



FAMILY & CHILDREN

Most people claim that they want to have children, but many of them never fulfil their wish. What is it that stops them? Why do certain family policies work in some European countries but not in others?

Demographers across Europe are engaged in solving these modern riddles. Their recent research provides exciting insights and leads to new political questions. Find some of them here – and many more on our website www.population-europe.eu.

Key Pieces of the Baby-Puzzle

Five Questions to the demographer Dimiter Philipov

How do Europeans decide whether they want to have children?

According to the socio-psychological theory of planned behavior a person's decision to have a child depends on three factors. The first factor includes one's attitudes towards having a child, i.e. whether the consequences of having a child are seen as good or bad. The second factor refers to the influence of the person's closest friends or relatives whose opinion the person highly appreciates. The third factor reveals to what extent the person is able to control such issues as housing conditions, income, or the time available for child-rearing.

In which way are such personal decisions linked to external factors like the social and economic situation?

Social conditions affect attitudes, and social norms are perceived by the person through his or her contacts with their personal network. Thus, social and economic conditions have an impact on all three factors, but they exercise their influence mainly through the third factor.

What are the main differences in this decision process between different European countries?

Our research shows a large diversity among European countries, especially when we look at the intentions to have a child during the next two years. While in The Netherlands 77% of those who have this intention are able to realise it, in Switzerland this percentage is 62%, and in Hungary and Bulgaria even less than 50%. Dynamics of social change in the latter two countries make plans for having a child less stable.

Which results surprised you most?

Our researchers examined different social norms in various European countries. Consider for example how Europeans view parents who work full-time when the child is less than 3 years old. It seems to be widely accepted for men to work, but our research shows that for women the picture is quite diverse. While the disapproval rate in countries like Denmark, Norway, Cyprus, and Finland is only 15%, it goes up to almost 60% in countries like Switzerland and the Ukraine.

What policy implications do these results suggest?

Policies should aim at mitigating obstacles which hinder the realisation of childbearing intentions. However, policies aiming only at reducing financial and time constraints for parents may have a limited effect if young adults feel a strong normative pressure to postpone or reject having another child.



Dimiter Philipov

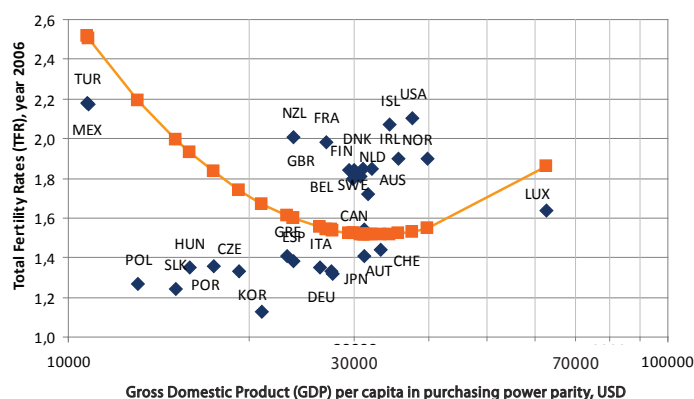
leads the research group for comparative European demography at the Vienna Institute of Demography. He also coordinates REPRO, a European project aimed at generating new knowledge on the factors that drive changes in the birth rates and influence the reproductive decision-making of European citizens.

See REPRO website

More offspring for wealthy countries

It has long been accepted as fact that economic growth and declining birth rates go hand in hand in industrialised countries. Yet some highly developed OECD countries including Belgium, France, the USA and Canada have recently witnessed a slight increase in birth rates, which demographers call a “fertility-rebound”. This suggests that the relationship between prosperity and fertility might actually follow an inverse J-shape, indicating that the number of births increases again once a country has reached a certain level of wealth.

In their new study Angela Luci and Olivier Thévenon test this hypothesis empirically, using OECD data that spans the years 1960 to 2007. The scientists not only compare the impact of economic



Graph 1. The orange line shows the model-calculation for a fertility rebound. The blue squares indicate the actual position of countries in 2006.

advancement on fertility rates in 30 countries but also try to estimate a threshold from which GDP per capita can be expected to “boost” fertility. According to their model this would be for high levels of GDP (around 32,600 USD in purchasing power parity) - prosperity currently reached by very few OECD countries. Moreover, steeper increases in fertility are observed in countries where the participation of women in the labour market has significantly contributed to economic growth. Thus, the impact of economic development per se might be small, unless accompanied by better opportunities for women to combine work with family. [Read full article](#)

Parents’ happiness increases with age

The world is pervaded by the cultural belief that children are critical for life fulfilment and happiness, especially for women. In fact, the majority of research demonstrates the opposite: Parents

are not as happy as childless people. A study by Rachel Margolis and Mikko Myrskylä now sheds new light on that paradox: All around the globe, young parents are unhappier than young adults without children. At older ages, however, the association reverses and the existence of children in these later years brings greater happiness. Moreover, how strongly children affect happiness is influenced by the prevailing political framework in the respective countries. [Read press release](#)

53.7 % of French mothers with at least one child younger than twelve years are working full-time. In Germany the

percentage is only 36.1% – and as low as 10% for Western German mothers with one child under three. The difference in numbers reflects different attitudes. In France, external childcare, even for very young babies, is widely accepted. Whereas in Germany, the prevailing conviction is: „Children under the age of three are best looked after by their mothers“. So it is not surprising that in Germany a lot of women still feel they have to withdraw, at least partly, from the labour force in order to be a “good mother”. Or they find this prospect unbearable and rather stay childless. The demographers, Anne Salles, Clémentine Rossier and Sara Brachet, had a closer look at these different attitudes around working mums in both countries and found a strong link between attitudes and practices towards childcare and the family policy applied for many decades in both countries. French family politics have been encouraging the combination of work and motherhood since the 1980s, whereas Germany only recently started to invest in the general availability of external care, especially for children under the age of three. This might explain the homogeneity of attitudes within each country and why new policy measures or further improvements are not followed by immediate increases in fertility. [Read full article](#)

Events & Publications

Population Europe Event; 29 March 2011, Budapest, Hungary: “Success Story or Sisyphean Challenge: The Impact of Policy Responses on Family and Fertility Dynamics in Europe”

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New book: “The Future of Motherhood in Western Societies - Late Fertility and its Consequences”, edited by Gijs Beets, Joop Schippers, and Egbert R. te Velde, offers a holistic overview of the process of postponement and its background in modern Western societies both at the personal and societal levels. [See abstract](#)