

Opinion: Calif. shouldn't be bragging about 40 million

By Joe Mathews

This summer, California's population finally surpasses 40 million.

We should celebrate by reflecting on just how small we are.



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Of course, we won't. California, like an insecure male lover, is always bragging about how big it is. And so crossing the 40-million threshold—by state figures, it's likely to happen in late summer—will occasion another round of boasting about our size, not merely in population but in economic output and cultural impact. The moment will also produce new predictions about how soon we'll get to 50 million or even 100 million people.

But such projections, while fun, are unlikely to be fulfilled. To the contrary, California should consider the real possibility that our era of population growth is over—and that shrinkage may be our future.

Trends that produced population decline in other places are now strong in California. Our birth rate has fallen to its lowest rate ever. We're losing more people to other states each year than come back to us. And international immigration

remains low—and could fall further given the federal government's systematic harassment and mass deportation of immigrants.

Our state's own policies—especially underinvestment in schools, infrastructure, and housing—all discourage family creation and add to the high cost of living that drives people away. The result is an aging California population that will consume less and innovate less (most new things are invented by the young), weakening the economy and reducing the number of jobs.

And I'm not even mentioning the population reduction that could result from once unthinkable disasters—from nuclear war to epic firestorms.

California's population growth is already at record lows—less than 0.8 percent annually—and falling. During the heyday of immigration, in the 1980s, annual population growth was 2.5 percent a year. Indeed, with many other states growing faster than the Golden State, in 2022 California actually could lose a seat in the House of Representatives for the first time ever. The likelihood of such a loss increases if the Trump administration succeeds in politicizing the census and undercounting California's population.

California would hardly be alone if its population started to decline. Illinois and Pennsylvania have seen their populations decline in some recent years. And the most recent population report from the United Nations says 51 countries are expected to see population decreases between now and 2050, including countries that inspire our state's social policies, like Germany. In Asia, Japan's population is already in decline; its prime minister has declared a goal of limiting losses so that the total doesn't fall below 100 million. Even China is expected to see a 2.5 percent decline in its population by 2050.

Despite the warning signs, the prospect of population loss hasn't penetrated the California mind. To the contrary, we remain devoted to the great California pastime of overestimating our own population growth. One big offender, Gov. Jerry Brown, has talked about reaching 50 million as a certainty and an environmental threat, urging Californians "to find a more elegant way of relating to material things."

But, out of sight, number crunchers at the state's think tanks and government bureaus have been quietly ratcheting down California's population estimates. As recently as the mid-1990s, the state and federal governments' official predictions showed California reaching 50 million people by 2020, a year when our real population likely will be fewer than 41 million.

And if we never get much beyond 40 million, will it be a mortal wound to our pride? After all, the United States had almost exactly that population way back in 1872, which was when the newspaperman Horace Greeley, famous for the advice "Go West, young man, and grow up with the country," ran for president, lost, and promptly dropped dead.

Today's 40-million-person California, for all its delusions of grandeur, has less than one-eighth the population of the United States, less than one-third the population of Mexico, one-fifth that of Pakistan, and not even one-thirty-fifth the population of China. If California were a country, we would rank just 35th. Ukraine, Uganda, Argentina, Colombia, Tanzania, and Myanmar all have millions more people than us. Our most populous city, Los Angeles, ranks just 71st on the planet.

This California, of 40 million, faces a choice. Either accept that, instead of the colossus of our boastful imaginings, we're a small place that's likely to become smaller—at least compared to a world that is growing faster than we are. Or think more seriously about how to attract more people here

from other states and countries, and do a better job of nurturing and retaining our own young people.

If we're as big as we think we are, this is no time to think small.

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