



Iwona LATKOWSKA 
Bytom, Poland

Anna ZASUŃ 
Jan Długosz University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Częstochowa, Poland

Family 500+ Program and the Birth Dynamics in Poland: Impact Analysis and Demographic Perspectives

Program „Rodzina 500 plus” a dynamika urodzeń w Polsce. Analiza wpływu i perspektywy demograficzne

• Abstract •

In the article, the authors discuss the effectiveness of The Family 500+ Program and its impact on the birth rate in Poland in 2016–2023. Their work aims to analyze the complexity of factors determining decisions regarding parenthood and the need to consider the broad social and economic context when formulating reproductive policy. They also present an analysis of the impact of various initiatives and a critical look at the effectiveness of government activities in this area. This work is an attempt to outline the complex factors shaping the country's demography, drawing attention to the need for a comprehensive approach to formulating reproductive policy. The article examines social and economic factors that may influence decisions about parenthood, including aspects of abortion policy and support for parents. The authors thus draw attention to the need for a holistic approach to reproductive policy, so in addition to the genuine, material help offered by The Family 500+ Program (currently known as The Family 800+ Program) and

• Abstrakt •

Autorki podejmują w artykule tematykę skuteczności programu „Rodzina 500 plus” oraz jego wpływu na dynamikę urodzeń w Polsce w latach 2016–2023. Celem ich pracy jest analiza złożoności czynników determinujących decyzje dotyczące rodzicielstwa oraz omówienie konieczności uwzględnienia szerokiego kontekstu społecznego i ekonomicznego w formułowaniu polityki prokreacyjnej. Przedstawiają one także analizę oddziaływania różnych inicjatyw oraz krytyczne spojrzenie na skuteczność działań rządowych w tym obszarze. W pracy podjęto próbę zarysowania złożonych czynników kształtujących demografię kraju, a także podkreślono potrzebę kompleksowego podejścia do kwestii formułowania polityki prokreacyjnej. W artykule przedstawiono różnorodne społeczne i ekonomiczne czynniki, które mogą wpływać na decyzje dotyczące rodzicielstwa, włączając w to aspekty polityki aborcyjnej i wsparcia dla rodziców. Autorki zwracają tym samym uwagę na konieczność holistycznego podejścia do polityki prokreacyjnej:

many similar initiatives, they also emphasize the need to consider the issue of reproductive health or access to sexual education.

Keywords: demography; fertility rate; Family 500+ Program; birth dynamics

doceniając realną, materialną pomoc, jaką oferuje program „Rodzina 500 plus” (znany obecnie jako „Rodzina 800 plus”) i wiele podobnych inicjatyw, kładą nacisk na nieodzowność kwestii zdrowia reprodukcyjnego czy dostępu do edukacji seksualnej.

Słowa kluczowe: demografia; współczynnik dzietności; „Rodzina 500 plus”; dynamika urodzeń

Introduction

One of the critical symptoms of the contemporary world changes is declining fertility rate, as an element of global depopulation trend. Analyses of demographic data and factors influencing the size and structure of population raise concerns among demographers, economists, and politicians. The qualitative and quantitative changes in the population have a significant impact on the structure of societies, raising questions about its causes and consequences. More regions are experiencing declining birth rates, resulting in an ageing population and demographic imbalance. Demographic problems belong to sociology, as their dynamics and determining factors evolve alongside social, political, and cultural transformations. Demography seeks to identify patterns and trends within populations under specific historical conditions, and to analyze mass phenomena while minimizing randomness – particularly in small populations and rare occurrences – that could distort conclusions (Okólski & Fihel, 2012, p. 11). The study of population regularities in demography relies primarily on reliable data sources – general population censuses, current records covering demographic events such as natural movement (marriages, divorces, separations, births and deaths), and migration (changes in residence, and population movement). Additionally, specialized studies conducted using representative randomly selected sampling methods, and thematically focused samples, or various types of registers and data collections, play a significant role (Stokowski, 2019, pp. 11–26).

The importance of population changes was being discussed long before demography became a scientific discipline. Particularly in the context of excessive population growth, theories on the effects of overpopulation emerged. The development of demographic theory until the mid-20th century was significantly influenced by Thomas Malthus's 1798 work, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. According to his theory, the population is limited by the available means of subsistence, and the difference between the rate of population growth and the growth of resources

cannot be easily compensated by aid or charity. Overpopulation leads to inefficiencies in agricultural production and a decline in the supply of food, ultimately resulting in famine, which reduces population to a level that can once again be sustained. This mechanism demonstrates the existence of cyclical demographic fluctuations, which occur abruptly and are often linked to violent social phenomena such as famine, disease, and conflicts over resources (Malthus, 1998, p. 4). The issue of overpopulation was also addressed in the Club of Rome's landmark report, *The Limits to Growth* (see: Meadows et al., 1973), which highlighted the consequences of rapid natural resource depletion caused by overexploitation driven by the increasing demands of a growing population. Like Malthus's theory, this report aligns with the anti-population perspective, which warns of the severe consequences of overpopulation. A turning point in the development of demography was the recognition of population problems as one of the major global concerns. First during the interwar period, through the efforts of the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) and the League of Nations, then, after World War II when academic centers dealing with demography began to be established. In 1945, Frank W. Notestein formulated the theory of demographic transition, which became a new paradigm in this field. In the second half of the 20th century, demography became an important element of the activities of international organizations (The United Nations, the European Association for Population Studies) or regional ones (in Poland – the Population Council, the Polish Demographic Society), and demographic forecasts and population policy were established as an integral element of the strategy of many states (Okólski & Fihel, 2012, pp. 12–14).

