

Does the US Have a Population Problem?

Population and US Policy
"Pro-natal" policies and consumption subsidies

US Environmental Impacts
The largest per-person impacts in the world

Population Growth and Quality of Life
More people, more problems, even for the world's richest nation

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283 or 519 million people?

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A plan to improve quality of life at home and abroad



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When population issues are mentioned, many people associate them with Africa, Latin America or Asia. But some observers contend that the United States also has a significant population problem. In terms of damage to the planet and depletion of its resources, they argue, 275 million Americans create a greater environmental impact than 1.25 billion Chinese or one billion Indians. And - despite living in the richest and most powerful nation on Earth - American citizens are suffering many of the same declines in quality of life associated with population growth in other regions.

Population and US Policy

Politically, the US is considered to be "pro-natal," meaning that it has national policies in place that encourage people to have more children. Foremost among these policies is an income tax structure that offers greater deductions for larger families. Recent political movements to grant additional tax credits for children and their college tuition reinforce this trend.

US immigration policies have also allowed an average of nearly 900,000 legal immigrants to enter the country each year during the 1990's. While actual numbers vary because of year to year adjustments, US immigration guidelines allow 480,000 "family sponsored" immigrants each year, plus 140,000 "employment preference" immigrants, and 55,000 "diversity" immigrants. Roughly 100,000 to 120,000 openings are also maintained for "refugees and asylees."

These new arrivals tend initially to have larger families than the national average, which is why some anti-immigration activists contend that the majority of US population growth is due to immigration. These new arrivals are also quick to adopt the American "super-consumer" lifestyle.

In addition to legal immigration, illegal immigration is estimated to be from 1.1 to 2.9 million each year. According to the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), most of these people ultimately return to their countries of origin, but some 275,000 remain in the US. The total number of illegal immigrants living in the US is now estimated by the INS to be five million.

There is a growing debate over national immigration policies. Critics argue that it costs Americans jobs, and burdens the economy with additional social needs. Defenders of immigration argue that the United States is historically "a nation of immigrants," and that new arrivals ultimately contribute more economic value than they receive. Still others suggest that the US should work to address "push and pull factors" that drive migration, such as poverty, unemployment, economic inequity, and conflict. Regardless of the causes and context, immigration is clearly responsible for a significant portion of the total environmental impact of population growth in the US.

Economic policies in America also increase our cumulative environmental impacts. Below-cost timber sales by the US Forest Service not only contribute to habitat and biodiversity loss, siltation of streams, and flooding, they also encourage consumers to use more forest products because prices are kept artificially low. Below-cost sales of mineral rights by federal agencies and antiquated mining laws also allow corporations to make billions of dollars from exploitation of public lands and evade responsibility for resulting environmental damage. This also artificially suppresses prices, and encourages consumption.

Agricultural subsidies designed to encourage production or stabilize prices often result in significant environmental damage. Some of these impacts include soil erosion and depletion, and excessive pesticide and fertilizer applications that run off into water sources. Below cost water sales and unsustainable irrigation practices divert water from ecosystems, and also favor agribusiness over consumers.



Artificially depressed energy prices encourage people to drive relatively inefficient automobiles, and to waste electricity. These practices - along with billions of dollars of tax shifts and subsidies for road construction and transportation infrastructure - encourage Americans to drive more, resulting in increased carbon emissions. Those higher levels of pollution then accelerate global warming and climate change.

US Environmental Impacts

The impact of the US on the global environment can be understood through the formula $I = PAT$ (Environmental Impact equals Population size, times Affluence, or consumption per person, times Technology and resulting pollution.) Using $I = PAT$, scientist Paul Ehrlich calculates that the environmental impact of the average American is approximately 20 times that of a Costa Rican, 50 times that of a Malagasi, and 70 times that of a Bangladeshi.

