



# The Legacy of Past Childbearing Decisions



This paper was prepared by Bill Boddington of the Population Statistics unit of Statistics New Zealand as part of the article series: Structural Change and the 65+ Population.

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## Childbearing patterns

Each generation tends to have a childbearing pattern that shapes their community and society. The shift to delaying parenting over the last four decades will have lasting effects. The generations who turn 65 in the next few years will have, on average, a very different family dynamic than those generations, born just 20 years later, who turn 65 around 2030.

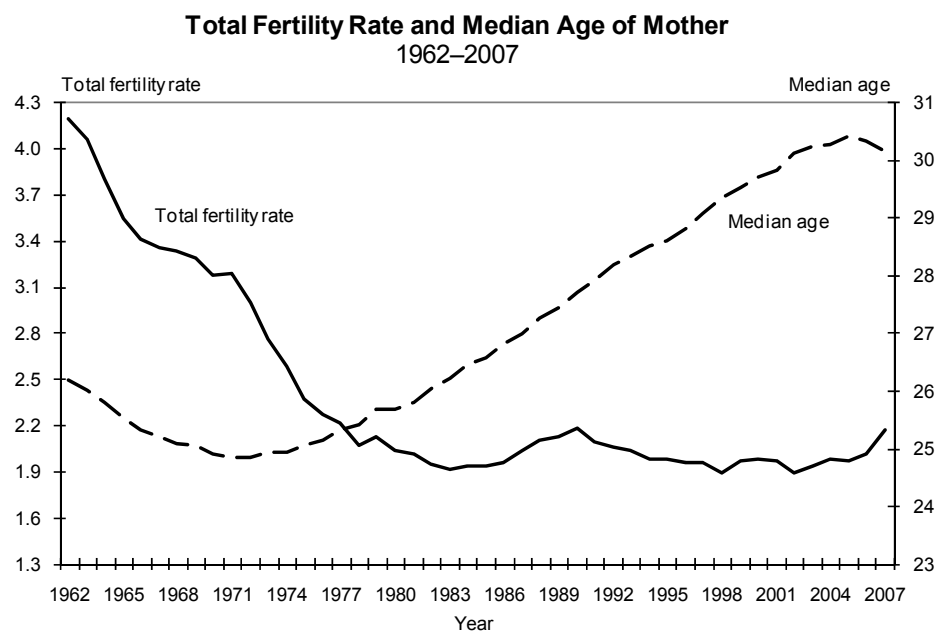
Increased affluence potentially means greater independence at all ages. However, for most people, family remains an important source of social contact and emotionally satisfying relationships in old age (Lye, 1996). Shanas (1979) notes that "family help, particularly in time of illness, exchange of services, and regular visits are common among old people and their children and relatives whether or not these live under a single roof".

When considering childbearing patterns, it is important to note that an individual's experiences can vary considerably from the norms for their birth cohort (a group of people born during a particular period or year). For example, the current trend for delaying childbearing is not universal. Despite half of women now completing their childbearing after the age of 30, some women continue to start, and even complete, their families in their teens. Others will spread their childbearing over several decades. Therefore, experiences are diverse even within the same cohort of women.

## Fertility of the post-World War II generation

The late 1960s and early 1970s was a period of young and near universal marriage for adults aged in their 20s and 30s. By 1971, the average age for first-time grooms had fallen to just 23.7 years and to just 21.2 years for first-time brides. These newly-weds were part of the post-WWII cohorts born in the late 1940s and early 1950s. On average, women in these cohorts had completed half their childbearing (1.3 births of their average 2.6 children) before age 25 and had completed three-quarters (2.0 children) by age 29 years. Males on average would have fathered more than half their children before age 28 and would have completed three-quarters by age 31.

Figure 1



Approximately 10 percent of these women remained childless; however, indications are that this was primarily because of the couples' infertility rather than their choice (Boddington, Didham, 2007). It is not possible to state with certainty what proportion of these infertile couples adopted children; however, it seems that a significant proportion did adopt. The almost 4,000 adoptions recorded in 1971 equated to more than 6 percent of births registered in 1971. More than 80 percent of the children were adopted by families they were not related to (1972 Yearbook).

### Model family 1

Helen was born in 1946. Like many women of her generation, she married her husband, Bob, in her early twenties and by the time she reached 30 she had three children aged 2, 6, and 8 years old.

Helen turned 60 a couple of years ago. Her parents attended her birthday party, but only Bob's mother attended (Bob's father died two years ago). Now a proud grandmother, Helen fussed over her two grandchildren. She is hoping for more – now that all her children are in steady partnerships – but as she says, “kids these days leave it to the 11th hour”.

