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Fewer teenage births in England and Wales: a convergence towards Europe?

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The proportion of births to very young mothers, aged below 20, is higher in England⁽¹⁾ than in the other countries of western Europe. Two decades ago, the gap was very wide, but it has narrowed in recent years and levels of teenage births in England are now converging with those of the continent. Comparing England and France, John Tomkinson explains the reasons behind this particularity, which is shared with other English-speaking countries, and its recent evolution.

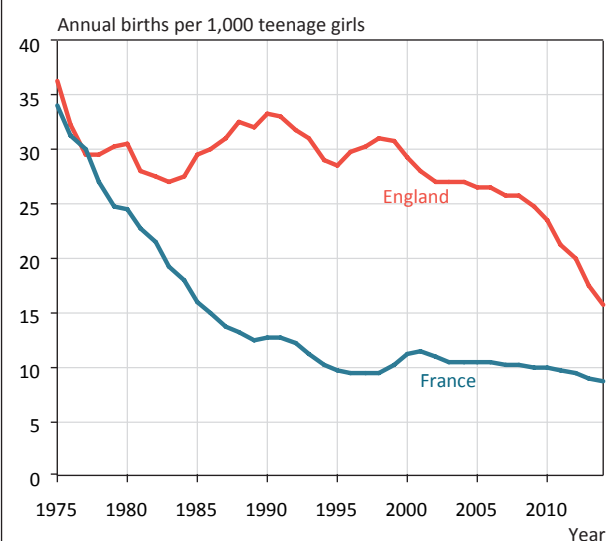
With 1.6 children per woman on average, European fertility is well below replacement level. England and France are outliers, with total fertility of 1.9 and 2.0 children per woman, respectively, in the early 2010s. England also has a particularly high level of teenage fertility: over the period 2010-2015, there were 18 births per 1,000 adolescent women aged 15-19 on average each year, compared to just half that number (9) in France. However, the gap has narrowed in recent years – in the late 1990s the teenage fertility rate in England was over 3 times higher than in France – pointing to a gradual convergence with other European countries.

High teenage fertility in the English-speaking world

Amongst western European countries and countries of European descent, the English-speaking nations are well known for their high levels of teenage fertility (Table 1). Over the period 2010-2015, levels were highest in the USA (30 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 years annually), followed by New Zealand (25), England (18) and Australia

(15). Ireland and Canada are the two English-speaking countries with the fewest teenage births. The other western European countries all have lower levels of

Figure 1. Trends in teenage fertility rates in England and France, 1975-2014



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Sources: Office for National Statistics, INSEE (author's calculations). Interpretation: In 2010, in England, there were 23.4 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19.

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(1) In this article, unless otherwise indicated, England refers to England and Wales.

Table 1. Teenage and total fertility in selected industrialized countries, 2010-2015

Country	Annual births per 1,000 women aged 15-19	Total fertility rate (TFR)	Contribution of women aged 15-19 to TFR (%)*
United States	30.0	1.89	7.9
New Zealand	25.3	2.05	6.2
England ⁺	18.1	1.92	4.7
Australia	15.5	1.92	4.0
Ireland	12.1	2.01	3.0
Portugal	12.0	1.28	4.7
Canada	11.3	1.61	3.5
France	9.5	2.00	2.4
Belgium	9.0	1.82	2.5
Spain	8.9	1.32	2.9
Austria	8.6	1.47	2.9
Greece	8.5	1.34	3.2
Germany	8.0	1.39	2.9
Finland	7.3	1.75	2.1
Italy	6.4	1.43	2.2
Norway	6.1	1.80	1.7
Sweden	5.5	1.92	1.4
Netherlands	4.5	1.75	1.3
Denmark	4.4	1.73	1.3
Switzerland	3.5	1.52	1.2

+ Including Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; * author's calculations. Source: [1]

adolescent fertility, although France, with 9 births per 1,000 adolescent women, is slightly above its neighbours. One might assume that countries with high teenage fertility also have high overall fertility, since the former contributes to the latter, but there appears to be no association between the two (Table 1). Some countries have similar levels of teenage fertility but very different levels of total fertility (e.g. Belgium and Spain), while others have comparable levels of total fertility but very different rates of teenage fertility (New Zealand and France); the factors associated with adolescent childbearing are different to those associated with total fertility.

