

NPG Forum

It's Time to Stop at Two

by Leon F. Bouvier

In recent months, the American public has awakened to the fact that our country is becoming more overcrowded than ever. We have seen tremendous public pressure to reduce both legal and illegal immigration – and most lawmakers are heeding the call to pass comprehensive reform of our immigration policy and reduce the number of immigrants allowed in annually.

Fertility is the Other Factor

Such changes will go a long way in reducing population pressure in the United States in the future. But the other most significant contributor to population growth – fertility – is sadly missing from the debate.

Population growth is not exclusively an immigration issue. It is my belief that the optimum rate of population growth for the United States should be negative until such time as the scale of economic activity, and its environmental effects, is reduced to a level that would be sustainable indefinitely. Then, and only then, should we, as a nation, consider a return to zero population growth.

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If present rates of population and economic growth are allowed to continue, the end result, within the lifetimes of many of us, would inevitably be near universal poverty in a hopelessly polluted world. Somehow, we must find a way – or ways – to eventually reduce population size if our quality of life is to be maintained and improved. A substantial decline in immigration is a start toward that goal – a much smaller population

than today's 265 million – be it 150 million or 200 million as the eminent senior statesman, George Kennan, recommends.

Yet, according to the most recent projections from the Census Bureau, if fertility remained at its current level, even a reduction to net immigration of 200,000 per year would still lead to a population of some 350 million in 2050. Even if immigration came to an end immediately, our numbers would still increase for many years. That is a startling statement and strongly suggests that we do something about our fertility and do it now.

US Fertility is Increasing

For about a decade during the peak years of the baby bust era (roughly 1975-1985), women averaged between 1.7 and 1.8 births (what demographers call the total fertility rate). But by 1988 fertility again began to rise. Now women are averaging approximately 2.0 to 2.1 births. Furthermore, the number of births has climbed and is now around four million annually for the first time since the baby boom years which ended in 1964.

A number of reasons have been given for this sudden and unexpected recent rise in fertility. Older women, still childless or perhaps with one offspring, have decided to have another baby before menopause. The increase in the share of the population that is foreign-born contributes to raising the fertility rate, since the foreign-born generally have higher birth rates than do the native-born and their share of the total population is growing. As the foreign-born share of the population grows, that could contribute to further increases in fertility. Both arguments have some validity, but in actuality the fertility rate has gone up at all ages. Simply stated, American women have decided to

have more children.

The Impact of Small Changes

To the uninitiated, it may seem odd to refer to changes from 1.8 to 2.1 births as being worthy of mention. After all, we are talking about less than 1/3 of a birth! But such an increase is monumental when talking about a population the size of the United States. A recent Census Bureau publication illustrates the tremendous power of a slight change in fertility.

By 2050, the difference between averaging 1.5 and 1.8 births (0.3 births) would mean a difference of 42 million people! If the fertility were 2.2, the difference between 1.8 and 2.2 (0.4 births) would result in 63 million more people. While major reductions in immigration are vital to lowering our population size, such reductions alone cannot get the job done. Together with limiting immigration to 200,000, fertility should be gradually reduced to no more than 1.5 births per woman, on average. That is just barely lower than the rate attained during the birth dearth period, so it is a reasonable goal. Even then, it would take 60 years before the nation's population was back to its current size and it would be 80 before it fell to below 200 million.

How to Reduce Fertility

Is it reasonable to expect fertility to fall to 1.5 births and stay in that vicinity? As we have already noted, fertility remained around 1.7 and 1.8 for over a decade during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

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Fertility rates vary considerably among subgroups of American women. Rates are highest among the least educated and the poor. According to the most recent Census Bureau survey, minority women have higher fertility than White women.

Then again, minority women are far more likely to be poor and undereducated than Whites.

It should be clearly understood that any fertility reduction based on race must be totally rejected. Rather, we should examine the reasons for high fertility among certain subgroups of American women and then propose appropriate solutions. For example, the relationship between education and fertility is far more significant than that between race and fertility. White women, regardless of years of school completed, have higher fertility than Black women with a college education.

The same is true of income. Among the higher earning families, Blacks have lower fertility than Whites, but Hispanic fertility remains fairly high. There is evidence, however, that Hispanic fertility falls in the second generation particularly where some assimilation has occurred. As immigrants and their descendants become more proficient in English – a good indicator of acculturation as well as increased education – fertility falls. Thus, one way to reduce fertility is to raise the educational levels for all and improve the economic status of women. If the fertility of all subgroups can be brought down to that exhibited by the better educated and the wealthier, irrespective of race, a good start will have been made toward the goal of 1.5 births per woman, on average.

Today, in predominantly Catholic countries like Italy and Spain, women are averaging 1.2 births! These are undoubtedly temporary aberrations in their fertility behavior. Nevertheless, no less than 26 nations, including Japan, Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, etc., have fertility rates below 1.6. If all American families, rich and poor, accepted the motto "Stop at Two", an overall rate of 1.5 would be well within the realm of possibility since many women remain childless and some have only one child.

