

Declining birth rates in Norway: Development and possible policy measures for young adults

Interim report from the Birth Rate Committee

English summary

During the last 15 years, birth rates have declined significantly in large parts of the world. The total fertility rate in Norway has dropped from 1.98 children per woman in 2009 to 1.44 children per woman in 2024. The rate for 2023 at 1.40 was the lowest recorded level for Norway. If the trend of low birth rates continues, there will be major consequences for the population's size and composition.

The Birth Rate Committee is tasked with investigating causes and consequences of the decline in birth rates, as well as broadly evaluating what measures might be effective in reversing the trend. The committee is to deliver its report as an NOU in February 2026. This report is an interim report from the committee. According to the mandate, the Birth Rate Committee's interim report should at a minimum contain some measures that could increase birth rates, an assessment of the costs of the measures, any potential conflict of interest with other policies, and the extent to which the measures could have lasting effects. The committee does not consider measures that could limit reproductive freedom, such as restricted access to contraception or abortion. The committee considers this restriction to be in line with the mandate's description of facilitating "for individuals to have the children they desire." According to the Birth Rate Committee's mandate, the committee should particularly assess measures relevant to birth rates among young adults. The decline in total fertility is to a large extent driven by men and women in their 20s having fewer children. The majority of the committee has chosen to limit the interim report by especially focusing on measures relevant for young adults. See also the dissenting remark from the minority, committee member Sparrman in chapter 11.4.

Significant decline in birth rates among men and women in their 20s

The primary driver of the decline in birth rates in Norway over the past 15 years is that young adults in their 20s are having fewer children. The decline in birth rates in this group is largely due to fewer having a first child before turning 30. The average age for first-time parents in Norway has increased over the last 15 years from 28 to 30 years for women and from 31 to 32 years for men.

Cohort fertility—measured as total number of children at age 45 for women and age 50 for men—has declined less steeply than the total fertility rate and stands at 1.9 children per woman and 1.7 children per man. The decline in cohort fertility is due to fewer people having more than two children and an increase in childlessness. Part of the decline is also due to an increase in the number of foreign-born individuals registered without children. We do not know whether current 29-year-olds wish to or are able to recuperate births in their 30s. Several factors suggest that the significant drop in birth rates among young people in their 20s will not only be a postponement of births, but will also lead to women and men having fewer children in their lifetime—meaning cohort fertility will continue to decline.

Possible causes for the decline in birth rates among young adults

A number of factors may have contributed to the decline in birth rates among young adults. Surveys show that a large majority of young men and women in Norway envision a life with children and that most ideally wish to have their children earlier than the current average age of childbirth in the population. There are significant differences between desired, planned, and actual birth rates in Norway. Over time, the proportion who report having time-specific intentions to have children has fallen, and studies show that the gap between desired and actual number of children may increase particularly in Norway.

Whether, when, and how many children an individual has is influenced by a number of personal, social, and economic factors, such as changes in values, relationship stability and health, concerns about the future, educational and labor market conditions, the costs and joys of raising children, and family policies. Over time, religiosity in Norway has declined, and other projects related to self-realization have gained greater importance. Material factors and not having a partner can also prevent intentions and plans for children from being realized. Fewer people living in partnerships has been highlighted as a possible explanation for the decline in birth rates internationally. Data from Norway show a decline in the proportion of young adults living in partnerships, and several studies suggest that more relationship breakdowns among young adults may contribute to declining birth rates. The committee believes that more knowledge is needed in this context in Norway.

Among young adults in their 20s, birth rates have fallen across all educational and income groups. Birth rates among young people in education have always been low, and they have further decreased since 2009. Several studies find that the most pronounced decline is among young adults without higher education and those with lower incomes. Childlessness increases the most among both men and women who have only completed primary education. The committee will continue working to identify specific barriers faced by this group.

Parents spend more time with their children than before and see it as a meaningful part of their lives. Expectations of a busy family life may contribute to postpone having children and/or have fewer children than they would otherwise have.

As this review shows, the causes of declining birth rates are numerous and complex. Values and norms are largely shaped by long-term cultural processes and societal debate—which in turn impact and are indirectly influenced by politics. The committee believes that authorities should be cautious in attempting to influence personal life choices directly. However, what they can and should do is facilitate informed decisions and good conditions that make it easier to have children, thereby supporting the desire for children. Therefore, the committee chooses to focus on measures related to knowledge, economy, and institutional support.

Increased age at birth — causes and consequences

A desire for economic security, career development, and self-realization may contribute to the increase in average age for first-time births. Having a secure economy and a good place to live is perceived as important prerequisites for becoming a parent. Most people earn more in their 30s than in their 20s, and having children later is also associated with better career development. Additionally, Norwegian family policies provide incentives to postpone family formation: 40 percent of young men and over 60 percent of young women pursue higher education, and they will receive significantly better compensated leave if they postpone childbearing until studies are completed and they are employed.

