Talkin' 'bout our Generations: Baby Boomers and Millennials in the United States

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Abstract

Over the next several years, baby boomers will continue to transition into retirement and old age as millennials (including echo boomers) pass through the traditional benchmarks of adulthood (e.g., completing college, finding employment, and establishing independent households). The future direction of each of these groups is of increasing interest to researchers as well as to policymakers and the general public. This paper provides a demographic foundation for understanding the importance of these generations by first characterizing their membership and then analyzing projected changes in their composition over time. U.S. Census Bureau data are used to track baby boomers and millennials through their past, present, and future. Distinctions are drawn between these generations on key demographic variables at different stages of the life course. School enrollment data are used to illustrate the impact that each of these generations had on the education system while passing through one of life's major milestones.

The cohort born during the post-World War II baby boom in the United States, referred to as the baby boomers, has been driving change in the age structure of the U.S. population since their birth. Because of this, they have been the focus of much attention as they pass through each of life's major milestones. The baby boomers began turning 65 in 2011 and are now driving growth at the oldest ages of the population. As this cohort moves through yet another stage of the human life course, the future direction of this group is of increasing interest to researchers as well as to policymakers and the general public.

At the same time that the baby boomers are transitioning into retirement ages, another large cohort, the millennials, is beginning to pass through the traditional benchmarks of adulthood (e.g. completing college, finding employment, and establishing independent households). Millennials, many of whom are the children of baby boomers, are also of increasing interest to the aforementioned groups.

This paper provides a demographic foundation for understanding the importance of these generations by first characterizing their membership and then analyzing projected changes in their composition over time. U.S. Census Bureau population estimates and projections are used to track baby boomers and millennials through their past, present, and future, while school enrollment data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) are used to illustrate the impact that each of these cohorts has had on societal resources, using compulsory education as an example.

WHO ARE THE BABY BOOMERS

The term 'baby boomer' refers to individuals born in the United States between mid-1946 and mid-1964 (Hogan, Perez, and Bell, 2008). Distinctions between the baby boom cohort and birth cohorts comprising proceeding and subsequent generations become apparent when fertility measures are framed within a historical context. The baby boom in the United States was marked by a substantial rise in birth rates after World War II. Two features of the baby boom differentiate this increase from those previously experienced: the size of the birth cohort and the length of time for which these higher levels of fertility were sustained.

As shown in Figure 1, birth rates in the United States declined steadily in the decades leading up to World War II. A notable deviation in this trend was a short-term increase in fertility after World War I. In 1909, there were 30 births per 1,000 population, but by 1933, these rates had fallen to 18.4. For the next seven years, as the United States experienced the Great Depression, birth rates hovered between 18 and 19. In response to economic improvements and U.S. participation in World War II, birth rates began to fluctuate in the early 1940s, increasing to just under 23 in 1943 and then falling to just over 20 in 1945. In the first year of the baby boom, 1946, rates increased to 24 births per 1,000 population, and in 1947, they peaked at 26.5. As previously noted, the increase in fertility following a major war was not without precedent. In 1920, following World War I, birth rates also increased. However, in that instance, rates declined back to their pre-boom levels within two years. During the post-World War II baby boom, the United States experienced 18 years of elevated birth rates, with rates remaining above the pre-boom levels until 1964.

Although the birth rates observed during the baby boom were not the highest ever seen in the United States, the number of births during those years was unprecedented. In 1945, 2.9 million births were reported. This increased by almost 20 percent to 3.4 million births in 1946 [National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) 2005]. Births continued to increase through the rest of the 1940s and into the 1950s, reaching a peak of 4.3 million in 1957. By 1965, the baby boom had ended and births fell below the 4 million mark – a level not exceeded again until 1989, when baby boomers were having children of their own. In the 35 years prior to the baby boom, the number of annual births had crossed the 3 million mark twice, in 1921 and 1943. Since the baby boom, annual birth cohorts have consistently remained above 3 million.

MILLENNIALS DEFINED

In contrast to the baby boom cohort, whose membership is defined based on substantial changes in U.S. birth rates, the millennial cohort is a generation that is largely defined on the basis of shared experiences. Because of this, the dates surrounding membership in the millennial cohort are loosely defined. While most agree that millennials are those born in the last two decades of the 20th century, there is considerable variation in the exact range of years specified for inclusion. For instance, Strauss and Howe, who are credited with coining the term *millennial* to describe this generation, define its membership as those born between 1982 and 2003 in their books *Generations* (1992), and *Millennials Rising* (2000). Others have used different ranges, including Carlson (2008) who used the dates 1983-2001, and the Pew Research Center (Fry, 2015), which uses the dates of 1981-1997 in an analysis of adult millennials, but does not identify a chronological end point for the group. For the purposes of this report, millennials are defined as those born between 1982 and 2000. No special significance should be attributed to this selection – the starting date was selected to align with the origin date identified by Strauss and Howe, and the end date was established because it encompasses an 18-year period (the same number of birth years included in the baby boom cohort).

The absence of a clear change in fertility to demarcate the millennial cohort is shown in Figure 1. Where there was a large increase in both the number of births and in the birth rates between 1945 and 1946, there is no corresponding increase to establish the start of the millennial cohort. Rather, births and birth rates began rising in the late 1970s as baby boomers started having their own children, commencing what is sometimes referred to as the "echo boom." While millennials are part of the echo boom, it should be noted that not all echo boomers are millennials. Between 1976 and 1977, the number of births in the United States increased from just under 3.2 million to slightly more than 3.3 million, an increase of 5 percent. The increase in births corresponded to an increase in the U.S. birth rate from 14.5 to 15.1. This uptick in births and in the birth rate was the start of a general trend toward increased fertility in the United States that lasted through 1990, at which time births peaked at 4.2 million and the birth rate at 16.7. Between 1991 and 1997, the number of births once again declined, as did the U.S. birth rate. Although birth rates continued to decline through 2013, the number of births increased between 1998 and 2007, from just below 4 million to 4.3 million, only to decline again from 2008 through 2013 in response to the latest economic recession.

