

# “Have More Babies:” Framing Fertility and Population Dynamics in Aotearoa New Zealand

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## Abstract title

Population dynamics are important, and it is necessary to consider how key demographic measurements and statistics are understood in public debate. When a political leader in Aotearoa New Zealand commented on 8 June 2023 that people should ‘have more babies’ to help with population growth, there was a national response. The resulting 18 media articles and comment sections were analysed to investigate how population dynamics and fertility are framed as “Too Few”, “Too Many” and “Human Rights”. Most public debate centres on Too Few or Too Many, framing the amount of childbearing as problematic. By contrast, the smaller proportion of the public debate using the Human Rights frame locates the problem in the structural barriers preventing individuals from exercising their agency in childbearing. Although most articles mention demographic statistics, these are often interpreted inaccurately. Demographers and journalists are encouraged to carefully consider the implications of how they present demographic measurements and to discuss population growth and fertility using a human rights approach.

**Keywords:** fertility decline, birthrate, TFR, reproductive rights, population growth

## Whakarāpopotonga

He hira ngā nekeneketanga taupori, ka mutu me whai whakaaro ki ngā āhua e whakaarohia ai ngā inenga hangapori matua me ngā tauanga matua i roto i ngā kōrero tūmatanui. I te wā i kī ai tētahi kaiārahi tōrangapū i Aotearoa i te 8 o Pipiri 2023, 'me whakawhānau kia nui ake ngā pēpi' hei āwhina i te tupu o te taupori, i kitea he urupare puta noa i Aotearoa. I tātaritia ngā tuhinga arapāho me ngā wāhanga kōrero 18 i whai ake kia kitea ai te whakawhāiti i te matahua me ngā nekeneketanga taupori hei

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mea 'Iti Rawa', 'Nui Rawa,' me 'Ngā Tika Tangata.' Ko te aronga o te nuinga o ngā kōrerorero tūmatanui ko ngā mea 'Iti Rawa,' te 'Nui Rawa' rānei, me te whakaahua i te rahi o te whakaira tangata hei raruraru. Engari, mō te ōwehenga iti ake o ngā kōrerorero tūmatanui e whakamahi ana i Ngā Tika Tangata hei tāpare e noho ana te raruraru i roto i ngā tauārai hanganga tērā e ārai i te tangata ki te whakarite i te kahawhiri ki te whakaira tangata. Ahakoa he maha ngā tuinga e whakaputa kōrero ana mō ngā tauanga hangapori, ko te tikanga hē ai te whakamāori i ērā. E whakatenatenatia nei ngā kaihangapori me ngā kaihaurapa kōrero ki te āta whai whakaaro ki ngā pānga o tā rātou whakaatu i ngā inenga hangapori, ki te matapaki i te tupu taupori me te matahua mā te ara tika tangata.

**Ngā kupu matua:** whakahekenga matahua, pāpātanga whānautanga, TFR, motika whakaputa uri, tupu taupori

**O**n 8 June 2023 the leader of the National Party in Aotearoa New Zealand, Christopher Luxon, spoke in Ōtautahi Christchurch at an infrastructure conference. As part of a discussion on immigration policy, he stated:

“Immigration’s always got to be linked to our economic agenda and our economic agenda says we need people. I mean, here’s the deal: essentially New Zealand stopped replacing itself in 2016. I encourage all of you to go out there, have more babies if you wish, that would be helpful.”<sup>1</sup>

This comment, particularly the injunction to “have more babies”, sparked national commentary about population and demography. Because this brief statement touches on births, decreases in the fertility rate, natural replacement, immigration, age composition, population size and growth, the responses offer insight into how demographic changes and population dynamics are being understood and represented in Aotearoa New Zealand. Taking online responses to the “have more babies” statement as a case study, this research investigates how fertility and population dynamics are discussed in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Background

The world’s population reached 8 billion in 2023, representing unprecedented achievements in health, including nutrition and disease prevention (McFarlane, 2023). At the same time, fertility rates are decreasing around the world, particularly in highly developed countries.

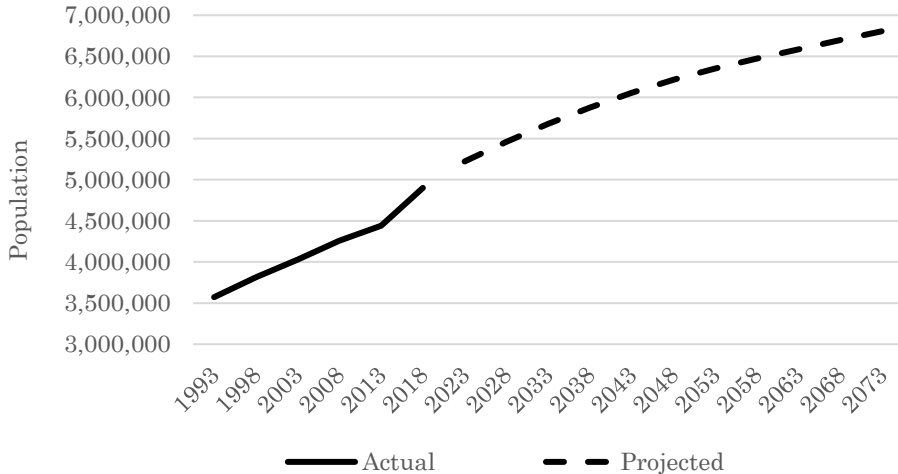
This demographic transition has seen mortality and then fertility decrease, with population momentum meaning that the overall population size is increasing even as the fertility rate is decreasing. Viewing births, deaths and growth separately may result in alarmist narratives about population being “too many” or “too few”. Each of these narratives is problematic and may contribute to approaches that seek to control births through controlling women and people who can become pregnant, as well as implying that some people are worthy of reproducing and others are not (McFarlane, 2023). This is of particular concern to demography, a discipline with a history of being associated with eugenics and coercive reproductive programmes (Nandagiri, 2021; Sear, 2021). To avoid furthering these problematic approaches, there is need for a recognition that “people are not procreation units who are designed to fulfil some perceived ideal level of reproduction or who are constrained to reproduce according to some quota or formula” (McFarlane, 2023, p. 128). One way of moving beyond these limited narratives of too many and too few is by recognising that people have inherent rights, including rights about their reproduction.