Teenage fertility in England and France: divergence followed by convergence

A comparison of England and France sheds light on the reasons for England's outlier status in western Europe. The evolution of teenage fertility rates in England and France over the last 40 years show that the two countries start from relatively similar levels in 1975, with 37 births per 1,000 adolescent women in England versus 34 per 1,000 in France (Figure 1). After an initial decline in both countries, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by a divergence: English teenage fertility started rising again, while that of France continued its steady decrease and then levelled off. From the late 1990s, teenage fertility fell sharply and steadily in England, from 31 births per 1,000 women in 1998 to 16 per 1,000 in 2014, a reduction of 47%.

Figure 2. Trends in age specific fertility rates in England and France, 1975-2014

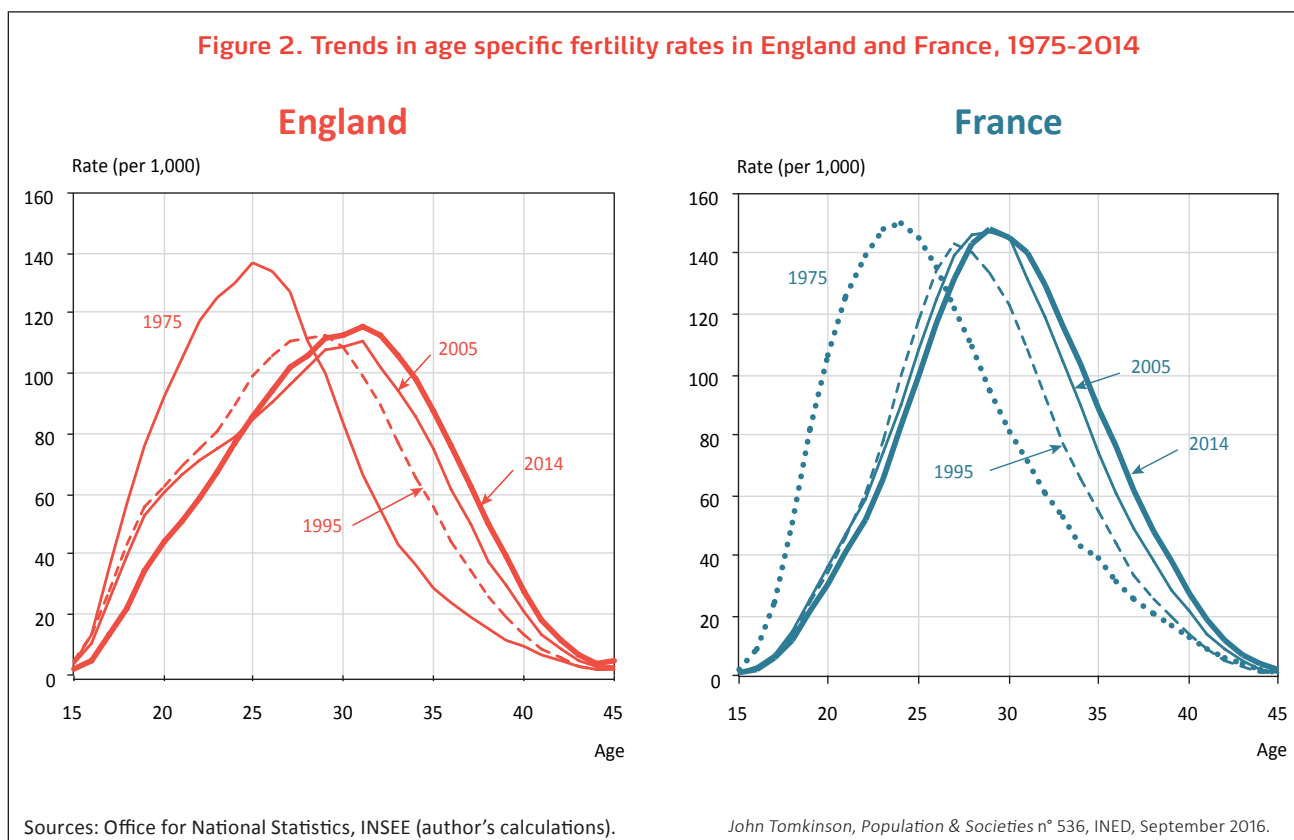


Table 2. Proportion of women having first sexual intercourse before age 20 and contraceptive method used at first intercourse

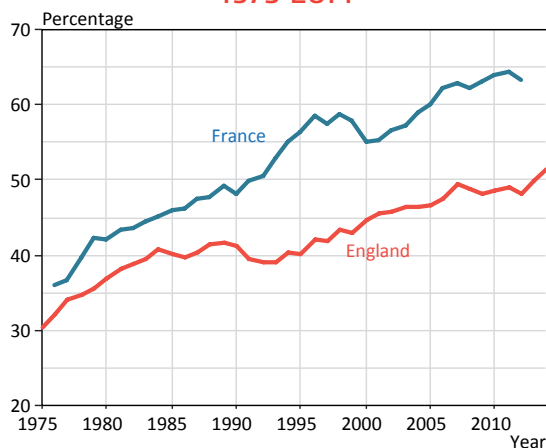
Country	Cohort (women's year of birth)	Proportion having first intercourse before age 20	Contraception used at first intercourse (%)			
			Condom	Pill	Condom and pill	No method
England	1960-1964	82.8	47.4	24.4	4.0	28.0
	1965-1969	85.4	49.9	31.7	9.5	23.8
	1970-1974	81.6	61.6	24.2	9.2	19.0
	1975-1979	83.4	71.2	28.5	17.4	13.8
	1980-1984	80.5	76.2	27.3	20.1	15.0
	1985-1989	83.2	78.5	26.9	19.8	13.0
France	1960-1964	76.5	17.3	39.8	2.1	34.7
	1965-1969	77.0	20.6	41.7	3.4	30.9
	1970-1974	77.4	42.3	41.9	10.1	19.3
	1975-1979	76.9	75.7	26.2	15.6	10.6
	1980-1984	78.5	81.2	40.1	33.9	10.9
	1985-1989	79.9	91.1	35.4	31.8	3.8

Sources: Natsal-3, FECOND (author's calculations).
 Coverage: for contraception, only women who had first sexual intercourse before age 20.
 Notes: "No method" includes cases where the woman used emergency contraception only.

