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**Family Forerunners?  
An Overview of Family Demographic Change  
in Sweden**

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and Gunnar Andersson**

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# **Family Forerunners?**

## **An Overview of Family Demographic Change in Sweden\***

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The last half a century has witnessed swift changes in patterns of family formation and family dissolution in developed countries, followed by increased attention to these changes and to the causes and consequences of such change. The field of family demography has developed substantially. In the European context, Sweden and the other Nordic countries have frequently been referred to as forerunners in family change. Consequently, these countries have gained much attention in family-demographic research.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Sweden and the Nordic countries led the so-called Second Demographic Transition in family change (Lesthaeghe 2010) with declining levels of fertility and marriage formation and increasing levels of divorce. However, the Nordic countries no longer stand out as a region with exceptionally unstable families. For example, already since the 1980s the region has been renowned for its relatively high fertility (e.g., Hoem 2005). In more recent years, it has also caught attention to turnarounds in trends in marriage formation (Ohlsson-Wijk 2011, 2015) and the stabilization of divorce levels (Andersson & Kolk 2015). Thomson (2014) demonstrates how the Nordic countries led the trends of increasing “family complexity” during the second half of the twentieth century but that these trends seem to have leveled off at the turn of the new century. In recent theoretical arguments the relatively high fertility of the Nordic region and its recent trend reversals in marriage formation and divorce have been linked to the new gender regimes of that region. For example, Goldscheider and colleagues (2015) link recent family change in this region to what they label the second step of an ongoing “gender revolution”.

In this chapter we aim to describe recent trends in family-demographic behavior in Sweden in light of the ideational changes of the recent decades. The chapter focuses on marriage formation, divorce, and re-partnering and family complexity, areas where trends have stabilized or reversed during the first decades of the 2000s. As a family-demographic forerunner, whose trends often have been followed by other developed countries, Sweden serves as an intriguing case in the study of family-demographic change.

### **Theories of family demographic change**

One of the most prominent theoretical approaches to explain the family-demographic changes that have occurred in the Western world in the last five decades is the theory of the Second Demographic Transition. It is based on the idea that family-demographic changes largely reflect a broader ideational shift towards more individualistic and secular values and away from authorities and traditions (Surkyn & Lesthaeghe 2004, Lesthaeghe 2010). When large parts of a population have achieved a certain level of economic standard with living conditions where basic needs are met, individuals can start focusing on higher order needs, in accordance with Maslow's (1954) formulation of the hierarchy of needs (Lesthaeghe 2010). These higher-order needs relate to individualism, self-realization, expressive values, and tolerance towards others. Although not as emphasized, this development is also seen as related to more symmetrical gender roles, and women's increased economic and reproductive autonomy.

According to the theory, in individual life projects family careers are postponed and no longer seen as equally central. Couple relationships are increasingly seen as a project that should be fulfilling to the individual; if a relationship does not live up to expectations, there is no necessity in staying together (Surkyn & Lesthaeghe 2004, Lesthaeghe 2010, Giddens 1992). Entering marriage as a lifelong contract becomes less attractive. Marriage rates gradually decline at the same time as divorce rates increase. In Sweden, this development started already in the 1960s, but in other European countries these trends began a few years or even decades later (Council of Europe 2006). Following the rise in divorce rates, there has been a growing prevalence of re-partnering and different aspects of family complexity.

Marriages were postponed to higher ages and in many Western countries, especially the Nordic ones, unmarried cohabitation became not only a prelude to marriage but for many couples also an alternative to marriage (Heuveline & Timberlake 2004, Hiekel et al. 2014).

The share of children born to non-married cohabiting parents increased, not least in the Nordic countries (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012, Heuveline & Timberlake 2004).

Nevertheless, most Europeans, including Swedes, marry sometime in their life (Andersson & Philipov 2002, Andersson et al. 2016) and there are still important institutional incentives to marry in many countries (Perelli-Harris & Sanchez-Gassen 2012) as well as normative ones. In Sweden around the turn of the millennium it seems that love and commitment were the prime motives for entering marriage from cohabitation (Bernhardt 2001, Strandell 2013).

