

8-1-1952

The Current Birth Rate

Clement S. Mihanovich

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mihanovich, Clement S. (1952) "The Current Birth Rate," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 19 : No. 3 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol19/iss3/5>

The Current Birth Rate

CLEMENT S. MIHANOVICH, Ph.D.

*Director, Department of Sociology
St. Louis University*

UP TO THE TIME of the beginning of World War II, the decline in the United States birth rate was attributed to the widespread use of artificial birth control devices. It was then presumed that the birth rate of the United States would continue to decline so that by the year 1960 or 1970, we would have a stabilized and then a declining population. All existing trends seemed to support this theory of decline. However, "something" happened in 1941 and this "something" continued to appear each year since 1941 so that at present we have an increasing population, a high birth rate and a population that is, demographically speaking, a strong population. A look at the following two tables plus the accompanying explanations will convince anyone that the population of the United States is on the increase.

In May 1951, the total population of the United States including armed forces overseas was 153,900,000.

On June 1, 1949, the Census Bureau estimated that the total population of the United States was 148,902,000. This represented a 13.1 per cent increase in population from April 1, 1940.

Family totals, too, have been rising at an unprecedented rate since World War II. The rise in the number of families seems to be keeping pace with the post-World War II record-breaking population rise.

The highest birth rate witnessed in the U. S. since 1915 was reached in 1947. This year was referred to as the "Baby Boom" year. An excellent study of this rise in the birth rate is presented in the National Office of Vital Statistics report "The Meaning of the 1947 Baby Boom," Volume 33, Number 1, October 7, 1948. The information that follows is taken from this report.

Crude Birth Rates: 1915-1951

(Exclusive of stillbirths. Rates per 1000 estimated midyear population)

1951*	24.6	1942	20.9	1933	16.6	1924	22.2
1950*	23.5	1941	18.9	1932	17.4	1923	22.1
1949	24.0	1940	17.9	1931	18.0	1922	22.3
1948	24.2	1939	17.3	1930	18.9	1921	24.2
1947	25.8	1938	17.6	1929	18.8	1920	23.7
						1919	22.4
1946	23.3	1937	17.1	1928	19.7	1918	24.7
1945	19.6	1936	16.7	1927	20.5	1917	24.5
1944	20.2	1935	16.9	1926	20.5	1916	24.9
1943	21.5	1934	17.2	1925	21.3	1915	25.0

*For the first eleven months of each year.

In 1947 there were approximately 3,720,000 births registered in the United States; allowing for those not registered raises the total to more than 3,900,000. This exceeds by over 400,000 the previous record established in 1946, and is almost 1,600,000 above the number in 1933.—the low point of the depression. Moreover, it is at least 800,000 larger than the number in 1921, the year most affected by the demobilization of the armed forces after World War I. Such comparisons raise again the question as to whether there has been a reversal of the long-time trend toward smaller families in the United States—a trend which has cut the birth rate by more than half in the last 140 years.

In trying to answer this question, it is essential to know how many of the births in 1947 were first births, second births, third births, etc. If an important part of the increase in total births from 1946 to 1947 came from an increase in higher order births (e.g., fifth and subsequent), this would indicate an increase in the average number of children per family. But if these higher order births decreased, and if most of the total increase occurred in first births, there probably was a continuation of the smaller family trend and a large gain in the number of new families which were started.

Number of Births, by Order of Birth, to Native White Women in the United States, 1920 to 1947¹

(In thousands)

Year	Total Births	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth	Sixth	Seventh	Eighth and Higher
1920	2,043.7	655.9	438.4	298.9	204.3	140.1	99.9	71.4	134.8
1921	2,127.9	687.8	443.3	309.8	216.2	146.4	105.5	75.0	143.8
1922	2,021.9	615.9	461.1	292.7	203.9	139.4	100.1	71.0	137.9
1923	2,059.0	612.5	475.9	302.8	207.1	143.9	103.5	72.3	141.0
1924	2,112.4	650.3	470.1	317.2	209.5	145.1	103.6	73.0	143.6
1925	2,077.9	641.4	463.1	313.0	207.5	141.4	100.9	70.9	139.6
1926	2,043.3	632.5	462.5	303.2	204.7	137.2	98.8	69.4	135.1
1927	2,045.8	644.2	458.0	300.4	204.2	137.1	98.0	68.5	135.5
1928	1,971.8	628.8	444.6	289.7	192.8	130.7	91.7	65.2	128.3
1929	1,907.7	618.3	435.7	278.6	182.2	124.5	86.8	61.0	120.7
1930	1,961.2	653.4	447.0	282.4	185.1	125.3	88.0	61.4	118.6
1931	1,895.2	632.1	437.4	271.7	176.9	118.8	84.1	58.5	115.8
1932	1,859.5	615.1	430.3	268.2	174.0	116.8	83.4	58.4	113.3
1933	1,780.2	589.2	413.6	257.9	167.6	111.0	78.3	54.9	107.8
1934	1,867.2	646.9	430.7	264.2	170.6	112.7	78.3	55.0	108.6
1935	1,876.5	688.4	428.2	256.0	163.7	107.7	74.8	52.7	104.9
1936	1,878.9	705.2	443.2	251.7	157.5	102.8	71.1	48.5	98.8
1937	1,934.9	747.8	464.4	254.4	155.3	100.3	69.0	58.0	95.8
1938	2,020.7	794.3	497.5	265.5	155.8	99.8	67.9	47.2	92.8
1939	1,997.6	785.4	506.2	266.4	152.0	94.7	63.5	43.5	85.8
1940	2,084.8	812.9	545.0	283.9	157.0	95.0	62.7	42.0	85.4
1941	2,224.3	914.0	575.2	294.9	160.8	95.4	61.6	41.3	81.2
1942	2,497.1	1,088.5	649.8	318.9	167.0	95.7	60.1	39.9	77.1
1943	2,605.2	1,006.6	731.7	373.0	193.0	108.9	66.7	43.6	81.7
1944	2,459.7	831.2	691.8	385.5	199.6	110.4	67.3	43.4	80.4
1945	2,394.4	845.7	671.8	378.6	198.7	110.3	66.5	43.2	79.5
1946	2,917.3	1,155.6	832.2	417.5	211.7	113.8	67.2	42.3	77.0
1947 ²	3,288.7	1,435.0	899.8	448.2	211.4	117.7	64.5	39.7	72.4