The teenage "hump" of the English fertility curve

The phenomenon of teenage births produces the famous "hump" in the British fertility curve at young ages (Figure 2), a feature also observed in the fertility distributions of Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and

Figure 3. Percentage of teenage pregnancies ending in abortion in England and France, 1975-2014



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Sources : Office for National Statistics, Department of Health, INSEE, [3] (author's calculations).

Canada.[2] The French curve does not show such high levels at young ages; it is symmetrical, with a gradual increase in fertility up to age 29 (in 2005 and 2014) followed by a steady decrease. This main symmetrical part is also present on the English curve, and produces a second hump corresponding to adult fertility which peaks at a slightly later age than in France. With the increase in mean age at childbearing, the curve is shifting to the right in both countries.

A combination of factors: sexual activity, contraceptive use, abortion and socioeconomic characteristics

There are a multitude of factors behind the phenomenon of teenage maternity. A first group of factors concerns sexual and contraceptive behaviours. While the age of sexual consent in England is one year later than in France (16 and 15 years, respectively), this is not reflected in the median age at first sexual intercourse, which has remained stable over recent birth cohorts, at around 17 years for women in both countries. However, the proportion of women in England who have had sexual intercourse by their 20th birthday is slightly higher than in France for all cohorts born after 1960 (Table 2). In addition, effective contraceptive methods are used less widely by English teenage girls than by their

French counterparts at first intercourse (Table 2), use of contraception at first intercourse being a strong indicator of future contraceptive use.

