

US showing its age as birth rate declines

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Fertility rates in the United States have hit a record low, raising concerns that there could be insufficient adults of working age left to support an ageing population.

The number of births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44, known as the general fertility rate, dropped to 62.0 in 2016, from 62.5 in 2015.

Total births also declined, with fewer than 4 million babies born in the country last year. Some of the fall has been blamed on a steep decline in the number of teenage mothers.

There were 20.3 babies born per 1,000 teenagers aged 15 to 19, last year – this is 9 per cent lower than the figure for the same demographic in 2015 and the lowest rate for the US since records began in 1909.

Much as in western Europe, American women are delaying having children until their late 30s and 40s but the

surge in births from older women has not made up for the decline among twentysomethings.

Economists fear that long-term changes caused by a lower birth rate could lead to insufficient adults of working age. The US faces an ageing population as the generation of baby boomers nears retirement. By 2050, more than a fifth of Americans will be aged over 65.

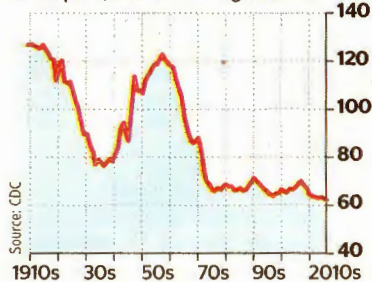
The picture is not as troubling as in Europe, where 20 per cent of the population in some countries is already over 65, and the continental birth rate average is 1.58 children.

Donna Strobino, a demographer at Johns Hopkins University, said that the decline meant “we might actually have fewer children in poverty so I don’t think it will all be doom and gloom”.

According to the Pew Research Centre, a Washington think tank, 40 per cent of American women want more children. However, pressures on

US fertility rate

Births per 1,000 women aged 15–44



working mothers and the rising cost of bringing up a child have discouraged couples from having a bigger family. The cost of childcare has surged and there is no statutory maternity pay in the US – it is solely disbursed at the discretion of an employer.

A government report suggests that bringing up a child born in 2015 to the age of 17 will cost a middle-class family

an average of \$233,110. Richer families spend more. American employers are not required to offer parental leave to workers, though President Trump’s daughter, Ivanka, is leading an initiative to change that.

Politicians in low birth-rate countries such as Germany say that more generous family policies have encouraged couples to have more children. Angela Merkel, the chancellor, has also sought to offset a low birth rate by opening the doors to migrants, many of whom are Muslim and traditionally have larger families.

Government campaigns to encourage births have had mixed results. In 2012, the Singaporean government joined forces with Mentos, the mint company, to create an advert released on a bank holiday to encourage citizens to “do their civic duty” and “make a baby”. The fertility rate in Singapore has since fallen from 1.29 that year to 1.20 in 2016.

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