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# THE POPULATION OF JAMAICA

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GEORGE W. ROBERTS

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THE POPULATION OF  
JAMAICA

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
KINGSLEY DAVIS

CAMBRIDGE  
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## PREFACE

This study, a formal demographic analysis of Jamaica, forms part of a broad research project sponsored by The Conservation Foundation. It is confined to the island of Jamaica; the dependencies—the Turks and Caicos Islands and the Cayman Islands—are not treated here because their vital statistics (which are not under the control of the Registrar General of Jamaica) are inferior to those of Jamaica.

As the last census of Jamaica was that of 1943 the analysis can in the main be carried no further than this date. However, in discussions of fertility and mortality full use is made of more recent data prepared by the Registrar General for years up to 1952. It remains an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of the rapidly changing vital rates that any demographic study of the island tends to have dated somewhat by the time it is published.

Comparative material for other West Indian territories is drawn on where relevant historical and other factors suggest that the subject can be more satisfactorily developed in the wider context of the British Caribbean as a whole. Thus in Chapters 1, 4 and 7 material from other West Indian territories is used though in each case the focus of the analysis remains the population of Jamaica.

Some of the material used in this study has already appeared in papers published in *Population Studies*, and thanks are expressed to the editors of this journal for their permission to incorporate such material in the study.

The writer is most grateful to The Conservation Foundation, and in particular to its Director of Research, Mr R. G. Snider, for being selected to work on this study. The work was done under the direction of Professor Kingsley Davis and the writer remains deeply indebted to him for his guidance and encouragement at every stage. Special thanks are also expressed to Professor D. V. Glass for his critical reading of the manuscript; as a result of his criticism both the form and the content of the whole study have been improved.

Discussions with colleagues on the other Jamaican studies, Miss Judith Blake and Mr Peter M. Stern, have helped greatly in developing and clarifying many of the topics dealt with here, though,

b—P.O.J.

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## PREFACE

of course, errors of fact or interpretation must in no way be ascribed to them. In addition special thanks are due to Mr Stern for his assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication. Throughout Mr Ira Shere has served as assistant on the project and it is in no small way due to his industry and ability that the study has been completed within the scheduled time. Mr Shere also prepared the Figures used, with the exception of Figs. 8 and 9, which have been reproduced with the permission of the editors of *Population Studies*. Acknowledgments are also made to the staff of The Conservation Foundation for assistance so willingly given, and in particular to the Librarian, Miss Joan Carvajal, who so readily secured much of the historical and statistical records required for the study.

Special debts of gratitude are here expressed to two authorities on West Indian populations, whose help in the past has proved most valuable in work on the present study. The first is to Mr L. G. Hopkins, who directed the 1946 census of the West Indies, and with whom the writer was associated on this work. Many of the problems of fertility and mating in the West Indies treated here were first raised and discussed in Part A of the 1946 census report. The second is to Dr Brigitte Long, who willingly gave advice on locating and using historical material on West Indian populations.

Institutions in Jamaica have also helped in various ways. In particular, thanks are due to the Registrar General and his staff for advance information and for special tabulations supplied from time to time, and to the statisticians of the Central Bureau of Statistics, who supplied data and gave advice on many problems.

GEORGE W. ROBERTS

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## INTRODUCTION

BY KINGSLEY DAVIS

Most tropical areas today suffer from a malady so prevalent and so well known that it strikes no one as peculiar. Yet it is peculiar because it is uniquely modern, and because it exists despite the fact that it would seem easily remediable by techniques far simpler than those used to solve many other modern problems, including physical disease.

The nature of the malady is this: the combination of rapid population growth with widespread poverty. In the past the world has seen plenty of poverty, but the poverty was not associated with a fast increase in numbers. Instead, such demographic expansion as did occur tended to take place among the more successful peoples. Now, however, it is primarily the under-developed parts of the earth, the parts where additional population can be least provided for, that are exhibiting the fastest rates of increase—rates, indeed, which have never before been equalled by any country in human history. This relatively new disorder, this strange social imbalance, complicates the other ills of these regions, makes their future economic progress uncertain, and exacts a greater toll in human frustration than any mere organic illness. It cries aloud for both perceptive understanding and scientific research, but unfortunately it gets little of either.

