

Committee for a Future with Children



NO 2: FROM RELATIVELY HIGH TO DECLINING FERTILITY RATES:
WHAT HAPPENED IN SWEDEN?

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From relatively high to declining fertility rates: What happened in Sweden?

Gunnar Andersson

Publication 2
Committee for a Future with Children

Foreword

The Committee for a Future with Children has been tasked with identifying obstacles to higher birth rates, increased gender equality and high employment rates, and to propose measures to strengthen family formation and hence promote a more family-friendly society; and to analyse the implication of these developments for the real economy.

An important element of this work is to contribute to public awareness and informed discussion through a series of short publications. The aim is to contribute to an open, knowledge-based debate highlighting different perspectives and key considerations and making these accessible to a wider audience. This publication is the second in English in a series published on the Committee's website (www.futurewithchildren.se). It is written by Gunnar Andersson, Professor of Demography and Head of the Stockholm University Demography Unit (SUDA). Responsibility for the content and conclusions of this publication rests solely with the author.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Gunnar Andersson for authoring this important publication. I would also like to express special thanks to Anna Björklund, Erik Carlsson, Eskil Wadensjö, Maria Pleiborn, Maria Stanfors, Marika Lindgren Åsbrink, Per Rosencrantz and Ulla Waldenström, all members of the Committee's reference group, for their valuable comments and contributions during this work. I would also like to thank the employees at the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, who have supported and contributed to this work, as well as Kristoffer Lundberg for his project management and Anne-Marie Flink Engdahl for her invaluable contributions, both large and small.

Comments and questions are welcomed via the Committee's website. This edition is an English translation of the Swedish edition. Apart from the translation, two figures have been updated.

Lund, January 2026 (updated edition, August 2026)

Åsa Hansson
Head of Committee

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1 Summary

The report begins by providing a background to the situation that previously prevailed, where Sweden was distinguished by relatively high levels of childbearing, great similarities between different social groups in terms of numbers of children and childlessness, high rates of gainful employment among women, and a relatively high degree of gender equality in society and the family. Sweden's family policy, with its focus on individual taxation of women and men, an income-based parental leave system, and a well-developed childcare system, has clearly played a role in enabling such a situation, and the Swedish model for family policy is often held up as an example in international contexts, particularly in countries where gainful female employment and parenthood cannot be combined in the same way as in Sweden and the other Nordic countries.

The report then provides an overview of how the situation has developed since the period around 2010 and the research carried out to explain the entirely new trends of continuously declining fertility rates that have prevailed in Sweden since that time. This recent trend is by no means unique to Sweden; in fact it coincides with similar and chronologically synchronous declines in fertility rates in virtually all high- and middle-income countries, regardless of their previous fertility rates and the structures in these fertility rates.

This behavioural change can be entirely attributed to a reduced inclination to become a parent. It is not about a general trend towards having fewer children. If a person decides to have their first child, their inclination to have a second and third child is roughly the same as before. The decline in first-birth rates has occurred to a very similar extent among people in different socio-economic groups and among those living in different types of residential areas in Sweden,

and it is not possible to link it to any deterioration in economic conditions during the period in question.

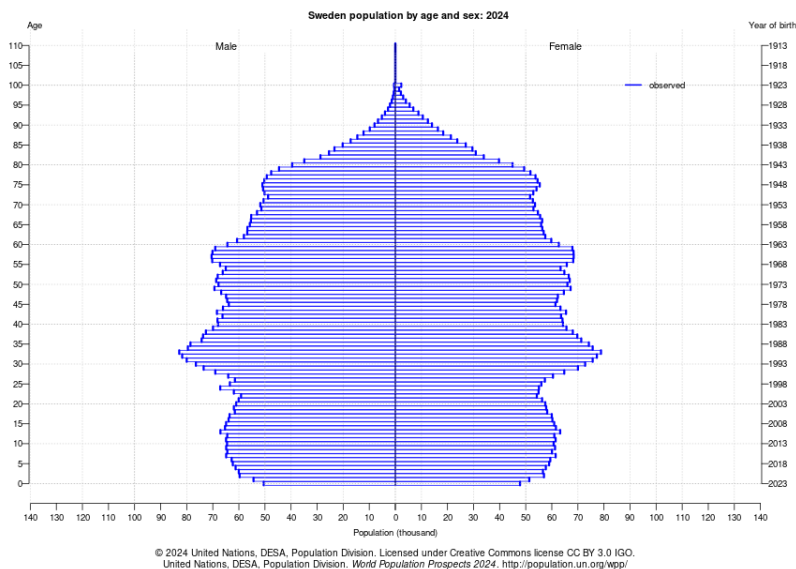
Nor is the decline due to a reduced inclination to form cohabiting couples. Instead, it is among cohabiting couples that there is a reduced tendency to make long-term commitments, such as becoming parents or getting married. Structural factors are no longer sufficient to explain the recent changes in behaviour among childless cohabiting couples. Instead, the focus must be directed towards more subjective explanatory factors that are operating at a general, global level. In empirical research, it is a challenge to pinpoint exactly how these factors influence behavioural changes among childless cohabiting women and men. Global uncertainty factors, in conjunction with a perceived unpredictable and bleak future, have likely had a negative impact on the desire to become a parent, as have unrealistic images of an ideal life that are portrayed on social media platforms. The decline in fertility rates has occurred in tandem with other societal changes, such as new currents of rising populism in the political sphere, and a sharp increase in mental health problems among young adults. Unravelling how these changes may be linked could be a task for future research.

