

THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN THE COLLECTION OF STATISTICS ON THE FAMILY

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The relevance of social statistics to the formulation of national policy is receiving wide recognition. This is particularly true of statistics on marital status, household composition, and fertility. The Department of Labor's report on the Negro Family, which was released in 1965, brought many of these data to widespread public attention. The hearings of the Gruening Committee have made policy-makers more aware of the importance of family size to national welfare. The development of "social indicators" in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare is another auspicious sign. Recent research on the characteristics of persons living in poverty has also emphasized the importance of facts about the family. In many parts of the federal government, we find an increased awareness of such topics as illegitimacy, average number of children per family, the incidence of divorce, and median age at marriage. Administrators are not only becoming more conscious of these variables, but are eager to use them to develop and guide programs and evaluate their results.

In brief, the current trend is toward an increased recognition of the policy and program relevance of statistics on the family. Therefore, the plea for the development and improvement of statistics on the family comes not only from the traditional sources - the professional statisticians, sociologists, and demographers - but also from administrators and policy-makers.

The responsibility for responding to this challenge rests primarily with two federal agencies: the Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics. Speaking very broadly, the Census Bureau is concerned mainly with statistics on the prevalence of various states, while NCHS is concerned mainly with statistics on incidence. For example, the Census Bureau estimates the distribution of the population by marital status at single points in time, while NCHS estimates the number of people marrying, divorcing, or dying during specific intervals of time. However, this distinction between the functions of the two agencies is by no means rigid. It is determined mainly by the data-collection systems each agency uses. Actually, there is some overlap in the statistics provided by the two agencies, and a great deal of overlap in the interests and objectives of their staffs.

Inasmuch as I am associated with NCHS, I shall deal largely with the present programs and future plans of that agency. In following this course, I do not want to suggest that the Census Bureau is doing less than the Center, but only that I know less about it.

In considering how to improve statistics on the family and fertility, we may think of two directions in which we might proceed.

The first is toward the more intensive development of family-related statistics themselves. This would include, for example, the development of improved measures of fertility, the construction of useful analytical devices, such as cohort tables for first marriage rates, and the intensification of efforts to improve the quality of all our statistics, especially those on marriage and divorce.

The second possible line of development is extensive, rather than intensive, and would involve new research programs to relate statistics on the family to a wide range of social and economic variables. The goal of this line of development is to identify more precisely the links between family-related variables and other aspects of the social and economic system.

If we wanted to interpret our responsibility narrowly, we could confine attention largely to the first line of development: the refinement and improvement of our basic statistical measurements. Certainly, we would all agree that this is highly important, particularly in areas where the data are seriously deficient.

But I believe that we must also follow the second, more extensive, line of development. We are led to this conclusion not only by personal inclination, but also by the needs of the administrators and policy-makers. Obviously, they are not using these measures in a vacuum, they are relating them to changes in other aspects of the social and economic system. So, I think that we have a broad responsibility to study the socioeconomic determinants and consequences of changes in family size and composition.

These, then, are the general principles that are being used to guide the development of statistics on the family in the National Center for Health Statistics. Now I shall describe the specific ways in which we are trying to apply these principles in the three subject-matter areas for which we have major responsibility: marriage, divorce, and fertility.

Although we publish total numbers of marriages for counties, States, and the entire United States, tabulations by age, race, and other characteristics of the bride and groom are shown only for those States included in the Marriage Registration Area. This comprises the States and independent registration areas that report marriages with a sufficient degree of completeness and in sufficient detail to warrant their inclusion in the national reporting system. At the present time it includes 39 States and the District of Columbia. This gives us coverage of about 78 percent of the total number of marriages occurring in the United States. Our most urgent task in the immediate future is to bring more States into the Registration Area.

Recent efforts to improve data on marriages include the development of a new standard certificate, which is being recommended for use by the States. In addition to items that appeared on the former version of this document, the revised version asks for the educational attainment of the bride and the groom, so that we will be able to develop new information on the socioeconomic correlates of marriage, using educational attainment as an indicator of socioeconomic status. The new version also asks for the date the previous marriage ended for persons who had been married before. This will enable us to develop data on the timing of remarriage.

The staff of the Marriage and Divorce Statistics Branch is now working on a method for estimating the total number of marriages in the United States classified by age, race, and order of marriage. This will make it possible to produce such long-needed statistics as age-specific first marriage rates. This project is still at an early stage of development, so we cannot be sure when it will be ready.

A still longer-range goal is the development of a set of tables showing central and cumulative first-marriage rates for birth cohorts over a relatively long time-span. Such a set of tables covering the period since 1917 was developed seven years ago by the Scripps Foundation for Research in Population Problems, but was not kept up to date. We hope to be able to improve on the original version of this table and to provide for regular updating. In preparing estimates of this kind, it is our intent to provide a model of what has happened over a long period of time and to make this model as consistent as possible with the few facts that we have to guide us.

