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## Smaller Families and Smaller Replacement Rates: An Investigation into the Declining U.S. Population

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# Smaller Families and Smaller Replacement Rates:

## *An Investigation into the Declining U.S. Population*

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**A**round 250 babies are born in the world every minute. These numbers, reported by The Guardian, lead us to believe that the birth rate and population are infinitely growing. But is this view really accurate? Two major data-collecting organizations, The World Bank (WB) and the United Nations (UN), have interesting answers to this question. On the surface, data show an expected increase in the world population over the next 50 years. However, looking closer at the number of births per family in the United States (U.S.) may reveal a different picture for the next half-century.

It is important to understand replacement rates to have a grasp of the significance of fertility numbers. According to a CNN report, a replacement rate is defined as the ability for a couple's offspring to replace them. So, let us say a made-up couple, Jess and Joe, have two children. This couple would be right at the level of the replacement rate because their children will make up the population difference when their parents pass away. Cilluffo and Ruiz of Pew Research Center note that the prime replacement rate is about 2.1 births per woman. This number would allow the population to maintain a stable size.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the U.S. currently has a replacement rate of about 1.7 births per woman. Moreover, this number does not show any sign of increasing soon. Social changes such as women pursuing higher education, more consistent use of birth control, and women focusing on careers have caused a later start to families in the U.S. According to the National Vital Statistics Report (NVSr) by the CDC, the mean age of a mother's first birth was 26.9 years in 2018. The NVSR accredits this to mothers having fewer births in their 20s and more in their 30s and 40s. However, this is not an uncommon occurrence, according to the World Bank. In fact, the U.S. is likely following in the footsteps of countries like Japan, Australia, and Italy, in which people are starting families at an older age. As expected, this later start causes smaller replacement rates: Japan with 1.4, Australia with 1.7, and Italy with 1.3.

The birth rate in the U.S. has steadily decreased in the last 15 years to about 1,729.5 births per 1000 women, resulting in the aforementioned replacement rate of 1.7. This decrease in replacement rate stayed relatively the same across races from 2017

to 2018. The decline in the replacement rate has caused some researchers to worry about its social implications in the next half-century. For instance, they have raised questions regarding how an only child will take care of elderly parents and how a smaller generation in the population may not be able to fill the workforce. In a report for National Center for Biotechnological Information, Phillip S. Morgan notes that this shift will result in "rapidly aging populations and possible country-level population decline." However, this is not necessarily a bad thing. In the highly populated countries in Europe and North America, population decline will reduce and slow the negative outcomes of overpopulation.

Additionally, starting families later and lowering the replacement rate have many benefits. For instance, having fewer children also allows children to have better access to resources. Because women are increasingly involved in the workforce, there is a higher chance a woman will have a stable career by the time she has her later birth. There may be more of a safety net for the child in this case. When the safety net is reserved for one or two children, the child will not cause as much financial and energetic strain on the parents. Morgan sees this as an outstanding benefit to fertility decline; he says, "children are costly in modern contexts: the fewer children one has, the better" the family is.

By having fewer children, a shift in parenting style and family relationships can take hold. A parent is able to give more attention to their child and spend more time creating trusting relationships with them. The choice of having fewer children in modern days, understandably, holds much more weight.

Conversations surrounding population changes frequently center on how the exponential growth of the global population will strain Earth's limited resources. More recently though, as certain countries incentivize having fewer children and starting families later, the conversations have shifted to how we can quell our fears of a declining population. However, there are numerous benefits enjoyed by households that have fewer children, illustrating that declining birth rates may not be as problematic as we might have previously conceived it to be. Encouraging families to be smaller by increasing access to birth control and implementing accessible family planning programs may be the next step in combatting overpopulation. ● ● ●



