

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 and 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 general views on the ideal family size, personal views on the individual's desired number of own children, and parents' views on the desired number of additional children further to however many they already have.

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 measure used 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). This information is available for European countries from certain waves of the Eurobarometer survey, 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?" Information is available in forms that are disaggregated by gender and for different age groups, plus also level of education and working status. Following Testa (2014), education is measured on a three-part ordinal variable based on the respondent's age at which they finished full-time education – those with 'low' education finished full-time education at age 15 or below, those with 'medium' education finished education between 16 and 19, and those with 'high' education finished full-time education aged 20 or above. Working status is measured according to respondent's self-reported 'current occupation' – individual's are classified as 'working' if they report their 'current occupation' as either employed or as self-employed, and as 'not working' if they report their 'current occupation' as either i) a student, ii) unemployed or temporarily not working, iii) retired or unable to work through illness or iv) responsible for ordinary shopping and looking after the home, or without any current occupation, not working.

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

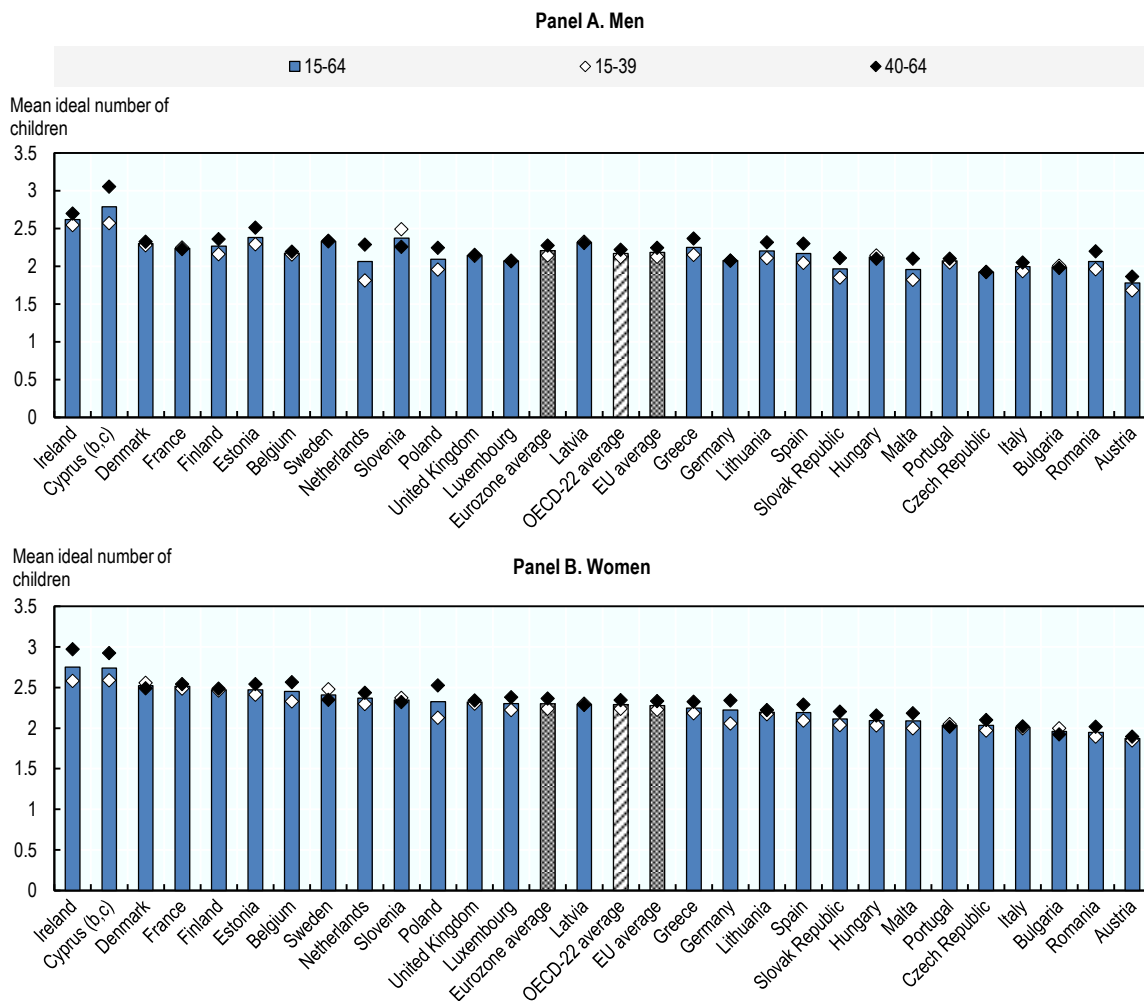
On average across OECD countries with available data, the mean personal ideal number of children for men is just under 2.2 and for women around 2.3, slightly above the population replacement rate level of 2.1 children per woman. Ideal personal family size does however vary widely across OECD countries. At over 2.6 children for men and 2.8 children for women, desired personal family size is largest in Ireland, while fertility intentions are also high in Belgium, France, Estonia, and the Nordic OECD countries (Chart SF2.2.A). By contrast, in Austria fertility "ideals" are below population replacement levels for both men and women across all age groups. In most other countries, the mean personal ideal number of children is generally somewhere between 2.0 and 2.4 across age groups. Differences by sex are generally not very large, nor, on the whole, are differences by age group – on average across OECD countries, both men and women aged 15-39 desire roughly 0.1 fewer children than men and women aged 40-64.

