

Home

About the Institute

Research

Staff

VID Publications

News & Events

Job vacancies

Information for the Public

Links

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A review of policies and practices related to the 'highest-low' fertility of Sweden

Journal: Vienna Yearbook of Population Research

Volume: 2008, pages 125-147

Publisher: [Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften](#)

DOI: 10.1553/populationyearbook2008s89

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Abstract

This article reviews research on the role social and family policies play for fertility in Sweden. Swedish family policies are not directly aimed at encouraging childbirth. Their main goal has rather been to support women's participation in the labour force and to promote gender equality. They focus on enabling individuals to pursue their family and occupational pathways without being too dependent on other persons. The following measures have helped women to reconcile family and working life: individual taxation and individual-based social-security systems, which make gendered segregation of work and care less attractive for couples; an income replacement-based parental-leave system, which gives women incentives to establish themselves on the labour market before considering childbirth; and subsidised child care, which allows women to return to work after parental leave. Fertility has fluctuated during recent decades but—as in the other Nordic countries with similar welfare state setups—it has remained well above the European average. The Swedish institutional context clearly is conducive to such 'highest-low' fertility. My review documents the importance of institutional factors in shaping childbearing behaviour and demonstrates some specific impacts of family policies on demographic behaviour.

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