



Childbearing on hold

delayed childbearing and childlessness in Britain

Described as 'one of the most remarkable changes in social behaviour in the twentieth century'¹, declining fertility is related to wider changes in families and relationships occurring in recent decades such as later marriage, increased cohabitation, and increased divorce and cohabitation breakdown. Declining fertility combined with low rates of mortality results in population ageing and potentially population decline². These have implications for areas such as social security provision and labour supply, as well as the provision of unpaid care.

It has been suggested that one important factor explaining declining fertility is higher levels of delayed childbearing and increased childlessness. This research investigates some of the factors associated with later childbearing and childlessness amongst men and women in Britain and whether these have changed over time. Through analysing data from large-scale cohort studies, the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS), this ESRC funded project compared fertility patterns of those born in 1958 and 1970.

Key points

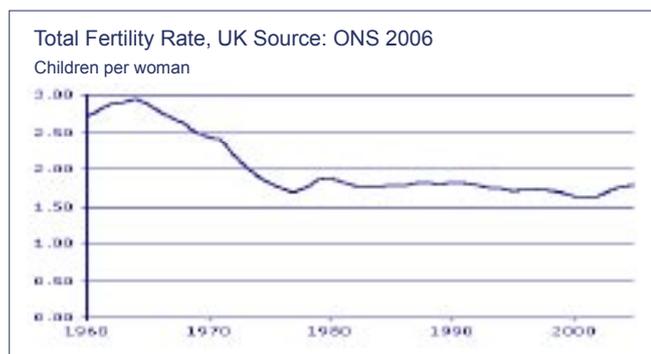
- While births have generally fallen, there are fluctuations. Following the recent decline since the 1960s 'baby boom' there has been a more gradual fall during the 1990s and a slight increase in the last few years
 - The average age of women first giving birth has risen from 23 in 1970 to 27 in 2005
 - Since 1992, women age 30-34 have had a higher fertility rate than those aged 20-24
 - The proportion of women remaining childless has almost doubled in recent decades from 1 in 10 women born in 1940 to nearly a fifth born in 1959
 - There has been a decline in families with 4 or more children, although the number of women having one child has remained broadly the same
 - 59% of men and 45% of women born in 1970 were childless at age 29, with the highest proportion of childlessness amongst those whose fathers were in professional or managerial occupations, and lowest amongst those with fathers in partly or unskilled occupations
 - There has been a marked increase in childlessness for highly educated men and women, with a rise of 37% for men and 31% of women between the 1958 and 1970 cohorts
 - Childlessness has also increased amongst those with no qualifications. A third of unqualified women born in 1970 are childless in their early 30's compared to 53% of men. It is unclear whether those with no qualifications are more likely to become parents, or whether parenthood inhibits educational attainment
 - Married men and women are more likely to have children than their cohabiting counterparts
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Why study delayed childbearing and childlessness?

There is much debate about the reasons for fertility decline. Later childbearing may be seen as an outcome of choice, with access to modern contraception meaning couples are better able to plan the timing and size of families. Postponing childbearing however may be associated with involuntary childlessness at later ages. Changes such as increasing opportunities in education and employment, particularly for women, have also been associated with delayed childbearing. In some debates this is related to a growth in values of self-fulfilment and increased individualism. However other explanations understand these trends more as a response to social and economic changes, whereby the timing and number of children people have are a means of reconciling work and family responsibilities. Some authors have drawn attention to the importance of gender equity in fertility decline, in particular the relative lack of change in ‘domestic democracy’ in the home alongside dramatic changes in the public sphere, such as in education and employment. Certainly, fertility trends must be considered in specific contexts of wider social and economic changes. Information on the relative circumstances of childless men and women in Britain contributes to a better understanding of the social processes underlying trends towards delayed childbearing and childlessness in recent decades.

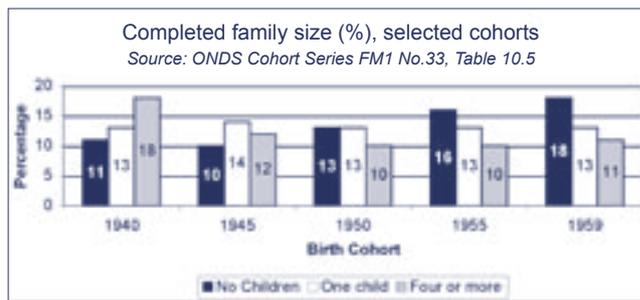
Changing fertility patterns in Britain

While births have fallen generally over the 20th century, there have also been large fluctuations. The recent decline in fertility is often measured against the significant ‘baby boom’ of the mid-1960s. Following a more gradual fall during the 1990s, the numbers of births has remained relatively stable, with a slight increase in the last couple of years.



Delayed childbearing, in particular the postponement of first births, is associated with smaller overall family size and an increase in childlessness. In Britain, the average age of women having their first birth in 2005 was 27, up from 23 in 1970. Since 1992 women aged between 30 and 34 have had a higher fertility rate than women aged 20 to 24, and in 2004 overtook that of women aged 25 to 29 (ONS, 2006a).

