



## **Primer: Family Formation in America’s New Golden Age**

By: Paige Hauser

### **Introduction**

President Donald Trump, in his second inaugural address, declared that “the Golden Age of America begins right now.” Judging by the lack of family formation and birth rates persistently below the level needed to replace each generation, called the replacement rate, such confidence, optimism, and renewed sense of purpose have been sorely needed. U.S. birth rates have fallen year over year since 2007. Worse still, the pace of decline seems to be increasing; from 2022 to 2023, rates fell another three percent.<sup>1</sup> Recently, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) reduced its long-term fertility projection from 1.7 to 1.6 and explained the accompanying significant challenges for U.S. solvency.<sup>2</sup> Birth rates consistently below the replacement level of 2.1 total fertility rate (TFR), as they have been in the United States since about 2009, risk the loss of economic growth, societal stability, and cultural identity. The significance of chronically low fertility goes beyond statistical data, impacting the very fabric of American society and the long-term viability of the nation. Reversing this trend is essential to ensure the country’s prosperity and truly enter a new Golden Age. This paper explores why arresting the decline in the birth rate and even boosting birth rates is necessary and outlines comprehensive strategies to achieve this goal, examining both domestic and international perspectives.

### **Economic and Social Impacts of Demographic Collapse**

The demographer Paul Morland, in his book *No One Left: Why the World Needs More Children*, writes of the disastrous consequences of too few babies being born for a population to replace itself. Of all the data points he cites in the book, of greatest concern for our purposes is the dependency ratio, defined as the proportion of the working to the nonworking age population (children and retirees). The U.S. ratio is 28 percent, which is double what it was in the 1950s, and it is expected to rise to 40 percent by the mid-2040s.<sup>3</sup> With fewer working individuals supporting an ever-growing and aging population, the strain on social security systems, health-care infrastructure, and public welfare programs becomes unsustainable.

---

1

Joyce A. Martin, and Brady E. Hamilton, and Michelle J. K. Osterman, “Births in the United States, 2023,” NCHS Data Brief, no. 507 (2024): 1–7, <https://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc/158789>.

<sup>2</sup> Congressional Budget Office, “The Demographic Outlook: 2025 to 2055,” January 13, 2025, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/60875>.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Morland, *No One Left: Why the World Needs More Children* (Swift Press, 2025), 23.

A higher dependency ratio indicates fewer workers supporting more older retirees; the imbalance forces higher tax rates extracted from fewer workers to care for the nonworking retired population and leads to growing government debt. Pat Buchanan wrote in his book *The Great Betrayal* that “social stability depends on a rising standard of living for all our people.”<sup>4</sup> Rising dependency ratios certainly threaten social stability and risk fostering intergenerational conflict as younger generations bear an ever-greater economic burden in exchange for a lower standard of living.

Furthermore, a shrinking workforce leads to diminished economic productivity and innovation. The simple equation for economic growth is growth in output per worker times growth in the workforce. Since the Civil War, growth in the output per worker has been about 1.9 percent annually.<sup>5</sup> Assuming productivity can be maintained with an ever-shrinking workforce, the economy does not continue to grow slowly; it contracts. As the pool of young, skilled workers shrinks, industries struggle to maintain competitiveness. Over time, this stagnation reduces consumer demand, weakens entrepreneurship, and diminishes the country’s global economic influence. Economic stagnation also exacerbates wealth inequality as opportunities dwindle for younger populations.

Take, for example, the cost of American housing, which has risen steeply. Such asset inflation is driven not simply by a disparity in supply and demand but more specifically by older generations with large savings chasing too few investment assets with good returns. The problem is exacerbated if large equity firms accelerate their buying up and conversion of housing into rental properties.<sup>6</sup> Younger generations cannot afford housing in these circumstances; their dollar has approximately 86 percent less buying power than that of baby boomers, with the National Consumer Price Index rising 500 percent since the 1970s while wages have only increased by 80 percent.<sup>7</sup> This is the type of generational wealth disparity that an ever-aging population exacerbates.

In Japan, the dependency ratio is already over 50 percent, and it has filed fewer patents than in previous decades.<sup>8</sup> Over the last several decades, Japan’s gross domestic product (GDP) grew at a much lower annual rate of 0.83 percent compared to the United States’ rate of 2.53 percent.<sup>9</sup> The difference can be explained purely in terms of population decline versus population growth.

---

<sup>4</sup> Morland, *No One Left*, 43.

<sup>5</sup> Jesús Fernández-Villaverde, “Rapid Fertility Decline Is an Existential Crisis,” *The American Enterprise*, February 5, 2025, [https://theamericanenterprise.com/americas-quadrillion-dollar-challenge-can-the-u-s-cope-with-rapid-fertility-decline/?mkt\\_tok=NDc1LVBCUS05NzEAAAGYmMuJSboxNeafdTurTLhABSRMp\\_bohYTEPC3X0hRGueBBupmIDupWaj5Qad9kox2w34FgLVMVjVgtgSn80BLKPh9ZDW2\\_kMpRBbOs7QkkyAmIoU8v](https://theamericanenterprise.com/americas-quadrillion-dollar-challenge-can-the-u-s-cope-with-rapid-fertility-decline/?mkt_tok=NDc1LVBCUS05NzEAAAGYmMuJSboxNeafdTurTLhABSRMp_bohYTEPC3X0hRGueBBupmIDupWaj5Qad9kox2w34FgLVMVjVgtgSn80BLKPh9ZDW2_kMpRBbOs7QkkyAmIoU8v).

<sup>6</sup> Philip Pilkington, “Generation Against Generation,” *First Things*, December 1, 2021, <https://firstthings.com/generation-against-generation/>.

<sup>7</sup> ConsumerAffairs, “Comparing the Costs of Generations [2024],” ConsumerAffairs.com, updated March 31, 2025, <https://www.consumeraffairs.com/finance/comparing-the-costs-of-generations.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Morland, *No One Left*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Fernández-Villaverde, “Rapid Fertility Decline.”

