Baby bust in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic? First results from the new STFF data series

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(with the assistance of Krystof Zeman (Wittgenstein Centre) and colleagues from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research)

UN DESA, Expert Group Meeting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on fertility (Virtual meeting) New York, 10 and 11 May 2021
COVID-19 and fertility: effects, mechanisms

Negative impact expected especially in the highly developed countries with widespread use of and access to modern contraception (e.g., Aassve et al. 2020; Cohen 2021)

Selected mechanisms: negative impact (Berrington et al. 2021)

- Uncertainty about the future
- Fear of infection and of getting pregnant during the pandemic
- Economic (income) and labour market impact
- Lockdown effects: higher stress, disruption to everyday life, loss of grandparental care and extra workload for parents; disruption to social contact and dating for the childless (Settersen et al. 2020)
- Disruption in the provision of assisted reproduction

Selected mechanisms: positive impact

- More time spent together, more time for intimate relations and for family life among some couples
- Disruption in the supply of contraception in some countries
Decline in short-term fertility preferences reported in the US and Europe:

- Luppi et al. (2020): survey of fertility plans among young adults (18-34) in 5 European countries; late March and early April (N=6,000)
- Lindberg et al: Internet Survey of US women aged 18-44 (N=2,009) on 30 April-6 May 2020, Guttmacher Institute
FIGURE 1. Many women report that their fertility preferences have shifted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

% of women reporting wanting to delay childbearing or have fewer children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>48*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual orientation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>46*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household income</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≥200% of federal poverty level</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;200% of federal poverty level</td>
<td>37*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Difference is statistically significant at p<.05. Note: Queer category includes responses of “gay or lesbian,” “bisexual” and “other.”

Source: Internet Survey of US women aged 18-44 (N=2,009) on 30 April-6 May 2020, Guttmacher Institute

Early Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings from the 2020 Guttmacher Survey of Reproductive Health Experiences

Laura D. Lindberg, Alicia VandeVusse, Jennifer Mueller and Marielle Kirstein
COVID-19 and fertility: early evidence

Evidence from online searches:
• Wilde et al. (2020): expected sharp downturn in births in the US from November 2020 to February 2021 based on fertility and pregnancy-related Google searches

Early evidence from birth records:
• Cohen (2021); data for Florida and Ohio: greater decline in births in counties with higher prevalence of infections and stronger reduction in mobility
Analytical focus, data issues

Key question:
• How did birth (fertility) dynamic change in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic?

Analytical focus: monthly births by countries and broader regions

Expectations:
• A downward trend associated with the pandemic
• Stronger in more affected countries (and in countries with weaker welfare system?) (especially in Southern Europe)
• Ups and downs in births associated with the waves of the covid outbreak? (Possible short-term recovery; Goldstein 2020)
Data: The STFF (short-term fertility fluctuations) Data Series under the Human Fertility Database

For citing STFF data, please follow the [HFD data citation guidelines](#).

We invite you to explore these data using our online [STFF visualization toolkit](#).

**Here you can download the following data and documentations:**

- **STFF Metadata**: concise description of country-specific data and data sources.
- **STFF Methodological Note**: description of input and output data formats and methodology.
- **STFF output file** *(xlsx or pooled csv)*: monthly counts of live births for selected countries.
- **Original data** *(country-specific csv files in one zip file)*: original birth counts in standardized format.

**Data availability**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>First month</th>
<th>Last month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>December 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>January 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>December 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>March 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>March 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>December 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>December 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>March 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>March 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>February 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>January 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenland</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>December 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
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<td>February 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>January 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>January 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>January 2000</td>
<td>November 2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STFF Data series

The Short-Term Fertility Fluctuations (STFF) Data Series

- Joint project of the Max Planck Institute for Dem Res. (Rostock) and the Wittgenstein Centre (Vienna)
- Monthly number of births, from Jan 2000 to most recent
- Highly developed countries with good quality data
- Regularly updated (35 countries/areas at present, 23 until Jan 2021)
- Metadata: 47-page document with all information about the data, sources, coverage, notes, warnings
- Methodological Note
- STFF visualization toolkit in Shiny
  https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/mvy62
STFF Visualisation Toolkit (Shiny)

https://mpidr.shinyapps.io/stfertility/

STFF visualisation toolkit created by Laszlo Nemeth, MPIDR
Data issues & adjustments

