Economic boom fuels

More births in Singapore

Hospitals report more deliveries as more than 9,000 babies are born in the first quarter alone, raising hopes of a bumper crop

Melissa Sim

A HUMP in baby numbers is raising hopes that the worst of Singapore's birth dearth is over — at least until the economy hits the next hump.

Last year saw a slight increase in the number of births — 37,492 compared with 37,174 in 2004 — but it is the figures for the first three months of this year that are inspiring predictions of a bumper crop.

There were 2,808 births in January, 3,066 in February and 3,177 in March. In all, 9,051 babies were born in the first quarter — 407 more than the same period last year.

Hospitals around the country are reporting more deliveries. Both Mount Alvernia Hospital and Thomson Medical Centre (TMC) say the number of births has jumped — by as much as 23 per cent in TMC's case. Figures from KK Women's and Children's Hospital, meanwhile, are holding steady, a spokesman said.

If the trend continues, the final figure for this year might well pass the 40,000 mark, not seen since the pre-Sars years.

Dr Ho Hon Kwok, consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at Mount Alvernia Hospital, said: "I have delivered significantly more babies for the past four months and this trend is expected to continue over the next few months based on the bookings received so far."

The majority of mothers he attends to are in their 30s and early 40s and expecting their second child.

Gynaecologist Lim Yuen Wen, of Women's and Children's Hospital, said: "Because the economy is good, I'm seeing repeat patients who have decided to have a second and third baby after having held off for a while."

Sociologist Chung Wai Keung at the Singapore Management University said a better and more stable financial climate was

Expectant mothers say financial security played a big role

One of these was Madam Jagtiani, who has a six-year-old daughter and is expecting a second child. She waited six years because the economy was in the doldrums. But she received a $900 pay raise in November last year and is now five months pregnant.

She said: "I want to be able to provide more than just 'enough' for my children. My pay raise has really bolstered my confidence in being able to give my children a good life."

Some have had to wait even longer.

Marketing executive Julliyanah Mohd Annu, 35, waited 10 years before having her third child, citing economic stability as the key deciding factor.

"In the last few years, the economy was not doing very well. Now, I know that my company is doing better and the market has been picking up. I definitely feel more secure in my job, which makes me feel positive about having my baby," she said.

Ms Julliyanah and her husband have a combined monthly salary of around $1,000 and live with their two sons in a four-room flat in Bedok.

Market researcher Kevin Huang, 39, said: "I think it's fair to say that there is a correlation between financial stability and wanting to have a child."

He admitted that financial constraints had made him and his wife, 29-year-old teacher Ashley Tay, wonder whether to go through with having a baby when she became pregnant three years ago.

But with support from friends and family, they decided to keep Cherie, who is now nearly two. And now that times are good and their jobs are more secure, they are ready for their second child.

Melissa Sim, Reema Jagtiani & Nur Aniza Abdul Karim

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among other things, one of the factors influencing couples' decisions to have children. Historically, couples seem to take their cue from the economy. In 2003, the year Sars struck, the economy grew just 2.9 per cent and the birth rate fell by more than 3,000 accordingly. This was despite the Baby Bonus scheme, introduced in April 2001 to encourage couples to have children. When the Asian economic crisis hit in 1997, Singapore's economy experienced negative growth of 1.4 per cent in 1998. Again, the birth rate plunged by 3,669, from 47,333 to 43,664. Earlier, the 1985 recession also coincided with a 4,105 drop in the number of babies born. But when the economy bounced back in 1988 with double-digit growth of 11.5 per cent, the birth rate sky-rocketed to 52,957 from just 43,616 the previous year. The Government has tried to influence the birth rate through a number of incentive schemes. The Table below shows the rise in births.

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<th>Month</th>
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| Cash gifts given to the second and third children were extended to the first and fourth child in August 2004. Other measures include longer maternity leave — 12 weeks instead of eight — and a lower maid levy. These schemes have had some effect, but to a large extent, the birth rates remain anchored to the undulating graph of the national economy.

Sociologist Paulin Straughan agrees that families generally start a family or plan for a larger family when they enjoy a sense of economic, social and political security, but remains cautiously optimistic about the rising figures. She said: “At least the absolute numbers aren’t going down and the state is showing its support for the family unit. But, ultimately, we’ll have to wait and see what the replacement rate is at the end of the year.”

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