

'Empty Planet': The Looming Danger of Population Collapse Is Real

Empty playgrounds. Schools without enough students to stay open. Small towns, deserted and abandoned. This is not some dystopian vision of the future. Demographers say this is our future.

Global population growth is leveling off, and as early as the second half of this century could begin to shrink for the first time since the Black Death struck the world almost 700 years ago.

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"Everything that we understand that functions in our societies today, that depends on people, which is almost everything, is going to change," says Stephen J. Shaw, a data scientist, demographer and producer of the film "Birthgap."

Shaw spoke to us from his home in Japan, a nation at the forefront of this global demographic collapse. Shaw told us he made the documentary mostly out of fear. "...Fear of the future that we're, as a planet, completely unprepared for and mostly unaware of," Shaw says.

The population crisis could be the most important story of our time, mainly due to all the changes and serious economic, social, and political problems it could bring to our world.



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Taxes could soar as economies shrink; the many elderly could cause retirement and medical systems to collapse; businesses will struggle to find employees, and there won't be enough young to care for the old.

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Shaw says, "Sporadically you're going to have housing that's left desolated. You're going to have stores that are empty. You're going to have places with fewer and fewer employees, fewer customers. You're talking of decimation of communities, you're talking of closed schools, you're talking of closed hospitals."

A nation needs an average fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman to keep its population from shrinking. But 70% of the global population and almost every developed nation falls below that replacement rate.

The U.S. fertility rate hit a new record low last year, dropping to births per woman, a number temporarily offset by record numbers of illegal immigrants.

In his film, Shaw explains how fewer children from fewer and fewer mothers creates a cascading effect, leading to what he predicts as a downward spiral from which no known civilization has ever recovered.

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