

The Two Child Family

by Lindsey Grant

Seen from a reasonably detached viewpoint — from Mars, let us say — the arguments for arresting U.S. population growth would seem so compelling as to raise the question “why isn’t it being done” It would help the nation deal with the problems that confront us, yet very few of our politicians and pundits even consider the idea. On the assumption that they are held back by unwarranted fears, let me show by what relatively gentle adjustments we could turn U.S. population growth around.

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In the NPG FORUM series, we have detailed the benefits that a reversal of U.S. population growth would have on the pursuit of environmental, energy and resource policies, in the rescue of our collapsing cities, and in addressing the horrendous problems of a society moving toward a two-tiered stratification of a few “ins” and more “outs”. In recent issues, we have argued that two present national projects — health reform and welfare reform — cannot be achieved without addressing population growth. We have made the point, repeatedly, that — unlike the proposals before the nation — a demographic policy would begin immediately to reap budgetary savings.

If the proposal finds few takers, it is perhaps because it conjures up fears of families limited to one child, of fertility controlled by forced sterilization and mandatory abortions, and of a “Fortress America” with all migration barred. The reality is much simpler and gentler. Let us show what could be achieved with the “two child family” and with immigration returned to the levels that prevailed for much of this century.

“Stop at Two”

The idea seems so transparently simple. Now that child mortality is under control, parents should have two children to carry on the family. The alternative — having many children so that some

might survive to maturity — may once have been necessary but it is no longer relevant. To behave as if we still lived in that unhappy condition is to invite population growth that goes, within a very few generations, from intolerable to unimaginable to mathematically absurd.

The two child family is a rather attractive idea, for those who would avoid the loneliness of the only child or the prospect of old age with few descendants or none. On the other hand, if there are no more than two, parents and society can hope to provide them with a decent upbringing and — even at today’s educational costs — an education to start them off in life. With no more than two, fewer families would fall below the poverty line.

The American Family

When one is introduced to the mother of a dozen children, the traditional response used to be to offer congratulations. By now, it is as likely to be incredulity or embarrassment. “Stopping at two” is already the norm for most Americans. Of mothers completing their child bearing years, 70 percent have had only one or two children — thus in effect “stopping at two”. Married women’s expectations have dropped sharply in the past generation, from three or more children to an average of just over two.¹

If parents indeed “stop at two”, it would lead to a total fertility rate (TFR) of about 1.5 children because not all women have children, and some have only one.² In all the debate about population growth, I have yet to see anybody other than NPG call attention to this simple proposition. As we shall see, a national TFR of 1.5 would make possible a gradual turnaround in the population growth that presently drives our social and environmental problems.

Immigration in Moderation

The two child family alone will not get us there.

In 1900 we were a nation of less than 76 million. About 43 percent of the population increase since then has been post-1900 immigrants and their descendants. U.S. population right now, as best the government can tell, is passing 260 million.

The Census Bureau’s middle projection for 2050 is 392 million, a rise of 50 percent. (They raised that estimate by 100 million after Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1990.) The high estimate reaches 522 million, a doubling. Of the population growth anticipated in the 21st century, nearly 90 percent will be post-2000 immigrants and their descendants.³ In other words, immigration is the driving force in a continuing and remarkable surge of population growth.

That kind of growth will not just lead to a much more crowded nation. It will have profound impacts upon the environment, on renewable resources like farmland, forests and water, and on our society itself. Our cities are being pulled apart by tensions we do not yet fully really understand, as job competition among Americans and immigrants tightens, and the opportunities are dried up by technological change. There are direct money costs as immigrants require services or displace U.S. labor, but even more poignant is the waste of human beings and, over the long term, the damage to the land that our children will inherit.

We are on a treadmill as we try to keep up with the expanding population, and it is a race that mathematically we cannot win.

The Way Off the Treadmill

The average annual level of recorded immigration from the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 through the 1960s was 198,000. Immigration is now over a million (nobody knows the real figure, because we cannot measure illegal immigration or total emigration.) If we were willing to make the choice, and to bring net immigration back to 200,000, our demographic future would change dramatically. Net immigration of 200,000, by the way, would permit a somewhat higher level of total immigration, because some people emigrate.

If we moved instantly to the “two child family” and concurrently brought immigration under control at a level of 200,000, it would lead in the next century to the population projection shown in the graph.

In that graph, the black bars labeled “planned” represent the population curve that would result if net annual immigration were to drop instantly to 200,000 and the total fertility rate were to drop to an average of 1.5 children. The “unplanned” bars are for comparison and show where our population appears to be headed with current levels of fertility and immigration.⁴

The “planned” bars make the point that population could be brought down to 150 million in the next century, and stabilized there, with the relatively humane assumptions of the two child family and 200,000 annual net immigration. Perhaps even more dramatic is the “TFR” line (right scale). By the middle of the next century, families could be encouraged to have more children (for a TFR of 1.9), if as a society we decide that the 150 million range is a good size for the nation.

