The BOISI CENTER for
RELIGION and AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Symposium on Religion and Politics

THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

"Current Trends and Potential Problems"

Reading Packet 1

2014–2015

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BOSTON COLLEGE

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NATIONAL AFFAIRS

Marriage, Parenthood, and Public Policy

Ron Haskins

America has been undergoing profound changes in family composition over the last four decades. In 1970, according to that year's decennial census, 83% of women ages 30 to 34 were married. By 2010, that number had fallen to 57%. This drastic decline in marriage rates has coincided with a steep increase in the non-marital birth rate among all demographic groups, from 11% to almost 41% over the same four decades. In 2010, an astounding 72% of births to African-American women were out of wedlock.

These dramatic changes are made all the more significant by the ways in which family composition appears to be related to important social, behavioral, and economic characteristics. Children raised by single parents are more likely to display delinquent and illegal behavior. Daughters raised by single mothers are more likely to engage in early sexual activity and become pregnant; their brothers are twice as likely to spend time in jail as their peers raised by married parents. They are less likely to finish high school or get a college degree. And they are four to five times as likely to live in poverty as are children raised by married parents. These intergenerational trends are prominent among both the causes and effects of America's limited social mobility.

Thus, as the nation confronts the stubborn problems of economic inequality and immobility, the rise in the number of single-parent families matters a great deal. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s paved the way for these massive shifts in family life, and these shifts are now making it more difficult for a huge portion of the current generation to

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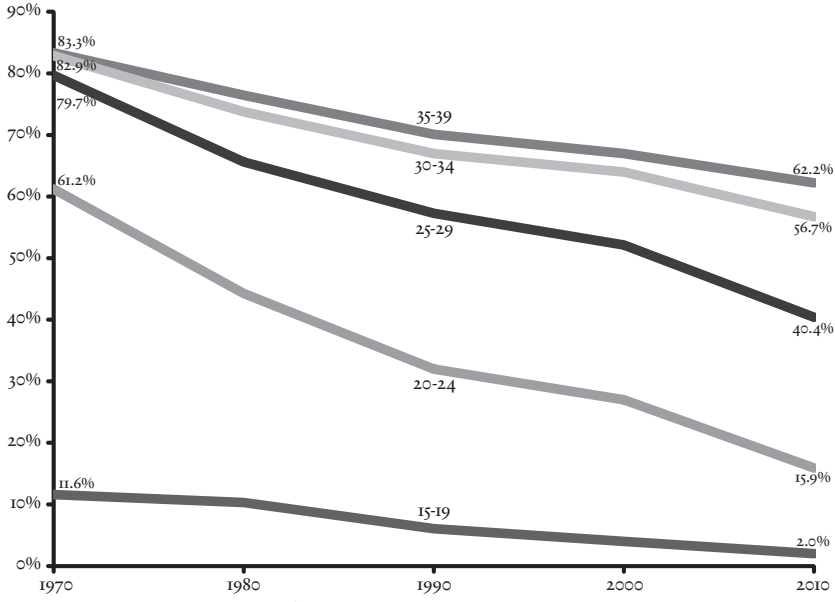
get its fair shot in the land of opportunity.

So what is to be done? Answers are difficult to find, but it's not for lack of trying. Both public and private institutions have attempted over the past four decades to decrease the rate of births to unmarried women, either by providing birth control or abstinence education or by encouraging marriage. The federal government has spent billions of dollars trying to counteract the poverty and other social consequences that follow in the wake of the breakdown of the family.

The results so far have been mixed at best, but they do suggest some patterns. Some kinds of interventions appear to make a modest difference on the margins, while others appear to be almost entirely ineffectual. But analyses of these patterns are too often distorted by ideological commitments on all sides. Given the magnitude of the problem, it is essential that analysts and policymakers come to terms with what our experience can teach us so they can seek to build on what works. It is easy to stand back and say that government can't make families, and it is also surely true. But it is nonetheless apparent that there are some ways that public policy, working together with the institutions of American civil society, can help create the circumstances to better enable families to form.

SHARE OF WOMEN WHO ARE MARRIED, BY AGE



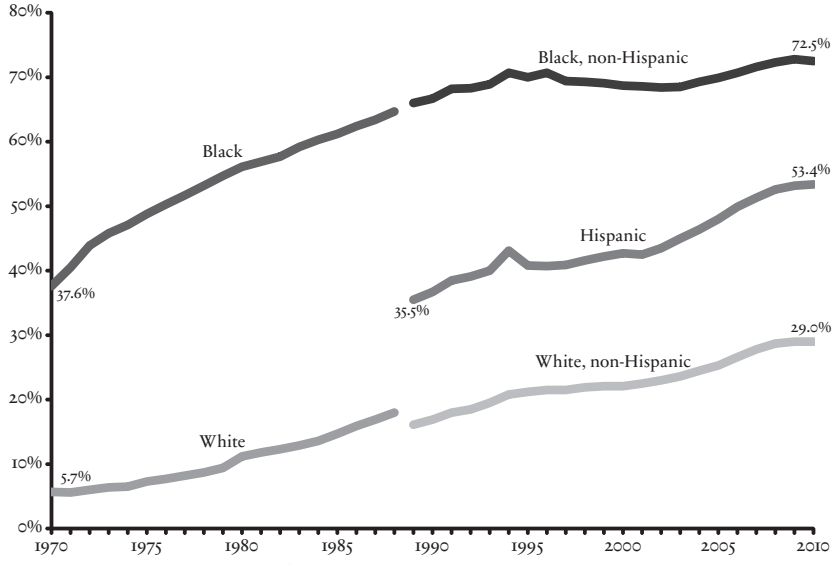
Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Author's calculations from the decennial census (1970, 1980, 1990, 2000) and American Community Survey (2010).

THE RISE OF SINGLE PARENTING

The shape of the typical American family has changed dramatically over the past four decades, in large part due to a precipitous drop in marriage rates. For almost every demographic group, whether broken down by age, education, or race and ethnicity, marriage rates have declined nearly continuously since 1970. The chart on the previous page shows the decline in marriage rates for five age groups from 1970 to 2010.

The decline has been dramatic. Marriage rates for 20- to 24-year-olds, for instance, fell from 61% to 16%, a decline of almost 75% in four decades. This drop in young marriages is not so surprising: The couples who do get married now tend to wait longer to do so than they would have a generation ago. What is more surprising is that the marriage rate for older cohorts has fallen as well. The rate for 35- to 39-year-olds, for instance, declined by 25%, from 83% to 62%. The only exception to the pattern of decline was for women with a college degree or more (not shown in the prior chart). After a modest decline of about 11% between 1970 and 1990, the marriage rate for college-educated women stopped declining and even increased by about 1% between 1990 and 2010.

SHARE OF BIRTHS TO UNMARRIED WOMEN, BY RACE/ETHNICITY

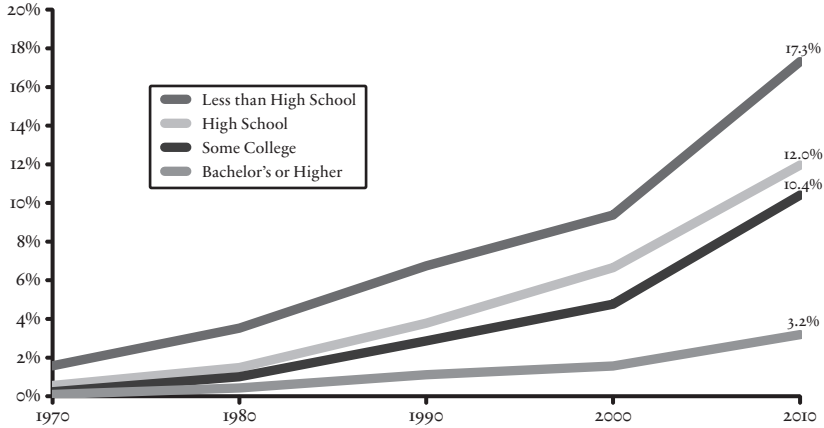


Source: National Vital Statistics System, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

This decline in marriage rates has coincided with steep increases in non-marital birth rates. As the chart above shows, in the same four decades, the non-marital birth rate for African-Americans increased by more than 90%, from 38% to 72%. In 2010, the Hispanic rate was 53%, a 50% increase over 1989 (when data on Hispanic birth rates first began to be collected separately from non-Hispanic whites). The rate for non-Hispanic whites, which stood at 16% in 1989, had increased to 29% by 2010, a larger increase in percentage terms than for any other group over that period.

