

Population growth

Case study: China's one-child policy

In 1979, China introduced the controversial one-child policy as part of range of measures aimed at reducing the growing population.

Previously, Chinese governments had encouraged large families to increase the workforce needed to promote the country's economic growth. But in the early 1970s, with growth rates averaging five births per woman, the government feared that the population would soon become unsustainable.

Family planning officials monitored births and large fines were levied on any couples who succeeded in having more than one child. Other punishments included the confiscation of property or loss of jobs. There is evidence that many women of child-bearing age have undergone forced sterilisations, while girl-children are abandoned or put up for adoption.

The policy seems to have had some impact on the birth rate, as the fertility rate in China fell from around three births per woman in 1980 to around 1.6 in 2008¹. The Chinese government claims it has meant 300-400 million fewer births than the country would otherwise have had.

This claim is contested by some academics who argue that the fertility rate started to fall in the mid 1970s before the introduction of the one-child policy when the government began to encourage delayed marriages and longer intervals between births.

But thirty years after the policy was introduced, the gender balance of the Chinese population has been upset. In a society which places greater value on boys, it is the female foetuses that tend to be aborted and the girls who are neglected or abandoned.

By 2000, the sex ratio had risen to 120 males per 100 females at birth, and 130 in some provinces. As a result, many Chinese men have difficulties in finding wives. In the west, many couples are adopting Chinese girls.

There is also concern about how China will support an ageing population given the dwindling number of working people and carers.

Although officially still in force, the one-child policy has been relaxed in recent years. Couples can now apply to have a second child if their first child is a girl, or if both of them are 'only children'.



¹ Estimates by the World Bank, data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN.

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Case study: Singapore's dual policy



Singapore is unusual in that it has introduced government-led policies aimed at both reducing and increasing the population over the course of a few decades.

Following the second World War, the average Singaporean woman was having six children, contributing to rapid population growth. The government, concerned at how a still-developing country would provide for a growing population, introduced the 'Stop at Two' programme in the late 1960s.

The vigorous state campaign which impressed on citizens the benefits of a small family was so successful that the fertility rate declined rapidly. An annual population growth of over 4 per cent per year in the late 1950s dropped to around 1.6 per cent in the 1990s¹.



The government was particularly concerned by the fact that the population's university-educated women were favouring careers over having children, with the result that most children were born to less-educated couples.

In an attempt to remedy this, in 1984 the government introduced the Graduate Mothers Programme, which gave preferential school places to children whose mothers were university graduates. Grants were offered to less-educated women who agreed to be sterilised after the birth of their second child. The government also established a Social Development Unit to act as matchmaker for single university graduates. The policies proved unpopular and most were soon abandoned.

In 1987, the government switched to a pro-natalist policy with a campaign entitled 'Have Three or More, if You Can Afford It.' A new package of incentives for larger families included tax rebates for third children, subsidies for daycare and longer maternity leave.

Pro-natalist measures remain in place, targeted particularly at the well-educated. The government aims to selectively increase the population by 40 per cent over 25 years. But the introduction of a baby bonus scheme in 2001 has failed to halt the fall in fertility, with the total fertility rate declining to an average of less than 1.2 births per woman in 2011².

Over the period of its changing approaches to population management, Singapore has undergone a rapid 'demographic transition', moving from the high birth and death rates typical of a poor country, to the low birth and death rates of an industrialised economy. It is now one of the wealthiest nations in the world.

¹ Department of Statistics, Singapore: www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/people/demo.html

² Department of Statistics, Singapore: www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/keyind.html#birth

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Case study: France's pro-natalist policy

The comprehensive raft of family-friendly policies adopted in the 1970s seem to have succeeded in giving France one of the highest birthrates in Europe. This has bucked the continent's trend of declining fertility as women have increasingly favoured career over childbearing.

The measures are designed to encourage women to continue to work while having children. They include tax breaks for parents, statutory parental leave and government-subsidised daycare. A state grant is also awarded to those who have a third child.

2006 proved a record year for France, with an average of two births per woman, the highest fertility rate the country had seen in quarter of a century.
[Eurostat, epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/main_tables]

[Eurostat, epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/main_tables] The rise in births came amid a continuing drop in marriage rates. Almost half the 2006 babies were born to unmarried mothers, suggesting that liberal social attitudes may have also helped to boost fertility.

It is also possible that France's long history of pro-natalism, which goes back to 1939 legislation offering cash incentives to stay-at-home-mothers, has given the population confidence that families will be supported.

France now has the third-highest fertility rate in Europe with an average of 2.03 children per woman in 2010, topped by Iceland at 2.2 and Ireland at 2.07.
[Eurostat, epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/main_tables]

Further links

ESRC Centre for Population Change

First established in 2009 and funded by the ESRC, this centre was the UK's first research centre on population change.
www.cpc.ac.uk

Population Reference Bureau

This US-based organisation seeks to inform people about topics including population, health and the environment.
www.prb.org

Eurostat

As the statistical office for the European Commission, Eurostat enables comparisons between countries and regions by providing the European Union with European level statistics.
ec.europa.eu/eurostat/

SOCIAL SCIENCE FOR SCHOOLS

The Social Science for Schools website, www.socialscienceforschools.org.uk, is packed full of useful resources, covering topical issues and concepts relevant to young people. Among these are printable resources, such as this one, as well as case studies, opinion pieces, and a library of external links which may be of interest to teachers and students alike.

Feedback and enquiries can be sent to schools@esrc.ac.uk

