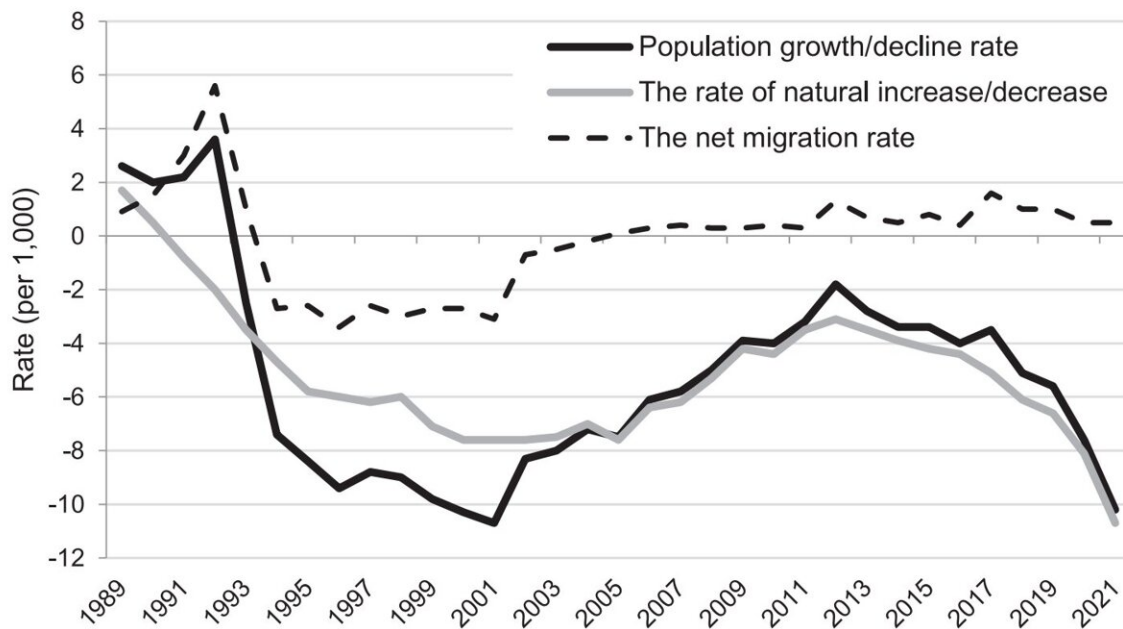


'We are dying out here': Study hears Ukrainian voices on depopulation crisis

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Population growth, natural increase, and net migration, 1989 to 2021. Credit: *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research* (2023). DOI: 10.1553/p-azcj-d4f4

Ukraine is facing a depopulation crisis that was being felt by ordinary Ukrainians even before the Russian invasion, according to new research by the University of Southampton.

Researchers are now calling on [policy makers](#) to support Ukrainians with

jobs, housing, and policies to help them start families to help stop spiraling depopulation.

Ukraine has one of the highest rates of [population](#) decrease in Europe. Its population has been steadily declining since 1993 and this was exacerbated by the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the rebellion by pro-Russian separatists in the east, and the COVID-19 pandemic. By 2021, Ukraine's population had shrunk by over 10 million people in 20 years.

"Before the Russian invasion, Ukraine was already facing a triple burden of depopulation—low fertility, high mortality and substantial emigration," says Professor Brienna Perelli-Harris from the Centre for Population Change at the University of Southampton.

"The Russian invasion has accelerated this decline in ways we could scarcely have imagined when we conducted our research just six months earlier."

To understand how Ukrainians were experiencing this depopulation, researchers conducted online focus groups in several locations in eastern Ukraine: rural villages; Mariupol, which was then receiving internally displaced people; the large city of Kharkiv; and Donetsk, held by Russian-backed separatists.

'Bleak' rural villages

The 'triple burden' was particularly apparent in [rural areas](#). According to the participants, a lack of job opportunities, the degradation of infrastructure, and limited [public transport](#) had resulted in more and more people, especially [young people](#), leaving villages.

'Thriving' Mariupol and Kharkiv

At the time of the study, the cities of Mariupol and Kharkiv were growing due to people coming from surrounding villages and an influx of internally displaced people who had arrived from eastern Ukraine after 2014.

Most participants in Kharkiv and Mariupol acknowledged the benefits of specialists and experts coming to their cities, but some were concerned about straining infrastructure and resources.

Professor Perelli-Harris says, "It's horrific that cities which our focus groups described as vibrant, bustling, and optimistic about their future have been devastated by war with Russia. Places which had been safe havens for people displaced by conflict have now found themselves in a warzone."

'Empty' Donetsk

Donetsk experienced armed conflict in 2014, followed by a massive outflow of people in subsequent years. Residents spoke of empty apartments, deserted neighborhoods, and eerily quiet streets. The 10pm curfew, which had been in effect since the start of the war, stifled any evening activity or nightlife.

The study says that even before the Russian invasion, depopulation was having dire consequences for Ukraine, leading to a shrinking labor force, severe aging, and a general lack of development.

"People in the areas we studied have now been displaced, made destitute, detained, forcibly deported, conscripted into the Russian army, or worse," says Professor Perelli-Harris. "Looking to a post-war future, policymakers across the world must recognize the issue of depopulation in Ukraine, and provide support to its people in rebuilding, regenerating, and stopping the spiral of depopulation. In the short-term, Ukrainians

should be supported with jobs, housing, and policies to help them start families."

The study, "The triple burden of depopulation in Ukraine: examining perceptions of population decline," has been published in *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*.

More information: Brienna Perelli-Harris et al, The triple burden of depopulation in Ukraine: examining perceptions of population decline, *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1553/p-azcj-d4f4](https://doi.org/10.1553/p-azcj-d4f4)

Provided by University of Southampton

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