

**Trends in Nonmarital Birth Rates and Approval of Nonmarital Childbearing
in Western Countries**

Matthew R. Wright

Karen Benjamin Guzzo

Bowling Green State University

Abstract

Nonmarital childbearing has been increasing in Western countries, though there is substantial variation. Second Demographic Transition (SDT) Theory argues rising individualism would lead to a shift away from childbearing within marriage, as attitudes become more supportive of nontraditional family behaviors. However, comparative research linking attitudes toward and levels of nonmarital childbearing is scarce. This paper examines how levels and support for nonmarital childbearing in countries have changed over time, as well as variation in the correlation across time and country. In addition, we examine whether attitudes predict nonmarital birth ratios or vice versa. Descriptive findings show that the proportion of births outside of marriage increased among the countries we observed between 1989 and 2012, though large variations exist in the magnitude of change and absolute levels. Preliminary evidence also suggests that attitudes have become more approving overall, but changes in attitudes do not appear to track changes in behavior neatly.

The past few decades have witnessed a steady increase in the proportion of births to unmarried women in Western countries, yet there is tremendous variation across countries (Kiernan 2004). In 2011, 41% of births in the United States were nonmarital, placing the U.S. roughly in the middle of levels seen among its European peers (Livingston and Brown 2014). At one end of the spectrum are countries with high levels of nonmarital childbearing, primarily located in Northern Europe; more than half of all births in Norway and Sweden, for instance, occur outside of marriage. At the other end of the spectrum are the countries where childbearing outside of marriage occurs less frequently, such as Switzerland (20% in 2011) and Poland (22%). The sources of the variation in levels of nonmarital childbearing have been variously attributed to differences in the level of nonmarital unions, such as cohabitation (Kiernan 2004), differences in social policy context (Perelli-Harris and Sánchez Gassen 2012), and differences in women's employment (Konietzka and Kreyenfeld 2002).

Another factor that is often mentioned as a possible cause is a weakening of traditional attitudes toward marriage and childbearing and an emergence of more liberal attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing. According to Second Demographic Transition Theory (SDT; Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006; Lesthaeghe 2010), as countries industrialize and develop, a shift occurs towards an increased emphasis on individual autonomy and self-actualization, leading to a growing acceptance of nontraditional family behaviors as essentially a manifestation of shifting cultural values (Perelli-Harris and Gerber 2011). There is some support for increasing acceptability of nonmarital childbearing over time. In the U.S., there is evidence that at least since 1974, attitudes have shifted towards greater acceptance (Pagnini and Rindfuss 1993; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Martinez et al., 2006). There seems to be a similar change occurring in Europe as well (Gubernskaya 2010).

Interestingly, despite a wealth of studies focusing on documenting and assessing the SDT in various contexts and over time, comparative research directly examining attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing and linking them to levels of nonmarital fertility has remained scarce. In this project, we examine attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing and nonmarital birth ratios in Western Europe and North America over two decades. Using several years of data from the General Social Survey (GSS) and the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) combined with data on nonmarital birth ratios from several sources, we describe trends in attitudes and in the proportion of births that are nonmarital across countries, document correlations between attitudes and behaviors within countries and over time, and attempt to disentangle the causal relationship between attitudes and behavior.

Second Demographic Transition Theory

Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory argues that changes in family and fertility behavior can be linked to cultural shifts in ideation. Specifically, increasing education and secularization contribute to ideational change, with greater focus on self-actualization and individualistic values and fulfillment (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006; Lesthaeghe 2010; Bianchi 2014). The cultural shift toward individualism is inconsistent with traditional family forms and behavior, such as marriage and childbearing within marriage. Thus, SDT predicts, among other things, a decline in the proportion of births occurring within marriage and an increase in nonmarital childbearing.

Support for SDT has been mixed. It seems most strongly supported in the Scandinavian countries, where stable cohabiting unions are common, and most nonmarital births occur within cohabitation (Kiernan 2004). Other areas of Europe, however, have displayed little evidence of the type of behaviors consistent with the ideological change posited by the SDT. Kertzer et al

(2009) find little support in Italy, given that the SDT does little to explain its low rates of fertility (both overall and nonmarital) and cohabitation. Perelli-Harris and Gerber (2011) draw similar conclusions about the applicability of the SDT in Russia, albeit for different reasons; they point to the socioeconomic disadvantage of unmarried families as counterintuitive to the notion that the educated would lead the shift towards individualism and secularization. Cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing in the United States is similarly concentrated among the less advantaged, casting doubt on the whether the SDT is occurring there as well (Bailey, Guildi, and Hershbein 2013). Lesthaeghe and Neidert (2006), however, still argue the general principles of the SDT are indeed occurring in the United States. In any case, it seems that the SDT is a more fluid and less defined theory than originally argued (Sobotka 2008).