In industrialized countries, monitoring demographic changes has become the norm, and demographic data are regularly collected. Obtaining the most precise statistical data on population changes is essential in assessing the potential threats posed by overpopulation and the regionally observed demographic decline. Growing concerns about population changes require monitoring the population size and looking for solutions. As part of the efforts of various expert circles, including political ones, programs were introduced to eliminate the harmful effects of population changes. In Poland, such tools include The Family 500+ Program, one of the most famous, both socially and politically, pro-natalist solutions introduced in 2016 by the then Law and Justice (next as L&J) government. Research to date suggests that the impact of The Family 500+ Program on fertility in Poland has been moderate and visible primarily among families with at least two children (Bartnicki & Alimowski, 2022). Regardless of the Program's noticeable and measured effects, its sustainability and economic viability should be the subject of further discussion.

The article's main aim is to analyze the impact of The Family 500+ Program on the birth dynamics in Poland in 2016–2023 and to determine the demographic prospects related to its implementation. The basis of the analysis are demographic data from the reports of Główny Urząd Statystyczny (GUS) and Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (CBOS), covering the births rates before, during and after the implementation of the program, compared year to year. Additionally, goal of the article is to analyze Poland's *Demographic Strategy 2040*, considering the potential of currently functioning pro-family tools that may change population dynamics in the coming years. Such research objectives have a significant connection with the socio-political context in Poland. The impact of The Family 500+ Program on birth dynamics in Poland has become significant considering recent political changes. The United Right Wing (Poland), which introduced the Program, lost the last parliamentary elections on October 15, 2023, which opened the field for new interpretations of social policy. The implementation of such goals will require answers to the following research questions: 1) whether The Family 500+ Program influenced the demographic decline in Poland?; 2) what factors weaken the effectiveness of family policy under the Program and others introduced by the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy?; 3) to what extent the identification of the Program with the ruling party influenced pro-family attitudes, and whether it was perceived as a tool for increasing political support?; 4) what features of contemporary Polish society determine the persistently low birth rate? Concerning the research questions, the following hypothesis can be proposed: 1) the demographic problem in Poland, as in the entire former Eastern Bloc, is resulting from social and economic transformation that has significantly affected families, especially women; 2) The Family 500+ Program, like subsequent family policy tools, have had a limited impact on the fertility rate because of the size of the reproductive age population, the frequency of forming stable relationships and the level of fertility of couples (Fihel et al., 2017); 3) the effectiveness of family policies has been weakened by an ideological decisions of the government that directly affected women's rights; 4) the politicization of The Family 500+ Program contributed to the decline in public trust in family policies. The verification of the hypotheses and the answer to the research questions was based on the qualitative analysis of statistical data and documents.

Demographic context before The Family 500+ Program

Poland has been experiencing an ongoing global trend of declining birth rates, which poses a significant challenge to the country's demographic structure. Experts indicate that this trend originated in the late 1980s and political transformation in Eastern European countries, when the total fertility rate began to decline rapidly. This can be partly attributed to the legacy of the socialist state, which aimed to expand welfare institutions and enhance women's employment rights – offering stable labor market participation, career opportunities, financial independence, and greater reproductive autonomy (Mishtal, 2009, p. 600; Fihel et al., 2017, p. 37). In the years 1990–1995, with minor exceptions, a steady decline in fertility was observed (Okólski & Fihel, 2012, p. 179). According to reports from 2013–2014, Poland had entered a constant demographic crisis (Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, 2014, p. 6). After 1989, Eastern European countries, including Poland, developed free market economies, and the existing employment and wage protection, including facilities and support for women with children, and the pursuit of privatization of health care, were abolished (Mishtal, 2009, p. 600). These changes have significantly influenced demographic trends: the tendency to postpone the decision to have a child and get marriage has increased, and the number of divorces has also increased. Despite the Catholic Church regaining its influence, social and cultural changes, including the growing importance of individualism, independence and freedom of worldview among the younger generation, have not been stopped.

Since 1990, the decline in fertility no longer guarantees the simple replacement of generations. In 2002, for the first time, the number of deaths exceeded the number of births, and since 2018, a negative natural increase has been developing. Its significant growth accelerated in mid-2020, related to the consequences of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (*Strategia Demograficzna 2040*, 2022, p. 7). Apart from the impact of the pandemic, the causes of this phenomenon include both economic (increased costs of living, access to stable work, financial burden related to raising children) and social factors (lifestyle changes, growing importance of professional career or shifting values related to the traditional family model). However, relationship between economic factors and changes in fertility rates is not clear. Initially, high unemployment used to be associated with higher fertility rates, and the high participation of women in the labor market – with declining birth rates due to the increasing costs of child-raising, including so-called opportunity costs. However, recent studies show a reversal tendency – female unemployment correlates with lower fertility, partly due to concerns about difficulties in returning to the labor market after childbirth (Castles, 2003, p. 214). Some researchers explain this trend

as a transitional effect (the “tempo effect”), others believe that this is a permanent trend and leads to a further decrease in the number of births (Mishtal, 2009, p. 601; Fihel et al., 2017, p. 37).

