

Finnish Family Size - Accidental or Planned

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In Finland the continuous surveillance of annual population development has been possible by following population statistics. However, we have been less aware of the goals private individuals set for the size of their own family, and if these goals are achieved, although these people, as individuals, decide how many children are born in our country.

The study¹ discussed here on the size of the Finnish family aims at clarifying the changes in the birth rate by coming closer to the private individual. Except for a few small scale studies, this is the first time that it has been possible to get information on the ideals and expectations Finns have concerning family size and the rate at which they wish their family to grow.

This study attempted to discover the goals Finnish men and women have concerning family size, how they space their family, and how the women interviewed had experienced each pregnancy, with special attention on changes between different age groups. In addition, there was an effort to find out why Finns vary in the ideals they hold concerning family size, in other words, why some people have children and some do not. Finally there is a discussion on what significance these observations have for population and family policy.

The research data was composed of a random sample of 2 500 persons picked from the 18—54-year-old population. In the sample the portion of 18—44-year-old women was doubled compared to their share of the population. This portion of the data composed Finland's share in the comparative fertility study made in 12 European countries through the investigation of the UN and the ECE, which necessitated the inclusion in the sample of at least 1 000 married women of reproductive age. The information was gathered with both questionnaire and interview in November and December of 1971 in connection with the research project exploring health, ways of life and interpersonal relationships.² The research data included both men and women, and opinions about family size were obtained from both unmarried and married people. But

¹ This resumé is based on a study under the same title made by the authors: Marketta Ritamies —Elina Visuri. Suomalaisten perhekoko — sattuma vai suunnitelma. The Population Research Institute, No. D1 1975, Helsinki 1975.

² Sievers, Koskelainen and Leppo (1974).

because the matter is not timely until one has founded one's own family, the study was mainly concerned with the conceptions held by married men and women. The percentage of response in the study was as high as 91.4, which is probably due in part to the skill of the 1 000 public health nurses who did the interviewing.

Ideals and expectations concerning family size

The opinions of the respondents concerning family size were obtained in different ways. There were questions on the ideal one had for the size of one's family at the beginning of the marriage and at the time of the interview, more generally on the ideal size of a Finnish family, and what the interviewee expected his own family size to be, in other words, the number of children the interviewee expected to have altogether.

Finns seemed to have a relatively definite idea on what is an ideal-sized family and what number of children would be suitable for themselves, as can be seen from the following tabulation, which shows the percentages of »don't know»-answers to different questions concerning the ideal number of children.

	Men	Women	Total
General ideal number of children	8.3	10.0	9.2
Ideal at the beginning of marriage	61.5	57.9	59.6
Suitable number in present circumstances	6.2	9.8	8.1
Expected family size	4.9	3.1	3.9

So that at marriage the ideal size for one's own family had not yet been defined, only later, as experience accumulated, were people able to form their ultimate goals.

Table 1 compares different age groups and different ideals concerning number of children, showing that at marriage the average ideal was 2.3 children. At the time of the interview the ideal number of children turned out to be the same, an average of 2.3 children.

Expected family size is believed to give a more reliable idea of the final number of children in the family than do the other ideals. Expected family size has been defined in slightly different ways. In this study the number of children there already were in the family at the time of the interview and the number of children the family was planning to have in the future have been added together. The desires for family growth of people who wanted children, but who were positively or possibly sterile, was left out. The expected family size turned out to be 2.5 children, which is slightly larger than the ideals people had concerning number of children (Figure 1).

Table 1. Comparison, according to age, of ideals, expectations and current number of children (maximum values).

Age	General ideal	Ideal at beginning of marriage	Suitable in present circumstances	Expected family size	Current number of children
18—29	2.7	2.2	2.0	2.1	1.2
30—44	2.8	2.3	2.3	2.5	2.3
45—54	3.0	2.8	2.5	3.1	3.1
Total	2.8	2.3	2.3	2.5	2.2
N	1866	831	1888	1975	1982

The age-group comparison in table 1 shows that the ideals of young people are smaller than those of the older age-groups. The ideal number of children held at marriage and that held currently are 0.5—0.6 children larger in the 45—54-year-old age group than in the 18—25-year-old age group, while the difference in expected family size is 1 child.

