

# Pronatalism is the latest Silicon Valley trend. What is it—and why is it disturbing?

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For Malcolm and Simone Collins, declining birth rates across many developed countries are an existential threat. The solution is to have "[tons of kids](#)," and to use a hyperrational, data-driven approach to guide everything from genetic selection to baby names and day-to-day parenting.

They don't heat their Pennsylvania home in winter, because heating is a "pointless indulgence." Their children wear iPads around their necks. And a Guardian journalist witnessed Malcolm strike their two-year-old across the face for misbehavior, a parenting style they apparently developed based on watching "tigers in the wild."

The Collinses are leading spokespeople for a movement called pronatalism, popular in Silicon Valley. Elon Musk, a father of 11, is one of its leading proponents. "Population collapse due to low [birth rates](#) is a much bigger risk to civilization than global warming," [Musk tweeted](#).

[Demographers disagree](#): there is no collapse, and one is not even predicted. Such evidence has not stopped the rise of pronatalism in response to an imagined "population bomb."

Pronatalism has strong links to [effective altruism](#), a movement tied to Silicon Valley and elite schools, which uses "evidence and reason to figure out how to benefit as many people as possible" , and [longtermism](#), which insists our long-term future is the key moral priority.

## What is pronatalism?

A [general definition](#) of pronatalism is "any attitude or policy that is 'pro-birth,' that encourages reproduction, that exalts the role of parenthood."

For pronatalists, having many children is not an individual choice, but a societal imperative: higher birth rates are necessary to maintain population levels, support [economic growth](#), and preserve cultural and national identities.

Pronatalism is not new. Anxieties around a declining citizenry are longstanding and [states have not been afraid to intervene](#).

For instance, after World War I, women in France were only averaging three children, while their German "rivals" were averaging five. Pronatalist organizations sprang up and lobbying groups were formed. [Laws were passed](#) prohibiting contraceptives and abortion, though these failed to alter the trend.

On the surface, pronatalism is driven by "rational" concerns. Many developed countries have [fertility rates below the replacement level](#) of 2.1 children. The inevitable result is an aging population. The fear is economic: with fewer working-age people, there will be no one to support the elderly and maintain economic productivity, straining state resources and social welfare systems.

Pronatalism's rational allure also stems from its reasonable recommendations. Financial incentives like direct payments and tax breaks are recommended for families with multiple children. Generous parental leave policies and affordable childcare are suggested to make the work/life balance work. And [affordable housing](#) and subsidized education can take the sting out of child-rearing costs.

These are not radical policies—indeed [many countries struggling to increase birth rates](#), such as Hungary, Sweden and Singapore, have already implemented various forms of them.

All of this assumes growth is not only good, but urgent. However,

scholars have questioned this powerful but unexamined assumption. In [Decline and Prosper!](#), population economist Vegard Skirbekk assembles a wealth of material to demonstrate that declining births do not mean the death of society, but may actually be a boon.

In fact, the population is only decreasing in some places: [across Africa](#), it is increasing. In Niger, Chad, Somalia and many other countries, total fertility rates range from 4 to above 6.

## **Pronatalism, ethnicity and engineering**

This brings us to a second and more [disturbing definition of pronatalism](#): "a political, ideological, or religious project to encourage childbearing by some or all members of a civil, ethnic, or national group."

In short, the problem for pronatalism is not declining reproduction, but *who* is reproducing. Pronatalism is inextricably tied to nationalism alongside race, class and ethnicity. In Britain, for instance, the media have doggedly begged or threatened women into having more children for the sake of the nation: "[close your eyes and think of England](#)."

Such a framing can quickly become xenophobic. Births "inside" the nation are inevitably contrasted with immigration from the "outside." This is fertile ground for theories such as the "great replacement" to take root.

Immigration is a "misnomer," [writes one popular proponent of the theory](#), "it is more akin to an invasion, a migratory tsunami, a submerging wave of ethnic substitution." In this zero-sum world, if "we" are not actively maintaining our numbers, our cities, cultures and livelihoods will swiftly be taken over by "them."

Here, nationalism tips into ethnonationalism and reproductive debates

descend into violent racism. "It's the birthrates, it's the birthrates, it's the birthrates," repeated the Christchurch shooter in his manifesto, a connection discussed [in my book about digital hate](#).

It's no surprise, then, when we see [white supremacists attending pronatalist events](#). The movement resonates with the infamous [14 words](#) of white supremacy: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children."

These more insidious aspects shed light on the pronatalism exemplified by the Collines. Firstly, this vision appears to be about reproducing a certain kind of person. The Collines [screen for disability and optimize for intelligence](#).

The logic here is that DNA is all-important. It doesn't matter that their children's rooms aren't heated, or they wear iPads around their necks, or that their two-year-old is struck across the face for misbehavior, because, in the end, nature wins over nurture.

Secondly, in the pronatalist vision, the children themselves seem to be beside the point. The child is less an individual, with desires and dignity, than a vehicle for a political project, a dense bundle of futurity.

Here we see the strong connections between pronatalism and effective altruism. Both are obsessed with abstract anxieties about "[trillions of people to come](#)" in the long-term future. In this numbers game, the child is demoted to a data point. As pronatalism rises, grasping these unspoken logics becomes key.

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