

China allows couples third child amid demographic crisis

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Adults and children ride pedal cycles at a public park in Beijing, Saturday, Aug. 21, 2021. China will now allow couples to have a third child as the country seeks to hold off a demographic crisis that threatens its hopes of increased prosperity and global influence. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein

China will now allow couples to legally have a third child as it seeks to

hold off a demographic crisis that could threaten its hopes of increased prosperity and global influence.

The ceremonial legislature on Friday amended the Population and Family Planning Law as part of a decades-long effort by the ruling Communist Party to dictate the size of families in keeping with political directives. It comes just six years after the last change.

From the 1980s, China strictly limited most couples to one child, a policy enforced with threats of fines or loss of jobs, leading to abuses including forced abortions. A preference for sons led parents to kill baby girls, leading to a massive imbalance in the sex ratio.

The rules were eased for the first time in 2015 to allow two children as officials acknowledged the looming consequences of the plummeting birthrate. The overwhelming fear is that China will grow old before it becomes wealthy.

China long touted its one-child policy as a success in preventing 400 million additional births in the world's most populous country, thus saving resources and helping drive economic growth.

However, China's birth rate, paralleling trends in South Korea, Thailand and other Asian economies, already was falling before the one-child rule. The average number of children per mother tumbled from above six in the 1960s to below three by 1980, according to the World Bank.



Children hold Chinese flags as they pose for a photo at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, on June 22, 2021. China will now allow couples to have a third child as the country seeks to hold-off a demographic crisis that threatens its hopes of increased prosperity and global influence. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein

Meanwhile, the number of working-age people in China has fallen over the past decade and the population has barely grown, adding to strains in an aging society. A once-a-decade government census found the population rose to 1.411 billion people last year, up 72 million from 2010.

Statistics show 12 million babies were born last year, which would be down 18% from 2019's 14.6 million.

Chinese over 60, who number 264 million, accounted for 18.7% of the country's total population in 2020, 5.44 percentage points higher than in 2010. At the same time, the working-age population fell to 63.3% of the total from 70.1% a decade ago.

The shift to the two-child rule led to a temporary bump in the numbers of births but its effects soon wore off and total births continued to fall because many women continued to decide against starting families.



Adults and children walk along a path at a public park in Beijing, Saturday, Aug. 21, 2021. China will now allow couples to have a third child as the country seeks to hold off a demographic crisis that threatens its hopes of increased prosperity and global influence. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein



A woman watches as a child jumps down steps at a public park in Beijing, Saturday, Aug. 21, 2021. China will now allow couples to have a third child as the country seeks to hold off a demographic crisis that threatens its hopes of increased prosperity and global influence. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein



A woman holds a child near heart shaped art installation around a fountain in Beijing on Aug. 14, 2021. China will now allow couples to legally have a third child as it seeks to hold off a demographic crisis that could threaten its hopes of increased prosperity and global influence. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan

Japan, Germany and some other wealthy countries face the same challenge of having fewer workers to support aging populations. However, they can draw on investments in factories, technology and foreign assets, while China is a middle-income country with labor-intensive farming and manufacturing.

At its session Friday, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress canceled the leveling of fines for breaking the earlier restrictions and called for additional parental leave and childcare

resources. New measures in finance, taxation, schooling, housing and employment should be introduced to "to ease the burden on families," the amendment said.

It also seeks to address longstanding discrimination against pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace that is considered one of the chief disincentives to having additional children, along with high costs and cramped housing.

While female representation in the labor force is high, women, especially those with children, are severely underrepresented at the higher levels, holding just 8.4% of leadership positions at the central and provincial levels. Among the young party leaders who will take the reins in the coming decades, only 11% are women

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