Aotearoa New Zealand’s population has been continuously rising, reaching 5 million in 2020 (Stats NZ, 2023). The fertility rate remained relatively stable at around 2 from the 1970s to 2015, and has recently decreased to 1.66 in 2022, with the fertility rate among Māori and Pacific Island peoples remaining higher (Rarere, 2018; Rarere et al., 2023; Urale et al., 2019). Life expectancies have been increasing, although at a slower pace for Māori (Disney et al., 2017), and there has been a rapid rise in immigration, particularly those of working (and reproductive) ages (Stats NZ, 2023). Taking this together, the population size is projected to continue increasing (Figure 1).

When considering births and fertility, a key distinction is between count and rate. The *count* of births is the actual number of births in a particular time period (e.g. a year). The *birthrate* (crude birthrate) is the number of births per thousand people in a particular time period, and age-specific birth rates are the number of births per thousand people in a particular age range (e.g. 20–29) in a particular time period. Finally, the fertility rate (that is, *total fertility rate or TFR*) is a composite measurement representing the average number of children who would be born per woman if she lived all of her childbearing lifespan in a particular year and bore

children at each age in accordance with the age-specific birthrates for that particular year.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1: Aotearoa New Zealand population 1993–2073**



Source: Author graph using data from Stats NZ:

1. Population estimates for 1993–2018 from InfoShare *Estimated Resident Population Annual–June*. <https://infoshare.stats.govt.nz/>
2. Population projections from 2023–2073 from *National population projections: 2020(base)–2073*. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/national-population-projections-2020base2073>

These measurements each have distinct uses. The size of a population is a result of births, deaths and net migration, which are observed by counts. By contrast, rates are standardised across population size and age structure. When a population has a high proportion of people at childbearing ages it can experience population momentum, meaning growth in population size despite a low TFR. High net migration, particularly of those in their childbearing years, can also result in population growth (Jackson, 2017). Selecting and interpreting the appropriate measurement is essential for correctly describing population dynamics.

Refining demographic measurements is an ongoing process, particularly for the pressing need to understand low fertility and adjust TFR appropriately for quantum, tempo and age-period interactions (e.g., Bongaarts & Feeney, 2000). Because of this sensitivity, TFR is not necessarily an ideal measurement for understanding overall fertility and it

is certainly not a measurement of actual births. Moreover, “‘birth rate’ has never simply been a number” (Franklin, 2022, 600), as it is developed and interpreted in social context.

This study examines the social context of demographic measurements by focusing on the “popular debate”, defined by Stark and Kohler (2002) as “the tenor of non-private, non-academic discussions about national-level issues” (p. 536). It extends prior work examining how the popular press frames the topics of population growth (Teitelbaum, 2004; Wilmoth & Ball, 1992) and fertility (Georgiadis, 2010; Stark & Kohler, 2002, 2004).

Popular debate about population issues such as fertility is important to understand for itself, as it is a serious concern beyond academia (Stark & Kohler, 2002). This wider debate reflects, challenges and generates perceptions about reproduction, particularly about who should and should not reproduce and under what conditions (Georgiadis, 2010). Understanding the wider debate is important because fertility levels alone do not determine countries’ perceptions or concerns, which may be influenced by other demographics such as overall population change and ageing, as well as by social values such as an ethnically based national identity and gendered family structures and roles (Stark & Kohler, 2002). Demographic alarmism draws on statistics to reflect wider public anxieties; the numbers may be fertility rates, but the surrounding discussion is about cultural struggles (Krause, 2001).

It is noteworthy that Mr Luxon’s statement was made in Ōtautahi Christchurch. In this city, on 15 March 2019, a gunman attacked two mosques, killing 51 people, injuring a further 40, and disrupting lives, families and communities (Crothers & O’Brien 2020). The country’s immediate response was overwhelmingly a show of solidarity with Muslim communities and against gun violence and violence shared online (Crothers & O’Brien, 2020). Less discussed has been the gunman’s motivations rooted in fears about the population, specifically low birthrates (Moses 2019). These alarmist fears arise from the “great replacement” narrative, a White supremacist and often Christian nationalist and colonialist concern that non-White (and non-Christian) populations will become larger than White Christian populations through higher levels of immigration and childbearing of non-White people, along with lower levels of childbearing among White people (Alba, 2020; Duignan, 2023). These fears echo the too

many and too few narratives, underscoring the importance of understanding the perception and discussion of population dynamics by the wider public.

