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China's Population Decline Accelerates as Women Resist Pressure to Have Babies

China ended 2023 with 1.410 billion people, a drop of 2.08 million, as births continue to plummet

By [Liyan Qi](#) [Follow](#)

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Over the past year, China's population dropped by 2.08 million, more than twice as many as in 2022.

PHOTO: TINGSHU WANG/REUTERS

Births in China dropped by more than 500,000 last year to just over 9 million in total, accelerating the decline in the country's population as women shrugged off the government's exhortations to reproduce.

The number of newborns has gone into free fall over the past several years. Official figures released Wednesday showed that China had fewer than half the number of births in 2023 than the country did in 2016, after China abolished the one-child policy. The latest number points to a fertility rate—the number of children a woman has over her lifetime—that is close to 1.0, a level considered by demographers as “ultralow.”

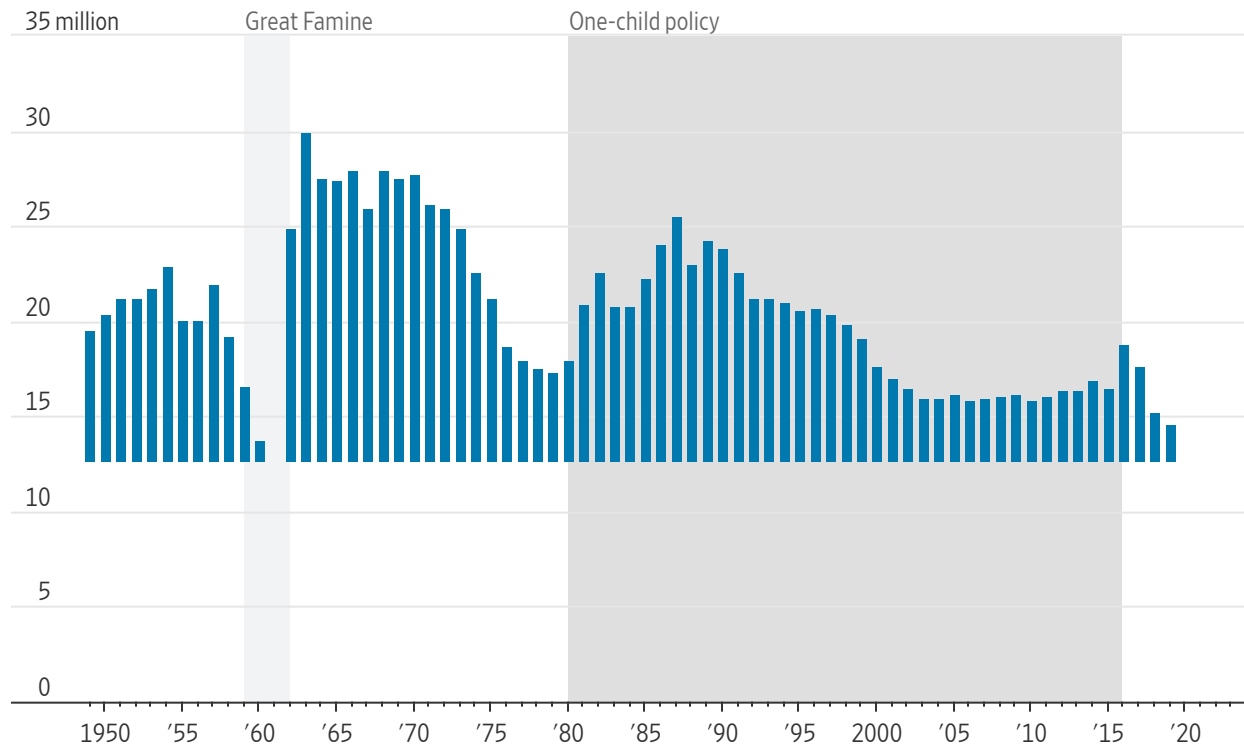
The worsening demographic gloom has taken on increasing urgency for Beijing. The country hit a historic turning point in 2022, marking the first year the

population shrank since the starvation years in the early 1960s.

Free-falling births

Births have dropped below levels in the early 1960s, when China was devastated by famine.

Number of births in China



Source: China National Bureau of Statistics

Over the past year, China's population dropped by 2.08 million, more than twice the drop in 2022. China ended 2023 with 1.410 billion people, the National Bureau of Statistics said Wednesday, down from 1.412 billion in 2022.

Economic headwinds didn't help the situation. Another possible factor was China's sudden abandonment of Covid-restrictions at the end of 2022, which might have led to a sharp rise in deaths early last year.

The statistics bureau, which doesn't break out deaths by month, said the number of deaths increased to 11.10 million in 2023 from 10.41 million in 2022.

China last year ceded its centuries-old position as the world's most populous country to India and is unlikely to be able to reverse the trend of declining births. Because of the decadeslong one-child policy, there are fewer young people than in past generations, including millions fewer women of childbearing age every

year.

