

- RAND EUROPE RESEARCH AREAS**
- CHOICE MODELLING & VALUATION
 - COMMUNITIES, SAFETY & JUSTICE
 - DEFENCE & SECURITY
 - EDUCATION, ARTS & CULTURE
 - FUTURES THINKING
 - EVALUATION & PERFORMANCE AUDIT
 - HEALTH & HEALTHCARE
 - INNOVATION & TECHNOLOGY
 - INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
 - POPULATION & MIGRATION

Europe's demography: Are babies back?

The recent recovery in EU period fertility due to older childbearing

After two decades of year-on-year decline, the average period fertility for the EU as a whole has stabilised in the 21st century, and increased in most Member States. Nonetheless, considerable variations still exist, and the recovery of period fertility has not been experienced uniformly across countries. Total fertility rate (TFR) in Germany, for example, has hardly increased in the last ten years. With 1.4 children per woman, Germany still has one of the lowest period fertility rates in Europe.

Observing TFRs alone can be somewhat misleading. The rising birth numbers and fertility rates in recent years might suggest that couples are having more and more children, but this is not necessarily the case. If we look at age-specific trends, we can see that the fertility decline at younger maternal ages has stabilised, while at later ages, fertility is increasing. Couples are having about the same number of children as couples 30 years ago, but at a later age.

The rise in older childbearing is not a new phenomenon however, since the age-specific fertility of women in their 30s began to increase in the 1970s and 1980s (see, for example, graphs for Spain and the UK, below). Originally, the effect of this trend on aggregate period fertility was offset by continuously falling fertility in younger age groups. It was not until fertility of younger women began to stabilise in recent years that aggregate fertility went up. It is unlikely that this trend will reverse, and societies and economies will have to accommodate older motherhood from both an individual and a societal perspective.

Abstract

Many European governments have been concerned about falling fertility rates, due to the welfare implications of an ageing population supported by a shrinking workforce. However, 'doomsday' scenarios of fertility spiralling downwards and European populations imploding have not materialised; indeed, recent snapshots of indicators for childbearing suggest some recovery in fertility. RAND Europe therefore decided to update its 2004 study into the causes and consequences of low fertility in Europe. We analysed the latest data, reviewed recent literature, and examined the situation in Germany, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK in depth.

There is no uniform explanation for this recovery

Some empirical research suggests that the increase in fertility is a result of continued economic and social development, while others argue that it is not human development as a whole, but the extent to which there is equality between men and women in society that helps explain this demographic transition. An unequal division of household labour and a conflict between women's roles in the family and in the labour force may result in lower fertility intentions. If true, then employment policies aimed at improving the balance of work and family life could have indirect impacts on fertility intentions. However, the evidence for the role of gender equality in the recent recovery

This product is part of the RAND Europe research brief series. RAND research briefs present policy-oriented summaries of an individual peer-reviewed document or a body of published work; current or completed work; and innovative research methodologies.

RAND Europe
Westbrook Centre
Milton Road
Cambridge CB4 1YG
United Kingdom
TEL +44 (0)1223 353 329
FAX +44 (0)1223 358 845

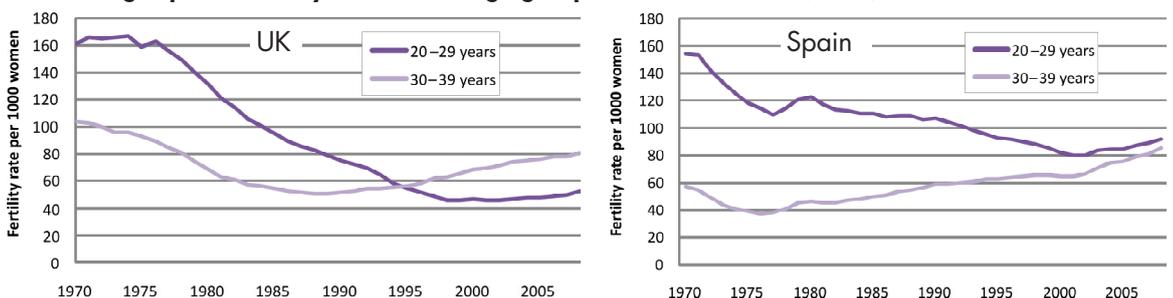
37, Square de Meeus
B-1000 Brussels
Belgium
TEL +32 (0) 2 791 7500
FAX +32 (0) 2 791 7900

Stijn Hoorens
hoorens@rand.org

© RAND 2011

www.rand.org/randeurope

Trend of age-specific fertility for selected age groups. Source: Eurostat (2010)



of fertility is not overwhelming, and further analysis is needed for more definitive answers.

Thirty years ago, researchers concluded that fertility was counter-cyclical, with fertility falling in good times as the opportunity costs of childbearing rose. More recently, there have been signs of the reverse – pro-cyclical fertility – in European countries, with economic growth being associated with higher fertility rates. Given this correlation, we would expect the recent recession to halt the increase in fertility rates in Europe.