Labor shortages are the natural consequence of fewer workers and have already begun to affect critical sectors of the United States' economy, such as health care, aviation, technology, and agriculture.<sup>10</sup> These shortages disrupt supply chains and hinder delivery of services. While shortages may inflate wages, there are no guarantees that wages will rise faster than inflation.<sup>11</sup> The health-care sector's ability to care for an aging population is particularly at risk, with severe consequences for public health outcomes, economic stability, and the need to stave off societal degradation.

In Japan, with a dependency ratio of over 50 percent, roughly four thousand elderly people die alone every week. New industries have emerged responding to the need to fumigate apartments after the long-departed are discovered weeks after they have died.<sup>12</sup> Technological advances will no doubt address some of the labor shortages, but the bottom line is that fewer workers mean not enough people to do everything that needs doing, and certain jobs will not get done. Does that result in crumbling infrastructure or elderly populations dying alone and uncared for? Probably both.

Perhaps artificial intelligence (AI) will save us. No doubt, not a few governments are hoping it will. Tech giants such as Bill Gates predict that AI will replace the need for humans to do most things, even within the next ten years.<sup>13</sup> While this paper is not an analysis of the pros and cons of AI and potential disruptions that it will bring and is even now bringing, suffice it to say that other tech giants, equally as bullish on AI, also think that the problem of low birth rates is one of looming civilizational collapse. See, for example, Elon Musk's recent comments during an interview in which he admitted this is the problem that he loses sleep over, saying that "humanity

---

<sup>10</sup> National Center for Health Workforce Analysis, "State of the U.S. Health Care Workforce, 2024," November 2024, <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bureau-health-workforce/state-of-the-health-workforce-report-2024.pdf>; HR Forecast, "Strategic Workforce Planning and Skills Management in the Aviation Industry," November 2024, <https://hrforecast.com/the-aviation-labor-shortage-challenges-and-solutions/#:~:text=As%20demand%20has%20recovered%2C%20airlines%20and%20airports%20have,incluing%20pilots%2C%20cabin%20crew%2C%20ground%20staff%2C%20and%20technicians>; Dan Martin and Dan Rosso, "Chipping Away: Assessing and Addressing the Labor Market Gap Facing the U.S. Semiconductor Industry," Oxford Economics, 2023, [https://www.semiconductors.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/SIA\\_July2023\\_ChippingAway\\_website.pdf](https://www.semiconductors.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/SIA_July2023_ChippingAway_website.pdf); Stephanie Mercier, "Labor Problems Persist in the U.S. Agricultural Sector," *Farm Journal*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.agweb.com/opinion/labor-problems-persist-u-s-agricultural-sector>.

<sup>11</sup> Inflation rises with aging populations because there is more pressure on production. An aging population continues to generate demand for the goods that labor produces, but labor shortages make meeting that demand increasingly difficult. Inflation will accelerate as too many old people require too many younger workers to produce too many goods relative to their ability to do so. Labor shortages will raise the price of labor, and the growing wage bill gets passed along to the consumer in the form of higher prices. See Pilkington, "Generation Against Generation."

<sup>12</sup> Morland, *No One Left*, 28

<sup>13</sup> Ariel Zilber, "Bill Gates Says AI Will Replace Doctors, Teachers Within 10 Years—and Claims Humans Won't Be Needed 'For Most Things,'" *New York Post*, March 27, 2025, <https://nypost.com/2025/03/27/business/bill-gates-said-ai-will-replace-doctors-teachers-within-10-years/>.

is dying.”<sup>14</sup> COVID-19 also proved there are many essential jobs that simply cannot be outsourced to robots or laptops.

Finally, there is the fundamental question of what kind of society leaves the care of its young and aged to robots. That is really the reason to be so concerned about shrinking birth rates and populations. It goes beyond the economic and financial problems of labor shortages and productivity declines.

Generational balance underpins social cohesion. With fewer younger individuals to support community structures, social networks weaken, leading to increased isolation. This erosion of social cohesion undermines national unity and identity, which are essential components of a stable society. In *The Great Betrayal*, Buchanan quotes Harvard University’s Dani Rodrik: “Social disintegration is not a spectator sport; those on the sideline get splashed with the mud from the field. Ultimately, the deepening of social fissures can harm all.”<sup>15</sup> While Rodrik is referring to the impacts of globalism on everyday Americans, his concerns can just as easily be attributed to the problem of a too-low fertility rate.

The CBO predicts that the population of the United States is projected to grow to 372 million by 2055, but that is only because of expected net immigration, not native births. The fertility rate is expected to decline to 1.6 births per woman through 2055, with women aged thirty and under averaging 0.79 births in 2025 and dropping to 0.62 in 2055, and women thirty and older going from 0.84 births in 2025 to 0.98 in 2055.<sup>16</sup> For the United States and modern societies worldwide, too-low birth rates and rising dependency ratios bring a host of economic problems that go well beyond GDP: They put the survival of our civilization at risk.

### **Why Immigration Is Insufficient**

Some argue that such dire consequences can be avoided if countries with low birth rates allow greater numbers of immigrants into their country—that is, simply substitute childbearing with immigration. Indeed, that appears to be the preferred strategy of most of Europe. Germany, for example, has had below-replacement fertility since the 1970s and needs an average of four hundred thousand skilled immigrants per year.<sup>17</sup> The United Kingdom has had below-replacement fertility for nearly half a century. Its old-age dependency ratio started increasing in 2009, and while its labor force has increased, worker productivity has been largely stagnant. What has produced economic growth in the United Kingdom is mass immigration. The foreign-born population is now greater than 14 percent. In fact, the only reason deaths in the United Kingdom do not outstrip births is because of the slightly higher fertility rate and younger profile of immigrant populations.

Although immigration can temporarily offset population decline and has been relied on by most developed countries to prevent the economic stagnation that accompanies too-low birth rates, it

---

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Bouris, “Elon Musk Says Shrinking Birth Rates Keep Him Up at Night,” *Daily Beast*, updated March 29, 2025, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/elon-musk-says-shrinking-birth-rates-keep-him-up-at-night/>.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Buchanan, *The Great Betrayal*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Congressional Budget Office, “The Demographic Outlook.”

