

How is fertility affected by separation and repartnering?

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In France, the frequency of separation and repartnering is increasing. Do separations reduce fertility by preventing births? Or do they have the opposite effect, with second unions providing new opportunities for childbearing? To answer this question, Éva Beaujouan analyses two recent surveys by INED and INSEE: the French version of the Generation and Gender Survey (Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelles, Erfi) conducted in 2005, and the 1999 family history survey (Étude de l'histoire familiale, EHF).

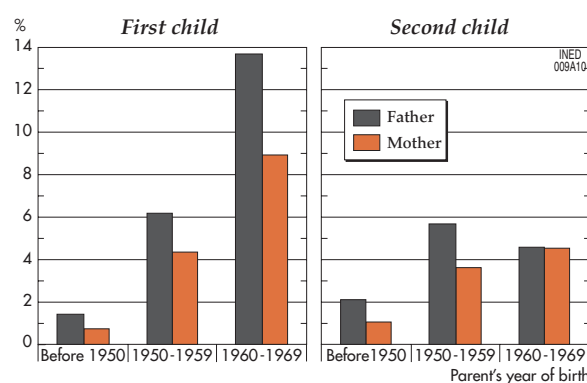
In France, most children are born to couples, married or otherwise [1]. Separation and repartnering that occur during the childbearing years will affect the number of children born: separations prevent births, while new unions encourage them. The increase in divorce and separations, and the growing frequency of repartnering have a potentially strong impact on individual fertility and, at national level, on the number of births [2]. But can we measure this impact? Has the total number of births fallen or risen as a consequence?

◆ A growing number of births in second unions

Conjugal behaviour has changed radically since the 1970s in most industrialized countries [3]. In France, practically half of all marriages end in divorce – in 2004 the total divorce rate was 45 per 100 marriages [4] – and repartnering is frequent. For example, one-fifth of the men and women born between 1960 and 1964 will have experienced at least two unions before age 50 (see Box for definition of a “union”). Moreover, since first births

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Figure 1 - Percentage of parents whose child is born in a second or subsequent union, by sex and cohort



Interpretation: 1.4% of men born before 1950 had their first child in a second or subsequent union.

Population: Men and women who already have one (respectively two) children.

(É. Beaujouan, *Population & Societies*, 464, INED, February 2010)

Source: Erfi-GGS1 survey 2005 (INED-INSEE).

now rarely occur at the beginning of the first union, many couples are still childless when they break up, and a growing number of children are born in a union which is not the first for their mother or their father.

This is notably the case for the first child. Among fathers, just 1.4% of those born before 1950 had their

first child in a second or subsequent union, versus 14% of those born between 1960 and 1969 (Figure 1). Among mothers, the proportions are respectively 0.7% and 9% (1). The same trend is observed for the second child, although the increase is less marked since some second children have yet to be born among the youngest cohorts included in the surveys. Overall, among births in the years 2000-2004 observed in the Erfi survey (see box), 22% were in a second or subsequent union for men and 17% for women.

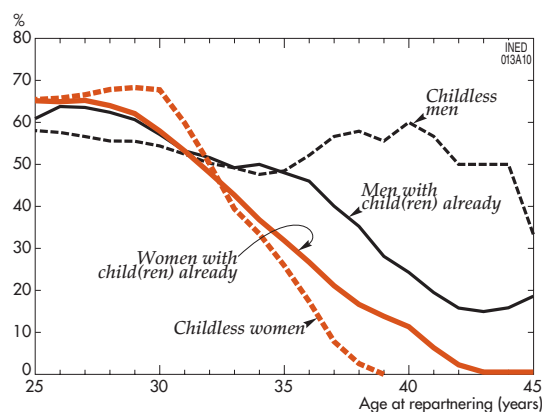
◆ Later second unions are less fertile

Many children are born following a separation, though generally after a new couple has been formed. Among persons wishing to have children, not all form a union “quickly enough”. Once a couple has been formed, fertility depends partly on the new partner’s characteristics. In second unions, formed at later ages than first ones, sterility is a more common problem: 14% of couples where the woman is aged 35 cannot have children, 35% where she is aged 40, and 80% where she is aged 45 [5]. Couples are becoming more aware that sterility increases with age, and know that childbearing should not be delayed for too long. Second union fertility is thus highly dependent upon the partners’ age at entry into union, that of the woman especially.

