

Real baby bonus found: a rising birthrate to keep us younger

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The decade-long fall in Australia's birthrate has halted, new research shows - and the likely explanation lies in more family-friendly attitudes and the ticking of women's biological clocks.

The fertility rate rose last year for the first time in seven years, according to the research by the demographer Peter McDonald. He thinks the birth-

rate will stay high because of increases in family payments, including the \$3000 baby bonus introduced last year by the Federal Government; this year's Industrial Relations Commission decision favouring working parents; and widespread discussion about women "waiting too long" to have children.

Professor McDonald's findings challenge arguments that the 3000 more births registered last year - taking the total to 254,579 births - were a statistical blip

caused by higher numbers of Australian women in their peak child-bearing years.

Professor McDonald, of the Australian National University, has delved into birth and age statistics and found that regardless of age distribution, Australia's overall rate of reproduction has increased. He estimates the total fertility rate last year (the average number of babies each woman is expected to have over her life) at 1.77, up from 1.75 in 2000.

This is likely to rise to at least 1.8 for the next 10 years. Professor McDonald said the long-term effect of the rise could delay by a decade the heaviest impact of population ageing, forecast to hit Australia in the 2040s according to the Government's 2002 intergenerational report.

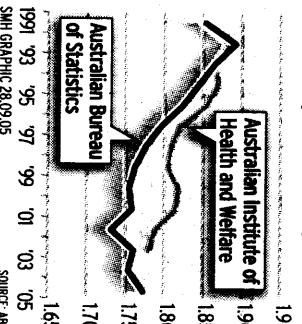
"It certainly has an impact on long-term planning," he said. "We will have a bigger labour force coming through."
Professor McDonald also found that Bureau of Statistics

figures might have exaggerated the apparent fall in the birthrate in the 1990s, because of delays in registering births. Figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare were a better guide.

The maternity payment will rise to \$4000 next July and to \$5000 in July 2008.
There is no shortage of takers. Between July last year and late last month, 275,967 babies have qualified their parents for the payment.

GROWING PAINS

Total fertility rate, Australia, 1991-2004



1991 93 95 97 99 01 03 05
SMH GRAPHIC 28/09/05 SOURCE: ABS