

POPULATION CONNECTION

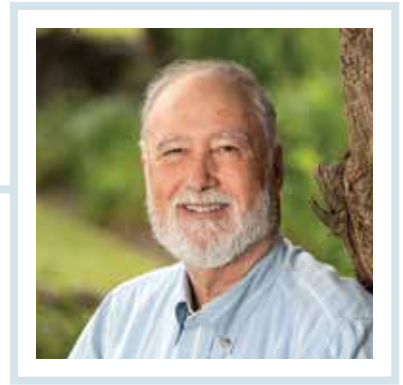
A woman in a black t-shirt and light-colored pants is pushing a black stroller with a baby inside. She is talking on a blue mobile phone. The scene is a paved town square with outdoor cafe seating under white umbrellas. In the background, there is a church with a yellow and white tower, and flags of the European Union and Romania are flying from a lamppost. Other people are walking in the distance under a cloudy sky.

**WOMEN'S
DESIRE FOR
SMALL FAMILIES
STRONGER THAN
GOVERNMENTS'
INCENTIVES FOR
HIGHER BIRTH
RATES**

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President's Note

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My years in politics often took me to the Democratic stronghold of Levittown, Pennsylvania, with its 17,000+ homes. Built to accommodate the post-World War II baby boom, it's often considered one of the U.S.'s first planned communities, along with its Long Island twin. But there is an asterisk.

Seven centuries before Jamestown and Plymouth Rock, a planned city dubbed Cahokia rose up in what is now the American Midwest when dramatic increases in rainfall produced bumper crops of maize. According to Broxton Bird, a climatologist at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, “That comes at right around 950 [C.E.] and that’s around the time the population at Cahokia explodes.” Cahokia grew rapidly to the point where it may have rivaled London and Paris in that era in terms of size. Along with its environs, Cahokia was home to perhaps as many as 40,000 people.

No one knows what its residents called their city. The name Cahokia is derived from the tribe of the same name which arrived in that area centuries later. There are no known links between any tribe and the largest pre-Columbian city north of Mexico.

Cahokia's wooden walls encircled modest dwellings amidst expansive plazas surrounded by flat-topped pyramids up to 100 feet high. Situated across the Mississippi River from present-day St. Louis, the city was a major center for trade and commerce. Raw materials arrived from as far away as Lake Superior, the Carolinas, and Oklahoma.

Cahokia thrived for about 400 years. Then its population collapsed and it ceased to exist. Cahokia's fall coincided with rapid climatic changes, resulting in “profound drought,” according to Dr. Bird. A recent study by researchers at the University of Ottawa supports the theory that “climate change, a large-scale phenomenon, was implicated in Cahokia's collapse.”

Only massive earthen mounds remain where thousands of people once lived and worked. Will we follow our own version of Cahokia's fate as rapid modern population growth abetted by massive use of fossil fuels triggers climate chaos? More broadly, our reckless expenditures of natural capital by 8 — soon-to-be 9, then 10 — billion people can't go on forever. We've exceeded Earth's carrying capacity as did Cahokia in its own corner of the world. It thrived. Then it vanished.

While demographers disagree on how population trends may play out over the remainder of the 21st century, there is cause for hope with the shift to lower fertility rates, especially in more developed nations. Regrettably, the positive impact of smaller families is ignored by many deeply concerned about greenhouse gas emissions, when it should be championed.

While we may never know the full story behind Cahokia's collapse, our own tale unfolds every day. We can begin a new chapter by stopping population growth through proven voluntary approaches so that humans and nature can thrive together. 🌍

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Feature

14 You Can't Even Pay People to Have More Kids.

By Anna North



Cover image: A mother and her baby in Romania's second largest city, Cluj-Napoca. Romania's population peaked in 1991 at nearly 23 million and has been declining since. Its population in 2024 (according to UN projections made in 2022) is 19.6 million, and its fertility rate is 1.7 births per woman. (Photo by Eren Bozkurt/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Departments

- | | | | |
|----|---|----|----------------------|
| 2 | Editor's Note | 22 | Washington View |
| 3 | Letters to the Editor | 24 | Field & Outreach |
| 4 | Pop Facts Infographic | 26 | Population Education |
| 6 | In the News | 28 | Virtual Events |
| 8 | President's Circle Member Listing | 30 | Global Partners |
| 12 | President's Circle Member Profile: Norton and Irene Starr | 32 | Editorial Excerpts |
| | | 33 | Cartoon |

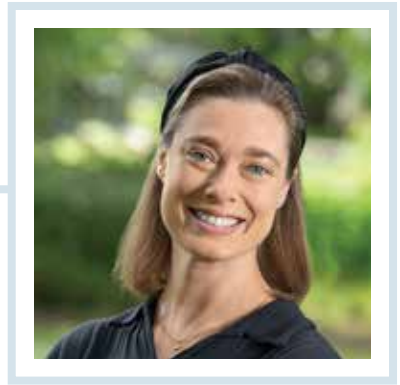
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Editor's Note

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Imagine not wanting children but being effectively persuaded to have them because your government is offering a one-time cash payment of a few hundred dollars ... when it costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to raise kids to adulthood in the advanced economies where fertility is very low and where governments are incentivizing childbirth ... and when women are already burdened with an outsized share of housework and, in some countries, are expected to give up their careers when they become mothers. I don't know about you, but a couple hundred bucks wouldn't be enough to sway me. It hasn't been enough to change the childbearing trends of most women in Europe or East Asia either, where pronatalist proposals have been met with indifference at best.

An oft-cited Gallup poll asks American adults, "What do you think is the ideal number of children for a family to have?" This should not be confused with the completely different question, "How many children would you personally like to have?" Nevertheless, journalists often do assign this erroneous meaning to the poll question, reporting that most Americans "want" two (44%) or three (29%) children. Because the current total fertility rate is only 1.65 births per woman, this would indicate that Americans are having fewer children than they wish to have and that public policy could inform people's childbearing decisions. Never mind that people could think it's theoretically ideal for kids to have a sibling or two while having no desire to have two or three kids themselves.

In fact, data from around the world have shown that pronatalist policies such as cash bonuses, employment and housing perks, and free pets (an actual proposal from a presidential candidate in Taiwan) have very little effect on childbearing trends. There is some evidence from European countries that making life a little bit less difficult for people who *want* to have children can raise fertility rates a tad, but these policies — e.g. parental leave, affordable health care, guaranteed childcare — should be implemented regardless of their influence on fertility rates.

In this issue's feature article on page 14, Anna North runs through many countries' attempts to yield higher birth rates among their citizens, and the reasons they never "succeed" in changing birthing trends in any significant way.

Parenting shouldn't be punishing, at least not in ways wealthy economies can prevent, but it also shouldn't be coerced. It's a step on the road to dystopia whenever governments nose their way into people's private lives, whether it's to lower birth rates or to raise them. The most optimal outcomes for individuals, families, communities, and countries occur when people have as many life options as possible and the education, tools, and services to make the decisions they deem best for themselves. And we know that personal freedom over childbearing results in smaller families, on average, fostering a healthier and less crowded planet for future generations. 

Letters to the Editor

Today's human population of 8 billion is far beyond Earth's carrying capacity, even as per person consumption rates and population numbers continue rising.

Contraception should be available for free to all women in America and ultimately around the world. If every woman could decide when and whether to become pregnant, the world would be a better place for all women and all humanity, right now and in whatever future we might have.

