

# The Case for More Babies

Joel E. Cohen

**What to Expect When No One's Expecting: America's Coming Demographic Disaster**  
by Jonathan V. Last.  
Encounter, 230 pp., \$23.99

Demography is the key factor. If you are not able to maintain yourself biologically, how do you expect to maintain yourself economically, politically, and militarily? It's impossible. The answer of letting people from other countries come in... that would be an economic solution, but it's not a solution of your real sickness, that you are not able to maintain your own civilization.

—Viktor Orbán,  
Prime Minister of Hungary, 2012  
(epigraph of *What to Expect When No One's Expecting*)

Jonathan Last wants Americans to have more babies. If we don't, he warns, the proportion of young people will fall while the proportion of old people will rise to unprecedented levels. This aging of the population will bankrupt our retirement system or divert spending from other priorities or—heaven forbid—lead to an increase in taxes. It will weaken America's capacity to project military power in the world because families with few offspring will be reluctant to sacrifice them in battle. It will diminish the proportion of innovators in the economy and lower America's rate of economic improvement. It will undermine America's competitive position in the world.

"In the long run," Last writes, "the groups that breed will (literally) inherit the future." To save America from the dire ills that accompany "the long, inexorable process" of demographic decline, he calls for a resurgent American natalism—many more babies must be born.

*What to Expect When No One's Expecting* is one more in a series of politically tendentious books on population decline, among them Fred Pearce's *The Coming Population Crash* (2010), Ben Wattenberg's *The Birth Dearth* (1987) and *Fewer: How the New Demography of Depopulation Will Shape Our Future* (2004), and Phillip Longman's *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity, and What to Do About It* (2005).

Last claims: "In order for a country to maintain a steady population, it needs a fertility rate of 2.1—remember this as the Golden Number. If the rate is higher, the country's population grows; lower, and it shrinks." The truth is subtler. If a country has low and constant death rates, and if migration changes neither numbers nor ages in the population, and if its total fertility rate is constant at around 2.1 children per woman's lifetime for a sufficiently long period, then in the long run its population size will remain constant.

When the "ifs" do not hold, however, a fertility rate below 2.1 no longer predicts population decline. The population of the United States had a fertility rate below 2.1 from 1971 to 2010 (except in 2006 and 2007, when it slightly

exceeded 2.1) and yet it grew from 209 million in 1970 to 310 million in 2010, an increase by nearly half. With a fertility rate that fell steadily from 2.01 in 1993 to 1.61 in 2009, the population of China grew from 1.19 billion to 1.33 billion. Last's simplification of the Golden Number omits the crucial effects of migration to the United States, China's high proportion of young people before the One-Child policy, as well as the timing of childbearing and mortality, especially child mortality. In Sierra Leone in 1995–2000, the replacement

of accidents of history and thousands of little choices.

He recognizes that America has other women:

Black women have a healthy TFR of 1.96. White women, on the other hand, have a TFR of 1.79. Our national average is only boosted because Hispanic women are... having an average of 2.35 babies.... Our concern isn't that Hispanic Americans are having



Titian: *The Worship of Venus*, 1518–1520

level of the fertility rate exceeded 3.4 children per woman's lifetime because of very high death rates in childhood.

America's fertility rate of 1.93 children per woman's lifetime in 2010 does not necessarily mean the average American woman alive in 2010 will have 1.93 children in her lifetime, because fertility rates changed in the past and will change in the future. The fertility rate indicates the current level of childbearing in a population. By analogy, a speedometer reading of sixty miles per hour usefully indicates a car's current speed, without implying that the car will be sixty miles further down the road after one hour (except when the car operates without interruption under cruise control on a superhighway with no accidents or congestion).

Last sees the current below-replacement fertility rates in some parts of America's population as an acute, momentous problem. "In America," he worries,

the fertility rate for white, college-educated women—we'll use them because they serve as a fair proxy for our middle class—is 1.6. In other words, America has created its very own One-Child Policy. It's soft and unintentional, the result

too many babies.... The problem with the elevated fertility level of Hispanic Americans is that it isn't likely to last.

Immigrants usually adjust their fertility rates to those of their country of destination.

What's wrong if America's fertility rate remains below replacement level?

The short answer is that sub-replacement fertility rates eventually lead to a shrinking of population—and throughout recorded human history, declining populations have *always* followed or been followed by Very Bad Things. Disease. War. Economic stagnation or collapse. And these grim tidings from history may be in our future, since population contraction is where most of the world is headed.

