

Fertility and Family Planning in the South Pacific

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This paper discusses fertility and family planning in 18 countries of the South Pacific region, listed in Table 1 and shown in Figure 1. (As can be inferred from the table, the Australian dependency of Norfolk Island, with a population of around 1,900, and the British dependency of Pitcairn, with about 70 inhabitants, are excluded from the discussion.) Table 2 only hints at the diversity of the region. Compare, for example, the Trust Territory of the Pacific, which has more than 2,000 islands,¹ only 90 of which are inhabited, with phosphate-rich Nauru, which comprises one island of 21 square kilometers.

Perhaps in part because of their small populations (see Table 2), many of these countries are neglected in global or regional overviews of fertility and family planning. For example, Kirk gives the following explanation of why a Worldwatch Institute estimate of a crude birth rate of 17.4 per thousand for Oceania is lower than an AID estimate: "Through carelessness the former omitted the islands that constitute the less developed part of the region."²

A further reason for this neglect may be the difficulties involved in obtaining and comparing statistical data. For example, because six of the 18 countries are French or US territories, the information available from the United Nations, which deals largely with independent nations, tends to be limited. Even within a country, comparability over time presents problems. Thus, a reputable reference book has incorrectly suggested that Tonga's crude birth rate, as a consequence of the family planning program, fell from 25 per thousand in 1974 to 13 in 1976,³ whereas (as discussed below) improved vital registration suggests

that the rate may well have exceeded 30. Because many of the countries have incomplete vital registration combined with significant and fluctuating net migration rates, estimates of annual growth rates are often speculative.

Why, then, are these countries of interest? First, many have gained increased political autonomy in the last two decades, and this has influenced their strategic importance. Second, although the land area of the region is only 551,039 square kilometers, the 200-mile Exclusive Economic Area gives the region a total sea area of around 29 million square kilometers.⁴ Third, with high growth rates and, in some cases, very limited land area, the need for emigration or fertility control has become urgent. In addition, population changes in the region often have repercussions in other countries. The growth rates below 2 percent in Table 2 have largely been achieved by emigration, principally to Hawaii, the mainland United States, and New Zealand.

Fertility

As with growth rates, the estimates of total fertility rates are also quite variable, as indicated in Table 3. Many of the better estimates in this table are based upon complete or adjusted registered births and on an age distribution derived from a recent census. However, with small populations fluctuating from year to year because of sex-selective migration, the assumptions of a constant age-sex distribution may not always be fully valid.

Similarly, the base populations that form the denominator for the crude birth rates in Table 4 may also be subject to significant fluctuations. For example, Guam is experiencing immigration of Koreans and Filipinos, along with continuing movements of

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