

## Do pro-fertility policies in Singapore offer a model for other low-fertility countries in Asia?

Policy Brief No. 15

Fertility in Singapore started declining steadily in the early 1960s, reaching below replacement level in 1975, then declining further to “ultra-low” levels in the early 2000s and staying at very low levels since. As of 2011, Singapore’s total fertility rate (TFR) was only 1.2 births per woman, well below the level required to maintain the size of the population and to keep the age structure in balance.

Singapore has the most long-standing and comprehensive policies to encourage marriage, boost fertility and provide support to families of any country in East Asia. Yet it also has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world. What does Singapore’s experience hold for other low-fertility countries in the region?

### Economic and social conditions drive down fertility

Economic and social conditions in Singapore strongly influence the perceived desirability and feasibility of building a family. This is a consumerist society, stressing achievement and upward mobility. Singaporeans are vastly wealthier than they were four or five decades ago, but, paradoxically, many feel a sense of relative deprivation, which means that aspirations can only be met by both parents working. The financial and opportunity costs of raising children are considerable, particularly as parents face enormous pressure for their children to succeed in a competitive system described as an education “arms race”.

At the same time, economic development and social modernization clash with traditionalism in the household, resulting in a conflict for women who try to balance work and family life. Access to childcare services is limited, and working mothers face long work days and an inflexible work environment. Mismatch between working hours and school hours presents a challenge to working mothers even after their children reach school age. Added to these pressures are long commutes and skyrocketing housing costs. As a result, Singaporeans are having fewer children and postponing marriage or not marrying at all.

### The most comprehensive pro-fertility policies in Asia

Singapore began introducing policies to raise fertility in 1987. There are three main categories: (1) financial incentives; (2) support for parents to combine work and family; and (3) policies to encourage marriage.

The Government began offering cash payments and a co-saving plan to parents in 2000. Since then, the amount offered has been increased substantially, and the period for full disbursement has been shortened. Singapore also offers tax rebates for working mothers, medical insurance for children and various housing subsidy schemes.

To help parents combine work and family responsibilities, the Government increased paid maternity leave from 8 to 12 weeks in 2004 and from 12 to 16 weeks in 2008. In 2013, the Government introduced a one-week paternity leave and allowed a father to take one additional week out of his wife’s maternity leave. The Government subsidizes centre-based childcare and offers cash support and reduced employment fees to help working mothers who rely on childcare from grandparents or domestic help from overseas.

Singapore is unique in its long-standing strategies to encourage dating and marriage. Programmes are varied, sophisticated and Internet-based, including personalized matchmaking and support for accredited dating agencies. The Government also seeks to promote marriage through housing policies that offer various inducements to Singaporeans who plan to marry.

### Government programmes help, but not enough

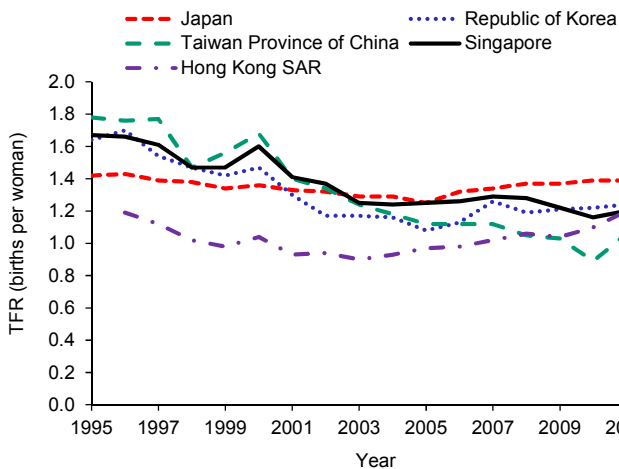
Singaporean families with two or three children can expect to receive significant financial incentives as a result of the overall package offered by the Government. As of early 2013, a family with two children could enjoy benefits of about US\$ 118,000 by the time both children turned 13. While substantial, these figures need to be compared with rough estimates of the total financial cost of having a single baby and raising the child to age 18, which would cost somewhere between US\$ 177,000 and US\$ 248,000. Beyond age 18, university fees add considerably to that cost.

