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Assumptions on fertility

Are surveys on fertility intentions useful in projections?

Note by Statistics Sweden*

Summary

Statistics Sweden have done surveys about the fertility intentions in the population. The association between fertility intentions relate to actual child bearing has not been investigated regarding its use in population projections. The primary aim with the study is to investigate whether the attitudes of individuals towards having children in the near future could be used to support assumptions on childbearing in the national population projection of Sweden.

We carried out a register-based follow-up of respondents to a questionnaire survey conducted in the spring of 2009 regarding fertility intentions. The follow-up included all births to respondents in the period 2009 to 2015. We use interaction analyses to describe the association between baseline fertility intentions and actual childbearing by various socio-demographic variables.

The present follow-up provides an opportunity to use fertility intentions in population projections. However, the results are limited to relatively short-term use, which depended on the question to identify childbearing intention. More structural measurement of fertility intentions could be used as an indicator to identify short-term fertility changes in the population that could be used for population projections.

I. Introduction

1. Statistics Sweden have done surveys about the fertility intentions in the population. The association between fertility intentions relate to actual child bearing has not been investigated regarding its use in population projections. In this report, we carry out a register-based follow-up of respondents to a questionnaire survey conducted in the spring of 2009, regarding attitudes to having children. The report provides an analysis of the actual outcome of childbearing in the period of 2009–2015 for the respondents to the questionnaire. The primary aim with the study is to investigate whether the attitudes of individuals towards having children in the near future could be used to support assumptions on childbearing in the national population projection of Sweden.

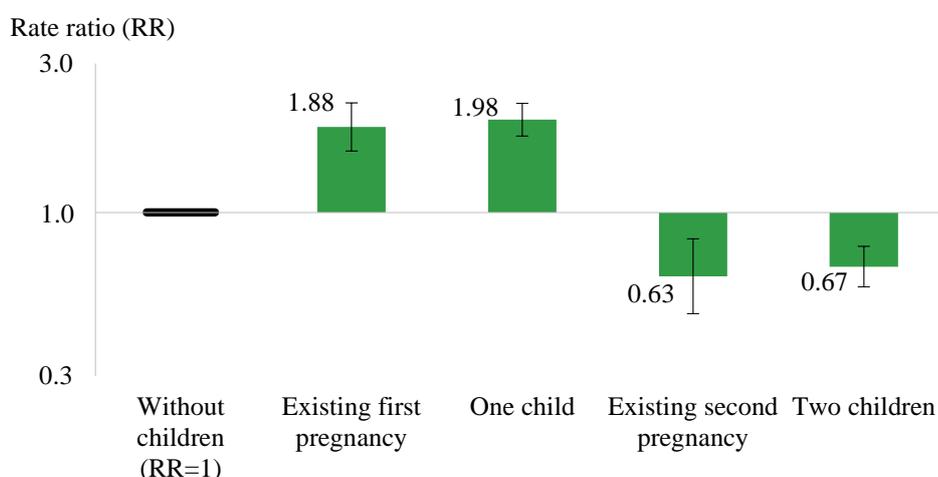
A. Methods

2. We carried out a register-based follow-up of respondents to a questionnaire survey (n=3579, women 20–40 years old, and men 20–44 years old) conducted in the spring of 2009 regarding fertility intentions. The follow-up included all births to respondents in the period 2009 to 2015. We use interaction analyses to describe the association between baseline fertility intentions and actual childbearing by various socio-demographic variables.
3. The results are derived from a questionnaire with a relatively high margin of uncertainty. In the report, this is expressed as a confidence interval. The results also show that the percentage who did have children among those who had none before was higher among those who responded to the questionnaire than in the total population having no children before the follow-up. This entails a risk that the survey somewhat overestimates the number of children born compared with the entire population.

II. Strong norm to have two children

4. Of the 3 600 people who responded to the questionnaire in the spring of 2009, approximately four out of ten had at least one child before 2015. A somewhat higher proportion of women than men had at least one more child; 48 percent compared with 38 percent. The tendency to have children within six years varied by age; it was highest for people aged 31–35 and lowest for people aged 40–48. Depending on the number of children the respondents already had, the tendency to have at least one more child was highest for those who were pregnant with their first child and those who already had one child. This result is consistent with the fact that two is the most common number of children in Sweden.

