

SCOTT CONNOLLY, KATIE ELMORE,  
AND WILLIAM RYERSON

# U.S. Attitudes on Population

A mixed picture that seems to reflect confusing media messages.

Our planet faces a “perfect storm” of unprecedented challenges, including climate change, food and water shortages, and a severe energy crisis. But while the urgency of addressing these issues is undisputed, many people in the United States fail to understand how overpopulation aggravates these problems. A recent nationwide Roper Poll commissioned by our organization, the Population Media Center, found that the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of the U.S. public on the issue of population are ambivalent or even contradictory. As it turns out, this is a clear reflection of mainstream media coverage.

World population grows by 78 million annually and that stark fact has received some notice. For example, on March 14, 2008, the *Financial Times* of London proclaimed, “Africa’s Greatest Challenge Is to Reduce Fertility.” Three days later, the Associated Press headlined, “Egyptian President Says Unrestricted Rise of Population Affects the Quality of Life.” On March 24, the *Wall Street Journal* chimed in with “New Limits to Growth Revive Malthusian Fears.” And in late April, the *Washington Post* announced, “Birthrates Help Keep Filipinos in Poverty.” And in response, some concerned people are speaking out. For example, in his Message for the New Millennium, the Dalai Lama said, “One of the great challenges today is the population explosion. Unless we are able to tackle this issue effectively, we will be confronted with the problem of the natural resources being inadequate for all the human beings on this earth.”

But although impressive progress has been made in reducing birth rates, this success has been interpreted by many journalists as the onset of a new crisis. By calling reduced fertility “The Birth Dearth,” the reporters have shifted the emphasis to too few young people and a possible decline in human numbers sometime in the next 50 to 300 years.

For example, on June 29, 2008, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a major essay entitled “Childless Europe,” which echoed an earlier piece (November 23, 1997) that proclaimed “The Population Explosion Is Over.” The June 18, 2008 *Boston Globe* carried an editorial entitled, “The Coming Population Bust” and followed it with a June 22 editorial headed, “A

World Without Children.” On June 30, 2006, *Science* magazine published “The Baby Deficit,” with a second piece called, “The Bomb that Wasn’t.” On July 9, 2006, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran an article headlined, “Birthrate Decline Will Be Our Global Peril.” On January 26, 2005, the *Times of India* went so far as to declare, “Population No Longer a Worry in Poor Countries.” On August 29, 2004, the *New York Times* printed an editorial entitled, “Subtract Billions: Demographic ‘Bomb’ May Only Go ‘Pop!’” *Newsweek* followed suit on September 27 with “Birth Dearth; Remember the Population Bomb?” The *Wall Street Journal* in a January 24, 2003 editorial referred to a “Global Baby Bust,” citing more recent United Nations projections.

Most of the articles downplay or leave out entirely that the UN projects a likely 2.5 billion population increase by 2050. At the time of this writing, there are 6.7 billion people on our planet; by 2050 there will probably be about 9.2 billion. These mixed and contradictory messages coming from the media about population are mirrored in the results found in our recent survey, which tapped a nationally representative sample of 1,011 U.S. residents age 18 and over and was conducted June 13–15. The margin of error for the total sample is, on average, +/- 3 percentage points at the 95-percent confidence level.

## Understandings and Misunderstandings

People in the United States are split when it comes to the impact of population growth on the environment. For example, just over half of survey respondents believe that there is a strong link between a growing global population and climate change. Similarly, the respondents are divided about whether population growth will affect the availability of resources for their children in the future, and half believe that unmanaged population growth could lead to catastrophe because of the Earth’s finite resources (see Figure 1). This suggests that half of the U.S. population is concerned about the impact of overpopulation on their lives, the Earth, and the future.

