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## Fertility: A baby bounce for Australia?

Australia has had a baby boom and a baby bust. Are we likely to have a baby bounce? Some key facts, reasons for the baby boom and bust and international experience are covered. The conclusion is drawn that a baby bounce is unlikely in the near future and the decline in Australian fertility is likely to continue.

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**Contents**

Introduction ..... 1

Some key facts ..... 1

Reasons for the baby boom ..... 2

Reasons for the baby bust ..... 3

International experience ..... 3

A baby bounce is unlikely ..... 4

Endnotes ..... 4



## Introduction

Australia has had a baby boom and a baby bust. Are we likely to have a baby bounce? A bounce would be an increase in the average number of babies women have in their lifetime (the fertility rate).

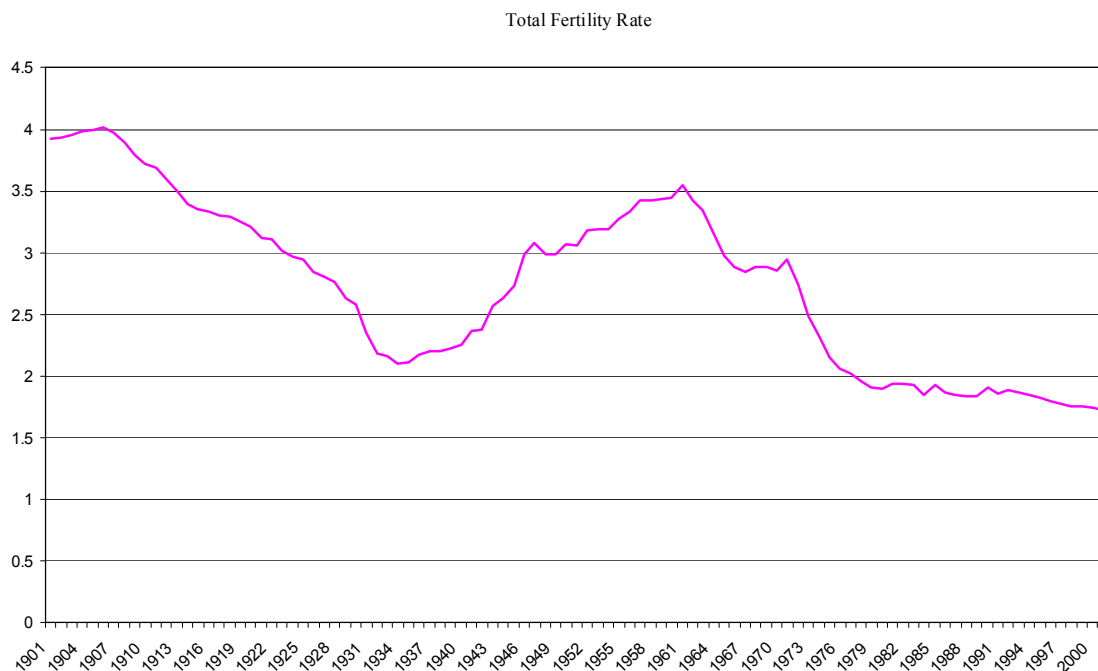
### Technical note

The number of babies born in a year is a reflection of the number of women in child bearing ages and the average number of babies they bear at each age in the same year. The Total Fertility Rate (referred to as the fertility rate in this note) summarises this latter information in terms of the average number of babies expected to be borne by a woman in her lifetime.

## Some key facts

- The fertility expectations of women aged 20–24 in 1976 equated with an average of 2.3 children, the same as twenty years later in 1996–97.<sup>1</sup> The actual fertility rates were less—2.1 in 1976 and 1.8 in 1997.<sup>2</sup>
- The fertility rate has reached 1.7 babies per woman for Australia as a whole, 1.6 in Adelaide, Perth and Canberra and 1.5 in Melbourne.<sup>3</sup>
- The fertility rate fell from about 6 babies per woman in the mid-nineteenth century<sup>4</sup> to 3.9 in 1901.<sup>5</sup> After a slight rise, probably a catch-up of births postponed during the 1890s Depression, it subsequently declined to 3.1 by 1921 and, associated with the Great Depression, to 2.1 in 1934. After this it increased to a high of 3.5 in 1961 before commencing the decline to the current level.<sup>6</sup>
- While 48 per cent of babies in 2001 were born to women 30 years and older, up from 30 per cent in 1961, fertility at all ages is now lower than in 1961.<sup>7</sup>
- On current rates about 24 per cent of young women will have no children, 21 per cent will have one, 27 per cent two, 18 per cent three, 6 per cent four and 4 per cent five or more.<sup>8</sup>
- To replace each generation an average of 2.1 babies per woman is required given current mortality rates.
- The reason why births still outnumber deaths (there were 246 000 births and 129 000 deaths registered in 2001) despite a below replacement level fertility rate of 1.7 babies per woman is that there is a large number of women in the child bearing ages—the daughters of the baby boomers. Deaths are projected to outnumber births sometime between the years 2033 and 2046.<sup>9</sup>

## Fertility: A baby bounce for Australia?



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Year Book Australia (Catalogue no. 1301.0) 2003, p. 125.

