

## The Future of American Fertility

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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.

The subject covers a vast disciplinary range including demography, economics, sociology, public health, reproductive biology, evolutionary biology, political science, and psychology. These disciplines have not produced a widely-accepted framework for analyzing the determinants of fertility at the level of a population. At various times, low fertility has been blamed on affluence and on economic downturns; on hedonic individualism and on archaic family values; on women's economic independence and on women's adherence to traditional roles. In the absence of powerful and successful theory, this study pursues an eclectic, inductive approach, surveying the landscape of fertility variation in search of clues about its principal drivers.

What have we learned that bears upon the future of American fertility? Several variables associated with fertility are changing in predictable ways. One of these is ethnicity. The US Census Bureau projects the size and ethnic composition of the US population using data on fertility achievements and expectations and anticipated immigration. Its latest projections suggest that the Hispanic population will grow from 12.6% of the population in 2000 to 20.1% in 2030. Combined with large Hispanic/non-Hispanic fertility differentials, and assuming that fertility levels remain constant within ethnic categories, this increase in Hispanic representation would modestly increase overall fertility rates in the United States.

A second variable related to fertility and moving in predictable directions is educational attainment. The US Census Bureau projects an increase in the educational attainment of women of approximately 0.7 years between 2003 and 2028. Combined with the fertility coefficient on years of schooling of  $-.097$ , such changes would lead to a very modest reduction in fertility rates. So the two most predictable changes in population composition, educational attainment and ethnicity, are expected to induce relatively small changes in fertility, and these changes are offsetting. Other factors may play a role, such as improvements in contraceptive technology, a more conservative Supreme Court that places greater restrictions on access to abortion, or an end to the rising age of childbearing.

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.

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One possible explanation of American “exceptionalism” is an unusually flexible and adaptive society, one in which women were able to react quickly to the rise in their work opportunities and find ways to combine motherhood and work while many other societies stayed wedded to more traditional family forms. If American women have simply been quicker to find ways to do things that women elsewhere also want to do-- have at least two children even when they have attractive earnings prospects outside of the home-- then fertility elsewhere could rise to American levels as women and men adapt to new circumstances and abandon older cultural forms.

A second possible explanation of American exceptionalism is the unusually high degree of religious belief and participation among Americans. Projecting religiosity into the future is risky, in part because recent trends are not entirely consistent. On the one hand, the proportion of American adults identifying their religious affiliation as “no religion” appears to be increasing. On the other hand, the proportion of adults who identify as conservative Christians continues to grow, fueled by differential fertility and high rates of intergenerational retention. The possibility that American fertility has strong religious underpinnings does not suggest a clear-cut direction for future fertility trends, but instead compounds the uncertainty.

The full working paper is available on our website, [www.nber.org/programs/ag/rrc/books&papers.html](http://www.nber.org/programs/ag/rrc/books&papers.html) as paper NB07-05.

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