



Americans are having fewer babies. Experts consider why

Birth rates are declining. Ohio State researchers study possible reasons, economic solutions and discuss the scrutiny of another aspect of reproductive choice

Materials contained within this podcast are copyrighted property of The Ohio State University.

Robin Chenoweth: In 2017, an article by Deborah Needleman appeared in the *New York Times*. At the top of the webpage, a video reel shows a mountain-top village in Italy, seemingly carved from the rock and accessible only by a footbridge. A haunting headline reads, “Who Will Save These Dying Italian Towns?” The village was nearly abandoned, its medieval buildings slowly succumbing to gravity. Residents had emigrated to the U.S. or to Italian cities. But another factor was at play, too, in this town and others. Italy, even before the pandemic, had a shrinking population because it has the third-lowest fertility rate in Europe. The article shocked me, because when I thought of population change, I had only considered what is called Malthusianism — the theory that population is growing exponentially and at a rate unsustainable for the planet. To me, it seemed inconceivable that the United States would ever see a declining birth rate, at least in my lifetime. But I was wrong.

CNBC Television: According to the CDC 3.6 million babies were born in 2023 in the U.S. That’s about 76,000 fewer than the previous year and the lowest one-year tally since 1979.

CNN: The Global fertility rate, it’s falling at an alarming pace from an average of five births in 1950 to an average of 2.32 in 2021. And in the U.S., it’s even less.

Conversations with Bill Kristol, Jonathan V. Last: All of the available evidence suggested that the glide path we are on in America, and frankly in the rest of the world, too, is continued decline and we don’t have any way of knowing where and when it stops. And we don’t have any evidence that a rebound is coming.

Robin Chenoweth: So, that's a good thing, right? Less worry about spent resources, catastrophic global warming, famine? As it turns out, the outcomes of declining birth rates are a little more complicated than that.

Yahoo! Finance, James Pomeroy: It's a damaging thing in terms of economic, sort of, momentum and economic growth. If you think about working age populations and how crucial they are in terms of determining the number of consumers, the number of taxpayers, the number of workers ... it's absolutely fundamental.

BBC News: This will inevitably create pressures. *The Economist* argues that for countries with low birth rates, the implications are higher taxes, later retirements, lower real returns for savers and, possibly, government budget crisis.

Robin Chenoweth: Michael Betz is an associate professor of human development and family science in Ohio State's College of Education and Human Ecology who recently completed a Fulbright Fellowship in Norway, where he studied the impacts of COVID on birth rates. Betz is a faculty affiliate of Ohio State's Institute for Population Research.

Michael Betz: The labor force is going to be smaller. So that means that every person in the labor force is going to have to support more people who are non-working — elderly and retired pensioners. So that can be a bigger challenge. It's going to put more pressure on the working age population. Another challenge is that there will then also be fewer taxpayers, so in the workforce. Then some state programs might struggle to be funded, and then this can cause a cycle of low economic growth.

Robin Chenoweth: You're not alone if all that leaves you feeling a bit conflicted. Here's Ohio State Sociology Professor Sarah Hayford, director of the Institute for Population Research.

Sarah Hayford: One of the challenges is a lot of the benefits that we're talking about of having children — you know, a growing economy, support for older workers, and more innovation — a lot of those benefits are public benefits. They're shared collective benefits, whereas ... a lot of the costs of having children are privatized costs, and especially they're gendered costs. They're disproportionately borne by women.

Robin Chenoweth: Also, news of declining births comes amid a tumultuous political environment in which women have been targeted for not having children. Has another aspect of reproductive choice become politicized? In this episode of the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we talk to two Ohio State researchers about Americans' choices to have fewer children, and how over time and collectively, those very personal decisions can change the future. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. Major declines in birth rates, what some are calling the Baby Bust, rarely happen overnight. The drop is steady. The United States, for example, has had a 20% decline in birth rates since 2008. In most other wealthy countries —

South Korea, Italy, Singapore to name a few — the drop has been happening for decades. If you haven't heard about it, Ohio State's Institute of Population Research studies how health conditions are distributed across populations, social determinants of health and changes in population structure — including birth rates, death rates, migration and immigration. I asked Sarah Hayford and Michael Betz about declining birth rates — scientists sometimes call them infertility rates — in the United States.

