

GROWTH SLOWS, BUT NO END IN SIGHT IN LATEST CENSUS PROJECTIONS

An NPG Forum Paper
by David Simcox

Census Bureau population projections released in late December 2012 and mid-May 2013 diverge substantially from projections released in 2009. The 2009 projections were based on trends up to 2008, when the U.S. was on the threshold of a crippling recession. All four series released since late 2012 maintain the same methodology, fertility and mortality assumptions, differing only in their assumptions about international migration.¹

The sluggish economy, spreading poverty, spiraling unemployment, and the shrinkage of household wealth in the four years prior to 2012 have been key demographic factors. Births and, particularly, international migration declined from 2008 to 2012 – reductions which account in part for the lower projections. As Census proclaimed in a December 2012 press release: “What a difference four years make.”² Here are some of the key findings and trends in a comparison of the 2009 and 2012/13 projections:

- **Overall population projections down nine percent.** The middle or medium series (the most probable) for 2012/13 projects a total U.S. population in 2050 of 399 million, a reduction of 9.2 percent from the 2009 middle projection of 439 million (Table 1). But this mid-century population is projected to keep rising, reaching 420.3 million by 2060 and still be growing. (The 2009 projections do not go beyond 2050).
- **Growth rates down accordingly.** The 2009 middle series projects an annual population growth rate of 0.97 percent in 2015, slowly declining to 0.87 by 2030 and 0.79 in 2050.
- The 2012/13 numbers project those rates lower: 0.77 percent in 2015, 0.66 percent in 2030, and 0.50 percent from 2043 through 2060. But even this seemingly-benign growth rate of 0.50, if maintained, would boost U.S. population beyond one-half billion by 2095.
- **Falling net immigration key factor in lower 2012/13 projections.** The medium projections released in 2009 show annual net international immigration of 1.38 million in 2015, rising to 1.67 million by 2030 and a robust 2.05 million by 2050. The 2012/13 medium projections see 42 percent less net immigration – rising from a little less than 794,000 in 2015 to 1.2 million by 2050 and 1.22 million in 2060 (Table 2). Both 2009 and 2012/13 have projections for constant, or steady, net immigration: the 2009 release assumed a constant immigration of 975,000 yearly; Census’ assumed constant 2012/13 is 25.7 percent lower – just 725,000 per year.
- **Immigration becomes the main driver in population growth.** A Census press release about its 2012/13 projections notes that immigration will supplant natural increase (Table 2) as the main driver of U.S. population growth between 2027 and 2038. For many population analysts, however, immigration has been the main driver of growth for some time, if children born to immigrants are counted.
- **Projections of births were also down somewhat in the 2012/13 series.** In part because of assumed higher immigration, the 2009 projections show births in the medium

variant rising from 4.46 million in 2015 to 5.65 million by 2050. The corresponding projections for those years in the 2012/13 releases are 4.29 million in 2015, 4.82 million in 2050, rising to 4.94 million in 2060 (Table 2).

- Regarding the age composition of the population, the 2012/13 projections show the share of the population that is working age declining from 62.7 percent in 2012 to 56.9 percent in 2060. The population age 65 and over is projected to increase from 13.7 percent to over 20 percent in the same time span. Both of these projections help nourish the alarm among business and government leaders that the U.S. growth is imperiled by labor force shrinkage and aging.

PROJECTIONS ARE A WARNING

It can't be said too often: Census Bureau population projections are not predictions. They are drawn from assumptions largely derived from prevailing demographic trends. For those Americans concerned about their country's long-term prospects, even the lower projections are a warning that if we keep doing what we're doing, we will end up bequeathing our grandchildren an environmentally-damaged, resource-depleted nation with a greatly diminished quality of life.

Even in their "low" scenarios, the two sets of projections point to an undesirable outcome: an already overpopulated nation will add 70 million to 108 million residents.

The latest Census projections of lower immigration than projected in 2009 leave us wondering about the trends and assumption they use. Census has had problems in the past gauging immigration, substantially undercounting it in preparing the 2000 Census. Do their trends and assumptions include political ones?

The recession has left the dominant U.S. political elites, and their corporate funders, hungrier than ever for more immigration, skilled and unskilled, as reflected in the Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) package approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee in May.

Immigration is lauded as an all-purpose economic elixir: if there is unemployment, immigration can stimulate job creation; if the economy overheats and there is "over-employment," immigration will loosen the labor market and buffer against wage inflation.

