

## Population 10 Billion by Danny Dorling – review

A myth-busting analysis of population growth is refreshingly free of doomsday rhetoric

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Crowds celebrate National Day in Tiananmen Square, China, the world's most populous country. Photograph: Andy Wong/AP

Genealogy and **population** fascinate us all. Who are we? Where do we come from? And crucially nowadays, how many more of us can we accommodate? Can we survive the impending crisis and, if so, how?

Danny Dorling, one of the UK's leading experts, tells us not to worry. His latest of several books on population takes to task the United Nations and its recent predictions of a world that will explode to 10 billion people.

First some stats – and in subjects such as this, data is illuminating and vital to the task. By Dorling's reckoning, it took 64,000 years for the planet to reach its first billion, in 1820. At various points during that long period the population fell, such as during the Black Death, and other assorted plagues and pestilence, and invasions from the Mongols and others.

The second billion came 106 years later, in 1926 – a speed that was 600 times faster. The third billion was recorded in 1960, only 34 years later, with the fourth in 1975. In 1988 the number rose to 5 billion – what was assumed to be the halfway point in the eventual maximum size of the species.

The rate continued to increase, with 6 billion coming in 2000. Up and up and faster and faster. If growth continues at the premillennial rate of acceleration, by 2300 the world will be inhabited by 133,592 billion people. Or rather it won't. By that reckoning, we'll all have been consumed in some cauldron.

There is a more serious academic debate, around a narrower band of numbers. Before May 2011 demographics boffins had broadly agreed that the world population would peak at 9.1 billion in 2100, and then fall to 8.5 billion people by 2150. Yet the UN, perhaps spooked by the 7 billion number reached in 2011, revised up its predictions, suggesting that 9.1 billion would be achieved much earlier, maybe by 2050 or before. By 2100 there would be 10.1 billion souls squashed perilously up against one another on the planet.

This 10 billion mark is proving talismanic, with a spate of doom-laden books presaging the moment. One eagerly awaited tome, by [Stephen Emmott](#), will be published shortly, with a message to be very scared. Dorling, by contrast, is more sanguine. Several factors, he argues, are driving down fertility rates. One is education. Another is public health. More intriguing is his contention about migration: "People tend to rapidly adopt the fertility rates of the places they move to. If Europeans want to be well cared for in our old age, and we also want fewer future people in the world, the last thing we should be doing is trying to reduce migration to Europe."

At every stage of the past century or two, population figures have stoked fear. The issue was central to Marxist immiseration theory in the early 19th century– the idea that the more people are born, the more capitalists will see the need to drive down wages and conditions in order to maintain their profitability.

In the 20s and 30s, as arguments over genetic superiority held sway among the ruling classes, fears of population growth influenced eugenicists. One was Aldous Huxley's older brother, Julian, who as vice president of the British Eugenics [Society](#) wrote in 1926: "Unless

[civilised societies] invent and enforce adequate measures for regulating human reproduction, for controlling the quantity of population, and at least preventing the deterioration of quality of the radical stock, they are doomed to decay." From the 1960s and 80s dystopian books and films, from *Blade Runner* to *Mad Max*, focused either on the threat of nuclear armageddon or urban chaos, or both. Dorling punctures many myths, including the relationship between crime and population size. He provides interesting insights into the effect of population on social mobility, the wealth gap and global warming. He notes that during economic downturns, not only does fertility tend to fall (unremarkably), but also that the age difference between married partners widens.

His analysis of the past convinces me more than his insights on the future. The author suggests that the world may have gone past its peak in energy consumption. That might be the case in the declining west, but surely not for Asia's booming economies.

In the end he may be right: the rate of global population growth may not be as dramatic as was once feared. Inequality may be stubbornly large, and rising, within countries, but between countries and continents it is falling, posing new opportunities and insecurities.

Dorling holds out the hope that a more sustainable world will be more open. Instead of pulling up the drawbridge to migrants, we should, he argues, embrace a world of unrestricted flows. I share his internationalist vision, but it remains utopian. One of the lessons of the past 20 years is that the more global we become, technologically and economically, the more perfectly decent people cleave towards the familiar.