Demography influences politics. The post-Second World War baby boom resulted in a surfeit of young adults. In 1960s Europe, protest rose. As China’s premier Zhou Enlai commented in 1972, it was too early to say what the political significance of the rioting by French youth might be. Today, with hindsight, we understand that the “68ers” were followed by a much smaller cohort, more easily accommodated. But we also understand that they were a taste of what was to come worldwide a half-century later.

In France, the number of 18-year-olds peaked in 1967. A second, shallower peak came in 1990. With every year that has passed since then there have been falling numbers of young adults in France and in many similar countries – fewer to teach, to become students, to riot. Europe has fewer teenagers today than in any year in the past half-century. Despite this, there is no paid work for a majority of young adults in many cities and in some whole countries.

Outside Europe there have never been more young people, but they have not appeared overnight. Wild oscillations in births in the past have become smoother trends as the world, and life, have grown more predictable. The aftermath of world war, Indian independence and the Chinese Revolution were all associated with demographic turmoil. We see the ripples from that turmoil in the slightly elevated numbers of baby boomers’ great-grandchildren being born today.

As the first baby-boom generation came of age in the 1960s, it brought with it an exuberance that has not been matched since and may now never be repeated. There were suddenly so many so quickly. The number of teenagers worldwide rose by a third between 1965 and 1974 and by a quarter in the next decade, but then the increase slowed. The postwar peak in babies born in France was recorded in 1964. The global peak year for births was around 1990. Now the numbers of babies born, and consequently teenagers who will be coming of age, is falling slowly.

Our total population is rising because we are living longer. At any one time for decades to come, there will be more of us around to be counted each year. This looks like more »
Go forth and multiply: the Peak-Teen generation might be the first to have more parents than children
people, but it is mostly the same people, just living longer.

Double the life expectancy in a place and, for a while, you double the population of that place even if no new babies are born at all. This is why we have not noticed the population slowdown. Each year there appear to be more of us even as we all have far fewer children (on average) than the year before. We talk of ageing rather than concentrate on the implications of fewer youths, but the second factor is just as important as the first.

In 1965 roughly 60 million people turned 18 worldwide. By 1975 it was 80 million; by 1985 almost 100 million; and by 2005 almost 125 million marked their 18th birthday in that year alone. It was only then that it became clear that something strange was starting to happen, something that had not occurred for a very long time – the rising number of teenagers faltered and began to fall.

Worldwide falls in fertility throughout the 1970s and into the late 1980s have finally had the effect of reducing not just the average number of children per family but now the absolute number of new children being born per year. This is despite there being many more potential parents.

The United Nations Population Division publishes counts of the numbers of people alive by five-year age group. Judging by these figures, the estimated number of 18-year-olds alive worldwide peaked at 125.2 million in 2006 and then fell by a million a year each year until 2010. That was the year in which “only” 121.2 million people celebrated their 18th birthday. It is the most recent year for which UN population estimates, rather than projections, are available.

The very latest projections (June 2013) are that the numbers of older teenagers will keep on declining to 2016; then there will be a slow rise again and a slow decline, followed by projected stability. I am a little sceptical that there will be much of an increase, but if one does happen it will be very good news, because fewer children will have died. Everyone who could turn 18 between now and the start of 2031 has been born.

I recently wrote a book on demography, Population Ten Billion, because I wanted to suggest that we are experiencing a very small worldwide baby boom, the last echo of those earlier booms, and that it may be distorting international estimates of future population. Birth rates may well fall a little faster than we now expect, and it is this that will mostly influence how many older teenagers we have after 2031. I expect births to fall faster than the UN projects they will fall because people are changing, and women are still gaining greater respect, education and security.

If fertility does fall just a little faster than is being projected, the year 2006 will prove to have been the year of “peak 18-year-old”. If the most recent UN revisions to population estimates are correct, then we will experience a second, shallower peak in a few decades’ time. Either way, the era of a rapidly growing youth population is over. Today, we have more young adults than we have ever had, worldwide, and already there is a falling roll of children. But if “Peak Teen” came in 2006, the current decade will be dominated by people in their twenties.

