



Why family size varies in England and Wales

Of the latest group of women in England and Wales to have reached the end of their childbearing years, four in five have had children. The majority of these women have two or more children, women are now as likely to be childless as to have three children, and one in every ten women has four or more children.

Many factors influence the family size chosen by people in England and Wales, such as societal views on parenthood, gender relations, government policy, stereotypes about only children, the cost of raising children, social class/deprivation, and the mother's country of birth. The occurrence of unintended conceptions is also a significant factor. This briefing paper will discuss family size in England and Wales and examine each of these factors.

Family size in England and Wales

The average completed family size for women in England and Wales in 2014 was 1.91 children per woman.¹ These figures come from the Office for

National Statistics (ONS), which assumes a woman to have completed her childbearing by the last day she is aged 45, that is by her 46th birthday. The last group of women to have reached this age in 2014 were born in 1969. This group have smaller families, on average, than their mother's generation, represented by women born in 1942, who had 2.29 children on average.²

Despite the fact that the total fertility rate (TFR) - the average number of children a woman has during her lifetime - in England and Wales has fallen between generations, two children remains the most common family size. Of the most recent generation of women to have completed childbearing in England and Wales, 18 per cent have no children, 17 per cent have one child, 37 per cent have two children, 18 per cent have three children, and 10 per cent have four or more children. Thus 82 per cent of women who have completed their families in England and Wales have children, the majority have two or more, women are now as likely to be childless as to have three children and one in every ten women has four or more children.³

The fall in fertility between generations is explained by increasing childlessness among women and a reduction in the number of families with more than two children. This is a pattern that has been observed throughout Europe with more and more women expressing an ideal of one child, or even no children, and the decline of the ideal of large families of three or more children.⁴

Women born in 1984 in England and Wales — who are the most recent group to have reached age 30 in 2014 — have had slightly fewer children on average (1.02) by their 30th birthday than women born in 1969 who had 1.12 children by the same age.⁵ This suggests that the TFR is continuing to fall but there are no signs that the

two-child family will cease to be the most common family size.

According to Professors Roger Penn and Paul Lambert from Lancaster University, *“in the last several decades a two-child ideal has become nearly universal among women in Europe, with countries that used to display higher ideal family size converging over time toward a two-child norm. Six out of ten women in Europe consider two children ideal, and this proportion is very similar in different regions, irrespective of their fertility patterns and levels.”*⁶ Almost 40 per cent of women in the England and Wales have families that correspond to the two-child ideal. This briefing will now examine why this is the case and why there is a disparity between family sizes.

Why does family size differ?

1. Societal views on parenthood

Parenthood is generally seen by society in England and Wales as a unique, fulfilling and transformative experience. A life without children is seen as incomplete.⁷ Indeed feelings towards childlessness can be even more extreme, with some believing that choosing to not have children (being “childfree”) is selfish or even irresponsible.⁸ This perception places significant pressure on both men and women to have children and helps to explain why the significant majority of women are also parents.

This perception has been gradually changing with more people coming to accept that life can be fulfilling without having many children. This view is supported by evidence from studies which show that happiness often falls with additional children due to reasons such as financial stress.⁹ This change in perception helps to explain the

increasing levels of childlessness among women in England and Wales and across Europe.



Societal views on parenthood come from a mixture of sources and one of the most important is religion. Religious institutions have often encouraged parenthood as a moral responsibility. The Catholic Church is particularly famous for its rejection of contraception but, in general, followers of the major world religions in the England and Wales and across Europe tend to express a desire for large families.¹⁰ However, while religion may have played a part in the creation of these norms, they remain remarkably persistent even among people and societies which no longer consider themselves overtly religious.

2. Gender relations

Gender relations and societal norms are closely linked. In gender unequal societies, society often views women exclusively as carers whose sole purpose is to stay at home and raise children. This can lead to criticism of any woman who chooses not to have children.¹¹ This again affects family size by encouraging childbearing and disincentivising women to have small families.

Improved gender equality in England and Wales means that women are subject to less criticism for having smaller families and are better able to

pursue education and to enter the labour force. This means that women have become more likely to delay childbirth and therefore have smaller families. This phenomenon has been observed in many countries across the world and is why studies have found that fertility is often inversely correlated with women's empowerment.¹²

3. Government policy

Government action also affects family size in England and Wales. Through its policies, the government often encourages childbearing and reinforces societal views on parenthood. There are many different ways that government policy can affect family size. Some of the most important ways are set out below.



Child benefit

A very clear example of government affecting family size is the rise in fertility that accompanied the increase in income support for families with children that the Blair Government introduced in 1999. Between 1999 and 2003, government spending per-child on these benefits rose by 50 per cent in real terms and this led to an increase in births of approximately 15 per cent among the group affected by the reforms.¹³

Family planning services

One in six pregnancies in England and Wales is unintended and teenage pregnancies are the highest in Western Europe. Inadequate access to family planning services is a key factor in why unintended pregnancies are so common and it is government policy and spending that primarily determines level of access to family planning services.

