

## **8 Billion People, Oh My!**

What Happens Next - 05.27.2023

Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, and culture.

Today's Topic is 8 Billion People, oh my!

Our guest is Jennifer Sciubba who has written a book entitled 8 Billion and Counting. I am fascinated by the field of demographics because population growth is critical in determining a nation's future political and economic power.

Buckle up.

Jennifer, can you please begin with your six-minute opening remarks.

Jennifer Sciubba:

I'm Jennifer Sciubba and I'm the author of 8 Billion and Counting: How Sex, Death and Migration Shape Our World. I want to show people how a better grasp of the political, social, and economic connections to population trends helps us make sense of this complex world. I wanted to write this book now for a couple of reasons. One is that interest in population is really high right now. China made headlines in 2023 for starting to depopulate and India has just risen to the top of the list of world's most populous countries. I want people to know that a lot of the alarmism around population is unjustified, and a lot of the determinism that pervades analysis of population is just plain wrong. Now, how do I know this? It's because I'm what's called a political demographer. My PhD is in government and politics, but I also saw additional training in demography. The world hit a population of 8 billion in November 2022, and these milestones are rare.

It took from all of human history until the year 1800 for us to have our first 1 billion people on earth. But over the 20th century, the world population went from 1.6 billion at the beginning to 6.1 billion at the end. That century was one of exponential population growth. This century is different. This century has thus far been characterized by differential growth. We still have countries that have high fertility, lots of children born per woman on average, but there's a big divide between them and those countries out there that have very low fertility.

And when you have such a vast difference in population trends around the world that has implications for everything from economic investment to global cooperation.

How did we get to this number of 8 billion and where are we going? Population trends are driven by just three variables. It's fertility, mortality, and migration. I like to think of those as dials that turn up or down to produce different outcomes.

So, we think about that exponential growth of the last century, the fertility variable was high, but we were starting to get control over mortality. Specifically, we were starting to get control over infant and child mortality so that more people could live to their reproductive ages. And so that's where we really see population growth shoot up.

Now, to explain where we are today, I would need to go back to the start of my population career, which was 1999 when I was a college student. My professor came in to announce that the world population had hit 6 billion people. That was a travesty in her eyes. The world of 6 billion was one where two-thirds of the world's countries had high fertility. Women had on average five or more children in their lifetimes. And it was rare for a country to have what's called below replacement fertility, which is fewer than two. In fact, only 8% of countries had that. Now, only two decades later. Those proportions are the inverse. Only 4% of countries have high fertility of five plus children per woman on average, while 71% have below replacement. I think that's where we're going in the future. We need so much more understanding of what a low fertility world looks like, and that is part of what I have to offer in my book.

Larry Bernstein:

In Russia, the number of young men has been falling for years, and some political analysts thought that with so few young men that Russia would be less willing to go to war. Well so much for that. The war in Ukraine has killed several hundred thousand soldiers and in addition millions of Russian men of fighting age have migrated to the West to avoid military service. What does this mean for Russia's demographics and their ability to project force in the future?

Jennifer Sciubba:

Putin has made speeches over the years where he calls their population the number one problem facing the country. So, this is somebody who has been really obsessed with the population aging and low fertility in Russia. Mid 2000s, Russia was losing about 600,000 people a year. Some of that was due to high mortality, specifically a lot of alcoholism among men and early deaths among men from accident and health-related illnesses. Putin and his regime really worked on that and had some success. So, they were able to raise that life expectancy for males. They're putting effort towards decreasing mortality, and then something like this happens and it just does the exact opposite of what it would've looked like he would've done based on his interest in population.

Larry Bernstein:

What are the long-term consequences of mass migration?

Jennifer Sciubba:

It can have a devastating effect, its mass exodus. Ireland's population still reflects the mass exodus of the Irish. These things resonate for decades if not longer because the people of the future are already born. And so much of the population is based on momentum. So not only do we have this issue of current people of childbearing ages either choosing not to have children because who wants to do so in a war zone and with an uncertain future, but also that will continue to echo for a long time because the future cohorts of childbearing ages are going to be smaller.

