

You're just one in 7 billion!

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Did you take a deep breath before pushing and shoving your way into a crowded train this morning? Stepped on a few toes or nerves perhaps? Phew, well, if you thought dodging elbows and trying to hop on that crowded morning rush hour train was bad, try thinking about this – the world’s population recently hit 7 billion and in an already crowded planet, that poses quite a problem.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, the world’s population more than doubled just in the last fifty years. This staggering growth is certainly a cause for alarm and has scientists, economists and sociologists scrambling to find a solution to combat the problems that come with an overcrowded planet.

Though some have hailed this as a milestone for humanity, there are probably many more reasons to fear our population boom than cheer it.

Shigehiro Oishi, Associate Professor at the University of Virginia’s Department of Psychology, examines the social and cultural impact that the [population growth](#) could have on people’s well-being. He refers to the results of a 2011 study by Richard Lucas of Michigan State University which found that residents of densely populated counties are less satisfied with their lives than those of sparsely populated counties in the US. “Stanley Milgram, in a 1970 Science article, famously theorized that urban apathy is due to sensory overload in urban living. Overall, the literature on subjective well-being and pro-social behavior both suggests that population density is negatively associated with well-being and the quality of life,” says Oishi.

Stephen Loughnan, of the University of Kent's School of Psychology, thinks that the 7 billion population is testament to man's advances in science and social sciences. However, he is concerned that population growth is largely driven by increased birth rates in developing nations. "As people in these nations begin to rightly demand a standard of living similar to that enjoyed by people in Western and developed Eastern nations, two distinct possibilities arise. On one hand they could be denied the chance to enjoy our level of health, wealth and well-being, which is unfair. On the other, they could adopt the consumption practices of developed nations, which may well be unsustainable," says Loughnan.

Daniel Stokols, Chancellor's Professor of Social Ecology in the Departments of Psychology and Social Behavior and Planning, Policy, and Design at the University of California, Irvine is concerned about the impacts that 7 billion people will have on the world's resources and stresses the need to find better ways of conserving resources for future generations.

"The effects of population growth and high density on behavior and well-being depend largely on the situations in which they are experienced. For the one billion people on earth living in slums, their experiences of density and crowding stress are more chronic and disruptive than for those living in more affluent environments. In general, though, increased population size and density tends to be associated with greater pollution and environmental problems that can dramatically lower our overall quality of life." Stokols says more effort is needed to develop greener energy technologies and ways of replenishing renewable resources as population growth puts more pressure on natural resources poses new challenges for protecting environmental quality.

Stokols also examines this issue from a psychological perspective. "One way that psychological science contributes toward solving environmental

problems is by helping people understand the links between their behaviors and adverse global outcomes – world population growth poses not only environmental and technological, but also behavioral challenges. Psychology offers a basis for promoting environmentally supportive behaviors and lifestyles. When people feel overwhelmed by environmental problems, they are less likely to make efforts to reduce them. As they become more mindful of the links between their own behavior and global problems such as climate change, they can begin to take steps toward reducing their ecological footprint—for instance, by recycling waste products and reducing their energy use” continues Stokols.

So, at 7 billion and counting, whilst we should applaud how far we have come in the last century, we also have to be aware that the problems posed by this population boom range from economic and technological to environmental and behavioral—and that we must redouble our efforts at personal and collective levels to take better care of our environment for future generations.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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