FactCheck Q&A: the facts on birth rates for Muslim couples and non-Muslim couples in Australia

July 24, 2017 3.57pm AEST

The Conversation fact-checks claims made on Q&A, broadcast Mondays on the ABC at 9.35pm. Thank you to everyone who sent us quotes for checking via Twitter using hashtags #FactCheck and #QandA, on Facebook or by email.

Q&A FactCheck - Muslim Birthrates

Excerpt from Q&A, June 17, 2017.

In view of the fact that in Australia Muslim couples have on average 4.5 children per couple, whereas the rest of us have 1.5 children per couple on average, is it not possible that in a couple of generations Australia could have a Muslim majority who vote in Sharia law? — Question submitted to Q&A by an audience member, posted on the Q&A Facebook page, July 17, 2017.

Central to the success of the current affairs television show Q&A are the questions submitted by audience members and viewers to be answered by the panellists of the week.

During last week’s live show, audience member Roger French said:

... in view of the fact that, in Australia, Muslim couples have a much higher birth rate than the rest of us, is it not possible that, in a couple of generations, Australia could have a Muslim majority who vote in Sharia law?

The original question French submitted to Q&A said Muslim couples in Australia have “on average 4.5 children per couple, whereas the rest of us have 1.5 children per couple on average”. Q&A’s producers did their own fact-checking on this question.

Q&A Executive Producer Peter McEvoy told The Conversation:

We want people to ask questions that reflect their own opinions and concerns but sometimes we go back to the questioners to ask them to shorten or simplify their question, or to check a factual assertion.

When the producers spoke to the audience member shortly before the program, he wasn’t able to provide a source for the statistics and so agreed to drop them. When he asked the question live Mr French didn’t include the statistics but maintained the general assertion about birth rates among Muslim couples and other couples in Australia.

Unfortunately, the Q&A social media team wasn’t alerted to that late change, so the wording Mr French submitted in his original questions was used initially in Q&A’s Facebook post.

This is understandable in the making of a fast-paced live TV show, and the Q&A Facebook post was corrected. But the original post had been shared on social media.
Let’s look at what the data show about birth rates for Muslim couples and other couples in Australia.

**Do Muslim couples in Australia have an average of 4.5 children per couple?**

There is no evidence to support the claim that Muslim couples in Australia have an average of 4.5 children per couple, or that non-Muslim couples in Australia have an average of 1.5 children per couple.

Census 2016 data show that women of Islamic faith in Australia have an average of 3.03 births per woman, while the average for all women in Australia is 2.02 births per woman.

It is correct to say that Muslim women in Australia currently have a higher birth rate than other women in Australia. It’s not reasonable to say, based on current figures, that Muslims in Australia will outnumber non-Muslims in “a couple”, or even many more, generations.

**Calculating birth rates for couples in Australia**

When we’re talking about how many children a couple have “on average”, we’re talking about birth rates. Birth rates are calculated by looking at how many children are born, and how many women there are, in a particular population. Birth rates in Australia relate to women, not couples.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics publishes a number of births indicators, but these data are not reported by religion. Australian Census data give us an opportunity to examine birth rates by religion,
with the caveat that reporting your religious affiliation in the Census is optional. In 2016, 96% of people provided a response to the question about religion.

We can estimate birth rates from Census data using information about the number of children ever born, which is asked of women aged 15 and over. By looking specifically at the number of children women have given birth to by the age of 45-49, we can see what is called the ‘completed fertility’ rate. Relatively few births in Australia occur to women 45 years or over.

Prior to the 2016 Census, information collected about the number of children a woman had given birth to did not include stillborn babies; only live births. In Census 2016, the instruction to include live births only was removed. Despite this change, the data appear to follow a similar trend as previous data.

Let’s look at what the data show about the number of children born to women who were aged 45-49 at the time of the 2016 Census.

Analysis of “children ever born” information shows an average of 2.02 births for all women aged 45-49 in Australia. Women in Australia of Islamic faith aged 45-49 had, on average, 3.03 births per woman. Women of Jewish faith of the same age had on average 2.17 births per woman, while women of any Christian faith of the same age had on average 2.11 births per woman.

**Average number of children born, by religion, Australia 2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>1.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other religions</td>
<td>1.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhism</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘No religion’ includes secular and other spiritual beliefs.

