

SF2.4: Share of births outside of marriage

Definitions and methodology

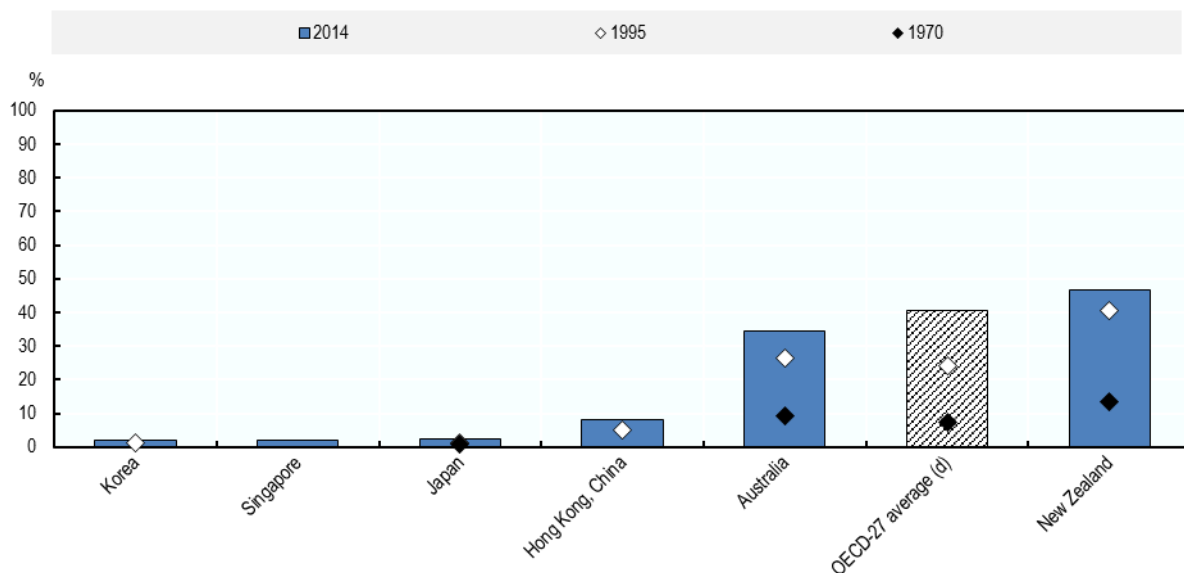
This indicator presents information on the proportion of live births outside of marriage. 'Births outside of marriage' are generally defined here as the proportion of births that are 'ex-nuptial' or 'out-of-wedlock' births, that is, births where the child's parents are not registered as married to each other (or, for New Zealand only, in a civil union with each other) at the time of the birth. This is notably different from the definition used in the OECD Family Database, where 'births outside of marriage' are defined as births to mothers whose legal marital status at the time of the birth is other than married.

Key findings

The share of births that occur outside of marriage is very low in most Asia/Pacific countries, but there are exceptions (Chart SF2.4.A). In Korea, Singapore and Japan only about 2% of births occur outside of marriage. The rate is slightly higher at just over 8% in Hong Kong, though this still remains very low in comparison to the average for OECD countries, for example (41%), and also in comparison to Australia (34%) and New Zealand (47%). Indeed, in New Zealand, almost half of all births now occur outside of marriage.

Chart SF2.4.A. Share of births outside of marriage, 1970, 1995^a and 2014 or latest available year^b

Proportion (%) of births that are ex-nuptial/out-of-wedlock births^c



a) Data for Hong Kong refer to 1996

b) Data for Hong Kong refer to 2011.

c) Births where the child's parents are not registered as married to each other (or, for New Zealand only, in a civil union with each other) at the time of the birth. For Singapore, data refer to the proportion of single-parent registration births by citizen mothers and births by citizen mothers who were not married to father named in the child's birth certificate at point of birth registration.

d) The OECD-27 average refers to the unweighted average across the 27 OECD member countries with available and comparable data. It is based on a slightly different definition of 'births outside of marriage' to much of the data used here - in the OECD Family Database, 'births outside of marriage' are defined as births to mothers whose legal marital status at the time of the birth is other than married. See OECD Family Database Indicator SF2.4 (<http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>) for more detail.

Other relevant indicators: SF2.1 Fertility rates; SF2.3 Age of mothers at childbirth and age-specific fertility; SF3.1 Marriage and divorce rate; SF3.2 Family dissolution and children

Sources: [Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics](#); Hong Kong, China: estimates calculated based on data from the Hong Kong Population Census; [Japan: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare](#); [Korea: Korean Statistical Information Service](#); [New Zealand: Statistics New Zealand](#); [Singapore: Ministry of Social and Family Development](#); OECD-27 average: OECD Family Database Indicator SF2.4.

These cross-national differences in the share of births outside of marriage are the product of decades-long differences in trends in births outside marriage (Chart SF2.4.A). In Korea, Japan and Hong Kong, the frequency of outside-of-marriage births has remained largely unchanged for the past four decades or so, with any increases only very modest. For example, in Japan, the current share of births occurring outside of marriage (2.3%) is less than 1.5 percentage points higher than it was in 1970 (0.9%). By contrast, in Australia and New Zealand, births outside of marriage are much more common now than they were in previous decades. In Australia, the share of births outside of marriage has increased by 25 percentage points since 1970, while in New Zealand the share has increased by over 33 percentage points over the same period.

Comparability and data issues

Data on the marital status of mothers and/or parents at the time of birth are based on administrative data and reflect only the *legal* marital status of the individuals concerned. Differences across countries and across time in the proportion of children born outside of marriage do not necessarily reflect differences in the proportion of children born to *non-partnered* mothers and/or without a father present, since it is possible for a child to be born to a couple who are not married to each other at the time of the birth (e.g. to a cohabiting couple). In other words, differences across countries and across time in the proportion of children born outside of marriage reflect differences in the propensity of couples to become married prior to parenthood, as well as differences in the proportion of children born outside of two-parent families.

Most of the data on 'births outside of marriage' used in this indicator are based on a 'ex-nuptial' or 'out-of-wedlock' definition of births outside of marriage, with births classified as 'outside of marriage' if the child's parents are not registered as married *to each other* (or, for New Zealand only, in a civil union with each other) at the time of the birth. This is notably different from the definition used in the OECD Family Database and by many organisations (e.g. Eurostat), where 'births outside of marriage' are defined as births to mothers whose legal marital status at the time of the birth is other than married. To the extent that some children are born to mothers whose legal marital status is 'married' but who are not married to the father of the child in question, the definition used in this indicator is likely to produce higher estimates of the share of births occurring outside of marriage.

Sources and further reading: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2014), *World Fertility Report 2013: Fertility at the Extremes*, United Nations, New York; Eurostat (2015) *Statistics Explained: Marriage and birth statistics - new ways of living together in the EU*, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Marriage_and_birth_statistics_-_new_ways_of_living_together_in_the_EU