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## TOWARD AN ENGAGED PUBLIC DEMOGRAPHY

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The core issues of population studies are among the central concerns of our societies and those we study, and have been for a very long time. This fact is widely recognized inside and outside the population profession. As Charles Hirschman notes, “Ever since the days of Malthus and Graunt, demographers have had an abiding interest in public affairs.”<sup>1</sup> The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan said, “[T]here is simply nothing so important to a people and its government as how many of them there are, whether their number is growing or declining, how they are distributed as between different ages, sexes...and different social classes and racial and ethnic groups...”<sup>2</sup>

Support for population studies on the scale we experience it today is justified by the discipline’s expected social utility, by the hope that research results can improve well-being. How well population research satisfies that expectation is difficult to measure, but the goal that population studies should be useful has been a guiding principle of the discipline.

Given the well-established link between population studies and public welfare, a priority of population scientists should be public demography, which I define as an effort to reach a public audience with demographic analysis and summaries of our research results, discussions about what these results mean, and what, if any, action the public and its elected and appointed officials ought to take based on what we have learned.

This paper outlines what I mean by public demography; highlights why public demography is important; suggests ways to implement a public demography agenda; and addresses some prominent objections to these suggestions.

My ideas about public demography have been shaped by the work of Michael Burawoy.<sup>3</sup> In his 2004 presidential address to the American Sociological Association and in articles and presentations before and after that, Burawoy distinguishes and describes four types of sociology—professional, critical, policy, and public.<sup>4</sup> But a less complex model

posits that a professional can take on several of these roles simultaneously or over the span of one’s career.

### What Is Public Demography?

Clifford Geertz refers to anthropology’s task as “the informing of informed opinion...in the matter of primitives as others inform it about Homer, Italian painting, or the English civil war.”<sup>5</sup> Slightly modified, that’s a worthy summary of public demography—informing informed opinion on matters of population.

Public demography includes any activity that brings population information and analysis to the public. This includes popular newspaper and magazine articles, contributions to websites and blogs, appearances on talk radio, and speeches before the Rotary Club or other service organizations.

Public demography is a presentation to nonspecialists about population-related issues, about such things as the relationships between population growth and environmental degradation or the impact of different living or parenting arrangements on child health or educational attainment. One hopes that from time to time such presentations would shape a national or indeed international conversation about these issues and guide the design of more effective policies.

Public demography should not be a preoccupation of all or even most population scientists. On the contrary, while more attention to communication with the public is badly needed, doing so is an additional responsibility done best by those who have an active research program underway. Those who are learning through their research typically have the most to tell us. Public demography is not a program for science writers or popularizers but an activity for serious analysts who identify important problems, analyze them carefully, and write or talk about them in an engaging way before public audiences.<sup>6</sup>

Public demography has a long and valued pedigree. The first population text I was assigned in school

was a volume of 19 essays that were prepared as lectures for a Voice of America Forum Series broadcast in 1963 to 85 countries. The purpose of the essays, according to the volume's editor, Ronald Freedman, "was to acquaint an intelligent world audience of non-specialists with some of the best current scientific knowledge and opinion about population trends."<sup>7</sup> The authors were a who's who of mid-20th-century population studies: Ansley Coale, Ronald Freedman, Philip Hauser, Amos Hawley, Nathan Keyfitz, Conrad Taeuber, Rupert Vance, and Charles Westoff.

Leading demographers have continued this type of work. Andrew Cherlin, former Population Association of America president and Griswold Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at Johns Hopkins University, is an exemplar of public demography work. Cherlin has an enviable academic curriculum vitae, but he has published twice as many articles in *The New York Times* as in *Demography*.<sup>8</sup> There are others in this mold including Nicholas Eberstadt, who does so much popular writing that he can legitimately be called a public intellectual.<sup>9</sup> Other population scientists, such as William Butz, have made careers of informing the public through their work (and management of others' work) at institutions like the U.S. Census Bureau and the Population Reference Bureau, whose missions include informing the public as an important element.

Population specialists are in a better position than other social scientists to engage the public because of our subject matter, our data, and our emphasis on empirical description. Moreover, population specialists are probably more comfortable than other social scientists in the public arena because so many of our colleagues work for government agencies (national statistical offices, for example) or for nongovernmental organizations (the Urban Institute, for example) that see communicating with the public as an important organizational function.