Bob retires soon and they are planning a trip to Europe after his mum's 90th birthday. Leaving Bob's mum is a bit of a worry because Bob's brother lives so far away. Even though they aren't in good health, Helen's parents will be OK, her sister and brother will keep an eye on them.

Helen and Bob are planning to move to a retirement home when upkeep on the family home gets too much. Little do they know, they'll still be in the family home for Bob's 90th birthday. That'll be a great day, surrounded by their children (all aged in their 60s now), eight grandchildren (seven of them bring their partners) and six great-grandchildren (so far).

**Note:** Model family 1 is fictional.

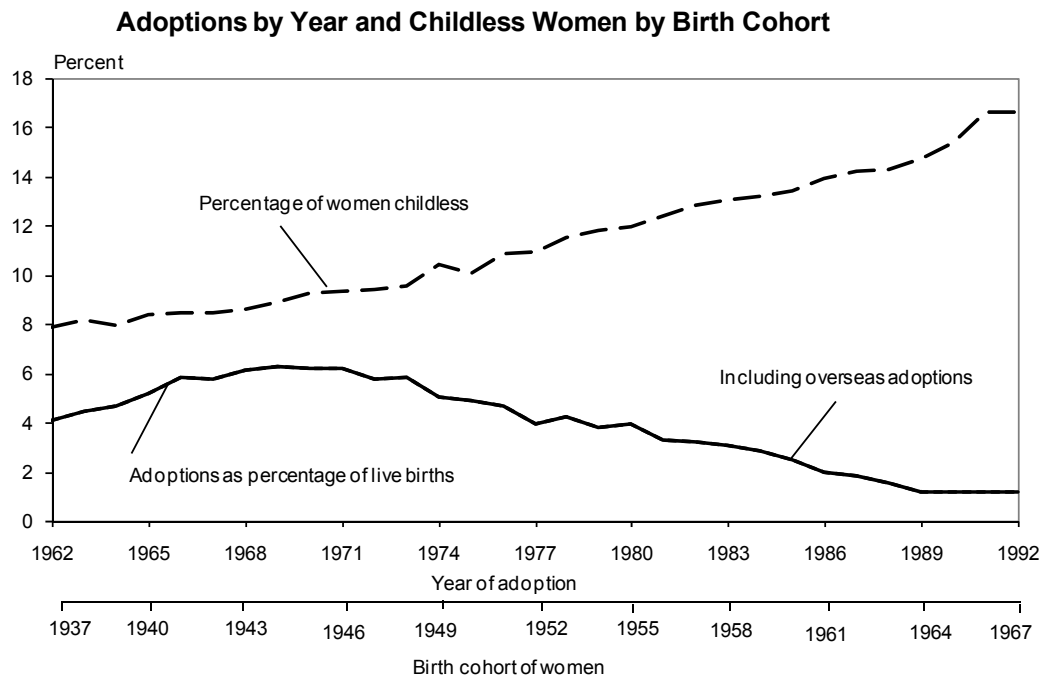
These cohorts, born shortly after WWII, will start turning 65 from 2010. By this stage, their children will typically be in their late 30s and early 40s and their grandchildren will generally be aged 0–15 years. Their own parents, if still alive, will probably be in their mid to late 90s. Given their parents had on average three children, there are likely to be an average of approximately six adults in the next generation (including offspring and their partners) to share any support needs. Although it should not be forgotten that partners have their own parents, the survivorship rate for their parent's cohort means that relatively few families will contain four ninety-year-olds and support will be potentially shared with a number of other siblings. And so, post-WWII cohorts are well placed to help their children with childrearing and to support their ageing parents. By the time these cohorts reach their mid 80s (around 2030) and their role has shifted from net-support providers (ie the support provided to others generally exceeds that received) to net-support receivers, their children will have reached their late 50s and early 60s and their grandchildren will be aged 20–35 years. Coming from an average family size of 2.5 children, almost all will have children (either biological or adopted), most will have adult grandchildren, and even though they will be in their 80s, many will still have a sibling or siblings.

## Fertility of the 1965 birth cohort

Those born twenty years after the end of WWII, as birth numbers peaked, had smaller families, delayed childbearing, or in some cases, simply did not have children or a partner. The social imperative to marry and have children experienced less than twenty years earlier had dissipated by the early 1980s – society's interests were not seen as overshadowing an individual's ambitions. Among other changes influencing family formation were better contraception, reduced job security, more time in education, and increased urbanisation. Cohabiting had also become an accepted alternative to marriage and the number

of divorces and relationship breakups rose. Women born in 1965 were four years older than their 1940s counterparts by the time they had completed three-quarters of their childbearing. Moreover, they had on average 11 percent fewer offspring.

