

Scottish mothers have fewer children than other UK women

December 7 2007

Fertility in Scotland is below that of other countries and regions in the UK. In comparison with their English neighbours, Scottish women leave longer gaps between their children and are more likely to stop at two children. As a result fertility in Scotland is not only below the average required to replace the population (as is the case in many developed countries) but also the lowest in the UK.

The potential causes and key implications of Scotland's low fertility are outlined in a new publication, 'Scotland's demographic trends: insights from Scotland's Demography Research Programme Findings'. This booklet highlights research findings from a two-year research initiative, Scotland's Demography Research Programme, funded jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Scottish Government.

Findings suggest that Scotland's lower fertility is related both to spacing (longer gap between first and second/subsequent children) and stopping (smaller families) behaviour. Scottish women are no more likely than those in England to remain childless and are in fact more likely to give birth to their first child when they are younger than English women. Half of Scottish women have a first birth before 27.42 years, compared with 28.08 years for English women.

However, while half of English women have a second birth within 3.2 years of their first birth, the comparable timescale is 3.5 years for Scottish women. For those having a third child, Scottish women again

wait longer than their English equivalents. A quarter of English women have a third birth by 3.3 years after their second birth, compared to 4.1 years in Scotland. In fact, fewer Scottish women have families of three or four children than English women. More Scottish women stop at two children.

New research reveals that Scottish women do not intend to have smaller families. A survey shows that men and women in Scotland would like to have more children than they actually have, with the average ideal family size in the study sample being 2.48 children. Yet, in practice, the average was 1.24 children. “Differences in fertility behaviour may therefore be responses to immediate circumstances rather than longer-term intentions,” argues researcher Professor Elspeth Graham.

The study points to several possible factors underlying Scotland’s current fertility trend including:

- Education - Both men and women with higher educational qualifications (Scottish Higher level or above) were more likely to start their families later and were less likely to have larger families than others. Those with no qualifications were most likely to have larger families – about one third had three or more children, compared with nearer one in ten of those with degrees.

- Employment, on average those working part-time had started their families a little earlier and had more children than those working full-time, for all ages. Findings suggest that it may be more difficult for women to combine full-time work with having children or a larger family. Nearly half of women (47.4 %) thought their work progress might suffer if they had another child.

- Gender equality - In this study, partnerships involving an equal distribution of housework were more likely to have low fertility than

those whose partnership involved an unequal distribution of housework. This lends some support to the argument that those who believe in greater gender equality are more likely to have to choose between having children and pursuing other commitments.

-- Friendship networks - The extent of contact with peers is more closely associated with fertility than the nature and extent of contact with parents. This suggests that friendship networks play a role in shaping fertility behaviour.

The quality of the area in which women live appears to influence fertility decisions. Those who were more negative about their locality were more likely to live in urban than rural areas, and more likely to live in deprived areas. They also expected to have or had fewer children than those who were more positive. Those surveyed stated that certain features – in particular low levels of crime and good schools – were key to making an area a good place to bring up children.

“A range of factors appear to have a bearing on fertility variations in Scotland,” concludes researcher Professor Frances Wasoff. “Low fertility in Scotland cannot be attributed in a simplistic way to people holding low fertility aspirations.”

“Low fertility is a controversial issue because of its possible implications for population ageing, labour supply and the costs of sustaining health and welfare services,” says Professor Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the ESRC. “Before policymakers can tackle the questions raised by low fertility, they require relevant, high quality evidence. The research undertaken during Scotland’s Demography Research Programme, which also examined migration and the impact of an ageing population, makes a valuable contribution to a topic that so clearly deserves our attention.”

Launched in 2005, more than 20 researchers based in five academic

institutions across Scotland took part in the ESRC/Scottish Government-funded 'Scotland's Demography Research Programme'. A one-day seminar to disseminate key developments and launch the booklet, 'Scotland's demographic trends: insights from Scotland's Demography Research Programme', will be held in the Point Hotel in Edinburgh on 7 December 2007.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

Citation: Scottish mothers have fewer children than other UK women (2007, December 7)
retrieved 3 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2007-12-scottish-mothers-children-uk-women.html>

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