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Geography Essentials

Human Systems

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From the National Council for Geographic Education:
Eighteen National Geography Standards
(http://www.ncge.org/publications/tutorial/standards/)

Human Systems

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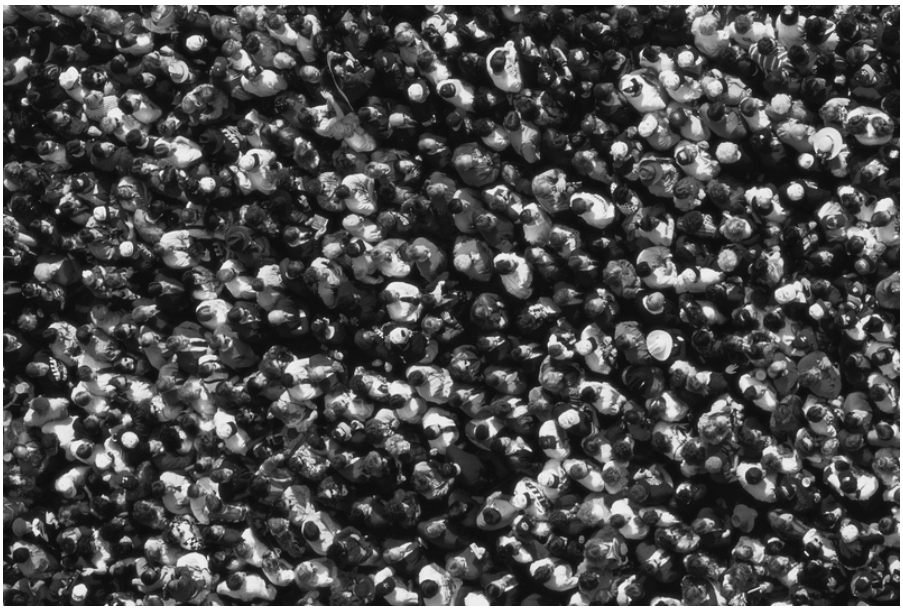
The geographic study of human systems involves examining how people organize themselves and their activities, move around, get along, and lead their daily lives.



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(Geography Standard 9)

A good way to begin learning about human systems is to discuss some aspects of human population.

Some important terms to know when studying population:

•**Population growth rate:** The rate at which a population is increasing or decreasing, expressed as a percentage of the total population. The population growth rate includes births, deaths, immigration, and emigration (moving away). The population growth rate of the United States was about 0.92 percent in 2004.

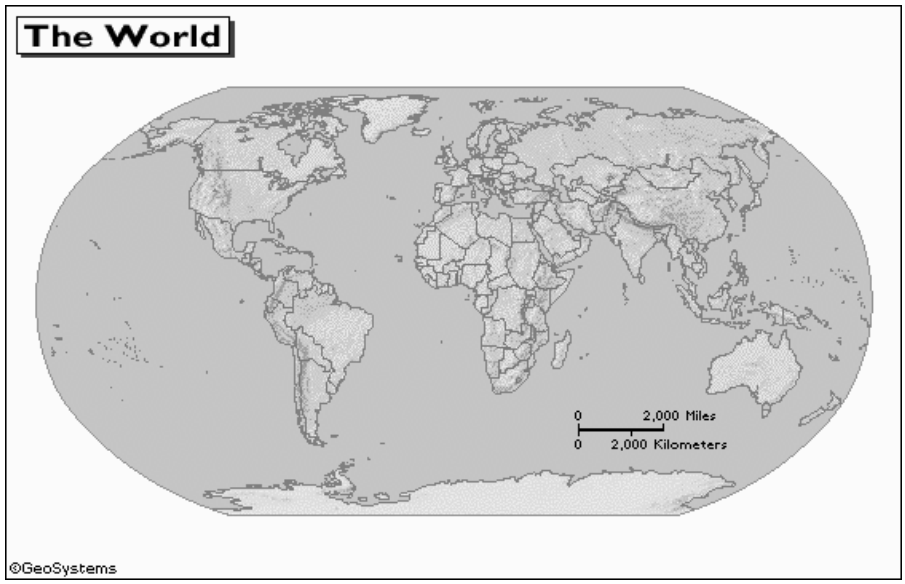
•**Birth rate:** The rate at which babies are being born, expressed as a percentage of the total population.

•**Death rate:** The rate at which people are dying, expressed as a percentage of the total population.

•**Rate of natural increase:** The birth rate minus the death rate; this is the same as the population growth rate but does not account for immigration and emigration.

•**Infant mortality:** Out of every 1000 births, the number of babies born who die. In 2004, infant mortality rate in the United States was about 6.63 deaths per 1000 births.

•**Life expectancy at birth:** The number of years a baby born today can expect to live.



