

Fertility: Fewer children, older moms ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Let's see, your great-grandfather was 1 of 7 children. Your grandmother was 1 of 4 children and you are 1 of 3 kids. You are thinking of having 1 or 2 kids, or, if you happen to be a statistician, that's currently an average of 1.61 children per woman.

Over the past 150 years, Canada has changed from a high-fertility society where women had many children during their lives to a low-fertility society where women are having fewer children overall and at increasingly older ages.

Despite some fluctuations, the total fertility rate in Canada has been below the replacement level for over 40 years. In fact, 1971 was the last year the replacement-level fertility of 2.1 children per woman was reached-meaning that couples, on average, had produced enough children to replace themselves.

In 2011, the total fertility rate was 1.61 children per woman, up slightly from the record low of 1.51 about a decade earlier.

Fertility patterns-specifically the number of children born and the average age at childbearing-affect the dynamics of population growth and the age structure of Canadian society, as well as family formation and household composition.

This demographic shift over the last 150 years has resulted in a transition from a country with a relatively young and growing population to one with an aging population, which is increasingly reliant on **immigration for population growth**. ^[3]

High fertility in the mid-1800s followed by decline

Until the early 20th Century, when people were still living primarily in rural settings, it was advantageous for couples to have large families. Children were expected to share daily chores, both in the home and on the farm. This added directly to the family's productivity and prosperity.

The economic benefits of a large family, combined with the influence of religious teachings and a lack of reliable contraception methods, resulted in an estimated total fertility rate of 6.56 children per woman in 1851.

For a woman of this era, childbearing would have continued throughout her reproductive years for the duration of her married life, as it was more difficult to control the timing and number of births.

Although fertility remained relatively high during the following decades, it began falling in the late 1800s and early 1900s. By the turn of the century, women were having close to five children, on average.

This fertility decline was associated with many factors, including a transition to greater urbanization, a growing dependency on wages earned outside the home and the rising cost of childrearing.

Then came the Great Depression, followed soon after by World War II. With the inherent uncertainties and upheavals of the times, fertility levels fell further during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s. By 1937, the total fertility rate had fallen to 2.64 children per woman, on average.

Fertility linked to social and legislative changes

From 1946 to 1965, thanks to a strong post-war economy, the reunification of families following the war and high marriage rates, Canada's baby boom was born. The boom peaked in 1959 when the total fertility rate reached 3.94 children per woman.

By the end of the 1960s, that all changed. The influence of religion on daily life was in decline, contraception was now more effective and readily available than ever and the participation of women in higher education and in the paid labour force was on the rise. Fertility levels fell rapidly.

Changes to divorce legislation in 1968, and again in 1986, allowed for easier access to divorce and a subsequent increase in the number of divorces, likely affecting both the number and timing of births for couples.

In the early 20th Century, average age at childbirth was 30 years

While the trend to delay marriage and motherhood may seem like a modern phenomenon, the age at which women marry and have their first child has varied over Canada's history.

Early in the 20th Century, the average age of a woman at first marriage was relatively late, historically speaking. In 1921, for example, it was about 25 years and changed little until the mid-1940s. Most childbearing occurred within marriage and the average age of mothers at birth, for all children, remained at around age 30 until the end of the 1930s.

Throughout the 1950s until the late 1970s, the average age at first marriage for women was 23 years or younger. Consequently, the average age of women at childbirth also fell, decreasing from 29.3 years in the mid-1940s to a low of 26.7 years in the mid-1970s.

The average age of mothers at first birth—a statistic available from 1945 onward—was about age 24 during the 1950s to mid-1970s.

Average age at childbirth begins to rise

In the context of the social changes that occurred in the latter half of the 20th Century, the age of mothers at both marriage and childbirth began to rise during the mid-1970s.

By 2010, the average age of mothers at childbirth—taking into account all births—had risen to over 30, similar to the early 20th Century. By 2011, it had edged up to 30.2 years, the oldest age on record.

Moreover, the average age at first birth in 2011—28.5 years—was the oldest recorded to date.

Unlike earlier periods, the modern time frame for childbearing has become increasingly concentrated around age 30. Many women are having their first child at an older age, compared with several decades ago. They are having fewer children overall, and therefore, are concluding their childbearing in a relatively short time span.

Definitions

Total fertility rate: Refers to the number of children that a woman would have over the course of her reproductive life if she experienced the age-specific fertility rates observed in a particular calendar year. It is based on a compilation of the fertility experiences of many different cohorts of women in a given year.

Replacement-level fertility: Refers to the number of children per woman necessary for the population to replace itself taking into account mortality between birth and age 15, and in the absence of migration.

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