<sup>17</sup> Morland, *No One Left*, 26.

cannot solve the problem. That is because birth rates have been too low for too long and the decline is too widespread.<sup>18</sup> There simply are not enough high-fertility source countries for the low-fertility, mostly industrialized world to draw from. What is more, immigrant fertility rates often converge with those of the host country within one or two generations.<sup>19</sup> This pattern further limits the long-term effectiveness of immigration as a solution to demographic challenges. And when an increasing percentage of the population is untethered to the country's founding norms and its native culture, the result is domestic instability as different cultures increasingly occupy the same geographic territory. Europe is currently experiencing this phenomenon.

Rich and low-fertility countries will find it increasingly difficult to attract high-skilled immigrant workers. This is because the source countries, those with higher fertility and lower wages, will increasingly be from places with lower educational attainment and economic productivity. The expected impact of such immigrants would be lower labor productivity in the host country.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the numbers indicate that immigrants whose incomes fall between the sixtieth and ninetieth percentile in countries with a welfare state are net-zero contributors, even to the second generation.<sup>21</sup> When migrants are less educated and therefore paid less than the native population and grow to a larger proportion of the population, inequality worsens, and society becomes more stratified.<sup>22</sup> Finally, and perhaps most obviously, immigrant cultures may be at odds with the native culture, and that too leads to social stratification.<sup>23</sup>

Over-reliance on immigration threatens the shared cultural and historical foundation vital for societal cohesion and national unity. Higher domestic birth rates are crucial for sustaining national identity and cultural heritage. Immigration does not address the systemic issues that lead to delayed family formation or the failure to welcome children across societies in the first place. A self-sustaining population is essential for long-term stability and resilience; any short-term spreadsheet problems alleviated by immigration only buy longer-term and much larger problems. It is worth considering whether the simple productivity gains and losses are the most important paradigm or whether a nation is something more than its productive output. A nation, if it is to be a real community that strives to build bonds of solidarity between citizens and form them into particular types of people capable of common goals—such as the transmitting of a culture of ordered liberty—can only absorb the limited number of immigrants it can assimilate.

---

<sup>18</sup> The United States' TFR as of 2024 is 1.62 births per woman. South Korea's as of 2025 is 1.08. The United Kingdom's TFR as of 2025 is 1.76. Unsurprisingly, the continent of Africa has the highest average TFR in the world across its countries, at 4.05 in 2025, but even this is part of a trend of declining rates in Africa, as it was higher in previous years.

<sup>19</sup> For example, the CBO's demographic outlook study projected that the fertility rate of America's native-born women would equal about 1.56 from 2025 to 2055. Foreign-born women's rate is predicted to drop from 1.88 births per woman to 1.80 from 2025 to 2035 and then stay at that rate through 2055. All of these figures are below the replacement rate of 2.1. See *Congressional Budget Office, "The Demographic Outlook."*

<sup>20</sup> Paul Morland and Philip Pilkington, "Migration, Stagnation, or Procreation: Quantifying the Demographic Trilemma," ARC Research, February 20, 2024, <https://www.arc-research.org/research-papers/the-demographic-trilemma>.

<sup>21</sup> Fernández-Villaverde, "Rapid Fertility Decline."

<sup>22</sup> Morland and Pilkington, "Migration, Stagnation, or Procreation."

<sup>23</sup> Morland and Pilkington, "Migration, Stagnation, or Procreation."

## Causes of Falling Birth Rates

Across the developed world, birth rates have been too low for too long. Globally, the fertility rate is barely above replacement at 2.3.<sup>24</sup> This widespread birth dearth makes it hard to pin the blame on any one factor, be it social, economic, or cultural. Nevertheless, policymakers and, indeed, anyone who cares about the continued existence of the United States must try to understand what led to the decline.

One theory is that the significant expansion in opportunities for women in education and the workforce increases the opportunity costs of childbearing, particularly during women's peak fertility years. The modern economy and educational system are structured to require long hours and near-singular devotion at the exact time when women are at their peak fertility. Such prolonged preparation for a career, almost certainly contributes to delayed marriage and childbearing. Then, once established, many women face difficult trade-offs between career advancement and family formation, contributing to lower birth rates. The increased emphasis on higher education and professional achievement means that many individuals enter stable careers later in life, reducing their window for starting families and thus reducing family size.

If couples make it through the education and career gauntlet, then they face perceptions of financial hardship that pose barriers to childbearing. This is the case even though married couples today are often better off financially than those of previous generations. Adjusted for inflation, median household incomes in the United States today are higher than they were in the 1950s, but so are expectations for standards of living. For example, in 1950, the median household income was approximately \$3,300 annually,<sup>25</sup> or about \$43,000 in today's dollars,<sup>26</sup> whereas the median household income today exceeds \$70,000. But the perception of a "two-income trap" reflects the fact that while incomes have risen, so have costs for housing,<sup>27</sup> health care,<sup>28</sup> and education.<sup>29</sup>

Take, for example, the average cost of a four-year degree, a starter home, and giving birth in a hospital, arguably three of the biggest expenses a young family might face. In the 1950s, the

---

<sup>24</sup> "Total Fertility Rate 2025," World Population Review, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/total-fertility-rate>.

<sup>25</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Income of Families and Persons in the United States: 1950," U.S. Department of Commerce Current Population Reports Series P-60, No. 9, March 25, 1952, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1952/demo/p60-009.html>.

<sup>26</sup> "\$3,300," CPI Inflation Calculator, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1950?amount=3300>.

<sup>27</sup> Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, "The State of the Nation's Housing," Harvard University, June 2024, [https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/reports/files/Harvard\\_JCHS\\_The\\_State\\_of\\_the\\_Nations\\_Housing\\_2024.pdf](https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/reports/files/Harvard_JCHS_The_State_of_the_Nations_Housing_2024.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Jim Probasco, "Why Do Healthcare Costs Keep Rising?," Investopedia, September 3, 2023, <https://www.investopedia.com/insurance/why-do-healthcare-costs-keep-rising/>.