Annual US population growth is about one percent, or roughly 2.7 million people. About 60 percent of this growth results from natural increase, with the remaining 40 percent from immigration. Applying the $I = PAT$ formula and Ehrlich's calculations, 2.7 million additional Americans will have an environmental impact equivalent to some 54 million Costa Ricans, 135 million Malagasis, or 190 million Bangladeshis. According to United Nations Children's Fund, a child born in the US will, in his or her lifetime, have an environmental impact more than 250 times greater than that of a child born in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Environmentalists note that lifestyles and patterns of consumption largely determine the extent of resource exploitation, waste generation, and environmental damage inflicted by any given society. According to Union of Concerned Scientists, the US, with under five percent of the world's total population, uses 25 percent of all oil, 23 percent of all coal, and 27 percent of all aluminum. The Natural Resources Defense Council estimates that Americans also consume one-third of all paper and generate nearly three-quarters of the world's toxic waste.

Americans own roughly one-third of the world's automobiles, drive about as many miles as the rest of the world combined, and are far and away the largest per capita producers of carbon dioxide - the primary greenhouse gas. The typical American also produces nearly a ton of garbage each year, uses roughly two and one-half times as much energy as the average Japanese, and has more shopping malls than high schools.

US growth from natural increase constitutes less than two percent of annual global population increase. But in terms of impacts, Americans consume resources, generate waste and inflict environmental damage on a scale far beyond their numbers.

US Population Growth and Quality of Life

Not all of the population-related impacts in the United States are suffered by the natural environment. The lifestyles and social health of Americans are also significantly degraded by impacts associated with overpopulation. The Fordham University Index of Social Health - which monitors 16 indicators of social well-being, including infant mortality, children in poverty, access to affordable housing, average weekly earnings, homicides, high school dropouts, and the

The American "Footprint"

Every person has an ecological "footprint." At the most basic level, we all need enough productive land to produce food and fiber - raise crops and graze animals - and enough clean water to drink, wash and irrigate. We also need enough land to supply energy for heat and cooking, and to dispose of our wastes.

As people's lifestyles expand, so do their footprints. In the industrialized world, we need more land to support our higher protein diet, and to supply resources to build our homes, schools, factories, shopping centers and offices, and to produce our consumer goods.

In the United States, the average ecological footprint is the largest in the world - nearly 10 hectares (25 acres.) By comparison, Italy has an ecological footprint of just over 4 hectares (10 acres) and Bangladesh has a footprint of .6 hectares (one acre).

As large as the United States is, the productive space (biologically productive land and ecologically productive water) within its borders is limited. Per capita, there is only about 5.5 hectares (14 acres) of productive space, so to support its lifestyle, the US has to import products from (and sometimes export wastes to) other areas.

On a global scale, the human footprint is calculated to be 2.4 hectares (5.5 acres) per person, but there is only about 2 hectares (5 acres) of productive space per person. Because the human footprint is already larger than available productive space, there is considered to be an "ecological deficit" - humans are using more of the Earth than is sustainable.

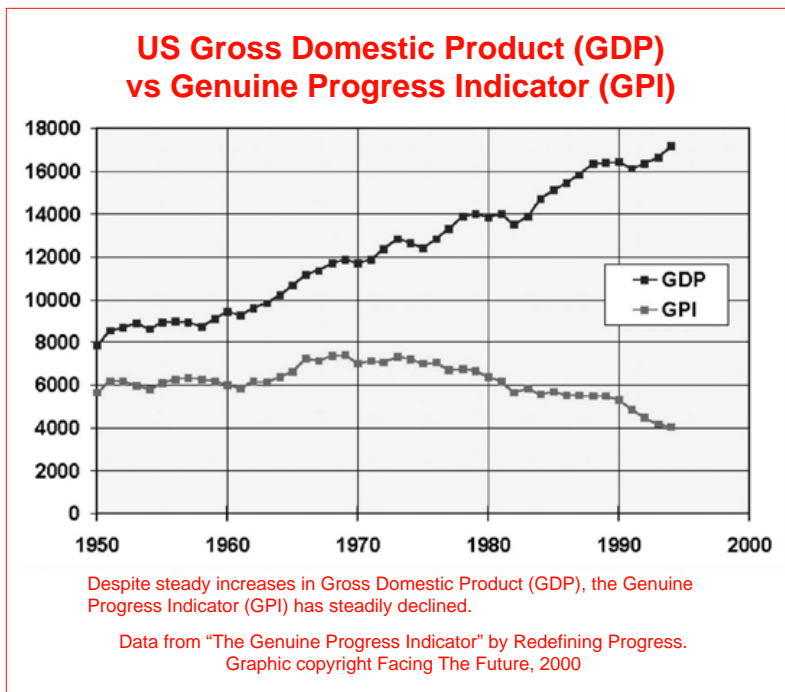
If everyone on Earth today had a footprint the size of the average American, our ecological deficit would be so great that we would need nearly four more planets to support us all sustainably. At current growth rates, we would need 11 more planet Earths to support the world's population in 2050.

