

## RESEARCH NOTE

### THE BABY BUST REVISITED: CANADA'S CONTINUING PATTERN OF LOW FERTILITY

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*Abstract* — In a paper I published in this journal in 1975, the low rates of Canadian fertility were documented and discussed (Grindstaff, 1975). Primary factors associated with the findings were contraceptive technology and the role of women. This paper provides an update on the fertility data gathered by Statistics Canada and shows that the predicted continuation of the trend has been accurate into the 1980s. The discussion centres around the importance of choice in childbearing for women in the future of Canadian fertility.

*Key Words* — fertility, role of women, childless

#### *Introduction*

In an article published in 1975 in *Canadian Studies in Population*, I documented the low levels of fertility in Canada and argued that these trends in childbearing would continue through the 1970s and into the 1980s (Grindstaff, 1975). It was shown that the decline in fertility during

the 1960s and early 1970s came about even though there had been a substantial increase in the number of women in the childbearing ages. In addition, increasing levels of childlessness were documented and it was estimated that by the census year 2001, about 20 per cent of the ever-married women in Canada age 30-34 would be childless. That figure is more than double the rate observed in 1971. It was indicated that these historically low levels of reproduction were associated with both technology (improvements and innovations in contraception) and social norms and values (changes in role opportunities for women).

### *Findings*

The purpose of this research is to update the information presented in the 1975 article in terms of crude birth rate, total fertility rate, live births and childlessness. The data used in that article were based on fertility figures in Canada as of 1971. This present presentation provides the fertility trends and patterns into the early 1980s. Table 1 shows that the crude birth rate has been reasonably stable throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. While the rate of 15.1 observed in 1982 is the lowest point in Canadian history, the range in the past 10 years has been between 15 and 16 births per 1,000 people in the population.

The total fertility rate, which takes the age structure of the women into account, continued to decline throughout the 1970s to reach points below the levels necessary for replacement fertility. In 1982 — the last available vital statistics year — the total fertility rate of 1.69 placed Canadian reproductive behaviour approximately 20 per cent under that rate which is necessary for population replacement over a period of time. Clearly, low fertility has been here to stay, at least for the past decade or more in this country.

Table 2 shows that the number of children born over the decade had stabilized at an average of about 360,000 births per year, but at the same time, the women in the prime childbearing ages (20 to 30) had increased by more than 30 per cent. Once more, these data are an indication that while the numbers of births have stabilized, the rates of fertility have continued to decline in a small but linear fashion throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s.

There is some indication that the low rates of childbearing by women in the prime reproductive ages will be elevated when these same women reach the age of 30 or older (Digest, 1983). In a sense, it is argued that

TABLE 1. CRUDE BIRTH RATES AND TOTAL FERTILITY RATES, FOR CANADA, 1921-1982.

Year	Crude Birth Rates	Total Fertility Rates	Year	Crude Birth Rates	Total Fertility Rates
1921	29.3	3.53 (a)	1970	17.4	2.33
1926	24.7	3.36	1971	16.8	2.19
1931	23.2	3.20	1972	15.9	2.02
1936	20.3	2.70	1973	15.5	1.93
1941	22.4	2.83	1974	15.6	1.88
1946	27.2	3.37	1975	15.8	1.85
1951	27.2	3.50	1976	15.7	1.83
1956	28.0	3.86	1977	15.5	1.81
1961	26.1	3.84	1978	15.3	1.76
1966	19.4	2.81	1979	15.5	1.76
1967	18.2	2.60	1980	15.5	1.75
1968	17.6	2.45	1981	15.3	1.70
1969	17.6	2.41	1982	15.1	1.69

(a) Excluding Quebec.

Source: Statistics Canada. Vital Statistics.

1975 and 1976 Vol. 1, Births, Tables 1 and 6  
 1978 Vol. 1, Births and Deaths, Tables 1 and 4  
 1980 Vol. 1, Births and Deaths, Tables 1 and 5  
 1982 Vol. 1, Births and Deaths, Tables 1 and 5

these women will "catch up" with fertility that has been postponed. Indeed, women aged 30 and over are more likely to be starting a family in 1981 than they were in 1971. That is, for ever-married women age 30-34 in Canada in 1981, one baby in four was a first-born child compared to one baby in eight for this age group in 1971 (Grindstaff, 1984). However, the actual age specific *rate* of childbearing for women age 30-34 decreased from 77.3 per 1,000 in 1971 to 68.0 per 1,000 in 1981 (Statistics Canada, 1983a). Again, contrary to some expectations, the actual fertility of these women had declined over the past 10 years or more. The cohort data show much the same trends. In examining a group that has

TABLE 2. NUMBER OF LIVE BIRTHS, CHILDREN AGED 0-4, AND WOMEN AGED 15-34, CANADA, 1961, 1971 AND 1981.