Throughout the 40-year period from 1970 to 2010, women with less education were always more likely to give birth outside marriage, but by 2010 the differences among educational groups had become enormous. As the chart below shows, a 35-year-old woman with less than a high-school degree, for instance, was more than five times as likely to be both never married and a mother than a woman with a bachelor's degree or more.

SHARE OF 35-YEAR-OLD WOMEN WHO ARE NEVER-MARRIED MOTHERS, BY EDUCATION LEVEL



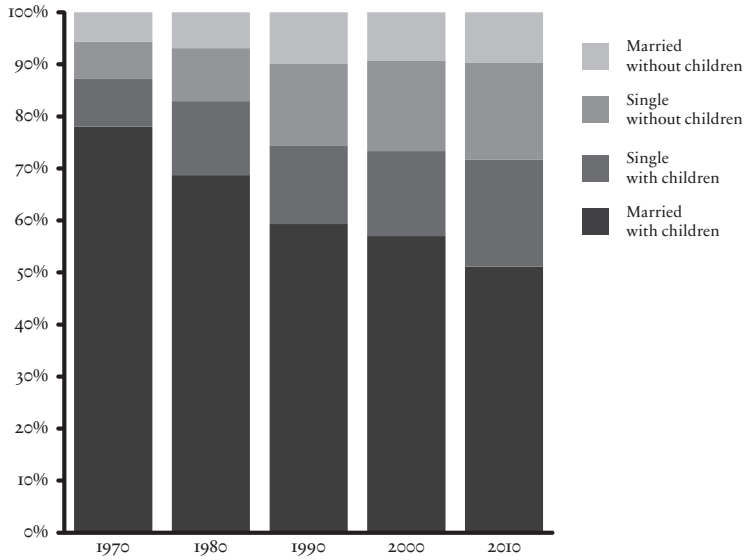
Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Author's calculations from the decennial census (1970, 1980, 1990, 2000) and American Community Survey (2010).

Taken together, the drop in marriage rates and the increase in non-marital birth rates, combined with the substantial increase in the number of married couples who remain childless, have resulted in a dramatic shift in the composition of the American family.

In the chart that follows, data from the five decennial censuses from 1970 to 2010 are used to divide 35-year-old women living in households into four mutually exclusive groups: married with children, married without children, single with children, and single without children. Over the

four-decade period, the percentage of married-with-children households declined by well over a third to just 51%. By contrast, the percentages of all three other types of households increased: married without children by 72%, single with children by 122%, and single without children by 165%.

WOMEN'S FAMILY STRUCTURE AT AGE 35



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Author's calculations from the decennial census (1970, 1980, 1990, 2000) and American Community Survey (2010).

The consequences of these changes in family composition are shouldered in large part by the children of single-parent households. These young people make up a fast-growing share of American children. In 1970, 12% of children lived with a single parent at any given time; over the next 40 years, that number increased by 124%, rising to 27% of children in 2010. Over the course of their childhoods, as many as half of all American children will spend some time in a single-parent household.

The available evidence on what growing up in single-parent households means for children suggests this enormous increase in the number of such households is yielding very troubling consequences. Poverty is perhaps the most harmful of these consequences. According to the Census Bureau, in 2012 the poverty rate among children living with only their mother was 47.2%; by contrast, the poverty rate among children living with their married parents was 11.1%, meaning that a child living with a single mother was almost *five times* as likely to be poor as a child living with married parents.

One of the most troubling aspects of this trend is the negative effect that poverty has on childhood development, especially among children who are poor in their early years. Given that the major cause of the rise of single parenting is the increase in non-marital births, it follows that many children in single-parent families experience poverty from the moment of their conception. Research shows that mothers giving birth outside of marriage are less likely to have complete prenatal care and are more likely to have babies with low birth weights and other health problems, all of which disrupt child development.

And a higher likelihood of living in poverty is far from the only challenge faced by children who grow up in single-parent families. Until the 1990s, the scholarly world mostly followed the lead of influential developmental psychologist Mavis Hetherington, who concluded that most of the children of divorce soon recovered from the changes in their households and showed modest if any long-term consequences. But a review of 92 empirical studies by Paul Amato, published in 1991, showed abundant evidence that children from divorced families scored lower on several measures of development than did children living in continuously intact families. Then, in 1994, sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur published *Growing Up with a Single Parent*, after which it was nearly impossible to deny that there were serious costs to single parenting. Based on sophisticated analyses of four nationally representative data sets, McLanahan and Sandefur concluded that "children raised apart from one of their parents are less successful in adulthood than children raised by both parents, and . . . many of their problems result from a loss of income, parental involvement and supervision, and ties to the community."

Since 1994, the literature on the effects of single parenting on children has continued to grow. A partial list of these effects includes an increased likelihood of delinquency; acting out in school or dropping out entirely; teen pregnancy; mental-health problems, including suicide; and idleness (no work and no school) as a young adult. Married parents — in part simply because there are two of them — have an easier time being better parents. They spend more time with their children, set clear rules and consequences, talk with their children more often and engage them in back-and-forth dialogue, and provide experiences for them (such as high-quality child care) that are likely to boost their development. All these aspects of parenting minimize the kinds of

behavioral issues that are more commonly seen among the children of single parents.

Many of these problems have consequences for future generations. One of the reasons it is so difficult for people born into poor families to lift themselves into the middle class is that the good jobs that pay well are often out of reach for those who grew up in poor neighborhoods. This should not be surprising in an economy dominated by high-tech industries and global business: An increasing share of jobs that pay well require a good education, which is much harder to obtain in failing schools in impoverished neighborhoods. And, regardless of the quality of their schools, children from single-parent families on average complete fewer years of schooling, which is correlated with lower adult earnings. This correlation makes it more likely that the cycle of poverty continues into the next generation.

The negative consequences of the rise in single parenting are not limited to those in single-parent families. The trend affects everyone. There are, of course, the immediate costs imposed on taxpayers to pay for government benefits for impoverished single mothers and their children. Single mothers often receive the Earned Income Tax Credit, which can be worth over $6,000 per year for a mother with three or more children, as well as the Additional Child Tax Credit, which can be worth up to $1,000 per year for each child. Female-headed families are also more likely than married-couple families to receive other welfare benefits such as housing, food stamps, medical care, and other benefits which can be worth several thousand dollars a year.

More important, however, is the human capital lost. Children raised by single parents tend to perform more poorly in school, and this fact appears to be one reason why America's children are falling seriously behind students from other countries in educational achievement. The most recent data from the Programme for International Student Assessment show that American children rank 21st in reading and 31st in math. Equally disturbing, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has recently published a comprehensive assessment of proficiency in adult literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving across 24 nations. The U.S. was near the bottom in almost every category. For example, 9.1% of American adults scored below the most basic level of numeracy compared to 3.1% of Finnish, 1.7% of Czech, and 1.2% of Japanese adults. The skills assessed by the survey are closely related

to adult earnings. Of course, single parenting is not the sole reason American children and adults fare so poorly on international comparisons. But the evidence points unambiguously to the conclusion that single parenting is one factor that accounts for the poor performance of the nation's children.

Many of the problems we associate with failures of American economic policy — especially the persistence of a high poverty rate despite the billions of dollars a year we spend on relief efforts — can also be attributed to family breakdown. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that America's social problems and its economic problems are thoroughly intertwined with the decline of marriage and the rise of single parenting.

Can anything be done?

