

The general trend in the national crude birth rate since 1951 is shown in Table 4.32. The annual rates declined steadily from 29.3 in 1921 to a record low of 20.1 in 1937, recovered sharply in the late 1930s and rose during World War II to 24.3 in 1945. Following the war the birth rate rose to a high of 28.9 in 1947. Between 1948 and 1959 it remained remarkably stable at between 27.1 and 28.5, but has since declined dramatically to a record low of 15.4 by 1974.

The rates for most provinces followed trends similar to the national trend with some regional differences. All provinces had record high rates immediately following World War II, but during the 1951-55 period average birth rates in Ontario and the western provinces were higher than during 1946-50 and those for Quebec and the Maritime provinces were lower. In fact, Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia had record high crude birth rates during the 1956-60 period. By 1973 all provinces had record low rates. In 1974 a slight improvement in birth rate was observed in some of the provinces due mainly to the favourable age structure.

Since these crude birth rates are based on the total population they do not reflect the true fertility of the women of reproductive ages in the different provinces. A more accurate measure of the true birth rate is one based on the number of women between the ages of 15 and 45. (Table 4.38; Section 4.6.2)

Sex of live births. The number of males to every 1,000 females born in Canada has averaged around 1,057 since the middle 1930s. Provincial sex ratios vary more widely because of the relatively fewer number of births involved — the smaller the total number of births, the greater the chance of wide sex-ratio variations from year to year. In 1974, 1,058 male infants were born in Canada for every 1,000 females.

Age of mothers. The distribution of infants born alive in 1974 by age of the mother is given in Table 4.34. It shows that 68.8% of the live births in 1974 to all mothers were among 20-29-year-olds, another 14.4% to 30-34-year-olds, and only about 11.5% of births were to mothers under 20.

Order of birth. Table 4.34 also shows the order of birth of all live-born infants in 1974 according to the age of the mother. As would be expected, 31,715 or four out of every five of the 38,314 infants born to mothers 15-19 years of age were the first live-born child, whereas slightly less than half (45%) of the children born to mothers of 20-24 years were their second or later live-born child. In 1974, 312 infants were born to mothers who had not yet reached their 15th birthday.

Table 4.35 summarizes the pattern of family formation since 1951 and shows that the percentages of first and second children have been increasing in recent years. This has been accompanied generally by a reduction in the proportion of third and higher birth orders.

Stillbirths. The 2,766 stillbirths of at least 28 weeks gestation that were delivered in 1974 represented a ratio of about eight for every 1,000 fetuses born alive. As is evident from Table 4.36, the stillbirth ratio, decreasing steadily, has been cut by more than half over the past quarter-century. Ratios in some provinces have been reduced more than in others.

Table 4.37 illustrates that the risk of having a stillborn child increases with the age of the mother. Although stillbirth rates for mothers of all ages have been declining, they continue to be much higher for older than for younger mothers.

Fertility rates

4.6.2

The sex and age composition of a population is a fundamental factor affecting its birth rates. Since almost all children are born 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, even though the actual rates of reproduction or fertility of the women are identical. It is therefore conventional practice to calculate age-specific fertility rates, i.e. the number of infants born annually to every 1,000 women in each of the reproductive age groups.