...But it's not just migration

In contrast with some reports in the popular media, we can conclude that recent migration is not the main reason behind the recovery of period fertility since 2000 in Europe, despite the influx of migrants, particularly following the 2004 EU accession wave. There are now more children born to foreign-born women than a decade ago – in many EU countries one in five or more children are born to migrant mothers. However, they mostly migrated a long time ago – and in countries examined in depth, the reproductive behaviour of migrants only played a relatively modest role in the recent recovery of aggregate period fertility. The data reveal that the fertility trends of many groups of foreign-born women tend to converge with the average of native women. In Sweden, this typically happened within two years of arriving, although with some different responses among specific countries of origin.

The fertility rate of recent immigrants appears to have little effect on fertility rates at national level. However, migration does bring in a rapid infusion of women of childbearing age; their contribution to the size of the labour force and to crude birth rate is substantial. This has a mitigating effect on population ageing.

Policy matters, but not much

Family policy packages in European countries take different approaches and have mixed results. Germany's recent efforts, primarily based on a male breadwinner model, have not noticeably impacted fertility rates. Poland's low fertility may be partly due to the fact that family policy measures do not yet acknowledge social change and the increasing number of children born out of wedlock.

The UK actively resisted EU family policy initiatives until the late 1990s. The New Labour government (1997–2010) focused on reducing child poverty and increasing female labour participation, which almost certainly affected fertility. Sweden and other Nordic countries demonstrate that long-term government efforts to stimulate female labour participation and gender equality in the workplace and the family have had positive unintended consequences for fertility. In particular, they limit the opportunity costs of children, impacting primarily on the choice to have a first child. Recent empirical studies find that these policies have a tempo rather than a quantum effect on fertility, which means that they help women to have their children earlier but do not necessarily increase the number of children each woman has.

It is impossible to extrapolate findings at country level to EU level. For each example of policy impact, there seems to be a counter-example with no impact. Thus it is too early to answer the key question of whether policy has been a driving force behind the recent recovery of fertility rates in the EU. It does seem unlikely, though, as interventions have by no means been uniform across Europe.

Despite the recent recovery in TFR, Europe's population will continue to age

While the outlook for fertility is better than it was a decade ago, fertility rates in several countries are still alarmingly low. This will lead to significantly fewer young people in the labour force a generation from now, and have a long-term multiplier effect, reducing the future population of potential mothers.

The main driver behind the looming increase in dependency ratios is not fertility rates but the pending retirement of the baby boom generation. It will take decades to reverse the ageing of Europe's population, even if TFR were to recover to replacement level immediately and stay there, because recent changes in fertility will only affect the working age population in the 2030s. Hence governments with generous welfare systems will still have to address the affordability of pensions and healthcare, and to do this, they must take all three components of population change – fertility, mortality and migration – into account. Focusing on fertility alone may be misleading. ■

Further reading

Hoorens, Stijn et al (2011) *Low fertility in Europe: Is there still reason to worry?* RAND Europe, MG-1080-RE.

Grant, Jonathan et al (2004) *Low fertility and population ageing: causes, consequences and policy options.* RAND Europe, MG-206-EC.

Hoorens, Stijn (2009) *Trends in fertility: what does the 20th century tell us about the 21st?* In: Bewley, Ledger and Nikolaou (eds) *Reproductive Ageing.* RCOG Press, London.

Hoorens, Stijn et al (2007) *Should ART be included in population policies? A preliminary assessment of the demographic and economic impact of assisted reproductive technologies* *Human Reproduction*, 22(9), 2471-2475.

RAND Europe is an independent not-for-profit research institute whose mission is to help improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis. RAND Europe's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

RAND Offices

Santa Monica, CA • Washington, DC • Pittsburgh, PA • New Orleans, LA/Jackson, MS • Boston, MA • Doha, QA • Abu Dhabi, AE • Cambridge, UK • Brussels, BE



EUROPE

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES
EDUCATION AND THE ARTS
ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE
INFRASTRUCTURE AND
TRANSPORTATION
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
LAW AND BUSINESS
NATIONAL SECURITY
POPULATION AND AGING
PUBLIC SAFETY
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
TERRORISM AND
HOMELAND SECURITY

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis.

This electronic document was made available from www.rand.org as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

Support RAND

[Browse Reports & Bookstore](#)

[Make a charitable contribution](#)

For More Information

Visit RAND at www.rand.org

Explore [RAND Europe](#)

View [document details](#)

Research Brief

This product is part of the RAND Corporation research brief series. RAND research briefs present policy-oriented summaries of individual published, peer-reviewed documents or of a body of published work.

Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This electronic representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Unauthorized posting of RAND electronic documents to a non-RAND Web site is prohibited. RAND electronic documents are protected under copyright law. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please see [RAND Permissions](#).