

Two is best? Ideal family size in Europe is surprisingly stable

Tomáš Sobotka and Éva Beaujouan

An increasing number of Europeans remain childless or have only one child. As families shrink, do people also change their views about ideal number of children? Tomáš Sobotka and Éva Beaujouan tackle this question in their recent study based on survey data for 37 European countries covering the period of more than three decades.

In some countries the ideal family size has stabilized at or above the replacement-level threshold. This would suggest that reproductive ideals are disconnected from fertility behaviour and likely to be higher than the actual number of children many people have. But ideals may also change and reflect, with some delay, the actual family trends. The *Low Fertility Trap* hypothesis proposed by Wolfgang Lutz, Vegard Skirbekk and Maria Rita Testa envisions that younger generations growing up in societies with falling birth rates and relatively few children around them, will internalize this experience and adopt small family size ideals. An earlier analysis of Austrian and German data from the *Eurobarometer* survey showed that these two countries might be the forerunners in this trend, with the mean personal ideal family size among younger women falling to a low level of 1.6-1.7 (Goldstein, Lutz and Testa 2003). Outside Europe, surveys in urban China have identified a fall in ideal family size to very low levels due to a widespread adoption of one-child family ideals.

Does current evidence confirm that family size ideals have been falling to very low levels in Europe? We analysed 168 surveys asking about family size ideals, conducted in 37 European countries in 1979-2012 (for more details see Sobotka and Beaujouan 2014). This is by far the largest collection of data on ideals analysed to date, which adds robustness to our

KEY FINDINGS

- » Mean ideal family size remains closely clustered around 2.2 in most countries in Europe
- » No sign of a consistent fall in ideal family size well below replacement in any European country
- » A majority of women consider two children as ideal; this share is stable around 60% in all broader European regions
- » Very low cohort fertility is associated with relatively low ideal family size at a country level

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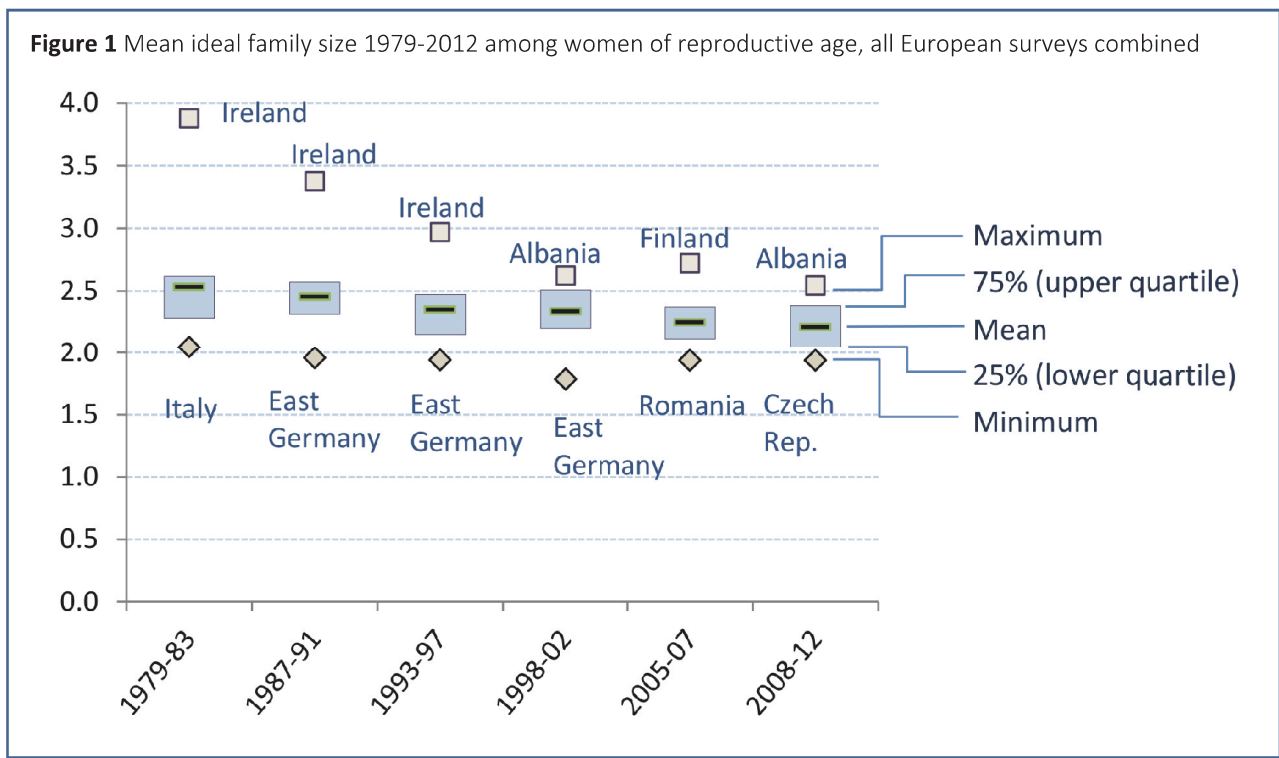