A large family in itself, however, seems to have something to offer even to a modern person, for young people, 18—25-year-olds, feel that the ideal size of a Finnish family is 2.7 children, even if they themselves only expect to have 2.1 children.

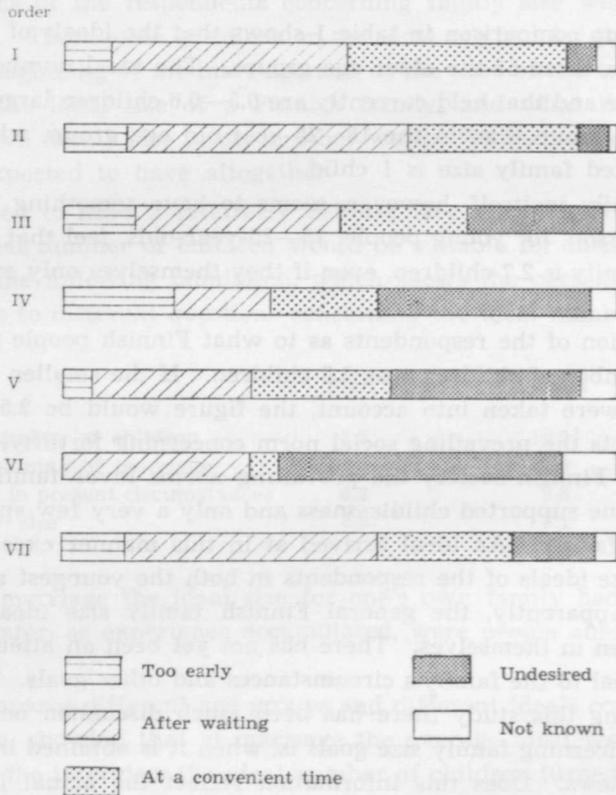
The conception of the respondents as to what Finnish people generally feel is the ideal number of children was 2.8 children. If the smaller alternative of some answers were taken into account, the figure would be 2.5 children. If this ideal reflects the prevailing social norm concerning fertility, then it could be said that in Finnish society the prevailing norms favor families with 2—3 children. No one supported childlessness and only a very few spoke on behalf of a one-child family. An ideal arrived at in this manner exceeded the personal family size ideals of the respondents in both the youngest and the oldest age groups. Apparently, the general Finnish family size ideal reflects the value of children in themselves. There has not yet been an attempt to accommodate this ideal to the family's circumstances and other goals.

While making this study there has been much discussion on how reliable information concerning family size goals is, when it is obtained in this manner, through interviews. Does this information reflect the actual intentions and behavior of the respondents, or are they only random thoughts that have popped into the respondent's mind during the interview? There were many attempts to find an answer, by comparing the opinions stated in answer to different questions and by comparing the family size ideals of mothers with their answers to questions on how hoped-for each of their pregnancies had been.

This study was not able to give a definite answer to the question of how reliable, as predictors of family size, opinions are, for this would necessitate follow-up studies. The ideal held at marriage concerning number of children was the same as that felt currently suitable for only 62 % of the interviewees,

and it must be remembered, that only 40 % of the interviewees mentioned an ideal number of children held at the beginning of the marriage. However, due to the joint effect of increases and decreases in the ideal, the averages were the same, that is 2.3 children. At the time of the interview the most suitable number of children was two (52 %), while 21 % felt it was three and only 8 % felt a larger family was suitable. Every tenth respondent was satisfied with one child and 1 % did not want any children at all.

Figure 1. Desirability of pregnancy according to order of pregnancy of those who felt two children was suitable (%).



The ideal at marriage concerning number of children was compared with the total number of children the interviewees expected to have, that is expected family size. The ideal held at marriage would thus be realized by only every second person. Again, deviations leveled each other out; thus, the average expected number of children, 2.5, differed very little from the figures mentioned above. 39 % of the interviewees expected to have two children, 21 % three children and 17 % four or more. One child would be enough for 15 % and 4 % of the interviewees would remain childless.