While the birth cohorts comprising the millennial generation were as large, and in some cases larger, than those of the baby boom, the millennial generation differs from the baby boomers because these large birth cohorts are part of a broader trend that started in the previous generation (generation X) and is continuing into the next. In other words, the fertility trends associated with the beginning of this generation are not exceptional.

SIZE AND GROWTH OF THE MILLENNIAL AND BABY BOOM COHORTS

Annual estimates of the population within each generation are shown for the years 2000 to 2060 (Figure 2). Although baby boomers are defined as those born in the United States, the data presented throughout the remainder of this report for the baby boom generation include individuals born abroad between 1946 and 1964 who migrated to the United States. In 2000, the last birth year included in the millennial cohort, there were an estimated 78.7 million baby boomers, compared to 76.5 million millennials. Over the next few years, the millennial generation continued to grow through immigration, while the number of people in the baby boomer ages declined. By 2005, the number of millennials had grown to outnumber that of the baby boomers: 78.2 million baby boomers compared to 78.8 million millennials. Given the age difference between the two groups, it is of little surprise that this trend is projected to continue at an accelerated pace through 2060, with mortality markedly reducing the size of the baby boom population. By 2060, the projected number of people in the baby boom ages is 2.6 million, compared to 85.1 million millennials. The youngest of the baby boomers at that time will be 96 years old, and the millennials will be between the ages of 60 and 78.

Figure 3 centers each of these generations, allowing for comparisons of their population size at a given age, as opposed to on a particular date (as was shown in Figure 2). The first data point for each group, for instance, represents the size of the first cohort included in that generation, while the last data point represents the size of the generation when the members are aged 60 to 78. Although there are more millennials than baby boomers in each age group represented, the basic pattern of growth for each of these generations is the same. The population of each group sharply increased for the first 18 years, as additional birth cohorts were added. The baby boom population increased from 2.4 million to 72.4 million, compared to an increase from 3.6 million to 76.4 million for the millennials. Growth continued throughout the young and middle adult ages for the baby boomers as immigrants contributed to increases in population. The population in the baby boom ages increased from 72.5 million when its population was between the ages of 1 and 19 to a maximum population of 78.8 million corresponding to the ages 35 to 53. Similarly, the millennial population is projected to increase from 76.9 million to 91.4 million for these ages. However, the millennial population is projected to continue to increase beyond this, peaking at a population of 91.5 million when its population is aged 39 to 57. Beyond this, the populations of each group are projected to decline so that by the time the baby boomers are aged 60 to 78, there are projected to be 68.3 million members of this generation remaining, compared to 85.1 million for the millennials.

While immigration contributes to the growth of both generations, a larger share of the millennial cohort is projected to be foreign-born compared to the baby boom cohort. The differential rise in the populations stemming from net international migration can be seen in the widening of the gap between

the two lines in Figure 3 for the ages 1-19 and beyond. The projected percent foreign born within each generation is shown in Table 1. Comparing the cohorts at the same point in time shows that a higher percentage of the millennial population is projected to be foreign-born, and that the difference in the percentages is projected to increase over time. In 2020, 16.4 percent of the millennial population is projected to be foreign-born, compared to 15.7 percent of the population in the baby boom ages: a difference of 0.7. This difference is projected to increase to 6.0 in 2060, corresponding to the difference between 25.3 percent foreign born for the millennial generation and 19.3 percent for the baby boomers.

The differences are even larger when comparisons are drawn across the groups for analogous ages. The millennial generation will be between the ages of 20 and 38 in 2020. The baby boomers were these ages in 1984. Although the ages do not exactly align, data from the 1980-2000 Decennial Censuses, the 2010 American Community Survey, and the 2014 National Projections are used to approximate differences in the percentage foreign born for these groups by age. In 1980, when the baby boomers were between the ages of 16 and 34, 6.2 percent of the population in these ages was foreign born, just slightly 10 percentage points lower than the share of the foreign-born millennials of similar age. By 2010, when the baby boomers were aged 46 to 64, the percentage of the population that was foreign born had increased to 15.6, whereas 24.4 percent of the millennials are projected to be foreign born when they reach these ages. Both fertility and net international migration contribute to the larger size of the population in the millennial generation relative to the baby boom generation.

In terms of their share of the total U.S. population, the percentage of the population that is in the baby boom ages has been lower than that in the millennial generation since 2005 (Figure 4). While the share of the population in each of these groups is projected to decline over time, the pace of decline is projected to be much steeper for the baby boomers than the millennials owing to the aging of the baby boom population in the years to come. In 2000, 27.9 percent of the total population was in the baby boom ages compared to 27.1 percent in the millennial ages. By 2005, the year that the millennial generation first comprised a greater share of the population than the baby boomers, these percentages had decreased to 26.5 and 26.7, respectively, and they are projected to continue declining such that less than 1 percent of the total U.S. population will be in the baby boom ages in 2060, while in that same year just over 20 percent will be millennials.

Centering the graphs on age (Figure 5) presents a better representation of the impact that each of these generations had, and will continue to have, on the composition of the U.S. population. Although the number of people in the millennial generation was larger than the number in the baby boom population at each age point, the reverse is true for the share of the total population in the generations. In each of the age points up until age 75, the baby boom population comprised a larger share of the total U.S. population. The difference between the two groups is the largest in the year that the oldest birth cohort in each group turned 18. In that year (1964 for the baby boomers), 37.8 percent of the total U.S. population was in the baby boom ages, as compared to 27.1 percent in 2000 for the millennial population. For 54 years, from 1957 (when the oldest of the baby boomers was 11 years old) to 2010, over one quarter of the total U.S. population was in the baby boom ages. The millennial generation is projected to constitute the same share of the total population for a much shorter duration, only 33 years.

