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Beyond the Numbers

How Americans View Global Population Issues

Two developments have heightened interest among the policy and research communities about American views on international population issues. First, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, Egypt, 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 access to health and family planning services and freedom to achieve desired family size. The extent to which Americans' views on the subject accord with this international shift in emphasis remains unclear. Second, the end of the Cold War has triggered a thorough reassessment of America's role in the world. This development has prompted considerable debate about whether to emphasize military or development assistance overseas and the merits of multilateral rather than unilateral approaches to addressing global problems.

However, no survey of American public attitudes on population issues or foreign assistance more generally has been conducted since the ICPD. To address the need for more-current information, RAND's *Population Matters* program conducted a nationally representative survey of 1,500 Americans.

The survey asked specifically about three 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 and abortion.

The survey found that Americans are not well-informed about the statistical dimensions of world population change but are nonetheless concerned about global population growth and its possible consequences.

Counter to the perception that Americans have become more absorbed with domestic issues, the survey also showed that a majority of the public—59 percent—supports U.S. economic assistance to other countries. An even greater majority—80 percent—favors U.S. assistance for voluntary family planning programs overseas. Abortion remains a divisive issue for Americans as it has been for the past 25 years, with about half opposed to abortion in most cases and the other half favoring a legal right to abortion.

VIEWS ON OVERSEAS ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE

American support for international economic assistance is at its highest since 1974, when opinions on the subject were first tracked (see Figure 1). Almost six in ten respondents (59 percent) favor U.S. economic assistance to other countries. Eighteen percent favored it very much, 41 percent favored it somewhat. A majority also agreed with the assertion that spending U.S. funds overseas benefits the United States.

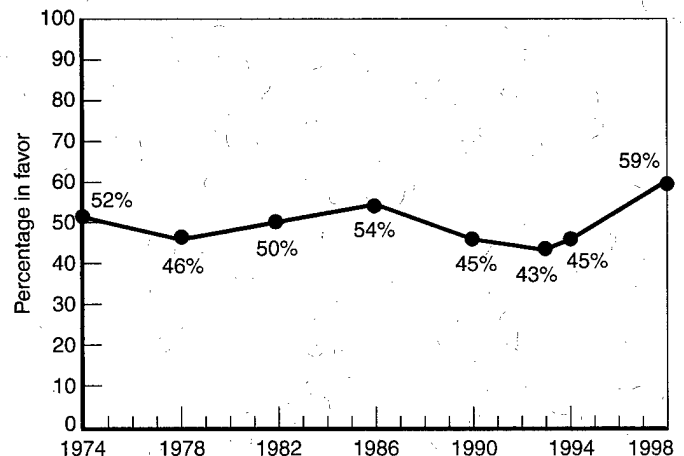


Figure 1—American Public's Support for International Economic Assistance Is at Its Highest Level Since 1974

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.

GLOBAL POPULATION TRENDS: WHAT DO AMERICANS KNOW?

The American public is not particularly well-informed about global demographic trends. Only 14 percent knows that the Earth's current population is approximately six billion. The same number—14 percent—thinks global population is at least five times that amount.

Nearly 40 percent said they did not know the size of the world's population (Figure 2). Furthermore, most show little grasp of population growth rates. For example, nearly half say the world population will double in less than 20 years. According to calculations of the United Nations Population Division, if existing rates were to continue, the 1998 population of 5.9 billion would double in 50 years.

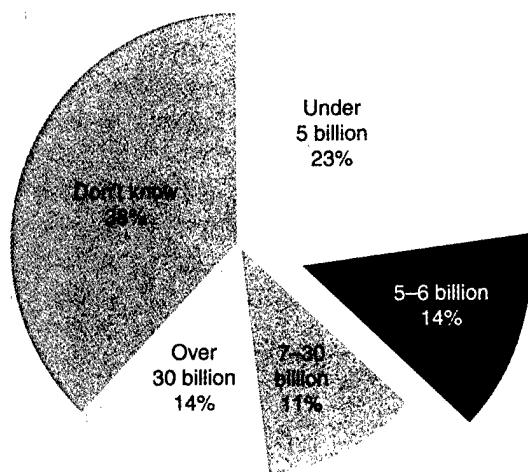


Figure 2—Most Americans Are Not Well-Informed About World Population Size

Notwithstanding this limited knowledge of population statistics, a majority of respondents believed the world is overpopulated. Although the American public views rapid population growth as less urgent a problem than some others—such as disease and hunger, the spread of nuclear weapons, or threats to the environment—a

majority believes that rapid population growth contributes to other problems by exacerbating environmental damage, civil strife, and economic stagnation in developing countries.

VIEWS ON SPECIFIC POPULATION ISSUES

Freedom to achieve desired family size. A vast majority of the American public (92 percent) believes that individuals and families should have the right both to determine the number of children they will have and to have access to the necessary means and information for accomplishing this.

Family planning programs. Most Americans see voluntary family planning programs (when understood to exclude abortion) as necessary and beneficial. Eight in ten respondents favor U.S. funding for voluntary family planning programs in developing countries. At least 70 percent of every demographic and political subgroup that we surveyed favors such funding. There is even stronger support (86 percent) for making government-provided family planning services available to poor American women. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of Americans (87 percent) favors requiring health insurers to cover the cost of contraception.

Support for U.S. family planning programs in developing countries appears to be related to the beliefs 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. Opposition to U.S. funding for family planning programs in developing countries appears to stem from opposition to giving economic assistance to other countries, belief that rapid population growth is not a serious problem, and belief that the availability of contraception encourages sexual activity among teenagers and unmarried couples. What limited opposition exists to U.S. funding for family planning 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.

Abortion. Abortion remains a central and divisive issue in the population policy arena. Attitudes about abortion in the United States have been remarkably stable over the last 25 years. 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. 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. Unlike those about family planning, attitudes toward abortion policy overseas are very similar to those regarding abortion policy in the United States—people who oppose legal abortion domestically also oppose it abroad.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH COMMUNICATION

The authors draw several implications for improving public knowledge and awareness about demographic issues.

- The American public is not well-informed about the size and rate of growth of the world's population. Therefore, communicators are likely to interest public audiences more by discussing these issues in terms of their impact on individuals and families and their quality of life, rather than by focusing on aggregate statistics and trends.
- Despite strong support for U.S. government funding of international family planning programs, 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, which total 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.

- Research shows that legal abortion can save women's lives. However, only two-thirds of the overall population and only one-half of those who oppose U.S. support for abortion overseas believe this.
- Because opposition to abortion may temper support for family planning, it is important that the public be informed about the potential of family planning to reduce abortion. Only about half of the public recognizes this relationship, yet evidence from a number of countries (e.g., Russia, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh) shows that improved availability of contraception has cut the number of abortions in these settings.

RAND policy briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This brief describes work done for the Population Matters project of RAND's Labor and Population Program; it is documented in How Americans View World Population Issues: A Survey of Public Opinion, by David M. Adamson, Nancy Belden, Julie DaVanzo, and Sally Patterson, MR-1114-DLPP/WFHF/RF, 2000, 148 pp., ISBN: 0-8330-2823-5, available free of charge from RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: toll free 877-584-8642; FAX: 310-451-6915; or Internet: order@rand.org). Population Matters is sponsored by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. Population Matters publications and other project information are available at <http://www.rand.org/popmatters>. Abstracts of all RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). Publications are distributed to the trade by NBN. RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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