

Rekindling the National Discourse on U.S. Population Growth:

Sprawl, Smart Growth and Cities

by Edwin Stennett, Population Connection Member

Why is the connection between U.S. population growth and our environmental ills absent from the national discourse? Why is the call for U.S. population stabilization only a faint echo of what it was circa 1970?

All politics is local!

Most people don't spend a lot of time worrying about population growth or biodiversity in the ecosystem. They fret over the crime level on local streets, worry about the education of their children, and guard against environmental declines in their local streams, air and parks. National and global issues are thought of only in abstractions; it takes a local, personal impact to motivate most people to action.

So how do we make people see that overpopulation is a local issue? How do we make everyone realize that the exploding population has a direct effect on their daily lives?

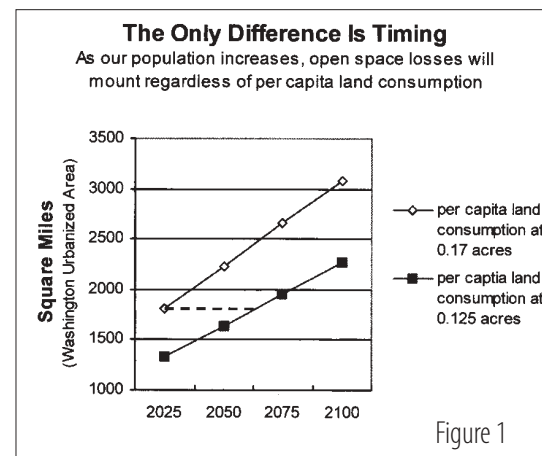
As a Population Connection member for over twenty years, I've been struggling with this question for a long time. I've seen firsthand the glazed look that crosses a face when the issue of overpopulation is raised. But start talking about the rippling effects of overpopulation—sprawl, traffic congestion, loss of green space, crowded schools—and the same faces become engaged and energized.

My book, *In Growth We Trust: Sprawl, Smart Growth, and Rapid Population Growth* strives to clearly and forcefully draw out the links between overpopulation and local, community-level problems. Focusing on the Washington, DC metro area, we see how a community's quality of life steadily declines as its population continues to increase. This same pattern is playing out in major metropolitan areas across the country—such as Atlanta, Las Vegas and Portland—to cite just a few.

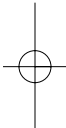
"We used to go out Rte. 50 for a drive in the country. Now, it's strip

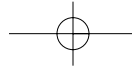
mall, town houses and apartments, one after the other. Pretty soon there won't be any open space between here and Winchester."—Madelon Vorbau, Annandale, Virginia

Like many major metropolitan areas, Washington is experiencing rapid population growth. Developed land in the Washington area nearly doubled between 1970 and 1990, and 47 percent of this increase was due to population growth.¹ If the population continues to mushroom, no amount of Smart Growth success will prevent the destruction of hundreds of square miles of open space. The forests, meadows and open lands that we enjoy today will vanish.



Smart Growth policies encourage development in a manner that reduces per capita land consumption. But Figure 1 shows that a reduction in per capita land consumption only slows the rate at which we lose our open land; it does not guarantee pristine space in the future. Land 'saved' in one generation will simply be lost in the next. For example, at 1997 per capita land consumption rates, Washington's urbanized area will climb to 1,800 square miles by 2025. Yet even if we could reduce per capita land consumption





25 percent below the 1997 rate, Washington's urbanized area would reach the same 1,800 square miles by 2063.

Loss of green space is not the only worsening threat. The area's maddening traffic congestion will continue to grow worse as the population rises—neither increased telecommuting, nor a doubling in mass transit capacity can prevent this.

As people go through their daily battle with clogged roads and maddening traffic, a plea grows for the government to build more roads. In the DC area though, new roads have not proved to be an adequate solution. Over a thousand lane-miles of roads were built in the metro area between 1982 and 1999—enough freeway alone to reach from DC to Chicago. Yet congestion only became worse.

The area spent 17 years planning and constructing an expansion of I-270, a major transportation corridor north of the city. By 1999, just eight years after completion, traffic loads on the widened road had already exceeded projections for the year 2010.¹¹ With populations growing at such fast rates, transportation planners have no expectation of being able to keep up with the demand.