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

The baby boomers have been of interest to researchers and the general population in large part because they have had an oversized representation relative to other generations. As a result, their transition through life's major milestones has introduced more of a shock to the societal institutions that support those activities than has been the case with other generations. Using the example of school enrollment for 5 and 6 year olds, Figure 6 shows the number of students enrolled each year for the years 1945 to 2010. In 1945, 2.8 million 5 and 6 year olds enrolled in school. Most of these children were born in the years 1939 and 1940. The number of students increased from 1945 to 1949 (3.5 million), and then declined to 3.2 million in 1951. The majority of children entering school in that year would have been born in 1945 and 1946, the last birth cohorts before the baby boom began. Over the next three years, as the early birth cohorts in the baby boom enrolled in school, the number of students increased dramatically, reaching over 5.4 million students in 1954. Enrollment continued to increase through 1967 when it peaked at 7.4 million (corresponding to children born in 1961 and 1962). Between 1951 and 1954, school enrollment increased by 70 percent, and between 1951 and 1967, school enrollment more than doubled, increasing 130 percent.

No such similar increase occurred in the late 1980s as millennials began turning 5 and 6. Instead, enrollment began a steady increase starting in the early 1980s, fuelled by the entry of the "echo boomers" into school. In 1980, there were 5.9 million students in these ages. This increased to 7.0 million in 1988 (students roughly born between 1982 and 1983). Between 1988 and 1993, the number of students in school remained relatively stable from one year to the next, but there was a notable increase between 1993 and 1994, from 7.3 to 7.8 million students, corresponding to the larger birth cohorts of 1988 and 1989 that were shown in Figure 1. Enrollment remained around this level through 1998 and then began to decline again. Whereas the baby boom generation's entry into school initiated dramatic changes in school enrollment, the same cannot be said for the millennials. Between 1987 and 1994, the height of school enrollment for those in the millennial ages, the number of students increased by less than 1 million, a rise of only 11 percent.

To further illustrate the impact of each of these generations on school enrollment, Figure 6 shows the annual change in the number of 5 and 6 year olds enrolled in school. For the majority of the data points shown, the number of students remained relatively stable from one year to the next. Fitting a Lowess curve fit to the data points shows that the annual change in the number of students did not vary much over time. The average annual change in enrollment between 1945 and 2010 was 78,800, with 50 percent of the annual changes falling between -75 thousand and 172 thousand. However, there are some exceptions to this, the most obvious being the increase of 1.4 million students between 1953 and 1954. The growth in 1954 corresponds to children born between 1947 and 1949 enrolling in school as 5 and 6 year olds. This is nearly triple the largest increase experienced at any point during the millennial generation's transition into school.

DISCUSSION

Despite the larger size of the millennial generation relative to the baby boomers, their transition through the life course has not introduced (and, moving forward, is not as likely to introduce) the same level of shock to societal institutions as the baby boomers caused. This is because the baby boom was marked by large increases in birth cohorts relative to those that had come before. This is not the case for the millennials. The millennials are part of an ongoing trend toward larger birth cohorts that started in the previous generation and has continued into the next. Large birth cohorts during the baby boom resulted from individuals having more children, whereas the large birth cohorts that have been the norm for the past three decades are the product of many individuals having smaller numbers of children. In other words, these birth cohorts are driven by population momentum that started with the baby boomers' transition into parenthood. Since the size of the millennial generation is consistent with the generations surrounding it, their transitions from one milestone to the next are less apt to introduce the same jolt to various systems as the baby boomers who came before them.

The example presented here of school enrollment was chosen because education for young children is a legal mandate, and enrollment patterns are not as likely to be influenced by societal or economic factors as other indicators like college enrollment or labor force participation. It was also chosen because the millennial generation is still relatively young and has yet to fully experience many of the other milestones. There are, however, some limitations to using school enrollment data as the only example. The millennial generation is projected to increase more through international migration than was the case for the baby boomers, and this might result in this generation having an increasing impact on societal institutions as they transition through adulthood. This would not be captured in the younger ages. Beyond this, the example provided here only examined numerical differences to show the changing burden the system associated with each of these generations. There are qualitative differences between the two generations that have the potential to create other demands on the school system that are not addressed here. For instance, the millennial population is much more ethnically- and racially-diverse than the baby boomers (Table 2), which could present challenges to school systems that need to meet the needs of students from a variety of backgrounds.

DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This paper uses estimates of the total U.S. population for July 1 for the years 1945 to 2013 and projections of the total U.S. population as of July 1 for the years 2014 to 2060. Data for the population in the years 1945 to 2013 are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's national population estimates. Historical estimates are of the resident population of the United States plus Armed Forces overseas for the years 1945 to 1979 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004b). Historical estimates prior to 1950 do not include Alaska or Hawaii. Estimates for the 1980s and beyond are of the resident population of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, excluding the Armed Forces overseas. Values for the 1980s are derived from the Quarterly Estimates of the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), while values for the 1990s and 2000s are intercensal estimates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Intercensal estimates are produced each decade by adjusting the existing time series of postcensal estimates for a decade to smooth the transition from one decennial census to the next. They differ from postcensal estimates that are released annually because they rely on a formula that redistributes the difference between the April 1 postcensal estimate and April 1 census count for the end of the decade across the

estimates for that decade. Postcensal estimates are used for the years 2010 to 2013 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Data for the projected years, 2014 to 2060, are from the 2014 National Projections (U.S. Census, 2014).

Birth data were obtained from National Center for Health Statistics publications and are based on administrative records reporting. Births reported for the years 1909 to 1914 were estimated based on the number of registered births in the 10 original registration states. Similarly, adjustments were made to the number of births in each of the years 1915 to 1932 to include births from states not included in the registration area during that year. Beginning in 1933, birth registration data was collected from all states and the District of Columbia.

Estimates of school enrollment for the years 1945 to 1969 are from the Census Bureau's Current Population Reports, while estimates for the years 1970 through 2010 are from the October Current Population Survey for those years. These data are for the civilian noninstitutionalized population and, therefore, exclude individuals residing in institutions.

