

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because We Need Good Data to Predict the Future

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Where do you live? How old are you? Did you finish college? Are you married? Do you have any children? Have you recently moved? What type of job do you have? These may seem like mundane questions, but to demographers the answers yield data that are critical to understanding today's society and predicting the future.

For 95 years, the [Population Reference Bureau \(PRB\)](#) has used demographic data to help people make informed decisions that affect communities around the world. PRB works in partnership with the [Population Association of America](#) and the [Association of Population Centers](#) to make population research accessible to a broad audience.

Just as roads and bridges are fundamental to our physical infrastructure, demographic information is vital to our data and policy infrastructure. Demography provides a lens that community leaders, policymakers, business leaders, advocates, and residents can use to allocate resources effectively and plan for a thriving future.

Here's how:

Demography is crucial for community planning and resilience.

Understanding population trends, migration patterns, and shifts in household composition allows planners to anticipate future needs for housing, infrastructure, and land use. For example, an area with an aging population might need to expand on-demand transportation services, accessible housing, and more frequent public transit. A community facing population decline might need to focus on adapting land-use policies or consolidating services to reflect changing needs.

Demographic insights also help us create sustainable and [resilient communities](#) in the face of natural disasters, economic downturns, and public health crises. Understanding the demographic characteristics of community residents, including age, disability status, and socioeconomic vulnerability, helps in identifying people who may be disproportionately affected by such events. This information is essential for developing targeted preparedness plans, allocating resources effectively during emergencies, and ensuring equitable recovery efforts.

Demography is crucial for a healthy society.

Demography is critically important for public health. At a minimum, population data provide denominators that help us understand the burden of disease and mortality in a population. Demographic data can also reveal disparities in health, access to care, and social vulnerabilities across different population subgroups. For example, understanding the prevalence of a chronic disease for children or older adults allows public health officials to develop tailored prevention and treatment programs.

Measles cases are currently on the rise in the United States. Demographic data can help us pinpoint communities at greater risk of infection because of lower vaccination rates. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention uses demographic data to highlight [disparities in COVID-19 vaccination rates](#) across racial and ethnic groups, informing efforts to promote equitable vaccine access.

“Demography helps us understand how the world is changing and why...”

Demography is crucial for a thriving economy and workforce.

Demography plays a vital role in economic development. Businesses rely on demographic data to understand consumer markets, identify potential labor pools, and make strategic investment decisions. Information on age structure, income levels, education attainment, and labor force participation helps businesses tailor their products and services, target their marketing efforts, and plan for future workforce needs.

Communities can leverage demographic insights to attract specific types of businesses that align with their population characteristics and growth. For instance, a region with a growing young adult population might be attractive to technology companies, while an area with a significant retiree population could be a hub for healthcare and leisure industries.

Demographic data can also inform the allocation of resources for social welfare programs, ensuring that support reaches families that are struggling. [Investing in children's health and education pays dividends](#) by preparing them for successful transitions to adulthood and the workforce.

Demography is crucial for democracy.

Census data, a [cornerstone of demographic data](#), are used to reapportion seats in the U.S. House of Representatives and to help state and local officials redraw congressional, state, and local district boundaries. They empower policymakers to better represent their constituents and develop policies that address their specific needs and concerns. Without this critical information, decisions would be based on anecdotal or unscientific evidence, or worse—misinformation.

Demography is crucial for understanding our world and meeting future challenges.

In November 2022, the world's population reached 8 billion people, and the [global population is projected to peak at about 10.3 billion](#) later this century. But demography is about more than just counting people. It's a vital tool for understanding how populations are changing and anticipating their needs. In many countries, declining birth rates and rising life expectancy are leading to aging populations and putting pressure on social welfare programs. Less-developed countries accounted for nearly 90% of global population growth during the 20th century, and that trend is expected to continue over the next three decades.

Demography helps us understand how the world is changing and why, providing critical data and insights that help governments, organizations, and individuals develop effective strategies to meet the complex challenges of the future. And we are fortunate that the Population Association of America, a governing member of COSSA, works to advance the population sciences as part of the broader social science research community.



Mark Mather is associate vice president of Programs at PRB, where he communicates population research to policymakers, educators, journalists, and the public. He has authored more than 70 reports and briefs on U.S. population trends and their implications, specializing in issues related to child, family, and older adult well-being. He also works in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau on several projects to increase knowledge and use of American Community Survey data. Mather holds master's and doctorate degrees in sociology from the University of Maryland, College Park. His research has been cited by The New York Times, the Associated Press, the Huffington Post, the Wall Street Journal, and many other media outlets.



Beth Jarosz is a senior program director at PRB. Her focus is on subnational demographic and socio-economic trends, estimation and forecasting, and trends in child well-being. Jarosz previously worked as an instructor at Pensacola State College and as a demographer at the San Diego Association of Governments. She has been both a panelist and steering committee member for National Academies' workshops on the American Community Survey and 2020 Census. She is currently vice president of the Association of Public Data Users and a member of the Essentials for Childhood Initiative's Steering Committee. Jarosz previously served as vice president of the Southern Demographic Association. Jarosz holds a master's degree in demographic and social analysis from the University of California, Irvine, and a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of Rhode Island. She has numerous publications in peer-reviewed journals and has been quoted in national media, including Fortune and CityLab (The Atlantic).

