

Birth Control: Academy Report Stresses Burdens of High Birth Rate among the Impoverished Here

It is no secret that if astrologers announce that the end of the world is coming most Americans feel they can be safely ignored, while if the speculation comes from Harvard astronomers, for example, more people begin to worry. Who says something is frequently as important as what he says, and for this reason alone a report issued this week by the Committee on Population of the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council on the domestic population explosion would undoubtedly attract attention. The report, entitled "The Growth of U.S. Population," while it in large measure recapitulates what private citizens and voluntary agencies have said for years about the social and personal implications of a high birth rate, particularly among the poor, speaks with an unassailable authority. And in this particular case the weight of the Academy's reputation is supported by a document of remarkable intrinsic quality. In a field where the writing has often been more polemical than reasoned, the new report strikes a number of delicate balances. It is frank without being crude, brief without sacrificing evidence, and sensitive without being sentimental. Above all, it is lucid. With all these qualities it seems likely that the report will help accelerate the changes already occurring in public and governmental attitudes toward birth control, and, further, that some of its proposals for action may be heeded.

The excellence of the new report should come as no surprise to those who remember the Academy's earlier excursion into the field of population, a 1963 report entitled "The Growth of World Population." That report was prepared by a population panel of the Academy's then newly created Committee on Science and Public Policy. In its 1963 report, addressed chiefly to the problems of economically underdeveloped countries, the panel warned that "nearly all our economic, social, and political problems become more difficult to solve in the face of uncontrolled population growth," and that such growth has a "pervasive and depressing effect on many aspects of human welfare." The panel concluded that "other than the search for lasting peace, no problem is more urgent" than that of curbing population growth, and it sug-

gested a number of ways in which the U.S. could, first, strengthen its own educational and scientific resources for dealing with these questions and, second, seek to make assistance available to people in other countries. The panel also recommended that the Academy assume an active role in the population field by establishing a permanent committee to encourage and coordinate "programs directed toward the solution of problems of uncontrolled population growth." Shortly afterward such a committee was appointed, headed by William D. McElroy, professor of biology at Johns Hopkins, who was also chairman of the original panel. The present report on population problems in the U.S. is the first effort of the new committee.*

The principal message of "The Growth of U.S. Population," as summarized by Academy president Frederick Seitz in a brief introductory note, is that "although the problems relating to size and growth of population are not the same for the United States as for other parts of the world, particularly the less-developed countries, they are nonetheless critical." Expanding on this theme, the preface to the report, signed by McElroy, states: "Too many Americans regard the so-called 'population explosion' with the mild concern usually reserved for vague crises in foreign lands; all too often we consider the size and growth of population as a problem peculiar to Latin America or Africa or Asia. Unquestionably," McElroy continues, "the crisis is more immediate and oppressive to the two-thirds of the human race living in the less-developed countries, where poverty, hunger, and disease are commonplace. However population growth does pose a crucial problem for the United States as well, not only because segments of our population are expanding rapidly, but because advances in communication and transportation have caused developments in other lands to affect our own lives."

The basic focus of the report is on "the steady and persistent increase" in the U.S. population, which it attrib-

utes chiefly to the preference for larger families that has characterized "the more prosperous and better-educated segment of our population" since the 1940's. "If present fertility and mortality trends persist," the report states, "our population will surpass the present world population in a century and a half. And in 650 years, there would be one person per square foot throughout the United States. In the very long run, continued growth of the United States population would first become intolerable and then physically impossible."

In addition to consideration of the long- and short-term social and economic effects of an expanding population, particular attention throughout the report is given to the "condition of high fertility" among the poor. "The high birth rate among the impoverished does not constitute a major threat to over-all national prosperity," the preface states, "but it is one of the factors that puts prosperity out of the reach of millions of our citizens." Indeed, the report says, in one of a number of statements that diplomatically seek to establish a link between the U.S. and the underdeveloped countries, "the burden of unwanted children among impoverished and uneducated mothers in the United States is much like that experienced by mothers in underdeveloped countries."

