

## Argument 1

### *The Other Population Crisis*

- A. It is an unquestioned principle that has dominated international thinking for decades: we live in an overcrowded world teeming with billions of humans who are destined to suffocate our cities and squeeze our planet of its precious resources. [1] *Our species is inexorably wrecking Earth: flooding valleys, cutting down forests and destroying the habitats of animals and plants faster than scientists can classify them. Our future is destined to be nasty, brutish, and cramped.*
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- B. Or is it? Now, it seems, population analysts have suddenly started to question the 'self-evident' truth that we are destined eventually to drown under our own weight. [2] *While accepting that populations will continue to rise, they point out that this rise will not be nearly as steep or as long-lasting as was once feared.* They even claim they can envisage the day when world population numbers will peak and begin to decline.
- C. As evidence, statisticians point to a simple, stark fact: people are having fewer and fewer children. In the 1970s, global fertility rates stood at about six children per woman. Today the average is 2.9 and falling. Such a rate will still see the world's population increase to nine billion by 2050, a rise of fifty per cent on today's figure. That is not good news for the planet, but it is far less alarming than the projections of fifteen billion that were once being made. More to the point, statisticians predict that after 2050 the number of humans will go down. Such trends raise two key questions. [3] *Why has the rise in world populations started to die out so dramatically? And what will be the consequences of this decline?*
- D. Answers to the first question depend largely on locality. In Europe, for example, couples will have only one or two children when they might have had three or four in the past. There are various reasons for this. Women now have their own career options, and are no longer considered failures if they do not marry and produce children in their twenties or thirties. This has taken a substantial number out of the pool of potential mothers. In addition, parents have aspirations for their offspring, choices not available to past generations but which cost money, for example, higher education and travel. These and other pressures have reduced the average birth rate in European countries to 1.4 per couple. Given that a country needs a birth rate of 2.1 to maintain its numbers, it is clear to see that in the long term there will be fewer Europeans.
- E. The causes of declining numbers in other countries are more varied and more alarming. Russia's population is dropping by almost 750,000 people a year. The causes are alcoholism, breakdown of the public health service, and industrial pollution that has had a disastrous effect on men's fertility. In China, the state enforces quotas of offspring numbers, and it is expected that its population will peak at 1.5 billion by 2019 then go into steep decline. Some analysts suggest the country could lose twenty to thirty per cent of its population every generation. There is also the exodus from the countryside, a trek happening across the globe. Soon half the world's population will have urban homes. But in cities, children become a cost rather than an asset for helping to work the land, and again pressures mount for people to cut the size of their families.
- F. The impact of all this is harder to gauge. In Europe, demographers forecast a major drop in the numbers who will work and earn money, while the population of older people - who need support and help - will soar. So, the urging by a British politician that it is the patriotic duty of women to have children makes sense. There will be no workforce if people do not

have children. At present the median age of people is twenty-six; within a hundred years, if current trends continue, that will have doubled. More and more old people will have to be supported by fewer and fewer young people. In China, the problem is worse. Most young Chinese adults have no brothers or sisters and face the prospect of having to care for two parents and four grandparents on their own. Pensions and incomes are simply not able to rise fast enough to deal with the crisis.

G. There are people who cling to the hope that it is possible to have a vibrant economy without a growing population, but mainstream economists are pessimistic. On the other hand, it is clear that reduced human numbers can only be good for the planet in the long term. Until we halt the spread of our own species, the destruction of the last great wildernesses, such as the Amazon, will continue. Just after the last Ice Age, there were only a few hundred thousand humans on Earth. Since then the population has grown ten thousandfold. Such a growth rate, and our imperfect attempts to control it, are bound to lead us into an uncertain future.