Finally, in order to supplement the few statistics we are able to obtain from marriage records themselves, we are pretesting a mail survey designed to obtain information from recently married couples. Three versions of this survey are being tested: one to obtain data on the health of the couple, another to obtain information on migration patterns following marriage, and another to ask about numbers of children desired and expected and the methods of family planning being used.

The reporting of divorces in this country is far less satisfactory than that of marriages. At the present time, the Divorce Registration Area includes only 22 States, which account for 36 percent of all the divorces occurring in the country. Even within the Divorce Registration Area the reporting of certain characteristics is deficient. For example, the ages of husband and wife at the time of decree is reported for only 54 percent of the divorce records that we receive. In effect, this means that we can tabulate divorces by age of husband or wife for only 19 percent of all divorces occurring in the United States.

So, we are concentrating our major efforts on the expansion of the Divorce Registration Area and the improvement of reporting within the Area itself.

The new version of the U.S. Standard Certificate of Divorce, like the marriage certificate, requests information on the educational attainment of the husband and the wife. This should eventually provide some very useful information on the socioeconomic factors associated with divorce, in view of Census Bureau data showing that divorce is more common among couples with less education.

In spite of the fact that the registration of divorces is far from satisfactory, we still do research in a relatively wide framework with the few data that we have. For example, Dr. Plateris of the Marriage and Divorce Branch is preparing a monograph on the number of children affected by the divorce of parents. He finds that the average number of children per divorced couples has risen markedly over the years - a social fact that has wide ramifications.

The coverage of birth reporting has included the entire country since 1933, and the completeness of reporting has risen to a high level. At the present time, we believe that reporting is nearly 99 percent complete.

Our most recent technical contribution in the field of fertility statistics has been the updating of the cohort fertility tables, which were originally developed by the Scripps Foundation. At the present time, we are working on a revision of the cohort tables that will enable us to publish rates separately for the white and nonwhite populations from 1917 forward.

However, the bulk of our effort in the Natality Statistics Branch has been to relate statistics on births to a wider social and economic context. This has led to the publication of reports on recent trends in fertility, which contain discussions of the factors associated with the recent decline in fertility. Another report describes the relationship between fertility and educational attainment in Puerto Rico, and a report that will soon be issued describes recent trends and differentials in illegitimacy.

In order to supplement the information obtained from birth records, the Natality Survey was established in 1963. This is a mail survey of 1 in 1,000 women giving birth to legitimate children. So far, only a methodological report has been published, but we will begin to issue reports of substantive findings soon.

At the present time, we are particularly interested in developing ways of measuring the incidence of unwanted childbearing in the United States. In spite of the fact that there is a great deal of concern about the birth of unwanted children, we do not have a very good idea of how

severe the problem is, and we do not yet have a data-collection mechanism that will permit us to see whether it is becoming more or less severe. Recently we did a small pretest of a mail survey in a large city to see whether mothers who had recently had a baby would be willing to answer a question on whether or not they had wanted another child when they became pregnant. We were surprised to find that in this small and unrepresentative sample, approximately 20 percent said they had not wanted another child and an additional 30 percent said that they had wanted another child, but not right away. We feel that these results are sufficiently encouraging to warrant further methodological investigation, which we hope to begin soon.

The Center's major effort to strengthen its research capabilities in statistics relating to the family has been its attempt to establish the National Survey of Family Growth. This would be a program for the scientific investigation of demographic, sociological, and health-related aspects of fertility. Data would be collected at regular intervals through surveys of women in the reproductive years of life. The survey would cover such topics as past and expected childbearing, physiological limitations on fertility, the use of various methods of contraception, and the effectiveness of efforts to space children and limit family size.

Previous surveys of family growth, conducted by universities and private foundations, have demonstrated the feasibility and value of such research, and the proposed survey program would be built on the foundations they have provided. The latest project of this kind is the National Fertility Survey of 1965, conducted by Princeton University and supported by funds from the U.S. Public Health Service. The establishment of a National Survey of Family Growth would assure the continuation of the valuable series of data that the earlier studies began.

In many ways, the interests of the research-oriented demographer and the program-oriented administrator coincide in the proposed family growth survey. Without such a survey, it would be impossible to measure the overall success of the government's efforts to help couples control their fertility. At the same time, it will provide a great deal of information needed for the scientific investigation of the relationship between fertility and the socioeconomic system.

In summary, I believe that we have a unique opportunity at the present time to meet the government's immediate needs for better and more meaningful statistics on the family, and at the same time to provide data that will carry us further toward our long-range scientific goal of better understanding the relationship between the family and the social order.