

Disruptive Demographics

Understanding population shifts help us to understand – and better address – a changing social, economic, and political landscape, said James H. Johnson, Ph.D. In a recent Philanthropy Southwest presentation, Dr. Johnson, who is a distinguished professor of strategy and entrepreneurship at the University of North Carolina, shared research findings on six demographic changes that represent what he calls “unprecedented shifts.”

- 1. The South Rises – Again.** For most of the 1900s, the South was the place to leave, capturing only about 30% of the nation’s population. In every decade since 1980, however, the South has captured more than 50% of growth, with four states – Texas, Florida, Georgia and North Carolina – accounting for more than 70% of the growth. The West is a distant second, with about one-third of the nation’s growth, followed by the Northeast and Midwest capturing only 6.5% and 9.4% of population growth, respectively.
- 2. The Browning of America.** Until the mid-1960s, U.S. immigrant admissions were based on a quota system that favored white Europeans over people of color. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act changed that, resulting in increased immigration from Asia and Latin America. At the same time, non-white groups have accounted for the majority of U.S. population growth. The median age of Hispanic women is 27.5 compared to 42.6 years for white women, which means more children are being born to Hispanic population. Demographers estimate the white population in the U.S. will fall below 50% by 2050.
- 3. Marrying Out is In.** The rapidly increasing rate of “out marriage,” individuals marrying someone of a different race or ethnicity, is also changing the complexion of U.S. society. Intermarriage is correlated with the level of school completed. In 2008, the rates were highest for newlyweds who had attended college (15.5%), followed by those who were high school graduates (13.5%), and couples with less than a high school education (11%). Between 2000 and 2009, the U.S. population self-identifying as members of two or more races increased 32.7%, second only to the growth of the nation’s Hispanic population at 35.8%.
- 4. The Silver Tsunami.** The “graying” or aging of Americans is driven in part by healthier, more active lifestyles. The average 65-year-old today will live nearly 20 more years, with an estimated 601,000 centenarians in the U.S. by 2050. But the main driver is the aging of the post-World War II baby-boomer population, some 79 million people. As boomers retire, many will become dependent on Social Security and Medicare.
- 5. The End of Men?** Men bore 80% of total U.S. job loss between 2007 and 2009. Johnson said this led some to dub the economic downturn a “man-cession” and others to argue that this may very well signal the “end of men” as the dominant force in the U.S. labor market. The gender rate in postsecondary education is also shifting, with the ratio in college admissions over the past decade being 60% female to 40% male. In four year colleges and universities, for every two males that graduated in 2010, three females graduated.

6. **Cooling Water from Grandma's Well... and Grandpa's Too!** A final disruptive demographic factor Johnson points to is the rapid growth of grandparent-headed households. Grandparents are increasingly providing their grandchildren (and in some instances, the fathers and/or mothers of their grandchildren) with "cooling water from their reservoirs of knowledge and experience, as well as emotional and financial support," said Johnson. Between 2001 and 2010, the number of children living in grandparent-headed households increased by 26.1%, while the number of children living in all U.S. household types increased only 3.8%. Johnson emphasized the added responsibility of taking care of grandchildren imposes a considerable social, psychological, physical, and financial strain on grandparent-headed households, particularly grandmother-only-headed households, who are far more likely to have incomes below the poverty level than other family types.

"Demography is not a debate," said Johnson. Rather, it is an important tool to help prepare for and navigate our changing social fabric. For example, Johnson says we need to consider how to best educate children who are far more diverse than previous generations, recognize that elder care will soon be a bigger deal than child care, and make sure the next generation are equipped to compete in a new economy. Only by fully recognizing these shifts, said Johnson, can we turn these changes into advantages.