

American Samoa
historic
1974

cpr population research

CENTER FOR POPULATION RESEARCH • NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CHILD HEALTH AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT • MARCH 1974

POPULATION GROWTH IN AMERICAN SAMOA

Jerry W. Combs, Jr., Ph.D.

Chief, Behavioral Sciences Branch
Center for Population Research
National Institute of Child Health
and Human Development

The population situation in American Samoa can be summarized very briefly. During the twentieth century the population has doubled every 30 years. According to a census taken June 1, 1900, the islands contained 5,679 inhabitants. This number had increased to 10,055 in 1930 and to 20,051 in 1960. In the following 10 years the population increased by more than 7,000, to 27,159 according to the 1970 census, despite a net outmigration estimated at more than 6 percent of the 1960 population. The increase in this last decade represents a growth of 35.4 percent, a rate of increase which, if continued, will lead to more than a doubling of the population by 1990, as indicated in the following table:

This paper was prepared as a portion of a report to the Secretary of the Interior, following a visit to American Samoa in December 1973 by Dr. Louis M. Hellman, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Population Affairs, HEW, Mr. James Hauser, Acting Regional Program Director for Family Planning Services, Region IX, and Dr. Combs, for the purpose of assessing the family planning program and the population situation in that American dependency.

Table 1

Population of American Samoa, 1900-1970

<u>Year</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Percent Change from Preceding Census</u>
1900	5,679	--
1912	7,251	27.7
1926	8,056	11.1
1936	10,055	24.8
1946	12,908	28.4
1956	18,937	46.7
1966	20,051	5.9
1970	27,159	35.4

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census; "Number of Inhabitants - American Samoa," November 1971, p. 56-5

The numbers of people we are dealing with, of course, are small. All told, they would comprise the population of a very small city in the United States. But the territory is restricted, amounting to only 72 square miles, and is separated by thousands of miles from supplies upon which the standard of living of its inhabitants depends. The density of settlement, amounting to about 389 persons per square mile, is not yet as high as some of the more densely settled rural areas of India and Pakistan, and does not approach the density of cities in the United States, but it is some six times higher than the density in the United States as a whole. Population growth in this century has reduced its area per person from 10 acres in 1900 to 2 acres in 1970, while its rugged terrain and tropical

climate restricts the expansion of its agriculture. Although its exports, mainly the product of its canneries, exceed in value its imports, it already imports some quantity of staple food, such as taro, and at present, at least, is entirely dependent upon its chief source of energy--oil, whose future availability may very critically affect the welfare of the islands.

The visitor to Samoa, overwhelmed by the islands' beauty, the charm of its inhabitants, and the vista of the open sea almost everywhere available, is not apt to be impressed with a population problem. Nor do the inhabitants, by and large, appear to be. It is, nevertheless, fair to say that the population has already outgrown the resources that the islands' traditional culture could support, and the outmigration of its people suggests that its population is also outgrowing the present economy. Given the vulnerability of that economy to certain resources, such as oil, and to the viability of transportation systems for its exports, its current pattern of growth is both threatening and incongruous.

This growth is the result of the juxtaposition of a traditional culture and value system that sustains a very high birth rate and a modern health system provided by the Government of the United States which assures an admirably low death rate. The birth rate in American Samoa is among the highest in the world, although apparently declining. Based on recorded births for the years 1969-1971, the birth rate in 1970 was 38.3 per thousand. In sharp contrast, the death rate was only 4.5 per thousand, yielding a rate of natural increase of 33.8 per thousand. At this rate of increase, the population will double every 21 years and will reach 52,802 by 1990 unless there continues to be substantial net emigration, as noted in Table 2. The

Table 2

Projections of the Population of American Samoa,
1970-1990

<u>Years</u>	A	I	II	III	IV
1970	27,159	27,159	27,159	27,159	27,159
1975	32,070	32,200	31,910	29,730	29,520
1980	37,870	38,620	37,750	32,660	31,950
1985	44,717	46,750	44,660	36,150	34,560
1990	52,802	56,560	52,500	40,110	37,260

Projection A. assumes constant increase of 33.8%, based on vital rates of 1969-71, and no migration.

Projection I assumes constant fertility and no migration.

Projection II assumes declining fertility and no migration.

Projection III assumes constant fertility and constant migration.

Projection IV assumes declining fertility and constant migration.

Source: Projections I through IV from "Population Statistics of American Samoa: A Report to the Government of American Samoa," by Chai Bin Park, December 1972, p. 61

population will certainly continue to grow rapidly, even if the high birth rate declines. And unless the latter does occur and migration continues, the islands' population is potentially even more explosive.

Vital Statistics

Although the statistics in the Islands have deficiencies which should be corrected, it is very unlikely that they substantially distort the fact of American Samoa's rapid growth. There is always a possibility of under-enumeration in censuses and, rarely, usually for political reasons, of over-enumeration. The 1970 census figure for American Samoa was probably quite accurate, inasmuch as a census of villages made in connection with the filariasis program in 1970-1972 confirms both the total population count and, with few exceptions, the count in villages as well.^{1/}

It is our opinion, as it was the opinion of Mr. Chai Bin Park who studied the population statistics of American Samoa in 1972, that the natural increase figure is also approximately correct. Most of the births in American Samoa occur in either the LBJ Memorial Hospital or dispensaries. Birth certificates are prepared on all these births. About 10 percent of the births eventually recorded occur outside the hospital or dispensaries. It is very possible, indeed likely, that some of the births which occur at home are never recorded, especially if the child dies before the mother or responsible individual finds it advantageous to record the birth. I was informed that occasionally mothers bring babies to the clinics for whom birth certificates have not been obtained, and the Registrar confirmed that there is some late

^{1/} Chai Bin Park, "Population Statistics of American Samoa: A Report to the Government of American Samoa" (December 1972) p. 48.

birth registration. Insofar as such deficiency in recording births is balanced by unrecorded deaths the figures on natural increase would not be affected. As Park pointed out in his report, the "delayed reports are an indication of incompleteness of birth registration," or at least, non-registration at time of occurrence. He adds: "Because of the necessity of presenting proof of identity in order to enroll in school or to travel, a need for birth registration eventually arises." (p.27)

There is perhaps a greater seriousness with respect to death records, but again our reservation is based on theoretical rather than factual grounds. The weakness in the vital statistics system appears to derive from the fact that, although the law requires a burial permit, which would insure that all deaths are recorded, we are informed that burial permits have in fact never been printed, and are therefore actually not required. The possibility thus exists that not only infant deaths but deaths of others also may escape the recording system. This possibility will continue to exist as long as the requirement for burial permits is not rigidly enforced. Unlike the situation with respect to births, no occasion arises to encourage registration of a death not recorded at the time of occurrence. In the absence of any factual evidence of unrecorded deaths, however, we have concluded that both the birth and death rates are at least as high as recorded, but that the rate of natural increase is probably not seriously overstated.

The third important element in population growth - migration - appears to be very inadequately covered by current statistics. Because of a serious fire in government offices, particularly affecting the records and functioning of this office, we made no independent effort to evaluate data regarding