Japan: A Crowded Nation Wants To Boost Its Birthrate

Japan is the most crowded nation in the world. It has 102 million people—half as many as the United States—all crammed into a string of narrow islands that are smaller in total area than Montana. Moreover, 85 percent of Japan's territory is mountainous—a scenic splendor but ill-suited for habitation—so the huge population is actually squeezed into a series of narrow valleys and coastal plains. Japan far exceeds any other country in population density per inhabitable area. As of 1968, Japan had 1333 inhabitants per square kilometer of cultivable land, compared with 565 for runner-up Holland.

The resulting congestion seems unbelievable to many Westerners. Farmland is so scarce that one finds crops growing everywhere—up the sides of steep hills, in the narrow alleys between adjacent railroad tracks, even at the front stoop, where one ordinarily expects to find a lawn. In the cities, and even in rural villages, tiny houses are jammed side by side, with little or no yard space and barely enough room to walk between. Living is so close that privacy is difficult. As one Japanese physician expressed it: "It's a standing joke among us that you can always tell what a neighbor is cooking. If you can't smell it, you can hear the conversation."

Thus it came as a shock to many Westerners last summer when Prime Minister Eisaku Sato publicly advocated an *increase* in Japan's birthrate. Sato's statement, made in a speech to Japanese newspaper editors, seemed to mark a major reversal of Japan's population policy. For the past two decades, Japan has struggled to curb its population growth, and to a large extent it has succeeded. But now, the Prime Minister indicated, the population control effort may have gone too far. Sato noted that Japan's birthrate had fallen below the average for other advanced nations, and he said the government would strive to bring it back up to that average level. Thus, while other world leaders are struggling to curb the widely feared "population explosion," Japan seems to have embarked on a somewhat contrary course.

The Prime Minister's remarks caused great consternation in family planning circles in Japan, for even at the current rate of expansion, Japan's population is expected to rise to 131 million by early next century before starting to decline. Takuma Terao, an economist who is chairman of the Family Planning Federation of Japan, told *Science*: "I am entirely against the idea of raising the birthrate. Japan already has too large a population." Similarly, Minoru Muramatsu, one of Japan's leading authorities on the public health aspects of population growth, said in an interview: "In terms of space, Japan already has too many people. If you live in Tokyo, all you can find is a place to eat and a place to earn money. There is no green, no trees. I don't feel that people are living a very human life."

A High-Level Recommendation

Yet Sato's statement was no irrational, off-the-cuff remark by an uninformed politician. It was based on some cautiously worded recommendations made by the Population Problems Inquiry Council, a cabinet-level advisory group which includes some of Japan's leading demographers. Moreover, the recommendations are aimed at alleviating some potentially serious economic and social problems that are related, at least in part, to Japan's success at curbing its population growth. One such problem is a worsening labor shortage that threatens to undermine Japan's "economic miracle"; another is an increasing number of elderly people who will have to be cared for somehow, particularly now that Japan's traditional descendant family system, in which the younger generations cared for the older, is breaking up.

This article will make no attempt to prescribe what Japan's population policy should be, for the Japanese, one of the world's most highly educated and industrious peoples, are certainly capable of deciding for themselves what sort of future environment they want. But the Japanese situation is worth examining in some detail because the same problems—and the same political and economic pressures—may well arise in this country as the population growth here is brought under tighter control.

Japan has undeniably achieved remarkable success at controlling its birthrate. In the early 1920's, the birthrate stood above 36 per 1000 population, but then it declined moderately and steadily, a phenomenon that usually accompanies the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society. The rate fell as low as 26.6 in the late 1930's before the trend was reversed by the pronatal policy of Japan's military leaders. After the Second World War the rate soared back up as Japan experienced the normal "baby boom" that occurs when soldiers and overseas civilians return home. The birthrate reached 34.3 in 1947 (an intermediate level by world standards) and stayed above 33 in 1948 and 1949, before beginning the precipitous drop that has brought Japan such praise for its "population miracle." By 1957 Japan's birthrate had fallen to 17.2, a historically unprecedented drop of 50 percent in just 10 years. The decline seems especially sharp when measured from the peak of the postwar baby boom, but even compared with prewar trends, the reduction is considered significant.

