



Written by [Walter E. Williams](#) on May 31, 2017

Overpopulation Hoax

In 1798, Thomas Malthus wrote “An Essay on the Principle of Population.” He predicted that mankind’s birthrate would outstrip our ability to grow food and would lead to mass starvation. Malthus’ wrong predictions did not deter Stanford University professor Paul Ehrlich from making a similar prediction. In his 1968 best-seller, “The Population Bomb,” which has sold more than 2 million copies, Ehrlich warned: “The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now.” This hoax resulted in billions of dollars being spent to fight overpopulation.



According to the standard understanding of the term, human overpopulation occurs when the ecological footprint of a human population in a specific geographical location exceeds the carrying capacity of the place occupied by that group. Let’s look at one aspect of that description — namely, population density. Let’s put you, the reader, to a test. See whether you can tell which country is richer and which is poorer just by knowing two countries’ population density.

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North Korea’s population density is 518 people per square mile, whereas South Korea’s is more than double that, at 1,261 people per square mile. Hong Kong’s population density is 16,444, whereas Somalia’s is 36. Congo has 75 people per square mile, whereas Singapore has 18,513. Looking at the gross domestic products of these countries, one would have to be a lunatic to believe that smaller population density leads to greater riches. Here are some GDP data expressed in millions of U.S. dollars: North Korea (\$17,396), South Korea (\$1,411,246), Hong Kong (\$320,668), Somalia (\$5,707), Congo (\$41,615) and Singapore (\$296,967).

The overpopulation hoax has led to horrible population control programs. The United Nations Population Fund has helped governments deny women the right to choose the number and spacing of their children. Overpopulation concerns led China to enact a brutal one-child policy. Forced sterilization is a method of population control in some countries. Nearly a quarter-million Peruvian women were sterilized. Our government, through the U.N. Population Fund, is involved in “population moderation” programs around the world, including in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Mexico, Indonesia, Brazil, the Philippines, Thailand, Egypt, Turkey, Ethiopia and Colombia.

The entire premise behind population control is based on the faulty logic that humans are not valuable resources. The fact of business is that humans are what the late Julian L. Simon called the ultimate resource. That fact becomes apparent by pondering this question: Why is it that Gen. George Washington did not have cellphones to communicate with his troops and rocket launchers to sink British ships anchored in New York Harbor? Surely, all of the physical resources — such as aluminum



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alloys, copper, iron ore and chemical propellants — necessary to build cellphones and rocket launchers were around during Washington's time. In fact, they were around at the time of the cave man. There is only one answer for why cellphones, rocket launchers and millions of other things are around today but were not around yesteryear. The growth in human knowledge, human ingenuity, job specialization and trade led to industrialization, which, coupled with personal liberty and private property rights, made it possible. Human beings are valuable resources, and the more we have of them the better.

The greatest threat to mankind's prosperity is government, not population growth. For example, Zimbabwe was agriculturally rich but, with government interference, was reduced to the brink of mass starvation. Any country faced with massive government interference can be brought to starvation. Blaming poverty on overpopulation not only lets governments off the hook but also encourages the enactment of harmful, inhumane policies.

Today's poverty has little to do with overpopulation. The most commonly held characteristics of non-poor countries are greater personal liberty, private property rights, the rule of law and an economic system closer to capitalism than to communism. That's the recipe for prosperity.

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