

TOUGH DECISIONS ABOUT POPULATION POLICY

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It doesn't take an expert to notice that the number of people in American Samoa has been steadily increasing. Kids are everywhere you look, the car traffic has increased so much that it is often hard for a person to walk across the street, and the congestion at the airport terminal can be quite an experience.

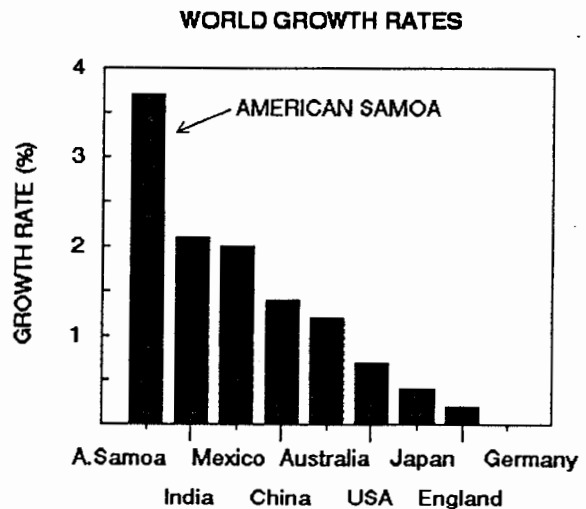
Are these just the normal growing pains of a healthy community? **No!** This population increase is the most important environmental and social problem facing American Samoa today.

An overstatement? Not when you consider that American Samoa has one of the fastest growing populations in the world (see Figure 1). We are increasing so rapidly that our current population of 55,000 will double in only 19 years!

At that rate, we will top 100,000 people on this small island by the year 2011. That is only a prediction, of course, but it is based on the realistic assumption that our growth rate will remain about the same as it has been during the past 15 years.

Figure 2 shows how abruptly our population has increased over time. For centuries, Tutuila supported roughly 5000 people who obtained all of their food and other needs from this island and adjacent sea. In the past 50 years, however, the number of people increased dramatically, far beyond what the local environment can support. Now, most of our food and other needs have to be imported.

That in itself is not unusual -- most countries do not produce all of the things they need. To pay for imports, however,



countries must obtain money by producing something that other countries want to buy. Unfortunately our economy has limited options in this respect.

We do not have much in the way of saleable resources like timber or oil, or a significant specialty service like tourism. Our economy is instead based primarily on grant money received from the federal government, and one product (canned tuna), the makers of which periodically threaten to pack up and leave the Territory. The canneries could do just that because the product that they sell is not actually caught within our Territory (the tuna landed here are caught elsewhere in the Pacific). American Samoa is merely a financially convenient location at present for the canneries to operate.

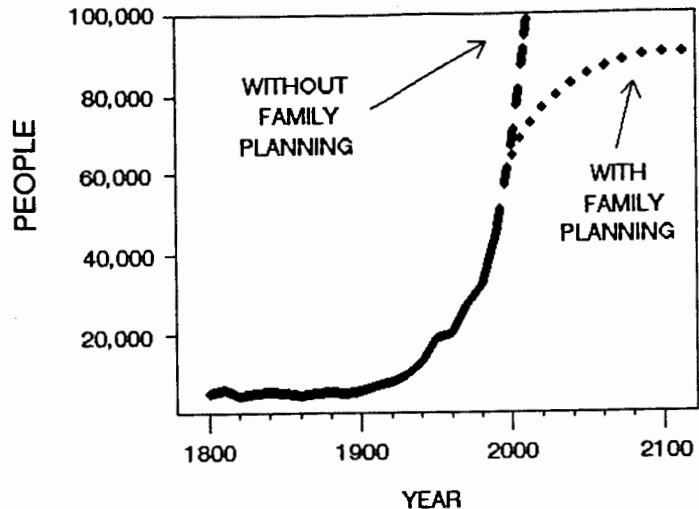
The point here is that we are in a vulnerable economic position. That is, we are not calling the shots. It is essential, therefore, that we think twice about burdening our economy with more people who will need more services and more jobs.