Understanding popular debate is especially important for demographers, who can play an essential role in accurately framing demographic concepts and statistics (Georgiadis, 2010; Stark & Kohler, 2002, 2004; Teitelbaum, 2004; Wilmoth & Ball 1992). Demographers can better communicate their work if they have knowledge of how and why demographic issues such as fertility matter to the press and to the wider public. Although demography produces stories that appeal to journalists, differences in professional norms and incentives mean that demographic information may become “garbled” (Teitelbaum, 2004). Demographers’ careful reports with caveats and explanations may be oversimplified in popular debate, minimising complexities and uncertainties, and with controversial aspects that catch reader attention exaggerated or even misrepresented (Teitelbaum, 2004). Along with improving accuracy, demographers’ participation in popular debate could make a valuable contribution by adjusting or reshaping perceptions and policies (Stark & Kohler, 2002).

Aotearoa New Zealand offers a particularly compelling location for examining the public debate about demography. This country stood out as having a unique position in a comparison of public debate about fertility in 11 countries with low fertility rates, focusing on 1998–1999 (Stark & Kohler, 2002). In this time period, New Zealand had relatively little public debate and the tone was overwhelmingly negative, focusing on national wellbeing. Interventions focused on increasing births by limiting reproductive health services, particularly abortion. Other interventions to change low fertility were notably extreme, such as Invercargill Mayor Tim Shadbolt suggesting that people need to “go forth and breed”, but that “the only hope we’ve got” to increase births would be for council to “plan a major power cut or ban television” (Southland Times, 26 August 1999, cited in Stark & Kohler, 2002). In most cases, countries with projected population growth had little concern about low fertility (e.g., the United States), and countries with projected population decline showed strong concern about low fertility (e.g., Italy). By contrast, New Zealand showed a strong concern about low fertility despite projected population growth (Stark & Kohler, 2002). Aotearoa New Zealand continues to be in the situation of low fertility along with projected

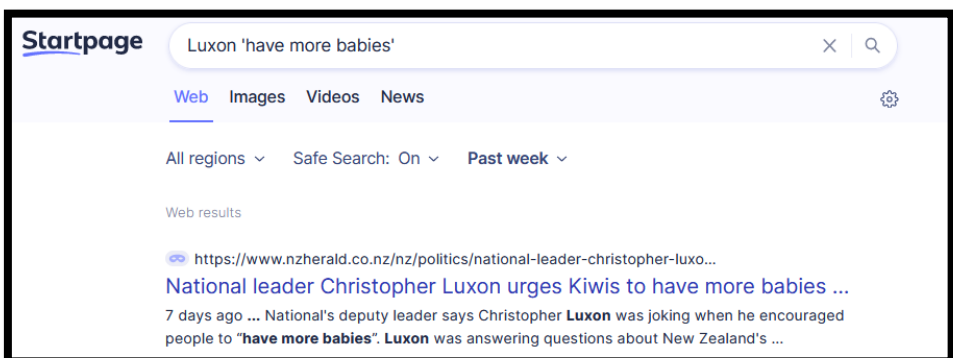
growth; it remains to be seen whether there continues to be a paradoxical concern with growth and fertility in the public debate.

## Method

The internet was searched using Startpage, a web search engine with no tracking, profiling or search history (Startpage, n.d.). The search was conducted one week following Mr Luxon's comment (on Thursday 15 June 2023), using the search term [Luxon "have more babies"] and time set to the past week (see Figure 2). Search A was set to web results (38 results; see Figure 2 for search settings and top result), and Search B was set to news results (15 results). Each result in Searches A and B was viewed to determine if it addressed Mr Luxon's statement and to eliminate duplicate links (duplicate text was included if it was posted on separate links). Each unique link that addressed Mr Luxon's statement was included in the analysis.

The final sample included 18 links: four with text and comments, 12 with text only, and two with comments only (see Table 1). Nearly all were published within one or two days of the original comment, and each was published by a separate outlet (with the exception of two articles by Radio New Zealand (RNZ)). Each article had a different author (with the exception of two separate articles by Martyn Bradbury on The Daily Blog and Waatea News). In three cases, article content was repeated in part across two outlets (RNZ & Herald; Voxy & The BFD; Stuff & r/ConservativeKiwi). Of the links that included comments, all stated that comments were closed.

**Figure 2: Search settings and top result**



The text length ranged from 81 to 686 words, for a total of 5267 words analysed. The number of comments ranged from 3 to 345, with a total of 664 comments analysed. The text of each article and/or comments was saved as a text document and uploaded into NVivo (QRS International, 2017) for coding. Full text and web addresses are available upon request.

All material is in the public domain, and as such is defined as exempt by the University's Human Ethics Committee. The current study follows the ethics guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020). Following these guidelines, named individuals quoted in the articles are considered public figures speaking publicly; the current study partially anonymises these individuals by describing their roles rather than giving their names. The guidelines advise that comments on public websites such as news articles and open forums are private individuals speaking publicly, and therefore the current study protects their privacy by not including any usernames in the results. Authors of the articles are given attribution as journalists acting in their professional capacity.



**Table 1: Items included in the analysis**

#	Source	Author	Title	Date	Words	Comments	Stats
1	RNZa	Anneke Smith	Christopher Luxon urges Kiwis to have more babies, saying it “would be helpful”.	8/06/2023	225	0	No
2	Stuff	Bridie Witton	National leader Christopher Luxon says we should “have more babies”.	8/06/2023	613	345	Yes
3	Herald	Anneke Smith	National leader Christopher Luxon urges Kiwis to have more babies, saying it “would be helpful”.	8/06/2023	225	0	Yes
4	Newshub	Molly Swift	Christopher Luxon jokingly encourages New Zealanders to “have more babies” – but sociologist says he has a point.	9/06/2023	391	0	Yes
5	1 News	Jack Tame	Luxon wasn’t seriously urging us to have babies.	9/06/2023	204	0	No
6	Right To Life	none listed	Christopher Luxon states “have more babies.”	10/06/2023	417	0	Yes
7	Voxy	Family First	Luxon is correct – we need more babies.	8/06/2023	270	0	Yes
8	The Daily Blog	Martyn Bradbury	Luxon demanding women have more babies isn’t helping with the Handmaids Tale memes and he won’t like my solution.	9/06/2023	482	92	No
9	Newstalk ZB	Heather Du Plessis-Allan	Is Luxon saying we need more babies controversial?	8/06/2023	419	0	Yes
10	r/ConservativeKiwi	N/A	National leader Christopher Luxon says we should “have more babies”.	8/06/2023	0	66	N/A
11	The BFD	Family First	Luxon is right – We need more Kiwi babies.	8/06/2023	267	0	Yes