At the beginning of the 21st century, Poland was one of the countries with the lowest fertility rates in Europe¹ – in 2002, it was only 1.25 (Okólski & Fihel, 2012, p. 179). The state of birth depression, i.e., a permanent decline in fertility below the replacement of generations (2.1), has been going on almost continuously since the 1990s, except for a short increase in 2008–2010 (GUS, 2023a, p. 11). In 2019, Poland was ranked 190th among 208 countries and territories classified jointly in terms of fertility rate (Pison, 2019, p. 5; *Strategia Demograficzna 2040*, 2022, p. 4). Despite similar fertility rates in Central and Eastern European countries, some of them (e.g., Romania, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia) have recorded significant increases in the last decade, which suggest that “there is untapped potential for population growth” in Poland (*Strategia Demograficzna 2040*, 2022, p. 6).

Many factors have influenced the low birth rate over the last three decades, the most important of which include unfavorable changes in the female fertility pattern and age structure in the population of women in the reproductive period. The decline in fertility is also spreading to increasingly older age groups, and over time, the decision to give birth to a child cause unfavorable changes in family formation processes, including a decline in the number of new marriages (also a decline of new marriages in younger age groups), which results in a decline in the number of births, and at the same time an increase in the number of divorces. Data from the Generations and Gender Survey 2014–2015 also indicate that approx. 20% of women and 22% of men declared their intention to remain childless, suggesting that the persistently low fertility rate may coincide with growing social acceptance of voluntary childlessness (Mynarska & Brzozowska, 2022, p. 163). Moreover, the emigration trend among Poles continues to increase, and such a scale significantly limits the demographic potential (Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, 2014, pp. 6–10).

Due to the unfavorable changes in the population structure observed in the 2002–2014 period and the resulting decline in the birth rate, projects of comprehensive actions in the field of population policy were developed. The Government Population Council in the Report for 2013–2014 recommended a long-term social policy and constant monitoring of the pro-natalist effects of the legal regulations, including the extension of parental leave, support for large families, combining

¹ Total Fertility Rate – the average number of children a woman would give birth to during her reproductive life, if the current (annual) fertility pattern in society continues (Kaźmierczak-Kałużna, 2023, p. 2; Holzer, 1994, p. 264).

motherhood with a professional career, financing health care for mother and child, health education for young people, and infertility treatment. In this context, The Toddler Program [Maluch] was implemented (in 2011), and then in 2015, The Toddler at University Program, which supported working or studying women in childcare (Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, 2014, p. 12). In 2017, the program was launched as The Toddler+, and in 2022, it was reformulated from an annual into a long-term program The Active Toddler (2022–2029). Comparative studies between 2011 and 2015 showed that the Program contributed to a significant increase in the number of childcare places for children up to 3 years of age. It also showed little chance of achieving the goals postulated in the Europe 2020 Strategy adopted in 2010 by the European Commission, assuming formal care to at least 33% of children under 3 years of age and 90% of children over 3 years of age. Significant changes were noted only after 6 years of the Program's operation, but they mainly concerned the availability of institutional childcare thus increasing the professional activity of parents (NIK, 2017).

In parallel, other pro-family initiatives were implemented, i.a., The Family on Its Own Program [Rodzina na Swoim] (2007–2013) or The Apartment for the Young Program [Mieszkanie dla Młodych] (2014–2018), which was adopted by amending *the Act on State Aid in Purchasing the First Apartment of September 1, 2015*. This change was intended to primarily benefit large families². However, a comparison of these initiatives with data on the number of births indicates no direct correlation between them. In the 1980s, there were about 700,000 live births, in the 1990s – less than 550,000, in 2000 – about 380,000, in 2010 slightly more – about 415,000, but a decade later – only about 355,000 (GUS, 2022a, p. 250). Despite the implementation of various programs aimed at supporting fertility, the overall downward trend continued.

The low fertility rate in most European Union countries has become an impulse to create projection models of ongoing demographic changes. Such a model was presented by GUS, titled *Prognoza ludności na lata 2023–2060*, showing three variant scenarios of the fertility level based on data from 2000–2022, in which fertility rate ranged from 1.39 (in 2020) to 1.26 (in 2022). The high variant assumes an increase to 1.79, the medium variant – to 1.49, and the low variant – a decrease to 1.19 by 2060 (GUS, 2023b, pp. 16–17). Implementing the higher scenarios requires maintaining a stable labor market, improving material conditions, developing care services (e.g., The Family 500+ Program), greater access to nurseries and

² Ustawa z dnia 25 czerwca 2015 r. o zmianie ustawy o pomocy państwa w nabyciu pierwszego mieszkania przez młodych ludzi, Dz.U. 2015 poz. 1194.

preschools, and support for combining motherhood with work. The deterioration in these areas results in a low scenario (GUS, 2023b, pp. 16–17). The European Statistical Office (Eurostat) and the United Nations (UN) prepared similar projections, estimating demographic changes until 2100. Data published in *Roczniki Demograficzne* [Demographic Yearbooks] also indicate downward trend – according to them, natural increase decreased from approx. +35,000 in 2010 to approx. –120,000 in 2020 (*Strategia Demograficzna 2040*, 2022, p. 8). Despite participating in the modernization processes typical of highly developed countries, Poland, like the entire EU, is struggling with low fertility rates, an aging society, and a projected population decline. In the long term, Europe may become a ‘continent of seniors’ (Łepkowski, 2017).

