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Neo-Malthusianism and Coercive Population Control in China and India

Overpopulation Concerns Often Result in Coercion

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the 1960s and 1970s, neo-Malthusian panic about overpopulation overtook eugenics as the primary motivation behind coercive policies aimed at limiting childbearing. Neo-Malthusian ideas spread among senior technocrats and government leaders in some developing countries, resulting in human rights abuses that Western development professionals encouraged and that Western aid often funded. Those abuses peaked in the form of China's one-child policy (1979–2015) and India's forced sterilizations during its "Emergency" (1975–77), a period in India when civil liberties were suspended and the prime minister ruled by decree.

The one-child policy saw over 300 million Chinese women fitted with intrauterine devices modified to be irremovable without surgery, over 100 million sterilizations, and over 300 million abortions. Many of these procedures were coerced. In a similar vein, India's Emergency saw 11 million sterilizations, many of them forced.

China and, to a far lesser extent, India still have troubling policies. After softening its one-child policy

to a two-child policy, China continues to brutally enforce family size limits and to require birth permits from prospective parents and parents seeking to expand their families. Coercion continues to define an unknown share of the country's 9 million annual abortions. In India, political representation is apportioned in a way that punishes states with high birth rates. Half the people in India live in states with policies that penalize, to varying degrees, families with more than two children to discourage large families. Fortunately, recent policy changes are reversing heavy financial penalties imposed earlier on high-fertility states.

Neo-Malthusian policies aimed at limiting family size have increased female infanticide and sex-selective abortion in China and India, skewing the *world's* sex ratio at birth to 107 boys per 100 girls. (The natural ratio is 105 boys per 100 girls.)

Neo-Malthusianism remains the chief cause of family size restrictions. Countering overpopulation hysteria continues to be important.

“Countering neo-Malthusianism is especially critical now given the recent prominence of such thinking.”

INTRODUCTION

In 1983, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)—then the United Nations Fund for Population Activities—the world’s largest multilateral source of funding for government population programs, began issuing a prize called the Population Award, to be presented annually to “an individual, to individuals, or to an institution for the most outstanding contribution to the awareness of population questions or to their solutions.”¹ The first prizewinners were Indira Gandhi, India’s prime minister who declared a national “Emergency” that suspended civil liberties and mandated sterilizations on a massive scale between 1975 and 1977, and Qian Xinzong, head of China’s State Family Planning Commission and the man in charge of the country’s one-child policy, which lasted from 1979 to 2015.

The coercive nature of India’s Emergency and the atrocities of China’s one-child policy were already well known.² The Nobel Prize-winning economist Theodore Schultz, chairman of the University of Chicago’s Department of Economics, resigned from the UNFPA Advisory Commission in protest of the award recipients.³

Why did the United Nations (UN) applaud Gandhi and Xinzong, who had overseen coercive policies that victimized millions of people? Part of the answer can be found in UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar’s statement as he presented the Population Award: “If rapid population growth in the developing nations is left unchecked, it will evidently undermine all efforts for economic and social development and could easily lead to widespread depletion of each nation’s resources.” He praised the “vision and foresight” of Gandhi and Xinzong for their efforts toward “controlling population growth.”⁴

Neo-Malthusianism, defined as fear that a large population size could lead to a humanitarian and ecological disaster and that combating so-called overpopulation is thus an urgent problem—has real-world

consequences. The belief has often resulted in support for coercive policies. Countering neo-Malthusianism is especially critical now given the recent prominence of such thinking.

At the 2020 World Economic Forum in Switzerland, famed primatologist Jane Goodall opined, “All these [environmental] things we talk about wouldn’t be a problem if there was the size of population that there was 500 years ago.”⁵ The world population 500 years ago is estimated at 420–540 million people, or around 6.7 billion fewer people than today.

Goodall is far from alone in her belief that population growth is an urgent problem. In August 2019, the United Kingdom’s Prince Harry subtly suggested that children are a burden to the planet and that responsible couples should have “two, maximum.”⁶ Bill Nye, “the Science Guy,” supports the introduction of special taxes or other state-imposed penalties for having “too many” children.⁷ And popular television host Bill Maher in April 2019 declared: “I can’t think of a better gift to our planet than pumping out fewer humans to destroy it. . . . The great under-discussed factor in the climate crisis is there are just too many of us. . . . We don’t need smaller carbon footprints, we need less [sic] feet.”⁸

Recent examples of neo-Malthusian writings include op-eds appearing in prominent outlets such as *NBC News* (“Science Proves Kids Are Bad for Earth. Morality Suggests We Stop Having Them”) and the *New York Times* (“Would Human Extinction Be a Tragedy?,” which muses that “it may well be, then, that the extinction of humanity would make the world better off”).⁹ In April 2019, the progressive magazine *Fast Company* released a video titled “Why Having Kids Is the Worst Thing You Can Do for the Planet.”¹⁰

Neo-Malthusianism enjoys support among some prominent elected officials. While historically overpopulation alarmism was a bipartisan concern in the United States championed by both Republicans and Democrats, in recent years it has been most common on the political left. When

asked in September 2019 if he would enact a “campaign” to “curb population growth” to fight climate change if elected president, Sen. Bernie Sanders (D-VT) answered in the affirmative, noting he would focus on poor countries.¹¹ Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) famously questioned the morality of childbearing in the face of climate change earlier that year, asking, “Is it OK to still have children?”¹² Presidential candidate and former vice president Joe Biden has even voiced acceptance of China’s family size limits, telling a Chinese audience, “Your policy has been one which I fully understand—I’m not second-guessing—of one child per family.”¹³

In November 2019, more than 11,000 scientists signed a report calling for the reduction of the world’s population to combat climate change.¹⁴ That report went viral and was shared on social media by many U.S. political figures, including Sanders and Sens. Ed Markey (D-MA) and Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) as well as Reps. Jimmy Gomez (D-CA) and Susie Lee (D-NV).¹⁵ Overpopulation alarmism, prominent in decades and centuries past, is undergoing a renaissance.

Others have offered in-depth critiques of neo-Malthusian theory.¹⁶ It turns out that birth rates tend to fall without coercion as countries grow richer and that population growth may make resources *more* plentiful thanks to humanity’s capacity for innovation. Economist Julian Simon, for example, argued that the human mind is the “ultimate resource,” allowing humanity to increase the supply of other resources, discover alternatives to overused resources, and improve efficiency of resource use.¹⁷ Recent research has found evidence supporting Simon’s view, showing that every 1 percent increase in population is associated with commodity prices falling by around 1 percent.¹⁸ In other words, each additional person helps to decrease resource scarcity on average, suggesting that humans, when free to innovate and engage in market exchange, tend to be net creators rather than net destroyers.

Also, evidence shows that as countries grow richer and children’s odds of survival improve, couples tend to choose to have smaller families without being forced to do so. (Contrastingly, parents faced with high rates of infant mortality in their communities tend to have large families in part as a strategy to improve their odds of having at least some surviving children.) This phenomenon is called the “fertility transition.” Today even in sub-Saharan Africa, the world’s poorest region, birth rates are falling voluntarily.¹⁹ The global population is projected to decline in the long run.²⁰

Yet many people remain convinced that overpopulation is an urgent problem necessitating government intervention, so it is worthwhile to detail some of the consequences of neo-Malthusian ideas. This paper focuses on the world’s two most populous countries, China and India, which together hold roughly 40 percent of the world’s population and are where neo-Malthusianism has arguably caused the most suffering.

While neo-Malthusian human rights abuses peaked with China’s one-child policy and India’s Emergency, problematic policies continue today. In both countries, neo-Malthusian policies have contributed to higher rates of sex-selective abortion and infanticide. China has the world’s most imbalanced sex ratio at birth, resulting in 30 million more men than women, and India has the world’s fourth most imbalanced ratio despite government and private efforts to combat sex-selective abortion.²¹ China and India have contributed to a *world-wide* lopsided sex ratio at birth of 107 boys per 100 girls and to over 160 million “missing” women globally.²² (The natural sex ratio at birth, when unaltered by sex-selective abortion or infanticide, is on average 105 boys born for every for every 100 girls.²³)

Cases of coercion, such as during the one-child policy and Emergency, alone are sufficient reason to oppose neo-Malthusianism. By documenting the extent of penalties and coercion, this paper seeks to demonstrate the grave importance of combating the resurgence of the neo-Malthusian mentality.

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A HISTORY OF NEO-MALTHUSIANISM

In 1798, English clergyman Thomas Robert Malthus published *An Essay on the Principle of Population as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society*, warning that out-of-control population growth would deplete resources and bring widespread famine. His preferred solution was to decrease birth rates by delaying marriage, but if that proved insufficient, he endorsed extreme measures to slash population growth. To prevent famine, he thought it morally permissible to “court the return of the plague” by having the poor live in swamps and even entertained the idea of banning “specific remedies for ravaging diseases.”²⁴

Malthus’s disregard for the welfare of the poor, in the name of slowing population growth, would prove an enduring part of overpopulation alarmism.

After Malthus died, the Industrial Revolution transformed Western society. It created unprecedented prosperity. Food became more plentiful even as the population grew. Malthusianism seemed disproven. Moreover, increased wealth led to more funding for sanitation, hospitals, and education and a decline in child mortality. That allowed for smaller family sizes and resulted in a decline in fertility.

In the early 20th century, as mortality rates among the poor declined, the pseudo-scientific “eugenics” movement emerged. It sought to prevent allegedly inferior people from reproducing. Roughly 70,000 people were forcibly sterilized in the 20th century under eugenic legislation in the United States alone.²⁵ Eugenacists and Malthusians often allied in policymaking, as they both believed that childbearing should be limited for people they deemed undeserving.²⁶

In 1952, population control and family planning activist Margaret Sanger, who was motivated by both eugenics (see her 1920 book, *Women and the New Race*) and Malthusianism, gave an address in Mumbai.²⁷ In her speech she claimed that Mahatma Gandhi, the man who led India’s successful campaign for independence from British rule, once told her that

he supported limiting couples to four children to combat “overpopulation.” She opined:

As population increases in any given territory, it encroaches upon all natural resources. . . . *Parenthood should be considered a privilege, not a right.* . . . Those who do not have the individual initiative and intelligence to plan and control the size of their families should be assisted, guided, and directed in every way to eliminate the undesirable offspring, who usually contribute nothing to our civilization but use up the energy and resources of the world.²⁸

The year she gave that address, Sanger founded the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), a global nongovernmental family planning organization that went on to provide technical assistance to China’s coercive one-child program.

The 1960s and 1970s saw rapid global population growth as economic development and the spread of medicine and scientific knowledge lowered mortality rates. During that time, Malthus’s view became resurgent, replacing eugenics as the primary motivation behind population control policies. In 1960, world population reached 3 billion. By 1975, it reached 4 billion. Rich countries’ governments started to fear that poor countries’ burgeoning populations would deplete the world’s limited resources, according to development economist Betsy Hartmann of Hampshire College.²⁹ Neo-Malthusianism was born.

