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China's population may start to shrink this year, new birth data suggest

Couples are ignoring governmental pleas and incentives to have more children

18 JAN 2022 • 4:20 PM • BY [DENNIS NORMILE](#)



Parents put a mask on their baby outside the Beijing railway station. Few Chinese couples are swayed by government incentives to have a second child. NOEL CELIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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Young couples are deciding against having more children, “despite all the new initiatives and propaganda to promote childbearing,” says Yong Cai, a demographer at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. “China’s population decline will be rapid,” he predicts.

The shift from growth to decline has happened startlingly fast. Projections made just a few years ago suggested China’s population would expand until around 2027. Last year, when it [announced results from the 2020 census](#), the statistics bureau still pegged the total fertility rate at 1.3.

China’s government has long promoted population control. But it has reversed course because of worries that a shrinking and aging population will strain pension systems and social services and lead to economic and geopolitical decline. The country ended its notorious one-child policy in 2016, allowing all couples to have two children. In May 2021, the limit went up to three children. Some local governments have started to offer monthly cash subsidies to couples for second and third children.

Experts say it is too little, too late. Already overworked and underpaid, and with minimal social support, few couples “put starting a family, or having another child, as their biggest priority,” Cao says.

The statistics bureau also reported that China is becoming ever more urbanized, with nearly 65% of the population now living in urban areas, up 0.8 percentage points from 2020. Those who relocate to cities are typically in their reproductive prime, says Wei Guo, a demographer at Nanjing University. The crowded housing, high living costs, and exorbitant educational expenses all “reduce people’s willingness to have a second child, let alone a third child,” Guo says.

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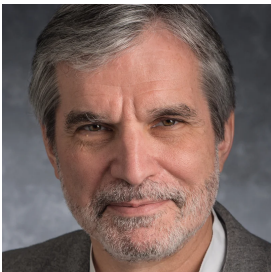
Yet some demographers say concerns about a looming demographic crisis are overblown. “China is certainly getting older,” says Stuart Gietel-Basten, a demographer at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. “However, China’s population is also getting healthier, better educated and skilled, and more adaptable to technology,” he says. Policies to encourage lifelong training, improve productivity, and ensure healthy aging are likely to have greater impact than trying to boost the birth rate, he says.

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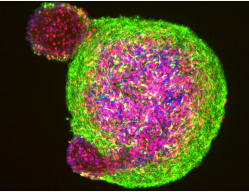
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