



**HAUT-COMMISSARIAT
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Rates versus Rights? Addressing Declining Fertility Without Imposing Norms

France experiences a sustained decline in its number of births since 2010, with fertility rates now at historically low levels. In this respect, it increasingly resembles most European countries entering a new demographic regime, where fertility rates have fallen below the replacement level over the past two decades.

First, desired family size has declined in France. Among younger generations, the ideal number of children now stands at around 2.3, compared with 2.7 twenty-five years ago. **Therefore, the central policy challenge is less to increase fertility at all costs than to reduce the gap between desired and realized births.**

Second, the recent decline in fertility has occurred in France despite substantive family policies. This calls for a shift in perspective: **the issue is not so much the overall level of support, but the design of policy instruments, how they fit together, and their ability to address the constraints faced by parents when entering into parenthood.** Furthermore, these constraints extend well beyond family policies: income stability, housing costs, job quality, and confidence in the future.

In addition, the paper argues that policy responses to this new demographic regime must avoid imposing family norms or undermining sexual and reproductive rights.

Finally, the paper's contribution lies in comparing French family policies with those of Hungary, Germany, and Sweden to identify the instruments most likely to respond to families' aspirations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Table 1 – Effects of Public Policies on Fertility: Summary

	OBJECTIVES	INSTRUMENT / MECHANISM	EFFECTIVENESS ON FERTILITY	AVAILABILITY OF SOURCES, METHODOLOGICAL QUALITY
Cash benefits and tax incentives	Reducing the cost of becoming a parent	One-time birth grants ("baby bonus")	Short-term positive effects , often concentrated around the timing of births; little guarantee of a lasting effect on the final number of children	Extensive, solid to very robust
	Reducing the direct cost of raising a child and supporting household income	Recurring cash transfers (child benefits, basic allowance, family supplement, etc.)	Positive but modest effects , often limited; may provide greater security for already established parenting plans rather than significantly increasing fertility	Extensive, very robust
	Reducing the net cost of an additional child	Tax incentives (<i>family allowance, tax credits, tax deductions, etc.</i>)	Positive but very limited effects , often even less significant than cash benefits	Rare to limited, robust
Early childhood education and care	Reducing the organizational burden and opportunity cost of women's work	Expand in childcare provision (daycare centers, group/public childcare, right to a spot, etc.)	Positive and among the most robust effects on fertility, especially in the short to medium term and on additional births	Limited, very robust
	Making childcare more affordable	Reduction/adjustment of childcare costs (<i>standardization of rates, childcare subsidies, etc.</i>)	Positive effects, but more modest than those resulting from an increase in supply ; may also lead to publicity stunts or timing issues	Limited, very solid
	Securing work-family trajectories over the long term	Coherent coordination between leave and early childhood care	More lasting positive effects when both levers are combined; the coherence of the "package" appears to be decisive	Comparative summaries, robust
Birth-related leave	Enabling care for the newborn without excessive disruption to income or employment relationship	Moderate-length paid leave (<i>maternity, paternity, parental</i>)	Positive effects on fertility, especially when they reduce the opportunity cost of having a child and ensure mothers can return to work	Extensive, very robust
	Promoting the sharing of parental responsibilities	Entitlements for fathers / non-transferable to fathers (<i>quotas, partner months, "use-it-or-lose-it" provisions, etc.</i>)	Limited direct effect on fertility or less well established, but clear positive effects on fathers' use of leave and on a more balanced division of tasks; primarily an indirect lever, more effective when combined with adequate compensation and well-developed childcare options	Limited, very robust

Source: HCSP, summary table based on Bergsvik J., Fauske A., and Hart R. K. (2021), "Can policies stall the fertility fall? A systematic review of the (quasi-) experimental literature," Population and Development Review, vol. 47(4), October, pp. 913–964.



