Old, Lonely, and Poor

The One-Child Policy Has Left China’s Economic and Social Support Systems Devastated

Jonathan Abbamonte / November 15, 2016

When China’s Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping first introduced the one-child policy in 1979, party insiders had been convinced that China’s population growth was impeding its economic development. Decades under Chairman Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution had wrecked the nation’s economy and left policymakers in the Communist Party searching for new solutions.

Some of the reforms instituted at that time have reaped significant dividends for the Chinese people. China began to incorporate free market economics and it opened its doors to foreign investment, policies which have helped to propel China to become an economic powerhouse. Other social experiments instituted at the time, however, like the one-child policy, have instead harmed China both economically and socially.

The one-child policy proved to be the most draconian birth reduction program in history. It enforced a one-child limit for all couples, a policy soon expanded to two children for couples whose first child was a girl. Under the one-child policy, the Communist Party, by its own estimation, prevented over 400 million births and carried out over 336 million abortions. More children were aborted under the one-child policy than the entire population of the United States.

Despite the Communist Party’s promise that the planned birth policies would promote economic growth, the drastic population control program has instead had the opposite effect. In 2012, China’s working-age population shrank for the first time ever, decreasing by 3.45 million potential laborers, according to China’s National Bureau of Statistics.

According to U.N. Population Division data, China’s working-age population began contracting in 2013, a trend which is projected to continue for many years to come. By
2035, China’s working-age population is projected to have declined by nearly 11 percent.

As China’s working-age population contracts, its retirement-age population is growing and is set to skyrocket in the coming decades, threatening to slow China’s rapid economic growth.

By 2035, China’s retirement age population (at current retirement ages) is projected to increase from 18 percent to 32 percent of the total population. With China’s pension system set to go into a deficit in the coming years, the Communist Party is planning to announce sometime next year a proposal to raise the retirement age.

Assuming that the Communist Party raises the retirement age to 65 for men and 60 for women, there are projected to be fewer than half as many working age adults for every retiree than there are in China today for men over 64 and women over 59, according to U.N. Population Division projections. While in 2015 there were 5.6 working-age adults (men 16-64 years of age, women 16-59 years of age) for every retirement age adult, by 2035, there are projected to be fewer than 2.4 working-age adults for every retiree.

China’s planned birth programs, not only imposed repressive birth limits but also for decades rigorously propagated the benefits of one-child families. The policy has helped force China’s fertility rate far below replacement. The policy has, in effect, helped to change couple’s fertility intentions from larger families to single child families. Many couples now believe that having a second or a third child would be too costly for them financially. As a result of altered fertility intentions, China’s return to sustainable fertility levels (which requires just over 2 children per couple to prevent population decline) will be an uphill climb.

The economic ramifications of the one-child policy are certain to continue to command the attention of Communist Party leaders for the foreseeable future. Yet a silent but no-less pressing problem created by China’s planned birth programs threatens to harm China on a social level. With families and the social support networks that come with them shrinking, or in some cases disappearing altogether, millions of Chinese are now facing the prospect of social isolation.

It is a great paradox that the world’s most populous nation may soon also become one its loneliest. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the number of single person households in China have more than doubled since the year 2000, jumping from 6.3 percent to 14.9 percent today. While this is partly a symptom of China’s increasing
prosperity as well-to-do single adults flock to urban areas for employment opportunities, the elderly are more often now living alone with fewer or no family members able to assist them. In the coming years, the number of single person households among the elderly are expected to increase further. With rising numbers of adults entering retirement age in the coming years and with fewer younger adults to accompany them, social isolation among the elderly is set to become a pressing issue soon.

While social isolation among the elderly is growing problem worldwide, particularly in the developed world, aging and social isolation will fall particularly hard on China as an emerging developed nation. While a modest pension system exists for many civil service workers, few social support systems are in place to provide for private business retirees.

Growing social isolation also threatens the health and well-being of China’s elderly. Without the assistance of younger adults, it will become increasingly more difficult for the socially isolated to make routine trips to the doctor, to the pharmacist to have a prescription filled or even to the local grocery store.

Without companionship many elderly may be more at-risk for feeling lonely. Studies have linked social isolation[1],[2] and perceptions of loneliness[3] among the elderly to an increased risk for early mortality. As positive social networks provide a safeguard against feelings of loneliness, increasing levels of social isolation increase among the aged should be watched closely to assure that those living alone do not become lonely and that adequate support mechanism are in place to account for their basic material needs.

And it isn’t just the elderly who will be affected by the demographic consequences of the one-child policy.

As a result of the gender imbalance caused by the one-child policy, millions of men will be unable to find wives. In China, particularly in rural areas and in years past, son-preference is strong. Male children provide not only an heir but are perceived as crucial for securing financial stability in old age. For centuries, male heirs were a couple’s de facto social security plan. Under the one-child policy, many couples resorted to sex-selective abortion to secure for themselves a male heir before their birth quota was filled.

Consequently, an abnormally skewed gender imbalance persists among young adults in China. Currently, among marriage-age adults, men outnumber women by a margin of nearly 14 million persons, according to U.N. data. There are 108 marriage-age men in China for every 100 marriage-age women in China today. The heavily skewed gender imbalance may
increase social unrest in a heavily male majority society and could fuel China’s sex trafficking industry. Societal perceptions and women’s preferences to marry men from a higher socioeconomic status than themselves as some women are earning more than men is further contributing to the marriage gap.

For the millions of men left single by the one-child policy, the effects will further have consequences for them into retirement. Men without family or heirs to provide for them will further exacerbate the problem of social isolation and will further contribute to the imbalance of the of working-age adults to support them down the road.

The one-child policy has devastated China’s economic and social support systems; yet, the Communist Party continues to assert its two-child policy in attempts to control how many children women are allowed to have. The adoption of free market economic reforms have helped China advance to become the world’s second largest economy. If the Communist Party would only allow families to grow freely as they have the markets, they would see the full potential of China’s economy come to fruition. China’s future and the inalienable rights of men requires, indeed demands, that China’s population control program be abolished once and for all.