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: In many countries the total number of births continue to fall steeply, and they did so in 2023, and people are calling this the Baby Bust. Does that adequately describe what this phenomenon is?

Sarah Hayford: Baby Bust is obviously not a technical term. That's a sort of social term, or an evocative term. And certainly, birth rates have been falling for almost 15 years now, since 2008. They fell after the 2008 recession, and then sort of never came back up again. And that's true across all wealthy countries, basically, in the world, even places like the Scandinavian countries and Norway, where there wasn't a big economic consequence of the great recession. So, I think understanding, what are the shared causes of this that aren't just economic, but that are broad across a lot of countries is something that's really interesting to population scientists.

Robin Chenoweth: Where does the United States stand in terms of the global birth rate picture?

Sarah Hayford: The U.S. is still among the higher birth rates of wealthy countries. You know, the lowest birth rates in the world are some of the wealthy countries in East Asia, especially the sort of city states, Singapore, Hong Kong. The United States: The total fertility rate is about 1.6 children per woman. So, we still have a lot of people having two or three children, we have increasing levels of childlessness. But still, I would say sort of moderate to low birth rates in the U.S., not the lowest low birth rates that we see in some other parts of the world.

Robin Chenoweth: Note that 2.1 children per woman is considered the “replacement level,” needed to replenish the population. That number factors in infant mortality, because some babies die before reaching adulthood, but also many other factors. By comparison, South Korea has the lowest fertility rate in the world, 0.72 in 2023. But the last time the U.S. rates hit that replacement level of 2.1 children per woman was in 2007, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This decline has happened once before, says Michael Betz.

Michael Betz: Birth rates are at historic lows right now, but they were very low coming out of the 1970s. So, during the 1960s and 1970s, where more women were entering the workforce, fertility rates steadily declined then as well. And we got down to about 1.7 births per women. And then we saw a little bit of an increase during the 1980s, up to about 2.1 and remained steady there until about 2007-2008, as Sarah mentioned, right before the financial crisis. And since then, it's been in a steady decline. So we've been at these lower levels before, and so it's

not completely unprecedented, but it's to be seen whether that's going to take an uptick again, or is going to level out, or is going to continue to decline.

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: What changed in the 1970s or '80s that allowed the birth rates to go back up again?

Michael Betz: Some of that was just a little bit of delay. As women entered the workforce, they were delaying the age at which they had first births.

Michael Betz: Then some of those births were ... actually realized in the 80s. ... There may be a little bit of that that has been going on now, average age of first birth has increased a little bit in the United States over the last 15 years, as we've seen this decline...

Robin Chenoweth: The average age of first-time mothers was 27.5 in 2023. In 2000, it was just under 25. You see the trend. And that age is increasing for every demographic group, not just white and Asian women. If you are a woman of child-bearing age in the United States, you don't need to ask why. We will get to those reasons in a bit. But the average age of first birth changed even more dramatically from the 70s when it was 21, through the 80s and 90s, Betz says, and then has increased slowly ever since. It's leveling, and the number of births is going down.

Michael Betz: So, we shouldn't expect there to be much of an increase because women are simply delaying births.

Sarah Hayford: I'll add one of the things that's happening in the past 15 years or so in the United States is that rates of unintended births are declining. So, a lot of the reasons for the recent decline is that people aren't having children when they don't want them, and that's especially people in their teens and early 20s. And so, I think the big question is people are avoiding having unintended births in their 20s. Are they then going to go on and have those children later, or are they just not going to have children at all? And that's something that we're sort of trying to figure out and trying to predict.

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: Is that because access to birth control has increased?

Sarah Hayford: You know, it's not clear whether it's about access to birth control, whether it's about declining rates of sexual activity — the age at first sex has increased in the United States — along with the age of first birth or some combination of less sex, more birth control, you know...

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: I find that, like, almost unbelievable. It has?

Sarah Hayford: Yeah, teen sex has declined in the United States. Yes, exactly. That's not what you would expect from reading the headlines. But it's, it's true. Teen drug use has declined also...

