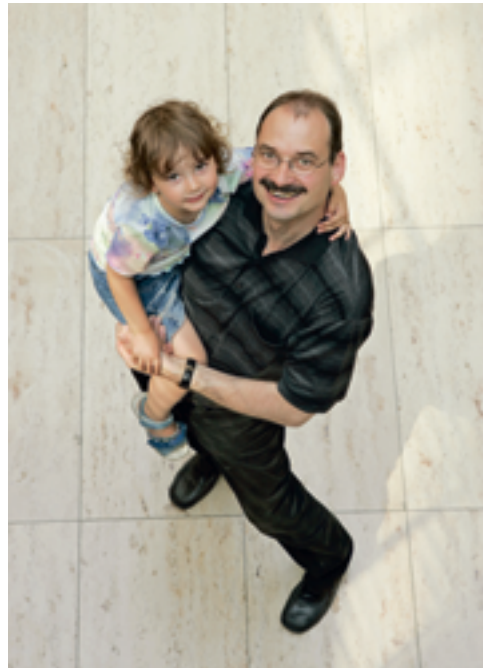


A One-Third-Child Head Start



*"People are always going to have children." Today, however, this famous statement by Konrad Adenauer is no longer accurate. But why is that? Does it have to do with present circumstances and conditions, or has yesterday's family ideal of husband, wife and two children been superseded by a new reality? Is it possible to counteract the low birth rates by implementing appropriate family policies, and if so, what should these policies look like? Investigations by a team of scientists headed by **JAN HOEM** and **GERDA NEYER** at the **MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH** in Rostock show that child-bearing trends are not only influenced by the state of the economy and cultural factors, but also by social policies and institutional factors.*

PHOTOS: AXEL GRIESCH (3) / DANIELA SCHÄFER (1)

Trends in family planning: Editor-in-Chief Helmut Hornung (45) with daughter Julia (3), Editor Christina Beck (39) with Laura (17) and Maurus (16), Editor Susanne Beer (42) with Svenja (12) and Meike (9), and Photo Editor Daniela Schäfer (37), who does not want to have any children. The resulting figures for the MAXPLANCKRESEARCH editorial team average out to just 1.25 children.

Today, the shape of the population pyramid still resembles that of a Christmas tree, but the tree is slowly morphing into a mushroom. The diagrams that display the future development of the population show the higher birth-rate years edging further and further toward the top over time, while population growth at the base is slowing down. By 2030, a large share of the German population will consist of sixty- and seventy-year-olds. Today, these senior citizens of the future are in their late thirties and forties, and they are leading the way in Europe – indeed, they are the absolute leaders in not having any children at all.

Strongly marked by a dwindling population and over-aging, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania is at the forefront in Germany in terms of declining birth rates. What place would be better suited for a research institute dedicated to investigating population development? At the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock, researchers work on tracking down the causes of changing birth-rate patterns in Europe.