For instance, due to financial pressure brought on by government cutbacks, not all methods of contraception are provided by all GPs and sexual health clinics. This means that people face a postcode lottery regarding the contraception that they require and thus can be much more likely to have unintended pregnancies.¹⁴ Currently, approximately one-third of women in England between the ages of 15 and 44 live in areas with restricted access to contraception advisory services or contraceptive methods that are most suited to their needs. This has a significant impact on family size in England and Wales.

Sex and relationships education

Inadequate sex and relationships education (SRE) is another factor that contributes to unintended pregnancies in England and Wales. This is because, even if family planning services are technically available, a lack of adequate SRE may mean that people do not know where to access it. Indeed, in a survey by the sexual health charity FPA, it was found that 43 per cent of women aged between 15 and 44 in England and Wales did not know where they could obtain emergency contraception.

There are many other ways that inadequate SRE can affect family size by contributing to unintended pregnancies. For example, FPA also

found that one third of respondents to their survey wrongly believed that a prescription was required to obtain emergency contraception and that two thirds mistakenly believed that repeated use would cause infertility.



It is government policy which primarily determines the provision and quality of SRE. The main problem with SRE in England and Wales and across the UK is that state schools are not required by statute to teach anything but the biological aspects of sex education. Non-state schools are not required to provide SRE and parents can withdraw their children from learning any non-science elements of SRE. Even when SRE is taught, the quality of teaching has been criticised and a recent report from the Office for Standards in Education described SRE in the UK as “not yet good enough”. This is due to the fact that SRE is not compulsory and therefore many teachers are not adequately trained to teach it and schools are less likely to invest limited resources in its provision. This failure by the government to provide adequate and compulsory SRE contributes to unintended pregnancies and differing family size.

Despite these failures, the government has actually managed to reduce teenage pregnancies in England and Wales by almost 50 per cent since 1999 through policies designed to improve access

to family planning and the quality of SRE — another clear example of the power of government policy to affect family size.

4. Cost

Excluding housing, it now costs, on average, almost a quarter of a million pounds to raise a child from birth to age 21. Factoring in the cost of an average two-bedroom home and tax contributions, and based on average income in the UK, this means that, on average, parents will have to earn at least £535,015.22 if they want to raise a child and be homeowners. This figure includes neither the parents’ own living expenses nor the opportunity costs of having children, such as potentially interrupting parent’s career progression and therefore reducing their earning power. These costs place enormous pressure on parents and almost one third of households in the UK are reported to be struggling financially.¹⁵ These rising costs affect how many children a family can have and place downward pressure on family size.

5. Social Class/ Deprivation

Despite the staggering costs of having large families, the proportion of families with three or more children is fairly evenly distributed across all socio-economic categories.

This would appear to be counter-intuitive, but is perhaps explained by the effect that deprivation has on teenage, unintended pregnancy. Deprived areas in the England and Wales with high child poverty and low employment tend to have the highest teenage pregnancy rates.

Therefore, women and girls from deprived backgrounds are more likely to have unintended

pregnancies and to have children earlier, which means they are more likely to have larger families.

6. Stereotypes about only children

Considering the significant costs associated with raising children in England and Wales, one might be surprised that the average family has two children rather than one, given that the societally promoted ideal of parenthood can be satisfied by having only one child.

One important factor that encourages most families to have more than one child is the persistent negative public perception about the effects of being an only child. Many people believe that only children have difficulties in sharing and communicating and that they are often lonely, spoiled and/or anti-social. These perceptions have existed for a long time, indeed almost a hundred years ago the famous psychologist and father of child psychology G. Stanley Hall described being an only child as a disease in itself.¹⁶

Hall's view on only children is still present in society today despite the fact that academic studies have largely dismissed his theories. For example, in 1987, Denise F. Polit and Toni Falbo conducted a large-scale attempt to assess the impact on children of not having siblings and found that "the disadvantages of being an only child were, on balance, non-existent." They conducted an analysis of 115 studies on only children and found that, in terms of achievement, adjustment, character, intelligence, parent-child relationships, and sociability, only children fared just as well as children from small families and in many cases much better than children from families with three or more children.¹⁷ There is evidence that suggests that having siblings does help to support the development of

soft skills such as communication and can even reduce a child's susceptibility to certain illnesses but overall it seems that the perception that many people have about only children is incorrect.¹⁸ Regardless, this stereotype persists and continues to influence family size in England and Wales.



7. Mother's country of birth

Considering that culture and societal norms affect fertility rates, it follows that the number of children that women in England and Wales have tends to vary depending on the mother's country of birth.