The era of a rapidly growing youth population is over

Just as France in 1968 was turbulent, so in most parts of the world most places might be expected to become more turbulent than before. That is not just because there are so many young people, all of them available to stand around on the streets. It is also because any decline in the numbers of young adults and children results in a reduction in economic demand. Marketers find it harder to prosper as the numbers of potential customers dwindle. Where there are fewer people that does not necessarily result in more jobs, if there is less demand.

Demography and politics have intertwined in interesting ways since the rise in world population began to slow down shortly after 1971. In 1974 in Rome, at the first World Food Conference, the then US secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, declared the world’s intention that “within a decade no child will go to bed hungry”. Within ten years there was vast famine in East Africa. Kissinger’s words are often repeated now as evidence that it is almost impossible to feed billions of people, but they were words of optimism, spoken in more optimistic times.

A youthful politics is often a politics of hope and aspiration. People starve when the mechanisms to deliver food fail, but rarely is there not enough food. For goods of trivial importance, market failure helps to correct the market. For any good of great importance, however, such as food, or health care, or education, both government by dictatorship and the global markets, left to their own devices, are dangerous.
Some economists still argue against self-sufficiency in food, and by implication against storing grain in case of drought. Yet what European countries have demonstrated over decades is that generally fewer go hungry in hard times in Europe – as is clear even in the current economic crisis – compared to the millions of the hungry in the United States, where one in seven of all households became food-insecure by 2010. One-seventh is the highest proportion ever measured in the postwar United States, a country that has run food banks for many years.

Across the globe, the largest ever generation of human beings is coming of age and being socialised at a time of great economic insecurity but rising demographic stability. Whether world population peaks at two, three or four billion more than we are now (the global population stands at 7.2 billion), and how early that peak comes, will depend on how secure the young become. If you grow to believe that there is no such thing as society, but only you and your family, you may need three or four children to look after you when you are old.

As the global number of our young people peaks, many analysts’ blind faith in the apparent efficiency of market capitalism is being shattered. The future of human beings is not simply a product of accidents that happen to us: our exposure to epidemic, famine, disaster or discovery. We also have collective agency. When well organised, we voluntarily have fewer children. If we fail to organise ourselves better in the near future, we may not see population growth continue to decelerate as it has done now for four decades (see facing page).

Market capitalism falters as markets shrink when, and where, fewer people are born. Population slowdown exposes the hype of those few prophets in some of the world’s most selfish nations who try to suggest that, if others were just as selfish they, too, could become as rich; that everyone could be as profligate as they only we all made something to sell to everyone else. That approach has worked only when there have been more young people to sell to next year. Otherwise, how can you make a profit?

It can be depressing to consider just how differently people in more equitable mainland Europe and Japan behave from their counterparts in the UK and US, but it is worth making the contrast. It can even give hope, because so many alternatives to the way we live exist. Various models of organising ourselves are on offer. Take travel; there are many examples of affluent countries where people could afford to behave more selfishly but are choosing collectively not to do so. A few years ago a town official in the US opposed the building of some pavements because he thought such things lead to socialism and believed in the supremacy of the car. So, what would he make of the Danish?

In April last year an 18-kilometre (11-mile) superhighway opened in Copenhagen that allows long-distance commuters to cycle to the city without having to compete for space with cars. Another 25 routes have been agreed to give cyclists from all directions the opportunity to cycle all the way from home to work and back. The longest route will run for 14 miles (22.5 kilometres).

The $1.4m (£1m, or £950,000) for the project was raised not by private finance, nor even by the Danish transport ministry, but by the body responsible for public health and public hospitals. The officials explained: “It’s a common saying among doctors that the best patient is the patient you never see. Anything we can do to get less pollution and less traffic is going to mean healthier, maybe happier, people.”