The latest data shows that the fertility rate is less than half of the replacement rate of 2.1, said He Yafu, an independent demographer based in Guangdong. That means that each generation will be less than half the size of the previous generation, he said.

In addition, many women are increasingly reluctant to marry and have children, putting their own life goals ahead of what Beijing and relatives want, a situation that has prompted the Communist Party, which desperately needs to rejuvenate China's aging population, to embark on a campaign for a "birth-friendly culture."

Adding to women's reluctance to have children was economic uncertainty last year, which pushed many young Chinese couples to postpone plans to start a family. And unlike in the U.S., where population effects from the pandemic continued to fade, what had been expected to be a slight uptick in births after China dropped its Covid-19 restrictions failed to materialize.

China's National Bureau of Statistics said there were 11.10 million deaths in 2023. PHOTO: STAFF/REUTERS

A Chinese woman is seen testing in late 2022. Beijing shows the damage done by Covid

AFTER a series of protests in late 2022, Beijing abruptly dropped its Covid policies, which had kept many people homebound and stifled much economic activity. China hasn't given a full accounting of the impact of the policy reversal, including whether it led to a sharp rise in deaths. Officials have stopped publishing data that can shed light on the issue, such as the number of cremations.

A peer-reviewed study based on obituary and search-engine data and published in JAMA Network Open, an American Medical Association journal, last year estimated excess deaths among adults 30 or older at 1.87 million in the first two months following Beijing's abandonment of the zero-Covid policy in early December 2022.

Economic challenges are likely to continue. China said Wednesday its economy grew 5.2% last year from a year earlier, slower than prepandemic levels of over 6%, reflecting an ailing property sector and soft consumer spending. Youth unemployment skyrocketed to a record of 21% last year, further damping young people's willingness to start a family.

For the coming decades, the number of newborns is likely to drop by one million each decade, according to a research report released by the Development and Research Center, a think tank under the State Council, China's cabinet, late last year.

China dropped its Covid policies, which had kept many people homebound and stifled much economic activity, in late 2022 after a series of protests. PHOTO: JADE GAO/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

China's population is aging much earlier in its economic development than other major economies. China's per capita gross domestic product in 2022, when its population first started shrinking, was around \$12,000, just above one-third of Japan's when it began seeing population declines, the report said.

In Japan, known for its aging population, more elderly people have stayed in the workforce, helping to keep the number of workers stable even as the population declines. Beijing has for years talked about raising the retirement age—one of the lowest among major economies—but has repeatedly postponed the move.

One out of every five Chinese is now 60 or older, the age when most Chinese, at least in cities, retire.

The U.S. is also facing an aging population. In the U.S., 17.7% of the population was 65 or older, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, compared with around 15% in China. But China is quickly catching up. The portions of Chinese 65 or older will be 30% and 41% by 2050 and 2100, respectively, according to United Nations estimates, which are based on China's 2020 census data. The U.N.'s projections for that age group in the U.S. is 24% and 30%, respectively.

And unlike Chinese seniors, especially in rural areas, many older Americans are in relatively good financial shape. Also, immigrants help replenish the U.S. workforce, while in China immigration is practically nonexistent. Foreign-born workers' share of the U.S. labor force rose last year, helping to offset potential labor shortages.

One out of every five Chinese is now 60 or older. PHOTO: CFOTO/ZUMA PRESS

The average age of China's nearly 300 million migrant workers, the pillar of its labor force, increased to 42.3 in 2022, the latest official data available, from 37.3 in 2012.

Beijing has for years said that aging isn't necessarily a drag on the economy and has tried to boost what officials dubbed as the "silver-haired economy," or industries focused on elderly care, from serving food to medical care.

Developers of new residential compounds must set aside land for elderly-care purposes, according to guidelines released by the State Council on Monday. The central government will support converting idle land, such as abandoned warehouses, into elderly-care facilities, the cabinet said. The guidelines didn't offer detailed policies.

To encourage more births, local governments have tried everything from matchmaking to cash incentives. A district of the city of Wuhan last year offered couples who have a third child 10,000 yuan, equivalent to \$1,395, a year for the child's first six years.

"The new demographic reality means that the demand side, especially household consumption, has increasingly become a persistent constraint on economic growth," Cai Fang, an academic adviser to China's central bank, wrote in an essay late last year.

Authorities should think outside the traditional policy box and encourage births by boosting employment and raising household incomes, Cai wrote.

Martin Whyte, a sociology professor emeritus at Harvard University, said in an essay in China-US Focus, run by the independent China-United States Exchange Foundation, last year that instead of pursuing higher birthrates, China should focus on improving the welfare of its people, such as expanding education opportunities for rural youths and reducing gender discrimination.

—Xiao Xiao contributed to this article.

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