

COVID-19 pandemic may produce dramatic changes in life expectancy, birth rates and immigration

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We're still studying the long-term implications of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic on populations. Credit: Shutterstock

Pandemics have historically given rise to major social and demographic transformation. Labor shortages following the Black Plague, for example, resulted in the rise of the middle class.

Like its predecessors, the current COVID-19 pandemic will likely usher

in major social changes as a result of the excess numbers of deaths, disruptions to fertility and restrictions to immigration.

Reduced life expectancy

The most direct impact of COVID-19 are excess deaths. By early May 2021, the pandemic had infected [152 million people and had claimed over three million lives worldwide](#).

The excess deaths from COVID-19 may reduce [life expectancy](#). Some researchers predict that [life expectancy in the United States has decreased by 1.13 years due to COVID-19](#). The toll among Black and Hispanic Americans, who have seen their life expectancy drop by 2.1 and 3.1 years, respectively, has been especially high.

COVID-19 also has the potential to age vulnerable populations. A report from the Brookings Institute reveals that, relative to white Americans, [higher shares of Black and Hispanic Americans who died from COVID-19 are middle-aged](#). Whereas whites comprise 62 percent of Americans between the ages of 45 and 54, they account for just 22 percent of people in that age group who have died from COVID-19. These differences imply that the pandemic will reduce the life expectancy of Black and Hispanic Americans.

Disrupted birth rates

Past work has consistently shown that [fertility tends to decrease during long-lasting and deadly catastrophes](#). Global research with preliminary data suggests that [the fertility trends during COVID-19 will follow this general pattern](#). The U.S. had experienced a small drop in births prior to COVID-19, but the rate of decline more than doubled during the pandemic.

Concerns about their own health may explain why some women decided to forego a pregnancy during COVID-19. Pregnancy is associated with a [higher risk of developing more severe forms of COVID-19](#). Expectant mothers also had limited access to prenatal care during the pandemic because [many health practitioners scheduled less frequent in-person appointments to minimize exposure to the virus](#).

Some women may have chosen to forego a pregnancy during the pandemic out of concern for their infant's well-being. Infants can contract COVID-19 shortly after birth and, because their lungs are less developed, [they are at higher risk of developing more severe forms of COVID-19 relative to older children](#).

Economic uncertainty and birth rates

Prolonged economic uncertainty may be another reason women have disrupted their fertility during COVID-19. The global pandemic and lockdown policies have exposed individuals to uncertain economic futures. Some couples may forego having a child during the pandemic because [they are concerned about their job and economic security](#). People may not wish to bring a child into this world when they do not know where their next paycheque is coming from or whether they will have a roof over their heads.

Others may forego childbearing because the pandemic has forced them to confront their own mortality. Many expectant parents may delay or eschew childbearing if [they cannot envision a future in which they will be able to provide a loving and secure environment for their child to thrive](#). This may be especially true for those in communities hardest hit by the pandemic.

Increased child-rearing demands is another reason behind the pandemic's fertility decline. School and daycare closures have meant that parents

have had to take on many new responsibilities, including assisting with their children's remote learning.

According to a survey of caregivers conducted by the Boston Consulting Group in April 2020, [the amount of time that parents in the U.S. and the United Kingdom spent on education and household tasks doubled to roughly 60 hours from 30 per week](#). Overwhelmed with the additional parenting responsibilities, parents may not welcome the challenge of caring for a newborn.

With only preliminary data, whether these fertility disruptions will hold or reverse themselves as the pandemic winds down is unclear. However, in the past, [a portion of the women who delayed their fertility in response to a long-lasting, catastrophic event never "made-up" their earlier disruptions](#).

In addition, for decades, fertility has been steadily declining in developed countries due to the growing expenses related to child care, education, health insurance and housing. Demographers cautiously predict that COVID-19 will [accelerate fertility's decline, which will in turn worsen population aging](#).

Migration patterns

COVID-19 may have also altered patterns of international migration. Roughly 105,000 border restrictions were [implemented around the world in response to the pandemic](#). These restrictions, coupled with delays in processing visas, have hampered migrants' mobility and contributed to a temporary decline in the number of international migrants worldwide.

Additionally, the pandemic is likely to have long-term impacts on immigrants' decisions to move. COVID-19 outbreaks in migrant work sites have unveiled the substandard living and working conditions of

migrant workers. Temporary migrants are often assigned to dense accommodations that do not offer the space necessary to follow social distancing guidelines. And their workplaces often lack adequate personal protective equipment.

Anti-immigration sentiment has also increased and hardened during the COVID-19 pandemic. One in five Canadians report that they have developed more negative attitudes toward immigration since the pandemic started. The use of racist phrases like "Kung-flu" to refer to the pandemic has [further stoked anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes](#).

What will the lasting impact be?

Though it is too early to tell how temporary or long-lasting the impacts of COVID-19 will be, it is clear that the pandemic has already brought significant changes. These changes, in turn, have disproportionately affected non-white, immigrant and lower-income populations.

COVID-19 has magnified disparities—in life expectancy, population aging and fertility—across society's haves and have-nots. The pandemic has also erected barriers to internal and international migration. In the absence of policies aimed at improving the living and working conditions of migrant workers, many countries may have difficulty filling labor shortages, mitigating population aging and achieving post-[pandemic](#) recovery.

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