Global population and health trends

Explore current trends in population statistics and how these are projected to develop in the coming decades.

Growth continues

In late 2014, the United Nations released its latest global population projections. Analysis published in the journal Science (Gerland and Raftery et al. 2014) suggested that, contrary to previous interpretations, world population is unlikely to stop growing in the twenty-first century.

Using new statistical techniques, Raftery (who is professor of statistics and sociology at the University of Washington) argues that there is a strong probability that world population will increase from the current 7.2 billion people to around 11 billion by 2100 — see Figure 1. Much of this will occur in sub-Saharan Africa, due to Africa’s higher fertility rates and a recent slowdown in the pace of fertility decline. In addition, the ratio of working-age people to older people is likely to decline in all countries, even those with younger populations.

Obesity in Europe

Closer to home, in more affluent Europe, the World Health Organization (WHO) is rather less concerned about population growth than it is about the very real possibility that many young people today might die earlier than their own grandparents. Europe has the highest rates of smoking and drinking alcohol of any region in the world and is second only to the Americas in associated obesity levels — see Figure 2. See if you can identify those countries with the highest levels of obesity.

Calls for a sugar tax to help reduce obesity levels have been recommended by the WHO but have generally been rejected by governments. This raises a classic question for sociologists: should people be free to choose as individuals in a less regulated marketplace what they want to eat and drink? Or should the state take more collective responsibility for intervening to better ‘manage’ the health of its people? This sounds like a good topic for a classroom debate. Let us know how it turns out.

Ageing

Professor Raftery argues that, at the global level, new data on the HIV/AIDS epidemic has shown a welcome decline in its impact on population growth. However, lack of health care, rising poverty and pollution, and growing social unrest, are all important sociological and policy problems linked directly to a jump in the world’s population.

Critical, too, is the problem of populations growing older over time, for example in currently booming economies such as Brazil and India — see Figure 3. ‘The problem of ageing societies will be on them, in population terms, before they know it,’ says professor Raftery. ‘Their governments should be making plans.’ But what type of plans, exactly?

References