

IT'S THE NUMBERS, STUPID!

by Lindsey Grant

In 1992, Candidate Bill Clinton's election campaign manager is said to have tacked a paper to the bulletin board with the slogan: "It's the economy, stupid!" I will borrow that blunt but effective message for this paper. From coast to coast, crowding has become a central issue at the local level, but — almost universally — the issue is argued without any recognition of the force that drives it: national population growth, which in turn is driven by immigration and by the high fertility of many of the immigrants. Only Congress can get at the fundamental cause of the crowding. The unhappy victims of crowding should direct their fire, not at their neighbors but at Congress.

The Problems of Crowding

There is an intensifying conflict between people whose lives are being made worse by crowding and the developers and entrepreneurs who seek to profit from growth. From NPG and elsewhere, I have collected over 1500 news stories during the past three years about crowding in growth areas of the United States. The range of issues is enormous: rising housing prices and the displacement of the less prosperous; urban sprawl, stalled traffic and the "transportation crisis"; infrastructure costs and rising taxes; the deterioration of public and social services; the impact of massive housing developments; rising school populations and inadequate schools; worsening local air quality; the polarization of local politics and the deadlock of government; rising unemployment in some areas and the dislocations caused by new industry in others; the spread of paving and the attendant problems of runoff and flooding; the failure of water supplies; the destruction of woodlands, farmland and natural landscapes; the sense of a lost quality of life and the feeling that growth has somehow gone bad.

Those articles deal exhaustively with the proximate sources of the complaints — such as a new development or shopping center, rising school populations, the construction of superhighways (or the lack of them), diminishing rivers and aquifers. They are all silent about the underlying driving force. A conservation group announces that excessive consumption is draining rivers across the country — and it blames "U.S. irrigation habits, urban sprawl, increased groundwater pumping and loss of wetlands...

more often than not government policies..." and excessive municipal consumption.¹ Not a word about population growth.

National population growth is driven largely by high levels of migration and by the high fertility of some of the immigrants. International migration generates internal migration as people seek to escape the problems of the cities, creating successive waves of movement.

Temporizing With Growth

The slogan "smart growth" has become fashionable among planners. The idea is that sprawl can be averted, and more people accommodated, and rural space can be protected, if we can simply persuade people to live more densely packed. Efficient, yes. It permits more people to be accommodated at a lower direct and social cost, and it slows the loss of farmlands and forests. Moreover — although its proponents seldom notice this advantage — it prepares us for the end of the petroleum era, when automobiles will probably become a prohibitively costly way for most people to shop and commute.

However, efficiency is not necessarily happiness. Americans tend to like to have space around them, and that gets harder as population grows. Japanese in their tiny apartments — or chickens in a modern chicken factory — are paradigms of efficient housing, but they don't much like it. In the long term, "smart growth" simply accommodates more growth and rising tensions if we do not turn off the engines that drive growth.

And "smart growth" is not benign even in the short

term if it facilitates growth. As one study noted, “smart growth” aggravates the pollution problems of the Chesapeake Bay because more people, moving into new urban settlements, generate more piped sewage which, in turn, increases the flow of nitrogen into the Bay.²

The Source of Growth

The population of the United States grew by 32.7 million between the 1990 and 2000 Censuses, the largest growth decade in our history. The rate of growth was 1.28 percent per annum, a higher rate than any since the 1960s. Numerically, we added another California in ten years.

The Role of Immigration. The Census Bureau thinks that net annual immigration has averaged 976,000 since 1996 – about one-third of total growth. The U.N. Population Division puts the level at 1.1 million. A private research group puts it at “more than 1.2 million.”³

The numbers are remarkably fuzzy, because

- Many de facto immigrants are admitted on temporary visas, and little or no effort is made to learn whether they ever leave.
- Illegal immigrants have reason to avoid being counted.
- We gave up trying to count emigrants in 1957.
- Legal immigration is in part the regularization of illegal migrants who were already part of the population for Census purposes — if we could count them.

Whatever the number, that is only a partial figure. The demographic impact of immigration includes both the immigrants and their descendants. The Census Bureau does a Middle projection of U.S. population and then runs a Zero Net Migration series (which is the Middle projection without any migration after 1999). By 2050, the Middle projection is 404 million. The Zero Net Migration projection is 328 million — a difference of 76 million in fifty years. In other words, 62 percent of the projected growth is the consequence of new immigration. Those projections are conservative because they were based on underestimates of recent immigration and immigrant fertility; they are being revised upward.

The Middle projection for 2100 is 570 million, and it too will have to be revised. We are moving toward population levels we used to associate with China and India. Is that where we want to go?