Figure 2



Indications show more than 1 in 20 of the 1965 cohort made life choices that resulted in them not having children; coupled with infertility, this resulted in approximately 15 percent of the cohort remaining childless. Decisions this cohort made about travel, career, education, and partnering contributed to childlessness resulting from quiescence (ie they didn't decide to have or not have children but life choices meant they didn't), but there were also those who did consciously choose to remain childless. For those who were involuntarily childless, there were limited options for adopting children. Previously, the proportion of babies given up for adoption almost matched the proportion of childless women (see figure 2). By the late 1980s and early 1990s, few adoptions took place and two-thirds of those were placements with family members (in 1970 only one-fifth were placed with relatives). Particularly since the early 1990s, some couples have resorted to seeking to adopt foreign-born children; however, numbers remain very small.

The 1965 birth cohorts will turn 65 in 2030. At this stage, those who had children may still be waiting for grandchildren. This is because their children will typically still be aged in their 30s. In 2002, the 30–34 year age group overtook other ages to become the most common age for childbearing. Just 25 years earlier, the commonest age group was ten years younger (20–24 years). By 2030, the parents of the 1965 birth cohort will probably be just reaching their 90s. Given their parents had on average two and a half children, there are likely to be on average five adults in the next generation (including offspring and their partners) to share any support needs. This compares with six adults for post-WWII cohorts. Moreover, unlike cohorts born twenty years earlier, mortality will not have thinned their parent's generations to such an extent. Families will be much more likely to contain four ninety-year-olds and support will be shared by fewer siblings, who are themselves less likely to have a partner to aid them. Unlike earlier cohorts, they are more likely to be balancing caring for grandchildren and supporting their ageing parents at the same time. Nevertheless, although fewer siblings will share any burden, it should be noted that 15 percent of this cohort remained childless and 20 percent of their children will not produce grandchildren. The combined effect of two generations with significant childlessness is that 1 in 5

(approximately 20 percent) of the 1965 birth cohort is unlikely to have biological grandchildren, although, a proportion will be grandparents via step-children.

By the time the 1965 birth cohort reaches their mid 80s (around 2050), and their role has shifted from net-support provider to net-support receiver, their children will be reaching their 50s and their grandchildren will be aged 10–25 years. Thus, many will have children who are still managing career and teenage families. Nevertheless, 1 in 7 of the 1965 birth cohort will not have any children to call on for support or advice. Moreover, of those with children, approximately 1 in 3 will have at least one child who is themselves childless.

### **Model family 2**

Sue was born in 1965. She met her partner Wirimu at university. They always planned to marry and have kids but, like many of their friends, waited until things were right. Besides, they both wanted to travel a little before they settled down. With the mortgage and their careers finally under control, Sue was 31 before the first of their two children arrived. Both of Sue's and Wirimu's parents helped out with childcare. Of course it helped that Sue's brother was still single, Wirimu's brother only had one child, and that Sue's and Wirimu's grandparents were still active and in good health.

Sue and Wirimu still sometimes talk about marrying, but this will never happen. Over the coming years they will drift apart and separate. At age 65, Sue will have three grandchildren (her new partner Dean won't have kids of his own). Sue will still be working full-time, but with both her and Dean's parents in their 90s, and the grandchildren not yet at primary school, at times this will be challenging.

At age 90, Sue is still waiting to become a great-grandmother. Her two children, now aged in their late 50's, gave her three grandchildren. The grandkids are all in now their late twenties, so they might start families soon.

**Note:** Model family 2 is fictional.

## **Implications for the future**

The timing of childbearing and family size have a profound effect on the ageing experience. Successive generations have exhibited quite different norms in terms of typical family size and age at childbearing. Added to this, there have been changes in partnering patterns, the labour market, savings, and education. These changes are likely to result in profound differences between each birth cohort's social, emotional, and financial wellbeing, which in turn have implications for 'ageing in place' as opposed, for example, to moving into residential care.

In contrast to those in their 50s and 60s, those in their 30s and 40s have a much greater diversity of family and household experience. They're having fewer children later in life, are more likely to remain childless, to divorce, re-partner, or remain single. At advanced ages, this is likely to mean more atypical living arrangements (eg living with flatmates, boarding, living with siblings, etc). For those 30- and 40-year-olds with more traditional family structures, having families later in life means that their children are likely to be balancing careers and children when they reach advanced old age.

Those planning for or providing services to the elderly are probably aware that, because of population ageing, their potential client base will grow rapidly in coming years. They are probably less aware of the inevitable changes in the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the burgeoning older population. Not only will family support networks change, but also needs and expectations in regard to health, work, housing, recreation, and security. Planning or policy-making based purely on population growth will carry significant risk.

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