

What's up with U.S. birthrates?

By Joseph A. D'Agostino

Americans like to think of themselves as exceptional, taking pleasure in the qualities that make the United States unique even among Western and westernized developed nations. An uptick in America's birthrate produced an exceptional milestone in 2006, one that marks U.S. society as far healthier than those of her fellow industrialized countries. From Japan to Europe, Western nations have birthrates too low to replace their populations with one exception: The United States' birthrate has returned to minimal replacement level, at an average 2.1 children per woman in her lifetime.

America's overall fertility rate rose by two percent from 2005 to 2006, putting our birthrate at replacement level for the first time since 1971. Yet our birthrate is far below that of 1957, when it was 3.8. The United States' population has continued to grow rapidly due to high immigration levels since the late 1960s and people living longer.

All other developed Western countries are headed toward extinction. The once-vibrant and family-oriented Catholic cultures, such as those of Italy and Spain, are now graying away. Those two Latin nations have birthrates or total fertility rates (TFR), in demographers' parlance, of 1.2 children per woman. That is far below replacement level, with no sign of revival. Germany's birthrate is 1.3. Britain's is 1.6. Asian nations that have adopted Western ways are the same. Japan's birthrate is 1.2 and South Korea's is 1.1.

"Demographically, the United States has headed

off in a different direction from the other affluent democracies," said Nicholas Eberstadt, Ph.D., a demographer at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. "This is a 35-year trend."

Why America is up

Though the U.S. birthrate plummeted during the cultural revolution of the 1960s, Eberstadt thinks that desires regarding family size stabilized in the 1970s. The dip below replacement rate and the recent return to it in 2006 is due less to a shift toward a more pro-child attitude among Americans than the delayed expression of a pro-child attitude that was there all along, he theorizes. "Women are having children at older ages than they used to," he said. "So during the time when childbearing ages were shifting later, the birthrate dropped, but now those women are having their children."

No such pattern has emerged in Europe or in developed Asian nations. Even Ireland, a relatively traditional society until recently, has a TFR of 2.0 and falling and that is the highest birthrate in Christian

Europe, Western or Eastern. Europe as a whole, from Ireland to Russia, has a birthrate of 1.4. Only Albania, which has a majority-Muslim population, has a birthrate above replacement.

So why is America different and demographically healthier than similar nations? Eberstadt believes that Americans' high birthrate has less to do with the factors demographers traditionally examine—income levels, immigration, urbanization, education—and more with an intangible pro-child culture. "Western

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Europeans and the Japanese have enjoyed peace and prosperity, too," he said. "Western Europeans have labor practices that most would consider more family-friendly than we have here and higher social spending levels by their governments." Yet even non-Hispanic white Americans have a birthrate much higher than those of almost all Western countries, at 1.8 to 1.9 children per woman. "Mexican-Americans have a higher birthrate than almost anyone else," Eberstadt stated, "but their immigration into the United States has not produced a radical increase in the American birthrate... Religiosity is what makes Americans special."

Eberstadt said that religious devotion and its pro-family attitudes set Americans apart from other affluent Western nations. "As long as Americans' religiosity remains high, I would expect their birthrate to remain relatively high," he said. By any measure—belief in God, church or temple attendance, and doctrinal beliefs—Americans have been shown repeatedly to be far more religious than Western Europeans. The more religious a group is, the higher its birthrate tends to be.

In America, mainline Protestant denominations have European birthrate levels and are aging rapidly. However, fundamentalist Protestants have a birthrate around 2.5 and Mormons around 2.7. Orthodox Jews have about four children per family on average. The U.S. Catholic birthrate is the same as the overall American birthrate; still, there are distinctions. Hispanic Catholics have a high birthrate of 3.0, but non-Hispanic white Catholics have a birthrate of merely 1.8. Most of the non-Hispanic white Catholics who were surveyed told pollsters that they accept contraception and otherwise dissent from Church doctrine. There is no reliable data on the birthrate of Catholics who say they are faithful to all Church teachings. Allan Carlson, Ph.D., president of the Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society, said, "I've yet to see a study on Latin Mass Catholics, but it seems to me that when I go to a Latin Mass church, there are a lot of children."

Other factors and the future

Carlson agreed with Eberstadt that the rise in birthrates could be due in part to the trend toward pro-life attitudes among young people in the last 10 years, but said, "I'd love to see some empirical data on that... This is anecdotal, but people who work in crisis pregnancy centers tell me that their clientele today is different than it was 20 years ago. The women no longer need to be talked out of having an abortion;

they just need material help. More and more of them are in their twenties."

American fertility statistics are not all positive, Carlson distinguished. "The out-of-wedlock birthrate has been ticking up, but they are not teenagers anymore," he said. "We're adopting the European model in which young women in their twenties and thirties are consciously choosing to have a child, even if unmarried." Yet the teenage birthrate is rising again for the first time in 14 years: It rose three percent from 2005 to 2006. There are other signs of trouble, such as black Americans' 70 percent illegitimacy rate, which is not due solely to a high rate of unwed birth. Carlson said, "Married African-American couples have a very low fertility rate."

There is a strong connection between pro- and anti-life attitudes and geopolitics. It is true that the American TFR is lower than it used to be and is lower than those traditionally associated with vigorous nations. But the United States' population will continue to be young and vigorous, compared to that of other powerful nations, and it could mean continued influence globally, according to some. In 2006, the U.S. population reached 300 million for the first time. Ben Wattenberg, another demographer at the American Enterprise Institute, argues, contrary to naysayers, that Americans' pro-life practices will yield fruit against her competitors in the 21st century. "There is no collapse in sight," Wattenberg wrote in the April 6, 2008 *Washington Times*. He also said,

The United States will become vastly more powerful in the decades to come. My primary reason concerns demographics. The first U.S. Census counted 3.9 million Americans... Just over the course of the 20th century, the population grew by 400 percent. Careful projections by both the U.S. Census Bureau and the United Nations Population Division now show a growth path to 400 million by 2050 and 500 million by 2100.

America's global competitors include China, whose coercive population control policies have held her birthrate down to 1.7, and Russia, whose birthrate of 1.3 is partly due to her astonishingly high abortion rate of 70 percent. More than two-thirds of Russian babies are deliberately killed in the womb. The European Union, meanwhile, has a birthrate of 1.5. So, despite all her problems, this leaves the United States in a strong demographic position for the future.

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