Chart SF2.2.B provides more detailed information on the exact number of children that women (15-to-64-year-old) consider as the general "ideal". Remaining childless is included here as an alternative to having 1, 2, or 3 or more children as the ideal general family size.

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, 2011

Mean average personal ideal number of children, 15-to-64-year-olds, by gender and age group



a) Respondents who refused to answer the question or who state that 'there is no ideal number, it depends' are excluded from the calculation of the 'mean average personal ideal number of children'.

b) 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";

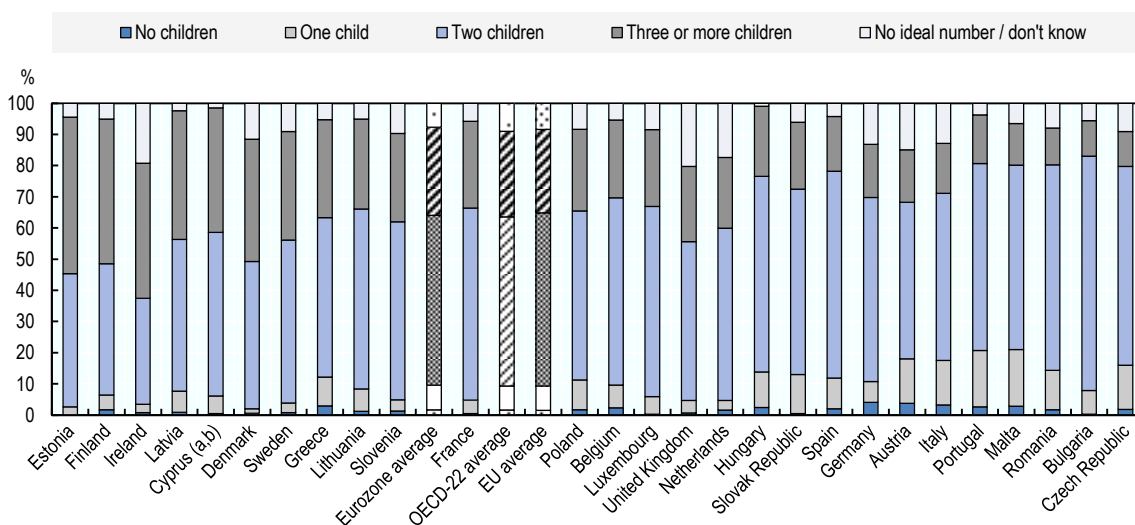
c) Footnote by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Commission: The Republic of Cyprus is recognized by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the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

Sources: for all countries, Eurobarometer 2011: Fertility and Social Climate

Childlessness is seen as the ideal general fertility option for only a small minority of women (2% on average across OECD countries with available data), but this proportion is roughly twice as high in Austria and Germany, where around 4% of women aged 15-64 suggest remaining childless is the general ideal fertility option (Chart SF2.2.B). Not many women report having only one child as the general ideal; on average across the OECD, only about 8% of respondents report their ideal general family size as 'one child', although the proportion is considerably higher (at roughly 15%) in some of the Southern European (Italy and Portugal) and Eastern and Central European (Austria, the Czech Republic, and the Slovak Republic) OECD countries. The large majority of adults prefer to have two children: more than 50% of 15-to-64-year-old women consider two children as an appropriate ideal family size in most OECD countries. When the proportion is lower than 50% (Finland, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, and Latvia), it is because many women consider having three or more children as the general ideal.