A 100-YEAR DOWNHILL TREND

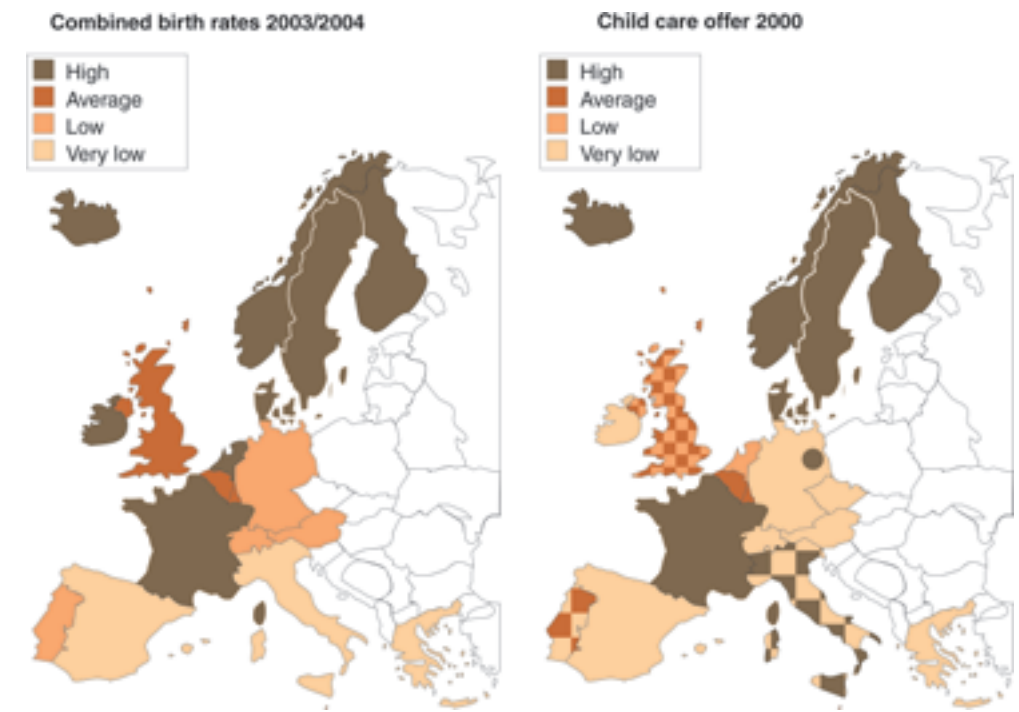
Comparisons between different European countries are one of the tools they employ to this end. Viewed over a longer period, the trend in Europe appears to be relatively uniform. Above all, a general development stands out: birth rates have been declining for more than 100 years. While women in Germany had an average of five children around the middle of the 19th century, this figure shifted to an average of two or three births per woman around the end of the century. This situation remained more or less unchanged up until the nineteen-sixties. In those years, a new decline set in and in the subsequent years so few children

were born that the total birth rate dropped below the 2.1 mark, and thus below the reproduction level – the threshold value necessary for the renewal of generations. The course of the birth rates in most European countries has not recovered since.

The low annual number of births is reflected in the mean number of children of the birth cohorts that have already concluded their childbearing. In Germany, women born in 1940 already gave birth to fewer than two children on average, and women born in later years had still fewer children – for instance 1.65 children for every woman born in 1960. The situation is similar in Italy, Austria, and Spain. In France and in the Scandinavian countries, the mean births of the cohorts are not that far below the figure of 2.1 children per woman necessary to maintain the present population level.

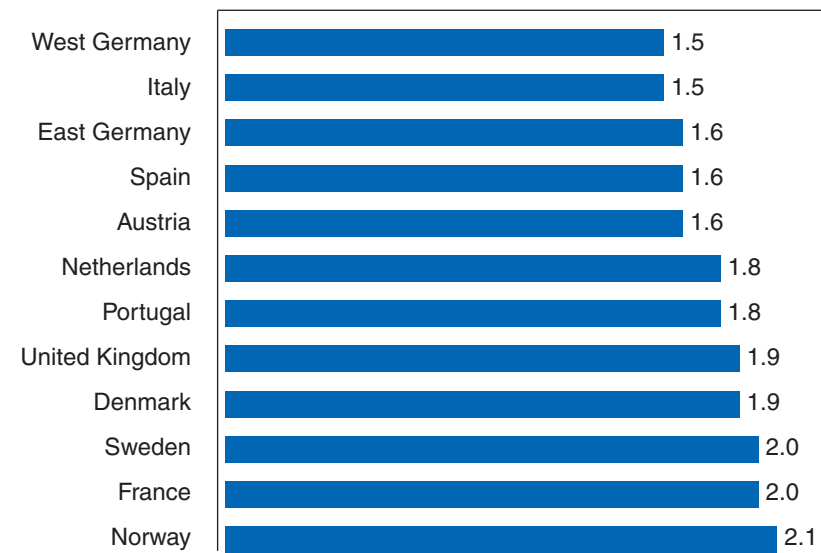
The fluctuating patterns of European birth statistics, with their trends