As the rates of single parenthood have risen and the consequences have become clear, all levels of government from local to federal have attempted to implement policies to address the problem but with limited success. These attempts generally fall into four categories: reducing non-marital births, boosting marriage, helping young men become more marriageable, and helping single mothers improve their and their children's lives.

The first class of policies, those aimed at reducing non-marital births, have met with some success, especially among teens. Teen pregnancy rates have declined almost every year since 1991, and the number of teen births has declined by more than 50% since that time.

It is difficult to identify which specific factors have contributed the most to this success, but several conditions conducive to attacking a national social problem are present in the case of teen pregnancy. There is nearly universal agreement among parents, religious leaders, teachers, and elected officials that teens should not get pregnant. This harmony sends an unambiguous message to teens. Although Republicans and Democrats fight over whether programs should focus on promoting abstinence or birth control, most programs at the local level seem to include both approaches. Teens get a host of messages from their school courses, from community-based organizations, from their parents, and from community leaders that sex can wait and that pregnancy is an especially bad idea.

Surveys show that teens agree with both messages but most of them try to implement only the second — and then indifferently, despite the widespread availability of birth control. As the pregnancy and birth

rates show, the situation is improving, but the U.S. still has the highest teen-pregnancy rates of any nation with an advanced economy, and more must be done to address the problem.

The Obama administration has implemented two prevention initiatives that support model programs that have shown strong evidence of success in reducing sexual activity or pregnancy rates among teens. About 200 local programs are now operating under these new funding sources, and the administration has created an elaborate plan for evaluating the local programs. There are also a handful of national organizations, such as the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, which are trying to keep the nation's attention focused on prevention programs and are using social media to reach teens directly.

Though public policies have been successful in reducing teen-pregnancy rates, the problem of non-marital pregnancy is now greatest among adults in their 20s and 30s. Non-marital birth rates among young adults had been increasing steadily until recently, and though the rate is now declining for most age groups, there are still far too many non-marital births.

Fortunately, this is one important social problem against which we have the knowledge and experience to make progress. High-quality modeling research by Georgetown University's Adam Thomas and others shows that additional spending on media campaigns and free coverage of birth control, especially long-acting methods, for low- and moderate-income women would further reduce pregnancy and birth rates and even save money. In addition to this modeling, there is an emerging body of empirical research on the impact of making effective birth control available to young adults.

For example, one recent study of free coverage for long-acting reversible contraceptives (such as implants and intrauterine devices) found that not only did they reduce unintended births but they also reduced abortion rates. Similarly, a recent study from the National Bureau of Economic Research found evidence that "individuals' access to contraceptives increased their children's college completion, labor force participation, wages, and family incomes decades later."

Some Americans of course object to contraception for moral or religious reasons and will therefore object to these programs as well. But for those whose objections have been rooted instead in skepticism about

the utility of these approaches or their cost-effectiveness, the evidence of their success is increasingly beyond question. They are not sufficient to stem or reverse the trends of declining family formation, but they can help and should be further implemented.

promoting marriage

The second, and perhaps most straightforward, solution to the problem of rising non-marital birth rates is to increase marriage rates. But reversing decades of declining marriage rates is turning out to be exceptionally difficult. Many civic organizations, especially churches, view encouraging marriage as part of their overall mission. Some churches have organized activities to strengthen marriages or help couples survive crises in their relationships. The Catholic Church, in particular, has long insisted on premarital counseling. We have very little reliable data on precisely how many such programs there are and very little evidence regarding their effects on marriage rates or marital satisfaction. We cannot know whether the marriage rate would have been even lower if these civic organizations had not been actively supporting marriage, but it is self-evident that they have not been able to stem the institution's remarkable decline.

Clearly, more evidence and data analysis are called for on this front. But it is also clear that a problem of this scale calls for serious public as well as private action. Apart from providing funds (including tax breaks) for organizations that provide marital counseling and paying for or creating public advertising campaigns about the value of marriage to children and society, however, the federal government has generally not done much to help find a solution to the problem.

The presidency of George W. Bush provided an exception to this rule, as the federal government implemented several marriage-strengthening programs that were executed by state and local organizations, most of them private. These programs provide an initial body of evidence about the possibility of a larger role for public policy in strengthening marriage, and the evidence they provide is decidedly mixed.

The Bush marriage initiative involved several separate strands, including three large intervention studies. One of these studies tested whether marriage education and services would help young, unmarried couples who have babies together improve their relationships and perhaps increase the likelihood that they would marry. Another tried

the same approach with married couples, aiming to improve and sustain their marriages. The third studied community-wide programs that adopted a number of strategies simultaneously to bring attention to the advantages of marriage and to strengthen existing marriages at the local level.

The first two initiatives were tested by gold-standard studies; the third was tested by a cleverly designed study that nonetheless involved a less reliable research strategy. In addition to these three initiatives, the Bush administration enacted a grant program that funded 61 healthy-marriage projects at the local level with a total of $75 million per year. Taken together, these four major activities, and others funded through the Department of Health and Human Services, stand as the most thoroughgoing attempt ever by the federal government to have an effect on marital satisfaction and marriage rates.

The results have been disappointing. The community-wide initiative, carried out in three cities, produced virtually no effects in the test cities as compared with three control cities. There have been few high-quality evaluations of the $75 million grant program, so no claims can be made about its effectiveness. (There are now a few ongoing studies of these programs, but none has published results based on rigorous analysis.)

The program for married couples has reported results after 12 months. The effects of the program were small but statistically significant. Couples participating in the program reported modestly higher levels of marital happiness, lower levels of marital distress, slightly more warmth and support for each other, and more positive communication skills. Spouses in the program group also reported slightly less psychological and physical abuse than control-group couples. The evaluators concluded that the program's positive "short-term effects are small, but they are consistent across a range of outcomes." A follow-up report of the results at 30 months after the program began is due out soon. If the same kinds of effects are still present or are even stronger at 30 months, there may be room for some optimism that married low-income couples can profit from marriage education and support services of the type offered by the Bush program.

The program aimed at helping young couples with an out-of-wedlock baby had some limited success. The test was set up in eight cities, with randomly-assigned controls in each site. Six of the sites produced no important effects on the couples, and the Baltimore program showed a

few negative ones. But the Oklahoma City test showed a host of positive effects. The Mathematica Policy Research firm conducted studies of the Oklahoma City site and reported that, 15 months after the program began, participating couples were superior to control couples in skills such as resolving disputes, planning finances, expressing positive feelings for their partners, and using good child-rearing techniques.

The effects of the programs for these unmarried couples, however, appear to have been only temporary. When researchers checked again 36 months after the program started, the positive results seen in Oklahoma had dissipated, as had the negative results of the Baltimore test. A program in Florida began to show negative results after three years, but the other test programs showed hardly any effects at any point. Thus, of eight sites, the only good news was from Oklahoma, and most of the encouraging results seen after 15 months had disappeared less than two years later. The couples in the Oklahoma program, however, were 20% more likely to still be together at 36 months than were the control couples in the same study.

The modest success of the Oklahoma City experiment may suggest that something about the program worked. Given the resources invested in the Bush marriage initiative and the programs' quite limited success, however, there is little reason to be optimistic that programs providing marriage education and social services on a large scale will significantly affect marriage rates.

HELPING YOUNG MEN

The young fathers of the children born out of wedlock present one of the main barriers to more successful marriages and fewer non-marital births. There are currently almost 5.5 million men between the ages of 18 and 34 who have less than a high-school degree. Large portions of them grew up in single-parent homes themselves, lived in poverty, and attended failing schools as children. A large percentage of them have prison records. Not surprisingly, poor young women are reluctant to marry them.

These women are, however, willing to have babies with them. After many years of interviews and living in poor neighborhoods, sociologist Kathryn Edin and several research partners have assembled an extensive picture of how these young men are viewed by the young women in their neighborhoods. When asked why they don't want to marry

the fathers of their children, the mothers indicated that they didn't trust the young men, that the men didn't work steadily or earn enough money, and that they were too often violent. This description mirrors that of the "cool-pose culture" that Orlando Patterson and other anthropologists apply to men who willingly embrace a lifestyle of hanging out on the streets, working as little as possible, and avoiding binding commitments to family, community, or the mothers of their children. Patterson concludes that the cool-pose culture has evolved to meet current circumstances — especially the difficulty of landing a good job with decent wages — and that no one has figured out a way to break through this culture.