<sup>29</sup> USAFacts Team, "College Tuition Has Increased—But What's the Actual Cost?," USAFacts, March 23, 2023, <https://usafacts.org/articles/college-tuition-has-increased-but-whats-the-actual-cost/>.

average annual tuition for a four-year public college was approximately \$200,<sup>30</sup> amounting to \$800 for the degree. Adjusted for inflation, this is roughly \$9,000 in today's dollars. In contrast, the average annual tuition for a four-year public college today is about \$10,000, totaling \$40,000 for the degree. The cost of a four-year degree has more than quadrupled in real terms since the 1950s.

In 1950, the median home price in the United States was \$7,354.<sup>31</sup> Adjusting for inflation, this is equivalent to approximately \$44,600 today. As of 2023, the median home price is around \$353,000. This represents an increase of nearly 690 percent in real terms over the past seven decades.

In 1954, a hospital bill for childbirth was approximately \$100,<sup>32</sup> which is about \$1,000 when adjusted for inflation. Today, the average out-of-pocket cost for childbirth, even after insurance, is approximately \$2,854. This suggests that the cost of giving birth in a hospital has nearly tripled in real terms since the 1950s, not to mention the premiums for health insurance to cover the rest.

These comparisons highlight the substantial rise in costs for education, housing, and health care over the past several decades, outpacing inflation and wage increases and impacting household finances significantly. Unlike the 1950s, when a single income could comfortably support a family, today's families often feel financial strain even with dual incomes. The reality is nuanced: While absolute purchasing power has increased, the relative cost of achieving middle-class stability has grown, especially in areas with a high cost of living. This perception of financial strain discourages family formation, even when household wages have increased.

Financial factors play some role in these trends, but beyond those structures are cultural narratives that perhaps play an even larger part. The idea is not dissimilar to the "social imaginary" Carl Trueman explains in his *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. There has been a marked shift in societal priorities toward individualism and career aspirations, often at the expense of family formation. Modern media and cultural narratives frequently portray parenthood as a burden rather than depicting them as the point of adulthood and treating children as a chief good. This anti-family bias discourages young people from having children.

Timothy P. Carney, in his book *Family Unfriendly*, notes that having children was once considered a natural progression into adulthood, with societal norms strongly supporting marriage and family life. Today, however, there is a prevalent "planner mentality," in which individuals meticulously map out every aspect of their lives, including whether and when to have children. This shift reflects a broader cultural move towards individual autonomy and

---

<sup>30</sup> Ernest V. Hellis and Associates, "Costs of Attending College: A Study of Student Expenditures and Sources of Income," U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1957, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924061145755&seq=284>.

<sup>31</sup> Valerie Forgeard, "How Much Was a House in 1950: Prices Then and Now," Brilliantio, April 6, 2024, <https://brilliantio.com/how-much-was-a-house-in-1950/>.

<sup>32</sup> Rose Heichelbech, "Old Hospital Bills Show Just How Cheap Having a Baby Used to Be," Dusty Old Thing, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://dustyoldthing.com/old-hospital-bills-cheap/>.

self-determination, making family formation a deliberate choice rather than an expected milestone.<sup>33</sup>

That change was only reinforced by the wide availability of hormonal birth control. By offering the illusion of consequence-free sex—that is, by preventing conception and the commitment children require—the Pill offers the illusion of control. It’s your life, says the birth control regime—totally planned out, everything happening on your timeline.

Yet, the widespread availability of birth control to prevent unwanted pregnancy has instead caused an increase in unwed motherhood and a decrease in married childbearing. In 1970, there were 26 births per 1,000 unmarried women; by 2016, it was 42 births per 1,000 unmarried women, and births for married women went from 121 to 90 per 1,000.<sup>34</sup> What explains the seeming contradiction? Put simply, the Pill changed how the entire culture views “other people’s kids.” In offering seemingly consequence-free sex, the Pill erased the whole notion of commitment, and procreation shifted from a natural occurrence to an individual choice. This is why birth rates have dropped and why career maximalism is the default and children are viewed as a hindrance.<sup>35</sup>

Others have pointed out that it was not the specific technology of the Pill but the cultural ethos arising from legal changes such as no-fault divorce that made the difference in ushering in the sexual revolution. Put another way, the legal and social changes did not require the technology of the Pill or abortion to effectively reduce fertility. As one example in support of that notion, Japan experienced all the same legal and cultural changes brought about by the sexual revolution; it had a baby boom driven by increased marriage rates and then a sharp fertility collapse, but it did not legalize contraception until 1999.<sup>36</sup> If the Pill drove the sexual revolution, then Japan should not have seen its birth rates collapse until 1999, but like the rest of the developed world, its rates began dropping in the 1970s.

While unmarried births and cohabitating rates are higher than before the Pill, the General Social Survey indicates that fewer adults are having sex or living together than ever before. The most troubling change is a staggering drop in national marriage rates (almost 60 percent in fifty years), which some have called the “relationship recession.”<sup>37</sup> In 2018, there were only 6.5 marriages per 1,000 people, the lowest level ever.<sup>38</sup> It turns out that dismantling the norms of society in exchange for a sexual ethic based only on consent, as the sexual revolution did, reduced marriage from the centerpiece of adult life to just another lifestyle choice. The marriages that do happen are happening later. In 2019, the average age at first marriage was twenty-eight for women, whereas in 2006, it was twenty-five years old.

---

<sup>33</sup> Timothy P. Carney, *Family Unfriendly: How Our Culture Made Raising Kids Much Harder Than It Needs to Be* (Harper, 2024), 275.

<sup>34</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 276.

<sup>35</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 278.

<sup>36</sup> Arctotherium, “The Five Stages of Western Fertility,” Not With a Bang (Substack), January 29, 2025, <https://arctotherium.substack.com/p/the-five-stages-of-western-fertility>.

