

Demography Is Destiny? Teaching About Cause and Effect With Global Population Trends

By Michael Gonchar March 23, 2016 2:19 pm

There's a common saying: *Demography is destiny*. It holds that population trends and distributions determine the future of a country, region or even the entire world. For example, if the human population increases too fast or too slowly, or if there are too many young or old people, then certain outcomes are likely to follow, such as economic boom or bust, political unrest or mass migration.

But is the concept really valid? Is demography truly destiny? Or, are there still too many questions about what demographic trends actually mean? And, are there too many uncertainties about what happens when governments enact policies or when technological advances influence society?

In this lesson, we use The Times to investigate important global demographic trends today, and we consider what these trends might and might not mean for the future.

Warm Up | In the 1960s, scientific concerns about unchecked global population growth reached the mainstream (for example, Paul R. Ehrlich, the author of the influential book “The Population Bomb,” became a frequent guest of Johnny Carson’s on “The Tonight Show”) and sparked campaigns for population control in the United States and around the world. But the

predicted apocalypse, the “utter breakdown of the capacity of the planet to support humanity,” never happened. Retro Report’s short film “The Population Bomb?” documents this history, and addresses the question about whether our rising world population still poses a threat to humanity.

Watch the film and then discuss:

Why do you think some scientists’ fears of global overpopulation found a receptive audience in the media, the public and even among world leaders? What evidence did the scientists have to support their predictions of mass starvation?

Do you agree with Dr. Ehrlich that the rising global population still represents a catastrophic threat? Or any level of threat to human progress and sustainability?

Or, do you think population stagnation or reduction, like Japan and Germany currently face, actually presents a greater challenge in the future?

Class Reading | The World Has a Problem: Too Many Young People

Somini Sengupta’s Sunday Review article “The World Has a Problem: Too Many Young People” addresses the current demographic trends that worry her the most. She writes:

At no point in recorded history has our world been so demographically lopsided, with old people concentrated in rich countries and the young in not-so-rich countries.

Much has been made of the challenges of aging societies. But it’s the youth bulge that stands to put greater pressure on the global economy, sow political unrest, spur mass migration and have profound consequences for everything from marriage to Internet access to the growth of cities.

The parable of our time might well be: Mind your young, or they will trouble you in your old age.

Read the entire article, then answer the following questions.

For Writing or Discussion

1. What is the “youth bulge” described in the article?
2. How have trends with today’s global youth changed since previous generations?
3. What does this statement mean: “Aspirations, when thwarted, can be a potent, spiteful force”?
4. What is the worldwide age divide? Is it dangerous? What are the best ways to balance that divide?
5. What is the “bachelor gap”? How did it come about? Why is it particularly worrisome?
6. What role can education, job opportunities and migration play in effecting positive or negative change in society?
7. What do you think governments should do to *mind their young*, or *mind their daughters*, as Ms. Sengupta suggests?

Going Further

Ms. Sengupta’s analysis introduces major demographic challenges that different countries and regions face. Working in small groups, students will investigate one of five countries: China, India, Japan, Nigeria and Germany. As part of their research, they should answer these questions:

What demographic challenges does this country face?

What are the causes of this demographic trend?

What do policy makers fear are, or will be, the effects of this demographic trend?

What are governments trying to do to address this demographic challenge?

Do you agree with the government's policy? Why?
What additional questions do you still have?

1. China

In the late 1970s and early '80s, China's central government enacted a nationwide policy that forced families to have only one child. The country's birthrate quickly plunged, but what also dropped was the percentage of girls being born. Influenced by a cultural preference for boys, many families opted to illegally abort baby girls — or even commit infanticide — so their one child would be a boy. China recently revised its rule to limit families to two children.

Today China faces the twin demographic challenges of a sizable imbalance in the number of boys and girls, and an aging population.

Use the following articles to start your research about China's demographic challenges:

China Ends One-Child Policy, Allowing Families Two Children
China Will Feel One-Child Policy's Effects for Decades, Experts Say
Experts Weigh Likely Impacts of China's 'One Child' Reversal
As China and Europe Age, Path to More Children Lies Beyond Bedroom

2. India

In only six years, India is forecast to pass China as the world's most populous country. Unlike China, India did not implement a strict population control program that limited the entire population's family planning choices. Instead, for decades it has relied on a program of mass sterilizations. In the 1970s the government faced protests because many of the sterilizations were forced. Today, millions of largely poor women are paid incentives to agree to undergo sterilizations.

Now India is taking steps to modernize its family planning policies

instead of relying on female sterilizations. The government has announced that it will make injectable contraceptives free of charge in government facilities, and that implanted contraceptives may follow.

Use the following articles to start your research about India's demographic challenges:

India Will Be Most Populous Country Sooner Than Thought, U.N. Says
India to Change Its Decades-Old Reliance on Female Sterilization
Web of Incentives in Fatal Indian Sterilizations

3. Japan

Japan's population is shrinking. In just the last five years, the country lost almost a million people. With one of the lowest birthrates in the world and little immigration, Japan might continue to face persistent economic woes as the population continues to age.

The government has tried to encourage women to have more children, but to little effect. And, the public is reluctant to open the doors to mass immigration.

Use the following articles to start your research about Japan's demographic challenges:

Japan Lost Nearly a Million People in 5 Years, Census Says
Without Babies, Can Japan Survive?
Japan Keeps a High Wall for Foreign Labor
The New Japanese Worker is Chinese

4. Nigeria

Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the highest birthrates in the world, containing almost all the roughly 20 countries where women average more

than five children. And, Nigeria is both included on that list and is the most populous country in Africa. In her article, Ms. Sengupta pointed out that Nigeria faces a serious youth bulge. In the United States, the median age is over 37; in Nigeria, it's just over 18. While the country is rich with oil, its middle class is growing and the population is quickly becoming more urban, large families are still highly valued in the culture and birth control has been slow to catch on.

Recently the government has become alarmed, and officials have begun promoting smaller families and have made contraceptives free.

Use the following articles to start your research about Nigeria's demographic challenges:

Nigeria Tested by Rapid Rise in Population

Africa's Population Boom (graphs)

Nigeria's Population Boom: A Problem, or Not?

5. Germany

Germany's work force is rapidly graying. In its most recent census, the country lost 1.5 million people, and by 2060, experts say, the country could shrink by an additional 19 percent.

Germany is not alone. Across the European continent, countries are confronting low fertility rates and an aging population, and the long-term economic implications are frightening many policy makers.

The sudden influx of as many as one million migrants and refugees from the Syrian civil war and elsewhere to Germany over the past year raises new challenges. Some see immigration as the best way to bolster Germany's economic outlook, but many Germans and Europeans in general are reluctant, and even resistant, to immigration.

Use the following articles to start your research about Germany's demographic challenges:

Germany Fights Population Drop

Despite Shrinking Populations, Eastern Europe Resists Accepting Migrants

Sex Education in Europe Turns to Urging More Births

Germany Counts Heads and Finds 1.5 Million Fewer Residents Than It Expected

Standards

This resource may be used to address the academic standards listed below.

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