and turning points, their gentle curves and abrupt peaks and troughs, their virtually parallel courses and their obvious divergences, attract the special attention of the "Fertility and Family Dynamics" department at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock. Jan Hoem, head of the department and one of the two Directors at the Institute, sums up some questions guiding their research: "Why do Italians and Spaniards have so few children despite the dominance of the Catholic Church and the family-oriented culture in these countries? Why was there a convergence in the childbearing trends in the GDR of the eighties and in the FRG despite the stark differences in social policy? What exactly happened in Eastern European countries after the demise of Communism: was there a reaction to deteriorating economic circumstances or merely an adjustment to Western standards? Some features of country



In terms of daycare facilities, the Scandinavian countries, Iceland and France rank as paragons – and these are also the countries in which the birth rates markedly exceed those in Germany.

GRAPHICS AND TABLES: MPI FOR DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH



Today's 40-year-old Norwegian women had the most children: On average, each woman born in 1965 had two children. West Germany and Italy bring up the rear among western European nations, with their women having an average of only one and a half children.

trends would appear to point in the latter direction. On the other hand, the many differences between eastern and western Germany that prevail today contradict the assumption that the systems have converged in terms of birth rates."

A wide range of possible factors can be cited to explain specific national characteristics: the situation on the labor market, cultural differentials and current trends and lifestyle shifts that affect private life, such as changes in the nature of the relationships between couples, or the general societal trend toward individualization. The researchers at the Rostock Institute systematically investigate individual sections of this range, such as the influence of family policies and welfare institutions.

There is much that indicates that political and institutional conditions exert a far stronger effect than, for example, cultural factors – at least, that is what studies of the childbearing patterns of immigrant women suggest. Gunnar Andersson, a member of the work group that focuses on policies and social institutions, has compared how childbearing pat-

terns and labor-market integration compare between immigrants and other population groups in Sweden. Here, as in other Scandinavian countries, the statistical data that reflect individual birth careers are especially complete and readily accessible to research.

SWEDEN – A PARAGON IN PROMOTING EQUALITY

"If there are cultural effects that shape childbearing patterns, then clearly defined patterns should be discernible here," states Andersson. For example, one should find that certain groups of female immigrants tend to stay at home with their children instead of joining the workforce, because their understanding of family role models are more conservative. "But that," explains Andersson, "is not the case. We investigated all possible groups of female immigrants, and we repeatedly found the same situation: their family behavior resembles that of other Swedish parents. Both groups strive in equal measure to first establish themselves on the labor market before starting a family."

While the country's domestic policies have worked toward making the family orientation of immigrants and Swedish nationals resemble each other, the differences between Sweden and other European countries are all the more pronounced. Sweden's total fertility rate has gone through the strongest swings of any European country in the past 20 years. And because Sweden is a nation with an extensive welfare system and pursues modern, progressive policies geared to establishing equal rights and opportunities for men and women, and also has a high birth rate despite the fluctuations, it is regarded as a paragon of social policies. Researchers and experts refer to the Swedish welfare state as "universalistic," because claims to social benefits and support are based on individual rights and policies geared to social equality. Unlike some other systems, it aims to enable all men and women to pursue both career and parenthood and to promote the equality of all citizens regardless of family status.

"According to this model, the rights of the individual are placed above the support of the family as an institution," explains Gerda Neyner, a member of the work group who is concerned primarily with issues relating to European comparisons. "For example, Sweden has applied individual taxation since the early nineteen-seventies, instead of the tax splitting between marriage partners that is standard in Germany. Comprehensive daycare for children, flexible parental-leave regulations, generous parental allowances, right to part-time work, and reserving part of the parental leave exclusively for fathers are regarded as success factors in the Nordic model."

