

Birth rate may dip further: Experts

Continued economic uncertainty and Govt's drive to raise labour productivity cited as reasons

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NEWS that 170 fewer babies were registered here last year worries sociologist Paulin Tay Straughan, who predicts that the numbers could dip again this year.

She cited two key reasons why she believes this will be the case: continued uncertainty over the economy and the Government's drive to raise labour productivity.

Said Associate Professor Straughan, who is a Nominated MP: 'When you are riding a rising tide, people would want to work harder in case the economy dips again. I don't think numbers will go back up this year.'

The Government's productivity drive could drive birth numbers down too, she told The Straits Times yesterday.

Leaders, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, have spoken this week about the importance of raising flagging labour productivity rates here.

Said Prof Straughan: 'I think the emphasis on productivity will overshadow work-life balance and the needs of the family. We all know the constraints, and with the contesting demand that work places on your time, investment in the family may have to take a back seat.'

Productivity growth is usually considered critical to improving living standards. It means getting more value from each worker, resulting in more income being available to be distributed.

Prof Straughan's concerns were piqued by latest birth figures revealed by PM Lee at an event on Monday.

Speaking at a conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), he revealed that Singapore had fewer babies for the first time in five years. The number of births fell by 172 last year to 39,654 when compared with the 39,826 babies in 2008. The reason could be last year's recession, Mr Lee said.

The dip indicates that Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) has dropped further. Singapore's TFR was last reported to be 1.29. A society needs a rate of at least 2.1 to replace itself.

Assistant Professor Chung Wai Keung, a sociologist at the Singapore Management University, agrees there could be another dip in the birth rate this year. He said this would be in line with the declining trend seen over the years since the 1980s.

'However, as a long-term trend, I don't foresee a big dip because it will never happen like that. Future birth rates will likely fluctuate within a limited range but in a decreasing trend,' he said.

But Dr Yap Mui Teng, a demographer and fertility expert at the IPS, sees it differently.

She predicts an improvement in the birth rate this year and pointed to the brighter outlook for the economy as a reason. 'People may be encouraged to have babies, particularly if they had postponed parenthood last year.'

But she said that any spike this year may be tempered by the effect of the 'Tiger Year'. The Chinese are traditionally less keen to have babies under this zodiac sign of the lunar calendar, believing that children would grow up to be rebellious, ill tempered and unpredictable.

To encourage Singaporeans to marry and start families, the Government has rolled out a host of measures, such as cash incentives to defray child-rearing costs, infant-care leave and subsidies, and longer maternity leave.

Dr Chung said the dip showed that Baby Bonus measures introduced since 2001 were not working well because 'raising children was never about these short-term or one-time economic incentives'.

He suggested looking at other measures such as longer parental leave, including for the father, and better sustained institutional support for raising children.

Agreeing, Prof Straughan said the Government needed to put in more effort to find out from Singaporeans what it would take to encourage them to have babies.

She said: 'It cannot be money because no government can pay for babies.'

But Dr Yap said it might be too premature to dismiss the Government's enhanced Marriage and Parenthood package as ineffective as it was announced just one month before the global financial crisis hit in September 2008.

However, changes will have to be made or new measures introduced over time in areas such as childcare subsidies and flexi-work arrangements for back-to work mothers, she added.

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