U.S. Birth Rates Remain High

Nation Will Maintain Work-Force Size, in Contrast to Other Powers

By Mark Fritz

The U.S., bucking a global trend, is the only major economic power these days with fertility rates high enough to keep the size of its work force relatively constant as the population ages, and that portends continued prosperity, a report says.

By contrast, fertility rates are declining in many wealthy and upwardly mobile nations, while their pool of older, nonworking citizens expands.

That leads to an imbalance that can sap economic growth, according to the report, to be released today by the nonpartisan Population Reference Bureau, which correlates population, health and environmental trends. If a country's work force shrinks and higher production per worker doesn't make up for this, its economy will shrink.

The U.S. "is one of the few states where the fertility rates have been holding steady," said William Butz, director of the bureau, which is funded by the Ford and Gates foundations, among others.

Attaining or maintaining affluence generally is linked to a fertility rate of 2.1 children to every woman. U.S. fertility rates rose sharply after World War II and remained around six into the 1960s, fluctuated slightly in the next decade-reaching a low of 1.7 in 1976—and since then have remained around two.

So the U.S. is positioned to retain its economic standing despite increasing global competition, some analysts say. Currently, 21% of the U.S. population is 15 years or younger; 12% is 65 and older.

Immigration has contributed to the pool of workers in the U.S. But if immigrants were removed from the picture, the fertility rate still would have remained steady, largely because the baby boomers themselves produced a population boomlet, said Carli Haub, the Population Reference Bureau's senior demographer.

While China is seen as a threat to U.S. economic and military might, the burgeoning superpower faces a serious aging problem, says the annual report, which mines data from global institutions and nations. Some analysts believe government-enforced limits on family size and rapid industrialization have created the potential for the nation of 1.3 billion people to face labor shortages within a generation.

China had a fertility rate of 6.2 in the first half of the 1950s; the report puts the current figure at 1.6, down from 1.7 last year. By 2040, China will have a higher percentage of people over 60 years old than the U.S., researchers predict.

"Mainland China has the distinction of being the first major economy to grow old before they grow rich," said Richard Jackson, director of the Global Aging Initiative of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank.

The population of India is expected to surpass that of China by 2050, according to the report. India's fertility rate has been falling since the 1950s and now stands at three children per woman, Mr. Haub said.

By comparison with China, India's slower pace of development and decline in fertility may help it avoid the potential dilemma wrought by China's industrial revolution, rapid economic growth and efforts to lower its population, Mr. Jackson says.

"India will have a more gradual and stabilizing transition," he says. "India may wind up at our level."

China's age crisis is shared across Asia, particularly in Japan. Its population of 127.7 million is expected to fall to little more than 100 million by 2050, the study says, barring a rise in fertility rates or an influx of immigrants. Indeed, if fertility and mortality rates from 2001 continue, researchers say, Japan's population would drop to one person by the year 3300.

Fertility rates in Germany, Italy and Spain have dropped to 1.3 from 2.5 to 2.9 in the first half of the 1960s, according to the bureau's report. Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia—along with South Korea and Taiwan—all average 1.2.