I know this issue raises hackles and challenges social, religious, and legal limitations in America and around the world, but it's time we all speak up.

Nathaniel Batchelder

Your interview with Dr. Jane O'Sullivan was eye-opening and disheartening. Before reading it, I assumed that most liberals were already on board with the need for population stabilization and that efforts to educate them on it were preaching to the choir.

I was disheartened also to learn that UNFPA has turned away from the goal of population stabilization. Although reproductive health, rights, and justice are worthy concerns, addressing them without also looking to the systemic causes of poverty, hunger, forced migration, war, etc. — problems that are compounded by overpopulation — is a losing battle. Current population projections smother any hope of humanity ever being able to tackle climate change, especially while also lifting the world's poorest out of poverty.

I grew up in Ghana in the 1970s, where my American medical missionary parents served a small rural hospital and my mother ran family planning and well-baby clinics. At that time, the Ghanaian government embraced family planning as a method of population stabilization, which it deemed essential for the country's economic development. There were public education campaigns, such as billboards featuring chubby, laughing babies with the message, "Small families are healthier and happier." These campaigns seemed to be working, at least for those who had access to contraception. And it wasn't the women who needed convincing; it was their husbands.

My parents' support of family planning came out of deep compassion for the individuals they served and a desire to ease the suffering caused by too many pregnancies — suffering both of mothers and of the children they already had. But my parents were also motivated by concern about unbridled population growth and its effect on the natural systems that support human life.

It was this concern that led me to a career in agricultural research. On top of solving the daunting challenges facing agriculture today, we are asked to anticipate the challenges of tomorrow, when we'll need to feed even more people, which feels like a Sisyphean assignment.

Lois Braun, PhD

The answer to the aging of America is simple: The superrich need to share. The idea that Social Security recipients need to work longer or take less is ridiculous when this country's overall wealth has gone up steadily, with the wealthiest growing the most. A small portion of the \$35.8 trillion controlled by the top 1% would certainly keep a coal miner from having to work into their 70s.

Frances Ryan, MD

U.S. CONTRACEPTIVE USE



Nearly all women of reproductive age — **99.2%** or **63.2 million** — who have ever had sex with a male partner have used at least one contraceptive method at some point:



Condom
94.5%



Pill
79.8%



Withdrawal
65.7%



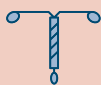
Injectable
24.5%



Emergency
Contraception
23.5%



Female
Sterilization
21.3%



IUD
20.4%



Fertility
Awareness
18.5%



Male
Sterilization
14.6%



Ring
10.4%



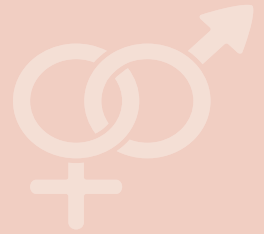
Patch
8.2%



Implant
5.7%

→ VIRTUALLY UNIVERSAL

Almost all women who have ever had sex with a male partner have used contraception, regardless of their religious affiliation:



None
99.7%



Protestant
99.3%



Catholic
98.8%



Other
97.6%

The use of most contraceptive methods, including traditional methods, increased with greater education (condom, pill, withdrawal, emergency contraception, fertility awareness, IUD, male sterilization, ring). The use of several methods, by contrast, decreased with greater education (female sterilization, injectable, patch, implant).

Source:

Daniels K, Abma JC. Contraceptive methods women have ever used: United States, 2015–2019. National Health Statistics Reports; no 195. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2023. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15620/cdc:134502>. Contraception illustrations: Vecteezy.com



IN THE NEWS

By Olivia Nater, Communications Manager

COP28 climate agreement a mixed bag

COP28, 2023's most important international climate change meeting, wrapped up in mid-December. Nations agreed for the first time to “transition away from fossil fuels,” which was seen by many as a significant victory.

However, the agreement is nowhere near ambitious enough to limit global warming to 1.5°C or 2°C by 2100 — a goal laid out in the Paris Agreement of 2015. Meeting the Paris target is deemed critical by climate scientists as exceeding this warming threshold significantly increases the risk of triggering catastrophic environmental tipping points.

The COP28 agreement doesn't set concrete targets or deadlines, making it unclear how and when the “transition” is supposed to happen. It also fails to address major drivers of greenhouse gas emissions, including agriculture and population growth, and makes little progress toward increasing financial assistance for developing countries that

are unfairly facing the brunt of climate impacts.

China's population continues slow decline

China's population fell for the second year in 2023, shrinking by 2.08 million, after declining by 850,000 in 2022. This continued decline is a natural result of falling birth rates, yet many media stories have portrayed it as a disaster due to the dampening effects population decline and aging can have on economic growth.

China ended its coercive one-child policy in 2016, replacing it with a two-child policy, and then a three-child policy in 2021. In recent years, the Chinese government has also rolled out cash incentives for childbearing, as well as campaigns to promote traditional gender roles and larger families. Family size has continued to shrink, however — according to UN data, China's fertility rate (the average number of lifetime births per woman) now stands at around 1.2, down from 1.8 in 2016.

While sub-replacement fertility is the norm across higher-

income countries, surveys of Chinese women reveal that pervasive gender inequality is a major reason an increasing number of women are foregoing marriage and childbearing altogether — a similar situation as in neighboring South Korea, which had the world's lowest fertility rate in 2022, at just 0.78 births per woman.

Impact of U.S. international family planning funding

In January, the Guttmacher Institute published updated calculations on the impacts of U.S. family planning assistance on women in developing countries. While the U.S. currently contributes \$607.5 million annually for international family planning, the country's “fair share” (proportionate to the size of the U.S. economy) is \$1.74 billion — almost three times higher. Increasing family planning assistance to this level would avert an additional 20.3 million unintended pregnancies, and prevent an additional 35,000 maternal deaths each year.

As some U.S. policymakers are proposing family planning

funding cuts instead of increases, Guttmacher also warns that every \$10 million decrease in funding below current levels would increase the annual number of unintended pregnancies by 174,000, unplanned births by 69,000, and unsafe abortions by 56,000.

U.S. not on track to meet climate goals

U.S. emissions declined by 1.9% in 2023 despite economic growth of 2.4%, according to preliminary estimates by the research company Rhodium Group. The decline is mainly attributed to a relatively mild winter and reductions in energy generation from coal power plants. Emissions from the transportation sector rose by 1.6% relative to 2022, while increases in domestic oil and gas production caused a 1% increase in industrial emissions. The researchers note:

A decline in economy-wide emissions is a step in the right direction, but that rate of decline needs to more than triple and sustain at that level every year from 2024 through 2030 in order to meet the U.S.'s climate target under the Paris Agreement of a 50-52% reduction in emissions.


Researchers propose novel climate mitigation pathway to address overshoot

A recent paper in *Environmental Research Letters* lays out a new “holistic, restorative scenario” to tackle climate change. The study highlights the critical need to address the interconnectedness of our planetary crises, from global warming to biodiversity loss to food scarcity and pandemics. It puts forward an alternative to mainstream climate change mitigation scenarios that would bend the curve on all detrimental environmental trends (not just emissions) while decreasing inequalities and advancing social justice. Proposed measures include improving gender equality to end population growth, cutting overconsumption and giving up the pursuit of endless economic growth in wealthy countries, reducing meat production, and protecting more nature.