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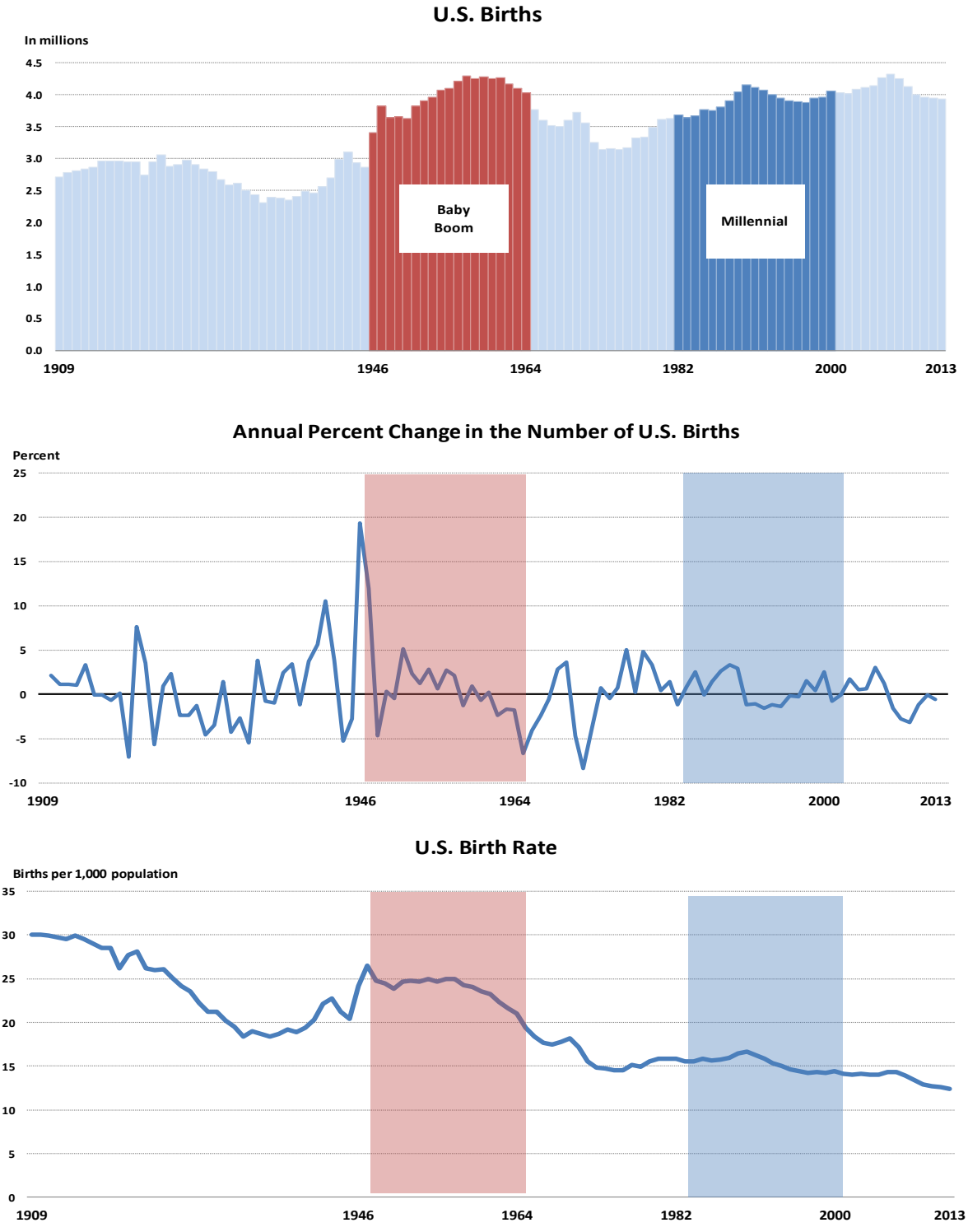
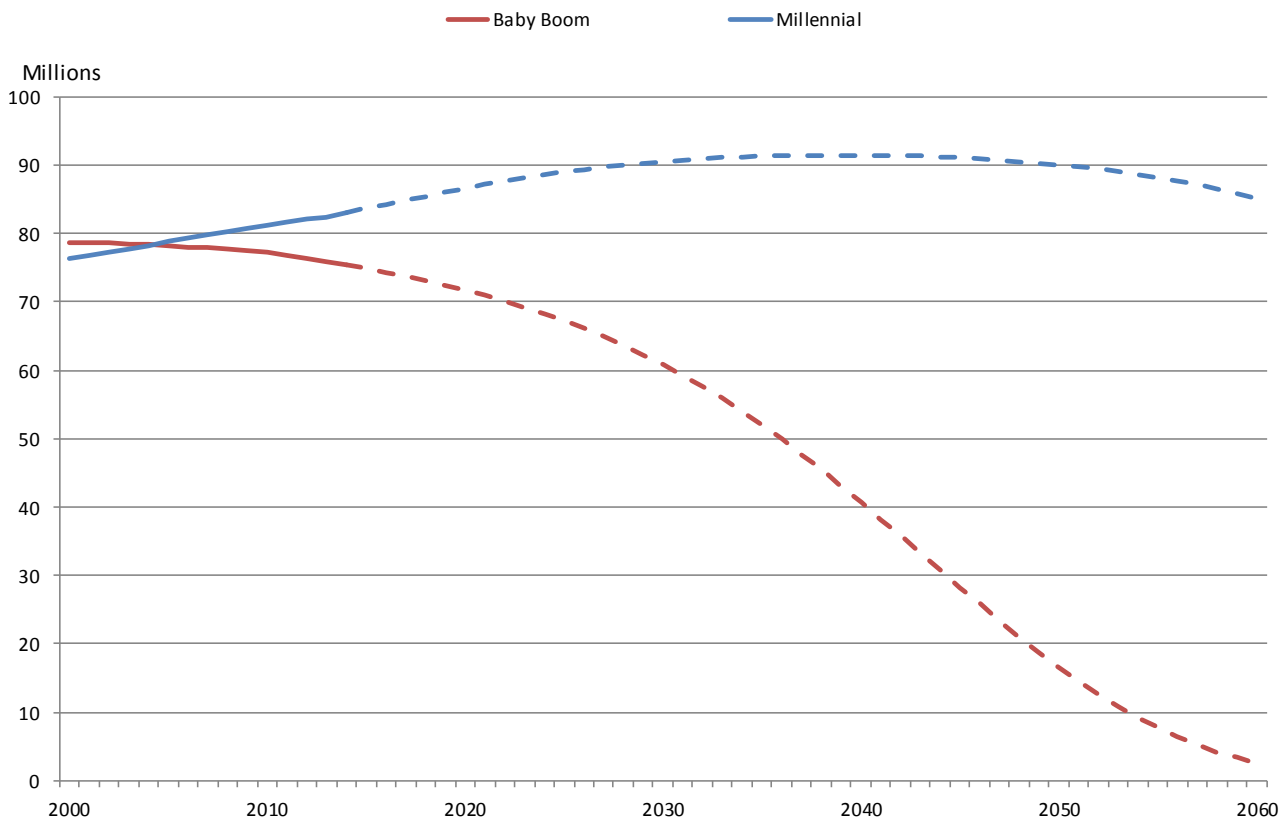
Figure 1.
Number of Births, Annual Percent Change in Number of Births, and Annual Birth Rate for the United States: 1909 to 2013



