

SF2.5. Childlessness

Definitions and methodology

The postponement of parenthood over the last decades, which can be gleaned from the declining percentage of childless women at different points over the life-cycle, has increased the probability for adults to remain childless. However, the extent to which childlessness has contributed to the decline in fertility rates remains a little unclear. *Definitive childlessness* can only be assessed at the end of the reproductive period, which for women is usually between ages 45 and 49, but relevant information can also be found across different cohorts of women.

Table SF2.5.A presents data on the proportion of women that are childless at or around age 40-44 for the mid-1990s and 2010 or the latest year available. Data are not available for all countries, and where they are available they sometimes differ in the year of reference or the exact age of the women examined. Nonetheless, these data provide at least some indication as to the level of and variations in childlessness at around age 40-44 across OECD countries.

Data on women for whom the reproductive period has ended are available for the cohort of women born in 1970 or before (Chart SF2.5.A). Chart SF2.5.B compares levels of definitive childlessness with information on completed fertility rates (SF2.1).

Key findings

The proportion of women aged 40-44 or around that are childless varies considerably across OECD countries (Table SF2.5.A). In some OECD countries, including Austria, Spain and the United Kingdom, 20% or more of women aged 40-44 or around are childless. In others, by contrast, rates are lower than 10%. Rates of childless at or around age 40-44 are particularly low in the South or Central American OECD countries – with the rate in Chile in 2002 only 7.72% and in Mexico in 2010 only 8.55% – and particularly also in Turkey, where as late as 2008 only 4.5% of women aged 40-44 were childless.

Rates of childless at age 40-44 or around are increasing in most of those OECD countries where data are available for both time points (Table SF2.5.A). In many cases the size of changes are not directly comparable across countries because of differences in the years of reference and in some cases also definitions. Nonetheless, in Finland for example, the proportion of 40-44 women that are childless increased by over 5 percentage points between 1990 and 2010, while in the United Kingdom rates of childlessness for women aged 45 increased by 6 percentage points between 1995 and 2010. Only four OECD countries (Chile, Luxembourg, Slovenia and Turkey) with available data see the rate of childlessness fall between their two time points, with the decrease in Luxembourg (from 19% in 1991 to 15% in 2001) particularly large.

Chart SF2.5.A shows how the proportion of childlessness among women at the end of the reproductive period – that is, ‘definitive childlessness’ – differs across countries and across time. At above 18% on average for the cohort born in 1970, definitive childlessness among women is highest in Austria, Finland, Japan, and Spain. For the same cohort, definitive childlessness is below 10% in the Czech Republic and Estonia. Trends show that for the cohorts born after the 1920s, childlessness first decreased in most countries and then increased for cohorts born after WWII.

