HONG KONG GENERATIONS AND GENDER SURVEY (GGS)

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP BRIEF SERIES

G G S . H K
The Generations and Gender Survey

Is There a Gap Between Ideal and Intended Fertility Among Young Adults in Hong Kong?

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Photography by Olia Danilevich

KEY POINTS

▶ Hong Kong has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world.

▶ Limited work has been done to explore the fertility ideals and intentions of young people in Hong Kong.

▶ While many young men and women ideally prefer two children, their fertility intentions are much lower, with a significant proportion of men and an even larger proportion of women intending not to have any children.

▶ Young people in Hong Kong have not given up on childbearing. However, they face significant barriers to achieving them and thereby resign to very small family sizes.

▶ The study highlights the need for the government to explore the barriers to fertility intentions and help people meet their reproductive aspirations.

ISSUE

Over the last three decades, Hong Kong has witnessed a sharp decline in its fertility rate, whilst its ageing population continues to grow. Hong Kong's fertility rate has dropped from 1.281 children per woman in 1991 to an unprecedented low of 0.772 children per woman in 2021[1]. At the same time, the older adult population has increased from 8.9% to 20.5% over the same span of 30 years. Life expectancy in Hong Kong is among the highest in the world, with 88.1 years for females and 82.5 years for men[2]. From 2020 to 2021, there was a 0.3% decrease in the total population in Hong Kong owing to birth rates falling below the stable death rates and increased outmigration driven by COVID-19. With a rising life expectancy, population ageing is projected to double by 2046, while a low fertility rate continues to persist.

[1] Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. (2023). Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics, February 2023: Fertility trend in Hong Kong, 1991 to 2021. Retrieved from https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/data/stat_report/product/FA100090/att/B72302FA2023XXXXB0100.pdf
[2] Centre for Health Protection. (2023). *Life expectancy at birth (male and female)*, 1971 - 2023. https://www.chp.gov.hk/en/statistics/data/10/27/111.html

Population projections highlight a changing household composition in Hong Kong. Within the next ten years, the older adult population in Hong Kong is expected to increase from the current 20% to one-third of its total population potentially leading to severe workforce shortages. The Hong Kong government is working to implement new policies or improve existing ones in order to address demographic changes in Hong Kong. For example, one policy implemented in 2022 to attract talent from mainland China and the rest of the world for employment or education is proving to be an ongoing successful initiative which boosts immigration and meets workforce shortages[3]. The Census and Statistics Department population projections for 2022-2046 observes a rebound in population and expects outmigration to reverse between 2022-2046.

The Hong Kong government have implemented several policy initiatives to address the low fertility rate, such as introducing a newborn baby bonus, offering reduced accommodation-related tax and providing subsidised accommodation arrangements for households with newborn children[4]. They also provide free pregnancy and delivery services at public hospitals and are trying to improve day care services for a better work-life balance[5].

The success of such policies hinges on two factors: First, the latent desire of the population for childbearing. Second, the effectiveness of the policy in addressing the socioeconomic barriers that discourage individuals from reaching their desired family size. The current baby bonus policy aims to reduce the economic barrier in childbearing by providing a one-time cash transfer of 20,000 HKD. However, due to the high cost of living in Hong Kong, this is not considered an adequate incentive. Furthermore, while financial incentives can be helpful, it is crucial to address the social barriers to fertility intentions.

ASSESSMENT

We investigate changing norms around family size and fertility intentions amongst a group of pre-childbearing age in Hong Kong. A pilot sub-survey based on the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) was conducted among undergraduate students at a public university in Hong Kong during May 2024 to understand the socio-demographic background of the students and explore their gender role attitudes and fertility preferences[6]. GGS is a cross-national panel demographic survey to provide information on life course transitions and family and kinship dynamics[7].

Our pilot sub-survey provides information on 686 undergraduates in the public university. Based on the information from the university website on the total number of undergraduate students, and gender distribution, we computed design weight as well as post-stratification weight to make the sample size representative of the university undergraduate student population.

GAP BETWEEN IDEAL FERTILITY AND INTENDED FERTILITY

There is usually a gap between the ideal number of children that people wish to have in the absence of any socioeconomic barrier (referred to as ideal fertility) and their expected or actual fertility in the presence of such barriers (referred to as intended fertility). Often, in post-transitional societies, the ideal number of children exceeds the intended number of children, leading to a fertility gap. Government policies should focus on identifying and mitigating the various barriers that discourage the intention to have children. Literature shows that in Hong Kong, there is an overall reduction in the ideal number of children compared with other developed Asian economies such as Singapore and Taiwan, where the desire for a two-child family still persists[8].

