The Heirs of Sexual Revolution

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Aims

Many authors have described characteristics and timing of sexual revolution in Western world during the second half of the 20th century (see, e.g., Bozon and Kontula, 1998 and Bozon, 2003). However, so far the landscape is not complete, as data for many countries are lacking, and comparison is limited to cohorts born until the middle of the Seventies. In this paper – dealing with different data sources – we compare age at first sexual intercourse (FSI) of men and women living in 40 developed countries, including the most of East Europe, overseas English speaking countries (OESC) and Japan. Moreover, using a just published survey of WHO and some recent data on US young people, for 28 countries it is possible to consider the first phases of sexual life of people born in 1982-87 (the heirs of sexual revolution) – see tables 1-3.

Main results

1. The starting point

Before sexual revolution, in most countries the so called *double standard* prevailed, with early FSI for males. It is possible – although not sure, because homogeneous data are lacking – that in North Europe, the OESC and Japan this gender difference were narrower. In any case, the interval between FSI and marriage was much wider for males, and circumstances of the FSI were very different by gender (often a spot and experimental experience for men, an advanced step of the often definitive couple stabilization for women).

2. *The geography of change*

New data for several countries suggest that sexual revolution and second demographic transition had similar geographical patterns (compare figures 1-11 with figure 12). During the 1950s (cohorts born in the 1930s) the first changes appeared in North Europe and in the OESC. Sexual revolution touched West and Central Europe in the following decade, South Europe during the 1970s (cohorts born in the 1950s), East Europe and Japan during the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, the poorest countries of Europe – the SE of the Balkan region and the SE of ex-SSSR – have been touched by changes only during the recent years, for people born in the 1980s (see also figure 13).

3. Do we see an arrival point?

We must be careful in comparing data for cohorts born in 1950-70, collected during face-to-face or phone surveys, with WHO data for cohort born in 28 countries in 1987, collected in the schools by means of self-filled questionnaires. Comparisons suggest that everywhere the cohort 1987 is more precocious than the cohort 1970, also in countries where the first changes affected cohorts born in 1930s (table 2 and figures 14-15). However, for eight but one countries with well comparable data, cohort 1987 is less precocious than cohort 1982 (table 3). In any country, the grow of the proportion of young people using contraception goes on, and condom is more and more popular as contraceptive and health device (see the last column of table 1).

4. A new, opposite gap between men and women?

An important starting point of sexual revolution is the closing gap between age at FSI of males and females. Nowadays, in the forerunner countries (North Europe and OESC) and in some countries of West Europe women have their FSI before men (figures 8-9). Some clues show that other countries are going to follow a similar path. E.g., in the North and Centre Italy man and women have their first sex at the same age, and the “traditional” gap of Italy is determined only by the delay of 1-2 years of Southern women (Borgoni and Gabrielli, 2004).

5. Discussion

Our data show that sexual revolution has begun everywhere in the developed world: the age at first sex of women has dropped, the gap between men and women in the age at first sex has closed or is closing, contraception – mainly condom – is very popular among young people. The geographical pattern is also clear: North Europe and OESC are the forerunners, West and Centre Europe follow after few years, South Europe goes back with a wider delay, and finally East Europe, Japan and the backward European countries are at the end of rank. However, some results call for further research.

The first question is methodological. At the present day, if we want to compare the older cohorts (born before 1975) with younger people, we must use data of different sources. Data for the older cohorts come from "classical" face-to-face or phone surveys, whereas data for young people have been collected by means of questionnaires self-filled in the schools: they are both representative national sample, but their characteristics are very different. The samples of "classical" survey are generally affected by relatively high proportion of unit-non-response: it could be that people not found by the interviewers or people who refuse to answer are (more or less?) precocious than answering people. On the contrary, if everybody goes school, the sample of school is well done, and data are collected during a lesson in the classroom, unit-non-responses are virtually absent, as practically nobody refuse to fill the questionnaire. Concerning our multi-countries data, it could be that in some places a high proportion of 15.5 years old people don't go school. As everywhere in developed countries people leaving early the school are sexually more precocious than students (Bozon and Kontula, 2000), it could be that our data for 1982 and 1987 cohorts underestimate the proportion of not virgin people. Moreover, in the "classical" survey, the interaction between the interviewer end the respondent may be strong: that's why in many face-to-face surveys on sex the most personal part of questionnaire is self-filled, while the interviewer does something else (reads a newspaper or so on). On the contrary, if questionnaires are self-filled in the classroom, the interaction with the interviewer are virtually absent, but answers can be influenced by desk neighbours.

These differences between the two methods of data collections could explain some of the wide distance between the sexual behaviour of people born before or after 1975. We can compare the proportion of not virgin people at age 15-16 for cohorts 1970 and 1987 for nine countries, and everywhere the youngest cohort is more and more precocious, particularly for females, but for males too. It is not easy to understand if and how these strong differences are due to data collection bias. In our opinion, it is difficult to be sure that data collected by "classical" surveys are better than data collected in the schools. We have to wait for the future population-based survey – where data are collected with the same methodologies for people born during the 70s and the 80s – in order to have more sure comparisons.

The second question is more substantive. In our opinion, data show that diffusion may be a reliable key for interpreting geographical differences of sexual behaviour among young people. This result is important, as for the first time it concerns almost all developed countries. However, research is only at its beginning, as the determinants of this imitative process should be explained. The analogy with the diffusion of second demographic transition could help scholars who want to deal with this difficult research field.

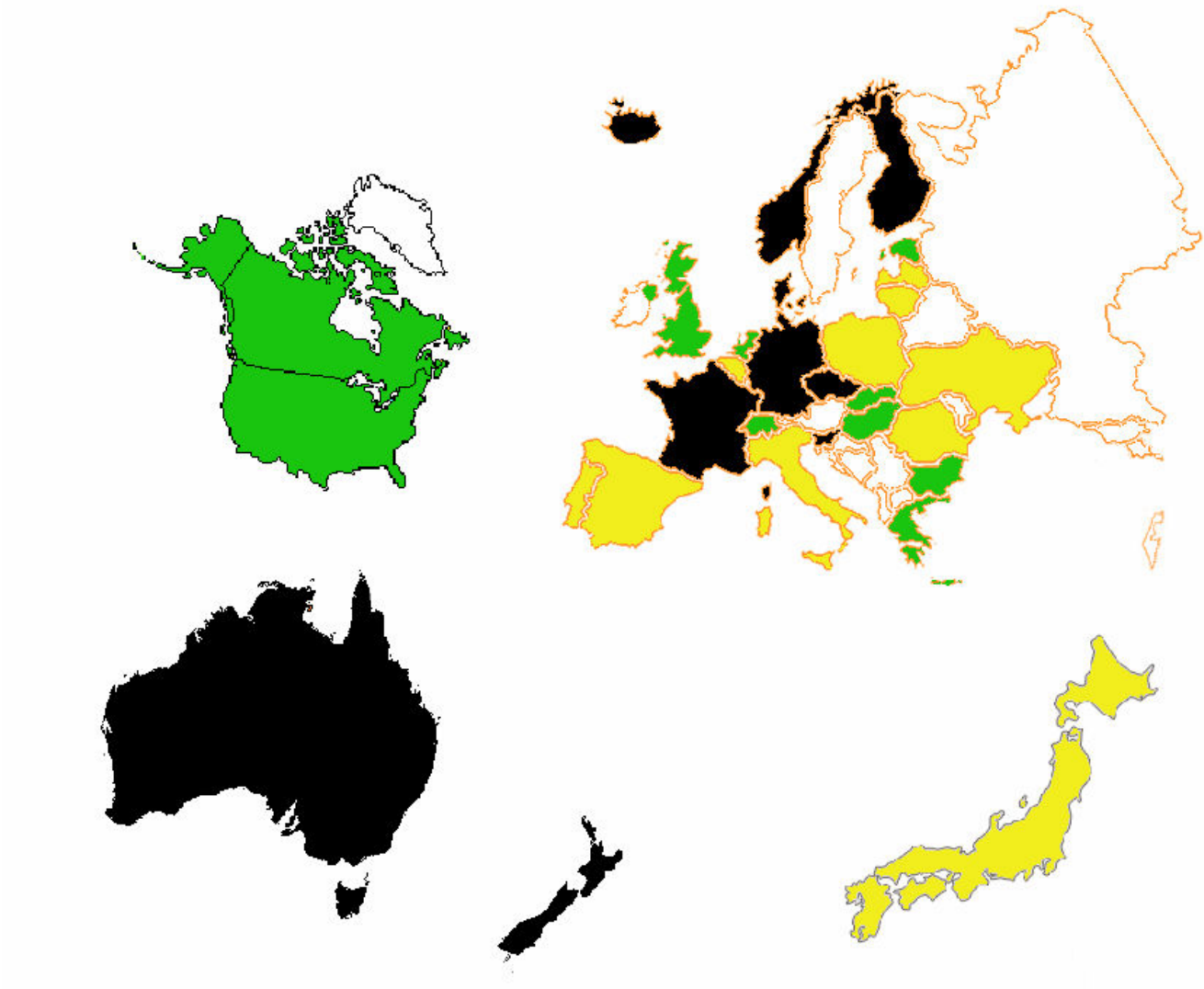
The last question comes from results of table 3. For eight but one countries with well comparable data, cohort 1987 is less precocious than cohort 1982. Is this a signal of an important change, or is it only a "pause", similar to the one detected by some authors looking at the behavior of cohorts invested by the growing HIV fear during their teens?