2 Childbearing and age structures in Sweden

Long-term trends in childbearing are crucial for a country's population age structure. Mortality and migration also have an impact on the age structure, with increasing life expectancy meaning that more people are living to ever-higher ages, and with migration leading to a continuous inflow or outflow of young adults. However, in the longer term, it is the patterns in childbearing that are absolutely crucial for what a country's age structure will look like. If fertility rates are consistently low, there will be fewer and fewer younger people in the population to support the larger cohorts of women and men that were born when fertility rates were previously higher. For some time now, Sweden has experienced both upswings and declines in childbearing, but over time these changes have cancelled each other out, and consequently Sweden has had a relatively balanced age structure compared with other countries.

Although there is some variation in the size of different generations in the population caused by past fluctuations in fertility rates, on the whole, the current situation reflects a society in which no single age group dominates the social landscape.

Figure 1. Age structure in Sweden, 2024. Women and men of different ages, single-year cohorts.



Source: United Nations, Population Division

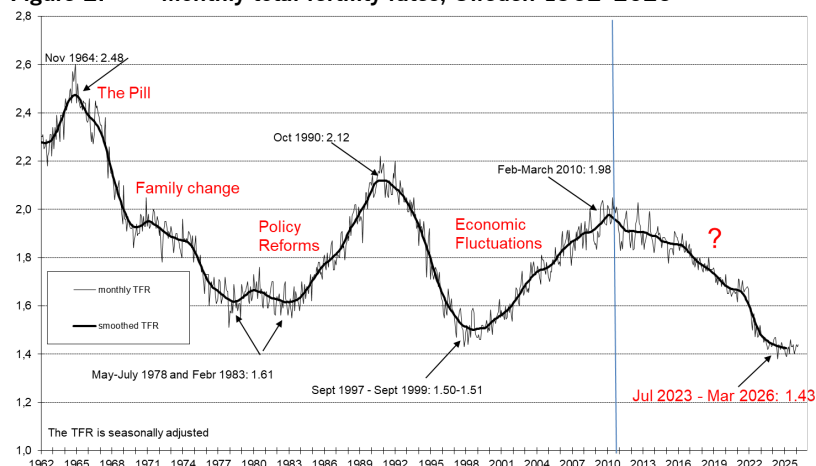
The current situation, in which the population is relatively evenly distributed across different age groups, initially gives the impression that the demographic situation is reasonably stable. In previous public debate, rising average life expectancy has often been cited as posing a major challenge with the community having to provide social care and financial support for an ever-increasing number of older people in the population. However, the challenges arising from rising average life expectancy can be seen as somewhat exaggerated. The younger end of the scale of older people in the population are able to continue in paid employment into later life to an ever-greater degree than before, and older people are also living longer in good health.

On the other hand, in the long term a lasting change in patterns in childbearing will have far-reaching consequences for how the age structure, dependency ratios, and social development will turn out. At the bottom of the age structure in Figure 1, we can see that something is happening with regard to the size of the cohorts of children born in the most recent years. If this is merely a temporary shift, future trends may well compensate for it with the arrival of slightly larger cohorts of children born later than usual, as has

previously been the case during the decades that produced the people who are now adults. As we will see in this report, there is much to suggest that the current change in fertility rates is different from the fluctuations that occurred in previous decades. There is reason to view the recent changes in childbearing as the start of a new situation with more permanent effects in the form of fewer children being born, and an increasing proportion of adults who do not have children at all.

Figure 2 below provides an overview of changes in the total fertility rate in Sweden since the early 1960s. The total fertility rate is the most commonly used measure of the level and changes in fertility in a society. It is calculated by totalling the various age-specific fertility rates for women aged 15–49 (number of live births per woman of the studied age/number of women of that age) and provides a picture of the number of children that a population group would have if patterns in childbearing were to remain the same as they were during the studied calendar year. This figure can be seen as a composite measure of the number of children a cohort of women (or men) would have if they were to spend their entire reproductive lives in the year in question. This measure is not the best one to use if one wants to understand the underlying structure in the patterns in childbearing, but as it provides an apparently straightforward picture of fertility levels, it is often used.

Figure 2. Monthly total fertility rates, Sweden 1962–2026



Source: Monthly data from Statistics Sweden (SCB)

Figure 2 shows the past fluctuations in fertility rates. There is extensive research based on excellent Swedish demographic data that describes how various structural factors can explain the ups and downs that occurred during the period 1960–2010. The decline during the 1960s was triggered by the introduction of modern contraceptives and coincided with a trend towards having children later in life, which developed in tandem with greater diversity in family patterns and more and more women entering the labour market. The family model that had dominated in the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s – with its emphasis on early marriage and the housewife model – began to become obsolete. In the 1970s, family policy reforms were introduced which made it increasingly possible for women to combine family formation with gainful employment. In the wake of those reforms, fertility rates rose in Sweden and the other Nordic countries. The increase was given a further boost by the 'speed premium', which was introduced into the parental-leave system in the 1980s and which led to children being born at shorter birth intervals. During the 1990s, however, there was a sharp decline in childbearing, caused by the economic crisis in that decade. Young adults were unable to establish themselves as easily in the labour market with the means of support required to start a family. Instead, the higher education system expanded, and those who did not enter the labour market used the time instead to pursue further education. By the time they later entered the labour market and the economy had recovered, they too had the financial means to start a family. Fertility rates therefore recovered during the first decade of this century. This development subsequently gave way to a new decline in fertility rates in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008–09, which prompted the research into changes in childbearing being examined here.