<sup>37</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 192.

<sup>38</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 200.



As it turns out, marriage rates are very good predictors of birth rates. According to one model, an average age for marriage of twenty-four yields a birth rate of 1.8, but an average age of thirty yields a 1.55 birth rate.<sup>39</sup> In 2009, the birth rate was still at replacement (2.1), and marriages were starting at younger ages. By 2019, the birth rate had fallen to 1.7, and marriages had started at older ages.<sup>40</sup> These trends, which reduce the number of childbearing years available, compound demographic challenges.

The alienation between the sexes is one cause of the relationship recession and a retreat from marriage, but it also contributes to the loneliness epidemic and deaths of despair from drug and alcohol abuse. Without the societal pillar of marriage, there is little wonder civilization is crumbling.

There is, however, evidence that men and women are not happy with these trends. The fertility gap is the difference between the number of children women desire to have and the actual number they end up having, or the difference between desired and achieved fertility. According to recent studies, the average American woman reports wanting about 2.5 children, yet the actual TFR remains below 1.7. As detailed above, typical causality is assigned to systemic barriers, including workplace inflexibility and the high costs of child care and education. When asked why they do not have children, however, one in three people in the 20–45 age range cited lack of a partner.<sup>41</sup>

Thus far, various economic, structural, and cultural factors that might explain falling birth rates have been analyzed, but the most direct link is to falling marriage rates. In fact, according to the demographer Lyman Stone, the entire decline in TFR after 2001 can be explained by a lower proportion of the population being married.<sup>42</sup> According to his research, “If people had just continued to get and stay married at about the rates they did in 2008 . . . total fertility would have been 2.0 lifetime-births per woman, instead of 1.85.”<sup>43</sup> Perhaps, then, the best motivation for policymakers to start steering away from this demographic iceberg is acknowledging that this all-important feature of the American dream, getting married and raising one’s own family, is still desired but not being realized.

### **Lessons from Other Countries**

In the early 2010s, the Hungarian government, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, began to prioritize policies to reverse Hungary’s declining birth rates to ensure its long-term economic stability and to maintain its cultural identity. Hungary explicitly rejected immigration as a solution to the problem of its declining population. While Orbán’s populist party is credited with moving Hungary in a decidedly pro-family direction, the country had long-established policies in

---

<sup>39</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 204.

<sup>40</sup> Sally C. Curtin and Paul D. Sutton, “Marriage Rates in the United States, 1900–2018,” National Center for Health Statistics Health E-Stats, April 2020, [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/marriage\\_rate\\_2018/marriage\\_rate\\_2018.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/marriage_rate_2018/marriage_rate_2018.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 204.

<sup>42</sup> Lyman Stone, “No Ring, No Baby: How Marriage Trends Impact Fertility,” Institute for Family Studies, March 19, 2018, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/no-ring-no-baby>.

<sup>43</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 204.

support of family formation. For example, in the 1950s, abortions and contraception were limited, and in 1967 a paid leave policy was introduced, which gave women the ability to stay home with their children until the age of three and keep their jobs open, with modest remuneration.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, fertility rates in Hungary plunged below replacement as they did in the whole region in the 1980s and 1990s.

Hungary's suite of pro-family policies now includes tax exemptions for families with multiple children, lifetime personal income tax exemptions for mothers of four or more children, subsidized housing loans, forgivable loans for families with children, expansion of daycare facilities, parental leave benefits, assistance with education costs, free school meals, health-care benefits for children, and direct financial incentives for childbirth. These measures aim to alleviate financial barriers and encourage people to have larger families. In total, Hungary now spends about 6 percent of its GDP on assistance to families.

Critics claim these policies have been unfruitful since Hungary's fertility is still below replacement. In 2010, however, Hungary's TFR was approximately 1.25 children per woman, and following policy implementation, the TFR experienced a gradual increase, reaching 1.59 in 2021. While recent data indicates a decline, with the TFR decreasing to 1.51 in 2023, Hungary has outperformed its neighbors in Europe with rates slightly higher than the EU average of 1.46 in 2022.<sup>45</sup> What can be said is that Hungary successfully slowed the decline in birth rates. Its success was to catch the fertile cohort and encourage them to have one more child before they hit forty years old.

In 1973, the TFR of Australia was approximately 2.0 births per woman. By 2023, that figure had decreased to a record low of 1.50 births per woman.<sup>46</sup> In the early 2000s, Australia experimented with "baby bonuses" to support family formation; its birth rates had fallen to below 1.75.<sup>47</sup> The baby bonus was a financial incentive designed to offset the costs associated with childbirth and encourage higher birth rates. Initially set at A\$3,000 per child, it was later increased to A\$5,000, paid in installments. Four years later, the birth rate had improved to just under two children per 1,000 women.<sup>48</sup> A 2011 study found that the baby bonuses did have a positive but modest impact on Australia's birth rates.<sup>49</sup> After the policy was abandoned in 2013, fertility rates have fallen back to around 1.7.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 176.

<sup>45</sup> Viktoria Nemeth, "The Hungarian Birth Rate Among the Best in the EU," Oeconomus Economic Research Foundation, October 4, 2024, <https://www.oeconomus.hu/en/oecogram/hungarian-birth-rate-among-the-best-in-the-eu/>.

<sup>46</sup> Media Release, "Birth rate continues to decline," (Australian Bureau of Statistics, October 16, 2024).

[https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/birth-rate-continues-decline?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/birth-rate-continues-decline?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>47</sup> Morland *No One Left*, 180.

<sup>48</sup> Morland, *No One Left*, 180; . Kristjana Einarsdóttir, Amanda Langridge, Geoffrey Hammond, Anthony S. Gunnell, Fatima A. Haggard, and Fiona J. Stanley, "The Australian Baby Bonus Maternity Payment and Birth Characteristics in Western Australia," *PLoS One* 7, no. 11 (2012): e48885, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0048885>.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Drago, Katina Sawyer, Karina M. Shreffler, Diana Warren, and Mark Wooden, "Did Australia's Baby Bonus Increase Fertility Intentions and Births?," *Population Research and Policy Review* 30, no. 3 (2011): 381–397, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41487443>.