Attitudes and behavior

Theoretically, we could expect attitudes regarding fertility to be related to childbearing behaviors. One particularly useful theoretical argument for examining the link between attitudes and behavior is the theory of planned behavior, posited by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975). The theory of planned behavior suggests that a behavior is more likely to occur if individuals maintain positive attitudes toward the behavior. Attitudes may have more of an impact on behavior if the behavior holds some degree of social support in society (Barber 2001; Barber and Axinn 2005). Conversely, behaviors that are not supported by social norms in the society are more likely to be discouraged, regardless of the individual's attitudes. For example, those maintaining positive attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing may receive social pressure to refrain from behaviors increasing the risk of having children while they are unmarried (Barber and Axinn 2005). Thus, we might expect that as the proportion of society opposed to nonmarital

childbearing decreases, pressures to avoid sex outside of marriage and nonmarital childbearing itself would wane, and nonmarital childbearing would rise.

In sum, increases in the proportion of births outside of marriage in Western countries are likely accompanied by increasing approval of nonmarital childbearing, though the causal ordering is not clear. However, it remains to be seen whether countries have experienced changes in behavior and attitudes in a similar fashion over time and the extent to which, if any, acceptability of nonmarital childbearing is linked to variation in nonmarital childbearing. In this paper, we have two basic research questions:

- 1) How have countries changed over time in both attitudes and levels of nonmarital childbearing? Does the correlation between attitudes and the proportion of nonmarital births vary across time and country?
- 2) Do attitudes predict nonmarital birth ratios or vice versa?

The second question is particularly important yet difficult to answer. A growing acceptability of childbearing outside of marriage reduces social stigma and the costs of nonmarital childbearing, likely leading to an increase in nonmarital fertility. At the same time, rising levels of nonmarital childbearing, perhaps due to other cultural, structural, and economic changes, can lead to a shift in attitudes as once-rare behavior becomes normalized. Thus, at the societal level, the relationship between attitudes toward and levels of nonmarital fertility is likely recursive.

Data and Methods

Data for this study will come from several sources, including the General Social Survey (GSS) and the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). The GSS is a cross-sectional data collection of representative samples of Americans 18 and older. Questions in the GSS

particularly focus on demographic characteristics and attitudes. The data are suitable for this study because attitudinal questions have been repeated in several years, allowing for examination of changes across time. The ISSP is a collection of data from nationally representative samples in over 20 countries, with a focus on information regarding values and attitudes (Kelley and Evans 1999), and the questions across the GSS and the ISSP are designed to be similar (GSS n.d.). Questions regarding attitudes and values are asked in the same sequence and wording, rendering responses comparable. Data used for this study will come from 1994, 2002, and 2012, as both the GSS and ISSP asked respondents questions about family behaviors and attitudes in these years. From the ISSP, data will be used for 22 countries, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and 20 European countries.¹

The analyses occur at the country level. We will pool the individual-level surveys within each country to create country-level indicators. Following prior attitudinal research on nonmarital childbearing attitudes across time and countries (Gubernskaya 2010; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), our measure of the acceptability of nonmarital childbearing is derived from the statement “People who want children ought to get married.” Response options were reported on a five-point scale, ranging from (1) “strongly agree” to (5) “strongly disagree.” Thus, a value of five on the scale indicates the most accepting attitude toward nonmarital childbearing, whereas the lowest value represents the least accepting attitude. This will be dichotomized into a country-level measure of the proportion who disagree or strongly disagree (i.e., the proportion who are accepting of nonmarital fertility).

