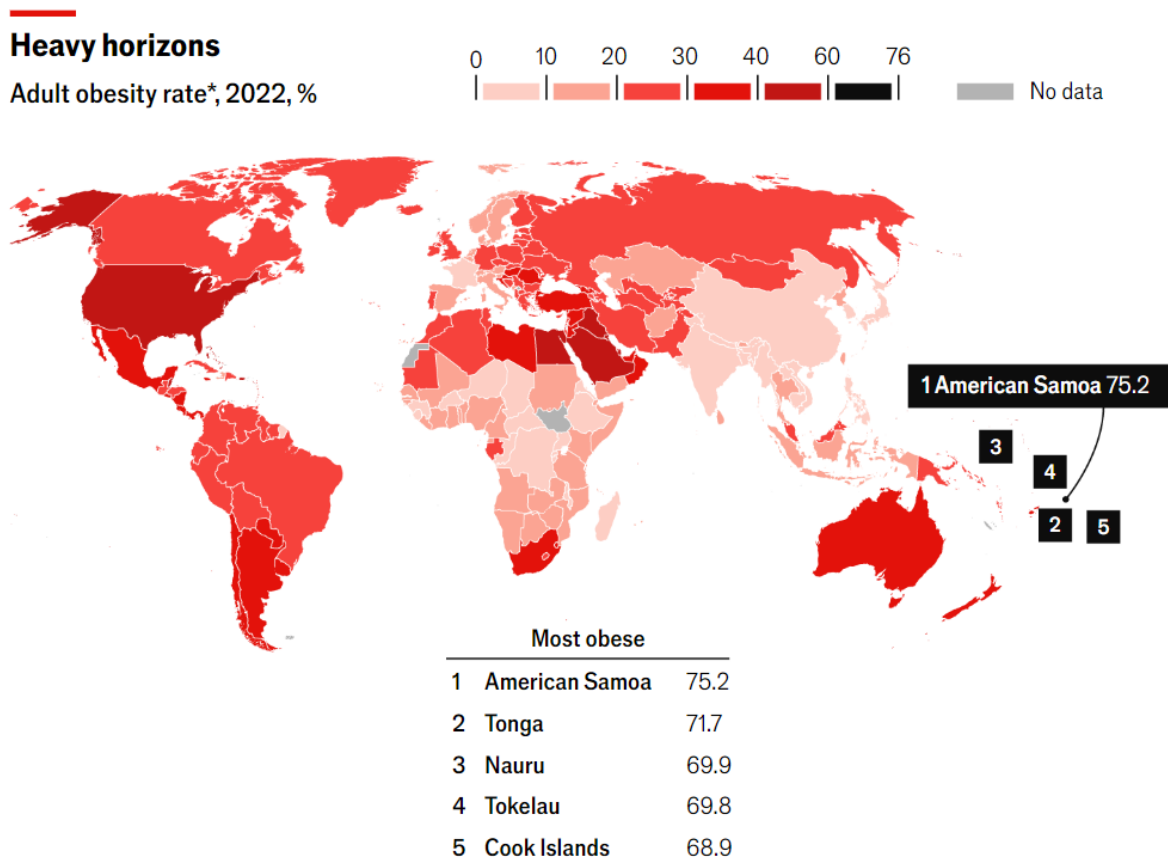


The obesity capitals of the world

A new study shows that waistlines are widening almost everywhere

The Economist 1 March 2024

It was not that long ago that more of the world's people had too little to eat than ate too much. Now the scales have tipped. A study published on February 29th in the *Lancet*, a medical journal, shows that more than 1bn people were classified as obese in 2022, the latest year for which data are available. The researchers based their findings on the weight and height measurements of more than 220m people from roughly 190 countries. They found that obesity rates have doubled among adults since 1990 and quadrupled among children and adolescents. Our map below shows which countries have the highest rates.



