SF2.3: Age of mothers at childbirth and age-specific fertility

Definitions and methodology

This indicator contains information on the age of mothers at childbirth and levels of fertility across age groups. It is based on two main measures:

- **Mean age of mothers at birth**, calculated as the simple mean average age in years of women at childbirth. The mean age of mothers at birth is shown both for all births and also for first births only.

- **Age-specific fertility rates**, calculated as the number of births per 1000 women of a given age in a given year. As a means of simplification, age-specific fertility rates are presented here per five-year age group and with particularly focus on fertility among adolescent (15-19 year old) women.

Key findings

In most OECD countries, the average age at which women give birth now stands at 30 or above (Chart SF2.3.A). Only in three Latin American OECD countries (Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico) is the mean age of women at childbirth 28 or less, and in only six (Chile, Hungary, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Turkey and the United States) is it between 28 and 30. In all remaining OECD countries, the average age of women at childbirth is at least 30. In several OECD countries (e.g. Japan, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Luxembourg, Spain and Switzerland), the average age is about or above 32.

Most OECD countries have seen the average age of women at childbirth increase by somewhere between 2 and 5 years between 1970 and 2019, with the largest increase (5.4 years) in the Czech Republic. However, three Latin American countries (Colombia, Costa Rica and Mexico) have seen the opposite – there, the mean age of women at childbirth has decreased by over two years since 1970.

Note: For 2019, data for Chile, Colombia and Costa Rica refer to 2014, for the Russian Federation to 2016; for Israel, Japan, Korea and the United States to 2017; and for Mexico, New Zealand and the United Kingdom to 2018.

Sources:
- European countries: Eurostat Demographic Statistics;
- Australia: AIHW Australia’s mothers and babies 2019—data tables;
- Canada: Statistics Canada Table 13-10-0417-01 Mean age of mother at time of delivery (live births); for all other countries, United Nations World Fertility Data 2019

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Other relevant indicators: Family size and composition (SF1.1); Fertility rates (SF2.1); Share of births outside marriage (SF2.4); and Marriage and divorce rates (SF3.1).
Increases in the mean age of women at childbirth are driven at least in part by a trend towards postponement of the first birth (Chart SF2.3.B). Current mean ages at first birth vary considerably across OECD countries – in the United States, for example, the average age at which women give birth to a first child is 27.0, whereas in Korea it is as high as 31.6. All OECD countries with available data have seen the mean age at first birth increase since 2000, with most recording an increase of at least 2 years. In Estonia, Korea and Lithuania, it has risen by around 5 years.

Chart SF2.3.B. Mean age of women at first birth, 2000 and 2019 or latest available

The shift towards postponement of the first birth is reflected in trends in adolescent fertility rates (Chart SF2.3.C). On average across OECD countries, current fertility rates for women aged 15-19 stand at 13.7 births per 1000 women. All OECD countries have seen adolescent fertility fall over the past few decades, sometimes by as much as 50 or more births per 1000 women aged 15-19 (e.g. Austria, Iceland, New Zealand and the United States). However, adolescent fertility rates remain high in some OECD countries. In Costa Rica, for example, the latest adolescent fertility rate is 61.2 births per 1000 women aged 15-19. In Colombia and Mexico, it is over 70 births per 1000 women aged 15-19 – over five times higher than the OECD average.

However, the effects of the delay in childbearing are best illustrated by looking at shifts in fertility across age groups. Chart SF2.3.D shows, by country, age-specific fertility rates by five-year age groups for the years 1970, 1995 and 2019. In almost all OECD countries, fertility rates among 20-24 year olds and 25-29 year olds are much lower today than they were in 1970. Much of the decline in fertility among women aged 20-29 occurred between 1970 and 1995, but in many countries fertility rates for women in their 20s have continued to fall since 1995. Conversely, current fertility rates for women aged 30-34 and 35-39 in several OECD countries are slightly higher than they were in 1970. In fact, in many countries – such as Australia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, New Zealand, Norway and the United Kingdom – fertility rates among 30-34 year olds have increased to the point where they are now higher than among any other age group. This is not the case in all OECD countries – some, such as Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Iceland, Ireland, and Mexico have seen fertility rates decline across almost all age groups. Broadly though, Chart SF2.3.D shows that in addition to a general decline in fertility (see indicator SF2.1. Fertility rates), many OECD countries have seen the focus of childbearing shift to later age groups.
Chart SF2.3.C. Adolescent fertility rate, 1970, 1995 and 2019 or latest available
Births per 1000 women, 15-19 year olds

Notes: for 2019, data for Chile, Colombia and Costa Rica to 2014; for the Russian Federation to 2016; for Israel, Japan and Korea to 2017; for Mexico, New Zealand and the United Kingdom to 2018.

Comparability and data issues

The disaggregation of fertility rates by mother’s age is useful as a means of identifying changes in the timing of fertility which, amongst other things, affect trends in the total fertility rate (SF2.1). The age profiles above show that women are postponing childbirth with fertility declining at younger ages and increasing at older ages. The consequences of these changes in timing on overall levels of fertility are not always exactly clear but postponement of childbirth is likely to lead to the underestimation of fertility as measured by the total fertility rate (Hvidtfeldt et al, 2010).

“Fertility rates by birth order”, “tempo-controlled estimates of fertility trends” or “the time between two births” are among the indicators that can help cast light on changes in the timing of fertility and help separate both the timing and quantum dimensions in the analysis of fertility evolution (see Potančoková et al. (2008) and other references below).

Chart SF2.3.D. **Age-fertility profiles, 1970, 1995 and 2019 or latest available**
Fertility rates (births per 1000 women) by five-year age group
Chart SF2.3.D. Age-fertility profiles, 1970, 1995 and 2019 or latest available (cont.) Fertility rates (births per 1000 women) by five-year age group
Chart SF2.3.D. **Age-fertility profiles, 1970, 1995 and 2019 or latest available (cont.)**

Fertility rates (births per 1000 women) by five-year age group

- **Poland**
- **Portugal**
- **Slovak Republic**
- **Sweden**
- **United Kingdom**
- **Turkey**
- **Switzerland**
- **Spain**
- **Costa Rica**

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Click [here](#) to download the data in Microsoft Excel Format
Notes: For 1970, data for Colombia refer to 1969, for Spain refer to 1971, for the United Kingdom to 1973, for Romania to 1975 and for Malta to 1977. For 1995, data for Colombia and France refer to 1998, for Canada, Germany, Korea and Latvia to 2000, and for Croatia to 2001. For 2019, data for Chile, Colombia and Costa Rica to 2014; for the Russian Federation to 2016; for Israel, Japan and Korea to 2017; for Mexico, New Zealand and the United Kingdom to 2018.