Table 1. Some data on sex of cohorts born around 1950, 1970, and 1987. 40 developed countries

	Median age at first sexual intercourse								Cohort 1987				
	Cohort 1950		Cohort 1970		Females – Males		1950 – 1970		% FSI < age 15.5			Contrac. at LSI %	
	F	M	F	M	1950	1970	F	M	F	M	M - F	F	M
Oversea English Speaking Countries (OESC)													
Canada	19.2	---	17.9	---	---	---	1.3	---	24.0	24.7	0.7	71.7	79.8
USA (*)	19.1	18.6	17.6	17.1	0.5	0.5	1.5	1.5	26.8	25.3	-1.5	74.5	82.0
Australia (*)	18.0	18.0	17.0	17.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	1.0	---	---	---	---	---
New Zeeland	18.5	---	17.2	---	---	---	1.3	---	---	---	---	---	---
Northern Europe													
Greenland	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	78.8	70.8	-8.0	74.5	77.9
Iceland (*)	18.0	17.5	16.6	16.6	0.5	0.0	1.4	0.9	---	---	---	---	---
Norway (*)	18.8	18.8	17.5	18.1	0.0	-0.6	1.3	0.7	---	---	---	---	---
Finland (*)	19.0	18.2	18.0	18.0	0.8	0.0	1.0	0.2	31.1	23.0	-8.1	58.6	72.6
Sweden	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	30.9	25.3	-5.6	57.6	72.9
Denmark (*)	18.3	18.2	16.7	17.4	0.1	-0.7	1.6	0.8	---	---	---	---	---
United Kingdom (*)	19.5	18.3	17.4	17.1	1.2	0.3	2.1	1.2	38.9	33.3	-5.6	69.0	72.1
Western Europe													
West Germany (*) (a)	18.6	18.4	17.7	17.7	0.2	0.0	0.9	0.7	33.5	22.5	-11.0	64.4	75.6
Austria	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	19.1	22.1	3.0	78.9	84.8
Switzerland (*)	19.5	19.2	18.4	18.2	0.3	0.2	1.1	1.0	20.6	25.1	4.5	83.0	78.3
Netherlands (*)	19.7	19.1	18.3	18.3	0.6	0.0	1.4	0.8	21.6	24.2	2.6	72.4	83.3
Belgium (*)	20.0	19.0	18.4	17.9	1.0	0.5	1.6	1.1	28.0	30.4	2.4	62.0	79.6
France (*)	18.9	17.9	17.6	17.4	1.0	0.2	1.3	0.5	18.3	26.1	7.8	77.0	87.0
Slovenia (*)	18.9	18.4	18.1	18.0	0.5	0.1	0.8	0.4	21.6	30.8	9.2	67.6	80.4
Czech Republic (*)	18.4	18.4	17.8	17.2	0.0	0.6	0.6	1.2	17.2	19.4	2.2	---	---
Slovak Republic (*)	19.5	18.3	18.8	18.3	1.2	0.5	0.7	0.0	---	---	---	---	---
Hungary (*)	19.1	18.5	18.5	18.0	0.6	0.5	0.6	0.5	16.4	25.5	9.1	71.8	84.5
Eastern Europe													
Latvia (*)	20.8	19.0	18.5	18.2	1.8	0.3	2.3	0.8	14.1	21.8	7.7	77.3	81.0
Estonia	19.6	---	18.4	---	---	---	1.2	---	15.8	20.1	4.3	70.5	75.9
Lithuania (*)	21.5	20.4	19.5	18.6	1.1	0.9	2.0	1.8	10.8	26.4	15.6	70.4	82.2
Poland (*)	20.9	20.0	19.6	19.7	0.9	-0.1	1.3	0.3	9.2	20.9	11.7	72.5	73.4
Ukraine	20.1	---	17.8	---	---	---	2.3	---	24.0	47.2	23.2	59.2	83.7
Russian Federation	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	16.4	40.9	24.5	---	---
Southern Europe													
Portugal (*)	21.5	17.5	19.8	17.4	4.0	2.4	1.7	0.1	20.3	30.2	9.9	77.8	68.5
Spain (*)	20.1	18.5	19.1	18.2	1.6	0.9	1.0	0.3	14.8	18.0	3.2	89.1	89.1
Italy (*)	20.6	18.6	19.4	18.4	2.0	1.0	1.2	0.2	20.5	27.2	6.7	---	---
Croatia	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	9.7	23.2	13.5	73.1	75.2
Macedonia	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	3.6	37.4	33.8	84.0	85.1
Romania (*)	20.1	18.3	19.5	17.3	1.8	2.2	0.6	1.0	---	---	---	---	---
Albania (1980)	---	---	18.2	17.9	---	0.3	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Bulgaria	19.9	---	18.7	---	---	---	1.2	---	---	---	---	---	---
Greece (*)	19.8	17.4	19.0	17.4	2.4	1.6	0.8	0.0	9.6	33.6	24.0	82.5	91.2
Georgia	---	---	20.9	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Armenia	---	---	19.7	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Israel	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	9.7	32.4	22.7	73.6	89.3
Japan (*)	21.3	19.8	19.5	19.6	1.5	-0.1	1.8	0.2	---	---	---	---	---
25th percentile (A) (*)	18.8	18.2	17.6	17.4	0.2	0.0	0.8	0.2					
Median (B) (*)	19.5	18.4	18.4	18.0	0.8	0.3	1.3	0.8					
75th percentile (C) (*)	20.1	18.8	19.1	18.2	1.5	0.6	1.6	1.0					
(C) – (A) (*)	1.3	0.6	1.5	0.8	1.3	0.6	0.8	0.8					

(*) The 25 countries where data for both cohorts 1950 and 1970 (males and females) are known. (a) Cohort 1987: united Germany. FSI: first sexual intercourse. LSI: last sexual intercourse. Sources: see appendix.

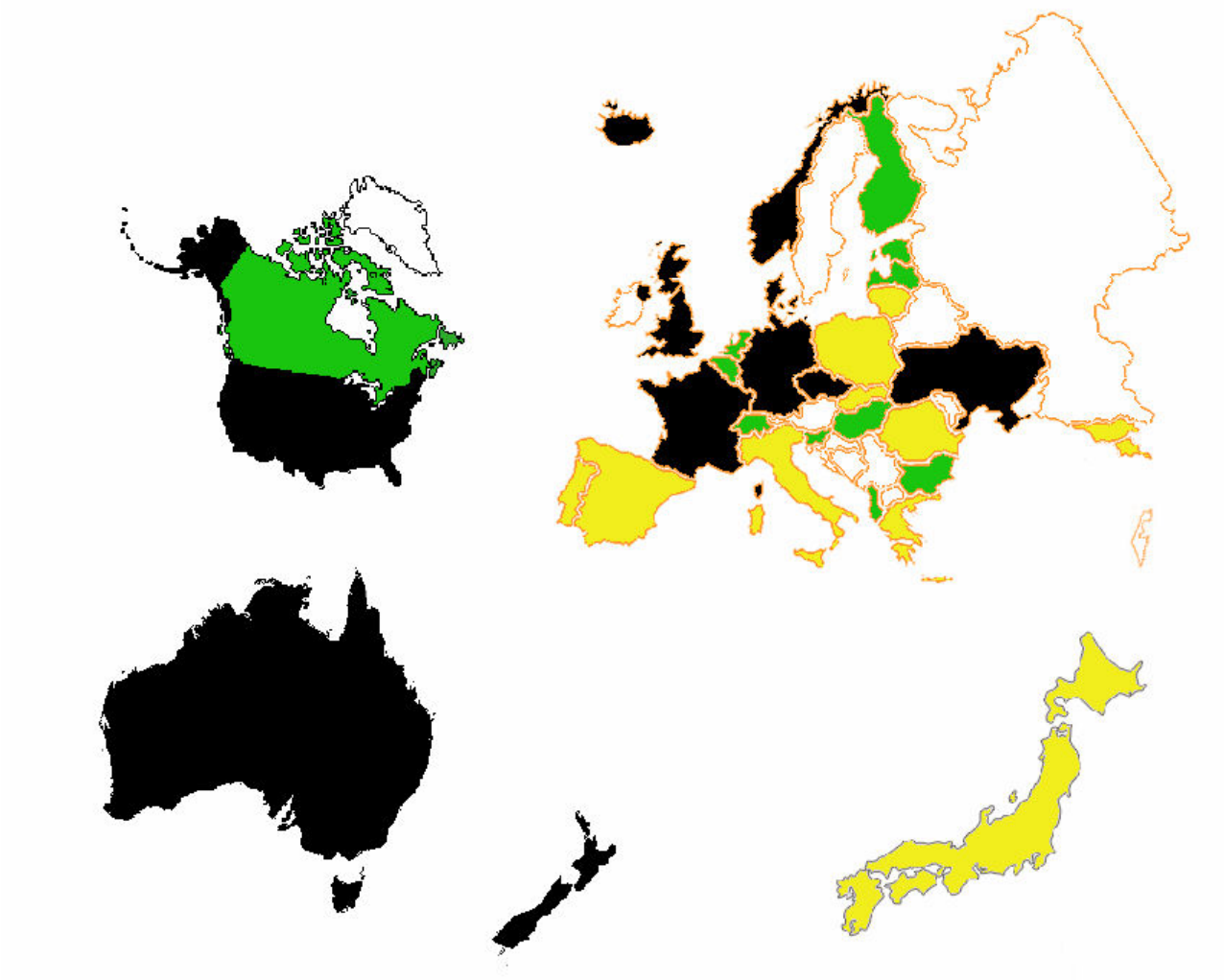
Figure 1: Median age at first intercourse: F cohorts born around 1950



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	20.0 – 21.5
	19.1 – 19.9
	18.0 – 19.0

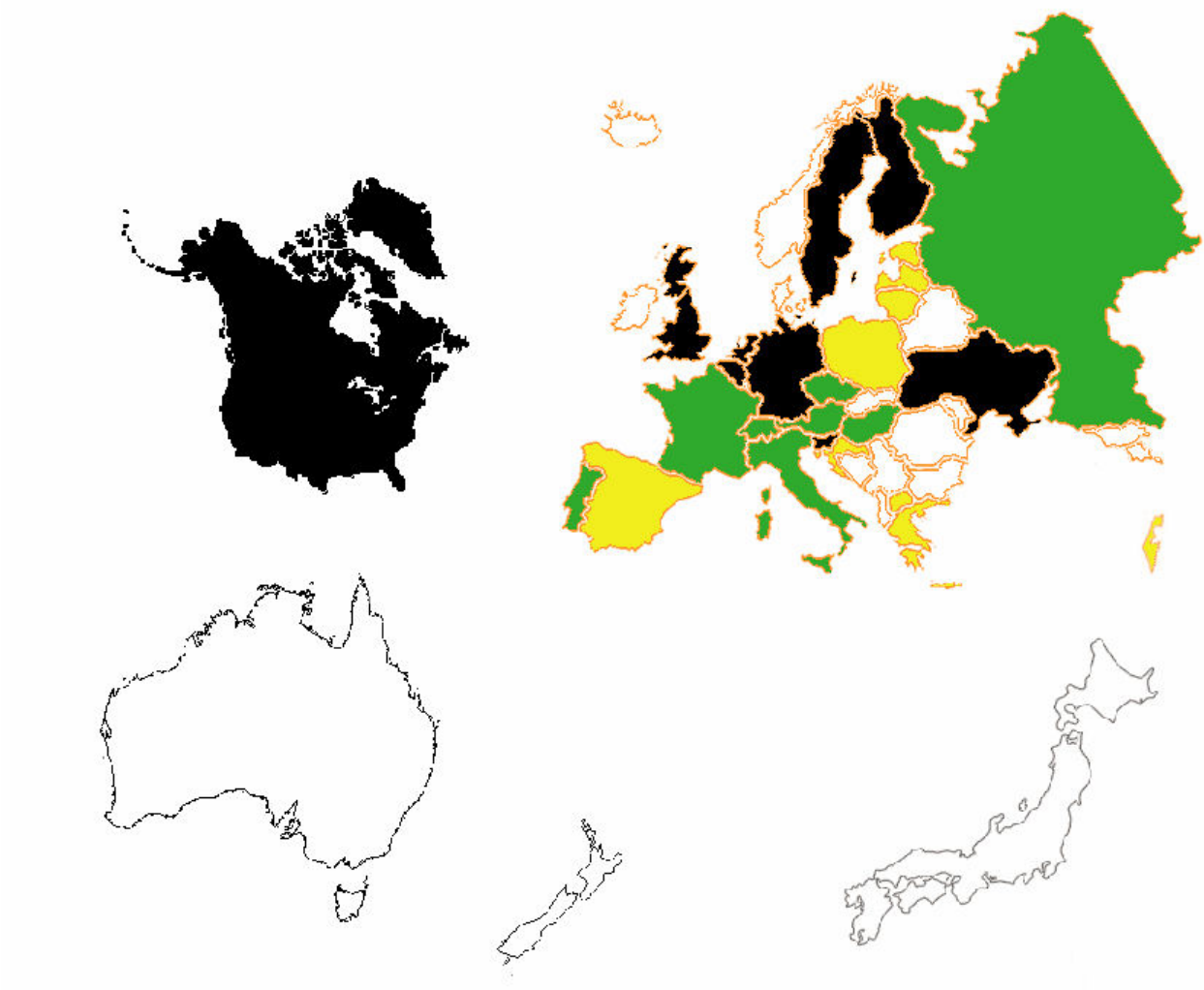
Figure 2: Median age at first intercourse: F cohorts born around 1970