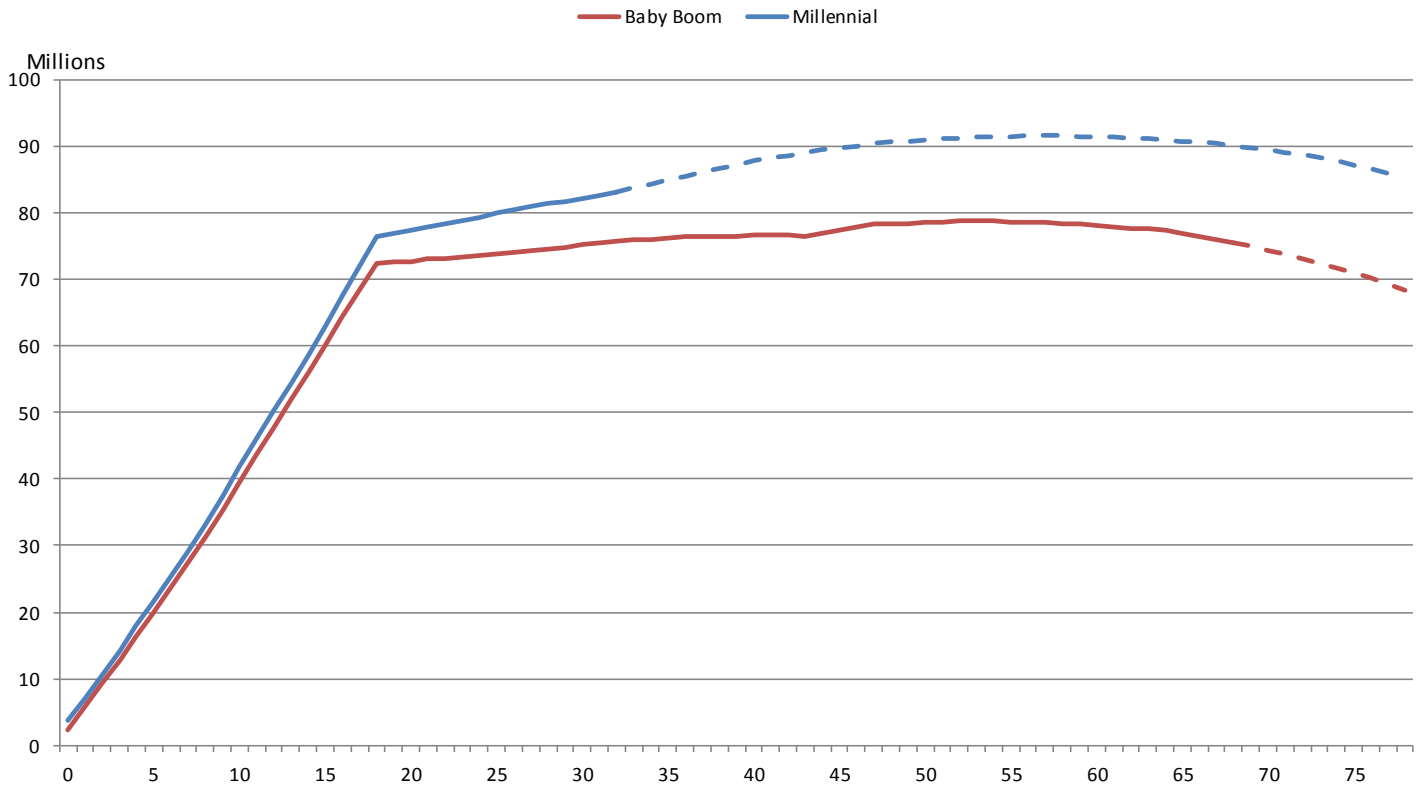
Source: National Center for Health Statistics 2005; Martin et al. 2012; Martin et al. 2013; Hamilton and Sutton 2013.

