

UNC researcher testing views of Americans on birth control

by Brad Stuart
Staff Writer

What governmental steps to reduce the birth rate would be accepted by the American public?

To find the answer to this question, a broad research project has been instigated. The study is directed by UNC's Dr. James E. Allen in connection with the North Carolina Population Center.

The research will use surveys and psychological studies to determine the knowledge, attitudes and practices concerning population control prevalent in various groups of the general public.

Key leadership groups, such as legislators, doctors and theologians, will also be studied.

Research is aimed at finding attitudes towards 15 basic programs possibly to be used by governments in controlling population size. According to researchers' literature, these range from controls which would "enlarge the freedom of both individuals and society" to those which would "highly restrict freedom."

Programs of the first type would include measures such as "universal availability of effective contraceptives... abortion on request... equality of women, additional family style alternatives" and research

towards better birth control methods and towards making possible "the ability to choose the sex of unborn children."

More restrictive programs might legalize "marketable licenses to have children, mandatory temporary or permanent sterilization and... incentives powerful enough to be coercive."

Dr. Allen said he prefers the former, less restrictive approach. He favors immediate liberalization of laws concerning abortion and contraception and supports "freedom from the psychology of being fertile."

Allen said there was no extensive research into public attitudes before the liberal abortion bill was voted on and defeated in the N.C. Legislature.

"I suspect the public would accept more population control measures than are currently in effect," Allen said. "If effective steps may be made which coincide with the value system already held by the general public, it makes sense to take these. Our study is to find what these are."

Allen believes new social and governmental population programs are necessary because of the critical nature of the population problem.

"Every nation including the U.S. must gain control over its birth rates," Allen asserts. To do this, he says, "social scientists and the government cannot avoid manipulating human behavior. This manipulation needs to be conscious and in accord with the public philosophy."

The present phase of the study, according to Allen, is for an initial nine-month pilot period, to cover instrument development, "further tightening of research design and development of proposals for further national and international studies over the following two years."

Allen holds a Ph.D. and an S.T.B. (Doctor of Theology) from Boston University and a Master of Science of Public Health degree from UNC. He is a senior research associate of the North Carolina Population Center, a lecturer in the UNC Department of Religion and an assistant professor in the Department of Health Administration.

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