

Birthrates are plummeting worldwide. Can governments turn the tide?



A study by the University of Washington predicts that by 2100, 97% of 204 countries will be below the replacement rate of fertility. Illustration: Ben Sanders/The Guardian

Nations are deploying baby bonuses, subsidised childcare and parental leave to try and reverse a rapidly declining fertility rate – largely to no avail

Tory Shepherd

Sat 10 Aug 2024 15.00 BST

Share

S

ophia and her partner have been thinking about having children for about five years. They are concerned about humanity's impact on biodiversity loss and climate change and worried about what the future holds.

“Our conversation has two parts,” says Sophia, a communications specialist who preferred not to use her full name. “One is: what’s the contribution of a child to the global [climate] crisis? The second one is [about] what would their life be like.

“I live with heaps of grief about biodiversity collapse. I think about the future and what the future of a child would be like in that sense.”

When desperate measures to persuade women to have children fail, it's time for fresh thinking
Devi Sridhar

[Read more](#)

The fear of climate change has led to couples having fewer babies; about one in five female climate scientists say they will have no children or fewer children because of the crisis.

It's not the only reason for what governments and headlines are calling a baby crisis, a population crisis, a fertility crisis, a demographic crisis, an ageing crisis and an economic crisis. The cost of living, housing security and a lack of opportunity also play their part.

The upshot is that all over the world (nearly – but more on that in a bit), governments are concerned that women are simply not having enough babies.

Elon Musk thinks falling birthrates are a bigger risk to civilisation than global heating. There's a burgeoning movement of pronatalists wanting to have “tons of kids” to save the world.

It's fairly clear that, when women are more educated, more liberated, and more able to access contraception, they start having fewer children. What's not clear is how to convince them to have more. Cheaper childcare? More flexible workplaces? More help from the menfolk? Affordable housing? More optimism about the future?

‘Low-fertility future’

Statistics show most countries are now below replacement rate – that’s 2.1 children per woman, enough to replace the existing population with a bit of a buffer.

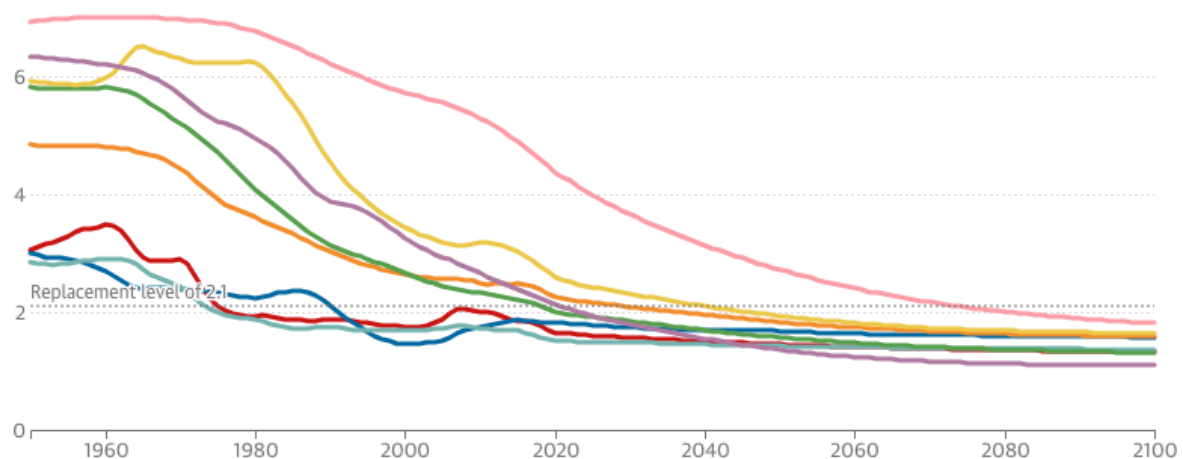
Five decades ago, Paul Ehrlich’s book *The Population Bomb* sparked global fears of “mass starvation” on a “dying planet” because of overpopulation. Now, experts are warning the fertility crisis is set to leave a dwindling youth base supporting a swelling ageing population and panicked governments around the world are throwing money at the omnicrisis.

On 11 July, the United Nations released World Population Prospects 2024, a revision of their population estimates from 1950 to the present for 237 countries, with projections to the year 2100. The report said that “women today bear one child fewer, on average, than they did around 1990”, and that the world’s population is now expected to peak at about 10.3 billion in the mid-2080s (up from about 8.2 billion today) before starting to fall.

