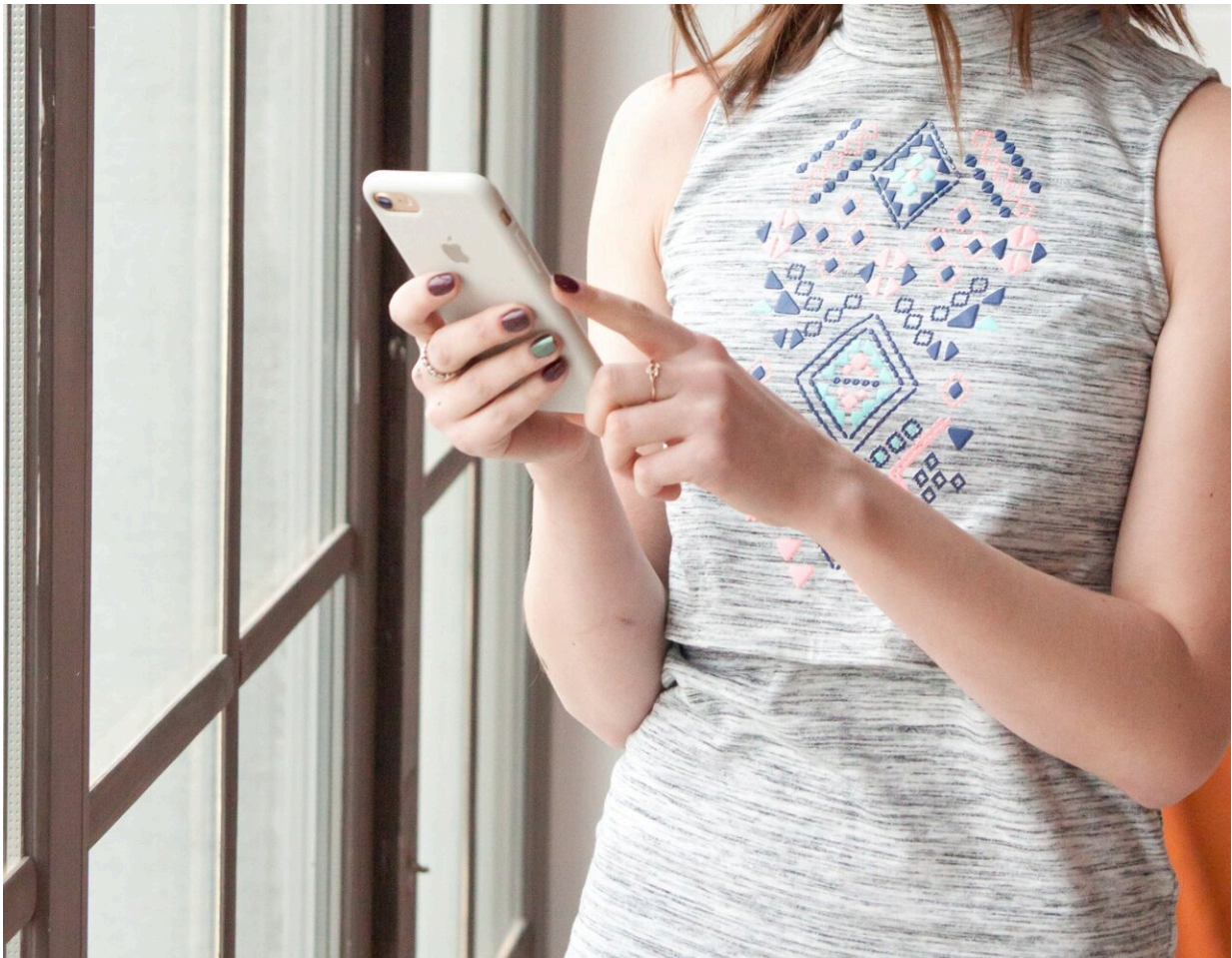


A world with fewer children? Addressing the despair behind declining fertility

May 4 2024, by Nathi Magubane



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In the 1992 dystopian novel "Children of Men," later adapted to film,

humanity faces the chilling reality of a world without children, a global infertility crisis that threatens to extinguish the species. While this apocalyptic vision might seem far-fetched, today's real world faces a quieter but equally alarming phenomenon: declining human fertility. This is not due to a sudden inability to reproduce but rather a collective, culturally driven decline in the desire to bring new life into the world.

