

Missing men or unaccounted for women? One of New Zealand's unresolved demographic mysteries.

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How many of you have daughters aged between 30 and 39 years?
How many of these daughters have had babies this year?
How many of these daughters don't have partners or husbands they are living with?
How many of these daughters have complained of a lack of eligible men?
How many of them returned to New Zealand recently from a stint overseas?
Did any of them come home sooner than expected?

These questions relate to some of the distinctive characteristics of New Zealand's contemporary population that I want to touch on today:

- 1) the high number of births
- 2) the increasing levels of emigration
- 3) the widening gap between numbers of men and women in their 30s.

These are all characteristics that have featured in the media in recent months – comments about another “baby boom”, about a “man drought” and most recently in Saturday's *Herald*, about “1000 a week now cross the Ditch” ...

Last year there were 64,340 births in New Zealand – just below the record number of births (65,390) in 1961 at the height of the post-war baby boom. This comparison in numbers of births has led some to say we are currently having another “baby boom”. But this is not the case. What is the big difference in NZ's population between 1961 and 2008? Its size – in 1961 NZ had a population of 2.4 million; in 2008 the population was 4.3 million. There are far more women in the reproductive age groups in 2008 than there were in 1961. If women today were having babies at the rate they were in 1961 we would have had over 150,000 births in 2008. We are not having a baby boom. The average number of children a woman could expect to have on the 1961 fertility rates was 4.2. In 2008 the average number of children women could expect to have on current fertility rates is 2.2.

While the overall fertility of women is lower in 2008 than it was in 1961, as measured by their numbers of births – not their reproductive potential (they are not less fertile!) – women in their 30s are having a lot more babies than they did in the early 1960s. In 2008 the peak childbearing age was 32 years, and women at this age produced 132 babies per 1000 women. 40 years ago women aged 32 were producing around 80 births per 1000 women. In the 1960s the peak child bearing age was 23 years, and women at this age were producing 250 births per 1000 women. In 2008 women aged 23 years were producing only 75 births per 1000 women.

So the 30s age group is now much more important for the production of our grandchildren. In demographic terms, this is a critical age group – this is the one which is playing an increasingly important role in replacing our population – producing the next generations of tax payers who will provide the superannuation to support us in our old age, as well as their mothers and fathers as they go into the older

age groups. And these are also the women who, according to the reports on a so-called “man drought” are suffering from a shortage of eligible male partners, if they are not already hitched up.

This “man drought” is not a figment of someone’s imagination. It is a demographic reality according to our recent censuses. Since 1986 the gap between numbers of men and women in their 30s has been widening – in 1986 there were 2,600 fewer men than women; by 1996 this disparity had increased to over 15,000; by 2006 it was over 30,000. There were also deficits in the age groups 20-29 years and 40-49 years, but it is the 30s where the biggest differences at each census are found.

Demographically this is most unusual. In most populations the numbers of males outnumber females at each age until around age 50. Why is this so? There are always more males than females born into a population. For every 100 female births there will be somewhere between 104 and 106 male births. In NZ during 2008 there were 33,100 boys and 31,240 girls born – 105 males per 100 females. Females eventually become more numerous in the population, usually after age 50, because they are the stronger sex in terms of survival – males die at a faster rate at every age from birth.

If we have more females than males aged 30-39 years in the population, then only three things can be causing this: higher than usual male death rates; higher male emigration or higher female immigration; or an increasing tendency for men in their 30s to avoid filling in census forms. In fact, all of these make a contribution in to the widening gap in numbers of males and females aged between 20 and 49 years, but the higher male death rates from accidents and suicides, and the higher male non-response to the census are really more common amongst 20 year olds.

That leaves migration. Is the flood of migrants across the Tasman, that the *Herald* refers to, largely a male flood? Well, there were slightly more men than women in the departures for 12 months or more to Australia in the year ended December 2008 – 25,000 men compared with 23,500 women (106 men for every 100 women). Not really a difference that could account for the widening disparities in numbers of men and women. What about in the other direction? Are there more women than men in the much smaller permanent and long-term flow from Australia to New Zealand? No, there are more men coming back from Australia after living there for 12 months or more than women.

When you look at permanent and long-term flows out of and into New Zealand to all countries (not just Australia) we find that there are higher numbers of men than women going in both directions, although the differences between them are very small. In the outflow there are 100 women for every 104 men who leave; in the inflow there are 100 women for every 106 men who arrive. Overall, during 2008, New Zealand gained 2,100 more men than it lost through emigration, and 1,700 more women than it lost through emigration. There were 400 more men than women added to the population ... a small contribution to easing the man drought ...

Permanent and long-term migration does not account for the deficit in men in the population. But it does seem that another kind of migration is contributing to growth in the number of women in the population, rather than excessive emigration of men.

This is the tendency for more women than men to change their minds about how long they stay overseas. This is what demographers call “category jumping”.

Let me explain – when you leave NZ, as an NZ resident, you say how long you will be staying overseas. If you give a time that is greater than 12 months, and you say that the country you will next spend 12 months or more in is a country other than New Zealand, then you are a “permanent or long-term departure”. If you stay away for at least 12 months, when you eventually return, you will be called a “permanent and long-term arrival” – an arrival who has been overseas for 12 months or more (this is if you are a New Zealand resident). You will have left and returned under the same category of migration.

However, if you come back after less than 12 months away, you will be classified as a short-term arrival – someone who has been away for less than 12 months. You will have returned under a different category of migration than you left, and you won’t be counted in the PLT migration statistics. Because Statistics NZ uses PLT statistics when calculating the effect of migration on the population, your return goes unnoticed in the migration statistics ... yet you are there at the time of the census.

In the year ended March 2008, New Zealand gained about 600 more men than women through its permanent and long-term flows. In the total migration flows, which include the short-term arrivals and departures, NZ gained 16,000 more women than men! A similar pattern, with some fluctuation in the numbers, can be found for most years since the mid-1980s. If these people are not being added into the population through net migration, then we are missing out on accounting for why there might be more women than men in the critical age groups affected by migration – the men and women aged between 20 and 49 years.

I won’t go further here with the analysis of this demographic mystery but I suspect it is not so much a case of “missing men” as one of “unaccounted for women”. This doesn’t help the women aged between 30 and 39 find suitable men, if that is what they are looking for. But the greater homing instinct of the women, rather than the flight of the men, might be at the root of the gender disparities in the 30s. Perhaps as the recession bites the situation will improve somewhat for women seeking men ... New Zealanders heading for Australia since 2001 have one distinct disadvantage over those who went across the Tasman to work and live before 2001.

What is that difference (it is one that could make a great difference to wellbeing at a time of recession). Since February 2001 New Zealand citizens, who can enter Australia without visas or meeting any of Australia’s immigration requirements except the usual criminal record test, have not been eligible for Australia’s unemployment benefit. This was a change introduced in 2001 to discourage kiwis heading for Australia who might become a burden on the Australian tax payer. If the recession becomes very deep and there are major job losses in Australia, as I think there will be, then there will be quite a few NZers without work ... and without benefits. They will be coming home, if for no other reason than to pick up the benefit. Maybe this will help balance reduce the disparity in numbers of men and women in those prime reproductive age groups ...

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