

This report presents results of a survey of how the American public views global demographic trends and issues in the context of U.S. international economic assistance.

BACKGROUND

Prior to this survey, no comparable survey had been undertaken since 1994. During the interval (between 1994 and August 1998, when this survey was conducted), important changes have taken place. First, the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) was held in Cairo, Egypt, in late 1994. This conference provided a forum for articulating and codifying the relatively recent shift in international population policy away from concerns about overall population growth and aggregate statistics toward a more individual-level concern with reproductive health and freedom in achieving desired family size. Second, the Republican Party won control of Congress, bringing with it a focus on domestic issues and national security. The new majority brought into key decision-making positions a political faction that traditionally has not placed a high priority on international development assistance. Third, the end of the Cold War in 1991 triggered a continuing and thorough reassessment of America's role in the world. Calls for a continued or even increased global role for the United States were countered by new isolationist sentiments.

Given these changes, a great deal of interest has arisen in policy and research communities about whether and to what extent American views of international population issues have changed.

To address these questions, the *Population Matters* project commissioned a nationally representative survey. The survey had two main purposes: to gain a clearer understanding of what the American public knows about global demographic trends and U.S. international economic assistance and to assess public attitudes and levels of concern about specific issues, such as family planning and abortion.

The survey was conducted by Belden Russonello & Stewart (BR&S), a public-opinion research firm in Washington, D.C. Telephone interviews were conducted with 1,500 U.S. residents aged 16 or older. When weighted to adjust for differences between our sample and the U.S. population in age, gender, and race, the survey data yield a nationally representative sample of Americans. The 1998 survey repeats a number of questions asked in a 1994 survey on these issues to allow for tracking attitude changes during the interim.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The survey asked about three groups of topics: attitudes about U.S. economic assistance overseas and priorities for targeting U.S. aid; knowledge and views of global demographic facts and trends; and views on specific issues, including family planning programs, abortion, and congressional actions on population-policy measures.

The survey found that, notwithstanding the perception that Americans may have become more absorbed with domestic problems since the end of the Cold War, a majority feels that U.S. economic assistance to other countries is necessary and appropriate. Most Americans lack knowledge about the world's population size and growth rate but are nonetheless concerned about global population growth and its possible consequences. Support for U.S. funding of voluntary family planning activities, both overseas and domestically, is overwhelming. The legal right to abortion, however, remains a contentious issue that divides the American public.

U.S. Economic Assistance Overseas

American support for international economic assistance is at its highest level since 1974, when opinions on the subject were first

tracked. Almost six in ten respondents (59 percent) favor 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.

The top priorities for international economic assistance are health-related and humanitarian programs, including those aimed at improving health, child survival, the environment, and human rights, as well as reducing suffering and helping women in developing countries reduce the number of 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. Helping countries slow population growth ranks lower.

Public Knowledge and Attitudes About Global Demographic 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 know that world population size is about six billion. The same number think it is at least five times the current size as know the correct answer, and nearly 40 percent say they did not know the size of the world's population. Furthermore, most show little grasp of population growth rates. For example, nearly half say the world population will double in less than 20 years, when current demographic trends suggest that the doubling time will be around 50 years.

Notwithstanding this limited knowledge of population numbers, a majority of respondents believes that the world is overpopulated. Although the American public does not view rapid population growth as being as serious a world problem as disease and hunger, the spread of nuclear weapons, on threats to the environment, a majority believes that rapid population growth contributes to environmental problems, civil strife, and economic stagnation in developing countries.

A majority of those surveyed did not feel that low fertility in developed countries was a pressing population issue.

Specific Issues

Freedom to Achieve Desired Family Size. An overwhelming majority of the American public (92 percent) believes in the fundamental right of individuals and families to determine the number of children they will have and that the necessary means and information for accomplishing this should be available to all. This principle is the basic tenet underlying the ICPD program.

