

China records 1st population fall in decades as births drop

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A girl wearing a face mask rides on a man's shoulders as they walk along a tourist shopping street in Beijing on Oct. 7, 2022. China has announced its first overall population decline in recent years amid an aging society and plunging birthrate. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein, File

China's population shrank for the first time in decades last year as its

birthrate plunged, official figures showed Tuesday, adding to pressure on leaders to keep the economy growing despite an aging workforce and at a time of rising tension with the U.S.

Despite the official numbers, some experts believe China's population has been in decline for a few years—a dramatic turn in a country that once sought to control such growth through a one-child policy.

Many wealthy countries are struggling with how to respond to aging populations, which can be a drag on [economic growth](#) as shrinking numbers of workers try to support growing numbers of elderly people.

But the [demographic change](#) will be especially difficult to manage in a middle-income country like China, which does not have the resources to care for an [aging population](#) in the same way that one like Japan does. Over time, that will likely slow its economy and perhaps even the world's, and could potentially keep inflation higher in many developed economies.

"China has become older before it has become rich," said Yi Fuxian, a demographer and expert on Chinese population trends at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

A slowing economy could also pose a political problem for the ruling Communist Party, if shrinking opportunities foment public discontent. Anger over strict COVID-19 lockdowns, which were a drag on the economy, spilled over late last year into protests that in some cases called for leader Xi Jinping to step down—a rare direct challenge to the party.



A man pulls a child past a Lunar New Year decoration on display at the Qianmen pedestrian shopping street, a popular tourist spot in Beijing, Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023. China has announced its first population decline in decades as what has been the world's most populous nation ages and its birthrate plunges. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

The National Bureau of Statistics reported Tuesday that the country had 850,000 fewer people at the end of 2022 than the previous year. The tally includes only the population of mainland China, excluding Hong Kong and Macao as well as foreign residents.

Over 1 million fewer babies were born than the previous year amid a slowing economy and widespread pandemic lockdowns, according to official figures. The bureau reported 9.56 million births in 2022; deaths

ticked up to 10.41 million.

It wasn't clear if the population figures were affected by a widespread COVID-19 outbreak following the easing of pandemic restrictions last month. China recently reported 60,000 COVID-related deaths since early December, but some experts believe the government is likely underreporting deaths.

The last time China is believed to have experienced a [population decline](#) was during the Great Leap Forward, a disastrous drive for collective farming and industrialization launched by then-leader Mao Zedong at the end of the 1950s that produced a massive famine that killed tens of millions of people.



Women wearing face masks walk with their children on a street as they head to Forbidden City in Beijing, Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023. China has announced its first population decline in decades as what has been the world's most populous nation ages and its birthrate plunges. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

China's population has begun to decline nine to 10 years earlier than Chinese officials predicted and the United Nations projected, said Yi, the demographer. At 1.4 billion, the country has long been the world's most populous nation, but is expected to soon be overtaken by India, if it has not already.

China has sought to bolster its population since officially ending its one-child policy in 2016. Since then, China has tried to encourage families to have second or even third children, with little success, reflecting attitudes in much of east Asia where birth rates have fallen precipitously. In China, the expense of raising children in cities is often cited as a cause.

Zhang Huimin bemoaned the "fierce competition" young people face these days—a fairly typical attitude toward starting a family among her age group.



A man carries his grandchild preparing to leave after taking a family photo with his family members at a photo studio in Beijing, Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023. For the first time in decades, China has fewer people than it did at the start of last year, according to official figures released Tuesday. The world's most populous country has worried for years about an aging population's effect on the economy and society, but the population was not expected to go into decline for almost a decade. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

"Home prices are high and jobs are not easy to find," said the 23-year-old Beijing resident. "I enjoy living by myself. When I feel lonely, I can take pleasure in staying with my friends or keeping pets."

Yi said that his own research shows China's population has actually been declining since 2018, indicating the population crisis is "much more

severe" than previously thought. The country now has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world, comparable only to Taiwan and South Korea, he said.

That means China's "real demographic crisis is beyond imagination and that all of China's past economic, social, defense and foreign policies were based on faulty demographic data," Yi told The Associated Press.

The looming [economic crisis](#) will be worse than Japan's, where years of low growth have been blamed in part on a shrinking population, Yi said.



