

FUTURE *takes*

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Discussion Threads

This issue continues two discussion threads, one on demographics and one on cultural diversity. *Future Takes* welcomes supporting, opposing, and other relevant commentary.

Discussion Thread on Demographic Issues: Demography as Destiny

by Juanita Tamayo Lott, jtlott@capaccess.org

Part 2: The Demography of Aging

The introductory article for this discussion thread stated that demographic transition and future sustainability can be viewed within the global village. With respect to aging, such a view would cast Europe as very old, North America as middle age, and Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East as adolescents and children. The aging of the United States population and other post-industrialized nation states has developed in the last century. In 1900, half of the U.S. population was less than 22.9 years old. By the end of the 20th century, this increased to 35.3 years old, the country's highest median age ever. In 1900, children younger than 15 years of age comprised over one-third of the U.S. population (34.5 %) while persons 65 years and older comprised only 4.1%. By 2000, children younger than 15 years old were only one-fifth (21.4%) of the U.S. population while the older population of 65 years and older had more than doubled to 12.4%. The most rapid growth of the older population in the 1990s was for the oldest age group, 85 years and older, which increased from 3.1 million to 4.2 million. On a comparative level, 15.5 % of the European population is 65 years and older, 6% for Asia (except for Japan at 17%), 5.5% for Latin America and the Caribbean, 4.3% for the Middle East and North Africa, and a low of 2.9% in sub-Saharan Africa. The lower proportions of elderly individuals outside of Europe and North America mask the fact that developing countries are aging as well, often at a much faster rate than in post industrialized countries.

More rapid growth of the U.S. population age 65 years and over will begin in 2011 when the first of the baby boom generation reaches age 65 and will continue throughout this generation's senior citizen phase. This growing aged population affects the future worker/dependent ratio and society's ability to sustain resources for an elderly and increasingly dependent population. Already, baby boomers also labeled 'the sandwich generation' are coping with care for their decreasingly independent parents, oftentimes while their own children are still dependent and living at home. Various living arrangements for the older U.S. population, ranging from full independence to total assistance, are welcomed by them to accommodate their changing needs. On the other hand, high quality care assumes substantial assets and is time and labor intensive. While baby boomers appreciate the variety of living arrangements for their elders, they do not see the same opportunities available to them when they will exhibit similar dependent needs. The growth in elderly populations, requiring varying levels of dependent care, coupled with the

proportional decrease in younger populations who are the source of the future workforce, is a challenge in general for society and in particular for futurists.

This article was based on data gleaned from the following sources:

1. Hetzel, Lisa and Annetta Smith, "The 65 Years and Over Population: 2000" Census 2000 Brief, U.S. Census Bureau, issued October 2001.
2. Hobbs, Frank and Nicole Stops, *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century*, Census 2000 Special Report, U.S. Census Bureau, issued November 2002.
3. Kevin Kinsella and Victoria Velkoff, *An Aging World: 2001*, International Population Reports, U.S. Census Report, issued November 2001.
4. Lott, Juanita Tamayo, "Economic Implications of Demographic Shifts," prepared for the U.S. Economic Policy Seminar, League of Women Voters, Washington , D.C. , May 1990.

Discussion Thread on Cultural Diversity

By Tommy T. Osborne, COL, USA (Ret), TheOsbornes16@msn.com

You [Dave] ask key questions which are central to the survival of homo sapiens. Cultures are one of the principal tools we developed to evolve. I emphasize tools (plural) against the current trend to count mega cultures, or major civilizations. Among major civilizations, one could list Islam, Judeo-Christianity; Hindu; Buddhist – this would forget the micro-civilizations which a few thousand developed and used when the world was much younger and we were much less numerous. A few hundred thousand spread over the globe are more likely to develop alternate means of survival than clumps totaling 6 billion!

Loss of cultural diversity follows loss of biodiversity for both demographic and hegemonic reasons, I think.

Demographic because there are fewer places where the big cultures/big populations aren't in control. Hegemonic because many have difficulty living in proximity to those whose cultures are dramatically different. The hegemons win by enculturation – ask any Amish how easy it is to escape the "modern world" even when you're not so different. As the exotic cultures and languages die we do lose, as Dave posited, alternative operating systems that we can turn to when the world changes and/or our current *modus operandi* doesn't work. As a minimum, it is useful to catalog and record the fullness of human cultures, so we can reach back when need be to another paradigm.