In most Western countries, starting from the 1970s childbearing was postponed to higher ages (Council of Europe 2006), to the life-course stages after finishing education, finding a job, and realizing other individual goals. Parenthood may be seen in conflict with self-realization in other life areas (e.g., Lesthaeghe 2010), because of the time restrictions, economic costs, and increased need for selflessness that may come along with having children. In many countries, although not as evident in the Nordic and a few other countries, childbearing is not only postponed, but also the average number of children that a woman has during her fertile years has decreased (Frejka & Sobotka 2008, Lesthaeghe 2010, Oláh 2015).

The second demographic transition perspective has received some critique and questioning, especially for making too far-reaching assumptions about a broad range of family behaviors across Western and other industrialized countries. For example, it can be argued that it primarily holds a Western view (for discussion see e.g., Ochiai 2014) or that it underestimates the role of labor-market and economic factors for changes in family behavior (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010, Ochiai 2014). Some scholars have debated if the second demographic transition is in fact only a continuation, or a secondary feature of, the first demographic transition (Cliquet 1992, Coleman 2004). For many Western countries, including Sweden, the 1950s and 1960s may primarily be seen as period with a temporary break from previous trends in family formation – with very early marriage formation and childbearing (for discussion see van Bavel 2010, Lesthaeghe 2010), leading to higher aggregate levels of marriage and fertility.

There are various structural changes that scholars have connected to family-demographic change. Somewhere around or after the mid-1900s, women in many industrialized countries started entering the labor market to a larger extent than before, thus making the same kind of movement into the public sphere that men did already during the early phases of industrialization (Löfström 2004, Stanfors & Goldscheider 2017). There have also been large

flows of both men and women into higher education (OECD 2012). Many scholars have connected women's increased labor-market participation and ambition to the postponement and decrease of both childbearing and marriage formation. From the second demographic transition perspective, education and paid work can be seen as arenas for self-expression and self-realization that compete with family life (Lesthaeghe 2010).

Becker (1993) has proposed that in earlier times there were gains from marriage because of labor specialization within couples. A man could have a wife to take care of the household and children and a woman could get the economic security and support that a husband's earnings provided. When women started working in the labor market, there was less specialization and less need for marriage and family formation. Furthermore, there was no longer a necessity for women to marry or to stay married as they could support themselves economically and were less financially dependent on any partner.

Much research from more recent decades contest that women's paid work is necessarily related to lower levels of family formation (see Oppenheimer 1997 for discussion); this certainly holds for the context of Sweden (Bracher & Santow 1998, Andersson 2000). There are signs that in recent years the association between female labor force participation and childbearing has turned positive at the national cross-country level (Ahn & Mira 2002, Billari & Kohler 2004). The role of policies that enable the combination of work and family life for this turnaround is widely acknowledged (Neyer & Andersson 2008, Gornick & Meyers 2008, Ferrarini & Duvander 2010, Hoem 2005). In countries with such policies, there is no need for women to choose between being active on the labor market and having children. On the contrary, for both men and women, paid work is often seen as a prerequisite for supporting a family economically.

Increasing gender symmetry, as well as women's increased economic autonomy, can be seen as components of the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe 2010). Recent research has increasingly emphasized the role of gender equality and changes in gender structures as crucial for understanding recent and ongoing family-demographic change (e.g., Goldscheider 2000, McDonald 2000, Bernhardt 2004, Sobotka 2008a,b). This is especially the case in more recent publications by Goldscheider et al. (2015) and Esping-Andersen & Billari (2015). These authors propose that women's mass-entry into the labor market and higher education may initially have decreased family-formation incentives and destabilized families through

increased uncertainty of what to expect from a potential partner and what role gender structures may play for work and family life. This may have led to less willingness to commit to a partner, for example through marriage or childbearing (Goldscheider et al. 2015). When women increasingly entered the labor-market and the public sphere they still had the major responsibility for the private sphere, such as housework and childcare, leading to a double burden for them (Gerson 2010). Some see this burden as a reason for why women may want to postpone marriage and motherhood and in some cases also reduce the number of children they have or even forego family formation altogether (McDonald 2000, Goldscheider 2000, Goldscheider et al. 2015). Both Goldscheider and colleagues (2015) and Esping-Andersen & Billari (2015) argue that this unbalanced situation can be solved by a move towards increasing gender equality. The flow of women into the labor market and the public sphere merely marks the first phase of what can be seen as a “gender revolution”. In the second part of this revolution men also take on a larger share of the responsibility for the private sphere (Goldscheider et al. 2015).

