

US birth rate declines to lowest point in more than a century

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The birth rate in the United States continued its long-term decline in 2020, according to figures released Wednesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which showed a 4 percent drop.

Even more alarmingly, the decline doubled to 8 percent in the month of December, the first month that births were affected by the coronavirus pandemic, which came to widespread public attention in the US during the month of March 2020.

A separate Associated Press report found that the plunge in December continued in January 2021 and February 2021, with births down 9.3 percent and 10 percent respectively, compared to the same month in 2020.

The CDC gave a provisional figure of 3.6 million for the total number of US births in 2020, just slightly ahead of the 3.4 million estimated deaths. It was the lowest total number of births for the United States since 1979.

In 2019, by contrast, 3.747 million people were born and 2.854 million died in the US, for a net gain, not counting immigration, of 907,000 people. The net gain in 2020 was barely 200,000. At the birth rates shown in December 2020 and the first two months of 2021, the US population will actually be declining, not counting immigration.

The Associated Press report found that 25 American states had more deaths than births last year, compared to only five states in 2019.

The general fertility rate in 2020 was 55.8 births per 1,000 women aged 15-44, also down 4 percent from 2019 and marking a new record low for the country. The comparable figures were 59.1 in 2018 and 58.2 in 2019, so the decline is accelerating sharply. The drop in 2020 was more than twice the decline in 2019. Last year's rate was the lowest since the federal government

began tracking it more than a century ago.

The birth rate has been declining steadily in the United States since the Wall Street crash of 2008 and the subsequent deep recession. Whereas in previous crises, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s, the birth rate fell sharply for several years and then rose again, there has been no such rebound from 2008.

This decline has been particularly sharp among younger women, those aged 20-24, where the birth rate has declined by an astonishing 40 percent since 2007. Over the same period, the birth rate for all women has dropped by 19 percent. The result is that the average age of women at their first time giving birth has risen from 23 in 2010 to 27 in 2020, a substantial increase in only a decade.

The birth rate declined across every race and ethnicity, demonstrating that it is a response to broader economic and societal pressures, particularly the impact of the 2008 crash and the subsequent protracted economic crisis on the working class as a whole.

There are complex social interconnections and processes underlying this decline in childbearing, related to advances in contraception which make having a child much more of a conscious decision on the part of women and their partners.

Women have been able to attend college in much greater numbers and enter into careers in the workplace, and thus have delayed childbearing, or opted out altogether. But the more recent drop is clearly the consequence of overriding economic factors.

For a protracted period, from the 1980s on, the lifetime reproductive rate for American women oscillated around the figure of 2.1 children, roughly corresponding to the number required to keep the existing population stable, known as "replacement-level fertility." This has dropped since 2008 to only 1.6

children per woman in a lifetime, well below the level of replacement.

This latest decline is a damning indictment of American capitalism, under which wages have stagnated and conditions of life for working people have worsened, to the point that tens of millions of families struggle to provide a decent life for children, and therefore feel themselves compelled to have fewer of them or none at all.

Figures provided by Statista.com illuminate the relation between declining birth rate and socioeconomic status, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The birth rate for those at the poverty level or below hit its recent peak in 2008, at 96 per 1,000 women of child-bearing age. This figure has declined steadily since then, to 74 in 2019, and is doubtless even lower in 2020.

For women living between the poverty level and 200 percent of the poverty level, the sections of the working class closest to poverty, there was a similar decline, although not as pronounced, from 72 per 1,000 women to 61 per 1,000 women.

But for women living at 200 percent of the poverty level and above, the financial crash had effectively no impact on their decisions to have children. Their reproductive rate fell slightly, from 48 per 1,000 in 2008 to 43 per 1,000 in 2013, and remained at that level, rising slightly to 44 in 2019.

The coronavirus pandemic thus exacerbates trends already embedded in the development of American capitalism. The preliminary figures for December 2020, and January and February 2021 suggest its colossal impact, not only on those who have died or fallen grievously ill, but on the entire population.

It is not surprising that women and men would not wish to bring a child into the world under grim conditions of mass death, economic privation and great uncertainty. To say nothing of the natural reluctance to make repeated visits to doctors' offices and hospitals that are overrun with the dying and desperately ill.

These figures demonstrate once again that the only rational and humane policy for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic is a complete shutdown of non-essential production, schools and other venues where people gather, until the entire population is vaccinated, including children, and the virus is exterminated.



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