## Why Bother?

There is a need for public demography. The world would be a better place if citizens knew more about the demographic aspects of their communities and the world in which we live. The U.S. Census Bureau recently released the first results of the 2010 Census.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the news stories, many of them well done, the American public and our political leaders would benefit from knowing the implications of the trends from those who study them. A summary of what the Census Bureau data indicate about American society would have been welcome.

Public demography can be entertaining. We enjoy Kelvin Pollard's demographic examination of the Olympic medal count, using what he calls the Crude Medal Rate, which controls for the population size of medal-winning countries; and the General Olympic Medal Rate, which accounts for the number of athletes a nation sends to the Olympics.<sup>11</sup>

The most important contribution of public demography is better informed discussions about important public policy matters that, one hopes, would lead to more appropriate interventions and better policies and programs. At the moment, the public in most countries is poorly informed about the nature of many issues that have an important demographic component, including old-age insurance programs, family breakdown, immigration, poverty—and the range of options to deal with them. Population scientists can help remedy that situation.

Another reason for suggesting that more effort be devoted to communicating to the public is to increase the size of the audience for population research. The core professional audiences for population research are very small. The latest issue of the newsletter of the Population Association of America lists membership as being under 3,000.<sup>12</sup> The paid circulation of the Population Council's journal *Population and Development Review* is also under 3,000.<sup>13</sup>

A third reason for doing public demography is because population scientists use public resources. If there is no connection between demographic research and the needs of society, it follows that taxpayers probably should not support such work. Academic work must maintain some connection with efforts to improve human well-being if we want the public to take responsibility for supporting that work.

A fourth reason for doing public demography is that, when it is done well, it can increase awareness of our scientific work and lead to a better understanding of it. That increased awareness and understanding may, at least indirectly, increase the odds that our work will receive support.

Like most of us, the directors of the population-related federal agencies have too much to read. Send them reprints of research articles and it is unlikely that they will find time to read them. But write an article for the *Washington Post's* "Sunday Outlook" section on a demographic topic, say the role of grandparents in promoting school attendance in poor families, and you will be quoted at some of the agencies' Monday morning senior staff meetings. The directors have to be aware of what's in the popular media in part because a newspaper article is likely to be read by members of Congress or their staffs and may lead to a phone call from a member's office. With different details, the same probably is true at the major foundations. In short, public demography is likely to get more attention from funders than the details of scientific work.

Some people argue that policymakers and public officials have a responsibility to ask for data and analysis on the issues they are considering.<sup>14</sup> That may be the case and it may sometimes happen, but that does not lessen the need or the opportunity for public demography.

## How to Do Public Demography

Until the past decade or so, an op-ed article in major national newspapers such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* was the best, most visible, most influential public demography outcome possible. However, David Brooks, a principal occupant of the *New York Times*' op-ed page, has compared the newspaper industry to whaling.<sup>15</sup> That judgment is confirmed by a cartoon in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that pictured two young people walking past a newsstand. One says, "Beats me. It's yesterday's news, it's hard copy, and you have to pay for it."<sup>16</sup>

The means of doing public demography are radically different, and much more far-reaching, than they were in the recent past. Public demography will be done on the Web, in blogs, and with podcasts. These new formats make this is a particularly exciting time to do public demography. Of course, there is a hierarchy among outlets in terms of coverage, reach, audience, and impact that needs to be taken into account by those doing public demography. There are many sources of good advice about how to get the public's attention, including university press offices.<sup>17</sup>

Impact, of course, is not guaranteed. To get started it helps to have an element of wishful thinking. A dose of optimism is an asset for working on public demography as it is for writing scientific articles. One thinks that a well-placed story will have a significant impact; typically that is not the case. But the impact can still be significant, the audience large, and the need substantial. The influential *New York Times*' columnist James Reston titled a collection of his columns *Sketches in the Sand* to illustrate their transitory character.<sup>18</sup> Amateurs aren't the only ones ignored. But before you get disheartened, look at the citation rates of scientific articles in second-tier journals. You will find work not remembered but apparently not much read in the first place.<sup>19</sup>

## Objections

Some dispute how important public demography should be in the daily lives of university faculty or other population professionals. Simply put, many population scientists regard public demography as a waste of time. Public demography takes time, energy, and perhaps other resources away from the important work of producing peer-reviewed scientific research. There are also complaints about public demography leading to declining standards, politicization, and the introduction of extraneous values into population research.