In demographic research, the focus is not so much on the total fertility rates shown in Figure 2. Instead, analyses of longitudinal individual data are carried out. These analyses make it possible to study the underlying structures in childbearing for different population groups and the willingness to have children before and after the first and subsequent children. For example, the factors that are important when deciding to become a parent at all are completely different from those that influence the likelihood of having a second or third child. The total fertility rates can nevertheless be used as a

starting point for studies of the patterns in childbearing in a given period, as they provide an indication of the ‘mood’ in childbearing during that period.

Total fertility rates can also be measured in a completely different way, namely as the final outcome of the number of children that different cohorts of women and men have had by the time they reach the end of their reproductive years. This measure is called cohort fertility and is measured for the birth-year cohorts of women and men when they reach the age of 50 (or another appropriate reference age). There is a stark contrast between the fluctuations in the total fertility rates in Sweden per period, and the underlying stability that has prevailed in cohort fertility over a very long period. For nearly a century, the cohort fertility rate for different cohorts of women in Sweden has remained at around 1.9–2.0 live births per woman. The periodic fluctuations in fertility rates shown in Figure 2 have been due to women having children earlier or later during different periods, and to shorter or longer intervals between births, but ultimately the outcome – in terms of the proportion of childless women and the number of births per woman – has remained largely unchanged. In light of this, one might think that the recent decline in fertility rates is merely another fluctuation in the time series that may not have any great effects in the longer term. However, the research carried out by demographers at Stockholm University analysing the underlying patterns in fertility rates shows that the current trend differs from that seen during previous periodic declines in fertility rates. There is significant reason to believe that the changes that have taken place in recent times will have more lasting consequences in the form of a rising proportion of childless individuals and a lower number of children per woman among the cohorts currently of reproductive ages. In light of these developments, Statistics Sweden has also revised down its long-term assumptions regarding the total fertility rate in Sweden in its population forecasts. Instead of a recovery to a long-term stable level of around 1.9 children per woman, the current projection is for a long-term level of around 1.7 children per woman.

In what follows in this report, I begin by providing an overview of previous research into patterns in childbearing in Sweden and the relatively favourable climate for family formation, and the possibility for women and men to become and be parents in Sweden.

A supportive family policy, favourable economic conditions, a relatively high degree of gender equality and an openness to forming a family in different ways have all contributed to a situation in which many of the barriers to family formation that exist in other contexts have been removed. There has therefore been considerable international interest in the Swedish family model and the way in which it has developed over time. There is no evidence to suggest that the underlying structural factors that previously had a positive impact on the possibilities of becoming a parent in Sweden have now deteriorated. This time it is instead part of a global trend that has little to do with the specific situation in Sweden, but which can be linked to more diffuse and subjective factors in the global environment. If we want to understand what is happening under the influence of the changing social climate, it is also important to understand what has previously worked so well in the Swedish model for social and family policy.

3 Family policy, social conditions and childbearing in Sweden – a background

In demographic research generally, and family demographic research in particular, Sweden has often served as a reference country. This is in part because Sweden has often been a pioneer in the development of new family-demographic and family-related trends (Ohlsson-Wijk, Turunen and Andersson 2020), but also because Sweden has access to excellent demographic data that enables the study of such trends. This latter circumstance is of great value even in the current situation, as we attempt to understand the circumstances behind the latest trends in childbearing. Sweden's experience has also been regarded as interesting because the country has been innovative in terms of policy development. In the 1970s and 1980s, changes in the standing of women in society motivated the introduction of a series of policies aimed at achieving a better balance between women's working and family life. Since then, public policy has focused to a greater degree on men and the balance for them between working and family life.

The situation that prevailed until recently, with childbearing being relatively high in Sweden and the other Nordic countries, has often been linked to the design of these countries' family and social policies, and to the distinctive features of the Nordic welfare systems. The recovery in fertility rates observed in the Nordic countries during the 1980s is often regarded as being linked to the introduction and expansion of various family-related policy measures (Bernhardt 1993; B. Hoem 1993; J. Hoem 2005). Sweden and the other Nordic countries have also been the focus of recent theoretical considerations that place changed relationships between

women and men at the heart of a trend towards greater family stability and higher levels of childbearing (McDonald 2000a,b; Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegård 2015; Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015).

In family policy contexts, Swedish policy has never been motivated by a specific desire to encourage higher levels of childbearing, but has instead aimed to facilitate women's attachment to the labour market and to promote greater gender equality. The policy has explicitly targeted individuals, not families, which has made it easier for people to shape their family and working career choices without being too constrained by institutional circumstances or dependencies on other individuals. It has been possible to see a relatively high level of childbearing as a by-product of that policy. Swedish government agencies have nevertheless been concerned that, in various cycles during the 20th century, fertility rates have fallen to levels significantly lower than those to which young adults say they aspire in various surveys. This led to government inquiries and reports on childbearing during previous periods of declining fertility. Alva and Gunnar Myrdal were pioneers in carrying out such an inquiry with their proposals for far-reaching reforms in family policy in connection with the 1930s depression and the low levels of childbearing during that period. A similar situation arose in the late 1970s. In connection with the decline in childbearing in the 1990s, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (2001) compiled a report titled *Barnafödandet i fokus: Från befolkningspolitik till ett barnvänligt samhälle* (Childbearing in focus: from population policy to a child-friendly society). This report gave a thorough overview of the **demographic** development and the structures in childbearing in Sweden at the time.

