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A world without children

By Jeff Jacoby, Globe Columnist | June 22, 2008

Second of two columns

IN 1965, the population of Italy was 52 million, of which 4.6 million, or just under 9 percent, were children younger than 5. A decade later, that age group had shrunk to 4.3 million - about 7.8 percent of Italians. By 1985, it was down to 3 million and 5.3 percent. Today, the figures are 2.5 million and 4.2 percent.

Young children are disappearing from Italian society, and the end isn't in sight. According to one estimate by the UN's Population Division, their numbers will drop to fewer than 1.6 million in 2020, and to 1.3 million by 2050. At that point, they will account for a mere 2.8 percent of the Italian nation.

Italy isn't alone. There are 1.7 million fewer young children in Poland today than there were in 1960, a 50 percent drop. In Spain 30 years ago, there were nearly 3.3 million young children; there are just 2.2 million today. Across Europe, there were more than 57 million children under 5 in 1960; today, that age group has plummeted to 35 million, a decline of 38 percent.

The world's population is still growing, thanks to rising longevity. But fertility rates - the average number of children born per woman - are falling nearly everywhere. More and more adults are deciding to have fewer and fewer children. Worldwide, reports the UN, there are 6 million fewer babies and young children today than there were in 1990. By 2015, according to one calculation, there will be 83 million fewer. By 2025, 127 million fewer. By 2050, the world's supply of the youngest children may have plunged by a quarter of a billion, and will amount to less than 5 percent of the human family.

The reasons for this birth dearth are many. Among them:

As the number of women in the workforce has soared, many have delayed marriage and childbearing, or decided against them altogether. The Sexual Revolution, by making sex readily available without marriage, removed what for many men had been a powerful motive to marry. Skyrocketing rates of divorce have made women less likely to have as many children as in generations past. Years of indoctrination about the perils of "overpopulation" have led many couples to embrace childlessness as a virtue.

Result: a dramatic and inexorable aging of society. In the years ahead, the ranks of the elderly are going to swell to unprecedented levels, while the number of young people continues to dwindle. The working-age population will shrink, first in relation to the population of retirees, then in absolute terms.

Now a determined optimist might take this as good news. In theory, fewer people in the workforce should increase the demand for employees and thus keep unemployment low and the economy humming.

But the record tells a different story. In Japan, where the fall in fertility rates began early, the working-age population has been a diminishing share of the nation for 20 years. Yet for much of that period, unemployment has been up, not down

"Similarly, in the United States, the number of people between the ages of 15 and 24 has been declining in relative terms since 1990," demographer Phillip Longman observed in the Harvard Business Review. "But the smaller supply has not made younger workers more valuable; their unemployment rate has increased relative to that of their older counterparts."

Far from boosting the economy, an aging population depresses it. As workers are taxed more heavily to support surging numbers of elders, they respond by working less, which leads to stagnation, which reduces economic opportunity still further. "Imagine that all your taxes went for nothing but Social Security and Medicare," says Longman in "Demographic Winter," a new documentary about the coming population decline, "and you still didn't have health care as a young person."

Gary Becker, a Nobel laureate in economics, emphasizes that nothing is more indispensable to growth than "human capital" - the knowledge, skills, and experience of men and women. That is why baby booms are so often harbingers

of economic expansion and vigor. And why businesses and young people drain away from regions where population is waning.

A world without children will be a poorer world - grayer, lonelier, less creative, less confident. Children are a great blessing, but it may take their disappearance for the world to remember why.

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