Michael Betz: Yeah, alcohol use, so lots of risky behaviors that might also be associated with first births, unintended first births, teenage births, like alcohol use, has declined amongst teenagers as well.

Robin Chenoweth: And the pandemic quelled teenage and young adult births even more. Betz's Fulbright research considers how COVID-19 impacted births rates differently in rural and urban areas.

Michael Betz: This was the interesting thing, Amy Acton's conjecture at the beginning of the pandemic, when she said we might see a baby boom here, in nine months.

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: We didn't.

Michael Betz: We didn't. And you know, part of it is the unintended birth story. So, the state home orders had a bigger impact on first births, and so moms that might not have been intending to get pregnant. And in rural areas, if there's no restriction on your movement, and you're allowed to kind of interact more socially, there's more likely you'll have an unintended birth. Whereas in urban areas, if there's restrictions on social interactions, there's less likelihood of an unintended birth.

Robin Chenoweth: Those unintended first births — mostly among 15- to 25-year-olds — dropped more in urban areas, where restrictions were more rigidly enforced, Betz is finding. But even now, 4½ years later, teen births are at historic lows and have fallen to a new low each year since 2009. Birth rates for women 20 to 24 are also the lowest they've ever been. So what's going on? Ask millennial Gen Z women. Here are Ohio State students Mary Corcoran, Ainsley Bronson and Grace, to lend their perspective...

Mary Corcoran: That's just me personally, and I think that a lot of people are, especially women, are pursuing more professional degrees, as opposed to deciding that they need to get married right out of high school. ... Mary Corcoran: or even right out of college. ... Personally, for myself I put my degree and like, actually getting a well-paying job in front of settling down and having kids.

Ainsley Bronson: So, I want to go to medical school and be a surgeon. And that lifestyle, I think, isn't really suited to have kids and raise them in the best way.

Grace: I, like, want to travel. I want to, like, find the right husband and everything. Like, I'm not rushing it. Like, 30s. ... I definitely want to be a mom, but I don't see that happening for a good amount of time from here.

Robin Chenoweth: I asked Sarah Hayford about how education and jobs have affected the issue.

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: You study family formation and reproductive health and the trends in childbearing desires, intentions and behaviors. Is it true that women have when they have access to birth control and to education and jobs that they're overwhelmingly choosing to have for fewer children. And is that part of the impact that we're seeing on these on these birth rates?

Sarah Hayford: It's true that when you go from a context where people are having, you know, six children on average, or four children on average. And you introduce higher education for women, you introduce better access to birth control, that birth rates fall from the sort of larger family size to a more moderate family size. I think there's a lot more questions around what happens... do birth rates fall from three to two, from two to one, from one to zero? We don't really know what the consequences of women tapping their full potential outside the family are going to be for family formation, and a lot of that depends on the degree to which men pick up roles within the family. So, I think that as women are taking on different roles and are doing things that are not only having children and not only responsibility between the families... We have a shift in what families look like and what women's lives look like, and how that's going to play out is going to, again, be determined by what we do in terms of policies that make it easier to both work outside the family and have children, and the gender distribution of that family labor. We don't know yet whether, whether women are going to keep having fewer children forever, or whether we'll stabilize at some more moderate level.

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: Because people put so much effort into their careers and, you know, getting a PhD, or whatever it is. ... A lot is being put on women here. It feels heavy to me to say that the economy and the world depends on us continuing to have more and more children.

Sarah Hayford: A lot of the costs of having children are privatized costs, and they're disproportionately borne by women, especially in the United States, but in a lot of other places in the world as well. ... We have a little disjuncture between the benefits that we're collectively hoping to reap, but the challenges or the costs that we're not so collectively willing to share in.

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: Right now, politically, there's almost the shaming of the choice to not have children.

JD Vance: We're effectively run in this country... by a bunch of childless cat ladies...

American Moment: They have no children, so they don't have any kind of base, biological or deterministic sense of longevity beyond their own life and they basically become sociopaths.

