

Invest in new generations

By Daphne Greenwood

As industrialized countries like the United States continue to reduce birth rates and lengthen life spans, a crisis is looming in Social Security and pension systems.

But rapid immigration is not the only solution, as some have argued. If we are able to be more productive in the future, we could support the aging baby boomers without massive population growth.

It's a myth that we have to have an ever-growing population. But generating more productivity for the population we do have requires investment in the generations who will be working and paying into the Social Security system in the future.

Only the top fifth of American workers saw their wages increase faster than inflation during the last 30 years. Imagine instead an economy where most workers receive steady increases in real wages and generate many more dollars for the Social Security fund - not to mention being able to better provide for their families.

Investment in youth has to occur at four levels: family, school, community and workplace. More than one-fourth of the children in our country are raised in families that subsist below or just barely above official poverty standards. Do we think that many have their basic health, education, and nurturing needs met? Even among the more affluent, two-worker families and ever-longer workdays and commutes are part of the reason our children watch television more and exercise and study less.

Here in Colorado, graduating in the top half of a high school class does not guarantee preparation for college work. Increasing shares of the higher education budget are devoted to remedial courses. And despite an income level well above the national average, Colorado voters have supported a system that puts us at the bottom in higher education funding per student. At a time when continued education is more critical for our youth than ever, and when many adults need to return to school for retraining, we are on the brink of further cutting public funding for universities in order to follow the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights guidelines and keep taxes low. This is hardly the kind of investment needed for our future.

At the community level, we also have ignored the needs of youth, with the development of neighborhoods that make children ever more dependent on automobiles and on the adults who drive them. We talk a lot about quality of life in Colorado, but that term seems to cover only the outdoor activities that adults enjoy. There is little focus on ensuring the kind of communities that help children and youth venture away from their

television sets and video games to develop into independent adults.

Investing in our children could be the silver bullet allowing population stability, continued economic growth and financial solvency for Social Security in the future. One of the highest rates of return on the dollar comes from quality preschool education, according to recent studies by Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman. Yet, despite the existence of programs like Head Start, a very small percentage of the children who could benefit have access to these programs. All levels of public education need to be supported - not just with dollars, but with recognition of the critical role of learning to a well-functioning democracy and a strong economy.

Today's business climate focuses on keeping costs down through cutting health benefits and wages, if not shipping jobs overseas. But if all children are going to be ready to learn, families must be healthy and economically strong. Let's get past the idea that cheap labor is the path to our prosperity and recognize its devastating effect on families, children and future generations.

Otherwise, we are unlikely to make the investments that our future well-being requires. If we don't invest in our youth right now - through families, education, communities and businesses - then we will have few good choices when the baby boom generation retires.

Former state legislator Daphne Greenwood is professor of economics and director of the Center for Colorado Policy Studies at CU-Colorado Springs.

DENVERPOST.com

All contents Copyright 2004 The Denver Post or other copyright holders. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed for any commercial purpose.