Fertility and Shifting Shares. Though the statistics on migration flows are fuzzy, we can get some sense of the impact by studying what is happening to different ethnic groups and their fertility.

Fertility among non-Hispanic White women has been well below replacement level since the 1970s. Their total fertility rate (TFR) is now at 1.84 children per woman, just about what it was in 1990, and the total number of children born to them each year has declined, because the population is aging. Among non-Hispanic Blacks, the TFR has declined by a dramatic 18 percent since 1990. It now stands exactly at replacement level, 2.1 children. The experience among American Indian women is even more startling. Their fertility has fallen by 20 percent since 1990 and now stands at 1.75, which is well below the fertility of non-Hispanic Whites — although poor populations such as the AmerIndians traditionally have higher fertility than the rich and educated.

At those rates, U.S. population growth would stop and turn around in a few years without immigration.

The situation of our Hispanic population is dramatically different. It has almost trebled from 14.6 million in 1980 to 38.8 million today, making it the largest minority. (As a percentage of the total population, it has risen from 6.4 to 13.4.) Part of that growth is immigration. Part of it is high fertility. In 2001, Hispanic fertility in the United States was 2.7 children — higher than Mexican fertility, and far above replacement level. It had declined only 7 percent since 1990, and it has been flat or slightly rising in the past three years.⁴

About half of all immigration is Hispanic. Some other sources of migration such as Africa, the Philippines and the Arab world also have high fertility, but we do not have the data to run a similar analysis on them.

The Census Bureau thought that the fertility of immigrants' descendants would descend to the overall U.S. level. That has not been happening. In fact, convergence is working the other way. As the immigrants become an increasing part of the U.S. population, they pull overall U.S. fertility upward.

To limit immigration is not to demand that it stop. It plays useful roles in an interdependent modern world. “It’s the numbers, stupid.” If non-Hispanic White and Black and American Indian fertility stay as low as they are, and if Hispanic fertility can be brought down to those levels, we could welcome 200,000 or so immigrants each year and still enjoy a slow population decline to more reasonable levels.

Will Hispanic fertility decline? The U.S. Government has long encouraged lower fertility in less developed countries, but not at home. Ideally, it should embrace a policy of “Stop at two”, and it should adopt non-discriminatory incentives and disincentives to encourage women and families to do so. Such a policy is hardly on the political horizon.

Hispanic fertility in this country is unique in the industrial world. Elsewhere — including Roman Catholic Spain, Italy and Quebec — fertility plummeted far more than would be needed here, as women on their own addressed the penalties imposed by large families. Perhaps some such change will occur among Hispanic women here. Perhaps.

Republocrats vs. The People

The Odd Couple. There is an odd alliance setting immigration policy. Business wants cheap and docile labor. Some idealistic people do not want to limit immigration because “they should have the same chance we did.” Having those idealists on their side is a great convenience for business interests because it provides the moral justification for a policy that serves their pocketbooks.

The Persistence of an Unpopular Policy. Immigration is not popular. For years, opinion polls have regularly shown a large majority of the respondents favoring lower immigration levels, but they have not had a perceptible influence on Congress.⁵

Hispanic Opinion and Political Misperceptions. The Hispanic population size has achieved a critical mass, and both parties now court the Hispanic vote. The problem is that the parties are listening to the self-proclaimed Hispanic leaders — whose own interests are advanced if Hispanic populations grow — rather than to the Hispanic public. I know of only two serious in-depth opinion studies analyzing Hispanic attitudes on immigration, and both date from the early 1990s. They found that some 60% to 80+% of Hispanics from different national origins wanted immigration reduced.⁶ One can understand why Hispanics felt that way. Many of them are unskilled or semi-skilled workers, and they compete directly with new immigrants.

Class and Attitude. The divergence between elite and public attitudes is not limited to the Hispanics. There is a remarkable difference between the way that immigration is viewed by the elite and by the general public. The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations for years has sponsored a unique Gallup poll comparing attitudes of “the

public” with the views of the business, political and intellectual “leaders” on foreign policy issues. In 1995, 84 percent of the public but just 51 percent of the leaders saw the preservation of American jobs as an important foreign policy objective. Immigration and refugees were seen as “a critical threat” by 74 percent of the public but only 31 percent of the leaders. Controlling illegal immigration was seen as “a very important goal” by 73 percent of the public but only 28 percent of the leaders. A subsequent poll in 2002 found that the present level of immigration was seen as a critical threat by 60 percent of the public but only 13 percent of the leaders. The sense of threat has receded somewhat, but the gap between public and leadership attitudes has widened.⁷

The upper middle-class people who lead many moral crusades tend to be silent on this one, because they can find cheap and compliant labor among the immigrants, particularly the illegal ones. They enjoy the low prices resulting from cheap labor. The immigrants they see are likely to be pleasant and likeable and no threat to them.

