

Australia's fertility rate falls to record low in 2020

Registered births fell by 3.7% in 2020, with the total fertility rate at an all-time low of 1.58 babies per woman

Australia's fertility rate has fallen to a record low, with births dropping 3.7% in 2020. Photograph: santypan/Getty Images/iStockphoto

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Australia's fertility rate continues to plummet, with registered births dropping below 300,000 for the first time in 14 years.

Figures released by the [Australian Bureau of Statistics on Wednesday](#) showed there were 294,369 registered births in 2020, a decrease of 3.7% from 2019. The previous year's decline was 3%.

Importantly, the total fertility rate (TFR) fell to a record low 1.58 babies per woman, extending a decline from 2.02 in 2008. The rate rose from about 2.1 – the population replacement rate – in the early 1930s to a peak of 3.55 babies per woman in 1962.

ABS director of demography Beidar Cho said fewer births in most jurisdictions could largely be attributed to “a year marked by Covid-19 disruptions”.



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The Northern Territory had the highest fertility rate, at 1.86 babies per woman last year, ahead of Tasmania at 1.77 and Western Australia at 1.70. Victoria posted the lowest rate, at 1.43 babies per woman.

Aude Bernard, a senior lecturer at the University of Queensland's school of earth and environmental sciences, said Australia's population growth rate was probably at its lowest in at least a century.

The pace may accelerate this year to an actual contraction, with migration all but stopping and people leaving Australia, she said.

However, with reports of maternity wards filling up and the return of migration, the decline of births should halt, at least temporarily.

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“Based on historical data, it’s very likely to rebound,” Bernard said. “But it’s going to be short-lived. There’s going to be an increase in people who just postponed having children because of the uncertainty before the [Covid] lockdowns.”

The data revealed longer term trends such as a reduction of younger women having children, while the number of those aged between 40 and 44 giving birth has tripled in recent decades.

The decline in the fertility rate was largest among women aged 15-19 years, decreasing by nearly two-thirds to 7.8 per 1,000 women. Babies born to women aged 40-44 almost tripled, to 15.2 per 1,000 women.

Given the later age women are giving birth, the window for more children is reduced, Bernard said. “There is this very well-established relationship between the age at first birth and the total number of children one will have.”

The median age of parents also edged up, to a record 31.6 years for mothers and 33.6 years for fathers. The two-year age gap has been roughly constant since the ABS began releasing such data in the mid-1970s.

The total fertility rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mothers was 2.25 babies per woman, down from 2.32 in 2019. “There were 22,016 births registered (7% of all births) where at least one parent was an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian,” Cho said.

Victoria had the biggest drop in registered births, with 3,846 fewer in 2020 than the previous year, while NSW had 3,330 fewer. The Northern Territory had the largest increase, with 103 more births than in 2019.

In 2020, 63.5% of the births were in a registered marriage, down from 64.4% in the previous year, the ABS said.