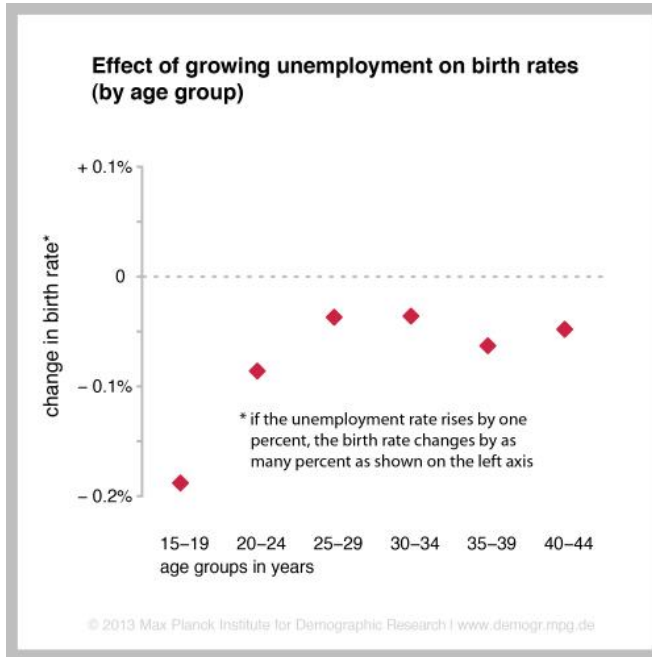


# Economic crisis lowers birth rates, research shows

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Biggest effect among young people: Rising unemployment lowers birth rates. On average, if the unemployment rate rises, birth rates drop for 28 European countries in every age group. Young people are most strongly affected. If the unemployment rate goes up by one percent fertility falls by nearly 0.2 percent for those aged 15 to 19, and by 0.1 percent for young people between 20 and 24 (overall effect for the period from 2001 to 2010). In Southern Europe, where setbacks are strongest, the decline in fertility is 0.3 percent for young people between 15 and 19 and one of 0.2 percent for those aged 20 to 24. The drop of children per woman was strongest for first births. Data: Human Fertility Databases, Eurostat & OECD. Credit: MPI for Demographic Research

The economic crisis has put measurable pressure on birthrates in Europe over the last decade. On average, the more the unemployment rose, the greater the decrease in fertility compared to the number of children per women expected without the crisis. This is the result of a new study

performed by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (MPIDR) in Rostock, Germany. MPIDR demographers Michaela Kreyenfeld, Joshua Goldstein and Aiva Jasilioniene have just published their analysis together with Deniz Karaman Örsal of the Leuphana University, Lüneburg, in the open access journal *Demographic Research*.

The largest effect was seen in young adults. Europeans under the age of 25 have especially refrained from having children in the face of rising [unemployment rates](#). The drop of children per woman was strongest for first births. That means, over the last decade young Europeans have particularly postponed [family formation](#).

Whether this leads to fewer children throughout their life is an open question. Right now most might just intend to postpone when they have children, not if they have children. "Fertility plans can be revised more easily at younger ages than at ages where the biological limits of fertility are approaching," says MPIDR demographer Michaela Kreyenfeld. In fact, among those over 40, birth rates of first children didn't change due to rising unemployment.

If and how economic conditions influence fertility is one of the big open questions in demographic research. The new MPIDR study proves that the extent of [joblessness](#) in a contemporary European country does in fact have an effect on birth rates.

However, the strength of this connection varies since factors such as family policies and [job security](#) are different for every nation. For example, the birth rates in southern Europe are most strongly affected by higher unemployment. "This is reflective of the especially unstable job situation at the beginning of the working life in the southern countries," says demographer Kreyenfeld.

The consequences of the recession appear

beginning around 2008. "The financial crisis hit Europe at a time when birth rates in many countries had just began rising again," says Michaela Kreyenfeld. The MPIDR had observed in earlier studies that the era of very low fertility in Europe had come to an end and that there had been a trend reversal from falling to increasing birth rates. "In some countries the crisis has just put a halt on the upward trend, in others birth rates actually declined," says Kreyenfeld. A noticeable setback occurred, for instance, in Spain, Hungary, Ireland, Croatia and Latvia. Spain experienced a particularly distinct change. Starting at a rate of 1.24 [children](#) per woman at the beginning of the millennium, fertility had risen every single year, reaching 1.47 in 2008. In 2009, however, the birth rate dropped to 1.40 after the unemployment rate jumped from 8.3 percent in 2008 to 11.3 percent in 2009. Spanish fertility continued falling to 1.36 in 2011 (no more recent data is available).

Formerly growing rates came to a halt in countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland, the United Kingdom and Italy. Some nations seemed to experience only weak or no effect from rising joblessness, like Russia or Lithuania. In Germany, Austria and Switzerland the analysis did not yield significant results. In these countries unemployment rates did not rise much or not at all. For Germany they even fell. (Charts with birth rates and unemployment rates for all 28 countries can be found on an additional data sheet online.)

The researchers used data from 2001 to 2010 for their study (some [countries](#) up to 2011). It is possible that the negative effects of the crisis on [birth rates](#) continue.

**More information:** Joshua R. Goldstein, Michaela Kreyenfeld, Aiva Jasilioniene, Deniz Karaman Örsal: Fertility reactions to the "Great Recession" in Europe: Recent evidence from order-specific data, *Demographic Research*, [DOI: 10.4054/DemRes.2013.29.4](#)  
[www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol29/4/](http://www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol29/4/)

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