
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Despite a perception that Americans have become more isolationist and absorbed with domestic problems since the end of the Cold War (see Kull [1996] and Murvachik [1995] for discussions of this perception), our survey found that most Americans feel that U.S. economic assistance to other countries is necessary and appropriate. Americans are somewhat concerned about population issues but less so than about a number of other issues. Furthermore, they lack knowledge about specific population facts and trends. Support for voluntary family planning activities is overwhelming. However, abortion remains a contentious issue that divides the American public.

This chapter summarizes and discusses the report's main findings and explores its implications for communicating population research.

INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE AND RECENT CONGRESSIONAL ACTIONS

U.S. support for international economic assistance is at its highest level since 1974. Almost six in ten (59 percent) support U.S. economic assistance to other countries. Moreover, support for international economic assistance is 50 percent or greater for every socioeconomic, demographic, and political subgroup we considered.

Strong support appears for health-related and humanitarian programs, including those aimed at improving health, child survival, the

environment, human rights, reducing suffering, and helping women in poor countries reduce unintended pregnancies.

Support is also high for programs that advance international relations goals, including promoting democracy, preventing war and conflict, promoting trade, and supporting friendly governments.

Support for helping countries slow population growth was not as high. The public believes that other phenomena, such as disease and hunger, the spread of nuclear weapons and threats to the world environment, are more serious problems. Our multivariate analysis also found that support for U.S. economic assistance to other countries is *not* associated with concern for population growth rates.

Although the American public does not put a high priority on funding population-related programs, it strongly subscribes to the principle of reproductive freedom for all. Support for this, the basic principle underlying the ICPD program, is universally high among all the subgroups interviewed.

The public has a mixed view of recent congressional actions regarding funding of international population-assistance programs. Fifty percent of the public approves of the 1996 congressional vote to reduce the U.S. contribution to international family planning, while 45 percent disapprove of it. The apparent contradiction between this response and the strongly held belief that the United States should support family planning programs overseas suggests either that respondents are unaware of historic or current funding levels or that Americans support such programs in principle but are less supportive when it comes to funding them.

There is less approval of Congress's actions in preventing the United States from funding family planning in organizations that perform abortions—even if the U.S. contribution goes only for the family planning component of services. Here, 51 percent disapprove of Congress's denial of funding and 44 percent approve.

Approval rates are even lower for Congress's withholding of a portion of the U.S. contribution to U.N. dues. Only 36 percent approved, while 48 percent disapproved.

SPECIFIC POPULATION ISSUES

Knowledge and Attitudes About Global Population Trends

The American public is only mildly interested in demographic issues and has a limited sense of the current dimensions of world population. Only 14 percent accurately report world population size in the five-to-six billion range. As many think it at least five times the current size as know the correct answer, and nearly 40 percent do not know. Furthermore, most show little grasp of the rates of growth. For example, nearly half say the world population will double in less than 20 years, when current demographic trends actually suggest that the doubling time will be around 50 years.

Notwithstanding this limited knowledge, a majority of respondents believe that the world is “overpopulated.” A majority also believes that the concentration of population rather than growth per se is a problem and concurs with the assertion that population pressures contribute to holding back economic development in developing countries.

Family Planning

Most Americans see family planning programs as needed and beneficial. Eight in ten favor U.S. funding for voluntary family planning in developing countries. At least 70 percent of all demographic and socioeconomic subgroups we considered favor such funding. A majority believes that family planning is not available to most people in the world.

Very strong support (86 percent) exists for the government to provide family planning services to poor American women who want them; there is similarly strong support (87 percent) for requiring health insurers to cover family planning services for Americans. More than three-fourths of every demographic and political subgroup we considered favor such programs.

The majority (67–70 percent) of the relatively few who oppose funding for family planning programs in developing countries nonetheless favor government and insurers’ support for family planning in

the United States. Hence, the small opposition to funding family planning overseas does not seem to result from an opposition to family planning in general. Rather, it seems to spring from opposition to overseas economic assistance and perhaps also from a belief that rapid population growth is not a serious problem in developing countries.

Support for family planning in developing countries is related to a belief that it can reduce the number of abortions, to beliefs that the world is overpopulated and that rapid population growth is a serious problem, and to strong support for all types of humanitarian and other economic assistance to developing countries. Opposition to U.S. funding for family planning programs in developing countries seems to stem in part from a belief that the availability of contraception encourages sexual activity among teenagers and unmarried couples.

Abortion

Abortion remains an ever-present and divisive issue in the population policy arena. About half of the sample opposed abortion either completely or except in cases of rape, incest, and danger to the mother's life. U.S. attitudes about abortion have been fairly stable over the last 25 years.