As early as 1959, the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations recommended that aid be given to “developing countries who establish programs to check population growth.”³⁰ In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson made U.S. foreign aid dependent on countries adopting population control policies.³¹ In 1967, Congress allocated \$35 million via the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for “population programs.” In 1969, President Richard Nixon established the Office of Population within USAID that

was dedicated to population control and had a \$50 million annual budget.³² In 1977, the head of that office, Reimert Ravenholt, said he hoped to sterilize a quarter of the world's women.³³ The World Bank also made aid contingent on population control, embracing "explicit demographic goals."³⁴

In 1968, Stanford University biologist Paul Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*, a bestseller claiming that without population control the world would run out of food, fresh water, and other resources and predicting mass starvation in the 1970s.³⁵ That year, a representative of the Ford Foundation, a prominent American charity, came out in favor of mandatory "sterilization after an allowable number of births."³⁶ Also in 1968, a group of academics, politicians, and businesspeople formed the Club of Rome to focus on environmental problems. In 1972, the organization published an influential report, *The Limits to Growth*, that warned population growth could deplete resources and lead to a "collapse" of global society.³⁷ The warning was based on computer simulations relying on dubious assumptions.

In 1969, the UN launched the UNFPA, which promoted the view that population growth was at the root of environmental problems and poverty, blaming the world's poorest people in particular. The "bottom billion often impose greater environmental injury than" all the other people "put together," the UNFPA said in 1992.³⁸ Increasingly prominent neo-Malthusians "spoke of a war on population growth," notes Matthew Connelly, a historian at Columbia University.³⁹ "The war would entail sacrifices, and collateral damage," Connelly wrote. "Poor countries were pressed to accept population programs and rich countries were expected to pay for them."⁴⁰

By the early 1970s, USAID contributed over half the budget of the IPPF and UNFPA and contributed substantial amounts to the Population Council and similarly minded groups.⁴¹

Facing pressure from officials in international organizations and rich countries who

prioritized the "wooing of national elites" in developing countries to their cause (through concerted campaigns and generous funding), many policymakers in poor countries came around to the view that population growth caused resource scarcity.⁴² Between 1976 and 1996 neo-Malthusian sentiments became more widespread, and the number of governments viewing their citizenry's fertility levels as "too high" increased from 55 to 87.⁴³ Over the same period, the number of governments pursuing policies to lower the rate of population growth grew from 39 to 71.⁴⁴ Overwhelmingly, it was poor countries that were expected to curb their populations (see Table 1).

The increasingly popular goal of lowering the population justified coercive policies in the minds of some scholars. In 1970, ecologist Garrett Hardin opined at a meeting convened by the Population Council, "It would be much easier if we have a persuasive campaign first to prepare the way for coercion later." By 1978, in a survey of Population Association of America members, 34 percent of respondents agreed that "coercive birth control programs should be initiated in at least some countries immediately."⁴⁵

By the 1980s, the background document to the International Conference on Family Planning, cowritten by the UNFPA, IPPF, and Population Council, decreed, "When provision of contraceptive information and services does not bring down the fertility level quickly enough to help speed up development, governments may decide to *limit the freedom* of choice of the present generation."⁴⁶ Many people saw coercion as acceptable because the overpopulation problem was deemed so urgent.

In a 1991 interview with the *UNESCO Courier*, the famed oceanographer Jacques Cousteau opined that humanity should not try to cure diseases because population "must be stabilized and to do that we must eliminate 350,000 people per day."⁴⁷ In 1994, at its International Conference on Population and Development, the UN declared that "intensified efforts" were "crucial" to "stabilization of the world population." In 2002, the UNFPA

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Table 1
Government policies on the rate of population growth

Year	Number of countries					Percentage				
	Raise	Maintain	Lower	No intervention	Total	Raise	Maintain	Lower	No intervention	Total
World										
1976	28	0	39	83	150	19	0	26	55	100
1986	26	12	53	73	164	16	7	32	45	100
1996	25	16	71	81	193	13	8	37	42	100
2009	36	33	67	59	195	18	17	34	30	100
Least-developed regions										
1976	5	0	6	31	42	12	0	14	74	100
1986	4	3	14	27	48	8	6	29	56	100
1996	1	1	27	20	49	2	2	55	41	100
2009	0	3	35	11	49	0	6	71	23	100

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "World Population Policies 2009," 2010, p. 46, Table 2.

“The prevalence of neo-Malthusian doctrine among international organizations, government leaders, and philanthropies became widespread.”

stated its mission to be “the universally accepted aim of stabilizing world population” to protect “the natural resources on which all life depends,” but its use of the word “stabilization” was misleading because it was a euphemism for *lowering* the population. Nafis Sadik, a former executive director of the UNFPA, clarified that stabilization meant “stabilization of world population at the lowest possible level, within the shortest period of time.” Groups that declared commitment to stabilizing the population included the Sierra Club, an environmental organization, as well as charitable foundations such as the Ford Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Packard Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation.⁴⁸

The prevalence of neo-Malthusian doctrine among international organizations, government leaders, and philanthropies became widespread. Through these groups, neo-Malthusians exerted moral pressure, sought converts to their cause, and offered financial incentives, rewarding governments in poor countries that enacted population control measures while sounding no alarms if those measures became coercive.

The results were catastrophic. Consider China and India.

How Neo-Malthusianism Came to China

In a Helsinki pub in 1978, a Dutch professor, Geert Jan Olsder, and a Chinese mathematician, Song Jian, sat down together for a beer. Olsder mentioned the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* report and ignited a “messianic fervor” for population control in Jian that would shape China’s future.⁴⁹ “His eyes lit up,” recalled Olsder, who maintained that “all things equal, [the world] should do the same [as China] and have a one-child policy.”⁵⁰

“During a visit to Europe in 1978, I happened to learn about the application of systems analysis by European scientists to the study of population problems with a great success,” Jian wrote of the encounter, “I was extremely excited . . . and determined to try the method.”⁵¹ He did not stop at *Limits to Growth*. He also read Malthus: “When I was thinking about this, I took Malthus’s book to research the study of population.”⁵²

Limits to Growth not only promoted Malthus’s idea that a large population creates resource scarcity, but it also promoted the notion that planners could use “systems analysis,” meaning mathematical procedures, to compute a country’s sustainable population size. In 1978, Jian calculated that China’s “ideal” population was between 650 million and 700 million

people—or 280 million to 330 million fewer than its population at the time.⁵³

Jian translated the Club of Rome's central arguments, but none of the circulating critiques of the Club of Rome's methodology, into Mandarin. He also published his own findings inspired by the Club of Rome's approach. Jian was highly respected for previous work on ballistic missiles, and he soon persuaded China's elite of an urgent population crisis necessitating forceful population control. Harvard University anthropologist Susan Greenhalgh's book *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China*, chronicles Jian's successful campaign to spread neo-Malthusian fears among China's elite despite opposition from rival government factions.

Population control became an integral part of the country's "socialist modernization" efforts, culminating in the one-child policy. Thus, the neo-Malthusian "crisis mentality and the top-down, engineering-type solutions to the crisis made their way to China," Greenhalgh wrote.⁵⁴

Not only was the intellectual impetus for China's coercive population control policies decidedly neo-Malthusian, but organizations such as the UNFPA and IPPF provided support for the one-child policy. The UNFPA opened an office in Beijing in 1979 and pledged \$50 million for population policy in China over the next four years. It stipulated that the money was in part to fund training for 70,000 family planning workers and an extensive campaign promoting smaller family sizes.⁵⁵ The Chinese state-run association responsible for implementing the one-child policy became an IPPF member in 1983.⁵⁶

International support for the one-child policy consisted of both intellectual and moral encouragement as well as financial support that, even when not ostensibly funding coercion, freed resources to support the one-child policy. For example, every dollar in aid money spent on training family planning workers or on educational campaigns freed Chinese funds that could go toward nonconsensual procedures. UNFPA grants went to training

and equipping the people who would go on to carry out coerced procedures. The UNFPA also paid for many of the computers used to calculate birth quotas.⁵⁷ Chinese funds that would otherwise have gone to buying computers or teaching family planning workers how to perform abortions and sterilizations were thus made available to fund the one-child policy's enforcement, including the collection of fines and performing coerced abortions and forced sterilizations.

When the minister in charge of the State Family Planning Commission of the People's Republic of China became one of the inaugural recipients of the UNFPA Population Award in 1983, he said in his acceptance speech that it was "a symbol of the support and encouragement given by the United Nations to China's family planning program."⁵⁸

Then UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar similarly emphasized the UN's role in helping to mobilize China's and India's population control policies. In his speech bestowing the first Population Award, Pérez de Cuéllar said: "The eminent laureates are making a moving acknowledgment of the bonds of common endeavor between their countries and our Organization. . . . Thanks to international cooperation mobilized by the United Nations, world population growth is slowing."⁵⁹

Many in advanced Western countries heaped praise on the one-child policy and ignored charges of coercion. "Population experts have praised the program" of the one-child policy, noted a 1988 article in the U.S.-based *Journal of Public Health Policy*.⁶⁰ In 1989, Sadik, then the executive director of the UNFPA, insisted that the Chinese program was "totally voluntary."⁶¹

Even after the turn of the millennium, China continued to receive encouragement from some neo-Malthusians in the West for the one-child policy. In 2002, Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, then executive director of the UNFPA, praised China's one-child policy, saying, "China, having adopted practical measures in accordance with her current situation,

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has scored remarkable achievements in population control. In recent years, the UNFPA and China have carried out a series of favorable and positive cooperation.”⁶²

As recently as 2018, New York University law professor Dan Guttman told *Harvard Political Review*: “With the One-Child Policy, China put into effect the single most effective climate change rule in the world. . . . If you have hundreds of millions of less people [sic], you have that much less resource use.”⁶³

Thus, neo-Malthusian doctrine—aided by Jian’s conversion to such thinking and bolstered by moral encouragement and financial support from Western organizations—created and sustained China’s one-child policy.