<sup>50</sup> Morland, *No One Left*, 180.

Finally, Russia launched an initiative in 2007 after it found that one-child families were becoming the norm to incentivize women to have a second or third child. The “maternity capital” incentive provides a one-off cash benefit of RUB 453,000 (approximately US\$6,900) for families having a second or third child. Russian TFR increased from 1.28 in 2006 to a peak of 1.79 in 2016, when the program was initially set to expire, but it has been extended, no doubt due to its popularity and possible effectiveness. A UN report describes the policy as having “succeeded in stopping and even slightly reversing the decline in cohort fertility, which was taking place among women born since 1957.”<sup>51</sup>

Examples from these countries suggest that targeted policies can make a difference, especially when focusing on the age group most likely to have another child.

### **The Outlier Nation: Israel**

Israel is unique as a modern industrialized country that has managed to maintain high fertility rates, averaging 3.01 per woman. It is no surprise, then, that many have looked to Israel to understand how to avert demographic collapse. Israel disproves the common notion that rich and educated countries cannot also have sustainable birth rates. To be sure, its birth rates vary by religious population, ranging from more than six among the ultra-Orthodox Jews to 1.96 among secular Jewish women, but even the latter have higher birth rates than any country in Europe. The majority of college graduates in Israel are women, and Israel’s family benefits are relatively modest, totaling about 2.1 percent of GDP.<sup>52</sup>

In *Family Unfriendly*, Carney explains what about Israeli culture makes for higher birth rates: Its religious, tribal, and national self-understanding help to create a child-friendly “ecosystem.”<sup>53</sup> Religiosity certainly predicts fecundity, not least because many Jews acknowledge a God-given command to “be fruitful and multiply,” a belief that makes it more likely that a couple will have children. The historical threats to eliminate the Jewish people and the fact that Israel is surrounded by enemies also explain the tribal and national understanding of reproduction as essential to survival. Those three large pillars—religion, the tribe, and the nation—help create a pro-child ecosystem that affects everything from physical infrastructure to expectations and societal norms. As one Israeli put it, “Other people have kids, so it’s normal.”<sup>54</sup>

Beyond its cultural norms and expectations, Israel has pro-natalist policies that help emphasize the importance of family. Policies include generous parental leave—fifteen weeks of paid maternity leave and up to one year while retaining job security—childcare support, and monthly per-child allowances and tax benefits, in addition to a per-child savings account program.<sup>55</sup> These

---

<sup>51</sup> Tomáš Sobotka, Anna Matysiak, and Zuzanna Brzozowska, Working Paper No. 1 (UNFPA Technical Division, Population and Development Branch, May 31, 2019), <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/policy-responses-low-fertility-how-effective-are-they>.

<sup>52</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 155.

<sup>53</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 161.

<sup>54</sup> Carney, *Family Unfriendly*, 163.

<sup>55</sup> “Savings for Every Child,” Altshuler Shaham Investment House, accessed April 10, 2025, [https://www.as-invest.co.il/en/provident-and-pension-funds/savings-for-every-child/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.as-invest.co.il/en/provident-and-pension-funds/savings-for-every-child/?utm_source=chatgpt.com); “Child Allowance Rates,” State of Israel National Insurance Institute, accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.btl.gov.il/English%20Homepage/Benefits/Children/Pages/Rates%20of%20child%20allowance.aspx>.

factors have enabled Israel to maintain stable fertility rates despite being a wealthy, modern, well-educated, and egalitarian society.

### **Policy Recommendations for the United States**

The Trump administration has not only the opportunity to deliver on the president's promise to usher in America's new Golden Age but also a pressing need to help orient this new Golden Age around supporting larger American families. If not its prime feature, the Trump–Vance ticket did campaign on making it easier to raise a family in America. While any policy that will ease the burdens on families should therefore be on the table, three considerations should guide policy development geared towards changing the economic incentives and cultural norms to at least slow the decline in births and perhaps even increase fertility to above replacement levels.

First is understanding the urgency of the matter and seizing the momentum of the mandate. Policymakers must act immediately to address collapsing fertility rates before demographic momentum makes recovery nearly impossible. With ever-shrinking cohorts of women of childbearing age, even a rise in birth rates will struggle to offset long-term population decline. Simply put, once fertility drops too low, reversing the trend becomes increasingly difficult. The time frame for effective action is short, and further delays risk locking the United States into an irreversible cycle of decline.

This decline is not something the American people want. As mentioned previously, the United States continues to experience a significant fertility gap of about 1.06 children per woman. This gap has been widening over the past few decades.<sup>56</sup> Most individuals desire more children than they ultimately have, indicating that other barriers—not personal preferences—are suppressing birth rates. This gap presents a crucial opportunity: Unlike other social challenges, where policy must shift public attitudes, here, desires and policy goals are already aligned.

Second, because the focus should be on arresting demographic momentum in the wrong direction, one set of policies should be targeted to encourage a significant portion of married couples who already have children to have an additional child. Such couples have already demonstrated a willingness and ability to have children, making them the most receptive to having more. Many of these families would like to have additional children but face financial, logistical, or work-life balance constraints that policies can directly address. Unlike childless individuals, who may still be undecided about parenthood or face deeper social, economic, or physical barriers, parents are already familiar with the demands of raising children and are more likely to respond positively to incentives. Focusing on these families would ensure a faster, more effective fertility boost perhaps within a decade, as the opportunity for increasing birth rates is limited by demographic momentum.

