



Demographic Profiles : China

China Demographic Profile Part 4: Government Policies

China's government sees overpopulation as its greatest demographic threat. An aging population, however, could pose new challenges that force China to relax its one-child policy and protect the elderly.



Chinese newlyweds receive their marriage certificates in Guangzhou under the new national marriage registry regulation which took effect in 2003. Chinese cannot get married and divorced without certification letters from their work units (Photo: Reuters)

Facing massive population growth and famine, China's communist government introduced its first birth control policies in the 1950s, increasing access to contraception and abortion. After several failures, a third wave of population policies introduced birth quotas. During the 1970s, the average number of children per women dropped from 5.8 to 2.7, the biggest recorded drop of a fertility rate in history.

Despite this success, party officials opted for a more extreme course and introduced the one-child policy in 1979. This ushered in the most coercive period of birth control policies. According to an official report from 2007, these family planning policies have prevented over 400 million births over the last 30 years.

Late marriage

Promotion of late marriage has long been one of the less coercive measures to reduce birth rates. Chinese women rarely have children out of wedlock. Marrying later thus often means having smaller families. Enforcement, however, became stricter throughout the 1970s, when couples in rural areas could not get permission to marry until the man was 25 and the woman 23 years old. In urban areas, men and women had to wait until they were 28 and 25, respectively.



Infographic (click on the image to enlarge)

China's boomtowns are aging. See more (Graphic: Allianz)

More recently, the rules have been relaxed so that couples can now marry when the man is 22 and the woman 20. Nevertheless, the government maintains that early marriage remains a problem in rural areas, jeopardizing family planning goals.

Birth control

China's population policies have been relaxed since the 1980s. How strictly birth control policies are enforced now depends a lot on where a couple lives. For those in large cities, "family planning" still means one-child only. In less densely populated towns and rural areas, couples may be allowed a second child. In ethnic minority regions, three or more children are acceptable.

The authorities have also started allowing couples where both the husband and wife are only children to have two children, to spread the future burden of taking care of two parents and four grandparents. In rural areas, exceptions are also granted to couples where only one partner is an only child.

Birth quotas are enforced with carrots and sticks. Families with only one child receive a small monthly stipend. All "authorized" children enter the hukou household registration system, entitling them to free education and preferential employment. Families must pay for the education and welfare benefits for "unauthorized" children. In addition, employers might punish rule-breaking parents.

Chinese officials say they remain focused on restraining population growth, targeting a peak population of 1.5 billion by mid-century. In 2007, the National Population and Family Planning Commission even warned there could be a "population rebound" because more affluent Chinese can afford to ignore the birth quotas.

Social security

Despite this fears, experts like sociologist Yong Cai think that a two-child policy might become necessary in the long run to address a new challenge: an aging China. Loosening birth control policies, Cai argues, could take pressure from China's rudimentary social security systems and "put the responsibility back on the family to take care of the elderly."

For centuries, strong family ties have ensured the well-being of the elderly. But with large rural-to-urban migration and shrinking family sizes, traditional safety nets are disappearing. Beijing acknowledges the problem, and has established an old-age insurance system in urban areas. However, 60 percent of China's elderly live in rural areas. The government has only just started looking into providing old-age insurance for them. In 2003, experimental work began on a new cooperative medical insurance that could cover 40 to 50 percent of costs.

The problem, argues Yong Cai, is unrealistic expectations. "People think

that if they pay every month the government will look after them when they are old. But when we ask them what benefits they will get, they don't know. It could be 20 to 30 dollars a month, which is nothing," he says.

Migration Policy

The hukou registration system is also supposed to regulate migration. By disqualifying migrants from housing and education benefits available to registered urban residents, the government had, in vain, hoped to prevent cities from being swamped. But people keep coming drawn by the prospect of jobs unavailable in the hinterland.

But with the household registration system discriminating migrants, the gap between rich and poor is growing further. China's leaders have been discussing separating housing and education benefits from resident status. However, local governments, who have to pay for these new residents, have voiced their concerns.

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