

Unions and nonmarital births

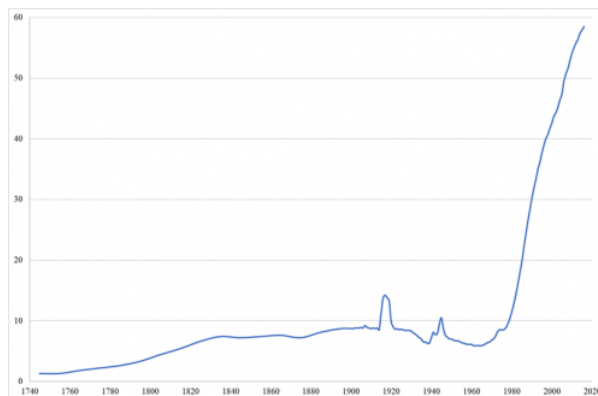
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ABSTRACT

Until the mid-eighteenth century, nonmarital procreation was still a marginal form of behavior, even though it was accepted in certain European countries as the possible consequence of the ritual of premarital seduction. These births, which were called “illegitimate” or “natural” at the time, later increased as Europe became industrialized and urbanized. It was indeed in cities, far from the social, familial, and religious control of the countryside, that nonmarital births were the most frequent, resulting from relations of shorter or longer duration, or more dramatic circumstances such as prostitution or rape. After a rise in nonmarital births during the two world wars, their number increased sharply beginning in the 1970s in particular. Marriage stopped being a norm, and an increasing number of couples cohabited and had children without marrying. Today nearly 45% of European children are born out of wedlock.



Richard Redgrave, The Outcast, London, Royal Academy of the Arts. Source [:Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Richard_Redgrave_-_The_Outcast.jpg)



Nonmarital births in France (1745-2016) Chart produced by the author. Sources: Yves Blayo, "La proportion de naissances illégitimes en France de 1740 à 1829," *Population*, numéro spécial Démographie historique, November 1975; Agnès Fine, "Enfant et normes familiales," in Jacques Dupâquier (ed.), *Histoire de la population française*, t. 3, De 1789 à 1914 (Paris: PUF, 1988), pp. 436-457; Françoise Daguet, *Un siècle de fécondité française, caractéristiques et évolution de la fécondité de 1901 à 1999* (Paris: Insee résultats, Société no. 8, 2002); Insee.



Percentage of nonmarital births in certain European countries Chart produced by the author. Source: Eurostat.

Europe experienced a rise in nonmarital births beginning in the eighteenth century. This rise began in the northwest, especially in France where the rate of illegitimate births rose from 1.3% in 1750 to over 4% in the early nineteenth century (figure 2), England (from 3.3 to 5.1% during the same period), and Sweden (from 2.4% circa 1755 to 6% circa 1815), and subsequently extended to Southern and Eastern Europe.

This rise in illegitimacy has often been interpreted as a sign of the decline in social, familial, and clerical control in connection with urbanization and industrialization. In fact, everywhere nonmarital births are more frequent in cities than in the country. During the second half of the nineteenth century in France, 4% of births were illegitimate in rural areas, and 11% in urban areas. In Transylvania, they numbered over 20% in Cluj or Sibiu, as opposed to the national average of 6 to 8%.

Nonmarital pregnancies could result from highly diverse situations ranging from prenuptial, cohabitational, or adulterous relations, as well as more dramatic circumstances such as prostitution or rape. In Nordic countries, the high share of illegitimate births can be explained by socially accepted sexual relations between the engagement and marriage. The majority of children born out of wedlock therefore came from cohabiting couples that later married. In Western Europe, it was primarily domestic workers and laborers that got pregnant out of wedlock, although their situation and that of their children differed depending on whether they were in cohabitation or single mothers. Cohabitation was common in urban and working-class settings. Some did not feel the need to marry, whether by ideology, absence of social pressure, detachment from Catholic values, to save on a costly ceremony, or due to difficulty in providing the needed certificates, particularly for migrants. In these settings cohabitation was practically the equivalent of marriage. However, women who ended up "*filles-mères*" (daughter-mothers)—a contemptuous term referring to mothers of children without a father—after a promise of marriage, prostitution, or rape faced much more difficult living conditions, and their children were subject to a particularly high rate of infant

mortality. Domestic workers represented a large share of these single mothers. Often cut off from their native environment, and required to remain single in order to preserve their employment, they were at high risk of nonmarital conception, and many of them were driven away when their pregnancy became visible. Abandoning children and even infanticide sometimes seemed like the only outcome in these dramatic situations.

A number of other reasons also explain nonmarital births, such as the absence of an inheritance for youngest sons in the Balkans or the Pyrenees (a family system referred to as "*cadetterie*"), or unsuitable matches, which forbade marriage between individuals of different social classes, for instance in the Kingdom of Bavaria until its integration within the German Empire in 1871. Finally, some states did not recognize religious marriage, for instance in Italy where many children whose parents were married only in church were considered as illegitimate by the state, or in Geneva or Cracow for Orthodox Jews married according to their own rites.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the trend reversed almost everywhere in Europe. This decline of illegitimacy has been attributed to the spread of contraceptive practices and a rise in abortions. It has also been seen as a consequence of greater ease in legitimizing nonmarital births: the decrease of social constraints enabled couples to marry either before the pregnancy comes to term or afterwards, in order for the children to be recognized and legitimized by both parents. Finally, the decrease of domesticity in Europe also contributed to the fall in illegitimacy.

This trend reversed during the two world wars, due to the separation of many couples, changes in social control over women, and new encounters with young national, allied, or enemy soldiers. Many illegitimate births occurred, whether they were the result of relations based on consent, venality, or rape. However, both postwar periods were characterized more by a period in which illegitimacy declined.

Contraceptive practices became more effective and varied during the twentieth century, but were more or less accessible depending on the country. The French law of 1923 banned all promotion of contraceptives, whereas the use of condoms was widespread in Germany. Beginning in the 1970s, practices of cohabitation before marriage and free unions developed. In France 12% of newlyweds were already living as a couple in 1965, a number that rose to 43% in 1977 and 87% in 1997.

The growing number of children born out of wedlock reduced the scorn in their regard. Until 1980, they represented less than 10% of births everywhere, with the exception of the Scandinavian countries (one third of children in Iceland). The new figure of the chosen "illegitimate" child suddenly appeared, bearing witness to the dissociation of reproduction and marriage. Nonmarital births represented 16% of total births in Europe at the beginning of the 1990s, 25% in 2000, and 45% today. However, the disparities are much more pronounced today than in 1960, as more than half of the children born out of wedlock are located in ten countries (over 55% in Estonia, Norway, France, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Iceland), but still under 10% in Greece (figure 3). For that matter, more and more children born out of wedlock are recognized by their father. For example in France, 76% of children born out of wedlock were recognized in 1965, as opposed to 97% today.

At the turn of the 2000s, a major change took place in the form of unions throughout Europe (civil union contracts, same-sex marriage). The practice of non-cohabiting couples also developed (Living Apart Together, LAT), particularly in Belgium, Germany, and Norway, accounting for over 5% of relations declared during the *Generations and Gender* survey launched in 2000). The choice of LAT can be explained by a desire for independence, financial reasons (75% of Georgian couples choose this form of conjugality), or difficulties in family recomposition following divorces or widowhood. Conversely, some separated couples continue to cohabitate (*Living Together Apart*, LTA)

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