For childless persons who repartner before their 30th birthday, the probability of having a child in the next five years is around 67% for women and slightly lower, at below 60%, for men (Figure 2). But beyond age 32, men are more likely than women to have a child, and the gap widens with age. Fertility drops rapidly at older ages, for women especially.

The gender gap is due mainly to the fact that men

Figure 2 - Probability of a birth in the five years following repartnering, by sex and age at repartnering



Population: Men and women who repartnered between ages 20 and 49 over the period 1980-1999.

(É. Beaujouan, *Population & Societies*, 464, INED, February 2010)

Source: Erfi-GGS1 survey 2005 (INED-INSEE).

Box

Defining a union

Definitions used in the two French surveys referred to here.

- **Erfi: “Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelles”, INED/INSEE, 2005**

Survey of 10,079 persons aged 18-79, of whom 2,600 had separated from a partner in their lifetime.

Definition of union used in the survey: “having lived together under the same roof with a partner for at least three consecutive months”.

Survey question: (*Apart from your current partnership or marriage*) have you ever before lived together with someone as a couple?

- **EHF family history survey (Étude de l’histoire familiale), INSEE/INED, 1999**

Survey of 380,481 persons aged 18 or above, of whom 86,100 had separated from a partner in their lifetime.

Definition of union used in the survey: “having lived together with a partner under the same roof, for a period of six months or more, with or without marriage”.

Survey question: [...]. *If you have experienced several [periods of living as a couple], please mention only the first and the last.*

In the Erfi survey, a union is thus defined as “living as a married or cohabiting couple under the same roof for a minimum period of 3 months” and in the EHF survey “for a minimum period of 6 months”.

tend, on average, to repartner with younger women, especially when they are over 30. Up to age 42, more than half of all men forming a new union do so with a woman aged below 35. For a man aged 42 who forms a new couple with a woman aged 35, the chances of having a child are much higher than for a woman who starts a new union at age 42. It is thus easy to see why the fertility of newly repartnered men falls more slowly with age than that of women.

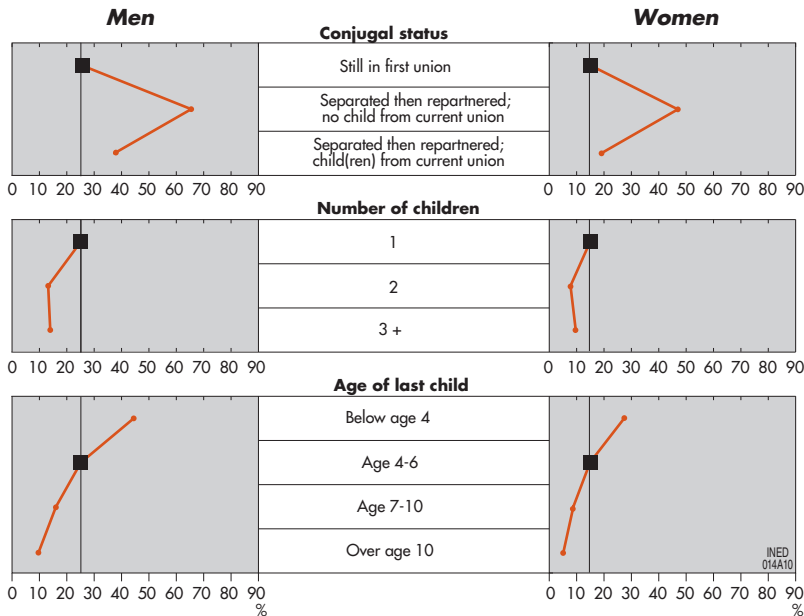
◆ Children born in a previous union have little impact on fertility

