



Possible links between the COVID-19 pandemic and fertility



Based on the experience of European demographers there is no evidence for a "COVID baby boom" (Aassve et al. 2020: 370).

However, COVID-19 may affect fertility differently depending on the level of development of a given society.

- Decisions about having children could also be influenced by how parents and couples divided their time spent on childcare and housework during the lockdown.
- Based on previous research there is a positive association between household division and fertility (Raybould - Sear 2021).
- As for economic uncertainties Bernardi et al. 2019 and Vignoli et al. 2020 found that they are not only related to the individual's labour market situation, but also to personal narratives about the future.
- Sobotka and his co-authors (2021) investigated whether COVID-19 caused a decrease in the number of births, similar to previous pandemics, in 22 developed countries: the crude birth rate decreased significantly in Southern European countries, but the largest decrease was observed in Hungary.

The purpose of this research is to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected childbearing plans in Hungary. We are looking for answers to questions such as whether COVID-19 has had a different effect on the plans to have children among different social groups, and whether considerations related to climate awareness appear in our country in relation to plans to have children.

Data and methods

- Our semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone during the second wave of COVID-19 (between September and November 2020) in Hungary.
- The number of new cases started to increase on a daily basis, and the COVID-19 vaccines were still under development.
- N=40, men and women aged 25 to 40, having no kids or only 1.
- We reached our interviewees using the snowball method.
- The focus of the interviews was on the following topics: attitudes related to COVID-19 and the impact of COVID-19 on the life of the individual, relationship history, characteristics of the division of labour within the relationship for people living in a relationship, career history and the issue of having a child.

Unemployment and financial uncertainties

Regarding the length of unemployment benefits, Hungary has the shortest period in the EU: max 90 days.

Nicole who used to work in the tourism sector (36, tertiary education, married with 1 child, from a village) postponed/cancelled her childbearing plan: "when this whole [pandemic] started, we said that now is definitely not the right time [...] because of uncertainty and financial unpredictability".

It is striking that the state does not appear as an actor capable of helping or reducing uncertainty.

Eco-anxieties

The pandemic also had such an indirect effect that some interviewees wondered whether "it is worth giving birth to another child in such a world, because who knows what else they will go through when they grow up" (Tamara, 38 years old, secondary education LAT, one child, from a village).

A few of them expressed concerns about climate change related to childbearing: one was planning to adopt children instead of becoming a biological parent (Dora 21, in education, LAT, Budapest), while Barbara (27, tertiary education, married with 1 child, Budapest) longs to have 3 or 4 children, but she finds this selfish and plans to have a maximum of two.

Although the concern about climate change is present among the interviewees in their 30s and 40s, it has less influence on their decisions about having children. For example Iris (42, low education, married with 1 child from a village): "Whoever does not have children because of this [climate change and overpopulation of the Earth] does have a screw loose".

References

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The burden on the healthcare system

According to Donald (35, tertiary education, married with 1 child, from Budapest):

"this can be stated from my wife's perspective: she absolutely thought that going to any medical place during such a period is a high risk. So we don't envy pregnant mothers, especially those who are pregnant for the first time, how difficult this can be [...] if we had wanted to have a child during this period, we would certainly have postponed that".

Elena (30, secondary education, married with 1 child, from a town) postponed her childbearing plan: "I was pregnant before, I went to prenatal care and they said that they pay attention to pregnant mothers, but I didn't experience that. I just sat there among the patients for up to half an hour, although I had an appointment. This is why I don't want to be in the hospital for a week while I give birth".

The effect of lockdown

In some cases, the fact that the father worked from home office while the mother was on maternity leave led to plans for an additional child.

However, those mothers who worked from home office while having young children at home reported difficulties: "I worked from home office because of COVID and there were days when I was really impatient with my son, I even spoke loudly to him and then he asked me to 'please not speak loudly'... So it persuaded me not to want another child" (Lola, 39, tertiary education, in cohabitation, Budapest).

According to Donald (35 tertiary education, married with 1 child, from Budapest) "I feel that I am with him [the child] more, because I am employed with flexible working hours. It makes me extra tired because my employer doesn't even take into account the fact that I have small children, they don't care, they burden me in the same way because I'm a man".

Summary

- While the burden of the health sector only had a negative effect, the impact of social distancing on childbearing plans was mixed.
- Financial considerations play an important role, especially during uncertainties such as a pandemic.
- Individual insecurities and eco-anxieties also appeared, leading to the question whether the future socio-environmental conditions are good enough to have children.