

# TEENAGE MARRIAGES IN SINGAPORE

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## SYNOPSIS

This is a study of 208,186 teenage marriages in various ethnic groups in Singapore (based on the Population Census 1980). The frequency of teenage marriages has been falling steadily among each of the three major races (Chinese, Malays and Indians) over the past four decades. For each decade, the Malays had the highest and the Chinese the lowest frequency. Lower frequencies were found among the literate (in particular, among the English speaking), those with a tertiary education and those who were Christians or had no religion. The educational level, religion and ethnic group similarly influenced the fertility of teenage marriages which was, however, consistently higher than those at later ages.

## INTRODUCTION

Teenage marriages have numerous disadvantages. Young mothers have increased risks of pregnancy complications and their babies are exposed to higher risks of infant mortality and morbidity (Spicer & Lipworth, 1966; Menken 1972). Teenage first births are more likely to be unintended (Cartwright 1976) and the parents are thus less likely to be prepared for parenthood. In a previous study of a British birth cohort (Kiernan 1980) it was shown that the teenage years were most unfavourable for embarking on parenthood: the teenage mothers were, on average, the least able academically, unambitious and left school at the minimal age. Their husbands were younger at marriage, had lower educational attainment and lower status jobs than the spouses of older mothers.

The present report is a study on the frequencies and fertility of teenage marriages in Singapore, taking into account the influence of ethnic/dialect group, educational level and religion.

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## MATERIAL AND METHOD

The source of data for this study is the 1980 Census of Population in Singapore, Release No. 9 on Religion and Fertility (Khoo 1981). Tuesday, 24th June 1980, 0000 hour was designated as Census Day, the reference point for the population count. The required particulars of all persons in Singapore on Census Day were recorded at their place of residence. From 20th May to 23rd June 1980, all census houses were numbered, households identified and listed, and particulars of persons recorded. Households were re-visited during 24th-26th June 1980 to confirm or update particulars of members to refer to Census Day. Persons without a fixed place of residence, namely wayfarers and those living on board boats within the Port Limits, were enumerated during the night of 23rd June and early hours of 24th June 1980. Crew and passengers in transit on board ocean-going vessels in Singapore waters on Census Day were collectively enumerated through the respective shipping companies or agents.

The ethnic group refers to the person's race. The population was classified under seven categories: Chinese, Malays, Indonesians, Indians, Eurasians, Europeans and other ethnic groups. Where a broader four-category classification of ethnic group is used 'Malays' includes both Malays and Indonesians, and 'Others' includes Eurasians, Europeans and other ethnic groups.

Language literacy refers to a person's ability to read with understanding a newspaper in the language specified. There are four official languages in Singapore: Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English.

The educational level refers to the grade or standard of formal education which a full-time student was attending during the census. Religion refers to the religious faith or spiritual belief as stated by the person regardless of how faithfully he practises it.

In this study, a teenage marriage is defined as one in which the bride was under 20 years at the time of marriage. In calculating the fertility only married women are taken into account. Fertility is expressed as the number of children per married female. The duration of marriage refers to the number of years the woman has married. It is derived by subtracting her year of first marriage from the census year 1980.

Standard statistical methods were used to evaluate the significance of the difference between two means (Student's *t* test) and between two proportions (Binomial Distribution). An Apple II microcomputer was used for all the statistical calculations.

## RESULTS

### Teenage marriages over the last 4 decades (Table 1)

The frequency of teenage marriages in the three major races (Chinese, Malays and Indians) in Singapore has been falling steadily over the last four decades. In each decade, the Malays had the highest frequency, and the Chinese the lowest. The differences between the three races are significant in each of the four decades ( $p < 0.0001$ ), with the exception of the Malays compared to the Indians in 1951-1960 ( $p > 0.05$ ) and 1961-1970 ( $p > 0.01$ ). The decrease in the frequency of teenage marriages in each successive decade is also very significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

### Teenage marriages in various ethnic/dialect groups (Table 2)

There is considerable variation in the frequency of teenage marriages in various ethnic/dialect groups. Among the Chinese the lowest frequency was among the Shanghaiese (29.1%) and the highest among the Henghua (47.9%),  $p < 0.0001$ . Among the Indians the lowest frequency was among the Bengali (35.7%) and the highest Sinhalese (62.0%),  $p < 0.0001$ . As a group, the Indonesians had the highest frequency (61.6%) while the Europeans were among the lowest (18.3%).