The spacing of children

At present in Finnish society there appear to exist opposing views on what is the appropriate spacing of children. On one hand, marriage at an earlier age is favored, because the legal minimum age at marriage has been lowered. And statistics have shown that the age at marriage has fallen and that child-bearing is concentrated in the younger age groups. On the other hand, however, there are certain features of society which require that people postpone having children. It is expected that young people complete their studies and learn a trade before they start a family. Difficulties finding housing and day care may also cause people to postpone having children to a later date.

There was a consensus among the interviewees as to the schedule for family growth. Although it has been traditional in Finnish reproductive behavior that 40 % of brides are pregnant at the time of marriage, the interviewees did not think this was an ideal situation. They desired that the first child be definitely born later than in current practice, that is 2.2 years after the time of marriage. It was also desired that the second child be born an equal amount of time after the birth of the first child.

At the present time, births are concentrated in the young age groups and most women have their children while they are under 30. However, the interviewees did not bar family growth at a later age. It would be appropriate for the mother to have her last child when she was 35—39 years old; 36 % stated this as their view. Opinions about this matter were very diverse. Only 4 % felt that family growth should be finished under 30 years of age and 15 % felt it was suitable to give birth even after the woman's 40th birthday.

Undesired pregnancies

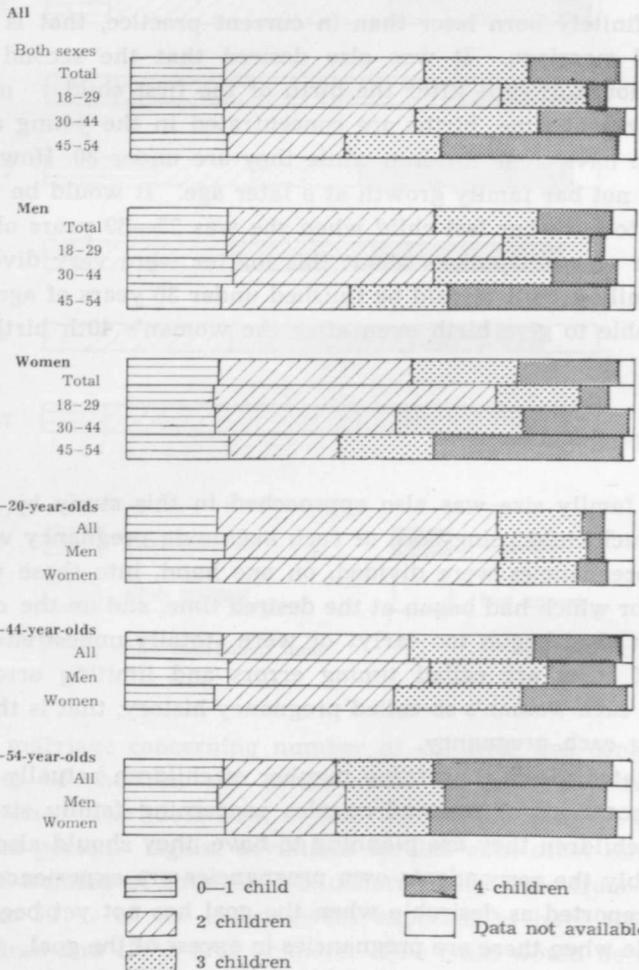
Desired family size was also approached in this study by examining how hoped-for each child being born or each beginning pregnancy was experienced. This way pregnancies were divided, on one hand, into those which had been waited for or which had begun at the desired time, and on the other hand, into those which »had begun too early» or were »totally undesired». The last two manners of onset are called timing errors and limiting errors. The study ascertained each woman's so-called pregnancy history, that is the circumstances surrounding each pregnancy.

If the stated ideals concerning number of children actually reflect the permanent conceptions of married couples concerning family size, and thus the number of children they are planning to have, they should also be reflected in how desirably the respondents own pregnancies are experienced. Pregnancies should be reported as desirable when the goal has not yet been exceeded, and undesirable when there are pregnancies in excess of the goal. Of course, ideals and goals concerning number of children may have gone through changes, and

the circumstances prevailing at the time the pregnancy began may have been exceptional compared with the ordinary situation of the family.

