

Historical data suggest hard knocks to human societies build long-term resilience

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Frequent disturbances to human societies boost the ability of populations to resist and recover from subsequent downturns, a *Nature* paper indicates. The [study](#), which analyzes 30,000 years of human history, has implications for future population growth and resilience and for contemporary resilience-building initiatives.

Resilience, the ability to withstand and recover after crises, is critical to the well-being and continued existence of all human societies. A large amount of research has focused on resilience in the present, but the factors that underlie long-term resilience have been less well studied.

To address this imbalance, Philip Riris and colleagues have quantified patterns of prehistoric population resistance to environmental or cultural disturbances. Their [meta-analysis](#) spans a 30,000-year time period and draws data from 16 locations across the globe.

They find that the frequency of downturns increases the ability of populations to withstand and recover from disturbances. The effect is strongly modulated by land-use patterns: farming and herding societies are more vulnerable to population-reducing crises, but they are also more resilient overall.

The study has parallels with [ecology](#), in which frequent natural disturbances are thought to enhance the long-term [resilience](#) of key ecosystem services. In addition, the authors suggest that humanity's long-term population growth may have been sustained at least in part by positive feedback cycles of vulnerability, resistance and recovery.

More information: Philip Riris et al, Frequent disturbances enhanced the resilience of past human populations, *Nature* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41586-024-07354-8](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07354-8)

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