

## **SECTION 17 SPECIAL REVIEW**

### **RECENT TRENDS IN FERTILITY IN HONG KONG**

This article gives a brief account of the trend in the birth rate since 1971 and identifies the factors that are associated with its decline.

## SPECIAL REVIEW

### RECENT TRENDS IN FERTILITY IN HONG KONG

#### INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong has achieved a remarkable decline in the birth rate over the past 15 years. Even in the late 1950's and early 1960's, the crude birth rate remained between 35 and 40 per thousand population. The rate fell sharply from 35 per thousand in 1961 to 19.7 per thousand in 1971, and has remained under 20 since then. The figure for 1978 was 17.5.

The purpose of this article is to give a brief account of the trends in the birth rate since 1971 and to identify the factors that are associated with its decline.

#### TRENDS IN BIRTH RATES SINCE 1971

The decade 1961–1971 saw a rapid decline of 43 per cent in the crude birth rate. The decline in the birth rate slowed down significantly in the 1970's. It remained stable at a level of about 19.5 per thousand between 1971 and 1974 but in 1975, resumed its declining trend, but at a slower rate. Table 17.1 shows the number of live births and birth rates for the period 1971 to 1978.

17.1 TOTAL LIVE BIRTHS AND BIRTH RATES, 1971-1978

Year	Number of live births	Crude(a) birth rate	General(b) fertility rate
1971	79 789	19.7	86.7
1972	80 344	19.5	84.7
1973	82 252	19.5	83.6
1974	83 581	19.3	81.7
1975	79 790	18.2	75.9
1976	78 486	17.7	72.9
1977	79 888	17.7	71.9
1978	80 785	17.5	70.3
Percentage change 1971/78	+1.2%	−11.2%	−18.9%

(a) Births per 1 000 population

(b) Births per 1 000 females in the age groups 15–49

The slower trends in the birth rate over the past eight years were the result of changes in both the age structure of the female population, which had the effect of increasing the crude birth rate during this period, and the proportion of those currently married among women in the reproductive ages, which had a less significant effect on the decline in the birth rate in recent years than previously. An analysis of the vital statistics shows that fertility, in fact, declined at an increasing rate throughout the period.

#### NUMBER OF WOMEN OF CHILDBEARING AGES

The small number of women in the prime reproductive ages over the decade 1961–1971 that resulted from the low birth rate during the war years contributed to the decrease in the number of births in the latter half of this period when there was also a fertility decline. This situation was reversed in the 1970's. As the large number of babies born in the late 1950's and early 1960's began to move up the age ladder, women aged 25–29 increased from 95 400 in 1971 to 188 600 in 1978. Those in the age group 20–24 also increased from 164 400 to 237 000 over the same period (see Table 17.2). This marked increase in the female population in the more fertile ages would have contributed to an increase in the crude birth rate even if fertility rates remained more or less at the same levels as recorded in 1971. The crude birth rate for 1978 standardized on the age distribution for 1971 was 13.3 per thousand, as compared with the actual birth rate of 17.5 per thousand. The effect of the change in the age structure of the female population over the period 1971–1978 has been to increase the birth rate by 21.3 per cent, although this effect was more than counterbalanced by a significant decline in fertility over the same period which produced overall a decline of 11.2 per cent in the birth rate.

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### 17.2 NUMBER OF WOMEN OF CHILDBEARING AGES 15-49 BY AGE, 1961, 1971, 1976 AND 1978

	Age group						
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49
Number (in '000)							
1961	91.0	91.6	118.0	124.8	110.1	96.8	82.6
1971	215.1	164.4	95.4	94.4	118.3	123.8	108.4
1976	259.2	215.3	167.8	94.0	101.9	117.6	121.3
1978	271.2	237.0	188.6	126.3	90.7	116.1	121.6
Percentage of female population							
1961	5.8	5.8	7.5	7.9	7.0	6.1	5.2
1971	10.8	8.3	4.8	4.7	6.0	6.2	5.5
1976	11.9	9.9	7.7	4.3	4.7	5.4	5.6
1978	12.1	10.5	8.4	5.6	4.0	5.2	5.4
Percentage change							
1961/1971	+136	+79	-19	-24	+7	+28	+31
1971/1978	+26	+44	+98	+34	-23	-6	+12

### PROPORTION OF CURRENTLY MARRIED WOMEN

There was an appreciable decrease in the proportion of those currently married among women in the more fertile ages 20-29, particularly between 1961 and 1971, as shown in Table 17.3 below. The change in the proportion of currently married women in the young fertile age groups over the period brought about an 8 per cent decrease in the birth rate.

