

# Canada Desperately Needs a Baby Bump

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By Michael Bonner



The 21st century is going to be overshadowed by a crisis that human beings have never faced before. I don't mean war, pestilence, famine or climate change. Those are perennial troubles. Yes, even climate change, despite the hype, is nothing new as anyone who's heard of the Roman Warm Period, the Mediaeval Warm Period, or the Little Ice Age will know. Climate change and the others are certainly problems, but they aren't new.

But the crisis that's coming is new.

The global decline in fertility rates has grown so severe that some demographers now talk about "peak humanity"—a looming maximum from which the world's population will begin to rapidly decline. Though the doomsayers who preach the dangers of overpopulation may think that's a good development, it is in fact a grave concern.

In the Canadian context, it is doubly worrisome. Our birth rates have been falling steadily since 1959. It was shortly after that, in the 1960s, when we began to build a massive welfare state, and we did so despite a shrinking domestically-born population and the prospect of an ever-smaller pool of taxable workers to pay for the expanding social programs.

Immigration came to the rescue, and we became adept at recruiting a surplus population of young, skilled, economically focused migrants seeking their fortune abroad. The many newcomers meant a growing population and with it a larger tax base.

But what would happen if Canada could no longer depend on a steady influx of newcomers? The short answer is that our population would shrink, and our welfare state would come under intolerable strain. The long answer is that Canadian businesses, which have become addicted to abundant, cheap foreign labour through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, would be obliged to invest in hiring, training, and retaining Canadian workers. Provincial and federal governments would scramble to keep older Canadians in the workforce



for longer. And governments would be torn between demands to cut the welfare state or privatize large parts of it while raising taxes to help pay for it.

No matter what, the status quo won't continue. And—even though Canada is right now taking in record numbers of new immigrants and temporary workers—we are going to discover this soon. The main cause is the "peak humanity" that I mentioned before. Fertility rates are falling rapidly nearly everywhere. In the industrialized West, births have fallen further in some places than in others, but all countries are now below replacement levels (except Israel, which was at 2.9 in 2020).

Deaths have long been outpacing births in China, Japan, and some Western countries like Italy. A recent study in *The Lancet* expects that by 2100, 97 percent of countries will be shrinking. Only Western and Eastern sub-Saharan Africa will have birth rates above replacement levels, though births will be falling in those regions also.

In a world of sub-replacement fertility, there will still be well-educated, highly skilled people abroad. But there will not be a surplus of them. Some may still be ready and willing to put down roots in Canada, but the number will soon be both small and dwindling. And it seems likely that countries which have produced Canada's

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immigrants in recent years will try hard to retain domestic talent as their own populations decline. In contrast, the population of sub-Saharan Africa will be growing for a little longer. But unless education and skills training change drastically in that region, countries there will not produce the kind of skilled immigrants that Canada has come to rely on.

And so the moment is rapidly approaching when immigration will no longer be able to make up for falling Canadian fertility. Governments will have to confront the problem directly—not years or decades hence, but now.

While many will cite keeping the welfare state solvent as the driving force, in my view this is not the reason to do it. The reason to do it is that it is in Canada's national interest to make it easier for families to have the number of children that they want. A 2023 study by the think-tank Cardus found that nearly half of Canadian women at the end of their reproductive years had fewer children than they had wanted. This amounted to an average of 0.5 fewer children per woman—a shortfall that would lift Canada close to replacement level.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNPF) has noticed the same challenge on a global scale. Neither Cardus nor the UNPF prescribes any specific solutions, but their analysis points to the same thing: public policy should focus on identifying and removing barriers families face to having the number of children they want.

Every future government should be vigilant against impediments to family formation and raising the desired number of children. Making housing more abundant and affordable would surely be a good beginning. Better planning must go into making livable communities (not merely atomized dwellings) with infrastructure favouring families and designed to ease commuting. But more fundamentally, policymakers will need to ask and answer an uncomfortable question: Why did we allow barriers to fertility to arise in the first place?

*Michael Bonner is a communications and public policy consultant at Atlas Strategic Advisors. His latest book is "In Defense of Civilization: How Our Past Can Renew Our Present." The original, full-length version of this article was recently published in C2C Journal.*