

THE BABY BUST: CHANGES IN FERTILITY PATTERNS IN CANADA

Carl F. Grindstaff

University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

Résumé—La baisse des taux de fécondité est historique au Canada (en dessous des niveaux de remplacement), et toutes les indications suggèrent une continuation de cette tendance. Les causes primaires de cette baisse se rapportent à la technologie contraceptive et au rôle de la femme dans la société. On peut aussi considérer comme une facette additionnelle de cette tendance l'accroissement des taux de stérilité parmi les femmes à tous les niveaux d'âge. Ces changements dans les tendances en fécondité exigent de différents abords aux organisations et institutions sociales traditionnelles.

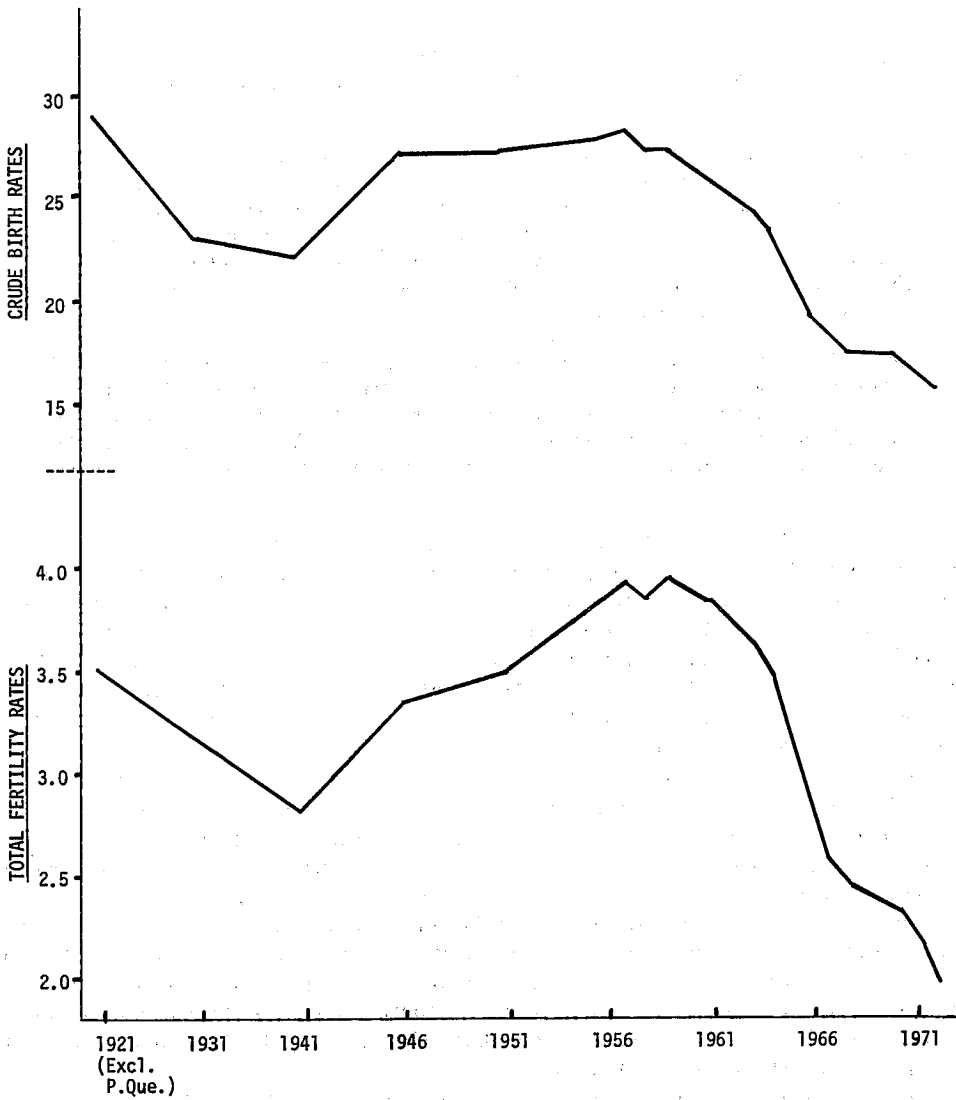
Abstract — Total fertility rates are at an historic low in Canada (below replacement levels), and all indications suggest a continuation of the trend. Primary reasons for this relate to contraceptive technology and the role of women in society. An additional facet of this trend may be increasing rates of childlessness for women at all age levels. These changes in fertility patterns necessitate different approaches to traditional societal organizations and institutions.

