

The population question

Earth has reached 8 billion inhabitants. But more people doesn't have to mean more greenhouse gas emissions.



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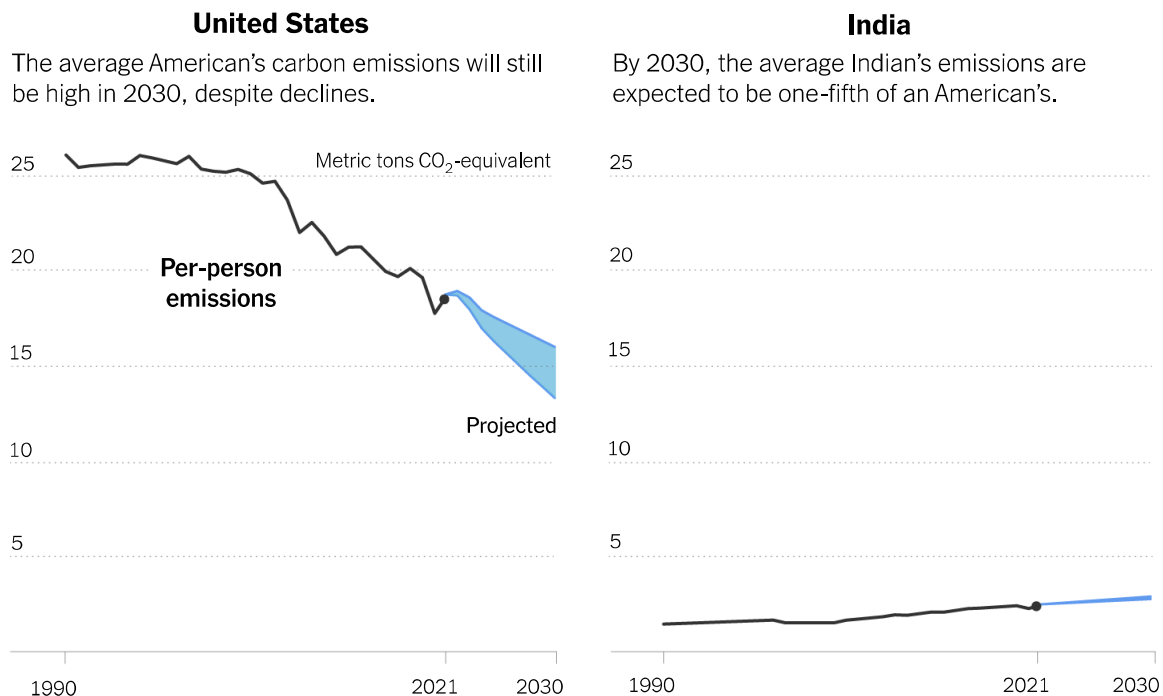
You're reading the Climate Forward newsletter, for Times subscribers only. Your must-read guide to the climate crisis.

There are now 8 billion of us.

How does that affect our ability to live within planetary boundaries — and to stave off the worst climate hazards?

Actually, what matters most is not how many we are. It's how we live.

More people doesn't necessarily mean more emissions. More fossil fuel burning means more emissions. And more affluence has historically meant more fossil fuel burning. Take a look at the United States and India:



Note: Data does not include emissions from land use and forestry. • Source: Climate Action Tracker; United Nations • By Elena Shao/The New York Times

By 2030, India's population is projected to be more than four times that of the United States. Yet India's total emissions are still expected to be lower than those of the United States, and its per capita emissions still a small fraction of those of the United States.

This reflects a global fact. Countries that represent 12 percent of the population account for 50 percent of the emissions that have warmed the planet over the last 170 years.

As a recent study in the journal *Nature* concluded, "the affluent citizens of the world are responsible for most environmental impacts" and are central to any future prospect of a more balanced relationship with the environment.

Put another way, those of us who live in the world's richest countries consume a lot of energy. We drive long distances in big cars. We crank up the air conditioning in our offices. We eat a lot of red meat, another huge source of emissions. We throw away a lot of food. (Hacks here on fixing food waste.)

Oxfam has concluded that the world's richest 1 percent, about 63 million people, account for double the carbon dioxide emissions of the world's poorest 3 billion.

The 8 billion number represents enormous progress.

It reflects the triumph of science. We are living longer, thanks to remarkable improvements in health and nutrition. Our babies are surviving to adulthood.

Second, it reflects the triumph of education, especially girls' education. We live healthier lives when our mothers go to school, and we women have a greater say over our lives.

Those advances also explain why population growth has slowed. According to the latest United Nations estimates, there will be 10.4 billion of us by 2100 and not 11 billion, as had been projected in 2019.

Girls' education matters.

Girls' education is often cited as one of the most effective ways to address climate change. That's because expanding the rights of women, including access to schooling and family planning services, delays childbearing and enables women to decide for themselves whether to have children, at what age, and how many.

Project Drawdown, a research group that examines ways to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions, looked at the climate effects of two scenarios: one in which investments are made in universal education and voluntary family planning, and one without. It found that "as fertility levels change due in part to increased uptake of voluntary family planning and rising education levels, population growth slows, with cascading benefits for the health and well-being of people and the planet."

