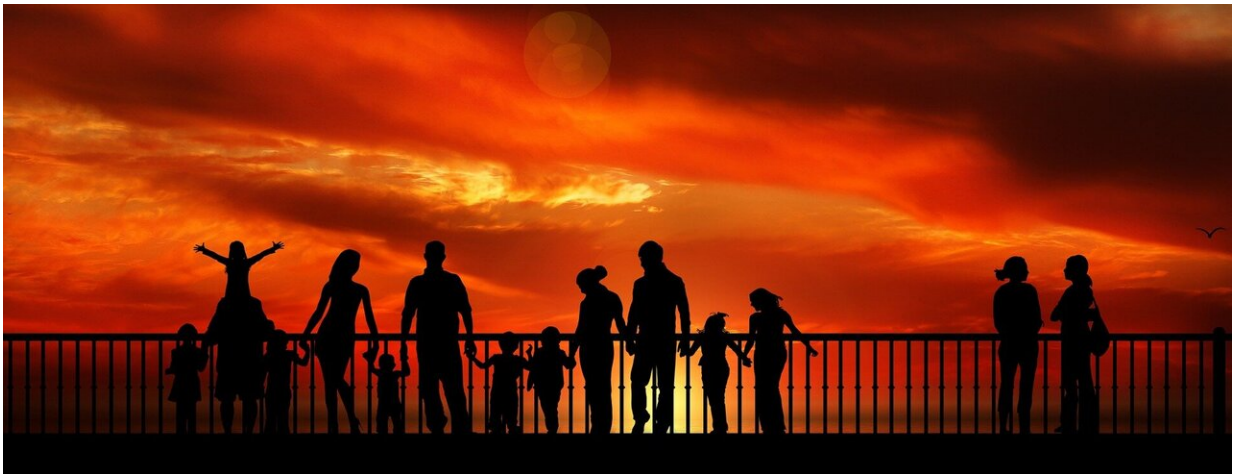


# Demographer addresses federal report on U.S. birthrate

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's annual report on the U.S. birthrate delivered some sobering news when it was released on May 15.

- The U.S. birthrate declined for a fourth straight year in 2018.
- 2018's 3,788,235 births, a 2 percent decline from 2017, were the lowest in 32 years.
- The U.S. fertility rate—the estimated number of children born over a woman's lifetime—had dipped to an all-time low, with women now predicted to have an average of 1.73 children in

their lifetime.

University of Rhode Island Professor of Sociology Melanie Brasher, who earned her master's and Ph.D. in sociology from Duke University, is a demographer who is fascinated by the topic. Brasher, of North Kingstown, R.I., an expert in [population](#) aging who has also conducted research on unintended births and health, addressed several questions on the CDC findings—factors behind the decline, possible concerns for the future, and the historical significance of the decline.

## **What were your first thoughts when you read about the CDC report?**

My first thoughts were that it's not particularly surprising. This is a trend that has been taking place for many years, and also globally. As time goes on, the U.S. birthrate gets closer to peer countries in Europe. In the past, the U.S. birthrate has been higher than other high-income countries because of many factors, including our higher teen birthrate and higher fertility rates of immigrant groups. The birthrate of immigrants has also gone down.

I know the CDC report is surprising to some demographers because the U.S. economy is doing well—in terms of new jobs added, the unemployment rate, the stock market—and the birth rate often tracks with the economy. But people still have a lot of uncertainty about the future—including the economy, the political situation, and also concerns about climate change.

## **What factors do you feel are key contributors to the decline?**

One key factor is the delay in having children. Why might women and

couples postpone having children? Overall [economic conditions](#), general instability, concerns about job security, student debt, concerns about access to health insurance. But also, it's hard to have children because of a lack of affordable childcare and not very generous policies for parental leave, especially in comparison to many European countries.

We also see in today's society that the transition to adulthood is prolonged. It takes longer to settle down, find a stable relationship, finish education, buy a home, and start a career. I think today many people have the understanding that parenthood should come after a certain lifestyle has been achieved, and this takes longer than it did in the past. But it's also a different understanding of what it means to be an adult and what should the timing of marriage and parenting look like.