Larry Bernstein:

My brother Ron and I visited Ireland in the late 80s to play golf. It rained one afternoon so we went to a museum in Killarney that told the history of the Irish potato famine, and the exhibit highlighted that 9 out of 10 people in that county moved to the U.S. Who stayed?

Jennifer Sciubba:

That is such a great question, because I never get asked that. Our world of 8 billion, most people don't move. The people who stay are often the super poor or the super wealthy. And I think that makes sense intuitively, of course, if you're super wealthy, you're probably so entrenched in whatever is happening where you are that you can't really extricate yourself. And if you're super poor, you don't have the money to get out. So, it's often those folks in the middle and people who are of working age because they're looking to leave to find opportunities elsewhere. And this happens around the world.

Larry Bernstein:

Ireland in the mid-19th century is very different from Mexico today. If you are a migrant that shares a border with the US, you can catch a flight from Chicago and be in Mexico City in a couple of hours. How does migration behavior change in an interconnected world?

Jennifer Sciubba:

I wish that there were more policy makers who saw the potential in that kind of migration. It really strikes me that when migration is pulled into the political arena, the positives are almost never talked about. It becomes very nationalistic, or it becomes an economic zero-sum game. I think there is a lot of potential for a world in which people could keep whatever national identity that might be born with, but seasonally migrate or migrate for a certain time to send money back home and then eventually return home. What doesn't happen in practice is that our rules of the game or our politics don't facilitate that. So, there's not enough visas for people who want to do so, even though it might benefit both the host country and the sending country. Instead, it pushes people into an either/or situation. In the United States, it's pushed people into this permanent state of illegality that didn't used to exist.

Larry Bernstein:

Next topic is elderly care. Some Americans choose to retire in Mexico, but they cannot use Medicare. Should the Filipinos move to Japan to care for the elderly, or should the Japanese move to an old age home in the Philippines?

Jennifer Sciubba:

Most people stay and most people want to stay. I think for a lot of elderly people you might be able to retire somewhere else cheaper with better weather, but for cons which is often moving away from entrenched networks of family and friends and what you've come to know.

What we're really seeing is looking at technology to supplement nursing care. Japan not only imports some Filipino nurses, but they also have these robotic cats that will sit in your lap, and you can pet, and they'll monitor your vital signs and they have washing machines for elderly people. Some of those technological solutions can help supplement care. But, at the end of the day, some of these basic functions of caring for another person are best done human to human. Without the infrastructure in place for that to happen, the elderly will really suffer.

Larry Bernstein:

Where will the Ukrainian refugees end up?

Jennifer Sciubba:

I think they'll want to go back.

For the most part we do need to remember that most people who are refugees want to return home. That's not just talking about Ukraine, that's talking about all kinds of refugee populations. It's the rare person who says, I am ready to be resettled and find a new home. The inertia is really to pull towards home.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think the Germans will let in a lot of Ukrainian refugees?

Jennifer Sciubba:

There are disincentives for governments to take in large groups of people permanently. Germany making news so much for taking in so many Syrians several years ago. But then just right after that wave, I started looking at their data on what percentage of asylum cases they were accepting. And it was so small. You have this initial push and then, they close the door again. We see that over and over with conflicts, initial pushes and then closing.

Larry Bernstein:

You study mortality and morbidity for large populations. What do we know now about what COVID did to demographic trends?

Jennifer Sciubba:

Was Covid a break from the past or a continuation? I want to shine a spotlight on how US life expectancy was already going in the wrong direction. Covid is also useful to spur us to think about laying the groundwork for a healthier population. 71% of countries in the world has below replacement fertility, they're on a path towards shrinking populations unless they're accepting large numbers of migrants like the U.S. and Canada do.

That means that we need to stop thinking of our people as disposable and not investing in their quality of life. And it sounds crass but when you have higher fertility or above a placement fertility, there's a disincentive to think about each person as this precious jewel that is rare, but when you have fewer of them, they actually are precious jewels.

The U.S. is in a club with Russia, China, and Mexico as having low healthy life expectancy. This is not a club as an American that I want to belong to. I want to belong in the club with Japan and Greece where we have long healthy life expectancy. I want it to be the case that on average an American is expected to live well into their seventies healthy before that health starts to decline.

