

SF2.5 Childlessness

Definitions and methodology

A childless woman can be simply defined as a woman without children at a given point in time. A distinction can be made between temporary childlessness and permanent childlessness. A woman can be temporarily childless if she does not have children but might have children in the future. A permanently childless woman has not had any children by the time she reaches the end of her reproductive years, usually between the ages of 45 and 49. Here we define being childless as the absence of biological children, therefore exclude other forms of parenthood from the analysis (such as adoptive- or foster-parents).

Childlessness can be voluntary or involuntary depending on the individual-level causes for remaining childless. Involuntary childlessness is caused by an inability, or reduced ability, of a person to have children. On the other hand, voluntary childlessness is caused by a woman's active decision not to have children. It is not possible to distinguish between involuntary and voluntary childlessness in the comparative data.

This indicator outlines childlessness with a focus on women without children. However, childlessness also concerns men. Despite data limitations, Miettinen, et al., (2015) suggested that the rate of childlessness is higher for men than for women in many European countries. In any case, permanent childlessness among men is more difficult to measure as the end of men's reproductive period is not clear-cut.

Data on women who are permanently childless is available for cohorts of women born in 1975 and before (Chart SF2.5.A). Chart SF2.5.B compares levels of permanent childlessness with information on completed fertility rates (SF2.1).

Key findings

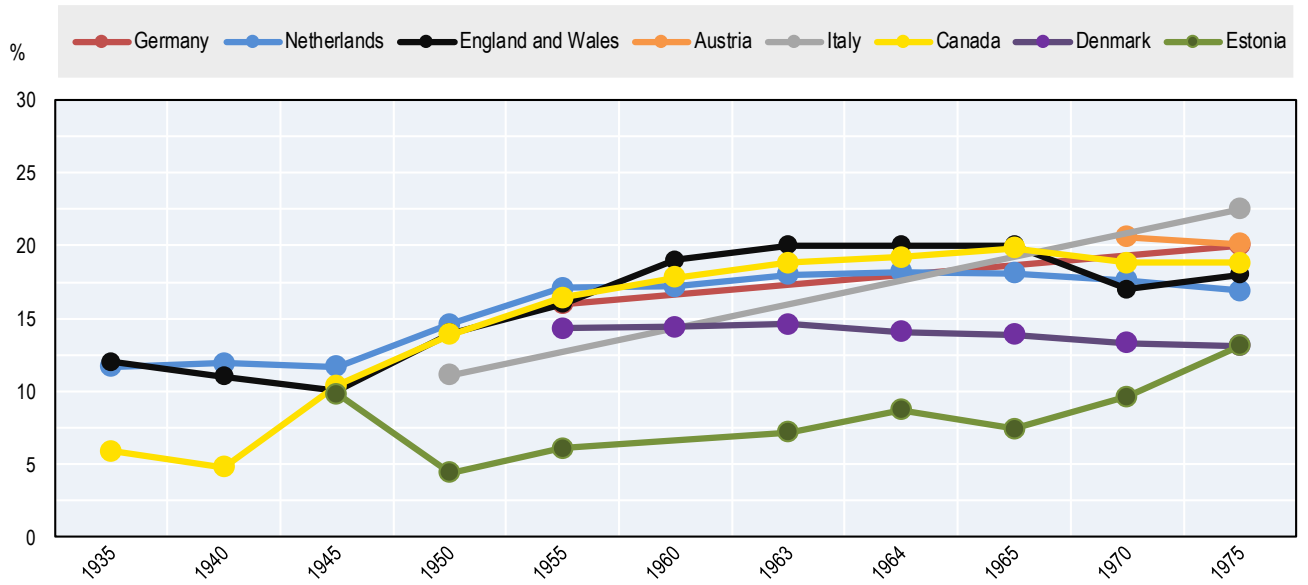
Chart SF2.5.A shows how the proportion of permanent childlessness among women over the age of 44 differs across countries and across time. At above 20% on average for the cohort born in 1975, permanent childlessness among women is the highest in Japan, Spain, Italy, Austria and Germany. For the same cohort, permanent childlessness is below 10% in Bulgaria and Portugal.

