

Order of birth. Table 5.36 shows the order of birth of all live-born infants in 1971 according to the age of the mother. As would be expected, 33,546, or four out of every five of the 40,480 infants born to mothers under 20 years of age, were the first live-born child, whereas about half of the children born to mothers of 20-24 years were their second or later live-born child. In 1971, 292 infants were born to mothers who had not yet reached their 15th birthday.

Table 5.37 summarizes the pattern of family formation since 1951 and shows that the percentages of first and second children have been increasing in recent years. As mentioned in the preceding Sections for illegitimate births and average age of parents, the decline in fertility and the recent evolution of the age structure of the female population affect the percentage distribution of births by parity. The increasing proportion of women in early child-bearing ages, where the majority of low-parity births occur, tends to increase the proportion of these births. Also, as explained for illegitimate births, the decline in the number of high-parity births also contributes to the increase in the percentage of low-parity births since the latter are taken as a percentage of total births.

Birthweight. Excluding Newfoundland, information on birthweight of newborn infants has recently become available from provincial records of birth. These data, in addition to their usefulness in calculating the average weights of newborn infants, are of importance from the public health and medical points of view in throwing light on the number of immaturely developed foetuses that are delivered alive. According to criteria recommended by the World Health Organization, infants of 5½ lb. or less at birth are considered "immature" and hence exposed to a much greater risk of dying than those over this weight.

Weights of infants at birth depend on a host of maternal factors — biological, physiological, environmental, nutritional, etc. — information on which is not available from the birth records. However, some information is available from Statistics Canada on the age of the mother and duration of pregnancy before delivery. Analysis of this information shows that there are variations in average weight according to the age of the mother; women under 20 and over 35 tend to produce higher proportions of immature infants, so that the late 20s and early 30s would appear to be the ideal ages for motherhood; and almost all infants of less than 28 weeks gestation are delivered "immature" according to the definition. The average single male infant born at full term weighs about 7 lb. 6 oz. at birth and the average female about 5 oz. less.

Stillbirths. The 3,396 stillbirths of at least 28 weeks gestation that were delivered in 1971 represented a ratio of a little over nine for every 1,000 foetuses born alive. As is evident from Table 5.38, the stillbirth ratio has been decreasing steadily, except for a slight increase in 1967, and has been cut by more than half over the past quarter-century. Although the variations between provincial ratios have never been wide, ratios in some provinces have been reduced more than in others. The stillbirth ratio among unmarried mothers has been consistently higher than that among married mothers but the difference is narrowing.

Table 5.39 illustrates the fact that the risk of having a stillborn child increases with the age of the mother. Although stillbirth ratios for mothers of all ages have been declining, they continue to be three to four times as high for mothers over 40 years of age as for mothers under 30.

The causes of death for the stillbirths delivered in 1971 are shown in Table 5.40. Of the 3,396 stillbirths, in 1,335 cases, or in about four out of every ten, the premature death of the foetus (before delivery) was medically certified as having been due to some abnormal condition of the placenta or the umbilical cord; in 1,482, or approximately 43%, death was due to injury during delivery or to some abnormal condition or infection in the foetus itself, and in the remainder (579) to some abnormal condition or infection in the mother.

5.6.2 Fertility rates

The sex and age composition of a population is obviously an important factor affecting crude birth rates. Since almost all children born each year are to women between the ages of 15 and 45, variations in the proportion of women of these ages to the total population will cause variations in the crude birth rate of different countries, or of different regions within a country, even though the actual rates of reproduction or fertility of the women in these age groups in each country or region are identical. It is therefore conventional practice to calculate what are termed age-specific fertility rates, i.e., the number of infants born annually to every 1,000 women in each of the reproductive age periods.