A boy wearing a face mask carries a Chinese flag as he walks along a pedestrian shopping street in Beijing on Oct. 6, 2022. China has announced its first overall population decline in recent years amid an aging society and plunging birthrate. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein, File

The statistics bureau said the working-age population between 16 and 59 years old totaled 875.56 million, accounting for 62% of the national population, while those aged 65 and older totaled 209.78 million, accounting for 14.9% of the total.

It also reported China's economic growth fell to its second-lowest level in at least four decades last year, although activity is reviving after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions that kept millions of people at home.

Any slowdown has wider implications. China became a global manufacturing powerhouse in the early 2000s. With millions of its citizens flocking from the countryside to its cities, China's seemingly endless supply of cheap labor lowered costs for consumers around the world for computers, smartphones, furniture, clothes and toys.

Its labor costs have already begun to rise—and changing demographics will likely accelerate that trend. As a result, inflation could creep higher in countries that import China's products, though production may also move to lower-cost countries such as Vietnam, as it already has.



Travelers walk through a trains departure board at the West Railway Station in Beijing on Jan. 15, 2023. China has announced its first overall population decline in recent years amid an aging society and plunging birthrate. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong, File

On top of the demographic challenges, China is increasingly in economic competition with the U.S., which has blocked the access of some Chinese companies to American technology, citing national security and fair competition concerns.

If handled correctly, a declining population does not necessarily translate to a weaker economy, said Stuart Gietel-Basten, professor of social science at Khalifa University in Abu Dhabi.

"It's a big psychological issue. Probably the biggest," Gietel-Basten said.

According to the data from the statistics bureau, men outnumbered women by 722.06 million to 689.69 million, the bureau reported, a result of the [one-child policy](#) and a traditional preference for male offspring to carry on the family name.

The numbers also showed increasing urbanization in a country that traditionally had been largely rural. Over 2022, the permanent urban population increased by 6.46 million to reach 920.71 million, or 65.22%.



Children wearing cardboard lion dance masks walk along a street in Beijing on Jan. 13, 2023. China has announced its first overall population decline in recent years amid an aging society and plunging birthrate. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein, File



A family poses for photos at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing on Nov. 12, 2022. China has announced its first overall population decline in recent years amid an aging society and plunging birthrate. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein, File



Commuters wearing face masks walk along a street in the central business district in Beijing on Jan. 12, 2023. China has announced its first overall population decline in recent years amid an aging society and plunging birthrate. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein



A resident wearing a face mask walks by women who line up to buy snack foods at a store in Beijing, Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023. China's economic growth fell to 3% last year under pressure from antivirus controls and a real estate slump but is gradually reviving after restrictions that kept millions of people at home were lifted. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong



A woman wearing a face mask walks a dog passing by shuttered business shops for rent in Beijing, Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023. China's economic growth fell to 3% last year under pressure from antivirus controls and a real estate slump but is gradually reviving after restrictions that kept millions of people at home were lifted. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong



A resident wearing a face mask walks by shuttered business shops in Beijing, Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023. China's economic growth fell to 3% last year under pressure from antivirus controls and a real estate slump but is gradually reviving after restrictions that kept millions of people at home were lifted. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong



A woman feeds snack food to a child on a stroller at Qianmen pedestrian shopping street, a popular tourist spot in Beijing, Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023. China has announced its first population decline in decades as what has been the world's most populous nation ages and its birthrate plunges. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong



A family visit the Qianmen pedestrian shopping street, a popular tourist spot in Beijing, Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023. China has announced its first population decline in decades as what has been the world's most populous nation ages and its birthrate plunges. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

The United Nations estimated last year that the world's population reached 8 billion on Nov. 15 and that India will replace China as the world's most populous nation in 2023. India's last census was scheduled for 2022 but was postponed amid the pandemic.

Gietel-Basten said China has been adapting to demographic change for years by devising policies to move its economic activities up the value chain of innovation, pointing to the development of semiconductor manufacturing and the financial services industry.

"The population of India is much younger and is growing. But there are many reasons why you wouldn't necessarily automatically bet your entire fortune on India surpassing China economically in the very near future," he said.

Among India's many challenges is a level of female participation in the work force that is much lower than China's, Gietel-Basten said.

"Whatever the [population](#) you have, it's not what you've got but it's what you do with it ... to a degree," he said.

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