

Which path to take?

Under Govt's projected scenarios, 20,000 to 25,000 new immigrants are needed annually to keep citizen population size stable

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To keep the size of its citizen population stable, the Republic would have to increase the rate at which it is giving out new citizenships - by up to 1.4 times compared to average figures over the past five years.

The National Population and Talent Division (NPTD) released a paper yesterday illustrating five scenarios based on certain assumptions about future demographics trends over a projected period.

Under the projections - which are not targets or forecasts - an intake of 20,000 to 25,000 new citizens each year would be necessary to keep the citizen population size stable, assuming Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) stays at its current rate of 1.2. Should Singapore be able to increase the TFR to 2.1, the citizen population size would be stable even if no new citizenships are granted.

In the worst-case scenario - where no new citizens added and the TFR stays at 1.2 - Singapore's native population will start shrinking around 2025, with citizen deaths exceeding births. And there will only be 2.1 working-age citizens to each elderly citizen by 2030.

According to NPTD, Singapore, like most East Asian cities, is faced with a declining TFR. It also has an increasing life expectancy, which is one of the highest in the world. As a result, the Singapore population will age rapidly, with the median age of citizens rising to 47 years in 2030, from 39 years last year.

The NPTD said the paper "seeks to provide a picture of our demographic challenges to facilitate review of population policies".

It added: "Our starting point when looking at the population is our citizens, who form the core of our population. Hence, the objective (of the paper) is to lay out the demographic characteristics of our citizen population under various population scenarios."

The paper will form the basis for a White Paper on population goals and policies, which will be released by the end of the year.

The NPTD said: "We have started with focus group discussions with different segments of the community, to gain a better understanding of the various views on population-related issues."

From the middle of the year, NPTD will engage members of the public through various avenues, "including dialogues and online channels to discuss these issues holistically".

It added: "Through this process, we hope to bring to light issues that are important to Singapore and Singaporeans, and develop a shared understanding of our strategies to build a sustainable population that secures Singapore's future."

Between 2007 and last year, on average, about 18,500 new citizenships were granted each year. During this period, the highest number of new citizenships granted was 20,513 in 2008.

On the projected scenarios, sociologists Today spoke to raised concerns on how the society would cope with increasing social tensions as the number of new citizens goes up.

They also noted that NPTD's projections do not take into account the number of permanent residents (PRs), which should be reduced correspondingly should the number of new citizens increase.

Also, Singapore may have to become more attractive to get as many as 25,000 new citizens a year, they added. National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan suggested that citizenship benefits be increased while the authorities seek to draw new citizens of better calibre.

Responding to media queries, an NPTD spokesperson reiterated that the Government "will continue to ensure that we take in immigrants who are of good quality and able to integrate well into our society". The spokesperson added: "We assess applications holistically on a set of criteria that includes the applicants' family ties to Singaporeans, economic contributions, qualifications, age, family profile, length of stay in Singapore, and their commitment to sinking roots in Singapore."

Still, Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong noted that without projections for the number of PRs, "it is difficult to decide what is the preferred landscape" - since PRs also put a strain on public amenities and housing, and the numbers are much larger than that of new citizens.

The sociologists stressed that moving forward, the strain on infrastructure caused by an influx of new immigrations must be addressed.

An "optimal position" would be one that can "best handle the conflicting demands and tensions", said NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser. He added: "Apart from enhancing our infrastructural capacity, we would still need to enhance Singaporeans' sense of security and promote social integration."