The ideal for the size of one's own family was reflected consistently, although not perfectly, in the desirability of each consecutive pregnancy. When the pregnancy histories of those with the most common family size goal, two children, were examined, it was discovered that as long as the ideal was not exceeded, there were very few totally undesired pregnancies or limiting errors, under 5 % (Figure 2). Timing errors did occur: 30—40 % of the pregnancies had begun too early. When the ideal was exceeded and the third pregnancy began, one fourth (24 %) felt the pregnancy was undesired. And if a fourth child was on the way, almost 40 % of the pregnancies were undesired.

Figure 2. Expected family size of married people according to age and sex.



Among those who felt a larger family, at least three children, was the ideal, 11 % felt their third pregnancy was totally undesired. A fourth pregnancy was experienced by already 28 % as undesired. When one wants several children, it is easier to experience contraceptive mistakes as timing errors. Over one third of the third and fourth pregnancies of those who had wanted three or more children were timing errors.

The matter can be examined from another angle. Although, at the time of the interview, the respondents had a certain ideal for their own family, only one fourth of the pregnancies exceeding the goal were undesired when they began. Three-fourths were considered completely desired or timing errors, at most. Is this rationalisation or have current ideas concerning suitable family size taken shape afterwards, when the children are already there? Is it the strain and worry caused by pregnancies, childbirth and the care of children which has made ideals smaller than they were when the pregnancy began? Or is it just that ideals measured thus in different ways vary randomly?

Undesired pregnancies, however, do not occur completely at random. They follow »rules» to a certain degree, they have their own epidemiology. Studies have shown that contraception is generally weaker among those who are less educated, who have a small income and who belong to the laboring and agricultural population.

In this study, however, no clear-cut differences came up in the portion formed by undesired pregnancies in the total number of pregnancies, although there was a certain general tendency related to faulty contraceptive behavior. The picture of undesired family size includes a low educational level, a small income and the countryside. In addition, it has already been noted in the study on Finnish sexual life (Sievers, Koskelainen and Leppo 1974) that the irresponsibility of the spouse, abundant use of alcohol and difficulty in discussing sexual matters are related to an unplanned number of children. The portion of family size caused by unplanned and undesired fertility is not a mere accident, rather it is explained by a weaker social position and a certain lack of balance and immaturity in the personalities of the spouses.

How pregnancies end

Most pregnancies end in the birth of a live child, but some end in miscarriage, stillbirths or abortions. In modern society, due to progress in medicine, effective maternal care and improved life circumstances, pregnancies ending in stillbirths are rare. In this study they were most common in the fourth pregnancy (4 %). Miscarriages were most common in later pregnancies. Generally 5—6 % of the first five pregnancies ended in a miscarriage, but in the sixth pregnancy the portion was already 14 %.

The significance of abortion also grows along with the ordinal number of the pregnancy. Only less than 2 % of first pregnancies end in abortion, but

7.7 % of fifth pregnancies. However, the information obtained in this study on abortions is not reliable, for it was noted already in the study on Finnish sexual life that only about one half of the total number of abortions shows up in this study. And as a consequence, the portion of pregnancies reported as undesired is too small.

Why there are different-sized families

This study also attempted to find an answer to why Finnish family size ideals vary, in other words, why some people want children and some don't. Because this study included a large number of different background facts, which were thought to affect family size, the researchers decided to employ step-wise regression analysis and discriminant analysis to uncover as those facts which best explain the variation in the phenomenon under study. Such facts were discovered, but they were not, however, able to explain more than a small part of the variation in family size, at best only less than 6 % of the variance.

The picture of large families arrived at in this study with the aid of regression analysis is very much in keeping with the information on fertility differences obtained in previous studies. Although the differences were small, they do show that, rural residence, living in Eastern or Northern Finland, marrying young, religiosity, the large family of one's own parents and unsuccessful use of contraception are related to the goal of having a larger family. Women with large families had not been and did not want to be employed and did not feel that earning an income was necessary. The personalities of the spouses had their own effect: parents who wanted a large family stressed how they loved children, those who wanted a small family felt, pessimistically, that it is not worth bringing children into the modern world.

