

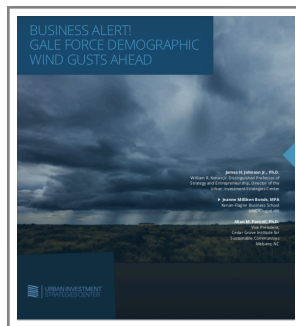
Roundtable News

GALE FORCE DEMOGRAPHIC GUSTS AHEAD!

Buckle your seat belts. Demographic changes are going to transform the United States.

In a dazzling presentation, rich in data informed by a natural teacher’s gifts for presentation, demographer Dr. James H. Johnson, Jr. painted a portrait of the United States in the midst of epic demographic change that is likely to accelerate in the years ahead. Johnson is the William R. Kenan Jr. Distinguished Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship in the Kenan-Flagler Business School and director of the Urban Investment Strategies Center in the Frank Hawkins Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

Drawing on data from the 2020 Census (and its predecessors) and recent population estimates for 2020-21 issued by the Census Bureau, he argued that the COVID pandemic has accelerated a pattern in which every state and region in the nation is in the midst of an “unprecedented demographic transformation” that can be ignored only at our peril. These changes “will dramatically transform all of our social, economic, and political institutions.” They will, he said, transform the workforce and the workplace. They will transform consumer markets. “And, most importantly for our presentation today, they will transform the business of both K–12 and higher education.” He outlined “Seven Gale Force Demographic Wind Gusts” driving these changes. A brief account such as this one can only touch on the major points. [A sobering report](#) with detailed data on these demographic changes is available from the Kenan Institute.



Wind Gust #1: Slowing U.S. population growth. The United States peaked in terms of the rate of population growth in 1960, when growth reached 18.5%, reported Johnson. Growth has generally grown more slowly in each decade since, he said, with the 2020 Census reporting growth at 7.4%, almost as poor as the 7.3% growth reported in 1940 after the decade of the Great Depression. “So, the 2020 Census shows the second slowest growth in population since we first started developing the Census in the 1790s.”



James Johnson

Wind Gust #2: Slowing foreign born population growth.

For the past three decades, much of U.S. population growth has been immigrant driven by people of color arriving from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, contributing to what Johnson defines as the “browning” of America—a trend dramatically transforming the composition of the school age population. But the *rate* of foreign population growth has slowed considerably over the past three decades—largely due to barriers erected to curtail immigration. For example, the foreign population grew by only 14% in the last decade after increasing by 24% in the 2000s and by 57% in the 1990s.

Wind Gust #3: A decline in the U.S. White population.

For the first time in history, the nation’s White population actually declined in absolute numbers between 2010 and 2020. This startling development goes far beyond the well-known reality that the White population is declining as a proportion of the total population. The latest Census reveals that there were 5.1 million fewer White people in the United States than there had been in 2010. What growth we have seen has been driven by immigration which is “age selective” of younger people who are more likely to have children than older people. Among other factors this means that all of our recent growth “occurred among people of color, which means greater diversity in our schools.”

Wind Gust #4: A decline in the total fertility rate among White women.

It’s been well known for some time that, on average, couples need to have 2.1 children in order to replace themselves. The U.S. total fertility rate has been below the replacement level since 2008. This issue is

especially relevant for White women, who have been increasingly career oriented, with many aging out of the child-bearing years and others either reluctant to bear children in marriage or finding few eligible and marriageable males with comparable levels of education.

Wind Gust #5: Growth in “deaths of despair.”

A particularly troubling development has been the growth in “deaths of despair.” That is to say, premature deaths associated with giving up on life through suicide, drug and alcohol abuse leading to medical complications such as obesity and cirrhosis of the liver. Initially thought to be concentrated in rural white areas among adults aged 25–44, said Johnson, more recent research has identified the problem in suburbs and in populations of color. Calling on a dramatic image, he said the number of annual deaths of despair in 2017 were “the equivalent of three fully loaded Boeing 737 Max jets falling out of the sky every single day for a year.” The numbers escalated even higher during the pandemic.

Wind Gust #6: Women driven out of the job market.

Gusts number 6 and 7 are related: Americans driven from the workforce by the pandemic. The pandemic, Johnson and his colleagues confirmed through focus groups, really hit women hard. The burden it placed on women, as teachers, childcare employees, and nurses, was immense. Largely responsible for childcare at home also, more than two million were forced out of the labor market. “We saw women crying, reporting, ‘I’m just so tired, I don’t know what to do.’ Until we figure out the childcare crisis in America, many of these women won’t be able to go back to work.”

Wind Gust #7: Older Americans forced into involuntary retirement.

About 1.7 million workers aged 55 or over were forced into involuntary retirement by the pandemic. They left the workforce either because of “risk of exposure to themselves personally or the risk of bringing the virus home to vulnerable people in their households.” They tended to be disproportionately people of color without a college degree with “personal savings of about \$9,000.” We have lost from the workforce some of the hardest working people in the hardest working generation, said Johnson.

Discussion. One of the side effects of all of this is that in recent years life expectancy in the United States has actually declined. Another thing you have to understand, noted Johnson, is that the Social Security system is a “pay

as you go” system. That is to say, today’s retirees depend on today’s workforce to keep the system solvent. This means that losing a large number of people in their prime working years from the workforce threatens the safety net on which many Americans depend as the foundation for their retirement. We also need to contend with the fact that “one in five workers today are balancing paid work and part-time care duties putting them at heightened risk of resigning.”

Asked if the escalating cost of raising children had contributed to declining fertility rates, Johnson responded: “Absolutely.” But he added, the phenomenon of a declining pool of eligible, marriageable men also needed to be considered. Many women now wonder if they need the added burden of bringing along a poorly educated man unable to serve as a significant family breadwinner.

When asked to comment on the ferocious political backlash among some White Americans to these demographic realities, Johnson noted that a group called the League of the South recently argued that multiculturalism is ruining the region and that everyone except White Christians should be kept out of the South, or even exported from it. But his analyses indicated that, left with only White Christians, the South would lose 41% of its population and several congressional districts; median age in the region would jump from 35 to 43—and from 29 to 61 on one county in Texas!; 46 occupations would disappear with devastating impacts on the tax base; and basketball and football teams in the Atlantic Coast and Southeastern Athletic Conferences would lose between 75 and 85% of their rosters.

Be careful what you wish for, was Johnson’s message. “We cannot sustain our society if we do what these people want.” We need to reframe the debate into the need to invest in K–12 and higher education to develop “the next generation of talent to propel our nation forward. Otherwise, we’re going to lose our shirt in the global marketplace.”

Steve McCammon, Executive Director
National Superintendents Roundtable
P. O. Box 6929, Louisville, KY 40206
steve@superintendentsforum.org
www.superintendentsforum.org

Join Us October 14-16, 2022

at Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, GA

NSR MEMBERS REGISTER NOW

FOR THE OCTOBER MEETING

Full Information Here: <https://conta.cc/3vv5Ajq>

Want to join us as a guest?

Contact nicole@superintendentsforum.org.