Figure 2.
Annual Population of Baby Boomers and Millennials: 2000 to 2060



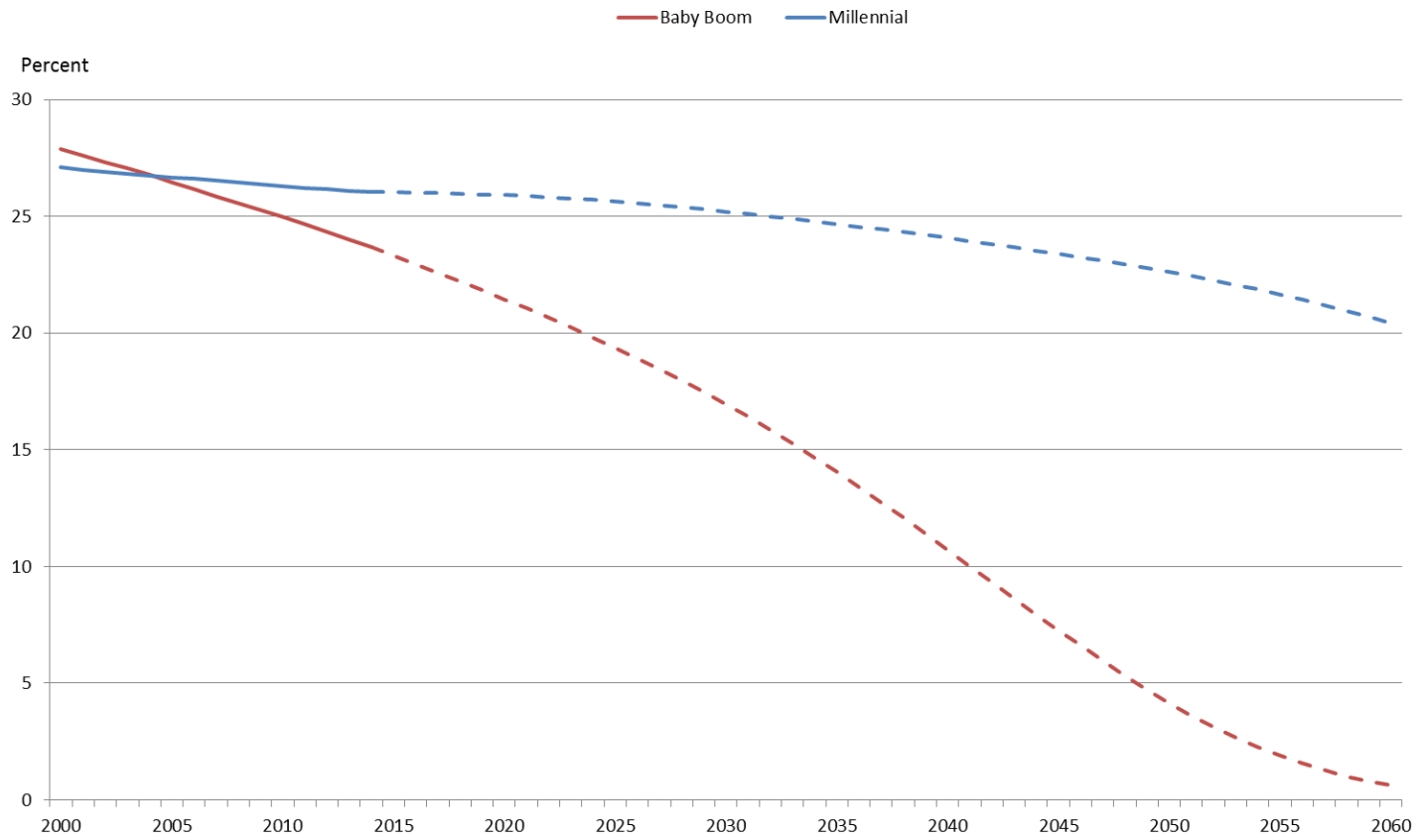
Note: Dashed lines represent projected years.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division.

Figure 3.
Population in Baby Boom and Millennial Generations by Age of Oldest Birth Cohort: 0 to 78



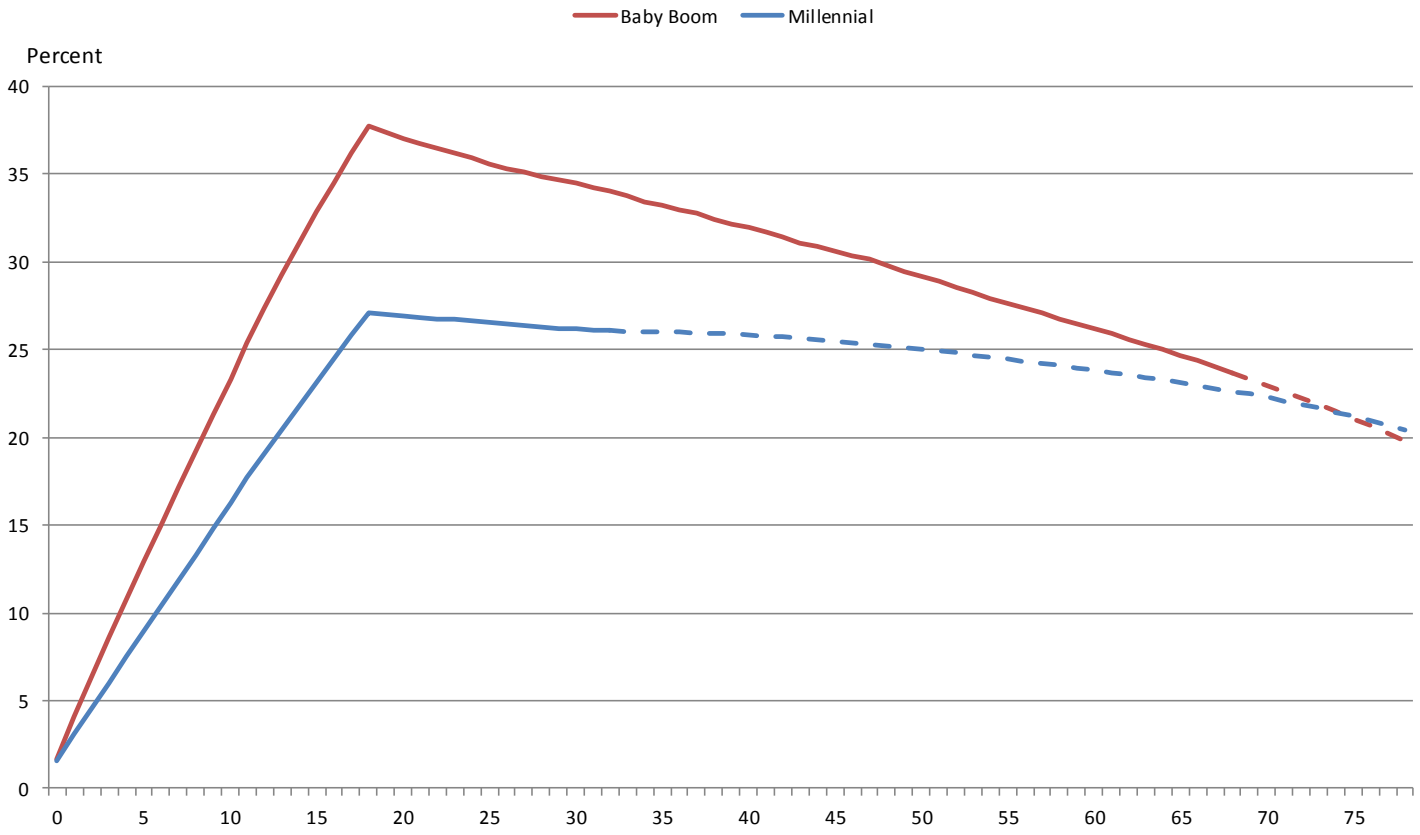
Note: Dashed lines represent projected years.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division.