The relatively high population growth rates of the late 1940s and the 1950s in Canada and the United States caught most people unawares, and there were many resulting problems in employment positions, schools, teachers, housing, etc. In the middle and late 1960s and continuing into the 1970s, we are witnessing a large decline in terms of growth rates. We should not be negligent during this period in attempting to deal with social changes that are inevitable results of such demographic swings in fertility patterns. Fertility is under control to a large degree and people are opting for having fewer children. We should begin to make plans for this continuing reality.

Certainly, unwanted conception is still a problem for certain population subgroups in Canadian society. In 1972 and 1973, there were approximately 82,000 therapeutic abortions conducted in Canadian hospitals, or about one abortion for every eight births (Tietze and Dawson, 1973). Nearly half of these operations were performed on women—usually unmarried—under the age of twenty-one. A study undertaken in Nova Scotia in 1971 indicated that nearly half of the 200 children born in a hospital over a period of one month were unwanted, and a disproportionate number of pregnancies occurred to women from low socio-economic areas (Family Planning Federation of Canada, 1973). It would appear that quite often for the young and disadvantaged, "compulsory pregnancy" is still a problem that needs to be solved. However, when examining the Canadian population *in toto* in the 1970s, it appears that fertility is well under control.

In 1972, both crude birth rates and total fertility rates fell to their lowest levels in Canadian history (see Figure 1). In addition, the actual number of registered births in 1972 (347,000) was the lowest since 1946 when Canada's total population was only 13 million compared to the current 22 million (Statistics Canada, 1973). Table 1 shows that the total fertility rate in 1972 was down to 2.02, and there has been a steady decline in this measure since 1959. This decline over the past decade in Canada has been faster than at any other time in our nation's history. Even during the depression years of the 1930s, rates dropped by less than two per cent per annum on the average, compared to the more than four per cent annual decline in the 1960s (Henripin, 1972). Replacement fertility levels in Canada are calculated to be approximately 2.1 and thus Canadian women are currently reproducing at a rate that would bring about zero population growth within 50 years.

FIGURE 1. TOTAL FERTILITY RATES AND CRUDE BIRTH RATES, FOR CANADA, 1921-1972



The decline of fertility rates has accelerated into the 1970s and, paradoxically, the decline in the numbers and the rates of children being born has occurred during a period when the number of women in the childbearing ages has *increased* substantially. Table 2 indicates that the number of children 0-4 years of age decreased by approximately 20 per cent between 1961 and 1971 while the number of women in the prime childbearing ages (15-34) has increased by 35 per cent. Women aged 20-24, the most fertile group in Canadian society, increased by nearly 60 per cent between 1961 and 1971 (due primarily to baby-boom children entering this age group) but actually had *fewer* children born in 1971 (124,310) than in 1961 (135,700). Part of this change is related to age at marriage — the median age of brides in

The Baby Bust: Changes in Fertility Patterns in Canada

TABLE 1. TOTAL FERTILITY RATES AND CRUDE BIRTH RATES, FOR CANADA, 1921-1972

Year	Crude Birth Rates	Total Fertility Rates	Year	Crude Birth Rates	Total Fertility Rates
1921	29.3	3.53 ^(a)	1961	26.1	3.84
1926	24.7	3.36	1962	25.3	3.76
1931	23.2	3.20	1963	24.6	3.67
1936	20.3	2.70	1964	23.5	3.50
1941	22.4	2.83	1965	21.3	3.15
1946	27.2	3.37	1966	19.4	2.81
1951	27.2	3.50	1967	18.2	2.60
1956	28.0	3.86	1968	17.6	2.45
1957	28.2	3.93	1969	17.6	2.41
1958	27.5	3.88	1970	17.4	2.33
1959	27.4	3.94	1971	16.8	2.19
1960	26.8	3.90	1972	15.9	2.02

(a) Excluding Quebec

Source: Statistics Canada. Vital Statistics, Preliminary Report, 1972. Ottawa: February 1974, pp. 8, 12.