Third, another set of policies should be targeted at efforts to increase marriage rates substantially. The collapse in birth rates is serious and undesired. Targeted policy interventions can have a measurably positive impact on slowing the decline, which is the most urgent need. It is trite to

---

<sup>56</sup> The fertility gap is the difference between the number of children individuals desire and the number they actually have. While the TFR is about 1.64 births per woman, the number of children women (and men) report wanting is approximately 2.7 on average.

say, but when one is in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging. More importantly, this final consideration gets to the heart of why birth rates are collapsing and helps to focus efforts on the true locus of the problem. This means addressing the cultural narratives and legal structures around marriage that grew out of the sexual revolution and the accompanying alienation between the sexes. Admittedly, such an endeavor is a long-term project, for which slowing the decline is ultimately buying time. Such decoupling or coupling far too late is the reason for the fertility decline. Consequently, targeting the long-term policy interventions toward reversing this trend can transform the culture so that it's normal to have kids again.

### **A Brief Word About Cost**

A common criticism of policy proposals intended to arrest the decline in marriage and fertility rates is cost. As mentioned above, Hungary's interventions amount to 6 percent of GDP. That same level of investment in the United States would equal more than \$1.5 trillion, or roughly the same amount as all current non-defense discretionary federal spending. That's a lot.

The cost of any policy intervention, however, must be considered compared to the cost of doing nothing. In this case, as outlined above, inaction would mean welcoming catastrophic civilizational collapse.

In the cost-benefit analysis of public policies, the value of human life must also be considered. Though the value of life cannot and ought not merely be considered in economic terms, human lives *do* have economic value.

For example, U.S. federal agencies use a measure called Value of a Statistical Life (VSL). This is a measure of the amount of money a society is willing to pay to reduce the risk of death. The Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Transportation, and Health and Human Services currently put the VSL between \$10–\$12 million. Using the low end of this crude measure, a pro-children policy that created one hundred thousand lives would be worth \$1 trillion. And while the VSL aims to measure value in light of *death*, a proper valuation of a *new life* created would have to consider the generational effects of that additional person's potential children, grandchildren, and so on. Using that framework, is it possible to invest too much?

### **Key Policy Interventions**

- **Income Replacement:** Providing income replacement for one parent during the first three years of a child's life could reduce financial and opportunity costs, especially for women as the primary caregivers when children are very young. This approach would avoid unintended consequences such as inflation in the childcare or housing markets. It also would have the added benefit of allowing one parent to stay home with the child during the child's most crucial developmental years.<sup>57</sup> The benefit should prioritize middle-income families, capping subsidies at the national median full-time wage or

---

<sup>57</sup> Erica Komisar, "Psychoanalyst: 'Children need a childhood!,'" Alliance for Responsible Citizenship speech, posted October 31, 2023, by Alliance for Responsible Citizenship, YouTube, 20:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=BHAO4wYGVsQ>.

salary (currently about \$60,000<sup>58</sup>) to ensure fiscal sustainability. The initial estimated cost of such a program would be about \$360 billion a year.<sup>59</sup>

Providing \$60,000 a year to roughly six million eligible households would be about \$360 billion annually or roughly 5.63 percent of the federal budget. If the program were expanded to every household with a child under age three regardless of the marital status of the parents,<sup>60</sup> then it would cost roughly \$630 billion a year, which is about what the U.S. military budget was in FY2018.<sup>61</sup> If the program were successful in increasing either marriage rates or birth rates, the cost would necessarily increase. Of course, the program could be further targeted to only the second, third, and so on child in accordance with the considerations outlined above, which would target the program to both those who have already demonstrated willingness to have at least one child and those who might be most willing to have an additional child. It might also initially reduce the program's costs.

While sizeable, such a program could begin to be paid for by not making policy decisions like sending \$175 billion to Ukraine<sup>62</sup> and by eliminating the Department of Education, which has an annual budget of about \$80 billion.<sup>63</sup> There would also be cost reductions in existing child support programs as eligibility would necessarily decrease and could help pay for this type of incentive. For example, about \$107 billion in child tax credits were claimed in 2022.<sup>64</sup> While the IRS has not released detailed data on the number of single filers for the tax year 2022, presumably at least some portion of this benefit would go towards the new benefit instead. Finally, the Center for Renewing America's FY2023 budget proposal identified more than \$3 trillion over ten years in discretionary savings,

---

<sup>58</sup> "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, updated January 29, 2025, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.htm>.

<sup>59</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau and other data sources, about four million children are born in the United States each year. Assuming that children under three years old represent roughly three years' worth of births (because the age group would include children aged zero to two), the number of children under three at any given time is approximately 4 million births per year  $\times$  3 years = 12 million children under three. Roughly half of children in this age group live in single-parent households (about 40 percent to 45 percent), and the rest live in two-parent households. Assuming 50 percent of the children under three live in households with at least one child, we can estimate the number of households: 12 million children  $\div$  2 children per household  $\approx$  6 million households with children under three.

<sup>60</sup> There are obvious downsides to policies that would further entrench the notion of the state as surrogate husband, not least of which are further declines in marriage and thus birth rates.

<sup>61</sup> Office of Management and Budget, "America First: A Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again," U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2017, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BUDGET-2018-BLUEPRINT/pdf/BUDGET-2018-BLUEPRINT.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, "Congressionally Approved Ukraine Aid Totals \$175 Billion," Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget Blog, May 10, 2024, <https://www.crfb.org/blogs/congressionally-approved-ukraine-aid-totals-175-billion>.

<sup>63</sup> Nicole Cohen, Jonaki Mehta, Elissa Nadworny, and Cory Turner, "A Guide to What the US Education Department Does (and Doesn't) Do," Oregon Public Broadcasting, February 5, 2025, <https://www.opb.org/article/2025/02/05/what-does-us-education-dept-do/>.

