

SOCIOLOGY FACES NO-GROWTH AND DECLINE IN ENROLMENTS**W G Steglich, University of Oklahoma****BIRTHRATES AND ENROLMENTS**

College and university enrolments are on a plateau, and will decline in the years ahead. Even those with no claim to an interest in the details of demography are aware that the baby boom of the 1950's has become the baby bust of the 1970's. However, most college administrators act as if they were unaware of what that means for colleges and universities in the future, or that they can cope with what is coming by "planning as usual" or if you are inclined to be cynical, by "planning not at all." Few academic leaders seem to be willing to face the fact that the coming enrolment decline will last for at least 15-20 years, and that there is no real hope for a significant upturn for the better part of a generation. How can I say that so absolutely? Because the people who will occupy college classroom in the next 15-20 years have already been born. Almost none of the unknowns that intrude on so much social forecasting are involved here. People do not go to college until they are 18, and most of those who do go are in the 18-21 year age group. Even if the birth rate rose dramatically in 1977, that would not affect college enrolments until 1995.

During the past 40 years the decline in the number of children born was steady and without significant interruption from the time we began to keep records until 1946. Then, for reasons that are still not clear, even after 30 years of study by sociologists, economists, and psychologists, we changed our orientation to child bearing. The one and two-child family of the 1930's became the three or four-child family of the years from 1947 through the mid-1960's. Then by 1964, the decline to the pre-1946 pattern of childbearing was dramatic, and apparently unexpected, as had been the increase in the late 1940's. The number of births dropped from the 4.3 million per year of 1956-1962 to just over 4 million in 1964, and to 3.5 million in 1967. That level of 3.5 to 3.6 million was maintained through 1971. Then occurred another sharp decline to the 3.1 or 3.2 million of the period 1972 to the present. Application of simple arithmetic tells you that 1.2 million fewer babies are being born each year in the 1970's than were born in the period

1957-1962. Some of the increased reproductive activity in 1947 and following, especially the postwar years of 1946-1950 represented catchup childbearing in cohorts of women who had delayed having children in the late 1930's and during the war period of 1940-1945. Cohort analyses of fertility bear out that statement. But the high level of average fertility that persisted through the 1950's was general, and not limited to cohorts playing catchup.

UNIVERSITY RESPONSES

How did universities respond in the middle 1960's to the sudden arrival of waves of freshmen for whom they had not planned? In the way that public institutions in the United States almost always respond — that is, by crisis response. Buildings that should have been planned and built 5 years earlier were suddenly put on the drawing boards. New PhD's were produced in all academic fields in great volume, and no longer only by the schools that had been awarding that degree for a long time. The market for college teachers was so firm and believed to be so permanent that we escalated academic appointments by one whole rank almost overnight. College teachers were hired without benefit of the doctorate as assistant professors and given tenure within 3 to 4 years after being hired. People who would not have been hired as instructors on temporary status in the 1930's and 1940's were hired as assistant professors and given tenure at the age of 30 in the 1960's. One academic department in a prestigious university, a science department in which knowledge turns over every 10 years, consists of 20 faculty members, none of whom is as old as 45, and 17 of them have tenure. Remember that this was happening in the middle 1960's, *after* the birthrate had already declined dramatically.

For the past three years, colleges and universities have experienced either stability or slight declines in enrolment, though there have been a few instances of small increase. Such declines are attributable to several factors, prominent among which is the fact that fewer high school graduates now choose to go to college, compared to 5 or 6 years ago. Other

restriction placed on veterans going to school under the GI Bill of Rights have reduced that source of enrolments. But mostly they reflect the fact that universities are now getting their freshmen from people born in 1958-1960, years in which the birth rate did not gain over the immediately prior years. Freshmen enrolments will stay at that plateau for the next 3 or 4 years; after that they will decline rather sharply.

Many university administrators seem to be telling themselves that they can compensate for the shrinking pool of available freshmen by more vigorous recruiting drives, by taking education to the people, and by enrolling larger proportions of older people. Perhaps they can, but it sounds like a 10-year-old boy whistling as he walks past the cemetery. It is true that the median age of university students is higher than it used to be. But that is based on body counts, not on credit hour enrolments. The bread and butter of college enrolment is, and will remain the full time student aged 18-22 who takes 5 or 6 courses per semester. In short, university administrators should be planning for the inevitable future of no-growth and decline.