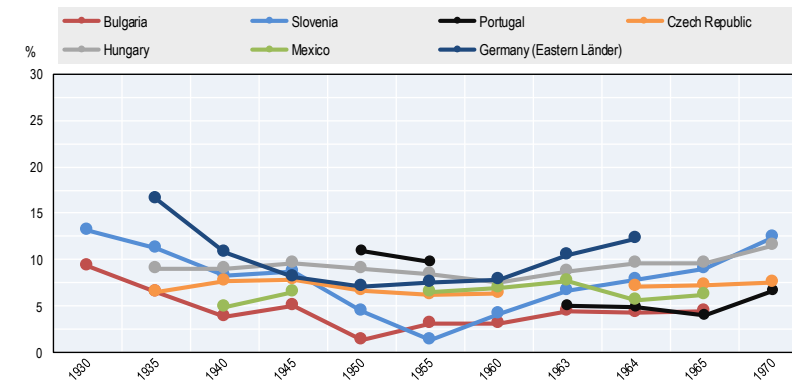
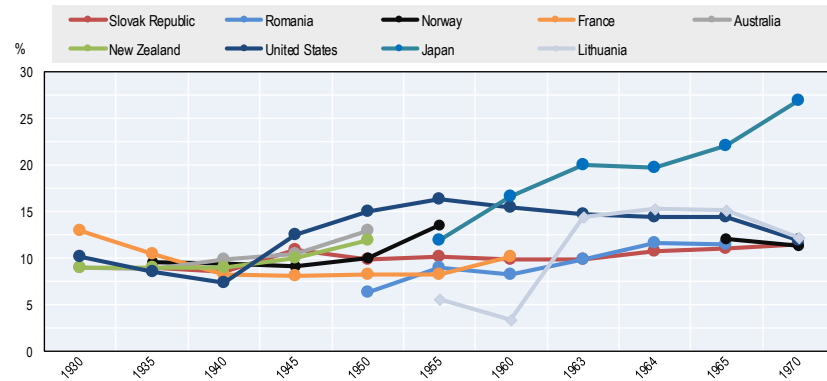
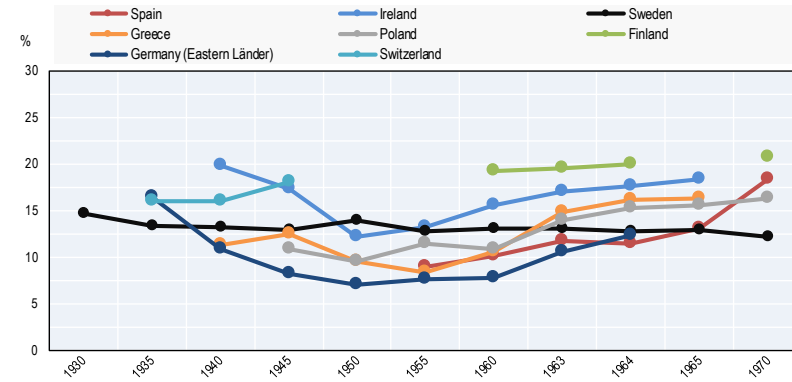
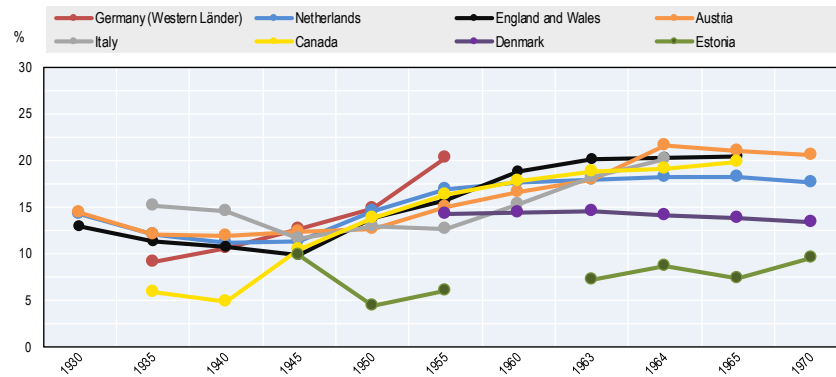
Other relevant indicators: Family size and composition (SF1.1); Fertility rates (SF2.1); Age of mothers at childbirth and age-specific fertility (SF2.3) and Share of births outside marriage (SF2.4)

Table SF2.5.A. Childless women at age 40-44^a, mid-1990s and 2010 (or latest available year)
 Proportion (%) of women aged 40-44 who have not had a live birth

	mid-1990s		2010 (or latest year)	
	%	Reference year	%	Reference year
Australia	12.80	1996	16.00	2011
Austria	7.60	1996	21.54	2010
Belgium	..	..	..	..
Canada	15.90	1991	18.94	2007
Chile	7.90	1992	7.72	2002
Czech Republic	4.90	1997	7.10	2011
Denmark	..	..	..	..
Estonia	9.40	1989	10.20	2011
Finland	14.60	1990	19.89	2010
France	7.70	1994	..	..
Germany	..	..	..	..
Greece	..	..	..	..
Hungary	8.50	1990	12.00	2011
Iceland	..	..	..	..
Ireland	..	..	19.00	2011
Israel	..	..	10.82	2008
Italy	10.50	1996	..	..
Japan	..	..	..	..
Korea	3.60	1990	6.78	2005
Luxembourg	19.00	1991	15.42	2001
Mexico	7.00	1990	8.55	2010
Netherlands	15.00	1993	..	..
New Zealand	11.90	1996	15.00	2006
Norway	..	..	..	..
Poland	6.10	1991	..	..
Portugal	8.10	1997	..	..
Slovak Republic	..	..	10.00	2011
Slovenia	9.40	1991	7.00	2002
Spain	..	..	21.60	2011
Sweden	..	..	13.40	2010
Switzerland	20.40	1995	..	..
Turkey	5.40	1990	4.50	2008
UK (England and Wales)	14.00	1995	20.00	2010
United States	17.50	1995	18.80	2010
Bulgaria	8.20	1998	11.70	2011
Croatia	9.40	1991	9.40	2001
Cyprus				
Latvia	6.90	1995	8.70	2000
Lithuania	12.20	1995	8.40	2011
Malta	14.10	1995	12.90	2010
Romania	9.70	1992	10.50	2002

a) Data for Austria (2010), Canada (2010) and Switzerland (2010) refer to women aged 45 and for the Netherlands (mid-1990s) to women aged 40 to 42.
 Sources: D'Addio and Mira d'Ercole (2005), Miettinen et al (2015), [United Nations World Fertility Data 2012](#), [United Nations World Fertility Report 2013](#)

Chart SF2.5.A Definitive childlessness
 Proportion (%) of definitive childless women per cohort