The contraceptive methods are available to ensure that families limit their families to no more than two offspring, if they so desire. Admittedly, pharmaceutical firms have been reluctant to proceed with more advanced research in this field, in large part to avoid offending religious conservatives, but present methods, if available to all, can do the job. Equally important are the new developments in abortion research. While I do not recommend abortion as a population control measure, it is a regrettably necessary backup when contra-

ception fails. As Vice-President Al Gore has said so well: "If abortion becomes necessary, it should be safe, legal, and rare." Our prime target is unwanted conceptions and not unwanted pregnancies. Whether through the use of contraceptives or new abortion techniques as a backup, the tools are available for all American couples to Stop at Two.

What would it take to convince young American couples to take that vital step? Certainly, we could follow the examples set by other countries like Mexico and Thailand where advertising, even through soap opera themes, has paid off in lowering rates. In Thailand, fertility is now lower than it is in the United States. In Mexico, while it remains too high, it has fallen considerably over the past decades.

Perhaps more successful would be government policies that would encourage lower fertility. Tax deductions after two offspring should be discontinued; the outrageous attempt by a majority in Congress to hand out subsidies of \$500 for each child should be rejected outright through a presidential veto if necessary. Rather, women should be monetarily rewarded for remaining childless until reaching at least age 20.

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We must also try to reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies at all ages. Demographer Kristin Moore has pointed out that there has been an eight-fold jump nationwide since 1940 in the number of babies born to single mothers. Moore states that this "is not a teen problem, not a minority problem and not a poverty problem. We are looking at something society-wide." Moore also noted that 72 percent of all teenagers having babies are not married.

Together, a massive advertising campaign,

governmental regulations, a re-examination of our family values and a sincere concern for the common good could result in our reaching the goal of 1.5 children in a relatively short period of time.

Benefits to the Nation

The benefits for the society of low fertility and low immigration and the resulting reduced population size are too numerous to mention. Consider the benefits for our resources such as water and air; currently these are being increasingly polluted through the use of more automobiles and growing numbers of people using up a dwindling water supply. As a result, our aquifers, so important to plant life, are suffocating. Consider the benefits for our infrastructure such as schools and highways and national parks. Our schools are deteriorating. Our highways are being increasingly crammed with vehicles as the number of cars rises along with population growth. It is next to impossible to visit our National Parks without making reservations years ahead and then waiting in long lines to simply enter. Our once beautiful beaches are now overcrowded and becoming more and more polluted – all because of population growth. The list goes on and on.

We need to instill in all Americans a sense of responsibility for the common good. While some families may be financially and emotionally able to have five or even ten children, they should resist this temptation for the good of all Americans.

Benefits for the Individual

I am not only concerned with numbers. There is no magic involved in advocating 150 million or 200 million Americans. My concern is with improving the well-being of each individual and I am convinced that a smaller population would contribute greatly toward achieving such a goal. But population change can only come from alterations in the three demographic variables: fertility, mortality, and immigration. I wholly favor increased life expectancy and long healthy lives even if the result is a larger population. With longer life expectancy, fertility and immigration would have to fall even more to allow us to reach our population goals, but improving the longevity and health of Americans is more important.

Fertility differs substantially from the other two demographic variables. When we discuss immi-

gration, we are thinking of a person who leaves one country and moves to another. When we talk about mortality, we think of the one person who has passed away. But when we talk about fertility, three persons are involved: the mother, the father, and the baby. The quality of life of all three is dependent to a great extent on the number of offspring the parents have.

The first rule should be this: Every child should be wanted, planned, and loved. If all couples (whether married or not) first arrived at a decision that they wanted (or didn't want) a child, if they agreed that a child was desired, they would then plan (and take the necessary precautions) on when to have that child (in a year, two years, five years), then that child when born would be truly loved. I do not deny that unplanned children can be loved by their parents. Further, love may be infinite, and that love, itself, can be given to more than two children. But our capacity to give children tangible expressions of that love is limited.

For most couples, the pie of love is only so large and cannot be divided into an unlimited number of pieces. Social and economic conditions almost mandate that both parents work. The few hours, usually in the evening, when the parents can give their undivided attention to their offspring are limited and with more than two children, can sometimes result in at least one child being neglected, albeit unintentionally.

Love is the magic word here

Nothing is sadder than the sight of an unwanted, unplanned, and unloved child who often

ends up being abused, whether physically or psychologically. On the other hand, is there anything more beautiful than the sight of all children being wanted, planned, and cared for – loved – by their parents?

When I urge all American families to *stop at two*, my primary goal is to improve the quality of life and standard of living of all Americans in this and future generations. But I am convinced that this goal can only be achieved if U.S. population is eventually stabilized at a level substantially smaller than it is today. Just imagine our country sometime in the next century where the population had stopped increasing and was even beginning to fall and where no families had more than two children and these children were loved because they were wanted and planned. Consider the differences it would make throughout the lives of all of us. Fewer abused children, physically and emotionally, massive reductions in juvenile delinquency, better schools and more success in those schools – in a word – more happiness for all American families.

If Americans can do both – reduce immigration and limit fertility to no more than two children, the 21st century could indeed become the Age of Aquarius – an era of peace and prosperity for all Americans.



About the author: Dr. Leon Bouvier is Adjunct Professor of Demography at Tulane University. With Lindsey Grant, he co-authored the book *How Many Americans?* (Sierra Club Books, 1994), which describes how fertility and immigration will profoundly shape our country's future.

The views expressed by the author do not necessarily represent the views of NPG.

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