



AMERICA'S POPULATION REACHES 300 MILLION

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America's population reached 300 million on Oct. 17, a cause for celebration but also a moment to pause and reflect on how such growth impacts the country's environment, economy and society.

It took America 52 years to grow from 100 million in 1915 to 200 million in 1967, but only 39 years to reach 300 million.

Only two other countries have bigger populations: China and India.

A changing population

"What's important about hitting this 300 million mark, aside from the fact that it's a big number and it focuses people on the fact that we're the third most populous country in the world, is how we're getting there," William Frey, a demographer who studies the population at the Brookings Institute, said on the NewsHour.

Aging and immigration have pushed America's population, unlike those of every other industrialized nation, to grow. Quickly. One American is born every seven seconds, while one dies every 13 seconds; basically, people are staying healthier and living longer.

Boosting those numbers is the Census Bureau's estimate that America absorbs close to 1 million immigrants a year.

Impact on the environment

More people also translates into more pollution and use of natural resources.

Americans use 20 percent more land (for homes, roads, schools, etc.) than they did 20 years ago, as well as three times more water than the international average, according to the Center for Environment and Population.

This worries some demographers.

"When I travel abroad and come back, I'm always stunned by the consumption here," Vicky Markham, the center's director, told the Guardian.

"Cars are bigger, people travel further distances, they build bigger houses. This is the ultimate disposable consumer society."

But other experts believe that American culture thrives on the challenges created by growth.

"The people who argue that we're going to run out of energy, that we're going to run out of water, that we're going to run out of other natural resources, overlook the fact that time and again technology has been able to overcome those limitations," Frey told the Christian Science Monitor.

Economic implications

Another contributor to the population's growth is the fact that people are living longer.

Consequently, government programs such as Social Security and Medicare spend more money to support the expanding number of seniors.

The younger population must support the baby boomers as they reach retirement. The result could be an increase in taxes -- up to 50 percent, according to the Newsweek Population Project.

Nonetheless, Frey is optimistic. "Unlike Europe and unlike Japan, however, we're going to be projected to grow in our labor force population, as well as in our child population, over the next three or four decades," he told the NewsHour.

"That will put us in a much better position, not only to take care of our elderly population, but also to have a more vibrant and vital labor force than they will have."

Changing role of race and ethnicity

Immigrants, who currently constitute over 12 percent of the people living in America, will continue to increase the population.

The Census Bureau predicts that by 2050, Hispanics will make up 25 percent of America's population.

As evidenced by recent debates in Congress, responses to the immigration trends in America are mixed.

"Immigration is adding diversity by bringing in people with new ideas, skills and cultures which mean we are better able to communicate and do business with other countries," Frey said.

A study by the Migration Policy Institute reports that immigrants make up 17 percent of graduates with bachelor's degrees in science and engineering, 29 percent of the country's

master's degrees and 39 percent of its doctoral degrees, according to the Christian Science Monitor.

Some Americans, however, argue that this high immigrant population robs citizens of jobs and further complicates national issues, such as health care and security.

“The predominance of poor workers frustrates future assimilation,” Robert Samuelson of the Newsweek project wrote. “This makes immigration seem threatening to millions of Americans, who visualize their country being overrun by an alien underclass.”

More to come...

Even as the momentous 300 million mark comes and goes, and Americans debate what, exactly, its significance is to the country, the next milestone is fast approaching -- 400 million by 2042, projections say.

-- *Compiled by Kaelin O'Connell for NewsHour Extra*

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