#	Source	Author	Title	Date	Words	Comments	Stats
12	New Zealand Issues	N/A	Luxon wants more babies.	8/06/2023	0	62	N/A
13	Project Gender	Erin Jackson	A quick Project Gender perspective on Christopher Luxon's call for more babies.	8/06/2023	686	3	No
14	NoRightTurn	[username]	Ewww.	8/06/2023	210	0	No
15	Spinoff	Shanti Matthias	Chris Luxon encourages people to have more babies – to provide workers.	8/06/2023	257	0	Yes
16	RNZb	Morning Report	Do New Zealanders need to have more babies?	9/06/2023	81	0	Yes
17	Waatea News	Martyn Bradbury	So why aren't we talking about New Zealand women having more babies?	14/06/2023	390	0	No
18	Kiwiblog	David Farrar	Nazi hysteria from TVNZ.	11/06/2023	130	96	Yes

Analysis used a reflexive thematic method (Braun & Clarke 2021), taking an approach that is critically realist with a presumption that the text represents a social reality; deductive by following the frames described by the State of the World's Population 2023 report (McFarlane, 2023) and inductive by examining the text for any additional frames; and semantic, following the overt content of the text, as well as latent, following the concepts underpinning the overt content of the text.

The analytical frames are “Too Many”, “Too Few” and “Human Rights” (McFarlane, 2023), and analysis followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021). Familiarisation with the data set occurred during the initial scanning of the articles and comments, then by re-reading the data and making notes. Then data was coded in NVivo to identify where the frames were being used and to find any additional frames. Themes were then identified, developed, and refined according to the three original frames and one additional frame, before finally being written up.

## Results

The articles and comments were analysed for their use of the frames of Too Many, Too Few and Human Rights. The analysis defined a further frame: “Demographic Statistics”. The most widely used frame was Too Few, and the most infrequently used was Human Rights.

### *Too Few*

The most-discussed aspects in the Two Few frame were immigration, selective application and gender. There was some discussion of economy, and a few mentions of environment. These are discussed below.

#### Immigration

Many discussions using the Too Few framing were concerned about not enough immigration: “With a declining fertility rate comes a reliance on migration to provide for an ageing population – but all countries around the world will be competing for that migration, because most countries are facing the same dilemma” (Voxy article); “Is [the “have more babies” statement] a hint that immigration needs to increase?” (comment on Stuff); “Given our demographics we absolutely need more babies born. The whole world is ageing and importing skilled young people is only going to get

harder, it's challenging now in ten years time nigh on impossible" (comment on NZ Forum); and "The world is swinging into a situation where, instead of trying to stop people from the 3rd world moving to western nations, there will be a bidding war to get the best" (comment on The Daily Blog). Most discussed immigration positively and as necessary, with the main concern being New Zealand attracting sufficient immigrants.

### Selective application

Discussions about Too Few often included a description of which babies would be more highly valued, often by contrasting New Zealand-born with those born elsewhere: "[Mr Luxon] is Correct. Kiwis to do kiwi jobs. Not immigrants" (comment on Stuff); "A New Zealand without children has no future and unless these children are born and raised in New Zealand by New Zealand mothers we also risk losing our collective culture" (comment on The Daily Blog); "If we as Kiwis want our country to survive, we need more Kiwis. There is only one way to do that, and that is to breed more. Real, true, natural, Kiwis. Not foreign imports. This is one of the biggest problems with many developed nations today. Their native populations are becoming extinct" (comment on NZ Forum); and "There should be an incentive for men and woman to get married and reproduce. Or is the thought of more White people "White supremacist"...? Any society that doesn't reproduce itself is doomed as pure matter of mathematical certainty" (comment on The Daily Blog). These statements were only found in comments and appear to conflate "New Zealand Kiwi" with White European, to have a static and restrictive view of race and culture, and to describe the future using negative terms such as "doomed" and "becoming extinct".

A few statements raised concerns about possible connections with "Great Replacement" ideas. One noted that Mr Luxon's "make more babies" directive had "unpleasant echoes of racist 'great replacement' thinking. After all, if you accept that 'we need people', why babies? Why not immigration? Which suggests Luxon is concerned about what people we get" (Norightturn article). Only two statements made this point, far fewer than the statements concerned with either too many or too few immigrants.

### Gender

The role of women was another prevalent topic in the Too Few frame, with the key message being that women are not having enough babies. These articles attributed the cause of lower birthrates directly to women's life

choices. One of these is the timing of childbearing, specifically age at childbearing and number of children: “Part of the issue was that many women were having only one child, or postponing starting a family. More babies were born to women aged over 40 last year than women aged 20 and under” (Stuff article). Without added context, these types of descriptions place emphasis on women, leaving men and social structures invisible.

