

## **Birth rates in state linked to economic conditions**

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Do humans reproduce more when economic conditions are good or during recession? This question remains a central debate among sociologists, economists and other scholars interested in understanding human reproductive behavior in historical context.

Let's forget fancy economic indicators and examine the association between unemployment and fertility in Alabama.

Thomas Robert Malthus, the famous English clergyman and scholar, and the author of "An Essay on the Principle of Population," warned people of his time that the means of substance will always be in short supply. According to Malthus, human reproduction will always outstrip the production of food needed to sustain a growing population.

As such, he recommended some sort of birth control to maintain the equilibrium between production of food and reproduction of the human species.

Although the demographic bomb has not arrived and is not likely to materialize any time soon, the fear of population explosion is shared by many contemporary scholars and governments.

In 1972, the Club of Rome, an international think tank based in Europe, published "Limits to Growth," which reported that the Earth was rapidly running out of all kind of resources. Similar arguments were made by biologist Paul R. Ehrlich, fuelling the fear of impending world famine and ecological devastation due to human population growth.

Other demographers, such as Julian Simon, saw it in another way. Author of the well-known and controversial book "The Ultimate Resource," Simon wrote "The world's problem is not too many people, but a lack of political and economic freedom."

What are the facts for the United States and, more specifically, for Alabama?

The Baby Boom generation is an interesting component in the history of the United States. After World Word II, the U.S. economy grew at an astonishing rate and young generations of men and women enjoyed greater earnings, stable employment and a productive economy, which resulted in greater reproductive outcomes. Fertility increased so much that the Baby Boom cohort still represents the largest age group in contemporary U.S. history.

But was this Baby Boom really the result of an economic boom? Is fertility linked to economic conditions?

Recent studies at the national level suggest that the U.S. birth rate actually declines during the periods of recession. A report released by the Pew Research Center in April 2010 shows evidence of a strong association between U.S. birth rates and economic recession.

The authors of this 2010 Pew Research Center report, Gretchen Livingston and D'Vera Cohn, noticed that "birth rates in the United States began to decline in 2008 after rising to their highest level in two decades, and the decrease appears to be linked to the recession."

Our analysis showed that per capita income is not a good predictor of fertility in Alabama. Therefore, to assess the relationship between human reproduction and economic recession in Alabama we used the fertility rate and unemployment for the past 20 years. The results show a clear association between the two variables.

Analysis shows the fertility of Alabama women falls during periods of economic downturn when unemployment rates are higher and rises when more people are in the workforce. For example, when the unemployment rate increased to 5.4 percent in 2002, the highest value in the preceding eight years, the fertility rate reached its lowest rate of 60.7 births per 1,000 women age 15-44.

The subsequent years were more prosperous, with unemployment rates falling to an overall low of 3.5 percent in 2007-08. This job security was associated with rising birth rates, which reached 68.1 per 1,000 in 2007 and 68.3 in 2008. Fertility began to drop again, reaching 68.1 per 1,000 women in 2009.

Besides unemployment, demographers also argue that poor economic conditions may have reduced immigration to the United States. Since immigrants tend to have higher fertility, lower immigration rates during periods of economic downturn may indirectly contribute to the smaller number of children born in the state.

The number of people who migrated to Alabama has been decreasing since the onset of the recession. Between 2006 and 2007, more than 22,000 people moved to Alabama, but this number went down to about 19,000 between 2007 and 2008, and fell further to nearly 16,000 between 2008 and 2009, according to the estimate from the Census Bureau.

Although unemployment rates are falling, we expect additional dips in the Alabama birth rate in 2010 and probably in 2011 as native and foreign people all look for signs of sustainable employment.

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