

“Late unions, less children? The impact of changes in union formation and dissolution on fertility in Poland in the 1990s”

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Non-technical summary

In the 1990s Poland experienced a rapid decline of aggregate fertility – the period TFR dropped from 2.05 in 1990 to 1.34 in 2000. The reduction of fertility was accompanied by strong changes in union formation patterns: marriages were postponed and less stable and more often preceded with cohabitation. Fertility, and union formation and dissolution are interrelated processes and this study aims at quantifying the contribution of union-related changes to the aggregate fertility decline observed in Poland in the 1990s.

To this end, two methods are integrated: event history analysis and microsimulation. It allows to take account of the complex interdependencies between processes and translate findings on the individual level into outcomes on the macro level. By using a microsimulation-based decomposition the total change in fertility is split into components depending on fertility, union formation and union dissolution behaviours.

Contrary to the expectations, the effects of changes in the union formation are only minor and the majority of the cumulative fertility drop is due to the change in fertility behaviour. Less than one tenth of the total change observed between the periods of 1980-1984 and 2000-2002 might be attributed to the changes in the union formation. A rise in the union instability is not an important factor, either. The main driving force of the fertility decline is the decreasing intensity of conception.

The study offers also a clear illustration of the well-known dependence between fertility postponement and life-course fertility – delays in the schedule of lower order births reduces strongly the number of the higher order births, too. This argument of postponement leading to abandonment is often used in the discussion on the explanations of fertility decline in the CEE countries. Our study provides evidence that this element is indeed a crucial one. Moreover, findings from this study are also relevant from the policy perspective. As it has been demonstrated, an intervention at higher parities will have a weaker impact on the cumulative macro level fertility compared to an intervention at lower parities. For that reason the policy should be aimed at possibly low parity. As the postponement of first births in the life course seems inevitable due to prolonged educational and more competitive employment careers a progression to the second child should be of main policy concerns.

Key words: fertility, union formation, union dissolution, microsimulation