

Experts warn of ‘the end of children’

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Falling fertility: While the number of births in England and Wales fell to a record low last year, the number of women of child-bearing age – 12 million – was the highest ever.

Can we boost birth rates? Experts have warned that a new and silent crisis is looming, threatening to shatter our economies and upend the structure of our lives. Prepare, they say, to greet a future without children.

What's happening?

In 2023, deaths outstripped births in the UK for the first time in almost 50 years, with an estimated 16,300 fewer births than deaths.

And the UK is not alone. Most countries in the world have the same problem. A professor in Japan has projected that there will only be one child under the age of 14 left in Japan by 2720 if the country's birth rate continues to decline at current levels.

At the same time, we are living longer. A child born in the UK today has a good chance of living to 100 years old.

Find out more

An ageing population will place a burden on healthcare while bringing in less in taxes.

But why are people having fewer children?

The theories are endless. The climate crisis, war and a long-term economic slump are all putting off would-be parents.

Some say we should provide better, cheaper childcare, longer fully-paid maternity leave, and give tax breaks or subsidies to new parents.

But many think that a population growing at a slower rate could lessen our strain on the environment and slow down global warming.

Can we boost birth rates?

Some say

Yes! We need to invest in reducing economic and social inequalities, averting climate crisis and ending war.

Others think

No! A lower birth rate is a natural symptom of living in a more equal world, where women have a choice about what their lives will look like.

Six steps to discovery

Some people say

"A finite world can only support a finite population; therefore, population growth must eventually equal zero."

Garrett Hardin (1915 – 2003), American ecologist and microbiologist

What do you think?

1. Connect

How do you feel about this story? - Do you feel positively or negatively about birth rate decline? What do you think is the most important factor in people choosing to have fewer children?

2. Wonder

What questions do you have? - For example: Which countries are not seeing declining birth rates? Why is this and what can we learn from them?

3. Investigate

What are the facts? - Pick out one thing we know for certain about this story and one thing we cannot say for sure.

4. Construct

What is your point of view? - Imagine that you have been put in charge of a new advisory group helping to suggest strategies for the government in your country to boost the birth rate. List your strategies.

5. Express

What do others believe? - In small groups, imagine that you belong to a scientific organisation that has figured out how to rapidly multiply the human population by growing babies in a lab. Write a press release or make an advertising campaign explaining your work and why it is important.

6. Reflect

What might happen next? - It is 2720 and you are the only child under the age of 14 in your country. Write an article or poem explaining how we got to this point and your opinion on what should be done.