In the 1960s, it was more common for people to get married at a [young age](#) and then grow together. These days many people expect their partner to also be established (financially, educationally) before pursuing marriage and parenthood. These days higher education is a "must have," so that alone means it takes longer to achieve adulthood status.

Perhaps families also feel more comfortable delaying having a child because of awareness of and improvement of assistive reproductive technologies, such as IVF and egg freezing. It's also socially acceptable to not have children at all, which also lowers the birthrate.

**There seems to be a split view of the record dip in the fertility rate, from alarm to some viewing it more as a sign that couples are merely putting off child birth. What is your take on the decline?**

The data that the CDC reports is just a snapshot of what the fertility and birth rates are in a given time period. A more accurate measure is to look

at the completed fertility rate—how many children women will have by the time they reach the end of their childbearing years. Of course, this data is harder to come by—you have to wait until cohorts of women reach age 49.

Research seems to indicate that most people who want to have children would like to have two to three children but there are factors that get in the way. The concern is that people postpone having children and then they may not be able to achieve their desired [family size](#) (because of genuine biological fertility issues at later ages). It's the idea that "childbearing postponed is childbearing foregone."



URI Sociology Professor Melanie Brasher. Photo courtesy of Melanie Brasher

It's interesting that we have seen this uptick in the birthrate for older mothers (ages 35 to 44). In the past, it was not unusual for women to

have children in their late 30s and 40s, but it was people with larger families who had started childbearing at young ages, whereas these days it's likely those births to older moms are first or second births.

## **Is the declining birthrate already causing a societal or economic impact?**

There are certainly some places in the U.S. that are already affected by a lower birthrate in terms of school enrollment and economic growth, but it's not just the birthrate. It's also out-migration (for example, in rural areas). It doesn't seem to be impacting the U.S. as a whole quite yet, but certainly some areas are struggling because of the declining birthrate.

But it's also the connection to population aging and the increased speed of it happening, and the future economic consequences of that. There is a concern that there won't be enough working-age people to pay into programs such as Social Security or fill jobs in health care.

Certainly, school districts need to pay attention to this and adjust accordingly. It's about doing this smartly. There are still schools in major cities where classes are overcrowded. How could a decline in births lead to better education policies? This can be seen as an opportunity to make things more equal. It's not unequivocally bad.

## **What are the most realistic concerns in the coming years?**

The concern over a declining birthrate is that this will accelerate the process of population aging. Population aging is currently taking place—an increase in the proportion of the population that is considered "older—usually age 65. This happens because fewer children are being born and older people are living longer, resulting in a higher number and

overall proportion of older people.

Although the U.S. population is currently increasing (due to population momentum and immigration), the concern in general is that the U.S. birthrate is less than the replacement rate, which means eventually we would see the U.S. population decline. (A woman would need to have on average, 2.1 children in order to maintain the population.)

It would take extremely high levels of immigration—much higher than today—to offset this. Some countries around the world are already experiencing population decline due to low birthrates—such as Japan, Germany, and the Ukraine. And some regions of the U.S. are experiencing a declining population, particularly in rural areas. There are not enough babies being born to replace people that move from rural to urban areas.

**The question then becomes, once population starts declining and birthrate goes below 2.1, how do you reverse that trend?**

It's so fascinating that 40 years ago the concern was about over-population and now it's the opposite.

**Historically, have we gone through other periods in the U.S. that have seen marked declines in birthrate?**

Yes. The birthrate often tracks closely with the economy and opportunities for women. One example is the decline in the birthrate during the Great Depression. By contrast, we can think of the baby boom that happened after World War II—the economy was doing well and there were limited opportunities for women in the labor force.

Families during the Great Depression of the 1930s had fewer [children](#) than families in the 1950s and 1960s. So, it's not that the birthrate has continuously gone up or down over time, there have been fluctuations.

But it's interesting that this current trend in lower births has continued for so long.

Provided by University of Rhode Island

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