

VICTORIA'S BABY DROUGHT



Fletcher, two days old, baby Chan (no first name yet), four days old and Mia, one day old, at Cabrini Malvern. Picture: JASON EDWARDS

House prices blamed for state's low birthrate

VICTORIA'S birthrate is falling steadily, despite a booming economy that some would say should be family-friendly.

A federal report reveals that Victoria had 79,013 births last year — a massive 25,800 fewer than the figure for New South Wales.

Victoria's rate of 1.641 births per woman last year was the lowest of any state or territory — and is much lower than the 1.84 total fertility rate recorded in 2012-13, says the ABS report Australian Demographic Statistics September 2018.

By contrast, NSW had a fertility rate of 1.864 in 2017-18, up from 1.761 the previous year.

The Australian Population Research Institute's Dr Bob Birrell said that the rapidly rising cost of family-friendly housing in Melbourne appeared to be a key explanation for the state's lower birthrate.

"Despite Victoria and Melbourne's booming population and economy, the state is not

JOHN MASANAUSKAS AND JOSEPH ARTHUR

creating the conditions where young families feel they can commit to having children," he said.

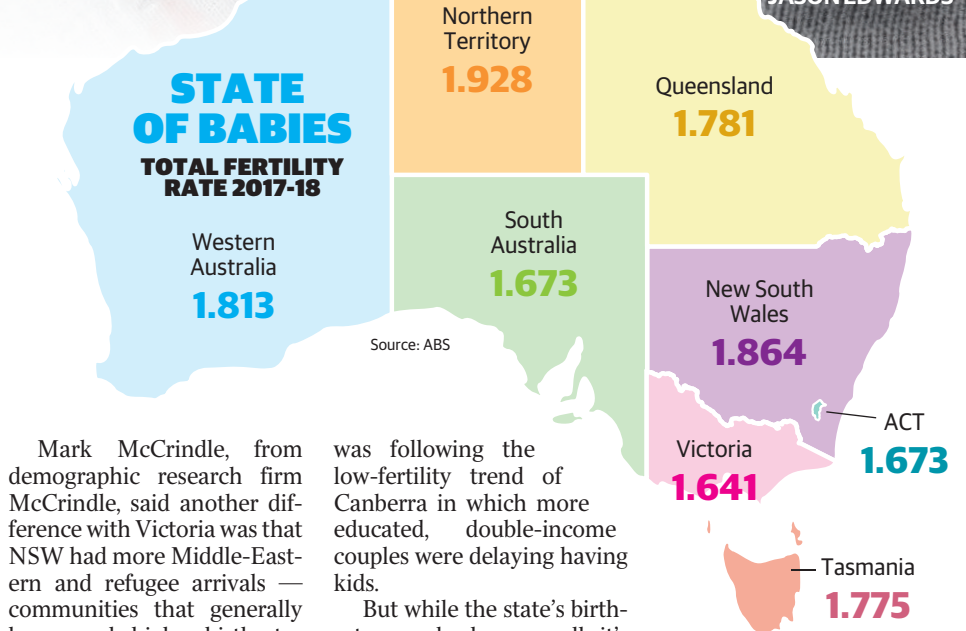
Dr Birrell said that NSW's higher birthrate could be related to Sydney's share of NSW's population (65 per cent) being considerably lower than Melbourne's share of the Victorian population (77 per cent).

"Fertility levels are typically much higher in regional areas where housing prices are much lower," he said.

Tanya Kirk, who gave birth to Fletcher at Cabrini Malvern this week, said that financial security was key for her and partner Andrew Douglas.

"We have a great support base and we knew we weren't going to do it without being stable," she said.

"We've previously rented and lived in an apartment, but we wanted to get a house with a yard and some more room before we brought kids back."



Mark McCrindle, from demographic research firm McCrindle, said another difference with Victoria was that NSW had more Middle-Eastern and refugee arrivals — communities that generally have much higher birthrates than the average.