In a paper published in [Nature Mental Health](#), University of Pennsylvania neuroscientists Michael Platt and Peter Sterling posit that the underlying mechanism of these declines may be despair, not dissimilar to what the movie depicts: a pervasive sense of hopelessness stemming from increasing inequality, economic uncertainty, and social fragmentation.

The researchers outline how the laws of conservation biology warn that any species unable to maintain its population risks extinction, and in the U.S. birth rates have been dipping below replacement levels for 50 years. The implications of this are far-reaching, and without intervention the repercussions will resonate throughout economies, societies, and generations to come. To discuss further and learn more, Penn Today sat with Penn Integrates Knowledge Professor Platt.

How did you and Peter Sterling both become interested in examining the effects of despair in the context of population declines?

We're [biologists](#), and when a biologist notices that species fertility has fallen well below replacement for many years—since 1973 in U.S.—there are two big questions.

1) How long will this continue because eventually it leads to population collapse and extinction? 2) Since the biological drive to produce offspring is normally so strong but in this case is superseded by a more

powerful force, we wondered what is the cause of collapsing fertility.

Given [our interest](#) in the causes of rising despair and its accompanying rise in mortality through suicide, alcohol, and [drug overdose](#)—plus rises in [cardiovascular disease](#) and diabetes caused by foods of despair and lack of social exercise—we hypothesized a connection. Having [teenage children](#), I'm especially tuned in to the roles of social media and [screen time](#) in rising despair in young people.

You cite a major economic concern related to a fertility decline, an altered population structure (reduced proportion of youth) leading to vast vacancies in entry-level and more physically demanding roles, but what else are you worried about?

The economic concerns are clear: Who will do all the work?

But there are further concerns, such as how will we care for our aging population, and where will the money come from? And with fewer consumers, who will buy stuff, the grist for the mill of capitalism? And without young, creative people where will moon-shot innovations come from to fight existential challenges like climate change? Taken to the extreme, a world without children is a world without hope, as vividly portrayed in the film "Children of Men."

Are there any effective long-term "pronatalist" initiatives that you have seen in action? What are some other causes for these failures?

As noted in the paper, various social subsidies have been tried to "kick

start" fertility, but to the extent they stimulate reproduction, it's a weak effect and brief at that.

Despair is rising most steeply for those of [reproductive age](#), so it stands to reason that young people who don't even want to live or who use lethal practices like drugs or greasy foods to elevate their mood are unlikely to find a 20-year commitment to rearing a child appealing.

Do you think young people's outlook on their economic prospects may be affecting their moods, which may exacerbate some of the declines?

Absolutely! As we note in the paper, for many people today, rewards experienced through both material gains and genuine social interactions are in decline, and these deficits are further exacerbated by comparisons with others on social media. We contend that this negative momentum serves as a potent driver diminishing fertility and increasing deaths of despair.

Do you have any comparative information on how despair or declining birth rates differ between more isolated roles versus team-driven ones?

Not yet, but we do note that recent polls find that more than 25% of remote workers report being lonely. Younger people love working from home, but their lack of opportunities to connect with co-workers in the real world may contribute to rising [despair](#) and declining interest—and even opportunities—to find a mate and have children, as [argued recently](#) by our colleague Scott Galloway of New York University.

What recommendations do you and Peter Sterling have to remedy

this? Also, how do you get people to care?

If falling fertility is indeed caused by rising inequality and social disconnection, the cure would not lie in minor tweaks such as maternal subsidies and more childcare centers. Rather, it would entail thorough socioeconomic restructuring to reduce inequality and restore all aspects of social life that have been so severely degraded. The "no cellphones in schools" movement is one positive step in that direction.

Our species has gone through bottlenecks before. If we provide young people with opportunities for real careers of learning and growth in skills with meaningful jobs, they will perk right up. Reduce their terrible social isolation and they will respond.

More information: Michael L. Platt et al, Declining human fertility and the epidemic of despair, *Nature Mental Health* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s44220-024-00241-1](https://doi.org/10.1038/s44220-024-00241-1)

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