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	18.8 – 20.9
	17.9 – 18.7
	16.6 – 17.8

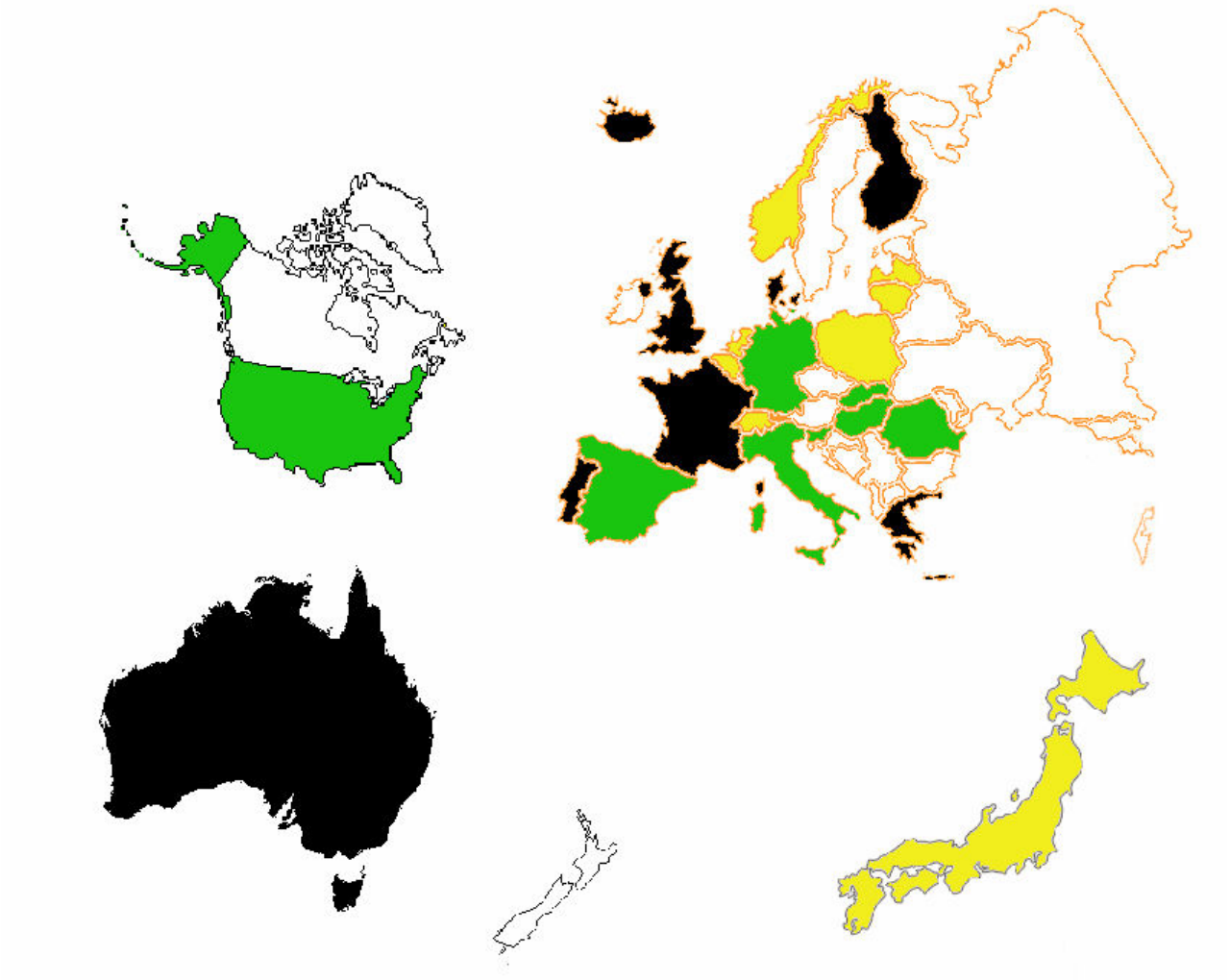
Figure 3: Percentage of young people who had intercourse at age 15.5: F cohorts born around 1987



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	3.6 – 15.8
	16.4 – 20.6
	21.6 – 78.8

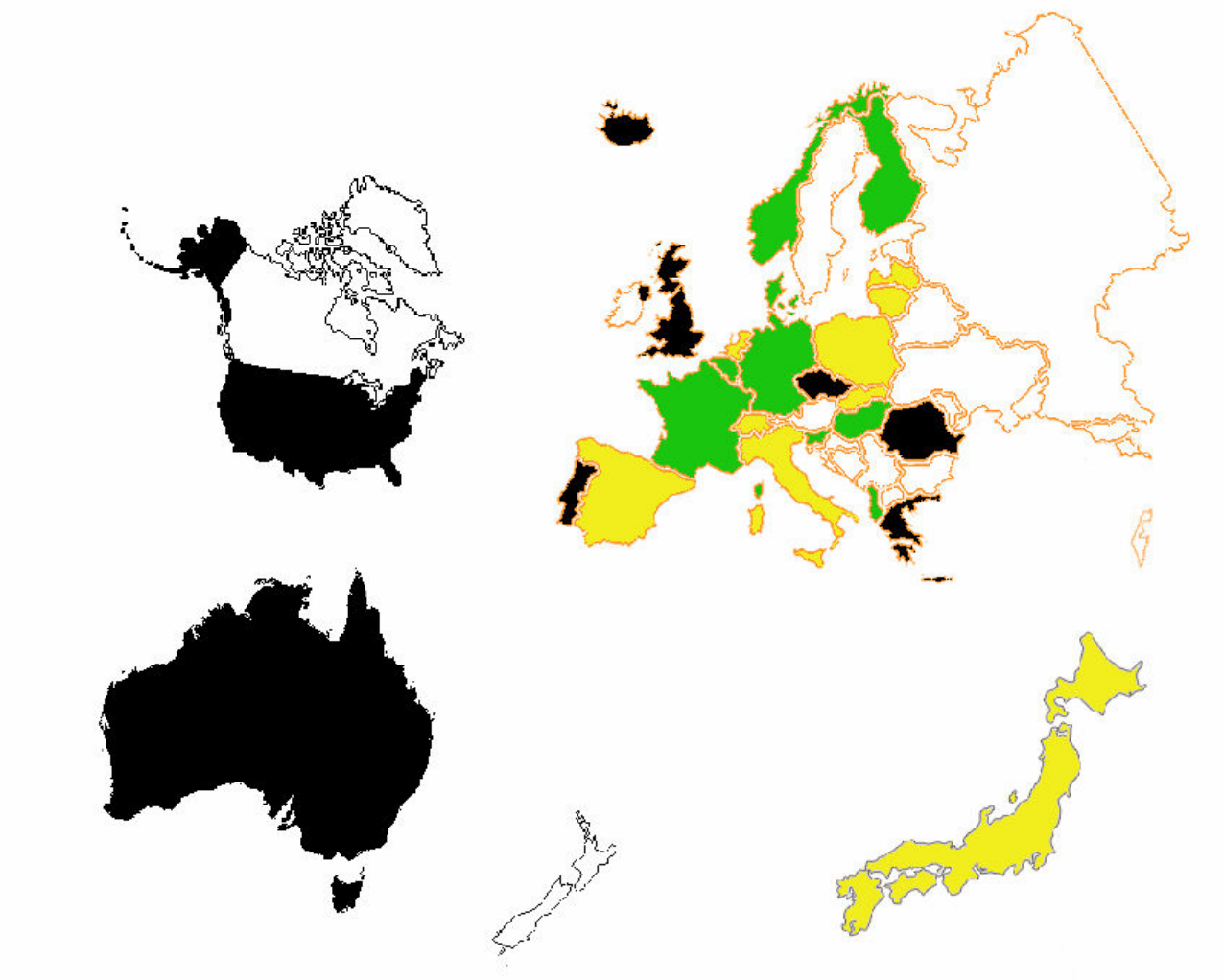
Figure 4: Median age at first intercourse: M cohorts born around 1950



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	18.8 – 20.4
	18.3 – 18.6
	17.4 – 18.2

