

SF2.4: Share of births outside of marriage

Definitions and methodology

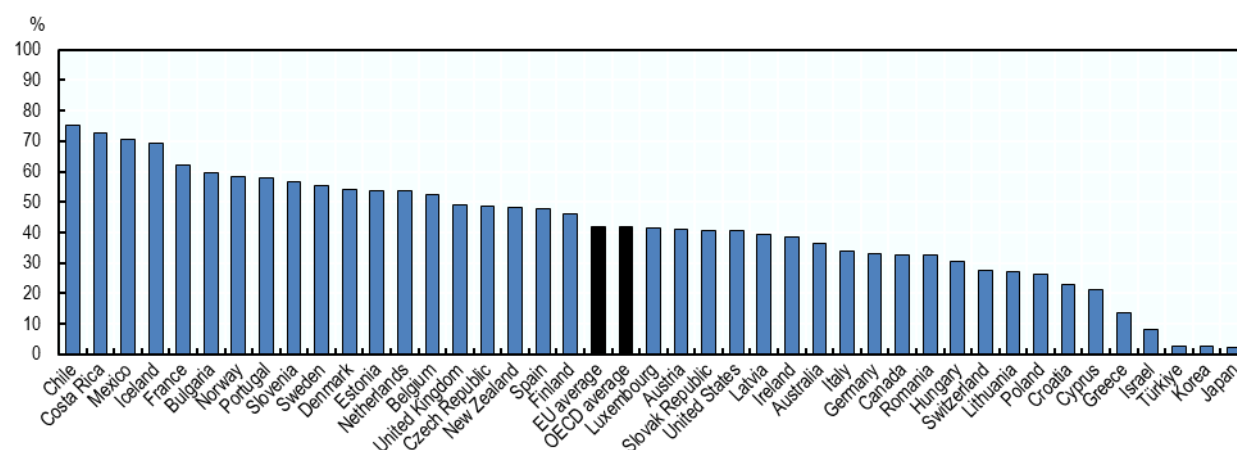
This indicator presents information on the proportion of births outside of marriage. “Births outside of marriage” are generally defined as births to mothers whose legal marital status at the time of the birth is other than married. This includes births to mothers who are single or who are cohabiting with a partner outside of marriage, births to mothers who are divorced or widowed, and births to mothers who are living with a partner in a “common-law” or “de facto” union (unless their legal marital status at the time of birth is also ‘married’). For Australia, Japan, Korea, New Zealand and Canada (1960-1973 only), data refer to ex-nuptial/out-of-wedlock births, that is, where the child’s parents are not registered as married to each other (or, for New Zealand, in a civil union with each other) at the time of birth. The “share of births outside of marriage” is calculated as the number of births to women whose legal marital status at the time of the birth is other than married [or, for Australia, Japan, Korea, New Zealand and Canada (1960-1973 only), the number of ex-nuptial/out-of-wedlock births], divided by all births in the given year.

Key findings

On average across OECD countries, 42% of births occur outside of marriage (Chart SF2.4.A). In 13 OECD countries (Belgium, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Estonia, France, Iceland, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, and Sweden) more than 50% of children are born outside of marriage, with rates particularly high in Mexico (70%), Costa Rica (73%), and Chile (75%). In four other OECD countries (Israel, Japan, Korea and Turkey), by contrast, less than 10% of children are born outside of marriage. In Japan, Korea and Turkey, the rate is as low as around 2-3%.

Chart SF2.4.A. Share of births outside of marriage

Proportion (%) of all births where the mother's marital status at the time of birth is other than married, 2020



This document, as well as any data and any map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

Other relevant indicators: Family size and composition (SF1.1); Fertility rates (SF2.1); Mean age of mother at first childbirth (SF2.3); Childlessness (SF2.5); and, Marriage and divorce rates (SF3.1).