China’s One-Child Policy, 1979–2015

The Chinese government estimates that its one-child policy prevented some 400 million births. However, that is disputed; the true number may be lower because China may have experienced the sharp decline in birth rates seen in most countries as they develop economically.⁶⁴

The policy was first introduced in 1979 and

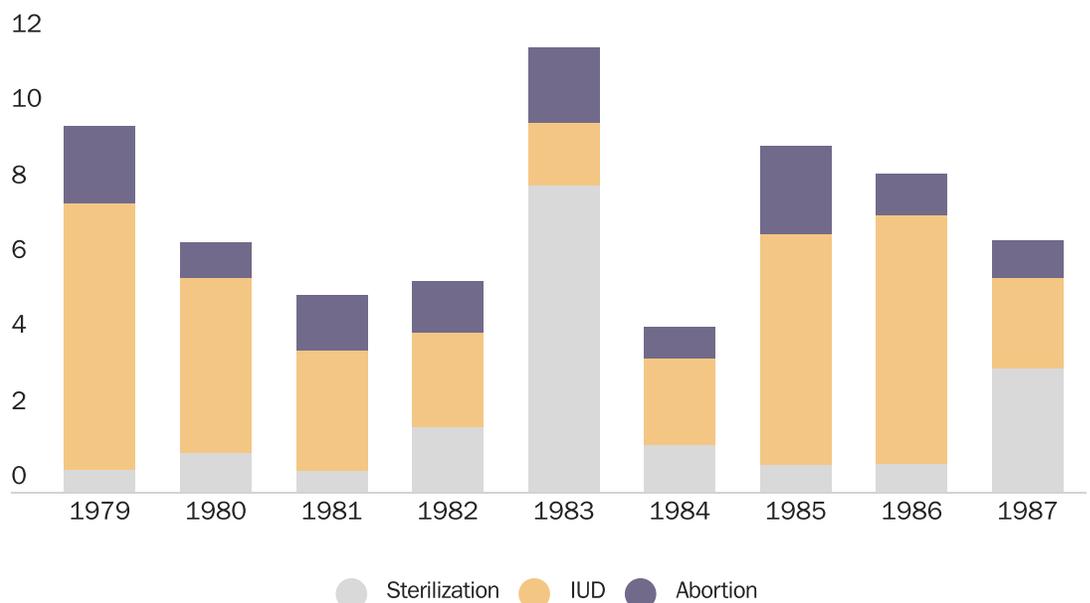
rolled out officially in 1980. It became stricter in the 1990s. However, the exact level of strictness fluctuated. Periods of strict enforcement were called “campaigns” or “shock months” or “shock attacks.”⁶⁵ For example, 1983 was a particularly strict year for sterilizations (see Figure 1). Not only did the policy’s strictness change over time, but its details varied by locality starting in 1984, when enforcement was decentralized. Afterward, exemptions to the one-child policy proliferated, such as some counties allowing rural families a second child.⁶⁶

While the policy’s enforcement and details varied based on time and place, the policy limited most couples to a single child.

Local administrators faced wage deductions, demotions, or dismissal if their locality failed to follow the one-birth-per-couple quota and received large pay bonuses for performing more abortions and sterilizations.⁶⁷ Some family planning officials showed lenience out of kindness or in exchange for bribes, but coercion and violence were frequent. In 1981, noncompliant women in Guangdong had their water and electricity cut off.⁶⁸ “As long as we kept the quotas, we could do anything; destroy

Figure 1

Percentage of married women undergoing sterilization or getting an intrauterine device (IUD) or abortion in Shijiacun, Hebei, China



Source: Susan Greenhalgh, “Controlling Births and Bodies in Village China,” *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 1 (February 1994): 16.

homes, property, jail people, even threaten to confiscate people's children," one official in Sichuan claimed.⁶⁹

Single parenthood was illegal, and married couples had to apply for a birth permit before conceiving. In some areas, women could be punished for "not using contraception" even if it did not result in pregnancy and for unwed cohabitation. Women of childbearing age had to undergo periodic mandatory pregnancy tests. In Jiangsu province, women were forced to line up and publicly take urine pregnancy tests twice a month.⁷⁰

China's women found some creative ways to overcome the restrictions. One single mother, whose boyfriend died in a car crash when she was four months pregnant, married a gay male friend (and divorced him after she gave birth) so that she could keep her government job without terminating her pregnancy.⁷¹ Many mothers had two children in quick succession under the same birth permit, lying that the children were twins. Some women used fertility drugs to improve their odds of birthing twins. China's one-child policy accounts for at least a third of China's rise in the number of twin births (the rest are a result of later childbearing, as older mothers are more likely to conceive twins).⁷²

China bans medical professionals from assisting with birth surrogacy, a practice that some used to evade the one-child policy. In 2009, three surrogate mothers were arrested in Guangzhou and forced to have abortions.⁷³

COERCED IUDS, STERILIZATIONS, AND ABORTIONS. In the 1980s, China began mandating that women, after having one child, be fitted with intrauterine devices (IUDs) that are modified to be irremovable without major surgery and be surgically sterilized if they managed to have two children. Many Chinese women considered surgical sterilization "a feared and painful procedure."⁷⁴ The most recent UN figures (2017) show that 18.3 percent of Chinese women aged 15–49 had been permanently sterilized and that 34.1 percent had an IUD.⁷⁵ In comparison, in Hong Kong, where there are no limits on

childbearing, only 3.5 percent of women aged 15–49 were permanently sterilized in 2012, the most recent year for which there is data.⁷⁶

IUDs are typically only effective for a decade, but in China they are effective until menopause and designed to remain implanted indefinitely. In China, women with IUDs are subjected to periodic x-rays to ensure the device's coil is still in place.⁷⁷ From 1980 to 2014, 324 million Chinese women were fitted with modified IUDs, and 107 million underwent tubal ligation—surgical sterilization—or got their "tubes tied."⁷⁸ That averages to 9.5 million modified IUDs and over 3 million tubal ligations annually. Those often occurred without screening for contraindications (conditions or factors suggesting the procedure should not be used because it may be harmful to the patient) or basic health standards.⁷⁹ As Greenhalgh put it: "The more children a woman succeeded in having, the more likely she was to be labeled a troublemaker and targeted for surgery."⁸⁰

As recently as 2010, China held a mass sterilization campaign for close to 10,000 people and detained almost 1,400 relatives of the couples targeted for sterilization to pressure the couples into undergoing the procedure.⁸¹

One woman with two children fled her home to avoid a mandated tubal ligation. The family planning team arrived at her house to find only the elderly grandmother of the escaped family. The officials tore down the dwelling, "making the house vanish in just 20 minutes," a member of the team who now regrets his role in the demolition said. "I told the official in charge, 'This is too ruthless,'" recalls the former team member. "He replied: 'It's policy.'"⁸²

Those who violated the one-child policy also faced "excess birth" fines, which were rebranded as "social compensation fees" in 2000. The fines amounted to up to 10 times families' annual disposable income. In 2013, China collected at least \$2.7 billion in these fines.⁸³ By 2015, the last year of the one-child policy, approximately 5 percent (800,000) of China's newborns were third-born children in violation of family planning policies whose

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parents thus incurred fines.⁸⁴ Since 1990, the average Chinese woman has fewer children than she says would be ideal.⁸⁵

The poor were often least able to afford the fines. It took some rural families years to pay the fine for a single over-quota birth. There are accounts of families selling all their furniture and even their house's front door to pay the fine.⁸⁶ “If the couple is too poor to pay, we'll take things from their house,” explained Huang Denggao, who enforced the population control policy in one village. He would send a team of about 10 enforcers, all “strong healthy young men,” to conduct the pillaging. “If they couldn't pay, you would confiscate some things of value in the home,” recalled a different former administrator. “Sometimes, we would climb up the roofs and make a hole, to show we meant business, or knock down some windows,” he noted.⁸⁷

Well over 300 million abortions took place in China over the course of the one-child policy, an unknown share of which were coerced.⁸⁸ In the early years of the policy, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, some women were “handcuffed, tied with ropes” and sent for forced abortions.⁸⁹ China bans abortion after six months of pregnancy, but officials often coerced late-term abortions past that point without repercussions.⁹⁰ One former family planning official estimates that she carried out 1,500 abortions, about a third of which were late-term.⁹¹ A study of Chinese villages found that one in four women who married in the 1970s had an abortion by 1987 and that one in eight had a second- or third-trimester abortion.⁹²

Consider the firsthand account of Wang Liping, who underwent a forced abortion in 2005 when she was seven months pregnant:

I was stopped by a couple of people on the street. . . . They asked me to go with them. They . . . beat me up and dragged me to the . . . [h]ospital, and forcibly induced labor on me without any examination or my signature. . . . They and some doctors and nurses pushed me

onto the ground. . . . Then they injected some medicine at my fetus' location in my belly, and then they roped me onto a sickbed. I could not resist this and nobody came to help me.⁹³

She continued: “My almost-fully-developed child was born. My child even mournfully cried for some minutes, and later the crying ceased.” The hospital demanded payment for the unwanted procedure.

“I was crying,” Xiao Hong recalls of her forced abortion in 2009 in Guangzhou. “I don't want to do this,” she told the officials. “But they still dragged me in and injected my belly with a needle,” she recalled.⁹⁴ She was four months pregnant with twins.

In cases where a coerced late-term abortion failed and resulted in a live birth, the unofficial policy was to kill the newborn. One former family planning official recalls skirting the rule: “I would secretly wrap them up and give them to the fathers. I told them to put the child in their bags, as if it was a thing, not a baby, and not to open the bag when they left, so they could get away.”⁹⁵

Many parents were not so lucky. In 1990, Mao Hengfeng was seven and a half months pregnant when family planning officials restrained her and forcibly injected her with a labor-inducing drug. To their surprise, she gave birth to a live child. “The baby was alive; I could hear the baby cry,” Hengfeng claimed. The family planning officials drowned the newborn in a bucket before the mother's eyes. “They killed my baby . . . yet I couldn't do a thing.”⁹⁶ There are other such accounts of newborn-drowning from the 1990s.⁹⁷

The procedure for failed coerced abortion remained similar over the years. Consider a case from 2011. “They grabbed my wife's body like they were grabbing a pig, four or five people holding her hands and legs and head, and injected a shot into her belly,” one man recalled to the *Washington Post*, requesting anonymity.⁹⁸ The drug failed, and hours after the injection, his seven-months-pregnant

wife gave birth to a living boy, wriggling and crying. The family planning officials refused to let the new parents hold their infant, instead wrapping the newborn boy in a plastic bag. They had him buried on a nearby hill.

“BLACK CHILDREN,” ADOPTION, AND TRAFFICKING. Those who managed to evade coerced abortion gave birth to illegal children known as over-quota or out-of-plan children, popularly called *beihazi* or “black children.” Such children lack government registration or *hukou*, a document needed to attend school, work, marry, and receive a birth permit. There are some 13 million unregistered persons in China.⁹⁹

The unregistered either must obtain registration with false identities, bribes, personal connections, or the paying of exorbitant fines or else live on the margins of society. Periodic amnesties and registration drives have allowed some to gain registration, but the process is often Kafkaesque. After a 2008 reform to encourage registration, one man spent about three years and \$7,000 without success trying to complete paperwork, police interviews, a DNA test, and other ordeals to obtain a *hukou* for his adopted daughter so that she could attend kindergarten.¹⁰⁰

The one-child policy also caused a surge in child abandonment and adoption.