In previous research, fertility trends in Sweden have been described with the aid of analyses of Swedish register data, which allows the anonymised life courses of all individuals in the Swedish population to be tracked over time. The population registers of Sweden and other Nordic countries therefore constitute a unique resource for demographic research (Stenbeck et al. 2013; Andersson, Monti and Kolk 2023). Studies of various kinds can analyse developments in the willingness of childless individuals to become parents, the development in the propensity of parents with one child to have a second child, and this same development for individuals

with two or more children to have additional children. This is done using multivariate statistical analyses, which also make it possible to study how various socio-economic and family-related background factors relate to the propensity to have children before and after the first child. Various individual and contextual factors have different effects on the willingness to have children at different birth orders. Previous studies have shown a continuous postponement of first-birth fertility in Sweden since the mid-1960s and a development towards shorter birth intervals for higher birth orders during the 1980s (Andersson 1999, with a later update by Andersson and Kolk 2015). Many of these trends coincide with similar trends in the other Nordic countries (Andersson 2002; 2004a), but the fluctuations in fertility rates have been more pronounced in Sweden than in the other countries, and the development towards shorter birth intervals during the 1980s was unique to our country. This more recent development can be linked to the changes made in the parental leave system during that decade (J. Hoem 1993; Andersson, Hoem and Duvander 2006; see also Miranda 2020).

As previously noted, the fluctuating period fertility rates to date have corresponded with an underlying stability in the number of children that different birth cohorts of women and men have had by the end of their reproductive lives. Andersson et al. (2009) and Jalovaara et al. (2019) provide an overview of the structure of cohort fertility in Sweden and the other Nordic countries. These studies show that the final outcomes in the form of childlessness and the average number of children born are very similar across different socio-economic groups in the Nordic countries, although the increasingly small group of women and men with very low levels of education stands out as having higher rates of childlessness than other groups (Jalovaara et al. 2019). The patterns showing a high degree of similarity in childlessness and the number of children born across groups of women and men with different education levels are entirely unique to the Nordic region. Highly educated women and men tend to have children at a later age than those with a lower level of education, but the end result is still the same. These patterns provide a clear indication that it is easier to combine a career in working life with family life than it is in other contexts.

Previous studies also show that establishing oneself in the labour market with a stable income is strongly and positively correlated

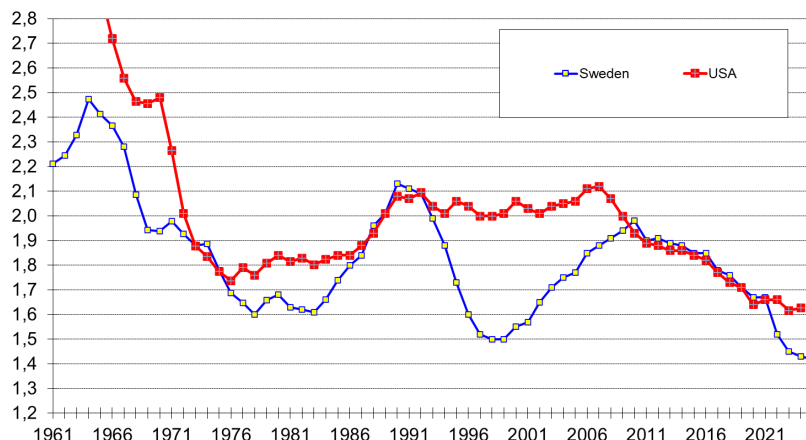
with both men's and women's propensities to become parents and the timing of such life-course events (Andersson 2000; B. Hoem 2000). This underlines the fact that Swedish families build their welfare on their own means of support and that there is no major conflict between women's and men's family and working lives. Naturally, a system offering generous parental leave and well-developed childcare facilitates this circumstance (Neyer and Andersson 2008). At the same time, the positive correlation between income and the timing for family formation means that childbearing has tended to co-vary with the business cycle. This correlation was most evident during the economic crisis of the 1990s (Andersson 2000) and the subsequent recovery in fertility rates that occurred during the 2000s. However, since 2010 the correlation between the economic cycle and childbearing has ceased to exist.

It is also interesting in this context that the relationship between economic security and childbearing is very similar for people born in Sweden and those who have immigrated here (Andersson and Scott 2005, 2007; Lundström and Andersson 2012). Foreign-born people have slightly higher levels of childbearing immediately following their move to a new country (Andersson 2004b) but subsequently show a remarkable similarity in the levels of, and the structures in, the birth-order-specific fertility rates. Childbearing for the 'second generation' of inhabitants with a foreign background through their parents is slightly lower than for the remaining, Swedish-born population (Andersson, Persson and Obućina 2017).

4 New trends in childbearing

The recent interest in the trends in childbearing is motivated by the fact that, for no apparent reason, fertility rates began a downward trend around 2010 and have continued to fall for just over a decade since then. This is true for Sweden and the other Nordic countries, despite the fact that there have been no structural changes in the Nordic region in the form of an economic downturn, less favourable family policy, or a reduction in gender equality during the period in which the decline in fertility has occurred. The decline in fertility rates is also well synchronised with similar declines in most other modern countries, starting with the development around 2010 and with an accelerating negative trend from 2016 onwards. The figure below shows how the development of total fertility rates in Sweden has been synchronised with that in the USA (Figure 3). The underlying structures for the patterns in childbearing in the two countries are completely different, but the downward trend is the same. The same trends are found in other countries in North and South America, Europe and Asia. Fertility rates are also falling in sub-Saharan Africa, but there the decline can be linked to a longer-term development connected to the region going through its demographic transition, from a situation characterised by high fertility and mortality to one characterised by lower mortality and lower levels of fertility. There are still great differences in the levels of fertility rates between different countries, which can often be explained by various structural factors. But the current downward trend looks very similar across a number of countries. A large number of countries have recently registered the lowest levels of total fertility rates ever recorded. This also applies to Sweden.

