

## PERSPECTIVES

# How the U.S. can avoid the havoc caused by population decline

The shrinking of America's population — perhaps probable, certainly regrettable — is not inevitable. It is preventable, but requires an attitude adjustment among Americans who do not understand that people are resources immeasurably more valuable than rare earth minerals.

In 2025, America's fertility rate (births per women of childbearing age), declining since 2007, reached a record low. Happily, the fertility rate for teenagers is down 81 percent since its 1991 peak, and the rate has risen among women delaying childbearing until their 30s and 40s, reflecting women's expanded life choices.

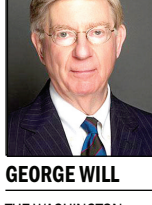
But a new report by the American Enterprise Institute's Nicholas Eberstadt indicates that an ominous question mark haunts the nation's future: "Can a Depopulating America Still Flourish?" He says "wrenching changes" that "depopulation will unforgivingly impose" might come with "stunning speed."

Some have already come. Higher education, a source of

overheated anxiety about population "pressure" threatening the planet's "sustainability," will suffer from a "birth dearth" and perhaps curtailment of legal immigration. Economist Tyler Cowen, writing for the Free Press, notes that a shrinking cohort of college-age Americans will accelerate this: Since 2013, more than 700 — about 15 percent — of U.S. colleges have closed.

The Congressional Budget Office projects America becoming what Eberstadt calls a permanently "net mortality" society — deaths exceeding births — in four years, with a million more deaths than births by 2046. Immigration will delay depopulation until 2056, when the U.S. population will peak at 364 million — just 4 percent more than today because of 0.1 percent growth from 2037 to 2056.

A depopulating America will be increasingly aged. In perhaps just three years, there will be more 65-plus Americans than children under 18. The fastest growing cohort, the "super-old" (80-plus), will more than double by 2050.



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THE WASHINGTON POST

Longevity has fueled global flourishing, and vice versa. Since 1968, world population has soared from 3.5 billion to over 8 billion, life expectancy at birth has increased from 56 years to 74 years, and the world is better fed and healthier than ever. This is because, Eberstadt says, "human beings are the uniquely adaptable, ingenious, problem-solving animal." Population increase means increased "consumers, workers, tax payers, investors."

Long-term population decline, coinciding with the increasing life expectancy of an aging population, would require people to work longer. This can compensate for an increasingly adverse ratio of workers to retirees that threatens the entitlement (essentially, Social Security and Medicare) state.

Population decline makes it imperative to reverse the decline of the labor force participation rate of Americans aged 15 to 64. This rate is now lower than in anti-workaholic Europe. If today's rate were what it was at its 20th-century peak in 1998, the workforce would be 5 million larger. Instead, the rate for prime age men (25-54) is slightly lower

than in March 1940, when the national unemployment rate was above 14 percent. So, Eberstadt says, for prime age men we have today a "Depression-scale problem with work."

This resists remediation because it involves some intractable and entangled social pathologies, particularly criminality and excessive dependence on government. Eberstadt's educated estimate is that 25 million — 1 in 7 adult men — have felony convictions, so there are more than 10 ex-convicts for every one currently incarcerated.

And dependency on government is disincentivizing work. Eberstadt: "By 2024 nearly one in four prime age men without children in the household lived in homes taking at least one means tested benefit: triple the fraction back in 1985." Disability benefits are implausibly rife among prime-age men who are neither working nor looking for work.

Population aging depresses the saving rate, hence investing, hence productivity, a particular threat to American households (36 million, in 2023) with net worths less than \$25,000, including 40 percent of Hispanic

American and almost half of Black households.

A depopulating society cannot thrive with the chronic dependence that accompanies the breakdown of family structure: Since 1960, the percentage of babies born to unmarried mothers has surged from 5 percent to almost 40 percent. By 2023, more than one-fifth of children were in one-parent homes.

America, Eberstadt says, has had "the most robust demographic growth of any developed society." The Social Security Administration, predicting what it must desperately desire, projects another 100 million Americans by 2100. But intractable pathologies — including government's fiscal incontinence and "pay-as-you-go entitlements" — spell catastrophe for a nation with an upside-down "population pyramid," where each generation is smaller than the previous one.

There is one promising solution. Increasing skilled immigration into our nation, which has, as Eberstadt says, "an unusually good knack for turning newcomers into loyal and productive citizens."