### Language literacy of teenage marriages (Table 3)

Language literacy appeared to have a marked influence on the frequency of teenage marriages. Among the four main languages spoken (Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English), the English speaking people had the lowest frequency of teenage marriages (17.5%) followed by the Chinese speaking (29.0%). It is interesting to note that if English was spoken in addition to one of the other three languages, the frequency of teenage marriages was decreased when compared to those who spoke Chinese only (29.0%),  $p < 0.0001$ . Generally, those who were literate had a significantly lower frequency of teenage marriages (28.9%) than those who were illiterate (53.5%). All possible comparisons in Table 3 are significant at  $p < 0.0001$ .

### Educational level of teenage marriages (Table 4)

The educational level (primary, secondary or tertiary) also had a significant influence on the frequency of teenage marriages as well as the fertility (expressed as the number of children per married female). The frequency fell steadily from those with no education (50.0%) to those with tertiary education (4.4%). The same trend was apparent with respect to fertility, but with one important exception: those with secondary education had the lowest number of children per married female. Again, all possible comparison in this table are significant at  $p < 0.0001$ .

### Religion of teenage marriages (Table 5)

The religion of the teenage couples was another factor in influencing the frequency and fertility of teenage marriages. The lowest frequency was found among the Christians and those with no religion (19.1% and 18.2% respectively), while the highest was among the Muslims (53.1%). The lowest fertility was found among those with no religion while the highest was among the Buddhists/Taoists and the Muslims (there are no significant difference between these two groups,  $p > 0.05$ ). There was also no significant difference in fertility between the Christians and those with other religions ( $p > 0.05$ ). Other possible comparisons in fertility are, however, very significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ), for instance, between the Christians and Muslims or between the Christians and those with no religion.

### Distribution of progeny size in teenage marriages (Table 6)

The distribution of progeny size among teenage marriages (in this instance, brides who married between the

Table 1. Teenage marriages in the last four decades

Decade	Chinese	Malays	Indians	Total
<b>Before 1951</b>				
No. of teenage marriages	81,250	15,592	5197	102,533
Total ever married females	133,541	20,155	6833	162,788
% of teenage marriages	60.7%	77.4%	74.7%	63.0%
<b>1951-1960</b>				
No. of teenage marriages	29,075	10,660	4180	44,396
Total ever married females	68,048	15,632	6239	91,721
% of teenage marriages	42.7%	68.2%	67.0%	48.4%
<b>1961-1970</b>				
No. of teenage marriages	20,931	8,242	6868	119,298
Total ever married females	93,482	14,998	6868	119,298
% of teenage marriages	22.4%	55.0%	52.7%	28.1%
<b>1971-1980</b>				
No. of teenage marriages	16,975	7,945	2355	27,748
Total ever married females	131,973	25,595	9026	171,262
% of teenage marriages	12.9%	31.0%	26.1%	16.2%
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>				
No. of teenage marriages	148,006	42,439	15,261	208,186
Total ever married females	427,044	76,380	28,966	545,069
% of teenage marriages	34.7%	55.6%	52.7%	38.2%

Table 2. Teenage marriages in various ethnic/dialect groups

Ethnic/dialect group	No. of teenage marriages	Total no. of ever married females	% of teenage marriages
<b>CHINESE</b>			
Hokkien	61,675	171,095	36.0%
Teochew	36,301	95,218	38.1%
Cantonese	24,748	83,319	29.7%
Hainanese	9,565	30,107	31.8%
Hakka	10,103	31,546	32.0%
Foochow	2,208	6,677	33.1%
Henghua	1,298	2,712	47.9%
Shanghaihinese	1,006	3,457	29.1%
Others	1,102	2,913	37.8%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>148,006</b>	<b>427,044</b>	<b>34.7%</b>
<b>MALAYS</b>	<b>36,236</b>	<b>66,308</b>	<b>54.6%</b>
<b>INDONESIANS</b>			
Javanese	2,752	4,558	60.4%
Boyonese	3,054	4,563	66.9%
Others	397	951	41.5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6,203</b>	<b>10,072</b>	<b>61.6%</b>
<b>INDIANS</b>			
Tamil	10,078	17,751	56.8%
Malayali	916	2,184	41.9%
Punjabi	1,373	2,646	51.9%
Bengali	90	252	35.7%
Sinhalese	75	307	62.0%
Others	2,729	5,826	46.8%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15,261</b>	<b>28,966</b>	<b>52.7%</b>
<b>EURASIANS</b>	<b>619</b>	<b>2,430</b>	<b>25.5%</b>
<b>EUROPEANS</b>	<b>1,081</b>	<b>5,902</b>	<b>18.3%</b>
<b>OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS</b>	<b>780</b>	<b>4,346</b>	<b>17.9%</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>208,186</b>	<b>545,069</b>	<b>38.2%</b>