As human growth slows, a politics of hope begins to look less fanciful

And in Paris in the spring last year, the city authorities announced their intention to return 2.5 kilometres (1.5 miles) of the Left Bank of the Seine to pedestrian-only use. Later on, in the summer, it announced that one kilometre of the Right Bank would be turned into a pedestrian corridor in the form of walkways by the riverside, with bars and cafés. The right-wing national government vetoed the proposal and denied it funding, but was voted out of office in 2012. The Left Bank car-free zone opened last month.

A third example of a Continental innovation that has improved lives dates from way back in the early 1970s. Researchers in the then West Germany concluded that there was no way of making roads safe for children with cars travelling at 30mph (48kmph). Children can be taught “kerb drill by rote”, they wrote, “but you will find that they do not really understand it and cannot actually put it into practice”. A child can’t be taught to judge the speed of a moving car well enough to know when it is safe to cross. Across much of mainland Europe, the car-speed limit in cities is now 30kmph (18.5mph), both to prevent children being killed and to increase the sociability of cities.

It may be that, in absolute terms, and to greatest effect, the greatest steps forward are being taken in China, where children are so much rarer. China has more green growth planned than any other country and is building car-free cities. As human growth slows, the politics of hope begins to look a lot less fanciful. “Can we do it? Yes, we can!” began with Dolores Huerta and the Mexican farmworkers’ struggle in the 1970s, but was taken up as a rallying call by Barack Obama. What you can do in a country where some officials oppose pavements is more limited than elsewhere, but you can at least begin to identify your greatest problems more accurately.

In November 2012, of the three top priorities Obama mentioned upon retaining his presidency, the second was reducing inequality, just after Hu Jintao, the outgoing Chinese leader, stated the same intent. From the revolutionary “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” and the feminist “Women bring all voters into the world”, to plans for free health services to be established “in place of fear”, to Martin Luther King’s 1963 pronouncement that everyone should “have a dream”, the best politics has always been the politics of hope, and has often been accompanied by a surplus of youth, as is the case across our world today.

Older people will warn that it is easy to get carried away with hope. In the year that King spoke in Washington of his dream that his “four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character”, scientists at the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii were taking their sixth annual set of atmospheric carbon-dioxide readings. It was then and there that the
cause of human-induced global warming was first detected. In 1963, the graph of CO₂ emissions was rising.

Today, collectively, we are learning more and learning faster than we have ever done. More people alive today may be able to read than the sum total of everyone who has ever read before but is now dead. We are learning that much economic growth can be harmful depending on the nature of that growth, but that other types of growth can be helpful. We must stop measuring all growth in the same way.

The old ways of measuring economic growth can be informative because they suggest that a change resulting in a reduction of per-capita production, and hence consumption, has already taken place, and that the changeover to reduced economic growth also began in 1971.

There is a remarkable coincidence between when world population growth first began to lose speed and when endless profiteering began to appear unsustainable. As family sizes began to fall in the 1970s, economic growth per capita also slowed. In the UK and the US, initially the fall in profit was dealt with by taking from wage rises at the bottom of both societies, which in turn resulted in even slower economic growth and allowed the income share of the richest to rise.

When population slowdown first arrives it is the richest who try hardest to hold on to the profits they once had. They find it hardest to adjust to the idea of a world in which you cannot expect simply to become richer as you lend monies to ever-growing numbers of naive youngsters. They cut the wages of the poor. And in the richest countries they make young university students take out huge lifetime loans.

Older generations are only gradually catching on to the idea of slow growth. The younger generation is bearing the brunt of the denial of change. In the future, our collective fortune may depend far more on how well we share out what we do have than on trying to push our profits ever higher. The young people who will have to decide if this is the case have only just become adults. They are the Peak-Teen generation, the first in world history to number more than the children growing up after them. The first generation that could see, in its lifetime, world population fall peacefully; the first generation to have more parents than offspring.

Danny Dorling’s book “Population Ten Billion: the Coming Demographic Crisis and How to Survive It” is newly published by Constable (£8.99). He is a professor of human geography at the University of Sheffield.