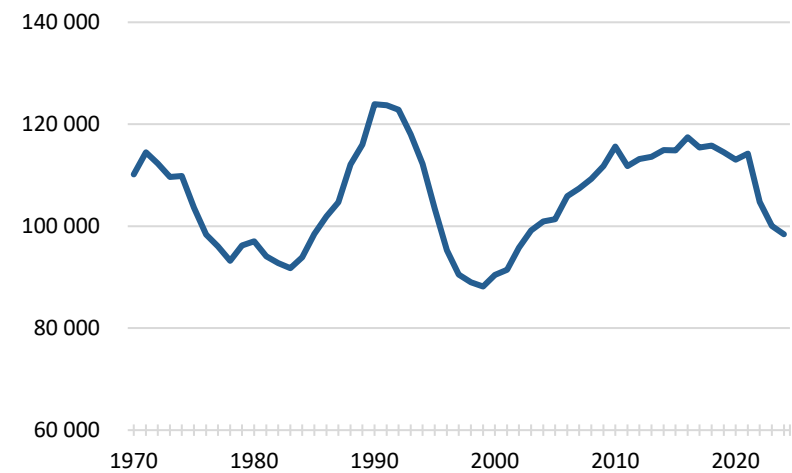
Figure 3. Total fertility rates, Sweden and the USA 1960–2025



Source: Human Fertility Database, Federal Reserve Economic Data, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis

The downward trends in fertility rates have attracted a great deal of attention in our neighbouring countries Norway and Finland, but in Sweden it was not until 2022 that the phenomenon came to be widely noted. Those who have researched childbearing and fertility, and those who have noted that previous population forecasts systematically overestimated the number of live births during the period 2010–2020, have of course noted that a new trend was emerging. But it was not until there was a clear decline in the number of live births that the phenomenon came to widespread attention. All of a sudden, phenomena such as the shortage of midwives had vanished into thin air, and instead local authorities and regions had to start planning for activities with fewer children in childcare and education than had previously been the case. Figure 4 shows the trend in the number of live births in Sweden for the period 1970–2025. That the number of live births did not fall during a period of declining age-specific fertility rates between 2010–2020 is due to the fact that the large cohorts born in the late 1980s and early 1990s were then reaching the ages at which people are most likely to have children. Two demographic trends simply cancelled each other out: one being a change in the age composition and the other being a change in fertility rates.

Figure 4. Number of live births in Sweden, 1970–2025



Source: Statistics Sweden (SCB)

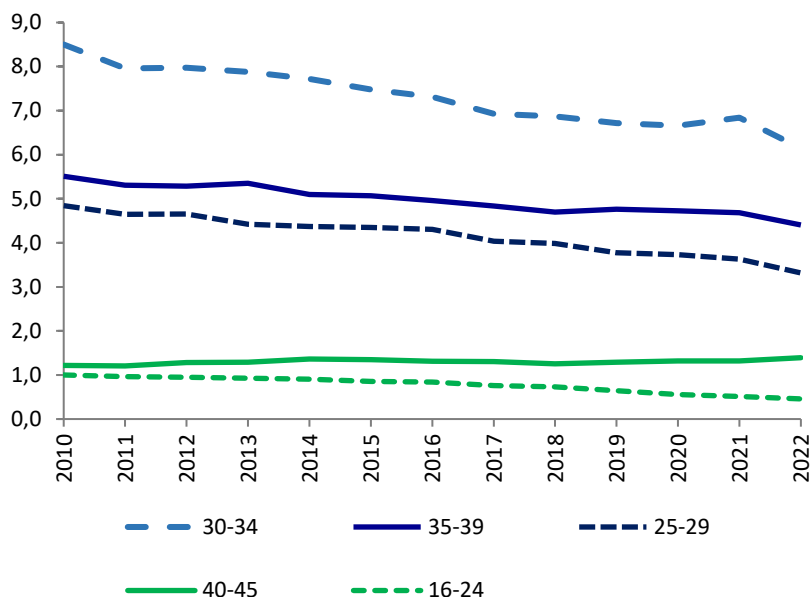
For some time, demographers had understood that a new and rather unexpected development was brewing in fact. Andersson and Kolk (2015) were the first to point out that a break in the trend seemed to have occurred in fertility rates in 2010, but it was not until after 2016 that it became clear that the current trends did not represent a temporary fluctuation and that entirely new research was needed to understand what the structure behind these new trends looks like. Towards the end of the 2010s, researchers at Stockholm University therefore brought together a group of demographers from all five Nordic countries to study how fertility rates had changed in the Nordic region during the 2010s (Comolli et al. 2021). Their assumption was that the decline in fertility rates began in direct connection with the global economic crisis of 2008–2009. The aim of the study was to investigate how birth-order-specific fertility rates for different age and education groups developed in the wake of that crisis compared with how fertility rates developed in the wake of the earlier economic crisis in the 1990s. Economic explanatory models often provide an initial entry point for studies of behavioural change, but the title of the study, *Beyond the Economic Gaze: Childbearing during and after recessions in the Nordic countries*, signals that one of its conclusions is that economic explanations for the decline in fertility in the 2010s do not take us very far. The

economic crisis of 2008–2009 was short-lived, and the subsequent economic recovery in the 2010s was very robust. The situation in the 1990s was different, but the conditions also varied more widely from country to country at that time. A key conclusion of the study was that the trends in childbearing pointed in slightly different directions in the five countries studied in the 1990s, leaving greater scope for the influence of various national factors. In the 2010s, however, the development was instead more uniform, with various national factors having less influence than was the case in the 1990s.