Hope for African elephants

A study published in *Science Advances* found that African savanna elephant numbers across southern Africa grew by 0.16% annually for the past quarter century, offering a ray of

hope for this iconic, endangered species. Unsurprisingly, the authors found that elephant populations living in large, well-protected, and connected areas fared the best.

Across all of Africa, however, elephant numbers are still declining. The African forest elephant, native to West Africa and the Congo Basin, was recently recognized as a separate species, and is even more endangered than the savanna elephant. Both species together number around 415,000, down from an estimated 10 million a century ago. Reasons for this steep loss include poaching, habitat loss, and human-wildlife conflict, all of which are exacerbated by expanding human populations. 

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PRESIDENT'S CIRCLE MEMBERS

Norton and Irene Starr

Interview by Sarah Ikemoto, Development Manager

Written by Julia Grimes, Stanback Fellow



Long-time Population Connection members Norton and Irene Starr have been supporting the organization at the President's Circle level since 2005. Norton first became aware of Population Connection over 20 years ago, when he saw President and CEO John Seager give a talk at Amherst College, where Norton taught for 43 years. When asked why he chooses to support Population Connection, Norton says, "I regard the population explosion as a major problem, and

I like Population Connection's mission of zero population growth."

Norton received his PhD in Mathematics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1964, before going on to his long career at Amherst College. In addition to his work in mathematics, Norton excelled in graphic design. He became one of the first in his field to use computer graphics to better illustrate his lessons,



“Population growth is a problem that’s going to be around for a long time and requires constant action, and that’s why I continue to support Population Connection’s ongoing efforts.”


–Norton Starr

and he had his designs published in several math and computer science texts.

Norton’s mathematical tendencies are epitomized by his collection of three-dimensional wooden puzzles, mostly by Stewart Coffin. He attends international puzzle conferences with Irene and has even designed a cubic puzzle, which he used in his classroom.

Irene received her BA and MS in Physics and subsequently continued her education to obtain an MEd in Instructional Media. After years of teaching collegiate physics, she transitioned to a career in technology management. In 2002, she retired as the Director of the Language Resource Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, but she continues to teach, consult, and create. She has maintained websites for several nonprofits and has helped Norton showcase his work and graphic designs online.

Norton and Irene first met at a picnic in their hometown of Kansas City, Missouri, and in 2024,

they will celebrate their 65th anniversary! After Norton’s retirement from Amherst, the Starrs returned to Kansas City to be close to a son and his family. They continue to enjoy 3D wooden puzzles, and they complete the *New York Times* crossword often. Though Norton is the one who pioneered computer research during his career, Irene has become the neighborhood “tech guru,” helping their retirement community by answering technology questions. Beyond their interests in STEM, Norton has enjoyed decades of bicycling, while Irene continues to enjoy figure skating — an activity she has been passionate about since her first time on the ice in the late 1940s. 

We are deeply grateful for Norton and Irene’s continued President’s Circle level engagement and support. If you would like to learn more about our giving societies, contact our Development team at giving@popconnect.org.



A child poses with a balloon at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in Taipei, Taiwan. (Photo by SAM YEH/AFP via Getty Images)

YOU CAN'T EVEN PAY PEOPLE TO HAVE MORE KIDS.

These countries tried everything from cash to patriotic calls to duty to reverse drastically declining birth rates. It didn't work.

By Anna North

Taiwan has spent more than \$3 billion trying to get its citizens to have more children.

In 2009, after decades of falling birth rates, it began offering six months of paid parental leave, reimbursed at 60% of a new parent's salary — then recently increased that share to 80%. The government has introduced a cash benefit and a tax break for parents of young children, and has invested in childcare centers.

Perhaps having exhausted more conventional approaches, current and would-be lawmakers have started getting creative: Authorities have hosted several singles mixers in an effort to get young people to pair up. Terry Gou, a candidate in this year's Taiwanese presidential election, has even proposed giving people a free pet if they have a child. "If there is no birth rate in the future, who will take care of our furry friends?" he said. "So I have put these two issues together."

If history is any guide, none of this will work. No matter what governments do to convince them to procreate, people around the world are having fewer and fewer kids.

In the U.S., the birth rate has been falling since the Great Recession, dropping almost 23% between 2007 and 2022. Today, the average American woman has about 1.6 children, down from

three in 1950, and significantly below the "replacement rate" of 2.1 children needed to sustain a stable population. In Italy, 12 people now die for every seven babies born. In South Korea, the fertility rate is down to 0.78 children per woman. In China, after decades of a strictly enforced one-child policy, the population is shrinking for the first time since the 1960s. In Taiwan, the fertility rate stands at 0.87.

The drop has frightened lawmakers and commentators alike, with headlines warning of a coming "demographic crisis" or "great people shortage" as economies find themselves without enough young workers to fill jobs and pay taxes. To stem the tide, the world's leaders have tried everything from generous social welfare programs to pink-and-blue awareness campaigns to five-figure checks to veiled threats, all to relatively little



A nurse takes care of a newborn baby in a maternity hospital in Fuyang in central China's Anhui province. China's population saw its first decline in six decades in 2023. (Photo by AN MING / Feature China/Future Publishing via Getty Images)

avail. “Even the richest, savviest, most committed governments have struggled to find policies that produce sustained bumps in fertility,” Trent MacNamara, a history professor at Texas A&M who has written about fertility

whether there’s any way for governments to convince their citizens to have more babies. If not, what should lawmakers be doing instead to help societies adapt to a demographically changing world?

able to control their fertility than in decades past. The Dobbs decision and subsequent state bans on abortion may change that calculus in the U.S., but prior to the fall of Roe, teen births and unintended births were on the decline, and the use of highly effective contraception methods was on the rise.

Recently, however, declining fertility has stoked anxieties around the world, as leaders face down the prospect of slowing growth and aging populations. Fewer births do have real consequences for how families and societies operate. In 2010, for example, there were more than seven working-age adults available to care for each person over the age of 80; by 2030, there will be only four. An aging society also means fewer workers in key industries and fewer people paying into programs like social security.

These prospects tend to elicit panic among conservatives, who take a moralistic — and sometimes xenophobic — tone in addressing the issue. Sen. J.D. Vance (R-OH) has warned of the dangers of the “childless left” and its “rejection of the American family.” In China, male Community Party officials at a recent meeting on women’s issues bypassed any talk of gender equality and instead urged women to “establish a correct outlook on marriage and



A man and woman with a baby in Hong Kong. According to local media reports, the Hong Kong government will announce in a coming address a scheme and incentives to encourage people to have children. (Photo by Vernon Yuen/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

rates, told Vox in an email. “If such policies were discoverable, I think someone would have discovered them.”

The failure of dozens of often very expensive pronatalist policies to produce much of a return has policymakers and observers alike wondering

How politicians have tried to convince people to have babies

In many ways, the falling birth rate is a success story — the result of young people, especially women, having more options and freedoms than ever before. For example, women are better

love, childbirth, and family.” In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has exhorted citizens to reproduce rather than allowing the country’s population to grow through immigration, saying, “Migration for us is surrender.”

But concerns about birth rates go beyond the rhetoric of right wing politicians. Governments like Taiwan’s have spent billions of dollars and tried all manner of incentives to cajole or even bribe people into having more babies. Many European countries that experienced plummeting fertility in the 1980s and ’90s have adopted pro-family policies, often including paid parental leave, publicly supported childcare, or a combination thereof, said Philip Cohen, a sociology professor at the University of Maryland who studies demographic trends and family structure. Austria, for example, lengthened maternity leave to 2.5 years. Germany increased investment in childcare and early education, and then, in 2013, affirmed that every child over the age of one had the right to a spot in a public daycare.

