



Fertility rates affected by global economic crisis

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The global economic recession of 2008–2009 has been followed by a decline in fertility rates in Europe and the United States, bringing to an end the first concerted rise in fertility rates in the developed world since the 1960s, according to research published today.

“A new study by scientists from the Vienna Institute of Demography of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (VID) and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) identify that economic recessions tend to be followed by a decline in fertility rates - and also identify how specific groups of people are influenced by a recession.”

The 2008–2009 global economic recession, the first major recession since that caused by the oil shocks of the 1970s, brought a sudden trend reversal to the previous pattern of rising fertility rates in several highly developed countries, including Spain and the United States. A larger group of countries including England and Wales, Ireland, Italy, and Ukraine experienced stagnation of fertility rates, following a decade of generally rising fertility after 1998 (see figure below).

The study found that individual reactions to the recession vary by sex, age, number of children, education level, and migrant status.

“We have noted some specific patterns of behavior; the young and the childless, for example, are less likely to have children during recessions,” says Tomáš Sobotka from the VID, one of the authors of the study.

“Highly educated women react to employment uncertainty by adopting a ‘postponement strategy,’ especially if they are childless. In contrast, less-educated women often maintain or increase their fertility under economic uncertainty.”

The patterns differ for men—those with low education and low skills face increasing difficulty in finding a partner or in supporting their family and often show the largest decline in first child birth rates.

The recent global economic recession has brought to an end the first concerted rise in fertility rates across the developed world since the 1960s. Of the 27 countries of the European Union, fertility rates increased in 26 countries in 2008 (with stagnation in Luxembourg). In 2009 as many as 13 countries saw their fertility rates decline and another four countries experienced stable fertility rates. A rise in unemployment and employment uncertainty was a key factor behind this trend. In many developed countries cuts in social spending driven by the need to address ballooning budget deficits may prolong the fertility impact of the recent recession well beyond its end.

The study focuses on the most developed countries (including Eastern and Southeastern Europe) which were hardest hit by the recession. Limited attention is paid to less developed countries where the effects of the recession may differ.

The study by Tomáš Sobotka and Dimiter Philipov from the Vienna Institute of Demography of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and Vegard Skirbekk from the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis is published in the latest issue of *Population and Development Review*.

Reference: Economic recession and fertility in the developed world. *Population and Development Review* (Vol. 37, No. 2) June 27, 2011.

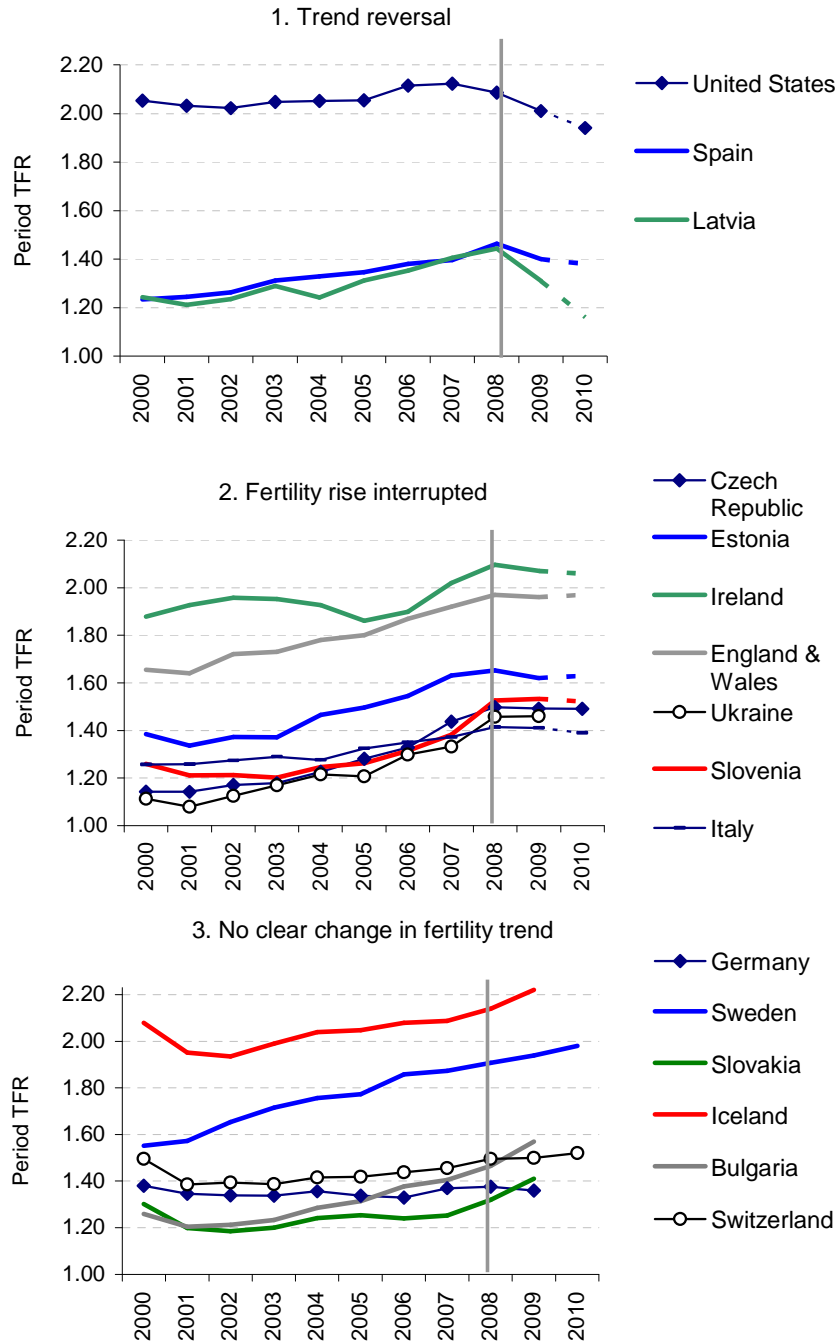
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Supporting information: Fig 1: Period fertility trends during the recent economic recession in selected countries of Europe and the United States: three patterns of fertility changes.



SOURCES: Council of Europe, Eurostat and national statistical offices.

NOTE: Dashed data for 2010 are preliminary estimates based on the reported preliminary numbers of total births or fertility rates for the whole or a part of the year. Grey vertical lines mark an onset of the recession in 2008.

Methodological explanation on the fertility indicator used in the figure

The period total fertility rate (TFR) gives a hypothetical number of children per woman under a condition that the observed fertility rates by age in a given year would remain unchanged indefinitely. In reality, this assumption often does not hold and the period TFR therefore does not express the real number of children among generations of women. That can be measured precisely only for women that are past their reproductive age.

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About the Vienna Institute of Demography: The Vienna Institute of Demography strives for the combination of scientific excellence with proactive relevance in analyzing and projecting demographic trends and in evaluating the social and economic consequences of population ageing. Thus the VID combines innovative methodological work with empirical analysis and communication of scientifically based insights. It gives special attention to the demography of Austria and to European comparative analysis. The Institute is embedded in the structure of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.