If approved in its present form, CIR would double legal immigration to 2.0 million in its first decade in effect. These new green cards and subsequent naturalizations, under loosened family reunification rules, would then expand follow-on family reunification numbers in subsequent decades. Improving business conditions, along with the prospects of an amnesty, is already boosting illegal immigration. Even if CIR fails, political will to enforce the existing immigration laws – already weak – is likely to decline even faster.

And did Census consider the push factors – the rising immigration demand abroad? Population growth and the rate of urbanization are highest in regions of frantic demand for U.S visas that have been rapidly building immigration networks here. Large and growing sending sources are India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, China and most of Africa, led by Nigeria and Ethiopia.

These trends suggest that the 2009 middle projections of net immigration reaching 1.67 million by 2030 are more realistic than the more recent projection of 1.14 in 2030.

ZERO-NET MIGRATION NOT CONSIDERED

A notable omission from the 2012/13 releases is any consideration of the zero-net migration option long advocated by NPG. Zero-net migration projections assume all immigration is matched by emigration. The 2009 projections included this scenario which, not surprisingly, showed population growth slowing significantly: 303 million in 2015; 318.3 in 2030; and 322.9 in 2050. Under these assumptions the country would attain zero population growth in 2046 and enter negative population growth in 2048.

It can only be speculated why Census in 2012/13 did not release zero-net projections.

Perhaps it would have seemed heretical in the Washington atmosphere of quasi-religious adulation of immigration, phobias of slower population growth and, more recently, a growing tendency to see high immigration as somehow a remedy for, not a contributor to, chronic unemployment.

Or perhaps Census concluded that in the present expectation of population growth

hardwired into U.S. culture, such a scenario would have been seen as an irrelevant fantasy. Even so, it is sad that Americans concerned about their future quality of life were not given the opportunity to examine this reasonable option for ending and reversing the nation's destructive population growth.

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**Table 1: Census Projections Compared:
2008-2012/13³
(000,000s)**

Variable	2009	December 2012/ May 2013
2015 Population		
Low	322.4	321.1
Medium	325.5	321.4
High	329.2	321.6
Constant Migration	321.1*	321.2**
Zero-Net Migration	303.2	N/A
2050 Population		
Low	422.6	383.9
Medium	439.0	399.8
High	458.2	415.7
Constant Migration	398.5	381.3**
Zero-Net Migration	322.9	N/A
2060 Population		
Low	N/A	398.2
Medium	N/A	420.3
High	N/A	442.4
Constant Migration	N/A	392.7**

*Assumes constant net annual immigration of 975,000.

**Assumes constant net annual immigration of 725,000.

**Table 2: Census Projections Compared:
Yearly Births, Deaths and Migration⁴
(000,000s)**

Variable	2009 Medium Projections	2012/13 Medium Projections
Births		
2015	4.46	4.29
2030	4.86	4.43
2050	5.65	4.82
2060	N/A	4.94
Deaths		
2015	2.72	2.61
2030	3.32	3.21
2050	4.25	4.04
2060	N/A	4.04
Nat. Increase		
2015	1.74	1.88
2030	1.54	1.23
2050	1.39	0.781
2060	1.40	0.891
Net Migration		
2015	1.38	0.794
2030	1.67	1.14
2050	2.05	1.2
2060	N/A	1.22

- ¹ Census Bureau Press Release: International Migration is Projected to Become Primary Driver of U.S. Population Growth for First Time in Nearly Two Centuries. May 15, 2013.
- ² Census Bureau Press Release: What a Difference Four Years Make: U.S. Population Projected to Grow at a Slower Pace Over the Next Five Years. December 12, 2012.
- ³ Census Bureau Population Division: (1) Projections of the Population and Components of Changes by Net International Migration Series for the United States: 2010-2050, Tables 1, 1-2, 1-C and 1-H, December 15, 2009; (2) Projections of the Population and Components of Change for the United States: 2010 to 2050 (Resident Population as of July 1), Table 1, August 14, 2008; (3) Projections of the Population and Components of Change for the United States, Tables 1-H, 1-L, 1-C, 13, 14, 17, May 2013.
- ⁴ Ibid.

About the author: David Simcox, an NPG Special Advisor, is a former career diplomat and past Director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington, DC-based think tank.

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Negative Population Growth, Inc.
2861 Duke Street, Suite 36
Alexandria, VA 22314

Voice: (703) 370-9510
Fax: (703) 370-9514
email: npg@npg.org
www.NPG.org

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