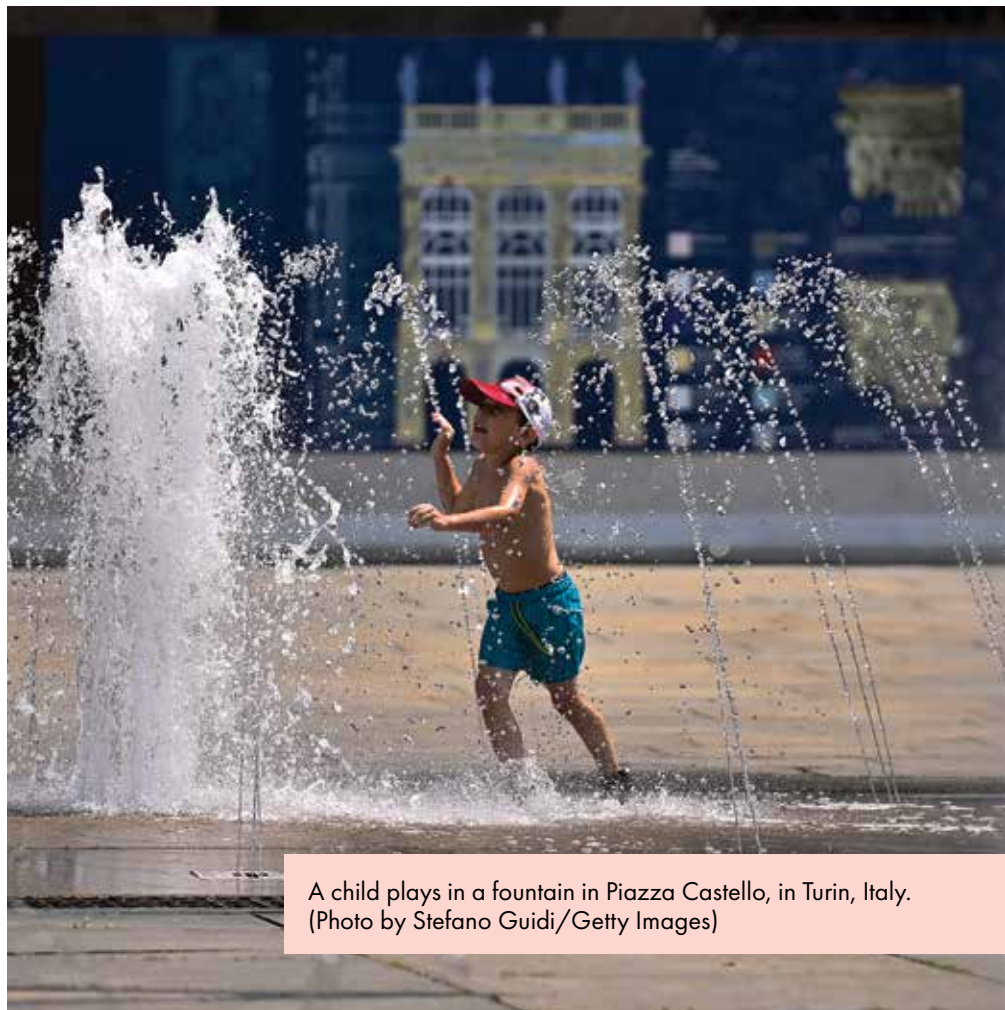
Other countries have tried direct payments to parents: Russia began offering a one-time sum of about \$7,000 to families with more than two kids, while Italy and Greece have experimented with per-child “baby bonuses.” In 2019, Hungary introduced a loan of around \$30,000 to

newlyweds. If they have three children, the loan is forgiven.

Public education campaigns have also emerged, essentially begging people to reproduce. In Copenhagen, for example, a 2015 poster asked, “Have you counted your eggs today?”

(“Only financially secure adults in stable, committed, longterm relationships should participate,” the campaign clarified.)

So far, most countries have tried either asking people nicely to reproduce or sweetening the deal with money. If that doesn’t work,



A child plays in a fountain in Piazza Castello, in Turin, Italy. (Photo by Stefano Guidi/Getty Images)

In 2012, the Singaporean government partnered with Mentos to release a rap video encouraging couples to “make Singapore’s birth rate spike.”

however, restricting people’s reproductive choices may be on the table, especially in more autocratic regimes. In Iran, where the government in

the 1990s made birth control cheap or free in an effort to curb population growth, authorities are now cracking down on abortion and contraception as part of a drive to boost births. In the U.S., abortion bans have not generally been explicitly promoted as population-boosting measures, but some see them that way. New House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) has linked falling birth rates and demographic change with abortion, arguing that *Roe v. Wade* was responsible for a dearth of American workers. “We’re all struggling here to

cover the bases of Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid and all the rest,” he said in a committee hearing. “If we had all those able-bodied workers in the economy, we wouldn’t be going upside down and toppling over like this.”

In China, some are concerned that exhortations for women to cease working and have children could translate into punishments for women who don’t comply. “If the party could sacrifice women’s body and birth rights for its one-child policy,” Fubing Su, a political science professor

at Vassar College, told *The New York Times*, “they could impose their will on women again.”

Why it’s so hard to convince people to procreate

From loans to speeches about traditional values, government efforts have generally failed to make much impact on people’s childbearing decisions. They may shift the timing of childbirth, but they “don’t ultimately affect the number of kids people have,” said Alison Gemmill, a professor of population, family, and reproductive health at Johns Hopkins University.

One reason may be that decisions around childbearing are influenced by larger social factors that are outside the scope of government policy — including the growing number of choices people have about how to spend their lives. As education and economic productivity have increased over time, the “opportunity cost” of having a child has grown as well, said Cohen, the sociology professor. “People, especially women, have more lucrative things to do.”

Public service campaigns and government sponsored singles events, which often have the awkward aura of a high school health teacher lecturing students about sex, typically meet with skepticism. The three mixers held by the city of Tainan,



A child cools off at a splash pad during a hot day in Vienna, Austria. (Photo by He Canling/Xinhua via Getty Images)

Taiwan, since 2019 have yet to produce a single wedding, let alone a child, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

In the U.S., meanwhile, rhetoric aimed at getting people to have more children can ring hollow given a racist history in which white motherhood has been lauded while Black women's fertility has been viewed as disordered and suspect, to the point that Black women have been forcibly sterilized. In a country where Black women die in childbirth at nearly three times the rate of white women, it's impossible to hear calls to increase the birth rate without questioning who they're really aimed at. Black women have always understood, "You're not talking about me when you're saying these things," said Regina Davis Moss, President of the nonprofit In Our Own Voice: National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda. Indeed, college educated Black women in the U.S. have fewer children than their white counterparts, with researchers speculating that concerns about maternal mortality could be a reason why.

Fears for the future may also play a role in declining birth rates around the world. "Young adults are living in a world which is characterized by many crises," from war to climate change to the erosion of democratic

norms in the U.S. and elsewhere, said Jessica Nisén, a family demographer at the University of Turku in Finland.

