

# Unravelling fertility decline in France

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### Abstract

Between 2014 and 2024, the French total fertility rate declined from 2.0 to 1.6 children per woman. In France, as in Nordic countries, the decline in fertility seems to be driven partly by a reduction in the proportion of cohabiting couples, the emergence of new union forms and, above all, by a drop in childbearing among younger couples. Studies based on different data sets suggest relatively limited disparities across socio-economic groups, a pattern that can be partly attributed to high-level interactions among explanatory factors. Our first objective is to compare results derived from different data sources concerning the recent decline in French fertility according to age, birth order, union status and social class. A central question is whether the decline primarily reflects a rise in childlessness or a reduction in higher-order births, particularly beyond the second child. Social differences are also a subject of debate as the decline in fertility seems to affect all social groups. Identifying the groups experiencing the largest declines requires the use of large-scale survey data and an assessment of their limitations and potential biases. Furthermore, fertility intentions among young adults in France have also fallen significantly over the past 20 years. Here again, similar trends are observed across all social groups. Our second objective is to evaluate whether the specific groups identified in large-scale surveys as having experienced the sharpest decline in fertility correspond to those for which fertility intentions are lowest in 2024.

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## Introduction

France, along with Nordic countries, has long maintained relatively high and stable total fertility rates (TFR) within Europe. Yet, since the 2010s, these countries have experienced a noticeable downturn in fertility rates. The fertility decline seems to be driven partly by a fall in the proportion of individuals living in cohabiting couples, with new forms of relationship becoming more common, especially among the young adults (Bergström et al., 2024). Moreover, fertility among young cohabiting couples has also fallen, further contributing to the overall decline in TFR (Breton & Tomkinson, 2021).

Besides changes in union status and age differentials in fertility rates, studies based on different datasets have revealed surprisingly relatively low TFR disparities across social groups. These results are partly due to the high-level interactions among explanatory factors (Greulich & Toulemon, 2023). Yet in France, this pattern may also reflect broader contextual changes with, on the one hand, an increase in economic uncertainty, especially among the less educated and, on the other hand, a decline in family policies benefits for the wealthiest families (Elmallakh, 2023).

The first objective of this study is to compare the results based on different datasets regarding fertility decline by age, union status, birth order and social class, which we will measure using different indicators including education attainment, occupational status, income, country of birth, and place of residence. Since fertility decline seems to affect all social groups, identifying specificities requires using large scale surveys and assessing their limits and potential bias. In doing so, this study will contribute to clarify the debate on the apparently low social inequality behind fertility behaviors. A central question is whether fertility decline is driven by an increase in childlessness or by a decrease in births of orders 3 or higher.

Furthermore, fertility intentions among young adults have dramatically declined in the last 20 years. Here again, the decline in fertility intentions is observed across all social groups (Bouchet-Valat & Toulemon, 2025). Our second objective is to complement our preceding analyses with an examination of fertility intentions to assess whether specific groups identified in large-scale surveys as having experienced the steepest fertility decline are the also the same reporting the lowest fertility intentions in 2024.

## Data and methods

We will rely on three main datasets: the French demographic panel (*Échantillon démographique permanent*, EDP), a 4% sample of the French population which collects census data, civil registration data on births and deaths, administrative data on employment, salary, income, taxes, and allowances (Robert-Bobée, 2021). The data are regularly updated and cover the years 1968-2024. This is the most efficient source to identify fertility trends in specific groups due to its large sample size and the fact that birth records come from civil

registration data, which complements census data. Birth records can also be imputed to potential mothers in case the original merging is not efficient enough (Reynaud, 2022).

Our second dataset is the new edition of the Family survey conducted by the French institute of statistics (Insee), collected within the 2025 census survey. It includes a sample of 300,000 men and women with data on fertility history tables, as well as information of stepchildren (defined as children born to the current partner). A first preliminary dataset will be released in December 2025, and will allow us to update long-term series on fertility by age, and birth order. Previous editions of this survey has allowed to more accurately measure period and cohort fertility by birth order and social differentials (Brée, 2017; Masson, 2013; Toulemon & Mazuy, 2001).

Finally, our third dataset is the French Generations and Gender Survey (GGG) conducted in 2024, which includes a complete fertility history and a series of questions on fertility intentions, based on a sample of 12,800 men and women aged 18 to 79 (Bouchet-Valat & Toulemon, 2025).

These three datasets will be used to validate previous results based on census data using the own children method (Breton & Tomkinson, 2021) and on the French EU-SILC (Elmallakh, 2023; Greulich & Toulemon, 2023), as these datasets may lead to inconsistent results. We will use period fertility tables by age and birth order, logistic and linear regressions on specific fertility rates, as well as decomposition methods.

## Expected results

Once the analyses using these three sources of data have been conducted, we expect to find an increase in childlessness much lower in France than in other European countries, as first births probabilities in France have been increasing at ages 30 and older. It is likely that childlessness is now more common among lower educated women, due to a reversal in social differential in union formation. We expect to contribute to the debate regarding the recent trends in fertility decline by clarifying prior inconsistent findings, as childlessness is overestimated in census data, due to the omission of children who no longer live in the parental household (Tomkinson, 2023), and likely underestimated in the Family survey, in which mothers are more likely to participate than childless women (Masson, 2013), while the EDP allows individual imputations leading to less biased results all birth orders taken together (Reynaud, 2022).

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