



RECENT CHANGES IN FERTILITY RATES IN THE UNITED STATES: What Do They Tell Us About Americans' Changing Families?

A Briefing Paper Prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families

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The number of births in the US increased by 3 percent in 2006, and has now reached levels not seen since the baby boom (1961), according to a recent report released by the National Center for Health Statistics (1). This development has generated considerable excitement, because the slow but persistent revival of fertility over the past several years has finally reached an average of 2.1 children per woman, crossing the threshold that puts us at above-replacement birth rates.

For the first time in 35 years, the rate of births to American women averages out to a level at which the population will reproduce itself by births alone, without counting any population growth fueled by the arrival of new immigrants. Reaching that threshold is extremely significant because most other wealthy countries, from Canada, to Europe, to Japan, to Korea, have seen their fertility fall well below replacement level (Our closest European counterpart is France, which has seen its fertility rate rise from 1.66 in 1993 to 1.98 in 2007).

Adding to the excitement has been a series of reports suggesting that in several big cities, there has been an increase in the number of affluent families with lots of children (2), The Council on Contemporary Families has fielded hundreds of media calls asking "Is Three -or even Four - the new Two?" We have been asked to determine whether affluent families are spearheading a return to larger, more traditional families.

This briefing paper provides answers to these and other questions that the press and public have been asking. It shows that the uptick in 3 and 4 child families among the affluent is confined to only a tiny sliver of the population, not enough to affect the overall fertility rates, and is not typical of what is happening for the other 98 percent of the population. But it also shows that there have been very significant changes in the fertility patterns of well-educated (but not super-rich) women and of poorly educated, low-income women. The paper also addresses several other commonly asked questions about contemporary fertility patterns.

Does the increase in fertility in 2006 show that we are witnessing the start of another baby boom, and that the United States is returning to more traditional family patterns?

No.

First, the total number of births may be larger than we have seen since the baby boom, but that is because the population is much larger. Fertility is rising in part because the number of women and men of childbearing age keeps rising due to an earlier baby boomlet now coming of age and in part because of more recent immigration.

The increase in the number of potential mothers explains about 1/3 of the 2006 increase, with rising birth rates among potential mothers explaining the other 2/3. But there is no evidence to suggest that 3-child families are once again becoming as widespread as they were during the 1950s. Indeed, the actual rise in fertility is not dramatic. The Total Fertility Rate has been hovering around 2.0 since 1990. It rose to 2.05 in 2005 and 2.1 in 2006. This is a rather modest increase, worth noting primarily because it put us into the category where population would continue to rise even without any additional immigration or adoption from abroad.

Furthermore, the increase in fertility is concentrated among a very non-traditional part of the female population. Almost all of the increase in births from 2005 to 2006 was in nonmarital births. Marital births increased from 2,611,000 in 2005 to 2,624,000 in 2006, or an increase of 13,000. Nonmarital births increased from 1,527,000 to 1,642,000, or an increase of 117,000. Whatever the other issues associated with non-marital childbearing, it seems to be an important part of what has pushed America's fertility above the replacement rate.

Most of these nonmarital births are to women in their 20s and 30s. Birth rates of teens are lower than they were in 1991. However, in 2006 the birth rate for teenagers rose by 3 percent after 14 years of decline. This might be a one-year aberration, but perhaps not. While teen birth rates declined in 2004 and 2005, those declines were smaller than any declines in the previous twelve years, so the increase in teen births in 2006 raised the teen birth rate to above 2003 levels. It is too early to explain the origins of the increase in teen births, which may stem from factors unique to that population. As soon as we have any data that will help answer this question, we will issue another research brief.

Is the rise in birth rates due to the higher fertility rates of America's immigrants, or among Hispanics, an ethnic group with a large immigrant population?

This question is difficult to answer precisely, because while the U.S. has pretty good records of births, it is difficult to get a representative sample of all immigrant women (who may or may not be mothers). Some government studies have estimated Total Fertility Rates as high as 2.9 for non-US-born women and for Hispanic women. (3) In contrast, Current Population Survey data from 2006 show average completed fertility at only 2.1 children for non-US-born women age 40-44, and 2.3 children for Hispanic women age 40-44. These levels of completed fertility are higher than for the overall population (1.86 children), so immigration is having some effect on overall fertility. In a minor technical note, completed fertility levels are slightly lower than Total Fertility Rates for all races because completed fertility is affected by the slightly lower total fertility rates of the past three decades.