Larry Bernstein:

You spoke of Japan as a role model for the US. I lived in Japan in 1998, and on my walk home from work, I passed a Mr. Donut and inside that shop were lots of elderly Japanese men smoking cigarettes. And when I walked past the local McDonalds, which was totally packed, you would see these 12-year-old youngsters a foot taller than their grandmas. It shows that the previous generations lacked sufficient protein, but there is not an obesity problem and that helps extend life expectancy.

Jennifer Sciubba:

That's possible. If we think about this western diet taking hold in a place where that was not there before, and how does that change life expectancy? Wouldn't we see those shifts by now if that was going to change things? There's something else about the lack of activity that we have in the United States.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned that India is now more populated than China. Who cares?

Jennifer Sciubba:

I'm with you. Who cares? Honestly, it's because demography is not destiny. So, I think there's so much hype around India taking over and there's so much alarm about China depopulating. I'm not an alarmist.

I have a newsletter that's free you can subscribe to on Substack. And I've wrote about India recently about how few women are in the workforce; it's low. And the most educated women, the most urban women have the lowest participation in the workforce. China and other Asian economies that really grew during the time that they had young populations, they grew because of investments in human capital, openness to foreign direct investment, solid governance, business friendly climates. Does India have those things in place? Because if they don't, then who cares if they're number one?

Larry Bernstein:

Uganda is expected to have substantially more people than Russia by the end of the century. How will this relative population change affect global political power dynamics?

Jennifer Sciubba:

Russia shows us this idea of demography not being destiny. We're talking about a country that's shrinking and is still willing to project power beyond their borders. There's not this direct relationship between whether a population is growing and their ability or willingness to project power. That's one of the considerations that we need to have because do those countries that are at the current top of the global order disappear and get replaced by those that still have growing populations or not?

And this is where being a political scientist, I say, who got to write the rules of the global order? It was those countries that won World War II wrote the rules of the global order with themselves in it. How do we predict the demise of the UN Security Council? How hard is it to change rules once they're in place for the foreseeable future? At least until I'm in the nursing home, it's going to look exactly like it looks now, because those rules are strong. What would it take to change them? You must see centers of economic power shift elsewhere. And there's a big question mark over whether some of the young and growing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa or Central Asia will have the governance and the capacity to make the most of their young and growing populations, or if they'll squander that opportunity because it's not automatic.

Larry Bernstein:

Nigeria is expected to have a population of 400 million people by 2050 and that is more than the US. Nigeria has lots of problems, where do you expect the Nigerians to move?

Jennifer Sciubba:

They'll go where people let them. So, remember that borders are strong. Look at the US southern border, it's still strong because there's little incentive to change border politics. So not all 400 million Nigerians of the future want to leave. Some are super wealthy, they'll never go. Some are super poor, they can't go. The ones in the middle who will let them come in, either let them sneak over and make a living or let them legally come in. And that's where we have to say the trend has been towards not very open borders, even as populations have aged. Will Korea start accepting far more migrants now that their population is getting cut by more than half by the end of the century or not?

Well, this is again, a political social question. I think in a couple of decades, I don't see any shift in global migration such that the countries that have had closed doors fling them wide open. We know that only two to 4% of the world's population lives outside their borders. And it's been that way for decades and decades. I think that's likely to continue in the future because of the alarm about change. It's powerful.

Larry Bernstein:

There are 150 million more men than women in China. What are the implications of that?

Jennifer Sciubba:

I know that I will sell a lot more books and get a lot more invitations to speak if I were much more alarmist about population trends. But as a student of politics and demography, I think the past is a great guide to the future. And what we know about China is there are millions of missing women because of sex selective abortion. We also know that to be the case in India. When I was at the Pentagon in the mid-2000s, there was tons of alarm about these untethered Chinese males were going to be the perfect fodder for the Chinese army to go take over the world.

We have not seen it used that way. It's not because these young men are unmarried. We should realize that even without missing women, marriage is not popular. People are getting married at an older and older ages all around the world. Now I'm about to celebrate my 20th wedding anniversary. I suppose by being married to me I have tamed my husband into nothing but a kitten. I just think this dog has not barked.

It is more of a social issue than a national security issue. And cultures change.