The lack of family friendly policies like paid leave and subsidized childcare could also contribute to falling fertility in the U.S. There's evidence, for example, that some people are having fewer children than they want. In a 2018 U.S. poll, about a quarter of respondents said they had or were planning to have fewer kids than they would ideally like to have. Of those, 64% cited the cost of childcare as a reason. Ballooning costs — of childcare, housing, college, and more — are an issue around the world, with South Korea and China topping the list of most expensive places to raise a child. "When you ask people, *why aren't you having the kids that you want*, we do see economic reasons come to the fore," said Gemmill.

Yet even in countries like Sweden and Norway, known worldwide for their generous parental leave and other supports, fertility has begun to decline. These countries do have higher birth rates than some of their neighbors, and it's possible that their drops would be starker without policies like childcare and paid leave in place, Nisén said. It's also possible that people in the Nordic countries are delaying having kids instead of skipping it altogether, and

that the birth rate will pick up later on.

At a certain point, however, delayed births become foregone as people age out of their reproductive years. Many experts told Vox they believe that there's no going back to a time when people had lots of kids in their 20s. "I just don't see that happening," Gemmill said. "People just want time to grow and develop."

There are policies that can help people create the families they want.

That leaves policymakers with the question of what they can do. For a lot of experts, the answer is nothing. "I'm basically against having birth rates be a policy target," Cohen said. "Anything you do to influence this is going to have very probable bad side effects, and any benefits you get are likely to be very small and very long term."

Instead of trying to boost birth rates, experts say lawmakers should focus on policies that allow people to have the families they want, regardless of size. "We need to invest in people and their success," Gemmill said. In the U.S., that means measures to improve access to high-quality jobs, paid leave, and affordable childcare, as well as supporting families in the transition to parenthood. "We always hear

that it takes a village, but that village is just not what it used to be,” Gemmill said. “It just seems like everything’s set up to be very hostile to parents.”

Equitable family policy in the U.S. also includes investment in health care for Black birthing people, including maternal mental health and “access to providers who look like us,”

Moss said. Any discussion of fertility and birth rates also needs to address the safety of children, including overpolicing, racist violence, and the spiking rate of gun deaths. “We want to be able to raise our children in safe and healthy environments,” Moss said.

Reforms to family policy may not produce the jump in birth

rates that some are hoping for, experts say. Countries may find themselves needing to adapt, both economically and socially, to an aging population.

They might also recognize that shrinking family size isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Lower birth rates around the world could lessen environmental degradation, competition for



A child holds a globe balloon during a demonstration as part of the Fridays for Future movement for climate change in Turin, Italy. (Photo by MARCO BERTORELLO/AFP via Getty Images)


resources, and even global conflict, Wang Feng, a sociology professor at UC Irvine, writes in *The New York Times*.

Nor is falling fertility necessarily a permanent condition. The baby boom that began in the 1940s “took everyone by surprise,” MacNamara, the Texas A&M historian, said. “Exactly zero demographers saw it coming. Even today, no one is quite sure why it happened and why it lasted so long.” It’s entirely possible, he said, that another boom could hit the U.S., just as unpredictably as the last.

It’s also possible that lawmakers can indirectly create conditions under which people feel optimistic about having kids. Most high-income countries, including the U.S., experienced dips in birth rate in early 2021, as people responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by delaying or forgoing pregnancy. But a few countries, including Norway and Finland, actually saw a jump in births.

These countries did not experience particularly high mortality or infection rates, and highly educated workers in particular may have been minimally impacted by the devastation of Covid — while enjoying more free time and flexibility thanks to working from home, Nisén said. There’s

another potential factor as well: “Finland is a country where people trust in their government quite strongly,” Nisén said. That trust may have mitigated the uncertainty people felt around the pandemic and helped them feel secure in growing their families.

Trust is a hard thing to legislate, but it’s unlikely to result from policies that are repressive or that seek to turn back the clock on women’s economic or social progress. Lawmakers might just have to accept that they can’t control how many children people have. “It’s better just to help the population take care of their needs,” Cohen said, “and let them decide.” 

This article originally appeared on Vox in November 2023. Minor updates were made with the approval of Vox Media.

Anna North is a senior correspondent for Vox, where she covers American family life, work, and education. Previously, she was an editor and writer at *The New York Times*. She is also the author of three novels, including the *New York Times* bestseller *Outlawed*.

“Fewer people on the planet, of course, may reduce humanity’s ecological footprint and competition for finite resources. There could even be greater peace as governments are forced to choose between spending on military equipment or on pensions. And as rich nations come to rely more on immigrants from poorer countries, those migrants gain greater access to the global prosperity currently concentrated in the developed world.”

—Wang Feng
(*The New York Times*,
January 30, 2023)

Resignations, Redistricting, a Rule, and Roe

By Brian Dixon, Senior Vice President for Governmental and Political Affairs

The incredible shrinking majority

The already razor thin majority Republicans held in the House shrunk even more with the expulsion of George Santos (R-NY) and the resignation of former Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA). Another Republican, Bill Johnson (R-OH) has announced that he will resign in the coming weeks.

The vacancy in New York will be filled in a special election set for February 13 (after our print deadline), with the Democratic candidate slightly favored to win. The declining majority means the Republican leadership can afford to lose even fewer votes on key measures. The far right “Freedom Caucus” continues to cause problems for the new Speaker and the ability of the House to move any legislation at all.

In the time since McCarthy was deposed as Speaker for agreeing to a short-term funding package, Congress has passed two more of those,

with the most recent one set to expire in early March. As of now, Speaker Mike Johnson (R-LA) has not faced a motion to remove him from the position, but some of the same people who brought down McCarthy have started grumbling about Johnson’s leadership.

It’s probably not a coincidence that several senior Republican members of the House have announced their plans to retire since.

Redistricting racket

The days of once-per-decade congressional redistricting seem long past. Alabama, Louisiana, New York, and North Carolina will all have new districts for the 2024 elections. A Republican supermajority in North Carolina drew new maps to eliminate several Democratic seats.

Both Alabama and Louisiana were found to have violated the Voting Rights Act by undermining Black voting strength, and each was ordered to create an additional

Black majority district. In both states, two incumbent Republicans will have to face off against each other.

A New York state court ordered the legislature to create new districts, and it’s likely that that will result in an indeterminate number of Democratic pickups.

HHS issues new rule on “conscience”

On January 9, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a new rule governing conscience protections in health care provision.

Under the previous administration, a rule was promulgated that allowed health care providers to simply refuse to provide needed care to a patient or customer based solely on that provider’s personal objection.

Three federal courts found the rule to be unlawful. The new rule will ensure that people seeking care will be protected to the same degree as the provider and will make sure

that they are able to access the care they need. When announcing the rule, Secretary Xavier Becerra said, “The Final Rule clarifies protections for people with religious or moral objections while also ensuring access to care for all in keeping with the law.”

White House marks anniversary of Roe

On January 22, the Biden-Harris administration took a series of steps to highlight the ongoing threat to reproductive health care and announced plans to protect and expand access.

The Vice President kicked off a Fight for Reproductive Freedoms tour in Wisconsin, where she reiterated the White House commitment to guaranteeing those freedoms to everyone. Referring to state abortion bans, she said, “This is, in fact, a health care crisis. And there is nothing about this that is hypothetical. Today, in America, one in three women of reproductive age live in a state with an abortion ban — one in three.”

“This is, in fact, a health care crisis. And there is nothing about this that is hypothetical. Today, in America, one in three women of reproductive age live in a state with an abortion ban — one in three.”


