

POPULATION AND IMMIGRATION POLICY
IN THE UNITED STATES

*Gretchen C. Daily, Anne H. Ehrlich,
and Paul R. Ehrlich*

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G.C.D.: Energy and Resources Group
Building T-4, Room 100
University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

A.H.E., P.R.E.: Center for Conservation Biology
Department of Biological Sciences
Stanford University
Stanford, California 94303

Among major industrialized nations, the United States has the largest population size, the highest total fertility rate, and the highest per-capita rates of energy use (PRB 1994; WRI 1994). The environmental degradation caused directly and indirectly by this set of circumstances is unsustainable, a threat to the future health and well-being of all human beings, and cries out for remedial action (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1992; Daily and Ehrlich 1992; Hall, et al., 1994; Daily and Ehrlich 1995). Halting U.S. population growth is therefore a critical step toward securing Americans and the rest of the world from problems generated or exacerbated by overpopulation (Daily et al. 1994).

Achieving zero population growth (ZPG) in the U.S., although easier than in most parts of the world, involves difficult social choices requiring educated public debate. In a thought-provoking article, Bartlett and Lytwak (1995) present a series of alternatives for reaching ZPG in the U.S. immediately. The simplicity of their calculations makes the policy implications all the more stark. For example, to stop growth instantly without changing the 1992 level of immigration, births would have to be restricted to slightly less than one child for every two couples. Even with zero immigration (and continued emigration), the U.S. population would have to reduce its fertility to one child per family.

For the U.S. to transform itself into a sustainable enterprise, it must face squarely these sorts of policy options, even without trying for an immediate halt to U.S. population growth. Examination of these options prompts the question: What kind of population and immigration policy should a nation like the U.S. have? Bartlett and Lytwak (1995) have laid out the numbers nicely, but close their article before addressing how to go about "lowering the fertility rate in the United States and stopping or reducing immigration."

In our opinion, policies for controlling the U.S. population size and composition must be formulated in a global context and inevitably involve consideration of a difficult suite of ethical and practical issues. We view today's unprecedented mass migrations as a symptom of a much deeper complex of problems and question the assertion that "It is within the power of any nation to regulate immigration into its territory" (Bartlett and Lytwak 1995). Certainly, immigration could be greatly slowed with expensive and draconian measures, but it seems politically naive to believe that measures sufficiently harsh to achieve near-zero immigration would be politically feasible in the U.S. in the near future. Ultimately, the success of any policy to control the size and composition of the U.S. population will hinge upon alleviation of the underlying causes of overpopulation and mass migration.

We find it difficult to envision any morally justifiable policy that would preclude all immigration into the U.S. Some level of admissions for family/humanitarian reasons presumably should be allowed by a nation that is a self-professed model of individual liberty and justice. At the very least, circumstances

and morality may often dictate providing at least temporary, if not permanent, shelter for victims of gross persecution. On the other hand, the recent court decision to confer refugee status upon Guo Chundi, a man claiming political persecution in China because he and his wife had refused to comply with China's one-child policy, clearly exceeded the limits of a reasonable understanding of persecution. Upon our mentioning this case to the chief architect of China's family planning policy, Dr. Jiang Zhenghua, he broke into a grin and said, "Fifty million will follow soon!"

Elevation of individual reproductive rights above all other rights and social responsibilities is not morally justifiable and will only exacerbate the population problem. Moreover, the transnational migration of millions of people, while necessary in extreme circumstances for temporary relief, is not a long-term solution to human rights abuses.

A practical reason for allowing some immigration is to obtain the benefits thereof. It is extremely difficult to quantify the total costs and benefits of immigration, especially since those costs and benefits are very unequally distributed across both regions and economic classes. Nonetheless, it is clear that the benefits can be substantial -- ranging from cultural enrichment to labor willing to do jobs disdained by citizens and taxes paid by people receiving few government services (e.g., Ehrlich et al., 1979). Overall, the total immigrant population (legal and illegal together) generates an estimated surplus of \$25 to \$30 billion per year (Sontag 1994).

At the same time, there are many rational reasons for restricting immigration to well below the present legal rate. First, most immigrants are transformed sooner or later into U.S. superconsumers, furthering both local and global environmental deterioration. Second, immigrants often bring with them cultural preferences for large families, which take a generation or more to fade away, meanwhile adding to our nation's gross overpopulation. A third, sad cost may be political fractionation as an ever larger and more diverse set of pressure groups oppose one another and all manner of legislative proposals. We have long been fans of diversity (e.g., Ehrlich 1980), but wonder whether the American political system can stand much more without grinding to a halt.