What was the secret of Japan's success? Interestingly enough, many Japanese demographers describe the achievement as largely "spontaneous" in the sense that the Japanese people, faced with near-starvation economic conditions after the war, concluded on their own that they should limit the number of children. The news media and women's magazines issued dire warnings, particularly at the height of the baby boom, about the bleak future faced by a nation with too many mouths and a war-ravaged economy, and the highly literate Japanese population obviously got the message. The national government unquestionably helped the population control effort, chiefly by reversing its pronatal policy of the war period. A national Eugenic Protection Law, passed in 1948 and subsequently amended, removed the previous obstacles to birth control, abortion, and sterilization. But many Japanese experts believe the government was always at least one step behind what the people were already doing. One reason for the Eugenic Protection Law, for example, was that so many women were obtaining illegal abortions that the government decided it should protect their health by legalizing the procedure. "The government

had no definite policy to bring about population control," says Toshio Kuroda, chief of the migration research division at the government's Institute for Population Problems. "It just happened under the very extraordinary situation after the war. Ten years later people looked back and said we were successful at controlling our population. But no expert in Japan predicted it would happen."

The chief method for curbing the birthrate was induced abortion. The Japanese do not seem to have the strong religious scruples against "taking a life" that have hobbled efforts to increase the use of abortion in this country. Indeed, during the 18th and 19th centuries Japanese peasants often resorted to infanticide to get rid of unwanted children at times of crop failure. Today, abortions are legally obtainable for a number of health and economic reasons. In practice, they are said to be obtainable almost at will. The vast majority of abortions are performed by private physicians within the first 3 months of pregnancy, and most of these take place without overnight admission to a hospital or another medical facility. The operations are quite inexpensive, costing an average of $10 to $15, according to one estimate published in 1967. Health insurance benefits often bring the out-of-pocket cost down much further—sometimes even below $1.

Abortions Declining

The number of officially reported abortions (which is believed to represent about half the total number of abortions) reached a high of 1.17 million in 1955 but has since declined to 757,000 in 1968, largely because of government efforts to encourage contraception as an alternative to abortion. In the early 1950's, according to studies by the Institute for Population Problems, abortion accounted for roughly 70 percent of the decline in Japan's fertility while family planning accounted for 30 percent, but in recent years the percentages have been reversed.

The percentage of couples practicing contraception in Japan seems to be somewhat lower than the figure for comparable populations elsewhere. A 1965 survey indicated that about 67 percent of all Japanese couples either had practiced or were then practicing contraception, compared with perhaps 80 to 90 percent for Great Britain and for the white population of the United States. The most popular contraceptive methods have consistently been the condom and the "safe period" or a combination of both. The Japanese make little use of the "pill" or the intrauterine device (IUD), which are mainstays of the population control effort elsewhere, largely because conservative medical opinion in Japan believes it is not wholesome to introduce foreign materials into a healthy body. The government officially prohibits the insertion of IUD's and the sale of oral contraceptives, and while there are large loopholes in these laws, few Japanese use either of the methods.

Japan's success at curbing its population growth is believed to have contributed significantly to the fantastic economic boom that has propelled Japan's gross national product to third rank in the world. If Japan had not curbed its birthrate so sharply, some analysts say, then a sizable portion of the nation's capital resources would have been used to support new additions to the population and would not have been available for economic recovery and industrial investment. Yet the curbing of population growth has not been an unmixed blessing. As conditions have changed in recent years, industry has increasingly complained about a labor shortage, particularly a shortage of young laborers.