At the same time, delaying family formation can have negative health consequences for mother and child: The physical strain of pregnancy and childbirth, and the risk of certain diseases, injuries, and developmental variations, increases with the age of the parents, especially the mother's age. The ability to have children gradually decreases with age, so the risk of being unable to conceive increases. For those who want more children, having the first child late can make it more difficult to have a second, third or higher order birth later. Research from other Nordic countries shows that many young people are unaware of how quickly fertility declines with age. Having fewer children than desired can also be a sorrow for the individual. Failing to achieve assisted reproduction can be a grief that couples and women live with over a long period.

The choice of age to have children can be seen as a trade-off between postponing to achieve better economic outcomes and opting for earlier parenthood (up to a certain point) to have lower risk of poor health outcomes.

Consequences of low birth rates are addressed in the NOU

The mandate for the Birth Rate Committee states that the committee should outline the consequences of various birth rate levels on society in the long term and for different parts of the country, including effects beyond the economic impacts. A period of lower birth rates permanently affects the age composition of the population. Initially, it leads to fewer children and young people, and over time, it results in fewer people of working age. Population changes occur slowly but transform society. In the short term—in demography, one generation—fewer children will allow the welfare state to save money because fewer attend kindergarten and school. In the medium term, when today's children are fully grown adults, the declining birth rates of today will lead to fewer and older people in work, and a smaller population. Institutions must shift from supporting families with children to caring for the elderly, which can result in fragmentation of the institutional support for families with children. The committee will analyze consequences of falling birth rates in the NOU, which will be delivered in February 2026.

Institutional framework, family policy, and birth rates

The Norwegian model is characterized by strong institutional support for families with children, especially through compensated parental leave and subsidized kindergarten. This supports both mothers and fathers to participate in both paid work and caregiving roles. In the Nordic countries, fathers have also increasingly spent more time caring for children. The relatively high fertility rates have been seen as a sign of a safe and stable society. Over the past 15 years, fertility has declined steeply in the Nordic countries, and the total fertility rate for Norway is now 1.44. We cannot know whether the decline would have been even greater without the current institutional support. Regardless, the rapid decline motivates a review of whether today's institutional support for families with children is sufficient, and whether it is optimally organized.

Literature reviews in this report show that political measures such as parental leave, daycare, health service offerings, and cash transfers can lead to earlier births, and also increase completed fertility. Different measures impact different groups in society.

The decline in birth rates has been steepest among age groups that benefit least from one of the most important and expensive family policy support schemes—paid parental leave. Most parents will receive higher parental benefits by having children when established in working life. As such, the increase in birth age can be partly seen as much as being in line with the direction of Norwegian family policy. Just like parental leave may have contributed to a perception that it is important to have a foothold in working life

before having children, an earmarked benefit for younger parents could, over time, contribute to changing perceptions about when it is appropriate to start a family. Given that the age at first birth has never been as high as it is in Norway today, it is reasonable to assume that welfare measures that provide incentives to have children earlier in life would also allow more people to have as many children as they want. Surveys highlight that Norwegian men and women have somewhat different views on what kind of institutional support that is crucial for having more children. While mothers are generally more positive towards measures that provide more time with children, fathers are generally more positive towards measures that improve financial conditions. At the same time, Norwegian men report that they want fewer children than women do. If it is more men's preferences that prevent couples from having (more) children, efficient policies should consider institutional support deemed important and relevant by men.

Economic incentives can facilitate childbearing among young adults

In the Birth Rate Committee's mandate, it is central to evaluate measures for young adults. The desired age at first birth today is on average three to four years lower than the actual age at first birth in Norway.

The majority of the committee has proposed economic measures aimed at young adults, as described in the table below. These measures are expected to contribute to earlier childbearing. They may also impact how many children an individual has in their lifetime. There may be advantages to having children later, such as better wage growth. Incentives to have children earlier should not be so strong that they conflict with incentives to be employed or with the principle that parents should primarily support their children through their own income. The assessment of the majority of the committee is that this conflict is avoided through the size of the transfers. Young adults in their 20s earn significantly less on average than adults in their 30s. Most young adults in their 20s can therefore expect that their income will increase in the years ahead, making it easier to acquire housing and cover the financial costs of having children. This provides an incentive to postpone having children. For those pursuing higher education, compensation for being on leave while enrolled in education is substantially lower than it will be when they have completed their education and are employed. Overall, this suggests that policies designed to make it easier to have children earlier should be linked to providing more financial security to young adults. See the dissenting remark from the minority in chapter 11.4.

