Migrants' cultural shift slows the birth of a new generation

THE MOTHER LOAD
Fertility rate of mums in Australia based on their country of birth

Median age at childbirth for mums in Australia based on their own country of birth

EXCLUSIVE
RICK MORTON
SOCIAL AFFAIRS WRITER

Immigrants from the Middle East and Africa are having more babies in Australia than other migrants and locally born mothers, propelling a flagging fertility rate that has slowed to a crawl in the past decade.

Mothers from Lebanon are doing the heavy lifting, having an average four children each, despite the fertility rate in their home country being lower than Australia's, a fact experts have trouble explaining.

The West is living through a "cultural shift" and migrants from Europe and other nations have the lowest birth rates, dragging the total fertility rate down.

The birthrate for Australian-born mothers in Australia is 1.96, slightly above the national average of 1.84.

The highest birthrate in Australia by nationality belongs to Lebanese mothers, who have an average 4.03 children — an anomalous result, according to experts, because the birthrate in Lebanon is only 1.74.

Laotian mothers in Australia are having an average of 3.5 children, slightly above the national average.

The story the Australian Bureau of Statistics wants to tell is what happens to second- and third-generation migrants. The ABS figures from 2016 are expected to be released late this year.

"The big question of course, in terms of the Australian family, is the second generation: are they taking on Australian values, whatever that means, or are they tacking on the values of their ancestral homeland? They are usually closer to their host population," says Professor Rayner.

If you are living in a rural area, you tend to have more children. If you live in cities, you tend to have fewer children. If you seek higher education, you tend to have fewer children. If you do not, you tend to have more. All these things come together.

The Australian National University's School of Demography says, "Migration is a short-term phenomenon. You are not going to get the same Lebanese migrants with the same behaviours for the next 20 or 30 years."

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![Graph showing fertility rates by country of birth](image)

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The birthrate for Australian-born mothers in Australia is 1.86, slightly above the national average of 1.84.

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Latin American mothers in Australia are having an average 3.5 children, Syrians 3.4 and Samoans 3.26. But these figures are book-ended by Estonians, Italians, Singaporeans and Lithuanians who all have birthrates of 1.1 or below.

Among the official statistics there are stories of mothers who never planned to have six children, such as Jody Scott-Greer, and others like Emma Carter who want three but are unsure if they will make it as the cost of living rises.

Ms Carter, 30, worked for a decade as a property valuer before taking time out to have children. She lost her job after the Australian birthrate was 3.54, but that trend went in one direction until 2001 when the rate hit 1.74, well below the replacement level of 2.0.

That rose again slightly in the years after — then Treasurer Peter Costello in 2004 implored parents to have a third child for the country — but has stagnated ever since.

`We are going through a big cultural shift in Australia, all the Western countries are," said James Raymer, head professor at the Australian National University School of Demography.

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Her dream is to have more children. "I think the cost of living is behind this drive down in the birthrate."