Last leaps from America's below-replacement fertility rates to the conclusion that American population is headed for decline. He never says how soon that could happen. The United Nations Population Division in 2010 calculated the future size of the population of every country in the world if neither birth rates nor death rates changed from their current values. This "no

change" projection is not a prediction. It is a "what if" thought experiment. It oddly assumes that net migration into the US remains constant until 2050 and then declines toward zero. This assumption is even less realistic than assuming birth rates and death rates remain constant at 2010 values through 2100.

In this scenario, the US population rises to 335 million people in 2040 and then very slowly declines to 330 million in 2100, where the projection ends. America's projected population size would be larger than it is now (around 315 million people in 2013) for the remainder of the twenty-first century. Is this an imminent crisis for America?

Last claims more: "Population contraction is where most of the world is headed." True, more than half the world's women have had below-replacement fertility rates since roughly 2003. Still, he ignores that global population grew by a billion people from 1999 to 2012 and is currently rising by 75–80 million people a year (adding every four years or so as many people as the current US population). In the UN's "no change" projection, global population rises from 7.1 billion in 2013 to 18.3 billion by 2100. In the UN's "low fertility" projection, assuming fertility rates that are half a child lower than the UN's best guess, global population rises for at least three decades to 8.1 billion in 2046 and then slowly coasts downward to 6.2 billion in 2100, just above the 6.1 billion people in the world in 2000. Is this an imminent crisis for the world?

Last blames what he presents as a crisis in American fertility rates on "the ubiquity of college, the delay of marriage, the birth-control pill, car-seat laws, [lack of] religious participation, the rise of the thousand-dollar stroller, and Social Security. This is a partial list." Social Security?

Where people's offspring had for centuries seen to the financial needs of their parents, retired people with no offspring now [have] access to a set of comparable benefits. They could free-ride on the system.... Those programs are now incentivizing couples to have fewer—or no—children

—i.e., children who would have looked after them. That the pensioners who had been employed with and without children paid Social Security taxes all their working lives doesn't seem to matter to Last.

Other causes of America's low fertility, in Last's view, include higher education for women, women's entry into jobs other than teaching, increasing cohabitation without producing children, falling rates of ever marrying by a given age, the rise of divorce, the decreasing percentage of single-family homes, the rising percentage of apartments and condominiums, frequent change of residence, the high cost of land, and, of course, the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court's first mistake, Last writes, was its erroneous decision in *Griggs v. Duke Power* (1971)

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

to outlaw using racially discriminatory test results in employment decisions. Because “the Court held that employers could not rely on IQ-type tests if minorities performed relatively poorly on them, . . . employers . . . launder their request for test scores through the college system, because colleges *are* allowed to use such considerations.” In Last’s view this decision gave support to higher education, which he deplors, writing that it “dampens fertility in all sorts of ways. It delays marriage, incurs debt, increases the opportunity costs of childbearing, and greatly increases the expense of raising a child.” It also makes people more likely to use effective contraception.

The Supreme Court’s second mistake was *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. Last writes with candor: “Yes, I’m one of those anti-abortion nut jobs who thinks that every embryo is sacred life and abortion is killing an innocent.” The consequences of illegal abortions and unwanted live births merit no attention. Since abortions reduce the number of births, they must be bad.

In his chapter called “Very Bad Things,” Last summarizes the causes of America’s low fertility using what some demographers call the “Second Demographic Transition” (SDT) and what he calls “the trap of modernity, which pushes people to eschew children in favor of more pleasurable pursuits.” He writes:

The SDT theory . . . predicts that cohabitation, widespread contraceptive use, and liberal abortion policies will materialize in all developed, democratic countries, the result of people valuing their self-actualization and individualism over more traditional moral precepts. These three horsemen have indeed ridden across the entire liberalized world.

Having identified the causes and catastrophic consequences of America’s low fertility rates, Last offers his cures. “What you need is a serious, decades-long commitment to family growth.” The problem, according to him, is that researchers find almost universally that “having children makes parents less happy. . . . Why can’t you bribe people into having babies? Because, for the most part, people aren’t stupid.” So, he says, “the overarching principle behind American natalism should always be this: The government *cannot* get people to have children *they do not want*. However, it *can* help people have the children *they do want*” (his italics). Last cautions, “Our best bet, I suspect, is not to try to remake the culture with the levers of government.” Still, almost all his recommendations are directed to government and we can expect to hear them in political debates to come.

First, he says, fix Social Security, following a suggestion of Phillip Longman, by reducing a couple’s FICA taxes by one third for the birth of each child until the children turn eighteen.