Probably the greatest need is for broad social change supportive of children and parenting, a difficult area for government policy. The big question is how Singapore will be able to overcome deeply entrenched gender roles within the family as well as societal pressures and expectations that work against family formation.

## What can other countries learn from the Singapore experience?

Across East Asia's low-fertility countries, cultural and social norms have been slow to adapt to improvements in women's education, changing labour markets and the economic pressures of a neo-liberal, consumerist economy. Although Singapore has led in the implementation of pro-fertility policies and has gone farther than other countries in many policy areas, there is no clear evidence that Singapore's policies have had much impact on fertility rates. The Singapore Government appears to have settled on a TFR of about 1.6 births per woman as its most optimistic target for fertility in the next few years — a rate way below replacement level.

### Trends in total fertility rate (TFR) for Japan, the Republic of Korea, Taiwan Province of China, Singapore, and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), 1995–2012



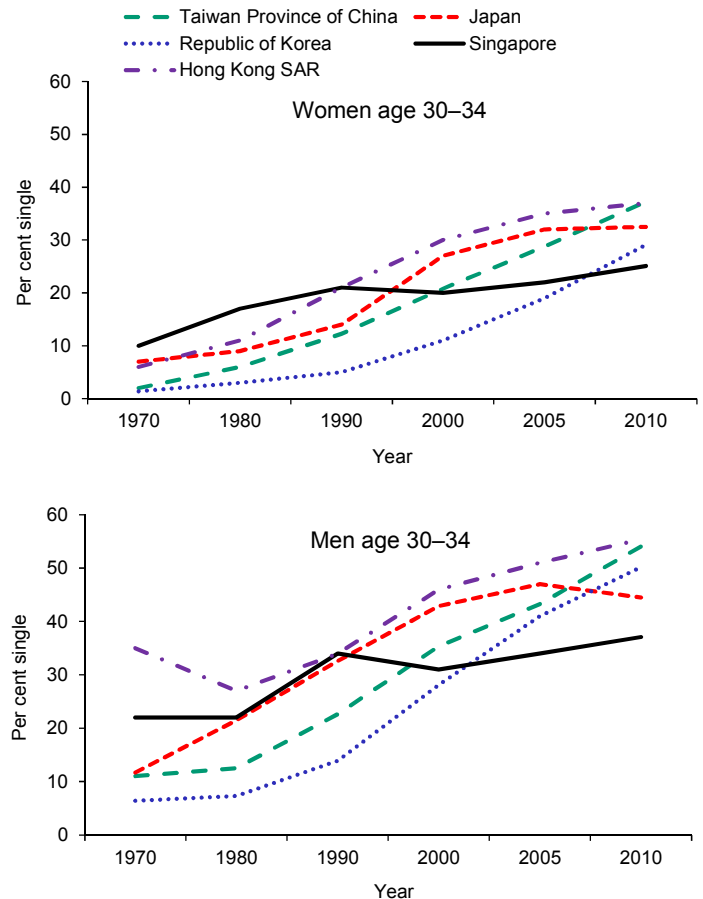
Perhaps one message to emerge is that policies bearing on fertility need to be seen as part of family policy, as they are in most European countries. Whether or not they have much impact on fertility, they can be considered successful if they make life better for families.

Extended singlehood is a key contributing factor to ultra-low fertility in East Asian societies, given that very few children are born outside marriage. For this reason, Singapore's experience with pro-marriage policies might usefully be examined by other countries.

Survey data indicate that financial costs and time constraints in combining work and family life are still the key "crunch points" for fertility decisions. This suggests that two things may be essential if fertility levels in Singapore — and elsewhere — are to be substantially raised. The first is for the Government to provide considerably higher financial incentives by raising baby bonus payments and providing universal childcare. This would come at a substantial cost, particularly in an era of slowing economic growth. The second requirement may be even harder to achieve. This would be to

change the economic and social institutions, regulations affecting working conditions, and popular norms in directions that will enable work and child-rearing to be more readily combined.

### Trends in proportion single among women and men aged 30–34 in Taiwan Province of China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), 1970–2010



#### NOTES

This policy brief was prepared as background material for the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Policy Responses to Low Fertility. It can be found online at <http://esa.un.org/PopPolicy/publications.aspx>. Queries can be sent to [PopPolicy@un.org](mailto:PopPolicy@un.org).

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