

From intentions to births: Realization of short-term fertility intentions across five decades in Norway

Lars Dommermuth (ldo@ssb.no)

Statistics Norway

Torkild Hovde Lyngstad (t.h.lyngstad@sosgeo.uio.no)

University of Oslo

Kenneth Aarskaug Wiik (kaw@ssb.no)

Statistics Norway

Abstract (250 words – now 246)

Background. A recent comparative analysis of five nationally representative surveys of Norwegian women aged 18–44 (1977, 1988, 2003, 2007, 2020) showed that short-term (3–4 years) and general fertility intentions were lowest in 2020, with the decline from 2007 to 2020 appearing in all sociodemographic groups and emerging earliest among young, childless, studying, and unpartnered women. These patterns raise a key question: are women nowadays less likely to realize positive short-term intentions?

Objective. We ask whether the realization of positive short-term fertility intentions has changed over time; whether Norway’s post-2010 fertility downturn is partly linked to lower realization; and whether realization varies across subgroups aligned with shifting partnership, education, and employment trajectories.

Data & methods. We harmonize intention measures across the five surveys and follow women for 3.5 years after interview. Follow-up comes from population registers for the 1977, 1988, 2003, and 2007 surveys, and from a second wave of the 2020 GGS-II (2024, response rate >70%). We define realization as at least one live birth within 42 months and estimate discrete-time event-history models, controlling for survey period as well as age, parity/parenthood, union status, education, and activity status, adjusting for survey design differences.

Expected contribution. Our data offers a rare opportunity to study realization over nearly fifty years with high response rates and minimal attrition through registers follow-ups. Beyond charting trends, we speak to the “opportunity structure of childbearing”—how changing partnerships and family policies have shaped the conversion of intentions into births.

Extended abstract (2-4 pages)

Motivation and background

Fertility intentions are powerful predictors of subsequent childbearing, especially when framed over a short-term time-horizon (Bachrach & Morgan 2013; Brehm & Schneider 2019; Harknett & Hartnett 2014). In a recent study using comparable surveys from 1977, 1988, 2003, 2007, and 2020, we documented that both short-term and general intentions reached their lowest levels in 2020 (Dommermuth, Lyngstad & Wiik 2025). The downturn from 2007 to 2020 was broad-based and appeared early among key groups previously implicated in Norway's post-2010 fertility decline (Hellstrand et al. 2021): younger, childless, studying, and unpartnered women. These findings suggest a shift in fertility norms and life-course expectations, but they do not reveal whether positive intentions—when held—are more or less likely to be realized today than in earlier decades.

Theoretically, realization is shaped by an “opportunity structure of childbearing”: micro-level constraints (fecundity, relationship quality) and macro-level institutional contexts (union dynamics, leave entitlements, childcare coverage) that either facilitate or impede acting on intentions. During the study period (1977-2024), Norway experienced major changes in partnership stability and a rapid diffusion of cohabitation (Lyngstad & Jalovaara 2010; Noack et al. 2014), alongside large expansions in family policies (paid parental leave and subsidized childcare). These developments may have raised or reduced realization of fertility intentions over time. Interestingly, the Nordic countries and their family policies were evaluated as role-models, for maintaining high fertility alongside high female labor force participation rates and modern family policies (Luci-Greulich & Thévenon 2013). Even though the scope and extent of these policies has not changed substantially in the past decades, we have observed a strong decline in total fertility since 2010 in Norway.

Research questions

1. Has the realized share of positive short-term fertility intentions changed across cohorts interviewed from the late 1970s to 2020?
2. Did realization decline in the 2010s, potentially contributing to Norway's post-2010 fertility downturn, beyond compositional shifts in who holds intentions?
3. Are changes in realization concentrated in specific subgroups (by age, parenthood, union status, education, and activity status) that also exhibited early declines in intentions?

Data and methods

We use harmonized data from five cross-sectional surveys from Norway, including women aged 18–44: the Fertility Survey 1977 (Statistics Norway 1977), the Family and Fertility Survey (Statistics Norway 1988), the Survey on Future Plans, Family and Partnerships 2003 (Statistics Norway 2003), the Generations and Gender Survey I 2007 (Lappegård & Veenstra 2010) and the Generations and Gender Survey II 2020 (Dommermuth & Lappegård 2021). The question wording, mode, and response rates were previously documented (Dommermuth, Lyngstad & Wiik 2025). We align positive short-term fertility intentions to a 3–4-year horizon across surveys. For follow-up, we link respondents to population registers for the 1977, 1988, 2003, and 2007

surveys, eliminating attrition. For the 2020 GGS-II, we take advantage of the second wave of the Generations and Gender Survey II conducted in 2024, with a response rate of 70% (Dommermuth et al. 2024).

The primary outcome is the realization of a positive short-term fertility intention, measured as at least one live birth within 42 months of interview. We exclude women pregnant at interview and those reporting infecundity. Analyses use post-stratification weights consistent with GGP technical guidance.

We estimate discrete-time event-history models (monthly person-periods) of first subsequent birth, conditioning on holding a positive short-term intention at baseline. Covariates include age, detailed parenthood status (parity and age of youngest child), union status (no co-resident partner/cohabiting/married), education (ISCED-harmonized), and main activity (employed/education/other). We allow effects and baseline hazards to vary by survey year and test interactions to trace subgroup-specific trends.

Expected contribution

We provide, to our knowledge, the first unified estimates of intention realization over almost fifty years in a high-income, low-fertility context with extensive family policies. Conceptually, we revisit the “opportunity structure of childbearing,” asking whether expansions in leave and childcare (which plausibly facilitated realization in earlier decades) were later offset by partnership instability, rising ages at first birth, and changing lifestyles and self-realization goals—forces highlighted in prior Norwegian debates and theory. By separating shifts in who holds positive fertility intentions from changes how often such intentions are translated into births, we disentangle how much of the post-2010 fertility decline can be attributed to changing norms versus changing constraints. Short-term fertility intentions are used because they are the most predictive intentions.

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