ASSESSING THREE MAIN LEVERS OF EUROPEAN FAMILY POLICY

Family policies in Europe typically rely on three broad instruments: direct financial support, parental leave schemes, and childcare provision. Comparative evidence suggests that these instruments have heterogeneous effects on fertility.

Table 2 – European comparison of female labor force participation rates and the main family policy instruments

Country	Female labor force participation rate for ages 25–54 (2024)	Benefits and taxation Deficit impact (2021)	Birth-related leave Total available duration (in weeks) and average pay (% of salary) over the entire period (2025)		Early Childhood Education and Care Enrollment rate in early childhood education and care services (2021)
			Paid maternity/paternity leave	Paid parental leave	
Germany	84.2% (-8 percentage points compared to men)	2.6% of GDP of which 1.4% is in-kind benefits	Mother: 14 weeks at 100% Father: 0 weeks	Mother: 44 weeks at 55% Father: 8.7 weeks at 55.3%	(Early childhood (0–2 years): 38.6% Early childhood (3–5 years): 93.1%)
France	85% (-7.4 pp)	2.7% of GDP of which 1.4% in kind	Mother: 16 weeks at 100% Father: 4.2 weeks at 100%	Mother: 26 weeks at 13.7% Father: 26 weeks at 13.7%	Early childhood (0–2 years): 59.5% Early childhood (3–5 years): 100%
Hungary	88.9% (-5.5 pp)	2.3% of GDP of which 1% in kind	Mother: 24 weeks at 100% Father: 2 weeks at 70%	Mother: 136 weeks at 38.1% Father: 8.8 weeks at 10%	Early childhood (0–2 years): 14.4% Early childhood (3–5 years): 93.4%
Italy	70.1% (-19 pp)	1.4% of GDP of which 0.6% is in kind	Mother: 21.7 weeks at 80% Father: 2 weeks at 100%	Mother: 26 weeks at 55% Father: 13 weeks at 30%	Early childhood (0–2 years): 33.8% Early childhood (3–5 years): 91%
Sweden	90.2% (-3.6 pp)	3.3% of GDP of which 2.1% in kind	Mother: 12.9 weeks at 77.6% Father: 1.4 weeks at 63.7%	Mother: 42.9 weeks at 56.9% Father: 12.9 weeks at 77.6%	Early childhood (0–2 years): 47.6% Early childhood (3–5 years): 95.2%

Notes: To represent all family-related benefits in 2024, it is necessary to add benefits related to education (3.5 billion euros), child welfare assistance (11.1 billion euros), and an “other” item (€6.2 billion)—which mainly consists of supplementary payments made by employers’ extra-legal schemes.

Sources: Eurostat data (2024) for female and male labor force participation rates, and data from the OECD data on public spending for family benefits, OECD Family Database PF2.1 for parental leave, and OECD Family Database PF3.2 for Early Childhood Education and Care

Cash Benefits and Tax Incentives

Cash benefits and tax incentives are designed to reduce the direct cost of children by supporting household income. In France, these instruments have historically been at the core of family policy. However, the empirical literature consistently finds that their effects on fertility are relatively modest. While stable and predictable recurring benefits may have a small influence on fertility over time, one-off “baby bonus” schemes tend to affect the timing of births, bringing forward already-desired births without increasing the total number of children.

Tax incentives, such as family tax credits or family income-splitting mechanisms (e.g., the French *quotient familial*), appear even less effective. Because the benefits of these mechanisms are often indirect and only become visible when households file their tax return, they have limited influence on long-term decisions about parenthood.

Hungary provides a striking example of a markedly different approach, centered more heavily on financial incentives than either the French or Nordic models. Since Viktor Orbán returned to power in 2010, fertility has become an explicit political priority, supported by high levels of public spending on families. The main instruments are primarily financial: an expanded family tax allowance, amounting to a net gain of around €25 per child per month for families with one or two children and up to €80 for families with three or more children, and a “baby loan”, introduced in 2019, whose repayment conditions become increasingly favorable with each additional birth. Yet this policy model is also selective and prescriptive. Its benefits are largely targeted at married couples, and it has been accompanied by restrictions on women’s sexual and reproductive rights. Its demographic effects remain limited: the fertility rate increased from around 1.25 children per woman in 2010 to 1.55 in 2021, before falling again to 1.38 in 2024, still below replacement level.