Beliefs differ significantly by income. For example, 63 percent of those earning US\$20,000–\$29,000 per year believe that, at the current rate of growth, there will not be enough resources for today’s children when they reach adulthood,



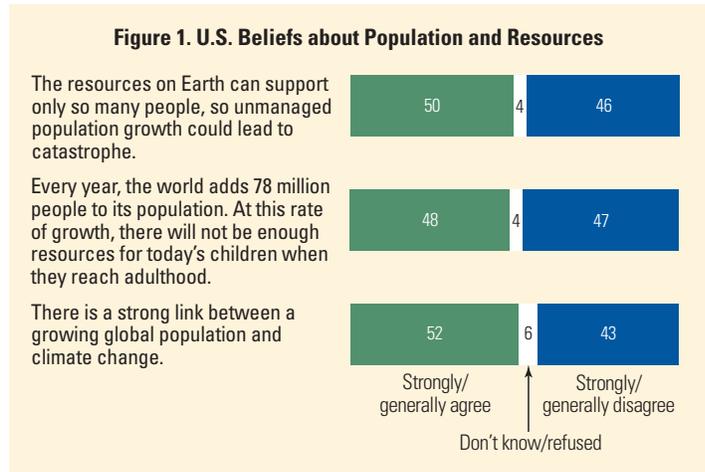
Reuters/Tim Shaffer

Newly naturalized U.S. citizens take the oath of allegiance at a citizenship ceremony in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, convention center.

compared to only 38 percent of those earning more than \$75,000. Resources are being depleted at alarming rates, and this is being recognized by people in lower-income brackets who may be experiencing the strain of increased food and energy prices today.

A majority of the respondents (64 percent) understands that as the U.S. population grows, so does the amount of U.S. CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. However, only 35 percent said that reducing the number of immigrants allowed into the country will help reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions coming from the United States. In other words, while the respondents understand the impact of population growth on U.S. carbon emissions, most do not understand the root cause of that growth. According to the Pew Research Center, if current trends continue, the population of the United States will rise to 438 million in 2050 (from 296 million in 2005); 82 percent of the increase will be due to immigrants arriving in that period and their U.S.-born descendants.

To create a sustainable future for the United States, pop-



ulation must be stabilized. This can be achieved through the combined effect of reducing fertility and limiting immigration numbers to replacement levels. Yet the U.S. media rarely men-



On a Miami Beach, Florida, playground, Hispanic teens celebrate "quince años," the fifteenth birthday of one of the girls.

Jeff Greenberg/Peter Arnold, Inc.

tion that emigration pressures in sending countries can be reduced by working to improve quality of life through promoting family planning and elevating the status of women. However, the U.S. public feels strongly that there are positive benefits from implementing family planning programs in developing countries: some 66 percent of all survey respondents agreed with the statement, “Supporting global family planning initiatives will help improve the health of the planet and people around the world.” And six out of ten agreed that having fewer children would increase their financial options. But less than half (47 percent) agreed that limiting family size to two or fewer children would stabilize population growth, and only 39 percent agreed that having fewer children would help protect the environment.

These results demonstrate that most respondents recognize the links between population growth, resources, and the environment, and that they recognize the benefits of family planning, yet are uncertain about how having fewer children (a personal decision) would have an impact. An opportunity exists here to educate the U.S. public about the advantages of having smaller families in addition to reducing consumption. The urgency of this cannot be overstated: according to data from the Global Footprint Network, the per-capita impact of U.S. residents on the planet is nearly 10 times that of citizens in other countries, such as those on the African continent.

## Population and the Next Generation

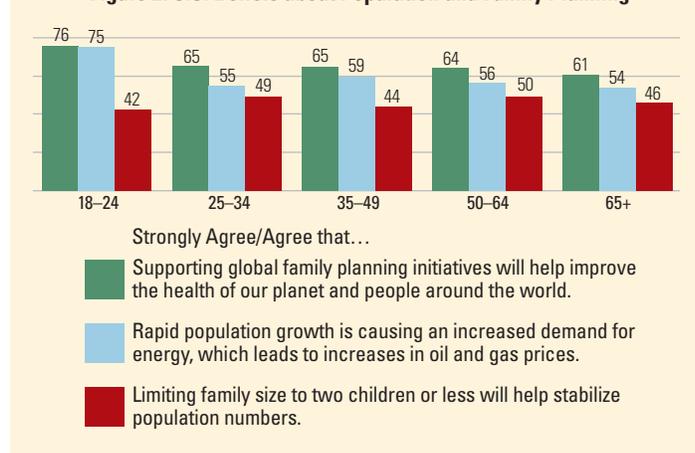
The survey data show that young people (ages 18–24) are ahead of their elders in recognizing the pressure that population growth puts on the environment and resources. For example, 60 percent of 18–24-year-olds understand that there is a strong link between a growing global population and climate change, compared with only 40 percent of people over the age of 65. And 75 percent of these young people agree, at a significantly higher level than all other age brackets, that population growth is causing an increased demand for energy, contributing to increases in oil and gas prices. Furthermore, 76 percent agree with the statement, “Supporting global family planning initiatives will help improve the health of our planet and people around the world” (see Figure 2). This is significantly higher than other age segments.

