

Baby boom turns to bust as half of countries face population slump

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Almost half of all countries are facing a "baby bust", with insufficient numbers of children being born to maintain their population size.

The figures, published in *The Lancet*, reveal a "remarkable" global decline in fertility rates, researchers said.

The report said the total fertility rate that a population would need to replace itself from generation to generation,

assuming no migration, is about 2.05. Today 91 out of 195 countries have fertility rates below this.

The trend is thought to be driven by improvements in infant mortality, better maternal education and access to contraception. In Britain increasing numbers of people say that they have chosen not to have children, or to restrict the size of their family because of environmental concerns.

The study published this week looked

at fertility trends in every country between 1950 and 2017. Overall, women in 1950 had an average of 4.7 children in their lifetime, falling to 2.4 last year. In Britain today the average woman has 1.7 children. In 1950 the figure was 2.2, rising to a high of 2.8 in 1963.

There is huge variation between countries, with the average in Niger, west Africa, 7.1. In Cyprus, women will generally have just one child.

"These statistics represent both a

'baby boom' for some nations and a 'baby bust' for others," said Christopher Murray, the report's author and director of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington in the US.

"The lower rates of women's fertility clearly reflect not only access to, and availability of reproductive health services, but also many women choosing to delay or forgo giving birth, as well as having more opportunities for education and employment."

Dr Murray told the BBC that the trend was "remarkable", adding: "We will soon be transitioning to a point where societies are grappling with a declining population. Think of all the profound social and economic consequences of a society structured like that, with more grandparents than grandchildren."

"I think Japan is very aware of this — they're facing declining populations. But I don't think it has hit many countries in the West, because low fertility has been compensated with migration. At a global level there is no migration solution."

The report, part of the Global Burden of Diseases series, said that countries facing population decline had options including policies to encourage women to have more children, which have limited impact, liberalising their approach to immigration, frequently "accompanied by social and political challenges", or increasing the retirement age.

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Case study

Alistair Currie, 55, lives in Brighton with his wife, Claire, 39, and son Alex, 8. He has one sister, and says growing up, "I probably thought I'd have two children."

However, after Alex was born, the costs of looking after a baby put them off having another. "We lived in London, where childcare is particularly expensive and were both working full time and it felt like there was no rush," he said. "As time went on, we never felt we were missing a second child, or that Alex was missing a brother or sister. Alex is a happy, sociable boy, so we've certainly never felt he needs a sibling on that score."

Mr Currie works for the charity Population Matters, which promotes smaller families on environmental grounds, and says the couple were increasingly conscious that "when Alex came into the world we were putting another mouth to feed on the planet, another carbon emitter".

He added: "Alex has said he doesn't want a sibling. Although he knows about my job, and it's a topic that gets discussed at home, I think it is more likely he doesn't want to share his toys."

