

SF2.2: Ideal and actual number of children

Definitions and methodology

Childbearing preferences are difficult to measure since they depend on different factors, including social norms, personal circumstances, and evolve with age and the number of children already born to parents. To get a better view of these different factors, some surveys aim to distinguish between personal views on the desired number of children, a more general view on the ideal family size, but also ask parents on the desired number of additional children.

Surveys can obtain information on the more general view on the desired number of children in families in society by asking respondents “Generally speaking, what do you think is the ideal number of children for a family?” However, the main indicator underlying the key findings in this indicator is the *mean personal ideal number of children* which reflects the number of children that people consider as ideal for themselves personally as averaged across respondents (Chart SF2.2A). For European countries, this information is based on survey responses to the question: “And for you personally, what would be the ideal number if children you would like to have or would have liked to have?” This information is provided for men and women of different age groups: 15-24, 25-39 and 40-54 years. Similar information is available for most non-European OECD countries, although these surveys account for the “personal” rather than the “general” view on the ideal number of children, which affects comparability (see comparability and data issues).

Intentions to have more children also depend on the number of children already born to parents. In addition to the children already born to parents the remaining number of “intended” children provides an estimation of the “ultimately intended family size”.

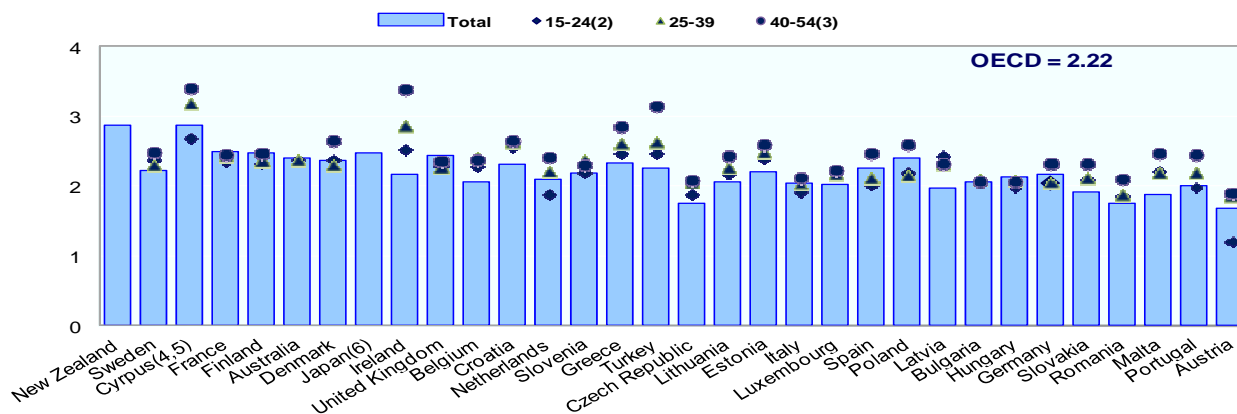
Key findings

On average in most OECD countries, the mean personal family size for both men and women is around 2.25 children, slightly above the population replacement rate level of 2.1 children per woman. The ideal family size varies widely across OECD countries. At over 2.7 children, the desired family size is largest in Mexico and New Zealand, and fertility intentions are also high in Australia, France, Japan and Northern European countries (Chart SF2.2.A). By contrast, in Austria, fertility “ideals” are below replacement levels in all age groups of women. In most other countries, the mean personal ideal number of children is close to 2 children or above among men and women between 15 and 39 years of age, who are the most likely to procreate. More broadly, the differences by sex are not very large, while ideals in family size increase with age for both for men and women. It is not possible, however, to assess if this relates to the effect of age and/or to cohort changes in attitudes.