The end state of the revolution, if it is ever reached, is that men and women share both paid work and housework and care equally. A development in that direction is expected to lead to better balance and willingness for commitment among partners and more stable relationships (Goldscheider 2000, Bernhardt 2004, Goldscheider et al. 2015). Esping-Andersen & Billari (2015) instead use the term “female revolution” for the changes in women’s roles and postulate that there can be a return to “more family” as gender egalitarianism becomes more normative. Many scholars argue that the shift into more gender egalitarian practice is still an ongoing, slow, or even stalled process (e.g., Esping-Andersen 2009, Gerson 2010, England 2010), and is very much contingent on contextual factors (e.g., Esping-Andersen & Billari 2015).

Although the different explanations for recent family-demographic developments are not mutually exclusive, they may carry somewhat different predictions for the future. Based on the second demographic transition arguments, a reasonable prediction for the future is a continuously weakening role of the family and continuance of the demographic change seen in previous decades, or at least not a reversal in such developments without a reversal in the ideational sphere. The more gender-based perspectives, on the contrary, predict lower and later family formation at first but then a strengthening of the family when, or if, norms and behavior become more gender egalitarian.

## **The Swedish value context**

Sweden's reputation as being one of the main forerunners in the second demographic transition is not only granted by its family-demographic developments but also by its value context. For example Sobotka (2008a,b), measuring the ideational context by a composite index of second demographic transition values, places Sweden at the top among more than twenty European countries. Based on World Values Survey data (World Values Survey 2015), the "Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map" was created with two axes measuring different ideational factors – with values at the high end of both scales being closely related to second demographic transition values. One axis measures the degree of traditional values versus more secular and rational values and the other axis captures survival values at one end and self-expressive ones at the other end. Sweden has in repeated surveys been ranked the highest in both secular-rational and self-expression values (among 40-60 countries all over the world), also higher than the other Nordic countries. Between 1981 and 2014 those values for Sweden have increased gradually (World Values Survey 2015).

Sweden is often seen as one of the countries that have come furthest in gender equality developments (e.g. Goldscheider et al. 2015, Bernhardt et al. 2008). This is especially the case when it comes to norms and values. For example, it is a general belief that both men and women should be engaged in paid work as well as in taking care of their children (Evertsson 2014, Fahlén 2013). At the same time, it can be argued that there has been less change in factual gender equality and that men still have more power than women in many areas, for example when it comes to decisions about the division of paid and unpaid labor (Bekkengen 2002). Men's increased engagement in their children could either be driven by a strive for gender equality or interpreted as a growing prevalence of child-orientation among fathers (Bekkengen 2002).

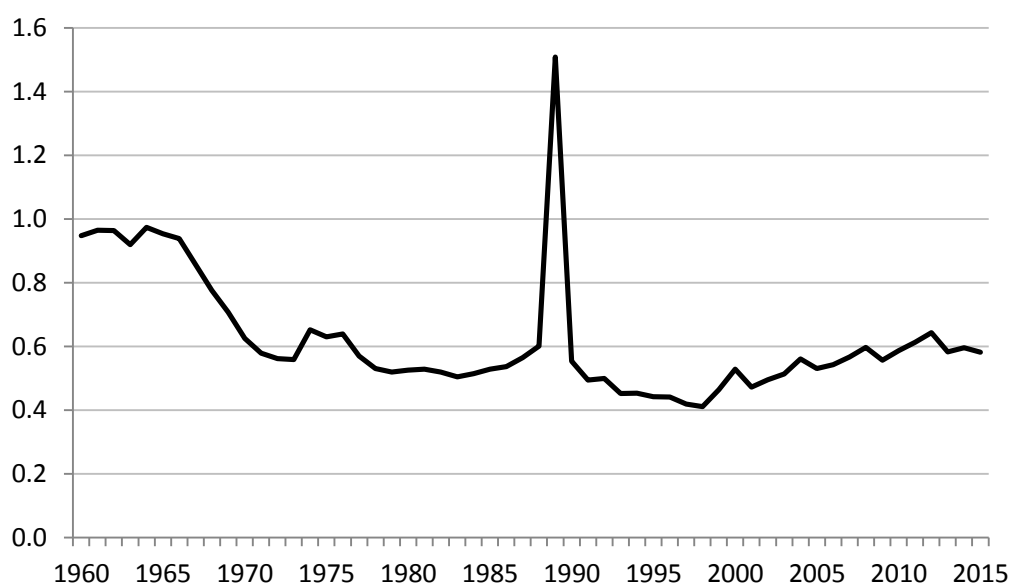
Altogether, Sweden is a theoretically interesting context on the forefront of the developments both in family-demographic change and in ideational and gender role change. Family-demographic developments certainly differ across historical, cultural, and political contexts (Reher 1998, Lesthaeghe 2010, Sobotka & Toulemon 2008, McDonald 2006). Still, the current state of Swedish family dynamics may provide insight into the broader state of affairs in regard to family-demographic developments.

