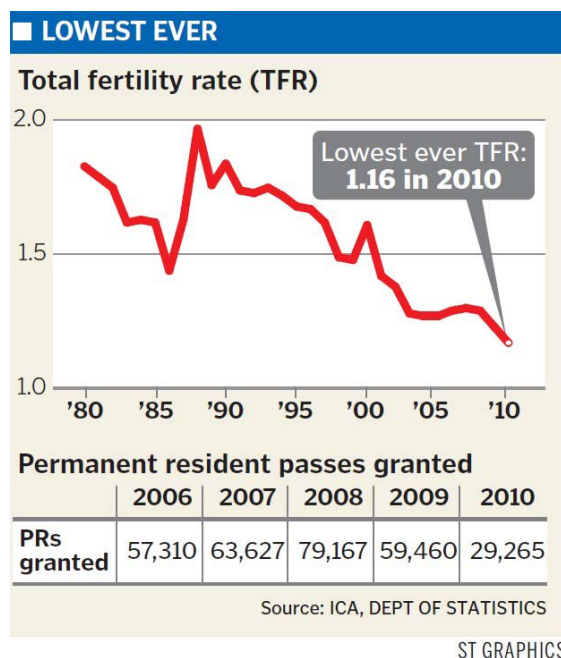


Fertility figures hit all-time low Shortage of babies a key hurdle to achieving a sustainable population

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SINGAPORE'S baby shortfall worsened last year when the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) sank to a historic low of 1.16.

That is down from 1.22 in 2009, and way below the replacement level of 2.1.

Speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) conference yesterday, Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng identified the low TFR, which is a preliminary estimate, as the key hurdle to Singapore achieving a 'sustainable population'.

Such a population, he said, has a strong citizen core, a stable ethnic mix, enough manpower for economic growth, and mitigates the impact of ageing.

TFR measures the average number of children that a woman would bear in her lifetime, in this case, a woman resident in Singapore.

On the uphill task of persuading Singapore residents to have more children, Mr Wong said: 'The going is hard, but we have not given up. We will continue to support couples' decisions to get married and have children, and create a pro-family environment.'

The veteran minister, who now heads the National Population and Talent Division, said that to be realistic, Singapore also has to accept that boosting fertility will take time.

'For the foreseeable future, we will need to tap on immigration to augment our population, to support economic growth and to mitigate the impact of ageing,' he added.

Last year also saw the effect of the Government's tightened immigration framework of late 2009, designed to better manage the inflow and quality of new immigrants.

It granted only 29,265 new permanent residence passes last year, half of the 59,460 it granted in 2009.

But the number of new citizens held steady at 18,758 last year, just shy of the 19,928 in 2009, because Singapore attracted migrants 'of good quality', Mr Wong said.

On the need to balance staying open to foreigners and addressing the concerns of its citizen core, he said: 'Ultimately, it is about navigating a path that allows us to grow as a global city, yet remain a distinctive and endearing home.'

The preliminary estimate of a TFR of 1.16 for last year places Singapore below Japan and South Korea, which have estimated TFRs of 1.2 and 1.22 respectively.

Taiwan now has the lowest TFR in the world at 0.91.

The latest drop in Singapore's TFR comes after almost 30 years of government incentives to get Singaporeans in the mood for love - and babies.

In particular, the last decade has seen it redouble its efforts, by introducing the Baby Bonus and longer, paid maternity leave, among other things.

But some population experts think that last year's dip might be a blip and could be reversed this year.

Two factors could explain last year's new low of 1.16.

The first was the recession of 2009, which put a damper on family planning.

Said Dr Yap Mui Teng of the IPS: 'People were feeling a lot of uncertainty. We were talking about how it was the worst recession since the Depression.'

The second factor was the Chinese zodiac year of the Tiger falling last year. It is believed by some to be an unlucky year for having children.

With the economy having rebounded strongly and the more auspicious years of the Rabbit and Dragon coming up, the TFR is likely to stabilise - or even rise this year

'2010 was a boom year and I wouldn't be surprised if the TFR sees a bit of pickup in 2011,' said Dr Gavin Jones, a population specialist at the Asia Research Institute (ARI).

Dr Leong Chan Hoong of IPS said the TFR could also have been pulled down by successive waves of new PRs since 2005, who have fewer children than citizens.

Young Singaporeans interviewed said they were reluctant to have children because of the 'very high' financial cost of raising children in Singapore.

Take lawyer Tania Chin, 26, who plans to marry soon but has no intention of having children as yet.

'It's a question of opportunity cost, and I can't afford the downtime from my career,' she said. 'Furthermore, speaking from my own experience as an only child, children are really expensive.' Dr Jones said one option is for the Government to increase its child allowance, but the increase would have to be 'by quite a lot for it to have much impact on fertility'.

Sociologist Jean Yeung, also of ARI, said another reason for the low TFR could be Singapore's patriarchal family system and policies.

'It will be useful for men to become more active and engaged as a co-parent rather than just a helper to the mother,' she said.