

Fertility rate here drops to new low

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SINGAPORE - The bottom is falling out of Singapore's fertility rates.

After inching to a record low of 1.22 babies per resident female in 2009, the Total Fertility Rate slumped to 1.16 last year based on preliminary estimates, taking the resident population further away from its natural replacement rate of 2.1 babies.

The figure was disclosed by Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng at an Institute of Policy Studies forum yesterday.

Sociologists MediaCorp spoke to were not surprised by the news.

Besides the fact that Singapore was coming out of an economic downturn, National University of Singapore Associate Professor Paulin Straughan suggested that the national agenda last year was not conducive for child bearing.

"The focus on the Budget debate was on productivity ... There was nothing on family issues," said the Nominated Member of Parliament.

"People are looking at policy direction. Of course, some may think, it's a personal choice, but that's missing the point. When you make decisions, whether it's investing in family or in work ... that individual has finite resources. If I'm going to plan for productivity, how am I going to find the time to plan for a family?"

"As a sociologist, I argue that you can't separate the private and the public."

Birth rates here have often been linked with cost of living issues, and Nanyang Technological University sociologist Kwok Kian Woon surmised that parents would look at the resources needed, "especially for children to succeed in Singapore society".

As to what that says about the Government's Marriage and Parenthood package, he said the incentives were "either not working as effectively as one might hope, or that they may be working, in that, theoretically, if not for them, the rate could be lower".

While there should not be an over-reliance on these incentives, Assoc Prof Straughan agreed that the cost of raising a family "can't be so high", for instance, if a 25-year-old wants to get married.

She is hopeful, though, that the fertility rate will not drop further this year.

"Economic optimism is a big factor, and a lot of things are looking up for young couples, for example, the arrest in spiralling housing prices, positive figures on economic growth, stable jobs and so on," she said.

"This may allow Singaporeans to feel like they're not living on the edge and they can afford to look at investing in their personal family life."