Note the "voluntary."

History is littered with population control horrors.

China's one-child policy lasted 40 years and haunted millions of families. India forcibly sterilized men during 20 months of emergency rule from 1975-77. The United States admitted to the forced sterilization of Native American women in the 1970s.

In 2100, can 10.4 billion people live healthy lives without destroying Earth's atmosphere? That's the test. The consumption habits of a few of us are what count the most. Also, as a practical matter, that's easier to fix than to go around telling people whether and how many children to bear.

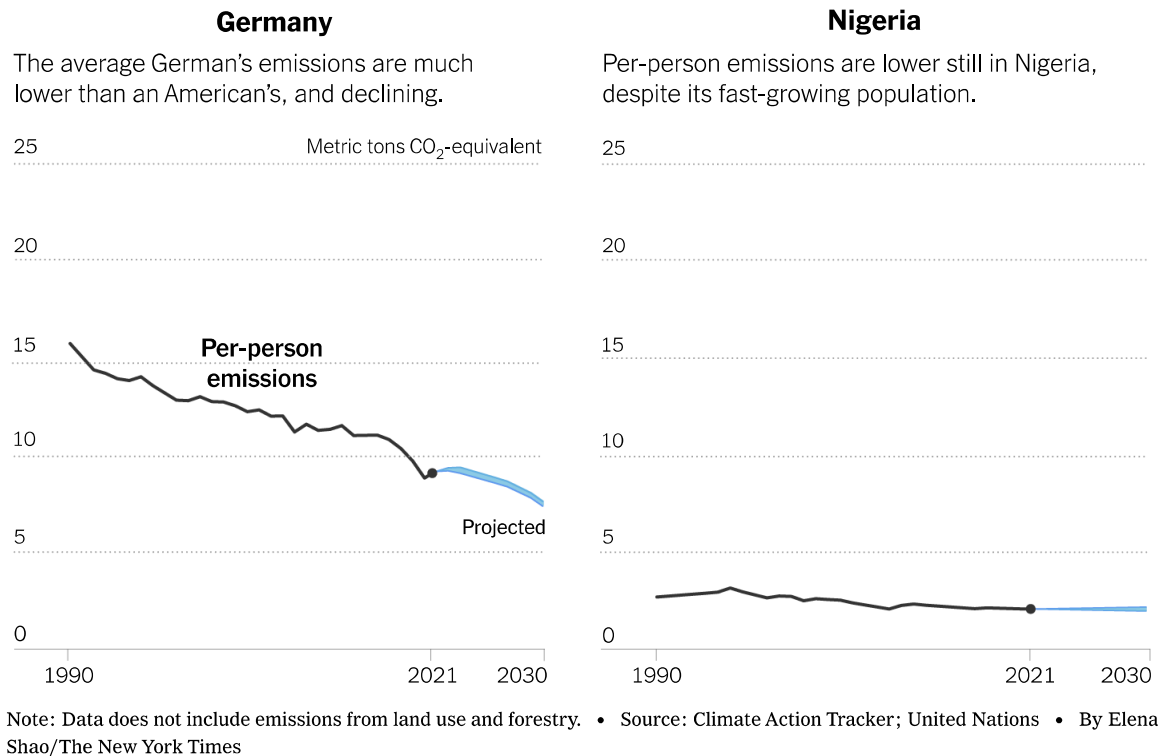
Raising children is a deeply personal matter. It can make you think hard about what kind of world you want to leave behind.

Adam Levy, the climate journalist, put it best on a YouTube video he posted this week after meeting his newborn niece. “There’s something about new life in the present,” he said, “which makes you reflect on the past and the future like nothing else can.”

Consumption patterns can change, and they are.

Is it possible to live healthy, comfortable lives without destroying Earth’s climate? The signs are promising. Many countries, especially in Europe, are growing their economies while reducing their emissions. They’ve been decoupled, as economists say. Renewable energy is a big reason.

Look at Germany’s trajectory. It’s the largest economy in Europe.



Lots of things can reduce our emissions without sacrificing creature comforts. Reliable public transit. Dense housing. Walkable neighborhoods. Better insulated buildings. Heat pumps. Moving away from coal, oil and gas to produce electricity. Wasting less food. One-third of the U.S. food supply goes uneaten.

Plus, using products for longer and finding ways to re-use materials would also go a long way toward preserving global biodiversity, no matter how fast the global population grows.

Then, there’s the issue of time frames.

Keeping climate change to manageable limits requires cutting the emissions of planet-warming gases by nearly half within this decade, according to the scientific consensus. That means immediately pivoting the global economy away from the combustion of fossil fuels and keeping forests and peatlands intact.

That’s the task at hand, even in the unlikely event that everyone agreed to have zero children as of today.

By contrast, the impact of population growth will play out over many decades. If we live longer and our children live longer, we could very well consume more natural resources. How much more is up to us. We get to shape that now.