Table 3. Language Literacy of Teenage Marriages

Languages literate in	No. of teenage marriages	Total no. of ever married females	% of teenage marriages
Chinese	47,727	164,358	29.0%
Malay	18,683	32,870	56.8%
Tamil	4,478	6,425	70.0%
English	10,138	57,850	17.5%
English & Chinese	5,323	42,570	12.5%
English & Malay	7,506	23,210	32.3%
English & Tamil	1,937	4,780	40.5%
Other languages	2,294	7,220	31.8%
NOT LITERATE	110,100	205,786	53.5%
LITERATE	98,086	339,283	28.9%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>208,186</b>	<b>545,069</b>	<b>38.2%</b>

Table 4. Educational Level and Fertility of Teenage Marriages

Education	No. of Teenage Marriages	Total No. of Ever Married Females	% of Teenage Marriages	Total No. Children	Mean No. Children	S.D.
No Education	152,575	305,024	50.0%	550,674	5.19	2.63
Primary	49,211	172,132	28.6%	140,082	3.12	2.11
Secondary	6,017	59,234	10.2%	11,944	2.15	1.67
Tertiary	383	8,679	4.4%	870	2.43	1.73
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>208,186</b>	<b>545,069</b>	<b>38.2%</b>	<b>703,569</b>	<b>4.48</b>	<b>2.67</b>

S.D. = Standard Deviation

Table 5. Religion and Fertility of Teenage Marriages

RELIGION	No. of Teenage Marriages	Total No. of Ever Married Females	% Teenage Marriages	Total No. Children	Mean No. Children per Married Female	S.D.
Christianity	9,056	47,466	19.1%	36,250	4.00	2.52
Buddhism & Taoism	91,082	268,904	33.9%	428,659	4.71	2.58
Islam	36,573	68,834	53.1%	171,427	4.69	2.94
Other Religions	9,056	17,776	50.9%	36,225	4.00	2.46
No Religion	8,799	48,255	18.2%	31,008	3.52	2.32
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>154,566</b>	<b>451,235</b>	<b>34.3%</b>	<b>703,569</b>	<b>4.55</b>	<b>2.67</b>

S.D. = Standard Deviation

Table 6. Distribution of Progeny Size in Teenage Marriages

No. of Children Born Alive	Teenage Marriages (Aged 15-19 years at first marriage)		Adult Marriages (Aged 20-24 years at first marriage)	
	Number	% of total	Number	% of total
0	4,890	3.4%	21,318	11.0%
1	12,699	8.9%	35,627	18.4%
2	21,896	15.4%	48,386	24.9%
3	22,681	15.9%	35,421	18.3%
4	19,899	14.0%	20,452	10.5%
5	15,849	11.1%	12,236	6.3%
6	13,227	9.3%	8,020	4.1%
7	10,199	7.2%	5,127	2.6%
8	7,763	5.5%	3,245	1.7%
9	5,263	3.7%	1,857	1.0%
10+	7,985	5.6%	2,259	1.2%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>142,351</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>193,948</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 7. Fertility of Teenage Marriages in Various Ethnic Groups

Ethnic Group (age at first marriage)	Total Number of Children	Total ever Married Females	No. Children per Married Female	Standard Deviation
<b>CHINESE</b>				
15–19 years	462,646	101,246	4.57	2.57
20–24 years	444,770	157,320	2.83	2.08
Total	1,105,766	350,523	3.15	2.36
<b>MALAYS</b>				
15–19 years	125,054	28,603	4.37	2.86
20–24 years	56,009	21,680	2.58	2.36
Total	236,402	64,280	3.68	2.89
<b>INDIANS</b>				
15–19 years	38,736	10,455	3.71	2.40
20–24 years	20,533	9,172	2.24	1.82
Total	76,441	24,840	3.08	2.36
<b>OTHER RACES</b>				
15–19 years	5,892	2,048	2.88	2.09
20–24 years	11,924	5,776	2.06	1.57
Total	23,899	11,592	2.06	1.69
<b>ALL RACES</b>				
15–19 years	632,328	142,352	4.44	2.63
20–24 years	533,235	193,948	2.75	2.10
Total	1,442,507	451,235	3.20	2.44