Canada has risen from 21.1 in 1961 to 21.5 in 1971. As a result, there are proportionately fewer women married in the 20-24 prime childbearing age group (see Table 3). While this demographic factor may play a minor role in the recent fertility decline, it seems that the major reasons are not strictly demographic, but rather sociological. Norms and values that have an influence on childbearing seem to have changed dramatically in the past 15 years, and the "baby bust" is a reality in the 1970s among ever married women. In addition, there are indications that this trend will continue into the near future.

Some experts in population statistics, for example, Philip Hauser (Greene, 1972) and Judith Blake (1973) caution against the prediction that low fertility is here to stay. In the past, fertility rates have been volatile, responding to temporary economic or political conditions, and these experts argue that current low levels may simply be due to recent changes in timing and spacing of children — a postponement of fertility, not a final reduction (New York Times, 1974; Greene, 1972). It is true that demographers in the 1930s were predicting continuing low and stable fertility, and that in fact from the early 1930s to the late 1950s the crude birth rates increased by some 50 per cent. It is possible that similar increases could occur in the future from the present low levels.

However, Larry Bumpass in a recent article entitled, "Is Low Fertility Here to Stay?" (Bumpass, 1973), argues that substantial changes have occurred in society relating to fertility that were not present previously, and that low fertility rates, with only minor fluctuations, are going to be the norm for the future. Bumpass cites several important developments both

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF LIVE BIRTHS, CHILDREN AGED 0-4, AND WOMEN AGED 15-34, FOR CANADA, 1961 AND 1971

	1961	1971	% Increase (Decrease) 1961 to 1971
Live Births	475,700	362,187	(-19.5)
Children 0-4	2,256,401	1,816,155	(-23.9)
Women 15-34	2,522,834	3,415,500	+35.4
15-19	703,524	1,039,915	+47.8
20-24	596,507	947,625	+58.9
25-29	595,400	783,410	+31.6
30-34	627,403	644,550	+ 2.7

Sources: (1) Dominion Bureau of Statistics. 1962. 1961 Census of Canada, Population: Age Groups. Volume I, Bulletin 1.2-3. Ottawa: Queen's Printer.

(2) Statistics Canada. 1973. 1971 Census of Canada, Population: Single Years of Age. Volume I, Bulletin 1.2-4. Ottawa: Information Canada.

in terms of technology and norms of fertility that will, in his view, insure that current patterns of low fertility are not simply transitional delays in childbearing. Among these changes, the two most important are: (1) More effective means of preventing unwanted conception and widespread distribution of these means (the pill, IUDs, sterilization). Such techniques lead to fertility being a matter of *decision* rather than accident. (2) There are more alternatives to motherhood for women in the society — employment, education, travel, etc. (Bumpass, 1973).

At current levels of age-specific and total fertility rates, (see Table 1) it can be estimated that cohort fertility (completed family size) would reach two children in the next 40 years. While such rates cannot be predicted with absolute accuracy, the trends and rationale cited above provide every indication that such a demographic pattern will indeed be the case in Canada. There may be some calendar year fluctuations that respond to temporal economic and social conditions, but the overall trend should reflect continued levels of fertility at or below replacement.

In addition, there is some evidence that these changes in society affect not only the number of children any woman might have when her family size is complete, but also whether or not a woman would have any children at all. Increasingly, the question may be not how many children do you want to have; but rather, do you want to have children or not. Fertility in terms of number of children per family is decreasing, but also the number of families without any children, especially among younger couples, appears to be increasing at a substantial rate.