Other relevant indicators: Family size and composition (SF1.1); Fertility rates (SF2.1); Age of mothers at childbirth and age-specific fertility (SF2.3) and Share of births outside marriage (SF2.4)

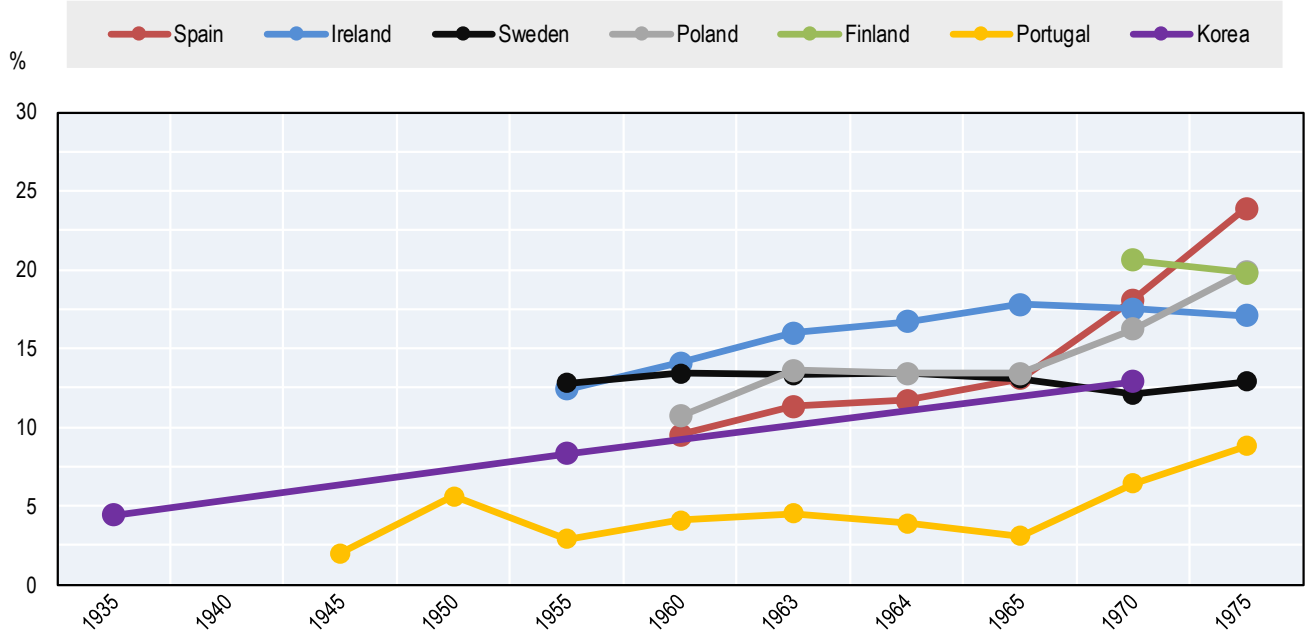
Figure SF2.5.A. Definitive childlessness

