

Fertility, family change and policy adjustments in the Czech Republic

Policy Brief No. 6

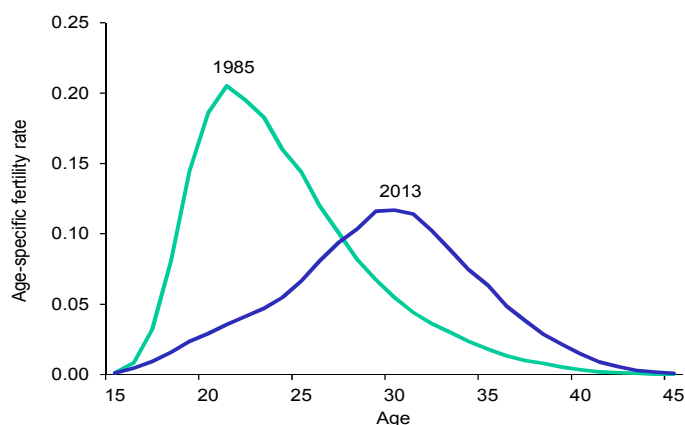
The founding of the Czech Republic in 1993, following the collapse of the state-socialist system in the former Czechoslovakia in 1989, ushered in economic liberalization and reforms in social and family policies that led to many new life choices and opportunities for self-realization for young people.

Economic and social changes were accompanied by a massive decline in the total fertility rate (TFR), which fell from 1.89 births per woman in 1990 to an extreme low level of 1.13 births per woman in 1999. Since then the TFR recovered gradually, reaching 1.50 births per woman in 2008. Following a temporary decline during the recent economic recession, total fertility rebounded to 1.53 births per woman in 2014.

Family transformations

The rapid fertility decline in the 1990s was largely fueled by the postponement of marriage and childbearing. During the state-socialist era, one half of women were married before age 22, while by 2013, women's average age at first marriage was 28.5 years. Similarly before the 1990s, women were most likely to give birth in a narrow age range of 19 to 25 years. Between 1990 and 2013, fertility plummeted among this age group and increased almost fourfold among women above age 35.

Age-specific fertility rates among women aged 15–45, Czech Republic, 1985 and 2013

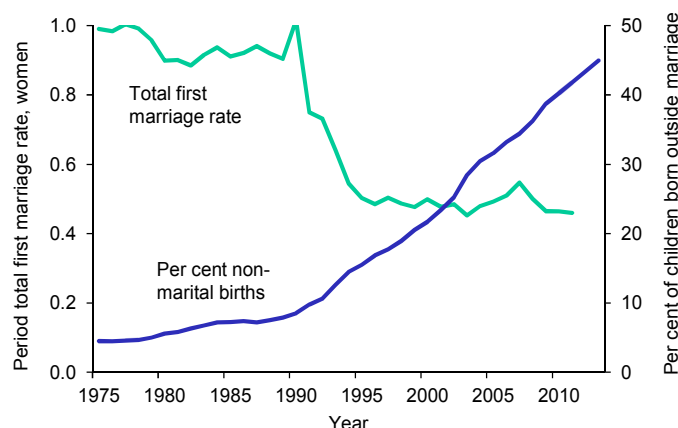


The quick adoption of modern contraception was an important aspect of this transformation. Up until the early 1990s, many couples used traditional contraceptive methods, many pregnancies were unplanned, and abortion was frequent. Between 1990 and 2007, the share of women of reproductive age using the pill rose from 4 per cent to 48 per cent, and abortion rates plummeted.

For many young adults, early marriage was replaced by prolonged periods of living with parents or cohabiting with a partner. In 2013, one half of Czech men and about one third of Czech women aged 25–29 lived with their parents.

Cohabitation has become an increasingly important form of partnership, accompanied by a steady rise in the share of children born outside marriage, which reached 47 per cent in 2014, compared with 4–8 per cent in the 1970s and 1980s. Marriage has been further eroded by high divorce rates. The total divorce rate — an indicator of the cumulative share of marriages ending in divorce — has stood at 40–50 per cent since the mid-1990s.

Period total first marriage rate and share of non-marital births, Czech Republic, 1975–2012



A growing acceptance of childbearing outside marriage may have a positive effect on fertility, as it broadens the choice of living arrangements considered suitable for raising a family. Most problematic from the policy perspective, however, is the high share of single mothers, fuelled by a mix of unintended pregnancies, voluntary single motherhood, and instability of marital and cohabiting unions. At present, 15 per cent of all families with children in the Czech Republic are headed by single parents, mostly mothers.

Expanding university education

In less than 20 years, the share of people aged 20–24 enrolled in university education has tripled. Today, more women (54 per cent) are expected to obtain a university degree than men (30 per cent). This expansion of tertiary education has been the key driving force in the shift towards delayed parenthood.

