

300,000,000!

IN THE USA

Concept:

Family-size trends have changed throughout American history based on economic conditions and cultural values. Surveying our own families and the families of our classmates help illustrate the trends we see in the larger society.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Calculate family-size trends in their own families and the “society” composed of class members and their families.
- Identify factors that influence family-size decisions.
- Discuss impacts that family-size decisions have on the larger society.

Subjects:

Math, Family & Consumer Sciences, Social Studies, U.S. History, Science, Geography, Health, History

Skills:

Calculating averages, gathering data, graphing, critical thinking, identifying trends

Method:

Students chart family-size trends over several generations and discuss factors that influence family-size decision-making.



Environment/Land Use



Population



Quality of Life

An American Family Perspective

Introduction:

Average family size has changed greatly over the course of U.S. history. Any number of variables influences parents' decisions about family size. One key determinant is family economics. For much of our history, large families were common, especially when most people lived in rural areas and needed extra hands to work family farms. As the country industrialized and urbanized, family size decreased. Over the past century, family size has fluctuated with economic and cultural trends. For instance, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, American families were relatively small because couples could not afford to feed and take care of many children. During the years after World War II, the country experienced economic prosperity, contributing to the prolonged U.S. Baby Boom (1946-1964) when couples had more children. That was followed by a decline in family size as women gained more opportunities in education and work outside the home. Also, modern methods of family planning have enabled couples to better plan the timing and spacing of their children. Today's average family size in the United States is two children.

The field of demography is the study of human populations and the changes and trends in those populations over time. In this activity, students will act as demographers to investigate trends in family size over several generations by analyzing data collected about the families in the class.

Emphasize that the class is gathering data to determine the average. Some families will always be bigger and some smaller than the average, and this is to be expected.

Materials:

Student Worksheets (one per student)
Calculators (optional)
4 pieces of different colored paper per student (small squares)
Graph paper

Procedure:

1. Have students complete items 1-5 on the Student Worksheet. Students may substitute a guardian or other adult relative for mother or father in answering these questions if they prefer; some students may not have knowledge of a parent. Students may need to take the worksheet home to get the information they need on previous generations of their families.
2. Now, it's time to come up with an average family size for each of the generations represented by the students' families. Distribute one piece of each of four colored papers to each student. Have students put their answers to item #1a-d

on one color paper; their answers to #2a-b on another, answers to item #3 on a third and item #4 on a fourth piece of paper. Here are two options for calculating the averages:

Option A: Designate four students to do the tallying, one for each question, 1-4.

Option B: Have the four designated students simply write all of the numbers on the chalkboard for the entire class to calculate the averages.

3. Have each student graph the results from his/her own family using the average number of children from generations 1 and 2 on their worksheet. Each student can also graph the class average, or the class average can also be graphed on the chalkboard or on a bulletin board display.
4. Ask students to describe any family-size trends they observe in the larger “society” formed by themselves and their relatives. Now have them respond to item #6 their worksheets.

Discussion Questions:

1. What factors, besides income, determine how many children people have?

Possible answers might include cultural and religious traditions and values, family traditions, career choices, lifestyle and use of family planning.

2. What difference does it make to a society’s population whether there is a tradition of large families or a tradition of small families?

In a society where most people have many children, the population grows quickly and the society must provide more goods and services for more people.

3. How do your personal family-size decisions affect other people in the society? How do they affect the natural environment?

One person’s decisions may not seem very significant in a large society. However, each person’s decisions multiplied by everyone in the society add up to a lot. This is the same principle as voting in a national election. Think about what would happen if everyone makes the same choices as you do. Every person uses resources from the environment to satisfy both their needs and wants. In the U.S., we use a lot of resources that come from all around the world, and so our decisions on family size affect the global environment.

Follow-up:

1. One key determinant in family-size decisions is family economics. Discuss with students the different costs associated with having children (including education, health care, food, housing, clothing, transportation, recreation, etc.) and why it is important for prospective parents to be sure they can provide for their children. You may wish to have students research how much it can cost to support an average family of four in the United States. They can accumulate their data by saving weekly grocery receipts and checking the newspaper for average home prices and rentals in the area, car prices and so on. The U.S. Department of Agriculture publishes an annual report on the expenses of raising children. See *Expenditures on Children by Families, 2005* at www.usda.gov/cnpp/Crc/crc2005.pdf.
2. Clip out several anniversary announcements from the local newspaper, or have students bring them in. Have students write an essay about whether the families in the announcements show a similar family size trend to the data from your class. They can also write about other similarities they find among the clippings (age at marriage, education level of husband and wife, work outside the home, etc.)

Name _____

Date _____

Student Worksheet
An American Family Perspective

1. Generation 1

- a) My maternal grandmother was one of ____ children.
- b) My maternal grandfather was one of ____ children.
- c) My paternal grandmother was one of ____ children.
- d) My paternal grandfather was one of ____ children.

The average number of children in my grandparents' families (Generation 1) is ____.
(Don't worry if the number includes a fraction or decimal place.)

2. Generation 2

- a) My mother was one of ____ children.
- b) My father was one of ____ children.

The average number of children in my two parents' families (Generation 2) is ____.

3. Generation 3

I am one of ____ children in my family.

4. Generation 4

I would like to have ____ children when I grow up, assuming I can provide for them.

5. Is there a family-size trend in your family? (Is the number of children getting larger, getting smaller, holding steady?) Describe what you see.

6. How does the family-size trend in your family compare with the trend in the larger "society" composed of your classmates' families?