Sofi Ohlsson-Wijk and Gunnar Andersson (2022) provide a more in-depth description of the structures in the decline in Swedish fertility rates during the 2010s. They show that the decline is solely attributable to a fall in the first-birth rate, i.e. the willingness of women and men to become parents. For those who have become parents, there have been no noticeable changes in the age-standardised fertility rates for higher birth orders. In other words, the decision to have a second and third child has not changed. The decline in total fertility is therefore not due to any general decline in the desire to have more children; it is in the first stage of the fertility career that things have started to progress more slowly than before.

One notable finding is that the decline in first-birth fertility can be observed in most age groups of childless women and men. Unlike in the 1990s, it is not merely a matter of people postponing childbearing, with declines in fertility rates among younger people, but rather a more general trend towards a reduced willingness to become a parent. Figure 5 illustrates this development, using updated data from a study by Ohlsson-Wijk and Andersson published in 2025. A Nordic study by Finnish demographer Julia Hellstrand and colleagues (2021) shows that the decline in first-birth rates among women aged 30 and older will lead to a higher proportion of women and men who are currently of fertile ages remaining childless. They will not be able, as they were in the past, to make up for the lack of parenthood that did not materialise during the 2010s.

Figure 5. Relative first-birth rates by age groups, 2010–2022

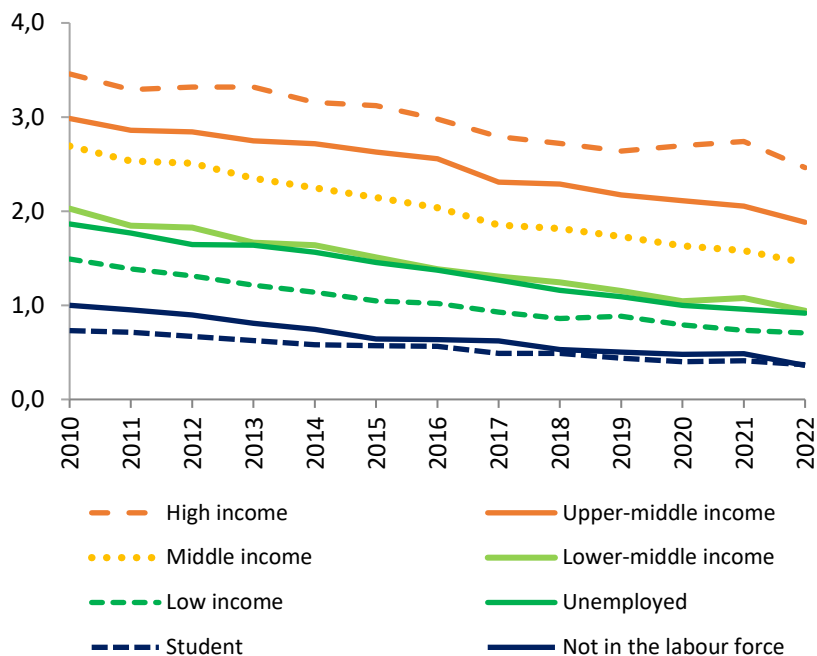


Source: Ohlsson-Wijk and Andersson (2025). The X-axis shows relative risks, which is a statistical measure indicating the difference in intensity of becoming a parent between childless women in different age groups and calendar years.

Another noteworthy factor is the similarity of the decline across different socio-demographic groups of women and men in the population. Figure 6, for example, shows that the propensity to become a parent has fallen among both high- and low-income earners. The figure relates to women, but the patterns are almost identical if one instead studies them from the perspective of men and their attachment to the labour market. The same similarities emerge when one studies the trends by foreign background or place of residence in Sweden. This latter correlation is perhaps particularly noteworthy, as one might expect that increasing difficulties in entering the housing market would lead to greater disparities between those residing in major cities and those residing in smaller towns. Instead, there is a striking similarity in the changes over time in the willingness to become a parent across different groups and different regions in Sweden. It does not seem to be so much local contextual factors that are influencing this development. Ohlsson-Wijk and Andersson point out that it is more reasonable that global

change factors are in motion, which have a surprisingly similar impact on women and men in different countries, as well as on women and men within the same country.

Figure 6. Relative first-birth rates, by groups of women with varying degrees of labour market attachment, 2010–2022

