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Taiwan

## Dogs in prams: Taiwan's falling birthrate sees pets outnumbering children

Trend of canine carriers goes beyond the practical and reflects changing attitudes towards pet ownership

**Helen Davidson** in Taipei[@heldavidson](#)

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**I**n a quiet southern Taipei alleyway, an ageing golden retriever peers sleepily from a pram being pushed by his elderly owner. A few minutes later a stroller pushed along by a young woman rolls past, carrying a brindle-cross.

That afternoon a puppy wearing a tuxedo and rainbow bowtie is wheeled through the heaving crowds of the Taipei Pride parade.

Dogs in prams are a common sight in Taiwan's capital, where the city's metro system allows pets on board only if they are in contained carriers. But observers say the trend goes beyond the



practical and reflects changing attitudes towards pet ownership and a growing propensity for “fur babies” amid a declining birthrate in Taiwan.



Hugs, sequins and rainbows as Taiwan enjoys victory over coronavirus

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Taiwan's birthrate is among the lowest in Asia, and is due to delayed marriages, analysts say. Having children outside of marriage is still socially unacceptable, and economic barriers to having children include minimal maternity leave entitlements.

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At the same time, pet ownership is skyrocketing. In September analysts estimated the number of Taiwanese pets had overtaken the number of children aged under 15.

As a result the pet accessory retail market is booming, and was worth US\$1.52bn a year in 2015, according to Taiwan's pet expo. Market research firm Euromonitor International said it has continued to grow ever since.

A spokeswoman for pet pram manufacturer, Ibiyaya, said sales had increased more than five-fold between 2002 and 2015, and it was still growing, with more suppliers coming on to the market. “The industry is getting more competitive while customers have more options when it comes to choosing the right pet stroller for their fur kids,” she said.

Strollers, sunglasses, raincoats and even socks for dogs are also increasingly common.

Wu Hung, the executive director of the Environment and Animal Society of Taiwan (East), worries that the desire for these items stem from “an anthropocentric way of thinking about animals and treat them as accessories for human fulfilment, rather than focusing on the animal's needs”.

“This can lead to serious welfare problems when the best interests of the animal are overlooked.”

Hung said it was “heartening” to see a growing number of positive interactions between humans and animals, and strollers were good for improving the life of old or disabled animals, and getting them through busy urban areas, but they still needed exercise.





▲ Pet transport in Taipei. Photograph: Peter Scholey/Alamy Stock Photo

In Da'an Forest Park, Syin and Han are wheeling their two dogs and cat to the vet. Syin says they usually walk the dogs around the park on leashes, but today they're in a hurry. "They still get exercise. This is for convenience so you can take them on the subway and to restaurants."

Syin says they grew up with lots of animals around them, but she's seen the rate of pet ownership grow, especially the younger generations.

"The first thing that comes to mind, is we don't want to have children," says Syin, when asked why.

"You spend more money, you have more responsibility. Even though we have to spend money and have responsibility for [our pets], but children are ... I don't know, I'm not a baby person," she laughs.

Tom Parker, a UK citizen, Taiwan resident and owner of a Boston Terrier named Bené, says his wife makes him shelter their dog under an umbrella when it rains, but if she's not around the dog gets wet.

"Dogs in Taiwan are pampered and well cared for, but can also be an accessory to show off, and the more portable the better," he says.

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trend, propensity, skyrocket, boom, heartening, show off

What do you think of dogs in prams? Could it become a trend in Korea?

What is your attitude to pet ownership? Do you or your family own a pet? Why did you choose to get a pet?

Should pets be allowed on public transportation?

What is there a growing propensity for in Korea?

Why is Korea's birthrate so low?

Do you think pet accessories are frivolous?

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you see children?

What do Koreans buy in order to show off?



NATIONAL / SOCIAL ISSUES

## Suga's fertility push hailed, but not panacea for boosting birth rate

BY MAYA KANEKO  
KYODO

Oct 18, 2020

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's pledge to boost infertility treatment support has offered a ray of hope to couples longing for children, but experts say the policy will not be a panacea for reversing the nation's declining birth rate.

As Japan, with the world's oldest population, struggles with dwindling numbers of newborns, Suga has vowed to make often costly infertility treatment eligible for coverage by national health insurance, with government officials eyeing the change for as early as 2022. In the run-up, subsidies for couples undergoing such treatment will be sharply increased.

Many couples who have undergone years of infertility treatment at the cost of millions of yen have been encouraged by the move, but some experts say it may not be enough to boost the nation's birth rate at a time when it is under fresh strain as the coronavirus pandemic darkens the economic prospects of working-age people.

Japan's total fertility rate — the average number of children born per woman during their reproductive years — stood at 1.36 in 2019 with a record-low 865,234 babies born that year. The government aims to raise the rate to 1.8.

A 37-year-old Tokyo woman, who gave birth to a child after spending ¥2 million (\$19,000) on four years of infertility treatment, said she was "heartened" by Suga's push for expanded support.

The woman, who changed clinics twice in the pursuit of better treatment, expressed hope that the public insurance coverage "will help improve the quality of medical care" provided at fertility clinics, because their technology and equipment differ.

She also said she had not been correctly informed about rates of successful treatment at fertility clinics. Currently, as they operate outside insurance coverage, there are no standards covering their disclosure of clinical outcomes.





