

## FERTILITY TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS

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### Summary

Fertility decline and fertility change in both developing and developed countries is a social change of essential importance. The divergence of mortality and fertility levels in the 2nd half of the 20th century has given rise to a rapid growth in the world population. More recently, below replacement fertility has spread from developed to developing countries, and in some developed countries, very low fertility has emerged as a prominent policy concern. In all contexts, fertility change is perceived as a central issue in a range of global and national concerns. At the same time, the fertility change underlying these problems has puzzled generations of researchers: alarmist perspectives, pessimism, optimism and revisionism have characterized the tides of the population debate. Moreover, as the world populations have entered the 21st century, the new challenges presented by very low fertility and its implications for the family and population aging have reinvigorated research on fertility but without necessarily resolving long-standing differences in the assessment of the causes, implications and policy responses to fertility change. New data and empirical analyses of both historical and contemporary fertility declines have weakened the standard theory of demographic transition, and the rise of low and in particular, very low fertility has challenged many theoretical frameworks that provided the workhorses of theorizing about fertility change during the 2nd half of the 20th century. This chapter reviews the key past and current trends in fertility in developed and developing countries, outlines the main theoretical frameworks that are used to explain changes and differences in fertility and discusses some new integrative approaches, and it concludes with a discussion of the future of low fertility, which has

emerged as a defining theme and challenge to contemporary work on fertility.

## 1. Introduction

Fertility decline and fertility change in both developing and developed countries is a social change of essential importance, encompassing human relations and conditions at almost any level of society. The divergence of mortality and fertility levels in the 2nd half of the 20th century has given rise to a rapid growth in the world population. More recently, below replacement fertility has spread from developed to developing countries, and in some developed countries, very low fertility has emerged as a prominent policy concern. In all contexts, fertility change and the associated alleged “population problems” of rapid population growth (in developing) and rapid population aging (in developed and some developing) countries have featured prominently in scientific and popular debates about fertility change and its demographic and socioeconomic implications. In these debates, fertility change is perceived as a central issue in a range of global and national concerns including economic growth, global resource distribution, the decline of families (or not) and intergenerational relations, well-being and health, sustainable development, and national and international political representation. At the same time, the fertility change underlying these problems has puzzled generations of researchers: alarmist perspectives, pessimism, optimism and revisionism have characterized the tides of the population debate in both developing and developed countries. Moreover, as the world populations have entered the 21st century, the new challenges presented by very low fertility and its implications for the family and population aging have reinvigorated research on fertility—but without necessarily resolving long-standing differences in the assessment of the causes, implications and policy responses to fertility change. These diverging assessments are in part due to the fact that considerable controversy exists among demographers, economists and sociologists over the causes of fertility change. New data and empirical analyses of both historical and contemporary fertility declines have weakened the standard theory of demographic transition, and the rise of low—and in particular, very low—fertility has challenged many theoretical frameworks that provided the workhorses of theorizing about fertility change during the 2nd half of the 20th century. Despite a plethora of new theories of fertility change, none has emerged as hegemonic or as an alternative guide to empirical research or population policy. Not surprisingly, the opinions about the long-term implications of fertility change and the need for policy intervention are inconclusive.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Hans-Peter Kohler** received a M.A. in demography (1994) and a Ph.D. in economics (1997) from the University of California at Berkeley, and is currently a Professor of Sociology and a Research Associate at Population Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania. His primary research focuses on fertility and health-related behaviors in developing and developed countries. A key characteristic of this research is the attempt to integrate demographic, economic, sociological and biological approaches in empirical and theoretical models of demographic behavior. For example, Kohler has been investigating aspects of the bio-social determinants of fertility, the determinants of low-and lowest-low fertility in Southern and Eastern Europe, the causal effects of education on health, the interrelations between marriage and sexual relations in developing countries, and the role of social interaction processes for fertility and AIDS-related behaviors. He is author of a recent book on fertility and social interaction, has co-edited a book on the biodemography of human reproduction and fertility, and has widely published on topics related to fertility, health, social and sexual networks, HIV/AIDS, biodemography and well-being in leading journals. Kohler has been awarded the Clifford C. Clogg Award for Early Career Achievement by the Population Association of America, has been a recent fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies at the Norwegian Academy of Science, and he currently serves as the president of the Society of Biodemography and Social Biology.