

## **Falling birth rate concerns all Americans**

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Population is undoubtedly the most important asset of economic development, if its size and characteristics are well aligned with sound development goals. One of the greatest strengths of the U.S. economy is its dynamic population. Compared to European countries, U.S. population is younger and more robust, growing at an annual rate of nearly 1 percent.

However, the current decline in birth rate is a concern for demographers and other scholars interested in the relation between population and development, as well as political changes. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that American women are having fewer children than ever before. In fact, the nation's total fertility rate has fallen to a level that may lead to population decline.

Total fertility rate measures the average number of children a woman is expected to have by the end of her reproductive life, usually by age 44-49. A total fertility rate of less than 2.1 children per woman is called below replacement, because such a population is headed to depletion if immigration is low or non-existent. According to CDC, the U.S. total fertility rate is now at 1.89 per woman. CDC's estimates are based on women aged 15-44 years.

Data from Alabama Department of Public Health show that the state's total fertility rate has been below replacement level for the past 10 years. The perfect replacement level was observed in 1999, when the state's total fertility rate was 2.12 children per woman. Today, Alabama women have an average total fertility rate of 1.85 children. If the state's total fertility rate remains below replacement level, we may observe negative population growth in a few decades.

Certainly, some areas are more affected than others. Twenty-four Alabama counties have total fertility rates at or above the replacement level, with the highest values found in the following five counties: Marshall (2.81), Bullock (2.71), Franklin (2.57), Dallas (2.56) and Greene (2.39). The remaining 43 counties have total fertility rates that are below replacement level. The lowest values are found in the following five counties: Macon (1.57), Lauderdale (1.60), Washington (1.62), Coosa (1.64) and Lee (1.64).

There are several reasons for this decline in fertility rate, but female education is probably the most important factor. As women stay longer in school to increase their chance of better employment opportunities and higher earnings, they tend to delay childbearing or fore go reproduction altogether. Today, an American woman without a high school diploma or GED has about 2.5 children during her reproductive years, as compared to 1.1 children for her counterpart with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Because the education of U.S. women is undeniably beneficial to our society, some scholars have argued that only immigration can help us maintain a good fertility rate. Their point is that foreign-born women, especially those from Central and South America, have higher birth rates than U.S.-born women. Therefore, increasing immigration flows from that part of the world can help boost U.S. fertility.

Yet a recent study by the Pew Research Center shows that the birth rate of foreign-born women declined by 14 percent between 2007 and 2010, whereas that of U.S.-born women decreased by 6 percent during the same period. As such, we cannot really count much on immigration to raise U.S. fertility.

Why worry about declining birth rates? Well, fertility is associated with a host of economic and political changes. First, higher fertility leads to population growth, which is good for the economy. Even as millions of people are still out of work, productivity is rising in the United States to meet the demand of the growing population.

For example, citing economist Donald Boudreaux of George Mason University, the *US News'* Rick Newman wrote that "Manhattan, one of the most densely populated places in America, is also one of the wealthiest, whereas rural states like Mississippi are sparsely populated, and much poorer."

Second, low fertility threatens Social Security and Medicare. If current fertility rates continue to fall, funds allocated to these social services will be depleted faster because there will be fewer workers paying into the system. Therefore, very high payroll taxes will be needed in order to maintain these services.

From a political view, fertility may change the electoral landscape. Just a look at the last presidential elections shows a strong association between electoral results and fertility at the state level. For the most part, red states had higher fertility rates than blue states.

Unless some dramatic changes occur to alter the current trends in fertility, the U.S. will soon join the European nations and Japan as countries on the verge of depopulation. If that happens, Social Security, retirement age, taxes and Medicare will become the cornerstones of political debate. The future of our nation is strongly linked to birth rates.

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