In our survey, the ideal number of children is measured through responses to the question:

"If there were no constraints at all (e.g. health, work, income, housing, childcare), what would be your *ideal* number of children?"

Fertility intention is measured through the follow-up question:

"Now, how many children, at the moment, do you *intend* to have?"

Based on responses to these questions, we find that the average ideal parity among young women is 1.75. However, the average intended parity for young women is as low as 0.84. Figure 1 and 2 below compares the percentage distribution of the ideal and intended number of children reported to differ at each level of parity for women and men.

[3] Chief Executive's Office. (2024). *Policy Address: Attract Talents*. Retrieved from https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2024/en/p104.html

[4] Chief Executive's Office. (2023). *Policy Address: Promote Fertility and Create a Childbearing Environment*. Retrieved from https://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2023/en/p113.html
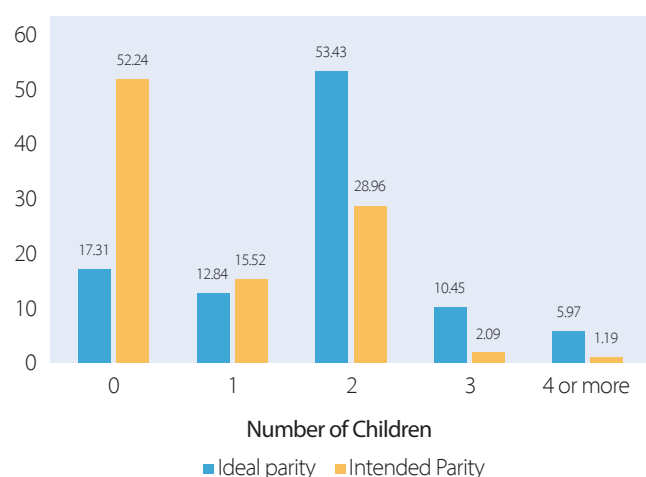
[5] Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. (2022). *Family policies to encourage childbirth in selected places*. Retrieved from https://www.legco.gov.hk/research-publications/english/2022in08-family-policies-to-encourage-childbirth-in-selected-places-20221031-e.pdf

[6] Note: The ethical clearance for conducting the study has been approved by the ethics committee of The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HPR #456)

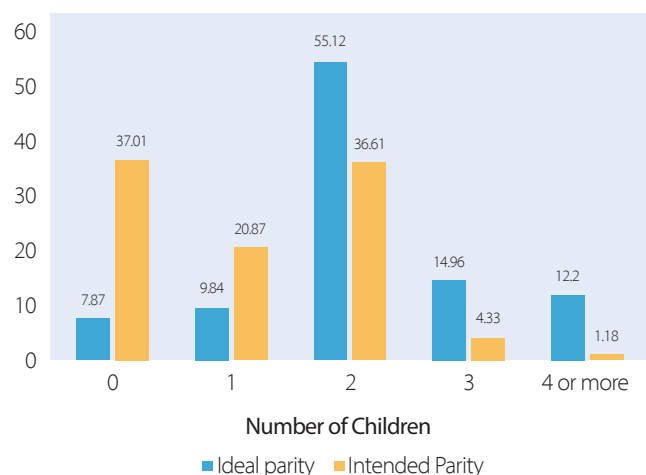[7] Generations & Gender Programme. (2024). *Data*. Retrieved from https://www.ggp-i.org/data/

[8] Chen, M., & Yip, P. S. F. (2017). The Discrepancy Between Ideal and Actual Parity in Hong Kong: Fertility Desire, Intention, and Behavior. Population Research and Policy Review, 36(4), 583–605. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-017-9433-5

Figure 1: Ideal and Intended Parity of Women (%)

The percentage of women with intended parity of zero (52.24%) is about three times more than those with the ideal parity of zero (17.31%). Moreover, 53.43% of women report an ideal parity of two, however, only 28.96% of women intend to have two children. The higher fertility intentions in ideals at parity zero and one, and a reduction in intentions compared to ideals at parities two and above, emphasise that there are roadblocks that hinder fertility intentions in Hong Kong.
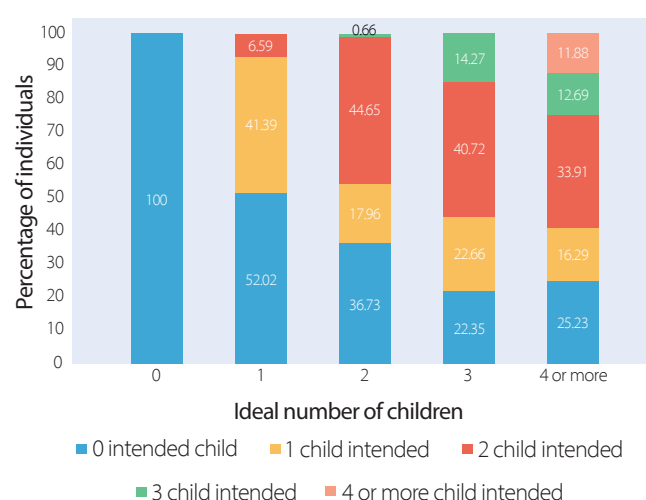
Figure 2: Ideal and Intended Parity of Men (%)

