

## More S'poreans and PRs, yet fewer babies

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But amid record low fertility rate, Indian and 'Other' babies see their proportions rise

Singapore experienced its worst baby drought last year, despite the influx of immigrants of child-bearing age over the past decade.

Last year saw 37,967 babies born - the lowest number since 2005, when there were 37,492 births, figures from the Department of Statistics show.

The country's total fertility rate (TFR), a measure of the average number of children a woman will bear in her lifetime, also sank to a historic low of 1.16 last year.

This is despite the surge in immigrant numbers in recent years, which means more women of child-bearing age here.

The number of citizens and permanent residents rose from 3.3 million in 2000 to 3.8 million last year, a 15 per cent increase.

Despite the larger base of women, the TFR sank to a historic low, noted Dr Yap Mui Teng, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, suggesting that the newcomers are also not having more babies.

'If we select the better-educated types to be PRs and new citizens, they are likely to think and behave like Singaporeans and not have lots of children,' she said.

Boosting the dismal fertility rate has long been a key concern for the Government. Last Monday, the Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, Major-General (NS) Chan Chun Sing, said tackling the low fertility rate was his ministry's key priority.

Demographers attribute last year's baby drought to the global financial crisis of 2008-09 and to the Tiger Year effect. Some Chinese believe it is inauspicious to have children born in the Tiger Year, which fell last year, as it is felt that feisty girls born in that year will have relationship problems.

Recessions have always spelt baby woes as pragmatic Singaporeans tighten their belts and postpone plans to expand their broods.

Demographers note, too, that the racial balance is gradually changing, with the inflow of younger immigrants from India and other countries who are starting or expanding their families here.

The proportion of Indian babies, as well as of babies who are neither Chinese, Malay nor Indian, has been increasing year-on-year over the past five years.

Last year, Indian babies made up 11.3 per cent of all babies born here, up from 9.8 per cent in 2005. The same goes for babies in the 'Others' group: They comprised 12.3 per cent of all babies born last year, up from 8 per cent in 2005.

Correspondingly, the share of Chinese and Malay babies fell. Chinese baby numbers fell from 64.8 per cent in 2005 to 61.4 per cent last year, while Malay babies made up only 15 per cent of all babies born last year, down from 17.4 per cent in 2005.

Indians comprised 7.9 per cent of the population in 2000 but rose to 9.2 per cent last year. Meanwhile, the share of the 'Others' group more than doubled from 1.4 per cent in 2000 to 3.3 per cent last year.

Indian nationals who have made Singapore their adopted home say they are starting families here as it is safe, offers career opportunities and a good education system, among other plus points.

The availability of maids was crucial for Indian working mums like Mrs Purti Kalwar, who had her first child, Mihika, last August.

An IT analyst, Mrs Kalwar said Singapore is a short flight from Mumbai, where her parents live, so it is easy for them to fly here to visit or help with childcare.

Another reason behind the jump in babies of other ethnic groups is the growing number of Singaporeans marrying foreigners, said Professor Gavin Jones of the Asia Research Institute, who expects this trend to continue.