Many Chinese gave over-quota children to relatives or neighbors following customary adoption practices: a workaround that family planning officials progressively sought to stamp out. In 1991, a national adoption law “codified the regulations used by birth planning officials to prevent and punish people for using adoption to circulate and hide out-of-plan births,” by making it illegal to give up a healthy child for adoption. It also made it illegal to adopt a child except for those who were both childless and over 35 (lowered to 30 in 1999).¹⁰¹

“Targeted abandonment” emerged, resulting in hundreds of thousands of children being secretly adopted against the law. Parents would leave an over-quota child in a basket at night at the doorstep of a family known

to want a child. The “abandoners” would set off firecrackers and hide, watching to ensure that the “abandoned” child was taken inside. “Strategic abandonment,” another way of giving children up for adoption, also arose. That involved leaving an infant in a basket filled with baby supplies at a well-frequented outdoor location, where someone would soon notice the “abandoned” child. (Secretly arranging adoptions more directly risked punishment by the government, which sometimes labeled such arrangements as child trafficking.) Some staged abandonments took place as recently as 2011.¹⁰²

Many adoptive families did not meet the restrictive legal criteria for adoption and struggled to keep the child and obtain a *hukou*. As part of its efforts to quash local adoption, the Chinese government seized many wanted children, placed them in overcrowded orphanages, and promoted international adoption. It was “widely understood” that such seizures were unlikely to be punished.¹⁰³ International adoptions grew from a few hundred children a year in the early 1990s to a peak of 14,000 children in 2005. More than 120,000 Chinese children were adopted internationally during the one-child policy.¹⁰⁴

International adoption became lucrative for state-run orphanages thanks to the adoption fees. As a result, many over-quota children were abducted from birth parents who could not afford the fine and then subsequently adopted out internationally. According to one Hunan villager, birth planning officials used to smash houses to punish noncompliance, but “after [the year] 2000 they haven’t smashed houses. They abduct children.”¹⁰⁵

FEMALE INFANTICIDE, SEX-SELECTIVE ABORTION, AND SKEWED SEX RATIO. Despite the proliferation of targeted and strategic abandonments, cases of reckless abandonment also swelled. Most abandoned children were girls.

Female infanticide and sex-selective abortion are estimated to have caused 50 million “missing” Chinese women.¹⁰⁶ Although both

“Those who managed to evade coerced abortion gave birth to illegal children.”

“The one-child policy helped destabilize China’s sex ratio at birth.”

female infanticide and sex-selective abortion are illegal in China, which instituted stiff penalties for ultrasound sex determination in the 2000s, birth limits have encouraged both practices given a cultural preference for sons over daughters.¹⁰⁷ Chinese cultural preference for sons predates the one-child policy, and some Chinese immigrant communities in the United States practice sex-selective abortion.¹⁰⁸ However, the sex ratio became more skewed in areas of China with stricter enforcement of the one-child rule than in counties that gave exemptions allowing more families to have a second child. The bribe to an ultrasound technician for prenatal sex determination was around 10 times cheaper than the fine for an over-quota child.¹⁰⁹

The one-child policy helped destabilize China’s sex ratio at birth, which peaked at 121 boys per 100 girls in 2004. It was still at an extreme 119 boys per 100 girls at the time the policy softened to a two-child rule in 2016. This imbalance has left many Chinese men without hope of finding a Chinese wife. These men have been labeled “bare branches” because they are seen as dead ends on their family trees. One 2013 study suggested that compared to China’s married men, the nation’s numerous bachelors suffer from higher rates of depression and aggression.¹¹⁰ In 2008, an economic study showed that every 1 percent increase in China’s sex ratio resulted in a 5–6 percent increase in violent and property crime.¹¹¹

The sex ratio imbalance in China varies substantially. In Tianmen, Hubei, in 2007 there were 176 boys for every 100 girls under age 4.¹¹² Contrastingly, the natural sex ratio at birth, when unaltered by sex-selective abortion or infanticide, is on average 105 boys born for every 100 girls.¹¹³

How Neo-Malthusianism Came to India

Following a big population jump revealed in its 1962 census, India became one of the pioneers of population control in developing countries.¹¹⁴ As neo-Malthusianism gained popularity among elected officials in the U.S. government and in international

organizations, it inspired those officials to support India in its population control efforts.

The campaign to spread neo-Malthusian ideas among India’s policymakers long preceded the Emergency’s forced sterilizations. From the United States, both the Johnson and the Ford administrations encouraged India’s Prime Minister Gandhi to pursue population control more aggressively.¹¹⁵

A now declassified U.S. National Security Council memorandum from 1974 by then secretary of state Henry Kissinger makes explicit the U.S. “aim . . . for the world to achieve . . . a two-child family on the average . . . by about the year 2000” and identifies India as a “key country” that the United States, through aid and through UN agencies, should “assist” with the goal of “population moderation.” The memorandum urges “explicit consideration” of “mandatory programs.”¹¹⁶

The memorandum claims that population control is needed to prevent “Malthusian conditions for many regions of the world” and “classic Malthusian cases with famines involving millions of people.” The report quotes the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi claiming that in India “Malthusian pressures are already being felt.”¹¹⁷

Western population professionals thronged to India’s capital in the 1960s, backing surveys, doling out research grants, proselytizing neo-Malthusianism, and training many of India’s demographers, doctors, and public health professionals. In conjunction with India’s elite, Western organizations helped design and bankroll policies, such as sterilization targets, aimed at curbing the fertility of the country’s poor.¹¹⁸

By the 1960s, the U.S. government, UNFPA, Ford Foundation, and World Bank accounted for most of the \$1.5 billion in annual aid that India received. In 1974, the UNFPA issued its largest grant ever to India, and in 1976 the Swedish Development Authority loaned India \$60 million for “family planning,” some of which ultimately funded coerced procedures. Between 1972 and 1980 the World Bank loaned

India \$66 million for “population control.”¹¹⁹ Upon returning from a visit to India in 1976 during the Emergency, then World Bank president Robert McNamara declared, “At long last, India is moving to effectively address its population problem,” noting without alarm coercive policies including, in his words, “compulsory abortion” and “sterilization laws.”¹²⁰

The Population Council sent Sheldon Segal, the head of its biomedical division, to New Delhi, where he served as personal adviser to Indian Armed Forces Lt. Col. B. L. Raina, India’s director of family planning. In 1969, the former advocated sex-selective abortion as a means of population control despite no political support for it at the time. The Ford Foundation soon allocated \$63,563 to the All-India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS), a prestigious public medical college, on top of earlier grants of \$1.7 million and Rockefeller Foundation grants of \$1.5 million. In 1975, AIIMS presented research that advanced sex-selective abortion as a means of population control, and there are reports of doctors encouraging pregnant patients to abort female fetuses because “population control was deemed so urgent.”¹²¹

The Western-funded research stated, “In India cultural and economic factors make the parents desire a son, and in many instances the couple keeps on reproducing just to have a son. Prenatal determination of sex would put an end to this unnecessary fecundity. There is of course the tendency to abort the fetus if it is female.” Outrage among India’s feminists led to the banning of prenatal sex determination at state hospitals in 1978.¹²² It was banned entirely in 1994.

When Gandhi declared the Emergency and suspended civil liberties, her son Sanjay—although he held no official title and his power was largely unconstitutional—seized the opportunity to embark on a compulsory sterilization program to fight “overpopulation.”¹²³ He ignored the fact that this policy violated Indian law.

Gandhi, in her acceptance statement for the UNFPA Population Award in 1983, gushed

that the family planning officials of her nation “will be encouraged that this world body has recognized India’s efforts in one of the most difficult areas of social engineering.”¹²⁴

She also said, regarding the birth rate, “The goal is to reduce the national average [from 35 per thousand] to 21 per thousand by the year 2000. The task is not easy. Millions of couples, many of them illiterate, must be persuaded.”¹²⁵ That number is revealing because it shows that her goal was to reach the target birth rate that professional population planners deemed appropriate. While she said that she favored using persuasion to attain this goal, the suspension of civil liberties and censorship during the Emergency meant that her son Sanjay Gandhi was able to force officials to conduct compulsory sterilizations with no legal authorization. Public outrage over the policy contributed to a stunning electoral defeat for Indira Gandhi in 1977. She returned to power in 1980, when the Janata coalition that defeated her in 1977 proved unstable, but when she returned she stated that she had never authorized coercion, and coerced sterilizations came to be widely seen as an excess of the Emergency.¹²⁶

India’s Emergency, 1975–77

During the Emergency, some 11 million Indians were sterilized, and an additional 1 million women were fitted with IUDs (see Figure 2).¹²⁷ An astonishing 6.2 million Indians were sterilized in 1976 alone—1.7 million in September.¹²⁸ Some 2,000 Indians died from botched operations.¹²⁹ Demographer and economic analyst Ashish Bose estimated that massively increased sterilization targets and coercive tactics accounted for approximately 7 million undesired sterilizations.¹³⁰ By late 1973, there were already 14.3 million sterilized persons in India.¹³¹

Sanjay Gandhi spearheaded the Emergency’s mass sterilization campaign. Young and ambitious, he wished to bolster his image by implementing a national program. For his focus he chose four policies, one of which was “Family Planning—for a prosperous future.”¹³² He

“In conjunction with India’s elite, Western organizations helped design and bankroll policies, such as sterilization targets, aimed at curbing the fertility of the country’s poor.”

“Massively increased sterilization targets and coercive tactics accounted for approximately 7 million undesired sterilizations.”

massively increased sterilization targets, particularly for the high birth rate states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan.¹³³ The majority of the victims of forced sterilization during the Emergency were men.

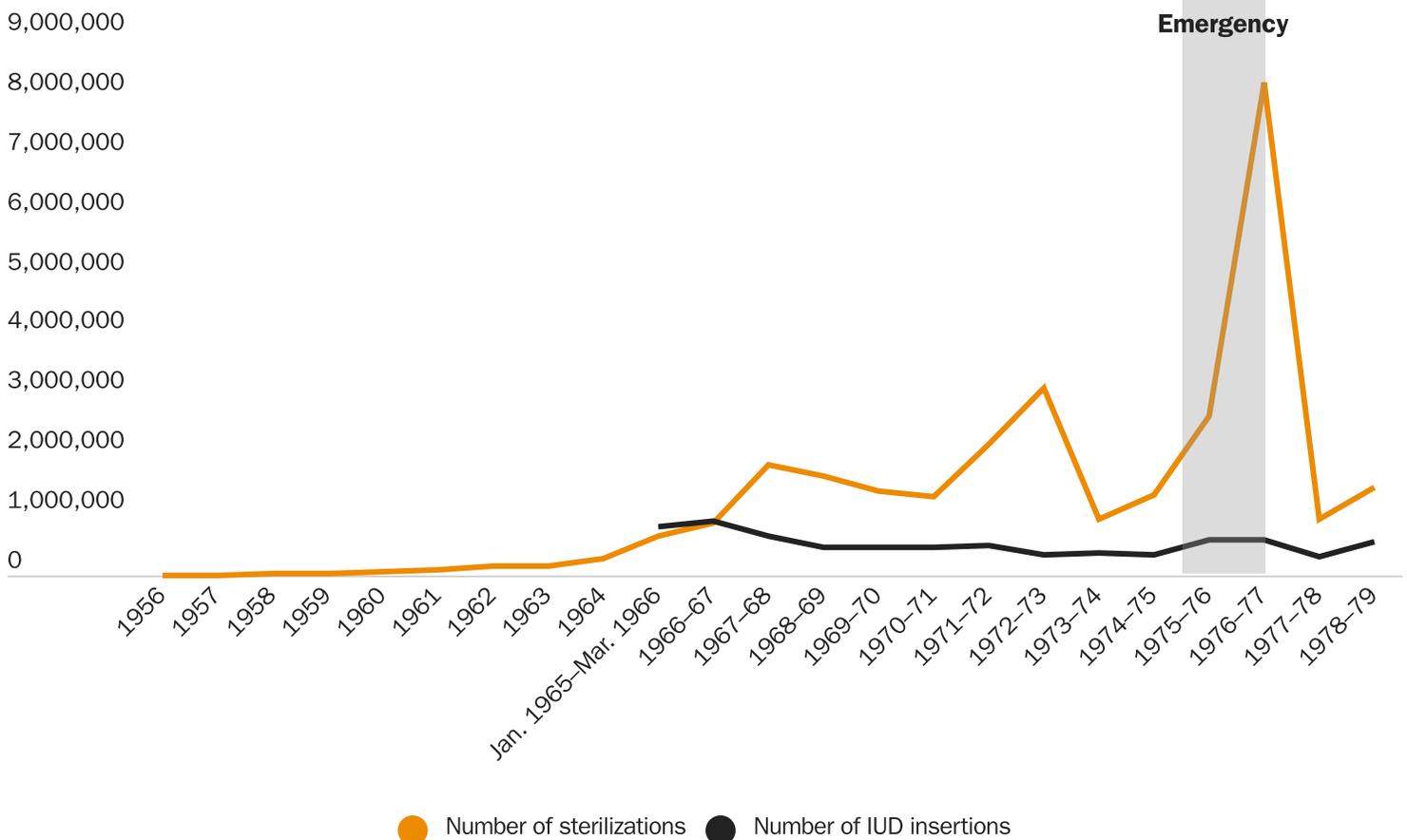
Some positive monetary incentives were offered to encourage sterilization, but negative incentives also flourished.¹³⁴ In Madhya Pradesh, irrigation water was withheld from village fields unless sterilization quotas were met. Teachers in Uttar Pradesh had to submit to sterilization or forfeit a month's salary, and health and family planning workers in that state had pay withheld until they met sterilization quotas.¹³⁵ In one incident in Uttar Pradesh, officials seized a man's buffaloes and threatened to take his land and house if he did not get sterilized.¹³⁶ In 1976, Maharashtra state mandated sterilization for couples with

