

RECENT TRENDS IN FERTILITY DIFFERENTIALS IN AUSTRALIA

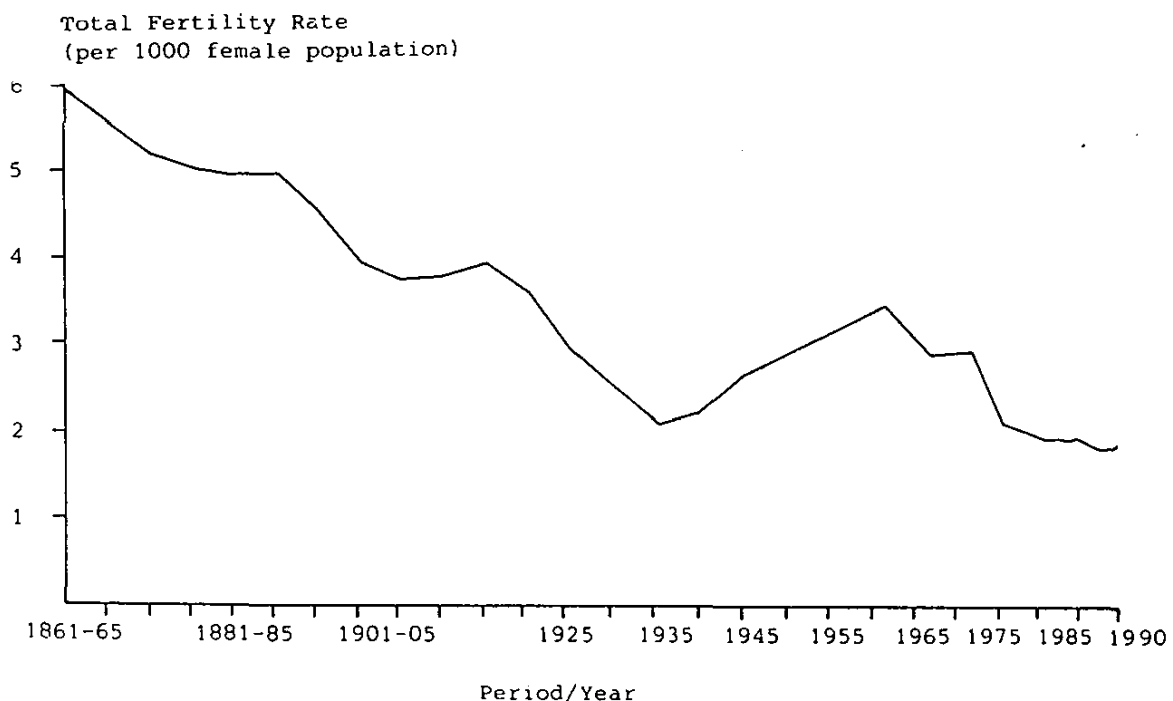
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Of all the demographic changes which have reshaped Australian society during the post-war period none have been so wide-reaching in their effects as the changes in patterns of fertility and family formation. Figure 1 shows the changes which have occurred in Australia's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) over the last 130 years. (The TFR is a useful measure of fertility since it provides an approximate answer to the question 'how many children are women having these days by the time they complete their childbearing?')

In the longterm, if a population is to replace itself without immigration from overseas, the TFR needs to exceed 2.115. As Figure 1 shows, by

1976 the TFR had fallen to below replacement level. In the 1980s it stabilised at around 1.85 to 1.9. Some European countries and the United States are now showing an increase in their TFRs. Australia could possibly do the same in the 1990s, but the aim of this paper is not to examine broad trends in Australian fertility but to analyse the extent to which fertility patterns vary from one group to another within Australian society. Though a brief paper cannot do full justice to this question, in general, differences between groups have been converging as fertility overall has declined. Some differences however remain (and some may be becoming more accentuated).

Figure 1: Australia: total fertility rate, 1861-65 to 1990



Source: ABS Demographic Bulletins, Birth Bulletins

ABORIGINAL FERTILITY

One of the most striking differences is found between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal fertility. Table 1 compares a series of estimates of the TFR for the South Australian Aboriginal community with figures for the total South Australian population. It shows a gradual recovery in Aboriginal fertility during this century up to World War II, in sharp contrast to the pattern in overall fertility shown in Figure 1. A peak in Aboriginal fertility was achieved in the 1950s and 1960s when it was twice as high as overall fertility. However the 1970s saw a sharp decline (more than 40 per cent a decade). But Gray and Tesfaghiorghis have brought together data from several states which give higher levels of Aboriginal fertility.¹ They warn that the patterns of the 1980s suggest that it would be dangerous to assume that the rapid declines in Aboriginal fertility will be continued into the 1990s.

