

Extended Abstract, prepared for EPC 2024

Value Change, Uncertainty and Voluntary Childlessness?

The Development of Ideal Family Size in Austria

Bernhard Riederer, Vienna Institute of Demography (OeAW), Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, OeAW, University of Vienna)

Isabella Buber-Ennser, Vienna Institute of Demography (OeAW), Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, OeAW, University of Vienna)

Ingrid Setz, Vienna Institute of Demography (OeAW), Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, OeAW, University of Vienna)

Short Abstract

The two-child family ideal is still prevalent across Europe. Nevertheless, research suggests that family norms are weakening and that intentional childlessness/childfreeness is gaining relevance. To describe the development of childbearing ideals in Austria, we employ data from thirteen different surveys conducted between 1986 and 2022/23. We explore both societal and personal childbearing ideals. In-depth analyses comprising multinomial regression and decomposition models focus on the subsample of 19- to 29-year-olds. Descriptive results demonstrate that the persistent dominance of the two-child ideal masks relevant changes beneath the surface. An increasing proportion of young adults does not name an ideal number of children at the societal level and tends towards a personal ideal of zero children. Both figures clearly peaked during the COVID-19-pandemic. Findings indicate that uncertainty about the societal ideal is stronger among the childless and the highly educated. A personal ideal of less than two children is more common among the childless, the lower educated, the unemployed, and persons who report a societal ideal below two or do not name a societal ideal. The increasing uncertainty about the societal ideal seems to be an important driver of the decreasing personal ideal family size. These developments are likely related to changes in values and uncertainty due to current crises (e.g., climate change). Finally, our results also have implications for the future phrasing of questions about fertility ideals. Uncertainties and opinions that there is no ideal number of children should be adequately considered.

Keywords

Fertility, ideal family size, two-child norm, social change, Austria

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Introduction

Despite substantial variations in family policies and prevailing gender roles (Billingsley and Ferrarini 2014; Panova and Buber-Ennser 2016), the two-child family ideal is widespread in Europe and the US (Gustavus and Nam 1970; Hagewen and Morgan 2005; Hilevych and Rusterholz 2018; Sobotka and Beaujouan 2014). The dominance of the two-child family ideal is surprising, in particular in low fertility countries like Austria. It would be plausible to assume that persistently low fertility rates lead to lower fertility ideals, at least among the younger generation (Goldstein, Lutz, and Testa 2003; Testa and Grilli 2006).

However, it has been repeatedly shown that the link between fertility ideals, childbearing intentions, actual fertility behaviour, and observable birth rates is not as straightforward as it seems (e.g., Harknett and Hartnett 2014; Morgan and Rackin 2010; Trent 1980). In particular, fertility ideals should be assumed to reflect individual and collective norms and values rather than concrete fertility plans. They have to be distinguished from more concrete fertility intentions which are influenced by own desires and ideals as well as perceived attitudes and beliefs of others (Ajzen and Klobas 2013; Bachrach and Morgan 2013; Miller 2011). Furthermore, societal ideals refer to societal expectations of the ideal number of children within a community whereas fertility desires refer to the ideal number of children respondents themselves would like to have (under ideal circumstances). Reflecting often deeply rooted societal norms, societal ideals are more independent of actual living conditions and thus largely unaffected by short-term changes (Kuhnt, Kreyenfeld, and Trappe 2017; Philipov and Bernardi 2012; Trent 1980). If societal ideals change, they are likely to mirror broader social developments.

Although there has been early evidence of decreasing fertility desires in Austria (Goldstein, Lutz, and Testa 2003), these results could not be confirmed in later studies (e.g., Philipov and Bernardi 2012). Recent research has shown that fertility intentions and desires slightly decreased in the US (Hartnett and Gemmill 2020) and Finland (Savelieva et al. 2021), respectively. Societal ideals, however, are still somewhat different. As already Blake (1966: 172) noticed, not even dramatic historic events such as the Great depression or World War II led to substantive changes in the ideal family size in the US. Instead, societal fertility ideals were only slightly adapted to societal circumstances. In times when people are confronted with an uncertain future and previously unknown threats (like climate change, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, war, inflationary pressures), the question arises whether and how fertility ideals, both societal and personal, are affected nowadays. Against this background, we explore stability and change in societal and personal childbearing ideals in Austria between 1986 and 2022/23.

Data and Methods

Our data comprises information from thirteen surveys, including four waves of the Social Survey Austria (SSA 1986, 1993, 2003, 2016), three waves of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP 1988, 1994, 2013), three waves of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGG 2008, 2012 and 2022/23), as well as single waves of the European Values Study (EVS 1990), the Family and Fertility Survey (FFS 1996), and the Austrian Microcensus/Labor Force Survey (LFS 2021). The LFS 2021 is of particular relevance, since its field phase took place during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. All surveys provide representative samples of the Austrian population and offer respective weights for analyses. We study both societal ideal number of children (reflecting perceived social norms, societal expectation) and personal ideal number of children (subjective norm, desires). Societal ideals have

been assessed in all surveys whereas information on personal ideals are only available in the GGS and the LFS.