Importance of The Family 500+ Program for birth dynamics

Poland, like others EU countries, by developing pro-natalist programs and pro-family policies, is responding to the obligations arising from the Barcelona objectives adopted by the European Council in 2003 and the Europe 2020 Strategy, repeating earlier assumptions. Both initiatives aimed, i.a., at the development of institutional childcare and combating poverty within families. Although Poland joined the EU in 2004, after two decades the effectiveness of achieving these goals remains controversial, and opinions on their pro-family or anti-family nature are ambiguous (Zych et al., 2018, pp. 59–60). The problem remains to balance between the etatist approach (based on financing institutional care) and the subsidiary approach (supporting various forms of care and leaving the choice to parents) (Zych et al., 2018, p. 61; Castles, 2003, p. 221). The implementation of The Family 500+ Program was in line with the etatist model, limiting families’ autonomy in choosing care options. This approach was consistent with the provisions of the 2011 “nursery act” and its 2017 amendment, which aimed to increase access to institutional care and facilitate women’s faster return to the labor market (Zych et al., 2018, p. 17).

The Family 500+ Program, implemented since 2016 on the basis of the Act on State Aid in Raising Children, was one the flagship election promises of the L&J Party (CBOS, 2016, p. 1). The nature and objectives of the program was defined as “support for families in partially covering expenses related to raising a child, including childcare and meeting their life needs” (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2025). Financial assistance aimed to reduce the level of poverty among families with children, improve the financial situation of large

families, and encourage having more children (Szarfenberg, 2019; Brzeziński & Najsztub, 2017). This benefit was granted independently of other forms of support, initially for the second and subsequent children (without income criteria), and for the first child – after meeting certain income thresholds. As M. Brzeziński and M. Najsztub noted, because The Family 500+ Program operates independently of the previous institutions supporting families, “in the Polish system of financial support for families, two administratively and legally independent instruments serving practically the same purpose have started to operate” (2017), additionally, the program did not provide for differentiation of the situation of families (e.g., for children of single parents).

The Family 500+ benefit was a main element of the L&J Party’s election campaign in 2015. Introduced with the aim of reversing negative demographic trends (Polskie Radio, 2017; Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2016; PAP, 2019), it was gradually modified – in 2019, it was extended to cover the first child³, and from January 2024, after indexation to PLN 800, it operates as The Family 800+ Program⁴.

The Family 500+ Program was a good move, not just politically. In its 2015 election program, the L&J Party justified the Program:

The fertility rate can be increased because of increased financial outlays in coherent, long-term, and effective family policy. Therefore, we will introduce a monthly family allowance of PLN 500 for each second and subsequent child in the family, and in the case of low-income families, already for the first child. The family allowance will be universal and not be limited by income criteria, as with family benefits. Due to this financial barrier, 3 million children have dropped out of the support system for families with children in Poland since 2004 (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, 2015, p. 120).

The Family 500+ Program contributed to a decrease in extreme child poverty but did not eliminate it (the program’s objectives concern not only supporting families living in poverty) (GUS, 2022b; Szarfenberg, 2019). It also did not transfer into a permanent increase in birth rates (see: Diagram 1) – a significant increase occurred only in 2016 and 2017 (GUS, 2023a, p. 11). According to estimates, slightly over 272,000 live births were registered in 2023 (GUS, 2024, p. 44), a decrease of over

³ Ustawa z dnia 26 kwietnia 2019 r. o zmianie ustawy o pomocy państwa w wychowywaniu dzieci oraz niektórych innych ustaw, Dz.U. 2019 poz. 924.

⁴ Ustawa z dnia 7 lipca 2023 r. o zmianie ustawy o pomocy państwa w wychowywaniu dzieci, Dz.U. 2023 poz. 1565.

32,000 compared to the previous year, and this is the lowest birth rate recorded in the entire post-war period (GUS, 2023a, p. 11), indicated the growing demographic crisis in Poland.

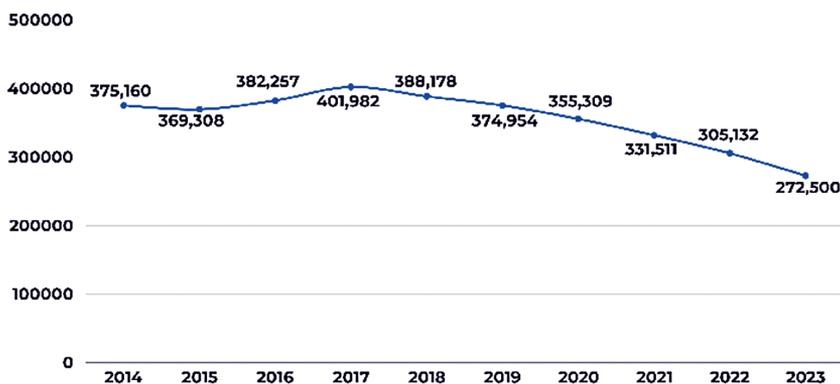


Diagram 1. Number of Live Births in Poland in 2014–2023

Authors' own study based on: GUS, *Rocznik Demograficzny* (2014–2023); GUS, 2024.

