

The Real Population Problem

by Jim Peron

According to one department of the United Nations, some 400 million people have vanished. This wasn't a spate of alien abductions. Instead the UN's Population Division (UNPD) lowered its projected world population figure for 2050 by 403 million. This revision is from the projection of just two years ago. The agency now concedes that the 2050 world population will fall below 9 billion.

The UN has been making such projections for about 50 years. Generally, the projections seem to err on the high side—hence the need for reductions. The UN now says the population in 2050 will be 8.9 billion. But this is its “medium variation” projection, which has always been a tad high. The “low” projection usually misses the mark as well, with the real number being somewhere in between. If the agency's record remains consistent, the actual figure will be between 8 billion and 8.5 billion.

This is significantly below previous projections, which were grabbed onto by various environmental groups to promote their agenda. The U.S. Department of State in 1969 said the world would have a population of 7.5 billion by 2000. This reflected UN projections of the day. According to the

UNPD, the figure for 2003 is 6.3 billion, 1.2 billion below 1969 projections.

Using its medium projection, the UN also estimates that by 2050 some 75 percent of the least-developed countries in the world will have birth rates below replacement levels. In these regions the total numbers of births per woman have been cut in half in the last 50 years. More important, much of that drop was in the last ten years.

For some years we “population optimists” have been arguing with the environmental pessimists that the overpopulation problem was illusionary. There was a population problem, but not the one for which everyone was planning: children and working-age individuals, as a percentage of the population, would be dropping steadily as the world's population aged faster than at any time in history. The cause of this is easy to understand: the number of infants born is decreasing every year, while life spans continue to grow because human existence has improved so much. Thus higher percentages of the population are elderly.

The most recent UN numbers verify the case of the optimists once again. The average life expectancy in the world is now at 64.6 years. But by 2050 the UN estimates it will rise to 74.3 years.¹ During that same period the average number of children born per woman will decline from 2.83 to 2.02. Population stability requires a rate of 2.1.²

Currently some 63 nations have birth rates low enough to lose population.³ By

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2015 the UN estimates that 82 nations will fall below replacement level. And by 2050 it estimates that 156 nations will be below replacement, with another ten on the edge. Only 23 countries will have fertility rates over 2.5.

The only reason that world population will still grow in 2050, in spite of declining birth rates, is that so many people will be living longer. Longer life spans, not high birth rates, have been the main reason for the world's population explosion over the last 50 years. But the population explosion that began in 1950 will flicker out by 2050, with world population figures going into decline.

This huge drop in birth rates, coupled with longer life spans, spells disaster for the welfare states of the world, especially for programs that support the elderly. These programs rely on people of working age to pay in while the elderly collect. But if the number of workers declines, while the number of recipients continues to increase, disaster looms.

In 2000 the world had 606 million people over the age of 60. By 2050 this figure is estimated to grow to 1.9 billion.⁴ More incredible is the projected increase for those who live past 80 years. In 2000 there were 69 million such people worldwide; by 2050 this will increase to 377 million.⁵ Living to 100 was once an anomaly. In 2000, just 167,000 people worldwide accomplished that feat. By 2050 it is estimated there will be 3.3 million people over the age of 100. Projections show that the United States will have 471,000 centenarians by 2050, exceeded only by Japan, which will have over 1 million.⁶ Those over 80 in the United States will total more than 29 million.⁷

Welfare State Problems

What is even more troublesome is that these trends are most pronounced in the welfare states. Sweden will see its elderly (60-plus) increase from the current 22 percent of the population to 33 percent, while the percentage of children (up to 14) will be just over 15 percent. Just 51 percent of the 2050 population will be of working age (15–59), and many will not be employed. A minority of the population (subtracting the unemployed) will be trying to support a majority.⁸ In the United Kingdom the percentage of elderly will increase from 21 percent to 30 percent.⁹ In Slovenia only 45.6 percent of the population will be of working age. The rest will either be elderly or children.¹⁰ In New Zealand the over-60 crowd will almost double—from 15.7 percent to 29 percent. Children under 15 will comprise just 16.3 percent.¹¹

Add in all the various recipients of government largess, and a growing majority of people will be sustained by a shrinking minority. The burden on young workers will have to increase substantially just to sustain the current system. Clearly that can't work.

When we look at the percentage of children in each country, it quickly becomes apparent that the problem will get much worse. What problems these programs face in 2050 will be nothing compared to those which will arise in the years after. The UNDP projects that the percentage of children will drop from 30.1 percent in 2000 to 20.1 percent by 2050.¹² This will happen even though infant mortality has plunged dramatically and will continue to do so. The 1995–2000 infant-mortality rate worldwide was 60.9 children per 1,000 live births. The

UN projects that by 2050 this will drop to 21.5.¹³

Many welfare policies were created during the baby boom and are built on the premise that workers will always exceed beneficiaries. But today's demographics make it clear that these schemes can't work much longer. While it is true that over a dozen nations today have large numbers of children (that is, future workers), these are almost all in Africa and none of these nations are welfare states. By 2050 some 22 nations, most of them welfare states, will have a minority of workers. These nations include Austria, Czech Republic, Italy, Japan, Greece, Estonia, Russia, Spain, and Switzerland. Another 19 will have working-age populations above 50 percent but below 53 percent, including Finland, France, Germany, and Sweden.

The UN report notes: "Europe is the major area of the world where population ageing is most advanced. The proportion of children is projected to decline from 17 per cent in 2000 to 15 per cent in 2050, while the proportion of older persons will increase from 20 per cent in 2000 to 35 per cent in 2050. By then, there will be 2.4 older persons for every child and more than one in every three persons will be aged 60 years or over. As a result, the median age will rise from 37.7 years in 2000 to 47.7 in 2050."¹⁴

Like a pyramid scheme, in a welfare state the number of payers has to grow faster than the number of recipients. As long as that happens the illusion that the system works can be maintained. But current trends indicate that the opposite is happening. UN projections for the developed world, where most

welfare states are, show that the working-age group will see its numbers shrink by 0.32 percent per year. In the same countries, however, those over 60 will see their numbers grow by 2.29 percent per year and those over 80 will grow by 3.39 percent.¹⁵

Political attempts to counteract these trends will consist of short-term fixes. The problem, however, is long term and increasing, and there is no reason to expect things to change dramatically. If anything, birth rates may be overestimated, compounding the problem.

Only short-sighted political agendas prevent governments from grappling with this demographic disaster. But the aversion to facing facts will become increasingly difficult with each passing year. Private alternatives will have to be more seriously considered if the workers of today are to be able to look after themselves when they grow old. Reality can only be faked for so long. □

1. United Nations Population Division, "World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision, Annex Tables," www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2002/wpp2002annextables.PDF, p. 41.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

3. Calculations such as this, unless otherwise stated, are made from the data provided in *ibid.* and are gleaned from numerous pages throughout this section.

4. UN Population Division, "World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision, Highlights," February 26, 2003, www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2002/WPP2002-HIGHLIGHTSrev1.PDF, p. 16.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Annex Tables, p. 61.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

15. Highlights, p. 17.