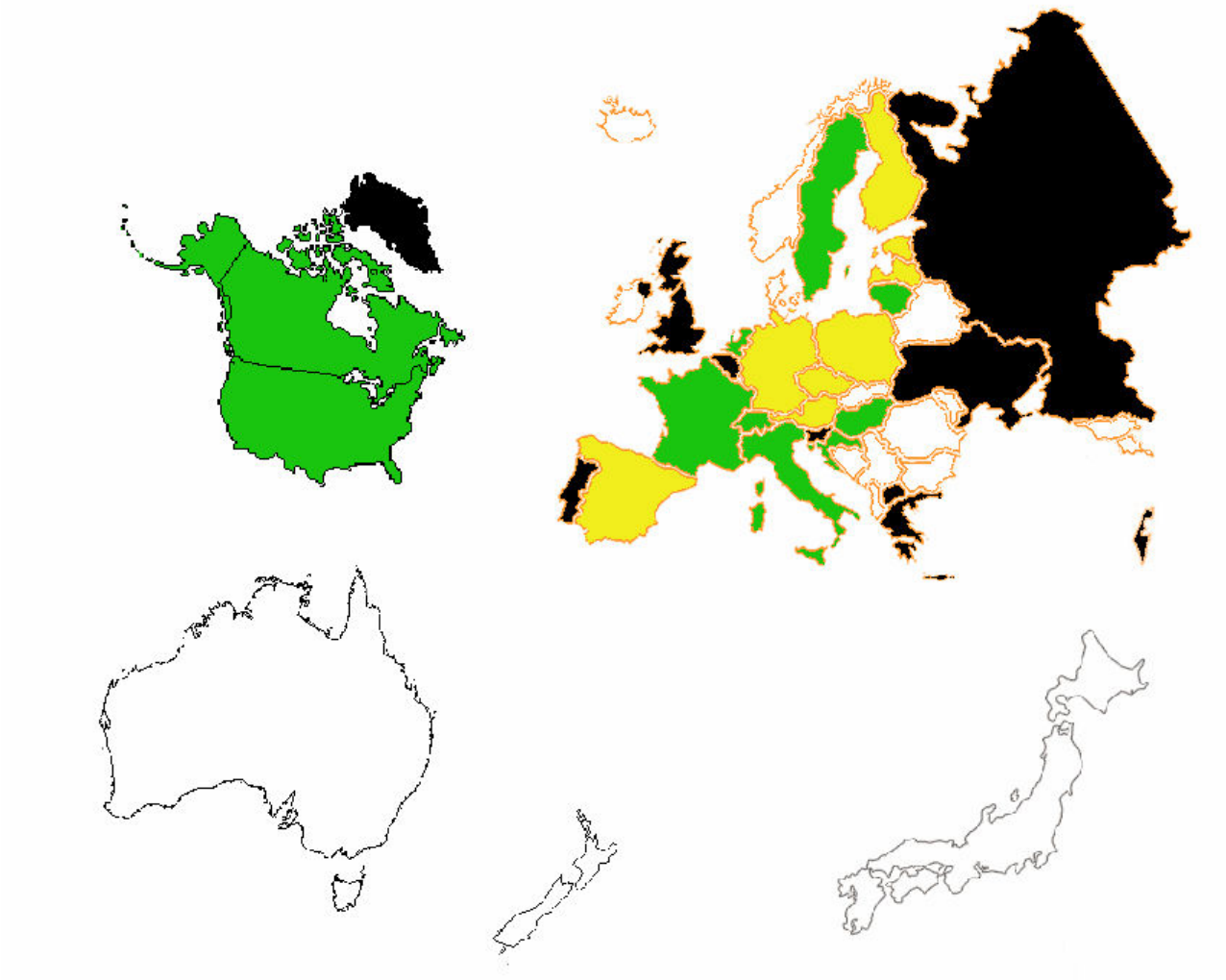
Figure 5: Median age at first intercourse: M cohorts born around 1970



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	18.2 – 19.7
	17.7 – 18.1
	16.6 – 17.4

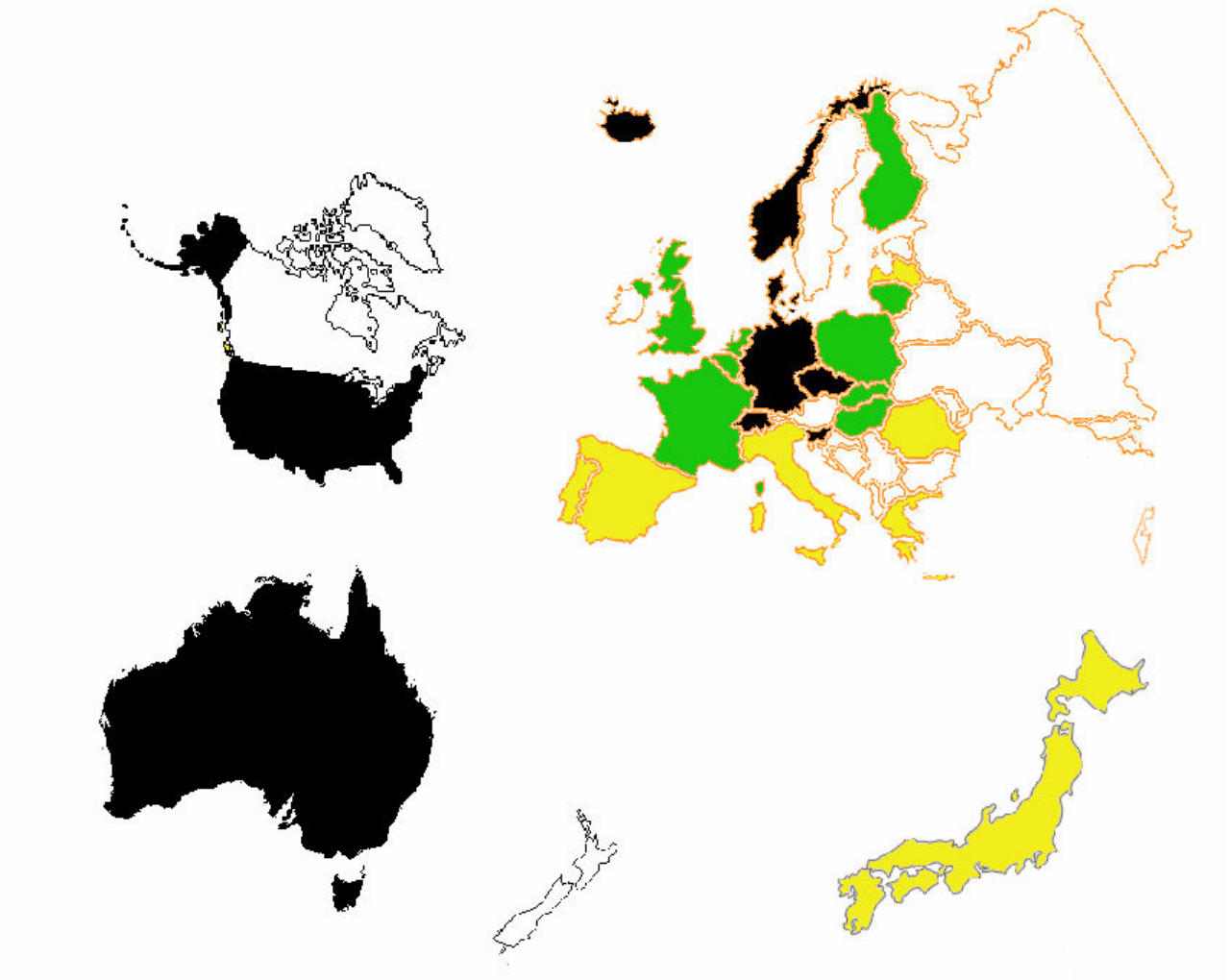
Figure 6: Percentage of young people who had intercourse at age 15.5: M cohorts born around 1987



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	18.0 – 23.3
	24.2 – 27.2
	30.2 – 70.8

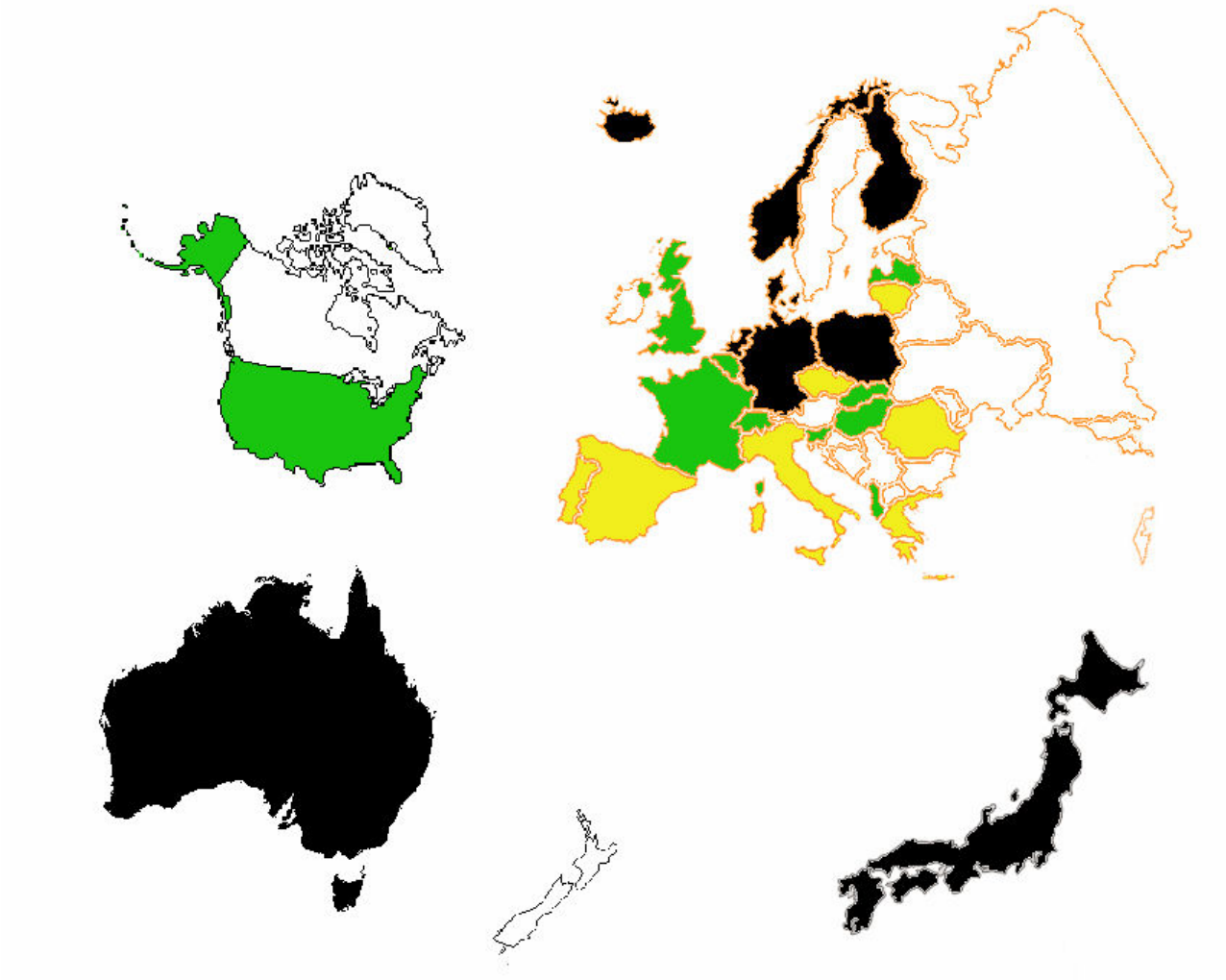
Figure 7: Difference in median age at first intercourse (F vs. M): cohorts born around 1950



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	1.5 – 4.0 years
	0.6 – 1.2 years
	0.0 – 0.5 years

