



HOW TO BRING ANTI-RACISM INTO THE POPULATION CONVERSATION

Research shows that our rapidly growing human population increases pressure on society and the environment, making it harder to address problems ranging from public health concerns to climate adaptation. An increasing number of people and our growing demands on the finite land, water and other resources on the planet are pushing species towards extinction at unprecedented rates. Population experts point to human rights, education and equity as the only acceptable solutions — and some environmental advocates concerned about population pressure also worry about addressing it in ways that benefit people and nature.

However, the long and ongoing history of injustices that have harmed people in the name of “population control” cannot be ignored. Although almost everyone concerned with population growth rejects, and would denounce, racism and eco-fascism, some continue to talk about population — often without realizing it — in ways that perpetuate white dominance, colonialism, gender injustice, classism and other oppressive systems.

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Why Talk About Population?

Population is a sensitive, nuanced topic that can be associated with trauma for Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latino and minoritized groups. Some people view any population conversation as a red flag for racism. If you don't want to cause harm to people, why talk about it? While many of the worst environmental harms are perpetrated by wealthy corporations, the exponential growth of human population over the past century has had a drastic, unprecedented effect on the planet. Even with the most sustainable practices, the demands of our population put enormous strain on other species, ecosystems and human communities.

By talking about population in a way that prioritizes equality and human rights, we can challenge those who are coopting the issue for anti-Black, anti-immigrant and other oppressive agendas. Understanding population pressure underscores the need to fundamentally transform our relationship with the world and each other from the exploitative ways of white dominance, colonialism, gender injustice and capitalism to one grounded in stewardship and the richness of biological and cultural diversity. We need to learn from nature and from varying minoritized racial and ethnic communities, including Indigenous cultures that value ecological unity and the interdependence of all species. And we need to recognize that justice issues — including reproductive and gender justice — *are* environmental issues.

What Is Anti-Racism?

Every oppressive system stems from dominant culture, where certain groups who are often, but not always, the majority, benefit from having more power than the groups they marginalize. The racism and oppression in white dominant societies is pervasive in how institutions and policies — and the people behind them — work to favor white people even when individuals don't consciously have racist preferences or participate in racist activities. Because these standards have become baked into how society operates, some people don't realize that white-dominant traits and norms don't have to be inevitable and can be consciously addressed.

Anti-racism is the commitment to changing the way our society functions, including in education, healthcare, policing, and economic opportunity to create a more inclusive, equitable world. It goes beyond merely avoiding what is known to be harmful behavior and extends to actively challenging white-dominant culture and policies.

Unconscious bias in public policy:

Everyone has unconscious biases, or the potential to unknowingly hold stereotypes about specific groups of people as a way to think quickly. Just because we don't realize we have them doesn't mean we aren't capable of causing harm with them, so it's up to each person to confront our biases – whether unconscious or intentional – and seek ways to dismantle racial power imbalances and injustices.

Unconscious bias in public policy (continued):

Incentives for sterilization or requiring contraception to receive public assistance have often been suggested as a way to help people manage their cost of living. Although some well-meaning people who would never see themselves as eugenicists support these policies, there is a darker history behind these incentives as a solution to slow population growth specifically among people with low-income. [William Vogt](#), environmentalist and author of *The Road to Survival*, supported eugenics (pseudo-science that claims to determine who is fit or unfit to have children) to address unsustainable population growth. This included encouraging governments to offer cash to the poor for sterilization, which he said would have “a favorable selective influence” on the species. Everyone deserves reproductive autonomy; coerced sterilizations are gross violations of rights that don’t fix the systemic problems that cause poverty.

Guidance for Talking About Population

Although most people concerned about population growth reject and would denounce blatantly harmful ideas like eco-fascism and eugenics, some people talk about population in ways that could support systemic racism by unintentionally perpetuating harmful stereotypes and unconscious biases. Any population conversation must address the inequities underlying these issues and recognize that everyone has the right to thrive in a safe, healthy environment. Human rights and equity must be at the core of any population conversation and understood to be a priority on their own.