Family policies, labour markets and persistent attitudes about gender roles and childcare have not caught up with this development. Highly educated women are trapped in an “incomplete gender revolution”, in which they find it difficult to reconcile family and career plans.

As a result, university-educated women tend to have lower completed fertility than women with less education. Among women born between 1966 and 1970, those with elementary or incomplete secondary education have, on average, 2.5 children, while those with university education have 1.7 children.

Family-related policies

The Czech Government spends 2.6 per cent of gross domestic product on family policies, which is average for Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. Soon after the fall of communism, Czech social and family policies shifted towards a conservative family model that favoured mothers staying at home with young children. This policy model was reflected in an extension of paid parental leave and a collapse of childcare for young children.

The Czech Republic has among the longest paid parental leaves in the OECD. In 1995, the leave benefit was extended up to the child’s fourth birthday, although employment protection remained set at three years. Parents opting for the maximum leave period thus risk losing their jobs. Not surprisingly, most mothers opt for a three-year leave. Very few fathers take parental leave.

The Czech Republic spends more on parental-leave allowance than any other OECD country. The total allowance is fixed at US\$ 8,553, distributed in monthly instalments over 19–48 months. Parents are allowed to be economically active during their leave, and mothers and fathers are allowed to alternate working and staying at home. On average in 2013, Czech parents obtained 46.4 per cent of the full-time equivalent wage when on leave.

The Czech Government provides modest child allowances (US\$ 19–27 per month), but only to low-income families. Tax deductions and means-tested social benefits help reduce poverty rates for couples, but these transfers are less successful in alleviating poverty in single-parent families. In 2011, more than one third of families headed by a single parent were poor, in particular because a high share of their income was spent on housing.

The recent economic downturn led to several rounds of fiscal consolidation, including the reduction of monetary benefits to families. Birth allowances were reduced in 2008, and in 2011 they became means tested and restricted to first births, although these cutbacks were partly reversed in 2015.

The system of childcare centres for children under age 3 collapsed in the 1990s due to three interrelated factors: mothers staying at home on prolonged parental leave; tough regulations that made the centres costly to operate; and closures of centres following the transfer of responsibility for funding from the central government to municipalities. The proportion of children aged 0–2 enrolled in public childcare dropped from 17 per cent in 1989 to 7 per cent in 2010. Among children aged 3–5, the

proportion enrolled went down less steeply, from 82 per cent to 78 per cent.

Policies on housing have a strong effect on families. In the Czech Republic, most housing is owner occupied, following massive privatization in the 1990s and 2000s. Housing costs are among the highest among OECD countries, making it difficult for young adults to start a family. Low-income households may qualify for a housing allowance, but this is often used to pay an overcharged price for a substandard apartment.

Policy evolution: Future plans and discussions

The current TFR is likely to increase modestly to around 1.6–1.7 births per woman once the shift towards delayed childbearing comes to an end. This is a moderate subreplacement level that can actually be supportive of higher standards of living in the long run.

A legacy of long economic stagnation limits the resources available to the Czech Government to pursue new family-related policies. Expanding childcare availability for children below age 3 is a priority, however, so the Government has turned to cheaper and less conventional solutions, such as new, company-based childcare centres and so-called “children’s groups”. The latter aim to provide care for smaller groups of children and are less strictly regulated and therefore more flexible and cheaper to set up than institutional childcare centres. It remains to be seen whether children’s groups will become widespread enough to make a difference in the meagre provision of care for young children.

The labour market tends to be rigid in terms of worktime flexibility, and there are few opportunities for part-time work. Mothers of children aged 0–3 typically stay at home, and mothers of older children typically work full-time. During 2011 to 2013, only 9 per cent of working mothers with children below age 15 worked part-time. The lack of part-time work opportunities delays the return of mothers to employment and makes it more difficult for them to cope with their multiple duties once they start working again.

The lack of affordable housing for young people and single parents is another area that probably affects fertility decisions. Finally, policies tailored to the changing character of the family might affect fertility. For instance, a wider legal recognition of cohabiting couples, including partnership registration, might help such couples obtain more rights with respect to the management of their shared property and children.

NOTES

This policy brief was prepared as background material for the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Policy Responses to Low Fertility. It can be found online at <http://esa.un.org/PopPolicy/publications.aspx>. Queries can be sent to PopPolicy@un.org.

The brief is based on Tomáš Sobotka (forthcoming), *The European middle way? Low fertility, family change, and gradual policy adjustments in Austria and the Czech Republic*. In Ronald R. Rindfuss and Minja Kim Choe (Eds.), *Low Fertility, Institutions, and Their Policies: Variations across Industrialized Countries*. Springer.

The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or the East-West Center.

Financial support from Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs (KIHASA) to conduct the research on which this policy brief is based is gratefully acknowledged.