

THE AMERICAN POPULATION PROFILE



An Address by

LOUIS I. DUBLIN, PH.D.

Second Vice-President and Statistician

**Metropolitan Life
Insurance Company**

★ NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE FORUM

October 23, 1950

RECEIVED

INSTITUTE OF
INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

APR 13 1951

The American Population Profile

WE have just passed through an eventful decade and appear to be entering another equally crucial. Ten years ago we were coming out of a period of depression, and we were moving into a war against a powerful adversary. The census of 1940 revealed the lowest rate of population growth this country had ever experienced. Population experts, reflecting the pessimism then current, predicted that our numbers were already close to a maximum and that our whole economic and social life would henceforth be geared to the requirements of an ultimately declining population.

Contrast that outlook with the situation today. We have come through a gigantic World War successfully; we have converted quickly to a peacetime economy and are now in a period of unprecedented prosperity. The new census of population shows an increase of 19 millions in one decade.

Today we are again confronted with a threatening international situation. Already our resources to resist aggression are being mobilized. It is well, therefore, to take stock of what we have to meet the new threat, realizing that our people are our greatest asset.

Our present population picture is a much more cheerful one than a decade ago. We are entering the second half of the century with 151 million people and with the promise of adding many millions more before the century is over. These large numbers and our continued growth have great social and economic implications. For some time, at least, we will continue to be a young and vigorous Nation, able to apply our great capacity for production to our rich resources. Our growing population, with more married per-

sons and more children, will mean increased demand for new homes, for more clothing and more food. There will also be an expanding demand for medical care and for more educational and recreational facilities. These needs can and will be met. On this score we can look forward with optimism to a healthy and growing economy.

EVEN more rapid than the rate of growth of our population has been that in the number of our families. When the results of the 1950 Census become available they will show, I believe, that there are now about 40 million families among us. Ten years ago there were 32 million. This means, of course, that the average size of our families has decreased. Early in the Nation's history more than one half of our families consisted of five or more people; today half have only three or more people. This trend toward more but smaller families likewise has its effect on our economy. It increases consumer demand all along the line. The new family is very mobile and calls for new housing facilities and equipment of all sorts.

Although the size of the average family may decrease somewhat further in coming decades, the indications are that we shall continue our National pattern of early marriage and of a high marriage rate. The average age of marriage for our young women has decreased almost two years within the last half century. During the war years our marriage rate rose phenomenally and remained at a high level in the early postwar period. However, it has recently been declining rapidly, but even at its present level it is higher than that in most other countries.

True enough, some of our high marriage rate results from remarriages following divorce. But it is noteworthy that the divorce rate has declined from its peak. In any event we can be sure that the environment in which we live is conducive to family life, and that this institution will continue to flourish as the fundamental unit of our society.

Fortunately, we have developed several means to safeguard the economic security of the family. Our oldest and time-tested means is private Life insurance through which

more than 80 million people have accumulated over 220 billion dollars of protection. In recent years private pension plans have added measurably to the protection of wage and salaried workers and their families. Finally, a solid floor of protection has been provided by the recently liberalized Social Security benefits, which will be increasingly appreciated as an important factor in the economic security of the American family.

FOR more than a century our population has been undergoing a marked change in its age composition. At each census up through 1940 we found a smaller proportion of children and an increasing proportion of the aged. In one respect this long-term trend has undergone an important reversal within the past decade. The census of 1950 will show that the number and proportion of our children have markedly increased. More than one tenth of our population is now under 5 years of age. This is a larger proportion than at any time since 1920.

We need not detail the circumstances which brought about this reversal in trend. It is now a familiar story that the release of men from the armed forces after World War II and the unprecedented prosperity of the past few years have brought us record numbers of babies. In one year alone—1947—this country had almost 3,900,000 births—a number equal to our total population when the country was founded. This resurgence of births has already presented our school administrators, both locally and nationally, with pressing problems. Many new schools will have to be built, and large numbers of additional teachers will have to be trained for this coming generation of pupils, and this need will continue for many years. One cannot overstress the importance of this need in view of the general apathy of most people and of government to the current situation.

At the other end of the scale we have the increasing proportion of the aged. Here we find an accentuation of the long-time trend. At the beginning of this century only 4 percent of our people were 65 years of age and over; now over 7½ percent are in this group.

Let me put the situation in a more dramatic way. Within the past 50 years our total population has doubled, while those 65 and over have almost quadrupled. Their number will double again by about 1980. In these figures we find the essence of the present problem of the aged which competent authorities consider one of our most important unmet domestic issues. Our difficulties arise primarily from the shift from an agricultural to an industrial economy, with the population increasingly settled in urban communities. When our people lived on farms, there was room for the aged and also something for them to do. Now the situation is completely different. In the city, dwelling units are small, and the home is no longer a place of work. Under these conditions the aged often suffer from lack of suitable homes. They are, for the most part, idle and frequently have no means of support. We can, therefore, understand the pressure for more adequate security in old age.