Burden on Poor Families

The inherent importance of assisting the poor in family planning even though their contribution to the birth rate does not greatly affect the national outlook is stressed again and again. The report points out that, although low-income families do have more children than more prosperous families, "the difference is perhaps not as great as some people believe." Among married women aged 40-44 in 1960, for example, the national average of children ever born was 2.6; for families with incomes under \$2000 per year it was 3.4; and for families with incomes between \$2000 and \$4000 it was 3.0. Thus the average number of children born into the lower-income groups differed by less than 1.0 from the average for higher-income families. But the report emphasizes that "even though the larger numbers of children in low-income families have relatively little effect on the average family size, on the total number of children born, or on the United States birth rate, it has a profound effect on the underprivileged

* The other members of the committee are Bernard Berelson, Population Council; Ansley Coale, Princeton University; Benedict J. Duffy, Jr., Georgetown University; Karl Folkers, Stanford Research Institute; Ronald Freedman, University of Michigan; Seymour Kety, National Institute of Mental Health; C. L. Markert, Johns Hopkins University; John C. Snyder, Harvard School of Public Health; and Howard C. Taylor, Columbia University. The executive secretary is Robert E. Green, National Academy of Sciences. The report, Publication 1279, is available from the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council, Printing and Publishing Office, 2101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20418, for \$1.25.

family itself. . . . The problems imposed on families by excess fertility are not diminished by the realization that such excess fertility does not greatly affect the overall fertility average."

Expanding on the human effects of high fertility, the report says:

Consider the implications of circumstances in which every couple would conceive only children they deliberately chose to have. For the majority of American couples with at least a high school education and enjoying a comfortable income, the result would be that the births they had would be spaced more in accordance with their desires. Couples would successfully terminate their family formation with the two, three, or four children that the vast majority prefer. Such a development in the less-educated sector of our population that contributes disproportionately to excess fertility would greatly diminish one of the conditions that perpetuates poverty in the midst of plenty in the United States.

In the opinion of many psychologists, deformation of character and personality in children, culminating, for example, in juvenile delinquency, often results from a feeling of having been rejected by their parents. Parental attitudes and behavior that produce this feeling of rejection are much more likely when children are born as a result of unintended pregnancies.

The likelihood of a successful education is known to be less for children born to parents who themselves are uneducated. The chance for a good education for children in such underprivileged homes is made even worse by excess fertility, which reduces the care and attention each child can receive.

Also running through the Academy report is the theme that although surveys indicate that the great majority of American couples approve of and practice some form of contraception, in general the poor are not among the practitioners. In the population as a whole, the proportion of couples who do not use and do not expect to use contraception is about 14 percent. Among white couples in which the wife had only a grade school education, the proportion is 28 percent. For non-white couples, the proportion is 43 percent. "The highest proportion of couples who never employ contraception or who have children beyond the number they intend," the report states, "is found among non-whites who live in the rural South or who have a rural southern background." One reason for this discrepancy, the report suggests, is that while most couples who do use contraception have learned about it informally from friends or relatives, or from family doctors, "the disadvantaged groups . . . often do not have even these informal sources of information, and seldom consult private physicians."

The committee's position on contraception is very simply that those who need it should have it. "The freedom to limit family size to the number of children wanted when they are wanted is, in our view, a basic human right," the report asserts. "Most Americans of higher income and better education exercise this right as a matter of course," it continues, "but . . . many of the poor and uneducated are in effect deprived of the right. No family should be fated through poverty or ignorance to have children they do not want and cannot properly care for. Responsible parenthood requires that couples of all social strata have the ability and means to limit births when they wish to do so, in accordance with their personal convictions. In short, this basic freedom for the individual family should be made effective throughout American society."

To promote this objective the Academy report includes a great many controversial suggestions. For example, after pointing out that a large proportion of illegitimate children are progeny of teen-age mothers, the report states that "high school education in family planning is essential"—a proposal quite likely to draw the wrath of the legion of critics who feel that such moves encourage illicit relationships. The report also criticizes public and private welfare and family agencies for having failed to provide family planning services, although it states that significant changes are occurring in this area. The group that comes in for the most detailed analysis and criticism in the population report is the medical profession. "A close examination of medical school curricula reveals serious deficiencies in preparing physicians to fulfill heavier responsibilities in helping to control human fertility," the report asserts. It suggests that more attention should be given in the curriculum to obstetrics and gynecology, and that physicians should have "adequate experience with the prescription and application of the various types of contraceptive methods." The report also stresses the role of the physician in encouraging maternity patients to utilize contraception. "We feel," the committee states, "that after delivery all patients should be offered birth control advice as their right, and that physicians must be trained adequately if they are to supply the needed information." While lamenting that much remains undone, the report commends the American Medical Association for a new policy adopted in 1964, when the

A.M.A. stated that "the prescription of child-spacing measures should be made available to all patients who require them . . ." and encouraged doctors to take a more active interest in birth-control programs.

