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OPINION

Tens of thousands of Canadians won't be born due to COVID-19



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One of the worst long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for Canada will be the tens of thousands who won't be born, a loss to this country's future.

To make up for that loss, and for the immigrants who were unable to come to Canada this year because of the lockdown, the federal government would need to increase its immigration target beyond 400,000 next year and in future years, which may be politically and logistically impossible.

The lost potential population – the work not done, goods not consumed, taxes not paid – will be felt for decades to come.

The Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, released a report this month that concluded “the COVID-19 episode will likely lead to a large, lasting baby bust.”

Like most developed nations, the United States has a fertility rate well below the 2.1 children per woman needed to sustain the population. (The U.S. fertility rate is 1.7; Canada's is 1.5.) Women are choosing to have fewer children, and to delay their first child until their late twenties or their thirties. (The mean age at which a woman has her first child in the U.S. is 27; in Canada, 29.)

Economic uncertainty can cause a woman to put off having her first child even longer, which may lead to her having fewer children than she originally intended. Examining past recessions and recoveries, the Brookings study found that “a one percentage point increase in the state unemployment rate led to a 0.9 per cent reduction in the birth rate.”

More than simple economic calculation is at work. “Economic pressures and uncertainty cause enormous pressure and stress within households and relationships,” said Judith Daniluk, professor emeritus at University of British Columbia, where she specializes in women’s sexuality and reproductive health.

“Surviving, much less rebounding from, this type of economic and existential crisis is challenging and takes time,” she told me, which can lead to “some women being unable to bear a child when they have regained their economic and relational footing, or in having fewer children than they had hoped.”

Based on projected unemployment levels resulting from the coronavirus lockdown, and a drop in fertility that accompanied the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-19, the Brookings study concluded that “we could see a drop of perhaps 300,000 to 500,000 births in the U.S.” in 2021.

Since Canada has about one-tenth the population of the United States, and the unemployment rate is similar (13.3 per cent in May in the U.S.; 13.7 per cent in May in Canada), we can expect to lose on the order of 30,000 to 50,000 babies next year – the equivalent of West Vancouver (population 42,694) or Belleville, Ont. (population 50,720) in the number of babies not born.

The fewer babies that are born each year, the more immigrants who are needed to replace them. The alternative is a shrinking and aging population, with too few workers and taxpayers available to fill vacant jobs, to power the economy through consumption, and to support the pension and health-care needs of the elderly.

The Trudeau government had planned to welcome 341,000 permanent residents this year and 351,000 in 2021. But with the year half over, and immigration essentially

frozen through border closings, Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino faces a difficult choice when he presents his immigration update this fall.

To prevent an overall drop in immigration, he will have to increase next year's intake to compensate both for immigrants who didn't arrive in 2020 and for babies not born.

But a target between, say, 400,000 and 500,000 would strain the resources of the department and of settlement services, and intensify protests from those who believe Canada is bringing in too many newcomers as it is.

Compensating for lost intake could be staggered over several years. Even so, we may be forced to accept that many thousands of people who should be with us in the years to come won't be.

"That will be yet another cost of this terrible episode," the Brookings report concludes.

To limit that cost, this Liberal government should do everything within its power to bring in as many new Canadians as it possibly can in the years ahead.

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