Not only do cities not have the money to build roads at the rate demanded by current population growth, but there's nowhere left for potential roads to go. The damage to the communities bisected by new roads would be nearly as detrimental to the health of the area as more congestion. According to the Texas Transportation Institute, "The need for new roads exceeds the funding capacity and the ability to gain environmental and public approval.... In many of the nation's most congested corridors there doesn't seem to be the

space, money and public approval to add enough road space to create an acceptable condition."¹²

Continuing with current levels of population growth, congestion will only get worse. The projected increase in the number of vehicles is a staggering 1.6 million in just 20 years. Lined up bumper to bumper, these cars would stretch from Washington to San Francisco and back again. There simply is not enough space in already dense communities to build roads to fit the staggering number of cars demanded by large populations.

"The problem of excessive population seems to be central to nearly every problem in our state."—George R. Ariyoshi, former Governor of Hawaii¹³

Citizens, planners, and elected officials all need to understand how population growth works against the goal to sustain a good quality of life. Due to the U.S.'s extensive land area,

some people claim there's no need to worry about our population explosion—they believe we still have plenty of land to absorb the increasing numbers.

"Our projections for 2100 will give us a population density one-quarter of the U.K.," said Frederick W. Holmann, a Census Bureau demographer. "We'll still be a sparsely populated country among the industrialized countries of the world."¹⁴ While arithmetically correct, this line of reasoning fails to consider that, unlike the U.K., much of the interior U.S. is arid and semi-arid regions, where a large percentage of the population opts not to live. The density of coastal regions far exceeds the density of interior regions, and we would be foolish to think this pattern will change.

In considering how many people a land area can support, we must take into consideration the quality of life of its inhabitants. If a majority of people prefer to live in coastal cities,



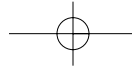


Photo: John Fielder, 2000/courtesy CO Sprawl Action Center



Denver metro area

we must factor that preference into future overcrowding projections. We can't ignore the building pressures of overpopulation by saying there's plenty of room, if only half of DC's residents would just move to the desert.

"The health of our country does not depend on population growth, nor does the vitality of business, nor the welfare of the average person."—Rockefeller Commission 1972 Report

We hear the phrase repeated endlessly: Growth is Good. Growth brings jobs, growth brings prosperity, growth prevents economic stagnation.... But as the Rockefeller Commission found back in 1972, there is no hard data to back up this sentiment. Job growth has no significant impact on unemployment, and personal income growth is not related to population growth.

The Growth Machine (Cities' Chambers of Commerce, Boards of Trade, etc.) always touts its efforts to recruit corporations and jobs into an area. Yet relatively few local residents every see any lasting benefits. According to Timothy Bartik, economist with the Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, "In the long run, if you create five jobs, four of them go to people who otherwise would be living someplace else."^{vi} Even in the short term, nearly half of

these new jobs are filled by people who move into the area from other cities.^{vii}

These new workers bring their cars, which need more roads, and their children, who need more teachers, and their housing needs, which leads to more development and the further urbanization of the area. The net result is that unemployment rates remain essentially unaffected, while congestion rises and the quality of living continues to plummet.

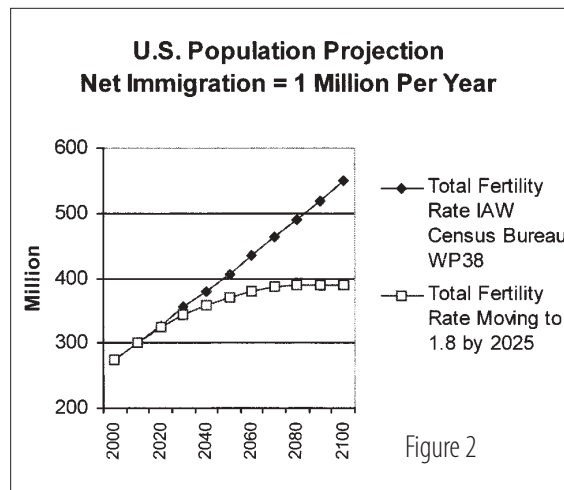


Figure 2

acceptable solution to the problem. Many people avoid the population issue because they assume that the U.S. population cannot be stabilized without advocating for a reduction in immigration levels, or they assume that stabilization means intruding on individual choice and forcing families to only have one or two children. Both assumptions are false.

Our current net immigration is about 1 million per year and our total fertility rate is 2.05 children per woman. If we were to establish and maintain a fertility rate of 1.8 children per woman, we would soon stabilize our population—even with a net immigration of 1 million per year. In fact, if the U.S. were to reduce its rate of unintended pregnancy and teen pregnancy, the fertility rate would quickly drop to 1.8 or below. For a wealthy nation, 1.8 is still a high fertility rate—Canada is at 1.6 and Germany 1.3.