Chart SF2.2.B Ideal general number of children, 2011

Distribution (%) of women (15-to-64-year-old) by general ideal number of children



a) see note b) to chart SF2.2.A

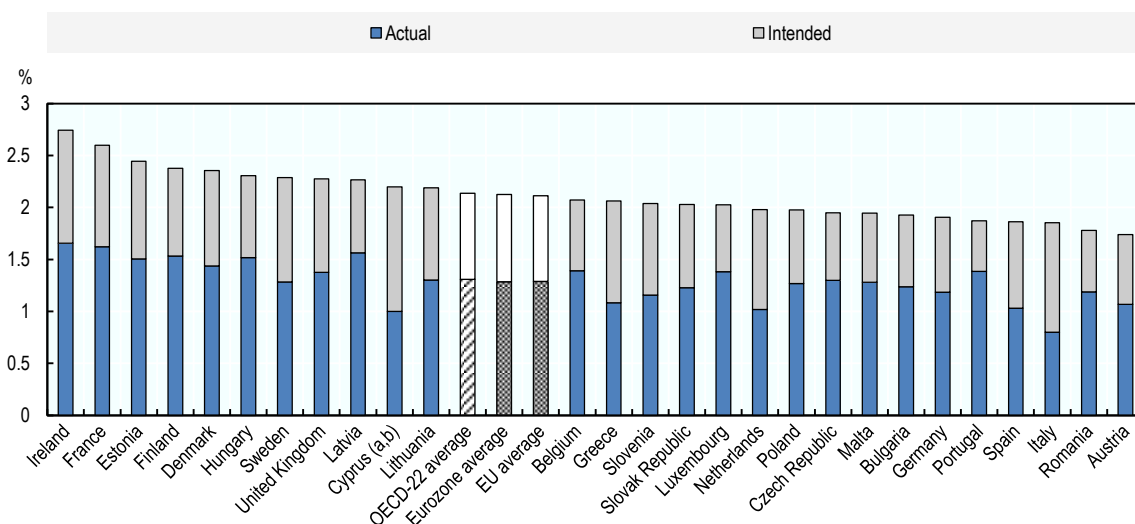
b) see note c) to chart SF2.2.A

Sources: for all countries, Eurobarometer 2011: Fertility and Social Climate

Many women aged 25 to 39 have not yet realised their childbearing intentions (Chart SF2.2.C). When ideal family sizes 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 Austria, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Nevertheless, in all countries the number of children women intend to have is far above the actual number they already have, which points to barriers in family formation across the OECD.

Chart SF2.2.C. Mean ultimately intended family size, 2011

Mean average actual and intended number of children, women (25-39)

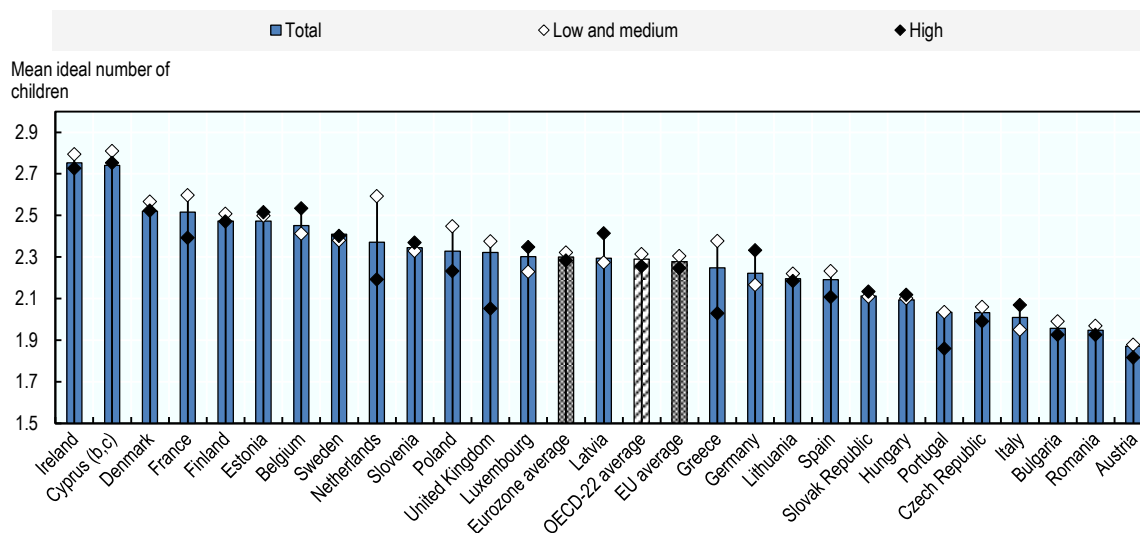


a) see note b) to chart SF2.2.A

b) see note c) to chart SF2.2.A

Sources: for all countries, Eurobarometer 2011: Fertility and Social Climate

Chart SF2.2.D Mean personal ideal number of children by level of education, 2011
 Mean average personal ideal number of children, women, 15-to-64-year-olds, by level of education^a