The island of Jamaica exhibits the malady in its classic, though not in its most extreme, form. In that beautiful place one and a half million people occupy a territory of 4400 square miles. Their average density, 340 persons per square mile, is roughly six times that found in the United States and three times that found in Ireland. Yet, despite this already high density, the population has been growing at a rate which, if continued, would double the number of people on the island every 41 years. In fact, it seems likely that during the next 20 to 40 years the rate of human multiplication may even exceed that of recent decades. In any case, the prospect of continued population increase poses a serious problem. The Jamaican economy has long provided only a low level of living and is now characterized by chronic unemployment, with between

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15% and 20% of the available labour force out of work. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development says in its report on the island that 'a further reduction in unemployment can in the end be achieved only through emigration, the possibility of which is limited, and a limitation of population growth'. Certainly the rapid multiplication of human numbers puts a major obstacle in the way of alleviating Jamaica's poverty.

In view of the prevalence of the population malady in much of the world and its presence in Jamaica, the present volume by Mr George W. Roberts is most timely. His is one of the few thorough case studies of population dynamics in an under-developed area, and aside from the material in Volume III of Kuczynski's *Demographic Survey of the British Colonial Empire*, it is the first such major study that deals with Jamaica. Among other things, it delineates the historic growth of population on the island, describes the changing internal distribution and the fluctuating external migration, presents the main features of the population structure, and analyses the patterns of fertility and mortality which have contributed to past growth and will affect potential future growth. The demographic side of the island's economy and social organization is thus brought forth with a precision and thoroughness that only an expert can provide.

Before discussing this excellent volume, I should perhaps mention that it is the first of three projected studies dealing with Jamaica's population problems. These interrelated studies, which The Conservation Foundation undertook to sponsor in 1952, are, first, an analysis of the island's demographic history; second, a field study of attitudes and family relationships in Jamaica as they relate to reproduction; and third, a discussion of the resources and land-use patterns of the island as they relate to past and future population trends. In seeking a person qualified to accomplish the first task, the Foundation naturally turned to Mr Roberts, who was already a recognized authority on the demography of the British Caribbean region. He kindly consented to take a leave from his regular post to make this intensive study, for which he already had unexcelled preparation.

The three studies just mentioned were designed to supplement one another. The present volume approaches the subject from the standpoint of systematic demography, utilizing the official census returns and vital statistics to throw as much light as possible on population

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trends and structure. The field study, based on intensive interviews, will provide information of a different kind—on family relations, motives, and attitudes with respect to sex and children. Finally, the analysis of resources and land-use will fill in another part of the picture. The three studies combined should throw more light on the population problems of Jamaica than is available for nine-tenths of the other under-developed areas. Yet these studies represent only a beginning. It is hoped that they will provide a basis and a stimulus for still more research, because a many-sided investigation of one area, rather than a more superficial look at many areas, has much to recommend it from both a scientific and a practical standpoint.

Altogether it can be said that the amount of scientific research devoted to population problems in heavily peopled but impoverished regions is negligible in comparison to the gravity and magnitude of these problems; Jamaica is only one case among a great number which, all told, involve hundreds of millions of people. The value of Jamaica as an object of intensive study arises partly from the fact that its demographic pattern is in general typical of that of many under-developed countries. Its death-rate has declined sharply, particularly in recent years. Its birth-rate, while lower than that of some regions, is still high enough to provide, with the lessened mortality, a rapid natural increase which is added to an already crowded population. But Jamaica also has certain peculiarities (as a single case always has) which force the student of its population problems to blaze new trails in scientific analysis. Why, for example, has its birth-rate long been lower than that of Puerto Rico, which has had a greater degree of urbanization and industrialization and more encouragement of birth control? Again, since Jamaica's family structure differs in important respects from that found in Latin and Asian countries, what effects has this had on the island's birth-rate? How, in turn, has the institution of slavery, which endured through more than half the entire period of British rule, influenced the population trends? From the standpoint of the science of population, these particular features of Jamaica are as important as the parallels with other under-developed areas.