<sup>64</sup> Brenda Schafer, Nicholas Yeh, and Astin Cornwall, "Tax Year 2022 Child Tax Credit and Additional Child Tax Credit Credits and Deductions Gap Estimate for Filers Using IRS Administrative Data," U.S. Internal Revenue Service, December 19, 2024, <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/24rptcunderclaims.pdf>.

primarily from dismantling the woke and weaponized bureaucracy, that could be gleaned to pay for an income replacement program.<sup>65</sup>

- **Work Flexibility:** Private businesses should be incentivized to expand access to parental leave, job security, flexible work arrangements for parents, and prioritization of women returning to the workforce *after* they have had and raised children. Potential incentives could mirror existing business tax credits that incentivize other desired outcomes, such as tax credits for research and development or the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, which offers businesses a credit for hiring employees from specified groups, such as long-term unemployed individuals, veterans, and recipients of certain government assistance programs. The state has no more compelling interest than ensuring the continuity of the nation through the people who make up the American citizenry. Federal nondiscrimination laws should be clarified to allow businesses to give preference to married men with children or women who have been out of the workforce for a time to raise their children. To pay for these incentives, Congress should consider refocusing a portion of existing business tax credits, worth an estimated \$40 billion annually,<sup>66</sup> to this higher priority.

Other existing programs should be reorganized to achieve higher-priority goals. Existing education and career tracks are misaligned with the optimal time for having and raising children. That is, women are most fertile when they are also expected to be pursuing educational and career advancement. That timeline should be flipped. For women who want to have children, higher education and a career are pursuits that should come later, and the societal structures need to be realigned to the priorities that biology dictates. If that is to happen, women especially need examples to follow and assurances that this shift is possible.

If this change is to be realistic, there needs to be an alternative avenue for women that can include postsecondary education but does not have to. In many instances, college is the place to meet and marry a spouse, but if that does not happen, women often follow the career path because there is no alternative. Brad Wilcox, who directs the National Marriage Project and frequently writes on family structure and social trends, has consistently pointed out that declining marriage rates in the United States are most

---

<sup>65</sup> Center for Renewing America, “A Commitment to End Woke and Weaponized Government: 2023 Budget Proposal,” 2023, <https://americarenewing.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Budget-Center-for-Renewing-America-FY23.pdf>.

<sup>66</sup> The Research and Development Tax Credit is worth \$20—\$25 billion annually. See Walter Melnik and Andrew Smyth, “R&D Tax Credits and Innovation,” *Journal of Public Economics* 236 (2024), 105157, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2024.105157>. The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit is worth \$8—\$9 billion annually. See U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Low-Income Housing Tax Credit: Joint IRS-HUD Administration Could Help Address Weaknesses in Oversight,” GAO Report No. 15-330, July 2015, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-15-330.pdf>. The Energy Investment Tax Credit costs \$4—\$5 billion annually. See U.S. Department of Energy, “Biden-Harris Administration Announces \$4 Billion in Tax Credits to Build Clean Energy Supply Chain, Drive Investments, and Lower Costs in Energy Communities,” press release, March 29, 2024, <https://www.energy.gov/articles/biden-harris-administration-announces-4-billion-tax-credits-build-clean-energy-supply>. There are diverse other business tax credits valuing in the millions and billions of dollars annually.

pronounced among working-class and lower-income Americans, particularly those without a college degree.<sup>67</sup>

- **Marriage Tax Credit:** The lowest-hanging fruit is eliminating marriage penalties in welfare programs and the tax code, but policymakers should go further by proactively rewarding marriage. Depending on income, a married couple might face either a marriage penalty or a marriage bonus. Doubling the standard deduction is the primary tax benefit to marriage, generally reducing the couple's taxable income, but it does not always work out that way. The tax code would better benefit married couples by providing a marriage credit, not unlike the current child tax credit. The marriage credit would be automatic for a married couple and would provide the economic and cultural signal that the country values marriage and wants to see more of them. The credit would not have to be large to send the desired message. It would be exclusive and available to only married couples each year. Australia's experience with baby bonuses and Russia's "maternity capital" program found that a small financial encouragement can in fact increase birth rates. The same should be tried in the United States; a financial reward for getting married is worth a trial period to determine its efficacy. If a marriage tax credit is the carrot approach. The stick approach would be for states to limit no fault divorce to raise the significance and seriousness of marriage. Both may be necessary.
- **Better Student Loan Forgiveness:** Reorienting the existing Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program in order to benefit married couples with children would be the definition of public service. Currently, the program often benefits woke nongovernmental organizations and government bureaucrats. But the new PSLF could be structured to forgive all loans after three to five years of marriage and two children, whichever comes first, rather than the existing requirements of ten years of qualifying employment and 120 months of qualifying payments. Further expanding loan forgiveness to attainment of career and technical skills would also assist lower-income men and women on the road to good paying jobs, which is the first step toward forming a family. Existing estimates for PSLF vary between \$1 and \$3 billion annually.<sup>68</sup>
- **Leverage Culture Makers to Tell Better Stories:** The so-called "gender wars" are playing out in real time online. The division between the sexes, the uncoupling of our society, urgently requires healing. How? For many, "influencers" are their main teachers, often accessed through a screen. Online media needs to be used to generate positive outcomes.

These are the broadstrokes of policies that have potential for major impacts on the structural, economic, and cultural reasons for the decline in marriage and family formation. They would of course need to be carefully tailored to avoid unintended consequences, but each has the potential

---

<sup>67</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox and Wendy Wang, "The Marriage Divide: How and Why Working-Class Families Are More Fragile Today," research brief for Opportunity America, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Brookings Institution, September 2017, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-Marriage-Divide.pdf?x85095>.

<sup>68</sup> Melanie Lockert, "Public Student Loan Forgiveness: PSLF Statistics for 2024," Student Loan Planner, February 7, 2024, [https://www.studentloanplanner.com/pslf-statistics/#toc\\_3](https://www.studentloanplanner.com/pslf-statistics/#toc_3).



to have far more significance and relevance than tinkering with tax credits. Implementing these policies will require substantial investment. But the costs should be weighed against the long-term economic and social benefits of reversing demographic decline.

### **Conclusion**

Addressing the decline in birth rates is not merely a demographic imperative but a societal necessity. Failing to act risks economic stagnation, weakened societal cohesion, and the loss of cultural identity and nationhood. While implementing policies to boost fertility rates will require significant resources, the costs of inaction are far greater. By prioritizing family-friendly policies and fostering a pro-family culture, the United States can secure a thriving and prosperous future for its people.