–Vice President Kamala Harris

Harris also highlighted the stories of several women and families who faced enormous challenges in their efforts to get needed care, and pledged opposition to any congressional effort to impose new federal abortion restrictions.

In Washington, President Biden convened a meeting of the White House Task Force on Reproductive Health Care Access, which heard directly from doctors navigating state abortion bans across the country.

The White House also announced new guidance

to support expanded coverage of a broader range of contraceptives under the Affordable Care Act, as well as new rules to ensure that federal health insurance programs make enrollees aware of the contraceptive benefit.

The administration is also promising to continue to fight to guarantee the availability of emergency abortion care in the face of court challenges and to protect the right of people to travel between states for needed care. 

FIELD + OUTREACH

Meet Our New Field Assistant, YoVanna Solomon

By Rebecca Harrington, Senior Director of Advocacy and Outreach

YoVanna Solomon returned to us in 2023 after earning a graduate degree in Latin American Studies at the University of Florida at Gainesville. She had already gotten her feet wet at Population Connection as our Advocacy and Outreach Fellow in 2021, and now she's here as a permanent staff member, in the role of Field Assistant. We're so happy to have her back!

Organizing origins

YoVanna's introduction to organizing was at Athenian Press & Workshops, a bookstore and publishing house for women and femmes based in her hometown of Wilmington, North Carolina. The organization also provided creative workshops for women of color, in collaboration with a group of partner community organizations, and connected folks to community health resources — including mental health providers of color and sexual and reproductive health services — through the county health department.

YoVanna volunteered leading creative writing workshops. She was struck that “while we were doing heavy work, everything was grounded in joy, and allowing women of color, in particular, to tap into their joy.”

One of the workshops she helped to run was called “Humor as a Vessel to Healing,” which encouraged participants to use humor to process personal and collective trauma. YoVanna called on her experience as an amateur stand-up comedian as she facilitated these sessions. “Comedy gives me a platform to process my girlhood and share my experience of Black womanhood. It's a place for me to step into my voice.”

YoVanna's first paid organizing role was with the Carolina Federation, a political organization that works to build power across race and class in North Carolina. Through this position, she came to understand the power of local government, and the importance of engaging at the municipal level. She realized, “The leadership system that most affects my life is local

government, and organizers and volunteers can shift power in local government so that it works to support the people who actually live there.”

Learning through travel

YoVanna witnessed firsthand the enormous unmet need for reproductive health care in low- and middle-income countries when she studied abroad in Uruguay and then subsequently traveled for a year throughout Latin America. She recalls a “vivid conversation” with a close friend in Colombia who'd had an unplanned pregnancy. This friend lamented “what her life could have been if she had been able to decide whether and when to have children.” After graduating, YoVanna eagerly returned to the region as a Peace Corps volunteer in Panama.

“Solo traveling made me feel powerful! It gave me the courage to pursue all kinds of opportunities. The connections I made with people in the places I visited were what motivated my desire to help improve the quality of life for women in Latin America. It’s why I joined the Peace Corps, it’s why I pursued a graduate degree in Latin American studies, and it informs the work I do at Population Connection.”

From student to sage

In 2018, one of YoVanna’s women’s studies professors at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (where she graduated with a degree in international studies) recommended that she apply to attend our annual Capitol Hill Days advocacy event. She joined us in DC and had a revelation while listening to the inspiring speakers and advocacy trainers that her voice, as a Black woman, mattered deeply.

She says, “I was so proud of myself that I lobbied my members of Congress. Lobbying had previously felt so impossible and like something only a white man in a suit who made lots of money could do.” This experience


showed her how much of an impact she could have as a constituent, and that political engagement was something that she could — and should — participate in, too. Now, YoVanna loves working with students to develop their organizing and advocacy skills, believing that “we can really influence how someone’s political identity is developed.”

A highlight for YoVanna of her first tenure with us was helping to facilitate the Summer of HER organizing program. She says, “Summer of HER was incredible — it was such an exciting challenge to lead in that way and to help develop the programming and build relationships with Summer of HER leaders.”



YoVanna Solomon

YoVanna is looking forward to being part of rolling out our 2024 #Fight4HER campaign from the early planning stages through to the general election. She’s eager to reconnect with old contacts and to form relationships with new volunteers in our six target districts. “I thrive most as an organizer in making one-on-one connections!”

We are grateful to have YoVanna as part of our team, and we look forward to all that she’ll contribute to Population Connection this year and beyond. 

POPULATION EDUCATION

Measuring PopEd’s Impact: Results From Our Biennial Evaluation

By Pamela Wasserman, Senior Vice President for Education, and Lindsey Bailey, Education Network Director

Now in its 50th year, the PopEd program continues to build relationships with new and veteran teachers across the U.S. and Canada through workshops and webinars led by our staff and members of our Teacher Training Network. Last summer, we surveyed participants of these events from the prior two years (2021 and 2022) to assess the impact our work is having on these teachers and their students. Below are some highlights of that evaluation project. The entire report and a shorter

summary can be found on our website at popconnect.org/PopEd-2023-survey-report.

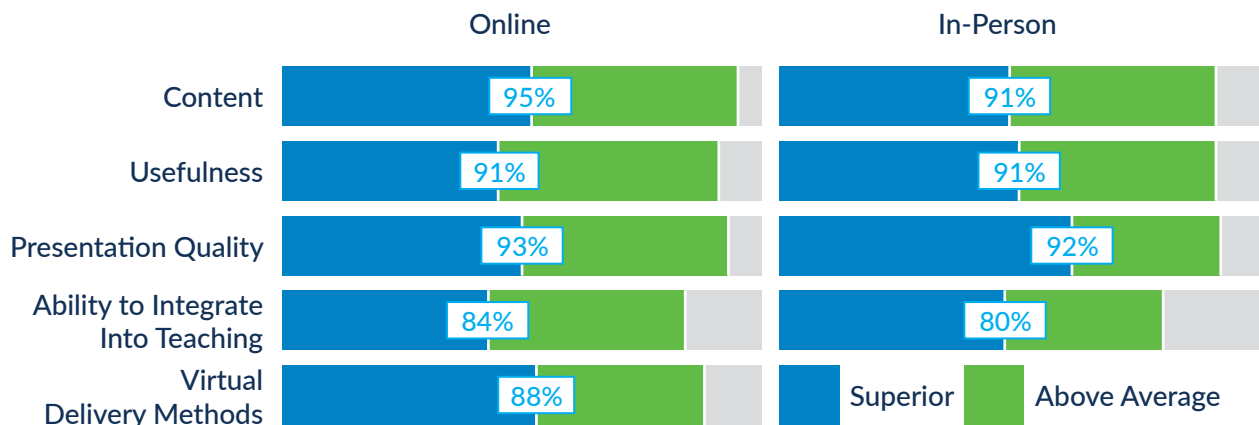
Over the two-year survey period, we trained 20,017 K-12 educators through 1,114 workshops in 49 states, the District of Columbia, and six Canadian provinces. Sessions were held for student teachers at colleges and universities, and for current teachers at conferences and professional development events run by school districts and the College Board (for AP

teachers). Our data is based on responses to nearly 500 surveys returned in June 2023. In 2021, 83% of our training sessions took place online, due to the pandemic. In 2022, this proportion was reduced to 47%, as more events were able to be scheduled in person.

