



Longer time spent in education means starting families later in life

The most prominent change in childbearing in developed societies in the last few decades is that women are having their first child at a later average age. This briefing paper provides a summary explanation for this widespread but poorly understood demographic trend. The change in the timing of motherhood has been due mainly to a longer time spent in education, but also to life course delays after the end of education. The age at which people complete their education is crucial to the demographic analysis of events in young adulthood. The findings highlight the key role played by structural, as distinct from cultural, factors in the timetable of fertility and family life over the past several decades in developed societies. They also identify educational participation as a potentially useful predictor in forecasting fertility. The research in this briefing paper was undertaken by Professor Máire Ní Bhrolcháin and Dr Éva Beaujouan and summarises the article 'Fertility postponement is largely due to rising educational enrolment' published in *Population Studies* (Vol. 66, no. 3) www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00324728.2012.697569#

Key Points

- Rising delay to first birth has been the most prominent fertility trend of the last few decades in Britain and France.
- Longer time spent in education and training over the past several decades has contributed substantially to the change in the age at which women become mothers.
- Due to greater educational participation, young people have been starting their full adult lives around two years later on average than in the recent past, and this has meant family life starting later.
- Structural factors have played an important role in the trend to a later timetable of fertility, with greater demand for a more skilled workforce providing an incentive for people to stay on in education.
- The best educated women also face longer additional delays in having their first child once they have completed education, probably due to the greater competition between career and family building.

Introduction

In Britain, the average age of a woman having her first child in 2004 was 27, three years later than in 1974, when the average age was 24. What accounts for this trend? A large number of reasons have been suggested. One type of explanation looks to changes in economy and society such as the wider take-up of education, more women in the labour force with the associated conflict between employment and family life, labour market uncertainty, house prices, and improved fertility control through efficient contraception and abortion. Another type of explanation sees changing cultural influences as the principal causes, for example, a retreat from family values due to the waning influence of religion, the growth of individualism, and the rejection of authority and traditional ways of life.

The research summarised here considers a more concrete cause: the impact of rising participation in education. Expansion in educational enrolment is largely driven by the increasing demand for a more skilled workforce. This has stimulated national policies raising compulsory school leaving ages and encouraging post-compulsory education and training. It has also provided the economic rationale for individuals to invest further in their education, so as to have the skills needed in a changing labour market. Though it is well established that the better educated become parents at older average ages than the less well educated, that does not mean that an upward trend in educational participation would necessarily result in later average ages at birth. However, that is what the study has been able to show.

The study

The trend to later childbearing in both Britain and France is because people are having their first birth at later ages. The study therefore concentrated on the timing of the first child. Two sources of data were used; for Britain, a pooled series General Household Survey (GHS) rounds from 2000 to 2007 were used - a subset of a larger time-series data-file of GHS surveys from 1979 to 2007 compiled by the Centre for Population Change. For France, the Family History Survey (FHS) linked with the French census of 1999 was used. In both the GHS and the FHS, information was collected on the age at which respondents finished their continuous education. It reflects the first age at which a person left full-time education or training and not the age at which, for example, they achieved their highest

qualification if they spent some time out of education and later returned. This information was used to establish the ages and dates at which respondents were in education.

Main findings

Longer educational enrolment and later first births are closely linked

Between the early 1980s and the late 1990s, first births were delayed in Britain to about the same extent as the rise in the age at leaving education; in France age at first birth rose by a slightly larger margin than age at completing education. If we measure the timing of the first birth from the end of education, rather than in terms of age, the close link between time trends in the ages at these two events becomes clear. In both countries, the gap between the end of education and first birth lengthened by just 0.5-0.6 years from the early 1980s to the late 1990s, while by contrast, the age at first birth rose by 1.4 and 2.4 years, in GB and France respectively. These figures suggest that the later age at completing education explains about three fifths of the delay to first birth over that period in Britain, and about four fifths in France.

The better educated have a greater incentive to delay childbearing

From the early 1980s to the late 1990s, in both Britain and France, the best educated women delayed their first child longer than did less well educated women. A natural explanation for this is that being better qualified and expecting also to be economically active for a larger part of their lives than in the past, they have more to lose in career and financial terms by having a child than women did formerly, and also than less qualified women do. While the impact of a later end of education could be thought of as mechanical, and while labour market issues involve economic costs and benefits, rising educational levels may, of course, also promote later childbearing by influencing attitudes and values, and by disseminating improved contraceptive knowledge and fertility control.

The end of education, key marker of the transition to adulthood

The results of this study suggest that the time since leaving education may be a more natural time scale than chronological age for analysing the various transitions of early adulthood. First birth rates are at their highest at around 6-7 years after the end of

education in Britain, and at around 4 years afterwards in France. In both countries, the profile of the rates by time out of education has been relatively stable in the 1980s and 1990s. We could see education and training as an extension of social and economic adolescence. In this perspective, twenty-somethings are of a younger social age in the late 1990s than in the early 1980s. Young people have therefore been starting their full adult lives around two years later on average than in the recent past, and this has meant family life starting later.

Policy implications

The role of rising educational participation in influencing the later timing of first birth suggests that finding the causes of later childbearing involves explaining the expansion in education. Deep-seated

macro-economic factors are likely a major influence through their impact on the demand for skilled labour.

A key conclusion is that postponed childbearing is a transformation of the life course that has come primarily from broad macro-economic, educational, and labour market trends.

The impact of educational expansion, whether at the macro or micro level, needs to be analysed in two parts: the effect due to enrolment itself, and effects during the post-enrolment phase.

Policies aiming to increase enrolment rates could potentially have an impact in reducing teenage fertility rates.

Policies aiming to influence the timing of childbearing could usefully address the flexibility of educational systems and the compatibility of childbearing with both education and labour market activity.

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