Women becoming educated and being in employment was identified as a cause of lower fertility by several articles (e.g., Stuff, RNZa, Newshub). One article cited a “distinguished sociologist” academic (Newshub article) when arguing that “women getting higher education qualifications and entering the labour market are a driving force behind declining fertility rates” (Newshub article). The same academic expert was quoted as saying “Then things like cost come in and environment come in –and so you’re choosing to stay in your job rather than come out and have children” (Newshub article). On its surface, this statement focuses on individual choices instead of the relational or structural context of childbearing, and thus the message appears to assign responsibility for not having children to individual educated and employed women. The phrasing “rather than” also juxtaposes employment and childbearing as incompatible for women. The statement may also suggest that educated and employed women who would like to have children are facing barriers to having them, such as concerns about cost and environment. This mention of the underlying structural issues indicates how a Human Rights frame would have been possible to use instead of the Too Few approach. (See below for further analysis of Human Rights framing).

Some commenters took issue with locating the problem in women’s choices, calling it “the old chestnut of women not having enough babies” (comment on Stuff), and countering with sarcasm: “Oh yes, it’s women being highly educated and working that is the problem! Eye roll...” (comment on Stuff).

### Economy

Articles mentioning the economy focused on having enough workers. One article noted that in his speech, Mr Luxon “touched on the shortage of workers to plug the infrastructure deficit and build for the future” (Stuff article). Commenters noted the importance to taxes: “The less people we have the less tax take and less for the beneficiaries and for the countries

development in general” (comment on The Daily Blog). “You can probably google and see what a child costs until they are taxpayer age, it is an astounding amount and then some of them don’t become taxpayers and still cost” (comment on NZ Issues). These statements were focused on people’s role in the economy through their labour and earnings, some implying that their “cost” should be balanced out by their contributions through taxes.

Some of the economy-focused statements also mentioned the need for workers to support a growing population of older people, such as the article pushing back that Mr Luxon’s “have more babies” statement was no joke, because “what could be more important than ensuring an adequate number of future generations to support our workforce, including doctors, nurses, healthcare professionals, teachers, builders, tradesmen, and caregivers for the growing elderly population” (Right to Life article). The growing population of older ages was also connected to the economy by the comment that: “An ageing population will also place a burden on the economy through increasing health care, aged care, and other fiscal costs such as the government pension” (comment on Voxy). Other comments found international parallels: “We are on the same path as many developed countries to becoming the next Japan. Where we end up with loads of old people drawing on the health system and Superannuation, and not having enough young working people supporting them” (comment on Newstalk ZB). All statements, in both articles and comments, that mentioned population ageing used this economic frame of an expanding need for workers.

### Environment

Very few articles or comments mentioned the environment in conjunction with a Too Few frame. When they appeared, these statements were focused on the ways in which concerns about the environment may play a role in decisions about not having children or having fewer children, as in the article stating that “increasingly, environmental considerations are encouraging couples to have smaller families” (RNZa article).

### *Too Many*

The Too Many frame most frequently discussed the environment, followed by infrastructure. Immigration was mentioned in conjunction with these two

topics, and gender was not directly mentioned. A third group of statements selectively applied the Too Many frame.

### Environment

Opposition to Mr Luxon's "have more babies" statement focused primarily on the effects of population size on the environment, nearly always with a global emphasis: "Quite the opposite should be encouraged, for the sake of the planet" (comment on Stuff); "Overpopulation being encouraged by politicians is the last thing our already crowded and stressed world needs" (comment on Stuff); and "The whole world needs to stop popping out babies and clean up the world they bring children into, not just here in New Zealand" (comment on NZ Issues). Several statements made the claim that the world's population is currently too large: "The world has vastly too many people already – at least double what the planet can sustain" (comment on Stuff); and "The last thing we need is more of us. Time to let the human race die off until sustainable levels are reached. Besides, the future is so bleak, it's not fair to inflict it upon anyone" (comment on The Daily Blog). These statements described the population size as unsustainable, the planet as "crowded" and the environment as "stressed" and needing to be cleaned up, painting a picture of a "bleak" present and future.

### Infrastructure

New Zealand's infrastructure was the focus of another group of economy-focused statements using a Too Many frame. Some of these voiced an interest in general wellbeing: "Most people were better off when New Zealand had 3 million people" (comment on The Daily Blog). However, most of these statements specified infrastructure as the key concern with population growth: "The very last thing that New Zealand needs, is more people. The facilities available at present couldn't deal with a three million population let alone one teetering on six million and increasing daily" (comment on Stuff); and "No Christopher [Luxon], we don't need more people. New Zealand (and Auckland) is not a better place for having 5 million people instead of the 4 million in 2003. Where are they all going to live, drink, work, drive, go to school, and dispose of their trash? Will you raise taxes to pay for that?" (comment on Stuff). The main point of these statements is pithily summarised by the statement that: "This country needs better infrastructure, not more people" (comment on Stuff).

A few statements discussed the need for infrastructure to address migration resulting from global environmental disasters: “Devastation via climate change could bring significant numbers of refugees to this country. New Yorkers who can’t breathe. Pacifica people displaced by rising sea levels. Others from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, amongst many. Instead of bizarrely encouraging more babies among those who are making considered choices, Luxon could be encouraging nimbleness in adapting to the new migrant influx” (comment on Stuff).