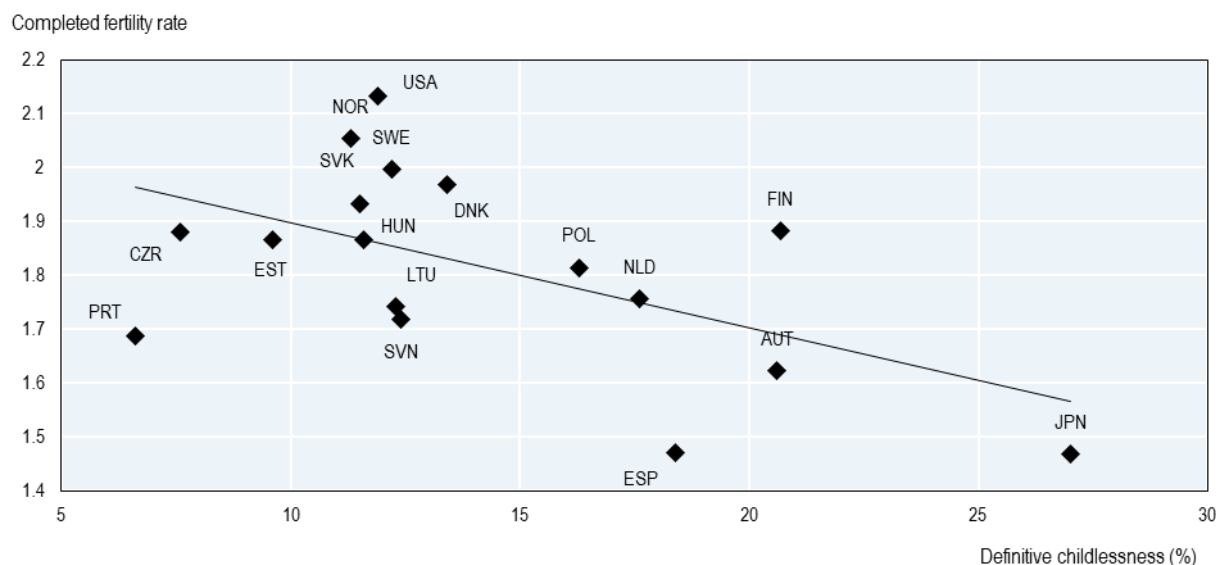


Sources: Observatoire Démographique Européen (Sardon, 2006) and Rowland (2007); Mexico: INEGI. XI and XII Censuses of Population and Housing and Count of Population and Housing 2005 for cohorts born before 1960. Data refers to women 45 years old. For cohorts born after 1960, Encuesta Nacional de la Dinamica Demografica 2006. For Austria, Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and Spain for cohorts after 1965; Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Japan, and Lithuania, the Human Fertility Database.

Childlessness is one of the factors that can help explain cross-country differences in completed fertility. Chart SF2.5.B shows that, when looking at women born in 1970, countries with comparatively high levels of definitive childlessness (e.g. over 15%) also often have lower completed fertility rates. The main exceptions to this are Finland – which has a high childless rate but also a relatively high completely fertility rate – and Portugal, which has both a low level of childlessness and low completed fertility rates for the cohort of women born in 1970. The former points to a relatively high share of large families among all families, and the latter to a relatively high proportion of families with one child (see indicator SF1.1).

Chart SF2.5.B Definitive childlessness and completed fertility rates

Proportion (%) of cohort that are definitive childless and completed fertility rates of women born in 1970



Source: Human Fertility Database.

Comparability and data issues

To consider whether or not childlessness prevails at the end of a female’s reproductive life, information on women born in 1970 at the latest is required (as observed in 2015 or around). For younger cohorts, it is impossible to discern whether childlessness is a permanent or transitory feature. Ideally, a closer look to cohort changes in the age- and parity-specific probability of having a child would allow going further in the assessment of transitory nature of childlessness and timing of births over the life course. Such rates, based on longitudinal data, are however not yet available in a standardized cross-nationally comparable format.

Sources and further reading: D’Addio, A.C and M. Mira d’Ercole (2005), “Trends and Determinants of Fertility Rates in OECD Countries: the Role of Policies”, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Paper, No. 27, Paris; Neyer G. and J. Hoem (2007), “Education and permanent childlessness: Austria vs. Sweden” , in Surkyn, J., P. Deboosere and J. van Bavel, *Demographic challenges for the 21st century: a state of the art in demography*, VUBPRESS, Brussel; Rowland D. (2007), “Historical Trends in Childlessness, *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(10), pp. 1311-37; Sardon JP. (2006), “Recent demographic Trends in Developed Countries”, *Population*, E-61(3), pp. 225-300; Sobotka T. (2005), “Childless societies? Trends and projections of childlessness in Europe and the United States”, Population American Association Conference; United Nations (2013), “*World Fertility Report 2013: Fertility at the Extremes*”, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs; Miettinen, A., A. Rotkirch, I. Szalma, A. Donno and M, Tanturri (2015) “*Increasing childlessness in Europe: time trends and country differences*” Families and Societies Working Paper Series, no.33(2015).