Data on nonmarital childbearing behavior came from a variety of sources, including Eurostat, the International Institute for Demographic Studies, and population statistics published

¹ Nonmarital fertility data was not available for New Zealand, Russia, and Japan for the majority of the years of our analysis.

by governments in Canada and the United States (see Appendix for all data sources used in the study). The key independent variable is the proportion of births outside of marriage. We were able to obtain the proportion of births outside of marriage for each year between 1989 and 2012 for the countries under consideration; a few countries are missing data on one or two years, generally either the earliest or latest years of information, and we will extrapolate the data to fill in the missing information. The proportion of births outside of marriage in Canada had to be calculated by hand from raw numbers. In doing so, we divided the number of nonmarital births by the total number of births and multiplied the result by 100 to get the proportion of births outside of marriage, but we had to exclude roughly 13% of births in which the mother's marital status was not listed.

To analyze the interrelationship between attitudes and childbearing, we will leverage the time-series nature of the data and use cross-lag models in multivariate models, though we have yet to decide on a final analytical approach.

Other covariates

Because the analysis uses countries as its unit of analysis, we will also use aggregated statistics from the GSS/ISSP surveys, which are nationally representative, to create country-level control variables (constructed as proportions) for factors likely associated nonmarital childbearing. Preliminarily, we expect to include the following proportions: female, non-white, in various age groups, at various education levels, never-married, and attending religious services weekly or more.

Preliminary results

Nonmarital Birth Ratios

Figures 1-5 present the trends in the proportion of births occurring outside of marriage between 1989 and 2012 by country groupings, following United Nations standard classification. In the Eastern European countries displayed in Figure 1, all countries experienced increases in the nonmarital birth ratio over the observed time period. In the beginning of the time period, there was relatively little variation, with the countries all within a 7 percentage point spread, ranging from only 6% of births outside of marriage in Poland to 13% of births in Hungary. By 2012, however, there is considerably more variation, though all countries reported that at least a fifth of all births were nonmarital. Poland remained at the lower end of the spectrum, at 22%. Bulgaria experienced the most dramatic increase and had the highest level in 2012, moving from 12% of births occurring outside of marriage in 1989 to 57% of births in 2012 – an increase of nearly 500%.

– Figure 1 here –

In Western Europe (Figure 2), there was greater variation in the early years of observation, with a low of 6% in Switzerland and a high of 28% in France. The proportion of births increased in all the countries included here, though the rate and magnitude of change varied. Switzerland remained at the low end of the spectrum among Western European countries, but its proportion of births outside of marriage more than tripled, from 6% to 20%. The Netherlands experienced the largest change, going from 11% in 1989 to 47% in 2012. In Southern Europe, though we only have two countries (Spain and Slovenia), we again see a pattern of increase over time (Figure 3). In Slovenia, over a fifth of births were already occurring to unmarried women in 1989, but by 2012, this had more than doubled to 58%, well over half of all births. The proportion in Spain quadrupled over the period of observation, rising from 9% in 1989 to 36% in 2012.

– Figure 2 here –

– Figure 3 here –

In Northern Europe, there is considerable variation, as seen in Figure 4. In the beginning of the time period, Sweden and Denmark had very high proportions of nonmarital births, already hovering around 50%. At the other extreme, only 13% of births in Ireland and 16% of births in Latvia were nonmarital. Not all countries demonstrated increases over time, either. Denmark's level stayed fairly stable over the time period, around 45%, until the last few years of observation, just reaching 50% in 2012. Many of these countries also experienced concentrated growth in the 1990s before reaching plateaus in the early 2000s. Even so, by 2012, nonmarital fertility was fairly common in all the observed countries of Northern Europe, at over a third in Ireland and over half in Norway and Sweden.

– Figure 4 here –

Finally, Figure 5 shows the proportion of births to unmarried women for the U.S., Canada, and Australia. At the beginning of the time period, all three of these countries were between 20% and 30%. Over the observation period, Canada's proportion of nonmarital births changed only slightly, rising from 27% in 1991 to 33% in 2011. Australia's rate increased during the 1990s, from its initial proportion of 22% in 1990, but has largely stabilized around 34% since the mid-2000s. The U.S.'s level of nonmarital childbearing rose from 27% to 41% between 1989 and 2012, with some hint of stabilization in the past few years as well.