Table 8. Infertile Teenage Marriages

Age at first marriage	No. without any children	Total no. of married females	% infertile marriages
10–14 years	272	12,216	2.2%
15–19 years	4,890	142,351	3.4%
20–24 years	21,318	193,948	11.0%
25–29 years	12,759	80,753	15.8%
30+ years	5,419	21,967	24.9%

Table 9. Fertility and Duration of Teenage Marriages

Duration of: marriages	Age at 1st marriage: 15-19 years			Age at 1st marriage: 20-24 years			Marriages at all ages		
	No.	Mean no. children	SD	No.	Mean no. children	SD	No.	Mean no. children	SD
0-4 years	10,500	0.92	0.72	41,363	0.71	0.70	58,504	0.72	0.70
5-9 years	6,030	2.07	0.89	45,518	1.91	0.87	163,996	1.88	0.90
10-14 years	16,145	2.92	1.10	29,977	2.68	1.02	170,919	2.65	1.09
15-19 years	13,751	3.74	1.43	21,967 <sup>41</sup>	3.38	1.36	162,396	3.36	1.45
20-24 years	18,002	4.75	1.84	17,177	4.11	1.84	185,369	4.28	1.92
25-29 years	17,947	5.60	2.20	12,976	4.93	2.18	191,729	5.20	2.31
30+ years	49,976	6.10	2.73	24,970	5.12	2.60	509,593	5.68	2.76
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>142,351</b>	<b>4.44</b>	<b>2.63</b>	<b>193,948</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>2.10</b>	<b>1,442,507</b>	<b>3.20</b>	<b>2.44</b>



ages 15-19 years) and adult marriages (brides who were 20-24 years at marriage) is shown in Table 6. The percentage of teenage marriages with 0, 1, 2 or 3 children were lower compared to those of adult marriages. On the other hand, there were higher percentages of teenage marriages with 4 or more children compared to adult marriages. All comparisons were again significant at  $p < 0.0001$ . These figures indicate the high fertility of teenage marriages compared to adult marriages.

#### **Fertility of teenage marriages in various ethnic groups (Table 7)**

Teenage marriages among the Chinese showed the highest fertility while the Indians had the lowest among the three main races, despite the higher frequencies of teenage marriages among the Malays and Indians compared to the Chinese (Table 1). Differences in the fertility of the teenage marriages (married at ages 15-19 years) compared to adult marriages (married at ages 20-24 years) were also very significant in each ethnic group, the teenage marriages consistently showed a higher fertility. All comparisons were significant at  $p < 0.0001$ .

#### **Infertile teenage marriages (Table 8)**

Teenage marriages which failed to produce children were significantly fewer than those at later ages, the frequency of infertile marriages rising steadily with the age at first marriage. Again, all the comparisons were significant at  $p < 0.0001$ .

#### **Fertility and duration of teenage marriages (Table 9)**

When the duration of marriage was taken into account, teenage marriages (married at ages 15-19) were again distinctly more fertile than adult marriages (married at ages 20-24 years),  $p < 0.0001$  in each case. As would be expected, the mean number of children for both the teenage and adult marriages rose steadily with the duration of marriage.

## **DISCUSSION**

The frequencies of teenage marriages in each of the three major races in Singapore (Chinese, Malays and Indians) have been decreasing steadily over the last four decades. Despite this trend, the proportion of teenage marriages are still high among the Malays and Indians (about a third and a quarter respectively of all marriages during the last decade). In view of the many disadvantages of teenage parenthood, this present figure must be of concern to paediatricians, sociologists and others. The high fertility of teenage marriages must also be of relevance to people involved in promoting family planning. The ethnic group, educational level, language literacy and religion are important factors in influencing the frequency and fertility of teenage marriages. Perhaps the factor which can be manipulated in an acceptable way to all concerned would be the educational level. Raising the educational level of the people is likely to decrease further the frequency of teenage marriages, with important effects on population control. Raising the minimal age for leaving school and vocational training of early school leavers may well have a similar effect, as this may delay the age of marriage. In Singapore intense efforts are being made in these directions, and in the coming decade significant decrease in the frequency of teenage marriages is anticipated.

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