

The Observer view on immigration being the answer to falling birth rates

Observer editorial

Declining fertility rates are good for the planet but bad for countries with ageing populations. But encouraging women to have more children is not the answer

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Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan, do not plan to have more than two children because of concerns for the environment. Photograph: Dominic Lipinski/AP

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex have become synonymous with a refreshing rejection of royal convention. Last week, Prince Harry dispensed with the royal predilection for larger than average families in an interview with the primatologist Jane Goodall. “[Two, maximum](#)” was his reply when asked, in the context of a discussion about preserving the planet, how many children he would have.

On this at least, Harry and Meghan appear to be in tune with the nation. New figures from the Office for National Statistics show that the birth rate in England and Wales has fallen to a record low, and that the overall fertility rate for women of childbearing age has [dropped to 1.7 children](#). This decline has come about as a result of people having children later, partly due to social progress – the rapid increase in education and employment levels of women in recent decades, vastly improved access to reliable contraception, and [falling teen pregnancy rates](#). But, more recently, finances have come into play, with rising house prices also a factor. The number of women who [remain childless](#) has also increased, from one in 10 of those born in 1946, to just under one in five of those born in 1970. Britain is far from an outlier: apart from Africa, and some parts of Asia, fertility rates are declining across much of the world.

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Is Prince Harry right that this might be something to celebrate? It’s certainly true that in richer nations, having fewer children is by far the most effective way for individuals to

reduce their carbon footprint. One academic study calculated that having one child fewer would save [58.6 tonnes of CO₂](#) a year. To put that in context, giving up a car would save 2.4 tonnes, and switching to a vegetarian diet 0.82 tonnes. Little wonder that some population experts have argued that falling birth rates are to be [welcomed](#).

Why, then, have governments around the world reacted with alarm rather than delight to falling birth rates? The answer lies in the ageing population structures that are their inevitable product, particularly at a time when stretching lifespans – a scientific advance to celebrate – mean not just more years spent in retirement but more extended spells of time spent in poor health. Older populations require more resources for health and social care, but they also have fewer people of working age to pay taxes to support those services, and to care for their older loved ones.

The answer – particularly given the implications of rising birth rates for the climate crisis – is not necessarily for governments to try to artificially nudge them upwards. They should of course ensure that low-income families with children receive adequate financial support, that childcare is affordable, and that the cost of housing is not so extortionate that couples are forced to delay having children. In the UK, a decade of cuts to tax credits and benefits, and years of runaway house price growth have conspired to ensure that some people have no choice but to put off starting families. But beyond that, policies to try to encourage women to have more children – whether Spain’s “[sex tsar](#)”, Taiwan’s [state-funded matchmaking trips](#) or Italy’s [sexist poster campaign](#) – are neither appealing, nor have a great track record of working.

One way for richer countries to resolve the conundrum of a falling birth rate that’s good for the planet but bad for the exchequer is through immigration – a redistribution of population from those poorer regions of the world where the birth rate is higher, and where there are plenty who want to emigrate. This is not without issues, including the ethical questions posed by population movements that can contribute to a brain drain from poorer countries. A big challenge, however, will be countering the anti-immigration sentiment that has taken root in the politics of the US and much of Europe. But if politicians aren’t brave enough to make the case for more immigration, they should get ready to compensate with higher taxes.