The number of children per woman is projected to decline everywhere in the world

Showing the total fertility rate (TFR, which is the estimated average number of children per female aged between 10 and 54) and forecast TFR for Australia, the world, and regions defined by the Global Burden of Disease project

● Australia ● Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia ● World ● High-income countries*
● Latin America and Caribbean ● North Africa and Middle East ● South Asia ● Sub-Saharan Africa play



Guardian Graphic | Source: [GBD fertility forecasting](#). *High-income countries includes Western Europe, US and Canada, and high-income Asian and South American countries

That peak will come earlier than expected for reasons including “lower-than-expected levels of fertility”, it found.

In March, an article published in the *Lancet* set off a new wave of headlines warning of catastrophe. A study titled global fertility in 204 countries and territories, 1950-2021, with forecasts to 2100: a comprehensive demographic

analysis for the global burden of disease study 2021, by the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), found the world was approaching a "low-fertility future".

The IHME study said by 2050, more than three quarters of the countries will be below replacement rate. By 2100, it will be 97%.

The only countries projected to have more than 2.1 by then are Samoa, Somalia, Tonga, Niger, Chad and Tajikistan.

"Governments must plan for emerging threats to economies, food security, health, the environment and geopolitical security brought on by these demographic changes that are set to transform the way we live," an accompanying press release said.

Low-income places with higher fertility rates – such as sub-Saharan Africa, which is set to contribute over half the world's births by 2100 – will need better access to contraceptives and female education, the researchers said.

Low-fertility, higher-income countries such as South Korea and Japan will need open immigration and policies to support parents.

The study also looked at pro-natal policies already in place, such as free childcare, better parental care leave, financial incentives and employment rights. But the findings suggested that even pro-natal policies could not boost fertility rates up to replacement levels, although "they may prevent some countries from dropping to extremely low fertility levels".

Dr Natalia V Bhattacharjee, a co-lead author on the study, said the trends would "completely reconfigure the global economy and the international balance of power and will necessitate reorganising societies".

Bhattacharjee also warned that some countries might try to "justify more draconian measures" to limit reproductive rights.

We are not replacing ourselves through births

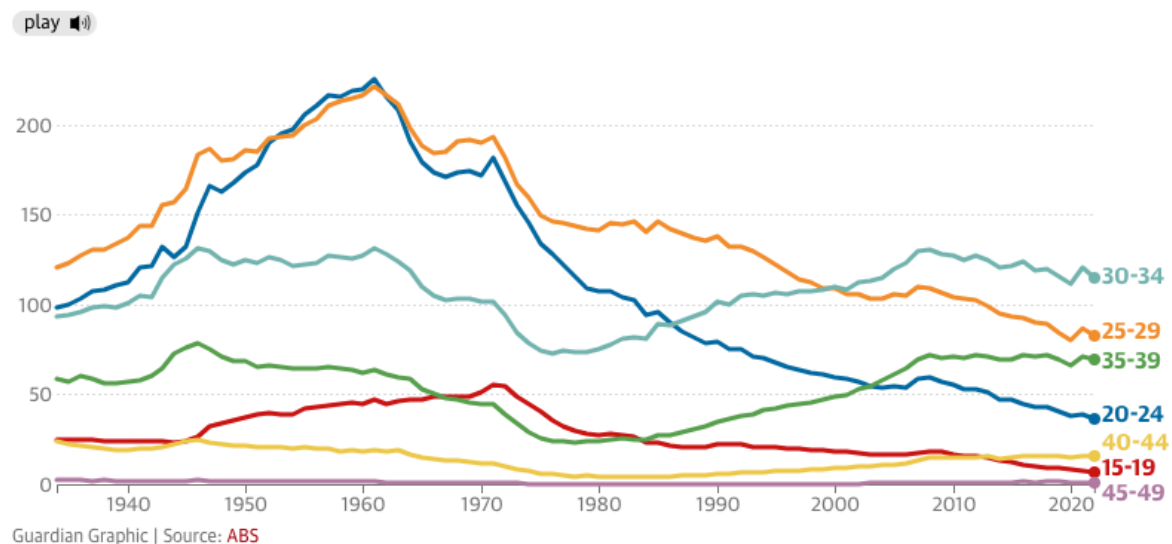
Dr Liz Allen

Meanwhile, in Taiwan, where the fertility rate has now fallen to 0.865, they are closing schools. In Japan, where the rate is 1.21, sales of adult incontinence products have outstripped nappy sales. In Greece, where it's 1.264, some villages have not seen a birth in years and people are being encouraged to work a six-day week. And in South Korea, where it's 0.72, the population is expected to halve by 2100.