Internationally and in Australia, a commonly used measure for birth rates is the total fertility rate. Total fertility rates are calculated using information about the number of births registered by women of different age groups in a particular period (for example, in 2015). Birth registrations are used to estimate the number of children a woman would have on average over her lifetime if those age-specific trends persisted.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data show that the total fertility rate for Australia in 2015 was 1.81 babies per woman. That’s below the population replacement level, which requires around 2.1 babies
per woman to replace herself and her partner.

Women in Australia who were 45-49 years old at the time of the Census and of Islamic, Christian and Jewish faiths are among the only groups examined which have at or above replacement level birth rates.

The difference between the Census figure (2.02 births per woman) and the ABS figure (1.81 births per woman) is that the Census figure relates to ‘completed fertility’ of women now aged 45-49, while the ABS figures look at fertility rates based on current trends.

Possible growth of the Australian Muslim population

Is it possible that, due to relatively higher birth rates, “in a couple of generations Australia could have a Muslim majority”? We can address this question by looking at the proportion of the Australian population reporting Islamic faith.

In Census 2016, fewer than 3% of all Australians reported being of Islamic faith. By comparison, more than 50% of Australians reported being one form of Christian faith. 30% of Australians said they had no religion.

**Australian population by religious affiliation, 2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhism</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other religions</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘No religion’ includes secular and other spiritual beliefs. As religion was an optional question, the total for Australia will not equal the sum of the items above.

Source: Australian Census of Population and Housing 2016

Based on current birth rates (3.03 children per woman) and the size of the Muslim population (604,200 people, or 2.6% of total population) people of Islamic faith in Australia will not outnumber those of non-Islamic faith in “a couple of generations” – or even many more generations.

It’s also important to remember that children will not necessarily take on the religious beliefs of their parents, particularly in the long term.
Percentage of people of Islamic faith in Australia, 2016

Source: Australian Census of Population and Housing 2016

Other studies

In April 2017 the Pew Research Center published a study on global religious affiliation trends that received international media coverage. The report’s authors projected that, worldwide, “the number of babies born to Muslims is expected to modestly exceed births to Christians” by the year 2035.

The Pew Research Center data are based on assumptions about future demographic trends, and how many people will switch religions in the future. The report suggests that between 2015 and 2020, around 8.2 million people will leave Christian churches, while 420,000 people will join the Islamic faith.

The report does not include country level information, but it does estimate that by 2060, the percentage of Muslims living in the Asia-Pacific region (which includes Australia) is expected to decline from 61% to 50%.

Verdict

There is no evidence to support the claim that Muslim couples in Australia have on average 4.5 births per couple, or that non-Muslim couples in Australia have on average 1.5 births per couple.

Based on Census 2016 data, Australian women of Islamic faith have, on average, 3.03 births per woman, while the average for all women in Australia is 2.02 births per woman.
There is also no evidence to suggest that the number of people in Australia of Islamic faith will outnumber those of non-Islamic faith in “a couple”, or even many more, generations. People in Australia reporting Islamic religious affiliation are a minority, despite relatively higher birth rates. — Liz Allen

**Review**

This is a sound FactCheck. The average numbers of children ever born for women aged 45-49 for the various categories of religion presented by the author are correct.

In view of the lack of published data on the fertility of religious groups based on birth registrations, the Census is the appropriate data source to use.

I agree with the author’s conclusion (and Q&A panellist Mehdi Hasan’s point) that, while the available evidence shows that, in Australia, Muslim women have a higher birth rate than non-Muslim women, it is extremely unlikely that Muslims will outnumber non-Muslims in Australia in one or two generations’ time.

I would further add that people of Islamic faith represent small minorities of the most recent inclusions in Australia’s population, both by birth and migration.

In the 2016 Census, 4.32% of children aged 0-4 years who had been born in Australia were recorded as being of Islamic faith. This figure reflects recent birth patterns and the identification of young children’s religion by parents.

The Census data also show that women of Islamic faith who were born in Australia have on average smaller numbers of children (2.67 per woman) than first generation migrant women aged 45-49 of Islamic faith.

In terms of migration, Census data show 10.53% of people who arrived in Australia between 2012 and the 2016 Census date were of Islamic faith.

The Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project projects that Muslims will form 4.9% of Australia’s population in 2050. — Nick Parr

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