I found considerable disagreement as to whether Japan is really suffering from a labor shortage and, if so, what should be done about it. The age composition of the Japanese population has changed considerably over the past decade or two. There has been a sharp decrease, both absolute and relative, in the population of children below the age of 15, and a sharp increase, both absolute and relative, in the population over 65. Meanwhile, the working age population, from 15 to 64, has continued to increase, but at a slower and slower rate. The average annual increase in the working age population exceeded 1 million for the 1965–70 period, but it will drop to 620,000 for the next 5 years and will become negative by the end of the century. When viewed against the needs of a rapidly expanding economy, the labor pool appears to be shrinking.

"The labor supply has changed rather remarkably from surplus to shortage," says Saburo Okita, director of the Japan Economic Research Center and a member of the Population Problems Inquiry Council. "There is already a shortage of young workers, and while there is still some surplus of middle-aged workers and women, many of us predict there will be a serious labor shortage in the coming years." Some Japanese economists contend that a decline in West Germany's economic growth rate in the late 1950's was caused primarily by a drop in the growth rate for Germany's labor population, and they suggest that Japan's "economic miracle" may be stalled by the same problem.

Seeking Cheap Labor?

Yet Takuma Terao, the economist who heads the Family Planning Federation of Japan, offers a much different analysis. "The industrialists say the labor shortage is very severe," he says. "But I say what is deficient is young labor, which is very cheap. So all we can say is that we lack cheap labor, only that." Terao and most other experts agree that the chief factor behind the shortage of young labor has not been the low birthrates, but rather the great growth in the number of young people who now go on to high school or college instead of beginning work at an early age. Terao believes it would be "rash to raise fertility" simply to assure more laborers. He believes it would be more sensible for Japan to "rationalize" its traditionally inefficient business enterprises so as to gain greater labor productivity. "We already have an abundance of laborers," he says, "but they are not well utilized."

The Population Problems Inquiry Council — the cabinet-level advisory group whose recommendations provided the basis for Prime Minister Sato's remarks—took a middle-of-the-road position. The council which is made up of some 40 public and private members, including academics and business and labor leaders, was asked in April 1967 to study the implications of Japan's low birthrate. Last August a subcommittee of the council issued an interim report on its findings; a final report is due this year. According to Kuroda, who sat on the council, the interim report represents a "compromise between those who are worried about a labor shortage and those who think Japan is already too populated." The report is said to have been drafted by Minoru Tachi, an eminent demographer who heads the government's Institute of Population Problems. An unofficial English translation was prepared by the U.S. State Department.

The report, if read carefully, does not seem especially earth-shaking. It notes that Japan's population, by some

measures, is no longer replacing itself; it warns that this is causing certain problems; and it recommends that Japan seek to achieve a "stationary" population in terms of both total size and age distribution. The report makes no mention of what the ideal population for Japan should be, and as far as I could tell from talking to two members of the council—namely, Kuroda and Okita—there was little discussion of optimum population size. Instead, the report focused its attention on indicators that measure the changing growth rate and age composition of the Japanese population.

The report expressed particular concern over trends in the net reproduction rate, a measure of the extent to which the female population of child-bearing age is reproducing itself with female babies. If the net reproduction rate is 1, the population will potentially become stationary one generation later. If the rate exceeds 1, the population will continuously increase, and if it falls below 1, the population is expected to begin to decrease one generation later. Japan's rate is currently the lowest in the world except for some East European Communist bloc nations. It has remained slightly below 1 almost every year since 1956, generally ranging between 0.9 and 1.

A Rare Occurrence

The report states that while the rate has occasionally dipped below 1 in other countries, "it is very rare for such a situation to continue for more than ten years." (The net reproduction rate for the United States was 1.2 in 1967 and has not dropped below 1 since the 1930's.) The report suggests that Japan's population reproductivity is now "too low," and while it acknowledges that "a high population increase rate cannot be welcomed," it nevertheless believes it would be "desirable" for the net reproduction rate to return to 1 "in the near future" in order to ease the "severe changes in population composition by age."