The newly enacted Social Security law, with its more liberal provisions, is a move in the right direction. A greater measure of financial security is, however, only one phase of the problem of the aged. Older people will increasingly demand the other satisfactions that go with economic independence. They will insist not only on the right to work but also on the measure of respect and consideration to which their past services entitle them. We must find the means of putting their hands and minds to productive activity, and this will tax our resourcefulness and ingenuity.

BETWEEN the children and the aged are those on whom falls the burden to meet our production and military needs. Since 1900 our people at these ages—from 20 to 64 years—have been increasing as rapidly as our total population. Today they constitute 58 percent of the total. Our favorable position is clearly indicated by the huge size of our current labor force. The figures for September 1950 show a total of 65 million, of whom almost 1.5 million are in the armed forces. Our civilian labor force alone is now about 8 million more than that just before our entry into

World War II. Even in the past year the civilian labor force has increased by more than three quarters of a million.

In a review of our country's needs and resources written only three years ago a leading economist predicted a total of about 60 million in our labor force by 1950. We have done better by 5 millions. This large number of workers, plus their increasing productivity, have brought our gross national production to an annual rate of about 275 billion dollars. There is no question that we can meet not only our mounting international obligations, both military and economic, but also the domestic requirements of our people for goods and services. Unemployment, at this writing, is dropping rapidly, and there is the possibility of recruiting additional workers from the ranks of the retired and the women who are not usually in employment.

What about the men at ages 18 to 25, who constitute the principal reservoir for our armed forces? Although their number is somewhat larger now than in 1940, the outlook for the immediate future is less favorable. This group increased from about 9.3 million in 1940 to an all-time high of more than 9.6 million at the close of World War II. Since 1947, however, the number of males at ages 18 to 25 has been decreasing and will continue to drop for the next few years, reaching a minimum of 8.7 million by 1956. This decline results from the marked fall in the birth rate in the late 1920's and early 1930's. But after 1956 the number of men at the main military ages will begin to climb again, and will reach about 11.4 million in 1965. The indications are that the increase will continue even beyond that time. On this score, too, we need have no serious concern. But let us hope that they will not be needed for military operations.

WE have also experienced rather recently an important change in the distribution of the sexes. Throughout our country's history males have outnumbered females. This situation was reversed in 1945, when, for the first time, we had more women than men. This is hardly surprising in view of certain recent trends. In the first place the lon-

gevity of women has been improving at a faster rate than that of men. In addition, within the last two decades we have had a sharp reduction in immigration which, over many years, brought us more men than women. Lastly, there is the effect of World War II, in which about 300,000 of our men were killed in battle. When we look into the details, however, we find that the present excess of women over men is concentrated, for the most part, at the higher ages—near or past midlife. At the marriageable ages there is still a satisfactory balance between the sexes; the chances still are about 9 in 10 that the average young person will marry.

Women are now an important part of the country's total labor force. Currently close to 30 percent of all our workers are women. At the beginning of the century only about 18 percent were women. The absolute figures are even more striking. Since 1900 the number of women workers has increased from some 5 million to almost 19 million. In the war year of 1945 they constituted 35 percent of the civilian labor force and many who went to work during the war years have remained there.

It is likely that in the event of a protracted emergency, women will enter the labor force in even greater numbers than during World War II. During recent decades there has also been a marked shift in the types of occupation in which women engage. In the early years, relatively large numbers had jobs on farms or were servants and semi-skilled workers; the proportions in clerical or professional work were rather small. Today, women are, for the most part, occupied as clerks or semiskilled workers. The proportion working as servants is much smaller than formerly and relatively fewer women now work on farms. Women in professional work now constitute a much larger proportion than a few decades ago.

Within recent years there has also been a marked shift in the ages of women who work. Just ten years ago, before our entrance into the war, three in five were under 35 years of age. Today less than half are at these ages; on the other hand, more than one fourth are over age 45.

This shift is understandable in view of the withdrawal of young women from employment in order to raise families. However, in spite of this trend, we find that almost half of the women now occupied are married. Apparently gainful employment has not interfered with entrance into family life. With the tendency toward early marriage, young women seem to be inclined to seek work to supplement their husband's earnings until the baby comes. In other words, the tendency is to build up the home early in married life and to save for later needs.