Figure 4.
Percent of Total U.S. Population in Baby Boom and Millennial Generations: 2000 to 2060



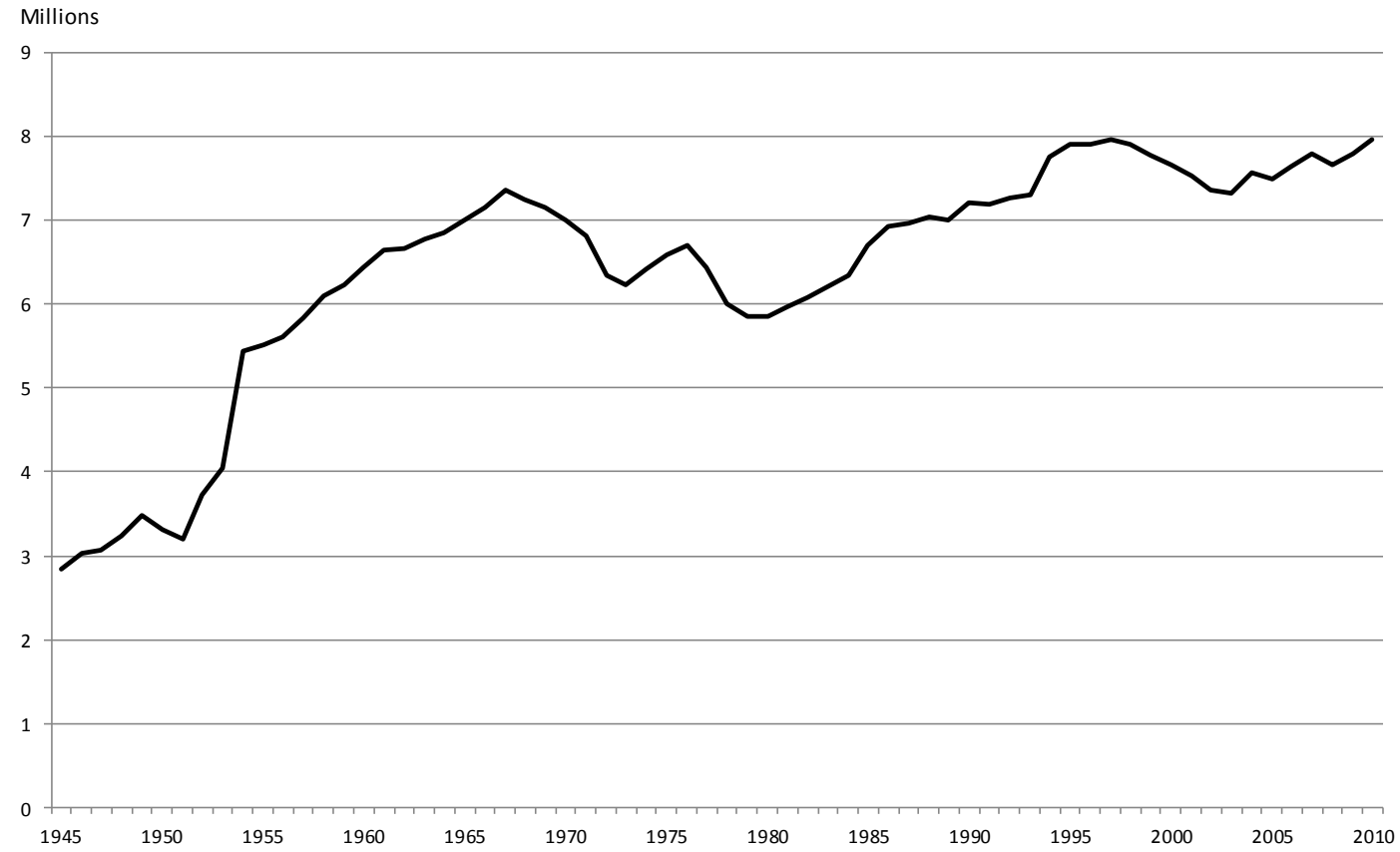
Note: Dashed lines represent projected years.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division.

