

Where the Children Are

Demographers like to simplify reality and argue that there are only two ways that explain why there are many children in a population. Either there are many children born to a few women or there are many women who each give birth to a few children. While this insight is obvious, this simplification explains the importance of demographic momentum—those population who until recently had a very high birth rate (resulting in a large number of children being present now) will have a large number of potential parents in the future (resulting in a large number of children being born even if birth-rates decline sharply).

One way in which demographers can assess the growth potential of any particular society is to consider the percentage of that society's population that is below the age of fifteen. Globally about 31% of the population is below age fifteen but this percentage varies greatly over the world. While the percentage is 17% and 22% in Western Europe and North American respectively, the percentage in Sub-Saharan Africa is 45% (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1996).

The birth rates in Sub-Saharan Africa decreased substantially during the 80s. In Northern Sudan, for example, the average number of births women had by age 20 decreased by 50% to 0.3 while many nations saw decreases of at least 30%, including Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Senegal, Northern Sudan, Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, the high birth rate that preceded this decline means that many children were born then and this, using the logic above, means that many children will be born in the near future even though fertility rates have declined.

Sources

U.S. Bureau of the Census. World Population Profile: 1996. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996.

"Where the Children Are." World Monitor (IV, 5) May, 1991, pp. 28-19.