

Western Experiences with International Migration in the Context of Population Decline

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Concerns about population decline and international migration have a long tradition in Western countries, going back over a century or more.

A common concern has been the metaphor of "aging populations", the nearly-universal shifts underway in age structures from higher percentages among younger age groups to higher percentages among older groups. This is mostly due to the near-universality of fertility declines, though changes in mortality and international migration can also have (smaller) effects. During the 1930s and 1940s, many portrayed "older" populations to be less vigorous, creative, ambitious, vital, dynamic, and powerful, and similar claims have reemerged in recent years. None of these claims have proved to be convincing.

It is sometimes argued that increased immigration can reverse population decline and demographic aging. In 2000, the United Nations Population Division published a series of hypothetical scenarios, alternative projections of the number of immigrants that would be required hypothetically from 2000-2050 to:

- prevent a decline in the total population size
- hold constant the size of the population between ages 15-65
- hold constant the "old age dependency ratio" (defined as persons 65+ to those 15-64).

The report was widely misinterpreted by the press, politicians, and advocacy groups, especially in Europe, as reflecting UN recommendations that Europe would "need" to substantially increase the number of immigrants it admits. Yet in reality its key conclusions were as follows:

- In countries with very low fertility rates, halting demographic ageing via immigration policy would require extraordinarily large numbers of immigrants
- Such a high level of immigration "...seems out of reach because of the extraordinarily large numbers of migrants that would be required."

In the UN's Japan case study, for example, the hypothetical scenario specifying a constant "old age dependency ratio" would require admission of some 553 million immigrants by 2050 who, with their offspring, would then account for some 87% of the population in Japan. More generally, large inflows of immigrants into a country with low levels of fertility can produce unusually rapid transformations in the proportions that are native- and foreign-born, which can lead to controversy.

All Western countries have low fertility rates, but there is no consensus regarding international migration. The "traditional countries of immigration" --- the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand --- have longstanding traditions of admitting and integrating large numbers of foreign nationals, but other countries such as Germany have long declared explicitly that they are "not

countries of immigration".

Immigration issues have often become entangled in debates about proposed free trade agreements, in at least two forms: whether freer movement of goods and capital should or should not be accompanied by freer movement of labor; and whether such free trade agreements reduce the pressures favoring unauthorized migration to Western countries. There is no consensus on these issues.

In Japan, recent fertility patterns have been very unusual. The "period" (or annual) total fertility rate has declined by nearly one-third between 1975 and 2001, but the number of children ever born among married women declined only slightly. The key to understanding seems to lie in Japanese marriage behavior, the most fascinating characteristic of which is the remarkably high percentage of women who have never married while in their 20s, normally the prime childbearing decade.

Japanese decision-makers will have to make their own determinations as to whether Japanese fertility rates are too low, and about appropriate levels and characteristics of immigration. In doing so, they should insist that any proposed actions on fertility or immigration meet the test of quantitative realism. Moreover, those claiming that the "dependency ratio" is deteriorating should acknowledge that in a society with Japan's high levels of life expectancy and health this ratio does not actually measure dependency. Those using very long-range (e.g. 50-100 year) projections should recognize how profoundly misleading these can be.

Simple answers to complex questions will not suffice. An array of approaches, each of modest magnitude and slow of pace but all operating in the same direction, are more likely to be effective.