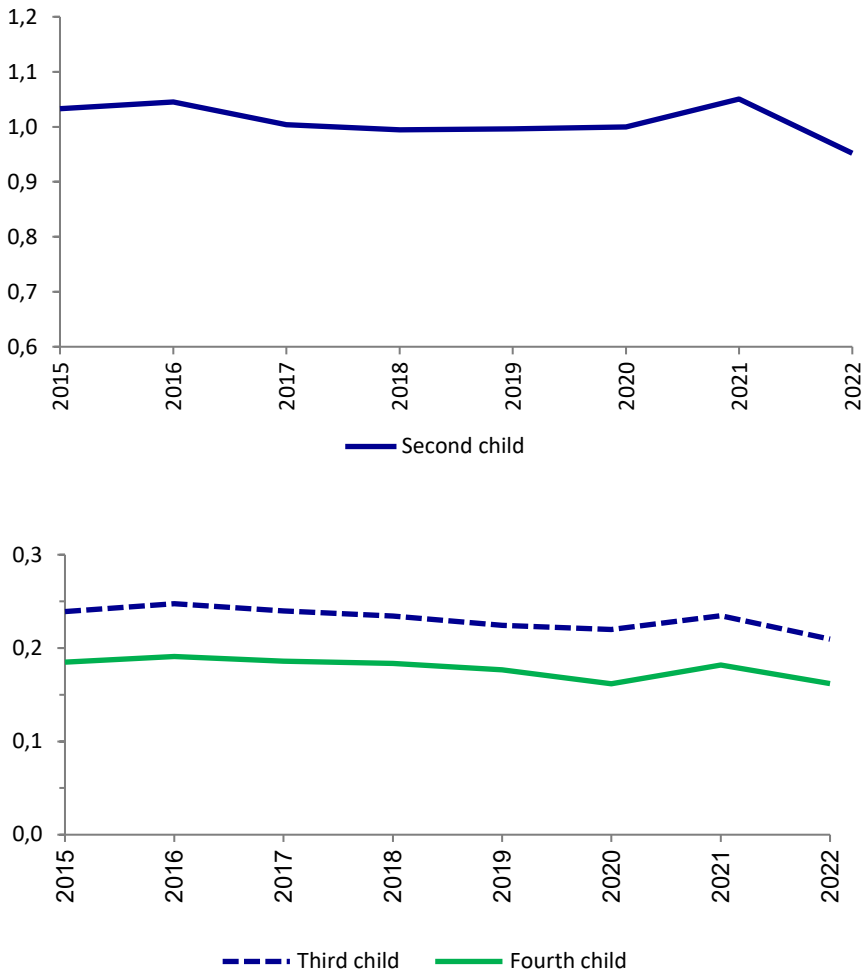


Source: Ohlsson-Wijk and Andersson (2025). The X-axis shows relative risks, which is a statistical measure indicating the difference in intensity of becoming a parent between childless women in different socio-economic groups and calendar years.

A global pandemic occurred in 2020–2021 that had a string of far-reaching consequences for living conditions in various parts of the world. To some extent, the changed living conditions also had an influence on birth rates in the various countries. Figure 5 shows that the pandemic had no significant influence on the long-term trend of declining first-birth rates in Sweden. On the other hand, the pandemic led to a slight increase in the willingness to have already planned children of higher birth orders. Given the varying degrees of recommended hours working from home, it might have made sense for certain groups to have a second or third child more early,

as they had more time for this anyway. Figure 7 shows that fertility rates among those who were already parents rose slightly in 2021, before returning to the same level as before the pandemic. A comparative study by Bujard and Andersson (2024) shows how the onset and end of the pandemic conditions related to the monthly changes in total fertility rates in Sweden and Germany.

Figure 7. Relative rates for second, third and fourth births, 2010–2022



Source: Ohlsson-Wijk and Andersson (2025). The X-axis shows relative risks, which is a statistical measure indicating the difference in intensity for parents with one, two and three children to have additional children in different calendar years.

The next stage in the research being done around the declining propensity to become a parent focused on the question of whether the new trend is due to a decline in couple formation or whether it is caused by changes in behaviour among women and men who are already in a couple relationship. It is quite conceivable that growing disparities in education attainment between women and men, along with changing attitudes to life and differences in political views, could pose a greater barrier to men and women forming couples. A study by Julia Hellstrand, Jessica Nisén and Mikko Myrskylä (2022), which analysed register data from Finland, found that the decline in fertility in the Finnish context was not particularly attributable to a reduction in couple formation, but primarily to a reduced willingness among women and men who had already moved in together as a couple to take the next step and become parents. Drawing inspiration from the Finnish study, Stefano Cantalini, Sofi Ohlsson-Wijk and Gunnar Andersson (2024) carried out a study based on Swedish register data to investigate how trends in new cohabitations and marriages may have co-varied with the declining childbearing trends. The ability to analyse patterns in cohabitations in Sweden is relatively new, as Swedish register data previously did not contain sufficient information on such relationships. This was made possible by the establishment of an apartment register in 2011–2012 and the registering of the population in unique apartments. The change was made primarily to facilitate the production of register-based census data from Sweden (Andersson, Monti and Kolk 2023).

The new study showed that, during the period when the first-birth rate was falling, there was no noticeable decline in the propensity to move in together and form new couples. Young women and men are, in fact, moving in together just as often as before, but they are not progressing further into family formation in the same way as before by becoming parents. The study also shows a clear decline in the willingness to marry during the studied period. The decline in marriage rates is a development of its own that cannot be fully explained by the fact that fewer people are becoming parents as this decline is observed among both childless individuals and those who have already become parents. In summary, the research based on analyses of Swedish register data shows that the behavioural changes responsible for the falling fertility rates can be attributed to new behaviours among childless cohabiting women and

men. To an ever-increasing extent, these people are shying away from making more long-term commitments, such as becoming parents or entering into marriage.

5 Influence of subjective factors

Register-based research shows that the decline in fertility rates is very similar across different socio-demographic groups of childless women and men, and that this changed behaviour cannot be linked to structural factors such as economic resources or geographical background. In order to take their research further, Nordic demographers realised that other types of data were also needed that can provide information on more subjective attitudes towards family-related conditions than those that can be studied with the aid of register data. Sweden and Norway had previously taken part in a European survey programme involving the collection of this type of data: The Generations and Gender Programme (for further information on the GGP, see www.ggp-i.org; Gauthier et al. 2025). In Sweden, for example, a Generations and Gender Survey was organised in 2012. To encourage greater Nordic participation in the survey programme, Nordic demographers organised a number of gatherings during which new survey question modules were developed that could provide new insights into family-related behaviours that were now being seen (Andersson, Dahlberg and Neyer 2020). It is thought that global uncertainty factors ought to be of interest in the context, and the Generations and Gender Surveys subsequently organised in all the Nordic countries include a module in which information about plans to have children can be linked to the extent to which people are worried about various uncertainty factors in the wider world, for example. Becoming a parent is a future-oriented, life-changing undertaking, and it is reasonable to think that a pessimistic view of the future should be linked to a reduced desire to become a parent. There has been no shortage of causes for concern over the ten-year period during which

