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One-child policy

Chinese government program

Written By: [Kenneth Pletcher](#)

One-child policy, official program initiated in the late 1970s and early '80s by the central [government](#) of [China](#), the purpose of which was to limit the great majority of [family](#) units in the country to one child each. The rationale for [implementing](#) the policy was to reduce the growth rate of China's enormous [population](#). It was announced in late 2015 that the program was to end in early 2016.

Establishment and implementation

China began promoting the use of [birth control](#) and [family planning](#) with the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, though such efforts remained sporadic and voluntary until after the death of [Mao Zedong](#) in 1976. By the late 1970s China's population was rapidly approaching the one-billion mark, and the country's new [pragmatic](#) leadership headed by [Deng Xiaoping](#) was beginning to give serious consideration to curbing what had become a rapid population growth rate. A voluntary program was announced in late 1978 that encouraged families to have no more than two children, one child being preferable. In 1979 demand grew for making the limit one child per family. However, that stricter requirement was then applied unevenly across the country among the provinces, and by 1980 the central government sought to standardize the one-child policy nationwide. On September 25, 1980, a public letter—published by the [Central Committee](#) of the [Chinese Communist Party](#) to the party membership—called upon all to adhere to the one-child policy, and that date has often been cited as the policy's "official" start date.

The program was intended to be applied universally, although exceptions were made—e.g., parents within some ethnic minority groups or those whose firstborn was handicapped were allowed to have more than one child. It was [implemented](#) more effectively in urban [environments](#), where much of the population consisted of small nuclear families who were more willing to comply with the policy, than in rural areas, with their traditional agrarian extended families that resisted the one-child restriction. In addition, enforcement of the policy was somewhat uneven over time, generally being strongest in cities and more [lenient](#) in the countryside. Methods of enforcement included making various contraceptive methods widely available, offering financial incentives and preferential employment opportunities for those who complied, imposing sanctions (economic or otherwise) against those who violated the policy, and, at times (notably the early 1980s), [invoking](#) stronger measures such as forced [abortions](#) and sterilizations (the latter primarily of women).

The result of the policy was a general reduction in China's fertility and birth rates after 1980, with the [fertility](#) rate declining and dropping below two children per woman in the mid-1990s. Those gains were offset to some degree by a similar drop in the [death rate](#) and a rise in [life expectancy](#), but China's overall rate of natural increase declined.

Problems and reforms

The one-child policy produced consequences beyond the goal of reducing population growth. Most notably, the country's overall sex ratio became skewed toward males—roughly between 3 and 4 percent more males than females. Traditionally, male children (especially firstborn) have been preferred—particularly in rural areas—as

sons inherit the [family name](#) and property and are responsible for the care of elderly parents. When most families were restricted to one child, having a girl became highly undesirable, resulting in a rise in abortions of female [fetuses](#) (made possible after ultrasound [sex determination](#) became available), increases in the number of female children who were placed in orphanages or were abandoned, and even [infanticide](#) of baby girls. (An offshoot of the preference for male children was that tens of thousands of Chinese girls were [adopted](#) by families in the [United States](#) and other countries.) Over time, the gap widened between the number of males and females and, as those children came of age, it led to a situation in which there were fewer females available for [marriage](#).

Another consequence of the policy was a growing proportion of elderly people, the result of the [concurrent](#) drop in children born and rise in longevity since 1980. That became a concern, as the great majority of senior citizens in China relied on their children for support after they retired, and there were fewer children to support them.

A third consequence was instances in which the births of subsequent children after the first went unreported or were hidden from authorities. Those children, most of whom were undocumented, faced hardships in obtaining education and employment. Although the number of such children is not known, estimates have ranged from the hundreds of thousands to several million.

Sporadic efforts were made to modify the one-child policy. In addition to earlier exceptions such as for minority peoples or for those whose firstborn was handicapped, those measures included allowing rural families in some areas to have two or even three children and permitting parents whose firstborn was a girl or who both were only children to have a second child. The one-child policy was enforced for most Chinese into the 21st century, but in late 2015 Chinese officials announced that the program was ending. Beginning in early 2016, all families would be allowed to have two children.

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