Workshop experience

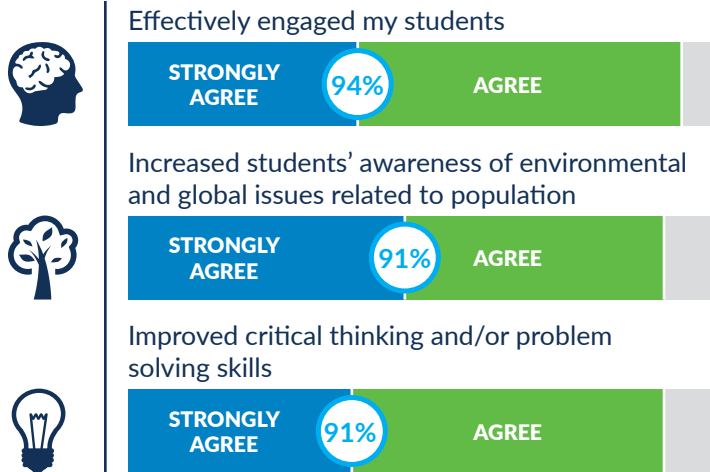
Whether participating in person or online, educators rated our workshops highly compared to professional development sessions from other organizations. Nine out

In comparison to other professional development workshops you’ve attended, how did the Population Education workshop compare in terms of...



“PopEd’s teaching materials are well thought out and clearly explained, making them easy to integrate into classwork, either as a stand-alone lesson or as a complete unit of work.”

Do you agree with the following statements? The Population Education materials I used in my classroom:



of 10 educators considered PopEd workshops “superior” or “above average” in terms of content, usefulness, and presentation quality. Similar scores were given for how well the curriculum integrates into their teaching and for the quality of our virtual delivery methods.

About half of PopEd workshops take place in

teacher preparation courses. Education faculty, who invite PopEd facilitators to present in their classes, indicated being very satisfied with their workshop experiences — 100% of surveyed professors rated the quality of the presentations as “exemplary” or “above average,” and all responded “very well” or “well” when asked how the

workshops fit their course syllabi and state content standards.

Teaching materials and classroom use

PopEd classroom resources reliably receive positive reviews from educators. A full 98% of survey respondents rated the materials presented at their workshops as “excellent” (59%) or “good” (39%).

Teachers reported using an average of three PopEd lessons with their students in social studies (43%), science (38%), math (10%), and language arts (7%). Two-thirds of respondents indicated using PopEd lessons two or more times during the school year.

Educators who use our materials reported working with an average of 64 students each annually. They confirmed that the PopEd lessons effectively engaged their students and promoted increased awareness of population issues. Teachers also noted students’ improvements in important skills like critical thinking and problem solving.

For more information about our teacher workshops, visit PopulationEducation.org.

“I have been to both face-to-face and online workshops — both were excellent, well organized, engaging, and timely — emphasis on contemporary topics and pedagogy — THANK YOU!”

VIRTUAL EVENTS

Recent and Upcoming Opportunities to Engage

By Natalie Widel, Director of Digital Marketing

We have a full slate of virtual events planned for 2024 — we hope you'll make this the year you start joining us if you haven't already!


We'll be hosting more of our Global Partners and learning how the generosity of Population Connection members supports their effective programs.

Page Turners book club meetings are scheduled

quarterly — join us for an interesting and fun way to discuss population topics with other members and supporters! And, of course, we'll feature expert speakers who will help you grow your knowledge about the connections between population, health, and the environment.

We're also looking ahead to Earth Day 2024! If you'd like to see what virtual events

we're planning, or to get more information about volunteering at an Earth Day event in your area, check out popconnect.org/EarthDay to see the latest updates.

You can find all information about future events and access recordings and presentation materials from past events on our website at popconnect.org/virtual-events. 

Winter 2024 Virtual Events

JANUARY



Leveraging Digital Activism for Environmental Protection & Women's Rights

Presented by
Florence Blondel

FEBRUARY



Dispelling Demographic Delusions

Presented by
Dr. Jane O'Sullivan

MARCH



International Women's Day with Hope for Kenya Slum Adolescents Initiative

Presented by
Melvine Ouyo

We are honored to include Joyanne Bloom in our ZPG Society. In addition to her yearly support, she established a charitable gift annuity with Population Connection.

“It’s a win-win. I can feel good about donating, and I’m also receiving quarterly checks, which is nice.”

Joyanne will continue to receive payments for life.



HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED?

You can make a difference with a legacy gift to Population Connection. By including a gift in your will or estate plans, you can help achieve global population stabilization – and leave a lasting testament that honors your commitment to a sustainable future for our entire planet.

You may wish to consider a gift to Population Connection through your:

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- Bank or investment accounts

Contact us today for more information about creating your legacy with Population Connection through a gift in your will or other estate plan. You can help sustain our education and advocacy efforts for years to come.

Victoria Wright
Director of Planned Giving
202-974-7756
legacy@popconnect.org

GLOBAL PARTNERS

Women for Conservation

Interview with Isabella Cortes Lara, CEO of Women for Conservation, by Lee S. Polansky, Senior Director of Executive Initiatives and Special Projects

Can you tell our readers the story behind your organization's founding?

Women for Conservation (W4C) was created by my mother, Sara Inés Lara, and me, with the vision of empowering women to become conservation leaders in their own communities. As Colombian wildlife conservationists who, because we are women, had to overcome incredible hardships to succeed in the conservation field, we are especially passionate about providing rural women with resources to join the wildlife conservation movement, by facilitating environmental education workshops in communities buffering nature reserves for endangered and endemic wildlife. During these workshops, many women expressed that they could not be meaningfully involved in grassroots conservation when they lacked access to basic reproductive health

care, couldn't plan their pregnancies, and couldn't afford to support their growing families. They asked us for help accessing family planning so they could overcome these barriers to pursuing their educational, career, and conservation dreams.

What is the link between family planning and conservation?

Women's empowerment is a top conservation solution, because when women are educated, healthy, and empowered, the environment also benefits. We have seen that providing women with reproductive autonomy allows them to finish school, pursue careers, and plan their pregnancies — all of which reduces reliance on local natural resources. Research shows that giving women reproductive freedom is a top solution for reducing emissions and mitigating climate change over the coming decades. Women in the Global South face compounding

oppressions which makes them disproportionately vulnerable to climate disasters. Accessible family planning is proven to boost the ability of marginalized populations to adapt to climate change.

What does your family planning work look like in the field?

Our family planning clinics most often involve transporting our partner Profamilia nurses to rural communities to facilitate pop-up clinics. It begins with our W4C community groups requesting educational family planning workshops so women and girls can learn about their contraceptive options and decide the method that is best for them. The vast majority of girls and women we work with choose to receive hormone implants in their arms. Once we have a few dozen girls requesting contraceptive implants, we arrange logistics and transportation to get nurses from urban centers to these remote locations. W4C transports these nurses hours

and sometimes days by car, speed boat, or bush plane to arrive to these extremely remote communities. Due to lack of health care facilities, a local woman will volunteer her house to host a two-day pop-up clinic, where nurses insert up to 50 implants a day. The nurses also provide cancer screenings and teach women and girls to perform breast exams on themselves. W4C facilitates visits from nurses in the following months to monitor healing of the implant incision and to answer any additional questions.


What are a few of the group's recent successes?