The Politics of Money. According to the adage, politicians’ first responsibility is to get elected. They need money to get elected, and generally they respond more to money and to those who have it than to the popular will. The Center for Immigration Studies cites the decision to expand the H-1b visa program, which allows companies to replace high-priced American technicians with cheaper foreign technicians, mostly from India. Rep. Tom Davis, one of the sponsors, admitted candidly that “This is not a popular bill with the public. It’s popular with the CEOs ... This is a very important issue for the high-tech executives who give the money.”⁸ The bill passed the Senate 96-1, even though Sen. Bob Bennett observed that many senators supported it only because they were “tapping the high-tech community for campaign contributions.”

Democrat legislators tend to score better than Republicans when rated by environmental groups, but an end to population growth is the starting point for environmental improvement, and Democrats do even worse than Republicans if one tallies their votes on legislation that affects immigration and child-bearing.⁹

There is trouble ahead when our elected officials respond to money rather than to the people. In Europe, popular frustration with the unwillingness of governments to address immigration has led to the rise of populist demagogues taking extreme anti-immigrant positions. The political landscape in this country may shift, regrettably, in that direction.

Can the Popular Will Change the Politics?

The current political scene is no cause for optimism. The people who suffer most from population growth are poor and unskilled. Money talks. The political calculus may change if unemployment continues to rise and begins to hurt the more prosperous (as it already hurts engineers and computer programmers). The complaints may become more insistent, and Congress may begin to hear them.

But we don't need to wait for a depression to address the problem. The crowding that afflicts suburban and exurban America is a problem of the prosperous, but most of them do not see its source. The message to those people is: You are hacking at the branches, not the root. Your problem starts, not with the shopping mall or rising local taxes or water shortages, but with the population growth that drives those symptoms. The population growth is a function of migration. Immigration policy is made by Congress. State and local governments could do much more than they now do to encourage and help the federal government to enforce the immigration laws we now have, but the fundamental decisions rest with Washington. Take your problem to your Senators and Congressman. You cannot solve it locally.

NOTES

1. American Rivers, "America's Most Endangered Rivers", quoted in Environmental News Service, 4-10-03.
2. Larry Carson, "Control of Growth vs. Harm to Environment. Sewage: Smart Growth's Success Could Add to Nitrogen Problems in the Chesapeake Bay" (Baltimore Sun, 6-4-01).
3. U.S. Bureau of the Census, www.census.gov/population/projections/nation/summary/up-t6-a.txt. U.N. Statistical Division, *World Population Prospects: the 2002 Revision*.

Steven A. Camarota, "Immigrants in the United States – 2000" (Washington: Center for Immigration Studies, January 2001)

4. National Center for Health Statistics, "National Vital Statistics Reports", Vol. 51, No.4, 2-6-2003, Table 2 and Figure 1. Final data for 2001. Fertility rates have been revised to reflect the discovery in Census 2000 that U.S. population growth, particularly of Hispanics, had been substantially underestimated.
5. For example, Roper ASW "Immigration Perceptions", March 7-9, 2003, sponsored by NPG, reported that 67 percent of the respondents thought that immigration should be less than 600,000 per year, 85 percent of respondents regarded illegal immigration as a serious problem, and 67 percent said that Congress should set a goal of reducing it to near zero. The numbers are similar to Roper Poll results going back to the 1970s.
6. *Latino National Political Survey Report*, "Latinos Speaking in Their Own Voices" (Released 12-15-1992 by a multi-university consortium sponsored by the Ford, Rockefeller, Spencer and Tinker Foundations), table 7.24. A parallel Ford Foundation study found majorities of 66% (Cuban) to 79% (Puerto Rican) favoring reduced immigration.
7. John E. Reilly, Ed., "American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy" (Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1995) and www.worldviews.org/dailyreportsusreport/html/ch5s5.html for the 2002 study.
8. Mark Krikorian, "The Year In Immigration" (Washington: Center for Immigration Studies. 2001).
9. For a systematic tally of Congressional votes on environment and population issues in 2000-2001, see Comprehensive U.S. Sustainable Population (CUSP), "Scorecard for the 107th Congress." On the web at www.uscongress-enviroscore.org. Or contact CUSP President Alan Kuper, 216-229-2413, cuspscore@earthlink.net.

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