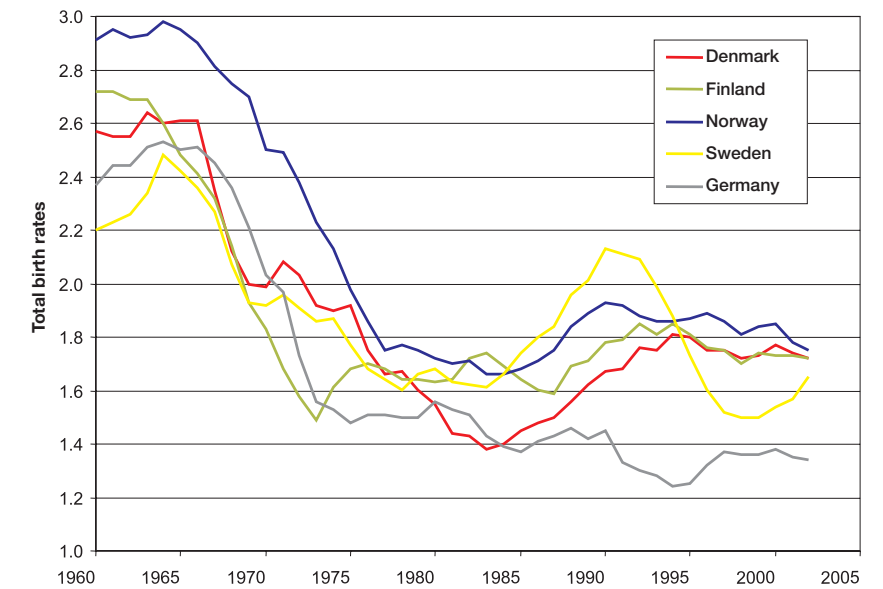
In Europe, apart from the universalistic welfare state, there are also liberal and conservative models. The liberal welfare state, which prevails in the Anglo-Saxon countries, is characterized by social services that are not

provided by the government, but by the market. The generally lower and need-based social benefits is another typical feature, geared to securing an absolute subsistence minimum.

By contrast, the conservative welfare state, which prevails in western and southern Europe, pursues the ideal of securing the status of the individual or the family: both social security benefits and unemployment benefits are gauged according to family earnings and on payments made to the social insurance system to date, or are dependent on family status. Married couples and family partnerships are supported by way of tax benefits, dependent's annuities, and the non-contributory insurance of a non-employed spouse through statutory health insurance.

A NEW ROLE MODEL MUST BE FOUND

The researchers at the Max Planck Institute in Rostock regard the conservative model – especially in its German form – as an obstacle on the path to increasing birth rates. "German policies practically discourage women from having gainful employment. What is regarded as an antiquated, outdated ideal in other countries is even defined as part of the German constitution, namely the protection of marriage and the family," states Jan Hoem, who himself moved from Stockholm to Rostock in 1999. The Max Planck Director has no shortage of clear recommendations. "In my opinion, German opinion leaders and politicians must look for a different interpretation of the constitution. Keeping women in the kitchen, so to speak, may hold a certain value of its own in the eyes of some, but it is not a good model for increasing birth rates." In a society in which more and more women obtain an increasingly better education, family policies should support the wishes of these women to reconcile career and family life. If they do



Sweden points the way: The introduction of the so-called "speed premium" led to a considerable increase in the rate at which families had second and third children in the nineteen-eighties.

not, the number of women who have fewer children or none at all will continue to grow.

In the post-war years it was long believed that the increase in the share of gainfully employed women was a major cause of the declining birth rates. General opinion held that countries with a high share of employed women would necessarily have low birth rates. Later, experience gained above all in the Scandinavian countries revealed that there is no such compelling connection. On the contrary: employment can even act as an incentive.

INDIVIDUAL DATA PROVIDES INSIGHT

Families that benefit from the woman's additional income are in a better position to afford children. "It is true that there were tendencies in the 1970s for gainfully employed women to have fewer children," states Jan Hoem. "A look at Europe today, however, reveals that all the countries with a high share of employed women – especially the Scandinavian and Benelux countries – also exhibit the highest birth rates."

