

Negroes and Birth Control

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THE American Negro has been going through a great period of stress, not only in this depression, but long before it. His income is reduced by ignorance and prejudice and his former tradition of early marriage and large families has put grave strain on a budget on which he was seeking, not merely to maintain, but to improve his standard of living.

As slaves, every incentive was furnished to raise the largest number of children possible. The chief surplus crop of Virginia and other border States consisted of this natural increase of slaves and it was realized in the consequent slave trade to feed the plantations of the lower South and Southwest. Frederick Bancroft has shown us that this trade, in the decade 1850-60, involved average annual sales of nearly 80,000 human beings, representing about \$100,000,000 of capital.

Even then birth control was secretly exercised by the more intelligent slaves, as we know from many reminiscences.

After emancipation, there arose the inevitable clash of ideals between those Negroes who were striving to improve their economic position and those whose religious faith made the limitation of children a sin. The result, among the more intelligent class, was a postponement of marriage, which greatly decreased the number of children. Today, among this class of Negroes, few men marry before thirty, and numbers of them after forty. The marriage of women of this class has similarly been postponed.

In addition to this, the low incomes which Negroes receive make bachelorhood and spinsterhood widespread, with the natur-

ally resultant lowering, in some cases, of sex standards. On the other hand, the mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among whites, is from that part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.

There comes, therefore, the difficult and insistent problem of spreading among Negroes an intelligent and clearly recognized concept of proper birth control, so that the young people can marry, have companionship and natural health, and yet not have children until they are able to take care of them. This, of course, calls for a more liberal attitude among Negro churches. The churches are open for the most part to intelligent propaganda of any sort, and the American Birth Control League and other agencies ought to get their speakers before church congregations and their arguments in the Negro newspapers. As it is, the mass of Negroes know almost nothing about the birth control movement, and even intelligent colored people have a good many misapprehensions and a good deal of fear at openly learning about it. Like most people with middle-class standards of morality, they think that birth control is inherently immoral.

Moreover, they are quite led away by the fallacy of numbers. They want the black race to survive. They are cheered by a census return of increasing numbers and a high rate of increase. They must learn that among human races and groups, as among vegetables, quality and not mere quantity really counts.