

From the Memorandum by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs on “The Reasons for Our Declining Birth Rate” (1957)

Abstract

In this 1957 memorandum, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs took up the question of why a society in the midst of the “Economic Miracle” was experiencing a declining birth rate. The memo concluded that in an industrialized society, families with numerous children faced a higher risk of poverty. In addition, there was a lack of adequate living space. But the memo also highlighted the trend toward consumption and the rise in individual living standards, the growing participation of women in the workforce, modern methods of birth control, the loss of millions of potential fathers through the war, and the growing divorce rate.

Source

The reasons for the declining birth rate

A. The changed economic situation of the family:

The ... findings – the lower the income, the lower the number of children in general – clearly reveal that one main reason for the drop in births is the changed economic situation of the family in industrialized society. In pre-industrial times, the family enterprise was for the most part the foundation of the economic order. It gave the family and all its members – including grandparents and the large number of children who remained single in the system at the time – full economic security. *Back then*, the saying was true: *The more children, the greater the family’s economic power.*

In short order, this system was radically altered by the emergence of the industrial economy and its division of labor. While previously the mass of the population lived and worked in the secure shelter of the family enterprise, today nearly 80% of our working people are employed in outside enterprises. One element of this new economic order is performance pay, which, as such, is the same for single men and family fathers. With this, the principle that once applied to the family in the previous economic order seems to have been inverted. It now says: *The more children, the greater the family’s economic problems.* [...]

B. Overvaluation of the living standard:

The overvaluation of the living standard undoubtedly numbers among the motivations for deliberately keeping the family small. Here, we see the interplay of intellectual and economic developments. Individualism, with its often excessively lopsided emphasis on the rights of the individual person, led to a situation in which marriage was widely seen not so much as a social institution in the sense of the Christian churches, but more as a means of perfecting one’s own personality by way of the partner. As a consistent further extension of this notion, the individual is less inclined to make sacrifices *for children* and to forego a part of his standard of living in favor of the coming generation. The development of the economy accommodated this attitude. The rapid surge in the supply of consumer goods in the last decades, reinforced by ever more effective advertising options, has made it seem to many that the possession of these goods is more valuable than the possession of children. That is especially true for Germany, where during two World Wars and their aftermath, a demand built up in one generation that is

now being satisfied. It is to be expected, however, that – much like in America, where the described development can be seen a few decades earlier – a kind of satiety will occur among us as well. The extraordinary rise in births that can be observed in America in the last few years, as well as the increasing interiorization of life, especially family life, that sociologists have simultaneously identified in that country, give reason to expect that among us, as well, the overvaluation of the standard of living will not last.

C. Gainful employment of married women:

The extraordinary rise in the gainful employment of wives in modern economic and social life must be seen in connection with the economic reasons for keeping families small. After all, it is chiefly these same reasons that are prompting married women to work, especially in factories and offices; those cases in which women prefer this sort of outside work to family work represent a genuine minority.

There can be no doubt that the gainful employment of married women has an unfavorable influence on the birth rate in this circle of women. Both economic and professional concerns, as well as the excessive physical strain associated with holding two jobs – the housewife's job is also a full-time job – lead gainfully employed married women to substantially limit the number of children they have. These thoughts are confirmed by the findings of the Federal Office of Statistics. According to this data, in 1950, married couples living together where the wife was gainfully employed had, on average, 0.6 children under the age of fifteen in their household, while the corresponding number for all married couples was 0.9.

However, these numbers do not yet provide any final indication, because they do not reveal unambiguously whether the lower frequency of births among working wives in each specific case was the consequence or the cause of employment. To render a secure judgment, we would have to know, in addition to age, also the length of the marriage, the income of the husband, and other characteristics about which the statistics currently do not provide any information.

D. Housing shortage:

The approximately 10,000 submissions that the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs receives each year just from those in search of housing clearly show that the housing shortage is still having a serious effect on many of our families. Despite the construction of about 3.5 million housing units at a cost of about 55 billion DM, the Federal Ministry for Housing Construction estimated that the shortfall of family housing units (multi-room apartments) was still 1.6 million at the end of 1956. These problems particularly affect younger couples, who, after marriage, have still been unable to find suitable housing or do not have sufficient funds to purchase an apartment. Time and again, the submissions make clear just how much younger married couples, who see raising several children as one goal of their marriage, are suffering from housing conditions that simply make it impossible for them to do so.

E. Contraception and abortion:

The desire to keep families small for the aforementioned reasons is aided by the fact that ever wider circles have received more comprehensive education about contraceptive measures and abortion. According to studies by the Federal Office of Statistics, condom production alone has doubled within the last five years (around 44 million in 1950, around 88 million in 1955). No numerical data on chemical contraceptives is available yet.

Much greater importance is attached to the rise in miscarriages and abortions. The Hamburg hygienist Professor Dr. Harmsen, a member of the advisory council of the Federal Ministry for Family Matters, rightly sees this as a central problem for our national health and for the birth trend.

Also, according to medical opinion, one can no longer overlook the considerable rise in miscarriages as a factor in the noticeable decline in current birth numbers. Although doctors have practically no obligation to report miscarriages anymore, whereas they did in time before the Second World War, the few numerical records from the postwar period provide sufficient indication that the rise in miscarriages is a terrifyingly serious socio-biological as well as socio-hygienic problem. [...]

F. An excess of women:

The great human losses of two World Wars represent another crucial cause for the decline in the birth rate. As a result, today there are 820,000 more women than men just in the age cohorts of thirty to fifty year-olds. All told, one can say that around 1 million women are being denied the opportunity for marriage and children because of this.

G. Frequency of divorce:

The divorce rate, the causes of which cannot be addressed here, is 85 divorces per 100,000 inhabitants. In 1910, there were only 23 divorces per 100,000, in 1937 there were 69 per 100,000. Of particular interest in this context is the fact that, according to private surveys, 12% of all marriages of returning prisoners of war ended in divorce, while the average rate for other marriages was 0.36%. [...]

H. Ethical aspects and conclusions:

The current magnitude of the decline in the birth rate poses serious problems. We are dealing here with decisions in the absolutely private sphere of human life, decisions that depend largely on the *ethical attitude* of the individual. Determining that attitude cannot be a matter of the state. The task here lies with the forces of the free ethical-cultural realm, especially with the churches. Surely the ethical side of the problem is even more important than economic-material questions.

Economic measures can only have a sustained effect if the ethical preconditions (suppression of an excessively materialistic way of thinking) are given.

It is likewise beyond doubt that the predominant desire for (more) children is broadly opposed by very *serious* external obstacles (the economic situation of families with numerous children, the housing shortage). This calls the responsible persons in the state and society onto the scene. It is necessary to counteract a development in which largely “the isolated individual became the partner and building block for the constructs of society, especially the state and political life” (Schelsky) [...]

Source: From the Memorandum by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs on “The Reasons for Our Declining Birth Rate” (1957), pp. 4f., 7ff, 10f. DGB/Bestand Familienfragen/Familiendenkschriften; reprinted in Klaus-Jörg Ruhl, ed., *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit 1945–1963*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1988, pp. 130–34.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

Recommended Citation: From the Memorandum by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs on “The Reasons for Our Declining Birth Rate” (1957), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-4566>> [December 07, 2024].