The literature review in this report indicates that economic incentives and welfare schemes increase birth rates. Such incentives particularly influence when people have children. The committee therefore concludes that economic incentives have the potential to affect both fertility timing, and cohort size.

Additional child allowance for parents younger than 30 years

The committee has considered various economic measures for young adults. Increased child allowance for parents under 30 is deemed the best measure to increase their disposable income. Increased child allowance has little effect on reducing work incentives, and compared to a one-time payment, child allowance will provide an income increase over a longer period. An additional child allowance would also avoid what could be perceived as an unreasonable cutoff point associated with a one-time payment, where those just under age 30 receive the full benefit, while those just over receive none. The committee therefore recommends an additional child benefit for parents under 30.

Financial support for parents under age 30 in education

Birth rates for individuals in education have been low for a long time but have further decreased over the last 15 years. The majority of the committee therefore find it important to better facilitate young people to have children while in education. The majority of the committee thus suggests introducing an increase of 25,000 kroner in the parental grant combined with a reduction of 25,000 kroner in student loan for young adults under 30 who become parents while under education. This will provide a more flexible financial situation for those who choose to have children during their studies, who compared to other groups have low incomes, and will assist in entering the housing market. An increase in the parental grant, which the committee considers to be a more effective measure than an increase in the child allowance, is expected to have less of an impact on the labor supply. This is because the child allowance is less likely to affect employment, either by reducing the number of hours worked or causing individuals to stop working entirely for a period.

	1. An extra child allowance for parents under 30 years old	2. Financial support for parents under 30 during education
Motivation	The decline in total fertility is driven primarily by men and women in their 20s having fewer children. Young people today have children four years later than the stated desired age. Young adults in their 20s earn significantly less on average than adults in their 30s. Measures that increase disposable income for young parents	Birth rates for individuals in education have been persistently low. A cash transfer provides support for current expenses. Reducing the debt burden contributes particularly to increased purchasing power in the housing market after education and to low ongoing expenses over many years.

	can therefore be suitable for increasing birth rates.	
Design	Extra child allowance for parents under 30, equivalent to one additional child.	An increase in the parental grant by 25,000 NOK, as well as forgiveness of 25,000 NOK of student loans per child born while under education. Both apply to parents under 30 years
Cost	Annual expenditure from the state budget of 1,215 million kroner.	Long-term effect of 114 million kroner annually.
Potential impact on birth rates	550-732 births. The measure could lower parents' age at birth.	49-65 births. The measure could lower parents' age at birth.
Conflicts of interest with other policies	Extra child allowance has little effect on reducing work incentives and compared to one-time payments, child allowance will provide a lasting income increase and prevent what may be perceived as unreasonable cutoff points.	An increase in the parental grant is deemed a better measure than an increase in the child grant because it is expected to impact work incentives less (i.e., by the target group either working fewer hours than previously or temporarily leaving the workforce.)

Facilitation for parents in education

The opportunity for adapted education is also important to support individuals in education who can have children. The committee believes that there is a need for a review of the current situation for individuals in education who have children. The committee suggests that the review includes an assessment of whether today's statutory text (universities and colleges law and vocational schools law) provides too little room to accommodate parents during education or whether compliance with the regulations is inadequate. Additionally, the review should examine whether there is currently adequate information to instructors, administration, and individuals in education about what rights and responsibilities the parties have when someone in education has children.

Knowledge about the ability to have children and pre-pregnancy health

The committee proposes increasing knowledge about the ability to have children (fecundity) and pre-pregnancy health. Knowledge about fecundity and pre-pregnancy health provides young adults with better prerequisites for making informed choices about when it is optimal to have children. Better pre-pregnancy health can have several positive effects: better maternal health, increased fecundity (ability to have children), healthier and more children, and reduced pressure on healthcare services. The committee specifically suggests that

- 1) Increase young people's knowledge of how the ability to have children is linked to age and lifestyle/health behavior
- 2) Prevention of infertility should be included as part of the public health field
- 3) Health personnel who interact with young adults should be given more competence in pre-pregnancy health and that knowledge about pre-pregnancy health should be strengthened through research

Concluding remarks

In the NOU, the Birth Rate Committee will evaluate how the public sector should prioritize efforts directed at families with children. Such prioritization requires a comprehensive investigation, which has not been done here. The committee emphasizes that a number of factors influence birth rates, and that the committee will review and assess a broader range of measures in the NOU.

Special remark

The committee member Victoria Sparrman has made a special remark in chapter 11.4 that the committee should first conduct a broad and thorough review of what is driving the decline in birth rates before considering which measures should be recommended for individuals and for policy development in the area. Based on this, the member does not support the committee's proposal on economic measures for parents under 30 in this interim report.

The translation of the summary from Norwegian was AI assisted, and was checked and corrected manually.