In 2016, the number of births in Poland increased by approx. 13,000 and by a further 20,000 in 2017⁵. However, this was an exception to the downward trend that dominated earlier and later. Although it is difficult to clearly attribute this increase to The Family 500+ Program⁶, some data indicate that parents were more likely to decide to have a second and third child (see: Diagram 2), which could be related to the design of the Program in its first years.

At the same time, other indicators, such as the number of births among women aged 20–24, showed no significant increase. In 2016, this number declined, and in 2017, it increased only slightly (by 158 children) (GUS, 2018, p. 264), before declining again (see: Diagram 3). This undermines the thesis that the Program had a real impact on reproductive decisions in the age group with the highest biological fertility (see: Stokowski, 2019, p. 75).

⁵ Data provided using the BSTS (Bayesian structural time series) technique indicate that in the period of April 2016–December 2017, the program increased the number of births by approx. 4.5% per month (on average 1,420 more births) (Bartnicki & Alimowski, 2022, p. 207).

⁶ Estimates presented in the literature show that from mid-2019, after the first child was covered by the Program, the effect of the Program on births is no longer statistically detectable (Bartnicki & Alimowski, 2022, p. 209).

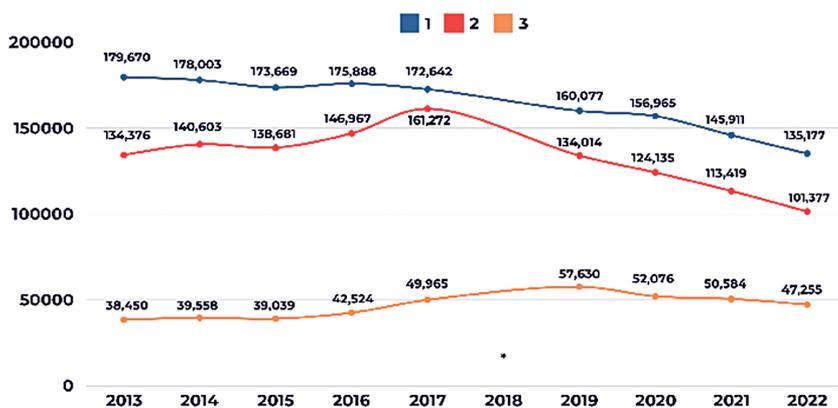


Diagram 2. Live Births According to the Order in Which the Child Was Born to the Mother Authors' own study based on: GUS, *Rocznik Demograficzny* (2013–2017, 2019–2021). No data for 2018. The Ministry of Health introduced new birth card templates, which resulted in changes to the records regarding the number of children born to the mother. This modification resulted in severe difficulties for physicians in correctly completing this information. As a result, it is impossible to present data on the birth order of children for 2018 (GUS, 2019).

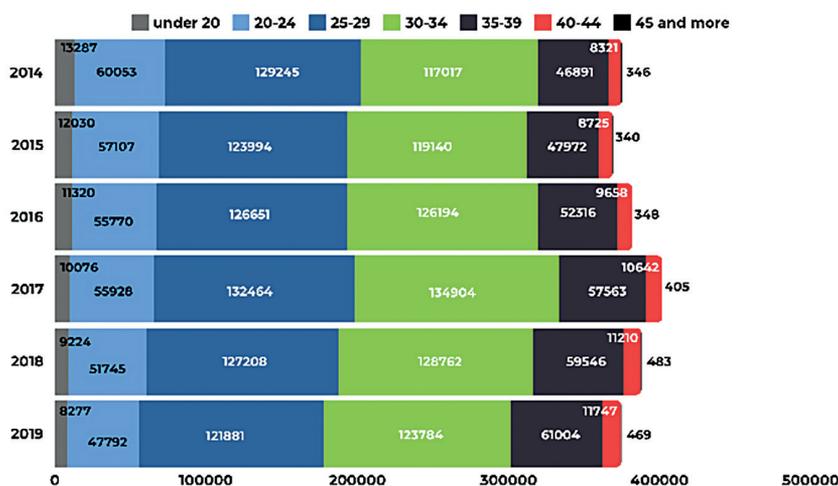


Diagram 3. Live Births by Mother's Age in 2014–2019 Authors' own study based on: GUS, *Rocznik Demograficzny* (2014–2019).

In the analyzed period, i.e., between 2016 and 2017, the increase in births was visible in most age categories, but the most significant increase was observed in the 30–34 age group – in 2016, there were 7,054 more births compared to the previous year, while in 2017, this increase amounted to another 8,710 births (GUS, 2017, p. 266; GUS, 2018, p. 264). Although biologically the highest fertility occurs in the age group of 20–24, the highest number of births was recorded in this older age group. That age group includes women born in 1982–1987 (up to 700,000 births per year)⁷, i.e., during the baby boom, which is an essential context for interpreting the observed growth. The data for the same period also show that these women more often decided to have second, third and subsequent children (GUS, 2017, p. 287; GUS, 2018, p. 285). Higher education may lead to delaying the decision to become a mother, resulting from the priority of achieving a stable professional and financial position – women with higher education dominate the 30–34 age category. In the context of family policy, it is worth noting that women with higher education tend to identify with left-wing and centrist politics (in their meaning according to the Polish political scene) (CBOS, 2023c), which may influence their attitudes toward programs developed by a government with a more conservative ideological profile. The diversity of worldviews among the targets of demographic policy provides additional context for its assessment and would require in-depth research.

