INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of a comprehensive survey of American attitudes about population trends and issues, particularly in the context of U.S. economic assistance overseas. The survey is the first comprehensive attempt to gauge U.S. public attitudes on the subject since 1994.

PURPOSE AND MOTIVATION FOR THE SURVEY

This survey had two purposes: to gain a clearer understanding of what the American public knows about global demographic trends and related issues and to assess public attitudes about specific issues, such as international economic assistance, family planning, and abortion.

For several reasons, it was important to undertake this survey. First, current information is needed on how the public views U.S. global engagement with respect to population and development assistance. The most recent survey of public attitudes on these issues was conducted in 1994, just prior to the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which was held in Cairo in September 1994. The ICPD was a multinational gathering sponsored by the United Nations that produced a comprehensive policy agenda and action items on a range of population issues. Signed by 178 nations, including the United States, the ICPD Programme of Action has influenced the way in which many stakeholder communities in the international arena frame population issues. Instead of focusing on aggregate population statistics and trends, these communities have become more focused on individual- and family-level quality-of-life
issues, such as achieving desired family size and improving the health, education, and socioeconomic status of women and children. While we had no way of tracing any causal effect of the ICPD on public attitudes, we were interested in whether American attitudes had changed in a way that was consistent with the ICPD “approach” to framing population issues. To help us track these changes, this survey was designed to parallel the 1994 survey.

Prior to this survey, we conducted in-depth interviews with congressional staff on population-related topics (Patterson and Adamson, 1999). We discovered that the offices of congressional moderates—the approximately 10 percent of members of Congress who constitute the “swing vote” on virtually all population-related policy questions—were more interested in population issues and more sympathetic toward population-related program funding than was widely believed. We also discovered a wide range of opinion among even this small congressional subgroup about Americans’ level of interest in the U.S. role abroad and U.S. leadership on international population issues such as family planning. The survey can help toward a better understanding of Americans’ interest in these issues.

Finally, we also wanted to identify information gaps and misperceptions in Americans’ understanding of these issues, especially those that could be addressed by the findings of scientific research. This information is important to the broader goals of the Population Matters project, which are to synthesize and communicate the findings and implications of demographic research in ways that policy analysts and others will find accessible. Because effectively informing these audiences requires understanding their attitudes and preconceptions, an important component of the project has been an assessment of audience knowledge and attitudes about population issues.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT**

In the next chapter, we discuss the survey methodology. Readers most interested in the findings may wish to proceed directly to Chapter Three, which presents findings on Americans’ attitudes toward international economic assistance and priorities for allocating assistance. Within this context, we sought more specific information on how Americans view demographic issues. Chapter
Four presents findings on what Americans know about global demographic trends and the extent to which they view these trends as problems. Chapter Five discusses findings on specific demographic issues, including individuals’ rights to achieve desired family size, family planning programs, and abortion. Chapter Six highlights key findings and conclusions and draws implications for efforts to communicate population research to the general public.