The existence of children from a previous union affects the probability of having a child in a second union, although the effect differs according to the age at repartnering (Figure 2). The majority of childless men, for example, have a child in the second union, regardless of the age at repartnering. For women, the probability of having a child in the second union is less affected by the existence of previous children. The majority of women who repartner before age 32 have one or more children in the new union, whether or not they were already mothers. After this age, however, second union fertility declines, regardless of previous childbearing history (2).

(1) The actual increase is probably even greater since some of the childless respondents in the youngest cohorts aged 36-45 at the time of the survey on which these figures are based, may subsequently have had a child.

(2) The number of childless women who repartner in the survey sample was too small to distinguish between women with and without children after age 32.

Figure 3 - Probability for a parent aged 35 of having another child, by conjugal history



■ Reference category

Note: Data on single persons were included in the calculations but the results are not presented. In more than 80% of cases, the current union is the second union.

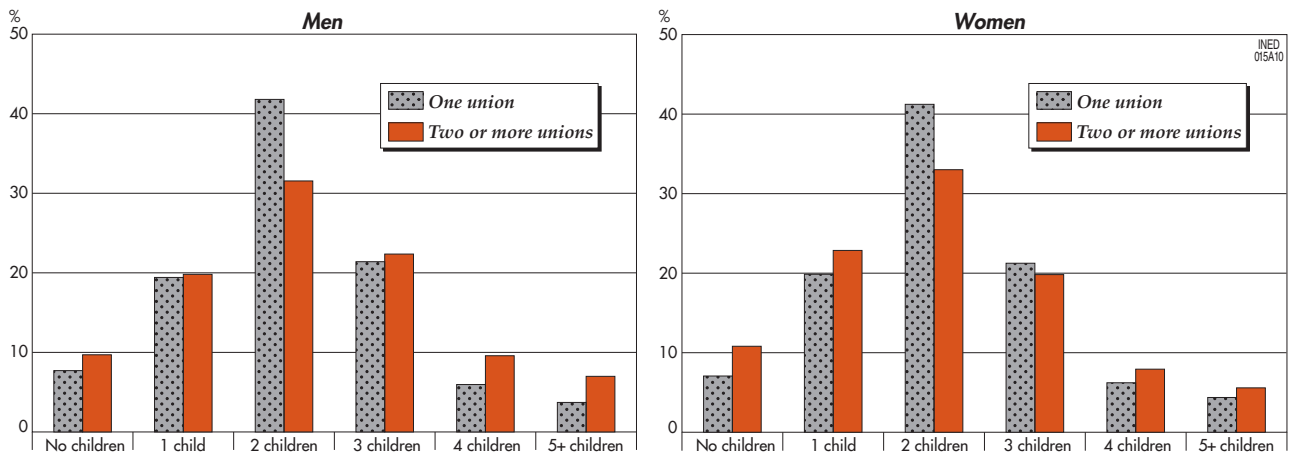
Interpretation: For a woman aged 35 in a second or subsequent union and with children from previous unions but no children in the current union, the probability of having another child is 47%, versus 15% for a woman with the same characteristics (age 35, already one or more children, equivalent socioeconomic characteristics, last child same age) but still with her first partner.

Population: Men and women aged 45-54 in 1999 who have lived with a partner.

(É. Beaujouan, *Population & Societies*, 464, INED, February 2010)

Source: *Étude de l'histoire familiale (EHF)*, INSEE-INED, 1999.

Figure 4 - Distribution by total number of children and number of unions



Population: Men and women aged 45-54 in 1999 who have lived with a partner.

(É. Beaujouan, *Population & Societies*, 464, INED, February 2010) Source: *Étude de l'histoire familiale (EHF)*, INSEE-INED, 1999.