The Family 500+ Program, introduced in 2016 by the L&J government, was one of the party's key social initiatives, announced shortly after its election victory. Although its primary objective was to support families raising children, from the outset it raised doubts about its actual impact on improving the demographic situation. The benefit was available to all families, regardless of income, which weakened its motivational function. For example, difference-in-differences estimates based on data from the Labor Force Survey indicate that by mid-2017 the mothers' labor force participation rate had decreased by 2.4 percentage points, which corresponds to approx. 103,000 women withdrawing from the labor market (Magda, Kielczewska, & Brandt, 2018, pp. 12–13). The Program often only contributed to household budgets and reduced the incentive to take up employment (Owczarek, 2016). The mechanism of withdrawing the benefit for the first child after exceeding the income threshold generated an inaction trap. For a single mother with two children, the effective marginal rate of return from employment could be less than 20% of net earnings, significantly reducing the incentive to take up employment (Magda et al., 2018, p. 8). More broadly, the Program also served a political function; its role in

⁷ In 1983: 720,000 (GUS, 1984, p. 29), in 1984: 699,000 (GUS, 1985, p. 30), in 1985: 677,600 (GUS, 1986, p. 35), in 1986: 634,700 (GUS, 1987, p. 37), in 1987: 605,500 (GUS, 1988, p. 36).

solidifying support for the ruling party, especially in regions where it achieved the highest electoral results, remains a significant though still under-researched subject.

Since the founding of L&J Party clear electoral tendencies have persisted, the party usually won in voivodeships: Subcarpathian, Lublin, Podlaskie, and Świętokrzyskie, and high support is also recorded in parts of the Lesser Poland, Masovian (except Warsaw), and Silesian voivodeships. Based on the 2015 elections, L&J Party achieved the highest results in voivodeships: Subcarpathian (55.09%), Lesser Poland (48.18%), Lublin (47.76%), Podlaskie (45.38%), Świętokrzyskie (42.81%), Łódź (38.35%), Masovian (38.30%) (PKW, 2015). The Warmian-Masurian Voivodeship (30.91%) (PKW, 2015) is less polarized in terms of the dominance of one party, but in 2015, the L&J Party won. In the first year of The Family 500+ Program, there was no clear relationship between areas where the ruling party had higher electoral results and the increase in the number of births in these regions compared to the rest of the country. It could not be clearly stated that the introduction of the Program resulted in a visible increase in the number of births in the political strongholds of the L&J Party. However, the analysis of demographic data from 2017 showed that in some voivodeships, there was a more significant increase in the number of births – in the Warmian-Masurian by 8%, in the Subcarpathian by 8.5%, and in the Lublin by 6% (GUS, 2016, p. 260; GUS, 2017, p. 260; GUS, 2018, p. 258), which were the highest differences all over the country. Can these changes in birth dynamics be attributed to the political trust effect? When analyzing birth dynamics in the context of areas with high support for the L&J Party, these changes should be attributed with caution to political support. Although the Program may have influenced decisions about having children in these regions, many other factors may determine birth dynamics, such as economic, social, and cultural conditions, which may significantly impact decisions about parenthood. The increase in births in the L&J Party strongholds may therefore be the result of both confidence in the Program and other regional conditions.

Evaluation of The Family 500+ Program

After the parliamentary elections in October 2023, the new coalition government decided to maintain the Program (Umowa Koalicyjna, 2023), while increasing the benefit to PLN 800 per month. Since January 2024, it has been operating as The Family 800+ Program. Despite rising inflation, the previous government decided not to index the benefit; the change was announced only in the campaign before the 2023 elections. The new coalition announced both continuing and increase

the benefit, which may indicate that the Program is considered socially important. However, the question remains whether the higher benefit will contribute to an increase in the fertility rates. Data to date indicate that the program has failed to meet demographic expectations.

CBOS research from 2016⁸ shows that The Family 500+ Program was positively assessed by Polish society – 80% of the respondents expressed support for the Program, and 47% of them strong support (CBOS, 2016, p. 5). The percentage of opponents was 15%. A significant factor differentiating attitudes towards the Program was respondents' socio-economic status: the highest support was recorded among those with primary education and per capita income of up to PLN 649 (90%), with marginal opposition. Among the respondents with higher education and incomes above PLN 2,000 per capita, support dropped to 65–68%, while opposition increased to 28–31% (CBOS, 2016, p. 6). The Program gained greater acceptance among those identifying with the right-wing and intense religiosity, i.e., primarily voters of the L&J Party and Kukiz'15. At the same time, there was noticeable criticism among electorate of the Civic Platform and the Modern of Ryszard Petru, fearing the negative impact of the Program on public finances (CBOS, 2016, p. 7) – the estimated unit cost of the program (per one additional birth) amounted to approx. PLN 1.4 million in the period April 2016–December 2017, with no lasting pro-natalist effect after 2019 (Bartnicki & Alimowski, 2022, p. 210). Importantly, the study results did not confirm that the Program was widely perceived as an effective pro-natalist instrument – 51% of the respondents suggesting that its potential impact on the number of births may be small (CBOS, 2016, p. 7).