The situation these men face is not fundamentally a result of failed public policies; it is a result of a whole culture of non-marriage, non-work, and serial relationships. It is therefore unlikely that adopting new government policies is going to transform these men into successful husbands and fathers. There are, however, four policy approaches that may help make a difference at the margin.

The first is to address the problem of incarceration. We should start by figuring out ways to avoid putting young men in jail unless they have committed violent offenses. A large number of these young men are incarcerated under mandatory-sentencing laws even for non-violent crimes, and especially for drug-related crimes. Sentencing laws enacted in response to high crime rates in decades past were not irrational or pointless, but it is time for our society to confront their negative consequences and to seek sensible reforms, at both the federal and state levels.

Given the huge proportion of poor young men with prison records, we also need to help these men become productive members of their communities when they get out. There are many programs already in place that attempt to help men who have spent time in prison get jobs and re-integrate into society. One important experimental program in New York City and other locations aims to figure out ways to help young men in juvenile-detention facilities acquire the education, training, counseling, and commitment to personal responsibility they need to avoid subsequent arrests. So far, the research on these programs has been only moderately encouraging. Many of the programs are still in progress, but perhaps the most widely accepted finding is that services, including employment services, for men coming out of prison do not raise employment rates but do reduce recidivism rates. Given this

limited but meaningful success with those who have prison records, it seems reasonable to conclude that we should continue and expand research and programs to help young high-school dropouts — whether or not they have spent time in jail — stay out of jail and find jobs.

A second, related set of ideas is aimed at finding ways to get these young men better qualified for and committed to employment. The program of this type that has had the most success so far is called career academies, in which students organize into small learning communities to participate in academic and technical education for three or four years during high school. Perhaps the most important aspect of the program is the opportunity students have to gain several years of experience with local employers who provide career-specific learning experiences. An eight-year follow-up of young adults who had participated in career academies showed limited effects on young women but major effects on young men. Young men who had been in the program were about 33% more likely to be married, were about 30% more likely to live with their partners and their children, and earned about $30,000 more over the eight years than the men in the randomized control groups. Expanding the reach of career academies, especially in high-poverty areas, would be a wise investment.

A third policy approach would be to provide young single workers without custody of children with an earnings supplement similar to the Earned Income Tax Credit. The goals of the program would be to provide an incentive for young men to seek and accept low-wage jobs and to increase their income so they would be more likely to continue working. An experiment testing the effects of this policy is now being implemented in New York City by the research firm MDRC. Young single workers will be eligible for wage supplements of up to $2,000 per year. Their response in terms of employment, earnings, and social relationships will be carefully tracked and compared to randomly assigned controls. If research on the EITC is any indication, this program should increase work rates and earnings and may have additional positive effects on the participants' social lives.

A fourth intriguing policy, again with some evidence of success, would provide job services to fathers who owe child support to help them find steady employment and increase their child-support payments. A program of this type initiated in Texas found that men who had little money to pay child support would, with the help of the

program, search for and accept jobs. The study also found that the work rates and child-support payments of these men increased. The federal Department of Health and Human Services has provided funds to a total of seven states (not including Texas) to implement and evaluate similar programs. If the Texas results are replicated, other states should launch employment programs for poor fathers who have difficulty paying child support.

By implementing policies to help poor young men develop the skills they need to break out of a destructive cultural cycle, we can help them become more responsible workers and better fathers. And helping young fathers could help young mothers by giving the men in their lives the tools they need to become responsible husbands and fathers.

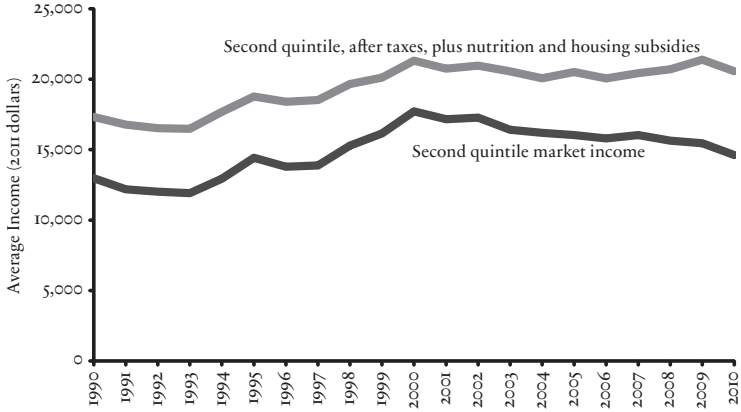
HELPING SINGLE MOTHERS

As long as the deep social maladies underlying non-marital childbirth go unaddressed, young single mothers and their children will continue to need help. Today, there are millions of single mothers who do not have the education, skills, or experience necessary to earn enough to escape poverty. So in order to help them provide for their families, the federal and state governments work together to provide cash payments, work subsidies, and a host of work-support benefits.

Since the Great Depression, an evolving set of government welfare programs has helped to meet the basic needs of poor mothers and their children. The most recent manifestation of these programs is a product of the successful 1996 welfare-reform legislation. Instead of a simple cash transfer (as is done with Social Security), the government's major cash-welfare program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, is contingent upon work for those who are capable of working. Recipients' wages are then subsidized with an assortment of work-support benefits: cash through the EITC and the Additional Child Tax Credit, medical care, food benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps), and child-care services.

A typical single mother earning, say, $10,000 might receive cash from the EITC and the Child Tax Credit, SNAP benefits, and Medicaid coverage for her children. The children also receive school-lunch and possibly other nutrition benefits. The family might also receive help with child care, although there is not enough money appropriated for all eligible mothers to receive such a subsidy.

IMPACT OF GOVERNMENT BENEFITS ON INCOME OF FEMALE-HEADED FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN THE SECOND INCOME QUINTILE



Source: Tabulations by Richard Bavier, based on U.S. Census Bureau March Current Population Survey.

The chart above shows the financial impact of these benefits for single mothers in the second income quintile (incomes between about $11,700 and $24,200 in 2010). The market income of these women (mostly earnings, shown in the bottom line) is increased substantially by the work-support benefits provided by government (as shown in the top line). The chart also shows that both measures of income increased beginning in the mid-1990s when mothers' work rates increased dramatically, primarily due to the work requirements in welfare reform along with a strong economy.

Perhaps the most important feature of this system is that it provides motivation for poor mothers to work because by doing so, even at the low-wage jobs for which most are qualified, they can bring themselves and their children out of poverty. An additional benefit of this system is that a modest number of these mothers prove to have the doggedness and talent to move up the job ladder and increase their earnings over a period of years.

The argument is sometimes made that single mothers are becoming too dependent on government benefits and that only the truly destitute should receive means-tested benefits such as food stamps. But the work-support system has enabled millions of mothers and children to live securely despite limited earnings. Further, many of the mothers who would in the past have been completely dependent upon welfare

have now joined the workforce, in large part because of the strict work requirements attached to these benefits.

Politicians should draw a clear distinction between means-tested benefits that go to able-bodied people who do not work and those that go to working people. It is especially important to maintain the benefits for low-income parents living with or supporting children.

Given the current non-marital birth rates and trends, millions of American children over the next several decades will live in families headed by single mothers. Since it is clear that we cannot produce public policies that will give them two married parents, we should do what we can to protect many of these children from the vicissitudes of poverty by continuing and even expanding the nation's system of strong work requirements backed by work-support benefits.

THE LIMITS OF POLICY

The United States has long been considered the land of opportunity. Americans take particular pride in Horatio Alger stories that seem to prove that anyone willing to work hard enough can make it in our country. That is why reports of rising income inequality and low levels of income mobility have received so much attention; they undermine the ideal of the poor young American able to pull himself up by his bootstraps.