Surprisingly, however, what members of the next generation do not seem to understand is what they can do to change population dynamics. For example, only 35 percent of 18–24-year-olds believe that having fewer children would help protect the environment, and only 42 percent understand that limiting family size to two children or fewer will help stabilize population numbers. Yet nearly 60 percent identify population growth as one of the leading causes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and 59 percent acknowledge the strong link between a growing global population and climate change.

This disparity could be the result of this age bracket entering childbearing years and wanting freedom to choose to have

as many children as they want. What it also suggests is that while the problems facing the world today are well understood, what one can do at an individual level to solve them is not. This raises the question of how best to educate the younger generation on the merits of family planning and keeping family size small, despite the conflicting messages from the media that there are not enough babies being born to support Social Security and that there is a birth dearth. At the individual level, conflicting media messages are leading to a caring yet uncertain generation, unable to comprehend the impact of their own decisions regarding family size, i.e., that

**Figure 2. U.S. Beliefs about Population and Family Planning**



replacement-level fertility is required to stabilize population numbers. While the U.S. fertility rate currently stands at 2.1 children per woman (replacement level), a recent survey on the birth expectations of American women aged 15–44 years reveals that more than one-third (36 percent) expect to have three or more children. It is crucial that this generation understand the impact of a growing population and the personal decisions its members make about the size of their families.

Because of globalization and the interconnectedness of the biosphere, we must look at this issue through a global lens. Half of the world’s population is under the age of 24, and we need to educate people entering their childbearing years about the benefits of family planning and achieving replacement-level fertility. (A method used in developing countries with considerable success is described on pages 28 and 29.)

*The authors are with the Shelburne, Vermont-based Population Media Center, where Scott Connolly is research director, Katie Elmore is director of public affairs, and William Ryerson is president.*



For more information about issues raised in this story, visit [www.worldwatch.org/ww/popmedia](http://www.worldwatch.org/ww/popmedia).

### Entertainment-Education for Social Change

It's a given that the media are influential in changing public attitudes and behavior, and it is probable that at some point in their lives many people have been influenced by a character in a television program. In the United States, for instance, millions of girls and women cut their hair like Jennifer Aniston's character, Rachel, on the TV show *Friends*. While "The Rachel" haircut taking over America didn't necessarily help to improve life on the planet, it demonstrated the tremendous impact that media and character role models, in particular, can have on behavior.

Entertainment-education, also known as *edutainment*, is a way of informing the public about a social issue or concern. Entertainment-education programs in the United

methodology for a new pro-social communication model, using telenovelas to promote literacy, family planning, and other social development goals. The Sabido methodology emphasizes use of long-running dramas in which characters evolve into role models for the audience to bring about positive behavior change. The Sabido methodology has proven to be one of the most effective—and cost-effective—strategies for bringing about such changes in social norms.

Sabido found that using serial dramas, as opposed to documentaries or single-episode dramas, offers some important advantages. They allow time for the audience to form bonds with the characters, for example, and they

allow characters to evolve in their thinking and behavior with regard to various issues at a gradual and believable pace in response to problems illustrated in the story line.

Just as important, long-running entertainment programs forge emotional ties to audience members that influence values and behaviors more forcefully than the cognitive information provided in documentaries. As described in the social learning theory of Stanford University psychologist Albert Bandura, vicarious learning by others is a powerful teacher of attitudes and behavior. Next to peer- and parental role models, role

models from the mass media are of particular importance in shaping cultural attitudes and behavior. This methodology has demonstrated a unique capacity for not only raising awareness among large numbers of people about critical issues but for actually motivating audiences to adopt new behaviors.

