

WHO MAKES THE BABIES?

Contrary to popular belief, it's the affluent — not the poor — who overtax the biosphere.



by PAUL R. EHRLICH and JOHN P. HOLDREN

Many middle- and upper-class Americans hold the convenient belief that the growth of the population of the United States is due mainly to excessive reproduction among the poor and ethnic minorities. In reality, fewer than one-third of the babies born in the US. each year belong to the poor, and fewer than 20 per cent to the non-white. Evidently, then, the backbone of our population growth is supplied by the parents of "Middle America," many of whom assure themselves that having a third or fourth child is reasonable because they can "afford" it. Unfortunately, the heaviest costs of excess births do not show up in the family checkbook. Rather, they are measured in terms of stress on non-renewable resources, on the life support systems of the biosphere, and on the overburdened institutions of our society.

The seriousness of population growth among the affluent is magnified by their disproportionate pressure on resources and environment. This fact is most easily demonstrated quantitatively in an international context by comparing per capita consumption in rich and poor countries. For example, the average American consumes fifty times as much steel, 170 times as much synthetic rubber and newsprint, and 300 times as much plastic as the average citizen of India. The ratio of per capita energy consumption (perhaps the best single indicator of environmental impact) for the same two countries is 56 to 1.

Similar arguments, applied within the boundaries of the United States, indicate that a poor person in our own population has far less opportunity to loot and pollute than does the average American. Thus the slightly higher birth rate among U.S. poor is more than compensated for, in terms of stress on resources and environment, by their lower per capita impact (and the fact that they comprise a relatively small fraction of the population). The

higher birth rate is of course a liability, but its consequences are most serious for the poor themselves. Statistically, not only are large families more likely to *be* poor, they are also more likely to *remain* poor. It is also worth noting that, although the poor have had relatively little to do with generating our environmental deterioration, they are often disproportionately its victims. The urban poor are confined to the cores of cities where air pollution is heaviest and urban decay and overcrowding are worst. Migrant farm workers may be spared the evils of modern urban life, but they suffer directly from agricultural pollution, especially misuse of pesticides.

It is particularly unfortunate that the Nixon administration has chosen to label the government's new policy of extending family planning services to the poor as "population control." This terminology has reinforced the erroneous beliefs of much of the public about the source of American population growth. More importantly, it has aroused considerable resentment among minorities, particularly black leaders, who often see such policies as a form of genocide aimed at blacks.

(Apparently, the public, including non-white minorities themselves, tends to equate "poor" with blacks, Chicanos, and American Indians, because higher proportions of these groups are in low income categories. Nevertheless, the majority of the poor are white, and the majority of non-white people are not poor. For instance, only about 30 percent of black families were classified as poor in 1967.)

In any case, the fears of genocide and economically selective programs have been fed by the attitudes of some population control advocates who seem mainly interested in controlling the reproduction of someone else, and by occasional abuses in existing birth control programs for the poor. Those who have encouraged such abuses, and others preoccupied with variations in the birth rate among different components of our population, should take consolation that a straightforward and non-controversial remedy is available. Specifically, among blacks and other minorities as well as whites, reproduction rates are closely correlated with income and educational levels. (Affluent black couples, for instance, have slightly fewer children on the average than do comparable white couples.) Thus, it would appear that minority and white birth rates will become indistinguishable as soon as minorities are provided the same economic, educational, and social opportunities as are now enjoyed by the rest of us.

In the meantime, of course, contraception and subsidized abortions should be available to *all* Americans, white, black, or brown, married or unmarried. No one should be subjected to compulsory pregnancy. Government support of these measures through national health and welfare services is necessary and long overdue. At the same time, it must be recognized that programs envisioned as purely voluntary and non-coercive by Congress and federal agencies may be coercively administered on the local level. To guard against this possibility, local administration should be in the hands of the recipients of the services and their peers.

Finally, the subsidized provision of contraceptives and abortions should not be misconstrued as population control. Rather, these measures are the logical continuation of family planning, which has been part of the American scene for more than two generations. Population control is the conscious manipulation of population size and growth rate on the societal rather than the family level. If the

failure of family planning to stabilize the American population necessitates the escalation to population control measures of some sort, the new efforts should certainly be aimed first at the middle and upper classes, where the societal (as opposed to personal) consequences of growth are greatest.

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