

Fewer Singaporean babies born out of wedlock

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Fewer babies have been born out of wedlock to Singaporean mothers in the past decade, from 1,152 in 2006 to 863 last year - a 25 per cent drop.

While there were two years within the decade that had a slight increase in the numbers - 2007 and 2012 - the rest of the decade registered a general downward trend.

The data was released last month by Minister for Social and Family Development Tan Chuan-Jin, in response to a parliamentary question by Nominated MP Kok Heng Leun.

The Straits Times understands that this is the first time the Government has made public the number of Singaporean babies born out of wedlock, as it is extending some of the benefits enjoyed by only married mothers to unwed mothers.

Singaporean children born to unwed parents from Sept 1 can get the Child Development Account (CDA), a savings account that can be used for childcare fees and medical expenses.

The children will receive the CDA First Step Grant of \$3,000 and the Government will also match dollar for dollar the amount their parents put in, up to a cap. From early next year, unwed mothers will get 16 weeks of paid maternity leave, up from the current eight weeks.

According to Ministry of Social and Family Development data, children born out of wedlock comprise those who do not have a father's name in the birth certificate, or those whose parents are not married when the birth is registered, even if the father's name is listed.

Social workers say greater use of contraceptives has led to a fall in unplanned pregnancies and babies born out of wedlock.

The number of teen births has fallen as today's wired teens are more savvy about contraception, said the Association of Women for Action and Research's (Aware) head of advocacy and research Jolene Tan.

Last year, 341 babies were born to teens aged 19 and below - fewer than half of the 838 babies born to teen mums in 2006.

Dr Yap Mui Teng of the Institute of Policy Studies said, by and large, Singaporeans still frown on having children out of wedlock. In 2013, it polled 2,000 singles and most said they would not want to have children if they are not married.

Social workers say unwed mothers range from teens to women in their 30s and span all socio-economic groups.

They do not marry the baby's father for various reasons. A common scenario: The father does not want the baby and the mother refuses to abort it, so they break up. Or the man disappears after learning of the pregnancy, said Ms Mary John, a pregnancy crisis case worker at the Family Life Society. In some cases, the man is already married.

Ms Jennifer Heng, founder of DaySpring New Life Centre, which helps pregnant women in need, said: "For many of those who omit the father's name from the birth certificate, they don't want to have anything to do with the man any more."

Social workers say unmarried mothers face a host of struggles, from making ends meet to finding a roof over their heads, if they are unable to live with their families. They also have to deal with the stigma of being unwed mothers.

Aware's Ms Tan pointed out that unwed parents still do not get the Baby Bonus cash gift and tax reliefs that married mothers enjoy.