more than two children (although that was poorly enforced).¹³⁷ Accounts abound of state hospitals refusing to treat unsterilized patients and of patients undergoing treatment for unrelated illnesses being sterilized without being informed.¹³⁸

“If some excesses appear, don't blame me,” explained the director of family planning in Mumbai. “You must consider it something like a war. There could be a certain amount of misfiring out of enthusiasm. There has been pressure to show results. Whether you like it or not, there will be a few dead people.”¹³⁹

The schools acted as well. A professor in New Delhi recalls: “In the Emergency, the pressure was on all teachers to get operated and produce cases [of sterilization] from their students. The government [would] withdraw their salaries if they did not agree.” A man who was still a student during the Emergency

Figure 2
Number of sterilizations and intrauterine device (IUD) insertions in India



Source: Marika Vicziany, “Coercion in a Soft State: The Family-Planning Program of India: Part I: The Myth of Voluntarism,” *Pacific Affairs* 55, no. 3 (Autumn 1982): 386.

recalled: “In schools they used to make announcements that those whose parents did not get sterilized would not pass exams. . . . The Sanskrit master went to my father and told him to go for the operation or else he would fail me and my studies would be ruined.” His father refused at first but eventually relented. “All those whose parents had got sterilized were passed and all those whose parents had refused were failed,” the son remembered.¹⁴⁰

To meet the high targets, many officials resorted to coercion with police assistance. “People were rounded up at random, from the streets, the tea shop, the bazaars, and taken to the family planning camps to be sterilized. . . . They would grab people by force, take them into the tent, make them sign papers,” one witness recalled. “If the police get you, you can’t do much.” Some people resorted to hiding in forests or sugarcane fields to avoid the police and forced sterilization.¹⁴¹

“In those days they would take you to the camp, ask how many children you had, then ignore it and sterilize you anyway,” claimed a different witness. “This sort of thing happened mostly in crowded places and main roads. In fact my employer even advised me to stay indoors as much as possible.”¹⁴²

Through the denial of permits, government officials pressured private businesses to help the sterilization drives. A factory worker recalls, “My boss told me to get sterilized so that he could get the license” to operate his business, which had been made contingent on sterilization of employees.¹⁴³

Preoccupation with meeting sterilization targets, rather than actual reduction of birth rates, often made public health workers indifferent to the age, fecundity, and other characteristics of those sterilized. Among the victims of forced sterilization during the Emergency were young people, childless people, people past their reproductive years, people whose spouses had been sterilized, hospital patients, jail inmates, and homeless people.¹⁴⁴ There are even accounts of sterilized people undergoing the procedure for a second time.¹⁴⁵

During the Emergency’s beautification drives, “slum” neighborhoods were razed and an estimated 700,000 people were displaced. Granting of new housing plots for the displaced was contingent upon sterilization, forcing people whose homes the government destroyed to choose between sterilization and homelessness. It was also possible to obtain housing plots by “motivating others” to undertake sterilization (usually with a bribe), thus sparing oneself. In an area in Delhi known as Turkmen’s Gate, local resistance to the sterilization drive and demolitions resulted in authorities killing at least 12 resisters, with some sources estimating a much higher death toll.¹⁴⁶

Those who obtained new plots without sterilization often faced eviction. As one man put it: “It was impossible to live here without getting sterilized because you would be evicted. Nobody liked the idea of sterilization. But people didn’t have any choice.”¹⁴⁷

NEO-MALTHUSIAN POLICIES TODAY INVOLVING COERCION OR DISINCENTIVES

While the worst human rights abuses of neo-Malthusianism are in the past, troubling policies inspired by those ideas persist. China and, to a much lesser extent, India continue to provide examples.

China relaxed its one-child policy into a two-child policy in 2016 and now encourages married couples to have a second child, but having three or more children is still illegal. In some provinces, women must still undergo periodic state-mandated pregnancy tests, would-be parents must seek birth permits, and single motherhood remains illegal. Those who fail to comply may face exorbitant fines, job termination, detention, coerced sterilization, or coerced abortion. While a far cry from the abuses of the past, even in democratic India half the country’s population lives in states that penalize families with more than two children, and political representation is apportioned in a way that punishes states with high birth rates.

“To meet the high targets, many officials resorted to coercion with police assistance.”

“The remaining limitations that the two-child policy impose are still justified in neo-Malthusian terms.”

Neo-Malthusianism Today in China

China has continued to limit family sizes through violence in recent years. In 2012, a case of forced abortion in China garnered international attention. It involved a woman who could not afford the fine for a second child and so was physically restrained and injected with an abortifacient when she was seven months pregnant.¹⁴⁸ Graphic photographs of the incident went viral on the website Weibo, China’s version of Twitter, sparking widespread outrage.

Commenting on the event, Weibo’s chief editor Hu Xijin wrote, “I strongly oppose the barbarous forced abortion,” but he maintained that overall the one-child policy was positive, writing, “the world resources cannot afford to feed a China with billions of people.”¹⁴⁹ His words echoed the neo-Malthusian reasoning behind China’s family size limits.

So did a *Global Times* op-ed about the incident. The English-language Chinese newspaper (under the control of the state-run *People’s Daily*) concluded, “China’s 1.3 billion population is competing for global resources. The world cannot afford a larger China. . . . forced termination of late-term pregnancies must be condemned and banned. But it shouldn’t be a reason for refuting the whole policy, which has freed China from the burden of an extra 400 million people.”¹⁵⁰

Although China has since relaxed its one-child policy to a two-child policy, coercion still occurs. The two-child policy was passed into law in December 2015 and went into effect on the first day of 2016. Some pregnant women reportedly attempted to postpone the delivery of their second child until after January 1, 2016, to avoid paying fines.¹⁵¹ The softening of the policy occurred despite backroom lobbying by former state counselor Song Jian, whose *Limits to Growth*-inspired models formed the basis of the one-child policy. Still, Jian delayed the reform for over a decade. (Jian’s views remained unwavering: in a 2011 essay, he called zero population growth “the ultimate goal of human society.”) High-ranking reformers had been trying to overturn the one-child policy since at least the year 2000.¹⁵²

The remaining limitations that the two-child policy impose are still justified in neo-Malthusian terms. “The tensions between population and resources and environment will not fundamentally change,” noted China’s State Council in its national population development plan for 2016–2030, released in 2017. The plan specifies, according to state-run news agency *Xinhua*, that the government must continue to implement the “two-child policy to promote balanced population development.”¹⁵³

The option of a second child came too late for many. Of the approximately 90 million women of reproductive age with a previous delivery who newly qualified for a second birth, half were over the age of 40. And 60 percent were over the age of 35, when female fertility sharply declines.¹⁵⁴

Much reporting on China now refers to travesties, such as forced abortions, in the past tense, as though they occurred only under the one-child policy, but that is inaccurate.¹⁵⁵ Families with three or more children still must pay a “social compensation fee,” which can reach 10 times a person’s annual disposable income. In 2018, some provinces still fined women who failed to undergo periodic state-mandated pregnancy tests even if they were not pregnant. Couples in some provinces were required to seek approval and register before a child was even conceived.¹⁵⁶ Many local governments have systems in place to monetarily reward those who report illegal births.¹⁵⁷

Unmarried women are still not allowed even one child in many counties. Unwed Chinese mothers must marry within 60 days of a child’s birth or pay the “social compensation fee.” Those who fail to comply with family size limits may also face job termination or detention. However, the most egregious forms of coercion fall into two broad categories: coerced sterilization and coerced abortion.

It is difficult to quantify the extent of human rights abuses, but a government report from Hunan province indicated that county authorities had carried out 19 sterilizations and 67 abortions just in the winter of 2017 and collected nearly 2.76 million yuan

(approximately \$437,000 U.S. dollars) in “social compensation fees.”¹⁵⁸ In February 2019, one couple in Chengwu county, Shandong province, who could not afford a fine of \$9,570 for violating family planning regulations had their life savings (around \$3,000) seized.¹⁵⁹

COERCED ABORTION IN CHINA TODAY. In 2016, China had an abortion rate of about 28 per 1,000 women aged 15–49. That was more than double the abortion rate for the United States in 2015, which was 12 per 1,000 women aged 15–44. There were over 9 million abortions in China in 2016 after the two-child policy replaced the one-child policy. That figure shows no meaningful decline from the figures for 2015 and 2014, when the one-child policy was still in effect (see Figure 3).¹⁶⁰

An unknown share of those abortions were coerced. The U.S. State Department’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2018 found “coerced abortions and sterilizations” continue under China’s revised Population and Family Planning Law. The report relates that forced abortions were carried out in the provinces of Hubei, Hunan, and Liaoning and that forced abortion

protocols remained on the books in Guizhou and Yunnan.¹⁶¹

Migrant workers may be particularly vulnerable. The U.S. report claimed, “In localities with large populations of migrant workers, officials specifically targeted migrant women to ensure they did not exceed birth limitations.”¹⁶²

