

Questions from the audience, with responses from Marian Starkey, VP for Communications, and Olivia Nater, Communications Manager

Are there any updated statistics concerning teenage pregnancies and unemployment rates in Eastern Africa?

UNFPA has a [2021 estimate](#) for the teen pregnancy rate in East and Southern Africa combined: 92 births per 1,000 girls, which is twice the global average. Not sure about estimates for just Eastern Africa, but the [UNFPA World Population Dashboard](#) shows the teen *birth* rate for all countries (select the Gender, Rights, and Human Capital tab, then select Eastern and Southern Africa on the map, which allows you to see the rates for individual countries in this area).

Statista has a [graph](#) for unemployment rates in Eastern Africa, going up to 2023. The World Bank also has [estimates](#) for individual countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Can you provide insight into how COVID-19 and improvements in medical technology have affected the average life expectancy?

COVID-19 significantly decreased life expectancy in many countries — there's a detailed *Nature* paper about that [here](#). Life expectancy appears to be slowly increasing again, but it seems (based on available data) that we are not yet back to pre-pandemic levels, at least in the United States, which has relatively low life expectancy among [OECD countries](#).

Overall, medical advances have increased life expectancy and decreased mortality in all countries.

Today's report also points to immigration as a main driver of future population growth in some populations. Can you speak more to this?

Migration is one of the three main variables that go into the UN models, alongside fertility and mortality. The UN demographers make assumptions about future migration levels based on past trends. The World Population Prospects 2024 [Summary of Results](#) notes:

“International migration tends to have a limited effect on population change in most countries caused by sustained low levels of fertility and an older age structure. Immigration is projected to be the main driver of population growth in 52 countries and areas through 2054 and in 62 through 2100. In a small number of countries and areas, immigration is projected to attenuate the decline in population size. This group includes Australia, Canada, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States of America.”

How would you describe the conflict between NGOs working to improve health and nutrition, and with it, wellness effects on fertility rates and the efforts of organizations who promote lowering population fertility rates?

There is no conflict — we fully support investments in health, nutrition, and well-being. Improving lives in low-income communities generally leads to lower fertility rates.

We have seen several thousand excess deaths due to high temperatures this year, and the situation will only get worse as CO2 continues to increase. Does the UN incorporate any increases in mortality due to this and rising conflicts?

Response from Dr. Jane O’Sullivan in the Zoom chat: As far as I know, the UN doesn't account for any influences on 'limits to growth' (climate change impacts or conflict). These things can't be 'projected' from past experience — they are inherently emergent phenomena. So, we can only speculate.

We answered this question during the webinar with the same information that Dr. O’Sullivan shared in the Zoom chat, and we referenced the UN Population Division press briefing that had occurred a couple hours earlier where the Director, John Wilmoth, answered a similar question from a reporter. You can see her question and his response beginning at minute 28:00 of [this recording](#).

What is causing the decline in fertility rates?

Response from Dr. Jane O’Sullivan: Richard, your question is a good one — what is causing the decline in fertility rates? This year's revision seems to be based on lower fertility in China and other low-fertility countries, particularly since the pandemic. In many places, this seems to be a response to worsening economic prospects for young people, particularly housing costs. What causes fertility decline in high fertility countries is the important determinant of ultimate world population. In the past, promotion of family planning (deferred first births, wider spacing, and smaller families) has been the biggest determinant of rate of fertility decline. Exactly the things UNFPA will not overtly do since 1994.

Response from Population Connection: The global decline in fertility rates through history is largely the result of empowering women by removing barriers to family planning and enabling them to pursue education and careers. Countries with the highest fertility rates tend to be [the ones with the worst gender inequality scores](#). If you’re referring to ongoing fertility decline in countries that are already below the replacement rate, this seems to be due to a combination of factors, including the increasing cost of raising children.

How can we counter fears of aging populations and the decline in the power of nations? Seems there needs to be a new framework for nations to adapt to this.

There are many available, beneficial policy measures to lessen the impacts of aging that governments can and should roll out now. They involve maximizing the productive members of society, by a) keeping older people healthy and active for as long as possible, b) improving child welfare and education, and c) making efforts to include groups that are still underrepresented in the labor market (e.g. women (and especially mothers), immigrants, people with disabilities). Our September 2023 magazine issue featured [an article](#) by economist Dean Baker, in which he lays out why population aging and decline are not actually something to lament from an economic perspective.

The UN World Population Prospects 2024 [key messages document](#) suggests,

“Countries that are at more advanced stages in the process of demographic ageing should consider the use of technology to improve productivity at all ages. They should also design more opportunities for lifelong learning and re-training, support multigenerational workforces and create opportunities to extend working lives for those who can and want to continue working.”

What should ultra-low fertility countries do?

