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Demography in Chile

Child bribe

An attempt to raise the birth rate

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BACK in 1990, Chile's fertility rate was 2.6 children per woman. By 2011, according to the World Bank, that figure had dropped to 1.8, matching Brazil as the lowest in South America. Faced with dwindling fertility, Chile's president, Sebastián Piñera, has implored his compatriots to have more kids. Last month he offered them money to do so.

The president will send a bill to Congress to reward mothers with a payment of \$200 for giving birth to a third child. A fourth child will merit an additional \$300; any further children will net \$400 a go. All mothers will be eligible, regardless of marital status or wealth.

The announcement prompted a good deal of ribaldry. Chilean men asked hopefully if they would be paid to father three children with different mothers. The payment was quickly dubbed "the Opus Dei bonus", after an influential conservative Catholic sect. It was designed, its critics said, to reward wealthy, conservative families, renowned for their prodigious fecundity. Critics say there are more constructive ways to encourage women to have larger families, such as better child care.

But the announcement has at least put the issue in the public eye. What Chile faces today—an ageing population and a workforce increasingly unable to afford their parents' pensions—is what the rest of the region will face tomorrow.

From the print edition: The Americas