### Selective application

A further group of statements, only made explicitly in the comments sections, applied the Too Many frame selectively to point out which babies would not be valued: “The trouble is the wrong people are breeding” (comment on Stuff); “I can’t see the problem with people having more babies IF they can afford them. So please anyone who is on a benefit and reads this, please do NOT go forth and multiply.....” (comment on NZ Forum); “Surely [Mr Luxon] doesn’t want bottom feeders to have more progeny” (comment on The Daily Blog). “Yes I know we have an overall declining birth rate but Health, Education and Social Welfare are over burdened by people having too many babies that don’t have the resources to raise them” (comment on Stuff); and “We absolutely do NOT need any more babies to families who need govt help to raise them, we don’t need any more from the kinds of dropkicks who produce ram raiders, in fact half the population needs to be sterilized to protect us from their retard offspring” (comment on NZ Issues). These statements give the opinion that certain people should not be having children, using offensive ableist and dehumanising terms. The suggestion is that people should not be using infrastructural or other policy support, implying an ideal of self-sufficient individuals. Although the main description is of the economic conditions of families, these statements can also be read as racialised. Statements such as “Pakeha families have stopped having babies but I think everyone else is going nuts for kids” (comment on NZ Issues) thus complete the highly problematic argument that there are “too few” White babies and “too many” non-White babies. Overall, these selective statements sound very similar to eugenics arguments.



## *Human Rights*

Human rights framing focuses on individual agency and the structural conditions that support it, including barriers faced by people who would like to have children. Statements using this frame included discussions of choice, financial barriers, supportive policy and reproductive healthcare.

### Choice

Several statements noted that it was not the government's place to mandate childbearing: "Choosing to have children is up to each person (and not everyone can) and for a politician to tell people to have more is just plain weird and irresponsible" (comment on Stuff); "The most important requirement for having children is for the parents to actually want and afford them; not as economic units for a National government" (comment on The Daily Blog); and "Luxon's call for more babies fails to acknowledge the importance of reproductive autonomy and personal choice for women. It is a human right that women should have the freedom to make decisions about their own bodies and reproductive lives" (Project Gender article). These statements draw on a human rights discourse rather than describing fertility as too high or too low, although the statement requiring parents to "afford" children has parallels with the selective argument in the Too Many frame.

Language can be a part of using a human rights frame: "People who talk about human mothers and babies, and the family, referring to it in a scientific term – fertility. Women and men as animals being assessed for their value to the farm (nation) is dehumanising" (comment on The Daily Blog). This statement suggests that the term fertility itself may not be a good fit with a human rights frame.

### Financial barriers

The most frequently mentioned topic of the largest comment section (on Stuff) focused on how people may not be able to simply "have more babies" even if they wanted to, because they face financial barriers: "For a lot of people, it's not as financially viable to even have kids these days" (comment on Stuff); "How does he think people can afford more babies?" (comment on Stuff); "And how are parents supposed to afford these babies who will become children and teenagers?" (comment on Stuff); "Many hard working lower and middle income couples can't afford to have sprogs due to the high

cost of housing” (comment on Stuff); “If you want couples to have babies, make doing so affordable” (comment on Stuff); and “[Mr Luxon] has lost touch with ordinary people. People are struggling to feed the children they have” (comment on Stuff). These statements clearly portrayed the financial barriers to being able to have children.

Some commenters included personal stories of wanting to have a child but experiencing financial barriers, particularly high housing costs and low incomes: “People want to have more kids, I want to have more kids. It breaks my heart my daughter likely never will have a sibling. She’s constantly talking about one” (comment on Stuff); “If my family could afford to live comfortably on one income so I could stay home with our children I would happily have four, even five kids maybe! But because of low wages and a high cost of living even having one is going to be really hard” (comment on Stuff); “I can’t afford myself let alone a baby but okay” (comment on Stuff); “With my current income, not confident myself having a baby” (comment on Stuff); “Can’t afford to buy a house, so not having kids” (comment on Stuff); “We can’t afford to have babies, raise children and have somewhere to live and support our elderly or unwell parents” (comment on Stuff); and “We didn’t get the benefit of free University educations and affordable housing, now we can barely afford a roof over our heads and food to keep us alive. Having children and saving for retirement have been put the side while we try to survive another week” (comment on Stuff). These personal stories, some highly emotional, illustrate the financial barriers to having children, even for those who very much want them.

### Supportive policy

To support people to have children, several statements noted the role of government policies in addressing these financial barriers: “If we want to respect the decision to carry life into this world and want to ensure the cost is not damaging mums and dads, we need to actually subsidise that cost” (Waatea article); “In New Zealand there are a range of policies in place to encourage people to have children; the latest budget included an extension of state-funded childcare, and Working for Families tax credits are provided to people supporting children under the age of 18 while working” (Spinoff article); and “Creating structures and policies that enable women to balance their personal and professional lives effectively is critical” (Project Gender article). These statements align with a Human Rights frame by highlighting supportive policies, particularly those that describe the need for respecting

parenting decisions. Although mostly using a Human Rights frame, some of these articles contextualised their discussion of policy with language that invoked a Too Few frame, such as “encourage people to have children” and having a “concern for the declining population rate” (Project Gender article).

Māori values were described by one article as providing the underlying rationale for policies supporting childbearing: “[Having more babies] is a debate that needs to be had, particularly for our indigenous culture who see family as adding to our collective whakapapa, whānau, hapu and iwi. ... If we want to ensure we can replace our population and if we want to make future generations more secure from the ravages of poverty, then it takes actual investment into the social infrastructure around having children! ...culturally for Māori this is a fundamental value issue” (Waatea article). This extends the Human Rights frame by expanding beyond the individual and viewing childbearing as embedded in collective and Māori values.

