

# Stable intentions in times of declining births? Trends in long-term and short-term fertility intentions in Germany, 2021-2024

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## Background

In the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic, fertility rates in Europe reached historically low levels. In 2023, the average Total Fertility Rate (TFR) across the European Union (EU) was 1.38 (Eurostat, 2025), existing data on TFR for 2024 suggest a further decline in several countries. Even some Northern European countries fell below 1.5 – an unprecedented development. Rising uncertainty due to multiple crises – including COVID-19, the Russian war against Ukraine, inflation, and climate change – is likely a key factor in this contemporary fertility decline (Bujard & Andersson, 2024), since disasters (Lee et al. 2023), economic crises (Sobotka et al. 2011), and war (Kulu 2024) linked to fertility decline.

Recent research indicates that fertility intentions are influenced not only by individual characteristics (e.g., education, parity, partnership) and objective indicators of economic uncertainty (e.g., unemployment, temporary contracts), but also socially constructed future expectations (“narratives of the future”; Vignoli et al., 2022). It is essential to determine whether the recent decline in period fertility reflects a temporary postponement of childbearing (Beaujouan 2023) or a more permanent reduction in fertility intentions. Understanding this distinction can clarify whether birth rates are likely to recover to pre-crisis levels or continue declining. Analyses of eleven European countries using data from Wave 1 of the Generations and Gender Survey Round II indicate that fertility intentions (intended number of children) remain significantly higher than period fertility (Friedrich & Bujard, 2025), suggesting that the fertility decline is largely driven by uncertainty and postponed childbearing.

However, annual panel data on fertility intentions are needed, to trace how short term and long-term fertility intentions developed during the period of fertility decline between 2021 and 2024. For Germany, where the TFR declined considerably from 1.58 in 2021 to 1.35 in 2024, the “postponement hypothesis” can be further examined using recent panel data from the German Family Demography Panel Study (FRoDA). Fertility intentions are a well-established indicator for understanding childbearing behavior (Regnier-Loilier & Vignoli, 2011; Speder & Kapitany, 2009), with short-term intentions being more reliable than intentions without a specific time frame (Philipov & Bernardi 2012; Ajzen & Klobas, 2013). We analyze both the intended number of children over the entire reproductive period and short-term fertility intentions within the next three years using linear probability models and Poisson regression models.

## Data and methods

We use recent data from the first three waves (2021-2024) of FRoDA (Bujard et al. 2025), a representative large-scale panel survey on partnership and family life in Germany. The study surveys individuals living in Germany who were between 18 and 49 years old at the time of the first wave. Each

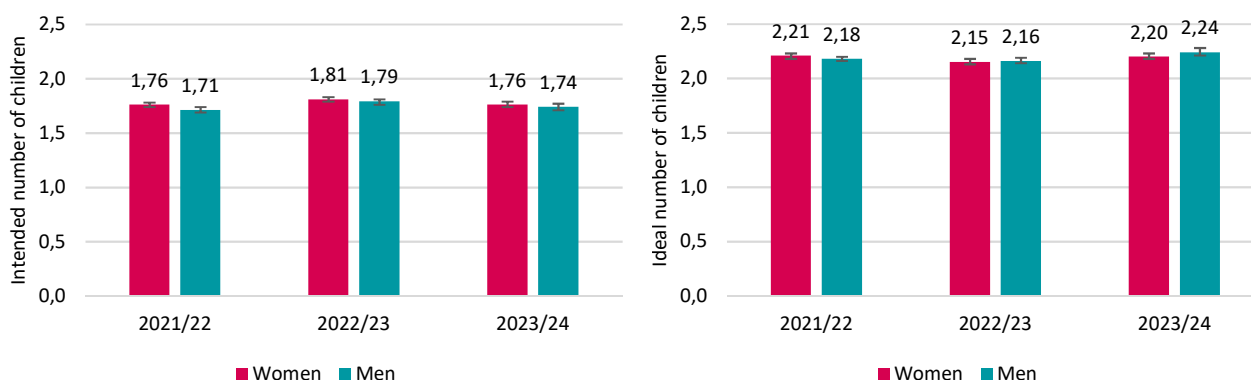
year, respondents are asked about their ideal number of children (“For you personally, what would be the ideal number of children you would like to have or would have liked to have had?”) and their intended number of children (“Realistically, how many children—including biological and adoptive children—do you intend to have overall?”). They are also asked about their short-term fertility intentions: “Do you intend to have a/another child during the next three years?”