## Marriage formation in Sweden

This chapter focuses on family change during the last half a century. When put in historical perspective we first note that the fraction of people in Northwest Europe, including Sweden, who never married was relatively high also during the 19<sup>th</sup> and earlier centuries (Coontz 2005). Ages at first marriage were also relatively high (Hajnal 1982). During historical time in Sweden, cohabitation was an alternative form of family arrangement for some sub-groups in society (Lewin 1979).

The Swedish marriage trends during the last half a century can be described through the developments in its Total First Marriage Rate (TFMR). This is done in Figure 1 for women during 1960-2015. The TFMR is a measure based on the number of newly formed marriages during a calendar year as well as the age structure and size of the population at hand. It gives the probability of a woman to ever get married if the age-specific first-marriage rates in that specific year would remain at current level throughout her marriageable years (in this case up to age 49).

**Figure 1. Total First Marriage Rate (TFMR) for women below age 50, Sweden 1960-2015**



*Sources:* TFMR for years 1960-2004 from Council of Europe (2006). TFMR for years 2005-2015 from Eurostat (2017).

Sweden was the first country, closely followed by the other Nordic countries, to experience a vast decline in marriage formation rates, starting in the mid-1960s. In parallel with the



marriage decline there was an increasing trend in Sweden in the prevalence of unmarried cohabitation (Trost 1979), to a larger extent than in most other Western countries outside the Nordic region. As can be seen from Figure 1, the trend in first-marriage formation was mostly declining from the mid-1960s until 1998, apart from temporarily deviating peaks in the mid-1970s and in 1989, which can both be ascribed to policy changes. The peak in the mid-1970s was likely due to changes in the divorce legislation in 1974 that facilitated divorce and created a large influx of divorcees into the marriage market. The possibility of a smoother dissolution of marriage and the public discussion about it might also have made marriage seem a more modern and less strict form of union (Agell 1985). The very dramatic peak in 1989 was due to changes in the widow's pension act that created economic incentives, primarily for middle-aged or older women, to marry their cohabiting partners before the end of that specific year (Hoem 1991).

The general trend of marriage decline, and especially the early and swift onset of this development, in parallel with the large prevalence of unmarried cohabitation created the image of Sweden as the leader in the fall of marriage (Popenoe 1988). From 1998, however, there has been an increasing trend in marriage formation. This is a trend that until quite recently received surprisingly little attention in the scientific literature, considering that this was such a clear break from earlier trends and that it challenges much previous theoretical discussion on the matter (Ohlsson-Wijk 2011). After 2008, the trend has been rather stable but somewhat fluctuating. There is also an evident peak in the year 2000, without any apparent explanation other than the fact that this year was the turn of the millennium (Ohlsson-Wijk 2014). There may also be a reversal in marriage formation in the other Nordic countries, judging from their Total First Marriage Rates (Council of Europe 2006, Oláh 2015). In addition, the trend reversal in Sweden was evident across different socio-economic groups (Ohlsson-Wijk 2011).

We note that the formation of new same-sex marriages has no direct numerical impact on the described Swedish marriage trends. Registered partnerships were introduced for same-sex couples in 1995 (Andersson et al. 2006, 2010) and the marriage legislation became fully gender neutral in 2009, but same-sex marriages are so few compared to opposite-sex marriages that they do not affect overall patterns visibly. Still, the introduction of registered partnerships and marriage for same-sex couples can be regarded as signs of a general development towards less traditional views of couple relationships and marriage. It

contributes to the image of the Nordic countries as forerunners in family change. Intriguingly, the introduction of a legal status for same-sex couples and the positive media attention these developments received may have helped make marriage more appealing also to the wider population. We note that the trend reversal towards increasing heterosexual marriage formation (Figure 1) follows shortly after the introduction of a marriage-like civil status for same-sex couples.