Table 1: Total fertility rates of Aboriginal women in South Australia and all South Australian women, 1906-1988

Aboriginal Women		All South Australian Women	
Period	Estimated TFR	Period	Estimated TFR
1906-1911	3.4	1911	4.2
1928-1933	4.7	1933	2.3
1942-1947	5.8	1947	3.2
1956-1961	7.0	1961	3.8
1961-1966	6.6	1966	2.8
1966-1971	6.3	1971	2.7
1971-1976	3.8	1976	1.9
1976-1981	3.3	1981	1.8
1981-1986	3.2	1986	1.8
1988	2.6	1988	1.7

Source: G. Hugo, 'A profile of South Australia's Aboriginal Population', Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1990, p.8.

Indeed they argue there is even evidence in some areas of an increase.

IMMIGRANT FERTILITY

A number of studies have established differential fertility among some groups of immigrants but, overall, there has been convergence between these groups, and between them and the Australian-born over the post-war period. In 1986, as Table 2 shows, there was only a small difference between Australian-born women and all overseas-born women. However Table 2 also shows that there is a great deal of diversity in the patterns of fertility between different birthplace groups; the TFR ranges from 4.3 for the Lebanese and 3.2 for the Filipinos to 1.6 for the USSR-born and 1.8 for the South African-born and the Hong Kong-born.

FERTILITY BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP

There is also the difficult question of fertility differences between various socio-economic groups. We lack appropriate data to examine their full nature and extent but it is worth exploring the following hypothesis:

Whereas the fertility decline in Australia is associated with a convergence of most fertility differentials, in recent years the opposite has been the case for socio-economic differentials. While the fertility decline has been experienced right across the socio-economic spectrum, better-off groups of women on average have smaller numbers of children than other women and are disproportionately represented among those who remain childless.

While this cannot be fully tested until further evidence becomes available, it was clear in the early 1980s that there was an inverse relationship between fertility and socio-economic status in Australia.² Has this differential widened resulting in a greater proportion of all children born being born into poor families than was the

Table 2: Total fertility rates for birthplace groups, 1986

Birthplace	TFR
Australia	1.925
Overseas	2.034
Total	1.923
Overseas - English speaking	1.935
Overseas - non-English speaking	2.134
Asia	2.459
China	2.483
Cyprus	2.381
Hong Kong	1.756
India	1.900
Lebanon	4.288
Malaysia	1.882
Philippines	3.161
Sri Lanka	1.742
Turkey	2.800
Vietnam	2.195
Oceania	1.916
New Zealand	1.782
Africa	1.948
Egypt	2.257
South Africa	1.790
America	1.974
Canada	2.004
USA	1.960
Europe	1.940
Germany	1.734
Greece	1.846
Italy	1.834
Malta	2.330
Netherlands	2.023
Poland	1.786
UK-Ireland	1.993
USSR	1.594
Yugoslavia	1.937

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census 86 - Australian Families and Households*, Cat. No. 2506.0, Canberra, 1989, p. 63.

case previously? A crucial group here are the women who remain childless. It appears that, more than in the past, this group is made up of high-income women, some living alone and others as couples, who have opted for childlessness at least in part because of the incompatibility that they see between childbearing and successful careers.

Some tentative evidence is advanced in Table 3 to suggest that a greater proportion of children born in the last decade are being born into less well-off families than was previously the case. Table 3 shows the average number of children which women in various age and income categories reported having had by the 1981 and 1986 censuses. Unfortunately the income categories for 1981 and 1986 in Table 3 are not directly comparable. This means that it is not possible to establish definitively whether differentials in fertility based on income grew between 1981 and 1986, but there is a clear gradation downward in the number of children as family income increases. And the broad categories do show a widening fertility gap between the two census dates.

Additional evidence is presented in Table 4. This uses the same income categories as Table 3 and shows the proportion of women in each five year age group who were childless at the time of the 1981 and 1986 censuses. (The patterns are striking although the problems of comparability are the same as for Table 3.) In low-income families there was a large reduction in the proportion of women who were childless between the 1981 and 1986 censuses, especially in the younger age-group categories. This of course is working in the opposite direction to the trend in the total population. In contrast, more women in the higher income families were childless in

1986, especially in the younger age-group categories.