We analyze the development of the ideal and intended number of children, as well as short-term fertility intentions, using descriptive statistics. Additionally, we examine the development of fertility intentions by estimating Poisson regression models (for the intended number of children) and linear probability models (for short-term fertility intentions), both with cluster-robust standard errors. All models are estimated separately by gender and adjusted for age, number of children, partnership, and education. To examine socioeconomic differences, the models for short-term intentions are further stratified by education and the ability to make ends meet. Wave (2021/22, 2022/23, 2023/24) serves as the independent variable, with the first wave as the reference category. The multivariable analyses of short-term fertility intentions include women and men aged 30-39 with complete data, who were not pregnant, whose partners were not pregnant, and who reported no infertility for themselves or their partners (10,777 women and 8,578 men). The multivariable analyses of intended number of children include all individuals aged 18-49 with complete data (27,223 women, 20,298 men). The intended number of children is a count variable and the intention to have a child in the next three years is coded as a binary variable.

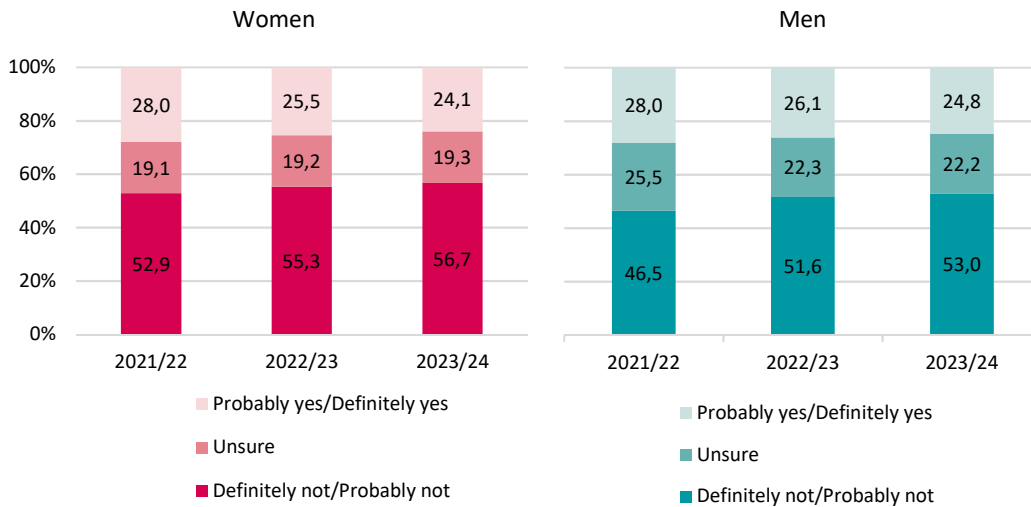
### Preliminary findings

Between 2021 and 2024, the average intended and ideal number of children remained stable among women and men aged 18-49 (Figure 1), at 1.7-1.8 and 2.2, respectively. This is notable, as the TFR in Germany fell from 1.58 in 2021 to 1.35 in 2024. Thus, the “fertility gap,” which measures the difference between the intended number of children and the actual birth rate, more than doubled for women, from 0.18 to 0.41. Moreover, we observe a noticeable decline in short-term fertility intentions. When women and men in the main phase of family formation (aged 30-39) are asked whether they plan to have a/another child within the next three years, 28% in 2021/22 indicate that they are likely or certain to do so (Figure 2). By 2023/24, this share has fallen to 24% among women and 25% among men. Further analyses show that the decline is strongest among childless women in this age group, falling from 41% to 31%.

**Figure 1:** Average intended and ideal number of children among women and men aged 18–49 years. FReDA Waves 1, 2, and 3. The latter year refers only to the beginning of the year. Weighted data. 95% confidence intervals.

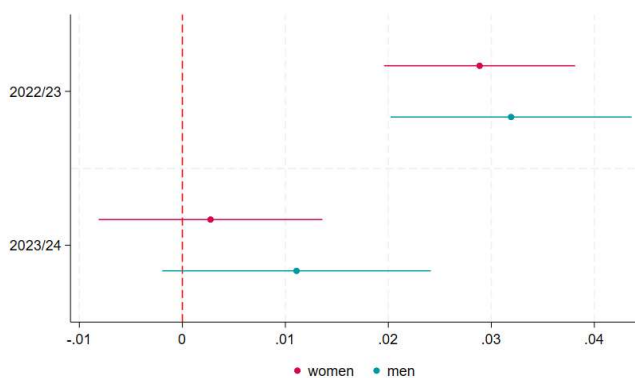


**Figure 2:** Intention to have a(nother) child within the next three years among women and men aged 30–39 years. FReDA Waves 1, 2, and 3. The latter year refers only to the beginning of the year. Weighted data.



