

Childbearing during and after recessions in the Nordic countries

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Abstract

Study background

The Nordic countries are universally recognized for their generous family policies, their protective welfare systems and their comparatively high fertility rates, at least until the very recent period. After 2010, in fact, TFRs have been declining in all the five countries, hitting historically low levels in 2017 in most of them (Nordic Statistical Central Bureaus 2018). This ongoing decline in period fertility rates came largely unexpected and it represents a conundrum demographers have not addressed yet. The timing of the decline suggests a link to the Great Recession, the recent financial and economic crisis that hit advanced economies after 2008. Empirical research in fact shows that TFR declines during economic downturns in response to rising labor market insecurity, and financial uncertainty.

Objective

This study contributes to the literature on the fertility response to the business cycle by investigating period variation in women's childbearing relative risk during and after economic downturns in a comparative analysis of the Nordic countries.

Data and method

We harmonize registers from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden to compare childbearing in the aftermath of the two most recent crises that hit those economies: 1990s' and 2010s'. We use event-history techniques to present parity-specific risks by

calendar year relative to a defined pre-recession year. We further examine the possible period impact of the two recessions by women's age and education.

Results

Results show a large heterogeneity across the five Nordic countries in the childbearing risk after 1990, especially on higher parities. This variation largely disappears after 2008 when period trends in birth hazards become more similar across countries. Finally, confirming results from other contexts, we find that lower parities in both periods are the most negatively affected in both periods of economic turmoil, as are women below the age of 30. Across educational groups, it seems that the risk of entering into motherhood declined after the onset of the economic crises more strongly for women with primary education. Higher parities, instead, were more negatively affected among tertiary educated women.