

Two is best? Family size ideal remains stable across Europe

Tomáš Sobotka and Éva Beaujouan

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Governments in many European countries are concerned about low birth rates, which have dropped well below two children per woman in all but a few countries in Western and Northern Europe. However, according to the results of the comprehensive data analysis by Tomáš Sobotka and Éva Beaujouan the ideal family size has become strongly centered at two children all across the continent during the last three decades.

An article published today in a leading population journal by Tomáš Sobotka and Éva Beaujouan from the *Vienna Institute of Demography* (Austrian Academy of Sciences) and the *Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital* traces changes in ideal family size among women of reproductive age (15-49) over the period of three decades, from 1979 to 2012. The authors analyzed 168 surveys conducted in 37 European countries, putting together the largest collection of data on the subject. Their analysis reveals a gradual decline in the mean ideal family size over time, from the European-wide average of 2.53 in the surveys conducted in 1979-1983 to 2.21 in the surveys conducted in 2008-12. This decline was mostly driven by a diminishing number of countries with high ideal family size. For instance, in Spain, the mean ideal family size declined from 2.88 in 1981 to 2.07 in 2011.

While the mean ideal number of children was slightly declining over time, the share of women embracing a two-child ideal increased and then stabilized at a high level: at present six out of ten women in Europe consider two children as an ideal. This proportion is similar in different parts of Europe, despite their contrasting fertility rates. Even in countries where childlessness and having only one child has become common, such as Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, a majority of women embraces a two-child family ideal (chart 1).

Europe-wide the share of women stating an ideal of three or more children has been declining over time, with fewer than three out of ten women holding this ideal now. In parallel, the number of women expressing an ideal of having no children or only one child has increased gradually. Despite that, it still remains relatively low, averaging 10% across Europe in the most recent surveys analyzed (chart 2).

What keeps ideal family size from declining below two children? It could be argued that having one child is an ideal solution to the pressures of contemporary life, where people strive to achieve many competing goals, where children are costly and where much emphasis is put on parenting skills and competence. People could then satisfy their “baby longing” and concentrate their resources and attention on their only child. T. Sobotka and É. Beaujouan identified five broad reasons that might act in preventing the family size ideals from declining below two children:

- The view that an only child needs a companion to play, quarrel and interact with;
- The related (although broadly incorrect) perception that one child is lonely, spoiled and suffering;
- The view that a child of each sex is unique, leading to an ideal of having one boy and one girl;
- An *insurance strategy*, where parents might be anxious that the only child might not turn out the way they expect, may not support them in older age or, in the worst case, might fall seriously ill or die;
- A continuing social norm of having two children, which is widely shared across generations and different social groups in Europe

This also implies that a dominance of a two-child ideals is likely to prevail in the foreseeable future, suggesting that very low fertility rates in some countries are not inevitable and do not closely correspond to the widely shared family size ideals.

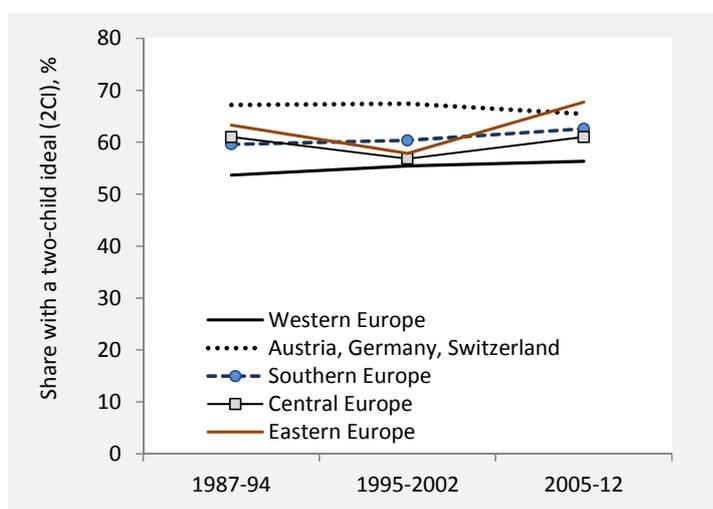


Chart 1

Share of women saying an ideal family size is two (an average of all surveys by region, excluding respondents with no ideal, non-numerical or “do not know” answers)

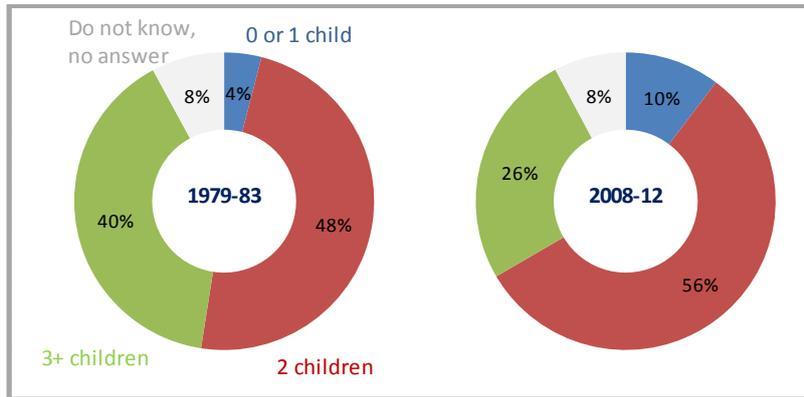


Chart 2

Ideal family size among European women in 1979-83 and 2008-12 (an average of all surveys analyzed)

Additional information and contact

The article covered in this press release:

“Two Is Best? The Persistence of a Two-Child Family Ideal in Europe”, by Tomáš Sobotka and Éva Beaujouan. Published on September 15, 2014 by *Population and Development Review* (Vol. 40, No.3, pp. 391-419)

- The article is available online at *Population and Development Review* website (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2014.00691.x/pdf>) or upon request from the authors
- Additional datasets, including country examples, data for individual countries, and supplementary materials: <http://videurep.oeaw.ac.at/two-is-best-pdr/>
- *Research Brief* covering the topic: videurep.oeaw.ac.at/wp-content/uploads/EURREP_RBfin_online_A4.pdf

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