It is disappointing that the question about 'issue' (number of children ever-born) was dropped from the 1991 census. This will prevent us from testing whether or not this diverging pattern of fertility between socio-economic groups is continuing. But a more detailed analysis of other data relevant to the question suggest that the trend to higher fertility in low-income groups is well established. For example, work on the 1981 and 1986 census results shows that high fertility in Sydney is increasingly concentrated in the lower-income western outer suburbs. Similar patterns were observed in other cities.³

The situation in the United States has reached a stage where there are now concerns being expressed that the fact that bright women are failing to have children is a phenomenon which

will reduce national productivity and diminish the quality of the national gene pool.⁴ This argument has uncomfortable overtones of eugenics but it cannot be denied that, in Australia, children from low-income backgrounds do not get the same opportunity to develop their potential by attending higher education institutions as do those from high-income backgrounds.

Increasingly in Australia income has become concentrated in the hands of families with few or no children, while those experiencing financial difficulty are more and more likely to be those with children (both in one and two-parent families).⁵ There is a real danger that Australia will follow the path of the United States where it is now recognised that, unless public policy offsets some of these trends, there will be greater polarisation economically and psychologically among the young adults of the late 1990s and

Table 3: Australia: Average number of children born to all women by age and family income, 1981 and 1986

Age of women	Family Income p.a.						Per cent difference between low and high income	
	Less than \$15,000	Less than \$12,000	\$15,001 - \$40,000	\$12,001 - \$26,000	\$40,001 or more	\$26,001 or more	1986	1981
	1986	1981	1986	1981	1986	1981	1986	1981
15-19	0.17	0.12	0.03	0.04	0.01	0.00	-	-
20-24	0.96	0.64	0.39	0.45	0.05	0.10	1800	540
25-29	1.66	1.52	1.24	1.40	0.39	0.72	326	111
30-34	2.08	2.11	1.98	2.10	1.35	1.69	54	25
35-39	2.31	2.48	2.23	2.44	2.00	2.33	16	6
40-44	2.37	2.80	2.32	2.78	2.39	2.67	-8	5
45-49	2.44	3.03	2.56	2.83	2.78	2.95	-12	3
50-54	2.69	3.03	2.61	2.89	2.91	2.81	-8	8
55-59	2.68	2.75	2.67	2.60	2.87	2.71	-7	15
60+	2.34	2.50	2.51	2.58	2.69	2.75	-13	-9
Total	2.05	2.18	1.76	1.95	1.55	1.77	32.2	27.2

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 1981 and 1986 censuses, one per cent sample tapes

Note: Not stated responses were assumed to be zero parity.

Table 4: Australia: proportion of women remaining childless by age and family income, 1981 and 1986

Age of mother	Family Income p.a.					
	Less than \$15,000 1986	Less than \$12,000 1981	\$15,001-\$40,000 1986	\$12,000-\$26,000 1981	\$40,000 or more 1986	\$26,000 or more 1981
15-19	83.8	88.5	97.4	96.5	99.7	99.8
20-24	31.3	57.3	71.3	69.0	95.7	92.8
25-29	13.2	25.8	31.3	27.5	75.4	59.4
30-34	7.0	14.5	10.2	11.1	31.8	23.0
35-39	6.8	11.6	7.6	8.9	12.5	8.9
40-44	8.2	11.5	8.7	7.2	6.2	6.7
45-49	13.0	9.7	8.3	8.3	4.5	5.6
50-54	8.6	10.2	6.5	8.6	3.0	7.3
55-59	8.8	12.2	7.1	10.1	5.4	7.6
60+	11.1	15.9	10.7	2.2	5.8	7.5

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 1981 and 1986 censuses, one per cent sample tapes

early 2000s. A minority will grow up with economic and educational advantages while many will come from larger families with fewer economic and educational advantages.

References

- ¹ A. Gray & H. Tesfaghiorghis, 'Social indicators of the Aboriginal population of Australia', *Centre for Aboriginal Policy Research Discussion Paper No. 18*, Australian National University, Canberra, 1991, p. 10.
- ² G. Hugo, *Australia's Changing Population: Trends and Implications*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, p. 63.

- ³ G. Hugo, 'Australia's contemporary and future fertility and mortality trends, differentials and implications' in National Population Council, *Population Issues and Australia's Future*, Consultants Reports, Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1992, pp. 661-62.
- ⁴ R.J. Hernstein, 'IQ and falling birth rates', *The Atlantic Monthly*, May, 1989, pp. 73-79.
- ⁵ See P. Saunders, 'Employment growth and poverty: an analysis of Australian experience, 1983-1990', *Social Policy Research Centre Discussion Papers, No 254*, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 1990, p. 35.