

A Statistical Overview of Ebeye

Part Two: *Elementary School Attendance*

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(This is the second in a series of short essays focusing on social and economic changes on the island of Ebeye¹)

The RMI recognizes education as one of its pillars of national development and has made access to basic educational services a fundamental right of all its citizens. The RMI Constitution, in the Bill of Rights (Article II, Section 15), states: “*The Government of the Marshall Islands recognizes the right of the people to health care, education, and legal services and the obligation to take every step reasonable and necessary to provide these services.*” As such, education is compulsory for children aged six to 14 (the elementary school age), meaning that every child must attend school at least until he or she completes the eighth grade.

However, over the past several decades, a disturbing trend has emerged: an increasing percentage of school age children are not attending school. This essay analyzes school attendance on Ebeye, the RMI’s second most populated island, using census data collected since the late 1960s.

The “JS” on Ebeye: Gaining in Numbers

A child who does not attend school is often referred to in Marshallese as a “JS” for “*jab school*,” which translates as “*doesn’t attend school.*” The very existence of such a term suggests that non-attendance has become quite common throughout the islands. Statistics confirm this.

Nationally, while educational attainment among adults has generally improved over time, the elementary school attendance rate has steadily declined. As of 1999, the number of children not in school in the RMI had increased to over 2,000.

Subject	1967	1973	1980	1988	1999
Population 6 to 14	980	1,303	1,562	2,532	2,340
Attended school	749	1,176	1,416	2,211	1,928
DID NOT attend	231	127	146	321	412
Attendance rate	76.4	90.3	90.7	87.3	82.4

Source: Insular Areas Statistical Enhancement Program

On Ebeye, the elementary age population more than doubled between 1967 and 1999, from 980 to 2,340. Interestingly, the elementary age population decreased by about 200 (almost 10%) between 1988 and 1999, most likely the result of decreased fertility and out-migration.

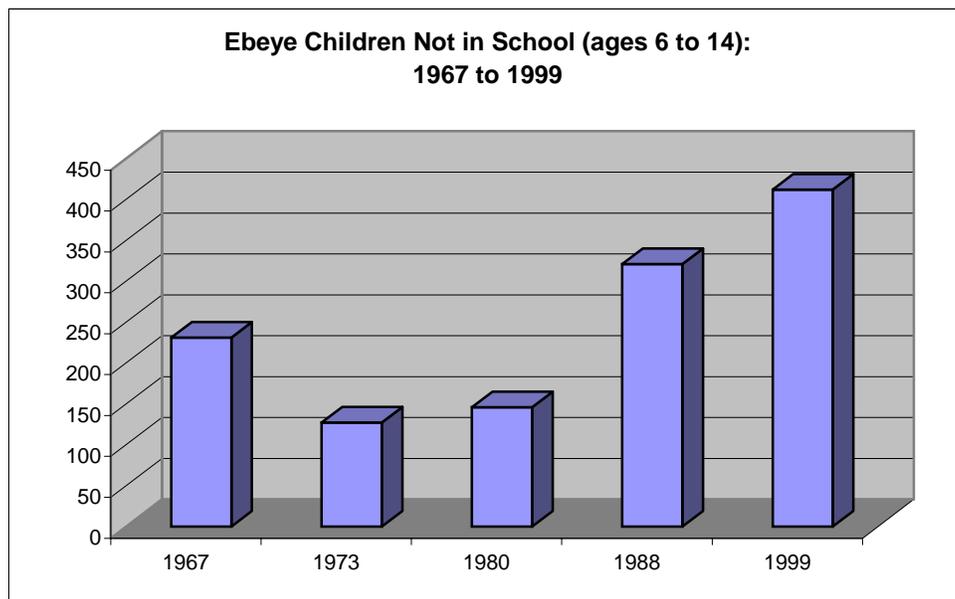
On the whole, the percentage of children attending school (the attendance rate) on Ebeye improved slightly between 1967 and 1999. However, after peaking at over 90% in the 1970s and 1980s, the rate has since declined. As of 1999, the rate had fallen to just 82%, translating into over 400 children (almost 18%) not in school.

Contributing Factors

Several factors may account for the decreasing attendance rate on Ebeye. The first and most obvious factor may be lack of space. Ebeye’s handful of elementary schools may simply not have space for all the six-year olds coming up every year, just as the RMI’s three public high schools do not have enough room for entering freshmen, as highlighted by a recent Marshall Islands Journal article. In other words, it is quite possible that high fertility rates have outpaced any growth in classroom space.

¹ For those who do not already know, Ebeye Island, in Kwajalein Atoll, is the second most populated island in the RMI. Nearly 10,000 Marshallese reside on Ebeye, many of whom work on the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site.

A second factor may be motivational; families and students themselves may not be placing enough importance on the value of education. Often, people do not recognize the increased employment and earning potential (among other benefits) that schooling provides.



Urban migration may be a third factor. Over the past several decades, hundreds of families have relocated to Ebeye from neighboring atolls, mostly in search of employment. These families often bring with them children who may encounter difficulty getting into already crowded schools, or who may have never attended school before (and are therefore unlikely to start).

The Future?

Any child, anywhere in the RMI, who does not attend school will almost certainly face disadvantages later in life. People with lower levels of education (or none at all) are much less likely to get hired and, if they are fortunate enough to get a job, earn wages far below their more educated co-workers.

But children who grow up in an urban setting like Ebeye and who do not attend school will be especially disadvantaged. Because these children reside in an urban setting (versus a rural, or outer island setting), they forego the opportunity to attain a traditional education (the “opportunity cost”). Living on Ebeye, these children may not have the chance to learn some of the important traditional skills that have helped Marshallese live and thrive in the coral atoll environment. At the same time, because these children are also not attending school, they do not attain a western education.

As a result, these children learn neither traditional nor western skills, a circumstance that will, without question, make basic social and economic survival difficult in any environment, urban or rural.

As these children grow older, what stations in life will they occupy? Will they become productive members of the community who will contribute to the growth and development of their island? Or will they become the proverbial “idle hands” of society? These are the difficult questions that need to be addressed.

Conclusion

Ebeye’s low elementary attendance rate should cause great concern. Even more alarming, however, is the fact that this rate has been on a steady decline since the early 1980s – and according to statistics from the most recent survey conducted on Ebeye, the 2002 Household Income and Expenditure Survey, the

attendance rate has not changed much since 1999. Out of 414 school aged children covered in the survey, only 85% were attending school.

This is, therefore, both a long-term and worsening crisis for Ebeye. Immediate measures must be taken to reverse this trend and to ensure that all of Ebeye's children have access to basic education.

After all, it is the law.



An aerial view of Ebeye Island. Total land mass: 0.14 square miles.

Special thanks to Dr. Michael Levin

Note: This essay is produced under the auspices of the Insular Areas Statistical Enhancement Program and is not an official RMI or US Census Bureau report. For questions or comments, email: benjamin.m.graham@census.gov