

General Demographic Overview

Background

Demographic research lies at the nexus of social science research and shares much in common with other fields. The overlap between demography and other fields often puts it in a difficult place in terms of solidifying its place as a unique field. This may be especially true in the current era of large scale data production where research concerning “populations” is used by a larger number of research fields. These large N studies allow for more detailed divisions and subpopulations within a particular population to be studied. While one could imagine a scenario where this could drain demography of its standing while other fields take over the space it once occupied this seems not to be the case. The expansion of data has come alongside an expansion in those that take a demographic mindset into their analysis and incorporate demographic methods in their study. It may be because of this that we have seen a relative growth in the size of institutions in the United States that are associated with demographic research, while at the same time a collapsing down in the size of the number of academic institutions that house a proper school of demography Xie (2000). In order to best summarize how we arrived at the current state of demography research I will discuss and review a brief series of papers that cover the history of demographic research in the 20 and 21st century, with particular attention to the development of the field in the United States.

Formal Demography and Population Studies

It is likely impossible to find a credible account of the history of demography in the United States without acknowledging Hauser and Duncan 1959 piece *The Study of Population*. The work attempted to establish demography as a legitimate social science and the particular research domains for which the field holds a special claim to. Though the work spans nearly 900 pages the often most cited passage comes to us as the direct, albeit vague, statement of what constitutes the field of demography. Hauser and Duncan state *Demography is the study of the size, territorial distribution, and composition of population, changes therein, and the components of such change*. While not stated specifically here the elements that constitute population changes in a society can be traced back to the forces of the demographic balancing equation, namely the increase contributed by births and the decreases attributed to death. If we subdivide our population into specific geographic areas then we must also consider how populations move in space and how these spaces may differentially experience births and deaths and thus, the particular focus that is placed on *territorial distribution*. How the age distribution of deaths, and the age of and number of children, predominately, women have are “shaped” are at the heart of what is now considered formal demography Xie (2000)

References

Xie, Yu. 2000. "Demography: Past, Present, and Future." *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 95 (450): 670. doi:10.2307/2669415.