Public demography should not get in the way of good academic or scientific demography. Building a body of demographic knowledge should not be inhibited by the commitments involved in public demography. There is nothing in the effort to communicate to the public that diminishes the canons of science. Nor does public demography imply that one's work need not win respect and approval from the community of scholars. Public demography showcases, but does not substitute for, our research. There is no good public demography without there being good demography first.

Public demography is not a moral or ideological crusade, or a call to dumb down science or dilute complex findings with the sauce of simplicity.<sup>20</sup> As Douglas Massey notes, "One does a disservice to one's cause...by basing an argument on shoddy research that is not

scientifically defensible."<sup>21</sup> Andrew Cherlin argues that, "Public discussions [of issues that concern demographers] are played out in a troubling pattern in which one extreme position is debated in relation to the opposite extreme."<sup>22</sup> Public demography can help correct that flaw and encourage more measured and data-based debate.

To be successful in the public sphere requires skills that can improve one's scholarship. The writing must be clear, and it helps to have a story. Public demography rewards the sharply focused article with a personal voice that is well suited to both quantitative and qualitative data.

Much of demographers' time is taken up by meetings, committee work, teaching, preparation for classes, and mentoring and guiding students. These activities leave little time for research, and research and publication are the criteria for promotion for many population specialists. So the question is how to reward public demography? I think there is a prior question, namely: how to ensure that those who engage in public demography are not punished.

In spite of my own enthusiasm, if I were advising a young assistant professor at a university in the United States, I would say hold off on your public role because it is very likely that someone on the tenure committee in your department will think ill of you for spending your time on these ventures. Especially for young scholars, the opportunity costs of public demography can be high. Tenure decisions, merit increases, and research grants are contingent on the opinions of your professional colleagues. But for those for whom tenure is not a concern, I encourage you to use some space around the edges of your work to explain it to the public that supports it and could benefit from understanding more of it.

Scientific research and publication are the sine qua non of the population sciences. I don't want to morph (the distinguished American demographer) Ron Freedman into (*New York Times* foreign affairs columnist) Tom Friedman. Instead, I want to remind you of Freedman's contribution to public demography, illustrated by those Voice of America lectures, and encourage you to emulate that effort.

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Peter J. Donaldson is president of Population Council. He was the chief executive officer of the Population Reference Bureau from 1994 to 2003.