What about the news stories suggesting that affluent families are leading a trend toward larger families?

It depends how you define affluent. Families in the top 10 percent or even top 5 percent of household earnings aren't having detectably larger families. However, surveys that are able to distinguish families with earnings in the top 1 to 1 1/2 percent have shown some evidence for an increase. Two comparable surveys from 1996 and 2004 report that among women age 40-49 in the top 1.3 percent of household earnings, 29 percent had three or more children in 1996, but 41 percent had three or more children in 2004. These earnings levels work out to \$300,000 per year in 1996 and \$400,000 per year in 2004 (it takes more to be in the top 1.3 percent nowadays). The high proportion of 3 and 4 child families among the super-rich can affect the demographics in parts of Manhattan, but since it is confined to the very top 1.3 percent of households, it cannot explain measurable shifts in fertility at the national level. Moreover, historians point out that the super rich have historically tended to have more children than the middle layers of society, so this is hardly as unprecedented as some observers have assumed. Contemporary figures continue to confirm a long-standing pattern in industrial societies whereby the people in the top half of the income distribution tend to have fewer children than people in the bottom half.

So what's the REAL news here?

Much more newsworthy than what may be happening to the 1.3 percent of the population in super-rich households are two trends that may mean much more to most Americans. One trend is the continuing increase in non-marital births I mentioned already. The other is a continuation of a long-term rise in delayed fertility. Birth rates for women age 30-34, 35-39, and 40-44 increased 2 percent, 2 percent, and 3 percent respectively in 2006, and have been increasing for several decades. America is having more success than most advanced countries in allowing women to pursue higher education, delay marriage, and develop careers without having to forego childbearing. And despite the overall rise in non-marital births, women who pursue higher education are less likely than other women to have a child out of wedlock.

One upshot of continued delays in fertility is a slow convergence in child-bearing rates between women in most economic categories and educational levels. If we go back to 1990, women who had not completed high school had an average of 2.7 children by their early forties, compared to only 1.5 children for women with a master's or professional degree. By 2006, those numbers had closed to 2.5 children and 1.6 children respectively - a small convergence, but one that is playing out across the educational spectrum. In contrast to the increasing economic inequality over the past 10 years, we seem to be seeing a reduction in demographic inequality between women.

References

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- 2) Sam Roberts. 2007. In Surge in Manhattan Toddlers, Rich White Families Lead Way. New York Times, March 23, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/23/nyregion/23kid.html>
- 3) Author's Tabulations are from the June 1990 and June 2006 Current Population Surveys (CPS), and from the 1996 and 2004 Surveys of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). The CPS and the SIPP conducted by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau. See also: American Community Survey Report ACS - 03. 2007. The American Community-Hispanics: 2004. U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration. www.census.gov/prod/2007pubs/acs-03.pdf

For Further Information

For further information on the socio-cultural consequences of late motherhood, please contact Michele Pridmore-Brown, Research Scholar, Gender and Women's Studies, University of California at Berkeley: mpb@berkeley.edu, 650.906.0108.

On childbearing among cohabiting couples and social class differences in the family context of childbearing, contact Pamela Smock, Professor of Sociology and Associate Vice President for Research, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor: pjsmock@umich.edu, 734.763.1290.

On the diversity of immigrant childbearing and family patterns, and the political and ideological implications of these, please contact Karen Pyke, Associate Professor, University of California, Riverside: karen.pyke@ucr.edu, 951.248.9197 (home, Pacific Coast time).

For information on the barriers to marriage and stable relationships facing unwed low-income women who have a child, contact Paula England, Professor of Sociology, Stanford University: pengland@stanford.edu, 650.723.4912 or 650.815.9308.

On the decision-making process of women in their thirties and forties who are economically stable (heterosexual and lesbian) and consciously choosing single motherhood, please contact Rosanna Hertz, Luella LaMer Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies, Wellesley College: rhertz@wellesley.edu, 617.566.4331.

For historical trends and international comparisons of women's work, marriage, and childbearing, contact Stephanie Coontz, Professor of History and Family Studies, The Evergreen State College: coontzs@msnn.com, 360.556.9223.

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