Can a 15-minute city push up a 0.87 fertility rate?
By Lily Kong

The Straits Times, Singapore, Page 1,2, Section: I OPINION,OPINION
Friday 8 May 2026
2162 words, 1350cm² in size
386,100 circulation

Can a 15-minute city push up a 0.87 fertility rate?

Singaporeans may feel more supported to have children if schools, workplaces and extended families are all close to their homes.

Lily Kong

Much of Singapore's strategy to address falling fertility has focused on financial incentives: Baby Bonuses, tax rebates, housing grants. These are important in addressing financial costs and, over the years, they have been progressively enhanced.

Important as they are, they have not led to the desired outcomes. Indeed, the total fertility rate (TFR) has declined further, to an all-time low of 0.87.

A quieter, less examined issue lies in the way we have organised everyday life itself.

RETHINKING PROXIMITY

For many families, the challenge of raising children is not defined by a single hardship, but by the steady accumulation of small, repeated frictions. The morning rush to get a child to school before work. The scramble to arrange care when a child falls ill. The long commute home before the second shift of caregiving begins, perhaps even paired with a night shift of catch-up work.

Each of these demands may be manageable on its own, but together they can become overwhelming, logistically and emotionally. Over time, this cumulative strain can shape decisions about whether to have a second or third child, alongside more commonly cited concerns such as financial cost and the stress of the education system.

The repeated daily pressures point to an issue about the spatial organisation of everyday life.

When essential services such as schools, childcare, healthcare, workplaces, and shops are spread out, families must constantly bridge distances, adding time, stress and uncertainty to already full schedules. If everyday routines feel like a continuous negotiation of distance and time, the experience of raising children becomes burdensome.

Urban planners sometimes speak of the "15-minute city", a concept developed by Paris-based French-Colombian professor Carlos Moreno, describing a city in which all essential needs (living, working, health, education, shopping and leisure) are within a 15-minute walk or cycle. The concept gained particular attention during Covid-19 when the self-containment of city districts was attractive for its prospect of reducing virus spread.

Singapore has long operationalised the concept of precincts and neighbourhoods, which embody the idea of proximity and self-sufficiency. But the degree of proximity does not go as far as Prof Moreno proposed. The concept thus bears closer scrutiny as a useful lens for thinking about family life, exploring how compact districts may enable more manageable routines in day-to-day life when raising children.

What if the next phase of policy to support Singaporeans to have families is to focus on reducing structural friction in daily life? What opportunities remain to be tapped?

DESIGNING FOR SUPPORT

To design for proximity is to design for support. Singapore's housing policies have long recognised the importance of intergenerational proximity, encouraging families to live near parents through schemes such as the Family Care Scheme. Here, there may be room to go further by enhancing quotas.

But beyond intergenerational proximity, other forms of proximity could offer benefits as yet under-exploited. Of value is the role of social network proximity.

Living near siblings, extended family or friends offers extended support networks, drawing on pre-existing social and familial ties and providing an additional layer of resilience for families, particularly in dual-income households where both parents are working. Parenthetically, this social network proximity is also increasingly important for those ageing alone.

Then there is care-home proximity. When childcare centres, eldercare services and healthcare facilities are co-located within single developments, including residential developments, instead of dispersed across a precinct, parents are better able to manage competing caregiving responsibilities.

A child falling ill, an elderly parent needing attention, or a sudden work demand becomes less destabilising when support is physically nearby, reducing coordination burdens on families. Reliable emergency backup support available within 15 minutes or less, delivered as a service, could provide relief for unexpected circumstances.

Or consider work-home proximity. As hybrid work becomes more common, there is scope to develop neighbourhood-scale work hubs that reduce commuting time and give parents more flexibility in structuring their day. Time saved from long commutes is time that can be reallocated to family life, but only if such alternatives are meaningfully available.

Undoubtedly, school-home proximity matters. When children can travel safely, even

CONTINUED ON PAGE B2

What families need is confidence, not just cash

FROM B1

independently, to school, it reduces the daily coordination load on parents and fosters a sense of autonomy in children themselves. Perhaps rather than consolidating schools on account of the decline in TFR, resources may be allocated to keeping a larger number of smaller schools, each located closer to homes, with the added benefit of smaller class sizes.

Even within the framework of the 15-minute city, Singapore can go further by improving experiential and not just physical proximity, through improving the ease and comfort of getting around, with better shelter, cooling, and accessibility, especially in older estates.

This recognises that the concept of distance is relative, too – a 15-minute walk through a familiar, tree-lined route with shade and flora may feel fleeting while the same 15 minutes through high humidity, heavy traffic and uneven pavements makes the distance seem greater.

In short, if the goal is to make parenthood more viable, then the next phase of urban planning must refine the principle of proximity, pushing for more granular, micro-scale and experiential proximity.

This means paying attention to how proximity is experienced in practice. These may sound like micro and technical considerations. But taken together, they shape the texture of everyday life.

They can potentially help lessen burdens in daily routines, so that raising a child in Singapore feels more manageable, and genuinely supported through the amelioration of everyday frictions. It is within this texture of daily life that decisions about marriage and parenthood are made.

These are long-term efforts and are not easily achievable without significant rewriting of policies and redesign of infrastructure; they cannot be achieved in the short term easily.

All the more, Singapore needs to move with urgency on these structural issues.

NOT JUST SPACE, BUT TIME

Proximity adjusts more than spatial experience. It addresses an issue of time poverty. But this is not the only time-related action required.