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results. We focused on the responses of women of reproductive age (15-49) in countries with population above 1 million. We excluded small sample surveys and surveys with high level of non-response (above 18%) for the question on ideal family size. Pooling country data in selected time periods shows a slightly declining mean ideal family size over time, from 2.53 in 1979-83 to 2.21 children in 2008-12. This decline has been fuelled by ever more countries falling into a relatively narrow range of mean ideal family size: in 2008-12, one half of the surveys in Europe showed a mean ideal family size between 2.05 and 2.38 children (Figure 1). The minimum value of the mean ideal family size has fluctuated around 2, as if there were a “natural” lower floor below which the mean ideal family size does not fall (with the exception of the 2001 Eurobarometer survey in eastern Germany, registering a mean ideal of 1.78 children). Overall, Europe has become more and more homogeneous in terms of fertility ideals. Nowadays most countries in Europe display at the same time fertility well below replacement and replacement-level family size ideals.

The shift towards a two-child ideal was remarkably uniform: during the last two decades six out of ten women have kept declaring that the ideal family comprises two children, and this share has been stable. It has also been quite similar across different parts of Europe (Figure 2), reaching highest values (around two thirds of respondents) in Eastern Europe and the German-speaking countries of

Central Europe. In Western Europe and Nordic countries, where a three-child family ideal remains frequent, the share with a two-child family ideal is lower. Additionally to the rapid decrease in larger family ideals (three or more children), in many countries the ideal of having only one child or no children at all is becoming more and more popular: in the surveys conducted in 2008-12 it was supported by one out of ten women, twice as many as in the 1980s. This share has been increasing faster in Southern Europe and in a few coun-

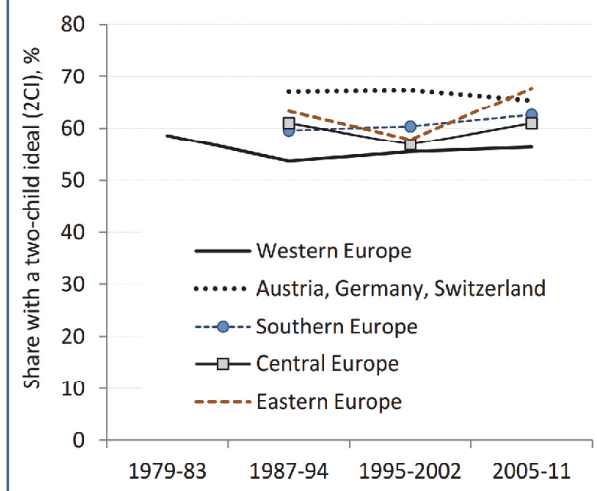
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tries outside this region, including the Czech Republic and Romania.

Our detailed analyses of trends in individual countries showed surprising stability in the mean ideal family size around or above two children in Austria, eastern Germany, western Germany and Switzerland, not confirming earlier findings of spreading sub-replacement family size ideals there (Figure 3). There are probably three reasons why our results differ: first, we excluded data with a very high share (20-30% of the respondents in samples of not more than 300 women) of non-response and uncertain responses; second, we included more surveys; and third, we used more recent datasets. The German-speaking countries

were the first in Europe to experience a lasting decline of fertility deep below the replacement level; they also show rather low fertility ideals today. Nevertheless, at the European level we could not find a link between early fertility decline and current levels of ideal family size. We did however identify an association between the actual and the ideal family size at a country level. With the exception of Greece, countries where the mean number of children fell below 1.6 among women born in the mid-1970s exhibit a preference for a relatively low family size in the range of 1.95-2.10 according to the most recent surveys available.

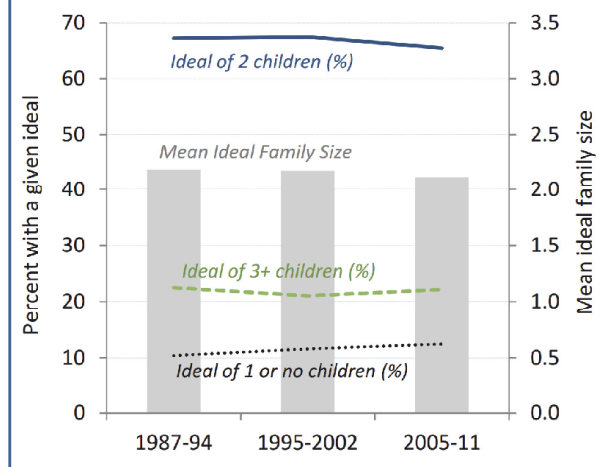
Figure 2 Share of women with a two-child ideal by broader European region, in %



This European pattern of a strong ideal of having two children is not unique. The rich low-fertility countries outside Europe show a similar pattern, with the United States displaying an ideal of “two or three children,” found in Europe also in France, Ireland and in the Nordic countries. Moreover, women in middle-income countries with strong fertility declines in Latin America and Asia increasingly display a preference for having two kids, which suggests it is becoming a dominant cultural norm.