Family Planning Programs. Most Americans see voluntary family planning programs as necessary and beneficial. There is very strong support (86 percent) for the government providing family planning services to poor American women who want them, and an overwhelming majority of Americans (87 percent) favors requiring health insurers to cover the cost of contraception. More than three-fourths of every demographic and political subgroup we considered favor such programs. Eight in ten favor U.S. funding for voluntary family planning programs in developing countries. At least 70 percent of all demographic and political subgroups favor such funding. Most Americans believe that family planning services are not currently available to most people in the world.

Support for family planning in developing countries is related to the belief that it can reduce the number of abortions, that the world is overpopulated, and that rapid population growth is a serious problem, as well as to strong support for humanitarian and other economic assistance to developing countries. What limited opposition exists to U.S. funding for family planning programs in developing countries does not result from opposition to family planning in general, because at least two-thirds of those who oppose funding family planning abroad favor government and health insurers' support for family planning in the United States. The small opposition that does exist seems to stem from an opposition to economic assistance to other countries, a belief that rapid population growth is not a serious problem, and a belief that the availability of contraception encourages sexual activity among teenagers and unmarried couples.

Abortion. Attitudes about abortion in the United States have been remarkably stable over the last 25 years. Abortion remains an ever-present and divisive issue in the population policy arena. About half of the survey respondents opposed abortion either completely or

except in cases of rape, incest, and danger to the mother's life. The other half supported a legal right to abortion. However, the public is not divisible simply into pro- and antiabortion rights segments because the great majority of Americans support or disapprove of abortion depending on circumstances.

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 toward abortion overseas are very similar to those regarding abortion in the United States—those who oppose one are likely to oppose the other. Fifty percent of respondents favor U.S. aid for voluntary, safe abortion as part of reproductive health care in developing countries that request it.

Relationship Between Family Planning and Abortion. As just discussed, 80 percent of our respondents favored U.S. funding for family planning programs in developing countries and 50 percent favored U.S. funding for voluntary safe abortion in developing countries that request it. We considered the overlap of these two groups. 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 14 percent opposed funding for both. More than two-thirds of those who oppose funding for abortion in developing countries support funding for family planning in those countries. 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.

The public is confused about whether the term “family planning” includes abortion. Forty-six percent of respondents said that “family planning” includes abortion, while 52 percent said that it does not.

For our other questions about support for voluntary international family planning programs, we stipulated that for purposes of the survey, “family planning” should be understood to exclude abortion.

Congressional Actions

The public has a mixed view of congressional actions regarding funding relating to population issues. 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 more disapproval 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 just for the family planning component of services. Here, 51 percent disapprove of Congress’s denial of funding and 44 percent approve. When asked about U.N. dues, 48 percent disapproved of Congress’s withholding a portion of the U.S. contribution to U.N. dues, while 36 percent approved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH COMMUNICATION

We draw six main implications for communicating demographic research findings to policy audiences and the general public.

First, few people are aware of the size and rate of growth of the world’s population. Our survey suggests that focusing on aggregate numbers—as, for instance, much of the press coverage of the “Day of 6 Billion” in October of 1999 tended to do—is less likely to interest the public than a focus on individual perspectives. 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 cannot assess whether the ICPD has had any causal effect on American attitudes.

Second, the public does not see much of a connection between population trends and other issues, such as reproductive rights, the environment, or global security, and they care less about the former than the latter. Therefore, research communication could usefully emphasize the connections of population growth with high fertility and other issues. Research has shown, for example, strong links between women's fertility behavior and their own and their children's health. 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.

Third, despite strong 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 foreign aid. They might also do this for family planning programs. In fact, funding for family planning programs is about 4.5 percent of foreign economic assistance. The public would benefit from accurate information about the relatively low cost of population assistance programs and the need for—as well as foreign 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, it is important that the public be informed about the potential of family planning to reduce abortion. Evidence from a number of countries (e.g., Russia, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh, Hungary, and South Korea) 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.