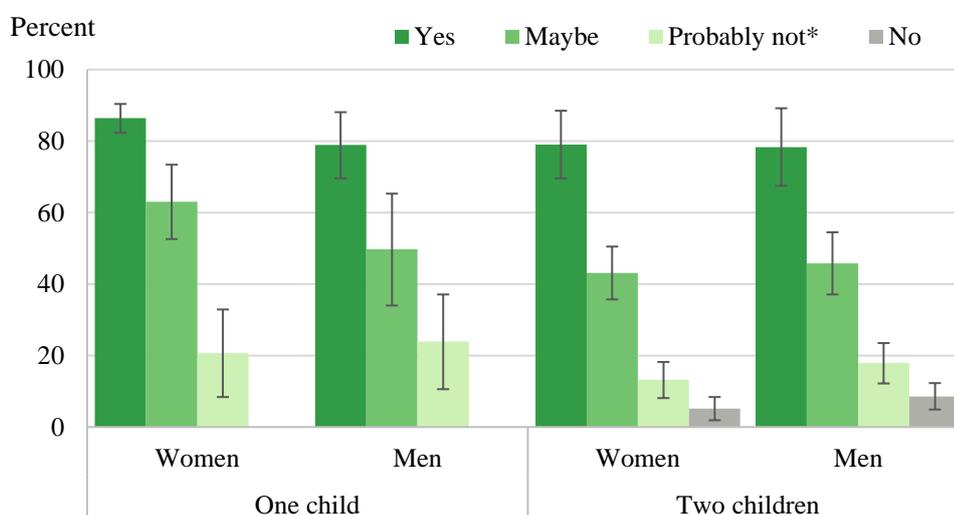
Graph 1
The propensity to have at least one child before 2015, differences by parity and pregnancy in 2009



B. Intentions to childbearing in the future are linked to actual child births

- For respondents who already had at least one child their future beliefs of additional children is measured with the following question: “Do you believe you will have more children within the next 5–6 years?” The possible answers – “Yes”, “Maybe”, “Probably not” and “Not” – were analysed in relation to actual childbearing, using regression analyses, both for people who had one child and for those who had two children at the time of the survey. Of the women who had one or two children and wanted additional children within six years, eight out of ten had at least one more child 86 percent and 79 percent, respectively. Among the men, the share was nearly as high 79 percent and 78 percent, respectively. The share of those who had children was lower among those who responded “Maybe”, considerably lower among those who responded “Probably not” and lowest among those who responded “No”.

Graph 2
Proportion of women and men who had at least one child before 2015, by number of children and response to a question of having additional children in 2009. Percent with 95 percent confidence interval



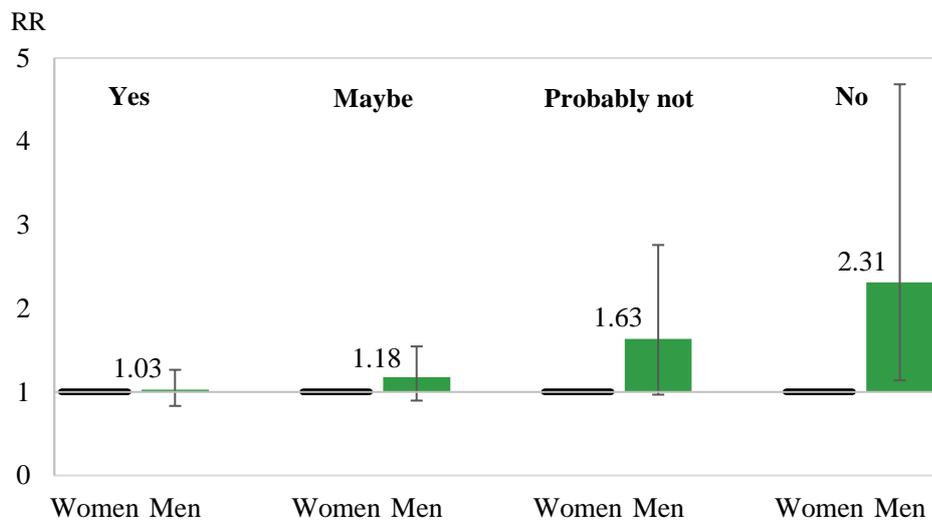
*There were very few respondents with one child who said “No”. They are grouped together with “Probably not”.

(a) Women’s attitudes somewhat more certain than men’s attitudes

6. There was no significant difference between women and men in actually having children within six years if child intentions were positive in 2009. If child intentions in 2009 were negative, men were more likely than women to have at least one more child up until 2015.

Graph 3

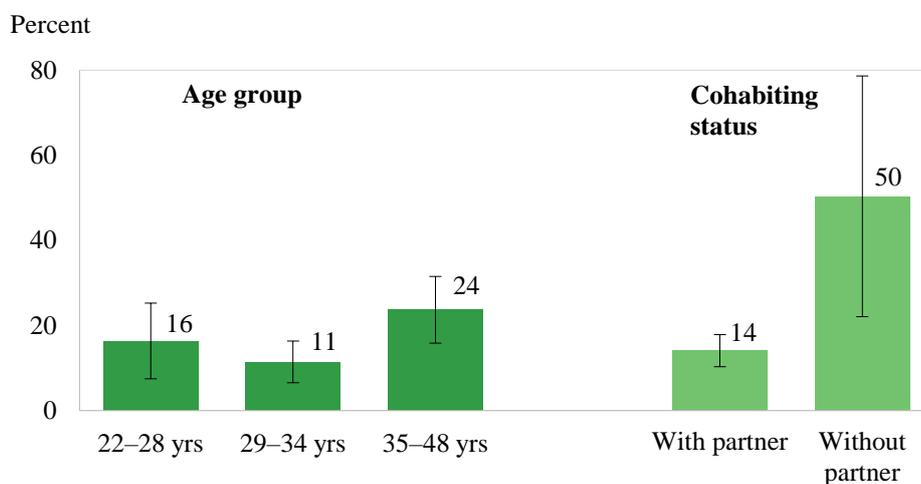
The propensity for respondents with two children to have at least one child before 2015, differences by sex and response to a question of having additional children in 2009. Rate ratios for men compared with women (RR=1) with 95 percent confidence interval



