

Population research reaches back

Population growth is an issue people often associate with the future. They discuss family "planning," "projected" birth rates and "impending" food and fuel shortages.

Some University of Michigan researchers, however, have looked to the past to see what influences fertility trends. Birth records from individual families as well as large scale census data are offering new clues about demographic patterns in 18th and 19th century Europe — clues which have implications for population policy today.

"Population control is an almost universal concern," observes sociologist John E. Knodel of the U-M Population Studies Center.

"A United Nations report on the world's 127 developing countries shows that 92 percent of their people live under governments committed to an official policy of reducing population growth or at least to supporting family planning."

"There is still very little firm knowledge, however, about which factors influence people to have fewer children."

"The slogan of the '70s among leaders of less developed countries seems to be: 'development is the best contraceptive.' As socioeconomic conditions in their countries improve, they argue, couples will have incentive to have fewer children."

But Prof. Knodel's historical readings indicate it is not that simple.

"True, when Europe changed from a predominantly rural-agrarian to a more urban-industrial society, the birth rate dropped dramatically.

"Moreover, this took place 100 years ago, before the advent of modern birth control or safe medical abortions. People limited their families by modifying their sexual habits without the benefit of contraceptive devices."

"But the changes in Europe happened almost simultaneously in countries which were at very different stages of social and economic development," Knodel says. "Thus, history indicates that 'development' is not the only key to reducing births in lesser developed countries today."

"COUPLES must be both motivated and able to control their family size. And motivation is a complex factor which varies from culture to culture and is not dependent solely on socioeconomic conditions," he explains.

"Births declined in England after a considerable urban and industrial transition, yet the same thing occurred in Hungary while that country was at a much lower level of development. Bulgaria was still considered backward by many standards when it experienced its decline."

Countries undergoing demographic changes since 1950 show much of the same diversity in socioeconomic development as the European nations in the 19th century, Knodel notes. "Moreover, we can cite countries which have shown substantial improvements in social and economic well-being, such as the central Asian countries of the USSR, or even Mexico, where high birth levels have persisted, at least until quite recently."

"What we're learning is that an individual couple's decision to have a large or small family is influenced not only by the socioeconomic level but also by the cultural norms of their society."

Initially, couples may not even be aware that preventing pregnancy within marriage is possible, he adds. In the more distant past in Europe, birth control practices were largely limited to extramarital affairs and may have been the specialized knowledge of only a small subset of the general population. Once such practices start being adopted by a few married couples, however, awareness and social acceptability increase and the custom can spread rapidly.

And once it starts to spread, Knodel reports, it is virtually irreversible.

"The changes in most of Europe were compressed within a remarkably short period of time — about 1880 to 1910. The population decline spread most rapidly among countries of similar language and culture."

AS NEW reproductive habits merge, they seem to generate a momentum of their own, Knodel says. Within countries, provinces, and even villages, the birth rate continues to decline until it is usually at well below half the original level by the end of the period of change. The same pattern is occurring now, Knodel says, in Thailand, Costa Rica, Colombia and a number of other Third World countries, but at an even faster pace.

But is it fast enough?

"There is a growing consensus that

the world population growth rate reached a peak in the last decade," the sociologist says. "But while the rate of increase may be declining, the population itself is nonetheless still increasing rapidly. There are still many societies in which most women have babies continually throughout their child-bearing years."

Why do government-sponsored family planning efforts succeed in some countries, such as Taiwan or Thailand, but achieve poor to moderate results elsewhere, as in India?

Again, the reasons seem to be as much cultural as socioeconomic, Knodel maintains. And one of the most influential cultural factors, he believes, is the position of women.

"It is women, after all, who suffer the brunt risks of childbearing and assume most of the burden of child rearing. The historical evidence indicates that women are often very receptive to limiting family size, once they are aware that it is possible."

"In countries such as Thailand, where the position of women is relatively favorable, they share in the improvements in education, are more active outside the home, and more assertive about their own childbearing preferences," he explains.

"In a cultural setting such as India or Pakistan, where the female role is subordinate to the extreme and women are more isolated from the mass media as well as from informal communication networks connecting the village with the outside world, family planning programs may be ineffective until the status of women is improved."

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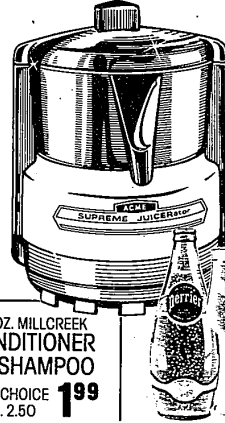
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