### Reproductive healthcare

Bodily autonomy was the main concern of some statements, making connections between childbearing decisions and access to reproductive healthcare such as contraception. “A feminist response to Luxon’s call for more babies highlights the importance of comprehensive sex education and reproductive rights. Empowering women to make informed choices about their bodies and sexuality ensures that they have control over their reproductive lives. Access to affordable contraception, safe and legal abortion, and comprehensive reproductive healthcare services is crucial for women to exercise their reproductive autonomy” (Project Gender article); and “This latest muttering from Luxon will explain in part why they will reinstate the \$5 prescription fee on contraceptives to hasten the birth statistics” (comment on Stuff). These statements noted the key role of the availability of reproductive healthcare in self-determination of childbearing.

### *Demographic Statistics*

Ten of the 16 articles included demographic statistics, including fertility rate/birthrate, replacement rate, immigration, population size and international comparisons. Most gave these statistics a prominent place, typically directly following the opening quotes from Mr Luxon.

### Fertility rate

A few articles gave the current fertility rate: “Statistics NZ recently reported that New Zealand’s fertility rate has dropped to 1.65, the lowest ever recorded since 1894” (Righttolife article). Other articles described the direction of change rather than giving a number: “New Zealand’s birthrate is at record low levels” (Spinoff article); “New Zealand’s birthrate has plummeted over the past decade” (Stuff article); “Christopher Luxon is absolutely correct to sound a warning about the nation’s declining birthrate” (Voxy article); and “Demographers warn that a birth rate of 1.5 is a point of no return. Consequently, our alarmingly low birth rate represents the most pressing crisis affecting New Zealand's future” (Righttolife article). A source, usually Stats NZ, was mentioned by some articles. Statistics were almost always used without definition, although most appeared to be referring to TFR. The context offered by the articles varied widely, although almost all articles noted that the fertility rate was lower than in the past, often describing the statistics using language such as “plummet”, “lowest ever” and “alarmingly low”.

### “Replacement rate”

Fertility rate was typically mentioned in conjunction with replacement: “Since 2016 we are no longer replacing ourselves (this means fertility rate has fallen below the 2.1 replacement rate)” (Kiwiblog article); “New Zealand's fertility rate continues to be at an all-time low, well below the population replacement level of 2.1 required” (Voxy article); “New Zealand had moved ‘very rapidly’ from replacement-level fertility to well below replacement-level fertility. The total fertility rate was 1.66 in the year ending December 2022, up slightly from 1.64 from the previous year, but still well below the 2.1 needed to replace the population” (Stuff article); and “The fertility rate has fallen to less than the replacement rate” (Spinoff article). By coupling fertility rates with replacement rates, the focus is limited to within-country populations and omits essential context such as population momentum and the contribution of immigration. No articles mentioned or explained population momentum in any way, although several mentioned immigration and/or made comments about overall population size and growth, as discussed below.

### Immigration

Immigration was mentioned by several articles which noted the contribution of immigration to population growth: “Immigration has kept the population growing” (Stuff article); and “Most years, we also have more migrant arrivals than departures” (RNZb article). Although rarely mentioned in articles, when it was included, the role of immigration in population growth appeared to be presented accurately.

### Population size

Population size was mentioned by about half of the articles giving statistics, which (with one exception given below) either stated or implied – incorrectly – that New Zealand’s population is becoming smaller. “New Zealand is currently facing a demographic challenge – a decline in its population” (Righttolife article). Another article cites the author of Family First’s 2019 report *Families: Ever fewer or no children, how worried should we be?* as saying: “Without population replacement or growth, economies decline” (Voxy article). One article mentioned counts of births and deaths: “There were 58,887 live births registered in New Zealand in 2022, only 228 (0.4 per cent) more than in 2021, according to Statistics NZ. This is compared to 38,574 deaths registered in the same year, up 3642 (10.4 per cent) from 2021” (Newshub article). By highlighting the increase in deaths and births, this sentence may give the appearance that the low rise in number of births (described as “only” 0.4 per cent more than the previous year), as compared with the higher percentage rise in deaths, means a decline in population size. In fact, the opposite is the case, as can be seen from the actual count of births being higher than the count of deaths. The article did not further explain these numbers, with the next sentence going on to discuss the rising age of mothers.

One exception to this incorrect information about population size was an article quoting a Stats NZ expert, who stated that New Zealand’s “population is still growing, of course, over 5.2 million, and our latest population projections suggest our population will keep growing, perhaps reaching 6 million in the 2040s. We still have more births than deaths, and most years we also have more migrant arrivals than departures. So there is no indication that our population is about to stop growing” (RNZb article). Given the availability of birth and death counts and population projections, as well as appropriate experts for comment, it is striking that there was only

one instance of an accurate description of population growth with a clear statement of how births, deaths and immigration contribute to population change.

### International comparisons

The possibility of a shrinking population was also raised by international comparisons. About half of the articles that included fertility statistics also included a comparison to one or more other countries, all of which have similar or lower fertility rates, including South Korea, Japan, Germany, Singapore and Sweden: “Researchers at the University of Washington’s Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, published in the *Lancet* in 2020, predict that the worldwide fertility rate will fall below 1.7 by 2100. 183 out of 195 countries are predicted to have a fertility rate below the replacement level” (Voxy article); “Reversing birth trends is a complex challenge for economies around the world; for instance, despite cash bonuses and support for fertility treatment, South Korea’s birth rate has dropped 4.4% in the last year, following a long-term trend” (Spinoff article); and “Politicians around the world were also grappling with declining birthrates. Only Sweden had managed to reverse its trend. ‘Looking around the world, pro-natal politics – which have put serious money on the table – still have not stopped fertility decline. Germany has thrown mega euros at it, the Singapore government is panicking,’ [the academic expert] said” (Stuff article). Fertility rates were described as falling globally. And although the statistic is accurate, the interpretation may not be, as it again lacks the context of population momentum and distribution. The articles consistently presented these fertility rates as problematic, stating or implying that societies were “grappling with”, even “panicking” about their population sizes and needed to “reverse” birth trends.