Conclusions

In addition to the suggestions contained in the body of its report, the Academy population committee made several specific recommendations in three major spheres of activity—research, education and training, and services. Essentially the recommendations in all three areas can be summed up in a single word—"more." Specifically, in terms of research, the committee called for "all appropriate institutions, both private and governmental, to expand their efforts in the whole range of disciplines that contribute to knowledge of population matters, including demography, economics and other social sciences as well as biology, medicine and public health."

In terms of education and training, in addition to encouraging more basic study of reproduction by medical students the committee also urged that "population studies . . . be more prominent in the professional training of biologists, statisticians, economists, sociologists, and psychologists . . ." and that expanded training be made available for "more and better qualified family-planning administrators" who could serve both in this country and abroad. Another recommendation calls for "the inclusion of population studies and the principles of responsible parenthood in the curricula of colleges, universities and secondary schools," and for continued discussion in the mass media.

The committee's most direct recommendations fall into the area of service. Here it makes two points. First, "Family planning should be an integral part of public health programs and of individual medical care. Specifically, family-planning discussion and instruction should be regarded as an essential feature of prenatal and postnatal care, and of maternal welfare programs." And, second, "Non-medical agencies (private and public) responsible for welfare services should include instruction in effective family planning as an essential component of their welfare programs."

In one final recommendation the committee points out that the federal government has an increasing respon-

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sibility in all these areas and suggests that the government "find a mechanism for facilitating as promptly as possible our programs in population research, education, and public service, perhaps by the appointment of a person at a high national level with specific responsibility for leadership in implementing population programs."

In thrusting itself into the middle of domestic discussions on population the Academy has joined ranks with a great many other institutions that have only recently abandoned attitudes of unconcern or neutrality. Chief among these is, of course, the government, which was committed by President Johnson's State of the Union Message to "seek new ways to use our knowledge to help deal with the explosion in world population and the growing scarcity in world resources," and which is now providing birth control assistance to foreign governments who request it, through the Agency for International Development. In addition the American Medical Association, the American Public Health Association, and a number of other agencies and institutions have begun to take an interest in the population problem. The direction of the next effort by the Academy committee has not yet been determined, but it is certain that it will attempt to provide what amounts almost to a new "movement" with the same enlightened leadership that has characterized its first two efforts.—ELINOR LANGER

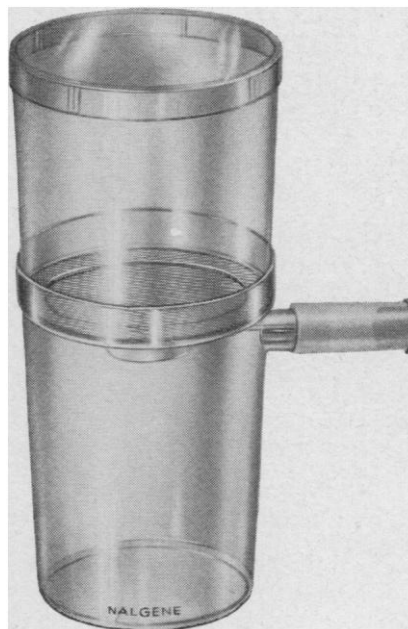
Announcements

Vannevar Bush, retired president of the Carnegie Institution, will present the first Warren G. Magnuson Lecture 1 June at the Pacific Science Center, Seattle, Washington. The lecture, on science and government, will begin a series, and honors Senator Magnuson's "continuing, resourceful leadership on behalf of science, the Pacific Science Center's development, and the Pacific Northwest," according to Edward E. Carlson, president of the Pacific Science Center Foundation.

Erratum: Figure 3 of the article, "Computerized bibliographic services for biomedicine," by L. Karel *et al.* (7 May, p. 769), is a composite of two sets of data. The cards (lower right), both labeled "National Library of Medicine," should have been designated to set them off from data on "Therapy of Chromoblastomycosis." The last item under "Therapy of Chromoblastomycosis" is incomplete.

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