

The 'Health Explosion'

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The “population explosion” of the past generation — the era when the tempo of world population growth surged and then peaked before commencing its current decline — was a phenomenon widely misunderstood and misinterpreted in academic and policy circles. Population did not boom because people suddenly started breeding like rabbits, but rather because they finally stopped dying like flies: the “population explosion” was in reality a “health explosion,” with improvements in longevity driving the entirety of this increase in human numbers. This basic fact helps to explain why the alarmism about third-world population growth and a predicted upsurge in poverty and famine proved (fortunately) to be so very badly wrong.

In our century, the world’s population profile is being transformed by a very different sort of demographic phenomenon: namely, a growing and seemingly unstoppable worldwide march toward sub-replacement fertility, population aging, and (in a growing number of countries already) long-term population decline. But like the mismeasure of the population explosion before it, analyses of this brave new demographic revolution for the most part have only begun to scratch the surface.

What will it mean as more children grow up with no siblings, cousins, uncles or aunts?

Frightening projections of ratios of senior citizens 65-plus to “working age” populations (people 15-64 years of age, by current definitions), for example, neglect the enormous economic potential of “healthy aging”: our older citizens are more robust, more educated, and better placed for productive work in older life than ever before. If our societies choose not to make use of that potential, that will be our political decision — not some consequence of inescapable demographic realities.

The most profound economic implications of the continuing global fertility drop may not entail changes in raw human numbers, or overall population structures, but rather changes in the central human institution: the family. In some places, like Japan and German-speaking Europe, low fertility is associated with extraordinary increases in voluntary childlessness — portending a very particular social policy and budgetary problems for the future. In other places, like urban China, prolonged and extreme sub-replacement fertility is spawning a new family type: children with no siblings, cousins, uncles or aunts. The atrophy of the extended family could have dramatic economic consequences. Other changes in family patterns are also likely to emerge in the decades ahead, and we would be well advised to follow these very closely.

Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/10/16/fewer-babies-for-better-or-worse/not-a-population-explosion-but-a-health-explosion>