TABLE 3. SINGLE AND MARRIED FEMALE POPULATION, AGED 15-29, FOR CANADA, 1961 AND 1971

Age	Single	Married	Widowed	Divorced	% Ever Married
<u>1961</u>					
15-19	642,007	61,197	262	58	8.7
20-24	241,435	353,215	931	926	59.5
25-29	91,940	498,637	2,371	2,452	84.6
Median Age of Bride: 21.1 Years					
<u>1971</u>					
15-19	962,100	75,715	1,540	565	7.5
20-24	412,190	527,870	2,405	5,165	56.5
25-29	120,695	646,655	3,970	12,085	84.6
Median Age of Bride: 21.5 Years					

- Sources: (1) Dominion Bureau of Statistics. 1963. 1961 Census of Canada, Population: Marital Status by Age Group. Volume I, Bulletin 1.3-1. Ottawa: Queen's Printer.
- (2) Statistics Canada. 1973. 1971 Census of Canada, Population: Marital Status by Age Group. Volume I, Bulletin 1.4-2. Ottawa: Information Canada.
- (3) Statistics Canada. 1974. Vital Statistics, 1971. Ottawa: Information Canada.

Table 4 shows the proportion of ever married women in Canada who were childless, by five-year age groupings, in 1961 and 1971. The under-30 age categories all show higher rates of childlessness in 1971 than in 1961, and just the opposite is true for the women 30-44. For this latter group, the prime childbearing years began in the late 1940s, and continued into the 1960s, corresponding to the period of the baby boom. Childlessness rates for this group, between seven and nine per cent, are probably close to physiological minimums.

The younger married women, especially in the prime childbearing ages of 20 to 30, demonstrate significant increases in proportion childless between 1961 and 1971. Married women 20-24 and 25-29 years of age in 1971 show more than a 50 per cent increase in childless rates in comparison to their counterparts in 1961. These figures may simply illustrate timing changes, a postponement in having children until the couples are ready to make the decision that a child would be welcome in their lives. The relatively high rates may also reflect later age at marriage and thus duration of marriage, but the median age of bride figures cited earlier seems to negate this possibility to a larger degree.

TABLE 4. PER CENT CHILDLESSNESS AMONG WOMEN EVER MARRIED, 15-44 YEARS OF AGE, FOR CANADA, 1961 AND 1971

Age	% Childless		% Increase (Decrease) 1961 to 1971
	1961	1971	
15-44	13.5	18.1	+34.1
15-19	42.3	49.7	+17.5
20-24	26.3	42.0	+59.7
25-29	13.6	20.7	+52.2
30-34	9.7	9.4	(- 3.1)
35-39	9.2	7.4	(-19.6)
40-44	10.3	8.2	(-20.4)

- Sources: (1) Dominion Bureau of Statistics. 1966. 1961 Census of Canada, Population Sample: Women by Age and Number of Children Born. Volume IV, Bulletin 4.1-7. Ottawa: Queen's Printer.
- (2) Statistics Canada. 1973. 1971 Census of Canada, Population: Women Ever Married by Number of Children Born. Volume I, Bulletin 1.2-6. Ottawa: Information Canada.

In a recent article, Jean Veevers suggests that "voluntary childlessness constitutes deviant behaviour in that husbands and wives who decline the opportunity to have children violate norms both of behaviour and motivation" (Veevers, 1972). In the past, couples who were childless for voluntary reasons had been stigmatized as barren, selfish, unfulfilled, abnormal, unnatural, immature and unhappy (Veevers, 1972). However, once a few couples decide to remain childless and with larger and larger numbers of young married people postponing childbearing, these stigmas may be applied less often, and the norms and motives to have children may well undergo change. A form of social contagion takes place.

Let us assume that the high rates of childlessness observed in Table 4 for young married women in 1971 were initially thought of as timing changes, and that a great proportion of these women plan to have children "when the time is right." Research in the United States and Canada on attitudes towards childbearing among high school students in the 1970s shows that 70 per cent of the young men and women want to have two or three children, and about five per cent say that they will not have any (Gustavus, 1973; Nobbe and Okraku, unpublished manuscript). These couples, who are obviously using effective contraception, can delay childbearing to help achieve economic, educational or career goals. During this period of delay — perhaps three, four or five years — a certain life style can develop which the couple views as rewarding and desirable. Thus they may choose to delay having any children a little longer and the postponement can easily become permanent. If there are many peer couples in this situation, and the data show that their numbers are growing rapidly, then a cumulative norm can develop between them which makes childlessness not a deviant act,

