

The Future of Demography

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Ever since the days of Malthus and Graunt, demographers have had an abiding interest in public affairs. The founders of demography combined empirical inquiry with speculative thought to address questions of longevity, population growth, and the sources of societal well being. The relevance of modern day demography to questions of public policy, informed by careful empirical research has given the field recognition, legitimacy, and support far beyond that of most other contemporary social sciences.

Yet, a closer look reveals that public interest in demography has waxed and waned over the years and the link to public policy issues has sometimes been a distraction from the development of scientific discipline. Much of the interest in demographic questions has come from outside the field. Public fears of over-population—or under-population—are often driven by ideologues or scientists with little or no formal training in demography. While most demographers are very skeptical of extravagant statements about the “population bomb” and similar claims, the fears of the consequences of rapid population growth in Asia, Latin America, and Africa helped to put demography on the international agenda as a policy relevant science during the second half of the 20th century. Major philanthropic foundations, foreign aid programs, and the United Nations expanded a wide variety of programs to address the “population problem.” While most funds were directed to family planning and other programs in developing countries, there were also enormous public and private investments that advanced the scientific field of demography as well.

One of the early programs of the United Nations was collection and publication of demographic statistics from around the world. This led to the production of texts on demographic theory and methods and the creation of training institutes in developing countries. There was also significant support for research and training in demography in universities around the world. A primary focus was research on the determinants of fertility, but in general, the support was sufficiently diffuse to allow for research on almost any topic that could be linked to the broad corpus of demography.

In spite of this enormous support, demography has rarely achieved disciplinary status in the academy. The highly regarded Departments of Demography at Australian National University and the University of California-Berkeley are notable exceptions. At most universities, demography is an area of specialization within sociology, economics, geography, anthropology, and public health, and demographers organize their teaching and research through interdisciplinary programs and centers. This mode of organization has, in general, been very successful and allowed demography to attract scholars from many disciplinary backgrounds to work together on a diverse range of empirical questions from family structure, socioeconomic development, population aging, and the relationships between population and the environment.

As evidence of the decline in fertility in many developing countries began to emerge in the 1990s, there was relief that the combination of socioeconomic development and public policy had begun to pay off. Yet, in the halls of demography, there was some disappointment as philanthropic foundations and governments began to reduce funding for population programs and for demography as a discipline. Demographers were quick to point out that their field was much broader than fertility and to note the amazing record of new empirical knowledge from research on a broad range of topics, including migration, labor force patterns, urbanization, race and ethnic inequality, residential segregation, and the status of families, women, and children. These are remarkable achievements for a relatively small field without disciplinary status, but clearly the golden age of demography was drawing to an end.

In spite of lack of targeted funding, I think the scientific field of demography is remarkably well positioned for a new era of growth. First and foremost, demography is an empirical science that has a comparative advantage in the design and collection of data as well as a wide variety of descriptive and analytical methods that clarify social trends and underlying causes. Secondly, demography has acquired an identity as, internally and externally, a policy-driven science. As new public policy issues emerge, from international health to the well being of families and children, demographers will be called upon for their expertise to measure the scope of the problem. The interdisciplinary nature of demography may be at a disadvantage in the competition for university resources and positions, but it has a distinct advantage in borrowing insights and methods from diverse fields and attracting new researchers. While we may look back on the golden age of demography with some nostalgia, I think the 21st century will witness the continued growth of international demography as the major source of knowledge for empirically informed public policy.