

Birthrate up, breaking 6-year trend

The number of newborns in Korea increased for the first time in six years in 2006, the National Statistical Office said yesterday.

About 452,000 babies were born last year, up 3.3 percent, or 14,000, from the previous year. It is the first annual rise in the birthrate since the 2000 "millennium effect," when the number of births rose 3.3 percent to 637,000.

Korea's overall fertility rate - the average number of babies a woman aged 15-49 gives birth to during her lifetime - also increased, to 1.13 last year from the record-low figure of 1.08 in 2005, the report said. It is the first rise in three years.

"We are expecting the birthrate to rise further this year. If the increase of newborns continues, the population decrease might slow," the NSO said.

The statistics office previously estimated Korea's population to start declining from 2020, shrinking by more than 12 percent by 2050.

On the other hand, the global population will continue to grow steadily from the current 6.5 billion to 9.3 billion in 2050, despite sharp fall in fertility rates in developed countries, the office said.

The NSO attributed the hike in births to an increase in first marriages since 2003. A total of 315,344 women aged 15-49 got married last year, up from 292,261 and 297,505 in 2003 and 2005, respectively.

An increase in the number of children born to women in their early 30s contributed most to the current growth.

The number of children born to women aged 30-34 rose by 11,000 to 190,000 in 2006 from the previous year. But the number of babies by women aged 25-29 fell by 1,000 to 174,000, and newborns to women aged 20-24 dropped by 2,000 to 31,000.

The average age of Korean women giving birth was 30.4 last year, up by 0.2 from the previous year, the report said.

The number of newborn babies to couples married less than one year increased to 7.3 percent last year from 5.7 percent in 2005. The number of newborn babies to couples married for longer than six years also increased, to 5.7 percent last year from 5.4 percent in 2005.

The number of second babies also increased by 6,000, or 2.9 percent, from 2005, the report said.

Some experts say the increase is temporary and the result of the lucky "ssangchun year" in 2006, when many couples tied the knot. But the NSO said that the impact of last year's increase in marriages has not yet been seen.

"We expect even more newborns this year from the ssangchun year effect," the NSO said.

There were a total of 332,800 marriages in 2006, up 5.2 percent, or 16,400 from the previous year.

Many couples chose to get married last year in the belief that ssangchun, or "double spring year," was a lucky year according to the lunar calendar.

"Public recognition of the severity of the nation's decreasing birthrate and the government's recent birthrate-boosting measures also seem to have contributed to the increased birthrate," the NSO said.

Korea - like several other Asian neighbors facing plummeting birthrates - has been desperately seeking ways to encourage people to have more babies.

The government has been engaged in an all-out campaign to promote childbearing in recent years by offering financial incentives and more welfare benefits.

Under the New Maginot Plan 2010, the government will provide between 32,000 won and 361,000 won (\$36-\$408) to families in the low-income bracket earning less than 3.7 million won a month. It is also planning to build more public nurseries particularly in the farming and fishing regions.

The government will also increase financial support to a maximum of 3 million won per couple for in vitro fertilization treatment. The budget is expected to cover 12,000 couples.

Each couple will receive funding for a maximum of two cycles of IVF. One cycle is estimated to cost 1.5 million won.

The success rate among the 14,000 couples that received funding from the government last year was 40 percent, according to the Health and Welfare Ministry.

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