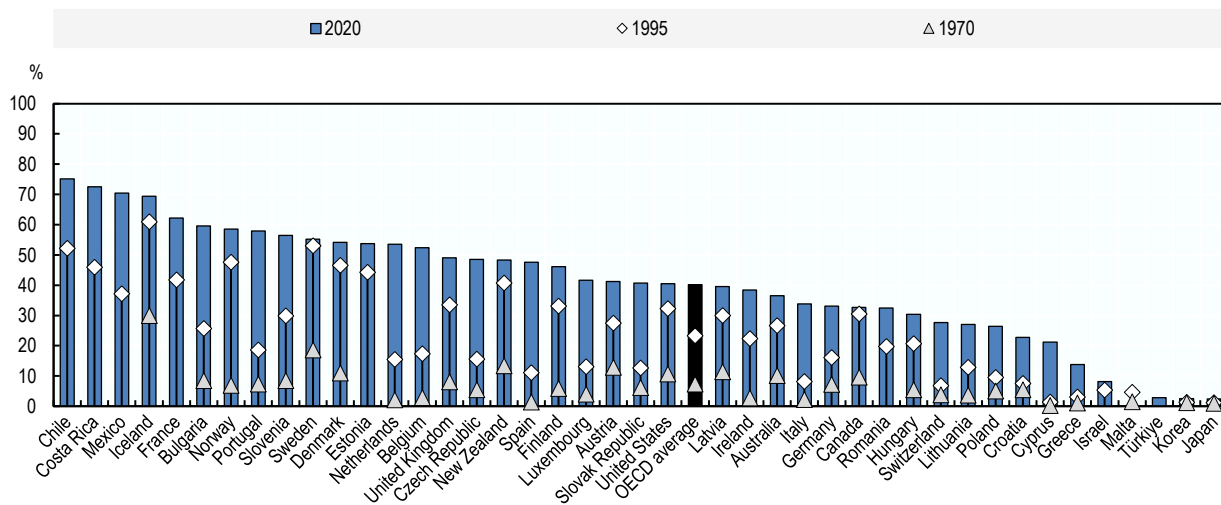
Note: Data for Australia, Japan, Korea and New Zealand refer to ex-nuptial/out-of-wedlock births, that is, where the child's parents are not registered as married to each other (or, for New Zealand only, in a civil union with each other) at the time of the birth. For all other countries, data refer to births to mothers where the mother's marital status at the time of birth was other than married. For Canada, births to mothers whose marital status is other than married as a proportion of births where the mother's marital status is recorded. In 2018, the mother's marital status was not recorded on 8% of births. For Mexico, births to mothers whose civil status is other than married as a proportion of births where the mother's civil status is recorded. In 2018, the mother's civil status was not recorded on 8% of births. Data refers to 2018 for Belgium, to 2019 for Chile, Cyprus, Estonia, Iceland, Ireland and Israel. No data for Colombia and Malta.

Source: for European countries, Eurostat Demographic Statistics; for Australia, Australian Bureau of Statistics; for Canada, Statistics Canada; for Chile, INE; for Costa Rica, INEC; for Israel, Central Bureau of Statistics; for Japan, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare; for Korea, Korean Statistical Information Service; for Mexico, INEGI; for New Zealand, Statistics New Zealand; for the United States, Centres for Disease Control and Prevention

The proportion of children born outside of marriage has increased in almost all OECD countries in recent decades (Chart SF2.4.B). In 1970, most OECD countries saw less than 10% of children born outside of marriage, with the average rate across the 30 OECD countries with available data just 7%. By 1995, this OECD-30 average had grown to 23%, and by 2020 to above 40%. In most OECD countries, the proportion of children born outside marriage has increased by at least 25 percentage points since 1970. The Netherlands, Norway, and Slovenia have seen the largest increases -- in these three countries, the proportion of children born outside of marriage has increased by roughly 50 percentage points since 1970. Of the 30 OECD countries with data available for all three time points, only Japan and Greece have seen increases of less than 10 percentage points.

Chart SF2.4.B. Share of births outside of marriage over time

Proportion (%) of all births where the mother's marital status at the time of birth is other than married, 1970, 1995 and 2020



Notes and Sources: see above Chart SF2.4.B.

Comparability and data issues

Data on the marital status of mothers and/or parents at the time of birth are based on administrative data and reflect only the legal marital status of the individuals concerned. Differences across countries and across time in the proportion of children born outside of marriage do not necessarily reflect differences in the proportion of children born to non-partnered mothers, since it is possible for a child to be born to a couple where the mother's legal marital status at the time of birth is other than married (e.g. to a cohabiting couple where the mother's legal marital status is 'single, never married'). In other words, differences across countries and across time in the proportion of children born outside of marriage reflect differences in the propensity of couples to get married prior to parenthood, in addition to differences in the proportion of children born outside of two-parent families. In many countries, the increase in the share of births outside of marriage is due in large part to an increase in the number of couples cohabiting outside of a legally registered marriage (SF3.3). This is particularly the case in many of the Central and South American countries (e.g. Chile, Mexico) where "free unions" (cohabiting, but not legally married) are increasingly common.

Data on births are collected through administrative sources based upon head counts, and in most countries the legal marital status of the mother and/or the partnership status of parents is recorded for (almost) all births.

Sources and further reading:

Eurostat (2022), Eurostat Database, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

OECD (2011), Doing Better for Families;

OECD (2019), Rejuvenating Korea: Policies for a Changing Society.