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The Global Baby Bust

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THE WRONG READING

You awaken to news of a morning traffic jam. Leaving home early for a doctor's appointment, you nonetheless arrive too late to find parking. After waiting two hours for a 15-minute consultation, you wait again to have your prescription filled. All the while, you worry about the work you've missed because so many other people would line up to take your job. Returning home to the evening news, you watch throngs of youths throwing stones somewhere in the Middle East, and a feature on disappearing farmland in the Midwest. A telemarketer calls for the third time, telling you, "We need your help to save the rain forest." As you set the alarm clock for the morning, one neighbor's car alarm goes off and another's air conditioner starts to whine.

So goes a day in the life of an average American. It is thus hardly surprising that many Americans think overpopulation is one of the world's most pressing problems. To be sure, the typical Westerner enjoys an unprecedented amount of private space. Compared to their parents, most now live in larger homes occupied by fewer children. They drive ever-larger automobiles, in which they can eat, smoke, or listen to the radio in splendid isolation. Food is so abundant that obesity has become a leading cause of death.

Still, both day-to-day experience and the media frequently suggest that the quality of life enjoyed in the United States and Europe is under threat by population growth. Sprawling suburban development is making traffic worse, driving taxes up, and reducing opportunities to enjoy nature. Televised images of developing-world famine, war, and environmental degradation prompt some to wonder, "Why do these people have so many kids?" Immigrants and other people's children wind up competing for jobs, access to health care, parking spaces, favorite fishing holes, hiking paths, and spots at the beach. No wonder that, when asked how long it will take for world population to double, nearly half of all Americans say 20 years or less.

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