

# Rise of the 'beanpole' families

As birth rates dip, experts warn of looming caregiving and social support challenges

By DIYANA PFORDTEN  
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

**PETALING JAYA:** The country's plunging birth rate, delayed child-birth and longer life expectancy are giving rise to more small "beanpole" families that have few siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins.

These long, lean households – once the exception – are fast becoming the norm, raising questions as to who will care for ageing parents, support rural traditions, or shoulder the emotional and financial load once shared among siblings and cousins.

This demographic shift also means that large families, typically defined as households with six or more children, are becoming increasingly rare.

According to the Statistics Department, the number of babies born as the sixth child or more dropped by 36.4% from 20,731 in 2013 to 13,186 in 2023.

Chai Sen Tyng, a senior research officer at the Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing at Universiti Putra Malaysia, said the rise of beanpole families is reshaping various aspects of family life in the country.

The term "beanpole family" was introduced by sociologists to describe families that have multi-

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ple generations but few members in each generation, appearing long and thin like a beanpole.

Beanpole families are distinct from traditional extended families, which often feature more aunts, uncles and cousins.

Chai said beanpole families have a direct impact on caregiving, as childcare and eldercare arrangements shift.

"Beanpole families mean that there will be fewer members of the next generation to share the load of caregiving," he said.

Figures from the department show that the number of births in Malaysia in the first quarter of this year fell to 93,500, compared with 105,613 births in the same period last year.

The 11.5% drop was the steepest ever recorded, the department noted in a report.

The country's average life expectancy on the other hand has been steadily rising, from 63.6 in 1970 to 74.8 in 2023.

The decline in large-family births is contributing to smaller

## Shrinking Malaysian families

Number of sixth and higher-order births in 2013 vs 2023

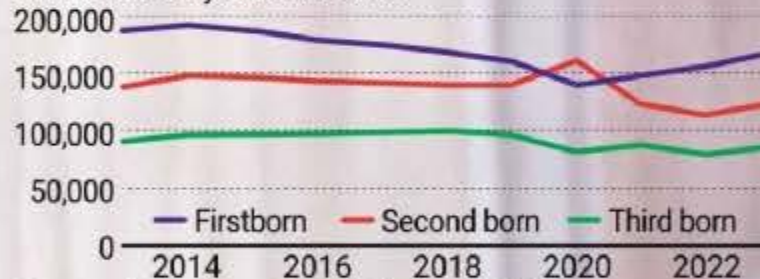


% change  
**A decline of 36.4%**

Year	Sixth	Seventh	Eight	Ninth	10th and above
2013	10,705	5,097	2,476	1,215	1,238
2023	8,186	2,986	1,222	468	324
% change	-23.5%	-41.4%	-50.6%	-61.5%	-73.8%

## Fewer big families, more firstborns

No. of births by order of birth



Source: Department of Statistics (DOSM)

Malaysia's average household size has declined from **4.6 in 1995** to **3.8 in 2022**.

The Star graphics

average household sizes.

In 1995, for example, the average size of a Malaysian household was 4.6 persons. By 2020, the figure fell to 3.8.

Chai said smaller families often mean that parents can invest more time, attention and money in their children, which can lead to better developmental outcomes.

He said the government needs to step up its involvement in

eldercare and childcare.

One way to help beanpole families with caregiving and social support is by strengthening civil society and harnessing technology.

"Think of e-hailing and delivery platforms; these innovations can be adapted for caregiving and social support," he said.

Another support measure is co-living and multi-generational housing, catering to the needs of

older persons, singles and child-less dual-income couples, he added.

Universiti Malaya demographer Assoc Prof Dr Tey Nai Peng said the shift to smaller families has led to a sharp decline in Malaysia's total fertility rate (TFR), which is now at 1.7 children per woman, well below the replacement level of 2.1.

He said a drop in the TFR to below 1.3 could result in long-term population decline.

The TFR is the average number of children a woman has in her lifetime, while the replacement level is the fertility rate at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next.

Tey said having fewer siblings means that a person will have less support to rely on when taking care of elderly parents.

This could lead to financial strain, with increasing reports of elder abandonment, abuse and neglect.

He said a growing proportion of older adults are living alone or only with their spouses, a trend that could rise further due to shrinking family sizes.

"In 2022, about 40% of older adults lived without any children, and only one-third co-resided with a single adult child," he added.