Figure 2 is a classic example of population growth that is out-of-control. In reality, however, we know that our population cannot increase forever. There is probably some limit beyond which our island society would grind to a halt. Imagine the possibilities -- water rationing, traffic gridlock, high unemployment, social unrest, overfished reefs, schools and hospitals bursting at the seams, more welfare, and so on. (One reviewer of this article remarked that we already have these problems. True. But think how things will be with 50,000 more people on this island.) In the absence of a solid and diverse economy, additional people destabilize society and greatly reduce the standard of living.

We must take charge of our future rather than be pushed around by it. In short, we need to acknowledge that our island is small and there is limited space (or jobs, schools, federal funds) for people. But for how many people?

We need to determine a population level that is in line with our limited resources, that provides the quality of life desired, and that keeps the Samoan culture intact.

How can our run-away growth be controlled? The answer is



surprisingly straightforward -- there are only two ways to increase population size (births and immigration) and only 2 ways to decrease it (deaths and emigration). The end result, when you add these plus and minus variables together, is that about 2000 new people are currently being added to Tutuila Island every year. The Statistics Department at the Economic and Development Planning Office informs us that babies account for 90% of this increase, and immigration 10%.

Let's consider each of the 4 variables:

1. **IMMIGRATION.** The number of immigrants entering American Samoa could certainly be tightened up, but that is not a simple task because of the close family ties between American and Western Samoans.
2. **EMIGRATION** (people leaving the Territory) might seem to be the 'safety valve' on our population pressure cooker. Many Samoans might move off-island to get a job, schooling, or whatever. Two comments about that. First, our current growth rate (3.7%) already takes into account all people who have left the Territory. Second, as a policy, it would obviously not be responsible to export Samoans to solve local problems.
3. **DEATH** is the least useful variable, because those who die are often the older folks who are no longer producing more kids.
4. **BIRTHS.** It seems clear that the key variable driving our population increase is our astronomical birth rate. On average, every woman here has 4.5 children. This, fortunately, is something we do have a choice about.

And the choice should be clear -- we need to lower our birth rate and do it now. If we do nothing, we will be saddling our next generation with the problem, and it will be far worse by then (see Figure 2). And they will not thank you for dumping it in their lap. They will wonder why you didn't tackle the problem when it was much more manageable.

The times are changing, and attitudes about family planning in the South Pacific are changing too. Take the case of the Marshall Islands. They have an explosively high growth rate (4.2%), a small area of land to live on, malnutrition, too few schools and teachers, and a 50% unemployment rate (Pacific Magazine 1991). Consequently, family planning efforts in the Marshalls were aggressively promoted and received community backing from both the Protestant and Catholic churches. Fr. James Gould, S.J., the vicar of the Catholic church in the Marshalls said "having unlimited children for the sake of having children is not blessed. Families should use appropriate family

planning to achieve their goals. A married man and woman have within them the means to act responsibly. They can space and have a certain number of children" (Samoa News, April 12, 1993).

A reasonable plan for American Samoa would be to strongly endorse family planning to reduce family size. The goal should be no more than 2 children per family so that there would be a 0% growth rate. That is, in each family the 2 parents would eventually be replaced by their 2 children, so the total number of people would not increase.

Even so, there is one major problem. The baby boom is coming. Even if we started today with the policy that all new families should have only 2 kids, our population will still increase for the next 10-20 years. That's because a large proportion (38%) of our population are now children who, when they grow up, will produce more children. There are a startling 20,000 kids under the age of 15 in Samoa today!

If we assume that half of these youngsters are girls who will each have 4.5 children later in life, that age group alone will produce 45,000 new babies. So, our population will continue to rise over the next 10-20 years. Even an optimistic scenario predicts that our population on Tutuila will hit at least 90,000 people in just a few years.

It is imperative that we address this issue. The message of this article is simple: we must either reduce our birth rate, or we should plan now for the needs required by some 100,000 inhabitants. That is, we must plan now for several thousand more jobs, twice as many schools, a second hospital, a 3-lane highway, increased social services, houses built with cisterns to collect rainwater for drinking, etc.

The population issue is obviously sensitive and complex. It involves a realistic appraisal of our available resources, and careful consideration of cultural and religious values. These are tough problems that require tough decisions.