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World Population Policies 2021: Policies related to fertility

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National population policies aimed at lowering fertility and curbing population growth have evolved since the early 1950s and gained global attention through a series of global conferences on population and development, the last of which was held in Cairo in 1994. Due to declining fertility and population ageing, population policies increasingly emphasize the need for raising fertility and promoting population growth. At the same time, persistent, high levels of fertility and rapid population growth remain a concern in many developing countries, where efforts to promote smaller families and facilitate access to sexual and reproductive health care and services should be strengthened.

*The following key findings are based on the report **World Population Policies 2021: Policies Related to Fertility**, prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).*

Ten key messages

1. Most countries have population policies and programmes to influence fertility levels.

Globally, through 2019, nearly three quarters of Governments had policies related to fertility. Of these, 69 governments had policies to lower fertility, 55 aimed to raise fertility, and 19 focused on maintaining current levels of fertility. A total of 54 Governments did not have an official fertility policy.

2. Population policies have evolved depending on the prevailing fertility levels.

Early adopters of population policies to lower fertility were concerned about the impact of high fertility and rapid population growth on socioeconomic development. As fertility has continued to decline, reaching below below-replacement levels in many countries, Governments have increasingly adopted policies to raise fertility aimed at countering population ageing and population decline.

3. Government policies to influence fertility vary across regions.

In sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), most Governments have adopted policies to lower fertility, whereas in Europe and Northern America and in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, policies to raise fertility are more prevalent. In the more developed regions and in Latin America and the Caribbean, about half the countries had no specific policy to influence fertility levels.

4. Government sponsored family planning programmes are a common feature of population policies.

Most governments provide family planning services to their populations, either directly through public programmes or indirectly through non-governmental organizations. Eighty out of 103 governments with available data in 2019 provided direct support for family planning services, of which 68 provided both direct and indirect support. In addition, 18 governments provide only indirect support.

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5. Most countries with low levels of fertility promote childbearing and childrearing.

Most Governments of countries with low fertility, including those with no official policies to influence fertility levels, have adopted measures to incentivise childbearing, including paid or unpaid parental leave with job security, subsidised childcare, flexible or part-time work hours for parents, tax credits for dependent children, and child or family allowances.

6. Many Governments consider adolescent childbearing a concern.

Governments in sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean have policy measures to improve the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents by providing school-based sexuality education and by raising rates of secondary school enrolment and retention among girls and young women.

7. Policies aimed at union formation, first birth and birth spacing help to lower fertility.

Most governments in countries with high or intermediate levels of fertility have adopted one or more policy measures aimed at (a) raising the age at first marriage or union formation, (b) raising the age of the mother at the time of her first birth, or (c) increasing the duration of time between successive births.

8. Political will and adequate resources are crucial for implementing population policies.

Case studies of countries in different regions and with differing levels of fertility illustrate the significance of political will and the availability of adequate resources for the successful implementation of policies and programmes aimed at reducing fertility levels and slowing down population growth.

9. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on future fertility trends is expected to be limited.

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic and social changes have affected fertility levels in many countries, this impact is expected to be short-lived. Based on both historical experience and the latest available evidence, it is anticipated that fluctuations in levels of fertility from 2021 to 2023 will be relatively minor and that those levels may return to pre-pandemic levels by around 2025.

10. Countries will need to adjust to population ageing and, in some cases, population decline.

The long-term trend in fertility decline will inevitably lead to increased population ageing and, potentially, to smaller populations in many countries across the world. While various approaches and initiatives to lower fertility have shown results, reversing long-term downward trends in fertility has proven much more difficult to achieve.



Prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). These key messages are based on the report **World Population Policies 2021: Policies related to fertility**. More work of the Population Division is available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/>.