

One-child policy yields multiple woes

January 4 2011, By Heather Wuebker



China recently marked the 30th anniversary of the launch of its one-child-per-couple policy. Intended to curtail the nation's burgeoning population, it has produced a serious gender imbalance, a ballooning percentage of seniors and a dwindling labor force, says Wang Feng, UC Irvine sociology professor and senior fellow and director of the Brookings-Tsinghua Center for Public Policy in Beijing.

Such conditions, he notes in [Science](#) magazine, heighten the social and economic instability that the single-child edict was designed to address. Here, Wang Feng discusses policy results, [China's](#) changing demographic makeup and implications for the country's future.

Q: How has the one-child policy affected fertility levels in China, and what does this mean for the

national labor force?

A: As much as government officials in China like to advertise the role of the one-child policy in controlling China's [population](#) growth, the policy's effect is limited. Fertility decline is a global trend and not limited to China alone. During the first decade after implementation of the one-child policy, the fertility level in China hardly changed. In countries that do not have a similarly forceful policy — such as South Korea, Thailand and Brazil — fertility has declined by roughly the same magnitude since the late 1970s. For China, the fertility level started to dip below the replacement level of 2.1 children per couple after the nation's accelerated economic takeoff in the 1990s. This trend is similar to that seen in other countries during times of economic growth.

Today, we see the effects in China's more than 150 million one-child families, located primarily in urban areas. Fertility reduction driven by forces other than the one-child policy has created a rapidly declining young labor force and a rapidly increasing population of the aged. The one-child policy has accelerated this process. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of Chinese workers in their 20s shrank by nearly 15 percent, and the trend will continue.

Q: What does the future hold for China if it continues on its current track?

A: Enormous challenges. With a current fertility level at around 1.5 children per couple, China's overall population will encounter rapid aging that will go unmatched in new births. This will lead to an eventual population decline. China has a life expectancy that's only a few years shorter than that of developed nations but a per capita income level that's about one-tenth of theirs. Rapid aging poses tremendous challenges for both public and private old-age support. At the current fertility and

mortality levels, China is expected to have 240 million elderly — aged 60 and over — in 2020 and 340 million in 2030, which is about one-quarter of the total population. This means not only higher taxes for the working population — of which there are fewer to tax — but also increased costs associated with healthcare.

Q: Is this trajectory reversible, and what can be done to restore a more balanced population in China?

A: The trajectory is irreversible. However, my colleagues and I have studied areas in China exempted from the one-child policy and found that while population growth was not any faster, the sex ratio at birth was much more balanced and individual families were spared the physical abuse that occurred during the forceful implementation of the one-child policy elsewhere.

Q: How are you trying to effect change in China?

A: As a scholar, my main mission — and that of my colleagues — is fact finding. Through research, we provide policymakers and the public with evidence of China's demographic shift and the role of the one-child policy in this process. We have in the last decade ascertained the current fertility policy requirement in China, the level of fertility and its trends, and the reasons for the recent fertility decline. In addition to formulating policy proposals, we have also taken our message to the public. It's our hope that our research and advocacy can facilitate responsible public policy.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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