

Bad News on Fertility

by Lindsey Grant

The National Vital Statistics Report in July 2001 conveys a great deal of bad news about U.S. fertility in one dense little paragraph.

The total fertility rate (TFR) indicates the number of births that a hypothetical group of 1,000 women would have if they experienced, throughout their childbearing years, the age-specific birth rates observed in a given year. The TFR for 2000 was 2,133.5, a 3-percent increase over 1999 (2,075.0) and the highest TFR since 1971. TFRs increased between 1999 and 2000 for all racial and ethnic groups--from 1,850.0 to 1,887.0 for non-Hispanic white, from 2,146.5 to 2,183.5 for black, from 2,056.5 to 2,098.5 for American Indian, from 1,927.0 to 2,072.0 for Asian or Pacific Islander, and from 2,985.0 to 3,107.5 for Hispanic women...

(These figures are per 1,000 women. The more usual and more easily understood formula is “per woman.” Thus 3,107.5 translates to 3.1075 children per woman.)

What this means is that, at current fertility levels, the U.S. population would never stop growing, even if there were no immigration. And immigration has risen to over 1.2 million per year.

It also shows what “shifting shares” can do. The more fertile population groups become a larger proportion of the population (barring much higher mortality rates), and that in turn drives the total population up faster. By far the highest fertility, and the largest share of immigration, is Hispanic. In fact, Hispanic fertility in the United States is well above the average fertility of 2.92

in the “less developed countries” (UN medium variant) and – unlike fertility in the LDCs – it is rising. It is much higher than in Mexico, where it is about 2.5.

Fertility tends to be higher for the poor and less educated. That explains much of the difference between, say, Blacks and non-Hispanic whites. It is not sufficient to explain the high Hispanic fertility, which presumably has cultural roots.

These things can change, sometimes very suddenly. In Quebec, for instance, fertility plummeted dramatically – too far, perhaps – in a few years, despite complaints from political leaders and the church. Perhaps more Hispanic women will come to agree with most women in industrial countries that there is more to life than childbearing. Perhaps they will sense the increased crowding around them and the competition for jobs and wonder how many children they should be bringing into a changing world.

It is difficult for a non-Hispanic to say this to them. The charge of “racism” is immediately raised. They need leaders who will warn them that the growth they are generating hurts them, as Cuban-born George Borjas has warned with respect to immigration and as Richard Estrada did before his untimely death.

The Census Bureau expected U.S. fertility to rise, but not so fast. The new fertility rates are higher even than its “highest” fertility projections. Two years do not predict what will happen in 100 years, but that “highest series” leads to a population of 553 million in 2050 and 1.18 billion in 2100. That, I think, would be an unmitigated disaster. I will watch for the 2001 and 2002 figures with nervous interest.

Some Mexican-Americans take pleasure in what they describe as the “reconquest” of the land Mexico lost in 1848, but nobody gains from the growth that we face. Ethnic rivalry is a poor basis for fertility policy. I will propose a better ideal, and one that discriminates against nobody: the ideal of the two-child family – stopping at two – for everybody, of every group and religious persuasion. It would particularly benefit the poor, since by encouraging them to have fewer children it offers them, and society, the hope of bringing the children up to escape poverty. Because some women have one child or

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none, it would stop population growth even with a modest net immigration of something like 200,000. Within two generations, it would give us the happy choice of being able to decide how populous the country should be.

[Addendum by the author: *The preliminary 2001 data from the National Center for Health Statistics came out just before we went to press. Total fertility was a shade less than in 2000, not a statistically significant difference. The bad news is that*

Hispanic fertility rose 1.4 percent. The good news is that teenage fertility declined across all groups, which probably reflects greater teenage responsibility and which I hope may presage lower overall fertility in coming years. (The fertility rates – though not the total numbers of births – will go down somewhat when they are adjusted for the 2000 Census, which showed population growing faster than the Census Bureau had anticipated.)]

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