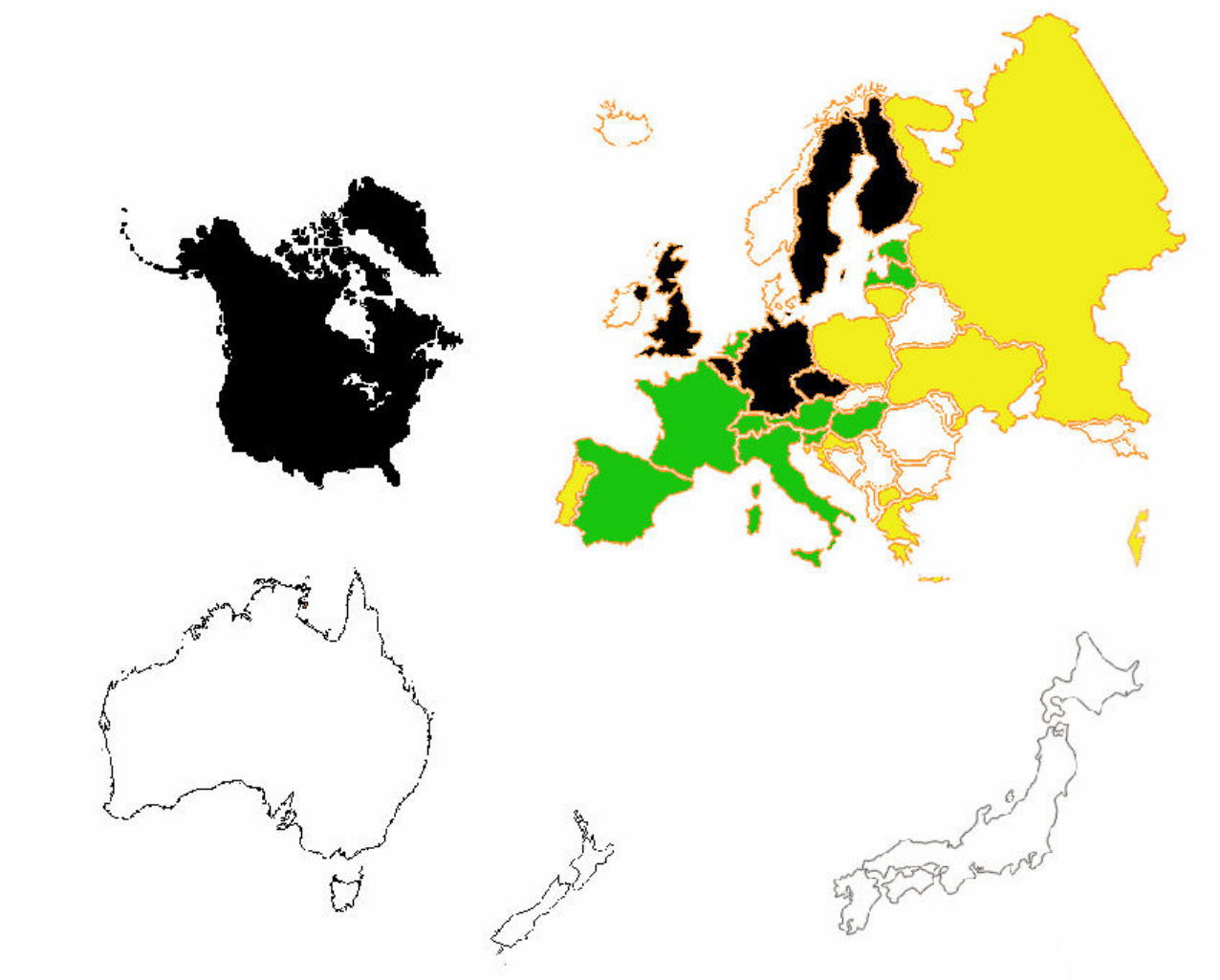
Figure 8: Difference in median age at first intercourse (F vs. M): cohorts born around 1970



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	0.6 – 2.4 years
	0.1 – 0.5 years
	-0.7 – 0.0 years

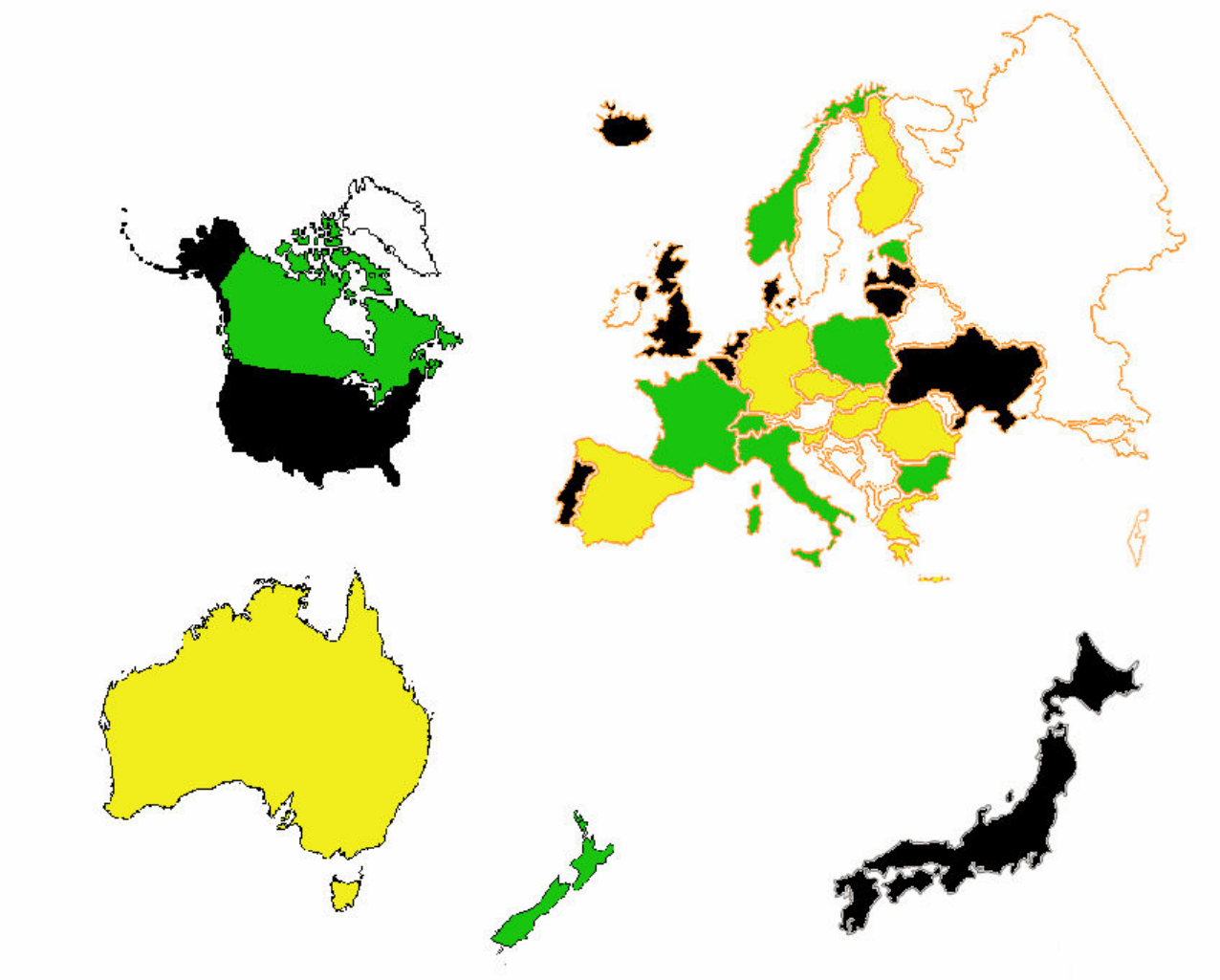
Figure 9: Difference in percentage of young people who had intercourse at age 15.5 (M vs. F): cohorts born around 1987



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	9.9 – 33.8 %
	2.6 – 9.2 %
	-11.0 – 2.4 %

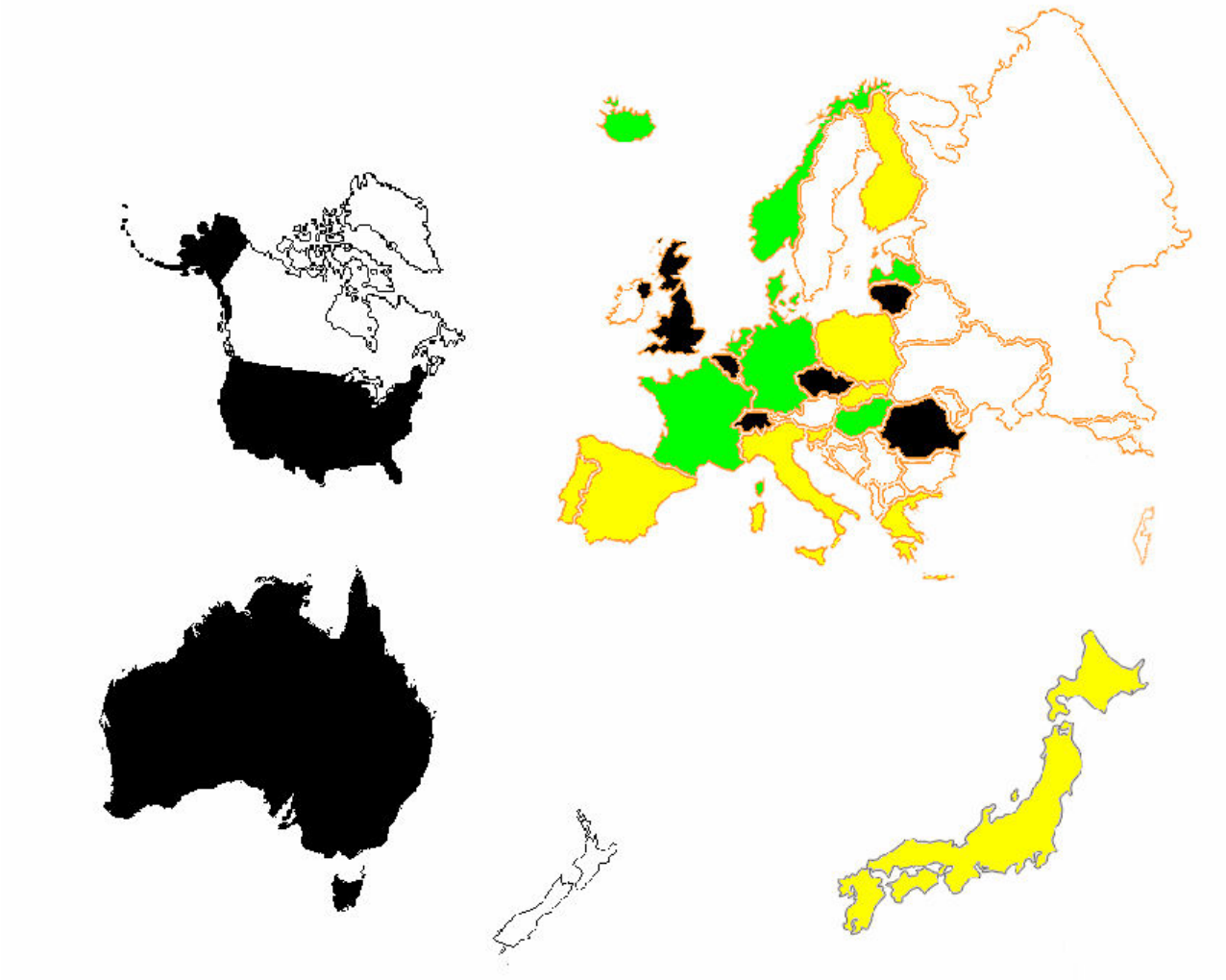
Figure 10: Difference in median age at first intercourse: F cohorts born around 1950 and 1970



