

# Demographics comes of age as a key analytical tool

When last Oct. 16, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that this country's population had reached the 300 million mark, there was considerable hoopla – and rightly so, since we continue to be the third-most populated country, home to about one in 20 people in the world.

Further, we account for 7 percent of the world's total occupied land area (excluding Antarctica), which also makes us the third-largest country by area, following Russia and Canada. The combination of land and population contributes to the United States' power; and in 37 more years, the Census projects, another 100 million residents will be added to this country.

Our nation is different from many other industrialized countries in that we are growing in population, while they are not. While over the next 37 years, we expect a 33-percent increase in our population, France and the United Kingdom are projected to grow by less than 10 percent, and

Germany, Japan and Italy are expected to lose population.

Although we have experienced lower birth rates in the past, our current 2.0 fertility rate (vs. a replacement level of 2.1 and Western Europe's 1.6) keeps us relatively stable, even though about 12 percent of our population is 65 and older – which is considerably less than Western Europe's 17 percent.

The major difference that sets us apart from these other countries is our immigration – a trademark of this country. The United States accepts more legal immigrants as permanent residents than the rest of the world combined.

The population, its distribution, characteristics and movement are what we study in demographics, a field largely ignored a generation ago, but now viewed as important to economics, marketing, development, geography, health, insurance and a host of other areas. The ease of generating numbers on computers and the growing recognition that selected numbers can reveal and even anticipate societal needs has fueled this new interest.

Consider the generation born between 1946 and 1964 – still called the “baby boomers” – whose numbers sparked this greater interest in demographics.

The Great Depression of the 1930s and the war years of the early 1940s were both times of deprivation and sacrifice, and the lack of jobs and the wartime struggle meant that marriages and having children were postponed, in many cases for a decade. When the war was over, it was time to catch up. And the children started to arrive in great numbers in 1946.

U.S. births in the first part of the last century had usually numbered less than 3 million per year, reaching a low of 2.3 million in 1933 and exceeding 3 million only twice, once in the early 1920s and once in the early part of World War II, just before fathers were included in the draft.

After the war, the numbers rose rapidly, reaching 4 million in 1954 and staying at that level until 1964 (after that, the number was not reached again until 1989). More than 75 million babies were born during the boom. Today, about 4 million babies are born in the United States each year again, but to a population that is nearly twice the size of that in the baby boom era.

The baby boom was a time of large families and many children, compared with today's small families. We experienced a sharp increase in the demand for housing, schools and colleges and a change in music and fashion, and the market responded over time. Now, as this generation starts to be eligible for Social Security benefits, there's talk of changing the system because of the impact they're going to make.

We have become enamored

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with labeling generations, so now we have Generations X and Y, and some have also added the Millennial label for the latest cohort.

Is demographics useful? In the best-selling Canadian book “Boom, Bust and Echo,” David K. Foot and Daniel Stoffman claim that “demographics explain about two-thirds of everything.”

In a Smithsonian Magazine article, however, Joel Garreau says demographics “is simply the arithmetic of culture and values – it only quantifies, it doesn't explain.”

Yet Garreau also concludes that while “demography may not be destiny ... the numerical study of who we are and how we got that way does have a refreshing habit of focusing our attention on what's important, long term, about our culture and values – where we're headed, and what makes us tick.”

Certainly, both agree, it is wise to count the numbers. ■

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