Doubts regarding the effectiveness of The Family 500+ Program in improving the fertility rate are confirmed by the results of a 2023 CBOS research. As many as $\frac{2}{3}$ of women aged 18–45 did not declare a desire to have children, with the percentage of women planning to have children decreasing with age. The highest number of such declarations came from women aged 30–34 (31%) and 25–29 (27%) (CBOS, 2023a, p. 1). Comparing to 2017, the percentage of women planning to have a child fell from 41% to 32%. This decline was attributed to a decrease in the number of younger women and an increase in the share of the 35–39 and 40–45 age groups (CBOS, 2023a, p. 2). Women declaring a desire to have children were more likely to live in big cities, have higher education, and income over PLN 2,000 per capita. Relationship status (formal/informal) did not play a significant role, but support

⁸ The study “Current Problems and Events” (309) was conducted using the method of computer-assisted face-to-face interviews (CAPI) on February 3–10, 2016, on a representative random sample of adult residents of Poland numbering 1,000 people (CBOS, 2016, p. 16).

in caregiving was crucial; women who indicated support from their immediate environment were more likely to plan motherhood (CBOS, 2023a, p. 5).

The problem of low birth rates also involves psychosocial factors that have a significant impact on decisions regarding having children. The costs of motherhood are indicated here, including a weakened position on the labor market, a triple burden of responsibilities (professional work, household chores, and childcare), and the dominant normative pattern of a mother devoting herself to the family (Sikorska, 2021, pp. 7, 10). In July 2023, the CBOS published the results of research on reproductive barriers. The most common reasons for giving up parenthood (55% the respondents) were personal, and 18% of the respondents expressed their lack of desire to have children. Other reasons justifying reluctance to parenthood included, i.a., excessive responsibility (10%), the need for independence (7%), too early to have a child (7%), non-heteronormativity (5%), and lack of a partner (1%). In addition to personal reasons, the financial situation was also an essential factor for 14% of the respondents in general, and particularly high costs of living and inflation (12%) or general living conditions as insufficient to starting a family (2%). The socio-political context was equally significant – 21% of the respondents indicated it as an obstacle to reproductive decisions, 11% of them cited difficult living conditions in the country, and another 11% were concerned about the current abortion law and the risk of giving birth to a sick child. Additionally, 9% of the respondents indicated the factors such as climate change, geopolitical uncertainty, and fears of war (CBOS, 2023b, pp. 5–6).

Over the past eight years, socio-political and material factors identified as crucial to reproductive decisions have gained in importance. Although The Family 500+ Program was received positively, several decisions of the United Right Wing (Poland), assessed as unfavorable for women could have more significant impact on the already difficult demographic situation in the country. An example was the 2016 citizens' bill "Stop abortion", which proposed a complete restriction of access to legal abortions due to fetal pathology and punishment for women and doctors (up to 5 years in prison). The project was rejected by a majority votes (352) in the Sejm on October 6 of the same year (*Obywatelski projekt ustawy o zmianie ustawy...*, 2016), following mass social protest, the so-called "Black Protests" (Nawojski, 2019, p. 9). In 2021, another bill tightening abortion regulations was submitted to the Sejm. It proposed, among other, punishing abortion as the murder of an unborn child, with a prison sentence of 5 to 25 years. The bill was rejected in its first reading on December 1, 2021, by a majority votes (361) (*Obywatelski projekt ustawy o zmianie ustawy...*, 2021). Both initiatives sparked strong public and international opposition, and their presence in public debate could have had a negative impact on women's reproductive decisions.

However, this was not the end of the tightening of women's reproductive rights. On May 25, 2017, the Sejm passed an act restricting access to emergency contraception. From July 23 of that same year, it could only be obtained from pharmacies with a prescription⁹. Another critical moment was the decision of the Constitutional Tribunal (Ref. K 1/20) of October 22, 2020 (Wyrok Trybunału Konstytucyjnego, 2020), which ruled that the provision permitting termination of pregnancy in cases of severe and irreversible fetal defects was unconstitutional. Following the publication of the judgment in the Journal of Laws on January 27, 2021, this provision became null and void. This decision sparked mass social protests and criticism from domestic and international organizations, which pointed to a threat to women's rights and limited access to safe medical procedures.

The crisis over the right to abortion was not the only one that directly affected the fertility problem. In 2016, the government ended funding for in vitro fertilization treatment, a key assisted reproductive technology. Limiting access to this expensive procedure, especially for lower-income families, could have contributed to a further decline in the birth rate in the long term and made it more difficult for couples experiencing infertility to achieve their parental aspirations. The United Right Wing (Poland) also decided to limit the scope of sex education in schools. Lack of access to comprehensive sex education may lead to less awareness among young people about reproductive health, safe sexual practices, and reasonable family planning. As a result, this may negatively impact the conscious reproductive decision-making, and, in the long term, contribute to the deepening of unfavorable demographic trends in Poland.

Given the above, assessing the effectiveness of The Family 500+ Program in improving the demographic balance requires considering additional factors that contributed to such poor results of the number of births in Poland. A sustainable pro-demographic policy requires comprehensive and mutually supportive actions, while several socio-political decisions made in parallel with the Program implementation may have limited its effectiveness. The recommended actions include: introducing a so-called paternity quota in parental leave, ensuring universal access to nurseries and flexible forms of employment, and state co-financing of in vitro procedures (Sikorska, 2021, p. 11). So, in subsequent years, new initiatives were launched to reinforce the ideas behind the Program. Some of them are elements of the "Polish Order", i.e., the country's post-pandemic reconstruction plan announced on

⁹ Ustawa z dnia 7 lipca 2017 r. o zmianie ustawy o przeciwdziałaniu narkomanii oraz ustawy o refundacji leków, środków spożywczych specjalnego przeznaczenia żywieniowego oraz wyrobów medycznych, Dz.U. 2017 poz. 1458.

