

# History lessons for policymakers pondering our population problem

Michigan feared a similar crisis in the 1970s

By Michael Van Beek | December 2023

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is concerned about the size of Michigan's population and has created a council to study the issue and generate policy recommendations. She's not the first governor to worry, though. Fifty years ago, Gov. William Milliken wanted to create a similar commission. Back then, though, the problem wasn't too few people, but too many. Today's policymakers could learn from this previous episode of population anxiety.

The effort to fix the state's population problem 50 years ago started with a

Republican state senator from Ann Arbor. Population forecasts troubled Sen. Gilbert Bursley. A Michigan State University professor noted in 1962 that the state had just surpassed eight million inhabitants. The professor projected that Michigan would reach 9.3 million souls by 1970.

Bursley launched a multi-prong effort to curb this apparent boom. He introduced legislation in 1970 to legalize abortion in certain circumstances, arguing that this would help slow the state's population

growth. Whitmer makes the opposite argument today, believing that easy access to abortion services can boost the population. Bursley also wanted to eliminate tax breaks for families with more than two children. Another bill he sponsored would create a population commission to "suggest legislation which might favor stabilization of our population."

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Fears of overpopulation were common back then. The White House studied the issue. “Zero population growth” was a phrase experts used that

neatly articulated their goal. The Malthusian trap is easy to understand: A growing population consumes increasing amounts of finite resources. Project those trends into the future, and pretty soon, we've run out of food. The state's natural resources department was sounding the alarm in 1970, publicizing estimates of how many people Michigan farmers could feed.

This is the first lesson for today's policymakers concerned about population stagnation: Don't get carried away with projections. In the early '70s,

eggheads predicted a “population explosion.” Even though it was clear within the decade that these predictions were off — Michigan’s population was 8.9 million in 1970, not the 9.3 million predicted earlier — concerns of overcrowding persisted. One article claimed the state’s “quality of life” was “on the line” because the state population would hit 13.5 million in 2000 “unless we change our ways.” Those concerns didn’t age well, and thankfully, not much more than a proposed government commission came of it.

In the population scare of 50 years ago, the natural resources department recommended “relax[ing] social pressures which glorify marriage and parenthood.” It forgot to mention how this might be achieved. “Proposed methods for dealing with population growth range from the stupid and unrealistic to the frightening and ruthless,” a Detroit Free Press feature writer remarked, perhaps thinking of ideas like that one.

The second lesson is to be on high alert for impractical policy proposals. These tend to surface when policymakers are dreaming up solutions to elusive problems that are projected to cause some unknowable harm at some unknowable time in the distant future.

Whitmer’s population council will be spared having to consider ideas as wild as the ones that were peddled back then, such as colonizing the moon or putting contraceptives in the water supply. Nor did anything come of the effort to create a population commission in the 1970s. Bursley’s bill didn’t pass, and the Milliken administration started noticing that the decreasing birth rate “somewhat alleviated recent

serious concerns.” It went on, “Many demographers are becoming almost optimistic that population control or limitation can indeed be left to individuals, and government regulations to guarantee stabilization of population will not be necessary.”

There’s the third lesson for today’s policymakers. The forces that drive broad population trends are largely beyond your control. The drivers of population change are multifaceted and impacted by amorphous social and cultural forces that no one is in charge of.

Hannah Kling recently analyzed the economic research on state-level population growth. “An important takeaway from the research is that there are limits on what state officials can accomplish to influence population trends,” she writes. Policies do matter, but lawmakers are not in control of the key determinants of state population.

The population problem of the 1970s was an illusion, but it whipped lawmakers into a frenzy anyway. To the extent it was a problem, it fixed itself without government intervention. This previous experience suggests policymakers should approach today’s alleged population problem with a helpful serving of humility. Their role in influencing population trends is limited, and they should focus on practical solutions to concrete and well-documented problems.

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