The following guidelines can help bring anti-racism values into population conversations.

1. Understand that population pressure is a sensitive and nuanced topic, but it is also a legitimate environmental concern.

Despite clear scientific evidence, population concerns and conversations are often dismissed because their intersections with race, justice and capitalism are complex. But by taking the time to learn the history of the population movement to understand why people are uncomfortable talking about population growth, we can have the important conversations about creating a healthy, just world where people and all species can thrive.

The history of the population movement is rooted in eugenics, which creates an understandable and justified trauma associated with the topic for many communities. But, as a major driver of biodiversity loss and species extinction, population pressure must be discussed. Harmful rhetoric must be disavowed in favor of the promotion of just, equitable solutions focused on supporting human rights. Advocates need to remain open to the different viewpoints and sensitivities rather than automatically deflecting criticism, so we can better understand and learn the nuances of these issues.

Examples of what to avoid:

- ❖ Avoiding the discussion of population growth altogether because of fear of racism, eco-fascism, and historical and current injustices.
- ❖ Dismissing concerns about coercion and other injustices due to feeling the environmental consequences of population growth are too urgent.
- ❖ Whitewashing the history of the conservation movement without addressing the problematic ideals many of its “founders” perpetuated like eugenics, racism and nativism.

What the “tragedy of the commons” gets wrong:

The tragedy of the commons is a commonly cited concept in environmental discussions that describes a situation where people act in their own interest at the expense of others, depleting shared ecological resources and putting everyone at risk. In population conversations, this often takes the form of judging people’s decision to have multiple children as one that harms the common good. Garrett Hardin, who popularized the concept in a widely read essay of the same title, was a known racist, eugenicist and nativist and called for throwing people with low-income out of the [metaphorical lifeboat](#). The “tragedy of the commons” is [misleading](#) because it oversimplifies resource use to individual selfishness while ignoring corporate greed and disregards both widely disparate consumption patterns and the variety of ways resources have been managed around the world.

What to do instead:

- ❖ Confront nationalism, racism and human rights abuses as perspectives that have no place in this movement.
- ❖ Examine one’s own implicit/unconscious bias.
- ❖ Promote equitable, rights-based solutions, like education and culturally appropriate, voluntary family planning.
- ❖ Discuss these topics with sensitivity, humility and respect. Be conscientious of the words you use and their potential meaning to others. Be willing to learn from and reflect upon the experiences of other communities, and not speak for them.
- ❖ Learn and talk about how systemic racism relates to fair housing, voting rights, public transportation and wealth inequality, and how these issues are tied to reproductive health.

2. Espousing population control and eugenics is never OK.

The ability to decide if and when to have children, and how many to have, is a basic human right that should never be dependent on race, ethnicity, class or culture and should be supported by reproductive justice policy that rejects the idea that certain people shouldn’t have children.

Eugenics is at the heart of the most dangerous actions taken in the name of population control. On the individual level, questioning, criticizing or shaming someone's preferred family size can cause harm and ignores the numerous cultural, religious, economic, health, and other personal and societal factors that determine whether a person gets pregnant.

Examples of what to avoid:

- ❖ Disregarding the fact that family planning is a very personal, emotional, and often culturally informed decision and should always be treated with respect.
- ❖ Mandating or recommending contraception or sterilization based on race, income, ability, education, etc.
- ❖ Stoking myths and stereotypes about welfare fraud and other false, harmful ideas about why people have children.
- ❖ Claiming to "just be joking" when making potentially harmful suggestions.
- ❖ Focusing on certain groups perceived to be having "too many" children.
- ❖ Implying there are certain people who should or should not be having children.
- ❖ Shaming those who choose to have larger families.
- ❖ Not recognizing the importance of who is delivering the message, including power dynamics, race, and relationships.

