

Marriages and Babies Born Up Last Year

Foreigners account for much of the increase in couples tying the knot

Theresa Tan

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THE number of marriages and babies born in Singapore rose sharply last year.

There is a caveat, however: Much of the increase in marriages is down to foreigners, a sign that efforts by the Government to get more Singaporeans to tie the knot have had limited impact.

According to latest available figures from the Department of Statistics, 24,596 couples were married last year, the highest number since 1999, when there were 25,653 unions.

Across the main ethnic groups - Chinese, Malays and Indians, including those from overseas - the numbers stayed fairly consistent. The big jumps came in the 'Others' category, which is largely made up of foreigners - anyone from an Australian to a Zimbabwean falls into this group, but Eurasians are also classified here - and in inter-ethnic marriages.

Last year, 1,172 couples from the 'Others' ethnicity got hitched, up 40 per cent from 840 the year before.

The number of inter-ethnic weddings also rose, to 4,113, up from 3,939 in 2007. Though inter-ethnic figures include marriages between, say, Chinese and Indian Singaporeans, statistics show that about half of all marriages in 2007 involved at least one non-citizen.

Thus, if the 'Others' and inter-ethnic categories were left out of the equation, there were 19,311 marriages last year, a shade above the 19,187 in 2007, to be sure, but far from record-setting pace.

The story with babies is less clear.

Of the 39,935 babies born last year - the highest number since 2002, when the number was 40,760 - 4,151 were from the 'Others' group.

It is not known how many babies in this group were born to foreigners.

But sociologists contacted say the increases in marriages and babies are mainly due to an influx of foreigners in recent years, many of whom are in their economic and reproductive prime.

Take Mr Calvin Zaw and Ms Sarah Soe, who are both from Myanmar. Mr Zaw, a 28-year-old engineer, came to Singapore to study in 2000 and met Ms Soe at Temasek Polytechnic.

They began dating in 2002, and along the way Ms Soe, 30, decided to take up citizenship.

The couple got married last year after they had saved up enough to buy a flat, and plan to make Singapore their home for good - Mr Zaw has taken up permanent residency.

Explaining why they chose Singapore, Mr Zaw said: 'Living standards in Singapore are much better, and the situation in Myanmar is quite unstable.'

Demographic expert Yap Mui Teng, from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy's Institute of Policy Studies, says the issue is whether others will take the route chosen by the Zaws and put down roots here for good.

Several foreigners interviewed say they have not decided yet.

Mr Alan Chou, an American who married a Singaporean, says the Republic is home - for now. The 39-year-old marketing manager says he and his wife have not decided on their long-term plans.

And what of the Baby Bonus scheme, a series of measures to promote parenthood, including tax rebates and longer paid maternity leave for having children?

Dr Paulin Straughan, a sociologist at the National University of Singapore, suggests the scheme may have limited effect.

She said: 'The birth figures suggest that the Baby Bonus package speaks to converts, or people who are already planning to have kids.'

Financial adviser Wendy Ng, 31, who gave birth to her first child last year, agrees. 'The incentives are short-term, but having a child is a lifelong commitment.'

Ms Ng says many other non-monetary factors, such as whether she can balance both career and baby, are key when it comes to deciding if she wants another child.

Housewife and mother of three Shermaine Wong, 33, agrees that having a baby is about more than just dollars and cents.

She said: 'I have to decide whether, if by having another baby, I will compromise everything else, like my relationship with my existing children and my spouse.'

The drive to get Singaporeans to marry and have babies has taken centre stage for a few years now as the country strives to reverse an alarmingly low fertility rate.

Demographers have warned that if the Republic stops welcoming immigrants now, the number of deaths here would outstrip births in just 12 years.