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 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 SF2.2.A). For European countries in the Eurobarometer survey, this information is based on survey responses to the question: “And for you personally, what would be the ideal number of 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 from the World Value Survey, 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” (the question asks “what is the total intended number of children”).

Information on ideal number of children among women is also presented by various socio-economic groups based on data available in the World Value Survey for a selected group of OECD countries (see Chart SF2.2.D): by the education level and employment status of women. The education level is divided into low (ISCED 0-1), medium (ISCED 2) and high (ISCED 3A+), while information on the employment status is categorised into women who are in employment (including full-time, part-time and self-employment) and women who are not in employment (including those unemployed and those not seeking employment).

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, 2011

Panel A: Men aged above 15, by age group

Panel B: Women aged above 15, by age group

1) 2010 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 is for women aged 40-44 instead of 40-54.

Chart SF2.2.B provides more detailed information on the exact number of children that women consider as “ideal” as a percentage of all women aged 15 to 39, as opposed to the average ideal number of children presented in Chart SF2.2A Panel B. Remaining childless is here included as an alternative to having 1, 2 or 3 or more children.

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 2011

Women aged 15 to 39, percentage

1. See Note 1 for chart SF2.2.A
Source: See 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 (Chart SF2.2B). When the proportion is lower (Belgium, Finland, France, Ireland, Mexico and Sweden), this is mainly 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, 2011

Women aged 25 to 39

At the macro-level, the gap between actual and ideal fertility is also illustrated by chart SF2.2.D which puts together total fertility rates and the “ideal” number of children such as provided by the 2010-2012 wave (wave 6) of the World Value Surveys.

Chart SF2.2.D: Ideal and actual fertility rates, 2010-2012

Source: Eurobarometer 2011: childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe

Ideal number of children by socio-economic characteristics

Chart SF2.2.E presents the average ideal number of children among women aged 40+ by their level of education. The data shows that women ideally want fewer children if they have a university degree (highly educated) than women with lower levels of education in all countries for which data are available, except in Austria and Poland. While women with low levels of education generally want more children than their peers. The difference in the average ideal number of children between highly and lowly educated women is greatest (difference of more than 1 child) in Canada, France, Ireland, Korea, Mexico, Spain, Turkey and the United States.

Chart SF2.2.E: Ideal fertility rates by education level of women, 2010-2012
Average ideal number of children among women aged 40+

The average ideal number of children that women want, grouped by employment status, is presented in Chart SF2.2F. The data shows that women who are in employment generally want more children than women who are not employment, except in Sweden. The difference in ideal number of children among women in employment and those who are not is largest (at more than 1 child) in France, Ireland, Mexico and Turkey.

Chart SF2.2.F: Ideal fertility rates by employment status, 2010-2012
Average ideal number of children among women aged 40+

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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 of 2011. 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 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 most often to higher estimates than personal ideals (Chart SF2.2.G). 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.G The gap between general and personal ideals number of children, 2011

15 years old and over

Source: Eurobarometer 2011: childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe

The ideal number of children among women aged 40+ by socio economic groups are descriptive and are not regressed with control factors, thus the differences may not be directly as a result of the socio-economic groups discussed but can also be due to other factors. While the World Value Survey includes information on many other factors, only the major socio-economic factors are presented where the difference in scores are statistically significant across most countries.