– Figure 5 here –

Attitudinal Change

Table 1 shows the proportion of GSS and ISSP respondents who seemed to support nonmarital childbearing in the three surveys. Recall that the indicator of support is disagreeing

or strongly disagreeing with the statement “People who want children ought to get married.” Most countries demonstrated an increase in approval for nonmarital childbearing over the time period, with some exceptions. Canada, for instance, shows declining approval between 1994 and 2012. Many of the countries with increases in approval experienced relatively small changes despite fairly large changes in behavior. The U.S. approval of nonmarital childbearing increased by only 4 percentage points even though the proportion of births outside of marriage increased by 14 percentage points. Other dramatic changes and high rates of approval seem to correspond only weakly with actual behavior. Approval in Spain, for example, was already high in 1994 and increased to 70% by 2012, yet only a third of births are outside of marriage.

– Table 1 here –

Conclusions, limitations, and next steps

In general, the proportion of births occurring outside of marriage increased among the countries we observed between 1989 and 2012, but as has been well documented, there is considerable variation in the magnitude of change and in the absolute levels. Our preliminary evidence also suggests that approval of nonmarital childbearing has also increased. However, a cursory examination of approval levels and change over time suggests that approval does not map onto actual behavior neatly. In our full paper, we will examine the association between the proportion of nonmarital births and approval for nonmarital childbearing more rigorously.

There are some limitations to the planned analyses, some of which we can overcome as we move forward and some of which we will be unable to address. We do not have nonmarital ratio data for a few industrialized countries (Japan, Russia, and New Zealand), nor is there ISSP attitudinal data for all countries in all waves of the survey included in this analysis. There are also some notable countries that did not participate in the ISSP survey, particularly countries in

Southern Europe, such as Italy, Greece, and Portugal, that have consistently had very low levels of nonmarital fertility. Our measure of approval of nonmarital childbearing, though used in other studies, is less than ideal, and we may explore other attitudinal measures that could be considered part of the package of changes expected with the Second Demographic Transition. We also may be able to extend the analysis further back to 1988 for a subset of the countries who participated in the 1988 ISSP.

REFERENCES

- Bailey, Martha J., Melanie Guldi, and Brad J. Hershbein. 2013. "Is There a Case for a "Second Demographic Transition"? Three Distinctive Features of the Post-1960s U.S. Fertility Decline." In Boustan, Frydman, and Margo (Eds.) *Human Capital and History: The American Record*. University of Chicago Press. www.nber.org/chapters/c12894.pdf
- Barber, Jennifer S. 2001. "Ideational influences on the transition to parenthood: Attitudes toward childbearing and competing alternatives." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 64: 101-127.
- Barber, Jennifer S., and William G. Axinn. 2005. "How do attitudes shape childbearing in the United States? Pp.59-91 in *The New Population Problem: Why Families in Developed Countries are Shrinking and What it Means*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Bianchi, Suzanne M. 2014. "A demographic perspective on family change." *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 6: 35-44.
- Gubernskaya, Zoya. 2010. "Changing attitudes toward marriage and children in six countries." *Sociological Perspectives* 53: 179-200.
- General Social Survey. n.d. <http://publicdata.norc.org:41000/gssbeta/faqs.html#14> Accessed 9/25/14.
- Kelley, Jonathan, and M.D.R. Evans. 1999. "Australian and international survey data for multivariate analyses: The IsssA." *The Australian Economic Review* 32: 298-303.
- Kertzer, David I., Michael J. White, Laura Bernardi, and Giuseppe Gabrielli. 2009. "Italy's Path to Very Low Fertility: The Adequacy of Economic and Second Demographic Transition Theories." *European Journal of Population* 25: 89-115.
- Kiernan, Kathleen. 2004. "Unmarried cohabitation and parenthood in Britain and Europe." *Law & Policy*, 26: 33-55.
- Konietzka, Dirk and Michaela Kreyenfeld. 2002. "Women's employment and non-marital childbearing: A comparison between East and West Germany in the 1990s." *Population (English Edition)* 57: 331-357.
- Lesthaeghe, Ron. 2010. "The unfolding story of the second demographic transition." *Population and Development Review* 36: 211-251.
- Lesthaeghe, Ron and Lisa Neidert. 2006 "The second demographic transition in the United States: Exception or textbook example?" *Population and Development Review* 32: 669-698.
- Livingston, Gretchen and Anna Brown. 2014. "Birth rate declining for unmarried women for the first time in decades." Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/13/birth-rate-for-unmarried-women-declining-for-first-time-in-decades/> Accessed 9/18/14.
- Martinez, Gladys M., Anjani Chandra, Joyce C. Abma, Jo Jones, and William D. Mosher. 2006. "Fertility, contraception, and fatherhood: Data on men and women from cycle 6 (2002) of the national survey of family growth." National Center for Health Statistics. *Vital Health Stat* 23(26).
- Pagnini, Deanna, and Ronald R. Rindfuss. 1993. "The divorce of marriage and childbearing: Changing attitudes and behavior in the United States." *Population and Development Review* 19: 331-347.