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Tomoko Abe (third from left) of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, submitted a proposal on boosting support for infertility treatment to the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry in February. | KYODO

Another woman, a 35-year-old resident of an area north of Tokyo, also welcomed the new premier's initiative after spending ¥8.5 million on six years of infertility treatment. But she expressed concerns that "women could be regarded as child-bearing machines if the policy is only targeted at reversing the declining birth rate." At present, most infertility treatment in Japan, except for the initial phase, such as tests to look into infertility and provision of ovulation-inducing drugs for timed intercourse, is not covered by the public health insurance, under which patients shoulder 30% of costs.

More advanced methods, such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), where eggs are collected from ovaries and fertilized by sperm in a laboratory, and microinjection, which resembles regular IVF but in which a single sperm is directly injected into an egg, can cost several hundred thousand yen per cycle.

Even though public subsidies totaling ¥1.05 million are available for couples for up to six IVF cycles, there is an age limit for women, currently set at 43. There is also a cap on a couple's combined annual income, set at ¥7.3 million in most municipalities.

"It's easy for couples comprising two full-time workers to exceed the annual income threshold," said Ran Kawai, a journalist who specializes in childbirth issues. Furthermore, many recipients of the subsidies cannot cover the total costs despite the assistance, she added.

Under Suga's initiative, the health ministry is considering scrapping the annual income cap as well as relaxing restrictions on the number of IVF cycles and boosting the amount of subsidies from next April, ministry officials said.



*In countries such as Fr., Ger., Belgium, and Israel infertility treatment is covered by*  
insurance to some degree, mostly with limits on the number of cycles and women's age, according to their  
authorities and data compiled by the NLI Research Institute.

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But Japan has not opted for insurance coverage, with infertility not defined as a disease, despite a record  
56,979 babies having been born in 2018 via 454,893 IVF cycles, or one in 16 newborns that year for the highest  
rate ever. In 2015, 18.2%, or one in every 5.5 couples, underwent infertility tests or infertility treatment.



([https://cdn.japantimes.2xx.jp/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/np\\_file\\_43698.jpeg](https://cdn.japantimes.2xx.jp/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/np_file_43698.jpeg))

Akiko Matsumoto (second from left), head of nonprofit group Fine, submitted a petition seeking expanded support for infertility  
treatment to a Liberal Democratic Party group in July. | COURTESY OF FINE / VIA KYODO

The number of IVF cycles conducted in Japan is the largest among developed countries, according to the  
International Committee for Monitoring Assisted Reproductive Technologies.

Akiko Matsumoto, head of nonprofit group Fine that supports those dealing with infertility, said momentum  
for seeking expanded assistance for them grew among Japanese political circles with then-Chief Cabinet  
Secretary Suga receiving a petition from ruling party members on the matter in June.

“When we organized a study session in parliament on infertility treatment in January, about 100 participants  
came, which was much larger than expected, and some of them enthusiastically discussed the matter,”  
Matsumoto said.

“It was encouraging to see the issue has gained public awareness, with some talking about their own infertility  
treatment experiences or someone close to them,” she said.



~~Pushing for insurance coverage for~~  
treatment and other support is Seiko Noda, currently the party's executive acting secretary general, who gave birth to a boy at the age 50 in 2011 through IVF using a donated egg in the United States.

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The major opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan similarly submitted a petition to the health ministry in February, calling for insurance coverage and other patient support. CDPJ leader Yukio Edano's twin sons were born in 2006 after four years of infertility treatment.

The CDPJ also stressed that expanded public support for infertility treatment should not lead to increased pressure on couples to bear children.

Both Kawai and Matsumoto said they hope lowering the economic burden through insurance coverage leads more young couples to start advanced infertility treatment early, as their success rate is higher compared with that for older couples, possibly shortening the treatment period.

According to 2018 data from the Japan Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology, the rate of childbirth per total IVF cycles stood at 21.6% for women aged 30, but fell to 9.5% for those aged 40.

"About two-thirds of advanced infertility treatment patients in Japan are aged 35 or older. If the government can boost financial assistance to people through the universal insurance coverage, they can feel free to start receiving it any time," Kawai said.

The journalist also argued it is unreasonable that IVF treatment for those with such problems as tubal obstruction and lack of sperm in semen has not been covered by health insurance.

The health ministry is set to conduct by next March a survey on some 600 IVF clinics and the general public in Japan on infertility treatment costs. Since the amount of the current subsidies is based on the ministry's fiscal 1998 survey, Matsumoto said such research is "long overdue." Kawai said boosting support for infertility treatment should be seen as one of several measures needed to help reverse the declining birth rate as Japanese women's lifestyles diversify, with many marrying later in life.

She suggested that another factor stemming from the coronavirus pandemic that may affect the birth rate besides the expected drag from the economic impact is that many young people may be missing opportunities to go out and find partners.

"The number of newborns is expected to sharply drop this year," she said.



pledge, a ray of hope, long for, subsidy, initiative, scrap, momentum, feel free to, be long overdue

Should Korea use Suga's IVF pledge to boost its birth rate?

Are you concerned about the sharply dropping birthrate in Korea?

Should the government continue to subsidize couples so they will have children?

Ladies, do you worry that you could be regarded as a "child-bearing machine?"

What is one law you want scrapped?

What do you long for?

Do you want a baby or a "fur baby?"

What should the government subsidize to make life better?