Overall, the evidence suggests that direct financial support is unlikely to generate sustained increases in fertility.

Parental Leave

Parental leave policies can play a more structural role, particularly when they support work-life balance and encourage a more equal distribution of caregiving responsibilities. The literature suggests that moderately long, well-paid leave can benefit child wellbeing and facilitate parents’ adjustment after childbirth. However, excessively long leave periods may reduce mothers’ long-term labor market attachment. This makes the design of leave schemes a central policy issue.

The German and Swedish examples illustrate why the design of leave schemes matters: fathers’ take-up is higher when parental leave includes dedicated, well-paid, and non-transferable entitlements.

- **In Germany**, the 2007 *Elterngeld* reform replaced a low flat-rate allowance with income-related compensation and introduced two additional “partner months” when both parents take leave. By making parental leave more financially attractive and by explicitly encouraging fathers’ involvement, the reform contributed to a sharp increase in fathers’ take-up, from around 3% before the reform to nearly 46% among fathers of children born in 2021.
- **Sweden** follows a similar logic. Parental leave is long and relatively well paid, and part of the entitlement is reserved for each parent on a “use-it-or-lose-it” basis. These non-transferable days, currently 90 per parent, create a strong incentive for fathers to take leave. This framework is complemented by broader cultural support, including fathers’ groups, which highlights that fathers’ involvement depends not only on financial and legal incentives, but also on evolving parenting norms.



More broadly, comparative OECD evidence suggests that non-transferable leave entitlements and adequate compensation are among the most effective tools for reducing the motherhood penalty and supporting women's employment continuity after childbirth.

Early Childhood Education and Care

Among all family policy instruments, access to affordable childcare appears to have the strongest and most consistent positive effect on fertility in developed countries. Recent comparative evidence suggests that expanding childcare provision can have lasting effects, especially when it is combined with well-paid but time-limited parental leave. This points to the importance of policy coherence: fertility outcomes depend less on isolated measures than on how different instruments work together.

Sweden has long represented one of the clearest example of this model. Its combination of income-related parental leave, non-transferable entitlements for both parents, and near-universal childcare provision helped sustain relatively high fertility levels by European standards, while also supporting women's employment. International comparisons point in the same direction: countries that invest heavily in child care and gender-balanced parental leave generally perform better than those relying primarily on cash transfers.

A distinctive feature of the Swedish model is that early childhood care is not treated only as a work-family reconciliation tool, but also as a genuine stage of education, combining care, socialization, learning, and child development. This is reflected institutionally: since the 1990s, early childhood has fallen under the Ministry of Education, and preschool has been integrated into a national curriculum. Municipalities are required to provide subsidized child care from age one for children whose parents work or study. The strength of the Swedish model therefore lies in the continuity between income-related parental leave, non-transferable parental entitlements, and early childhood education and care. Together, these instruments address both parents' need to reconcile work and family life and children's need for early education and socialization.

POLICY RESPONSES TO THE NEW DEMOGRAPHIC REGIME

Demographic decline calls for a broader reassessment of the objectives of family policy itself. The goal is no longer simply to increase the number of births, but to improve the conditions under which children are raised and societies reconcile parenthood, employment, and gender equality. This requires a shift toward a more qualitative approach: expanding access to childcare, supporting more balanced co-parenting arrangements, reducing gender inequalities in caregiving and improving the material and social conditions in which families are formed.