◆ **A second union is often the chance to have another child**

Second unions are generally associated with additional births: even if one or both partners have children from a previous union, the formation of a new couple often leads to the birth of a child that would otherwise never have been conceived.

Take the example of a man aged 35 with one or more children from his first union (Figure 3). If this man repartners, he is two and a half times more likely to have another child than a man of the same age still in a first union (same number of children and same age of last child). The same is true for a woman aged 35 in the same situation.

If the couple already has a child born in the new union, the chances at age 35 of having another increase much less than if the child was from a previous union. The chances of having another child after age 35 are also lower if the person already has two or more children, and they decrease with the age of the last child.

◆ **Broader dispersion in the number of children**

What are the consequences of separations and repartnering on the number of children individuals have over their lifetime? For men and women alike, the average number of births among individuals who have or have not repartnered is different. While individuals

who have repartnered more frequently have no children or just one (Figure 4), they also more often have four or five children: 40% of men who have repartnered before age 45 have three or more children, versus 32% of those who have remained with the same partner. Childless persons who repartner are less likely to have a child in the second union. By contrast, for persons with children from a previous union, repartnering results in higher completed fertility.

◆ Higher lifetime fertility for repartnered men but not for repartnered women

Persons still in their first union at age 45 have slightly more children on average than the others. Men born between 1945 and 1954 had 2.17 children on average, and women 2.20, if their first union remained intact, versus 2.09 and 2.05 children, respectively, if the couple separated (Table 1). Completed fertility varies according to the trajectory after separation. Individuals who do not repartner have lower completed fertility, while for those who repartner, the average number of children is slightly higher among men (2.29) and slightly lower among women (2.13) than for those whose couple remains intact. When repartnering follows a childless first union, the mean age at birth of the first child is logically higher: 34 for men if the birth is in a second union, versus 26 in a first union, and 32 versus 24 for a woman. Completed fertility is reduced accordingly. It would appear that each period of life spent without a partner, during the childbearing years especially, has a negative effect on completed fertility [4].

Separations thus have contrasting effects at individual level, which partially offset each other at the level of the population as a whole. Separation with no subsequent repartnering or late repartnering is associated with lower individual fertility, while separation followed by rapid repartnering with a still fertile partner is associated with higher fertility. In

Table 1 - Completed fertility by conjugal trajectory

Conjugal situation	Men	Women
Intact first union	2.17	2.20
First union dissolved	2.09	2.05
No new union	1.78	1.98
New union	2.29	2.13
Overall	2.15	2.16

Population: Men and women aged 45-54 in 1999 who have lived with a partner.

(É. Beaujouan, *Population & Societies*, 464, INED, February 2010)

Source: *Étude de l'histoire familiale (EHF), INSEE-INED, 1999*

France, the large increase in separation and repartnering over the last 30 years is contributing to family diversity, but the impact on overall fertility remains small.

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ABSTRACT

Separation and repartnering are becoming increasingly frequent in France, reflecting a change in conjugal behaviour which is also affecting fertility. While almost all children are born to couples, married or otherwise, a growing proportion are born in second unions. Among men and women born before 1950, 1.4% and 0.7%, respectively, had their first child in a second union, compared with 14% of men and 9% of women in the 1960-1969 cohorts. For both men and women in a second union, the probability of having another child at age 35 is 2.5 times higher than for those in an intact first union. But men who form a new union are more likely to have a child than women of the same age who repartner, as they tend to form couples with younger women. Last, individuals who have experienced two or more unions are more likely to be childless or to have 4 or 5 children than those in intact first unions.

New release

Portraits de familles

(edited by Arnaud Régnier-Loilier)

Éditions de l'INED, collection Grandes enquêtes, 2009, 543 p.

An analysis of changes in conjugal behaviour and family structure as revealed by the Erfi survey, the French version of the Generations and Gender survey, conducted by INED and INSEE in 2005.