### 17.3 PROPORTION OF CURRENTLY MARRIED WOMEN BY AGE, 1961, 1971, 1976 AND 1978

	Per cent			
Age group	1961	1971	1976	1978*
15-19	6.4	2.9	3.9	2.7
20-24	51.0	32.3	31.5	26.5
25-29	83.4	79.5	74.0	74.2
30-34	91.4	93.4	92.2	93.0
35-39	90.0	95.1	95.2	96.7
40-44	84.5	92.9	94.3	96.5
45-49	75.5	89.1	90.8	94.2

\* Estimated from past trends

Comparisons between 1971 and 1978 show that the decrease in the proportion of those currently married for women in the age group 20-24 has slightly tapered off. Consequently, the effect of the postponement of marriage on the decline in the crude birth rate has been less significant in recent years - estimated to be about 6 per cent.

### DECLINE IN FERTILITY

There was a decline in fertility in the late 1960's and early 1970's. This contributed about 50 per cent to the decline in the crude birth rate during 1961-1971. The actual decline in fertility became very significant towards the late 1970's. In fact, the crude birth rate for the past years would have been on a rising trend if there had not been a drastic decrease in the level of fertility. This is illustrated in Table 17.4 which shows the age-specific fertility rates for the period 1971-1978.

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### 17.4 AGE-SPECIFIC FERTILITY RATES, 1971-1978

Year	Births per 1 000 females							Total fertility rate
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	
1971	17.0	145.0	243.0	162.2	83.3	28.4	3.6	3 413
1972	17.4	139.3	248.0	145.8	77.4	25.8	3.2	3 285
1973	17.9	132.5	243.3	141.8	72.4	23.5	3.2	3 173
1974	18.8	133.3	219.2	137.4	65.7	21.1	2.5	2 990
1975	17.8	121.5	198.6	126.0	54.5	18.3	2.4	2 696
1976	17.4	109.7	192.1	119.6	48.9	14.6	1.5	2 519
1977	17.4	105.2	185.8	115.5	45.6	12.9	1.1	2 417
1978	15.3	98.9	178.6	113.0	43.6	11.3	1.1	2 309
1971-1978								
Change in rate	- 1.7	-46.1	-64.4	-49.2	-39.7	-17.1	- 2.5	-1 104
Percentage change	-10.0	-31.8	-26.5	-30.3	-47.7	-60.2	-69.4	-32.3

Between 1971 and 1978, the birth rates for all age groups 15-49 recorded a decrease ranging from 10 per cent to 69 per cent. The greatest reduction has been in the less fertile age groups 35-49. The total fertility rate dropped from 3 413 per thousand in 1971 to 2 309 per thousand in 1978. To a large extent, this pattern of fertility decline was associated with a marked reduction in the number of high-order births over these years.

Out of 79 789 live births that occurred in 1971, 21.4 per cent were of a fifth child and above; the corresponding proportion for 1978 was just 5 per cent. Table 17.5 below shows the fifth- and higher-order birth rates by age of mother for each year during the period 1971-1978. The high-order birth rates for all age groups 15-49 decreased steadily throughout the period; the rate of decrease was however smaller for the older age groups.

### 17.5 HIGH-ORDER BIRTH RATES BY AGE OF MOTHER, 1971-1978

Year	Fifth- and higher-order births per 1 000 females					
	Age of mother					
	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49
1971	1.2	23.7	58.6	51.6	21.5	2.9
1972	1.1	20.2	49.7	45.9	19.6	2.5
1973	0.9	17.2	43.6	39.9	16.9	2.4
1974	0.8	12.1	35.0	32.8	14.3	1.9
1975	0.7	9.2	27.6	24.9	11.7	1.6
1976	0.3	5.9	21.1	20.4	9.6	1.1
1977	0.2	4.8	15.5	17.4	8.2	0.8
1978	0.2	3.6	11.6	12.9	5.4	0.8

### FACTORS IN THE DECLINE IN FERTILITY

Although there is no established causal relationship between the decline in fertility and changes in the status and role of married women, it is generally held that the fertility decline in Hong Kong, which started in the early 1960's and became very significant towards the late 1970's, was directly or indirectly the result of rapid industrialization, improvement in the educational attainment and socio-legal status of, and in employment opportunities for, women, among other socioeconomic changes. The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong, through its educational activities and provision of family planning services, also had a part to play.