- The number of women between 20–39, who between them accounted for 95 per cent of fertility in 2001, is projected to be relatively constant over the next 50 years at about 2.9–3.0 million.<sup>10</sup>
- A change of 0.1 in Australia's fertility rate over the whole of the next 50 years would mean a population change of about one million.<sup>11</sup>
- The decline in fertility is the major reason for the ageing of the population given that immigration has only a marginal impact on the age structure of the Australian population.<sup>12</sup>

### Reasons for the baby boom

The 1935 to 1961 increase in the fertility rate included the post-World War II baby boom. The reasons that have been advanced for the baby boom include:<sup>13</sup>

- the catch-up of births postponed during the Great Depression and World War II
- a marriage boom encompassing a reduction in the average age at first marriage of women and an increase in the proportion of women marrying. More than three-quarters of the 'baby boom' has been attributed to the 'marriage boom'

- the effects of the post-war acceleration in net international migration which was highly selective of young adults, and
- reduced involuntary childlessness due to increased knowledge of sub-fecundity and medical treatment of it.

### **Reasons for the baby bust**

The reasons that have been advanced for the decline in the fertility rate from the 1961 level of 3.5 to the current level of 1.7 include:<sup>14</sup>

- introduction of the oral contraceptive pill in 1961
- availability of abortion, effectively on request, following a reinterpretation of abortion law in 1971. This had a particular impact on young women's fertility<sup>15</sup>
- increasing job insecurity, and
- increasing participation of women in higher education and the labour force. Women increased their participation in the labour force from 37 per cent in 1971 to 55 per cent in 2001.<sup>16</sup>

For women seeking full-time paid employment there are difficulties in gaining recognition and promotion while taking long periods off to give birth and look after young children as well as undertaking the majority of housework.<sup>17</sup>

### **International experience**

In the last 20 years the USA and Sweden have experienced baby bounces although also followed by subsequent falls.

In the USA the fertility rate went from 1.8 in 1980–1985 to 2.1 in 1990–1995.<sup>18</sup> The increase has been attributed to the very large inflow of migrants from Mexico. The relatively high level of fertility in the USA also reflects high teenage fertility and access to cheap child care arising from the wage structure and probably also illegal immigration.<sup>19</sup>

In Sweden, the fertility rate went from 1.7 in 1980–1985 to 2.0 in 1990–1995 associated with provision of day care for small children and paid paternal leave.<sup>20</sup>

The support of women who wish to be involved in the labour force and have children appears to have a major impact on fertility rates. In Northern Europe there is generally greater government support of child care facilities, facilitation of temporary movement out of the labour force and participation by husbands in domestic tasks than in Southern Europe and Japan. This is reflected in Northern Europe's fertility rate of 1.7 while the more patriarchal Southern Europe and Japan have a rate of 1.3.<sup>21</sup>

If the Southern European and Japanese rate is to be avoided and the aspirations of young women in Australia for more than 1.7 children on average are to be achieved, then policies are needed to give explicit recognition that children are valuable to the whole society, not just to their parents.<sup>22</sup>

### **A baby bounce is unlikely**

What are the prospects of an increase in fertility?

Indicators of an increase in fertility would be an increase in age-specific first marriage rates (69 per cent of births were to women in a registered marriage in 2001) and/or fertility rates for younger women.

First marriage rates are in decline. The decline in these rates for women under 30 years is not matched by the increase for those 30 years and older.<sup>23</sup>

The age-specific fertility rates for women aged 15–24 years (and 40–44 years) showed a very minor increase in 2001. Because the 15–24 year age group contributed only 22 per cent to fertility in 2001, this was not enough to break the overall downward trend in fertility.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the expressed wish of young women for 2.3 children on average, because of the trend towards fewer first marriages, a baby bounce is unlikely in the near future. The decline in Australian fertility is likely to continue as illustrated by women in Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Canberra already having a fertility rate below the current Australia-wide rate of 1.7 babies per woman.

Given stabilisation of fertility in the long-term, the level of fertility reached will reflect the environment created for families, and women in the labour force in particular, to have children.

### **Endnotes**

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