What to do instead:

- ❖ Embrace the fact that everyone should have the right to have or not have children. Population growth doesn't rest solely on a single person's decisions but how society as a whole supports the right to reproductive freedom and justice.
- ❖ Reinforce the need for equitable healthcare and education for people to make their own choices.
- ❖ Commit to increasing your understanding of diversity and inclusion and defending the rights of marginalized communities.

3. Recognize that population pressure is about more than just numbers.

Population growth is only part of the equation since consumption levels also factor into the overall impact of different societies. Focusing on a specific "ideal" population number oversimplifies the issue and fails to recognize the complexity of the human experience.

When people focus exclusively on numbers, such as total population or fertility rate, without considering factors like affluence and consumption patterns, they're not looking at the bigger picture of how humans affect the environment and biodiversity — and vice versa. This can easily and unjustly shift the blame to those least responsible who have a relatively small environmental impact. It also ignores the fact that humans are more than numbers, opening the door for oppressive, coercive policies and eugenics rhetoric.

Examples of what to avoid:

- ❖ Centering the conversation around the “right” or “optimal” numbers, like what is the “correct” number of children to have, desirable fertility rate, or the ideal amount of people for the global population without recognizing the complexities of how consumption, wealth and inequality contribute to human impact.
- ❖ Highlighting exclusively the individual decision to have children as the primary cause of environmental pressures while failing to acknowledge the systems of pronatalism, culture, religion, inequitable access to healthcare, structural violence and profit-driven corporate destruction that prioritize growth above all else.
- ❖ Assuming high-fertility countries or areas of “high-need” (urban, religious, minoritized groups) domestically are exclusively to blame for population pressure without considering economic disparities and lack of access to healthcare, along with the disproportionate per capita impact of wealthier communities.
- ❖ Not acknowledging and learning from the historical and current injustices in the population movement. These are not just actions of the past and continue to occur closer to home, and more recently, than many people realize.
- ❖ Advocating for policies dictating the number of children people can have.
- ❖ Focusing exclusively on limiting immigration to stabilize population growth.

Injustices aren’t ancient history:

When asked for an example of population control, many people cite [China’s One-Child Policy](#) from the late 1970s. While that policy did cause human rights atrocities like sex-selective infanticide, there are more recent examples of eugenics and violations of reproductive rights that happened closer to home, as well. These actions may not have been motivated by population control, but they share the same roots of abuse and oppression.

- Between 1970-1976 as many as [25-50% of Indigenous women in the United States were subjected to forced sterilizations](#).
- Between 2006-2010 nearly [150 women in California prisons](#) had tubal ligations performed on them without their consent.
- In 2020 at least [17 women at one ICE detention center](#) in Georgia experienced forced sterilizations.

It’s important to note that birth control, abortion and sterilization services targeting Black, Brown and Indigenous communities without input from the community — including but not limited to incentivized or involuntary services — is not the same as increasing access to reproductive healthcare in order to increase options for reproductive freedom for those requesting it and in the most need.

What to do instead:

- ❖ When discussing countries with high fertility rates, acknowledge that individuals in those countries typically have a smaller environmental impact than Americans and oftentimes the population pressure they experience is worsened by climate change and habitat loss caused by global consumption.
- ❖ Understand that an individual does not always have the option to choose what they consume depending on what is available to them in their society, culture and personal circumstances.
- ❖ Address the specific barriers communities may have to these solutions through a process that includes prioritizing those with lived experiences.
- ❖ Stress that reproductive freedom is a human right.
- ❖ Acknowledge the history and current injustices carried out in the name of “population control” in order to move forward with equitable, empowering solutions that reject any efforts to “control” people.
- ❖ Recognize that immigration and the pursuit of safety and better circumstances are not the root cause of population pressure, nor are immigration restrictions the way to address the issue.
- ❖ Get comfortable with making mistakes while continuing to learn and make this work more equitable and just.
- ❖ Address systemic barriers that make it difficult for all to access reproductive healthcare (lack of insurance, poor public transportation, inadequate public healthcare funding, lack of access to all modern contraceptive methods, abortion restrictions) or live sustainably (inequitable access to healthy food, wealth inequality).
- ❖ Speak up when you hear racist comments by explaining to the person on why that viewpoint is problematic and the importance of emphasizing equity and rights.