This surprising good news is illustrated in Figure 2. Both curves in the graph project U.S. population growth assuming a constant net immigration of 1 million per year throughout the century. The key to the dramatic difference in the two curves is that the upper curve reflects the Census Bureau projection that U.S. fertility will climb quickly from 2.05 to more than 2.2 children

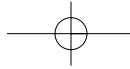
per woman.

The Census Bureau tacitly assumes that there will be no effort to educate and influence fertility in a more beneficial direction. However, there are a number of steps that can

Now to the good news!

The problem of U.S. population growth must be presented in a manner that people viscerally respond to, but that is not enough. People also need to see an achievable, socially





be taken that would not only influence the fertility rate, but also provide other important societal benefits.

Some of the steps toward decreasing the fertility rate include: 1) reducing the high school dropout rate, 2) reducing poverty, 3) providing quality family planning services to women living in or near poverty, and 4) using the immense potential of the media to educate all Americans in regard to childbearing. Note that the unifying characteristic of all four steps is educating and helping people—particularly helping those who are not sharing in our great wealth. The additional good news here is that the path to reduced fertility is completely in keeping with the traditional American values of respecting individual freedom and helping those in need.

Inscribed on a granite wall at the Franklin D. Roosevelt memorial in Washington is the quote:

"The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the



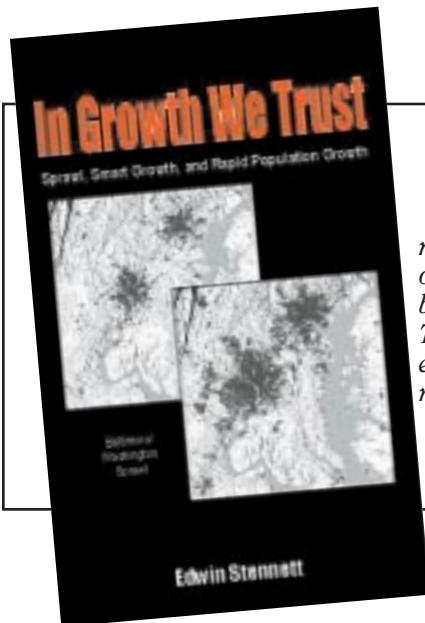
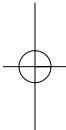
Photo: Tim Cline

abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

Aiding those who have too little is not simply an act of altruism. It is an act that will benefit our children and grandchildren in a very tangible way. Conversely, failing to aid those who have too little will cause our children and grandchildren to suffer increasing quality of life declines—driven by continuing rapid population growth.

Sources:

- ⁱ Weighing Sprawl Factors in Large U.S. Cities, Kolankiewicz and Beck, March 19, 2001, Appendix A.
- ⁱⁱ "Induced Travel: Definition, Forecasting Process, And a Case Study in the Metropolitan Washington Region," National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, September 19, 2001.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The 2001 Urban Mobility Report, Texas Transportation Institute, page iii.
- ^{iv} Holding Our Ground, Tom Daniels and Deborah Bowers, Island Press 1997, p. 251.
- ^v "2100 Census Forecast: 2000 x 2," D'Vera Cohn, Washington Post, January 13, 2000.
- ^{vi} "Officials Base Subsidies on Flawed Model," Jay Hancock, The Baltimore Sun, October 12, 1999.
- ^{vii} Better, Not Bigger, Eben Fodor, 1999, p. 64.



For more information on how to order Edwin Stennett's book, "In Growth We Trust," please see the enclosed business reply envelope.

What's your Population Connection?

We were thrilled to learn about Population Connection member Edwin Stennett's book, *In Growth We Trust*, and hope that you found the article as interesting as we did.

Now we want to hear what you're doing!

We know that our members are active in their local communities, and we'd love to hear your stories.

Did you start a local river clean-up crew? Have you met with your local representative to discuss population issues? Did you organize an educational event for your local community? Have you researched pollution problems in your town?

Maybe you haven't written a book, but we'd still love to hear your story! Perhaps we'll print it in a future issue of *the reporter*.

Email mnelson@popconnect.org or phone 1 800 767-1956 and ask for Mara Nelson, managing editor, to share your story. Let us know how you're making the Population Connection in your own neighborhood.