

# 10 Fertility rates hit a record low (again)

Women in Canada now have fewer children on average than in past generations. This shift can be seen in the decline in the total fertility rate (average number of children per woman) over the past half-century. After reaching an all-time high of 3.94 children per woman in 1959<sup>1</sup> during the peak of the baby boom, the total fertility rate (TFR) declined sharply until the late 1980s.<sup>2</sup> It then fluctuated over the next 20 years until starting another long-term decline in 2009 that continues to this day (except for a small temporary increase in 2021). The most recent data show a new record low was reached in 2022 at 1.33 children per woman.

The reasons for this long-term decline are complex. They include the growing participation of women in higher education and in the paid labour force, increased effectiveness and availability of contraception, and the decreased influence of religion on daily life.<sup>1</sup> The percentage of women aged 25 to 54 with a postsecondary certificate/diploma more than doubled from 28.3% in 1990<sup>3</sup> to 74.5% in 2021.<sup>4</sup> During the same period, the labour force participation rate of women aged 25 to 54 increased from 75.5% to 84.2%.<sup>5</sup>

People's decisions about childbearing can be affected by the uncertainty resulting from major events or changes in broader social, political, environmental, or health circumstances. For example, survey data from April to June 2021 showed that 23.5% of the population aged 15 to 49 changed their fertility plans because of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Nearly one in five (19.2%) said they now wanted to have fewer children than previously planned, or to have a baby later than previously planned.

Declining fertility rates also coincide with changing patterns in the age of mothers.<sup>1</sup> The average age of first-time mothers increased from 26.2 years in 1994 to a record high of 29.4 years in 2019.<sup>7</sup> While age at first birth declined for all age groups under 30, it increased for those aged 30 and older.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, fertility among young women aged 15 to 19 dropped from 25.1 per 1,000 live births in 1994 to 4.4 per 1,000 live births by 2022.<sup>2</sup>

Fertility rates vary across the country. Since it was created in 1999, Nunavut had had the highest total fertility rate in Canada (2.23 children per woman in 2022), followed by Saskatchewan (1.69), Northwest Territories, and Quebec (1.49 each).<sup>2</sup>



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The lowest fertility rates in 2022 were in British Columbia (1.11) and Nova Scotia (1.18).

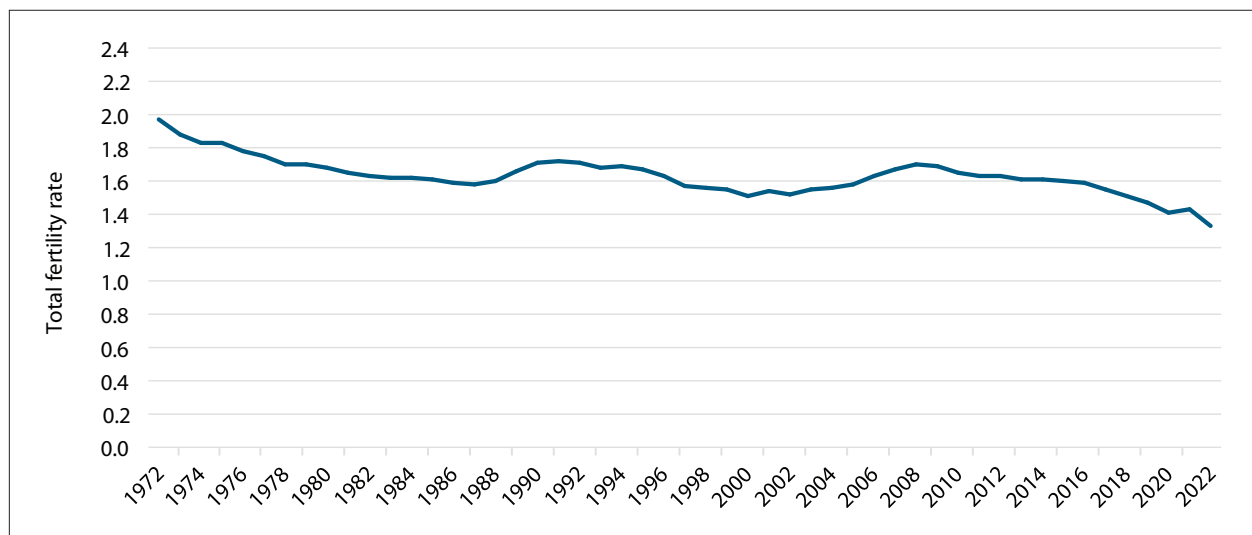
## Why this matters

Policymakers and researchers closely monitor fertility rates because major shifts can affect families, the labour market, and the economy. For families, fewer children mean there are fewer people to provide care and support within and across generations. It also means that intergenerational transfers of wealth (e.g., inheritances, family support for

major life expenses, etc.) could be increasingly concentrated in fewer hands in the coming years.

Smaller numbers of babies being born will result in fewer workers entering the labour market in the future. Therefore, the labour market could become increasingly reliant on immigration to maintain a balance of older and younger workers. Tracking fertility rates can inform long-term policy and program development, such as immigration targets, family allowances, subsidized childcare, pension plans, and compassionate care benefits.

**Average number of children per woman (total fertility rate), Canada, 1972–2022**



Sources: Statistics Canada. (2018, May 17). Fertility: Fewer children, older moms. *Canadian Megatrends*.<sup>1</sup>

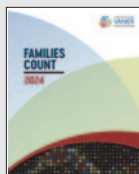
Statistics Canada. (2023, September 27). Crude birth rate, age-specific fertility rates and total fertility rate (live births).<sup>2</sup>



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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. (2018, May 17). Fertility: Fewer children, older moms. *Canadian Megatrends*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2014002-eng.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. (2023, September 27). Table 13-10-0418-01 Crude birth rate, age-specific fertility rates and total fertility rate (live births). <https://doi.org/10.25318/1310041801-eng>
- <sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada. (2018). Table 1 Distribution of women and men, by age group and highest level of educational attainment, Canada, 1990 and 2009. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11542/tbl/tbl001-eng.htm>
- <sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. (2022, December 9). Table 98-10-0384-01 Highest level of education by census year: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations. <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810038401-eng>
- <sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada. (2023, January 5). Table 14-10-0327-01 Labour force characteristics by sex and detailed age group, annual. <https://doi.org/10.25318/1410032701-eng>
- <sup>6</sup> Fostik, A., & Galbraith, N. (2021, December 1). Changes in fertility intentions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *StatCan COVID-19: Data to Insights for a Better Canada*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2021001/article/00041-eng.htm>
- <sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada. (2020, September 29). Births, 2019. *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200929/dq200929e-eng.htm>



*Families Count 2024* is a publication of the Vanier Institute of the Family that provides accurate and timely information on families and family life in Canada. Written in plain language, it features chapters on diverse topics and trends that have shaped families in Canada. Its four sections (Family Structure, Family Work, Family Identity, and Family Wellbeing) are guided by the [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#).

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