Population:
The Fear That Birth Control May Mean ‘Genocide’

Concern over the world’s population explosion, and the attendant dissemination of birth control devices and the liberalization of abortion laws, have had their effects in the United States: a marked decline in the birth rate. But they have also sparked a growing controversy over the implications of the zero-population-growth movement for racial and ethnic minorities within the nation.

Traditional opposition to birth control measures, of course, has come from the Roman Catholic Church, on moral grounds. The new opponents base their dissent on political and cultural grounds. The position has been articulated most openly by Jews and Negroes.

Since many Jews have been active in the zero population-growth movement, observers have been particularly struck by the dissenting views voiced in a recent issue of the magazine Commentary. In a lead article by Milton Himmelfarb and in a column by editor Norman Podhoretz, the magazine asks in effect whether American Jews are not going to eliminate themselves as an important force in the society by their enthusiasm for population control.

The Arguments

It has been argued that the birth rate among Jews is lower than that for most other groups, and that any lessening would further decrease the relative size of the group in the society. The statistical evidence for such conclusions, however, is incomplete; there are, for example, no comparable census statistics on the trend over time of births, deaths and contraceptive use among Jews.

The opposition to zero population-growth grows among Negroes, that has been more widespread. At the extreme, militants charge that efforts to persuade black women to use contraceptives or to have abortions—where they are legally available—are really aimed at achieving black genocide.

A recent report by a black researcher, Dr. William A. Darby of Amherst, Mass., suggests that these sentiments have large support in the Negro community. In one New England city, Dr. Darby found that 93 per cent of the black males under 30 were opposed to abortion, or at least half of them felt that encouragement of the use of birth control methods "is comparable to trying to eliminate [blacks] from society."

Additionally, some black nationalists have argued that it is important for the black population of this country to grow more rapidly than the white population so that Negroes can gain increasingly more political power. "The more people, the more power," they proclaim.

In the case of non-white citizens, the great majority of whom are Negroes, there is a wealth of population and birth data, particularly from a special Census Bureau study released last month. The statisticians report that this country’s black population is actually growing rapidly, both absolutely and relative to whites. Between 1950 and 1970 the number of Negroes in this country increased by 90 per cent, from 15 million to 22.7 million persons, while the white population increased by less than one-third.

Two factors explain the difference in growth. One is the higher birth rate for Negroes. Over most of the past 20 years the non-white birth rate in this country has usually been about 10 to 15 per cent higher than the white birth rate. This marked difference has persisted even over the past decade when the birth rates of both groups have declined appreciably.

The second factor is the rapid decrease in the non-white birth rate since 1960. Over the past 20 years this rate has fallen about 15 per cent, and has reached roughly the same level as the white death rate which has remained almost constant. Last December, in fact, the non-white death rate was slightly below the white death rate.

By census definition, it is worth noting, the "white" category includes Americans of Spanish origin—primarily Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans—whose social, economic and demographic characteristics resemble those of blacks more closely than those of the descendants of European immigrants. Aside from Negroes, the "non-white" category includes Indians, Chinese, Japanese and Hawaiians.

A census calculation published two years ago suggests that if recent trends continue they could produce further appreciable changes in the "mix" of the American population. Census statisticians calculated what they call the "intrinsic rate of natural increase." This is an attempt to make white and non-white rates of population growth fully comparable by allowing for the differences in the age patterns of mothers and in the age patterns of death.

On this corrected basis, if 1967 trends were to continue for a substantial period of time, the white population would grow on the average by 3.6 persons per 1,000 women annually and the non-white population by 18.2 persons per 1,000 women annually, or three times as rapidly.

Such calculations are pure exercises in theory, of course, for trends can and do change. Thus some statisticians argue that as non-whites rise in the economic scale and become better educated, their birth rates tend to fall in the same manner that birth rates of whites have declined. Demographers have stubbornly held these views, even though some predictions that have turned out to be wrong that they are reluctant now to make rigid forecasts for the future even as regards total American population growth, let alone its components.

—HARRY SCHWARTZ

Death Rate

Deaths per 1,000 population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Non-white</th>
<th>White</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10.5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'70</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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On this corrected basis, if 1967 trends were to continue for a substantial period of time, the white population would grow on the average by 3.6 persons per 1,000 women annually and the non-white population by 18.2