

**Fertility after Separation:  
Second Births in Higher Order Unions in Western Europe**

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**Short Abstract**

In this collaborative project, we study fertility dynamics in higher order unions. Our main focus is on the transition to the second child of respondents who separated after first birth. In most countries, including those that we consider in our investigation, we observe a strong “two child norm.” Women and men whose unions terminate after first birth will encounter difficulties to comply to this norm and to space their first two children reasonable close to each other. Against this background, we investigate how disruption alters birth spacing patterns, how it varies by policy context and by gender. Data for this analysis comes from rich survey data from Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the U.K as well as from Finish register data. We thus cover behavior for a large fraction of the population in western Europe.

**Extended Abstract**

In most industrialized countries, divorce and separation rates have been on the raise for decades. In tandem with this development, we witness a continuous increase in the share of lone mothers and fathers, and the prevalence of stepfamilies (Griffith et al. 1985; Brown, 2000; Jefferies et al., 2000; Juby et al. 2001; Allen Li, 2006; Heintz-Martin et al. Forthcoming; Vikat et al., 1999; Buber and Prskawetz, 2000; Olah, 2001; Henz, 2002; Prskawetz et al., 2003; Thomson, 2004; Vikat et al., 2004; Holland and Thomson 2011).

Stepfamily research has focused on the partnership and fertility dynamics of couples who have a least one resident children from a prior partnership. While the *family* or the *couple* is here the focal point of attention, recent research on “multi-partnered” fertility addresses the question how children are “spread” across different unions (e.g., Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007a, 2007b; Manlove et al 2008; Scott et al. 2010). From this perspective, the focal point of attention is the *individual actor* and his or her life-time fertility. This paper contributes to this strand of literature by providing recent evidence on fertility dynamics after separation. Different from previous literature, we take a life course perspective and more narrowly focus on the *spacing of first and second children*. We have chosen to focus on second birth behavior because having a second child is a very regular event. Most people aspire to have two children, and those parents who have a second child tend to do so around three years after their first child is born. Therefore, first-time mothers and fathers who experience union dissolution not only see a breakdown of their partnership, but also a potential disruption of their fertility career. How do women and men behave who experience a disruption of their union after first birth? How quickly do they re-partner? How quickly do they have a first child in a new union? How does this affect the spacing of their children? How does it differ by gender? How does the pattern vary by policy context?

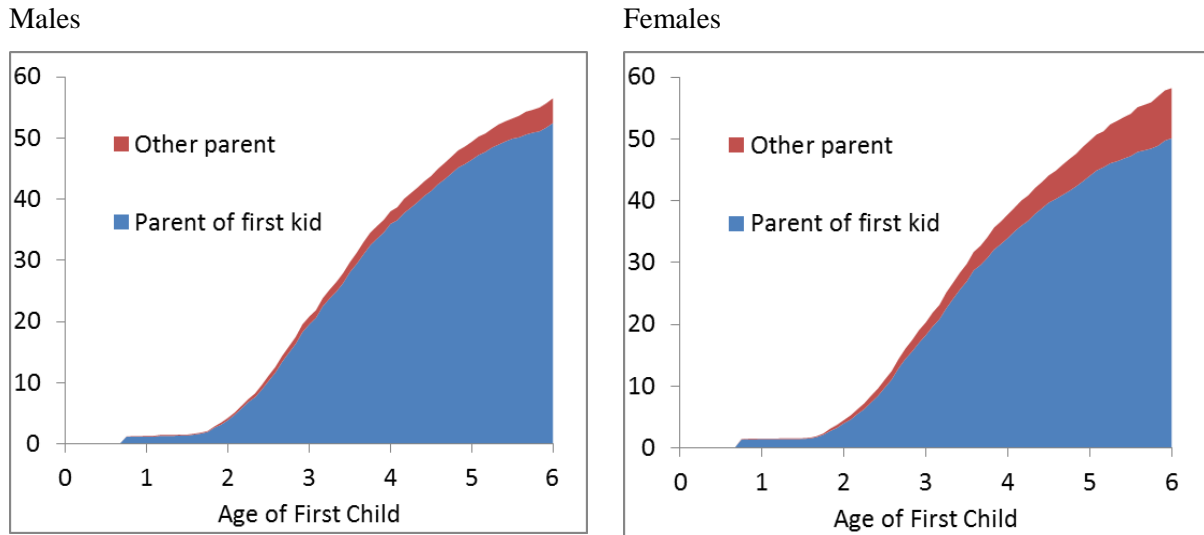
## **Data and Method**

This paper draws on recent survey data for Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK as well as from Finish register data. Since we are interested in second birth spacing, our sample has been limited to respondents who have at least one biological child. Respondents with multiple births have been deleted from the sample. Respondents whose first child had died were also omitted. The first part of the analysis is mainly descriptive: We use cumulative incidence curves to display the birth spacing patterns across Europe. The two competing events are: “second child with the first partner” and “second child with a new partner”. The multivariate analysis includes a competing risks model (for a similar strategy, see Thompson et al 2014).

## **First Results**

Figure 1 displays the results from the cumulative incidence curves for Germany. The graphs distinguish transition patterns to second children by gender of the respondent. When the first child is six years of age, about 50 percent of the male and female respondents have a second child with a man/woman who is also a parent to the first child. However, men and women are not equally successful in having the next child with a new partner. When the first child is six years of age about 10 percent of the women in Germany have a second child with another partner. For men we only observe that this is the case for less than 5 percent of the cases. This also shows up in the multivariate results (Table 1). Women have a much higher rate of having a second child in a new union than men. We also observe some interesting educational differences: Lowly educated are more reluctant to have second children than highly educated, if they remain with the same partner. However, they have higher second birth fertility, if their unions disrupts. We furthermore find that eastern Germans are more reluctant to having second children than western Germans. However, this is not the case for eastern Germans who experience disruption after first birth. Eastern Germans in higher order unions have higher second birth rates than western Germans. We may attribute this findings to the different context in the two parts of Germany: In western Germany, men are usually obliged to pay alimony payments to their ex-wives. This is the case to a much lesser extend in eastern Germany where women are often not married and are thus not entitled to claim post-marital maintenance (“nachehelichen Unterhalt”). Because eastern German men are less burdened by providing financial support to their ex-wives, they may be less reluctant to have another child in a new union. This paper tries to further understand the role of the policy context for fertility transitions in higher order unions by expanding the analysis to other European countries.

Figure 1: Transition to the second child by whether child is from new partner, results from cumulative incidence curves, Germany



Source: pairfam, cohorts 1971-73, own estimates

Table 1: Results from competing risk model, relative risk of having second child, Germany

	Second child with parent of first child	Second child with another parent
Education		
Low	1	1
Medium	1.04	0.52***
High	1.38***	0.49***
Region		
West	1	1
East	0.58***	1.13
Gender		
Female	0.93	1.68***
Male	1	1

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.10$

Source: pairfam, cohorts 1971-73, own estimates

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