



Low birth rates a threat to economy, study shows

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OTTAWA - Throughout the developed world, lowered birth rates and family breakdown will have a devastating effect on the global economy and the welfare state's viability, says an international study released Oct 3.

"On current trends, we face a world of rapidly aging and declining populations, of few children — many of them without the benefit of siblings and a stable, two-parent home — of lonely seniors living on meagre public support, of cultural and economic stagnation," says the study, entitled "The Empty Cradle: How Contemporary Trends Undermine the Global Economy."

Co-sponsored by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (IMFC) and pro-family groups in the United States, the Philippines, Spain and Colombia, the study shows even developing countries such as Iran, Lebanon, Chile, Thailand and South Korea have seen their lifetime births per woman shrink to fewer than two from averages as high as six. Canada's birth rate is only 1.5 children per woman.

While fewer children are born overall, increasingly higher numbers are born "out of wedlock," either to single mothers or co-habiting parents whose relationships studies show are less stable than those of married couples, the researchers say. In Canada, 25 per cent of children are born outside of marriage, but in Quebec that figure rises to 63 per cent.

The study examines how urbanization, higher education for women leaving them options outside of marriage, the high cost of raising children and tendencies to delay child bearing to years when fertility naturally falls all play a role. The study also notes that social-security systems and private pension plans "paradoxically provide incentives to remain childless or limit family size."

"In advanced economies, citizens no longer must have children and raise them successfully in order to secure support in old age," the study says. "Instead, the elderly in developed countries have largely been able to rely on health and retirement benefits paid for by other peoples' children: that is, working-age adults who are currently paying the taxes for public pensions."

But as the birth rates fall, the study shows, there will be fewer and fewer of these workers to support the needs of a growing cohort of retiring seniors.

The study also examines the role of culture and concepts of the good life.

“Today there remains in the individual countries of Europe, and of the West generally, a strong and growing correlation between conservative religious values and larger-than-average family size.”

In France and Spain, for example, practising Catholic women have “significantly more children” than non-religious women.

“Much the same story can be found throughout the globe, where the religiously observant typically have markedly higher birth rates than does the rest of the population.”

The study even examines the role that watching soap operas — especially in developing countries like Brazil — plays a role in reducing family size by portraying lifestyles uninhibited by traditional family constraints.

The study predicts that the size of the working age population will shrink globally, even in Europe despite high levels of immigration.

The study offers several public policy suggestions to promote strong families and higher fertility levels. It urges the promotion of family enterprises and entrepreneurship through payroll tax breaks to small businesses and rigorous enforcement of anti-trust laws; it calls for increased income security for young couples; it suggests looking for ways to make it easier for women to re-enter university or employment if they take a break to have children; it recommends building family friendly communities with affordable housing and low-cost transit; honouring the choices of all women, including those who choose to stay at home to raise children; and it urges support for marriage and responsible parenthood and the promotion of thrift.

The study also recommends a cleanup of global media.

“From pop stars’ efforts to push the sexual envelope, to Hollywood films, violent video games and the ubiquitous Internet pornography, the global media sends a strong message to young people around the world that a family centred way of life is passé.”

The authors write that mass media producers, from movie makers to advertisers, “need to catch up with the new demographic reality and become aware that we now live in a world in which strong families can no longer be taken for granted — much less endlessly mocked and trivialized.”

The study also recommends respect for religion’s role in society.

“Childlessness and small families are increasingly common among secularists,” the study says.

The authors recognize their suggestions “are nowhere near adequate” to solve the coming demographic challenges, but they indicate a philosophical approach is needed, “one that emphasizes the critical role of the intact, nurturing and financially secure family in sustaining and renewing the human, social and financial capital of aging societies around the globe.”