- Perelli-Harris, Brienna and Nora Sánchez Gassen, N. 2012 “How similar are cohabitation and marriage? The spectrum of legal approaches to cohabitation across Western Europe.” *Population and Development Review* 38: 435–467.
- Perelli-Harris Brienna and Theodore P. Gerber. 2011. “Nonmarital childbearing in Russia: Second demographic transition or pattern of disadvantage.” *Demography* 48: 317-342.
- Sobotka, T. (2008). Overview chapter 6: The diverse faces of the second demographic transition in Europe. *Demographic research*, 19(8), 171-224.
- Thornton, Arland, and Linda Young-DeMarco. 2001. “Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960 through the 1990s.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63: 1009-1037.
- Ventura Stephanie J. 2009. Changing patterns of nonmarital childbearing in the United States. NCHS data brief, no 18. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

Appendix A. Sources of Data for Nonmarital Birth Ratios			
Country	Year	Source	Link
Australia	1990-2010	Australian Bureau of Statistics	http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30March+Quarter+2012
Austria	1989-2012	Eurostat	http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=demo_find&lang=en
Bulgaria	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Canada	1991-2011	Statistics Canada	http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&retrLang=eng&id=1024507&pattern=marital+status&tabMode=dataTable&srchLan=-1&p1=1&p2=-1
Czech Republic	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Denmark	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Finland	1989-2012	Eurostat	
France	1989-2011	Eurostat	
Germany	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Great Britain	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Hungary	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Ireland	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Latvia	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Netherlands	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Norway	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Poland	1990-2012	Eurostat	
Slovakia	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Slovenia	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Spain	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Sweden	1989-2012	Eurostat	
Switzerland	1989-2012	Eurostat	
U.S.	1989-2012	NCHS Data Brief No. 162, August 2014	http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db162.htm

Table 1. Proportion Who Disagree or Strongly Disagree with the Statement "People Who Want Children Ought to Get Married" in the General Social Survey and the International Social Survey Program, 1994, 2002, 2012.

	1994	2002	2012
<i>Eastern Europe</i>			
Bulgaria	17.8	17.7	29.9
Czech Republic	14.3	22.5	19.3
Hungary	27.0	35.8	
Poland	14.7	16.8	25.4
Slovakia		13.9	15.3
<i>Western Europe</i>			
Austria	29.0	37.9	36.4
France		44.8	50.7
Germany	32.2	35.2	46.9
Netherlands	53.8	57.0	
Switzerland		39.5	38.7
<i>Southern Europe</i>			
Slovenia	45.9	49.1	59.8
Spain	40.9	55.4	69.5
<i>Northern Europe</i>			
Denmark		38.8	47.6
Finland		36.3	41.5
Great Britain	26.4	30.1	34.5
Ireland	19.3	34.2	46.8
Latvia		22.9	24.0
Norway	30.7	38.2	44.3
Sweden	35.9	41.6	
<i>North America and Australia</i>			
Australia	17.3	19.9	35.8
Canada	36.8		27.7
U.S.	16.4	18.9	20.1

Figure 1. Proportion of Nonmarital Births in Eastern European Countries, 1989-2012