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"Western" countries, such as the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, have lower population growth rates, birth rates, death rates, rates of natural increase, and infant mortality rates than developing countries such as many in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Compare these figures:

United States 2004 birth rate: 14.13 births per 1000 people in the country

Afghanistan 2004 birth rate: 47.27 births per 1000 people in the country

United States 2004 infant mortality rate: 6.63 infant deaths per 1000 births

Peru 2004 infant mortality rate: 32.95 infant deaths per 1000 births

United States 2004 life expectancy: 77.43 years

Uganda 2004 life expectancy: 45.28 years

Why do you think this is the case? What factors contribute to these trends?

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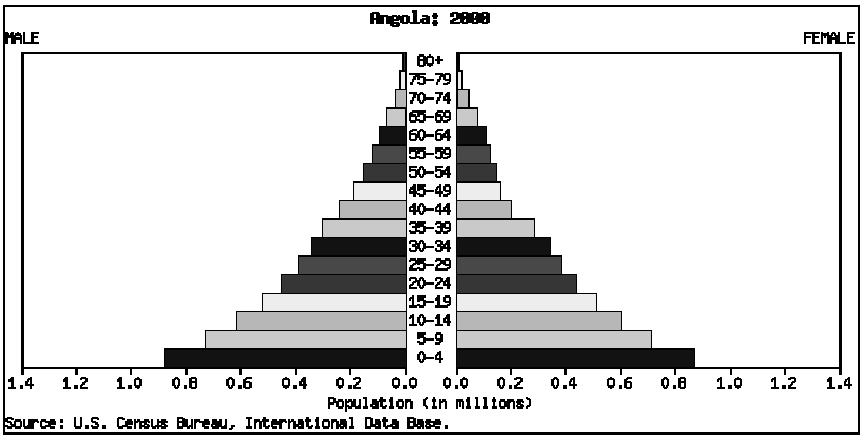
A complex array of factors contributes to these trends in population figures. Lack of economic opportunities and medical services in many countries creates incentives for women to bear large numbers of children. With a high infant mortality rate and a largely agricultural population base, it's natural that families would want to try to have as many children as possible to ensure that at least some of them survive to help the family earn a living. Some of these surviving children will work on the farm, while others might seek financial rewards in the cities. Cultural and religions traditions also contribute to this trend toward a higher birth rate. Additionally, the majority of women in developing countries are poorly educated and thus do not have the incentive to delay marriage and pregnancy that educated women with good job opportunities have. These uneducated women tend to remain unaware of methods of contraception, which are often expensive, unavailable, or frowned upon by men and other members of their society.

As economic opportunities increase, particularly for women, families tend to have fewer children at later ages. This is what has occurred in Western countries such as the United States.

Infant mortality rates and death rates are directly related to quality of and access to medical care. Most people in developing countries have difficulty accessing and affording what people in Western countries consider the most basic sources of medical care, such as antibiotics.

Lack of access to clean water is also a major problem for many people in the developing world.



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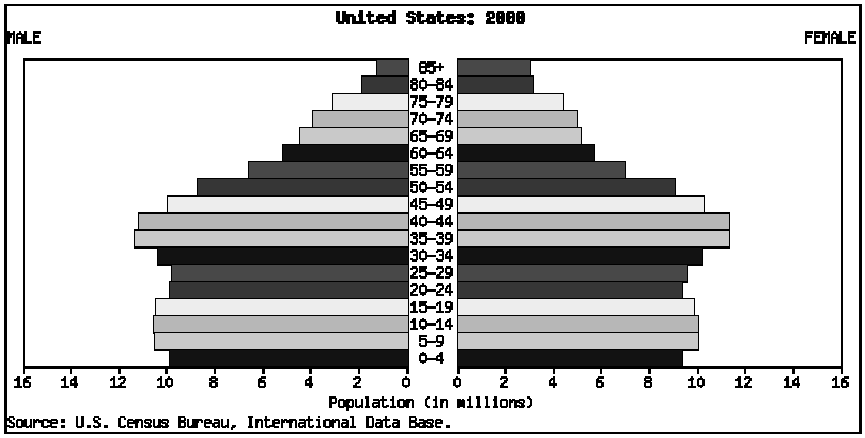
Despite higher infant mortality rates, developing countries tend to have much younger populations than Western countries.

The graph in this slide is called a population pyramid. It shows the population of Angola, a southern African country, as distributed over various age groups in the year 2000. The left side of the pyramid represents males in Angola, and the right side represents females.

The bottom lines show the numbers of people in the youngest age groups. The top lines show the numbers of people in the oldest age groups. For example, the royal blue line at the very bottom shows the number of people ages 0–4. The tiny yellow line almost at the top shows the number of people ages 75–79.

As you can see from this population pyramid, Angola has many more people in the younger age groups than in the older groups.



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This is a population pyramid for the United States in the year 2000. What differences do you notice? Are there more people in the younger, older, or middle-age groups in the United States?

This graph reflects the impact of the "baby boom" of the late 1940s through the early 1960s. Birth rates reached a peak during these post-World War II years. In 2000, baby boomers were in their late 30s to early 50s, represented as the bulge in the middle of the pyramid.