Toward a Cure for the Myopia and Tunnel Vision of the Population Debate: A Dose of Historical Perspective*

Allen C. Kelley¹ and Robert M. Schmidt²

¹ Department of Economics and Center for Demographic Studies, Duke University
² Department of Economics, University of Richmond

1. The Population Debate: Why Does it Continue?

Debates about the economic consequences of population growth and size have been too narrow, and they have been too focused on impacts that occur in the short run.¹ Such tunnel vision and myopia have resulted in alarmist assessments. However, when the analysis of the economic impacts is broadened in scope and extended over time, not only are the conclusions altered, but the analysis becomes at once more complex and more reasonable. In short, the pitfalls of misjudging the economic consequences of population growth are attenuated when one gains perspective.

This paper has three objectives.

Section 2.0 surveys the evolution of thinking over the post-war period about the net overall economic impacts of rapid population growth—the bottom lines, as it were.² We advance a surprising conclusion: most

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¹ The major exception to this statement relates to concerns about the long-run impacts on the environment, and the important, but lamentably nebulous and to date unmeasurable, concept of "sustainable" resource base.
² We will focus primarily on American contributions to the population debate.
economists\(^3\) who have specialized in population issues have held a balanced and distinctly non-alarmist position on the economic impacts of population growth. While most would consider slower population growth to be beneficial to per capita economic growth, especially in those poor countries with exceptionally high rates of fertility and mortality, there is insufficient empirical evidence to justify the conclusion that the negative impact is particularly large on average.\(^4\) To the contrary, there is considerable evidence that some of the negative impacts are small or muted over time. From a policy perspective, while most economists would embrace some forms of population policies, they would place them as second-order in importance. More specifically, the economic benefits of population policies\(^5\) are likely to be modest by comparison with a host of alternative policies to improve the living conditions in poor countries. This statement applies even to those specific areas (e.g., education, saving, exhaustible resource use, etc.) assessed by population pessimists as being compromised by rapid population growth. Population policies and programs in most of these areas can, at best, be justified as being complementary, albeit with relatively slow-acting and modest impacts, to more fundamental policies designed to accomplish specific economic ends.

These assessments by economic demographers may come as a surprise since most writers who advance strong pessimism about population matters base their arguments on alleged powerful adverse economic impacts. The key insight to be gained from section 2.0 will be an answer to the question: Why don’t economists share the strong pessimism about the economic impacts of population growth so widely embraced by biologists, clergy, ecologists, journalists, and demographers? While the answer to this question will leave plenty of room for disagreement about economists’ conclusions, it should clarify the "rules of the debate" and the perspective of this paper.

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\(^3\) Unless otherwise specified, reference to "economists" in this paper relates to the subset of economists who specialize in population matters, sometimes denoted as economic-demographers.

\(^4\) When discussing any issue relating to 100 plus developing countries, exceptions to the rule are the norm. Debaters on both sides of the population issue highlight such exceptions. The generalizations advanced below represent our best judgment about the predominant weight of the evidence for the strong majority of the developing countries, but these must be qualified by the reality that no generalization holds for all countries and across all periods of time. To qualify each statement with such a disclaimer, while rigorous, would be unnecessarily tedious.

\(^5\) These include programs affecting mortality (e.g., immunization, child and maternal health); fertility (e.g., family planning, infertility); and migration (e.g., resettlement schemes). Quite apart from ethical considerations, economists, both professionally and intellectually, look with great skepticism at any forms of compulsion and coercion of individual decision making unless "externalities" are important.