III. Few clear differences between demographic and social groups

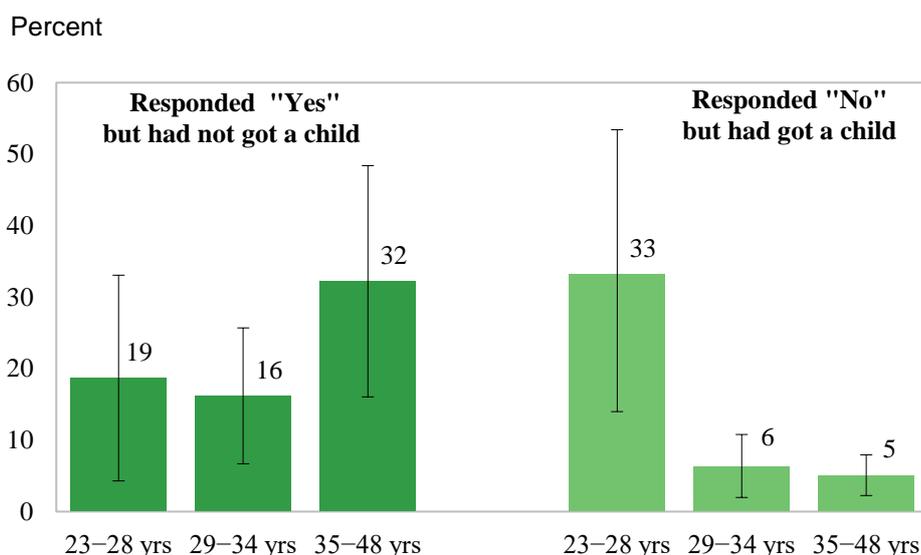
7. The report compares the tendency to have more children in several different demographic and social groups. Few obvious results, except age, show any one group as being systematically more or less inclined to have children within a six-year period, regardless of the number of children at the beginning of the follow-up. However, the group that had attained a post-secondary education of at least three years had a higher propensity to have children than those with an upper secondary education; this applied equally to those with one or two children.
8. Of the respondents with one child who responded “Yes” to a question of having additional children in 2009 50 percent of them without a partner had a child and 86 percent of them with a partner, see graph 4.

Graph 4
 Proportion of parents with one child who responded “Yes” to a question of having additional children in 2009 but who had not have a child until 2015 by age group and cohabitation status in 2009. Percent with 95 percent confidence interval



- Approximately a third of the parents who were 21-28 years old and had two children in 2009 and who did not believe they would have more children within six years, actually had at least one more child before 2015, see graph 5.

Graph 5
 Proportion of parents with two children who responded “Yes” to a question of having additional children in 2009 but who had not got a child, and the proportion of parents who responded “No” but had got a child in the follow-up period by age group. Percent with 95 percent confidence interval



IV. Conclusion

- Are questions regarding the attitude to future childbearing of any use for population projections? The results show several uncertainty factors that should be considered in the

assumptions regarding childbearing that could possibly be used. Some of those who believed they would have more children never realized this desire to have more children, to the largest extent for the age group 35–48 years. This may be due to a number of factors that change over time. The questionnaire included questions on different obstacles to childbearing, including a hesitant partner or a home that was too small. And a part of those that did not believe they would have more children within six years, especially off the younger respondents.

11. Relatively many did not express a strong opinion on childbearing in the near future; it could be said that they were hesitant. The present follow-up, however, provides an opportunity to use the results regarding the percentages that are “likely” to have children even if they respond “Maybe” or “Maybe not” when asked if they consider having children in the next couple of years.
12. Findings for childless persons who responded the questionnaire suggest that their propensity to have children is greater than for the entire childless Swedish population. This means that respondents to the questionnaire were partly selected of persons who are more prone to have children than the average person in the population.
13. The present follow-up provides an opportunity to use fertility intentions in population projections. However, the results are limited to relatively short-term use, which depended on the question to identify childbearing intention. More structural measurement of fertility intentions could be used as an indicator to identify short-term fertility changes in the population that could be used for population projections.