“Australia’s population is structurally ageing and that means that we are living longer and we are not replacing ourselves through births,” says Dr Liz Allen, a demographer and lecturer at the Australian National University centre for social research and methods.

In Australia, younger women are having fewer children than they used to

Showing the age-specific fertility rate for different age groups of Australian women



Australia’s fertility rate peaked at 3.5 in 1961. By 1975 – not long after Gough Whitlam abolished the luxury tax on the contraceptive pill – it had dropped to replacement level (2.1), and now, a couple of years after the 2021 figures the study used, it sits at 1.6.

That 70s dip was thanks to the pill, Allen says, but also other big social changes around gender equality, with women increasingly educated, working and with access to no-fault divorce.

There are those who decide they don’t want any children. There are women deferring having children, and therefore having fewer as their personal fertility declines. And in Australia and other developed nations there are fewer teen pregnancies – generally considered a good thing, but also something that contributes to a lower fertility rate.

Childcare, baby bonus, parental leave: can governments fix it?

Governments throughout the OECD – and increasingly in developing countries – are trying all manner of ways to boost fertility.

Most low-fertility countries have some form of maternity leave. Many have subsidised childcare and some form of family allowance and just over half have flexible work hours or tax credits for dependent children, according to the United Nations. But even Nordic countries, with their focus on gender equality, parental leave and a strong social services network, are experiencing declining fertility.

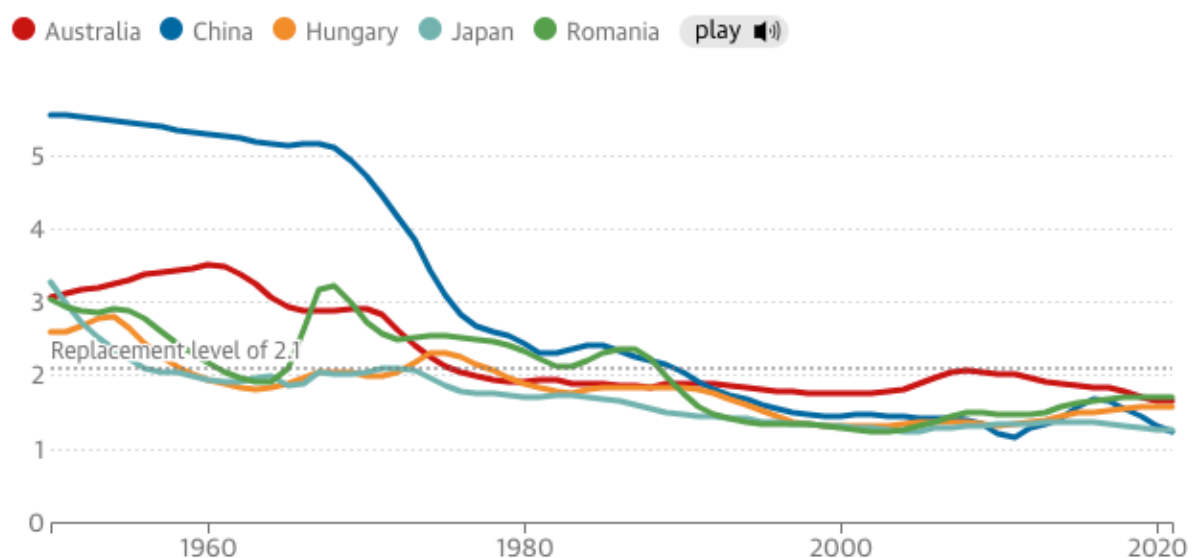
In China, the “one-child policy” has become a “three-child policy”, along with better maternal health care – and decreased access to abortions. Japanese politicians are trying to outdo each other with pronatalistic policies including subsidies, free daycare, better job security and support for fertility treatments. And the South Korean government has spent more than US\$200bn to support families to have children.

It hasn't worked. The best-intentioned policies have consistently led to less of a baby boom and more the occasional baby bump.

Take Australia's baby bonus, for example, introduced by then treasurer Peter Costello with the exhortation: “One for mum, one for dad, and one for the country”.