Part of the previous decline in marriage rates in Sweden, as in other countries, was driven by a general postponement of marriage formation to higher ages (e.g., Winkler-Dworak & Engelhardt 2004). The mean age at first marriage in Sweden is high compared to many other European countries (Sobotka & Toulemon 2008, Council of Europe 2006, Oláh 2015). It has increased quite continuously from the historical low in 1966 at ages 23.3 for women and 25.9 for men to that of ages 33.4 for women and 35.9 for men in 2012 (Statistics Sweden 2014a).

Another way of studying the developments in marriage formation over time is to look at patterns across birth cohorts. When compared to women born in 1935 it is apparent that the fraction ever married at any given age decreased across every cohort up to those born just before 1970. At age 44, only 69 percent of the women born in 1965 had ever been married, while the corresponding figure was 93 percent for women born in 1935. However, women born in the 1970s still reached the levels of those born in the mid-1960s before turning 40 and women born in the 1980s even surpassed the levels of those born in 1975 when they were in their twenties (Ohlsson-Wijk 2011). This shows that marriage is no longer becoming less common and it underlines the shift in period marriage trends.

We note that as cohabitation became more prevalent as a union form, the legal difference between cohabitation and marriage in terms of rights and regulations have gradually been minimized in Sweden. Some crucial changes occurred as late as in the 1990s, such as the introduction of fathers' equal right to shared custody of children also in the case of dissolution of a cohabiting union as in the case of formal divorce (Schiratzki 2008). Marriage is no more advantageous than cohabitation in terms of social security, legal rights, or economic benefits in the way that it is in many European countries outside the Nordic region (Perelli-Harris & Sánchez Gassen 2012). Nevertheless, a few small differences remain that makes marriage more favorable, such as the inheritance rules for married and cohabiting partners (Agell & Brattström 2008). This may produce an incentive to marry, especially for couples with large

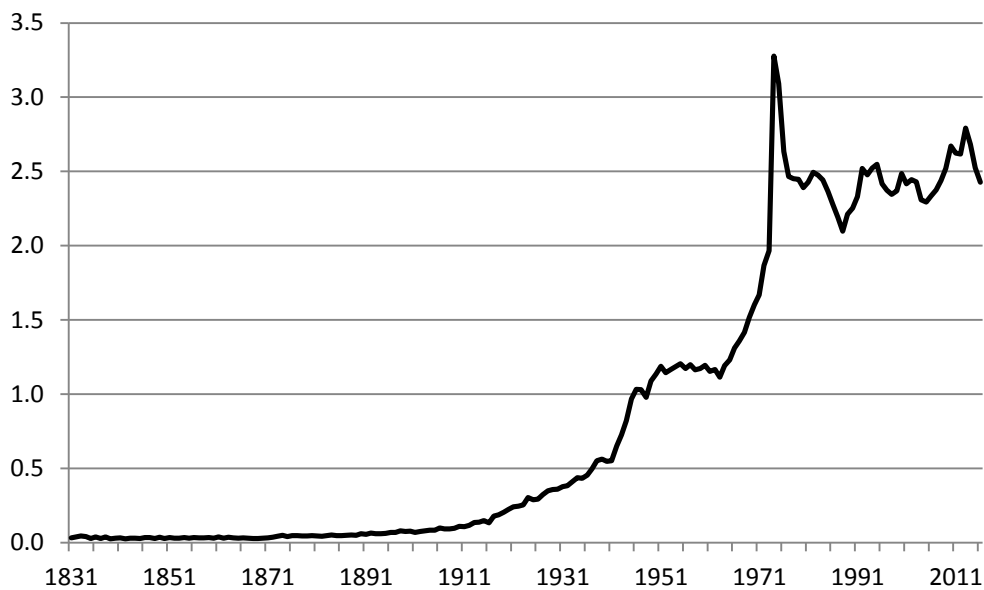
assets. In addition, in the event of legal divorce, assets and property are divided more equally between the two former partners than at the less formal dissolution of a cohabiting union (Agell & Brattström 2008). Potential gains from marriage may thus differ across socioeconomic groups (Duvander 1999).