As we have seen, children born out of wedlock are far more likely to live in poverty, and they are far more likely to remain poor as adults. Children raised by two married parents, on the other hand, are not only more likely to have a stable financial situation at home, they also reap the benefits of having more parental investment in their development, better schools, and better neighborhoods. As these patterns reproduce themselves over generations, non-marital childbearing and the poverty that so often accompanies it help to create and sustain two societies within the same nation. Our changing, knowledge-based economy is growing less forgiving of a lack of education, making it hard for young people without college degrees or specialized skills to earn a decent living. And now the last and perhaps most important piece of the traditional American system for building equal opportunity — the married-couple family — is coming apart.

If we want to address the challenges of income inequality and immobility, we must address one of their main causes — non-marital births and single parenting. Maybe stable, married-couple families will never

again be the dominant norm, but if so the children who are raised by such traditional families will continue to have yet another advantage over their peers who have minimal contact with their fathers, live in chaotic households, and are exposed to instability at home as their mothers change partners.

Our society and culture will no doubt continue to change, but our children will continue to pay the price for adult decisions about family composition. Public policies cannot ultimately solve this problem, but those that prove themselves capable of ameliorating some of the damage are surely worth pursuing.

ALSO BY PHILLIP LONGMAN

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THE EMPTY CRADLE

How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity And What To Do About It

PHILLIP LONGMAN

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To Sandy and Sam

2

Coffins and Cradles

When asked how long it will take for the world's population to double, nearly half of all Americans say 20 years or less.[1] This is hardly surprising, given the sensations of overcrowding all of us feel in our day-to-day lives and the persistent reports we hear of teeming Third World megacities. Yet looking beneath the surface of events, we can see that world population growth has already slowed dramatically over the last generation and is headed on a course for absolute decline. Indeed, forecasts by the United Nations and others show the world population growth rate could well turn negative during the lifetime of people now in their 40s and 50s, and is very likely to do so before today's children reach retirement age.[2] Long before then, many nations will shrink in absolute size, and the average age of the world's citizens will shoot up dramatically as the elderly in many parts of the world become far more numerous than children.

These predictions come with considerable certainty. The primary reason is the unprecedented fall in fertility rates over the last generation that is now spreading to every corner of the globe. In both hemispheres, in nations rich and poor, in Christian, Taoist, Confucian, Hindu, and especially Islamic countries, one broad social trend holds

constant at the beginning of the twenty-first century: As more and more of the world's population moves to crowded urban areas, and as women gain in education and economic opportunity, people are producing fewer and fewer children.

Today, global fertility rates are half what they were in 1972. No industrialized nation still produces enough children to sustain its population over time, or to prevent rapid population aging. Germany could easily lose the equivalent of the current population of East Germany over the next half century. Russia's population is already decreasing by three-quarters of a million a year.[3] Japan's population meanwhile is expected to fall by as much as one-third—a decline equivalent, the demographer Hideo Ibe once noted, to that experienced in medieval Europe during the scourges of the plague.[4]

Yet the steepest drops in fertility, and the most rapid rates of population aging, are now occurring in the developing world, where many nations are now growing old before they get rich. Today, when Americans think of Mexico, for example, they think of televised images of desperate, unemployed youths swimming the Rio Grande or slipping through border fences. However, because Mexican fertility rates have dropped so dramatically, by mid-century Mexico will be a less youthful country than the United States, and its population will be older than Japan's is today. The same is true for much of the rest of Latin America, according to United Nations projections.[5]

The Middle-Aging of the Middle East

Similarly, those televised images of desperate, unemployed youths broadcast from the Middle East create a false impression. Fertility rates are falling faster in the Middle East than anywhere else on earth, and as a result the region's population is aging at an unprecedented rate. It took fifty years for the United States to go from a median age of 30 to today's 35. By contrast, during the first fifty years of the twenty-first century, Algeria will increase its median age from 21.7 to 40, according to UN projections.[6]

How can this be? Anyone who travels to the Middle East cannot help but notice the ubiquitous throngs of loitering young people leaning against walls. The phenomenon is so pronounced that there is even a new North African slang term for these idle youth: "Hittite," a play off the Arabic word for "wall."[7]

These youths are members of a distinct, and aging, baby boom generation. They are children of the 1980s, whose large numbers derive not from an increase in fertility rates, but from a dramatic decline in infant mortality that cannot be replicated in the future. Much like the American baby boom generation when it was still in its youth, their large numbers are shaking every institution of their society. But also like the baby boomers in the United States, they are followed by a "baby bust" generation. In demographic terms, the Middle East is following the same path as Europe and the United States did in the 1960s and 1970s, only on a more dramatic scale, with the falloff in birthrates being much steeper, and the resulting aging of population therefore coming on much faster.

In many corners of the Middle East, falling fertility rates have set off alarms about national decline. In 1995, Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan of the Islamist Refah Party warned, "Our population which is nearing 65 million is not enough. . . population is the power by which we shall establish right in the world. These would-be westerners (proponents of family planning) are trying to reduce our population. We must have at least four children."[8]

More recently, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, shortly before becoming Turkey's new prime minister, railed against contraception as "straight out treason to the state." "Have babies," he told a cheering crowd. "Allah wants it."[9]

Despite such exhortations, Turkey's fertility rate continues to decline. At 2.32 children per woman, it is now barely sufficient to replace the population. As a result, Turkey is also among the most rapidly aging

countries on earth, and will have a population structure older than that of the United States by 2050. Iran's fertility rate, meanwhile, has already dropped below replacement levels. By 2025, according to projections by demographer Youssef Courbage, the Middle East as a whole will have a fertility rate of 2.08 children per woman, which is below the amount needed to sustain population growth.[10]

The increasing unwillingness of women in the Middle East to have as many children as their mothers did may in part explain the rise of reactionary fundamentalism in the region. Because of the spread of contraception and female education over the last generation, women of the region increasingly control their fertility. The resulting fall in birthrates allows more and more women to compete directly with men for scarce jobs and political positions, and so the fundamentalists preach (thus far with diminishing success) that Muslim women must stay home and make babies. The old patriarchal order in the Middle East, notes demographer Philippe Fargues,

> rests on two pillars—obedience of the younger to the older and of women to men. Lower fertility rates challenge the first: an only child has no younger sibling to watch over. The second. . . is threatened by changes in society. Girls have better access to education and are marrying later. Through work, they're entering a world of men outside their own family. And there are more single women—something hitherto unknown.[11]

Because of the high fertility rates of the past in the Middle East, a large percentage of the population is now of childbearing age. This means that despite the dramatic decline in the region's average family size, the number of births is still growing. But it is doing so at a greatly slowing pace, with the rate of increase in septuagenarians, octogenarians, and nonagenarians outstripping the rate of increase in children. In thinking about the future of the Middle East, it is important, of course, to reckon with the still expanding population of the region, which puts enormous pressure on water resources and creates many other problems, to say the least. But it is also important to remember that this population is aging rapidly and on a course for absolute decline.

Aging Asia

Similarly, China's low fertility rate, brought on in part by its one-family/one-child policy, has put the country on a course on which by 2020 its labor supply will be shrinking and its median age will be older than that of the United States. By mid-century, China could easily be losing 20–30 percent of its population per generation. Adding to China's demographic meltdown is the spreading use of ultrasound and other techniques for determining the sex of fetuses, which, as in India and many other parts of the world, is leading to much higher abortion rates for females than males. In China, the ratio of male to female births is now 117 to 100, which implies that roughly one out of six males in today's new generation will not succeed in reproducing themselves.[12]

India's fertility rate dropped by roughly a fifth since the first half of the 1990s.[13] Residents of the major southern provinces of Kerala and Tamil Nadu already produce too few children to replace themselves, and this will be true for Indians as a whole by the end of the next decade.[14] Meanwhile, India's sudden drop in fertility means that its population will be aging at three times the rate of the U.S. population over the next half century. By 2050, the median age in India is expected to be 37.9, making its population older than that of the United States today.[15] These projections assume, however, that India does not experience an AIDS pandemic, as now seems increasingly likely. The U.S. National Intelligence Council projects that 25 million Indians could be infected with HIV/AIDS by 2010.[16]

Dwindling Momentum

The global decline in fertility rates, as profound and well established as the trend may be, is hard to spot simply by observing the fabric of ordinary life. Indeed, as I've noted, ordinary life gives most people the opposite impression. That's because, even in areas where birthrates are dramatically below the levels required to avoid population loss even in the near future, the absolute number of people is often still growing.