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## References

- 1 Charles Hirschman, "The Future of Demography," *Asian Population Studies* 4, no. 3 (2008): 233-34.
- 2 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Most Important Decision-Making Process," *Policy Review* 1 (Summer 1977): 89-93.
- 3 Burawoy's public sociology publications and comments from others, accessed at <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS.htm>, on Aug. 27, 2008.
- 4 Michael Burawoy, "For Public Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 1 (2005): 4-28. The characteristic activity of professional sociology is basic research—the effort to advance theoretical and empirical knowledge within the framework of the discipline's scientific norms. Critical sociology deconstructs and explores paradigm shifts. Policy sociology is concerned with applied research and concrete questions about public policies or service programs. Public sociology focuses on public interest and producing material that addresses the public's concerns. A great deal of what demographers do is on the border between what Burawoy defines as "professional" and "policy" work. Formal demography, biometrics, the development of better methods and data collection procedures aside, demography is about issues of public concern. Think of the research of scholars such as Linda Waite on marriage, Sara S. McLanahan on children, or Douglas Massey on immigration.
- 5 As quoted in John Shelton Reed, "On Narrative and Sociology," *Social Forces* 68, no. 1 (1989): 1-14.
- 6 I do not wish to demean science writers, but to encourage population scientists to make a greater effort to communicate to the public. More attention on the part of science writers to population-related issues would be welcome; so too would be more collaboration between population specialists and science writers.
- 7 Ronald Freedman, "Introduction," in *Population: The Vital Revolution*, ed. Ronald Freedman (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964): 1.
- 8 Andrew J. Cherlin, "Public Display: The Picture Perfect American Family? These Days, It Doesn't Exist," *Washington Post*, Sept. 7, 2008. Cherlin's article is an excellent illustration of public demography.
- 9 For more information on Nicholas Eberstadt's articles and short publications, see [www.aei.org/scholars/filter.all.view.offlinetm.recNo.11.scholarID.62.type.1/pub\\_list.asp](http://www.aei.org/scholars/filter.all.view.offlinetm.recNo.11.scholarID.62.type.1/pub_list.asp).
- 10 See Michael Barone, "The Great Lone Star Migration," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 8, 2011, for a popular account of some of the implications of the early results. Accessed at [www.aei.org/article/102980](http://www.aei.org/article/102980), on Jan. 27, 2011.
- 11 Kelvin Pollard, "Norway, Austria Prevail at Torino's 'Demographic Olympics'" (2006), accessed at [www.prb.org](http://www.prb.org), on Aug. 29, 2008.
- 12 *PAA Affairs* (Winter 2008): 7.
- 13 "Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation," *Population and Development Review* 36, no. 4 (2010): 872. See note 19 for data on articles that were downloaded.
- 14 B.C.K. Choi et al., "Can Scientists and Policy Makers Work Together?" *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 59, no. 8 (2005): 632-37.
- 15 David Brooks, "Public Image of Conservatism," speech delivered at the Young America Foundation's 30th National Conservative Student Conference, Washington, D.C., Aug. 5, 2008, accessed at [www.c-spanarchives.org](http://www.c-spanarchives.org), on Aug. 7, 2008. Brooks said, "Journalism, my business, working for newspapers—it is the whaling business. It's a dying business. But it's still...an impressive thing to do."
- 16 See <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v52/i48/48harris.com>, accessed on Aug. 13, 2008. I appreciate George Dowdall's telling me about this cartoon. For a similar perspective, see Russell Baker, "Goodbye to Newspapers," *The New York Review of Books* 54, no. 13 (2007), accessed at [www.nybooks.com/articles/20471](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20471), on Aug. 14, 2008. John Haaga argues that newspapers are not being replaced by the Web, but rather migrating to the Web, where they provide an important quality control function for public discourse (personal communication, Feb. 14, 2009).
- 17 See, for example, "Op-Ed Articles: How to Write and Place Them," accessed at [www.dukenews.duke.edu/duke\\_community/oped.html](http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/duke_community/oped.html), on Sept. 2, 2008.
- 18 James B. Reston, *Sketches in the Sand* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969).
- 19 Impact factor" is a measure widely used by Thompson Reuters of the average number of citations within a given year of all the articles published in the two previous years. A journal with an impact factor of 2 in 2010 signifies that the articles the journal published in 2008 and 2009 averaged two citations each in the year 2010. The median impact factor for all journals within demography is about 1. Thompson Reuters also provides data for demographic journals for the most recent five-year period. The top 10 demographic journals averaged fewer than four citations per article in the five years following publication. Looking at citation metrics such as the impact factor can be a misleading indicator of actual readership since it includes only the number of times readers documented their readership through their scholarship. Data on the number of scientific articles downloaded online provide a more encouraging picture. For example, in 2009, articles published by the Population Council's two journals—*Studies in Family Planning* and *Population and Development Review*—were downloaded (through Blackwell's website and other online hosts) about 100,000 and about 270,000 times, respectively. I am grateful to Gary Bologh for these data and the details on the impact factor.
- 20 In some accounts, the public activities I have been describing are defined in moral terms. Burawoy says that "public sociology" represents sociology's "moral fiber." I am not sure what Burawoy has in mind, but the agenda proposed here is less grand. I want to increase the informed public knowledge of the population dimension of important public policy issues. See Michael Burawoy, "For Public Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 1 (2005): 4-28.
- 21 Douglas Massey, "What Critical Demography Means to Me," *Sociological Forum* 14, no. 3 (1999): 525-28. Massey's article covers many of the issues I address, but he uses the designation "critical demography" for what I call public demography.
- 22 Andrew J. Cherlin, "Going to Extremes: Family Structure, Children's Well-Being, and Social Science," *Demography* 36, no. 4 (1999): 421-28.



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