In Sweden, the difference between marriage and cohabitation is generally perceived to be relatively small (e.g. Heuveline & Timberlake 2004). When compared to the United States, marriage is much less ideologized (Cherlin 2009) and there is less turn-over in terms of marriage, divorce and re-marriage. Evidently, the fraction who never marry is larger in Sweden than in the U.S. (Andersson & Philipov 2002). Marriage in Sweden more often occur after extended periods of cohabitation, and often after childbearing has begun, which also reflect differences in the meaning ascribed to marriage (Holland 2017).

### **Divorce and separation**

Swedish national divorce statistics date back to 1831, a year when just 95 divorces were registered in a population of 2.9 million people. During the same year 19,983 couples got married (Statistics Sweden 2017). Obtaining a divorce at that time was difficult and included long periods of mediation by the Swedish state church. The divorce rate remained low until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it started to rise slowly but gradually. This development was helped by the fact that as early as in 1915 the Swedish parliament passed a divorce act that included the possibility for no-fault divorce (Simonsson & Sandström 2011, Sandström 2012). Divorce trends increased until the 1950s when trends leveled off for a decade. They rose again sharply during the 1960s, which marks the onset of the so-called second demographic transition (Figure 2). Divorces peaked in 1974 when the current divorce law was enacted. It made divorce available on an individual basis without the couple having to agree (albeit with a six month waiting period in case one of the spouses does not agree or if the couple has minor children) or give any reason for the wish to terminate the marriage.

**Figure 2. Crude Divorce Rate (number of divorces per 1000 people) in Sweden, 1831-2016**

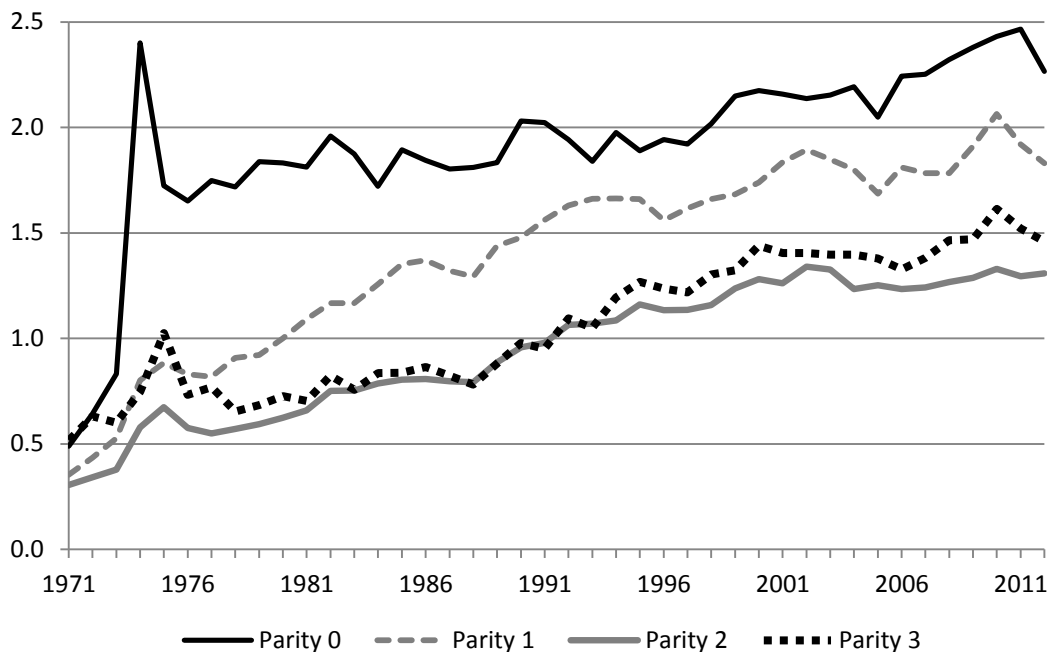


*Source:* Statistics Sweden (2017)

During the pre-1950s period divorce was most common among the higher socioeconomic strata and the divorce rate for people in occupations like lawyers, journalists and military officers was on a level on par with that of the general population of Sweden today. By the early 1960s the positive association between social class and divorce began to change. From that time until today working-class couples have exhibited higher divorce rates than those in higher socioeconomic groups (Sandström 2011, 2012).