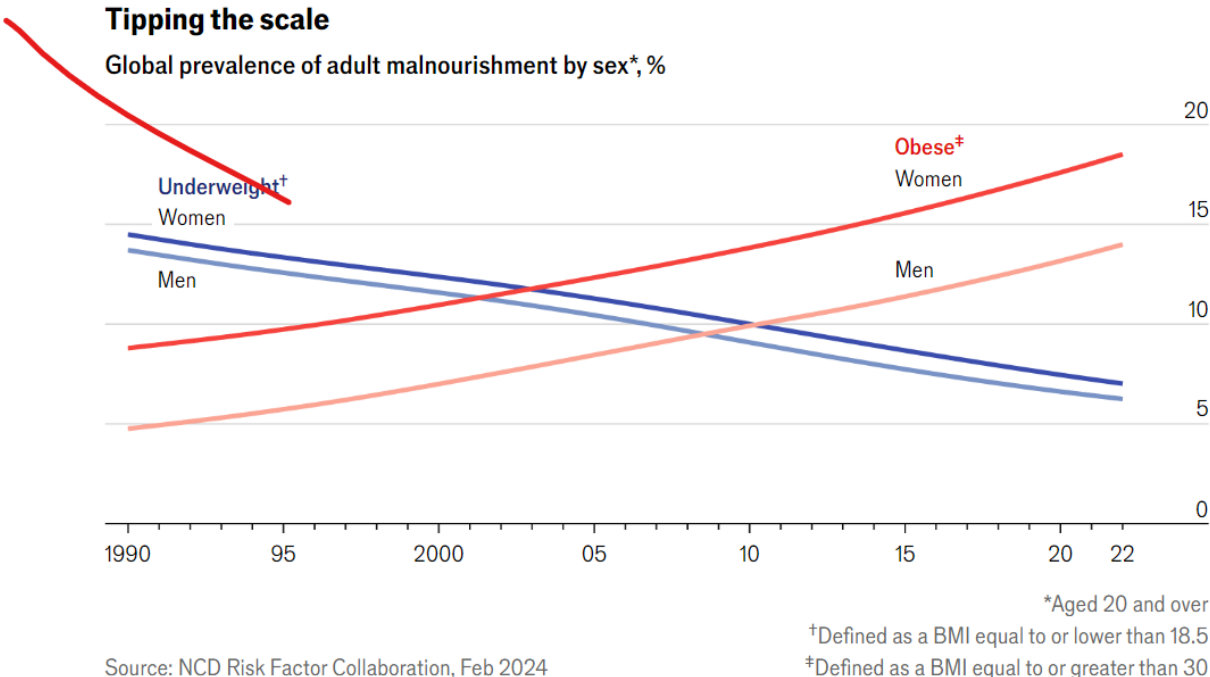
Source: NCD Risk Factor Collaboration, Feb 2024

*Aged 18 and over with a BMI equal to or greater than 30

Obesity is typically determined by the ratio of weight (in kg) to the square of height (in metres), known as the body-mass index (BMI). In this study a BMI above 30 is considered obese. The measure is imperfect (most bodybuilders, for example, would be classified as obese because of the weight of their muscles, despite having very little body fat). But it is a useful rule of thumb. Studies have shown that most people with a BMI over 30 are significantly more likely to suffer from conditions like diabetes than those with a BMI of 23. Higher BMI is also known to increase the risk of more than a dozen types of cancer. In these and other ways, obesity is thought to kill around 4m people each year.

The analysis finds higher obesity rates in low- and middle-income countries than in many high-income ones. More than 60% of adults in Polynesia and Micronesia were living with obesity in 2022—the highest rate in the world. This is likely to be a result of changing diets and a culture that puts a value on size. Tonga had the highest rate for women (81% were considered obese); American Samoa had the highest for men (70%). Countries in Africa and the Middle East, historically associated with undernourishment, are now also struggling with weight gain.

Turkey was the obesity capital of Europe for women, with a rate of 43%. For men it was Romania, at 38%. French women and men were the most slender in the region—only 10% were considered obese. The rates were four times higher in America, where 44% of women and 42% of men had a BMI over 30.

