



Births Outside Marriage Now Common in Many Countries in Europe

PowerPoint graphs showing the proportion of births outside marriage in Northern, Southern, Western, and Eastern Europe, and other countries, can be downloaded from [PRB's Graphics Bank](#) (scroll to the bottom of the page).

by Carl Haub

(November 2010) The link between marriage and childbearing has greatly weakened worldwide, evidenced by a sharp rise in births outside marriage in most developed countries. While several factors underlie the trend, a growing social acceptance of births outside a married relationship in many countries has contributed to the increase. Women are now far less dependent upon a male breadwinner than they once were, having entered the career labor force in large numbers since the 1970s. Cohabiting couples may treat their relationship as a "trial" marriage complete with children, or they may spurn traditional marriage completely. Some pregnancies are simply accidental. Whatever the cause, births outside marriage have climbed to surprising proportions.

Northern Europe

Northern Europe has had the highest proportion of births outside of marriage for a long time. As early as 1960, 25 percent of births in Iceland were extramarital. From that point on, the increase was rapid in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway and to a lesser degree in the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, where there was a sharp acceleration following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. (The same effect can be seen in Eastern Europe.) Lithuania remains well below its neighbors at 29 percent extramarital births in 2008, possibly due to its strong Catholic traditions. Currently, Estonia and Iceland have the highest rates in the world—62 percent and 64 percent, respectively. Overall, 46 percent of births are outside marriage in Northern Europe, the highest of any region. There is also some indication that the proportion may rise and then "plateau." Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden give evidence of this plateau, while Estonia, Norway, and the United Kingdom have continued to rise.

Western Europe

In **Western Europe**, rising proportions of births outside marriage have been a more recent development. Prior to 1985, extramarital births were below 10 percent in each country, except in Austria. Around 1985, however, there was a swift rise in every country except Switzerland, whose increase began about 10 years later. France now has the sixth-highest proportion among developed countries and is one of seven countries where the majority of births are outside marriage. In France, the legal distinction between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" children was abolished in 2005. The proportion also seems to be continuing to rise in all countries of Western Europe, with no country reaching a plateau. For the region, extramarital births are slightly lower than in Northern Europe at 42 percent.

Eastern Europe

The pattern of change in **Eastern Europe** is particularly striking. Relatively low rates prevailed in all the countries right up to the breakup of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. At that point, all countries saw sharp rises in the proportion of extramarital births, although in Belarus, Romania, and Russia the increase has recently leveled off. Extramarital births are much less common in Eastern Europe, 26 percent, than in Northern and Western Europe.

Southern Europe

The gradual increase in the proportion of births outside marriage in **Southern Europe** is somewhat similar to Western Europe. In most countries, the rate remained below 10 percent until around 1985. One difference between Southern Europe and the other regions is that in three countries, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Greece, proportions have remained rather low at about 10 percent or less. Across the region, 25 percent of births occur outside marriage, the lowest rate in Europe.

More Cohabiting Couples

A birth outside marriage does not necessarily result in a single mother left to support a family. Many extramarital births occur within a relatively stable relationship of cohabitation without marriage. In Norway in 2009, for example, there were 27,288 births to married mothers, 27,217 to cohabiting mothers, and only 7,302 births to single mothers. Births to cohabiting mothers have been rising rapidly in Norway and could outnumber marital births this year. In the United Kingdom in 2006, 44 percent of births were outside marriage but 63 percent were jointly registered by persons living at the same address.

Acknowledging paternity has generally risen with the rise of the proportion of extramarital births. In Australia in 2008, only 9 percent of extramarital births were not recognized by the father, down from 26 percent in 1988. Acknowledgment may entitle the father to visitation rights along with some obligation to provide support. In the United States, the Census Bureau recently reported that 28 percent of nonmarital births occurred to cohabiting parents in 2008.¹ But in other countries where cohabitation is much less common, such as Romania, extramarital births likely result from the inefficient use of contraception.²

The PowerPoint graphs accompanying this article portray a sweeping change in family formation. In the past, pregnancies outside marriage were not socially acceptable and were frequently stigmatized. In many countries, that is no longer the case.

Carl Haub is senior demographer at the Population Reference Bureau.

References

1. U.S. Census Bureau, "Fertility of American Women," accessed at www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/fertility.html, on Nov. 4, 2010.
2. Cornelia Muresan et al., "Romania: Childbearing Metamorphosis Within a Changing Context," *Demographic Research* 19, no. 23 (2008): 855-906.

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