

Spotlight – USC Population Dynamics Research Group (from the June 2014 CSDC Network News)

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The Population Dynamics Research Group (PopDynamics) at the University of Southern California (USC) has an academic focus on demographic trends, projections and interpretations. We are housed in the Sol Price School of Public Policy (formerly the School of Policy, Planning, and Development). Our mission is primarily research driven but we conduct a lot of public outreach to share our research findings.

Our major geographic focus is on Los Angeles and California, not simply because we are located here, but because this is likely the greatest demographic laboratory in the United States. Many trends develop in our state and localities a good 10-20 years before they become visible in the rest of the nation. Our group is drawn to conduct national studies for a number of reasons. For one thing it is useful to compare California and its cities to national counterparts so that we can better understand our distinctiveness. In turn, we are also interested in studying how we can apply lessons from California to other parts of the U.S. Another good reason for seeking national coverage is that we are a “soft-money” research shop and broader sources of funding are available from national sources.

The most distinctive contribution offered by USC PopDynamics is the series of population projections we developed under the series we call California Demographic Futures. Our post-2010 census vintage projections have been issued as the Pitkin-Myers Generational Projections, including versions prepared for the United States, California, and Los Angeles County. (A couple of other large California counties are also in progress.) The chief architect of these projections is John Pitkin, Senior Research Associate. What distinguishes our projections is that we add a nativity dimension to the standard cohort-component framework. Specifically, we integrate a classification of California-born, other U.S. born, and foreign born. Among the foreign born we track year-of-entry cohort membership (decade of US arrival), and among the U.S. born we also break out second generation (children of immigrants) from third and higher generation.

Our generational projections require an extensive R&D effort and are not well suited to mass production. The detailed input data requires extensive calibration, and the resulting databases are extensive. Yet beginning in 1999, we have made this effort because of the unique importance of immigrants to California’s population. The number of foreign-born residents and their 27 percent share of the state’s population are both larger than in any other state in the U.S., and, remarkably, the number and share are also larger than in any sizable nation in the world, including Australia and Canada. Immigrants also have particular political and policy importance in California. For these reasons, the innovation was developed in California before it arose in other parts of the U.S. We successfully tested our projections for the state ahead of the census results in 2000 and 2010, foreseeing the leveling off of the growth in foreign-born share and projecting much (not all) of the slowdown in overall population growth.

We share our research findings through postings on the PopDynamics website: <http://www.usc.edu/schools/price/research/popdynamics/home.html>. We also stage an “annual demographic workshop” in May/June of most years, collaborating for the last few years with the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG). Our contributions extend beyond the technical. Citizens and public decision makers have a growing interest in demographics, but they are confused by the flood of regular data releases on myriad different trends. Part of our mission is to help make sense of the ongoing demographic changes. Sometimes that involves

singling out and highlighting the simplest facts, such as our recent report on the declining number of children and what it means for the state. (As shown in our team photo, our group has been doing its share to stem this decline!)



USC PopDynamics Group (L-R): Sarah Mawhorter, Haekyoung Lee, Hyojung Lee (Baby Jane), Dowell Myers, Anna Jacobsen (Baby Noah), Ying Mao, and Janna Goldberg (Not pictured: John Pitkin, MiYoung Kim)

Given our location in a policy school, we seek to promote public understanding of demographic trends as they relate to public policy and the planning of solutions to different problems. Our research work in recent years has addressed applications to housing and urban growth, workforce development, and education. We are also developing methods for translating our generational population projections into projections of future voting populations and future taxpayers.

As director of the research group, I am the one responsible for the unusual mix of demographic activities that has evolved. I began in urban planning at UC-Berkeley (MCP '75) and continued at MIT (PhD '81). My grounding was in housing demography, working from the simple premise that different kinds of people make different housing and neighborhood demands, and, along with their cohort dynamics, these demographic variations accounted for the lion's share of explanation in economic models. Shortly after my arrival back in California, following work experience in Texas and Wisconsin, the 1990 census revealed an explosion of changes due to immigration. Working in this great state we discovered a whole range of new issues to explore. Being in the right place at the right time, several of our local discoveries led to scientific publications, many of which emphasized the duration of the immigrant experience in the U.S. I am currently serving on a National Academy of Science panel that is addressing the economic and fiscal consequences of immigration. Through all of this activity, my interest is two-fold: to demonstrate how the different elements of change interconnect and to keep decision makers more focused on the future. Sooner or later, with or without our attention, the future is going to arrive! As a planner and demographer I feel the duty to help plan ahead.