

GROWTH OF THE BLACK POPULATION
A Study of Demographic Trends

REYNOLDS FARLEY

Chicago, Markham Publishing Co., 1970, 286 pp. \$7.50.

Black People have always been an absorbing interest of whites. This is part of the "American way of life." Usually also this interest has been of the order of "personal curiosity." Within the past 20 years, however, events have transformed this interest into "objective curiosity." Whites have found themselves invited, thrust or forced into "peer" relations with blacks in many life situations. They felt the need to know what manner of people these blacks are.

One response to this augmented and heightened interest has been a tide of scientific, quasi-scientific and popular literature about blacks. GROWTH OF THE BLACK POPULATION is in the scientific sector of this literary genre. It essays a comprehensive survey and scientific explanation of the checkered growth pattern from first settlement of blacks in the colonies to the present time. Along the route of this study, Farley pulls together, examines and evaluates many, perhaps most of the relevant data and sources. One strength of this little monograph rests in the fact that it cuts a clear and logical path through this morass of data and materials. Thus, if the reader follows Professor Farley, he can thread his way through what otherwise would be a hopeless thicket.

By hewing close to the line of logic and objectivity, Farley is able to resist the temptation (irresistible to many others) to

sentimentalize and moralize about Negro family and sex behavior. Many readers will thank him for this. Thus, for example, he does not repeat the gossip about the lasciviousness of slave women and the alleged superior sexual virility of black men. The "illegitimacy problem" is treated in context as a subordinate issue. Unlike some other white "scholars," Farley does not poke around in his data looking for peculiar "racial" explanations of the alleged weakness of black families.

But these very strengths of the book are sources of some of its weaknesses. Professor Farley refuses to stray out of sight of his data into the inviting side paths of speculation and "sociological imagination," to borrow C. Wright Mills' felicitous phrase. As a consequence, the book is solid, trustworthy and rather pedestrian.

In this monograph Farley has produced a focused and scholarly study of considerable interest and importance. Focus is achieved by defining the problem of investigation as first, describing the varying rates of population growth, and second, accounting for changes in these demographic rates (p. 1). In this way he protects himself from the distractions that may invite the student of this subject to stray from his assignment.

The study adduces data that show very high growth rates, on the order of two to three per cent per year, from the early seventeenth century until the Civil War. Beginning in the early 1880's and continuing through the Great Depression, this growth rate declined steadily. During the Depression decade of the 1930's the black population grew at a rate hardly large enough to maintain itself. After 1940, the growth curve turned up sharply, peaking in the 1955-59 half decade at a rate approximating that of some decades prior to the Civil War. However, after 1960 the rate of growth of the black population again declined, even though it remained relatively high, 1.88 per cent yearly.

Explanation of these variations in the pattern of black population growth is the central problem of analysis in this monograph. Farley examines three hypotheses to explain these

changes of growth rates. He states these hypotheses in the following way:

. . . first, that changes in fertility could be explained by changes in the age at which women married, the proportion who married, or the stability of marriages; second, that changes in fertility are explicable by changes in the use of birth control; third, that changes in fertility result from changes in health conditions, particularly the health conditions that affect the capability of women to bear children. (p. 8).

After an examination of appropriate data, he concludes that, "they [changes in health conditions] are the important reasons for the decline in fertility which occurred before the Depression, and the more recent rise in fertility." (p. 13). However, throughout I have been troubled by this "health conditions" explanation. Perhaps it is just because it is so evident and reasonable. It seems to me that Farley demonstrates a crude and unmeasured correlation between alterations of health conditions and variations of the black fertility and death rates. The temptation to conclude, as Farley does, that this correlation constitutes explanation is seductive, indeed almost irresistible. Yet it is only a correlation. It may well be that variations of both health conditions and population growth rates are explicable by a third factor.

This health conditions hypothesis seems to exclude or ignore too many factors that may be relevant, even decisive. For example, it cannot take account of the sociopsychic factors (recognized by Farley) that influenced fertility behavior (of both blacks and whites) during the Great Depression and in the following sudden baby boom. Also, hewing strictly to the hard data line tends to ignore the social-relations and psychic aspects of the changing American racial structure. There is a persuasive literature that argues that this dynamic interplay constitutes an important, perhaps the crucial element in the behavior of blacks. Under the terms of this approach, it is argued that softening the rigid racial structure functioned to heighten optimism of blacks about the society and made them more willing than

formerly to bring children into the improved and improving world. A more adequate explanation might combine health conditions with other hard and soft data factors into a syndrome as the lead element of a correlational model.

GROWTH OF THE BLACK POPULATION is an exemplary piece of demographic scholarship. Farley is meticulous in assessing the reliability of his data and sources. He employs sophisticated demographic methodology. The exposition is lucid and the organization is logical and orderly. In the orthodox demographic tradition, Farley exercises caution in making interpretations and drawing inferences from his data. He plays the demographic game close to the hard data and the hard logic.

The first chapter is a summary of the research problem, the supporting data, the analysis and findings and limited prediction of future growth trends of the black population. The chapters forming the last half of the book present and analyze the data that test the hypothetical explanations of variations of the growth pattern.

The analysis in this monograph is tightly focused, and so it is also narrowly restricted. It asks what factors conditioned variations of the growth rates of the black population over time in the United States. It avoids asking questions about the consequences of this growth and these variations. In the issue-oriented context of contemporary American life this book has only limited relevance. It is in the style of the self-contained, circular scholarship that draws the ire of many students and younger scholars.

A study of growth of the black population might speak to some of the most crucial problems of contemporary American life. However, such an investigation would have to examine growth in terms of regional, rural-urban and intra-urban location and movement. It would be concerned with relative growth by migration as well as by natural increase. Thus formulated, it could speak with significance to such issues as ghetto formation, the new stance on politics by blacks, the dysfunctions of our

welfare system, the prospects of urban violence, to name only a few.

On balance, although **GROWTH OF THE BLACK POPULATION** fails to deal with these exciting and perhaps extraneous issues, it makes a useful contribution to the literature of demography. It illuminates aspects of a problem that has increasing scientific and policy importance. The report suggests aspects of the general problem that need further investigation. Professor Farley has drawn attention to some of these issues. I have suggested some others that could be researched with great value to the field of demography and the tasks of social policy and action.

JOSEPH S. HIMES