With support from Population Connection and other generous donors, W4C was able to provide 354 women and girls with family planning in 2023. In 2022, W4C began receiving requests from men who wanted vasectomies, to lift the burden of family planning from women's shoulders.



Top: Behind the scenes of a family planning brigade with Women for Conservation and local partner Profamilia.
Bottom: Women for Conservation patients in Puerto Pinzón show off their new contraceptive implants. (Photos used with permission from Women for Conservation)

A success that we are incredibly proud of is destigmatizing family planning — in the past, it was seen as a taboo topic in the communities where we work. Through education and years of building trust in these communities, women and girls are now proud to share their

family planning stories and promote the importance of reproductive health care among their family and friends. W4C's growing popularity has resulted in long family planning waiting lists in the communities where we work. 

EDITORIAL EXCERPTS

DAILY NEWS

Once again, the U.S. Supreme Court finds itself at the center of a national case involving access to abortion, this time around the drug mifepristone, which along with misoprostol forms part of the regimen for a so-called medication abortion. Its ruling is expected in June, and that ruling should be clear, if only to help clean up the mess the Court created with its overturning of *Roe v. Wade* a year and a half ago.

For a body that had insisted its Dobbs ruling would finally and definitively send the question of abortion to the states, it has often found itself dragged back to the debate. This should come as no surprise; it was obvious even before Dobbs was leaked that the radical groups and officials hell-bent on taking away this medical choice from women would not be satisfied with doing so only within the confines of certain states. ...

In this case, the Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine — a preposterously named organization that in contrast to its moniker is in fact seeking to do plenty of harm — and other pseudo-medical organizations are suing the Food and Drug Administration over its 2000 approval and subsequent use authorizations of mifepristone.

We've said it before but it's worth repeating: No one — not one peer-reviewed study, not one serious medical group, not one government assessment — has ever determined that mifepristone is any more dangerous than thousands of other drugs on the market. In fact, the evidence has shown that it is safer than common medications like penicillin. ...

—New York Daily News, December 26, 2023

The Boston Globe

... Not only did the Supreme Court's conservative majority overturn *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, it did so with a stinging opinion by Justice Samuel Alito that called *Roe* "egregiously wrong from the start."

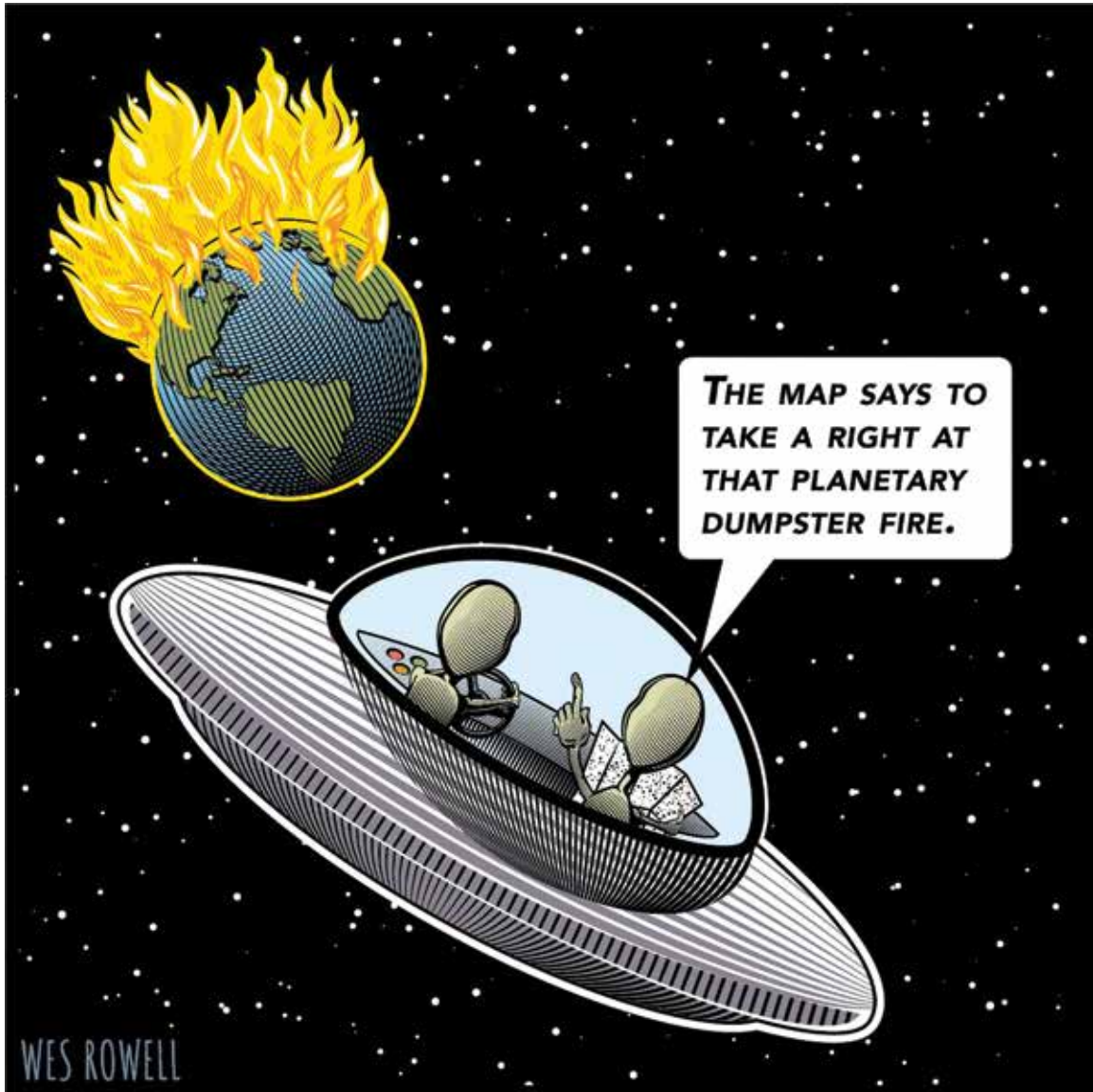
The Court has also demonstrated ever-increasing contempt for the administrative state, striking down actions of federal agencies as overreaching, even where Congress has specifically delegated such authority. In the last several years alone, the Court blocked vaccine mandates issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, rolled back the ability of the Environmental Protection Agency to enforce clean water rules, and struck down student loan forgiveness measures by the Department of Education. ...

Now, it's also posed to turn its microscope on the FDA's drug approval and regulation authority. If it upholds the lower court's restrictions, what could come next? Halting or reversing FDA-approval for drugs and treatments for gender-affirming care? Restricting medical research and treatments based on stem cell research? Rolling back access to treatments for conditions primarily affecting the LGBTQ community or those from certain ethnic backgrounds? The possibilities are as endless as they are horrifying.

This case will show the nation and the world what this Supreme Court is really made of. Is it, like some critics claim, outcome driven in a way that flouts precedent and established statutory and constitutional analysis? Or will it respect Congress's decision to let experts in the field be in charge of crucial decisions like whether or not a drug is safe and should be made available? The answer lies in the justices' hands.

—The Boston Globe, December 20, 2023

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- Establish a charitable gift annuity to receive payments for life that will never change, no matter how long you live or whether the stock market fluctuates.



Our invaluable members enable Population Connection to provide life-changing support to our Global Partners. This photo shows some of the women who benefit from Women for Conservation, our Global Partner in rural Colombia.

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