Proportion (%) of definitive childless women per cohort

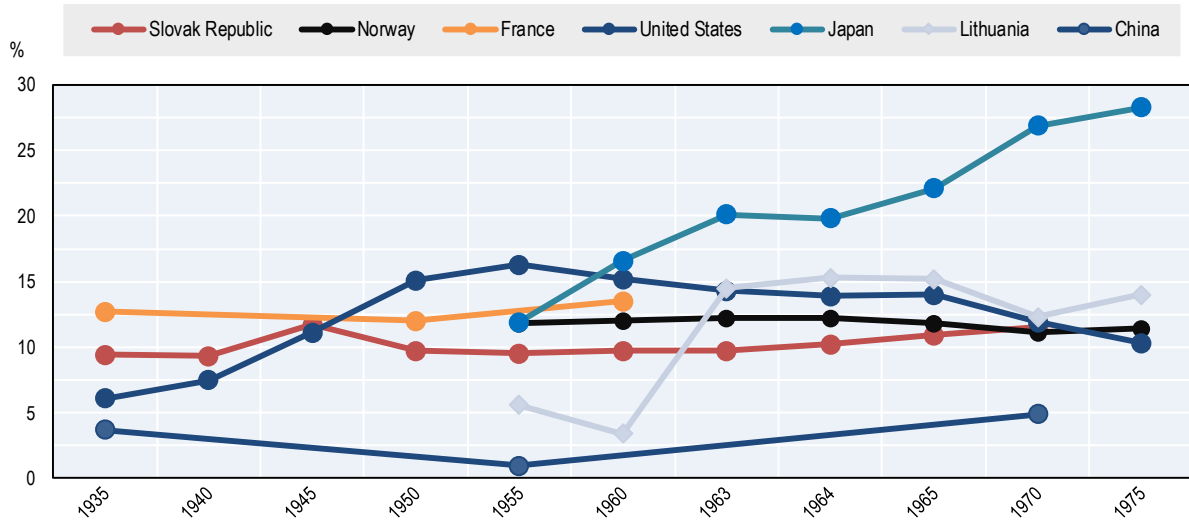
Panel A



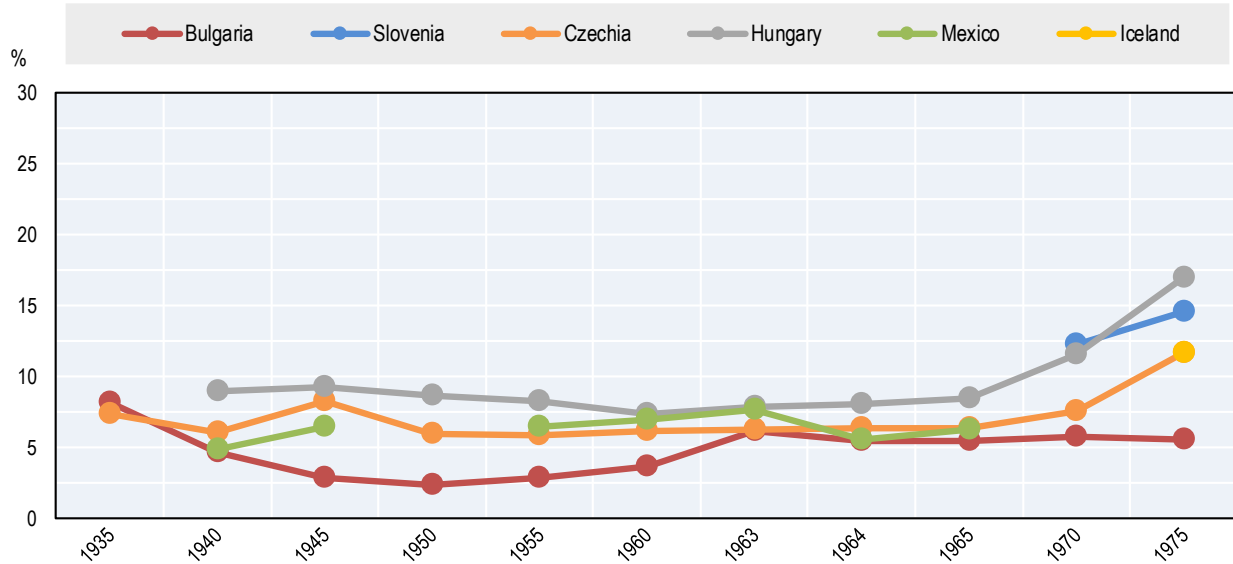
Panel B



Panel C



Panel D



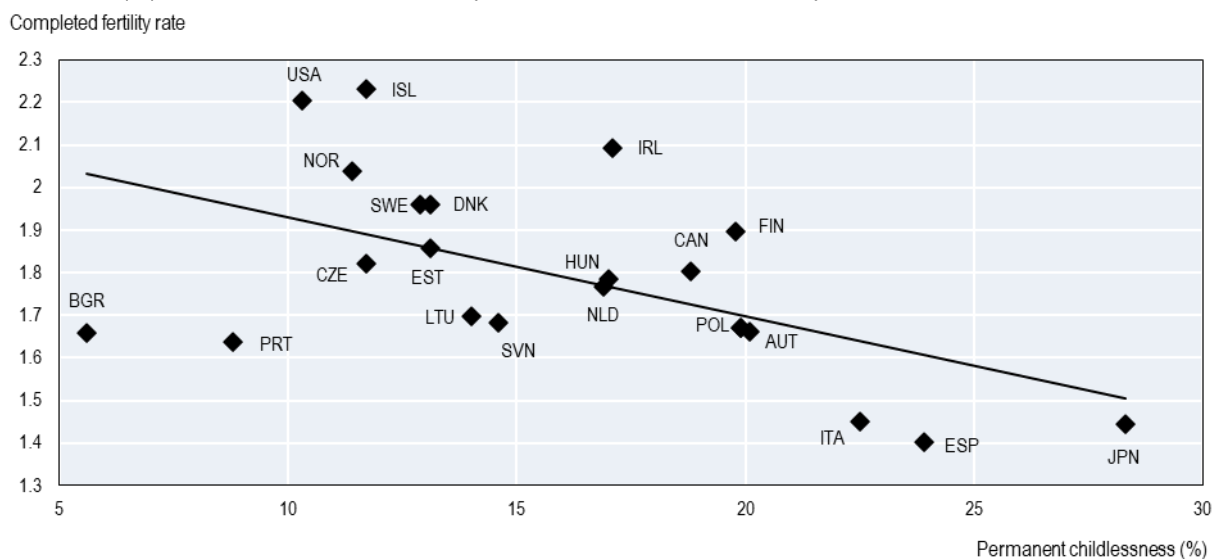
Notes : 1. For China, Cohort 1935 refers to women born 1931-1935, and 1955 refers to women born in 1951-1955, these data were calculated using the 1995 dataset; Cohort 1970 was calculated based on the 2015 dataset. China conducts decennial population census in years ending with 0, and the 1% population sample survey (also called 'Micro Census'), during the inter-censal years ending with 5. 2. Regarding the data for the 1975 cohort, data concerns the 1970 cohort for Korea and the Slovak Republic; women born in 1975-1977 for Germany; and the 1978 cohort for Italy. Data for the 1975 cohort for France are based on a projection, see Köppen, Mazuy, and Toulemon (2017). 3. Regarding the data for the 1955 cohort: data concerns the 1950 cohort for Italy; women born in 1951-1955 for France; women born in 1954-1956 for Germany; the 1956 cohort for Poland; 1960 for Spain; 1967 for Finland; 1968 for Slovenia; and 1969 for Austria. 4. Regarding the data for the 1935 cohort: data is for women born in 1931-1935 for France; the 1937 cohort for Hungary; 1944 for Estonia; 1952 for Norway; 1953 for Denmark; and 1953 for Japan. 5. Korea: the Census only asked married and divorced women and widows on their number of children. Births outside marriage are uncommon in Korea. 6. Mexico: INEGI. XI and XII Censuses of Population and Housing and Count of Population and Housing 2005 for cohorts born before 1960. Data refers to women 45 years old. For cohorts born after 1960, Encuesta Nacional de la Dinamica Demografica 2006.