gap between rich and poor - declined 41 percent between 1970 and 1996. It is significant to note that this decline continued through economic expansions and recessions, and through Democratic and Republican administrations. It also occurred despite a near doubling in Gross Domestic Product during those years.

In that same period, the number of people living in poverty rose by

over 50 percent, and included more than one-fifth of all US children. What is particularly significant is that due to a decline in wages - which is linked to an excess of workers due to both population growth and increasing mechanization - a number of working people have been pushed into poverty. In 1995, the share of US workers earning below-poverty wages reached 30 percent.

Studies have also indicated a correlation between increasing population and a number of other concerns, including crime and drug abuse. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, crimes of all types, as well as the percentage of people in prison, have soared as America has become more populated and more crowded. Road violence - incidents of assaults



and shootings by drivers in traffic altercations - increased by more than 50 percent between 1990 and 1995, resulting in over 200 deaths.

Another indicator, the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), developed by the policy organization, Redefining Progress, profiles a similar trend. The GPI includes more than twenty economic indicators that the traditional indicator of economic progress,

Gross Domestic Product, (GDP) ignores. It adjusts for factors such as income distribution, adds others (such as the value of housework and community work), and subtracts still others (such as pollution costs and resource depletion). "The result," according to Redefining Progress, "is a balance sheet for the nation that starts to distinguish between the costs and benefits of 'growth.'" By this "balance sheet," GPI has declined in the US by some 45 percent since 1969, despite a rise in GDP of some 45 percent over that same period.

Environmental degradation caused by overpopulation and high consumption in the US contributes significantly to a lower quality of life for many Americans. Because of groundwater pollution, roughly one

Hunger and Homelessness in the US

In 1998, as in every year that the US Congress of Mayors has surveyed hunger and homelessness in America's cities, the overall demand for both emergency food and shelter increased. Requests for emergency food assistance increased by 14 percent, and demand for emergency shelter increased by 11 percent.

On average, the Mayors reported, 21 percent of requests for emergency food were unmet, as were 26 percent of requests for emergency shelter. Almost half the survey cities had to turn hungry people away due to lack of food resources, and over two-thirds of the cities were unable to meet demands for emergency shelter. Over 90 percent of cities reported that emergency food assistance was relied upon by families and individuals

both in emergencies and as a steady source of food over long periods of time.

Some 37 percent of people requesting food assistance were employed, and officials estimated that 38 percent of the homeless were families with children. Underlying these problems, the Mayors reported, are low paying jobs, unemployment, cuts in food stamps due to welfare reform, poverty or lack of income, high housing costs, low benefits in public assistance programs, and substance abuse.

City officials reported that the strong economy had very little positive impact on hunger and homelessness. Of reporting cities, 96 percent expected requests for emergency food to increase in 1999, and 93 percent expected emergency shelter needs to increase.

out of every five Americans is dependent on water contaminated by lead, toxic chemicals, or fecal bacteria. Because of air pollution, more than 60,000 Americans die prematurely each year from cardiopulmonary conditions.