In these international comparisons, the articles explicitly linked low fertility rates to lower population sizes: “But it isn’t just New Zealand grappling with declining fertility rates, in fact, it’s happening everywhere in the high-income world. If you look at Germany, [the academic expert] said, each year it has had more deaths than babies for the last 30 years. By the end of the century, the United Nations projects 23 countries will see their populations halved” (Newshub article); and “We are on the same path as many developed countries to becoming the next Japan. ... Look at what’s happening to Japan. The birthrate there is now so low that the Japanese Prime Minister in March said the country is standing on the verge of

whether they can continue to function as a society” (Newstalk ZB article). Not only does this imply a direct link between a decrease in fertility rates and a decrease in population size without discussing context, the articles highlight the extremes by focusing on populations “halved” and societies unable to function.

## Discussion

The injunction to “have more babies” by the leader of a major political party, who shortly thereafter became Prime Minister of Aotearoa New Zealand, sparked responses that offer a case study of how key demographic concepts such as fertility rate and population growth are understood and presented in popular debate. In the 18 source texts included in this analysis, covering 5267 article words and 664 associated comments, the frame of Too Few is most often invoked. This frame shares with Mr Luxon’s original comment the premise that fertility rates are too low and more babies are needed. For statements using this frame, the typical argument is that New Zealand needs more workers, and the cause of lower fertility rates is identified as educated and employed women having too few children. The demographic statistics offered in most articles are nearly always presented with a Too Few frame, such as when fertility rates are described in striking language, such as “plummeting”. By contrast, the Too Many frame is used less often, typically to highlight issues with global environment and local infrastructure. The analysis also found that a Human Rights framing is used infrequently and indirectly, typically found in discussions of financial barriers to having children. This study demonstrates that New Zealand remains in the paradoxical situation described by Stark and Kohler (2002) of being concerned about low fertility despite projected population growth, with the popular debate illustrating social perceptions about reproduction.

By presenting fertility as a problem, both the Too Few and Too Many frames risk the dehumanising approach that is raised as a concern in the *State of the World’s Population* report (McFarlane, 2023). Two of these concerning aspects can be seen especially clearly in this analysis. One aspect is that women are specified as the source of problematic low fertility. This idea could contribute to approaches that seek to control women and people who can become pregnant (Nandagiri, 2021). Another aspect is that the public debate, particularly in comments sections, applied the Too Few and Too Many frames selectively, offering two sides to the same argument: That

there are too few of some kinds of babies, and too many of other kinds of babies. This problematic “selective pronatalism” (TallBear, 2018; Thompson, 2005), supporting reproduction only for some, suggests value placed on a Eurocentric national identity and a neoliberal self-sufficient family structure with gendered roles (Georgiadis, 2010; Stark & Kohler, 2002) and echoes eugenic and great replacement arguments (Alba, 2020; Sear, 2021).

The use of demographic statistics in the articles poses a particular challenge. When the fertility rate is described as low and is presented as below replacement and similar to countries whose populations are decreasing in size, this strongly implies a declining population in New Zealand. This is inaccurate as the population is, in fact, growing and is projected to continue growing for at least the next 50 years. Articles also presented the statistics using alarmist and potentially misleading language without necessary context or explanation. Typically, the only context given is the replacement rate, which is a problematic measurement (Sear, 2021). Similar to Stark and Kohler (2004), TFR is often mentioned despite being a less-than-ideal measurement for these purposes. This study, similar to others, suggests that demographic statistics mainly appear to embellish the larger argument (Krause, 2001; Stark & Kohler, 2004; Teitelbaum, 2004).

Nuanced public debate is needed about population momentum, age structure and growth patterns (Pool, 2017), but this is not in evidence in the articles or comments in this case study. Greater statistical and demographic literacy is essential for presenting population dynamics accurately and without fearmongering. Demographers may be able to help journalists avoid “garbled demography”. The participation of demographers in public debate can involve far more than providing accurate statistics – demographers need to actively participate in the discussion and framing of demographic measurements and trends, including consequences and potential interventions (Stark & Kohler, 2022; Teitelbaum, 2004).

This analysis of the public debate in response to Christopher Luxon’s “have more babies” statement demonstrates that there is much room for improvement in media portrayals and the public debate of demographic statistics and population dynamics in Aotearoa New Zealand. Demographers and journalists should carefully consider their approach to demographic issues of fertility and population growth, avoiding framing population and childbearing as either too many or too few. They should instead take a human rights approach, keeping the focus on social structures



(both as barriers and supports) and recognising the inherent worth and dignity of all persons and communities.

## Notes

- 1 This statement was reported consistently by media and the wording was not contested by Christopher Luxon or his team. For example: Smith, A. (2023, 8 June). *Christopher Luxon urges Kiwis to have more babies, saying it “would be helpful”*. Radio New Zealand. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/491585/christopher-luxon-urges-kiwis-to-have-more-babies-saying-it-would-be-helpful>
- 2 These definitions are based on the Glossary of Demographic Terms from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, the World Health Organization’s Global Health Observatory, and the United Nations World Population Prospects.

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