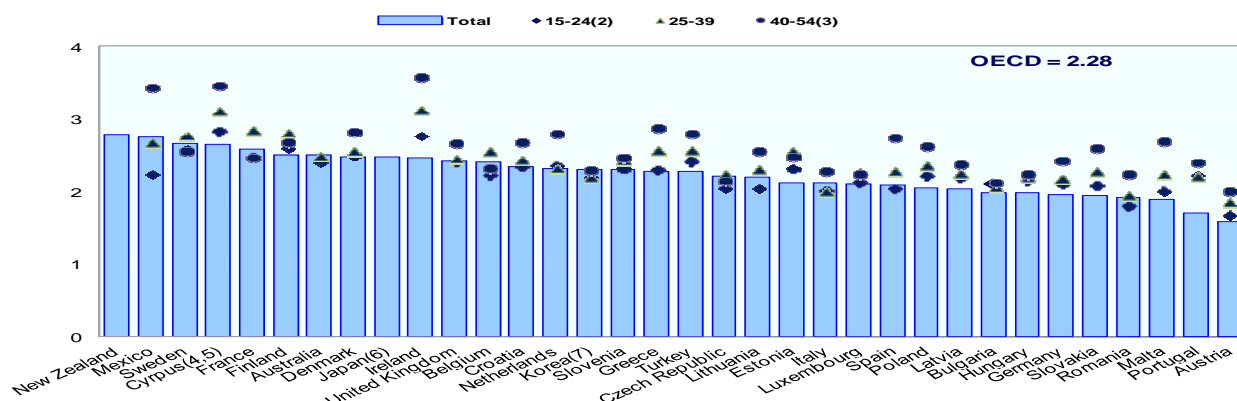
Other relevant indicators: Family size and composition (SF1.1); Fertility rates (SF2.1); Mean age of mother at first childbirth (SF2.3) and Share of births outside marriage (SF2.4); and, Childlessness (SF2.5).

Chart SF2.2.A: Mean personal ideal number of children, mid 2000s¹

Panel A: Men aged above 15, by age group



Panel B: Women aged above 15, by age group



1) 2006 for European countries and Mexico; 2005 for Japan; 2004 for Australia and New Zealand; 2003 for Korea

2) 20-24 instead of 15-24 for Australia.

3) 40-44 for Korea

4) Footnote by Turkey: The information in this document with reference to "Cyprus" relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Turkey recognizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of United Nations, Turkey shall preserve its position concerning the "Cyprus issue".

5) Footnote by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Commission: The Republic of Cyprus is recognized by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

6) Data for Japan cover married men and women all together.

7) Data for Korea cover married women from age 15 to 44.