However, contraceptive use at first intercourse has increased considerably in recent years among adolescent girls in England. Almost four in five women born between 1985 and 1989 who had first intercourse as a teenager used a condom that first time, compared with less than half of those born between 1960 and 1964. While use of the pill at first intercourse has remained relatively stable over time, the dual use of condom and pill increased from 5% to 20% between these cohorts. At the same time, the proportion using no method of contraception at first intercourse has fallen from more than a quarter to 13%. The improvements in contraceptive coverage at first intercourse seen in the cohorts born from 1975 onwards and commencing sexual activity from the 1990s onwards, correspond to the period of declining teenage fertility in England first seen in the early 1990s. While contraceptive coverage was lower among teenagers in France than in England in the older cohorts, in the more recent ones the situation has reversed as a result of two new trends: widespread condom use at first intercourse and a sharp increase in the dual use of condom and pill.

Box. Access to abortion and contraception in England and France

While teenagers in both countries now have widespread access to contraception and abortion, France initially lagged behind England in this respect. In England, the contraceptive pill first became available in 1960, initially for married women only, and then in 1967 for single women too. Abortion was also decriminalized in 1967. Due to pro-natalist family politics in France, it was not until the “Neuwirth law” voted in late 1967, but only applied from the end of 1972, that contraception became available to women, and not until the “Veil law” of 1975 that abortion was legalized.

Today, in England, women aged 16 years old and above can consent to an abortion without informing their parents, whereas in France a minor must have parental authorization and consult a psychosocial counsellor before deciding to terminate a pregnancy. While contraception, notably the contraceptive pill, has been provided freely and confidentially (without parental consent) to young people by medical and family planning services in England for over half a century, this has only been the case in France since 2012-2013.

The development of the morning-after pill was also an important step forward. It has been available without a prescription to English women aged 16 years old and above since 2001 and to all women in France since 2002. Since 1999, secondary school nurses have also been authorized to give the morning-after pill to teenage girls in France, though young women now tend to buy it from a pharmacy, where it is sold for 10 euros (around 30 euros in the UK [5]).

Finally, part of the difference in teenage fertility rates can be attributed to more frequent recourse to abortion by pregnant adolescents in France than in England (Figure 3). Teenage abortion has increased steadily in both countries, but while in France more than 50% of teenage pregnancies have ended in abortion since the early 1990s, this threshold was not surpassed in England until 2015.

Fertility and recourse to abortion vary by socioeconomic status, in England especially, where adolescent fertility is higher and abortion less frequent among disadvantaged groups.[4] Not all teenage pregnancies are unintended: for certain low-educated young women, a lack of prospects may accelerate entry into motherhood as it gives them a status otherwise difficult to obtain. But while levels of teenage pregnancy are higher in England than in France among disadvantaged women, as recent census data shows, this is also the case at an equal level of educational attainment and economic activity.

Why the convergence towards Western Europe?

The contraceptive behaviour of English teenage girls changed very rapidly from the late 1990s. This is due partly to the implementation of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy under the Labour government and a strong political will to reduce the number of teenage births. Designed to inform teenagers about sexual health matters and intimate relationships, and to promote and facilitate access to contraception, this Strategy has brought England more closely into line with the rest of western Europe.

References

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Abstract

Between 2010 and 2015, births to teenage mothers were more frequent in England than in France, due partly to a lower level of contraceptive use and less frequent recourse to abortion. But behaviours are changing. Thanks to efforts to inform young people about sexuality and contraception, along with greater use of contraceptives and recourse to abortion, the teenage fertility rate has fallen sharply in England in recent years and is moving closer to the levels observed in the rest of western Europe.