If this seems counterintuitive, think of a train accelerating up a hill. If the engine stalls, the train will still move forward for a while, but its loss of momentum implies that it will soon be moving backwards, and at ever-greater speed. So it is when fertility rates shift from above to below replacement levels.

The equivalent of the hill is death itself, which is always pushing against any increase in human population. The equivalent of the engine is a fertility rate that consistently produces more births than deaths. When fertility falls below replacement levels, the population continues to increase for a while through sheer force of momentum. But this momentum is a dwindling legacy of a past effort when fertility rates were still above replacement levels.

Specifically, when women born during a period of high fertility (such as the 1950s in the United States) wind up having fewer children than their mothers, population size may well still grow because of the large number of women of childbearing age. But in the next generation, the pool of potential mothers will be smaller than before, and in the generation after that, the pool becomes smaller still. By then the momentum of population growth is lost, or more precisely, is working in the opposite direction with compounding force. Even if a generation comes along in which each woman has more children than her mother did, population decline may by then be inevitable.

Italy provides a good example of both how this phenomenon works and why it goes so largely unnoticed. In industrialized countries, the average woman must bear about 2.1 children over her lifetime to replace the population. The fertility rate of Italy now hovers around 1.2 children per woman, or just 57 percent of the number needed to maintain population size over time.[17] Already the trend has become nearly irreversible. The sharp fall in fertility over recent decades has brought Italian births down from 1 million in the mid-1960s to just over 500,000 in the mid-1990s. The implication, notes demographer Antonio Golini, is that after about 30 years, the pool of potential parents will also fall by half, "and at that point, the population decline will become very intense."[18]

But at least until very recently, the only part of this reality you could observe by walking around the country was a gradually building increase in the number and proportion of old people on streets. Otherwise, with the population still growing by 0.08 percent per year in the late 1990s, the traffic in Rome continued to get worse every year, and the competition for university admission and houses grew more acute.[19] Observing this, Italians, like their counterparts nearly everywhere, could understandably gather the impression that they live in a country that will continue growing ever more crowded.

Yet, the population growth we see all around us, and that so informs our worldviews, is a waning phenomenon. Even in the mighty United States—a nation that in the last two centuries has relied on population growth more than any other to extend its boundaries and project its power—the prospect of rapid population aging is now inevitable, and an absolute fall in population is hardly inconceivable.

3

America's Vanishing Labor Supply

Writing in 1751, Benjamin Franklin exalted in the fecundity of Britain's thirteen American colonies. "There are suppos'd to be now upwards of One Million English Souls in North America, (tho' 'tis thought scarce 80,000 have been brought over Sea)." Franklin was one of the world's earliest demographers, and by his calculations American birthrates (8 children per woman) were double that of Europe and would produce a doubling of the population every 20 years. In another century, he enthusiastically predicted, "the greatest Number of Englishmen will be on this Side of the Water."[1]

Franklin was not far off the mark. Between 1790 and 1830, for example, despite only minimal levels of immigration, the U.S. population grew by 227 percent. And by 1851, the white population of the United States exceeded that of England and Wales by 1.4 million. Today, the fecundity of America's native-born population is long gone. By the early twentieth century, the decline in birthrates among New England's WASP ascendancy was already causing Theodore Roosevelt to mock its pretensions to "Puritan conscience" and to label it as "diseased" and "atrophied."[2] Since then, the phenomenon of falling birthrates has spread to include Americans of all creeds and races.

Today, the United States still has a higher fertility rate than any other industrialized country, but this is only because of its success in attracting large numbers of immigrants who produce comparatively large families. Fertility rates among native-born women are far below what they were in the 1930s, when the privations of the Great Depression forced a sharp decrease in family size. Though the fertility of white women has ticked up slightly in the late 1990s, the last year in which white Americans had enough children to replace themselves was 1971.[3]

Fertility rates among blacks meanwhile are falling faster than among any other racial or ethnic group, with the average African American woman now bearing only 0.1 more children than the average white woman. Because infant mortality is some 137 percent higher among blacks than whites, and life expectancy at all ages is shorter, the black population of the United States is probably not creating enough babies to reproduce itself.[4]

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, meanwhile, are reproducing at well below replacement levels. Among major ethnic and racial groups, only Hispanics are reproducing above replacement levels, and that is primarily because of the comparatively high fertility of recent arrivals, who are themselves having decreasing numbers of children.[5] Nationally, the average Hispanic woman of childbearing age produces fewer and fewer children each year, with the rate dropping from 107 per thousand in 1990 to 96 per thousand in 2001—a 10 percent decline.[6]

In 2002, the "crude" birthrate in the United States as a whole—the number of babies born for every 1,000 U.S. residents—reached a record low, having declined by 17 percent since 1990. This trend is primarily due to the aging of the population, which leaves fewer women of reproductive age, and to an increase in the number of women delaying motherhood until their late 30s or early 40s. The total number of children that women now of reproductive age will have over their lifetime can only be known for certain after the fact. But the government's latest estimate of the total fertility rate shows it having fallen by 3 percent since 1990, to just 2.0125 children per woman, which is below the level required to replace the population.[7]

A continued increase in the percentage of women going to college or graduate school, as well as continued social and economic progress for African Americans and Hispanic Americans, could well push this rate down further. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, "A woman's educational level is the best predictor of how many children she will have."[8] Based on an analysis of 1994 birth certificates, NCHS concludes that non-Hispanic white women with college degrees will complete their childbearing with just 1.7 children. College-educated black women produce even fewer children, while college-educated Hispanic women have a below-replacement level fertility rate. The declining fertility rate among Hispanic women in California, which is driven primarily by gains in educational attainment, has put the state on a course on which it could easily see its population of children under age eleven decline by 585,000 between 2000 and 2010.[9]

Newly arriving immigrants also tend to be better educated than in the past, which means that their fertility rates are much lower as well. The large majority of Mexican immigrants these days, for example, have a secondary education. Immigrants arriving from more distant places are likely to have college degrees or higher. For example, the majority of recent immigrants from the Philippines have been to college, while 75 percent from India have a tertiary education.[10]

Because of the low birthrates of recent decades, the number of native-born American workers aged 25 to 54 will not grow in the next two decades.[11] If fertility rates gradually sink to the levels now seen in most other industrialized Nations and the growth of the foreign-born population settles toward 183,000, the U.S. will be losing population by 2042.[12] If U.S. fertility rates converge with those now seen in Japan or Germany, population loss will begin much sooner.

Meanwhile, even if current fertility and immigration rates hold constant, the U.S. population will be aging rapidly. Between 2005 and 2025 the population aged 65 and older will swell by more than 72 percent, according to Census Bureau projections. Even after assuming an 8.4 percent increase in American fertility rates, and continuing robust levels of immigration over the first half of the twenty-first century, the Census Bureau finds that by 2050, one out of every five Americans will be over age 65, making the U.S. population as a whole much older than that of Florida today. The elderly will be more numerous than children, with the population 65 and over outnumbering those 14 and younger by more than 13 million. Over the first half of the twenty-first century, the number of "old old" persons (85 plus) is expected to nearly quadruple—adding the equivalent of an entire New York City of over-eighty-five-year-olds to the population.[13]

The long-term deficits created by population aging in the United States are staggering. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the combined cost of just two programs—Medicare and Medicaid—will increase from 4.3 percent of the nation's total economic output in 2000 to as much as 11.5 percent in 2030 and to 21 percent in 2050. In other words, before today's five-year-olds turn 65, the cost of these programs alone will be consuming a larger share of the nation's income than *the entire federal government does today*, including the growing cost of interest on the national debt. (See note 16, page 201.)