The proportion of women remaining childless has almost doubled in recent decades, from around 1 in 10 women born in 1940 to nearly a fifth born in 1959. At the same time there has been a decline in families with four or more children³. The proportion of women having one child however has remained broadly the same, a different situation to other European countries.



Study aims and methods

The findings reported below are based on analyses of the 1958 and 1970 British cohort surveys. Through repeat interviews, these longitudinal surveys follow all the people born in one week in 1958 and 1970 respectively. They provide information on their physical, educational, social and economic development from a variety of sources including medical records, parents, teachers and, as they grew older, from the individuals themselves.

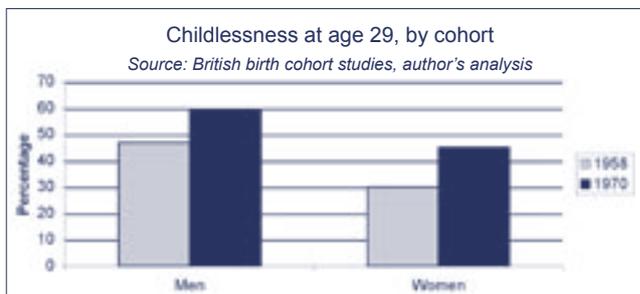
While measures such as TFR’s illustrate trends in fertility, they tell us little about how fertility patterns vary by social class background or education, or how these might differ for women and men. This research compares the circumstances of childless men and women in their early thirties, with comparisons of the cohorts indicating how this has changed over time.

Although only 12 years separate the cohorts, people born in 1958 will have experienced their early adulthood in the 1980s, a very different social, economic and economic context than the 1970 cohort experiencing this in the 1990s. For example, whereas the 1958 cohort initially experienced a favourable labour market but faced worse conditions as they got older, the opposite was true for those born in 1970 (Makepeace et al., 2003). There have also been different patterns of employment for women and men, with a narrowing of the gap between men and women’s employment rates (from 35% to 9% between 1971 and 2004) brought about by falling employment rates for men and increasing rates for women (ONS 2005).

Main findings

Differences by sex

The incidence of childlessness amongst younger adults differs significantly by sex. At age 29, nearly half of men born in 1958 were childless compared to less than a third of women. This difference may be due in part to men partnering at a later age than women (ONS 2006a). There has been a significant increase in the proportions of both men and women remaining childless at this age, to 59% of men and 45% of women born in 1970.



Differences by social class background and educational attainment

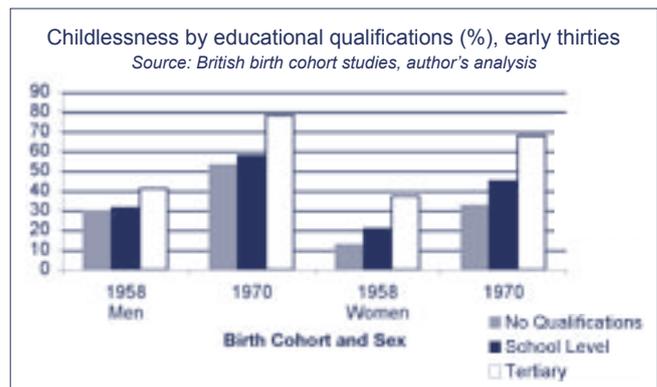
The likelihood of remaining childless as a young adult is influenced by both social class background and educational attainment. The highest proportion of childless men and women at age 29 are amongst those whose fathers were in professional or managerial occupations, and lowest amongst those with fathers in partly or unskilled occupations. However, comparisons by cohorts show increases in the proportions remaining childless at this age occurred across social classes. For example, while the proportion of younger childless women with fathers in professional or managerial occupations increased from 46% to 55%, there was also an increase in the proportions of younger childless women with fathers in partly or unskilled occupations, from just under a quarter (24%) of those born in 1958 to nearly two fifths (37%) of those born in 1970.

Recent decades have seen a massive expansion in post-secondary education, and young adults spend an increasing proportion of time in education. The 1958 cohort experienced an educational context in which the majority (over 60%) of young people left school at 16. When the 1970 cohort reached 16, in 1986, this had declined to 54% of males and 45% of females. Comparisons of the cohorts illustrate changes over time in educational attainment for women especially, with the proportions gaining tertiary qualifications by their early thirties⁴ increasing from a quarter to just under a third (32%), a similar rate to that of 1970-born men. These changes however are differentiated by social class, and the gap in chances of gaining tertiary qualifications for the children of fathers in the highest and lowest social classes has widened over time (Makepeace et al, 2003).

The role of educational attainment in fertility decline is much debated: as well as the time spent in education seen as resulting in a delayed transition to economic independence (Kohler, Billari and Ortega, 2002), education enhances the position of individuals in the labour market. It is also associated with changing values and preferences (Oppenheimer 1994).