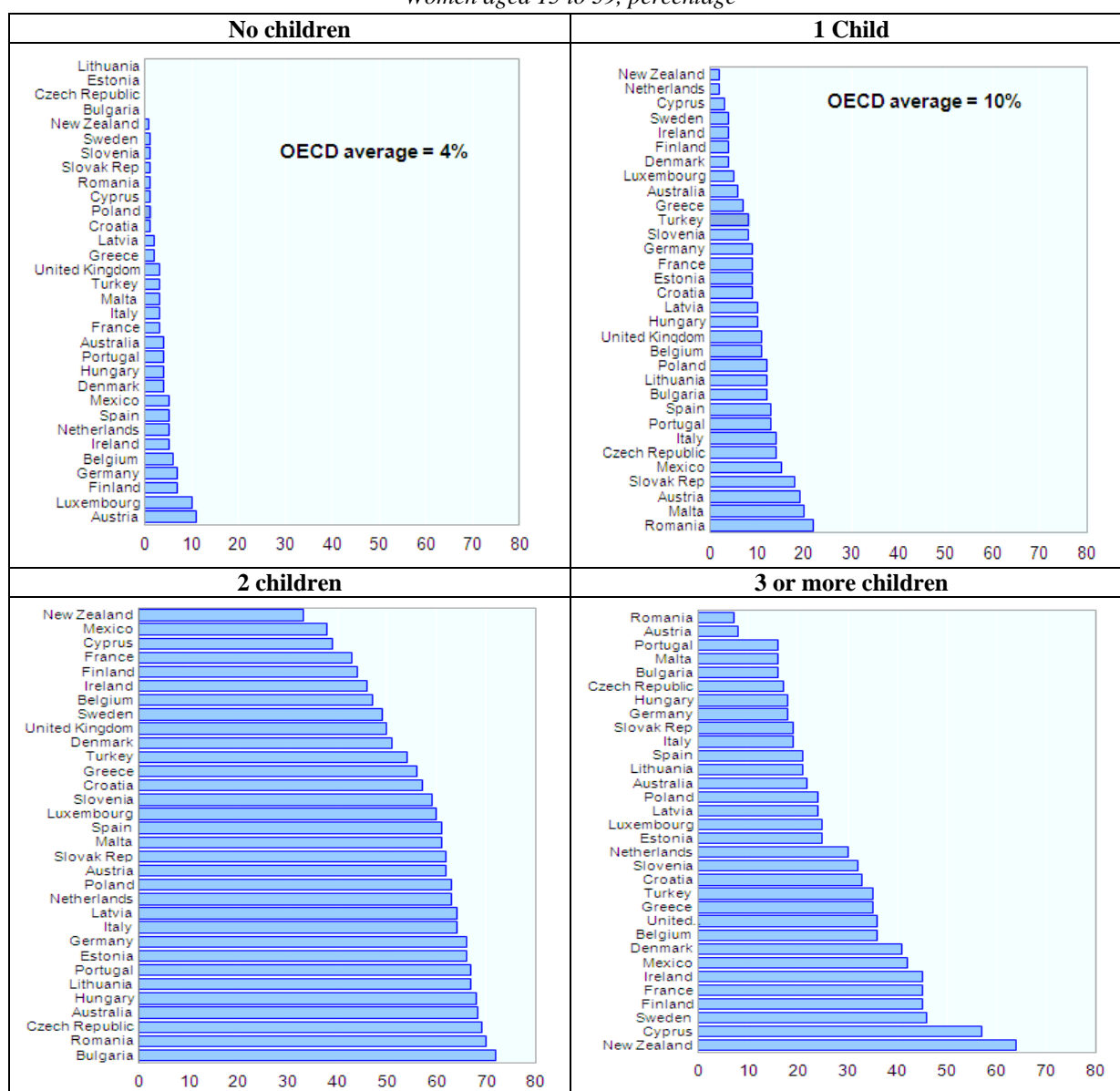
Sources: Australia: Fertility Decision Making Project 2004, Australian Institute of Family Studies; European countries: 2006; Eurobarometer 65.1 and 65.3 - see Testa (2006) Childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe; Japan: Thirteenth Japanese National Fertility Survey; Korea: 2006 Korea Institute for Health & Social Affairs; New Zealand: 2004 World Value Survey; Mexico: 2006 Encuesta Nacional de la Dinámica Demográfica.

Chart SF2.2.B provides more detailed information on the exact number of children that women consider as “ideal”. Remaining childless is here included as an alternative to having 1, 2 or 3 or more children considered as ideal family size.

Childlessness is the ideal fertility option for only a small minority of adults (4% on average in the OECD), but this proportion is more than twice as high in Austria and Luxembourg (Chart SF2.2.B). Not many women wish to have one child only; about 10% of respondents on average, but this proportion is higher in South European countries (Portugal, Spain and Italy), Mexico, the Slovak Republic and Austria.

