

Low fertility in Europe -- is there still reason to worry?

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The post-war trend of falling birth rates has been reversed across Europe, according to a new study. However, despite an increasing emphasis on family and fertility policies in Europe, this recent development involves social, cultural and economic factors more than individual policy interventions.

For some decades, couples have been having children later in life. But birth-rates among [younger women](#) have stabilised and the long-term trend towards lower [fertility rates](#) has been reversed.

Politicians are still left to grapple with problems associated with an [ageing population](#) as Europeans live longer and birth rates remain below the level needed to dramatically change the balance between young and older people.

In 2004, RAND Europe published a report which explored the issues associated with low birth rates in Europe. At that time the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman in every Member State of the EU. This new study updates the findings of the earlier report and examines the impact of the policy options available.

Lead author Stijn Hoorens said: 'The effects of individual policies aimed at family and fertility are relatively small and now the [economic crisis](#) has added a new level of uncertainty for policy makers. Early figures suggest that [birth rates](#) have fallen back in the wake of the economic

down-turn.'

Key findings and implications

- Since the early 2000s there have been signs of recovering fertility. In all but four countries of the EU (Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal), fertility rates increased between 2000 and 2008.
- Despite this, the TFR remains below the replacement rate in all 27 EU countries and more than half (14) have a fertility rate below 1.5 children per women (all else being equal a fertility rate of 1.5 would lead to a population halving in size in fewer than seven decades).
- There are signs of a 'two speed Europe' developing with north western European states having higher fertility rates than central, southern and German speaking states.
- Nowadays, 1 in 5 babies in Europe has a mother who was born abroad. Migration is not the main reason behind the recovery of period fertility in Europe however. The reproductive behaviour of migrants played only a relatively modest role. But migration does tend to cause a rapid infusion of women in their reproductive years, which has a mitigating effect on population ageing.
- Despite the recovery, Europe's populations continue to age and policy makers will have to address the consequences for pensions, health care etc. Emerging evidence suggests that the economic crisis has triggered an end to the trend of recovering fertility.

Provided by RAND Corporation

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