

Examine the reasons for changes in birth rates

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Since 1990, there has been a declining trend in birth rates and family size. The birth rate refers to the number of live births per 1000 of the population per year. There have been incidents of 'baby booms' during the 20th century, where the birth rate has suddenly increased. These include after both world wars and during the 1960s. However, overall the birth rate has been decreasing. There are a number of social factors responsible for these changes. Firstly, the changing position of women in society has been partially responsible for the decline in birth rate and family size.

The changes include greater equality changes between women and men, more education and work opportunities for women, easier access to divorce and wider availability of contraception and abortion, allowing women to control their fertility. As a result of these changes, women are seeing other possibilities in life other than marriage and childbearing. Many women are delaying child birth and putting their careers first. This leads to them having children at a later age and consequently being unable to have several children. Furthermore, a change in social attitudes mean some women are not having children at all.

In addition to this, many sociologists argue that a decline in infant mortality rate leads to a decline in birth rate. They argue this because couples are not having children to replace the ones they have lost in infancy, as infant death is much rarer. In 1990, 15% of babies born died before their first birthday. Today, the infant mortality rate stands at only 5%, a great decrease from 1990. The decline in infant mortality rate is linked to a number of factors including improved healthcare, better nutrition for both babies and mothers

and better care for mothers and their children through agencies such as antenatal and postnatal clinics.

The decline in infant mortality, it is therefore argued, has a direct impact on the birth rate. Furthermore, birth rate and family size have decreased since 1900 as children have become an economic liability. Previously, children had been sent out of work to earn an income, such as chimney sweep boys during the Victorian era. However, laws banning child labour and the compulsory education extending means that children are not allowed to earn an income. Instead they remain economically dependent on their family for longer.

Additionally, children's material expectations have risen, meaning the cost of maintaining children has too. Increasing child expenditure has led to a reluctance from couples to have large families, thus the birth rate has decreased. The child-centered attitude that has now become prevalent in society is a final reason for a declining trend in birth rate and family size. The social construction of childhood has led people to view childhood as a unique, important period in a person's life.

In relation to this child-centered attitude, parents' attitude has shifted from 'quantity' to 'quality' when it comes to their family. This means people prefer to have a smaller family size so they can spend more attention on children during their important life stages. Overall there has been a steady decline in birth rate and family size since 1990. This has been due to a number of social factors including the changing position of women, the decline in infant mortality rates, changes in child laws and social attitudes towards childhood as a social construct.

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