The first social content telenovela that Sabido created was called *Ven Conmigo* ("Come with Me"), and was written to address the issue of literacy. Within weeks of airing the literacy plotline and epilogues in *Ven Conmigo*, nearly a million new adult students in Mexico signed up for literacy classes. Sabido then created another telenovela to promote family planning, called *Acompañame* ("Accompany Me"). Over the course of the nine-month series, *Acompañame* showed the personal benefits of planning one's family, by focusing on the issue of fam-

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Actors recording for PMC's radio serial drama in Ethiopia, "Yeken Kignit" (Looking Over One's Daily Life).

States, such as *Sesame Street* or *The Cosby Show*, have been extremely popular and are credited with having huge impacts on child learning and positive parenting techniques. For example, Harvard's National Designated Driver Campaign worked with the Hollywood community to place health messages in prime time programming and thereby informed millions about the importance of having a designated driver.

There are many examples of entertainment-education in the fields of population and reproductive health, from songs about fidelity to condom parades at football games. Drama formats have become increasingly popular, ranging from two-hour plays to mini-series and long-running serialized melodramas. In fact, the first "soap operas for social change" were developed by Miguel Sabido, a Mexican TV producer, in the late 1970s. Sabido developed his

ily harmony. The results of *Acompaname*, as reported by the Mexican government's national population council (CONAPO), were significant:

- Phone calls to the CONAPO requesting family planning information increased from zero to an average of 500 a month. Many people calling mentioned that they were encouraged to do so by the telenovela.
- Contraceptive sales increased 23 percent in one year, compared to only 7 percent the preceding year.
- More than 560,000 women enrolled in family planning clinics, an increase of 33 percent from the previous year (compared to a 1-percent decrease the year before that).

During the decade 1977 to 1986, when five such Mexican soap operas were on the air, the country experienced a 34-percent decline in its population growth rate. As a result, in May 1986, the United Nations Population Prize was presented to Mexico as the foremost population success story in the world.

Miguel Sabido now serves as a consultant and trainer for Population Media Center (PMC), a major practitioner of the Sabido methodology. PMC has adapted and replicated this model for entertainment-education in 15 countries around the world. In less developed countries, lack of access to family planning information and services, as well as cultural traditions that encourage women to stay home and have babies, lead to rapid population growth. The result is ever-increasing numbers of poor people across Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere, suffering from malnourishment, overcrowding, inadequate shelter and clean water, and HIV/AIDS and other diseases. By modeling the benefits of small families, empowering women and girls, educating men about the value of females in society, and providing important information about family planning, these programs are helping to change population dynamics.

Sabido-style programs provide people with entertainment and information to help them make informed decisions without telling them what to do. The approach emphasizes noncoercive, informed decision-making, tailored in each case to local needs and circumstances. Programs are designed to promote human health and dignity by providing education and examples of various alternatives and their consequences.

The Sabido strategy for behavior change has consistently delivered impressive results all over the world. In Ethiopia, 63 percent of new clients seeking reproductive health services at 48 clinics reported that they were listening to one of PMC's serial dramas. In Nigeria, PMC's program *Gugar Goge* was reported as the primary motivation to seek health care services by 33 percent of family planning and reproductive health clients and 54 percent of obstetric fistula clients. In Rwanda, 57 percent of new family planning adopters reported that their decision to visit the clinic was motivated by PMC's program, *Umurage Urukwiye*; similarly, 59 percent of people seeking HIV tests indicated that they were motivated to seek testing by listening to *Umurage Urukwiye*. In Brazil, where PMC acts as



Recording a PMC radio show in the Philippines, "Sa Pagiskat Ng Araw" (The Hope After the Dawn).

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an advisor to TV Globo, among viewers interviewed at family planning clinics, 60 percent of clients ages 18–24 said that scenes in TV Globo's telenovela *Paginas da Vida* stimulated them to seek a health service.

Positive role modeling offered via long-running serials holds great promise for changing family-size decisions in developing countries and consumption behaviors in developed societies. Serialized dramas are also highly cost effective because they attract huge audiences and have strong impacts. In Ethiopia, for instance, PMC's first long-running radio drama cost just 4 U.S. cents to reach each listener.

Scott Connolly, Katie Elmore, and William Ryerson