When, in the analysis, of women aged 18—34 years the ideal family size appropriate to the respondents' circumstances was examined, it was clearly shown that age is a significant factor. Suitable family size was smaller when the respondent felt that the family needed the wife's income and wanted to postpone the birth of the first child. Especially women with urban jobs felt a small family was suitable. Among the young a certain pessimism appeared, shown by affirmation of the statement »it's no use bringing children into the world, when the future is so uncertain».

These results, however, are only suggestive, for the differences between the means were so small that it was not possible to describe family size separately in each class of independent variable.

The situation where family size changes from two children to three would appear to be very critical to population policy. Calculations show that if an average of two children are born per family, the population will decrease, but an average of three children will increase the population.

This study has attempted to discover what kind of people plan to exceed the two children the average family has. Included in this examination were all couples with two children whom neither age nor sterility barred from having more children. Women were limited according to age to 18—36-year-olds and men to those whose wives were that age. Because we also wanted to find out more about those who were not able to state their own opinion or who had not given the matter any thought, such respondents were included as a group of their own.

Among women with two children, 65 % do not wish to have any more children, 19 % would still like to increase the size of their family, and 16 % are not able to say whether they want more children or not. Discriminant analysis was not able to reliably separate these groups from each other, in other words, it was not possible with any certainty to say which people will have bigger families and which will have smaller ones.

Discriminant analysis did, however »pick out» a few variables, which correlate with each other as little as possible and each of which also increased the explanatory level of the model. This explanatory ability was relatively small in the analyses, around 11—20 %. Although we have to admit that we failed in our effort to explain why some couples wanted a third child and some did not, these facts may be useful when making further studies. Out of a large number of variables, discriminant analysis and regression analysis have uncovered certain variables, whose effect should especially be watched, when explaining the number of children.

Because the study was not able to differentiate clearly between 2- and 3-child families on the basis of analysis, the interviewees themselves were given a chance to shed light on why they had arrived at a certain number of children.

Married men and women were asked what number of children they felt would be suitable for them in their current situation. People who answered this question were also asked why they did not want more or less children than they had mentioned.

These two open-ended questions could be used only for a purely superficial examination of the motives pertaining to family size. Replies to these questions were rigid and unvarying. The upper limit to family size seems to be influenced mainly by economic factors among these respondents. Among those who gave some reason, 80 % said economic factors were a barrier to having children. Marital problems, the age and health of the parents, the parents' freedom and leisure time activities were very rarely mentioned as factors when discussing the suitable upper limit to family size.

Then why do people have 2—3 children, why not quit after one child. Over one half of those who gave some motive said factors concerning the upbringing of children were the reason why people should have more than one child. Liking children was also a relatively frequent motive. However, the child's sex, the security and happiness of the parents in old age, religious reasons and eco-

conomic possibilities were insignificant in determining the lower limit of family size.

Finns thus support the idea of a small family. The description of family size has had to be executed according to fractions of decimals, so that any differences would show up at all. The study of such simplified »decimal children» has been easy statistically. There was also an attempt to clarify emotional attitudes toward children. Nevertheless, the information obtained in the interview and the questionnaire had to be classified into ready-made alternative responses, which limits the possibilities for original expression and the free portrayal of one's feelings. Although there is an exceptionally large amount of information in the data on the personalities of the respondents, it was not possible within the framework of this research report to delve deeper into the total picture of love for children.

Expected family size and future population development

The purpose of this study was to obtain as much new information as possible, but also it seemed necessary to ponder the meaning of the observations.

The information from the study was used in making a population forecast beginning in 1966—70 and extending to the year 2100. The main emphasis of the forecast was not on making as reliable a prediction of population size as possible, instead its purpose was to demonstrate the effect often seemingly slight changes have on the size of the population in the long run.

Two alternative forecasts were used to demonstrate what kind of changes in the future population would take place, if the ideals of the respondents concerning the ideal number of children were realized and especially if the change predicted by the study in the expectations of different age groups concerning family size actually came about.