Whatever the actual costs and benefits of immigration, it seems highly unrealistic to expect fertility rates within the U.S. to drop to less than one child per couple; rapid achievement of ZPG will therefore require a complementary restriction of immigration.

This brings us to the question of how, from both ethical and practical standpoints, the U.S. can restrict immigration. The U.S. is the most resource-wasteful nation in the world with the largest share of responsibility for global environmental deterioration. Can it ethically restrict the flow of people up the

gradient of wealth to its doorstep if it does not also restrict the flow of resources into its territory, so as not to create or exacerbate inequities in access to those resources?

Ethics aside, can it even in practice further restrict the immigrant flow? The U.S. Border Patrol would have its already tough job made much more difficult, especially if the disparities between rich and poor continue increasing, and if the projected growth of potential immigrants comes to pass. Attempting to build a "Berlin Wall" along our borders, and supplementing the Border Patrol with troops from the armed forces, would doubtless present a whole new array of severe political and other problems.

The biggest and fastest growing class of potential immigrants is that of economic/environmental refugees, the vast majority of whom would most likely prefer to remain in their native land were it possible to lead a decent life there. The numbers of these people should not be considered unrelated to U.S. behavior, however. On the contrary, U.S. political and economic policy exerts a profound, if often unintended, influence on the size of this group (Daily and Ehrlich 1995). Considering both ethics and practicality, the optimal long-term strategy to control mass migration is to reduce incentives by remedying its causes. Historically, disregard of the underlying causes of immigration has led to the spectacular failure of control measures. Although precise numbers are difficult to determine, a substantial proportion of immigrants to the United States in the last decade, probably about a quarter, are clearly illegal (Mydans 1993).

A wise course of action by a country as wealthy as the U.S. would be to couple any attempt to restrict the flow of people with a substantive effort to improve the dismal economic and environmental conditions that prevail in most parts of the world. This is practical in more than one way. First, it is more likely to bring about a reduction in migration than attacking the symptoms of the problem alone. But second, if done right, it could reduce the rapid global environmental deterioration that will affect the U.S., both directly and indirectly. Third, it will reduce social strife to the extent that it is caused or intensified by environmental deterioration. Fourth, reducing inequities promotes lower fertility rates, which would further reduce the number of poor people trying to enter the United States (Daily and Ehrlich, 1995).

Our bottom-line recommendation would be for the United States to try to restrict immigration further while doing three additional things. The first should be to establish a national goal of joining Spain, Italy, and Germany with an average completed family size in the vicinity of 1.3 children. The U.S. should set an example by explicitly tackling its own serious fertility problem, seeing to it that every sexually active resident has easy access to contraceptive services and, when needed, safe (and hopefully rare) backup abortion.

We think that fertility goal would be relatively quickly achievable if political leaders and the media got behind a persuasive campaign, pushing a slogan such as "patriotic Americans stop with one or two." Some tax or other economic disincentives for large families might be required (measures could be instituted to protect children from unwanted side-effects of such disincentives). What is lacking is not the ability to bring the American population explosion under control, but the political and social will to do the job.

Second, the U.S. should set another example by undertaking a serious program to reduce its wasteful consumption, by, for instance, starting to redesign the nation around people rather than automobiles. In fifty years, we might have a nation where almost everyone could walk or bike to work, or at worst take mass transit. People would be healthier and happier; the quality of life would go up (even though those changes doubtless would shrink the GNP).

Third, the U.S. should mount a determined campaign to help improve conditions in poor nations, by such mechanisms as changing terms of trade, ceasing export of toxic materials, forgiving debt, and supporting in every way possible the empowerment of women, greatly enhancing their access to jobs, sound health care and contraception and abortion services. One step in the right direction was the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the long-recommended economic integration of Canada, Mexico, and the United States (e.g., Ehrlich et al. 1979).

All three steps would begin at once to alleviate the assault the United States now mounts on the global environment. If accompanied by obvious efforts by the U.S. to get its own house in order, they should also lessen North-South tensions. Such a program would not achieve instant ZPG, but suddenly instigating an average family size below one would be socially undesirable for many reasons, especially because it would cause disruptive changes in age-structure. Better to end growth more smoothly within a few decades and adjust migration and vital rates to start a needed slow decline towards a population size and a high quality of life that would both be sustainable.

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