Figure 5.
Percent of Total U.S. Population in Baby Boom and Millennial Generations by Age of the Oldest Birth Cohort: 0 to 78



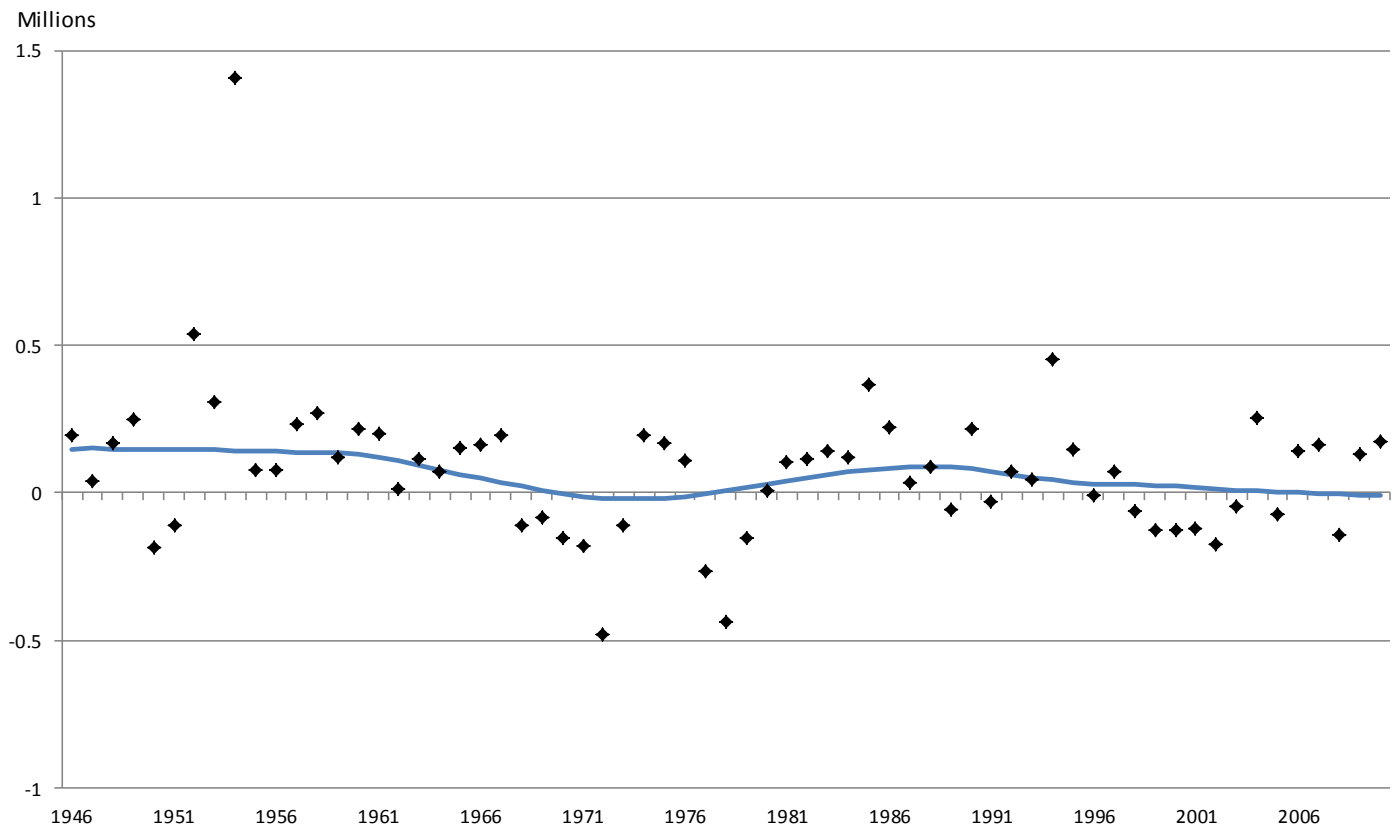
Note: Dashed lines represent projected years.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division.

Figure 6.
Number of 5- and 6-Year-Old Children Enrolled in School by Year of Enrollment: 1945 to 2010



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1945 to 1969 Current Population Reports, 1970 to 2010 Current Population Surveys.

Figure 7.
Annual Change in School Enrollment: 1945-46 to 2009-2010



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1945 to 1969 Current Population Reports, 1970 to 2010 Current Population Surveys.

Table 1.

Percent Foreign-Born for Baby Boom and Millennial Generations by Year and Cohort Age

	Year				
	2020	**2030**	**2040**	**2050**	**2060**
Baby Boom	15.7	16.9	17.7	18.4	19.3
Millennial	16.4	20.9	23.1	24.4	25.3
	Age Range				
	20-38	**30-48**	**40-58**	**50-68**	**60-78**
Baby Boom	6.2	10.8	14.3	15.6	15.7
Millennial	16.4	20.9	23.1	24.4	25.3

Note: Age ranges used in comparisons are approximations. Ages shown in column headers align with the ages of the millennials in the years presented. Data sources used for the baby boom generation do not allow for exact comparisons. For example, the data for baby boomers aged 20-38 are derived from the 1980 Decennial Census. In that year, baby boomers were aged 16-34.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980-2000 Decennial Censuses, 2010 American Community Survey, and 2014 National Projections.

Table 2.

Distribution of Baby Boom and Millennial Generations By Race and Hispanic Origin: 2015 to 2060

Race and Hispanic origin	Year					
	2015	2020	2030	2040	2050	2060
Baby Boomers						
Non-Hispanic White Alone	71.8	71.5	71.2	70.7	69.6	68.0
Non-Hispanic Black Alone	11.1	10.9	10.4	10.1	10.2	10.8
Non-Hispanic AIAN Alone	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6
Non-Hispanic Asian Alone	4.7	4.9	5.2	5.5	5.6	5.8
Non-Hispanic NHPI Alone	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.2
Non-Hispanic Two or More Races Alone	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.1
Hispanic	10.7	11.0	11.4	12.0	12.8	13.6
Millennials						
Non-Hispanic White Alone	55.5	54.1	52.2	51.4	51.0	50.9
Non-Hispanic Black Alone	14.0	13.7	13.5	13.4	13.2	13.0
Non-Hispanic AIAN Alone	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.7
Non-Hispanic Asian Alone	5.7	6.7	7.9	8.4	8.8	9.1
Non-Hispanic NHPI Alone	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Non-Hispanic Two or More Races Alone	2.4	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.3	2.3
Hispanic	21.3	22.1	23.2	23.7	23.8	23.9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 National Projections.