Interventions to increase the total fertility rate rarely result in a long-term increase

Showing the total fertility rate for selected countries which have introduced incentives or other interventions to increase the number of children people have



Guardian Graphic | Source: [GBD fertility forecasting](#)

It worked, a bit, but experts describe the fertility uptick as more of a “blip”. That hasn’t stopped countries including Russia, Greece and Italy giving baby bonuses a go.

Jennifer Sciubba, an American demographer, political scientist and author of *8 Billion and Counting: How Sex, Death and Migration Shape Our World*, was on the [Ezra Klein podcast](#) recently talking about the complex interplay of factors determining baby desires.

She says following the “success sequence” – getting an education, a great job, a home, some savings – means pushing back having children. And once people have more money, they also want to have other things in their lives that kids might detract from – going out for a nice meal, taking a holiday, a full night’s sleep.

Having more than two can seem unimaginably intensive, hard and expensive, she says, but it’s never just the money. What about family and community support? Religion? The “little logistics” like needing a new car to fit enough car seats?

Through east Asia, Sciubba says, the idea is spreading that “marriage is no longer required to have a good life”.

“It might actually stifle your life because of gender relations within the household,” she says.

Sciubba questions how much the state can do. Then there’s the prevailing culture; in South Korea, for example, there’s paid paternity leave, but men don’t take it.

“[And] once [countries] fall below [replacement level], they tend to stay there,” Sciubba says.

Hungary, [under Viktor Orbán](#), has offered free IVF, tax breaks and low-interest loans for families with children – and while that has pushed up the fertility rate, it is also a cloak for nationalist identity politics and comes with restrictions on birth control and abortion.

“You can strip away individual rights” in order to increase fertility rates, Sciubba says. “I am not advocating for that.”

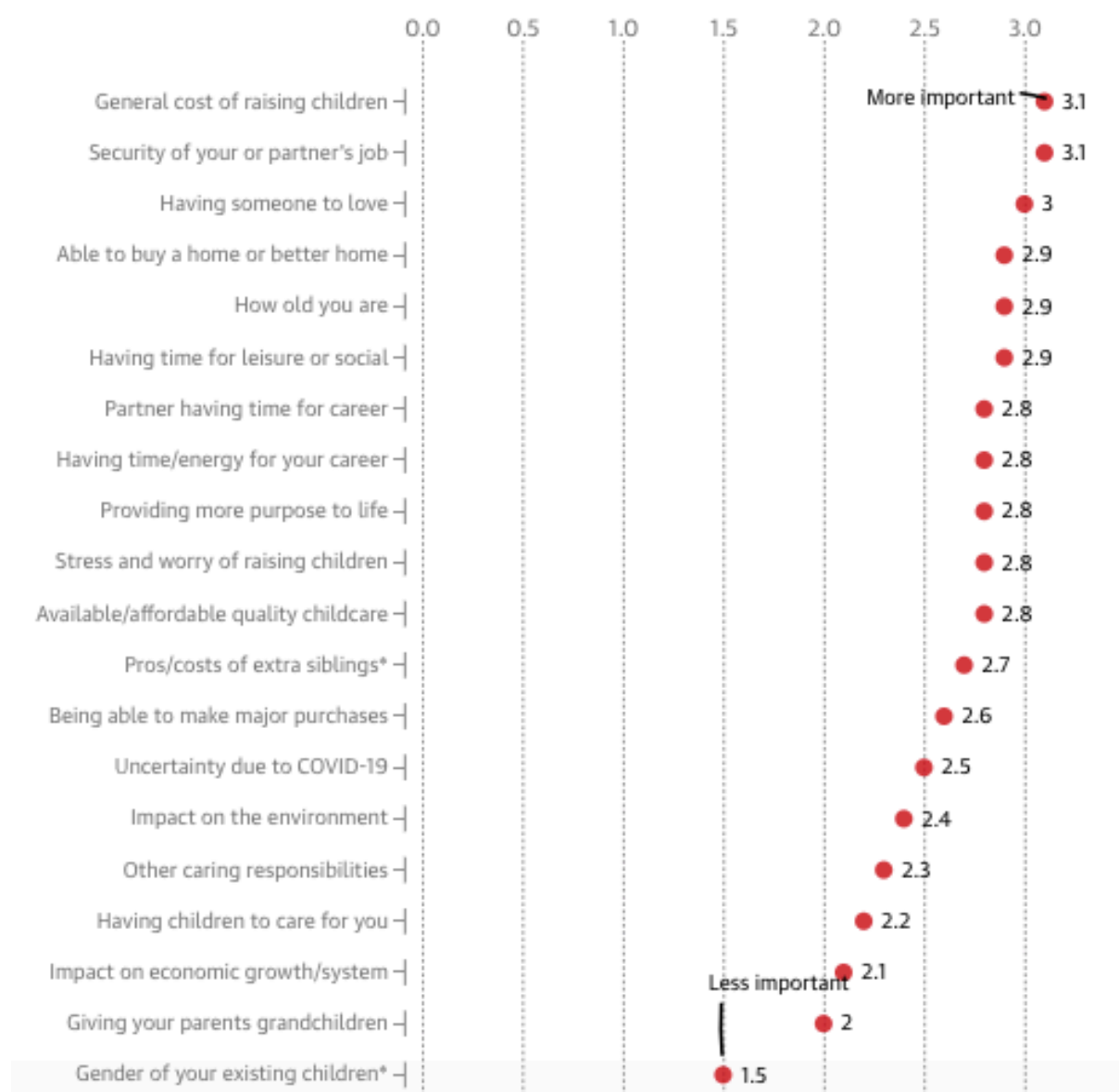
She points to the example of Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu, the dictatorial communist leader who came to power in the late 60s. He tried to boost the fertility rate by outlawing contraception and [banning abortion](#) for