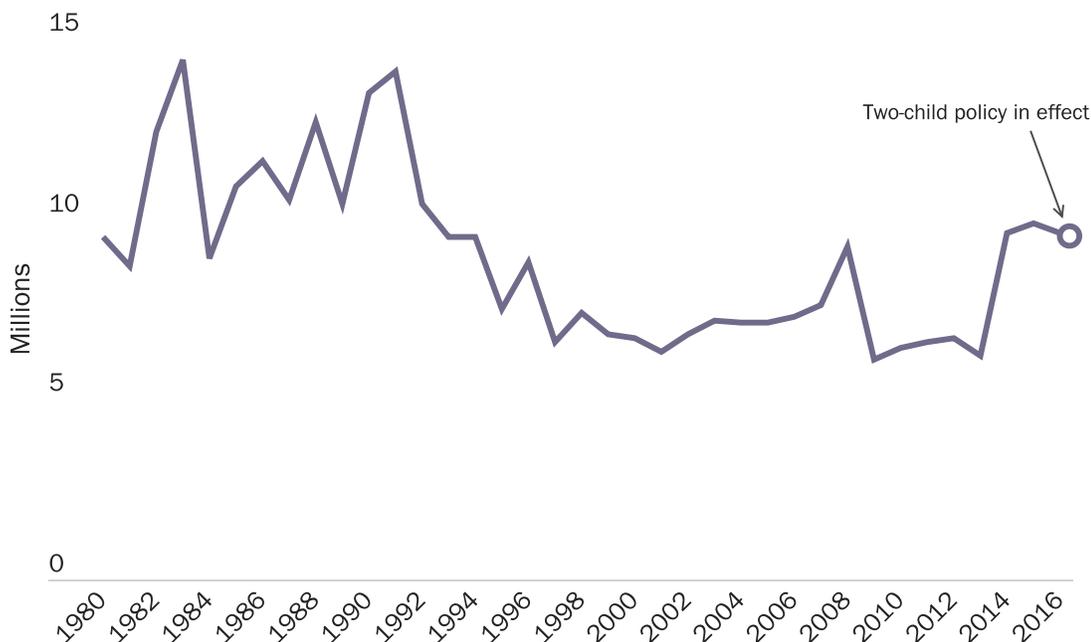
China “continued to enforce compliance with family planning policies using methods including heavy fines, job termination, detention, and abortion,” according to the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China’s 2018 report. The 2019 report had similar findings: “Chinese authorities threatened or imposed punishments on families for illegal pregnancies and births, using methods including heavy fines, job termination, and abortion.”¹⁶³

Also noted in the 2018 report are official statements from local government authorities that women are compelled to undergo the “four procedures” (IUD insertion, sterilization, first trimester abortion, and mid- to late-term abortion) in Gu County in Shanxi province, Guichi District in Anhui province, Yunyang District in Hubei province, Wolong

“The most egregious forms of coercion fall into two broad categories: coerced sterilization and coerced abortion.”

Figure 3

Abortions in China



Source: *China Health and Family Planning Statistics Yearbook 2017* via Viola Zhou, “Inkstone index: China’s Abortions,” Inkstone, January 9, 2019.

“Many recent testimonies of forced abortion involve minorities such as ethnic Kazakhs and Uyghurs.”

District in Henan province, and Dongshahe Township in Shandong province. The 2019 report notes that in Dalu township in Hainan province, local authorities carried out 264 of the “four procedures” in 2018 and that local authorities had a success rate of 83 percent in detecting pregnancies within the first six months of the gestation period and reached 100.5 percent of their family planning work targets.¹⁶⁴

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that in March 2018 a high school teacher in Tangshan municipality in Hebei province who already had two children aborted a pregnancy after being threatened with job dismissal and a fine.¹⁶⁵ In March 2019, authorities in Yunfu municipality in Guangdong province reportedly dismissed another public school teacher from her job for giving birth to a third child in violation of the two-child policy. She had been threatened on 14 separate occasions to terminate her pregnancy or face losing her job.¹⁶⁶

“A third baby is not allowed so we are renting a home away from our village. The local government carries out pregnancy examinations every three months. If we weren’t in hiding, they would have forced us to have an abortion,” a Chinese father of three told the BBC in 2016. In response to the question, “If they had come for your wife, to carry out this forced abortion, would it have been possible to resist? Could you have refused?,” he answered: “No we cannot resist. There would be many family planning officers to take us away. They would put us in a van, directly to the family planning office, for the abortion.”¹⁶⁷

The BBC investigation showcased an official who said that his district requires women of childbearing age to report for two ultrasounds per year and that if a woman is found to be pregnant “out of quota,” then she “will be advised accordingly.” The same official admitted that he and his colleagues have in the past “kidnapped, drugged and forcibly operated on women.”¹⁶⁸

Minorities Targeted for Coerced Abortion. Many recent testimonies of forced abortion involve minorities such as ethnic Kazakhs

and Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic group. An ethnic Kazakh named Kuliziya Mogudong (sometimes transliterated as Gulzira Mogdin) was forced to have an abortion at five months of pregnancy in February 2018 in Xinjiang. “They ordered me to get an abortion. They said I couldn’t have the babies because I’ve had two others and that a third was not allowed,” she told *NPR*.¹⁶⁹ “I told them no, I’m not willing to do it.” Then the authorities threatened to jail her brother unless she complied.¹⁷⁰ Mogudong alleged that she was one among “several” ethnic minority women in China who have recently been forced to have abortions under the two-child policy.¹⁷¹

Similarly, the ethnically Uyghur Abduqadir family fled China to Turkey in 2017 to avoid a forced abortion.¹⁷² Another Uyghur, Kalbinur Tursun, also fled to Turkey to avoid an unwanted abortion in 2016.¹⁷³ Yet another Uyghur named Gulnaz Uighur said that she fled China after her neighbor died from a botched forced abortion at six months of pregnancy. She alleged that even after the one-child policy was softened into the two-child policy, “forced abortion was a common thing” in Uyghur communities.¹⁷⁴

COERCED STERILIZATION IN CHINA TODAY.

In 2017, the government offered to surgically remove IUDs for couples who qualify to have a second child under the two-child policy.¹⁷⁵ Roughly 18 million women with IUDs are eligible. After the birth of a second child, the mothers would once again be fitted with modified IUDs that cannot be removed without another major surgical operation.

Surgical removal can be risky, particularly for woman who have had an IUD for a long time—as many of China’s women have. The IUDs often become “embedded in the uterine wall,” according to a gynecologist at Beijing United Family Hospital. “That makes it much more difficult to remove.” Surgical removal may result in bleeding, infection, and injury to the uterus.¹⁷⁶

One woman who tried to have her IUD removed, Ai Xiaoming, said that she, like many other Chinese women, had never been

advised of potential complications after getting her IUD.¹⁷⁷ Her surgery failed, and she had to have a hysterectomy (i.e., removal of the uterus).

Over the years, many Chinese women have come to hate the practically irremovable IUDs, which act as de facto sterilization. The mass implantation of IUDs equaled “involuntary, forced acts of mutilation,” Han Haoyue, a popular columnist, wrote in a Weibo post shared nearly 3,000 times.¹⁷⁸ That is a lot of shares for a post openly criticizing the government, which tightly monitors Weibo.¹⁷⁹

Minorities Targeted for Coerced Sterilization. In the Xinjiang region, minorities such as Uyghurs have been subject to strict enforcement of birth limits and mandated sterilization, particularly over the past four years, according to an Associated Press investigation released in June 2020. As

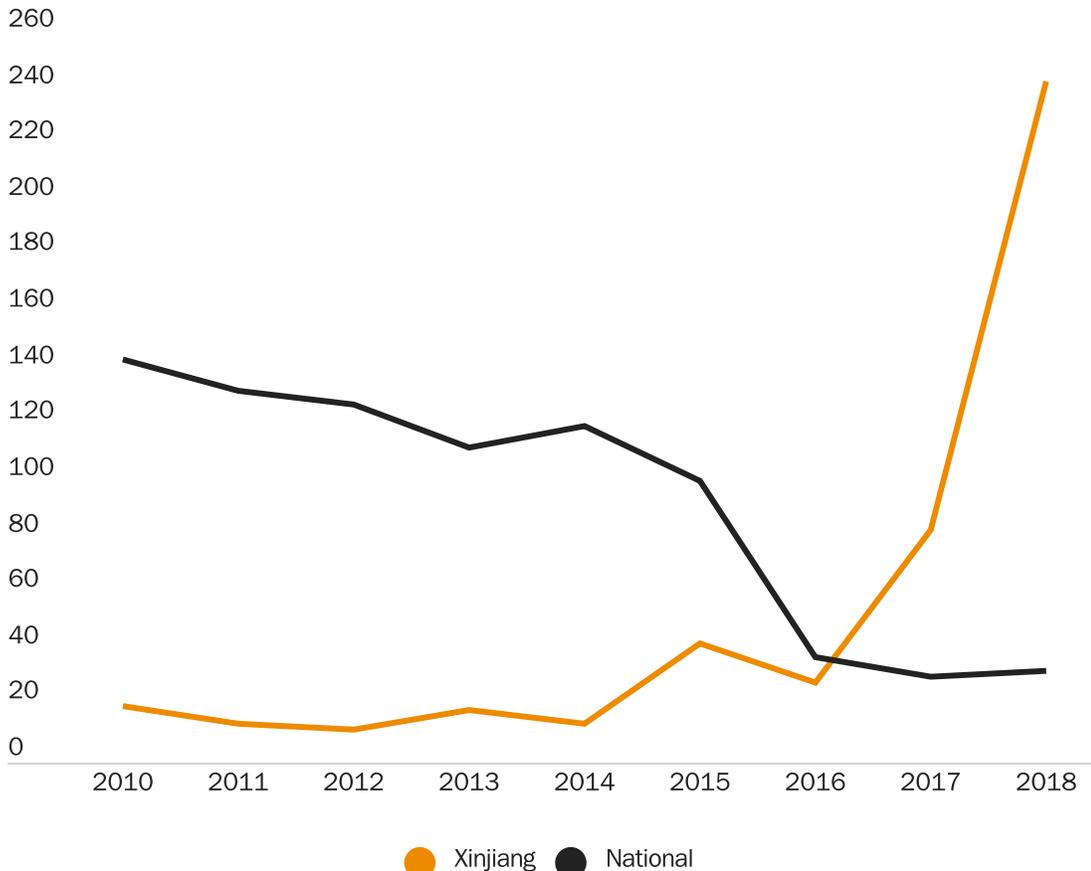
Figure 4 shows, sterilization rates in that region have skyrocketed. Those who defy birth limits are often sent to internment camps.¹⁸⁰ Members of the minority Uyghur population have also alleged that they are the targets of recent forced sterilization via unwanted drug injections during internment. “We [prisoners] had to stick our arms out through a small opening in the [prison] door” to receive shots, claimed Gulbahar Jalilova, a former Uyghur detainee. “We soon realized that after our injections that we didn’t get our periods anymore” as they had become sterile against their wishes.¹⁸¹ The kind of drug that was used is unknown.

Another former Uyghur detainee, Mehriqul Tursun, told a similar story of having been unknowingly sterilized when she was forcibly administered a cocktail of drugs while imprisoned in 2017.¹⁸² After regaining her freedom,

“While coercion is illegal, disincentives firmly remain part of India’s family planning policies.”