Second, “eliminate the need for college” by reversing *Griggs v. Duke Power*. This “would upend the college system at a stroke.” The government should “create a no-frills, federal degree-granting body, which would allow students to leapfrog the four-year system” by earning certificates when

they pass exams for specific subjects. According to Walter Russell Mead, who originated this idea, “Subject exams calibrated to a national standard would give employers something they do not now have: assurance that a student has achieved a certain level of knowledge and skill.” And “the government should stipulate that public universities become family-friendly” by providing housing for students with families and children. Forget states’ rights or local control.

Third, fix land costs. According to Last, “since land costs contribute so much to family formation costs, the government has an interest in trying to open the field for parents who would have more children if they could afford them.” Accordingly, government should “make the suburbs more accessible by improving our highway system. . . . The answer is not more public transportation.” In his only recommendation addressed to the private sector, Last encourages telecommuting, which would allow people to live where land is cheap. He does not mention the possibility of improving the private sector’s employment practices regarding child care, parental leaves, and guarantees of employment after childbearing.

Last estimates that it costs over \$1.1 million to raise a single child, largely in the form of mothers’ (always mothers’) foregone salaries. Meanwhile, “the median price of a home in 2008 was \$180,100.” If his figures are right, median home prices are 16 percent of the cost of raising a single child, and for most of the country, the cost of land is a small fraction of the cost of a home. Last’s own statistics do not support his claim that “land costs contribute so much to family formation costs.”

Fourth, fix immigration. “A reasonably liberal program of immigration is necessary for the long-term health of our country. Yet at the same time, this liberal approach to immigration should be coupled with a staunchly traditionalist view of integration,” Last writes. “Tolerance need not be surrender and a certain amount of cultural chauvinism is necessary for societal coherence.” Just how that cultural chauvinism should be imposed is not clear.

Fifth, fix “the Church and the State.” Last insists that

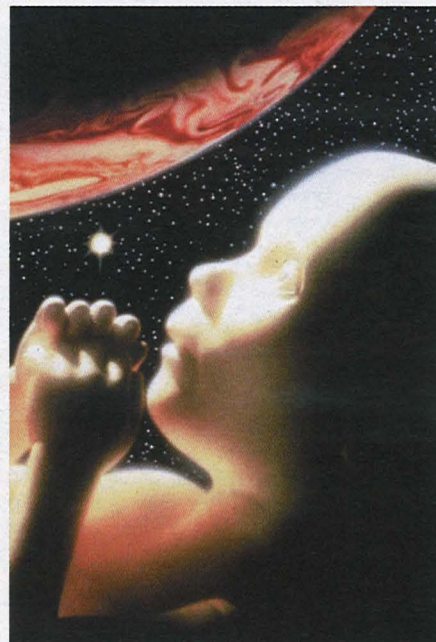
it is important we preserve the role of religion in our public square, resisting those critics who see theocracy lurking behind every corner. Our government should be welcoming of, not hostile to, believers—if for no other reason than they’re the ones who create most of the future taxpayers.

Not to mention most of the future Social Security recipients. Last does not suggest how religious organizations, or any others, could better educate young people in the skills and rewards, as well as the inevitable stresses and strains, of raising children well, within or outside of marriage.

Last moves back and forth between contradictory positions regarding demographic determinism, causation, and freedom. Is demography destiny? Yes: he opens with the assertion of the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán that “demography is the key factor” and cites approvingly Fred Pearce’s *The Coming Population Crash*, of which the introduction begins, “Demography

is destiny. . . . Never has that been more true than today.” But no: Last states that “demography is not destiny” and warns that “we should be careful never to confuse the two.” Still, his entire book argues that demography is dominant in military, economic, political, and cultural matters. He tries to have it both ways. In their excellent historical summary in *The Fear of Population Decline*, written in 1985, Michael Teitelbaum and Jay Winter were prophetic:

A belief in demographic determinism suffuses the writings of many of those who addressed the problem of population decline in the period 1870–1945. . . . If contraception was a key subversive agent in contemporary history, then one could dispense with arguments



The star child at the end of Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey

about the destabilizing effects of poverty and inequality. Hence, for such writers, a simple form of demographic analysis could completely and conveniently displace social analysis.

Is correlation causation? Obviously not, says Last:

Please understand I am not arguing that correlation equals causation. . . . What I am hoping to do is layer enough of these trends upon enough of these data points to convince you that each trend is probably contributing some part to the outcomes you’ll see.

But maybe correlation does equal causation: “The Pill first became available in America—and much of the West—in 1960, just before fertility rates dropped through the floor.” Isn’t the reader supposed to infer that the Pill contributed importantly to the drop in fertility? American fertility rates have generally declined at least since the Civil War. What would Last have us believe about the effect of the Pill on fertility rates?