Larry Bernstein:

New technology will make it easier to choose the sex of the child. What do you think will happen?

Jennifer Sciubba:

Yeah, I do expect people to use it because we've seen them do it in the past.

From a purely sex ratio issue, it frankly doesn't matter if some people are going to choose the sex of their children if there's no strong cultural preference for one sex over the other because it'll probably still come out in the wash. Some people love girls, some people love boys. So, you don't know that you'll have an abnormal sex ratio at birth just because people are choosing the sex of their child. But a strong preference historically has been sons, that is when you see abnormal sex ratios at birth.

Larry Bernstein:

Population is going to explode in Africa, what happens next?

Jennifer Sciubba:

In sub-Saharan Africa we see different fertility rates in different countries. And so, the region itself, it does not look cohesive when we start to look at total fertility rates. There are some countries where it has come down fast and is continuing to do so, and that tends to be the countries where the leader buys into the idea that providing people with healthcare, education, having family planning, that's a good thing for society overall. In those instances, fertility tends to fall fast. We saw that happen in Botswana, but in some countries like Niger, Mali, and Nigeria, we still have fertility rates that are above five that are high.

So even though fertility has come down overall, it is not falling quite as quickly in some of those countries as it is in others. So, what that means is that that country has the momentum for tremendous, continued growth. And I did a CK newsletter on this recently called "global population peaks sooner than expected." And I actually look at a couple of different fertility scenarios for certain countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, and depending on how fast it falls, that makes 20, 30 million differences in the number of people just a few decades out.

Tanzania had a leader until recently who feared population aging and wanted to make sure that the country kept growing therefore it will keep growing.

Larry Bernstein:

Sometimes African leaders blame foreigners for pressuring them to reduce fertility rates, is that a problem?

Jennifer Sciubba:

Some of Africa's leaders do think that already. Part of the India sterilization program came from pressure from foreign foundations and the environmental regime in encouraging lower population growth. I've been around the advocacy community, since the Cairo Conference, the



emphasis on rights-based family planning. That is what most of these foreign aid agencies are promoting. I think that we open the door to coercion when we make an ideal population size the goal. I would love to see us move as a world away from trying to dictate population size but instead thinking about people's lives.

The UN has a recent report out their state of the world population, and I moderated an event on this for the Wilson Center recently that's available online. In this report, they talk about the number of countries with explicit programs to determine population size, whether too many or too few is increasing. And it goes back to this alarm about population. That's why I'm out there as a counter alarmist because when you say that population is a problem, then tools to change population become the solution. Taking away people's rights is very effective at lowering fertility where it is high, we don't know if thus far it's not very effective at raising fertility. So, places where it's low tend to still be low.

Larry Bernstein:

In Israel, the very religious are having lots of children. What are the implications of that?

Jennifer Sciubba:

Israel really is an interesting case. It's hard to predict how that will change politics and life in Israel in the future. Because even though we might wish that our children have the same religious beliefs as us, we actually can't guarantee that. All we can do is plug this into our equation and say, "wow, the ultra-orthodox population in Israel is really growing in the future."

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode with a note of optimism. Jennifer, what are you optimistic about?

Jennifer Sciubba:

When I finished writing my book *8 billion and Counting*, I was absolutely shocked to see that I was an optimist because I had spent a decade and a half in the college classroom teaching environmental politics. And my students had even nicknamed my courses the Apocalypse courses. But the exercise of writing that book and having to zoom so far out to understand how far we have come with human life expectancy and how far fertility has fallen, actually both of those made me very optimistic because I know a lot of people are raising alarm about below replacement fertility, but we can feel confident that if we only have one child, that child will make it not only through their reproductive ages, but into old age. It is confidence in the future.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Jennifer for joining us today.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The topic was Dude, WTF! How Bad English Improves the Language. Our guest was Valerie Fridland who is a professor of Linguistics at the University of Nevada at Reno, and she is the author of the book Like, Literally, Dude.

I am annoyed when people abuse the English language, but I recognize that language evolves. Valerie discussed how mostly young women use new words and expressions that change the language, often for the better.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website [whathappensnextin6minutes.com](http://whathappensnextin6minutes.com). Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining me, good-bye.