Figure 4

China’s increasing sterilizations in Xinjiang, per 100,000 people



Source: Chinese Health and Hygiene Statistical Yearbooks and Adrian Zenz calculations as seen in “China Cuts Uyghur Births with IUDs, Abortion, Sterilization,” Associated Press, June 29, 2020.

“India apports political representation in a way that acts as an indirect penalty for large families.”

she moved to the United States, where a medical examination confirmed that she had been irreversibly sterilized.

Tursunay Ziyawudun, yet another former Uyghur detainee, from Xinjiang, similarly reported that camp authorities regularly “forced [Uyghur women] to take medicine” that stopped their menstrual cycles and “took women to the hospital and operated on them so that they no longer could have children.”¹⁸³

Neo-Malthusianism Today in India

The coercive policies of India’s past were ultimately punished at the ballot box, with Indira Gandhi experiencing a resounding defeat in the 1977 election partly due to the unpopularity of Sanjay’s population control policies. Yet even in a democracy such as India, where inclusive political institutions offer protection against oppression, problematic policies persist. While coercion is illegal, disincentives firmly remain part of India’s family planning policies. Families are encouraged with a mix of positive and negative incentives to undergo sterilization surgery and have no more than two children.¹⁸⁴ And malapportionment of political representation penalizes states with relatively high birth rates.

However, in the past two decades, the Indian government has also boasted that it is the best country in the world for multinational corporations to invest in because it is enjoying a huge demographic dividend (a rise in the proportion of the workforce in the population). The demographic dividend has been credited as a major driver of economic growth in India.¹⁸⁵ On the one hand, India’s boasting of its demographic dividend amounts to an implied reversal of its emphasis on small families with no more than two children. On the other hand, that boast has not led to the cancellation of the many rules and incentives that still follow the neo-Malthusian line of thought.

Many Indian policymakers still possess a neo-Malthusian mindset. In 2018, 125 members of India’s Parliament signed a writ petition urging President Ram Nath Kovind

to implement a nationwide two-child policy.¹⁸⁶ In August 2019, during his Independence Day address, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted “the issue of population explosion” and the “consequences of the uncontrolled population growth.”¹⁸⁷

The prime minister’s words and the public response to them are revealing. The Indian *Telegraph’s* editorial board published a response that questioned the prime minister’s choice of words doubting large families’ patriotism, not least because those words could be interpreted as a dog whistle meant to insult Muslim Indians. Nonetheless, the editorial board agreed that “the burden of population on India’s . . . resources and environment has been crushing.”¹⁸⁸ The piece concluded that what “India needs is a united and robust response to check population growth” that uses less inflammatory language.

The ideas of neo-Malthusianism remain prominent in India’s educational system. “We are taught from school onwards that India’s population is a big problem, and we need to control it,” wrote reporter Amit Varma in the *Times of India* in 2019.¹⁸⁹ Supporting his contention, a 2019 survey found that 39 percent of Indians consider “overpopulation” to be among the top three most pressing environmental issues facing their country.¹⁹⁰ Varma also decried alleged “immoral coercion still carried out on poor people across the country.”

Likewise, Indian journalist Swaminathan Aiyar has noted that “India remains a country where a great many people, especially in the middle class, are convinced that force is needed to reduce fertility. This is plain wrong and ignores evidence the world over.”¹⁹¹

As an example, a petition filed in 2018 by Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay, the Delhi leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (or BJP, one of India’s two major political parties), urged more action on population control and a nationwide two-child policy. He claimed that “every year population is increasing but the amount of natural resources to sustain this population are diminishing.”¹⁹² That petition joined four similar petitions already in

the court system advocating for a nationwide two-child policy.

Neo-Malthusian thinking is not limited to a particular political party in India but has bipartisan appeal. Jitin Prasada, an influential politician in India's other major political party, the Indian National Congress, stated in September 2019: "There should be a nationwide discussion on population control. A law should be made in this regard. . . . From the environment to water, almost every natural resource is under stress."¹⁹³

PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION. India apportions political representation in a way that acts as an indirect penalty for large families. In 2001, India extended a freeze on seat allocation between states for the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Parliament, until 2026. The freeze was first enacted in 1976, during the Emergency, when India's 42nd Amendment Act decreed that seat allocation between states for the Lok Sabha would be based on the 1971 census figures until the year 2001. "The rationale was that family planning was a national imperative and states would have little incentive to pursue it if success meant their share of political power would go down," as their relative populations decreased, according to the *Times of India*.¹⁹⁴ The choice to extend the freeze until 2026 was similarly intended to reward states with low birth rates while punishing states with high birth rates and high population growth by lessening their political representation.

Consider Table 2. If political representation were to reflect the changing demographics of India's states rather than the figures in the 1971 Census, then in 2019 the state of Uttar Pradesh would have had 13 more seats in the Lok Sabha than it did, while the state of Tamil Nadu would have had 10 fewer seats than it did.

Aiyar has pointed out that the seat apportionment freeze has had the effect of unfairly reducing political representation of Indians in the country's poorest states.¹⁹⁵ Birth rates tend to be higher in poor areas because, as Aiyar notes, in communities with high infant mortality rates it can make sense to have

many children. (In such circumstances, having many children increases the likelihood of having at least one child who survives to adulthood.)

While reduced political representation is unlikely to incentivize families to have fewer children and is thus an ineffective form of incentivization, diminishing political representation for people in states with high birth rates is nonetheless a form of punishment for large families.

FAMILY SIZE LIMITS. Roughly half of India's population lives in states with some form of penalty pressuring families to have no more than two children. Today, 30 percent of Indian women say they want to have more than two children, but India is combating that with various disincentives.¹⁹⁶ The U.S. State Department notes:

Policies penalizing families with more than two children . . . created pressure on women with more than two children to use contraception, including permanent methods such as sterilization, or even termination of subsequent pregnancies. Certain states maintained government reservations for government jobs and subsidies for adults with no more than two children and reduced subsidies and access to health care for those who have more than two.¹⁹⁷

A 2018 report from the Human Rights Law Network, a collective of Indian lawyers and activists, identified the seven states that penalize families with more than two children as Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Bihar, Gujarat, and Uttarakhand.¹⁹⁸

"I was offered a job as a guard at the Rajasthan Legislative Assembly," recalled Umed Singh Rathore in a segment published in January 2020, speaking to *France24*, the French state-owned international news television network.¹⁹⁹ He continued: "But later the director told me that the offer had been revoked. I asked why." The hiring

“Roughly half of India’s population lives in states with some form of penalty pressuring families to have no more than two children.”

Table 2

Representation in the Lok Sabha, lower house of the Indian Parliament, number of seats per state

State	Current seats (reflecting 1971 population)	Seats reflecting 2019 population	Difference
Uttar Pradesh	80	93	13
Rajasthan	25	31	6
Bihar	40	44	4
Madhya Pradesh	29	33	4
Maharashtra	48	51	3
Haryana	10	12	2
Delhi	7	9	2
Gujarat	26	27	1
Jharkhand	14	14	0
Nagaland	1	1	0
Assam	14	14	0
Chhattisgarh	11	11	0
Puducherry	1	1	0
Chandigarh	1	1	0
Tripura	2	2	0
Mizoram	1	1	0
Uttarakhand	5	5	0
Sikkim	1	1	0
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	1	1	0
A&N Islands	1	1	0
Daman & Diu	1	1	0
Lakshadweep	1	1	0
Manipur	2	1	-1
Arunachal Pradesh	2	1	-1
Goa	2	1	-1
Meghalaya	2	1	-1
Himachal Pradesh	4	3	-1
Jammu & Kashmir	6	5	-1
Punjab	13	12	-1
Karnataka	28	26	-2
West Bengal	42	40	-2
Odisha	21	18	-3
Kerala	20	15	-5
Andhra & Telangana	42	37	-5
Tamil Nadu	39	29	-10

Source: "How 1976 Seat Freeze Has Altered Lok Sabha Representation," *Times of India*, March 16, 2019.

director informed him that Rajasthan bans people with more than two children from working for the government. Rathore said: “I have three children, but I didn’t do anything wrong. This law is wrong. Why does the government interfere in our private life?”

Family Size Limits and India’s Missing Girls. While sex-selective abortions and female infanticide (the latter of which has become rarer) are illegal in India and have a long history predating population control policies, policies pressuring families to have fewer children contribute to the persistence of those two practices in India, as they have in China. A 2018 study published in *The Lancet* found that in India there are on average 239,000 annual deaths of girls under the age of five that occur specifically due to gender discrimination and that neglect of female children accounts for half the country’s “missing girls” (or estimated deficit of women given the low proportion of females in the population).²⁰⁰

Laws preventing people with more than two children from serving on *panchayat* councils harm the sex ratio. (*Panchayat* councils are elected local government assemblies.) Economists S. Anukriti from Boston College and Abhishek Chakravarty of the University of Essex looked at seven Indian states—Rajasthan, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra—in which such laws were in effect between 1992 and 2005. Using data from the National Family Health Survey and District-Level Household Survey, the researchers found a marked decline in the number of women in the general population reporting third births exactly one year after the new policy was announced. Laws enacted in the late 1990s and 2000s restricting political eligibility to candidates with a maximum of two children severely affected the sex ratio in India, the research found.²⁰¹

Another study, conducted by scientist Nirmala Buch between 2001 and 2004 and published in 2005, also explored the consequences of policies punishing families

with more than two children by disqualifying them from serving on *panchayat* councils in five states: Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Rajasthan.²⁰² Buch’s study found that the two-child policy in those states resulted in an increase in cases of desertion, neglect, and death of female infants, illegal sex-selective abortions of female fetuses, and the giving away of female children for adoption. The study also documented cases of men deserting wives with over-quota pregnancies or pressuring wives into having abortions to maintain their *panchayat* seats.

Some question those findings. Aiyar, for example, notes that barely 1 percent of Indians have ever run for public office. He argues that only marginal effects can flow from laws limiting political participation for people with more than two children.²⁰³

Although India has launched campaigns to discourage sex-selective abortion and prenatal sex determination has been outlawed since 1994, the law is weakly enforced.²⁰⁴ (Enforcement of laws is generally weak in India.²⁰⁵) A 2007 BBC investigation easily found four doctors in South Delhi willing to conduct sex determination via ultrasound. Many clinics justify flouting the law by maintaining that they are “fending off population growth by helping parents meet government targets.”²⁰⁶ According to the *Times of India*, despite the illegality of sex-selective abortion, a woman undergoing three such abortions, typically coerced by her husband or in-laws to ensure a male child, is “very common.”²⁰⁷

State-based two-child policies have increased sex-selective abortions and neglect of female children, contributing to a skewed sex ratio. In Uttarakhand, one of the provinces that penalizes families with more than two children, not a single female child’s birth was registered in an area covering 132 villages over the course of three months in 2019, sparking a criminal investigation into suspected occurrences of illegal sex-selective abortions or, less likely, female infanticide.²⁰⁸

“There are many hopeful signs that China is moving toward ending its two-child limit.”

“Even as the Chinese government now worries about falling birth rates, many local governments ‘hungry for revenue’ continue to fine couples for illegal births.”