New York Times Matter of Opinion: The more you tie parenthood to some type of creepy ethnonationalism or patriot duty or make the idea that people who for some reason don't meet

your version of parenthood are somehow deficient and unpatriotic, the more you polarize this and make it all the more unappealing for people to have children, especially women.

Robin Chenoweth: Sarah Hayford.

Sarah Hayford: I think a lot of the shaming around not having children comes back to this idea of individualizing, individualizing the decision to have children, individualizing the responsibility for raising children. It's interesting to me that the shaming often is focused on women who choose not to have children. Of course, men also make the decisions not to have children. But this sort of idea that if you don't have children, you know, you don't know what having children is like, or you're not invested in the future of society, I think, goes along with that idea of like sort of individualizing this responsibility, that we don't have a collective responsibility for children, or a collective interest in raising children. That it's only individual parents who are worried about their own individual children.

Sarah Hayford: I did some interviews with young people about having children recently, and one of the things that of the things that came up was that women, especially, but also men, were really thinking about the physical consequences of having children. The sort of strain on women's bodies, the strain of giving birth, the economic cost. What it would cost to give birth in a hospital, and how they were going to pay that? And I think as people are thinking about that physical process of reproduction, the restriction on abortion goes to the idea that having children is something that's risky and hard, and if abortion is restricted, that makes it more risky because it limits the kind of care that you might get that you might need when you're pregnant. So, I think that contributes to the idea that it's a little bit scary to think about the process of labor and delivery, and that, again, it makes it a weighty decision and an important decision that people are making.

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: Could people be putting it off even more, though, because they know that those health options aren't there for them? Just the whole ectopic pregnancy thing. That could put you in a dangerous situation depending on where you live now.

Sarah Hayford: I don't think we know from survey data or aggregate population data, what the high-level impact of abortion restrictions are on people's decisions about having children. But certainly, we hear anecdotally that people are more worried, and we hear anecdotally from doctors that, for example, sterilization rates are increasing.

Michael Betz: There's probably lots of different reasons that politicians have for restricting abortion, but if one of them is to try to manage this decline in births, it's a really poor policy lever. It's really ineffective. Some of the really earliest estimates about the abortion bans that went into effect after Dobbs found that births increased by about 2% in states that had abortion bans compared to states that didn't. ... If you think about that, you're causing this pretty substantial disruption in women's health, and the net result of that is a 2% increase in births. That's just a tiny, tiny increase compared to the decline of about 20% since the last 15

years. ... In general, government doesn't have a lot of policy levers to increase births. ... I'll start to tie in a little bit of my time in Norway. As you look at the Nordic states, who do about as good a job as any country and supporting families. They have generous parental leave. They have subsidized childcare. They have time off from work if your children get sick. So, they're very well supported, but they still have birth rates that are about the same as the United States. And so in this is kind of something that has been found over and over again, is that, yeah, these policies, they can make a difference, but the difference is very, very small, and it might cost a lot of money too if you're aiming to change fertility rates. Now that's not to say these policies shouldn't be enacted, because they should. They should be enacted just on the basis of having living in a more humane society that does a better job at supporting parents and supporting families, because these have all kinds of positive benefits to society. Parents that are less stressed are going to be more productive at work. They're going to be better parents. They're going to invest more in their children, and those children are going to grow up to be healthier, more productive citizens. So, in the end, while if your policy goal is to try to get people to have more kids, there's not a whole lot that governments can do to really increase that, but these policies should be enacted anyway, because they're going to create a better, more healthy, more prosperous society.

Sarah Hayford: If we're talking about policy goals, the goals shouldn't be a higher birth rate or a lower birth rate, the goal should be a healthier and happier and more productive population. And there are lots of ways to do that. And, you know, changing birth rates is very hard and is not really what our ultimate goal should be.

Robin Chenoweth: So, teen births are at historic lows. After decades of hearing that the planet was hurdling to certain demise because of rising populations and dwindling resources, births are decreasing. That could mean easing the housing crisis, reducing habitat destruction, having less traffic congestion, more equitable distribution of education resources. It begs the existential question.

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: Is declining population a bad thing? Because there are some people who will say that the world needs fewer people when you think about environmental impacts and things like that.

