

## BIRTH ORDER AND THE DECLINE IN THE BIRTH RATE

STUDENTS of population have sometimes assumed too freely that the decline in the birth rate has been due almost exclusively to the passing of the large family. Striking evidence that inroads have been made upon the fertility of small families is afforded by a brief analysis entitled, "Birth Order and the Decline in the Birth Rate," and featured in the editorial section of a recent issue of *Population Index*.<sup>1</sup> The materials presented are designed mainly to illustrate the usefulness of annual census tabulations of births by order of birth. The accompanying chart shows for 1924 and 1934 births of designated order per 1,000 estimated population in the birth registration area of 1924, exclusive of Delaware, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. The total crude birth rates for 1924 and 1934 are simply broken down to indicate how much of the respective rates is attributable to first births, second births, third births, etc. The shaded areas portray, for each order of birth, the decline in the rate during the decade under consideration.

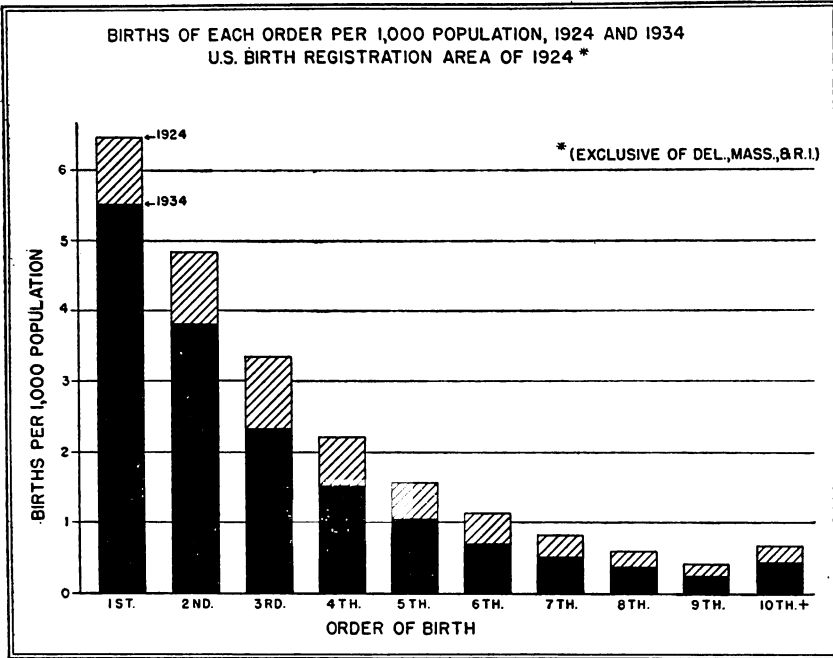
Two outstanding points are visible from the chart. In the first place, the percentage declines in birth rates were greatest among sixth and succeeding orders. The rates of decline were: first births, 14 per cent; second births, 22 per cent; third births, 31 per cent; fourth births, 33 per cent; fifth births, 37 per cent; and births of succeeding orders around 39 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

In the second place, despite the high percentage decline in birth rates among large families, the absolute declines were too small to exert great influence upon the total birth rate. The large absolute declines among the lower orders were much more important. The situation was summarized as follows:

In 1934 there were over half a million fewer births in this group of

<sup>1</sup> *Population Index*, October, 1937, iii, No. 4. See Frontispiece and pp. 154-155.

<sup>2</sup> Data of similar nature may also be found in "Decline in Birth Rate in Relation to Age of Mothers," Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, *Statistical Bulletin*, December, 1937, xviii, No. 12, p. 6. In this instance gross reproduction rates, by order of birth, are shown for two periods 1920 to 1924 and 1930 to 1934, in the expanding birth registration area of the United States. In this article emphasis is placed upon the greater percentage declines in the high orders of birth than in the low orders. Little attention is devoted to the strikingly high absolute declines in the lower orders. The article does point out, however, that "the age group of maximum fertility receded from the age group 25 to 29 in the earlier period to the age group 20 to 24 in the later period."



states than the 1924 rate would have yielded. Of this decline, nearly one-sixth was due to the reduction in first births, about one-third to reductions in the first two children, about one-half to reductions in the first three children, and nearly three-fourths to reductions in the first five children. In other words the very sharp drop in the birth rates for the sixth and all higher orders accounted for only a little more than one-fourth of the total decline in births. The reduction in the rates for the first two children alone accounted for more of the decline than that for all orders over five combined.

The decline in the rate for initial births from 6.5 per 1,000 population in 1924 to 5.5 in 1934 is of special interest because it suggests an increase in the proportion of childless women. Questions may arise concerning the validity of using 1924-1934 comparisons of first births as a basis for studying secular trends of infertility. During the early years of the depression the marriage rate fell sharply. According to Stouffer and Spencer, the marriage rate in 1932 was only three-fourths as high as the average annual marriage rate from 1920 to 1929.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the marriage

<sup>3</sup> Stouffer, S. A. and Spencer, L. M.: Marriage and Divorce in Recent Years. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, November, 1936, p. 56.

rate began rising in 1933 and by 1934 had regained its predepression level. Also, in 1934 the total birth rate was higher than that for the previous year and there is ample evidence that this rare instance of an increase in the birth rate arose in large part from first births, perhaps in considerable degree from first births to marriages postponed by reasons of the depression. Furthermore, computations have shown that in 1930 there were 6.0 first births per 1,000 population in the registration area covered by the analysis. As indicated above, this rate was 6.5 in 1924 and 5.5 in 1934. It is therefore apparent that the previously mentioned 1924-1934 decline in first births did not arise wholly from the shortage of marriages during the depression. Instead, there would appear to be much reality to the suggested increase in childlessness.

For interpretation of the situation the reader is reminded that, since the rates are crude and are based upon the total population, the declines by order of birth could be influenced by changes in such factors as the ratio of married women in the childbearing span, ages of women, and spacing of children. Whatever may be the bearing of these factors, there can be no doubt that an important part of the declining birth rate in recent years has arisen from reductions in the fertility of small families.

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