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Populations Falling and Rising

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One of the statistics you rarely hear about is the declining birth rate in much of the world. The population of any given country remains stable when the birth rate is at or around 2.1—that is, when each female of childbirth age has roughly two children—on average, of course. Below that figure, absent immigration, the number of citizens goes into decline.

Knowing that, it might be interesting to note that the U.S.'s current fertility rate is 1.6, and has been below replacement since at least 2009.

The U.S. has a lot of company. China (1.0), Singapore (1.0), Chile (1.1), Japan (1.1), Spain (1.1), Poland (1.1), Italy (1.2), Thailand (1.2), Estonia (1.2), Greece (1.2), Canada (1.3), Finland (1.3), Austria (1.3), Russia (1.4), the Netherlands (1.4), Hungary (1.4), Belgium (1.4), Portugal (1.4), Norway (1.4), Germany (1.4), Ireland (1.5), Denmark (1.5), Australia (1.5), Malaysia (1.5), Croatia (1.5), Slovenia (1.5), Turkey (1.5), Brazil (1.6), France (1.6) and Great Britain (1.6) all have fertility rates at or below American levels. One of the jokes among demographers is that Italians are becoming an endangered species after years of low birthrates. But perhaps the same could be said for a number of other countries—including South Korea, which holds the record for the lowest international fertility rate, at 0.7.

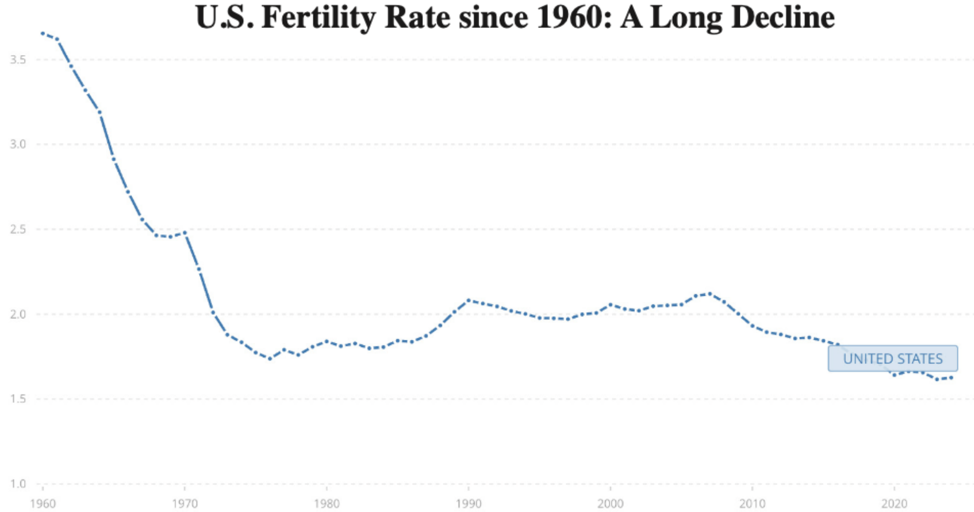
The obvious thing to note on this list is that they are all, more or less, above average in terms of per capital wealth and income, with access to health care, education and work opportunities for men and women. Italy currently has the third-highest per capita income in the world, while Spain and Japan are in the top 10, along with Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Spain.

When you look at lower-per-capita countries around the world, you still see falling fertility rates, but which are still well above replacement level: Somalia (6.0), Chad (6.0), Central African Republic (6.0), Niger (5.9), Angola (5.0), Afghanistan (4.8), Mali (5.5), Mauritania (4.6), Yemen (4.5), Tanzania (4.5), Cameroon (4.3), Uganda (4.2), Ivory Coast (4.2), Guinea (4.1) and Zambia (4.0).

India is an interesting example of this. It's overall fertility rate has dropped to 1.9, but the poorer states of Bihar (2.9) and Uttar Pradesh (2.6) pull the average up, while the more prosperous states like New Delhi (1.2), Tamil (1.3) and Kerala (1.3) are leaking citizenry.

Average it all out, and the world's population (roughly 8.3 billion as you read this) is rising by about 69 million people each year. That works out to an annual growth rate of 0.84%, down from a peak of over 2% a year in the 1960s. If current trends continue, then the United Nations estimates that global population growth will gradually slow to a stop sometime around 2080, and begin a long, slow decline from a peak of roughly 10.2 billion souls on this increasingly crowded planet.

U.S. Fertility Rate since 1960: A Long Decline



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