

Alabama's Population Trends Telling Shifting Segments

Yanyi K. Djamba

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The average number of children that an Alabama woman is expected to bear during her reproductive life is now about 2, according to recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This figure is below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, the demographic threshold number that allows couples to replace themselves.

This trend was not really anticipated, and until now little attention has been given to understanding the causes and consequences of low birth rate at the state level. Nonetheless, some states are doing better than others, but the national population growth rate is considered stable, around 1 percent per year.

This stable population is the result of a moderate birth rate and a well designed immigration program that brings some 50,000 foreigners per year. Known as the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program, this immigration program was created by the United States government to admit educated and skilled foreigners to this county in order to maintain a dynamic population and compensate for low birth rates.

However, the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program does not have a mechanism in place for redistributing immigrants once they arrive in the United States. As a result, some states attract more immigrants and see their populations flourish, while other states, such as Alabama, attract fewer immigrants and experience very slow population growth.

In fact, the state of Alabama has had below-replacement fertility for many years now. Its current total fertility rate, or the average number of children per woman, is below that of Georgia, Florida, Mississippi and Tennessee. What are the consequences of such a low fertility?

Thanks to progresses made in medicine and other improvement in hygiene and sanitation, we live longer today than ever before. But this gain in life expectancy may be challenged by the reduction in the number of people in the workforce whose financial contributions are partially used to support the elderly.

Even if we assume that our senior citizens will remain in the workforce longer than their parents and grandparents, their ability to support themselves will not last forever, especially when various impairments set in with aging conditions.

Hence, while a lower birth rate means less pressure on children-related resources such as education expenses, aging increases spending for the older population segment and put more demands on specialized care and new forms of living arrangements.

According to the Census Bureau, Alabama's population will continue to increase at a moderate pace, but will remain under 5 million in the next decade. Yet, the number of children under age 5 will significantly decrease by 0.5 percent, whereas the number of persons age 65 and older will increase by 45.3 percent between 2000 and 2020.

What are the other forces behind this low birth rate? One of the key factors is the increased duration of schooling, especially for women. One effect of higher educational attainment is the delay of the onset of childbearing. And even after graduating from college, educated women tend to delay the timing of childbearing until they reach a desired level in their professional careers. As more women attend college and enter into professional careers, births will be postponed to later ages, which will continue to depress fertility.

Although the percentage of births to unmarried women has been on the rise in the last decade, the overall fertility rate did not catch up, due in part to a lower rate of marriage. Other factors such as changes in the value of children and living arrangements also contribute to lower fertility observed in Alabama and elsewhere.

Who bears children in Alabama today? Recent data from the American Community Survey, a national sample of American population show that women age 20-34 were more likely to have given birth in the past 12 months than younger or older women. The birth rate was also higher for foreign-born women than native women.

Unfortunately, as fertility declines in Alabama, the percentage of low birth weight also increases. With the exception of Mississippi, Alabama's percentages of low birth weight babies are higher than those of its neighbor states (Florida, Georgia and Tennessee) and the nation. This lower birth rate is due in part to a lack of prenatal care.

Will the current economic recession affect fertility in Alabama? Some economic demographers argue that unfavorable economic conditions bring spouses together, leading to higher birth rates. Others believe that fertility tends to remain at low levels in time of uncertainty.

We will have to wait and see, but one thing is clear: the consequences of low fertility rates for the state of Alabama can have serious effects on the well-being of our society, especially on the senior citizens, who will experience continued growth over the next few decades.

Yanyi K. Djamba is director of the Center for Demographic Research and associate professor of sociology at Auburn University Montgomery. The center's Web site is www.demographics.aum.edu.