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	0.6 – 1.0 years
	1.1 – 1.3 years
	1.4 – 2.3 years

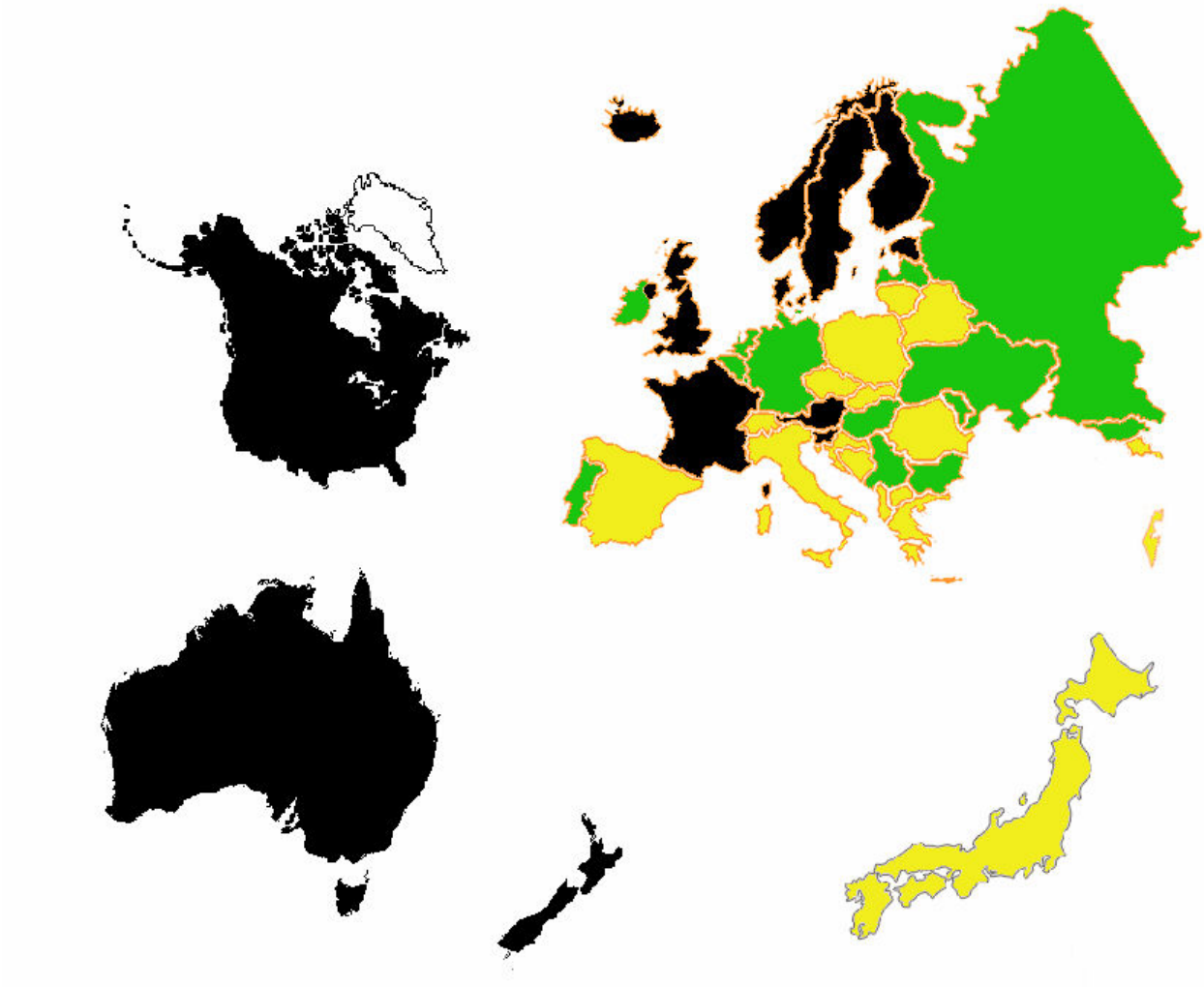
Figure 11: Difference in median age at first intercourse: M cohorts born around 1950 and 1970



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

	No data
	0.0 – 0.4 years
	0.5 – 0.9 years
	1.0 – 1.8 years

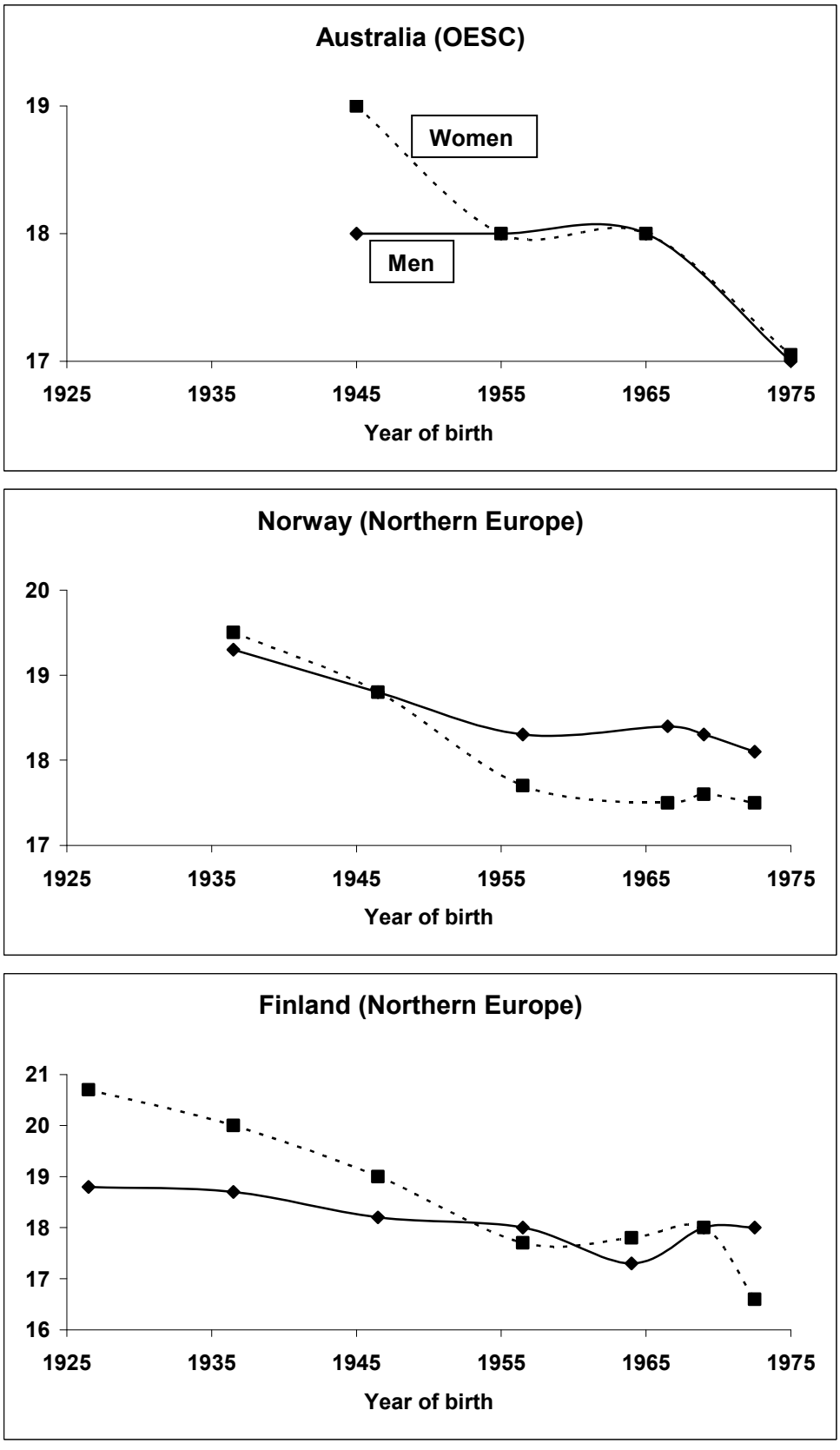
Figure 12: Percentage of extra-marital births around 1990



Three categories with roughly the same number of countries

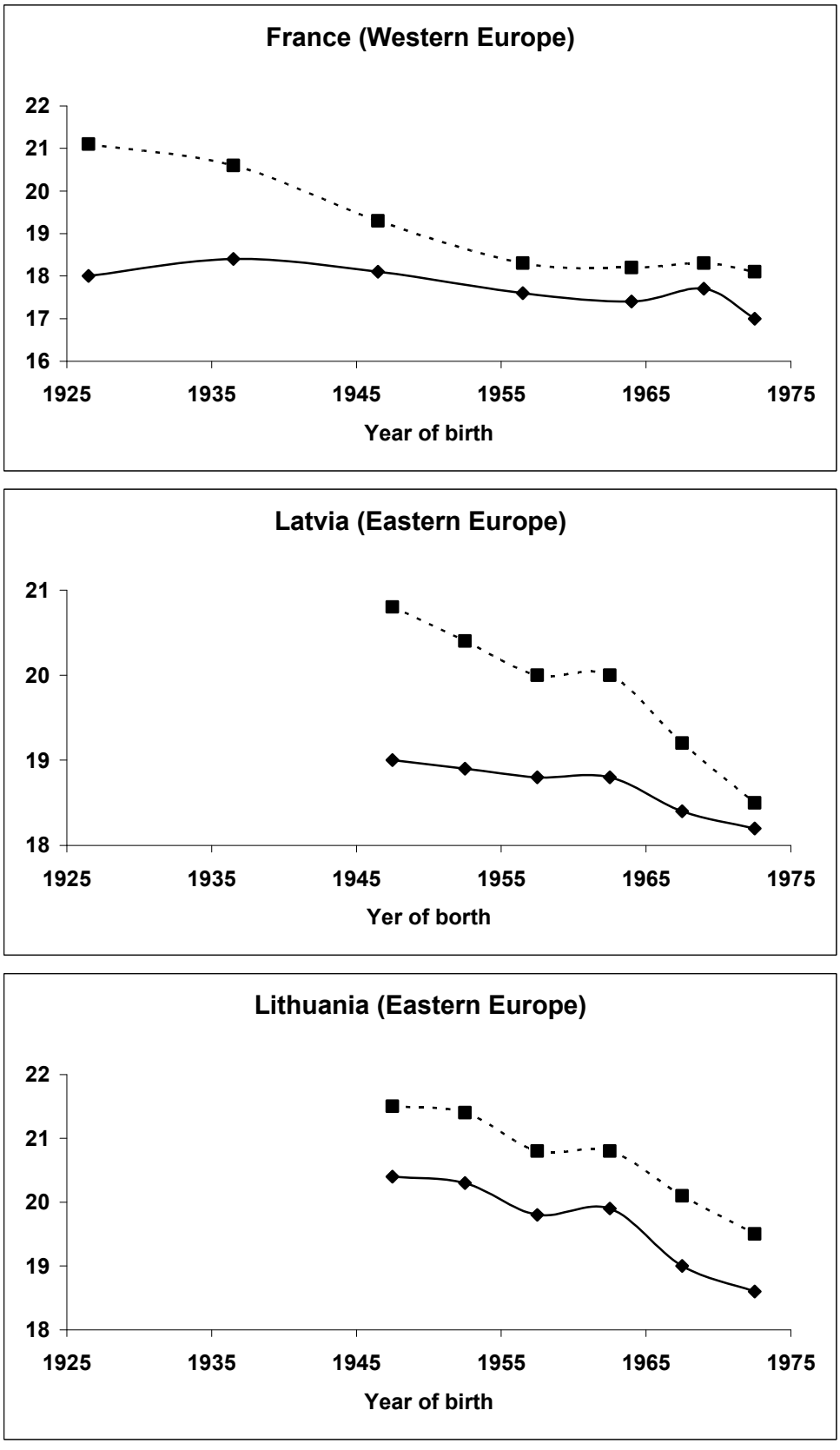
	No data
	1.0 – 9.6 %
	11.1 – 18.2
	23.6 – 55.2

