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Demographic Change because of Aging, Low Fertility, and Migration Causes Concern in Cuba

by Daniel Vázquez

Category/Department: Cuba
Published: 2011-11-10

Cuba’s population will decrease to the point that, between now and 2025, it will have fallen by more than 203,000, and the island will have the oldest population demographic in Latin America. This phenomenon is attributed to such factors as natural mortality, low fertility, and migration and is disconcerting because of its imminent impact on the economy, social security, and health services.

The trend is linked to very low, and occasionally zero, population growth; fertility rates below replacement level, with less than one daughter per woman since 1978; low infant mortality; higher life expectancy, now 78 years; and the annual exit of thousands of people who settle abroad permanently.

With 2 million people aged 60 and above, Cuba now has one of the oldest populations in Latin America, topped only by Uruguay and followed by Argentina. President Raúl Castro’s government believes that the aging population is the island’s greatest demographic challenge and is unprecedented for a developing country.

In 2010, Cuba’s elderly population reached 17.8% of the 11.2 million inhabitants and exceeded the birth-to-14-year-old population. In 2035, the number of Cubans older than 60 years of age will reach 3.6 million and will make up 33.9% of the population, according to data from the Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas (ONE). The average age will increase from 38 to 44 years of age by 2025.

This phenomenon of aging is even evident to tourists visiting Cuba. They say that they notice that there are few families walking with children and fewer teenagers and 20-somethings than usually seen on the streets of any Latin American country.

Aging and instability
The island’s economic stability already represents dramatic challenges for the elderly. Rosa, 68 years old and a resident of El Vedado (one of the best residential districts in Havana), worked for 25 years, but her current retirement does not exceed US$7 a month. She tries to improve her situation by selling peanuts every day in front of a downtown cinema.

One in two adults confessed to feeling "fear or uncertainty" about their economic situation or their future health, according to the National Survey of the Aging Population taken between December 2010 and March 2011 by the Centro de Estudios de Población y Demografía (CEPDE) of the ONE. This was the first study of this kind in the country.

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Retirees and pensioners make up 54% of Cubans 60 years old and above. Of those surveyed, 71.2% said that their income is from their retirement or pension, while 15% of respondents said relatives on the island or abroad helped them; 31% said that their income "is not enough to live on," and 22% suffer "hardships and deprivation."

Only 44% of respondents said that they could cover their food expenses. Pensions in Cuba range from around 200 pesos (about US$8) a month to 400 pesos (about US$17), while the average monthly wage remains at about US$20.

Among the government responses to the population’s increasing age and its consequences for the economy was the 2008 adoption of a new Social Security Act, which increased the minimum age for retirement by five years, 60 for women and 65 for men, and stipulated that pensions be calculated from the highest wages earned.

Among respondents, 42% of the elderly population complain of difficulties in repairing their home or purchasing a new one while 16.2% would like to take vacations, trips, or tours. Television and radio are their main sources of entertainment. At the same time, they complained about the conditions of their surroundings, that lighting and cleanliness were lacking and that the streets were deteriorating.

Medical forums on the island warn of the looming increase in health problems. More than 80% of Cubans 60 years of age and older suffer from chronic diseases such as hypertension, rheumatoid and osteoarthritis, rheumatism, diabetes, and heart disease. Alzheimer’s disease, the leading cause of disability in older adults, affects 130,000 Cubans, and that figure will double by 2030.

**Fewer births and more emigration**

The island had 11,241,161 inhabitants at the close of 2010, which was 1,467 less than 2009 when a population increase of 6,529 broke the downward trend from 2006 to 2008. Official press estimates said the island’s population would not reach 12 million and by 2031 could be below 11 million.

Granma, the official newspaper of the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC), warned at the end of 2010, "In the short term, the population decline will continue, there will be fewer people entering the legal working age than leaving it, the number of dependent people will increase, the number of women bearing children will decrease and they will be older."

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Cuba’s fertility rate was 1.7 children per woman in 2009, one of the lowest in Latin America and the Caribbean. The decline in births has been linked to insufficient salaries, housing problems, and the difficulties in providing child welfare.

The Ministerio de Salud Pública has implemented a health care program for infertile couples, which make up 14% of marriages in the country, with the hope that 90% of those will have children. They also caution women about the risks of abortion, which has become a commonplace method of contraception.
"My daughter has had more than five abortions and she is not 30 years old yet, but she doesn’t want to have children because the economic situation is very difficult," says Regla, a resident of the popular El Cerro neighborhood in the nation’s capital. Regla’s other two children left for the US and Mexico, where they both decided to have children.

The local press quoted Dr. Antonio Aja, director of the Centro de Estudios Demográficos of the Universidad de La Habana, as saying that between 30,000 and 35,000 Cubans leave the island annually, most of them girls and women of reproductive age.

"Many young people refrain from having children to avoid complications when they leave the island and avoid the drama of family separation and cumbersome immigration procedures for traveling with a minor," confessed Victor, a young computer engineer who desires to settle in Canada and shies away from marriage and parental commitments.

The next census of population and housing will be carried out in September 2012. It will be the fourth census in former President Fidel Castro and President Raúl Castro’s five decades of power. At that time it is expected that the country’s demographic profile will be reorganized, showing the migration flows to the nation’s capital from the interior and the international departures that have not been officially recorded.