1. Births in the birth-registration area have been adjusted for incomplete recording, using the percentages in the left-hand column. Those for 1935 to 1944 are estimates of the National Office of Vital Statistics; those for the remaining years are estimates of the writer.

Births in non-registration states have been estimated according to the method described by P. K. Whelpton, in "United States Birth Rates by Age of Mother," *Congres International de la Population*, V.5, Hermann et Cie, 6 Rue de la Sorbonne, Paris, pp. 71-80.

2. Based on 142,183 births to native white resident women in upstate New York.

The conclusions to be drawn regarding the influences of the exceedingly large number of births in 1947 on the long-time trend toward smaller families are much the same for the United States as for upstate New York (see footnote of the preceding table). The record-breaking number of first births presumably resulted primarily from the delayed starting of families postponed by World War II and the earlier starting (because of prosperity)

of families that normally would wait until 1948 or later, rather than from a decreased portion of women who will never bear children. Moreover, the new high in second births probably is chiefly a matter of timing—the adding of a second child during 1942-1946—rather than a decrease in the proportion of couples that would have only one child. Similar statements are equally true for third and fourth births.

The foregoing conclusions do not deny the fact that if the fertility pattern of a given year were continued indefinitely, the 1947 pattern would result in larger families than that of any other year since 1924, and perhaps since before 1920. If birth rates by order of birth and by age and parity of mother (with adjustments for spinsterhood and sterility) were to remain as they were in 1947, there would be well over 277 births per 100 women living to age 50, and 343 per 100 women bearing 1 or more children. The continuation of 1933 conditions, in contrast, would have resulted in only 198 births per 100 women living to age 50, and 264 per 100 bearing at least 1 child. It is just as improbable that the high rate of 1947 will remain in effect as it was that the low rates of 1933 would do so. Both were the results of unusual conditions—the great depression of the early 1930's, and demobilization and high prosperity following World War II.

If the long-time trend toward smaller families is to be stopped and the net reproduction rate of the native white population maintained at 100 or higher, it will be necessary to have more than 2,200,000 births to native white women in 1948 and a somewhat larger number in each succeeding year. The requirement is almost certain to be met for at least two or three years, because of the addition of second and third children to many of the families begun in 1947, 1946, etc. The real test will come later when the numbers of first and second births have fallen sharply as they are sure to do. It will then be essential that third and fourth births hold much of their recent gains, for a substantial rise in fifth and later births seems quite unlikely.

Fortunately, with marriage rates and death rates as they have been during recent years, a population can be self-replacing without high rates for fifth and later births. Under recent conditions more than 90 out of each 100 white girl babies will live to age 45, and more than 80 will marry before that age. If these 80 give birth to 100 girls in their turn, the population will be maintained numerically.

A projection of the present birth rate trends of 1941-1951 into the future would result in a U. S. population of 193 million by the year 1975.

What has happened to the use of birth control devices in the U. S.? May we expect the birth rate to increase or at least maintain its present high level?

It is generally presupposed, as evidenced by the second table in this article, that most of the births that have occurred since 1941 were first and second births. There has not been a significant increase in third, fourth, fifth, etc. births. These first births are high in number because the marriage rate has been high. Furthermore, the present economic atmosphere is favorable to the bearing of children. More security is available, better and generally cheaper and easily-available medical and hospital care has been provided. Consequently, the fear of childbirth, whether it be economic or physical, has been reduced substantially. On the other hand, paradoxical as it may seem, most population experts do not expect the present birth rate to increase or maintain its high level. They believe that the slightest disturbance in our present economic equilibrium will result in a birth rate decline.

Our families are not growing larger in spite of the fact that we have more families. An increase in the size of the families is a definite indication of an increasing birth rate that will continue to either increase or maintain its high level. In April 1951, the average population per family was 3.54 persons (this includes mother, father, sons, daughters, or any relatives that might be living with the family); in March 1950, 3.57; in April 1949, 3.58; in April 1948 3.64; in April 1947, 3.67; and in April 1940, 3.77. Actually, the average size of our families is declining while our birth rate has increased.

In other words, the present increase of the population of the U. S. is a temporary increase as is the increase in the birth rates. Soon the birth rate will begin to level off (see the birth rates for 1948-1951), stabilize and then decline. And so the 110 year trend of a declining birth rate and a declining rate of increase in U. S. population will be resumed.

What was stated for the U. S. is also true for the whole of Western civilization. Western birth rates have increased since the end of World War II. They are now in the process of becoming stabilized and may soon resume their decline. A careful study of the U. S. Demographic Yearbook will substantiate this conclusion.

In regard to the Eastern sections of the world, we may expect their populations to increase in proportion to their introduction of the Industrial Revolution. This increase will not be a result of an increase in the birth rates but rather a result of rapid declines in the death rates. Once industrialization sets in, the East may expect to experience the same population trends as the West: periodic periods of increase but in general a declining birth rate and a declining rate of increase and an eventual stabilization and/or decline in population.