

# Baby-making a la mode in burgeoning France [FR] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

The sound of squawking children echoing around a sun-soaked park here Thursday underscores France's aggressive response to the crisis of aging populations.

While countries like Canada ramp up immigration to deal with low birthrates, as highlighted in a recent Statistics Canada report, France has seen its fertility rate soar.

Babies are everywhere in France, a country that gives presidential medals to its most prolific parents.

"As we say in France, it's very a la mode to have a baby. It's fashionable," says Marie Carles, 31, relaxing with a friend in Paris's popular Parc de Monceau as their infants slept in stylish carriages.

An environmental consultant, Carles gets 80 per cent of her salary while on maternity leave for 16 weeks. When she returns to work, her son will go into a subsidized child-care facility costing as little as \$350 Canadian a month.

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Statistics Canada reported this week that, for the first time ever, more Canadian families are made up of couples without children.

The birthrate is far below the 2.1 children per woman of child-rearing age required to sustain a population in the absence of more immigration. Canada's estimated birthrate for this year, according to the U.S. government's World Factbook, will be 1.61 children per woman, which is roughly in line with that of the United Kingdom and Sweden, and ahead of Japan's and Germany's rates of 1.4 children.

France's estimated rate, by contrast, is two children per woman.

"France is leading the way," The Economist magazine reported earlier this year in a special analysis of Europe's demographic challenges.

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Analysts aren't certain why the French are so keen to have babies. Germany is among many countries with generous social benefits, but its birthrate is abysmal. France's Catholic heritage can't take much credit, given low fertility rates in Spain and Italy. And, in some instances, countries like Canada offer more attractive maternity-leave benefits.

Some point to the confidence the French have in the country's child-care system, which gets enormous government support. In Canada, the Harper government cancelled a Liberal day-care program and instead offered parents \$100 a month for each child under six.

"Some countries have struck a successful balance between life and work that enables parents to raise children without sacrificing their careers," The Economist concluded.

"If the explanation is right, it does not matter that France doles out presidential medals. But it does matter that it has an excellent, state-subsidized system of creches, to which mothers are happy to entrust their offspring."

- reprinted from the Edmonton Journal

**Region:** Canada <sup>[2]</sup>

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