
The Growing of America

Background

Environmental protection, aging, and immigration

Since 1800, human population has soared from one billion to six billion today. Over the next half century, our numbers will increase again—to a staggering nine billion people. Yet nearly all of this growth will take place in developing countries, where the demand for food and water already outstrips the supply of these resources. In stark contrast, most industrialized nations will see their populations shrink and rapidly age, with one out of every three people over 65. Our world appears poised on the brink of a profound demographic divide.

How will our world cope with both three billion more people and unprecedented aging? The impacts of these two demographic trends will reverberate around the globe. Although the forces that compel them are already in place, their outcomes are far from fixed. From a U.S. perspective, the primary concerns are the demographic distribution—aging—of the population, and the environmental and natural resource implications of population size. This issue is extremely complex with many conflicting variables.

Why does population matter?

While the total number of inhabitants in the United States may not seem particularly important, it is actually intimately related to a whole range of critical national concerns: sufficient housing in urban areas, clean water and air, tax revenues available for social programs like education and Social Security, agricultural land for crops and animals, sustainability of fish life, pesticide use, energy availability and cost, forest survival and biodiversity, and others.

In addition, the issues of population are not only about the total numbers of people, but also about the age distribution of those people. Children and the elderly are usually economically dependent upon those in the middle—the workers—to help support their basic needs, either directly or through payment of taxes to the government. If the elderly and youth make up a larger proportion of the population, there is more pressure on the workers to generate and share their revenues. In the United States, the trend toward an aging population points to real causes for concern.



Decisions we make now about population will have profound impacts on the future of today's youth. Should the U.S. act to slow population growth? Should the U.S. act to increase the population of workers in this country? And how much should we worry about the global impact of rapid population growth in other parts of the world? This simulation provides an opportunity for you, the youth of today and workers of tomorrow, to decide.

Population growth in the U.S.

Unlike Japan and many other industrialized nations with similarly decreasing birth rates, the United States population is not decreasing. This may be surprising, since the current U.S. birth rate is lower than ever recorded and has been dropping each year. A release in May 2003 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported the lowest U.S. birth rate ever recorded for 2002: 13.9 births per 1,000 persons.

However, America's population is expected to increase from 281 million in 2000 to 394–438 million in 2050—a 40 to 55 percent increase. Some of the growth will come from new births to people already living in the U.S., some will come from people living longer, but more will come from immigration and the children born to immigrants.

Over the past 10 years, about one million immigrants were admitted legally into the United States. Since 1965, priority is given to those with relatives in the U.S. and those whom employers want to hire. In addition, there are currently an estimated 8–12 million illegal immigrants living in the U.S.

The role of immigration in population growth is monumental: Had there been no immigration after 1990, experts believe the United States population in 2050 would be only 310 million—25–30 percent smaller than it is predicted to be with current immigration rates. According to demographer Leon Bouvier, half of the increase in the U.S. population since 1970 has come from immigration. According to recent studies of the Census Bureau, the amount of growth each year due directly to immigration is 45 percent. This doesn't account for the full amount of growth since not only does immigration add current citizens, it adds future citizens—the children of today's immigrants. This impact is increased because many immigrant groups coming to the U.S. have higher birth rates than the U.S. average.

Immigration is the focus of U.S. population policy because it is the only area where the government has much control. Birth rates and death rates are difficult to influence by policy, but the number and rate of immigration is in large part determined by governmental action.

Should the U.S. close its borders? What are the costs and the benefits of reducing or eliminating immigration?



The environmental impact of U.S. population growth

A growing population means increased demand for food, which in turn means more land must be used for growing crops and grazing livestock. The increase of food production leads to more pressure to increase the intensity of farm-land use, which leads to increased pollution and agricultural run-off, and more energy being used to import food from elsewhere. A growing population also increases the demand for clean water, straining our supply. We currently use far more water each day than is replaced through natural processes. Our use of energy is also growing, leading to greater pollution, increasing expenses, and threatening our domestic security, as we rely on other countries in the world to fulfill our needs for oil. And even if these resources are never depleted, we must continue to divide them up amongst an ever-increasing number of people, leaving less for each.

Another impact of an increasing population is the loss of open space. Forests are cut down to make room for neighborhoods, and roads are built so people can drive from these new neighborhoods into more metropolitan areas for work, shopping, and entertainment. As forest and wild lands decrease, so do the habitats of hundreds of species of animals. Meanwhile, the hours we spend driving from home to work increase, as does the traffic and the resulting air pollution.



What should we do to stem the environmental pressure of our growing population?

Balancing population growth with the global environment

Environmental sustainability also has a global perspective: the impact of people on the environment is said to vary depending on the circumstances in which those people live. Immigration does not increase the global population, it redistributes it. The net effect of increasing U.S. immigration could cause negative environmental consequences on the U.S., in terms of increased use of energy, water, and land, but it may prevent other environmental consequences from occurring that ultimately impact the U.S., such as the destruction of Amazonian rain forests.

While the United States can decide not to welcome immigrants into America, this may not prevent all the environmental problems described above. The world's growing population will continue to use resources, and in fact may cause greater damage to more ecologically sensitive areas, such as rain forests, jungles, and biodiversity hot spots. In addition, many advocates argue that decreasing legal immigration will lead to increased illegal immigration, which causes other significant economic and cultural difficulties for the U.S.