Figure 13. Pattern of median age at first sexual intercourse in some developed countries



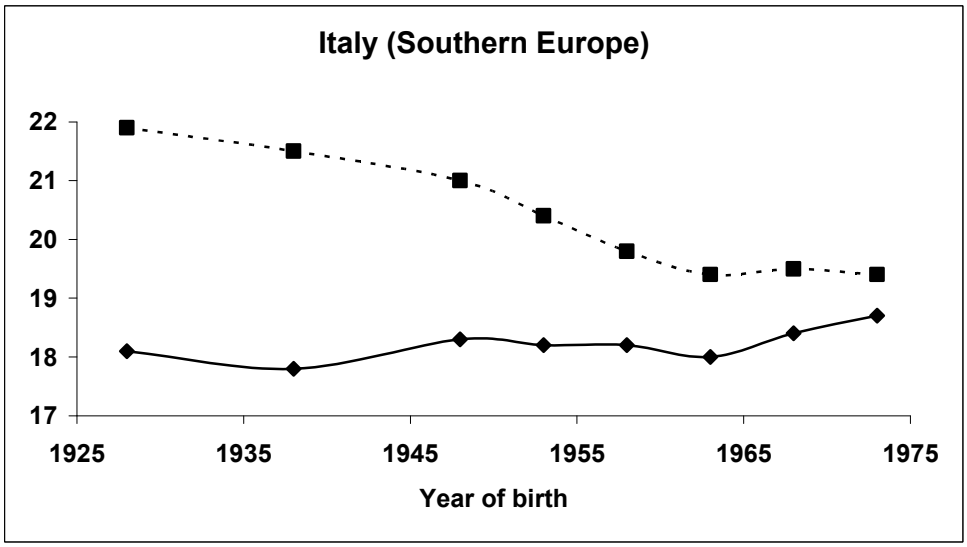
(continue)

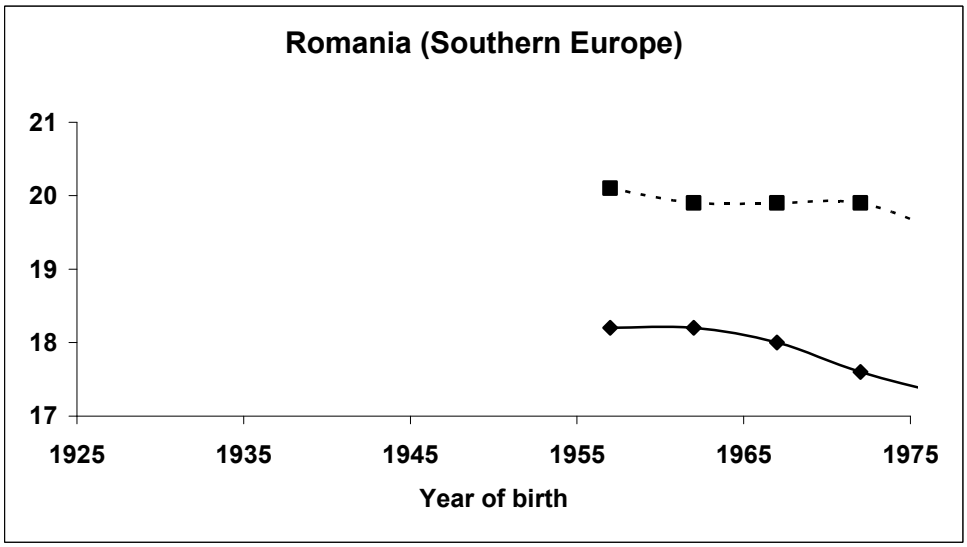
Figure 13 (continued)



(continue)

Figure 13 (continued)





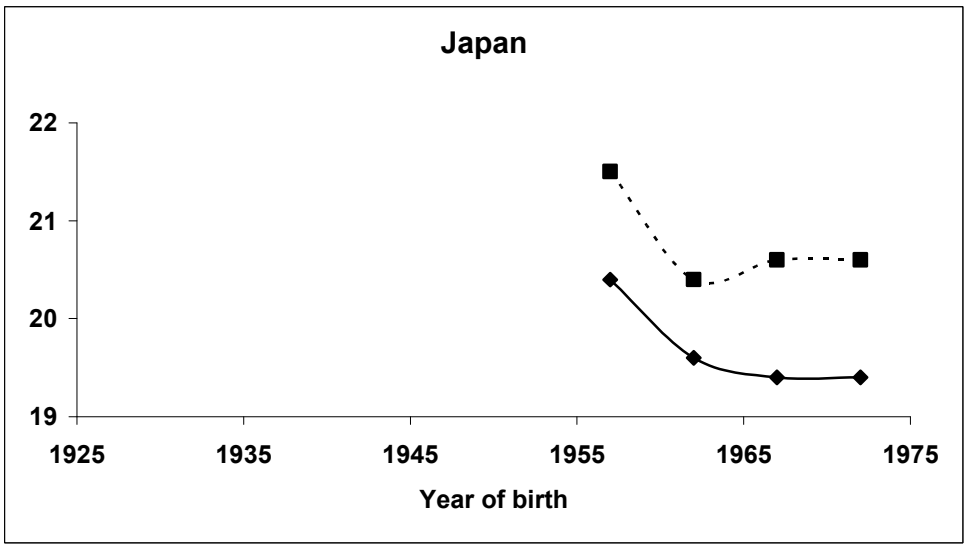
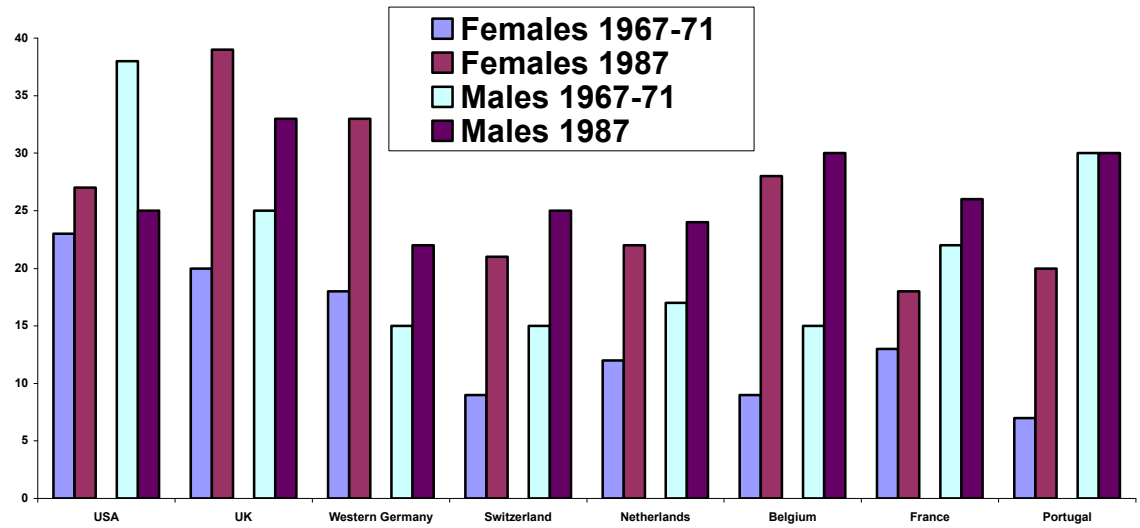


Table 2. Proportion of people who had the first sexual intercourse before age 16 (cohort 1967-71) and before the exact age 15.5 (cohort 1987). Males and females of some developed countries

	Females		Males		M – F		1987 – 1967-71	
	1967-71	1987	1967-71	1987	1967-71	1987	F	M
USA (non Hisp. black)	33	37	63	48	30	11	4	-15
USA (non Hisp. white)	20	26	33	17	13	-9	6	-16
Finland	18	31	20	23	2	-8	13	3
UK	20	39	25	33	5	-6	19	8
Western Germany	18	33	15	22	-3	-11	15	7
Switzerland	9	21	15	25	6	4	12	10
Netherlands	12	22	17	24	5	2	10	7
Belgium	9	28	15	30	6	2	11	15
France	13	18	22	26	9	8	5	4
Portugal	7	20	30	30	23	10	13	0
25th percentile (A) (*)	9	20	15	22	2	-9	6	0
Median (B) (*)	13	28	20	25	6	2	12	7
75th percentile (C) (*)	20	33	30	33	13	8	15	10
(C) – (A)	11	13	15	11	11	17	9	10

(*) Non Hisp. US black are not considered for these indices *Sources: cohort 1967-71, Bozon and Kontula, 1998; cohort 1987, Currie et al., 2004. For USA, cohorts 1972 and 1986, Abma et al. 2004.*

Figure 14. Proportion of people who had the first sexual intercourse before the 16th birthday (cohort 1967-71) and before the exact age 15.5 (cohort 1987)



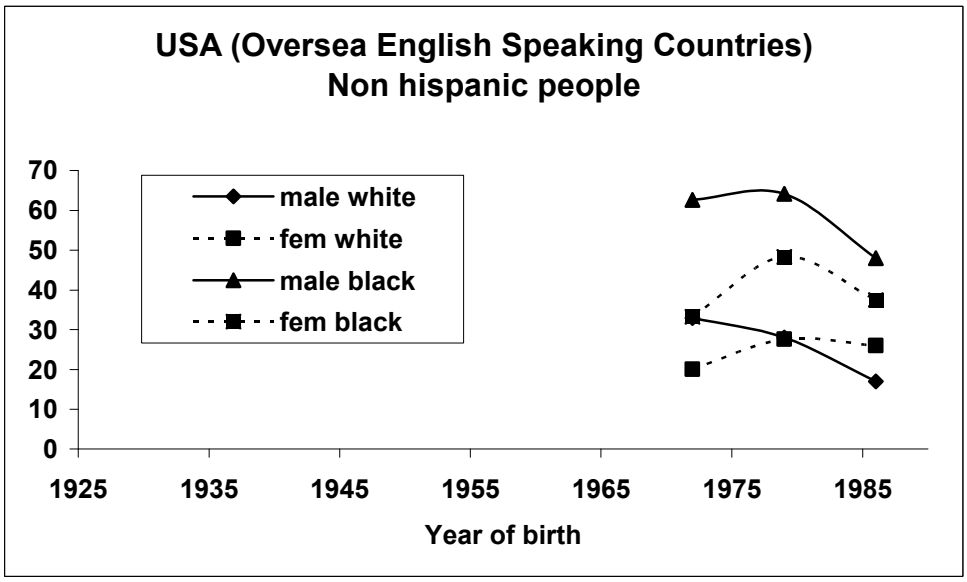
Source: see table 4.