The impressions gained depend strongly on the methods applied. As Hoem explains, if genuine causalities are to be discovered, it is not sufficient to merely compare macro-level data for regions or countries. It is necessary to shift the focus one step deeper, down to the level of individual data, and examine the course of individual lives. "This calls for additional data and a completely different methodology. But the results obtained justify the effort invested; the difference is as striking as switching from black-and-white to color television. All of a sudden, everything looks totally different," says Hoem.

Only by conducting follow-up studies based on individual-level data can we determine whether the connection between higher female employment and lower birth rates is specifically due to the fact that gainfully employed women have fewer children – or whether it is non-employed women who are choosing not to have children.

Even if an investigation remains on a more aggregate level than studies of individual life-courses, a great deal also depends on the approach

taken. There are already tremendous differences between the total fertility rate calculated on the basis of data concerning children born in a specific year, and the cohort fertility rate, which is the number of children born by women of a specific birth cohort. What would appear to be a dramatic development in terms of the total fertility rate is put into a calmer perspective when the corresponding completed cohort fertility rates are considered: the latter are in fact surprisingly constant. A sudden sharp decline in the total fertility rate can often be explained by a development where a given generation of women simply starts having children at a much later age. Women in Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden are currently becoming mothers at the age of 28 or 29, while in the nineteen-seventies, the average age at which women had their first child was around 24 or 25.

THE JOB DETERMINES THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN

Life-course studies not only reflect how closely births follow each other. They can also show, for example, to what extent such delayed births are associated with changes in women's education, training, or employment behavior. One frequent impression is that female academics are less inclined than others or have less incentive to have children. As they usually enjoy a comparably high income, they would be confronted with greater financial setbacks during their years as parents than their peers in lower wage brackets – unless they were to remain fully employed while raising their children. New research activities in which Jan Hoem, Gerda Neyer, and Gunnar Andersson are involved based on Swedish data even suggest that the field of study is at least as important as the mere level of education in determining how many children a woman will have. On average,

women who have a degree in fields related to education or health have more children and are less frequently childless than women who have studied administration, social sciences or business – regardless of their ultimate level of education.

However, scientists are not always successful in dispelling common misconceptions. In fact, sometimes it is even their own findings that give rise to such misinterpretations. Recently, with reference to scientific studies, it was claimed that improving daycare facilities in Germany would have no effect on birth rates. This is the – apparent – conclusion of a study that Michaela Kreyenfeld published some time ago together with another Max Planck colleague. Michaela Kreyenfeld herself is anything but satisfied with this interpretation of her findings: "If our study and other surveys fail to show a significant connection between the provision of daycare facilities, the share of employed women, and the development of birth rates, it is not at all surprising."

"Even in regions in which the provision of daycare facilities is relatively good, the actual availability of all-day care places is so limited in Germany that potential parents cannot really count on being able to effortlessly reconcile children, family and career. The reports in newspa-

pers often quoted us as if we had delivered scientific proof that the Federal government could easily dispense with the planned expansion of daycare facilities for children," explained Michaela Kreyenfeld.

In general, doubts repeatedly surface as to whether targeted policy measures exert any influence at all on childbearing behavior. While this skepticism is understandable, there are many examples proving the opposite. In Sweden, for example, a "speed premium" was introduced in the nineteen-eighties for mothers who have another child within two-and-a-half years after a birth. Under this rule, such women receive a parental-leave benefit after the birth of their second child, calculated on the basis of their income while they were still childless, even if they switch to part-time employment or stop working after their first child, and the rule also applies for each subsequent child.

This measure had a very clear impact: the rate at which women in Sweden had second and third children quickly rose, and this contributed to a total fertility rate that temporarily exceeded the reproduction level of 2.1. And one more example: In the nineteen-nineties, parental leave in Austria was extended to a total of two years. As in Swe-

den, this new regulation resulted in couples having additional children sooner. It did not, however, achieve a long-term increase in the birth rate.