## ICE detentions should not be a profit center for Kentucky's jails

By Kyle Ellison  
Kentucky Lantern

In 1860, Dr. William Sneed, who had been the chief surgeon at Kentucky's penitentiary, warned of any "effort to make the inmates a source of revenue for the State."

Flash forward 166 years to a story in the Louisville Courier-Journal reporting that eight Kentucky county jails were holding 1,100 immigrants on behalf of the federal Department of Homeland Security and ICE. For this service, the jails in Boone, Campbell, Christian, Daviess, Grayson, Hopkins, Kenton and Oldham counties receive payments of as much as \$88 per day for each federal prisoner.

Let's do the math. At the \$88 a day rate, those eight counties could pull in over \$35 million dollars a year. No wonder more immigrants are detained in Kentucky than in any state on its borders.

These eight jails are among the largest and newest of Kentucky's 74 county jails. They were designed and built to hold prisoners from outside the county. Big jails require more staff and higher bond payments, so counties have incentive to bus in high-profit federal prisoners from out-of-state.



PHOTO COURTESY KENTON COUNTY SHERIFF

The Kenton County Detention Center is one of the Kentucky jails housing detainees for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

These jails don't serve local demand. Sixty percent of the total 4,300 prisoners in these jails are federal or state prisoners. The prisoners are there because they bring income.

Meanwhile, county jails are run with little oversight or regulation. Six of the eight jails are overcrowded. There's no penalty for running an overcrowded jail, so the more prisoners the better.

Consider the Grayson County jail. That jail has 563 federal inmates in a 536-bed jail. (One hundred and fifty of those federal inmates are immigrants on hold by ICE.) Including

local and state prisoners, Grayson was operating at 124 percent of capacity at the end of April.

This isn't an unusual occurrence. It was, in a way, the plan from the beginning. The Grayson County jail was designed and built to pay for itself by holding prisoners from other agencies. Only 66 of a total 665 prisoners there at the end of April were held on county charges. Many of the prisoners have been held there for months.

It is a system without much meaningful oversight. None of our county jails, except Louisville Metro jail, issue any kind

of annual report. Without news media or others filing requests under the state open records law and citizens who talk with inquiring reporters, we would know nothing of what happens inside these walls. "Out-of-sight-out-of-mind" is standard operating procedure.

This is not just an issue with county jails holding ICE detainees. Forty-five of our 74 county jails are overcrowded. For many years Kentucky Department of Corrections Jail Inspectors have cited them for overcrowding, but the citations had few consequences. Thirty-five percent of people serving state felony

time are housed in lower cost county jails instead of a state prison. This is a grossly inhumane practice because jails were never intended for long term confinement. Jails have limited rehabilitation programs. The Grayson County jail was built with no secure outdoor area, so prisoners are never allowed outside. These jails generally lack the minimal living space options to protect sick, weak, mentally ill or non-criminal prisoners from exploitation.

Is it any surprise that 268 people have died in county jails since 2019?

The practice of building county jails as money-making propositions has created an outsized population of inmates in Kentucky. There are 20,000 people in 74 county jails and half those beds are "rented out" to state or federal agencies. Three thousand federal prisoners (including 1,100 immigrants) and 7,000 state prisoners are in county jails along with 10,000 prisoners facing county charges. Sixty thousand people are on state probation or parole. If all these people were in one place, it would be Kentucky's third largest city.

Only five states have higher percentages of incarcerated citizens than

Kentucky, according to 2024 figures.

We don't need more county jails and we don't need more tough-on-crime bills coming out of the legislature. Kentucky's crime rates have fallen for the past five years and are lower than the national average.

Still the bills keep coming. An army of vested interests drives legislators to pass more "tough-on-crime" sentencing laws (such as the "Safer Kentucky Act" of 2024) without providing additional funding for humane living conditions, treatment programs or staffing.

Kentucky quickly forgot what Dr. Sneed knew so many years ago when he opposed leasing inmates to private entities for their labor. It is immoral to run jails and prisons as profit and loss businesses. Blood should not be turned into money.

Kyle Ellison has followed incarceration issues since 1972 when he became a Kentucky Department of Corrections probation and parole officer in Louisville. He worked for the Department of Corrections for 16 years. Seven of those years were as a training officer for prison and jail staff all over the state, giving him the chance to research the prison history of Kentucky.