

## **AMERICA – AND DARWIN**

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It's not the sexiest title in town -- "Births: Final Data for 1999." But it is from such obscure government publications that we often learn whither we are tending, and perhaps why. In that sense, this new National Center for Health Statistics report deserves headlines.

Part of the portrait comes from what's changing, part from what's not.

First, the teen-age birth rate went down to record levels, particularly among blacks. For all teen-agers from 1998 to 1999, birth rates dropped by 3 percent. For a longer period, 1991 to 1999, the drop was 22 percent for whites, 12 percent for Hispanics and 30 percent for blacks. (The black rate declined 5 percent in 1998-1999 alone.)

Why? NCHS demographer Stephanie Ventura ascribes the change to many factors. Programs and publicity have inundated the teen community, some stressing safe sex, some preaching abstinence, some promulgating both -- through public, private and religious venues. I would add welfare reform to that list, which has taken away a destructive bonus for teen-age parenthood.

Therefore what? In short, when taught, teen-agers learn. (Flash!) Teen-age birth, typically out-of-wedlock, is a bummer. If teen-agers are learning, we ought to keep teaching. And we ought to remember that many smart alecks a decade ago scorned the idea that social policy could reduce sexual activity in these oh-so-sophisticated modern times. So: Activism works.

Second, while teen-age birth has gone down, rates for women in the their 30s and

early 40s have gone up mildly. But this is no balance. Most women have their children in their 20s, at a rate of about 115 per 1000 women in that age group. But from ages 30 to 34, the rate is 90, for women aged 35 to 39, it is 38, and for women aged 40 to 44, just 7. So, when those rates for older women go up, it doesn't have a huge effect on overall fertility.

Third, the age of first birth continues to climb, as it has since 1972, now up to 24.5 years of age, up from 22. This is a global phenomenon. Something is going on. Women are going on to higher education, getting jobs, getting married later -- and having starkly fewer children.

If you push this fact a bit, it yields a cosmic question. Was Charles Darwin wrong? He said that "survival" of the species was a predominant human driver. But Darwin didn't live in the late 20th century, when women are more likely to go to college than men and often hold good jobs, when farmers move to cities, when abortion is legal and contraception common, when color television is in almost every house. So now, with all that, according to solid ongoing data, modern people aren't coming close to assuring the survival of their species. Weird.

Consider: The big grand number in demography is the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) -- that is, the number of children a woman bears on average over the course of her child-bearing years. For 30 years in America, the TFR has been below the "replacement" rate of 2.1 children per woman; it is now at 2.075. But that is artificially inflated in some measure by a substantial immigration of Mexican-Americans who, in their first generation, have high fertility rates. (As a sign of the times, the TFR in Mexico has declined by 9 percent, just since 1995.)

The white, non-Hispanic (so-called "Anglo") TFR is currently 1.85, about 12 percent below replacement. The Cuban-American rate is the lowest, at 1.6. (Black Americans, 2.21; Mexican-Americans, 3.18; Puerto Ricans, 2.38; Asian-Americans, 1.9.)

That Anglo rate of 1.85 is not much higher than some of the low rates in Europe that we cluck about, France and England for example. Some of the other European rates have been bizarrely low for more than a generation -- about 1.2 in Spain, Germany and Italy. The Japanese rate is 1.3. The rates in most of the so-called non-modern world have also shown vast drops in fertility, albeit from higher base levels. What does it mean, Professor Darwin?

And finally, some mildly satisfying non-change. About one-third of all

American births are out of wedlock. That is catastrophically higher than it used to be: 5 percent in 1960, 11 percent in 1970, 18 percent in 1980, 28 percent in 1990, 33 percent in 1994. But it has held constant at about that one-third level for the past five years. The black out-of-wedlock rate is much higher, soaring from 23 percent in 1960 to 70 percent in 1994, since which time it has actually fallen fractionally. When harmful change has been so stark, no change can be big news. It appears as if a most unfortunate trend has at least topped out.

In fact, I think it may well reverse itself. When teen-age girls don't get pregnant and wait until their 20s to have children, that 20-something mom is much more likely to be married to her children's father. For technical reasons, there will likely be a demographic lag until we see that happen. But when we see it, it will be big news, and you'll know it first from an obscure government report.

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