Michael Betz: You can have your own personal opinion about that. As scientists, we kind of just talk about what is happening. Whether or not that's a good or bad thing ... There are some positive things that would be associated with slowing populations, and there are also challenges as well.

Robin Chenoweth: And that brings back around those ways population impacts the economy and burdens workers: School districts and universities downsizing, military conscription, reduced state budgets. And by the way, that famous theory of demise that Thomas Robert Malthus laid out in 1798? It predicted extreme poverty that leads to depopulation by decreasing birth rates.

Michael Betz: I would say, probably, maybe the thing that people don't think about the most is that humans, are the greatest resource that any society has, because we are the ones that generate creative ideas and come up with innovations, that come up with really great new ideas that make life better. ... When we think about the number of people working on the problems that we care about most — so things like, how do we produce enough clean energy? How do we have enough clean water? How do we have enough food to have a sustainable global system? Really, what you're looking at is people who are innovating, and more people that you have innovating and coming up with good new ideas, the more likely we are going to be able to solve a lot of those problems.

Sarah Hayford: I think the framing in terms of challenges and opportunities is a really nice framing of what happens when we have lower birth rates or higher birth rates. And both of those are things that policy can manage. So, policy can help deal with the challenges of having a smaller labor force. Policy can help deal with the challenges of having to support more older workers. And we can also think about policy as necessary to take advantage of the human resources that we have, that we have a lot of people now who are living in places where they don't have the opportunities to enact their creativity and their innovation. And so we could think of having more people, and we could also think about supporting the people that we have to be able to maximize their potential. And so those are all things that are not don't happen in a vacuum, that birth rates don't have effects on their own on social outcomes. They have effects that are shaped by policy and shaped by human interactions and human social structures.

Robin Chenoweth: While it might seem taboo in the current political and social context, population scientists nearly all agree on a solution to the problems that declining population brings: Immigration.

Michael Betz: By far and away, the thing that could increase overall global economic development is free migration and, movement of labor.

Robin Chenoweth with Michael Betz and Sarah Hayford: Really?

Michael Betz: Yeah. The estimates are between 100% and 200% of GDP growth if there were no restrictions on labor, just because there are so many people who are in poor countries that, because of their situation, where they live, their potential is not being anywhere close to being maximized. And so the question is: Well, not having any restrictions on migration is not a tenable policy. We have to have some restrictions on that. But where is the United States at in terms of being able to have a more, I think, beneficial immigration policy? ... Almost all of the political discourse is on the low skill labor in around the southern borders, and there's this other aspect of high skill migration that almost nobody is talking about. ... A bigger issue in terms of economic growth is how we deal with our high skill labor. And right now the United States could increase immigration from a lot of other countries, China and India, and lots of places in Southeast Asia that there are lots of high skilled workers that would love to come to the United States. ... We have this kind of untapped superpower where all the best and

brightest and most skilled and most educated people want to come to the United States to maximize their potential.

Sarah Hayford: That really underlines that for a lot of the concerns we have about the implications of low birth rates, they're actually not very hard policy solutions. You know, we know lots of ways to address what's going to happen when birth rates decline, and whether we can accomplish those things as a political question, in many ways, not a scientific question...that we know the answers that could work as scientists, or we know the possible pathways as scientists, and just a question of what's politically feasible.

Robin Chenoweth: At least in the United States, we have something called demographic momentum working in our favor.

Michael Betz: Even though there might be lower birth rates right now, it takes a while for those to actually come to be realized, because the generation that is now in their childbearing years is larger than the previous generation who is in their childbearing years. So even though that cohort is having fewer children, it's still going to be, on net, roughly the same size.

Robin Chenoweth: It takes a while for the trend to catch up. Think of population like a wave on the beach. Even if the wind that created the wave stops blowing, it will continue to move forward and crash onto the shore because it has momentum. So, people born before the birth rates dropped will still have more babies, at least for a while.

Michael Betz: These are changes that are going to happen over the coming decades, not in the next five years. ... This is, this is a problem that we definitely need to address and definitely need to deal with, but we do have some time in thinking about these things.

©2024 The Ohio State University