"The migration from mainland China doesn't have that uptick in fertility, but migration from India has a bit more of one, and the Middle-East and Africa certainly do," he said.

Mr McCrindle said it was also possible that Melbourne

was following the low-fertility trend of Canberra in which more educated, double-income couples were delaying having kids.

But while the state's birthrate may be low overall, it's not apparent in booming fringe areas like the west's City of Wyndham.

"We have more than 90 babies born a week to Wyndham mothers, and our overall population is forecast to double between now and 2041, reaching just under 500,000," said Mayor Mia Shaw.

"Because of our high rate of births, we are in need of increased access to local health and hospital services."

Cr Shaw said the area also urgently needed more child-care centres, kindergartens and schools. john.masanauskas@news.com.au

Asbestos fears keep kids home

ONE in seven pupils at Essendon North Primary were kept at home yesterday as Premier Daniel Andrews moved to reassure worried families over asbestos exposure fears.

Parents of 90 students refused to send their children to school for a second day running, after a series of asbestos incidents over the past month.

Over the past two weeks up to 15 possible asbestos fragments were found on the oval

ASHLEY ARGOON

and a garden bed. They were discovered during audits that followed the discovery of asbestos dust in Grade 1 classrooms after maintenance works about a month ago.

Mr Andrews said yesterday the school had been deemed safe and there was "no need to be alarmed".

"I understand this would be a very stressful, difficult time

for parents at that school but the advice I have ... is that extensive testing has been done, that the school is safe, and that there is no reason to keep kids at home," he said.

The Herald Sun understands about 20 parents — some of whom have more than one child at the school — wrote to government representatives to advise that they would keep their children home over asbestos concerns.



Ben Cousins

BAIL GRANTED TO COUSINS

FALLEN AFL champion Ben Cousins has walked free from prison after being granted bail ahead of his trial later this year over alleged family violence offences.

The 40-year-old drug addict had been behind bars since his arrest at a Canning Vale house in August when he was charged with a string of offences.

Cousins faced Armadale Magistrates' Court last Tuesday and was

subsequently granted bail. Last month, the Brownlow medallist pleaded not guilty to 12 counts of breaching a violence restraining order, and one count each of stalking and threatening to harm.

A trial date has been set for September 12.

Cousins is alleged to have told ex-partner Maylea Tinecheff: "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to take your life and your freedom and the things you love the most."

Cat killer cleared of cruelty

A MAN who threw his girlfriend's cat from the balcony of a 45th-floor Melbourne apartment has had animal cruelty charges dismissed.

The fatal fall has been declared a "tragic accident" after Cheng Lu, 20, admitted he used "a bit too much force" when trying to put the cat outside to teach it a lesson for scratching.

Magistrate Costas Killias yesterday dismissed charges of animal cruelty and reckless endangerment against Mr Lu, finding the university computer sciences student threw the cat over the balcony but had no criminal case to answer.

The magistrate compared the event to a driver accidentally hitting a dog, versus one who actively ran one down out of a dislike of dogs.

"I have every sympathy for the poor cat that found itself in this situation, but I have to satisfy myself ... whether it was intentional or not," Mr Killias said. There was no intended cruelty, he found.

Mr Lu told the court he only meant to throw Chau Chau on to the balcony after the kitten scratched his leg from under a couch in April 2018.

"I grabbed the cat and put the cat outside but I might have used a bit too much force," Mr Lu said, through a Chinese interpreter. "I only intended to put the cat on to the balcony, not over the balcony."

The court previously heard Kaiqi Chen, Chau Chau's owner and Mr Lu's then girlfriend watched from the bathroom as her beloved pet sailed "in the air" over the balustrade.

March hits heat record

AUSTRALIA has sweltered through its hottest March on record.

The national mean temperature was 27.7C, making it 2.13C above average, according to The Bureau of Meteorology's monthly climate report.

It was particularly warm in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, which both posted their hottest March on record, while it was among the six warmest for NSW, Queensland and South Australia.

Rainfall for March was above average for large areas of eastern Australia and parts of the west.