

## MM Lee weighs in on Singapore's record-low fertility rate

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SINGAPORE: A day after it was revealed that Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) has hit a record low, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew said that Singapore needs young immigrants.

Otherwise, Singapore will rapidly age and shrink, he said.

Mr Lee also revealed that the fertility rate for the Chinese remained the lowest among all races.

And latest figures from the newly-formed National Population and Talent Division also showed that the fertility rates for the Malay and Indian communities in Singapore have been declining since 2008.

Minister Mentor Lee was speaking at a dialogue at the 25th anniversary celebrations of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA) on Tuesday.

Despite measures to encourage marriage and procreation, Singapore's TFR fell from 1.28 in 2008 to 1.22 in 2009 and 1.16 in 2010.

For the Chinese community, it was 1.02 in 2010, down from 1.14 in 2008 and 1.08 in 2009.

For the Malay community, it was 1.65 last year, down from 1.91 in 2008 and 1.82 in 2009.

The Indian community, too, has been facing declining fertility rates: 1.19 in 2008, 1.14 in 2009 and at 1.13 last year.

Dr Yap Mui Teng, senior research fellow at Institute of Policy Studies, said: "Basically it's due to people postponing marriage or not getting married at all and also for those who are married, they don't have as many children as they have before. These are the two demographic factors. And why are people postponing marriage or not getting married at all?"

"Partly, because it takes them longer to establish themselves (in a job)...people are staying in school longer nowadays. In the past, after their O-Level and A-Level, people start getting economically active, get a job, start a family and buy a flat. (Now) it is taking longer for young people to get to that stage because they feel they need better qualifications to get better jobs."

"Elsewhere it has been shown that the demand of the job has increased and people need higher skills to enter the labour force and get a job before they start a family."

Others cited different reasons for Singapore's low fertility rate. "Everyone is so stressed up with work, working 9 to 5 and overtime and by the time you get home you are tired and you've got no time to make babies," said a member of the public.

"To bring a kid up (is not easy), Singapore education is very 'hard' and is also very expensive, school fees very expensive, tuition fees, also," said another.

Minister Mentor Lee said that at the current low birth rates, Singapore's economy will slow down like the Japanese economy. Hence the country needs young immigrants.

Mr Lee noted that some Singaporeans are worried about competition from new immigrants. He explained that the government understands these concerns and has taken steps to slow down the inflow of immigrants and foreign workers.

It has also sharpened the distinction between citizens and non-citizens, giving more benefits to citizens. Mr Lee believed that the first generation of new immigrants would take some time to integrate, but their children will be completely Singaporean and they will help increase the population and talent pool.