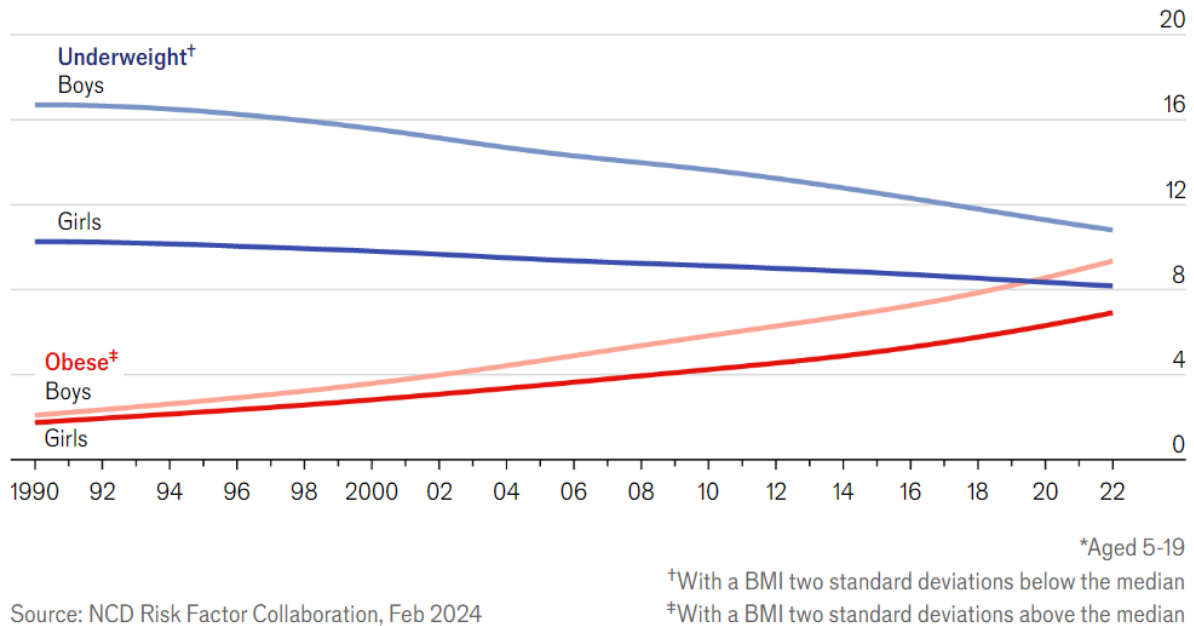


Global obesity rates now significantly exceed the share of adults who are underweight (a BMI under 18.5). The number is creeping up for children and adolescents, too. The study found that obese children outnumbered underweight ones in two-thirds of the countries studied. In rich countries childhood obesity is concentrated in poor families. But in poor countries it is a middle-class problem—so as average incomes rise, more

children are moving into the overweight category. Many poor countries are now facing a “double epidemic” of malnutrition and obesity.

Childhood issues

Global prevalence of childhood malnourishment by sex*, %



That so many people are struggling with their weight shows that obesity is more than a matter of dietary willpower. The human body has evolved to survive winters and famines: it is designed to cling on to body weight and will resist efforts to lose it. A superabundance of cheap, ultra-processed foods has also triggered overeating just as lifestyles have become more sedentary. Weight-loss drugs are starting to arrive, but remain prohibitively expensive for most. With time they may start to help countries nibble away at their obesity problems. But reversing these trends will require preventing more children and adults from getting fat in the first place. That will need intervention from governments—which both politicians and voters will find hard to swallow. ■

Superfluous people vs AI: what the jobs revolution might look like

The spectre of technological unemployment is causing fear — but we should treat the coming changes as an opportunity

John Thornhill *Financial Times* 14 March 2024

The first time I heard the term “superfluous people” was when reading the 19th-century Russian writers Alexander Pushkin and Ivan Turgenev. In their stories, mollycoddled, world-weary layabouts from the minor nobility would chase women, gamble away their inheritance and shoot each other in duels.

Like the “fifth wheel on a cart,” as Turgenev described them, they could find little purpose in life and their real-life counterparts would later be sucked into radical causes. Such elite overproduction is sometimes blamed for fuelling the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

The second time I heard the term “superfluous people” was in a more recent, and chilling, conversation with a West Coast venture capitalist. Only this time it was in connection with the artificial intelligence revolution. His view was that machines would soon be able to do almost all the jobs humans currently do, rendering a lot of us superfluous.

“There will be only two types of jobs in the future: those that tell machines what to do and those that are told by machines what to do,” he said.

In other words, either you will be the one writing the algorithms instructing Uber drivers where to go. Or you will be the Uber driver being told by that algorithm where to go. Then again, both jobs might disappear with the arrival of fully self-driving cars.

