



"Utah's Fertility Decline: Richer Lives for All"

A White Paper by the Utah Population and Environment Council (UPEEC)

Executive Summary, September 2019

Starting with scattered bands of a few hunter-gatherers millennia ago, global population now exceeds 7.5 billion people.

The global population growth rate has increased from the beginning of human time, and it accelerated dramatically during the industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This accelerating growth rate continued until the mid-twentieth century.

In 1971, something very dramatic happened: the annual population growth rate peaked (at a bit more than two percent) and started declining rapidly. It is about one percent per year now, and headed lower, perhaps much lower. As long as the population growth rate remains positive, total population will increase; when it goes negative, total population will start to decrease. Demographers increasingly believe that this "sign change" will occur sometime in the current century, perhaps around 2050. Then, country by country, we all will face decreasing population levels.

This seemingly inevitable trend will occur everywhere, including the United States. And, yes, Utah will face the same pattern of leveling and declining population levels. Utah's total fertility rate — the average number of babies born per woman over her lifetime — recently found a new low of 2.1. This figure happens to be the "replacement rate," the point below which populations levels will decrease unless net in-migration offsets the decline. So, barring unlikely, dramatic changes in immigration and migration rates, Utah has already reached the tipping point that will lead eventually to declining population levels.

This trend is good news. Slowing population growth — and eventual population stabilization — will not hurt per capita gains in living standards, which, since the Industrial Revolution, have grown nearly unceasingly regardless of demographic conditions. We can all expect to get wealthier going forward.

True, some people worry about an aging population, a declining workforce, and a worsening "dependency ratio" — the ratio of (non-working) old and young to the total population that must support them. These are valid problems; they are not our main concern in the white paper, but we are optimistic that modest policy changes — and economic growth — will take care of them.

Even better, a lower population engenders numerous environmental and quality-of-life benefits, from reduced CO₂ emissions to more wilderness to — here in Utah — better air quality and less traffic in the canyons on powder days.

UPEEC's new white paper, "Utah's Fertility Decline: Richer Lives for All," explores the dimensions of this exciting future for Utah. We seek to promote better understanding of the positive effects of declining population levels — and we seek to make wise adjustments that take advantage of already existing trends.