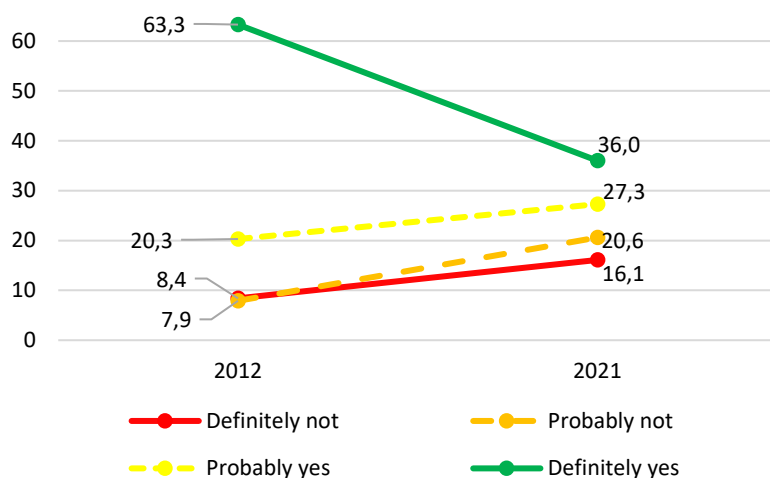
fertility rates have fallen, and more recently new factors such as war, pandemics and inflation have been added.

In Sweden, demographers at Stockholm University organised a new Generations and Gender Survey in 2021 (Andersson, Dahlberg and Neyer 2021; Neyer, Andersson and Dahlberg 2024). At that time, Sweden's GGS also included new modules containing questions on trust in social institutions (Gortfelder, Neyer and Andersson 2024) and on intensive parenting (Mollborn and Billingsley 2025), providing information on two other social phenomena that might conceivably be related to the desire to become a parent. Analyses of the survey data collected show that childless people who worry about a bigger number of external factors than others are slightly less likely to plan to become parents (Neyer et al. 2022). However, there is no single external factor – such as concern about climate change – that has greater significance in this context than other factors. Future research will be able to monitor the extent to which various subjective attitudes among the research participants at the time of the interview can be related to whether they have had children in the years following the data collection.

As the team behind Sweden's Generations and Gender Surveys organised a data collection in 2012 and a further one in 2021, this data can also be used to study how women's and men's childbearing plans have changed during the period of falling fertility rates. It is perhaps no great surprise that the respondents' plans to become parents and have children were less in 2021 than in 2012 (Lai, Neyer and Andersson 2026), a finding that is also reflected in a Norwegian study of how childbearing plans have changed in our western neighbouring country over the past decade (Dommermuth, Lyngstad and Aarskaug Wiik 2025). It is of particular interest to monitor the childbearing plans of cohabiting women and men who have not yet become parents. Data based on Sweden's surveys show that around half of this group of respondents still state that they plan to become parents in the next three years. What is more striking is what has happened in the remaining group of cohabiting women and men who say they do not plan to become parents within the next three years. Figure 8 shows a dramatic decline in the number of people who say they definitely plan to become parents at some point later in life, and an increase in those who are uncertain about whether

they intend to have children later in life and those who say they have no plans at all to become parents.

Figure 8. Childbearing intentions among childless women and men in a couple relationship: Proportion of those who do not plan to have children in the next three years who state that they plan to become parents at all, 2012 and 2021.



Source: Generations and Gender Surveys for 2012 and 2021.

One conclusion drawn from the analyses of childless women’s and men’s childbearing plans is that a growing group in the population can envisage a completely child-free life. The results also suggest that fertility rates and childbearing may not recover to any significant extent in the near future. What might happen in the slightly longer term is, of course, even more uncertain.

The research carried out to date shows that the decline in fertility rates over the last decade cannot be explained by changes in the structural factors that have previously been important in explaining differences in levels of childbearing between different countries and socio-economic groups. Under the influence of more elusive subjective factors, childless women and men have become less disposed to become parents. It is not entirely clear whether this change in behaviour is due to perceived barriers to the possibilities of creating a good life as parents, or whether it is largely due to a shift in life priorities, whereby parenthood no longer plays the same

role as it did previously. There can surely be no doubt that social media is an important factor in this context. The decline in fertility rates coincides closely in time with the expansion of communication via such media. The fact that the changes appear so similar in different parts of the world is also likely to be associated with the fact that a great deal of the interactions on social media are quite similar, regardless of where one lives in the world. Social media helps to spread both bleak and conflict-driven images of our time and the future, whilst at the same time spreading images of a fantastic life that rarely corresponds to the everyday lives that most of us lead. In a book on how online dating affects our relationships, the Swedish-French sociologist Marie Bergström (2019) argues that the Internet's unrealistic portrayals of fabulous lives may make people reluctant to commit to the couple relationships they are currently in. The rise of social media has also been accompanied by other social changes, such as increased polarisation in politics, distrust of science, and a marked rise in mental ill-health among younger people. It is not entirely straightforward to disentangle empirically how these social changes are linked, and how they might be associated with the decline in the desire to become a parent. The research is continuing to work with these questions to the extent that the conditions exist for such research to continue.

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