This reductionist talk has become louder as the AI hype has grown. Smart machines will automate brain power in the same way that dumb machines automated brawn power during the industrial revolution. Once again, the recurrent spectre of technological unemployment has emerged. AI would be “the most disruptive force in history” and we could reach a point “where no job is needed”, the billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk told the British prime minister Rishi Sunak last year. “AI will probably be smarter than any single human next year,” Musk posted this week.

This sense of technological inevitability was partly echoed at a recent Ditchley Foundation conference in Oxfordshire, UK on the impact of AI on work and education, attended by policymakers, technologists and business executives. Some speakers argued that we were rapidly approaching a jobs “emergency”. Employers were already jumping on the possibilities of

generative AI to shed workers and cut graduate recruitment. Today, generative AI threatens the jobs of copywriters and call-centre workers. Tomorrow, it will hit middle managers and lawyers.

Generative AI will also alter the nature of many tasks that employees perform, even if it does not kill their jobs outright. One study of its impact estimated that the technology would affect at least 10 per cent of the tasks carried out by about 80 per cent of the US workforce.

But some labour market experts counter that these sweeping predictions of a jobs apocalypse are ahistorical and almost certainly wrong. They ignore our past experience with new technologies, the dynamics of societal adaptation, the possibilities of creative innovation and the weight of demographics. In short, they confuse technological feasibility with economic viability, as the sociologist Aaron Benanav has argued.

One of the main complaints of employers at the Ditchley conference was how hard it was to recruit skilled workers in near full-employment economies and ageing societies. And while it is easy to see the jobs that will be disrupted by AI, it is hard to imagine those that will be created. About 60 per cent of the job categories in the late 2010s did not exist in 1940 — in medicine, software, entertainment and solar power, for example. “Barring a massive change in immigration policy, the US and other rich countries will run out of workers before we run out of jobs,” wrote David Autor, the MIT economist, in a recent essay.

As Autor, and others, have argued, we should therefore regard AI as an opportunity, rather than an emergency. It offers the chance to extend the “relevance, reach and value” of human expertise to more workers and rebuild the middle class.

We can use AI to boost life-long learning and supplement a diminishing workforce. We can upskill and revalorise the professions that are still best performed by humans, such as nursing and teaching. And we have to find better ways to redistribute the financial gains of the AI revolution from the winners to the losers.

Failure to do so will probably lead to another revolt of the “superfluous people”, only this time against the robots, rather than the Romanovs.

The real reason women are having fewer kids

[Natasha Sarin](#) *Washington Post* March 18, 2024

My mother gave birth to me when she was 21. Thirty-five years later, she is thrilled that her first grandchildren are finally on the way: I'm pregnant and expecting twins later this year.

I am part of a broader trend: Millennials are having children later — or not at all. This is among the most pressing economic challenges of our time. Fewer babies born now means fewer workers — and resources — in the decades to come. That will ultimately hurt growth and make it difficult to support a large old-age population.

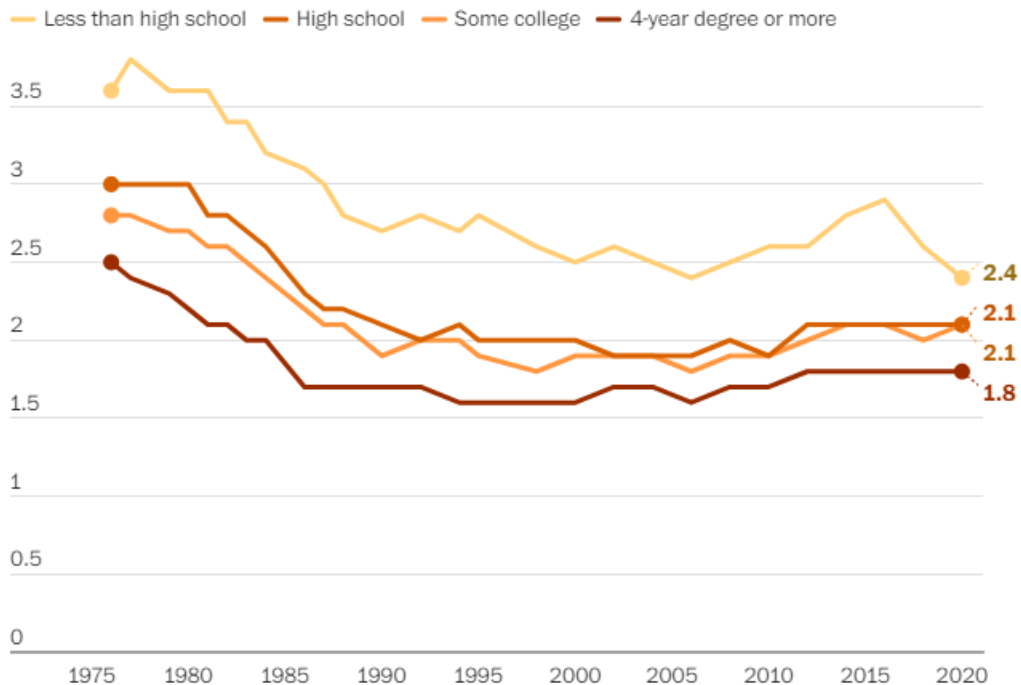
This isn't just a U.S. problem. Over the past 50 years, global fertility has been halved. The decline is especially pronounced in high-income economies, where the population is already shrinking or on track to shrink soon.

