

Germany's birthrate is the lowest in Europe - and falling fast

After generous parental allowances fail to reverse the trend, experts call for a different approach

The birthrate in Germany is falling. Many believe this is due to the problems of working women finding childcare. Photograph: Adam Gault / Alamy/Alamy
[Kate Connolly](#) in Berlin

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In all the data about Germany, it's the one statistic that bucks the trend. Its economy is strong, its cities are regularly cited as among the best in the world to live in – but Germany is a shrinking country. It has the lowest birthrate, [just 1.36 children per woman](#), in Europe, and one of the lowest in the world.

According to the national statistics office, fewer babies were born in [Germany](#) last year than at any time in its history. A total of 663,000 children were born, 15,000 fewer than in 2010 and in stark contrast to 1964 when German births (east and west) peaked at just under 1.4 million. The rate for younger women in particular fell last year, though it increased for those from their mid-30s to mid-40s.

Demographics and family policy experts are divided over the reasons for the apparent reluctance to have children, as well as the ways to tackle the situation. What they generally agree on is that Germany's demographic future looks gloomy. With many more Germans dying than being born for 40 years, the obvious results will be a shrinking workforce, lower growth and a struggle to pay for a rapidly ageing population. Britain's population is forecast to exceed that of Germany by 2040.

Kerstin Schenk is a 39-year-old new mother from Munich whose experience goes some way to explaining the trend. "I had hoped to have children earlier, but I didn't finish my studies until I was 30," said the management consultant. "And then I felt I needed to get some work experience under my belt before I went off on maternity leave. When I did then have the right partner it took quite a long time for us to get pregnant."

That the government of Angela Merkel has thrown so much money at the problem is seen by many, even within her own ranks, as a mistake. "*Elterngeld*" or "parents' allowance" has cost well over €20bn (£16.1bn) since it was introduced five years ago and its results are questionable.

Under the scheme, considered one of the most generous family policies in [Europe](#), parents can receive up to 65% of their salary (capped at €1,800) per month over a period of up to 14 months.

A scheme to start next year instigated by the [family minister, Kristina Schröder](#) – the first minister to have had a child in office – will guarantee every child over the age of one a childcare place. But so far similar measures have apparently done nothing to boost the birthrate.

Social scientists want a far broader approach that views the family as a whole and tries to create

stronger links between the workplace and family. In many parts of Germany parents complain of a lack of access to childcare. Most schools finish earlier than elsewhere in Europe – sometimes as early as 11am – making it harder for women in particular to combine work and family. Though the phrase is used less and less, working mothers are still referred to as "*rabenmütter*" or raven mothers.

When Schenk returns to work she will be able to take advantage of a flexible working scheme. "But this is an exception, and what I daren't think about yet is how my employers would view it if I had a second child," she said.

What Germany needs and what France and Scandinavia have, according to Wolfgang Nowak, director of the [Alfred Herrhausen Foundation](#), and a former adviser to Gerhard Schröder, the ex-chancellor, is an agreement between the workplace and the family that would make the two much more compatible. He said Germany's generous welfare system needed to be much simpler.

"Every new government tries to advocate social benefaction with the result that we now have a completely confusing jungle of social benefits, including no less than 150 ways of financing family life. The result is too much fragmentation of the resources available."

Yet another "family-friendly" measure, which involves paying women to stay home with their toddlers, was championed by the conservative CSU party in Bavaria, which has but has proved controversial, involves paying women to stay at home with their toddlers. Critics have called it a reinforcement of the traditionalist view of women's roles – often referred to as "*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*" (children, kitchen, church) – that does not fit into modern Germany.

Margot Kässmann, former head of Germany's protestant church and the mother of four daughters, said the birthrate problem had much to do with people's unwillingness to leap into the unknown. "Apart from all the factors that mean people are having children much later, many people are put off by the bind it involves. This is a society which is obsessed with having options – they want to test everything first and having children is obviously something you can't test in advance."

With signs that Germany itself might face a recession before long, there are fears that the problem of "*Schrumpfnation Deutschland*" (shrinking Germany) will only worsen. Statisticians say you only need to look at the Great Depression to see how childbearing is affected by economics. Demographics experts are therefore keeping a close eye on Merkel's efforts to end the euro crisis.

Germany passes Japan to have world's lowest birth rate - study

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- From the section [Europe](#)

A study says Germany's birth rate has slumped to the lowest in the world, prompting fears labour market shortages will damage the economy.

Germany has dropped below Japan to have not just the lowest birth rate across Europe but also

globally, according to the report by Germany-based analysts.

Its authors warned of the effects of a shrinking working-age population.

They said women's participation in the workforce would be key to the country's economic future.

In Germany, an average of 8.2 children were born per 1,000 inhabitants over the past five years, according to the study by German auditing firm BDO with the Hamburg Institute of International Economics (HWWI).

It said Japan saw 8.4 children born per 1,000 inhabitants over the same time period.

The figures come despite efforts by the German government to help parents with childcare. In Europe, Portugal and Italy came in second and third with an average of 9.0 and 9.3 children, respectively. France and the UK both had an average of 12.7 births per 1,000 inhabitants.

Meanwhile, the highest birth rates were in Africa, with Niger at the top of the list with 50 births per 1,000 people.

Higher wage costs

Germany's falling birth rate means the percentage of people of working age in the country - between 20 and 65 - would drop from 61% to 54% by 2030, Henning Voepel, director of the HWWI, [said in a statement \(in German\)](#).

Arno Probst, a BDO board member, said employers in Germany faced higher wage costs as a result.

"Without strong labour markets, Germany cannot maintain its economic edge in the long run," he added.

Experts disagree over the reasons for Germany's low birth rate, as well as the ways to tackle the situation.

Mr Probst said the country would need young immigrant workers to fill the significant skills gap. And more women were needed in the workforce to avoid economic problems.

Germany has [one of the highest migration rates in the world](#), but has also seen growing support for anti-immigration party Alternative fur Deutschland (AfD).

The latest birth rate figures comes despite efforts by Mrs Merkel's government to invest in childcare support.