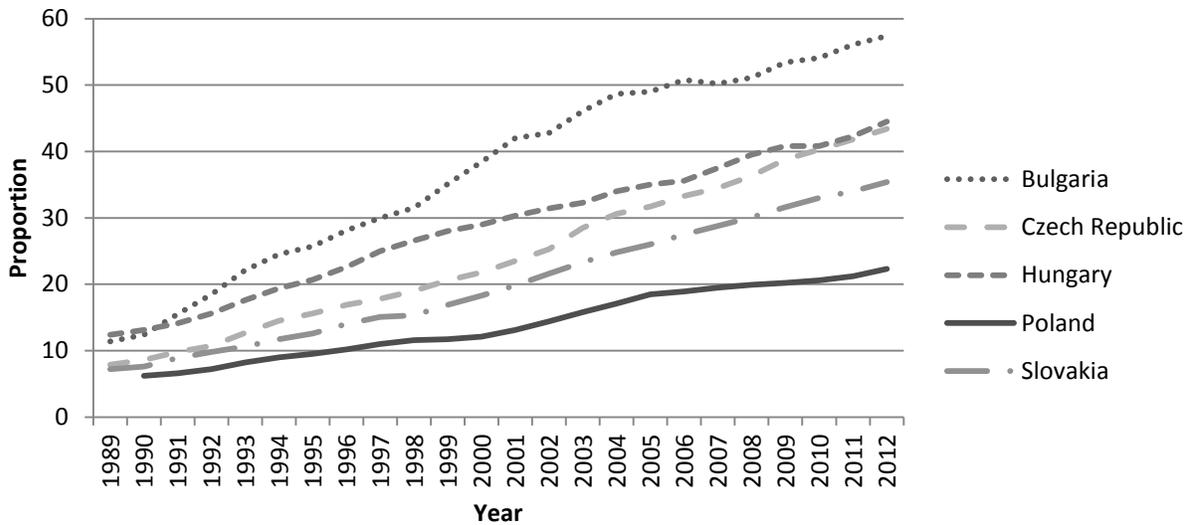


Figure 2. Proportion of Nonmarital Births in Western European Countries, 1989-2012

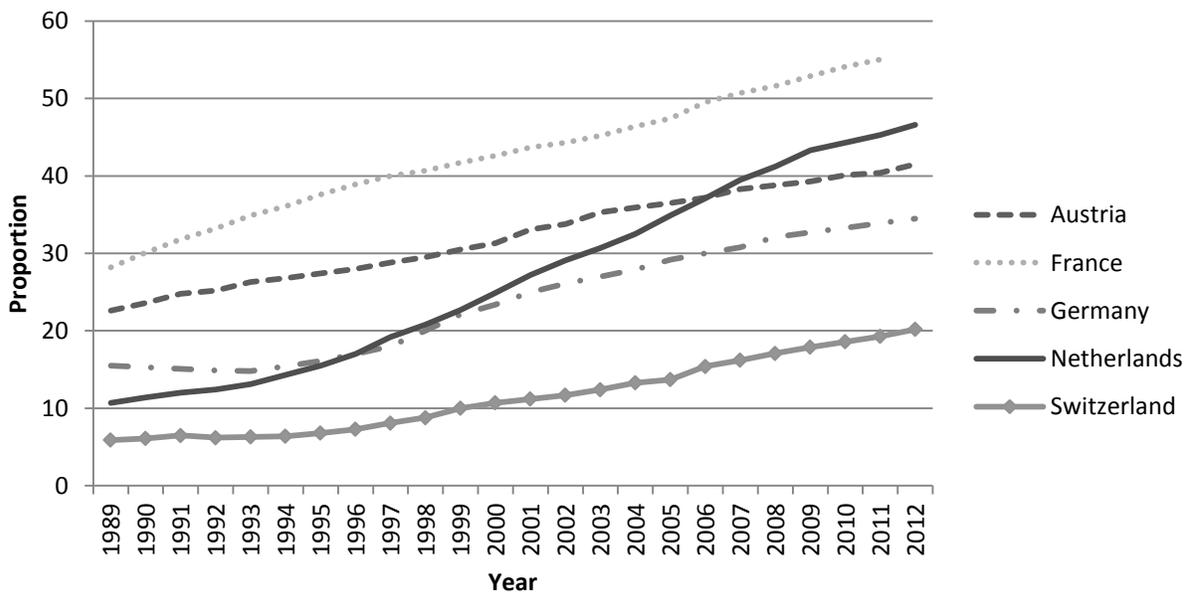


Figure 3. Proportion of Nonmarital Births in Southern European Countries, 1989-2012