women under 40 with fewer than four children; women died from childbirth or backyard abortions and orphanages filled up with abandoned babies.

“You did see births increase ... as long as his thumb was pressing on it. Then it went back down,” Sciubba says.

Fertility decisions are the result of a complex balance of economic, personal and family factors

Showing the average importance of various factors associated with fertility decisions in Australia. People surveyed were asked to rate each factor from 1 (not important) to 4 (very important)



Guardian Graphic | Source: [ANU](#). *refers to those questions only asked of those with existing children

A 2022 review done by the Australian National University for the federal government's centre for population found financial incentives like the baby bonus and the family tax benefit can have a positive effect on fertility. "However, the effect is usually small because transfers represent a minor fraction of the total direct costs of children," it found.

The baby bonus potentially increased births, temporarily, by about 2%. Other policies, including better childcare and better parental leave, can all do a bit, but they are not fixing the problem.

The top three most important factors associated with fertility decisions, the ANU review found, were the cost, job security, and "having someone to love".

Allen says by about 2054, it's likely there will be natural population decline – more deaths than births. So immigration will be more important than ever to fill skills shortages and fuel growth. To build homes and infrastructure. In Australia, immigration is used to buffer the fertility rate – but it is its own policy battleground.

'The blame gets placed on women'

With no answers in sight, Allen says, there's also an ethical problem. Women are asked to have the kids, care for the elderly, participate in the workforce and do the unpaid labour at home. And young people now see through this, she says.

Allen says the push for women to shoulder the burden of the demographic "crisis" has been going on in Australia since colonisation. It was part of displacing First Nations people and creating a European outpost, she says, of ensuring the "right kind of women" breed.

"We see echoes of these encouragements from these politicians over time. They say things like 'populate or perish'. 'Lie back and think of England'. 'One for mum, one for dad and one for the country'. 'The right women aren't having enough babies, the wrong women are having too many babies'," Allen says.

"The blame gets placed on women. Women are seen as the gatekeepers of population and are seen as hedonistic and selfish if they do not populate."



Australia in biggest 'baby recession' since 1970s as pandemic birth boom fades

She points to a 1944 inquiry into Australian birthrates, where women were – for the first time – allowed to have a voice. In response to (yet another) call for women to “populate or perish”, one woman voiced her frustration at the burden thrust upon her.

“You men in easy chairs say populate or perish,” she said. “Well I have populated and I have perished with no blankets.”

Sophia is now pregnant – just in the early stages – which is why she didn’t want to use her full name.

“I was pretty sure that I didn’t want children. There was a big lifestyle factor. It changes your life to be responsible for another human.

“Ultimately it was a very selfish decision ... on this one I’m going to own it. I selfishly wanted that extra depth in my life. But it wasn’t an easy decision for my partner or I ... we really laboured on it, pun intended.

“But on balance we decided it was what we wanted for our lives.”