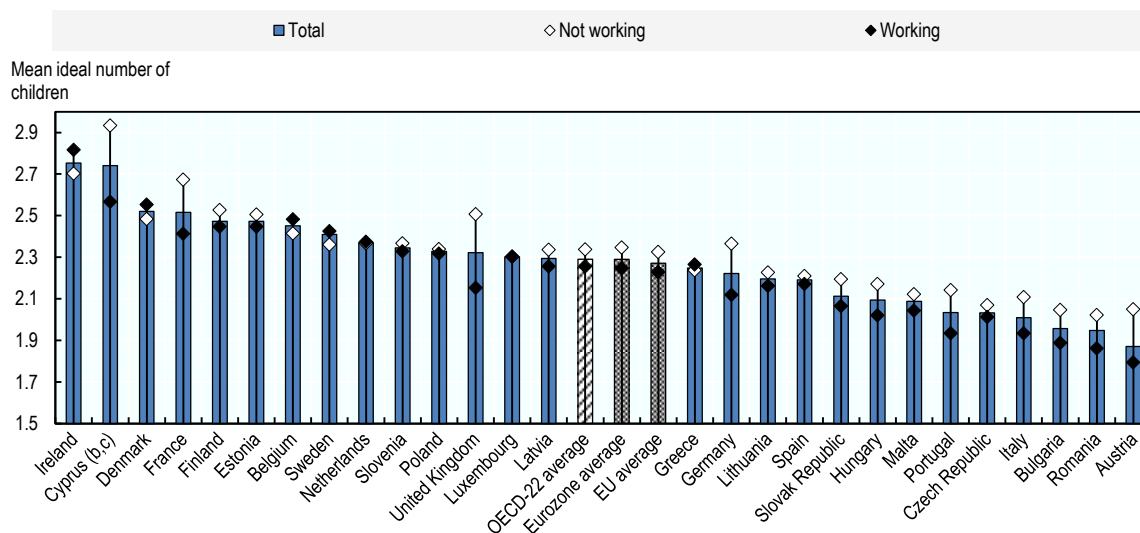
a) Level of education is measured on a three-part ordinal variable based on the respondent's age at which they finished full-time education. Those with 'low' education finished full-time education at age 15 or below, those with 'medium' education finished education between 16 and 19, and those with 'high' education finished full-time education aged 20 or above. Individuals with no full-time education are included under 'low' education. Those who are still studying are excluded. Respondents who refused to answer the question or who state that 'there is no ideal number, it depends' are excluded from the calculation of the 'mean average personal ideal number of children'.

b) see note b) to chart SF2.2.A

c) see note c) to chart SF2.2.A

Sources: for all countries, Eurobarometer 2011: Fertility and Social Climate

Chart SF2.2.E Mean personal ideal number of children by working status, 2011
 Mean average personal ideal number of children, women, 15-to-64-year-olds, by working status^a



a) Individuals that are 'working' are those who report their 'current occupation' as either employed or as self-employed. Individuals who are 'not working' are those who report their 'current occupation' as either i) a student, ii) unemployed or temporarily not working, iii) retired or unable to work through illness or iv) responsible for ordinary shopping and looking after the home, or without any current occupation, not working. Respondents who refused to answer the question or who state that 'there is no ideal number, it depends' are excluded from the calculation of the 'mean average personal ideal number of children'.

b) see note b) to chart SF2.2.A

c) see note c) to chart SF2.2.A

Sources: for all countries, Eurobarometer 2011: Fertility and Social Climate

In several OECD countries, women with lower levels of education prefer to have slightly more children than highly-educated women (Chart SF2.2.D). On average across OECD countries with available data, the mean average ideal personal family size for women with low and medium

education is 2.31 children, compared to 2.26 for highly educated women, with the gap largest in Greece, the United Kingdom, and especially the Netherlands – there, the mean ideal personal family size for women with low and medium education is, at 2.59 children, 0.4 points higher than the mean ideal personal family size for highly-educated women (2.19 children). Some countries, however, show the opposite pattern. In Germany, for example, the mean ideal personal family size for women with low and medium education (2.16 children) is roughly 0.2 points *lower* than the mean ideal personal family size for highly-educated women (2.33 children).