The deepest unresolved tensions in the book are between the conflicting values, shared by conservatives and liberals, of individual freedom (to procreate or not) and community responsibility (which Last sees as entailing procreation, while others have argued the opposite). For the conservative Last, the free-market system (which according to him is intrinsically good but

which also makes childbearing difficult and costly) conflicts with bearing and rearing children within a stable family (which entails parental sacrifice, personal and economic). These internal conflicts of values are no more resolved in Last’s book than they are in American society.

Let us set aside unknowable future numbers of births. Are too few children born these days in the US or the world? Last answers this question by inferring the eventual effects of assumed fertility rates on retirement systems, military defense, and economic production. I would rather look at children and those who produce them.

How highly do we value the children we have now? If every child were treated as so precious that the scarcity of children appeared to be distorting American life, then I would conclude that we are not having enough children. On the other hand, if children are widely treated as cheap, as a nuisance of small value, then I would conclude that we are having too many children relative to the care we choose to provide them.

No doubt, some fortunate children are treated as precious (e.g., my children, and maybe Last’s children and yours). But in a world that produces enough food to feed everyone adequately, 26 percent of all children under age five (roughly 165 million children) were stunted in 2010. A stunted child is abnormally short for his or her age, by the standards of normally fed children, as a result of chronic undernutrition. Stunting generally impairs mental and physical capacity, health, and economic productivity for the rest of a person’s life.

According to World Health Organization data of 2012, “childhood malnutrition was an underlying cause of death in an estimated 35 percent of all deaths among children under the age of five.” When more than one in four children is stunted and when a cause of death of more than one in three of those who die is the lack of proper food, I conclude that, globally, children are being treated as cheap and disposable. We need better care and feeding of the children we do create before we need more children.

In the United States, stunted children are rare. Do Americans have too few children? Ask those who have them. According to a 2008 report of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, of the live births in the United States in 2003, 86 percent were wanted at conception. The percentage of births wanted at conception was highest for non-Hispanic whites, 89.3 percent; lower for Hispanics, 83.2 percent; and lowest for non-Hispanic blacks, 73.8 percent. After all miscarriages, induced abortions, and still births, roughly one live birth in seven was unwanted at conception. The report observes, “Mothers who report a pregnancy as unwanted at the time of conception may later cherish the child born as a result of that pregnancy.” It also warns: “Studies have shown that births from pregnancies that were unwanted at conception may be associated with adverse consequences for the mother and the child.”

I conclude that some women are having children they don’t want, and it’s bad for them and those children. Rather than encouraging more births by restricting contraception and banning abortion, as Last desires, we need to improve mothers’ success in having wanted children. □

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## LETTERS

### TOO MANY EARTHLINGS?

*To the Editors:*

I was surprised that Joel Cohen's review ["The Case for More Babies," *NYR*, April 24] didn't take the opportunity to talk about the dangers posed by overpopulation. Is that because Cohen does not share my belief that overpopulation is the greatest danger confronting our species? It seems to me that all our efforts to curb the harm that we do to the planet are meaningless if we halve the consumption rate of individuals and have twice as many individuals. I agree with Jonathan Last in his book *What To Expect When No One's Expecting* that the dangers he discusses are real, but I believe the dangers posed by his solutions are greater. I cannot understand the thinking of religious institutions that seem intent on maximizing the number of souls now rather than sustaining viable conditions in which those souls, for millennia to come, can die having lived lives worth having.

**Dan Stroock**

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**Joel E. Cohen** *replies:*

For a successful airplane trip, six ingredients are necessary: thrust, lift, control of roll, control of pitch, control of yaw, and a place to land and take off. Lacking any one of these, the airplane will either never get off the ground or end in disaster.

So it is with the human populations of Earth. Human well-being depends on solving simultaneously the problems of population, economics, environment, and culture (including values, institutions, laws, languages, and religions). Solving demographic problems is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for human well-being: see my "How Many People Can the Earth Support?," *NYR*, October 8, 1998, and "Seven Billion," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2011.

If I did not think that human population problems were important, I would not have spent much of my life studying them. What I have learned suggests that human population problems arise in a context of other equally significant problems that are also urgent on a wide variety of time scales. Dealing with the problems of human populations can make it easier to deal with the problems of economics, the environment, and culture; and, importantly, vice versa.

Focus on overpopulation narrows attention unproductively to a single number, the number of people. But human population problems are not adequately summarized by any single number. They include problems of spatial distribution, urbanization, age distribution, nutrition, health, and education. These problems vary widely in different regions of the world and, often, within a single country. Population problems wear many faces and require multifaceted responses.