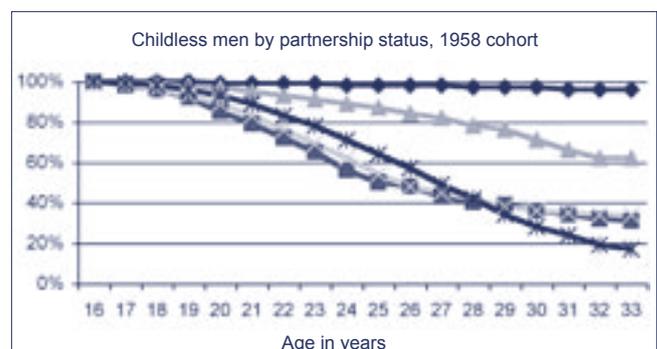
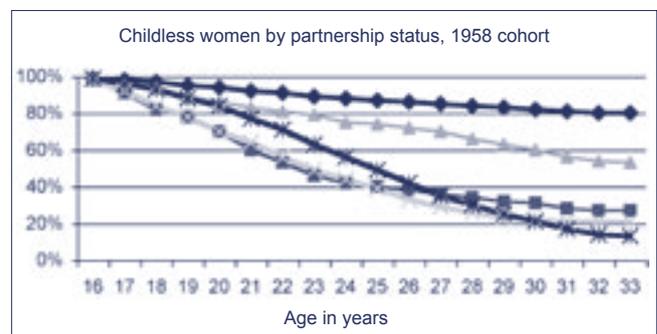
There is considerable evidence of large differences in first birth timing according to the level of education of women (Sobotka 2004). However, comparisons of men and women in their early thirties indicate that these differentials also apply to men. Indeed, this research indicates the largest increase over time has been amongst men with tertiary qualifications, almost doubling from 41% of the 1958 cohort to 78% of the 1970 cohort. This compares with an increase in the proportions of childless women with tertiary qualifications from 37% to 68%.

The largest differences by sex are between men and women with no qualifications: whereas a third of unqualified women born in 1970 remain childless in their early thirties, this compares to over half (53%) of unqualified men. The causality here is difficult to unpick, and it is not clear from such figures whether women with no qualifications are more likely to become mothers, or whether motherhood subsequently inhibits educational attainment. This suggests factors such as educational attainment may have different implications for different groups of people.



Differences by partnership status

Recent fertility trends have taken place in the context of considerable changes in partnership formation. There has been a dramatic decline in marriage, with only two-fifths of men born in 1970 marrying by age 29, compared to over two-thirds of those born in 1958. While over half (52%) of women born in 1970 had married by age 29, this compared to four-fifths of those born in 1958 (Berrington 2003). Alongside this there has been an increase in cohabitation. There is some debate as to the extent to which cohabitation can be seen as a proxy or alternative to marriage. However, as the following graphs looking at childlessness amongst men and women born in 1958 illustrate, in this respect there are significant differences between these partnership statuses, with marriage a much stronger predictor of childbearing amongst young adults.



As might be expected, there are very high levels of childlessness amongst never-married and currently single women and men in their early thirties. However,

there are also large differences between those currently partnered. Amongst never-married women in a cohabiting relationship, over half (53%) remain childless at 33, compared to only 13% amongst married women of the same age. For men the differentials are even higher: 62% of those never-married and cohabiting remain childless compared to 17% married men of the same age.

These figures provide a snapshot of the differences in childlessness for men and women in their early thirties. At this age however we do not know how many may go on to have children, that is, whether rates of childlessness at this age represent a delay in childbirth or an overall decline. They are not informative as to people's 'routes into' various partnership status, for example whether those classified as never-married and single have previously experienced a residential partnership. In addition, they cannot provide insight into people's motivations and understandings, for example whether childlessness is experienced as a choice or as the outcome of other factors.

Implications of delayed childbearing

The delay in childbearing has significant policy implications:

- Delayed childbearing and increased childlessness have implications for population ageing affecting a range of policies on employment, social security, and pensions.
- Delayed childbirth and subsequent 'stretching' of the generations may mean increased burdens for those undertaking informal care of young and elderly dependents simultaneously.
- There are a range of policies which influence fertility both directly and indirectly. These include family-friendly policies to enable men and women to reconcile work and employment responsibilities. However, the impact of other policies which may indirectly impact on birth timing as well as number of children, such as education policies which may delay transitions to economic independence, also need to be considered.

¹ Leete R (1998) p3.

² The Total Fertility Rate (TRF) is the most widely used measure of fertility, providing a single figure that accounts for the age and numbers of men and women in the population. The 'replacement rate', a TFR of 2.1, is the rate at which the population of a society would remain stable, excluding migration.

The rate of fertility in Britain, currently 1.74, is above the EU average of 1.5. However, Scotland has had lower fertility than England and Wales since around 1980, with a TFR of 1.60 in 2004, compared to 1.80 and 1.79 respectively.

³ These figures are for England and Wales; comparable figures for elsewhere in Britain are not readily available.

⁴ The 1958 cohort were interviewed at age 33, the 1970 cohort at age 29/30.

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This briefing was written by Roona Simpson, based on a research study undertaken as part of the ESRC Understanding Population Trends and Processes programme (<http://www.uptap.net/index.html>), and edited for this research briefing by Sarah Morton and Fran Wasoff.

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