

The Future of American Fertility

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Policy Abstract

The fertility rate is a principal determinant of future age demographics. Fertility has fallen below the replacement level of 2.08 children per woman in all developed countries. It is higher in the United States than in many countries, remaining in a narrow range of 1.98 to 2.08 since 1989. What fertility patterns might be expected in the future? This paper reviews the major factors that appear to be affecting fertility levels in the United States, with an eye towards making defensible statements about future directions of fertility. Several variables associated with fertility are changing in predictable ways. One of these is ethnicity. Another is educational attainment. In each case, however, the projected impact is modest and the combined impact is offsetting. The clearest finding of the study is that fertility in the United States is relatively high, even for its lowest-fertility groups. Compared to most countries in Europe and East Asia, fertility is high even for white non-Hispanics, for states with the lowest fertility, and for college graduates. Until the source of this discrepancy is better understood, it introduces substantial uncertainty into fertility projections.