4. Emphasize that reproductive freedom should never be limited by policy.

All solutions must be centered around comprehensive, community-driven strategies that incorporate a justice and rights-based approaches.

It’s dangerous to promote extreme solutions, which to some have the intent of eugenics, without fully considering people’s human rights, bodily autonomy, and the wider complexity of the issue. There are long-term consequences of policies that restrict access to reproductive healthcare, dictate the number of children people can have or otherwise limit reproductive freedom.

Examples of what to avoid:

- ❖ Recommending coercive policies that attempt to control reproductive decisions.
 - Examples: one-child (or any specific number of child) policies, forced sterilizations, mandating contraception to receive government assistance or incentivizing contraception for patients or providers.

- ❖ Advocating for other regressive policies that would disproportionately affect specific (and often minoritized) communities.
 - Examples: eliminating tax credits for children, enacting tax penalties for children, closing borders, limiting of contraception through domestic policies like ACA changes and Title X.
- ❖ Separating abortion from other essential voluntary reproductive healthcare services like contraception and not supporting it as a basic right to ensure bodily autonomy.

Regressive policies are often based on misinformation:

There are many pervasive misbeliefs that are used to support policies for family planning incentives or penalties that disproportionately harm people with low incomes while failing to address the issues they claim to target.

- A [family using public assistance has the same average number of children](#) as the general population, so suggesting contraception as a condition of receiving benefits reinforces false stereotypes.
- There is [no clear evidence](#) about current tax credits significantly increasing fertility long term. Well-documented research shows that the Child Tax Credit has [positive effects throughout the life of a child](#), including improved health during infancy and school performance.
- Increased taxes or tax penalties as a disincentive to having more children would wind up penalizing families with the least access to family planning and the fewest resources, which would only serve to reinforce systemic racism.

What to do instead:

- ❖ Denounce any and all coercive policies.
- ❖ Advocate for ethical, long-term, interconnected solutions that incorporate access to education, healthcare, voluntary family planning, healthy and safe environments, and gender equity for everyone.
- ❖ Address the specific barriers communities may have to these solutions through a process that includes centering those with lived experiences.
- ❖ Promote policies such as fair housing, voting rights, public transportation and wealth equity that are often the underlying cause associated with many social issues.

5. Advocating for gender inclusivity and equity are key.

When population conversations only address fertility rates and family planning, they're missing key factors that affect a person's ability to determine their reproductive future as well as their overall health and [environmental resilience](#). Without gender inclusivity and equity, entire groups of people and a variety of individuals' experiences are excluded.

We need to empower and educate people to allow for bodily autonomy by removing real barriers that prevent them from making their own reproductive health choices or having access to the care they need, particularly for young people, women of color, immigrants and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+). In addition to ensuring the right to health, safety and economic opportunity, minoritized populations have critical perspectives that must be included in conversations about addressing environmental crises.

Examples of what to avoid:

- ❖ Focusing solely on cis women (people who were assigned female sex at birth and identify as female) and the expectation for them to bear sole responsibility for fertility rates through female contraception and traditional family planning roles.
- ❖ Ignoring LGBTQIA+ parents and children and the unique struggles and discrimination they face when trying to access essential healthcare.
- ❖ Assuming everyone has equal access to all the factors that go into receiving care such as insurance, transportation, funding and universal access to all modern contraceptive methods including abortion.
- ❖ Disregarding contraception myths and patriarchal influences on fertility as barriers to bodily autonomy.

Distrust in the medical establishment:

In addition to more recent examples (see above in *Injustices aren't ancient history*), there is a long history of racism and violence perpetrated by the medical community on Black, Indigenous and people of color.