Chart SF2.2.B: Ideal family size, mid 2000s¹

Women aged 15 to 39, percentage

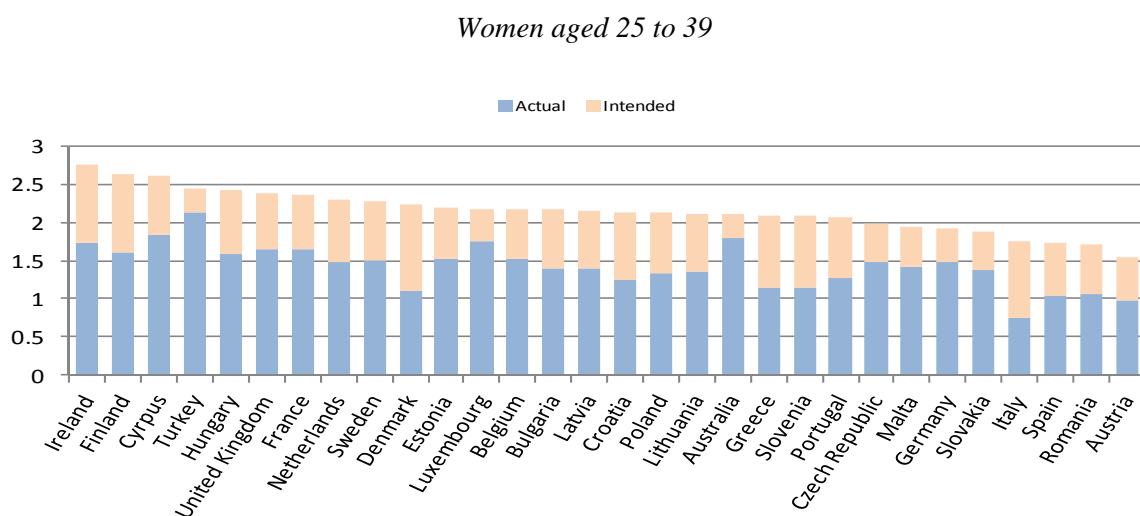


Year: see chart SF2.2.A
 Source: same as chart SF2.2.A

The large majority of adults prefer to have two children: more than 50% of 15 to 39 years old respondents consider 2 children as the appropriate family size in most OECD countries. When the proportion is lower (Finland, Belgium, Ireland, Mexico, France, and Sweden), this is because 40% of the adults would like to have larger families with 3 children or more.

Many women aged 25 to 39 have not yet realised their childbearing intentions (Chart SF2.2.C). When these intentions are considered together with the number of children women in this age-group already have, large cross-country variations appear in the ideal “ultimately intended family size” of women. The ultimately intended family size is particularly small in Italy, Spain and Austria. Nevertheless, the number of children women intend to have in these countries is above the actual fertility rate, which points to barriers in family formation in all these countries.

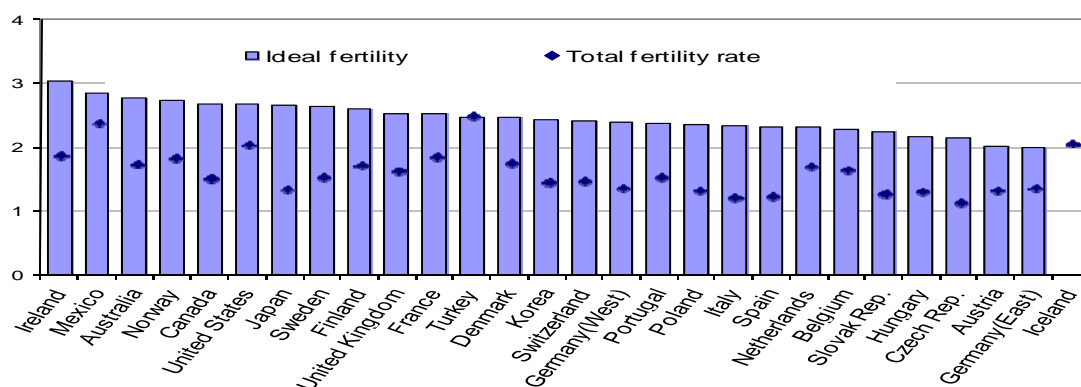
Chart SF2.2.C: Ultimately intended number of children, 2006



Source: Eurobarometer 2006: childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe

At the macro-level, the gap between actual and ideal fertility is also illustrated by chart SF2.2.D which put together total fertility rates and the “ideal” number of children such as provided by the 2000s wave of the World Values Surveys.

Chart SF2.2.D: Ideal and actual fertility rates, 2000 or around



Source: World Value Survey, as in D'Addio A. and Mira d'Ercole M. 2005.