The social and economic conditions prevailing in the 1960's that were deemed conducive to family limitation persisted throughout the period 1971-1978. Economic activities continued to prosper in the 1970's making Hong Kong one of the world's important industrial and trading centres. This has created plenty of employment opportunities for the population of Hong Kong. The demand for young female workers in certain industries like textiles, toys and electronics was particularly keen. As observed in the last two censuses, the proportion of women engaged in gainful employment increased steadily for almost all age groups 15-54; the proportion was higher for women in the more reproductive age groups 20-34, and especially for those in the 20-24 age group.

### 17.6 PROPORTION OF WOMEN AGED 15-54 CURRENTLY WORKING BY AGE, 1971 AND 1976

Age group	Per cent	
	1971	1976
15-19	56.4	47.2
20-24	69.5	71.8
25-34	39.6	47.7
35-44	38.7	42.9
45-54	38.9	39.6

The educational attainment of the population has improved markedly since 1961. During the period 1971-1976, the proportion of the population who had no schooling or only kindergarten education further dropped from 21.0 per cent to 18.5 per cent, whereas the proportion of those with secondary or university education increased from 26.0 per cent to 34.3 per cent. The position for the population as a whole was reflected in a larger proportion of women with secondary or university education, as shown in Table 17.7 below.

### 17.7 PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AGED 5 AND OVER BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY SEX, 1971 AND 1976

Educational attainment	Per cent			
	Male		Female	
	1971	1976	1971	1976
No schooling/kindergarten	11.7	10.1	30.5	27.3
Primary	56.9	50.0	49.1	44.3
Secondary	28.7	36.4	19.5	27.0
University	2.7	3.5	0.9	1.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

It has been observed from the results of the 1971 and 1976 censuses that the higher the social status of ever-married women as indicated by their educational attainment, the fewer children they would produce (see Table 17.8). The number of births to women with the same level of education also decreased over this period.

### 17.8 MEAN NUMBER OF LIVE BIRTHS TO EVER-MARRIED WOMEN BY AGE BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT 1971 AND 1976

Age group	No schooling/ kindergarten		Primary		Secondary		University	
	1971	1976	1971	1976	1971	1976	1971	1976
15-19	0.9	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	—
20-24	1.5	1.4	1.3	1.2	1.0	0.8	0.6	0.4
25-29	2.8	2.5	2.2	2.0	1.6	1.4	1.2	0.8
30-34	3.8	3.6	3.2	3.0	2.4	2.1	1.8	1.6
35-39	4.4	4.3	3.8	3.6	3.0	2.6	2.4	2.0
40-44	4.6	4.6	4.1	4.0	3.4	3.1	2.7	2.2
45-49	4.3	4.7	4.0	4.2	3.7	3.4	3.0	2.6
Standardized mean* (15-49)	3.6	3.6	3.2	3.1	2.6	2.3	2.0	1.6

\* Using the 1976 age and sex distribution as standard

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As indicated in the last two censuses, there was a marked difference in fertility between rural/marine and urban population. The level of fertility was highest for the marine women. Among the land population, women in rural areas generally had higher fertility than those in urban areas. Table 17.9 shows the mean number of live births to ever-married women by urban, rural and marine areas for 1971 and 1976.