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

China

Motivated in part by looming intergenerational fiscal concerns as China’s population ages, the government may soon end coercive restrictions on childbearing. China must follow through on its apparent intentions and end its childbearing limits while also refraining from instituting any new coercive population policies. The latter includes resisting the temptation to use coercion to try to *raise* birth rates with *minimum* birth quotas. The country should not trade one kind of coercion for another.

ENDING CHILDBEARING LIMITS. There are many hopeful signs that China is moving toward ending its two-child limit. In 2019, its birth rate reached a 60-year low, lending strength to those in China’s government who argue that the country should not be concerned about overpopulation.²⁰⁹ China’s National People’s Congress makes no mention of coercive family planning policies in the draft of a new Civil Code up for consideration, and an official suggested to attendees at a United Nations conference that China wouldn’t set population limits in the future.²¹⁰

Several restrictions have already been loosened. For example, many local governments across China have recently ended fines for unwed motherhood. Having her child “would not have been possible a year earlier,” an unmarried new mother named Yue Li, who lives in Guangdong province where fines for single mothers were recently lifted, told *Bloomberg News* in 2019. “The penalties would have cost tens of thousands of yuan!” she said.²¹¹

Yet bureaucratic inertia and local officials’ desire to obtain revenue contribute to the continuation of the two-child limit, notes Yi Fuxian, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.²¹² Even as the national government now worries about *falling* birth rates, many local governments “hungry for revenue” continue to fine couples for illegal births, reported the Associated Press in February 2019.²¹³ “The low

birthrate has everyone on edge, yet the local governments care only about collecting fees,” according to Chinese journalist Jin Wei.²¹⁴

Eliminating *all* fines for extra-quota births (thus rendering the quotas symbolic) or, preferably, ending the two-child limit itself, would be a logical next step in loosening restrictions on childbearing and would take away the monetary incentive for coercive limiting of family sizes.

PREVENTING FUTURE COERCIVE POPULATION POLICIES. Some even fear that as birth rates fall and China faces a shrinking workforce, it may swing to the *opposite* extreme and implement minimum birth quotas using the same infrastructure that is being used to limit childbearing. China’s National Health and Family Planning Commission, according to 2006 figures, employed about 500,000 people in 82,350 regional offices across the country.²¹⁵

In March 2018, China merged its National Health and Family Planning Commission into a new agency called the National Health Commission. The removal of “family planning” from the name signaled reorientation toward other health issues related to the aging population and decreased focus on enforcement of childbearing limits.²¹⁶ Although deprioritized, enforcing childbearing limits is nonetheless a role of the agency and has not yet been eliminated. The agency justifies its resistance to eliminating coercive family planning rules by citing China’s Constitution, which says, “The state promotes family planning so that population growth may fit the plans for economic and social development.”²¹⁷

Even if the two-child policy ends, future policymakers may give in to the temptation of using an expansive family planning bureaucracy to coercively engineer the size of the country’s population (whether to grow or shrink it). To lessen that temptation, China should amend its Constitution to eliminate the reference to regulating population growth and should further downsize the number of civil servants working on population policy within the National Health Commission and

decrease the budget for population policy within the commission. Many of those civil servants could be redirected to other projects within the National Health Commission or encouraged to find employment in the private sector.

India

While a return to the sanctioned forced sterilizations of the Emergency would be politically unfeasible, Indian support for disincentives for large families remains. Neo-Malthusian thinking is still widespread, as demonstrated by Prime Minister Modi's August 2019 remarks about a "population explosion." However, Modi and his cabinet colleagues have also repeatedly hailed the advantages of India's demographic dividend. University of Cambridge economist Joan Robinson famously said that whatever was true of India, the opposite was also true. This is reflected in the huge variations in different parts of a very diverse country, leading to countless internal contradictions that can make nonsense of many categorical theses.

Neo-Malthusian thinking certainly is still embedded in many of the government's policies. But recent boasting about the demographic dividend reflects a Robinsonian internal contradiction, as the country takes pride in high fertility even as it maintains policies to combat it. Anti-Muslim bias is another confounding factor influencing population policy while being distinct from neo-Malthusian concerns. Pride in the demographic dividend will hopefully help to erode and end neo-Malthusian rhetoric and policies.

POPULATION AND REVENUE-SHARING AMONG INDIA'S STATES. India's Finance Commission recommends how taxes that are levied by the central government should be shared between the central government and different states, based on several criteria, including population size. In the 1970s, the wealthier southern states, which had lower birth rates, complained that the population size criterion penalized low-fertility states and rewarded the

northern states for their perceived failures in population control. Successive Finance Commissions based their revenue-sharing formulae on state populations listed in the 1971 census and not the latest available figures to avoid such penalization.

However, the 14th Finance Commission, which was appointed in 2013, eroded the advantage of the low-fertility states somewhat. The 15th Finance Commission, which was appointed in 2017, went further and abolished references to the 1971 census altogether. To assuage outraged southern states, the commission also included some benefits for states with lower birth rates. On balance, however, the high-fertility northern states gained enormously in revenue. That represented a substantial rollback of the traditional neo-Malthusian policy pursued by the Indian government.

Partisan politics also played a role in the government's decisionmaking. The BJP is popular in the high-fertility northern states but has almost no support in some of the southern states. By switching from the 1971 population levels to the 2011 levels, the BJP greatly increased the revenue share of the northern states and reduced the revenue share of southern states.

Neo-Malthusian thinking has certainly dominated Indian policy for decades. But the rise of the BJP has introduced new trends. Many BJP stalwarts have called for Hindus to have larger families to stop the Muslim share of the population from rising. In India, Muslims tend to have larger families and so their share of India's population has risen from 9.8 percent in the 1951 census to 14.2 percent in the 2011 census. Prime Minister Modi has sought to bring attention to this trend. An official slogan to encourage smaller families in India since the 1970s has been "hum do, hamare do," meaning "we are two and have two children."²¹⁸ Noting that some Muslim men have four wives, Modi quipped derisively in a 2002 speech that the equivalent Muslim slogan was "hum paanch, hamare pachees," meaning "we are five and have 25 children."²¹⁹

“Several recent proposals calling for a national two-child policy present the possibility that India may move to adopt such a policy nationwide.”

“Malapportionment of political representation intended to punish states with high birth rates is both undemocratic and pointless and should be corrected.”

India needs to build on the momentum of successive finance commissions rolling back neo-Malthusian biases in revenue sharing by abandoning neo-Malthusian biases in all policy areas, irrespective of partisan interests.

TWO-CHILD POLICY GAINING MOMENTUM. Assam will become the latest Indian state to disqualify people with more than two children from holding government jobs beginning in January 2021, and several recent proposals calling for a national two-child policy present the possibility that the country may move to adopt such a policy nationwide.²²⁰ In January 2020, Mohan Bhagwat, the head of a prominent nationalist volunteer organization called the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has 5–6 million members including Prime Minister Modi, said that the RSS would shift its focus to promoting a national two-child policy.²²¹ As noted, Indian Muslims tend to have more children than Hindus. So, a penalty on large families is a not-so-subtle attempt by the Hindu nationalist BJP to discriminate against Muslims. Clearly, neo-Malthusianism is not the sole motive behind the policy, even when neo-Malthusian language is invoked as a justification for the policy.

Consider the constitutional amendment bill introduced February 7, 2020, by Shri Anil Desai, a member of the upper house of India’s Parliament and of a regional political party allied with the BJP. The bill proposes to promote small families with a mix of positive and negative incentives. The bill is justified with neo-Malthusian reasoning, claiming that a “population explosion will cause many problems for our future generations.” It goes on to read: “Today, there is . . . a need to . . . discourage [couples] from producing more children by withdrawing tax concessions, *imposing heavy taxes and by making other punitive provisions for violations.*”²²²

A distinct but likeminded proposal is the Population Regulation Bill introduced July 12, 2019, by Shri Rakesh Sinha, a Parliament member who also belongs to the BJP and is an associate professor at the University of Delhi. That

bill would grant various benefits to couples who undergo sterilization after two children and enact punitive measures on families with more than two children. That bill is also justified with neo-Malthusian reasoning, reading in part: “Given the limited . . . ecological and economic resources at hand, it has become an urgent need to do objective analysis and intervene to plan the process of demographic change for the coming generation[s] of future India.”²²³

AGAINST THE TWO-CHILD POLICY. The fears of “population explosion” in India are misplaced. The country’s total fertility rate in 2017 (the most recent year for which there is data) was 2.24 births per woman and falling, so it is on track to soon reach the replacement fertility level of 2.1 births per woman.²²⁴ If India follows the pattern seen in other countries as they grow richer, the fertility rate will continue to fall until it is beneath the replacement level. In other words, India is on target to stabilize or decrease its population without any need for punitive measures.

Enacting laws that punish, to varying degrees, large families is not only pointless but may further exacerbate the problems that the government is attempting to combat of illegal sex-selective abortion and, less commonly, infanticide. Therefore, recent enthusiasm among some policymakers and activists for the introduction of punitive measures for large families is misplaced. India’s government should avoid enacting a nationwide two-child policy, and individual Indian states with two-child policies should repeal those policies.

The government should also rethink its rhetoric in light of the recently established advantages of a demographic dividend, notes Aiyar.²²⁵ Fertility remains high in states like Uttar Pradesh Bihar and Jharkhand. Until recently, many neo-Malthusians criticized those states for allegedly threatening India’s future prosperity, but those states will become important providers of the country’s labor force. Rising living standards have already reduced fertility rates in most Indian states to below replacement level, and many Indians now view the high-fertility states as

serving an unanticipated national purpose. No disincentives should be implemented to discourage small families, but all disincentives for large families should be lifted.

CORRECTING MALAPPORTIONMENT. In 2026, instead of again extending the freeze first instituted during the Emergency that has resulted in malapportionment of political representation in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament should reflect the country's changing demographics.

A central tenet of democratic representation is the notion of "one person, one vote." The freeze violates that tenet by valuing a person's vote according to the relative fecundity of those residing in the same state, amplifying the voices of those living in low-population growth states and devaluing those living in states with high birth rates.

Furthermore, reducing political representation for high birth rate states is an ineffective form of incentivization that is vanishingly unlikely to alter any individual family's behavior.

Malapportionment of political representation intended to punish states with high birth rates is both undemocratic and pointless and should be corrected.

CONCLUSION

Every family deserves the right to decide for themselves how many children, if any, they wish to have, free of government meddling. Neo-Malthusian concerns, both historically and today, have been used to justify restricting that right, sometimes violently. By punishing those who diverge from an alleged ideal family size determined by technocrats, neo-Malthusian policies in China and (to a lesser extent) India both encroach upon personal freedom and contribute to the problems of sex-selective abortion and female infanticide, thus skewing the global sex ratio at birth.

Evidence suggests that population growth can coincide with increasing abundance of natural resources and does not necessarily lead to scarcity and that birth rates are declining dramatically across much of the world without coercion. While the height of neo-Malthusianism hopefully lies in the past and China may finally be moving away from heavy-handed population control, such ideas may be seeing a resurgence in India and elsewhere. Combating neo-Malthusian doctrine remains critical as long as coercive population policies persist anywhere in the world.

“Every family deserves the right to decide for themselves how many children, if any, they wish to have.”

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