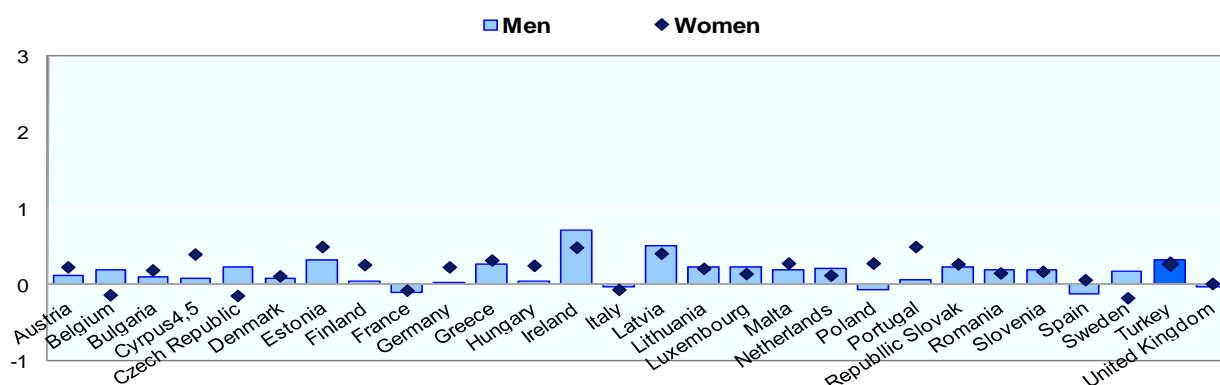
Comparability and data issues

Different sources are used to obtain information on the “ideal” number of children. The Eurobarometer was used for 25 European countries where the survey was conducted during the winter 2006. The main advantage of this survey is the cross-country comparability of data through the use of a common questionnaire in all 25 countries. However, the limited size of survey samples (around 1,000 respondents per country) may affect the representativeness with regards to the demographic characteristics and attitudes of the population. The same shortcomings apply to the World Value Surveys that has been used for New Zealand. In contrast to that, estimates for Japan, Korea or Mexico are based on fertility surveys with much bigger sample size (6,800 in Japan and 39,000 in Mexico for example). In these latter surveys, people are asked about their “ideal” number of children, with no distinction between general and personal views.

Measurement of family size “ideals” and/or fertility intentions are also very sensitive to how questions are ordered and formulated. The 2006 Eurobarometer attempts to disentangle opinions on the number of children that people consider as ideal from a general or collective perspective from what they consider as “ideal” for themselves. General opinions on family size ideal lead most often to higher estimates than personal ideals (Chart SF2.2.E). Because the distinction between “general” and “personal” ideals is not applied in the World Value Survey or in the other fertility surveys, these surveys (Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, Mexico and the United States), therefore are likely to slightly overestimate the “personal ideal family size”.

Chart SF2.2.E The gap between general and personal ideals number of children, 2006

15 years old and over



Source: Eurobarometer 2006: childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe

Responses on intentions to have children should be interpreted cautiously for different reasons:

1. They change with time horizons fixed by the questionnaire: intentions for the next 3 years are different from those covering a longer term.
2. Fertility intentions are not stable over time and age. For example, for the Netherlands, Liefbroer (2009) finds that most people reduce family size intentions as they get older. By contrast, for Australia, Wilkins et al. (2009) found that around 40% of men and 35% women who were between the ages of 18 and 39 in 2001 reported a different number of total expected children in 2006 compared to 2001, and, for both men and women, the proportion who reported a higher number of expected children in 2006 was slightly larger than the proportion

who reported a lower number (see also Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan (2003) for the US, and Heiland et al. (2008) for Germany, and Iacovou and Taveres (2009) for the United Kingdom).

3. The capacity to predict childbearing behaviour from intentions is also limited since the total of births includes an important number of non-intended births. Toulemon and Testa (2005) estimated for example, that 45% of the children born between 1998 and 2003 in France were not initially intended. A lower share of non-intended births (13%) is estimated for the births that occurred between 2001 and 2006 in Australia (Wilkins et al., 2009).

Sources and further reading: D'Addio A., M. Mira d'Ercole M. (2005). Fertility trends and the impact of policies. Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, OECD, Paris; Heiland, F., A. Prskawetz, and W. Sanderson (2008), "Are individuals' desired family sizes stable? Evidence from West German panel data", *European Journal of Population*, 24(2), 129–156; Liebroer A. (2009), "Changes in Family Size Intentions Across Young Adulthood: A Life-Course Perspective", *European Journal of Population* (2009), Special issue on 'Fertility Intentions and Outcomes', 25(4): 363-386; Quesnel-Vallée A. and S. Ph. Morgan (2003), "Missing the target? Correspondance of fertility intentions and behavior in the US", *Population Research and Policy Review* 22:497-525; Toulemon L. And M.R.Testa (2005), "Fertility intentions and actual fertility: a complex relationship", *Population and Societies*, 415; Testa M. R. (2006), Childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe, Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_253_en.pdf; and, Wilkins R, D. Warren and M. Hahn (2009), Families, Incomes and Jobs, Volume 4: A Statistical Report on Waves 1 to 6 of the HILDA Survey, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research.