But the report is very careful not to suggest any direct intervention by the government, such as subsidies to support additional children. Instead, the report simply urges the government to improve social conditions so that Japanese couples will spontaneously decide to have more children. The report also recommends that Japan improve its old-age welfare system and increase the productivity of its labor system.

The report gives no hint as to how its recommendations would affect the size of Japan's population, but there is no question that the population will continue to rise substantially. Government estimates for Japan's population in the year 2025 range from a minimum of 129 million (if the net reproduction rate remains below 1) to a maximum of 152 million, with the median projection being 140 million.

The report is so cautiously written that even such critics as Muramatsu acknowledge there is "nothing really wrong with it if you read the text very carefully." After all, who can object to the government improving social conditions? But opponents of the report are upset that mass media stressed the need for more births and largely ignored the question of social improvement. Some also feel the government was premature in its announcement, since they believe the net reproduction rate is already heading back toward 1, or even higher, without any encouragement. Other critics fear the government will eventually decide to intervene in a very direct way to encourage more births, and some even fear that the government's action was partly motivated by a desire to grow soldiers for a future large army.

At bottom, the disagreement is one of priorities. Those who regard economic expansion as the greatest good want more bodies to man the assembly lines. Those who are worried about overcrowding are willing to sacrifice some economic growth in return for more living space. The question of how much living space is desirable, however, is a knotty one. My own reaction to Japan was to be appalled at the overcrowding. But there is some evidence that the Japanese have grown accustomed to their close living conditions and actually even like them. Ichiro Kawasaki, a former Japanese diplomat, has written that the massive stone buildings of the West "overwhelm" Japanese travelers, and they soon "begin to miss the light wooden structures and small landscape gardens to which they have so long been accustomed." Similarly, Maramatsu, who spent several years at Johns Hopkins University and who frequently travels abroad, laments that many Japanese have no idea what he is talking about when he extols the "spacious way of living" in other countries. "For generations," he says, "many of our people have been living under the same conditions, so they don't question whether it is wrong or right."

Such differing attitudes toward space needs make it difficult for the experts in one advanced nation to suggest the best population policy for another advanced nation. Such differences also make it difficult to visualize how much of a burden population growth in any one country would really impose on future generations in that country. Perhaps future generations will enjoy living shoulder to shoulder.

The Lesson of Japan's Experience

Japan's decision to boost its birthrate slightly may have an impact and significance beyond its own borders. Some family planning advocates fear Japan's action may throw a monkey wrench in worldwide efforts to curb population growth by somehow downgrading the importance of birth control. Others fear Japan demonstrates that radical population control can never succeed, for the minute a nation reaches the point where its population is apt to level off and then decline, various pressures—political, economic, and nationalistic—build up to reverse the trend. Both views are probably too apocalyptic, for Japan is merely trying to boost its net reproduction rate by a modest amount until it returns to 1—a level that is considered the desirable goal by planners in many other countries. Some U.S. experts, for example, have called for a stationary population and a zero rate of growth, and that is precisely what Japan is seeking.

The real significance of Japan's experience may be that it underlines the costs involved in achieving population control. Some experts in this country, such as Ansley J. Coale, director of the Office of Population Research at Princeton University, have pointed out that a stationary population and a zero growth rate have unfavorable as well as advantageous effects. Coale suggests, for example, that a stationary population "is not likely to be receptive to change and indeed would have a strong tendency towards nostalgia and conservatism." He also suggests that such a society would no longer offer "a reasonable expectation of advancement in authority with age," since there would be essentially the same number of 50-year-olds as 20-year-olds. Zero growth is unquestionably desirable at some point before crowding becomes painful, but in the current rush to jump on the population control bandwagon, it is well to remember that population control is not an unmixed blessing. There are costs involved, and someone will have to pay them.—PHILIP M. BOFFEY