

Number of babies born last year up by 0.5 per cent, after four consecutive years of decline

Theresa Tan

The Straits Times, 1 April 2020

SINGAPORE - After four consecutive years of decline, the number of babies born here inched up by 0.5 per cent to 39,253 last year from 39,039 in 2018.

But while Singapore welcomed more babies last year, more people died too.

In fact, with a rapidly ageing population, the number of deaths here has continued to rise steadily year after year in the past decade.

Last year, 21,385 people died, up 0.5 per cent from 21,282 in 2018.

The 2019 figures, which are provisional, are contained in the Singapore Demographic Bulletin 2019 Fourth Quarter report, published by the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority in March.

Academics interviewed described the increase in births last year as slight.

However, any increase in births in Singapore is "worth being happy about", given Singapore's dismal birth rates, said Dr Mathew Mathews, head of the Institute of Policy Studies' Social Lab.

Singapore's resident total fertility rate last year was 1.14, which is among the lowest in the world.

Dr Mathews added: "The impact of a small increase may not change the current age pyramid structure much, but it does point out that more of the measures that Singapore has been taking to deal with low fertility are at least keeping our birth rates from falling much more."

Singapore has introduced a whole suite of measures to encourage couples to have more children. These include giving parents a Baby Bonus cash gift and making fertility treatments more affordable, to higher pre-school subsidies and promoting more flexible work arrangements to help parents juggle work and family commitments.

Academics interviewed expect the number of babies born in the near future to fall, given the current Covid-19 crisis when lives and livelihoods are majorly disrupted and there is widespread economic gloom. The Bill is expected to be debated at its second reading during the next Parliament sitting.

Dr Mathews pointed out that in past years when the economy did not do well, fewer children were born.

He said: "In times of crisis and economic downturns more couples are cautious about having children since this adds to the already unpredictable situation they live in."

Besides, more people are remaining single and few people in Singapore have children out of wedlock, academics added.

Dr Tan Poh Lin from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS) said that as the number of babies born over the years has declined, there will be fewer women of child-bearing age in the future.

Couple the falling number of births with the rising number of deaths in an ageing population, the academics note, and the result is worrying.

She said: "The Singapore case is not too different from quite a number of other developed societies, where there has been a rise in longevity but fewer births. Ultimately the shift will mean that there will be a decline in the labour force, even if those who are older stay on longer at work."

And the changing demographics have serious implications on society, said NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser, such as fewer children to support ageing parents and less workforce competitiveness for Singapore.

Mr Raphael Zhang, 35, welcomed his first child, a girl, last year. He and his wife, also 35, married in January last year and their child was conceived the following month.

Mr Zhang, a programme strategist, said: "We were both 34 when we wed and we didn't feel that time was on our side. Also given our age, one concern is that it may be harder to conceive if we wait."

Ms Christabel Tan, 30, and her husband, Joel, a 32-year-old civil servant, also became first-time parents last year. They wed in 2016 and she gave birth to Clarissa in August last year.

When the couple tied the knot, they were ambivalent about having children.

Ms Tan, a digital marketing manager at Focus on the Family Singapore, a charity, said: "Parenting is a very selfless decision that calls for lots of sacrifices and sleepless nights. Initially, I felt I didn't know what it means to be a good mum and I was really afraid I would fail my child.

"But I saw all the good mothers around me at work and I had a change of heart. I'm very grateful to be a mum now and my daughter is a real blessing."