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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fertility

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Since early 2020, the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has caused great economic disruptions, with major impacts on people's health and livelihoods. The effects on fertility are likely to differ as a function of the severity and duration of the epidemic, the country's socio-economic level and its policy responses. Understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fertility is critical when making projections of future population levels and trends.

These messages were derived from the Expert group meeting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fertility, convened by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) from 10 to 11 May 2021. Details of the meeting, which was held virtually, can be found at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/event/egm-impact-covid-19-fertility>.

Ten key messages

1. Past health crises provide limited scope for explaining the potential impact of COVID-19 on fertility

Caution should be exercised when comparing the impact of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic to the 1918 influenza pandemic (Spanish Flu) or to the 2015-2016 Zika epidemic that spread in Brazil and other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean and Northern America, given the differences in disease transmission, progression, morbidity and mortality profiles as well as differences in the socio-economic consequences of the related disease containment measures.

2. Fertility levels to return to pre-pandemic levels between 2023 and 2025

Fertility levels are expected to return to pre-pandemic levels between 2023 and 2025 with short-term post-pandemic fertility trends likely to differ between countries with low and high fertility as well as among regions.

3. The short-term impact of COVID-19 on fertility is expected to differ across the world regions

For most regions, short-term declines in fertility relative to pre-pandemic levels are expected. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand) and for Northern Africa and Western Asia, experts were divided about the likely magnitude and direction of the potential impact and recommended to recognize the differences among countries and to avoid applying a one-size-fits-all approaches.

4. The COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to have any impact on global fertility trends in the long run

Based on the evidence currently available, fertility fluctuations during 2021 to 2023 are generally expected to be minor and unlikely to impact longer-term fertility forecasts. However, fertility projections should be reviewed and revised when more data, including longer time-series, and more research become available.

5. There is considerable variation in the provision of and access to family planning services

In countries with available data in sub-Saharan Africa, access to and use of family planning seem to have been stable since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some instances, contraceptive use increased, and women switched to more effective methods (implants and injectables) rather than to discontinue their use. Early data for Northern Africa and Western Asia as well as for India report disruptions to family planning services, with poorer women and women in remote rural areas being more likely affected and therefore possibly exposed to a higher risk of unintended pregnancies.

6. China experienced a significant drop in the number of births reaching record low fertility in 2020

A significant drop in the number of births was reported in China's birth registration system in late 2020, disrupting seasonal monthly trends of births observed in previous years. The latest census also reported very low fertility levels (1.3 births per woman in 2020). When assessing fertility and population trends in the short to medium term, it is important to consider the long-term decline in the number of births in China, that was accelerated by the rapid reduction in the number of women of reproductive age.

7. Fertility levels in the United States of America have reached a new low in 2020

The total fertility rate in the United States of America continued to decline from a historic low of 1.7 births per woman in 2019 to 1.6 births per woman in 2020. It is expected that in the short term the United States will continue to observe declines in both the number of births as well as in total fertility levels. According to research available, only structural changes in the economy and in the labour market, combined with family policies, could propel an increase in fertility rates.

8. Fertility in Europe is expected to decline briefly but will return to pre-pandemic trends shortly after

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a baby bust in most European countries, albeit with significant regional differences. The strongest impact was observed in Southern Europe, while no fertility declines were reported in the Nordic countries. Large fluctuations were observed in the Baltic countries especially Latvia and Lithuania and in Eastern Europe. Provisional data for February/March 2021 point towards weaker downturns and some unexpected upturns. An overall decline in fertility after 2021 appears likely in most countries.

9. Data from countries in Latin America and the Caribbean show some evidence of fertility decline

Early evidence points towards a decrease in fertility in countries strongly affected by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, with preliminary data pointing to a postponement of childbearing in Brazil and to an accelerated drop in adolescent fertility in Chile. Experts caution that, overall, the impact of the pandemic on fertility levels depends on the severity of the pandemic as well as on the number of waves, the duration of the pandemic and policy responses. However, in the long term, the region is expected to return to pre-pandemic fertility patterns and trends.

10. Low fertility and continued declining fertility trends are "baked into" Eastern and South-Eastern Asia

In the case of high-income countries in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, very low fertility has been "baked in". In middle- and low-income countries in these regions, there was no evidence of a possible stall of the ongoing downward trends of fertility. Therefore, based on the current empirical evidence available, fertility trends in this part of the world are expected to remain on pre-pandemic trajectories.



Prepared by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). These key messages were derived from the Expert group meeting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fertility, convened by the Population Division, UN DESA, on 10 and 11 May 2021. More work of the Population Division is available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/>.