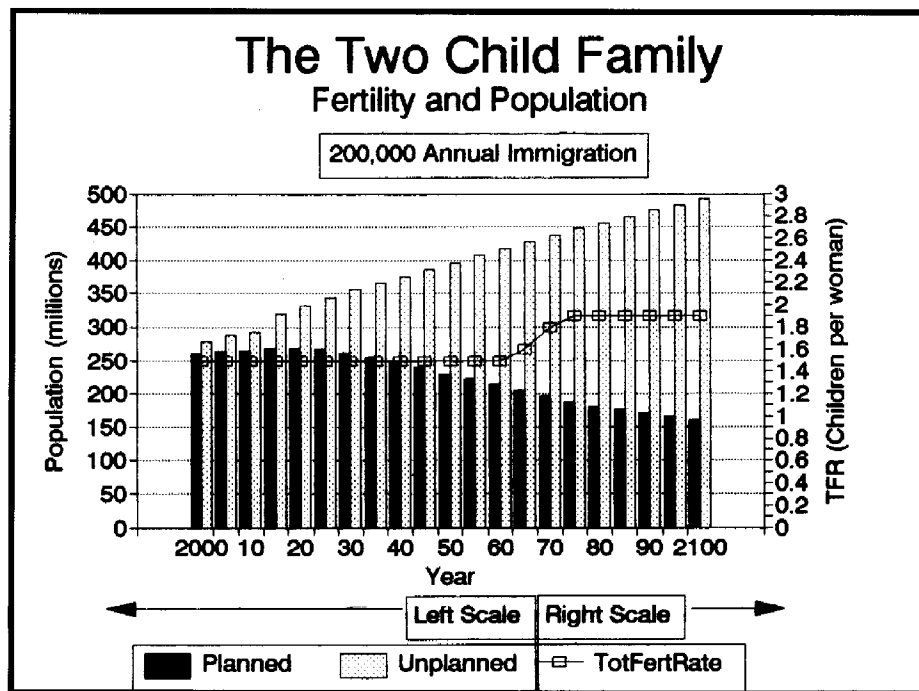
Singapore has actually gone through a comparable experience. It was so successful in using inducements and disincentives to bring fertility down that it has changed course and encouraged somewhat larger families.

The graph shows one way of achieving a desired demographic result. One could make another graph with fertility held low and an increase in immigration, and arrive at the same population size.

All demographic projections are just that: projections, not predictions. Fertility rates and migration change constantly, and these projections simply illustrate what trends would result from certain behavior patterns and immigration policies. Having said that, the “planned” curve is perhaps too dramatic. It would be more realistic to assume that it will take time to bring fertility down to 1.5. If we assume a gradual decline to that level by 2050, and annual immigration of 200,000, the population in 2100 will be 193 million and still declining.⁵ The difference between the two projections is one of timing; the more gradual projection simply defers the day when the nation has the luxury of deciding what mix of fertility and migration would stabilize population at a desirable level.

If this sounds like too much management for the American taste, I would suggest that the reader look again at the “unplanned” alternative in the graph and consider whether it is worth avoiding. The human tribe, including this nation, has learned how to manage mortality — at least for the time being — without a corresponding willingness to manage fertility. The result has been a profound worldwide demographic imbalance that lies at the heart of our own environmental and social problems and that generates the painful necessity for choosing between limiting immigration and continuing the demographic explosion here in the United States.

The combination of the two child family and a moderate immigration level of 200,000 — which



Getting There.

To achieve a population turnaround, the two child family must be accepted as the place to stop. If third and fourth children are more than an exception, the demographic prospects grow dimmer. In pursuing the various ways of encouraging lower fertility,⁶ this requires an explicit effort, both by leaders and role models and through the manipulation of incentives and disincentives, to make it clear that going beyond two is socially undesirable.

was sufficient to absorb many legitimate refugees from World War II — offers the prospect of addressing our own future without slamming the door.

We need the courage to take on our demographic future. If we can so confidently urge African nations to bite the bullet and face their demographic problems, what about doing it ourselves?



NOTES

1. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fertility of American Women: June 1992*, Publication P20-470, June 1993, Tables 1 & 10. The proportion of one and two child families among Blacks and Hispanics is somewhat lower: 62 and 50 percent, respectively. This probably is a reflection of economic status and education more than of race, but data are not available to check that assumption. Expected number of children is almost identical for Blacks and Whites, still somewhat higher among Hispanics.

2. The TFR would actually be 1.495. One can make the calculation from Table 1 of *Fertility of American Women* (note 1). The oldest cohort (40-45 years old) has a (substantially) completed TFR of 1.999, of which 0.504 represents third order children and above. The residual is 1.495.

3. See Leon Bouvier and Lindsey Grant, *How Many Americans?* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, publication scheduled August 1994). Chapter 2.

4. The "unplanned" projection is from Bouvier and Grant, op cit. Chapter 2. The "planned" projection was run by Decision Demographics, a branch of the Population Reference Bureau, at the request of Negative Population Growth, Lnc. in 1992 and is the basis for the calculations in NPG Position Paper *Why We Need a Smaller Population and How We Can Achieve It*, July 1992.

5. Bouvier and Grant, op cit. Table 4.4.

6. See John R. Weeks, *How to Influence Fertility: the Experience So Far*, in the NPG FORUM series, 1990, or in Lindsey Grant et al, *Elephants in the Volkswagen* (New York, W.H. Freeman & Co., 1992) Chapter 15.

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