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## The Real Population Threat

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For well over a century, many prophets of doom have predicted world overpopulation would lead to ecological disaster, famine, poverty and other woes. As Philip Longman points out in the March 24, 2009 edition of *USA Today*, the world's population is expected to hit 7 billion by 2012, up from the 6 billion mark set in 1999. So, is overpopulation a real threat?

Not hardly. Though population density can threaten sustainability in some areas of the globe, the far greater danger for our future is what Longman calls "depopulation." On a global scale, we are seeing the population of older persons exploding and the numbers of young persons falling.

The trend toward depopulation started in Europe, spread to Asia, and is now detectable even in Latin America. The United Nations now predicts that total world population may begin falling as early as 2040, and much of the surviving population will be very old indeed.

Consider this observation from Longman:

*Under what the U.N. considers the most likely scenario, more than half of all remaining growth comes from a 1.2 billion increase in the number of old people, while the worldwide supply of children will begin falling within 15 years. With fewer workers to support each elder, the world economy might have to run just that much faster, and consume that much more resources, or else living standards will fall.*

*In the USA, where nearly one-fifth of Baby Boomers never had children, the hardship of vanishing retirement savings will be compounded by the strains on both formal and informal care-giving networks caused by the spread of childlessness. A pet will keep you company in old age, but it is unlikely to be of use in helping you navigate the health care system or in keeping predatory reverse mortgage brokers at bay.*

The simple fact is that a stable standard of living depends upon a steady stream of young persons entering the work force and contributing to the economy and the culture. When an unprecedented percentage of the total population is aged, the economy and the society in general begins to tilt toward unsustainability. To state only the most obvious point, when the number of retirees is out of balance with the number of workers, there may simply not be enough economic activity to pay the bills.

Economists and demographers will debate innumerable aspects of this new phenomenon, but from a Christian worldview perspective certain issues stand out. Longman underlines the fact that this looming population imbalance is the result of chosen behaviors and lifestyle changes — not to forces beyond human control.

Consider this one statistic alone: Nearly one-fifth of Baby Boomers never had children at all. As Longman observes, childlessness puts great strains on the entire system of care-giving upon which both individuals and the society in general depend.

There is something horribly haunting about his comment about pets: "A pet will keep you company in old age, but it is unlikely to be of use in helping you navigate the health care system or in keeping predatory reverse mortgage brokers at



bay.” The media have provided any number of recent stories on the fact that many Baby Boomers now look to their pets as children. Need we point out that the pets will not be able to return the favor?

Christians should remember that this issue is never isolated from God’s purpose in creating humanity in His image and giving humans a distinctive role in the world. He also gave us marriage and the gift of children within the family. The contraceptive revolution has changed the way modern people look at children. Now, children are a choice . . . and a choice many couples now do not choose.

Longman concludes: “Societies around the globe need to ask why they are engaging in what biologists would surely recognize in any other species as maladaptive behavior leading either to extinction, or dramatic mutation.”

The contraceptive mentality and the trend toward childlessness bring consequences, and these are not easily reversed. The more we distance ourselves from the natural blessings of the natural family, the greater our vulnerability grows. China, Longman notes, is fast becoming a nation in which one child supports two parents and four grandparents. Not only is this pattern unsustainable — it is untenable.

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Sunday’s edition of *The New York Times* included a front-page story, “Its Population Falling, Russia Beckons its Children Home.” As reporter Clifford J. Levy explains, “The government is trying to head off the country’s severe population decline by luring back Russians who live abroad as well as their descendants.” A case in point.

Philip Longman’s book, *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What to Do About It*, is a very important resource for understanding this issue.