Stability and Clarity

Family decisions are inherently long-term. For this reason, policy predictability matters as much as the level of support itself. In France, repeated adjustments to family benefits and the gradual accumulation of overlapping programs have made the system harder to understand. Eligibility rules, benefit levels, and leave arrangements have become increasingly difficult for families to navigate. A key priority for policymakers across Europe should therefore be to **simplify and stabilize the overall structure of family policy, in order to strengthen trust and reduce uncertainty.**

Expanding Non-Transferable Leave Rights

The literature strongly suggests that parental leave is most effective when it is relatively short, adequately paid, and partly reserved for each parent individually. Expanding the share of nontransferable parental leave entitlements within existing systems, following the Swedish “use-it-or-lose-it” model or the German “partner months” approach, should be considered a European best practice.

The objective is not merely to create formal rights for fathers, but to encourage their actual take-up and reduce the concentration of career interruptions among mothers.

Targeting Childcare Gaps

Investment in childcare should be targeted first at areas and social groups where provision remains insufficient. Evidence shows that low-income households are far less likely to use formal childcare than higher-income, despite often facing the greatest constraints in reconciling work and parenthood. Expanding affordable childcare therefore serves both demographic and social equality objectives.

Strengthening Europe’s demographic analysis and foresight capacities

Debates over fertility, migration, and reproductive rights have become increasingly politicized across Europe, often without a sufficiently robust shared evidence base. **This points to the need to strengthen Europe’s capacity for demographic analysis and foresight.**

- In the short term, this could involve reinforcing the European Commission’s Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography (KCMD), with a view to improving comparative analysis and long-term projections.
- In the longer term, following recommendations also made by the European Economic and Social Committee¹, the European Union could support the **creation of an independent European demographic agency**. Its mandate would go beyond producing harmonized demographic data and projections. It would also include independent policy analysis, comparisons of national systems, and clear explanations of how demographic, family, migration and social policy frameworks operate across Member States, in order to better inform public decision-making.

Integrating Childcare into European Cohesion Policy

France could also advocate for the explicit inclusion of early childhood care under Heading 2 of the EU budget, which covers cohesion, resilience and social investment. In response to a shared and long-term demographic challenge, the aim would not necessarily be to create a new stand-alone objective for early childhood care, but rather to make it more visible within existing EU funding priorities. This could take the form of a dedicated budget line, earmarked funding through the ERDF and ESF+, or a mechanism linked to the European Child Guarantee and the 2030 Barcelona targets. Such an approach would give greater political visibility to childcare infrastructure and support investment in formal childcare provision across Member States.

1. See Opinion C/2024/6867 of the European Economic and Social Committee of 28 November 2024.



Protecting Reproductive Rights at the European Level

Any demographic strategy must remain fully compatible with sexual and reproductive rights. France has already supported the explicit inclusion of the right to safe and legal abortion within the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union². It could also strengthen its support for European mechanisms designed to preserve effective access to reproductive health care when such rights come under pressure in certain Member States³. This approach is consistent with the European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030, which connects gender equality, work-life balance, care policies, and reproductive health.

CONCLUSION

Strengthening the coherence of family policy alone will not reverse deep demographic trends. Fertility is declining across nearly all advanced economies, including countries that historically had relatively high fertility rates. This reflects broader transformations in social and gender norms, economic insecurity, and family aspirations.

Therefore, the challenge is not to restore a demographic norm at all costs, but to adapt European social models to an era of structurally lower fertility, while enabling individuals to realize their desired family choices under better social and economic conditions.

This demographic reality, which is likely to endure, should now be fully incorporated into policy debates, particularly those concerning productivity growth, higher employment rates, and economic migration. Declining fertility should no longer be treated as a cyclical fluctuation, but as a structural factor likely to durably reshape economic, social, and collective balances over the long term.

2. See President Emmanuel Macron's [speech](#) before the European Parliament.

3. See the European Citizens' Initiative "[My Voice, My Choice: for safe and accessible abortion](#)," voted on by the European Parliament on 17 December 2025.

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