Based on the replies of the youngest age group, 18—29-year-olds, (expected family size 2.1 children), growth would be slighter and would end already at the turn of the century, and then begin a decline (forecast I). With the two-and-one-half-child-system, that is, with the respondents' average expected family size of 2.5 children, the population of our country would grow during the next 30 years by about one million, and during the next generation it would rise all the way to six million, after which it would remain constant (Figure 3).

In interpreting the results of this »population forecast», one must bear in mind that the assumption that behavior patterns would remain constant for such a long period of time is unrealistic. In a population where family planning is practiced, large swings in the birth rate and in the spacing of births are still possible. These could be caused by many factors from a sudden deterioration in the economic situation and conflicts between nations all the way to some form of »fashion».

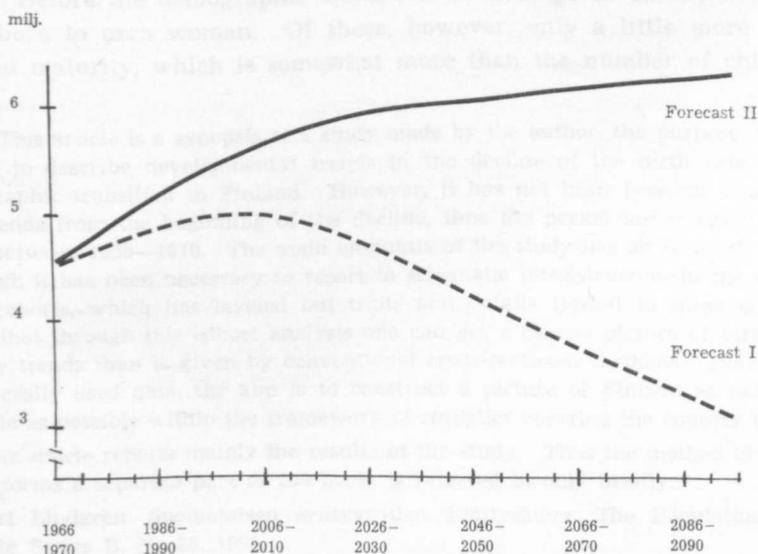
If it is desired to »guarantee» population growth, a larger number of children would apparently be appropriate from the standpoint of population policy. If, however, population growth is not considered essential to economic progress, one can remain unperturbed in a situation with a smaller average, at least until, through recurring studies, some clarification can be found as to how permanent the expectations and ideals of young families are, and how they will be realized.

There are several ways to arrive at a family size of two-and-one-half children, as shown in the following hypothetical tabulation. It shows the distribution in percentages of different patterns which give an average of 2.5 children.

Pattern	Number of children					Total
	1	2	3	4	5 or more	
2—3 children	5	45	45	5		100
1—4 children (current situation)	15	40	30	10	5	100
1—5 children	25	30	25	10	10	100
1 or 3 children	35	10	35	10	10	100

Currently 2.5 children is arrived at by 60—70 % desiring two or three children. There are still quite a few childless couples, so the eradication of causes of childlessness and its care are significant. Different patterns of family size call for different types of social services and benefits, e.g. those having one child are often »career» mothers and those with three or more often »home mothers».

Figure 3. Population development in 1966—2100 millions



Although in this study the respondents themselves referred frequently to economic reasons as factors limiting the number of children, the small weight in family size differences in different social groups reveal that economic barriers are also related to the aspirational level. The more wealthy have not had many children. On the grounds of justice there should be an increase in the subsidizing of family expenses, even if the result on the fertility front were not certain. Such an equalization is actually easier to arrange when family size is homogenous, because then no comparisons are made between benefits given to different kinds of families. However, family policy and general social security policy are the only ways through which even an attempt can be made to influence the situation, for the limiting of contraceptives and of abortions would be a step backward from the currently still weak contraceptive level and also probably lead to illegal abortions. Family planning would be furthered by improved social planning, so that it would be possible for parents to look to the future with more confidence, in regard to housing and the availability of both jobs and child care services.

References

Sievers, K., Koskelainen, O. and Leppo K. Suomalaisten sukupuolielämä. Porvoo—Helsinki 1974.