First, we provide analysis for respondents aged 19–80 years. The mean sample size is 3,037 but case numbers vary considerably, ranging from 918 (ISSP 1994) to 14,382 (LFS 2021). Second, we focus on young adults (19–29 years). Over the life course, changing life circumstances and experiences affect the personal ideal number of children (Gray, Evans, and Reimondos 2013; Heiland et al. 2008). Ideals of the younger generations are thus more likely to reflect normative aspects of societal development. In addition, they are of particular interest because several authors expect them to decline as a consequence of persistent low fertility (Goldstein, Lutz and Testa 2003; Testa and Grilli 2006). In our analyses, we compare figures obtained with valid answers (i.e. concrete ideal numbers) and figures obtained if we include those not answering or giving nonnumerical answers (i.e. "Don't know" or "There is no ideal number of children; it depends").

More detailed analyses are conducted for the subsample of the 19- to 29-year-olds. Exploring the reasons for changes over time, we will make use of multinomial regression and decomposition models. In these analyses, trends like the educational expansion, the secularization, or the increase in single households and migrant populations shall be linked to changes in fertility ideals.

Selected Findings (Summary)

Societal Ideal

At the societal level, the two-child norm is dominating in the observed three and a half decades. Analysing valid numbers, between 63 and 76 % of respondents in main childbearing age (19-44) regard two children as the ideal number of children for an Austrian family. However, we gain further insights if we take numerical and nonnumerical responses into account, thus including missing answers as well as “don’t know” and “there is no ideal” answers. The two-child norm is still dominating but, overall, decreasing during the last 36/37 years. The reason is an increasing share of respondents reporting no ideal number of children, peaking in times of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 (see Figure 1 for the age group 19-29). The general trend, however, is highly robust. First, it is observable across all age groups (19-80). Second, it remains significant when we exclude the surveys that explicitly allow for alternative answers that result in a higher share of "unknown" ideals (including the LFS 2021, i.e. the peak). Third, it is also observable in the subgroup of surveys that did allow for additional nonnumerical options to answer. In other words, the general trend is observable whether we include the surveys with additional nonnumerical options to answer or not.

Using collapsed observation periods (1986-2003, 2008-2016, 2021-2022) allows to control for differences in question phrasing and survey mode. The wording of the questions for societal ideals slightly differed across surveys. The core wording used in all surveys except the FFS is “What do you think is the ideal number of children for a family?”. Some surveys added a few words (e.g. “for a family in Austria” in GGS and LFS) or a second question (e.g. “Father, mother and how many children?” in early SSA waves). First results show hardly any effects on answering behaviour with two notable exceptions: The share of respondents not reporting an ideal number is larger if the option “There is no societal ideal” is available and if computer assisted web interviews (CAWI) were used instead of personal interviews.¹ Nevertheless, the controls do not affect the observed change over time. Further exploration of this increase in the share of respondents reporting no ideal number of

¹ Personal interviews refer to paper-and-pencil personal interviews (PAPI), computer assisted personal interviews (CAPI), and computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI).

children is work in progress. It is planned to consider changes in education, employment, household size, housing, parity (non-parents vs. parents for the age group 19-29), religiosity, the share of immigrants, health, and income (variables are available in most of the surveys).

First multinomial regression models allow for the following insights: Reported societal ideals differ by gender, partnership status, parenthood status, education, employment, citizenship, and place of residence. Female respondents, childless respondents, highly educated, and third-country citizens stated more frequently that there is no ideal number of children for families in Austria. Unemployed individuals and those living alone or with a partner reported more often ideals below the two-child norm (than employed respondents and those still living with their parents, respectively).

Finally, another descriptive finding stands out: If the option “There is no societal ideal” is available, almost all nonnumerical answers refer to this option while “I do not know” or simple non-response do not matter at all. This should be considered in the future phrasing of questions about fertility ideals.

Personal Ideal

The share of the 19- to 29-year old Austrians who perceive being childfree as personal ideal slightly increased during the last decade (Figure 2). Figures peak in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, with 11% among the 19- to 24-year olds in 2021. With further 7 % regarding one child as their personal ideal, we find that in 2021, a total of 18 % report personal ideal family sizes below the two-child norm. Among individuals in the mid- and late twenties, this figure amounts to 17 %, with having one child being slightly more relevant than for 19- to 24-year olds. In 2022/23, figures are more similar than in 2012. But it seems that there has been a shift within the group of ideals below two: an increase in those reporting being childfree as an ideal opposed by a decrease in those reporting a one-child ideal.