- The first large-scale study of the birth control pill was done on [women living in housing projects in Puerto Rico](#). Autopsies were not done on the women who died during the trial, and even when trials were stopped in the United States due to complications, they continued in Puerto Rico.
- [Black women in the South](#) have suffered unneeded hysterectomies so that medical students could practice.
- The [Tuskegee Study](#) let nearly 400 Black men, mostly poor sharecroppers in the South, suffer with syphilis without offering treatment. Researchers used a Black nurse, Eunice Rivers Laurie, to gain the Black men's trust and persuade study participants to remain engaged.

The harms caused by these unnecessary procedures performed without ensuring that potential risks and outcomes were clearly explained and understood have created different levels of trust in the medical establishment that must be acknowledged as part of understanding healthcare choices, outreach, and services among different communities.

What to do instead:

- ❖ Understand equity means everyone is empowered to determine their reproductive futures and healthcare regardless of gender identity.
- ❖ Don't tell people what they should or shouldn't do with their bodies.
- ❖ Support agency, bodily autonomy, and reproductive freedom for young people, Black, Indigenous and people of color, minoritized ethnic and religious groups, LGBTQIA+ communities and rural communities, which face more barriers to reproductive health care.
- ❖ Address the specific barriers communities may have to receiving appropriate health care, education and economic opportunity through a process that includes centering those with lived experiences.
- ❖ Get comfortable with making mistakes while continuing to learn and make this work more equitable and just.
- ❖ Discuss these topics with sensitivity, humility and respect. Be conscientious of the words you use and their potential meaning to others.
- ❖ Fight against systemic oppression by promoting policies that advance equitable healthcare and wealth equity and provide protection from discrimination and violence that are often the underlying causes associated with many social issues.

6. Avoid either/or thinking.**Population pressure is a complex issue that demands a combination of approaches and solutions.**

There is no single, perfect solution to the issue of population pressure. Many individual solutions disregard the interconnectedness of actions and systems — and how those can vary depending on geography, income, culture and other factors — or aren't viable once they are scaled up. Oversimplifying these issues as an either/or problem fails to recognize the complex systems of oppression that threaten human rights, wildlife and the environment.

Examples of what to avoid:

- ❖ Population vs. consumption — Addressing population growth without reducing consumption and destructive extraction and production practices will fail to stop the climate and extinction crises. Similarly, focusing solely on consumption without acknowledging our growing human population will fail to address the social and environmental problems caused by population pressure.
- ❖ Countries with high income vs. countries with low income — Disregarding countries with high income because their fertility rate is lower leaves out the fact that they have a disproportionate impact per person. Likewise, countries with low income, while consuming less, still have higher fertility rates and a large unmet need for contraception.

- ❖ Individual action vs. systemic action — Completely dismissing the impact of individual choices erases the collective power we have as individuals to demand change from institutions. Conversely, it is wrong to place all the burden of change on individuals rather than holding corporations and governments responsible for creating and upholding the systems of oppression and environmental destruction we all live in.
- ❖ Making absolute statements like “single-largest” problem and “only” solution. Absolute language negates the reality of how problems and solutions are intertwined and the need for multiple approaches to address these complex issues.

What to do instead:

- ❖ Understand that these issues are complex and interconnected, that the population, environment, and family planning movements all have histories of racism, and that there are many equitable ways to do this work.
- ❖ Acknowledge that we cannot rely on a single solution to remedy these multifaceted issues.
- ❖ Work collaboratively across disciplines for greater impact and different viewpoints.
- ❖ Use language that conveys there is not just one singular issue at play — even if you can’t work on multiple issues at once — by using phrases like “contributes to” or “a leading cause.”

Conclusion

Population pressure and its associated solutions are too important to leave out of the conversation. To address population growth and confront systemic racism, we all must be conscientious of how we talk about these topics and get comfortable with making mistakes while we continue to learn and make this work more equitable and just. By discussing these topics with sensitivity, humility and respect, we can denounce hateful rhetoric that perpetuates systems of oppression and engage more individuals and communities in advancing solutions that benefit people and the planet.

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