough capital to achieve an economic breakthrough.

3. *Illiteracy.* Illiterate, impoverished and hungry people cannot be expected to place much emphasis on education. In areas of greatest overpopulation, seven out of ten children never see the inside of a school. This shocking propagation of illiteracy in this age of enlightenment is one of the greatest anachronisms of the twentieth century. UNESCO has confirmed that there were more illiterates in 1966 than twenty years earlier. Beyond food for subsistence, education is the *sine qua non* to all that we refer to as progress in advancing human welfare.

4. *Erosion of human rights and individual freedom.* Probably the most dangerous consequence of overpopulation is the threat that it poses to the rights and dignity of the individual. The concept of what constitutes these rights in a highly interdependent society changes as population pressures rise. Beyond a certain point in density, the public interest becomes paramount. Organizationalism supplants individualism and pragmatism supplants traditions; even the institution of marriage is flouted. Young people, frustrated in their attempt to achieve some measure of

identity, turn to non-conformity, rebellion, and protest. Private enterprise becomes ever more difficult. Mounting crime rates and group violence make greater regimentation necessary. Privacy becomes less and less assured. Soon, computers will keep a dossier on every citizen and few secrets will evade their notings.

5. *Social unrest and political tensions.* People enduring privation and with little to lose are easily stirred to action against neighbors or brothers by the prospect or promise of bettering their lot. Civil strife becomes commonplace. Political ideologies compete for the seizure of power, which, in any event, tends to become centralized. The maintenance of order requires greater centralization of power. The socio-economic problems reach such magnitude that no instrument of society other than the central government is capable of coping with them.

Possibly more remote, but certainly not to be overlooked, is the effect of crowding on world peace. Population pressure has often served to incite war, or as an excuse for war. Dictators welcome such pressure. Hitler and Mussolini both extolled the virtues of large families, with little success, I might add. Most observers of the current international scene feel that the heavy hand of population pressure is pressing against the trigger of atomic warfare. One of the great ban-the-bomb advocates, Bertrand Russell, concedes that "nothing is more likely to lead to an H-bomb war than the threat of universal destitution through overpopulation."

Much effort has been expended on developing reliable means of forecasting population growth. We are all familiar with the idle projections as to how long it will take man to encrust the earth with a mantle of humanity one hundred feet or one hundred miles deep. What concerns us is the

population projections for the decades immediately ahead. History has proven all means of forecasting to be inaccurate, but in only one direction; they all err on the conservative side.

In a nutshell, the reason for the present unprecedented increase in population growth is the introduction of death control without birth control. In the emerging nations, it is now possible to cut the death rate in half within a period of about five years, but with no reduction or even an increase in the birth rate. The result of these changes is that the advanced countries constituting one-third of the world's population are growing at a modest rate, whereas the less-developed and heavily populated nations of the world are showing fantastic population increments.

It is commonly assumed that death control means more old people, and to a minor degree it does; but the predominant effect on the age structure of society is to expand the younger age groups. In the low-income nations of the world, 40-45 percent of the population is under 15 years of age. The figure for the advanced nations is only 20-25 percent.

It may be of interest to compare the demographic features of the two great powers, the United States and USSR. Their birth rates and death rates are essentially identical. Marxist doctrine outwardly proclaims that over-population can occur only as a result of the capitalistic system, but operationally the Russians are doing a fairly respectable job of curbing their population growth. Years ago, Engels stated that if over-population were to occur, the Communist state is in the most favorable position to do something about it. With that, I think most people would be willing to agree.

We now come to a consideration of population growth in relation to food supply.

To wit, the situation we now face is that two thirds of the human population are living on marginal subsistence with no food reserves and an increasingly heavy reliance on importation of grain, mostly on a credit or gift basis. People living in depressed areas of the world do well to reach a daily intake of 2000 calories per day, and millions survive on 1600 to 1800. Contrast this with the US average caloric intake of 3000, which I have not space to defend as either good or bad. A second factor of critical importance to the world situation is that the food reserves in countries with heavy agricultural production such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and Argentina, are rapidly being depleted. It has come as something of a shock to the people of the United States to discover that quite suddenly their enormous agricultural surpluses of five years ago have vanished. We are down to what has often been referred to as the "ever normal granary."

The question that is stirring concern in high

quarters is how long the world can continue to feed itself. The answer, on a short-term basis, boils down to how long can the underdeveloped and overpopulated areas of the world continue to feed themselves. These are the areas where the need to increase agricultural production is greatest and its achievement most difficult. Ignorance, reluctance to change established farming practices, inability to pay the high costs of modern farming machinery, fertilizers and improved seeds, and lack of water for irrigation are some of the hindrances that are not easy to overcome. In the advanced nations of the world, the prospects are good that for the remainder of this century food production will by and large keep pace with the expansion of the consuming public. On a longer-term basis, and assuming that growth of the population will not be brought under effective control, then it is, of course, inevitable that the crisis in food supply will become world-wide and of appalling nature.

To those who are in a position to sense the future situation, there is mounting apprehension. They disagree not on whether famines will occur in the less-developed areas; only on how soon, i.e., by 1975 or 1985.