Another reason for giving attention to Jamaica is that none of the British territories in the Caribbean has previously been intensively studied from a demographic point of view. In contrast, Puerto Rico, with its Latin-American cultural background, has been thoroughly studied; and Japan, Malaya, India, Taiwan and Egypt have

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received at least some serious demographic attention. Jamaica, though the most populous of the British colonies in America, is yet small enough to be amenable to investigation as a unit. It has, furthermore, far better sources of demographic information than most under-developed areas. These sources are by no means perfect, but Mr Roberts, who has used internal checks wherever he could, has reason to vouch for the proximate accuracy of the censuses and vital statistics (though not for the external migration figures).

In the task of analysing Jamaica's demographic history, Mr Roberts has had several unique advantages. Reared in the British West Indies, he knows the people and their culture as only a native can. At the same time, his training in demography and his experience with West Indian censuses and vital statistics have given him a rare technical competence. For several years his regular position has been that of Vital Statistics Officer of the Colonial Development and Welfare Organization in the Caribbean headquarters at Barbados. In this position he has advised the colonial governments of this area on matters pertaining to registration and census statistics and population estimates. At the same time he has been active in population research, publishing a number of distinguished articles dealing with his region in the British Journal, *Population Studies*.

Mr Roberts has used to good advantage his knowledge of the comparative statistics and history of Britain's possessions in America. Frequently, he draws instructive comparisons between Jamaica and other territories. He is able to show, for example, that until 1919-23 the birth-rate in Jamaica was higher than that of British Guiana and Trinidad. After this period the Jamaican rate declined somewhat while that in British Guiana and Trinidad rose, so that the past relationship was reversed. The explanation he finds in the long-range effects of a different amount and kind of immigration into these two territories. From 1834 to 1914 British Guiana and Trinidad received a much heavier immigration than Jamaica, composed of a high proportion of East Indians. Once the East Indians were established in their new homes in Trinidad and British Guiana and their sex ratio had become normal, they exhibited a higher rate of procreation than the natives. Furthermore, they came to compose an ever larger proportion of the total population of the two territories, thus pushing up the overall birth-rate.

Occasionally the author is able to draw on the statistics of other

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territories to help fill in gaps due to missing information for Jamaica. In his very skilful study of mating and marriage as they bear on fertility in Jamaica, for instance, he has at least two technical problems. On the one hand, as he makes clear, the traditional apparatus of demographic analysis with respect to fertility has been worked out in societies where 'mating and marriage are largely synonymous terms'. In the West Indies, however, most children are born outside of legal wedlock, and a sizeable proportion of the mothers in the census report their marital status as 'single'. In this situation it becomes obviously difficult, on the basis of census and vital statistics, to include mating habits in the analysis of reproduction in the way that would be done, say, in Britain or the United States. Such terms as 'marital fertility', 'births by duration of marriage', 'male net reproduction rates' and 'age at marriage', become almost meaningless from the standpoint of a statistical understanding of reproductive behaviour. Given the difficulties of analysing reproduction in relation to the various types of sexual unions he has to deal with, the author's second problem is that certain crucial data are not available, or not available in the best form, for Jamaica. In one such case, by calling upon superior data from Barbados where the mating patterns are generally similar to Jamaica, he is able to deduce something concerning the ages at which women enter the different types of relationships. He finds that women who enter the 'keeper relationships' tend to do so approximately at ages 19 or 20 (which is perhaps an overestimate). Those women who eventually settle down in a 'common law marriage' usually do so at a late age, around 30 years of age. Though many common law marriages eventually are legalized by formal wedlock, this does not occur until about 34 in the modal case, at which time the woman has already borne most of her children.

These illustrations suggest that the character of Jamaican society and the peculiarities of its statistics do not permit an easy demographic analysis along traditional lines. Mr Roberts has brought a great deal of skill and ingenuity to the task. He has also brought sociological and historical knowledge to bear on his subject. The reader will soon find that the volume deals, for example, with the influence of slavery on nearly all aspects of the demography of the island. The author is not able to say as much or to be as certain about this influence as we would like, because the sources

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are not adequate. The sources, however, are not entirely fruitless, so that the connexions between slavery on the one hand and mortality, mating patterns, birth-rates and population structure on the other, can be treated with some hope of approximating the truth.

The result of the skills, experience, and interest which Mr Roberts has brought to his task is an unusually competent and original case study of a highly interesting population. He is to be congratulated by professional demographers, by specialists in under-developed areas and above all by the Jamaicans themselves for his skill in catching their lives in his demographic net.

KINGSLEY DAVIS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

BERKELEY, *January* 1956.