Countries with ultra-low fertility rates should do more to make it easier for people to have kids if that’s what they want. This could mean subsidizing education and daycare, more generous parental leave policies, etc. They also need to listen to women’s concerns – in countries like [South Korea](#) and China, it’s

become clear that women feel having kids would seriously disadvantage them due to sexist norms. Measures to improve gender equality and make it easier for women to have both careers and families would likely help.

However, ultra-low fertility rates are unlikely to increase dramatically, so governments must also prepare for inevitable population aging and decline. This could include:

- Reforming/revising/adapting pension and welfare programs, infrastructure, and jobs training
- Making it easier for people to work and stay in the workforce
- Raising productivity through better health and education and through continued automation and possibly AI

How do we counter the constant message that economic prosperity requires population growth?

See above, especially Dean Baker article.

Why is immigration a taboo topic? Are the concerns that so-called third-world countries will lead to an influx of immigrants with high TFRs overwhelming host countries & consuming significant resources legit?

Not sure in what context it is taboo, but there are certainly sensitivities when discussing immigration. From a population perspective, immigration from high- to low-fertility countries can bring many benefits. Immigrants tend to be young (working-age adults and children), which can help reduce the effects of population aging. Immigrants also tend to assimilate their fertility behaviors to their host countries, which helps slow population growth at a global level. Thirdly, people have to live somewhere, and many people are increasingly unable to live in their home countries because of the climate crisis (primarily caused by rich nations), resource scarcity, or civil unrest.

Success in lowering birth rates has led to the closure of local schools, upending families' lives. What are some possible remedies?

As discussed during the webinar, in the United States, this is more an effect of people moving from rural to urban areas than of low birth rates. The U.S. population is still very much growing and is projected to continue doing so for at least several more decades.

We talked to a *New York Times* reporter recently who is considering writing a book about adapting to population decline at the municipal and state level in the U.S., and about low fertility at the national level in Europe and East Asia. It will be interesting to see what she learns from talking with urban planners, mayors and town councils, school board members, etc.

What is the explanation for so many refugee wars and conflicts, lack of arable land, and/or greater desertification every year?

There is strong overlap between the fastest growing countries, the poorest ones, the most conflict-ridden, and those most impacted by climate change and desertification. This is no coincidence as all these variables are related in multiple, complex ways. For example, rapid population growth can trap people in poverty and lead to overuse of land and soil degradation, especially in areas that are already arid, such as the Sahel. Resource shortages combined with a high number of young people (especially

young men) without education or job prospects often leads to conflict and radicalization (Google “youth bulge” if you’re interested in learning more about this phenomenon).

Address issues of governments, corporations, and media refusing to acknowledge the problems associated with growing populations.

This is because population growth has historically been viewed as a marker of success. More people means more consumers, more tax payers, a larger military, more voters/congressional districts. Environmental concerns have sadly never been prominent on governments’ or corporations’ agendas. The media largely reflects this ingrained pro-growthism.

Add to that the fact that the United Nations agency founded to address population challenges, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), now condemns “[population narratives](#)” and frequently releases reports to the media that insist that population growth is not a contributing factor to climate change and other environmental crises. While we are incredibly frustrated by this messaging, we still support and applaud the on-the-ground reproductive health care UNFPA provides to people in over 150 countries — often, without UNFPA, people in the most conflict-ridden regions would receive no reproductive health care at all. For this reason, we continue to demand that the U.S. government consistently fund the agency (all Republican presidents since Reagan have eliminated funding during their administrations), and fund it at a much higher level than we are presently doing.

How to address the exploding population across Africa without appearing racist?

Many leaders across Africa are concerned about their countries’ rapidly growing populations and want to do something about it. Family planning assistance is delivered on request from governments and foreign NGOs, not forced on them by donor countries. Most African countries actually have official population policies to lower fertility and slow population growth, as outlined in [this report](#) (key messages available [here](#)).

Are there any strategies in place to reduce human population besides warfare, starvation, and disease?

Yes! They include comprehensive reproductive health care, including all methods of contraception and safe abortion, quality education (especially for girls), and employment opportunities. These all help lower fertility rates, which eventually leads to population stabilization or decline.

How is it possible to educate the public about the impacts of human overgrowth without running into a wall of defensiveness?

Present the undeniable facts while also laying out the globally beneficial solutions — no reasonable person can argue that empowering women and removing barriers to family planning is morally questionable.

Please provide a breakdown of population growth by religion.

I’m not sure this is available anywhere, and it wouldn’t tell you very much anyway, as there is huge variation within religions. Fertility rates tend to be higher among those with fundamentalist interpretations that restrict women’s status and reproductive autonomy, regardless of the religion. For example, Niger and Turkey are both predominantly Muslim, but the former has very high average

fertility while the latter has low fertility. Or take the Philippines and Italy — both are predominantly Catholic, but again the former has a high fertility rate and Italy has an ultra-low one. You would also find significant variation within each of these countries, with people in rural areas having significantly larger family sizes than people in urban areas.