	1961	1971	Percent Increase (Decrease) 1961 to 1971	1981	Percent Increase (Decrease) 1971 to 1981
Live Births	475,700	362,187	(-19.5)	371,346	+ 2.5
Children 0-4	2,256,401	1,816,155	(-23.9)	1,783,375	(-1.9)
Women 15-34	2,522,834	3,415,500	+35.4	4,412,695	+29.0
15-19	703,524	1,039,915	+47.8	1,132,875	+ 8.9
20-24	596,507	947,625	+58.9	1,169,520	+23.4
25-29	595,400	783,410	+31.6	1,093,200	+39.6
30-34	627,403	644,550	+ 2.7	1,017,100	+57.9

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

Statistics Canada. 1973. 1971 Census of Canada, Population: Single Years of Age. Volume 1, Bulletin 1.2-4. Ottawa: Information Canada.

Statistics Canada. 1983. 1981 Census of Canada, Population: Age, Sex and Marital Status, Volume 1, Catalogue 92-901, p. 1. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services.

by and large finished its fertility, the number of children ever born to ever-married women 35-39 years of age decreased from 3.16 in 1971 to 2.33 in 1981 (Statistics Canada, 1983).

Table 3 provides evidence that childlessness continues to increase for ever-married women of all age groups except those 40-44, who were in the prime childbearing ages toward the end of the Baby Boom. Overall, childlessness rates went up among all women age 15-44, but the largest increases have taken place in the 25-34 age group. Approximately 30 per cent of all ever-married women 25-29 in 1981 had no children, and increase of 45 per cent from the previous decade. Over 14 per cent of women age 30-34 were childless in 1981, a 50 per cent increase over 1971. In the "Baby Bust" article of 1975, it was predicted that by the year 2001, fully 20 per cent of women in this age group would be without children (Grindstaff, 1975). It would appear that this outcome is on schedule. Even adolescent fertility has been decreasing, with the number of babies born to teenagers in Canada down to 29,330 in 1981 from 40,480 in 1971. While the issue of adolescent fertility is still an important one, the volume of children born to these young women has fallen dramatically, paralleling the trend in the rest of the society (Grindstaff, 1985).

### *Conclusions*

Some writers have argued that the low fertility rates in the 1970s were simply temporal responses to cyclical and economic factors present in the society (Blake, 1974; Easterlin, 1978). It would appear that the force and importance of choice in childbearing has been underestimated. At the present time, women generally have the ability to choose not to be pregnant, and they also have attained increased opportunities outside of the motherhood role (over 50 per cent of all women 15-44 years of age are in the labour force). While it may be that many women in the labour force in the 1980s are there more out of economic necessity than out of occupational choice and that, in better economic circumstances, the participation rates may in fact decline (Easterlin, 1978), it is also true that the number of children in the family is negatively associated with labour force participation. For example, over 80 per cent of childless ever-married women aged 20-40 are in the employed labour force, compared to about 50 per cent of ever-married aged 20-40 who have children; and ever-married women at age 30 contribute over 40 per cent of the family income when childless, compared to less than 20 per cent when there are

TABLE 3. PERCENT CHILDLESS AMONG WOMEN EVER MARRIED, 15-44 YEARS OF AGE, FOR CANADA, 1961, 1971 AND 1981.

	Percent Childless			Percent Increase (Decrease) In Childlessness	
	1961	1971	1981	1961 to 1971	1971 to 1981
15-44	13.5	18.1	22.7	34.1	25.4
15-19	42.3	49.7	64.9	17.5	30.6
20-24	26.3	42.0	54.0	59.7	28.6
25-29	13.6	20.7	30.0	52.2	44.9
30-34	9.7	9.4	14.2	(-3.1)	51.1
35-39	9.2	7.4	9.3	(-19.6)	25.7
40-44	10.3	8.2	7.3	(-20.4)	(-11.0)

Sources: 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.

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Statistics Canada. 1983. 1981 Census of Canada, Population: Nuptiality and Fertility, Volume 1, Catalogue 92-906. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services.

two or more children in the family (Grindstaff, 1985). Clearly, children negatively impact both on the labour force participation of women and on the level of economic contribution provided by women to their families — and women seem to be aware of this situation. It would appear that continuing low levels of childbearing#childrearing would enable women to be better placed in the economic structure. Given these and other factors (Ryder, 1979), it is apparent that low fertility rates and corresponding high levels of childlessness will continue to be part of the social scenario in Canada for some time to come.

While the number of children being born may increase slightly in the

next decade due to the movement of the Baby Boom generation through the childbearing years, the rates of fertility will most likely remain below the replacement level into the 1990s. More and more women are recognizing that childbearing and childrearing are detrimental in terms of personal long-range economic outcome, and many are not willing to trade potential economic independence for children (Eichler, 1983; Grindstaff, 1985). Women will continue to take advantage of role opportunities outside of motherhood. Even when choosing to begin childbearing, the pattern begins later in life and fewer babies are born over a reproductive lifetime. If more children becomes a social goal, then women will need to obtain some form of economic compensation.

As I stated in 1975, "We must be prepared as a society to recognize that such (fertility) 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" (Grindstaff, 1975:21). That type of preparation is just as critical in the 1980s. Women will not be content with an exclusive homemaker role, and as a concerned society, we need to find ways for women to be mothers if they so choose, without sacrificing other important life goals.

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