The TFR of women in England and Wales who were not born in UK was 2.09 children in 2013 whereas for UK born mothers the rate was 1.76 children. Poland remains the most common country of birth for non-UK born mothers and fathers between 2010 and 2014, followed by Pakistan and India.¹⁹ The TFR of each of these three countries is higher than the UK rate and it has been found that fertility trends of mothers in England and Wales tend to be close to the TFR of their country of birth. This shows that culture and societal norms can continue to effect parents' decisions on how many children they should have even when they move to countries with different cultural and societal norms.

Conclusion

Of the most recent generation of women to have completed childbearing in England and Wales, 18 per cent have no children, 17 per cent have one child, 37 per cent have two children, 18 per cent have three children, and 10 per cent have four or more children.²⁰ Thus 82 per cent of women who have completed their families in England and Wales have children, the majority have two or more, women are now as likely to be childless as to have three children, and one in every ten women has four or more children.

The main factors which influence this disparity in family size are societal views on parenthood, gender relations, government policy, stereotypes about only children, the cost of raising children, social class/deprivation and mother's country of birth.

Culture and societal views on the importance of parenthood, including cultural views from mothers' countries of birth, seem to be the key drivers which discourage families from having no children. Both men and women are subject to significant pressure to have children, and can even be subject to criticism for choosing to be childfree. Government action and failure to provide adequate family planning and SRE also plays an important role in why only one in five women in England and Wales do not have children, as they lead to unintended pregnancies, which make up approximately 17 per cent of pregnancies.

Of course, having only one child would technically satisfy the socially-created standard of parenthood, but most women have two children. This can be partially explained by the negative stereotypes about only children which lead many to believe that only children are at a great

disadvantage compared to children who have siblings. These stereotypes have remained remarkably persistent despite generally being dismissed in academic circles. Another reason that many families have more than one child is because religion and culture often encourage people to have as many children as they can afford. However, considering the currently staggering costs of raising children, which can now amount to more than a quarter of a million pounds, this is unlikely to be more than two children for most families.



Thus cost places downward pressure on family size, as is clearly demonstrated by the significant rise in fertility that accompanied government increases of child benefit. Interestingly, at first glance it seems that wealth and socioeconomic class do not have much influence on whether people choose to have large families, as the proportion of families with three or more children is fairly evenly distributed across all socio-economic categories. However, this can be in part explained by the fact that deprivation is linked to teenage and unintended pregnancy. Therefore, women and girls from deprived backgrounds are more likely to have unintended pregnancies and are more likely to become pregnant earlier in life, which means they are more likely to have larger families.

Gender relations also play a critical role in women's decisions about how many children to have. Improving gender equality in England and Wales means that more women are pursuing higher education and entering the labour force, which means they are increasingly delaying childbirth or indeed foregoing having children altogether. It also means that women have less societal expectations to be solely wives and mothers and therefore have greater freedom to choose how many children they wish to have, thus leading to different family sizes and, increasingly, smaller families.

Overall, the TFR in England and Wales has been falling, and continues to do so, driven by changing gender relations, perceptions on parenthood and, to a lesser extent, cost. More people are choosing to be childfree, or to have only one child, and the number of people with larger families of three or more children is in decline. Despite this, the population is still increasing and is expected to rise by approximately 12 million people by 2050.²¹ In order to reduce this population growth, society must address the outlined factors that encourage people to have large families.

¹ Statistical bulletin: Childbearing for Women Born in Different Years, England and Wales: 2014. (n.d.). Retrieved July 20, 2016, from

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/conceptionandfertilityrates/bulletins/childbearingforwomenbornindifferentyearsenglandandwales/2015-11-10>

² Statistical bulletin: Childbearing for Women Born in Different Years, England and Wales: 2014. (n.d.). Retrieved July 20, 2016, from

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/conceptionandfertilityrates/bulletins/childbearingforwomenbornindifferentyearsenglandandwales/2015-11-10>

³ Statistical bulletin: Childbearing for Women Born in Different Years, England and Wales: 2014. (n.d.). Retrieved July 20, 2016, from

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/conceptionandfertilityrates/bulletins/childbearingforwomenbornindifferentyearsenglandandwales/2015-11-10>

⁴ ONS. (2002). Population Trends. Retrieved July 20, 2016, from

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⁵ Statistical bulletin: Childbearing for Women Born in Different Years, England and Wales: 2014. (n.d.). Retrieved July 20, 2016, from

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<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/11182115/Can-a-woman-be-happy-without-having-kids.html>

- ⁸ Why does it matter if I have children or not? (n.d.). Retrieved July 20, 2016, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/11747549/Why-does-it-matter-if-I-have-children-or-not.html>
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