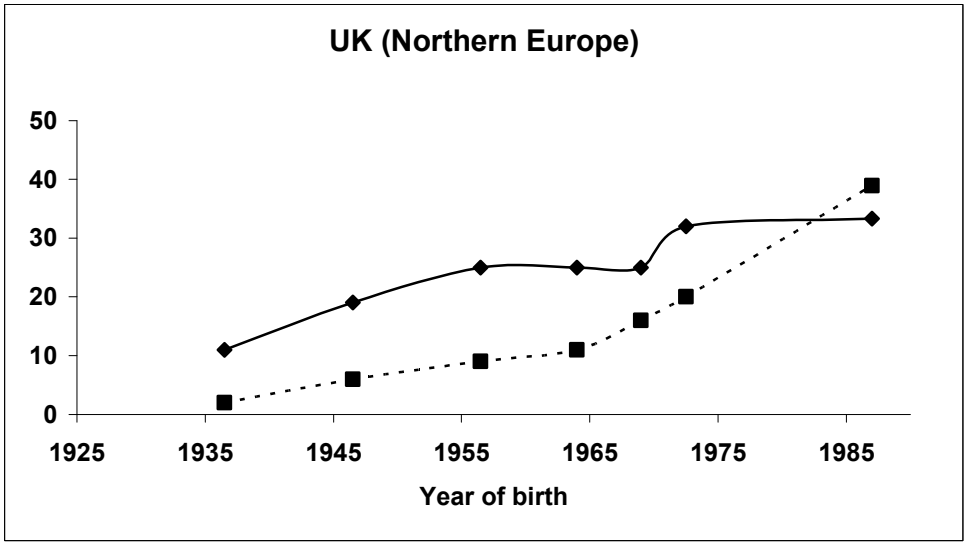
Table 3. Some data on sex of cohorts born in 1982 and 1987

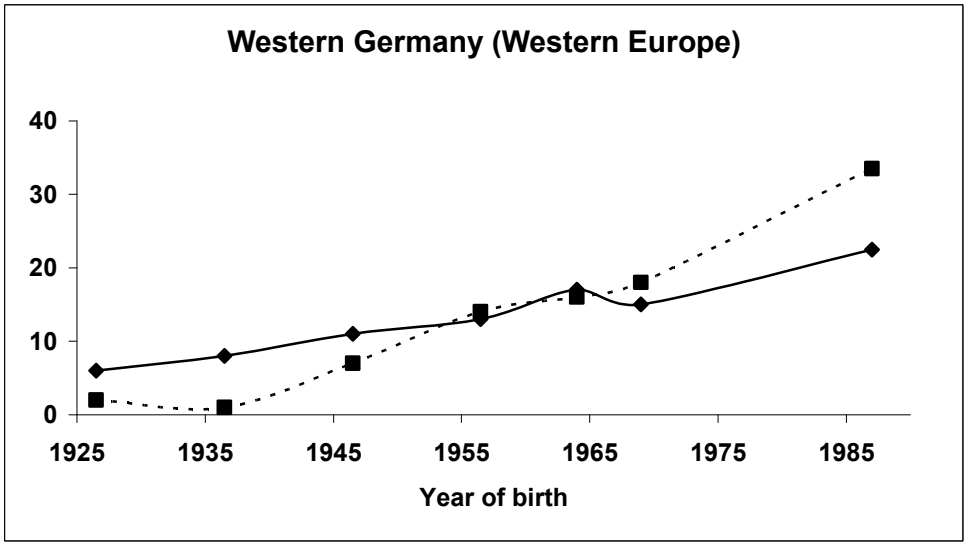
	% first sexual intercourse < age 15.5								% using contraception at last intercourse			
	Cohort 1982		Cohort 1987		Males – Females		1987 – 1982		Females		Males	
	F	M	F	M	1982	1987	F	M	1982	1987	1982	1987
USA	38	38	27	25	0	-2	-11	-7	85	74	83	82
Scotland	37	33	33	35	-4	2	-4	2	75	63	79	76
Finland	30	23	31	23	-7	-8	1	0	91	59	88	73
France	20	30	18	26	10	8	-2	-4	98	77	89	87
Hungary	34	47	16	25	13	9	-18	-22	72	72	69	84
Latvia	19	36	14	22	17	8	-5	-14	67	77	75	81
Poland	13	30	9	21	17	12	-4	-9	79	72	85	73
Israel	11	44	10	32	33	22	-1	-12	73(*)	74	81(*)	89

(*) Only condom. *Source: WHO data in Currie et al. (2000 and 2004).*

Figure 15. Proportion of people who had the first sexual intercourse before the 16th birthday (cohort 1925-75) and before the exact age 15.5 (cohort 1987)

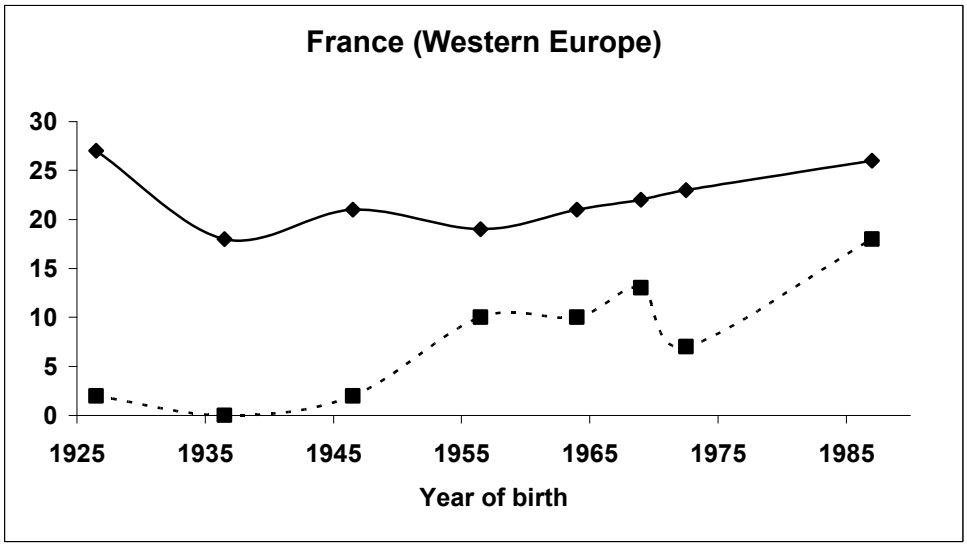


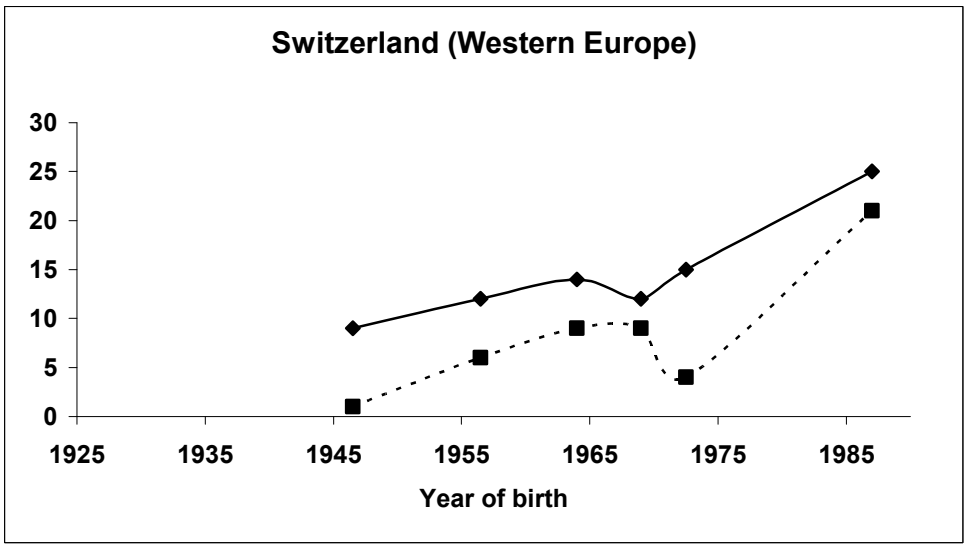


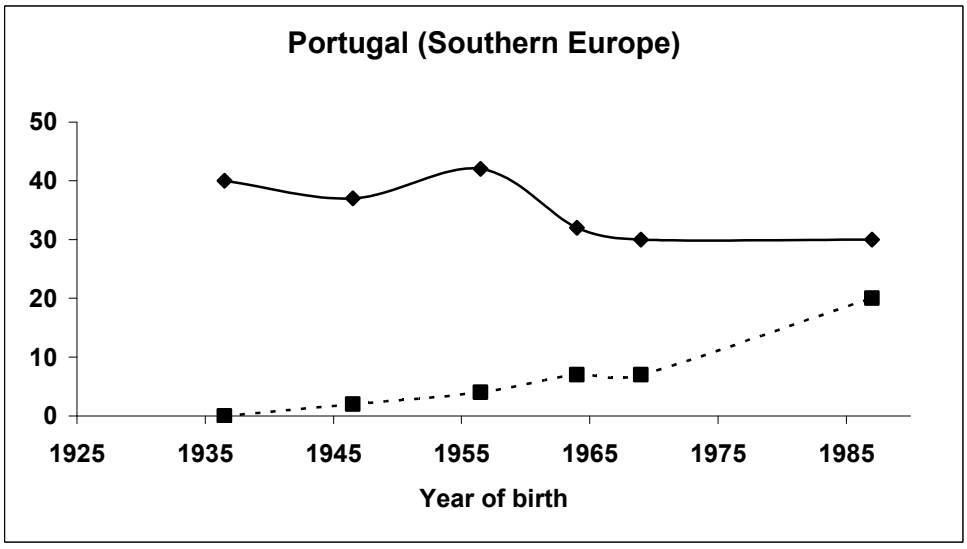


(continue)

Figure 15 (continued)







Appendix

Main data for cohorts born before 1975

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