Andersson (1997) and Andersson & Kolk (2015) have analyzed recent divorce trends with more detailed data, with divorce risks calculated based on the married population at risk. They demonstrate how the age-standardized divorce risk rose in 1974 in response to the liberalization of divorce legislation and that the standardized divorce risks continued to increase during the 1980s and 1990s (Figure 3). To a large extent, the rise in 1974 was due to a growing propensity for divorce among childless people, the later increase can be attributed to a rise in divorce risks among parents, who constitute the vast majority of married couples (Andersson & Kolk 2015).

**Figure 3. Relative risk of divorce, by number of children and calendar year in Sweden, 1971-2012**



*Note:* Divorce-risks for first-married Swedish women, standardized for age and duration of marriage. Risks for mothers also standardized for duration since previous birth and premarital childbearing. Rates relative to rates for one-child mothers in 1980.

*Source:* Swedish register data, Andersson & Kolk (2015)

Interestingly, we can observe a tentative recent trend break in divorce risks as well, which coincides more or less in time with that of the trend reversal in marriage rates. Since the turn of the new century divorce risks for two-child mothers in particular no longer increase. Seen together with the much stronger trend reversal in marriage formation, we note that more recent family dynamics in Sweden increasingly seem to have become characterized by more marriage-oriented behaviors.

Based on a comparative perspective and data from the Fertility and Family Surveys program, Andersson & Philipov (2002) used life table techniques to study family-demographic behavior in sixteen countries across Europe and North America during the late 1980s—early 1990s. Their analyses were followed up by a similar cross-country description by Andersson et al. (2016) based on data from the Gender and Generations Programme of the early 21st century. Comparing the two studies and focusing on divorce risks in Sweden reveals a stabilization or even decline in levels of dissolved marriages: While 28 percent of new marriages in Sweden ended in divorce within 15 years in the late 20th century the

corresponding fraction in the early 21st century was calculated as 22 percent. The latter number may well be an under-estimate of the true divorce level (Andersson et al. 2016, authors' own calculations based on Swedish register data), but the comparison across time still supports the notion that the direction of divorce-risks trends has changed.

As mentioned above, Sweden is renowned for its high share of cohabiting unions, also among couples with children. When focusing on all co-residential unions, regardless of marital status we note that the overall level of union instability has also leveled off. During the 1980s and 1990s, 54 percent of couples in new co-residential unions had separated within 15 years (Andersson & Philipov 2002) whereas a similar fraction (52 percent) experienced separation in the 2000s and 2010s (Andersson et al. 2016). When looking at divorce or separation from a child perspective we note that the fraction of children having experienced a parental divorce or separation by age 15 has decreased marginally, from 30 to 28 percent. During the same time period the share of children experiencing a union dissolution at comparable ages in the United States was much higher, and increased from about 40 (Andersson 2002) to 44 percent (Andersson et al. 2016).

### **Re-partnering and family complexity**

With previous increases in divorce and union dissolution the pool of men and women under risk of re-partnering, as well as children under risk of entering a stepfamily, has grown. Evidently, increasing family dissolution has produced increasing levels of family complexity with many children gaining stepparents and stepsiblings. Because childbearing out of union is quite rare in Sweden (Thomson & Eriksson 2013) the children under risk of stepfamily formation are mainly those who have experienced parental divorce or separation. Andersson and colleagues' (2016) comparative life-table analysis shows that about 70 percent of contemporary children in Sweden who experience the dissolution of their parents' union will experience a new union formation (of their mother) within ten years. This share is slightly higher than the corresponding statistics for the 1980s and 1990s (Andersson 2002). During the same period the share of U.S. children experiencing such a family reconstitution was somewhat higher, varying from 78 percent (Andersson 2002) to 76 percent (Andersson et al. 2016). Although children in families with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to experience a divorce or separation there are no educational differences in stepfamily

formation. Children of parents with low education have the same risk of entering a stepfamily as those with highly educated parents (Turunen 2011).

