The Evolution of Fertility in Europe: a Parity Analysis.

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Short abstract

Total fertility had continuously decreased in Europe since the end of the 1960s until mid 1990s, and has remained almost stable since. We will show that this evolution is mainly due to the role of two factors: the postponement of the age at first childbearing and the rise of childlessness. On the contrary, we will show that the change in the fertility of families, or parents, was much less instrumental in the decrease of total fertility. This will lead us to argue that change in fertility by parity are in fact more important in explaining low fertility in Europe than the variation of fertility tempo.

Abstract

Total fertility had continuously decreased in Europe since the end of the 1960s until mid 1990s, and has remained almost stable since. We intend to show that this evolution is mainly due to the role of two factors: the postponement of the age at first childbearing and the rise of childlessness. On the contrary, we will show that the change in the fertility of families, or parents, was much less instrumental in the decrease of total fertility. The fertility of parents is even increasing in the recent period in some Western and Northern European countries, while childlessness is still growing, and the latter evolution explains why total fertility is now stagnant.

These observations will lead us to ask whether it is wise to focus only on tempo factors in order to explain low fertility in Europe. We will show that in fact fertility of families has remained almost stable since the 1970s, and that total fertility is very low nowadays in Europe due to factors related with the decision of when and whether to become a parent.

At the analytical level we will use birth data by order to calculate cohort and period parity progression ratio. We will then apply variance decomposition methods in order to quantify the role of each parity in the variation of total fertility, by cohort and by period.