but a perfectly "normal" one. As more and more couples in the younger ages remain childless, the principle of cumulation works to create a new norm and definition of the situation which makes childlessness an acceptable pattern of behaviour. In general, temporary delay will foster a life style, especially relating to career opportunity and advancement for women, that will ultimately result in permanent postponement of childbearing. We suggest that such a pattern will develop in the 1970s, and this trend will have important effects on many institutions in our society. With the increasing participation of women in all aspects of Canadian life, and more opportunities for self-fulfilment outside of motherhood, the number of married women who choose to remain childless as a permanent condition will undoubtedly be higher than in the past decade. We would estimate that in 2001, about 20 per cent of the ever married women 30-34 years of age will be childless — or approximately double the current rate. This estimation is subjectively based on the changes involving fertility already noted and on the trends from age group to age group in 1961 and 1971. For example, if the rates of childlessness cited in Table 4 continue to increase at even half the percentage pace for the ages 15-19 and 20-24 in 1981 and 1991, and the trends established between 1961 and 1971 continue at the other age levels, then the rates of childlessness in 1991 would be 18 for women aged 30-34 and 13.1 for the 35-39 age group. In the year 2001, these figures would be 18.5 and 14.2 respectively. This projection depends, of course, on a relatively constant age-specific mortality rate, and no substantial in- or out-migration of women in the prime childbearing years.

It is incumbent upon leadership in government, labour and business to recognize this *likely* change and to be flexible enough in decision-making to provide plans to accommodate fewer children in schools, to make other uses of existing schools, to train fewer educationalists, to explore different recreational needs, to arrange for more and diverse employment opportunities for women and to create different housing possibilities. The four bedroom, two and one-half bath colonial in the suburbs may not appeal to the potential 20 per cent of the nation's couples who may choose to remain childless in the near future. These are but a few of the areas of concern that we may have to deal with in the next decade.

While forecasting future patterns of fertility is risky at best, it is important that we recognize probable demographic changes in our society and make plans for the rippling effects these changes can produce on basic educational and economic institutions. The demographic figures are there; it is the responsibility of people in the field of population study to interpret these data and make programme recommendations to the men and women who have to make decisions that will affect us all. Family planning, in the sense that most people have a chance to make a rational decision based on the costs and benefits of childbearing, is fast becoming an integral component of life in Canada. For the first time in history, people are gaining control over the consequences of their sexuality, and this is a good thing. However, we must be prepared as a society to recognize that such control has far-reaching implications for social organization and institutional arrangements. For the next decade or more, we must begin to project for total fertility rates at or below the replacement level and for 20 per cent or more of married couples remaining childless. Otherwise, fertility control, which should be a blessing, will simply be the cause of other problems.

References

- Blake, J. 1974. Can We Believe Recent Data on Birth Expectations in the United States? *Demography* 11:25-44.
- Bumpass, L. 1973. Is Low Fertility Here to Stay? *Family Planning Perspectives* 5:67-69.
- Family Planning Federation of Canada. 1973. *Family Planning and Population* 1(2).
- Greene, W. 1972. The Militant Malthusians. *Saturday Review*, March 11:40-56.

Carl F. Grindstaff

- Gustavus, S. 1973. The Family Size Preferences of Young People: A Replication and Longitudinal Follow-up Study. *Studies in Family Planning* 4(12):335-342.
- Henripin, J. 1972. Trends and Factors of Fertility in Canada. A 1961 Census Monograph. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
- New York Times. 1974. Birth, Fertility Rates at a New Low in U.S. Tuesday, April 16.
- Nobbe, C. and I. Okraku. An Analysis of Sex Preference Differentials and Their Implications for Future Fertility Research. London, Ontario: University of Western Ontario. An unpublished manuscript.
- Statistics Canada. 1973. *Statistics Canada Daily*. Ottawa: September.
- Tietze, C. and D. Dawson. 1973. Induced Abortion: A Factbook. Reports on Population/Family Planning, No. 14. New York: The Population Council.
- Veevers, J. 1972. The Violation of Fertility Moers: Voluntary Childlessness as Deviant Behaviour. In C. Boydell, C. F. Grindstaff and P. C. Whitehead (eds.), *Deviant Behaviour and Societal Reaction*. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Received October, 1974; Revised August, 1975.