Source: Human Fertility Database, National Bureau of Statistics (China), Destatis (Germany), Statistics Korea, INEGI (Mexico) the "Istituto Nazionale di Statistica", "Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques", Office for National Statistics (England and Wales), and Köppen, Mazuy and Toulemon, "Demographic Research Monographs, Childlessness in Europe: Contexts, Causes, and Consequences", www.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-44667-7_4.

Childlessness is one of the factors that can help explain cross-country differences in completed fertility. Chart SF2.5.B shows that, when looking at women born in 1975, countries with comparatively high levels of permanent childlessness (e.g. over 15%) also often have lower completed fertility rates. The main exceptions to this are Finland and Ireland – which have a high childlessness rate but also a relatively high completed fertility rate – and Bulgaria and Portugal, which have both a low level of childlessness and low completed fertility rates for the cohort of women born in 1975. The former points to a relatively high share of large families among all families, and the latter to a relatively high proportion of families with one child (see indicator SF1.1).

Figure SF2.5.B Permanent childlessness and completed fertility rates

Proportion (%) of cohort that are permanently childless and completed fertility rates of women born in 1975



Source: Human Fertility Database.

Comparability and data issues

To discern whether childlessness is permanent or temporary, information on cohorts of women born in 1975 and before are required (as observed in 2020 or around). For younger cohorts it is not possible to discern whether childlessness is permanent or not since these women have not reached the end of their reproductive age yet, and any observed childlessness could therefore be temporary. Ideally, a closer look to cohort changes in the age- and parity-specific probability of having a child would allow going further in the assessment of transitory nature of childlessness and timing of births over the life course. Such rates, based on longitudinal data, are however not yet available in a standardized cross-nationally comparable format.

Sources and further reading:

Beaujouan, E. and C. Berghammer (2019), "The Gap Between Lifetime Fertility Intentions and Completed Fertility in Europe and the United States: A Cohort Approach", *Population Research and Policy Review*, Vol. 38/4, pp. 507-535, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-019-09516-3>.

Brini, E. Childlessness and low fertility in context: evidence from a multilevel analysis on 20 European countries. *Genus* 76, 6 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118-020-00074-7>

OECD (2024), *Society at a Glance 2024: OECD Social Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/918d8db3-en>.

Sobotka, T. (2021), "World's Highest Childlessness Levels in East Asia", *Population et Sociétés*, Vol. n° 595, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.3917/popsoc.595.0001>.

Miettinen, A., A. Rotkirch, I. Szalma, A. Donno and M. Tanturri (2015) "Increasing childlessness in Europe: time trends and country differences" *Families and Societies Working Paper Series*, no.33(2015).