

Editor's Note

Marian Starkey
marian@popconnect.org



Population Education lesson plans didn't reach me in Maine when I was growing up. In fact, I don't believe I had ever considered the size of the human population before 1999, when I was a senior in high school and the world reached the 6 billion milestone. When I was going through an old storage bin last winter, I came across a paper I wrote for the occasion and wasn't surprised to see that my perspective on "overpopulation" at 18 wasn't all that different from what it is now, over a quarter-century later. I approach the issue with more nuance now than I did as a teenager, but my general stance remains the same: Continued population growth is an obstacle to advancing gender equality, improving public health, and achieving sustainable development initiatives, and it could be resolved by empowering people to make more educated and informed choices.

We confirmed in our YouGov survey earlier this year that Americans tend to struggle to accurately identify population sizes and trends. The majority of our 2,000 respondents made guesses that were more than 50% higher or lower than the actual population, both domestically and globally.

Having a reasonable awareness of population data and dynamics is important for understanding many of the environmental, economic, health, and development challenges we experience and how to best address them. Educating young people about the impact of our numbers and consumption patterns helps them become more thoughtful future professionals, parents (if they choose to have children), consumers, and voters.

Despite the importance of population literacy, however, our Population Education (PopEd) program — which turns 50 this year — is the only remaining one of its kind in the United States. With a staff of 13, a volunteer network of nearly 700 teacher trainers, and approximately 50,000 educators using our curriculum materials in their classrooms, we reach about 3 million K–12 students each year. Because of our carefully crafted and time-tested lesson plans, many millions of young people have learned about population challenges when they otherwise wouldn't have.

Part of what keeps the program operating so effectively is the lengthy tenure of its leaders. Pam Wasserman, Senior Vice President for Education, is our longest serving staff member — she came here as a new college graduate in 1988! You can read her responses to questions about the history of the program in the interview beginning on page 22. Carol Bliese, Senior Director of Teacher Programs, has 19 years with PopEd under her belt, and Lindsey Bailey, Education Network Director, has been with us for 15 years. The dedication of these three staff members is invaluable to the organization and to the professors and pre-service educators they work with each year.

The high school seniors who will witness the 9 billion milestone are currently in kindergarten or first grade (depending on when in 2036 the milestone occurs and whether this UN medium projection is accurate). May they all receive Population Education in the meantime. 