On the other hand, the environmental impacts of population growth in the U.S. are made more serious by our high consumption rates. According to a report by World Resources Institute, the average American uses the equivalent of 300 shopping bags filled with natural resources for food, shelter, energy, transportation, and other products and services every week. The average North American consumes five times as



much as an average Mexican, 10 times as much as an average Chinese, and 30 times as much as the average person in India. Shifting more of the world's population to the United States therefore increases the overall consumption of natural resources.

While the average American consumes far more resources than the average citizen in the developing world, the lack of technology and dire poverty in the developing world often contributes to severe environmental crises that impact the whole world. Environmental groups therefore have different perspectives on the costs and benefits of immigration rates.

Is the U.S. then better off absorbing immigrants from the developing world because we have access to more resources and to technologies that can balance environmental stresses?

The graying of America

Another piece of the immigration puzzle is the aging of America's population. The number of people age 62 and over is projected to increase from 40 million in 2002 to 69 million in 2030. Between 1990 and 2020, the population aged 65 to 74 is projected to grow 74 percent. In 2030, about 20 percent of the total population will be over 65, compared to about 13 percent now.

What are the costs to the rest of society of a much larger percent of older people?

Today's seniors receive monthly checks from the government as part of a program called Social Security. Social Security benefits are drawn from the taxes collected from today's workers. 96 percent of workers contribute to Social Security, from paying a flat tax that comes out of their wage income, which is then matched by their employer. Money left over after paying the benefits to today's seniors is added to the Social Security Trust Fund, which is invested to provide funds for future use or borrowed by the government to cover other important priorities, like money for schools, health research, and defense.

The amount of money paid by Social Security does not change with the ups and downs of the economy, nor does it vary based on the amount that comes in from taxpayers. Social Security is an entitlement program, which creates a legal right of benefits for every qualified person within the age group. Unlike the money given by the government for schools, which can be changed from year to year depending on the economy, the federal government owes specific amounts of money to every senior citizen, based on how long they paid into the system and how much they earned when they were working.

The entitlement nature of this program creates a challenge—today’s workers expect that their benefits upon retirement will coincide with the amount they pay now in taxes. However, as the population ages, there will be more seniors collecting benefits and fewer workers supplying the income. One estimate predicts that instead of today’s ratio of 3.4 workers for every senior, the ratio will drop to 2.1 workers for every senior. A 2002 report by the Social Security Board of Trustees predicted that, with no changes in the current law, the trust fund will run out of money by mid-century—and many other studies predict much sooner. At that point, the amount collected through taxes on current workers will not be enough to pay the benefits owed to seniors. When we add in the costs of medical care for the elderly, through the entitlement programs of Medicare and Medicaid, the situation looks even more dire. And any decrease in immigration would further reduce the numbers of workers compared to the numbers of elders.

What are the implications of the graying of America on U.S. immigration policy?

Opinions and data on the benefit of immigrants on caring for the elderly vary. According to advocates, immigrants contribute greatly to the U.S. economy overall and can help to fill in the gaps in our population age distribution. These advocates argue that most immigrants contribute far more in taxes than they will receive in benefits. One study done last year found that an average new immigrant can be expected to contribute \$46,000 over his lifetime, not counting the economic benefits his children will contribute.

However, this study also found that, to really solve the Social Security problem, the U.S. would need to admit an additional five million immigrants per year. Others argue that immigrants on average are less productive, and older immigrants or those with many children may pay less into the system through taxes than they will receive from their own benefits and tax support for the education of their children.

Either way, it is clear that decisions made now about immigration policy will have dramatic effects on care for the elderly.

Your assignment

As government officials have sought to set new long-term policy on support of the elderly and environmental sustainability, the link between these topics and immigration has raised increasing interest. For that reason, the President and Congress have established a blue-ribbon commission of environmental and elderly-support groups to provide recommendations on immigration policies. The issues you need to consider are:

- Immigration and the elderly: Can changes in the U.S. immigration policy improve efforts to support the retirement needs of an aging population? If so, what should those changes look like?
- Immigration and the environment: Should U.S. immigration policy be changed to reduce the environmental impacts on America’s natural resources? To protect the global environment? Both? If so, what would those changes consist of?

Procedure

You will take on the role of one of the following representatives. You will review confidential instructions for your role and then meet with the other representatives.

One World Resources Group (OWRG): The OWRG is a worldwide environmental group founded in the 1970s. OWRG believes that rapid population growth and its effects on the environment are fundamentally global problems, and that environmental issues cannot be solved by closing borders.

U.S. Environmental Trust (USET): USET's mission is to promote domestic environmental management and environmental stewardship. It has advocated for reducing population growth as a prime means to preserving America's natural resources.

Council of American Elderly (CAE): The Council of American Elderly is a non-partisan group that conducts research and engages in advocacy on behalf of senior citizens and retirees. It has forwarded research showing the beneficial effects of immigration on support for the elderly.

Aging Citizens for American Protectionism (ACAP): ACAP is a national organization dedicated to protecting and promoting the rights of elderly Americans. It has advocated for limiting immigration and maximizing social benefits going to senior citizens.

The group has decided to hold two meetings. During the first meeting you will explore the primary interests and beliefs of each group. Then you should attempt to highlight areas of agreement, areas of disagreement, and the relative priorities of each to the groups. During the second meeting, you should focus on developing a proposal that you can submit to the President and Congress regarding your suggested changes to U.S. immigration policy.

As a group, you may also make policy suggestions for dealing with other aspects of caring for the elderly (i.e., Social Security policy changes) or protecting the environment (i.e., energy policy changes), but these should be secondary to the main task of immigration policy. Participants are encouraged to use creativity to create suggestions that are acceptable to all groups. Only unanimous proposals will be included in the Commission's final report.