Nearly every week brings new warnings about the future of old age in America. Government economists have recently calculated, for example, that the U.S. Treasury would have to put aside $44.2 trillion today in order to cover the cost of unfunded pension, health care, and other benefits promised to Americans over the next 75 years. This is more than four times the entire annual output of the U.S. economy. If every American worked for four years and handed over every penny earned to pay down the debt, it still would not go away. Medicare is

the biggest culprit, accounting for more than 80 percent of the shortfall. Social Security accounts for most of the rest, along with a bundle of unfunded promises to aging veterans and government employees. To close this long-term deficit, the economists conclude that "an additional 16.6 percent of annual payrolls would have to be taxed away forever, beginning today."[14]

But what really would that accomplish? The long-term outlook for an aging society is not ultimately a question of finance. It's a question of biology: How many children are born, and for how long after they grow up do they remain healthy, productive adults?

Because of today's low birthrates, there will be fewer workers available in the future to produce the goods and services consumed by each retiree. This would be true even if Social Security and Medicare were fully funded, or even if every American saved up a fat 401(k) balance. Money is just a claim on other people's labor—a way to persuade them to do things like serve you food, mow your lawn, or even more to the point, diagnose your cancer or give you your insulin shot each day. Without human capital, money is worthless.

The nineteenth century economist Henry George made the point quite nicely with his example of the "luxurious idler," who imagines he is living off the legacy of his long-dead father, but who really lives off the labor of those around him.

> On his table are new-laid eggs, butter churned but a few days before, milk which the cow gave this morning, fish which twenty-four hours ago were swimming in the sea, meat which the butcher boy has just brought in time to be cooked, vegetables fresh from the garden, and fruit from the orchard—in short, hardly anything that has not recently left the hand of the productive laborer. . . What this man inherited from his father, and on which he lives, is not actually wealth at all, but only the power of commanding wealth as others produce it. And it is from the contemporaneous production that his subsistence is drawn.[15]

Guns and Canes

Military power also requires contemporaneous production, of both skilled people and materials. Today, the United States thinks of itself as the world's sole remaining superpower, and it is. But as the cost of pensions and health care consume more and more of the nation's wealth, and as growth of the labor force vanishes, it will become more and more difficult for the United States to sustain its current levels of military spending, let alone maintain today's force levels. It may be that national power today is much less dependent than before on the ability to raise large armies. It may be, too, that many of the world's current hot spots will settle down as their populations age. In countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Egypt, more than half the population is currently teenage or younger, but by mid-century, more than half will be well into middle age.

Yet the United States will still face threats. Rapid population aging in the developed and developing world may well add to the list of failed states, creating vast new breeding grounds for terrorism and extremism. Already, countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and the former Soviet Union have been deeply destabilized by financial crises largely induced by the unaffordable cost of their pension systems. As we will see in future chapters, China's political and economic system will also be under deep strain due to population aging, as will that of Japan and Korea, while Europe's social cohesion could also be undone by changing demography. Around the world, population aging, in combination with globalization, is causing social safety nets to fray, even as the extended family everywhere declines.

In such a world, the United States may not face any peer competitors in purely military terms, but could well face exceedingly dangerous terrorist threats and pandemics spawned by the chaos of failing states. How will the United States meet these challenges if they emerge? The technologies the United States currently uses to project its power—laser-guided weapons, stealth aircraft, navigation assisted by the space-based Global Positioning System, nuclear aircraft carriers—are all products of massive and ongoing investments that the United States will not be able to afford if the cost of entitlements continues on its current course. The same point applies regarding the ability of the United States to sustain or increase its levels of foreign aid. If the war on terrorism is indeed a "generational struggle," as National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice has warned, then the United States will have a very difficult time sustaining its financing.

By 2030, according to the Congressional Budget Office, the three big senior benefit programs (Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid) plus interest on the national debt may well consume as much as 24 percent of Gross Domestic Product. By 2050, their cost could well rise to 47 percent of GDP, which is more than double what federal revenues are expected to be at the time. Without dramatic cuts in benefits or increases in taxes, all federal spending will eventually go to seniors.[16]

Moreover, even *within* the U.S. military budget, the competition between guns and canes is already becoming extreme. The Pentagon today spends 84 cents on pensions for every dollar it spends on basic pay.[17] Indeed, except when there is a war on, pensions are now one of the Pentagon's largest budget categories. In 2000, the cost of military pensions amounted to twelve times what the military spent on ammunition, nearly five times what the Navy spent on new ships, and more than five times what the Air Force spent on new planes and missiles. Population does not equal power, but no Great Power has managed to maintain its strength while experiencing the degree of population aging the United States faces over the next several decades.

The graying of the federal budget suggests one of many ways in which population aging may become a vicious cycle. As the cost of supporting the elderly has risen, governments have already responded by raising taxes on younger workers, and will be compelled to do so

much more in the future. Younger workers, finding that not only does the economy require them to have far higher levels of education than did their parents, but that they must also pay far higher payroll taxes, are less able to afford children, and so have fewer of them, causing a new cycle of population aging. If current projections prove true, the working population of the United States essentially will wind up paying one out of every five dollars it earns just to support retirees, while simultaneously trying to finance more and more years of higher education, as well as paying for a military that sees more and more of its resources devoted to yesteryear's soldiers. Under such a scenario, one can well imagine a collapse in fertility rates similar to that which has occurred in Europe (along with an equivalent loss of military power and world influence) as young people try to protect their diminishing standard of living by having even fewer children.

The Limits of Immigration

Immigration is at best only a partial solution. The United States is able to attract a lot of human capital from abroad that is largely paid for by others. India, to take an extreme example, expends precious resources to maintain world-class universities like the Indian Institute of Technology, which rivals Harvard and Caltech in prestige, only to see two-thirds of each graduating class emigrate abroad, mostly to the United States, where many become CEOs and coveted engineers. However, immigration does less than you might think to ease the challenges of population aging. One reason is that most immigrants arrive not as babies, but with a third or so of their lives already behind them, and then go on to become elderly themselves. In the short term, immigrants can help to increase the ratio of workers to retirees, but in the long term they add much less youth to the population than would newborn children.

Indeed, according to a study by the United Nations Population Division, in order to maintain the current ratio of workers to retirees in the United States over time, it would be necessary to absorb an average of 10.8 million immigrants *annually* through 2050. At that point, the U.S. population would be 1.1 billion, 73 percent of which would be immigrants who had arrived in this country since 1995 or their descendents. Just housing such a flow would require the equivalent of building another New York City every ten months or so.[18] The only way any aging country could close its birth deficit through immigration, notes demographer Jean-Claude Chesnais, would be through "massive immigration of children without their parents," a practice Chesnais properly rejects as reminiscent of the slave trade.[19]

Meanwhile, it is unclear how long the United States can sustain even current rates of immigration. One reason, of course, is the heightened security concerns about terrorism. Another is the prospect of a cultural backlash against immigrants, the chances of which increase as native birthrates decline. In the 1920s, when widespread apprehension about declining native fertility rates found voice in books like Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy*,[20] the American political system responded by shutting off immigration. Germany, Sweden, and France did the same in the 1970s as the reality of population decline among the native-born started to set in. Aging nations may need immigrants more than ever, but are often fearful of letting them in.

As historian Alan C. Carlson has noted, "among naturally growing modern peoples, immigrants [seem] to be perceived as a healthy addition to successful, expanding social systems. Among a declining people, though, doubts about national identity appear to grow, immigrants become perceived as a threat, and liberality gives way to xenophobia and suppression."[21] The United States reopened its immigration gates in 1965, just as most Americans were starting to conclude that the native-born baby boom would go on forever. If American fertility patterns continue to converge toward those seen in Western Europe today, we certainly have reason to expect a revival of native chauvinism.

