

**INTERACTIVE: Malaysia's population is barely growing. Here's why and why it matters.**

PETALING JAYA: Population loss in some districts and a slow rise in the number of residents in many states have put the brakes on the country's population growth.

According to the **Statistics Department**, Malaysia's population in 2020 stood at 32.4 million compared to 27.4 million in 2010, with an average annual growth of 1.7%, the lowest recorded since 1970.

The department's figures show Sarawak with the smallest rise in average annual population growth at 0.2%, followed by Perak (0.8%) and Sabah (0.9%).

**Chief Statistician Datuk Seri Dr Mohd Uzir Mahidin** said the country's population growth was being affected by a substantial decline in birth rates, higher death rates and slower growth in the number of non-citizens in most states, which declined from 6.3% in 2010 to 1.8% in 2020 due to the closure of international borders during the pandemic.

"The number of live births in 2020 dropped 0.4% from 491,239 in 2010 to 470,195 in 2020, the lowest number in a decade," he added.

Mohd Uzir said falling births had led to a decline in the country's overall Total Fertility Rate (TFR).

The TFR is a demographic indicator used to estimate the average number of children a woman should give birth to during her reproductive period (15-49 years).

Over the past decade, the TFR for women aged 15-49 years declined from 2.1 children in 2010 to 1.7 children in 2020.

Mohd Uzir said the decline in the TFR has occurred in every region of the world and is a result of a process known as demographic transition.

A demographic transition refers to the historical shift from high birth rates and high death rates in societies with minimal technology, education (especially of women) and economic development, to low birth rates and low death rates in societies with advanced technology, education and economic development.

"In order to maintain its population, ignoring migration, a country requires a minimum fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman," he said, noting that the number is slightly greater than 2 because not all children live to adulthood.

"Low fertility rates that cause long-term population decline can also lead to population ageing, an imbalance in the population age structure," he added.

Mohd Uzir said that women, among other reasons, have a tendency of having fewer children due to better access to education, which broadens their job prospects.

He added that the marriage age is also an important factor in controlling the population, as the increase in the age of marriage reduces fertility.

“The average age of marriage has increased in recent years which can be attributed to the change in attitudes toward economic issues such as rising living costs, housing, unemployment, and marriage,” he said.

He added that lower population growth at the state level has a direct impact on development, as the population size is used as a measure for distributing public funds and providing facilities at state, district, parliament and state-assembly constituency level.

“Education programmes, healthcare, law enforcement and highways are apportioned based on an area’s population, income, age, and other factors.

“Equitably distributing the billions of ringgits of public money will be based on the latest population number,” he said.

Several districts in Sarawak, Sabah, Perak, Pahang and Terengganu are meanwhile seeing declining populations.

The sharpest drop was in Song. The Sarawak district recorded a -50.5% (-10,144 persons) population growth from 2010 to 2020.

Other districts in the state that had a similar trend included Belaga (-36.2% or -12,745 persons) and Maradong (-29.3% or -8,414 persons).

Overall, 18 out of 30 regrouped administrative districts in Sarawak recorded a lower population in 2020 compared to 2010.

Several administrative districts in Sabah also showed a substantial reduction in population: Keningau (-22,176 persons), Ranau (-9,015 persons), Tenom (-4,225 persons) and Tambunan (-4,094 persons).

However, Mohd Uzir noted that a significant increase in population in other districts had offset the substantial reduction, particularly in Kota Kinabalu (+48,363 persons), Sandakan (+42,760 persons), and Penampang (+40,240 persons).

He said despite a low or negative population growth, a country could still increase its average living standard or GDP (gross domestic product) per capita and total GDP by focusing on productivity growth.

He, however, also said that if the decline in the total population is not matched by an equal or greater increase in productivity (GDP per capita) and the situation continues from one calendar quarter to the next, the country would experience a decline in GDP, known as an economic recession.

“If these conditions become permanent, the country could find itself in a permanent recession,” he added.

This, he said, could lead to a rise in the dependency ratio (an indicator measuring the burden caused by non-working people on the working-age population), an elderly care crisis, difficulties in funding

entitlement programmes, declining innovation and a strain on mental health, as well as deflation caused by the ageing population.

He added that the government needs to maintain the liveability of areas where the population is shrinking or where declines are forecast.

“The provincial and municipal authorities, with support from the central government, hold primary responsibility for tackling the consequences of population decline and demographic ageing,” he said.

He also said state and federal authorities could not be expected to tackle the problem without help as they need to work together with housing associations, care institutions, active members of the community and businesses.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/04/22/interactive-malaysias-population-is-barely-growing-heres-why-and-why-it-matters>