

How Youth Unemployment and Population Growth Undermine Domestic Tranquility

By WILLIAM B. DICKINSON

In a few days, 6,500 University of Kansas graduates in cap and gown will wind their way down Mt. Oread to receive diplomas that launch them into a scary economy. Similar scenes will be repeated at campuses across America. In all, 1.7 million members of the class of 2012 will embark on the next phase of their lives. In one sense, these are the lucky aspirants to the good life in America. Better education, better outcomes.

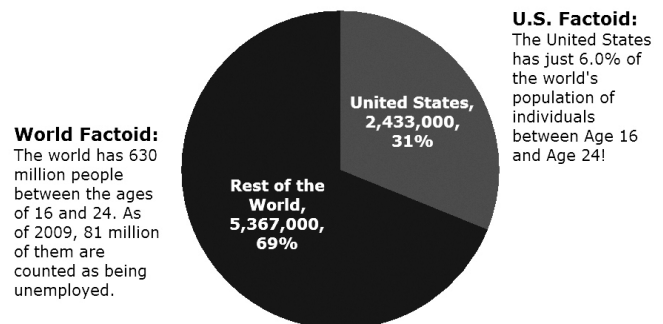
But a future that looked promising four years ago has dimmed for many in the Class of 2012. A disturbing number will join what has been likened to “a kind of B.A. breadline” of minimum-wage jobs or, worse, a forced return home. A relative describes the status of a daughter who graduated last year from a pricey New England college and at last found poorly paid work teaching English to ambitious Vietnamese in Ho Chi Minh City. “It’s amazing how few of her cohorts have career-type jobs at this point,” he writes. “Most are living at home and working as waitresses or baristas or as tutors, dog-sitting, etc. And these were all very successful kids throughout college.”

The New York Times Magazine spoke with 226 of the 309 members of the Class of ’11 from well-regarded Drew University in Madison, N.J., seven months after graduation. The *Times* survey (“Hello, Cruel World,” April 1, 2012), revealed that 17 percent of its sample of Drew grads were unemployed; only 39 percent had full-time jobs; and 34 percent of all jobs involved food service, retail customer service, or clerical or unskilled work. One Drew grad has part-time work in an holistic pet-food store and hopes to start her own grooming business. “Worse still,” said the article, “the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics was reporting that only 5 of the 20 jobs

projected to grow fastest over the coming decade would require a bachelor’s degree.” Heavy debt to finance college also hangs over most graduates and their families.

How will this play out on the political stage in a presidential election year? What does it portend for creation of traditional (or untraditional) families down the road? More importantly, with jobless youth a rising problem both in our country and around the world, what can be done to keep societies from imploding under the stress? Is the inchoate Occupy Movement the precursor of something more focused and aggressive?

Increase in Global Youth Unemployment from 2007 to 2009



The plight of unemployed U.S. college graduates pales in comparison to those Americans with less education or minority status. And nothing can match the sheer scale of youth unemployment around the world. The Arab Spring, it may be recalled, began when a young fruit vendor, one of Tunisia’s many unemployed university graduates, set himself on fire in late 2010 to protest police harassment.

Jobless youth in rich as well as poor nations pose the greatest threat to domestic tranquillity. Consider some of the most dangerous examples of the generational divide in developed nations: In Britain, one out of every five 16-to-24-year-olds is unemployed. The majority of those who took to the streets in London last summer were young people who were unemployed, out of school, or not in training programs. In Italy, almost three in 10 young people between 15 and 24 have no job. One reason that the system has not fallen apart there

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is that the Italian family has become the welfare state, maintaining their children of 20, 30, even 40 years old. In Spain, half of the country's eligible young people cannot find work. Greece's rate is 48 percent.

In poor nations, youth unemployment statistics are still more shocking because there is often no safety net to mitigate the pain. Egypt's rate is 25 percent, an incendiary situation where 60 percent of the citizens are 30 and under. The jobless rate for those under 18 in South Africa is 70 percent. In Africa, three in five of the unemployed are youths.

Yes, birthrates are falling in most nations, leading optimists to believe that a demographic nightmare can be avoided. Columnist David Brooks even warns that fertility implosion could lead to lower living standards in the United States. "It's clear that young people are the scarce resource," he writes (March 13, 2012). But it's hard to take this argument seriously when confronted with Census Bureau projections that world population will grow from 7 billion today to 9 billion by 2044. A United Nations Population Fund director put the outlook in stark terms:

Most population growth in coming decades will come from the demographic momentum arising from young people who currently populate most of the developing world. This group will account for 80 percent of world population growth. Specifically, about 70 percent of future world population growth will take place in just 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia (not including China).

Indeed, one can almost predict the next flash points of humanitarian and economic crisis by looking at projected population growth. Try Bangladesh, a fragile and crowded nation with one of the worst per capita incomes. Another 22 million people are projected to be added to its labor force in the next nine years. Or Afghanistan, where, despite a decade of war, population could double to 63 million by 2050. Think about the prospects in Swaziland, a small land-locked country in southern Africa, where children account for 50 percent of the country's population, a majority of them orphaned by an HIV epidemic that infects 26 percent of adults. And in the Middle East, there are now more than 100 million individuals between the ages of 15 and 29, up from 67 million in 1990. According to a British Defense Ministry study, the population of the Middle East will increase by 132 percent by 2030, generating an unprecedented youth bulge. Falling fertility rates are welcome, but come too late in the day to change the fate of those already caught up in the momentum.

Back in the good old U.S. of A., we need to find jobs for each new graduating class, college and high school. A solid education will help. A task force organized by the Council on Foreign Relations recently warned that the nation's security and economic prosperity are at risk if America's schools don't improve. It said that the dominant power in the twenty-first century will depend on human capital. But many of our young people are subject to what sociologists call "failure to launch," with joblessness leading to loss of skills, self-respect, and ability to work. Parents, relatives, and friends watching the Class of '12 proudly accept their diplomas have reason to wonder whether we have done enough to prepare them for ruthless competition in a globalized world. ■