THIS leads me to a discussion of the recent trend in the birth rate. For many decades before we reached the bottom of the depression in 1933 the birth rate had been declining, almost without interruption. In that year the rate reached a low of 18 per 1,000 population, or about one fourth less than only a decade earlier. The birth rate during the decade of the 30's, if continued, was insufficient to maintain the level of our population. As the economy recovered the birth rate rose slightly, ~~reaching the figure of~~ 19 in 1940. The outbreak of World War II produced a radical change in this picture. The rate jumped, reaching its maximum in 1947 when the figure was 27 per 1,000—the highest figure in 30 years. It is of interest, however, to find, as we analyze the data, that during and since the war years the remarkable upsweep in the birth rate was most pronounced among young mothers bearing their first or second child. Thus, in 1947, about one fifth of our young women between 20 and 30 had babies. This was well over $1\frac{1}{2}$ times the rate for women at these ages ten years earlier. There has also been a moderate rise in the rate at which women gave birth to third and fourth children. However, at the higher order of births, the long-term decline continued. Since 1947 the total birth rate has been falling, and the indications are that we are evolving a pattern of the three-child family. Large families are definitely a thing of the past.

Before leaving the subject of the family I would make a few added observations. Because of the great improvement in our health conditions we are living longer, and

this has benefited family life. Currently the average young couple entering marriage at age 25 can expect about 40 years together, provided the family is not broken by divorce. This average duration of married life is about seven years greater than might have been expected on the basis of health conditions a generation ago. It may seem paradoxical to say at the same time that the chances of widowhood for the wife are increasing. The explanation, however, is simple. Although longevity has been increasing for both men and women, the gain for women has been the greater, and they are now outliving men by a larger margin. Older widows are an important factor in the current excess of women over men.

LET us now consider our trends in longevity and mortality. Just 50 years ago the average length of life of the American people was $49\frac{1}{4}$ years. This has increased by over 18 years, and we now have an average length of life of $67\frac{1}{2}$ years. We have greatly reduced our mortality and have thereby increased our chance of survival to middle and later life. According to the mortality of 1900 less than half survived from birth to age 60; under current mortality about three quarters of the babies will attain that age.

A number of factors have been involved in this improvement. First, thanks to the great advances in medical science, we have reduced the mortality from certain infections almost to the vanishing point. Children rarely die of diphtheria or of scarlet fever today. Extraordinary progress has been made in controlling tuberculosis and pneumonia. One can almost forecast the date when tuberculosis will be a minor item in the mortality table.

In these advances the widespread development of the public health services has been of the greatest assistance. We now take for granted the purity of our water supplies, the quality of the food we buy, and the safe and rapid disposal of our waste products. I should also mention the widespread activities of our voluntary health agencies. There are some 20,000 of them, and they have been of inestimable service in educating the public to take care of

itself and to appreciate the value of good health. I must not omit, however, to give credit to our rapidly rising standard of living which has made possible a better environment at home and at work.

As a result of the marked improvements which have taken place in the health picture over the last 50 years, we find a striking change in the relative importance of the various causes of death. Half a century ago the first three causes, in the order of their rank, were tuberculosis, pneumonia, and diarrhea and enteritis. At the present time the leaders are diseases of the heart and arteries and cancer—diseases typical of the older ages. This shift is only in part the result of the aging of our population. It represents primarily the conquest of the infections. The diseases of old age are today's leading health problem, and it is gratifying to find that both the medical profession and the public health leaders are concentrating their attention on this field both in providing appropriate services and in seeking out the underlying causes which bring about these degenerative conditions.

I HAVE thus presented in brief outline our current population profile. There are other interesting and important features that I could present, such as the improved health of our Negro population, the shift of population toward the Pacific Coast, and the marked growth of our suburban communities. But time is short. I will close with a few comments on the probable size of our future population.

On that score we are on rather uncertain ground. In the past, we have generally erred in such forecasts, but almost always on the conservative side. We hope to make new projections when the details of the 1950 Census become available. Three factors are involved—mortality, immigration, and births. There is every reason to believe that mortality will continue to decline. We can, in fact, estimate future death rates with reasonable reliability. Immigration is not of any great significance. On the other hand we are on uncertain ground when it comes to making forecasts of births, which are the most important factor in

estimating future population. I have already indicated that a return to the large-family pattern is not likely; nor do I believe that the rapid downward trend of the birth rate characteristic of the prewar decades will continue. We appear to be stabilizing on the three-child family pattern. I am of the opinion that in coming decades our young people will maintain a fairly high marriage rate. The level of births will follow that of marriages.

I would, therefore, read in the current trends the promise that our population will continue to grow—at least moderately—for decades to come. We have doubled our population during the first half of this century. During each of the last few years we have had at least two million more births than deaths. In view of this margin my guess is that before the end of the century our population will pass the 200 million mark. Our resources, our talents, and our initiative will help us support this number with comfort and, let us hope, in peace.