What keeps ideal family size from declining below two children? Parenthood is perceived by most people as a unique, valuable and desired experience. But people could attain the status of parents and satisfy their “baby longing” by having only one offspring; all their resources and attention could then concentrate on their only child. We have identified five broad reasons that might act in preventing the spread of one-child ideal: 1) the view that a child of each sex is unique, leading to an

Figure 3 Mean ideal family size (MIFS) and the distribution of ideal family size (in %) in Austria, eastern Germany, western Germany and Switzerland (average value across these regions for all analysed surveys in a given period)



ideal of having a boy and a girl child; 2) the persistent (although broadly incorrect) view that a single child is spoilt, lonely and suffering; 3) a related view that the “only” child needs a companion to interact and play with, 4) an “insurance strategy” whereby a second child greatly improves the chances that at least some of the parents’ expectations and desires related to their children will be met if the first child dies, moves away, drops out from school, abuses drugs, or simply does not connect well with the parents; and 5) continuing social norm of having two children, widely accepted across generations and social groups in Europe.

The study covered here:

Sobotka, T. and **É. Beaujouan.** 2014. “Two is best? The persistence of a two-child family ideal in Europe.” VID Working Paper 3/2014, Vienna Institute of Demography, Austrian Academy of Sciences / Wittgenstein Centre.

http://www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/download/WP2014_03.pdf

Other studies:

J. Goldstein, W. Lutz, and M. Rita Testa. 2003. “The emergence of sub-replacement family size ideals in Europe”. *Population Research and Policy Review* 22 (5-6): 479-496.

W. Lutz, V. Skirbekk, and M. R. Testa. 2006. “The low fertility trap hypothesis. Forces that may lead to further postponement and fewer births in Europe.” *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research* 2006: 167-192.

EURREP project in a nutshell

The ERC-funded project Fertility, reproduction and population change in 21st century Europe (EURREP) analyses fertility, reproduction and their implications in low-fertility societies. We study changes in fertility rates, fertility intentions and ideals and their underlying drivers. We pay particular attention to the education dimension, looking at how cohort fertility rates, family size, and fertility intentions are structured by level of education. Apart from Europe, which is the project's primary focus, we examine other countries with low fertility rates, including the United States, Japan, Korea, and Brazil.

The project consists of four interrelated themes:

- » Advancing fertility research in contemporary Europe: Theories, patterns and reversals
- » Aggregate patterns and developments of fertility intentions in Europe
- » Fertility, migration, and population change: Advancing methods and measurement
- » Expanding and sustaining new data infrastructure

The EURREP project strongly contributes to data availability. We are involved in developing open-access databases which provide detailed, well documented data for low-fertility settings:

- » Two existing interrelated databases, the Human Fertility Database (HFD, www.humanfertility.org) and the Human Fertility Collection (HFC, www.fertilitydata.org) developed as a joint activity of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock and the Vienna Institute of Demography / Wittgenstein Centre.
- » A new Cohort Fertility and Education Database (CFE) provides user-friendly access to data and indicators based on censuses and surveys. The database allows users to create interactive graphs and tables on cohort fertility, parity distribution and parity progression ratios by level of education in low-fertility countries. The test version of this database is available at www.eurrep.org.

The project team makes its research widely available, via the regularly updated project website, open-access journal articles, EURREP Research Briefs publicising selected findings as well as the European Fertility Data Sheet scheduled for 2015.

Find up-to-date information about the EURREP project, researchers involved and all publications on our website:

www.eurrep.org

OUR RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Beaujouan, Éva. 2014. "Counting how many children people want: The influence of question filters and pre-codes", *Demográfia*, English edition 2013 56(5).

Sobotka, Tomáš and Éva Beaujouan. 2014. "Two is best? The persistence of a Two-child Family Ideal in Europe", *Vienna Institute of Demography Working Papers 3/2014*

Brzozowska, Zuzanna. 2014. "Births to single mothers: Age- and education-related changes in Poland between 1985 and 2010", *Demographic Research* 30(52).

Ní Bhrolcháin, Máire and Éva Beaujouan. 2013. "Education and Cohabitation in Britain: A Return to Traditional Patterns?", *Population and Development Review* 39(3): 441–458.

KEY FACTS ON EURREP

Project duration

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