The regression results for the intended number of children align with the descriptive findings: the intended number did not decrease between 2021 and 2024 for either women or men. In fact, both genders show a statistically significant increase of about 3% in 2022/23 (Figure 3). For short-term intentions, the linear probability models confirm the descriptive pattern: the intention to have a child declined already in 2022/23, statistically significant only among women (Figure 4). By 2023/24, this decline becomes statistically significant for both genders, with the probability of planning a/another child within three years falling by 4 percentage points among women and 2 points among men.

**Figure 3:** Poisson regression models: intended number of children. FReDA Waves 1, 2, and 3. Models control for age, number of children, partnership, and education. FReDA Waves 1, 2, and 3.



**Figure 4:** Linear probability models: intention to have a/another child within the next three years. Women, men aged 30-39. Models control for age, number of children, partnership, and education. FReDA Waves 1, 2, and 3.

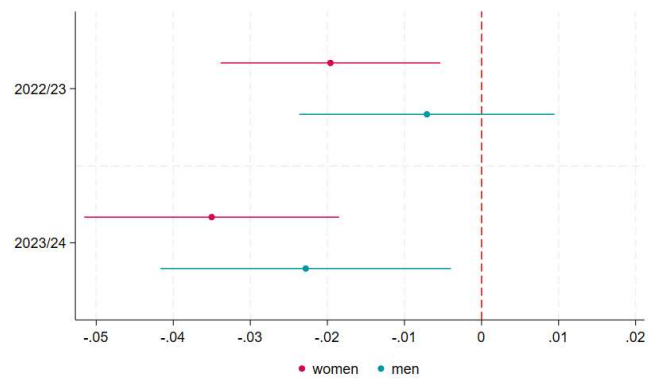
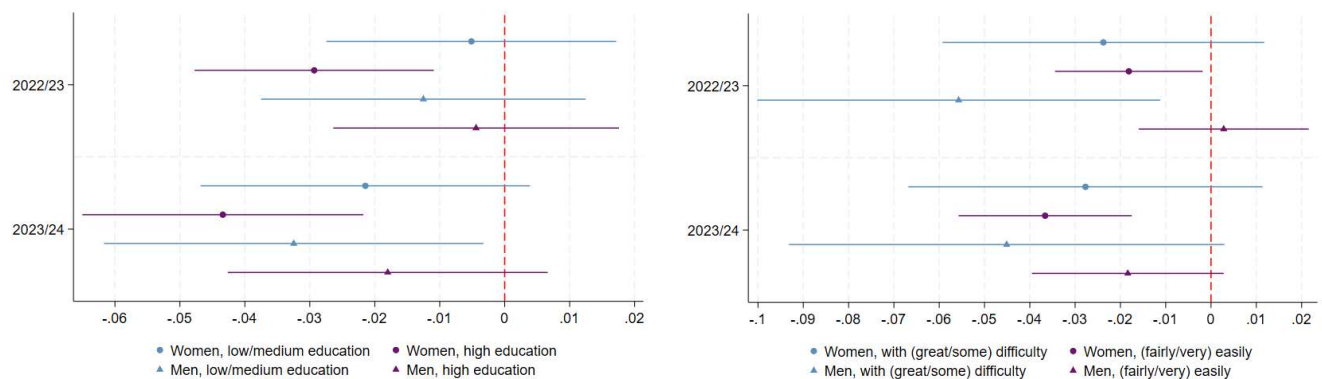


Figure 5 shows that the decline in short-term intentions among individuals aged 30–39 is stronger among men with low or medium education than among high educated men, and is statistically significant for lower-educated men in 2023/24. Among women, the pattern is reversed, likely reflecting gender-specific role expectations: highly educated women show a statistically significant greater decrease in their short-term intentions. Men who report having difficulties making ends meet exhibit a larger, statistically significant decline in 2022/23. Among women, the pattern is less clear: while in 2022/23 women with financial difficulties show a greater decline, this trend is reversed in 2023/24.

**Figure 5:** Linear probability models: intention to have a/another child within the next three years. Women and men aged 30-39. Models estimated separately by educational group/ability to make ends meet, controlling for age, number of children, and partnership. FReDA Waves 1, 2, and 3.



Overall, the results support the “postponement hypothesis” and remarkably stable long-term fertility intentions. The intended number of children remained stable from 2021 to 2024, a time of steep decline in fertility in Germany. In contrast, short-term fertility intentions declined, especially among men with lower education and weaker financial security. The multiple crises have created a climate of uncertainty, which may be leading individuals to postpone childbearing. However, postponing childbearing carries the risk that some individuals may not realize their desired number of children due to advanced age, which could lead to a decline in cohort fertility in the future (Beaujouan 2023).

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