Personal ideals also vary by gender, parenthood status, education, employment, citizenship, and place of residence. Parents, highly educated, and third-country citizens report less often personal ideals below two children whereas unemployed report them more often. In particular, however, personal ideals differ by the reported societal ideal: Unsurprisingly, those with societal ideals below two children are more likely to hold personal ideals below two whereas those with societal ideals above two children are more likely to hold personal ideals above two. Those who state that there is no ideal number at the societal level are less likely to follow the two-child norm and more likely to hold both personal ideals below and above two children. Decomposition analyses (2012 vs. 2021) suggest that the increase of those who do not name a societal ideal cannot be explained by compositional changes. However, they also indicate that the observed changes in societal ideals may be largely responsible for the increasing spread of personal ideals below the two-child norm.

Overall, our findings indicate that there has been change in societal ideals as the number of respondents who cannot or do not want to name a concrete ideal number of children has increased. This may be a sign of a weakening of social norms and/ or higher (contemporary) uncertainty due to anthropogenic climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic. These change in societal ideals seems also to affect personal ideals.

Figure 1: The Development of the Societal Ideal Number of Children in Austria among the 19–29 years old since the 1980s

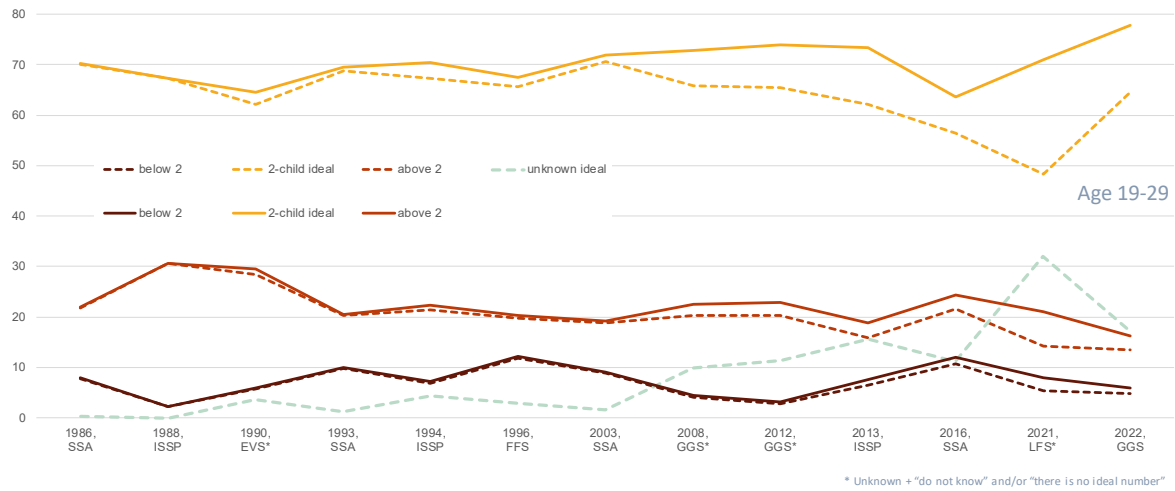
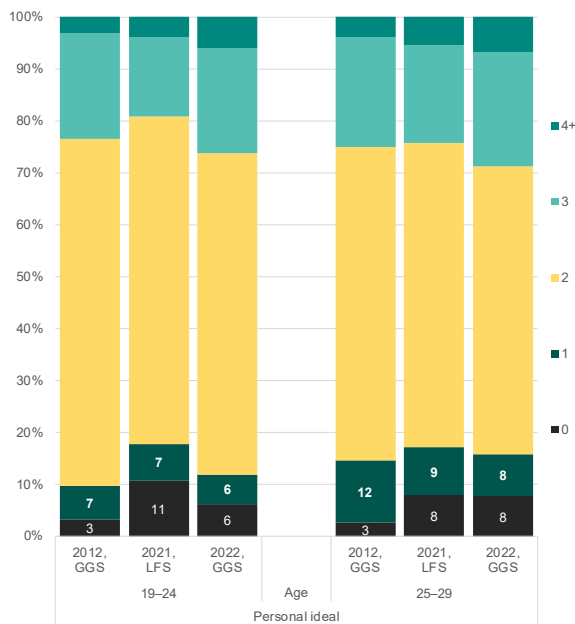


Figure 2: The Personal Ideal Number of Children in Austria among the 19–29 years old in 2012 and 2021/2022



Abbreviations:

- SSA = Social Survey Austria 1986, 1993, 2003, 2016
- ISSP = International Social Survey Programme 1988, 1994, 2013
- EVS = European Values Study 1990
- FFS = Family and Fertility Survey 1996
- GGS = Generations and Gender Survey 2008, 2012, 2022
- LFS = Austrian Microcensus/Labour Force Survey 2021

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