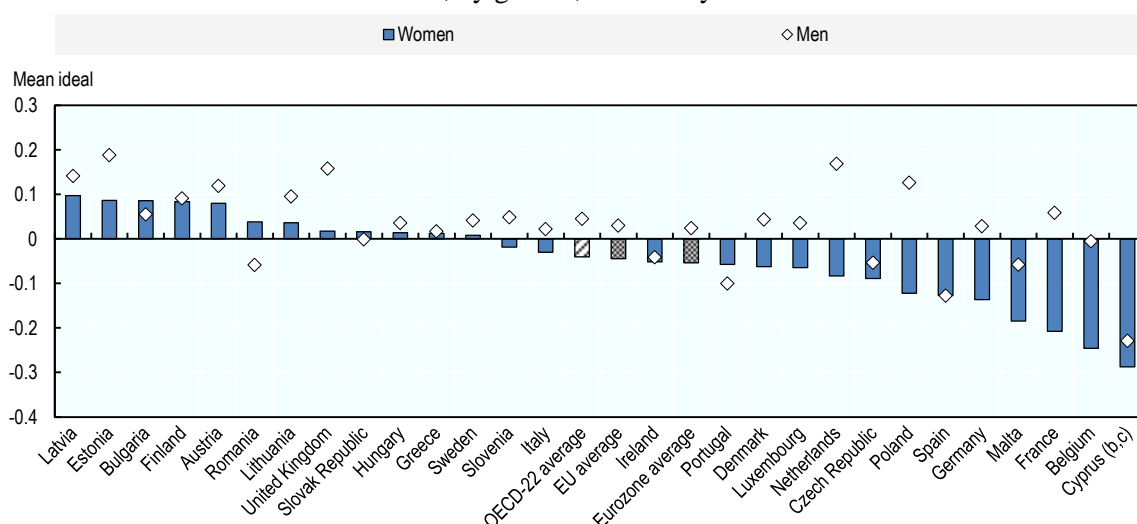
Working women tend to have slightly smaller ideal personal family sizes than women who are not at work (Chart SF2.2.E). On average across OECD countries with available data, the mean average ideal personal family size for women who are working is 2.25 children, compared to 2.34 children for women who are not working, with the gap particularly large, at just less than 0.4 points, in the United Kingdom. Again, though, some countries exhibit the opposite pattern. In Ireland, working women have a mean average personal ideal family size of 2.82 children, just over 0.1 point higher than the mean for women who are not working (2.70 children).

Comparability and data issues

Data for this indicator come from Eurobarometer 75.4, a survey spanning 27 European countries and conducted during the winter of 2011. The main advantage of this survey is the cross-country comparability of data through the use of a common questionnaire in all 27 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.

Measurement of family size “ideals” and/or fertility intentions are sensitive to how questions are ordered and formulated. The 2011 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 in many countries to lower estimates of ideal numbers of children than personal ideals, especially for women (Chart SF2.2.E).

Chart SF2.2.F. Differences between general and personal ideal number of children, 2011
 Mean average percentage point gap (general less personal) in general and person ideal number of children, by gender, 15-to-64-year-olds



a) Respondents who refused to answer the question or who state that 'there is no ideal number, it depends' are excluded from the calculation of the 'mean average personal ideal number of children' and the 'mean average general ideal number of children'.

b) see note b) to chart SF2.2.A

c) see note c) to chart SF2.2.A

Sources: for all countries, Eurobarometer 2011: Fertility and Social Climate

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

1. 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).
2. The capacity to predict childbearing behaviour from intentions is also limited since the total number 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; Liefbroer 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), 2011 Eurobarometer 75.4 on Fertility and Social Climate http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/whatsnew2011_en.htm, Testa, M.R. (2011), Family Sizes in Europe: Evidence from the 2011 Eurobarometer Survey, http://www.oecd.org/els/workingpapers/edrp_2_2012.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. Testa, M.R. (2014), "On the positive correlation between education and fertility intentions in Europe: Individual- and country-level evidence", *Advances in Life Course Research*, Vol. 21, pp 28-42