As the case studies show, changes in childbearing patterns are sometimes merely transitional. Frequently, though, they are also the effects of regulations that were introduced for entirely different purposes. In Denmark, for example, in the second half of the nineteen-nineties it was possible to claim a one-year leave from work for educational and training purposes. As it later turned out, many women used this grace period as a baby year, although the regulation was not really envisaged for such purposes. In Sweden, measures taken to ensure equal rights for men and women showed surprising effects: part of the parental-leave period was reserved for the father, and was cancelled if he did not claim it. Studies have confirmed that Swedish families in which the father had claimed part of the parental leave for their first-born child were more inclined to have a second child than families in which the father had not claimed parental leave.

EFFECTS SURPRISE POLICY MAKERS

Although there are thus clear connections between policies and childbearing patterns, it is difficult to actually steer such developments. "Naturally, politicians would be happy if there were such a thing as clear-cut recommendations for action," states Gerda Neyer. "But it cannot be expected that a single planned measure will always have an immediate effect, and one that is easily foreseen. The policy change may affect only certain groups or work under certain circumstances. Or it may manifest itself in an entirely different area than childbearing."

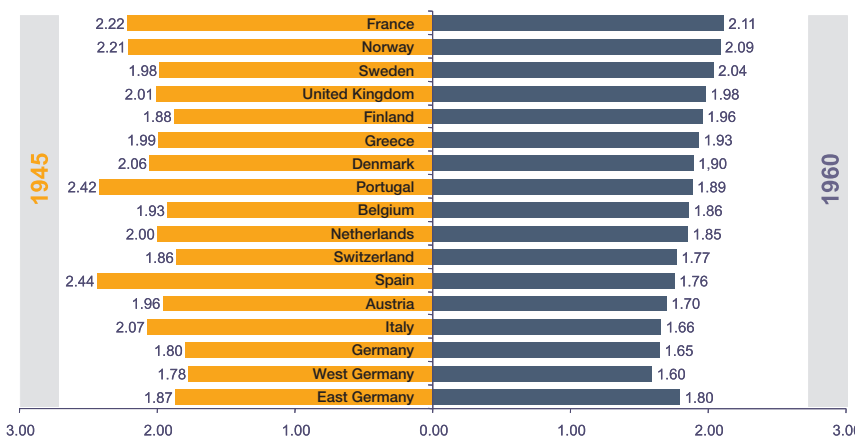
Consequently, the researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock are also

eager to discover how a new plan by the Federal government would shape developments. Renate Schmidt, the current Minister for Family Affairs, proposed increasing the child-raising allowance to income level. Similar measures in Scandinavian countries around 20 years ago had born fruit. In 1978, the parental-leave allowance in Norway was adjusted to individual incomes, and the number of couples having their second and third children increased. In 1982, a similar provision was introduced in Finland, and here too, the fertility rate increased. In 1984, the same development was recorded in Denmark. In Sweden, however, in 1974, a different picture emerged: the increase of the parental-leave benefit to nearly the level of income prior to the birth of a child did not reverse the declining birth rate at the time.

In the opinion of Gerda Neyer, the effect of introducing an income-linked parental allowance in Germany would also depend on its specific structure and features, as well as on its context. Would the allowance be based on the level of individual income or on the family income? How much time will be allowed for parental leave and how flexible will it be? "A key factor will be whether the parental-leave allowance and parental-leave period will allow for child care that does not incur major income losses or jeopardize employment or vocational training," explains Gerda Neyer.

And Jan Hoem is convinced: "An entire culture will have to be developed and established. Germany will have to debate issues that were already discussed and resolved in Scandinavia some 40 years ago." Statistically speaking, Germany is trailing Sweden by a third of a child per woman – and that will continue only if Sweden's policy makers do not likewise come up with some new ideas in the meantime to further increase their birth rates.

RALF GRÖTKER



Spain shows the largest gap: The women who are 60 years old today had an average of 2.44 children, whereas today's 45-year-olds had an average of just 1.76 children.



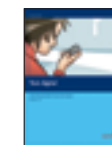
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