


U.S. Fertility Rate Hits 35-Year High, Stabilizing Population

Some have speculated that one small factor for the rise may be an increase in births in families of military personnel being deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, Ventura said.

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"Maybe they came back and didn't know when their next deployment may be," Ventura said. "That's very interesting, but it's anecdotal at this point."

Some of the increase is explained by immigration. Hispanics have the highest fertility rate -- about 2.9 -- followed by blacks (2.1), Asians (1.9) and whites (1.86). But Hispanics do not represent enough of the population to fully explain the trend, and the fertility rate of U.S. whites is still higher than that of other developed countries.

"It's hard to say any one factor is responsible. It's frustrating when you can't put your finger on what's going on," Ventura said.

Advertisement For developed countries, a replacement-level fertility rate is considered vital for keeping retirement programs such as Social Security solvent by supplying new workers to pay into the system to support retirees.

"A low birthrate results in an old society. It will be hard to support social systems when you have so few people relative to older people," Bongaarts said. "The Europeans are very worried and are turning to all sorts of measures, including giving incentives to people to have children."

The slowdown in the fertility rate can be offset by increasing immigration, but that has caused a backlash across Europe.

"It's a real crisis for some countries," Morgan said. "If you're talking about replacing the births you are not having with migrants, that would lead to fundamental societal change for the receiving country."

Although many European countries offer women incentives to have children, such as providing lengthy paid maternity leave, guaranteeing their jobs and subsidizing child care, the efforts have had limited impact.

"It's widely accepted in the United States that women can have this balance," said Mark Mather of the Population Reference Bureau, a Washington research organization. "I'm not sure that's true in some European countries, such as Germany, where there may still be more of a stigma attached to women working and having families."

While being a mother who works outside the home is far from easy for many American women, many experts said the United States is in many ways more amenable to the practice than many other developed countries. The high-octane consumer economy, for example, helps women run households more efficiently in a number of ways, including making prepared foods more widely available, and weekend and late-night shopping possible. American men are also helping more with their children than in the past, experts say.

"We also have a relatively high percentage of part-time jobs available," said Ronald Rindfuss, a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina. "There's also more shift work outside the normal nine-to-five, Monday-through-Friday schedule that enables parents to share child care."

The nation's religiosity also contributes to the higher fertility rate, which varies geographically, experts said. Red states tend to have both more religious people and higher fertility rates.

"Americans are much more religious than Europeans: They believe in God more. They go to church more," said Charles Westoff, a Princeton University demographer. "That sort of religious attitude or set of values is strongly correlated with fertility."

Whatever the cause, the fertility rate combined with increased immigration is likely to continue to fuel growth of the U.S. population, experts said.

"We have a lot of population momentum in this country because we have so many young people who themselves are going to soon be having 2.1 children," Mather said. "We're going to be growing for quite some time at a fairly fast pace."

But not everyone sees that as encouraging, given that the United States remains a leading consumer of increasingly scarce natural resources.

"The world is now consuming resources faster than the Earth can sustain over the longer term," said Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute. "Forests are shrinking. Fisheries are collapsing. Water tables are falling. Large parts of the world's grasslands are deteriorating. The U.S. is already disproportionately responsible for that because of our very high consumption levels."

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