THE GRADUATE SITUATION

Graduate education in sociology is most directly related to ups and downs in university enrolments. The bulk of those having advanced degrees in sociology find jobs in teaching. If those job outlets will be diminished because there are fewer college and university students, where will our new MA's and PhD's coming out of graduate school in undiminished numbers find such jobs? If the past dozen years had been normal, we could argue that the normal attrition of 7 to 8 percent per year through retirement and death would provide ample new jobs in college teaching. But they were not normal years. We hired unusual numbers of new PhD's to take care of the momentary increase in college enrolments. But these new, and not-so-young PhD's have 20 to 30 years of career ahead of them before normal retirement. In my own department, the earliest mandatory retirement is still 10 years away, and the next will be 12 years from now, and the next (me) in 15 years. Possibly the age of mandatory retirement will be lowered. If not, hopefully, many of us will

take early retirement, but I do not see any others planning to do so. Many believe that they cannot afford to consider early retirement. There are ways in which the university could facilitate early retirement by bonuses or increased pensions. That surely must be problematic.

Prospects for jobs for people with graduate degrees in sociology are not exciting. There are jobs, even good ones, such as those in the Census Bureau, the centers for the National Institutes for Mental Health, the Department of Agriculture, and other federal and state agencies. But it seems obvious that only sociologists trained in survey research and quantitative methods, especially in the applied areas, can successfully pursue such positions. There is not much market for general theorists or philosophically oriented sociologists in such careers. Professional associations have only recently become interested in this problem of non-academic outlets and are doing surveys of available positions for graduate level sociologists. The Southern Sociological Association and the American Sociological Association are exploring the possibilities of expanded employment for sociologists.

What about undergraduate sociology majors? What, other than going to graduate school can good students with degrees in sociology expect to do? Again the answer is the same as that for people with graduate degrees. There are jobs of all kinds for those with training appropriate to the market. As in the case of graduate degrees, appropriate training means knowledge and reasonable mastery of survey research methods and statistics, familiarity with data sources, and some detailed knowledge of public agencies and public policy issues in areas such as corrections, gerontology, drug abuse, and mental health.

SOCIOLOGY CURRICULA

This comes down to a critical view of the courses and curricula that have emerged in the name of sociology during the past 15 years. In several ways, we have lost the perspective of our American sociological fathers, and have become captives and perhaps victims of the European versions of sociology that have dominated the American

street light, because the light was better there.

A common manifestation of seeing statistics as an end in itself rather than a means to sociological research is the tendency of young colleagues and graduate students in their contempt for aggregate statistics. They dismiss such data by knowing comments about the "ecological fallacy." Since most of the data that exist in public records, including those of decennial censuses and the reports of public agencies, are aggregate data. To dismiss them because they do not lend themselves to certain statistical treatment is to dismiss much of the information that is available for sociological investigation. Would an Emile Durkheim in today's sociology graduate program be denied the opportunity to study the phenomenon of suicide by using national differences in suicide rates?

PRACTICAL RESPONSES

What are some right responses to these problems? We need to return to substantive sociology as central in our curricula at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, not to be rid of theory and methods, but to provide knowledge and data to which theory and methods can be applied. This means courses

at the core of traditional sociology, such as stratification, social organization, social change, and social conflict, as well as specific institutional areas like family, gerontology, crime and corrections, and intergroup relations. Second, we should package these emphases into applied sociology programs. The current vogue of evaluation research in mental health, in crime, and delinquency is one such response. Another is the concern with policy analysis in corrections, energy, public education and other areas. Such an emphasis is especially necessary in graduate sociology.

A serious danger must be kept in mind when one attempts to establish such applied programs. They must not become training programs within the specified area of application rather than programs in sociology. There is nothing sadder than to train at the college level, people for specific jobs in corrections, social work, or counseling, only to discover that the market for that specific kind of training is glutted in a year or two, and that the promise of a job at the end of a vocational training program cannot be honored. Such programs must not be in lieu of a liberal education in general sociology.