**17.9 MEAN NUMBER OF LIVE BIRTHS TO EVER-MARRIED WOMEN  
BY AGE BY AREA (URBAN, RURAL AND MARINE), 1971 AND 1976**

Age group	Urban		Rural		Marine	
	1971	1976	1971	1976	1971	1976
15-19	0.7	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.8
20-24	1.2	1.0	1.4	1.3	1.6	1.3
25-29	2.0	1.7	2.6	2.2	3.5	3.0
30-34	3.0	2.6	3.8	3.5	5.1	5.1
35-39	3.7	3.4	4.6	4.3	6.3	5.9
40-44	4.1	4.0	4.9	5.0	6.8	6.9
45-49	4.0	4.2	4.6	5.0	6.4	7.0
Standardized mean* (15-49)	3.1	2.9	3.7	3.6	5.1	5.0

\* Using the 1976 age and sex distribution as standard

In order to alleviate high densities in the main old urban areas arising from the rapid increase in population, the Government embarked on a large-scale urbanization programme in the past two decades to provide public housing for some 40 per cent of the population, and to develop more new towns in the New Territories. It was estimated that in 1976, the urban areas contained about 88 per cent of the population; this compares with 85 per cent in 1961. Increased urban growth must have been a factor affecting the decline in fertility in recent years.

No single one of these background social factors can be pointed to as crucial in the decline in fertility. But together they helped to raise not only levels of living but also aspirations; to break the hold of earlier social norms; to increase the degree of rational self-interest in individual decision processes. Such changes helped to change couples' attitudes towards family limitation. Certainly, judging by the activities of the Family Planning Association and Medical & Health Department (whose 'clients' participating in the programme in 1978 totalled 179 400 as against 105 000 in 1971 and 28 000 in 1961), greater interest is now shown in family planning as providing a guide to measures for controlling the size of families. From the surveys on family planning knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP) conducted by the Family Planning Association, it was indicated that an increasing proportion of women (from 53 per cent in 1967 to 80 per cent in 1977) strongly approved of contraception. The KAP surveys also revealed a substantial improvement in the knowledge of contraceptive methods and in contraceptive practice among women in Hong Kong. It was estimated that in 1977, 72 per cent of all currently married women were practising family planning at the time of the survey, as compared with 50 per cent in 1972.

**17.10 AGE-SPECIFIC RATES OF CONTRACEPTIVE PRACTICE  
OF CURRENT-USERS BY AGE, 1972 AND 1977**

Age group	Per cent		
	1972	1977	Rate of change 1972/77
Under 25	35.8	56.6	58.1
25-29	48.6	72.9	50.0
30-34	61.5	83.7	36.1
35-39	63.6	87.9	38.2
40-44	54.2	80.2	48.0
45-49	28.2	49.2	74.5
Overall	49.6	71.9	45.0

Source: Survey Report on Family Planning Knowledge, Attitude & Practice in Hong Kong, 1977.

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Current rates of contraceptive practice varied with the age of users. Much lower rates were found in the youngest and oldest age groups, and the highest rate occurred in the 35–39 age group. Increasing contraceptive practice among women, as a means to limiting family size, has definitely prevented unwanted pregnancies, thus helping to reduce the overall level of fertility.

It is believed that the widespread use of contraceptives, to varying degrees, must be the result of well planned propaganda campaigns and educational programmes organized by the Family Planning Association. Since 1966, new media of publicity such as films, contests and enquiry services have been used. Family planning messages have also been broadcast on radio and television more frequently than before. The population at large are now better informed of family planning and have become more ready to practise it.

### CONCLUSION

The decline in the crude birth rate from 1971 to 1978 was less marked than the decline in the decade 1961–1971. The slowing trends in the birth rate over these years were the result of changes in the age structure of the female population. Discounting the differences in the age structure of the female population between 1971 and 1978, the crude birth rate would have decreased from 19.7 per thousand in 1971 to 13.3 per thousand in 1978, a fall of 32.5 per cent as against 11.2 per cent observed over the period. The actual decline in the level of fertility has, in fact, become more significant since 1971.

The continued and sustained decline in fertility was clearly the result of the economic and social changes that Hong Kong had undergone during the past two decades. These changes could be identified as rapid industrialization and urbanization; the improvement in employment opportunities for, and in the socio-legal status of, women; the provision of compulsory primary and expanded secondary education; the breakup of the large family system; the provision of various forms of social welfare assistance as alternatives to kinship for support and social control; and the expansion of the means of physical and intellectual communication. These factors together helped to develop the growth of individual aspirations and to create new pressures on reproductive behaviour. Couples took a more positive attitude towards limiting family size. With the existence of this social complex, once a fall in the birth rate had been 'triggered', further decline was systematic and fairly rapid. This explains the more substantial decline in fertility observed over the period 1971–1978.