

Recession means fewer babies; US births fell 2 pct

August 7 2009, By MIKE STOBBE , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- There aren't just fewer jobs in a recession. There are fewer babies, too.

U.S. births fell in 2008, the first full year of the recession, marking the first annual decline in births since the start of the decade and ending an American baby boomlet.

The downturn in the economy best explains the drop in maternity, some experts believe. The Great Depression and subsequent recessions all were accompanied by a decline in births, said Carol Hogue, an Emory University professor of maternal and child health and epidemiology.

And the numbers have never rebounded until the economy pulled out of it, she said, calling the 2008 recession the most likely culprit for fewer babies.

It's not clear that it's the only explanation, however. Another expert noted a recent decline in immigration to the U.S. may also be a factor.

The nation recorded about 4,247,000 births last year, down about 68,000 from 2007, according to a new report from the National Center for Health Statistics.

This recession began in December 2007, and since then the economy has lost almost 7 million jobs. Housing foreclosures worsened in 2007 too, and fell into a state of crisis in 2008.

The largest decline in births were in California and Florida, two states hit hardest by the housing crisis.

"I wasn't surprised," Hogue said, of the new numbers, which are not final and will be updated.

But the downturn's effect on the public psychology - and families' willingness to have babies - may not have really hit until the fall of 2008, said Stephanie Ventura of the health statistics center, the agency that put out the report.

Of course, 2007 was a year in which more babies were born in the United States than any other year in the nation's history. In the past, a fluctuation of births by 1 or 2 percent would not be seen as very significant, especially from such an unusual year.

But the drop seems to break an unusual trend. Births had been rising since 2002, and birth rates had been increasing in women of different age groups, said Ventura, chief of the agency's reproductive statistics branch.

The new report is an early count of births from each state, and does not contain demographic breakdowns that might more completely explain whether birth declines occurred in some groups, but not others.

Births were up in January, February and April of 2008 compared to 2007, but were down every month after that except September. The largest declines were in October and November.

Births were down in all but 10 states, primarily the northwest quadrant of the country, including North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Washington and Alaska.

In contrast, births in California were down by 15,000 and in Florida, by 8,000, compared to 2007.

While the recession probably played an important role in fewer babies, another factor may be the net decline in recent years in immigration to the United States, said Mark Mather, demographer with the Population Reference Bureau.

"If there are fewer immigrants coming to the U.S., there are fewer moms and dads," said Mather, noting that California and Florida are states with large immigrant populations.

"I don't think we have enough data to know for sure what's going on," he added.

About half of U.S. pregnancies are unplanned. But Hogue, the Emory professor, said the recession likely affected the other half.

The recession also may have cut into the number of unplanned pregnancies that progressed to live births, but it's hard to say. Abortion statistics for 2008 are not yet available, Hogue said.

On the Net:

National Center for Health Statistics report: <http://tinyurl.com/lzzsss>

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