On some dimension, these are trends to be celebrated. Declining fertility is strongly tied to the fact that there has been a surge in the past half-century of women going to college and launching successful careers. For example, as the birth control pill became more broadly accessible in the 1970s, it gave more women the freedom to invest in professional education, according to research by Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz. The result? The percentage of lawyers and judges who were women more than doubled from 5 percent in the 1970s to over 13 percent in 1980, and the share of female physicians grew from 9 percent to 14 percent over this horizon. And progress has continued: Female lawyers now make up 39 percent of the profession; female physicians, 36 percent.

But something more is happening with millennials. Fertility is falling dramatically across education levels. The declines in the United States are especially pronounced for the most educated and least educated women, as economist Melissa S. Kearney and co-authors have pointed out.

U.S. fertility rates are declining for women of all education levels

Average number of births by the time women are ages 40 to 44.



Source: [Pew Research Center](#)

They were the most likely to report that financial insecurity had caused them to postpone childbearing. Those delays likely meant some women who wanted children were never able to have them in part because fertility treatments such as in vitro fertilization, which can cost well over \$10,000, are out of reach.

For highly educated professionals, part of the story seems to be a workforce culture that demands more time and investment in the early career phase. For example, people used to go straight to law school after graduating college. The age of students entering law school has been rising over time, with many students now starting at age 25 or older, after working for a few years or doing fellowships. Similarly, PhD programs are taking longer than they did in the past. Nearly 70 percent of economics doctorates today are awarded after more than five years in the program, with the median duration being seven and a half years.

Half of childless young adults report that they want children someday. But when millennials find themselves well into their 30s and still training for their careers, it is hard to see when exactly kids are supposed to fit into the picture.

It is a challenge to come up with policy solutions that can address demographic woes. Plenty of nations are trying out solutions to encourage having kids, but they aren't working. Ad campaigns calling on couples to (and I quote) "do it for Denmark" flubbed, so, too, have one-time cash bonuses for new parents (so-called baby payments), generous parental leave and free early-childhood education.

I want to be clear: Some of these policies are incredibly worthwhile and have significant benefits for families and children. It's shameful that the United States is one of only six countries in the world without federally mandated paid family leave. Similarly, access to preschool reaps benefits for children in the decades to come.

But addressing declining fertility will require more creative thought about how to preserve women's economic gains in the workforce while also affording them flexibility to start families if they desire to do so. It is no surprise that young men without children are more likely than young women to report that they want to be parents someday. Women bear the physical cost of childbirth and face greater career interruptions from parenthood.

We need to make it easier to have and raise children. One of the silver linings of the pandemic was that it expedited the shift toward more flexibility to work from home or have different hours that can help ease the transition to parenthood. Truly affordable and high-quality child care will do the same — and has the potential to be much more meaningful than one-time bonuses for new parents that quickly run out. Making fertility treatments more broadly available is also crucial.

I want this to be better for Gen Z. My partner and I are lucky to be able to invest heavily in child care, including by relying on help from two sets of grandparents, who are young, healthy and excited to assist. He and I are fortunate to have this as an option, and ironically, by virtue of our own choices to wait to start a family, it's one we won't be as well-equipped to afford our own children.