Family dissolution may also be related to childbearing behavior, both in terms of dampening fertility when childbearing unions are disrupted and in stimulating fertility as new couples are formed. As re-partnered couples may desire to have a shared child (Thomson et al. 2002, Thomson 2004) increasing divorce and subsequent re-partnering lead to increasing childbearing across partnerships in terms of multi-partnered childbearing with children gaining new half-siblings. Based on analyses of historical register data Turunen & Kolk (2015) demonstrate a quite stable pattern in the ratio of full siblings versus half-sibling from early 18<sup>th</sup> century Sweden until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period the reasons for stepfamily formation gradually shifted from being dominated by parental death to that of parental union dissolution. From the mid-1900s, the share of half-siblings in Swedish families began to rise substantially. At the same time, the ratio between maternal and paternal half-siblings began to rise from around 0.2 to 0.8 in the early 2000s (Turunen & Kolk 2015).

In a comparison of family dynamics in Sweden and the United States, Thomson (2014) shows that the share of mothers who have children with more than one partner is about twice as high in the United States as in Sweden and that this difference is largely due to the much higher fraction of out of union births in the U.S. (see also Thomson et al. 2014). As was the case for divorce trends, the previous increases in the share of children with at least one half-sibling seem to have leveled off for the most recent cohorts of Swedish children (Thomson 2014).

One factor in Swedish society that helps making family structures yet more complex is the common practice of shared physical custody of children after divorce or parental separation. This practice implies that children of separated parents typically reside equally (or nearly equally) in both parental households after any union dissolution. It often means that children live one week with a single parent and the next in a stepfamily – or that they alternate between two stepfamilies, with or without step- or half-siblings. The share of children with this kind of residential arrangement has grown from around one percent of all children to divorced or separated parents in 1985 to over a third in 2013. The fraction is about 50 percent among those in the most recent divorce cohorts (Statistics Sweden 2014b).

## **Concluding remarks**

In a European perspective, Sweden and its Nordic neighbors have often been in focus as forerunners in family change. In the 1960s, Sweden led the way towards increasing diversity in family dynamics, with decreasing levels of marriage formation and increasing levels of non-marital cohabitation, divorce, non-marital childbearing, union dissolution, family re-formation, and step-family dynamics. These developments occurred in tandem with changing value orientations and changing gender relations as women entered the labor market and the sexual revolution largely de-coupled childbearing decisions from romantic encounters. At the same time, Swedish social policies were re-directed to explicitly promote gender equality and offer a neutral stand to the different family forms women and men may choose to enter. During the 1970s, social policies were re-directed to support the dual-earner dual-carer (heterosexual) family model. At the same time, family law and other legislation were largely re-written to not support marriage in front of other (increasingly common) family forms.

Half a century later, the picture of Sweden as a “family forerunner” is both familiar and different. In one sense the picture has changed substantially: As other countries in Europe have caught up in their developments towards increasing family diversity, Sweden no longer stands out as a country with exceptionally high family instability (Andersson et al. 2016). (When compared to the situation in the United States it never has.) On the contrary and as demonstrated in this chapter, the most recent trends in Swedish family dynamics may rather point towards more of family stability than more of family volatility. On the other hand, Sweden and the Nordic countries seem to have re-gained its reputation in the demographic literature as “family forerunners”. In more recent arguments, the Nordic countries are once again high-lighted as forerunners in terms of changing gender relations and family-demographic change (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015, Goldscheider et al. 2015, Anderson & Kohler 2015). This recent literature nicely link ongoing developments to the developments that began half a century ago. However, this time the changing gender dynamics of Nordic families and Nordic societies are linked to different manifestations of increased family stability.

At the same time, Sweden and its Nordic neighbors continue to produce entirely new patterns of family-demographic change. The introduction and legalization of same-sex unions is a case in point. This family form was first introduced in the Nordic countries in order to soon spread



and gain legal status across practically all countries in Western Europe. It marks the democratization of marriage in times of changing gender relations and manifests the neutrality of policy makers towards the different family forms that women and men may want to enter.

The increase in shared physical custody of children in the wake of divorce and family dissolution is another new development that reflects quite some degree of innovation in Swedish family life and family dynamics. It can be linked both to increased gender equality and men's move towards more family oriented values and behavior (Goldscheider et al. 2015) and to children's increasing rights in society in terms of their equal access to both of their parents. It remains to be seen what new developments in the sphere of family life that Sweden is capable to produce in the years to come.

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