Long working hours and expectations of after-hours responses remain deeply embedded in the local work culture. Even where flexible work arrangements exist, they are not always experienced as genuine options. Formal policies may be in place, but workplace cultures can quietly penalise those who make use of them.

Without addressing time poverty, creating the spatial environment and providing financial support will not go far enough. Flexible work arrangements could become a baseline entitlement rather than an employer-discretion practice. Artificial intelligence may have the potential to help working parents spend more time on childcare by automating routine tasks, improving productivity and easing mental load, with proper training on how to harness AI at work. But even with that, ultimately, increased productivity only leads to more family time if employers do not raise workloads.

In the end, it comes down to realistic job demands and family-friendly practices. Celebrating employers, such as through The Straits Times' Best Employers list, is helpful. Conversely, is there a leaf to be taken from the Consumers Association of Singapore, with its company alert lists, suitably modified, by calling out employers with outrightly family-unfriendly practices?

If people are to have the families they say they want, they must feel confident that family life is not just financially supported, but also logistically and emotionally manageable, says the writer. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Another time-related change entails further equalising and extending parental leave, particularly for fathers, to create time for childcare while rebalancing caregiving norms. Childcare should be treated as essential social infrastructure, not only expanded, but made reliably affordable. Importantly, with respect to this focus on time, childcare needs to have available hours aligned with full-time work, including non-standard hours. Support should also extend beyond early childhood, recognising that parents make decisions with the entire life course in mind.

BUT DO SINGAPOREANS STILL WANT FAMILIES?

Before diving into major structural and policy changes, do we know if Singaporeans still desire to get married and have children? Survey data suggests many do.

The Government's Marriage and Parenthood Survey has consistently found that a large majority (over 80 per cent) of young Singaporeans express such aspirations, even if those aspirations have softened a little over time. In the same surveys, many married couples continue to say they would like two or more children.

What is evident is not the disappearance of aspiration, but the widening gap between what people say they want and what they feel able to sustain. Many couples today are not rejecting parenthood outright. They are deferring it, sometimes indefinitely. Financial concerns remain significant, as studies by groups such as Cultivate SG have shown. But beyond finances lies the broader calculus: time, energy, predictability and the ability to cope with disruption.

As one dual-income couple put it: "We're not saying no. We're just not sure how to make it work."

SPACES FOR INTERACTIONS

There is also a more upstream dimension to consider. Families can only form if people meet, connect and build relationships in the first place.

The Marriage and Parenthood Survey 2021 indicated that among singles not currently dating, 58 per cent cited having a limited social circle and 57 per cent indicated a lack of opportunities to meet potential partners.

Here, too, the organisation of social and physical environments plays a role. Educational institutions, workplaces and neighbourhoods are not just functional spaces; they are social ecosystems where relationships are formed. As work intensifies and social lives become more fragmented, opportunities for organic, repeated interaction may be diminishing.

Digital platforms such as Bumble, Hinge and Coffee Meets Bagel offer convenience and reach. But they cannot fully substitute for environments where familiarity and trust develop gradually through shared experience.

This points to a broader design question: Are we creating enough spaces, both physical and institutional, where such interactions can occur naturally?

Educational institutions remain important nodes of connection, particularly where residential life, sports, arts and student activities create repeated opportunities for interaction. Workplaces, too, can foster relationships through shared experiences beyond purely transactional tasks, from collaborative projects to community initiatives. While constructing classrooms is never in question, would we invest in residential living, dance halls and sports facilities for whole-person development and, in the process, create space for love to take root? Where bottom lines predominate, might setting aside budgets to support corporate social responsibility have positive effects on culture-building in the workplace and, in the process, make space for relationships to deepen?

At the neighbourhood level, community hubs, interest-based groups and public programming, from sports leagues to arts events, create conditions for people to encounter one another through shared interests rather than structured matchmaking. Even urban design plays a role. Walkable, vibrant neighbourhoods with accessible public spaces increase the likelihood of casual, repeated encounters, the kind that, over time, build familiarity and connection.

These factors may seem intangible compared with financial incentives or housing policies. But they form part of the broader ecosystem that shapes whether relationships, and eventually families, take root.

ASSURANCE DEFICIT

Singapore has, to its credit, invested heavily in supporting families. Financial incentives have been expanded. Parental leave provisions have been strengthened, including increased paternity leave and shared arrangements. Childcare capacity has grown, with greater subsidies to improve affordability. Housing policies prioritise young couples and families through grants and ballot allocation.

These measures matter. They have reduced some of the immediate costs of having children and signalled a clear commitment to supporting parenthood.

But their effects are often felt at the margins. International evidence suggests that such policies tend to influence the timing of births more than the total number of children families eventually have. They make it easier to have a child slightly earlier, rather than to have more children overall.

Designing for proximity, reducing time burdens and strengthening everyday support systems are not quick fixes. They require coordination across housing, transport, manpower and social policy. They also require a shift in emphasis, from seeing fertility as a matter of incentives or attitudes, to recognising it as a reflection of how people experience their lives.

If people are to have the families they say they want, they must feel confident that family life is not just financially supported, but logistically and emotionally manageable. What we need is detailed understanding of everyday challenges that comes from close listening, and the dexterity to work across different agencies and diverse policy contexts to act on the structural nature of the challenge. This will hopefully help address the deficit of assurance, convincing Singaporeans who actually want to have families to have them, and sustain them, with confidence.

• Lily Kong is president of Singapore Management University, a social-cultural geographer and urban scholar. She has long studied how the conditions – in cities, institutions and everyday life – shape how people live, connect and build families.