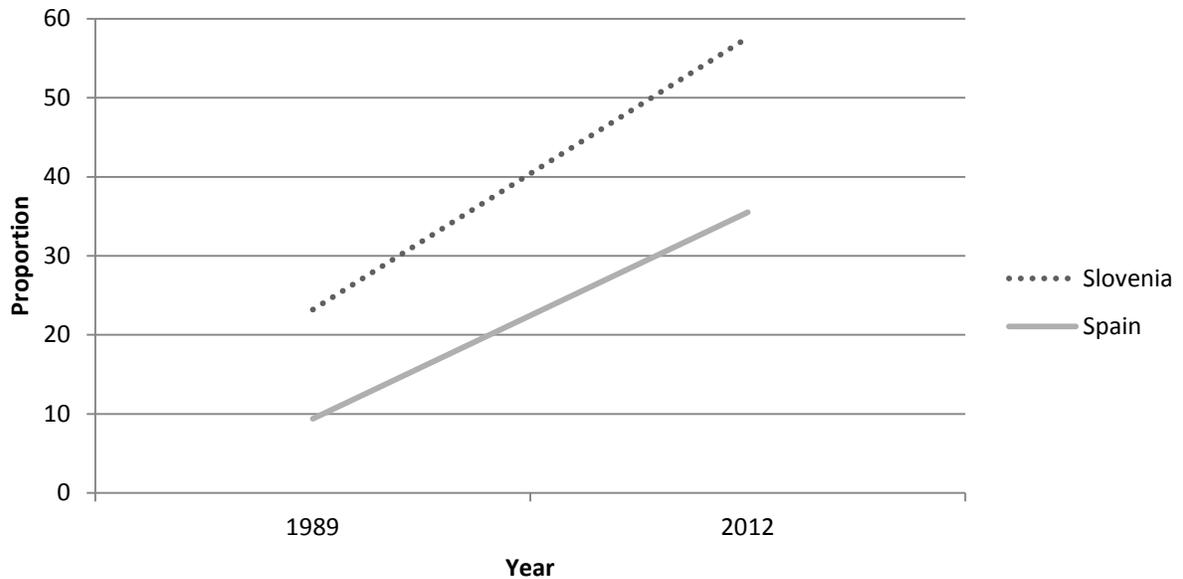


Figure 4. Proportion of Nonmarital Births in Northern European Countries, 1989-2012

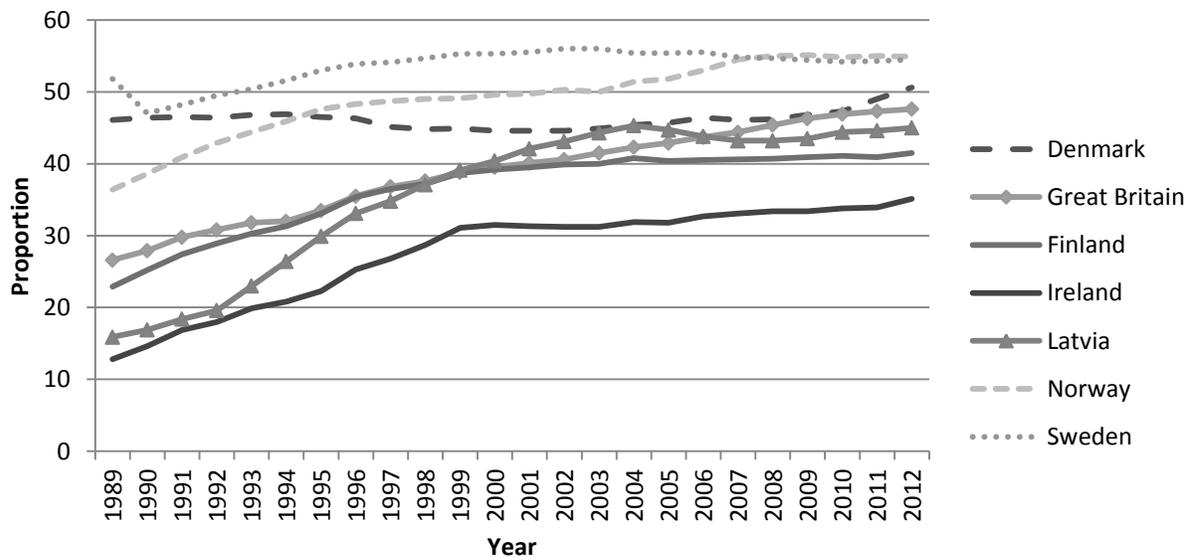


Figure 5. Proportion of Nonmarital Births in North America and Australia, 1989-2012