The United States has lost 55 percent of its wetlands, 95 percent of its old growth forests, and 99 percent of its native prairies. More than 500 plant, animal, and other species have already disappeared in the US, and over 1,400 more are currently listed as endangered or threatened. Habitat and

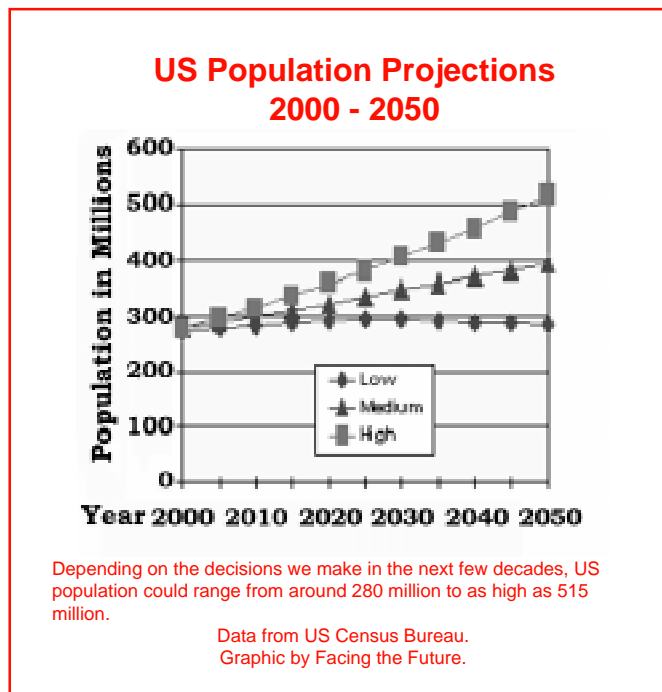
farmland continue to disappear as population growth forces conversion of open space to human uses. And because of urban / suburban "sprawl," an area the size of the state of Delaware is paved over every year.

The Future of US Population

While the US inflicts a significant amount of damage on local and global ecosystems - and Americans suffer the impacts of declining social and environmental health - there seems little prospect of alleviating these impacts if current trends continue. With a natural increase rate among the highest in the industrialized world (second only to Australia) and continuing high levels of immigration, US population is expected to increase even more dramatically in the future. Unless sustainable population, development, and environmental protection policies are implemented - and policies that subsidize waste, over-consumption, and destructive practices are reversed - long-term projections indicate a continuing decline in well-being for most Americans.

And the Answer is . . .

A study by the State University of New York concluded that every baby born in the US would, in his or her lifetime, produce one million kilograms of atmospheric wastes, 10 million kilograms of liquid wastes, and one million kilograms of solid wastes. Based on current patterns, the study also concluded each new American would



use 700 kilograms of minerals, and 24 billion BTU's of energy.

The report concluded that "the most effective way an individual can protect the global environment, and hence protect the well being of all living people, is to abstain from creating another human."

This is not a new concept. In 1974, the Rockefeller Commission was appointed by President Richard Nixon to study the impacts of population growth. Nixon's decision was based on concerns about declining

quality of life in US cities and increasing environmental damage.

The Commission concluded that "no substantial benefits would result from continued growth of the nation's population" and that the United States should "welcome and plan for a stabilized population." It proposed adoption of policies designed to achieve and maintain replacement-level fertility (two children per woman) and capping immigration at 400,000 per year. The Commission also called for school-based population and sex education programs, promoting adoption, promoting women's rights through passing the Equal Rights Amendment, and providing universal access to family planning services.

These measures are no less important, and would be no less effective, today than they were in 1974. Supported by tax laws that encourage smaller families, cultural acceptance of people who choose not to have children and focused anti-poverty measures, they could lead to population stabilization within a single generation.

Coupled with renewable energy systems, investments in education and infrastructure, increased taxes on pollution (and reduced taxes on income), and enhanced environmental protection, these actions could greatly improve the future quality of life in the US. With America leading the way in supporting global population stabilization through health care, education, human rights, and sustainable development, US citizens could look forward to a secure and sustainable future.