Similarly, in figure 2, the fertility intention at parity zero for men (37.01%) is close to five times more than fertility ideals at zero parity (7.87%). The percentage of men reporting an intention for one child is much higher than those who ideally preferred one child. More than 50% of men ideally preferred two children; however, only 36.61% of men intended to have two children.

It is worth noting that the majority of both men (55.12%) and women (53.43%) report an ideal parity of two, reflecting a preference for a two-child family among young adults in Hong Kong. However, the highest reported intended parity among men (37.01%) and women (52.24%) is zero, indicating a growing reluctance to having children. These findings demonstrate the potential fertility gap in Hong Kong.

Figure 3: Gap in Ideal and Intended Parity in Hong Kong

The x-axis represents the ideal number of children reported by the young adults in our study population, and the y-axis is the percentage distribution of intended parity of the people within each ideal parity category. Figure 3 highlights how the intentions differ from the ideal number of children desired by young adults in the presence of real-world constraints. For individuals with no latent desire to have children (ideal number of children = zero), their preferences remain consistent as there is no gap between their ideal and intended number of children. However, for all other individuals with reported ideal parities of one or more, a significant proportion report an ideal parity that exceeds their intent, leading to a fertility gap.

Among those who reported the ideal number of children as one, more than half (52.02%) of this group intend to have no children in the presence of socioeconomic barriers, and only 41.39% intend to meet their ideal parity. Similarly, for those whose ideal parity is two children, 36.73% intend to have no children, whereas 44.65% intend to meet their ideal parity. At higher parities, the proportion of individuals intending to achieve their ideal parity declines, with intentions remaining significantly lower than the ideal for most of the population. In order to bridge this gap, it is necessary to identify the underlying barriers. Literature shows that gender role expectations within households are a significant contributor to the fertility gap in Hong Kong[9].

9 Chen, M., & Yip, P. S. F. (2017). The Discrepancy Between Ideal and Actual Parity in Hong Kong: Fertility Desire, Intention, and Behavior. *Population Research and Policy Review, 36*(4), 583–605. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-017-9433-5

CONCLUSION

While the ideal parity of zero is low in Hong Kong, the region has one of the highest rates of childlessness globally. This is prevalent among working professionals in Hong Kong, a population our university students will likely graduate into. More than half of the women in this study report an ideal of two children, even when the average ideal parity among women is less than two. While lower average ideals can be influenced by outliers, fertility intentions differ significantly from their ideal preferences. There are evidently substantial barriers that prevent our group from reaching their ideal family size. In the presence of real-world obstacles, having no children has become the realistic option while having two children has become increasingly unrealistic. More than half of students who chose an ideal number of children of two opted for a lower parity of zero or one, with around 36% choosing a parity of zero.

This study shows that young adults have not given up on the idea of childbearing. However, from a prospective standpoint, there are huge barriers to meeting their ideal family size and they tend to resign to very small families. With changing gender norms in Hong Kong, especially in women's evolving familial roles and aspirations beyond caregiving, it is important for the government to explore these barriers in fertility intentions and help people meet their reproductive aspirations.

Government policies should provide a supportive environment for childbearing, especially for women, by offering childcare options and a flexible work environment. For example, in the 1970's, the government of Singapore adopted a two-child policy. However, when the fertility started to fall below replacement levels, they started a set of long-standing and comprehensive pronatalist family policies to encourage marriage and boost fertility while encouraging women's participation in the labour force[10,11]. Now, Singapore incentivises first birth by offering a baby bonus cash gift equivalent to 63,790 HKD and encourages second and third births with higher financial incentives. In subsequent research, we will explore the various contributing factors to the fertility gap in Hong Kong.

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[10] United Nations Development Programme. (2015). UNDP EGM 201511 policy brief no. 15. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undp_egm_201511_policy_brief_no._15.pdf

[11] Tan, P. L. (2020). Reversing Demographic Decline. IMF Finance & Development, 57(1). Retrieved from https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2020/03/lessons-from-singapore-on-raising-fertility-rates-tan

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