

Why we fail to see the positives of population growth and immigration

Written by

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Many people believe population growth means greater competition for a fixed supply of resources. But we should view others as producers, as well as consumers, says Dr Guy Voichek.

Across the world, and particularly in Europe and the US, [anti-immigrant sentiment](#) is on the rise. This is driven by a range of complex factors, including questions of identity, culture and history. Alongside these, however, a key underlying component is **concern about increased competition** for resources.

People worry that incomers will rapidly increase local and national population sizes, leading to less food, fewer jobs, more strain on public services, and [faster depletion of natural resources](#). This is not a new phenomenon: the global population has been rising almost continuously [for the past 12,000 years](#), and has rocketed since the 1700s, and **this fear has persisted for much of that time.**

The problem is that, for almost as long as this fear has been around, it has been proved groundless. More people does mean more mouths to feed, but it also means more arms to work, more minds to generate ideas, and a greater incentive to innovate. This actually leads to greater abundance rather than resource depletion, and the world has shown this by adapting to a scale of population growth our predecessors would have considered impossible.

Why do people think migration is bad?

Our study highlights a psychological mechanism that causes people to fail to acknowledge the positive impact that population growth has on production and efficiency. This means most people see others purely as consumers, rather than as both consumers and producers. The researchers call this mechanism "efficiency neglect".

People are inclined to believe that population growth means they have to work for longer than those in previous decades

This way of thinking has a significant impact on people's perceptions. For example, the research found that, even though **a range of consumer goods have become cheaper over time** (in terms of the number of hours of work required to afford them), people incorrectly believe they have become more expensive.

Linking back to the question of immigration, there's a clear danger of such systematic misperceptions of economic trends leading people to align themselves with political positions and movements that they may not otherwise support. In other words, those who incorrectly see incomers as a direct threat to their own access to food, shelter and acceptable living standards may be driven to support action against those people.

Labour vs. demand

So, are we destined as a species to resent population growth as a threat to our own wellbeing? Thankfully, the research highlights a **potential solution**. Starting with the question of the price of goods: when the researchers prompted people to consider the effect of increased demand, they continued to believe that it would increase prices. However, when they were prompted to take technological changes into account, this effect was mitigated.

Most people see others purely as consumers, rather than as both consumers and producers

Moving on to immigration specifically, the researchers found that, when thinking about its impact, people similarly tend to focus on how it affects demand. In other words, they see it as zero-sum, with economic benefits for immigrants coming at the expense of current citizens. However, as with the question about the price of goods, when people were prompted to consider how immigration affects the number of available workers, this effect was reduced.

This demonstrates that simply reminding people that **population growth can boost labour power and spark innovation** may be enough to improve their view of immigrants and immigration. Critically, this has to be an active reminder – the study shows that the default view tends to focus on depletion, due to the psychological mechanism of efficiency neglect.

How people vote

Ultimately, and worryingly, people are inclined to believe that population growth means they have to work for longer than those in previous decades to purchase the same goods, and that they are in greater competition with others for a fixed supply of resources – even though neither of these things is true.

And, of course, faulty economic beliefs lead to bad policies. This **helps to explain the rising fervour across Europe and the US for closed borders** and population control measures, in the wake of conflicts and environmental impacts forcing greater numbers of people to migrate.

Fortunately, as the research shows, being reminded to consider how immigration affects productivity and innovation can mitigate people's concerns, even if it does not eliminate them. A practical question for society at large is whether there is the political will to issue these reminders – to make the case for immigration's positive impact on economic factors. This very much remains to be seen, but a [year of elections](#) across a range of developed countries may provide some clarity.

This article draws on findings from "[Efficiency Neglect: Why People are Pessimistic About the Effects of Increasing Population](#)" by Jason Dana (Yale School of Management), George E. Newman (University of Toronto) and Guy Voichek (Imperial

College London).

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Guy Voichek is an assistant professor of marketing. His research focuses on when and how people make comparisons. Specifically, he researches what leads people to pay attention to – or ignore – salient comparisons or even a particular aspect of a specific comparison, and how this affects their choices and experiences.

Read [Guy's Imperial Profile](#) for more information and publications.

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