Furthermore, two-thirds of respondents said that abortion is used by "too many" as a "routine means of controlling birth." About 47 percent said they believed that most women use abortion only as a last resort. Perhaps this apparent contradiction is explained by the possibility that opponents of abortion rights regard anyone's use of abortion as "*too many*."

Support for abortion appears to stem in part from a belief that legal abortion can save women's lives. Opposition to abortion appears to stem in part from belief that too many women use abortion as a routine means for controlling births and that the availability of legal abortion encourages sexual activity among teenagers and unmarried couples.

Attitudes about supporting abortion overseas are very similar to those regarding supporting abortion in the United States; those who oppose one are likely to oppose the other. Opposition is especially strong among Evangelicals, born-again Christians, those who attend religious services frequently, and among political conservatives.

Relationship Between Family Planning and Abortion

Half of the respondents agree with the statement that providing family planning would reduce the number of abortions were it to be provided where it had not been previously available. This belief is consistent with findings from demographic research, which has shown the potential for family planning to reduce abortion.

The majority (57 percent) of those who favor U.S. funding for family planning programs in developing countries also favor funding for voluntary safe abortion, and nearly all (90 percent) who favor funding for abortion also favor funding for family planning programs. In addition, more than two-thirds of those who oppose funding for abortion in developing countries support funding for family planning in those countries. Of our entire sample, 45 percent favored funding for both family planning and abortion, 32 percent favored funding for family planning but opposed funding for abortion, while only 14 percent opposed funding for both. Those who favor support for family planning but oppose support for abortion are similar to those who favor funding for both in their support for international engagement and in their belief that improved availability of family planning can reduce abortion, but they are more likely to align with the group that opposes funding for both on all other issues regarding abortion. This suggests that an understanding of the potential of family planning to reduce abortion is associated with support for family planning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATING POPULATION RESEARCH

The survey findings have several implications for communicating the findings of population research to the public.

First, we found that very few people are aware of the size and rate of growth of the world's population. This finding suggests that many of the recent stories on "The Day of 6 Billion," in October of 1999 and afterward, might not have resonated with the public. Our survey suggests that this focus on aggregate numbers is less likely to interest the public than a focus on individual perspectives, such as helping women avoid unintended pregnancies. Stories about world population growing to "6 billion" seem to have little impact on the public, especially youth (who are even less concerned or informed about population size and rate of growth than the rest of the population). A focus on individual- and family-level quality-of-life issues, such as achieving desired family size, is consistent with the ICPD approach to framing population issues, although we are not able to assess whether the ICPD has had any causal effect on American attitudes.

Second, there is little linkage between the views people hold on the seriousness of population growth or its relationship to world problems and their views on reproductive rights, the environment, or other issues. Furthermore, the public cares less about population growth than it does about such issues as children's and women's health and the environment. Therefore, research communication could usefully emphasize the connections of population growth and high fertility with other issues Americans care about more. Research has shown, for example, strong links between women's fertility behavior and their own and their children's health.¹ Indeed, additional research that explores the intersections of these areas, cutting across traditional fields of analysis, would be valuable in advancing public understanding of how demographic concerns relate to other issues thought to be more pressing. The *Population Matters* project has several such projects under way: one, in publication, is examining the global security implications of demographic trends (Nichiporuk, forthcoming); the others, still in draft form, are examining the interrelations between demographic factors and environmental change and the relationship between population change and economic development.

¹For an example of such research, see National Research Council, 1989.

Third, despite high levels of support for U.S. government funding for international family planning, half of the respondents did not oppose congressional cuts in funding for family planning programs in developing countries. Other research has shown that Americans tend to overestimate the fraction of the U.S. budget spent on international economic assistance. They might also do this for family planning programs. In fact, funding for family planning programs is about 4.5 percent of total international economic assistance, amounting to only pennies a day per American. The public would benefit from accurate information about the relatively low cost of population assistance programs and the need for—as well as governments' and individuals' continuing desire for—U.S. support for such programs.

Fourth, research shows that legal abortion can save women's lives, but only two-thirds of the overall population and only one-half of those who oppose U.S. support for abortion overseas recognize this.

Fifth, the public could be better informed about what research has shown regarding the potential of family planning services to reduce the prevalence of abortion. Research from a number of countries² shows that improved availability of contraception has cut the number of abortions.

Finally, the public lacks a clear grasp of what the term “family planning” means and whether it encompasses abortion. This is not surprising, because the demographic research community itself does not seem to agree on a single definition of family planning. This finding implies that communicators should not always assume that their audiences know the meanings of terms like “family planning” or “birth control” and should define them whenever possible.

²For example, Bangladesh (Ahmed, Rahman, and van Ginneken, 1998), South Korea (Noble and Potts, 1996), Hungary (Balogh and Lampe, 1994), Russia (Popov, 1996), and Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan (Westoff et al., 1998).