

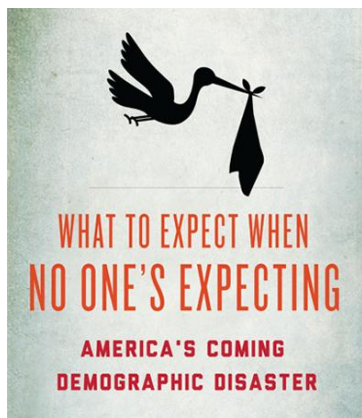


A review of *What to expect when no one's expecting*

We are in a demographic crunch. How did we get here and where will we go?

Last, Jonathan V. (2013). What to expect when no one's expecting. New York: Encounter Books. 221 pages.

Reviewed by Derek Miedema



Can the world handle more people? To some, fewer people means more space, the use of fewer resources and a healthier planet. Jonathan V. Last, author of *What to expect when no one's expecting*, begs to differ. We need more people, he argues, in order to maintain our population levels over the long term.

Last makes a compelling argument that a shrinking population is no panacea for a purportedly crowded world. Just the opposite, in fact. A shrinking population means, among other things, abandoned homes, shuttered businesses, shattered local economies. Think Detroit.

The author has created an impeccably researched and eminently readable book. He faces critics head on with humour and makes clear that his warnings are not predictions. The future fertility rate is never written in stone of course, so things could be better or worse than he describes depending on how many babies are born in subsequent generations.

Fertility trends around the world do not breed confidence in this regard. Last shows that in spite of government efforts around the world to raise birth rates, once that rate falls below replacement (2.1), it never returns. Canada's fertility rate is 1.63. The US fertility rate, currently just shy of 2.1 but kept high by the Hispanic population, shows signs of dropping overall. In fact, Last shows that the fertility rate of white middle class America (1.6) is only slightly higher than that of China (1.54), which has had a one child policy for decades.

How did we get here, you might ask? Some would go back to the Baby Boom itself and say we simply aren't having enough kids. That's part of the truth. Others would go back a century and note the radical improvements in life expectancy combined with deep decreases in infant mortality. More people survive and live to be older than ever before. Last gives evidence that the sheer cost of raising children today, from top of the line strollers and cribs onwards, has moved children from being "a *marker* of economic success to a *barrier* to economic success."

Furthermore, a raft of government policies has together had the unintended consequences of lowering the fertility rate. Last notes that government provision of old age social security removed the incentive to have kids; social security rewards equally those who have many children and those who have none. The legal requirement of car seats means that cars which would have held three in the back and two in the front can only hold two in each row. A bigger family therefore means a bigger car. And housing in our big cities isn't built for big families. The list goes on.

Cohabitation, delayed marriage and delayed childbearing all contribute as well. And contraception is the wool that knits all those together. Last is even so bold as to show that women with higher education levels tend to have fewer babies than those without. Even positive developments, in other words, have negatively affected fertility rates.

What happens when a population doesn't replace itself? Two things: The age structure of the population is turned upside down. This is happening in the US and in Canada today. There are more seniors and fewer kids. The second is that the population begins to shrink when all those seniors die. That isn't happening in North America yet, but it is happening in Japan and parts of Germany and Italy, says Last.

An upside down age structure means that entitlement programs for old age will not be affordable. There are more people drawing from them than paying into them. A shrinking population means empty houses, shuttered businesses, empty streets, not (as in Detroit) because the local economy has collapsed and everyone has moved elsewhere, but because there simply aren't enough people to keep those houses, businesses and streets alive.

There is no real way that we can avoid an aging society; it's already happening. And the only way we could avoid a shrinking population is a massive increase in the fertility rate. This isn't impossible; No one in 1940 would have thought the Baby Boom possible, but it happened. However, neither is it likely.

We have no experience to show us how to navigate these waters. Writes Last, "(s)ince the Industrial Revolution (at least) there is no model for a country experiencing a sustained, structural shrinking of its population."

In sum, *What to expect when no one's expecting* is a rare achievement: A no holds barred examination of demographics that is as easily read by demographers as it is by lay people. This is not a hopeful book, but it is nonetheless entertaining and highly informative. It's a must read *particularly* for those who think *fewer* people will mean a better world. For what will it matter if the planet is pristine, but there's no one left to enjoy it?