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England and Wales: Stable fertility and pronounced social status differences

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Abstract

For nearly three decades, the total fertility rate in England and Wales has remained high relative to other European countries, and stable at about 1.7 births per woman. In this chapter, we examine trends in both period and cohort fertility throughout the twentieth century, and demonstrate some important differences across demographic and social groups in the timing and quantum of fertility. Breaking with a market-oriented and laissez-faire approach to work and family issues, the last 10 years have seen the introduction of new social and economic policies aimed at providing greater support to families with children. However, the effect of the changes is likely to be limited to families on the lower end of the income scale. Rather than facilitating work and parenthood, some policies create incentives for a traditional gendered division of labour. Fertility appears to have remained stable despite, rather than because of, government actions.

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