The Latin Age Wave

Another constraint on immigration to the United States involves supply. Birthrates, having already fallen well below replacement levels in Europe and Asia, are now plummeting throughout Latin America as well, creating the prospect that America's last major source of imported manpower will offer a declining pool of applicants.

Mexico's fertility rate, for example, has already fallen below 2.5 children per woman, and will soon be below replacement levels if current trends continue. The fall in Mexican fertility rates has been so dramatic that the country is now aging at a far more rapid pace than the United States and is destined to do so for at least the next two generations. According to UN projections, the median age of Americans will increase by four and a half years during the first half of the twenty-first century, reaching 39.7 years by 2050. By contrast, during the same period Mexico's median age will increase 20 years, leaving half the population over age 42. Put another way, during the course of a year, the U.S. population as a whole ages by little more than one month, while the Mexican population ages by nearly 5 months. Notes Enrique Quintana, coauthor of a book on Mexico's aging population: "Picture a scenario in which almost 23 million people are over the age of 60, most of them have few descendents and many of them scant savings, no job, no retirement coverage scheme. The results can hardly be described as anything but catastrophic."[22]

Long before Mexico reaches this point, the supply of Mexicans available to work in the United States could easily evaporate, as the example of Puerto Rico shows. When most Americans think of Puerto Rico, they think of a sunny, overcrowded island that sends millions of immigrants to the West Side of New York or to Florida. Yet with a fertility rate well below replacement level and a median age of 31.8 years, Puerto Rico no longer provides a net flow of immigrants to the mainland, despite an open border and a lower standard of living.[23]

Similarly, most Caribbean nations are either reproducing at below-replacement levels or tending in that direction. Cuba's fertility rate is among the lowest in the world. As a result, by 2050 Cuba will have a substantially older population than the United States, with nearly half the population over 49. Other Caribbean countries that will be older than the United States include Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint Vincent and Grenadines, St. Lucia, and Barbados.[24] Moreover, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay will all have older populations than the United States by mid-century. Indeed, the UN projects that the median age for Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole will be 39.8 by 2050, which is slightly older than its projections for the United States.[25]

The United States also must contend with the reality that it faces increasing competition from Europe in attracting new immigrants from Latin America. Today, Latinos comprise the fastest growing immigrant communities in Italy, Switzerland, Spain, and Britain. Just between 1999 and 2003, the number of legal Ecuadorian immigrants to Spain surged from just 7,000 to 200,000, accompanied by at least that number of illegals.[26]

Competing for Africans

Sub-Saharan Africa still produces many potential immigrants to the United States, as do the Middle East and parts of South Asia. But to attract immigrants from these regions, the United States must again compete with Europe, which is closer geographically and has a more acute need for imported labor. Europe also offers higher wages for unskilled work and more generous social benefits, as well as large, already established populations of immigrants from these areas.[27]

Moreover, it is by no means clear how many potential immigrants these regions will produce in the future. Birthrates are falling in sub-Saharan Africa as well, even as war and disease leave mortality rates extraordinarily high. The fall in fertility has been largest in South Africa, where total births per woman dropped from 6.85 during the early 1950s to 3.29 by the end of the 1990s.[28] As a result of this and

the AIDS pandemic, the population of South Africa will fall from 43.4 million in 2000 to 38.7 million in 2015.[29] UN projections for the continent as a whole show fertility declining to 2.4 children per woman by mid-century, which may well be below replacement levels if mortality does not dramatically improve. Today, life expectancy at birth ranges from 32 years in Zambia to just 58 years in South Africa, as compared with 80.5 years in Japan.[30] Recent evidence suggests that women infected with HIV, even if they do not develop AIDS, have lower fertility as a result of miscarriage and sterility brought on by the disease and its associated opportunistic infections.[31] Based on studies in Africa, overall fertility of HIV-positive women is 40 percent lower than that of HIV-negative women.[32] Though the course of the HIV/AIDS epidemic through sub-Saharan Africa remains uncertain, the Central Intelligence Agency projects that AIDS and related diseases could kill as many as a quarter of the region's inhabitants by 2010.[33]

All told, some 59 countries, comprising roughly 44 percent of the world's total population, are currently not producing enough children to avoid population decline, and the phenomenon continues to spread. By 2050, according to the latest United Nations projections, 75 percent of all countries, even in underdeveloped regions, will be reproducing at below-replacement levels.[34] Since in the past the United Nations has consistently underestimated the fall of birthrates and may not have given sufficient weight to the effect of AIDS and other pandemics, many demographers believe the falloff in human population will be even more pronounced.

Indeed, even if human life expectancy continues to improve, current fertility trends will most likely cause human population to peak within the lifetime of today's children and possibly much sooner, after which the number of humans will be headed on a rapidly downward slope. A study by researchers at Austria's highly regarded International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, published in the prestigious journal *Nature*, finds that there is around a 20 percent chance that world population will peak before 2050, around a 55 percent chance that it will do so by 2075, and around an 85 percent chance that it will be falling by the end of the century. Under the most likely scenarios, the share of the world population over age 60 will increase from 10 to 22 percent, making the world as a whole older than Western Europe or Florida is today.[35] Some share of the human race will of course continue to reproduce themselves, but who will those people be and what will be their motive?

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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

Divorced From Reality

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THE great myth about divorce is that marital breakup is an increasing threat to American families, with each generation finding their marriages less stable than those of their parents.

Last week's release of new divorce statistics led to a smorgasbord of reporting feeding the myth. This newspaper warned readers, "Don't stock up on silver anniversary cards" because "women and men who married in the late 1970s had a less than even chance of still being married 25 years later." And apparently things are getting worse, as "the latest numbers suggest an uptick in the divorce rate among people married in the most recent 20 years covered in the report, 1975-1994." Other major newspapers ran similar articles.

The story of ever-increasing divorce is a powerful narrative. It is also wrong. In fact, the divorce rate has been falling continuously over the past quarter-century, and is now at its lowest level since 1970. While marriage rates are also declining, those marriages that do occur are increasingly more stable. For instance, marriages that began in the 1990s were more likely to celebrate a 10th anniversary than those that started in the 1980s, which, in turn, were also more likely to last than marriages that began back in the 1970s.

Why were so many analysts led astray by the recent data? Understanding this puzzle requires digging deeper into some rather complex statistics.

The Census Bureau reported that slightly more than half of all marriages occurring between 1975 and 1979 had not made it to their 25th anniversary. This breakup rate is not only alarmingly high, but also represents a rise of about 8 percent when compared with those marriages occurring in the preceding five-year period.

But here's the rub: The census data come from a survey conducted in mid-2004, and at that time, it had not yet been 25 years since the wedding day of around 1 in 10 of those whose marriages they surveyed. And if your wedding was in late 1979, it was simply impossible to have celebrated a 25th anniversary when asked about your marriage in mid-2004.

If the census survey had been conducted six months later, it would have found that a majority of those married in the second half of 1979 were happily moving into their 26th year of marriage. Once these

marriages are added to the mix, it turns out that a majority of couples who tied the knot from 1975 to 1979 — about 53 percent — reached their silver anniversary.

This surveying glitch affected only the most recent data. Still, factoring in an appropriate adjustment yields the conclusion that divorce rates have been falling, not rising. This is not just statistical smoke and mirrors: the Census Bureau warned that the most recent data understate the true stability of recent marriages. But a warning buried in a footnote does not always make the headlines. (Indeed, this newspaper reprinted the table, but omitted the warning.)

The narrative of rising divorce is also completely at odds with counts of divorce certificates, which show the divorce rate as having peaked at 22.8 divorces per 1,000 married couples in 1979 and to have fallen by 2005 to 16.7.

Why has the great divorce myth persisted so powerfully? Reporting on our families is a lot like reporting on the economy: statistical tales of woe provide the foundation for reform proposals. The only difference is that conservatives use these data to make the case for greater government intervention in the marriage market, while liberals use them to promote deregulation of marriage.

But a useful family policy should instead be based on facts. The facts are that divorce is down, and today's marriages are more stable than they have been in decades. Perhaps it is worth stocking up on silver anniversary cards after all.

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