- Data by month of occurrence vs. registration (e.g. South Korea, Russia)
- Preliminary vs. final data (also incomplete data; e.g. Switzerland)
- Fluctuations, irregularities (also due to small numbers in some countries)
- Monthly data: impact of seasonality
- Main comparison: birth dynamic compared to the same month in the previous year (with an adjustment for 29 days in February 2020)
- Expected impact of the COVID-19: from November 2020 onwards (pregnancies started in early March, based on average pregnancy duration of 266 days or 8.7 months from ovulation to delivery; Jukic et al. 2013)
Data issues: fluctuations in some countries and areas

Relative change in the number of births compared with the same month in the previous year: 5 countries and areas with unstable data
Baby bust in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Findings: trends by country and region

Most of this research based on the following report:

Western Europe: France

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%):
France, Jan 2020-Mar 2021
Western Europe (summary)

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%)

A fall in France, Belgium; less intensive decline in Austria; contrasting trend in the Netherlands.
Nordic countries: Finland

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%): Finland, Jan 2020-Mar 2021
Nordic countries (summary)

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%)

No clear shift in DK, Finland, Norway until Jan 2021
Southern Europe: Spain

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%): Spain, Jan 2020-Feb 2021
Southern Europe (summary)

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%)

A sharp downturn in Italy, Portugal and Spain through Jan 2021
Central Europe: Hungary

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%): Hungary, Jan 2020-Mar 2021
Central Europe (summary)

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%)
Eastern Europe: Russia

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%): Russia, Jan 2020-Mar 2021
Eastern Europe: Ukraine

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%): Ukraine, Jan 2020-Feb 2021
Baby bust in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Findings: summary*
European Union
11 countries with data until Jan 2021, ex. Romania, Germany

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%): European Union (11 countries), Jan 2020-Feb 2021

Countries covered: Croatia, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden
Huge regional differences until Feb. 2021

Average relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%): European regions and the United States, Jan 2020-Feb 2021
Monthly trends across analysed countries

Average relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%): 21 countries with data until at least Dec. 2020

Figure excludes countries with large fluctuations in data or incomplete data: Lithuania, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, Chile, Germany, Switzerland; Data for Feb and Mar 2021 based on a smaller subset of countries
Baby bust in Jan. 2021 (selected countries)

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%): January 2021 and Jan-Sep 2020 compared with the same period in the previous year (selected countries without data fluctuations)
Birth upturn in Feb-Mar 2021

Relative year-on-year change in the number of births (%): January 2021 to March 2021 compared with the same month in the previous year (all countries with available data until March 2021)
Baby bust in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Concluding discussion
Key findings: trends and cross-country differences

- **1\textsuperscript{st} wave of the COVID-19 pandemic associated with baby bust in most countries:** accelerated downturn in the year-on-year number of births from Nov 2020 to Jan 2021
- Mostly in line with the expectations

Regional differences

- **Strongest impact:** Southern Europe, also Belgium, France, Estonia, Hungary; probably Ukraine, Latvia
- **No negative impact in some countries:** Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Czechia (until Dec 2020)
- **Large fluctuations in the data:** Romania, Baltic countries (esp. Lithuania, Latvia), Eastern Europe
Period trends: birth recovery after the baby bust?

Downturn in the number of births after Oct 2020 accelerating until Jan 2021

- Consistent across countries: avg. decline by 11.4% across all analysed countries, 13% in 14 EU countries
- These pregnancies mostly started in April and (early) May → peak of the 1st COVID-19 wave & lockdowns

The biggest surprise:

Trend reversal in Feb-Mar 2021: consistent across countries

- February 2021 data show much weaker downturns than January 2021 and some unexpected upturns (esp. Finland, Netherlands, Estonia, Hungary)
- Further accelerating in Mar 2021, esp. in CEE region

⇒ A temporary baby boom associated with ending of the 1st wave?
Future trends

Short-term trends

• Birth trends might move in cycles of busts and recoveries, similar to the cycles of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns
• Widening cross-country differences in fertility response?

Longer-term trends

• Overall, a decline in fertility in 2021 likely in most countries
• Downturns past 2021 more likely if COVID-19 leaves long-lasting scars in economy, labour market and if it affects government spending
• Different “starting” position: fertility in some countries record low in 2019
• Moderating impact of social and family policies
Thank you!
⇒ also to the fantastic HFD team at the MPIDR!

STFF (Short-Term Fertility Fluctuations) dataset:
https://www.humanfertility.org/cgi-bin/stff.php

STFF Visualisation Toolkit:
https://mpidr.shinyapps.io/stfertility/

Report on monthly birth trends (to be updated soon, 😊)
https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/mvy62

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