The one and only humane solution to the population problem is birth control, whether practiced with contraceptive aids or by voluntary restraint. Such birth-control practices have played a prominent role in keeping the population growth rate within reasonable limits in many of the European countries over the past century, and are continually operative in all advanced nations today. It is estimated that among the educated women of reproductive age, something on the order of 90 percent use some form of birth control at least for family planning purposes. On the other side of the coin, it is doubted that among the uneducated poor more than 10 percent of the women of child-bearing age practice any form of birth control.

Why is birth control so hard to effect?

Among backward peoples, birth control runs counter to the basic traditions of family life-traditions that have come down unchanged through the centuries.

Among the very poor there is another and even more impelling reason for not adopting birth control. Children are in a very real sense the only security available. They are the sole means of support for the aged and for others unable to engage in productive work. Obviously, impoverished nations cannot afford social security, and until such can be guaranteed by the state, the poor are not going to forego the protection of having productive members of the family at all times. In underdeveloped countries, large segments of the population are tied to the land, where children tend to be an economic asset, whereas in an urbanized

society such as ours, children are in reality a great economic liability. The average cost of raising one child to age 18 is \$23,000.

Death control is largely a medical problem, but birth control is such only in part. The obstacles to effective control of human fertility are neither technical or scientific, but cultural, religious, and political. The prevailing attitude of the medical profession has been that it is their business to save lives, but their humanitarianism is boomeranging. The attitude of the profession, like the hands-off policy of the government, is changing—but all too slowly. A couple of years ago, the National Institute of Health was spending \$800-million on death control and \$1-million on birth control.

Although authorities universally agree that birth control is the only humane solution to the population crisis, precious little is being done about it. Birth control has been tried on a long-term, all-out national basis in only one country—Japan. There, the birth rate was cut by nearly 50 percent within ten years, and population growth was brought under reasonable control. It is important to note, however, that this clear demonstration of the effectiveness of a birth-control campaign was achieved in an advanced society and under the sponsorship of the national government. It is extremely doubtful that Japan's striking postwar economic recovery could have been achieved without this control of her population growth. Sweden has succeeded in keeping her birth rate low and it is no coincidence that she has one of the highest per-capita incomes in the world. In the past few years, national birth control programs have been inaugurated, or at least sanctioned, in a half dozen moderately developed small countries, but it is too early to judge their effectiveness.

Up to this point, all birth-control programs have been on a strictly voluntary basis, and while we have some evidence that such control may be effective under the most favorable circumstances, the fact still remains that birth control has not yet had the slightest decelerating effect on the rates of world-wide population growth. Moralists recoil from the thought of involuntary fertility control, but such may become necessary purely as a humanitarian measure. Before you jump to the conclusion that involuntary control is something for the distant future, let me point out that the Indian Government, after twenty years of disheartening experience with voluntary birth control, is considering compulsory sterilization of all men who have fathered three or more children. This proposal has the backing of the Prime Minister, Indhira Gandhi. India is also offering inducements for voluntary sterilization—a bit of vacation and a transistor radio. The decision to add another citizen affects the welfare

of the community, state, and nation, and cannot forever be left to the will of individuals who abuse the privilege.

Science has the means now to stop the female biological rhythm on a mass basis. It is a sobering thought, but it is important to realize that if feasibility and knowhow were the only considerations, total impotence could be imposed on virtually the whole of the human race in a matter of months. It is pertinent that oral contraceptive agents are being seriously proposed as a rat-control measure. The adult non-pregnant females would become permanently sterile, and the female offspring of animals pregnant at the start would be sterile. In this regard, consider the implications of the fact that ovulation can be permanently prevented in laboratory animal models by the single injection of a hormone at the time of birth or the even more fantastic demonstration that pregnancy can be blocked in mice simply by the unfamiliar odor of a strange male. It is not at all inconceivable that in the twenty-first century, women will have to take a pill in order to ovulate when pregnancy is desired. As in adoption procedures, this may take some demonstration of qualifications for responsible parenthood in order to secure the pill.

It is an absolute certainty that the world population will not contract automatically, and involuntary control is not likely to come until the possibilities of voluntary control have been exhausted—and this will probably come too late. What, then, can be done on the voluntary basis?

Persuasion has not yet been tried on an all-out, grass-roots propaganda basis in an underdeveloped country. Contraceptive information and supplies can be made available on a much expanded basis. There are several contraceptive methods available which are virtually 100 percent effective *if* they are used and *if* they are used properly. These are big ifs. Probably the most important thing that has been learned is that different methods will have to be developed to suit the needs and idiosyncrasies of individual nations, or even of different cultures within a single territory such as India.

Although size of population ought to be a concern of every nation, the idea of having a population policy has seldom been seriously considered.

I feel that one of the most important steps that should be taken immediately is for enlightened groups to undertake discussions aimed at framing a sane population policy. Every nation should know not just what population it can tolerate, but what sized population is in its own best interests. The population goal of every nation should, in general, be consonant both with its own resources and with the welfare of mankind at large.