May 15, 2021, or are consistent with the main directions of *Strategia Demograficzna 2040*, which include financial security of families, support in meeting the housing needs of families, development of forms of childcare, development of a family-friendly labor market, etc. (*Strategia Demograficzna 2040*, 2022, pp. 78–79). An example of such initiatives is the Family Care Capital [Rodzinny Kapitał Opiekuńczy] introduced on January 1, 2022 (under the Act of November 17, 2021), which allows parents to receive financial support of up to PLN 12,000 for their second and subsequent children aged 12 to 35 months. The strategy also provides ongoing funding for children's stay in a nursery, children's club, or with day caretaker, for children not covered by family care capital (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2022). Additionally, The Toddler+ Program continues to be developed, and its new edition, which was launched on January 19, 2023, aims to increase the availability of childcare institutions at the municipal level to enable families, especially mothers, to return to the labor market (Ministerstwo Funduszy i Polityki Regionalnej, 2023). This type of institutional and financial support can incentivize parents to have children, consequently increasing the fertility rate (GUS, 2023b, p. 16).

The effectiveness of pro-demographic programs is determined mainly by the economic situation in Poland. Life prospects, sense of financial and housing stability, and predictable government support are key factors. Development of employment policy and the housing market may foster decisions to have children, but these are not the only determinants of the increase in birth rates. For example, The Large Family Card Program, although aimed at large families, failed to meet expectations – in 2014, less than half of eligible families took advantage of the benefit, and the number of large families gradually decreased (Witkowska, 2017, p. 27). This example can illustrate the complexity of factors that influence family size. According to Richard Easterlin's hypothesis, a significant determinant of the decision to have a child is the relationship between the prospect of support and the material aspirations of the young generation. Material aspirations means the individual standards of living of the young generation, and a product of the environment in which they grow up. If the correlation between the expected support and material aspirations is weak, it may lead to less desire to create, or to enlarge the family (Lutz, Skirbekk, & Testa, 2007, pp. 181–182). Data from 2021 show that in Poland, 50.1% of families raise one child, and only 2.1% have four or more children (Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, 2024, p. 214). At the same time, Poles' procreation declarations from the same period indicate that approx. 50% of them would like to have two children. This discrepancy suggests a so-called “fertility gap”, i.e., a difference between intentions and the actual number of children they have (Sikorska, 2021, p. 1). Moreover, the number of young people who choose professional and personal development instead of raising children

is increasing. In the years 2011–2021, the total number of families decreased by 3.2%, including families with children by 4.1%, and informal relationships constitute an increasing percentage (Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, 2024, pp. 212–213).

An important factor influencing the effectiveness of pro-family programs is their long-term perspective and the stability of their financing, which is particularly important in Poland considering the political volatility. Before the parliamentary elections in October 2023, one of the important questions asked by voters was the continuation of The Family 500+ Program in the event of a change of government, which shows the strong connection between the Program and the policies of the previous rule. For the assessment of the effectiveness of the benefit, it is also crucial to distinguish between its function of supporting household budgets and actual impact on reproductive decisions.

Considering the current financial situation of Polish families and migration changes, demographic forecasts for 2023–2060 predict a slight increase in the fertility rate – to 1.5 in 2060. However, in a broader perspective, Poland's demographic situation will continue to pose a challenge: the total population will decrease by approx. 6.8 million compared to 2022, the number of people aged 65 and over will increase by 36.9%, while the number of children under 14 will decrease by 32.1%, and the number of women of reproductive age (15–49 years) will decrease by 35.6% (Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, 2024, pp. 14–16). These forecasts consider negative birthrate, increase in immigration and a decrease in emigration. A significant influx of immigrants from Ukraine is expected in 2027–2029, when they will be able to apply for permanent residence, which may affect the country's migration balance (Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, 2024, pp. 18–19).

Conclusions

The analysis of the possibilities and effects of programs such as The Family 500+ Program presented above would not be complete without referring to the overall context in which the modern family functions. Researchers emphasize that the demographic situation depends on broader conditions than the location of the family in specific socio-economic conditions. Behind every statistic there is an individual with choices, attitudes, and expectations. Research on the demographic transition provided many explanations for the causes of the declining fertility rate but did not answer all the new challenges. A significant contribution to explaining these phenomena is made by the concept of the 'second demographic transition' by Dirk J. van de Kaa and Ron Lesthaeghe (see: van de Kaa, 1994), which became the basis for studying fertility

changes in contemporary Europe (Fihel et al., 2017, p. 41; Janiszewska, 2022, p. 7). It indicates a shift from materialistic values based on stability and security, to a system in which individual autonomy, freedom of choice, and individualism play a key role. These changes result in the increased importance of self-fulfillment, a redefinition of family roles and lifestyles, and a decline in the importance of traditional authorities, including in the decision to have children (Janiszewska, 2022, p. 12). Contemporary societies, particularly in highly developed countries, reflect these trends through increased individualism and lifestyle changes, which increasingly influence birth rates and demographic structures, including in Poland.

The analysis of the impact of The Family 500+ Program on the dynamics of births and the demographic prospects of Poland in 2016–2023 showed a weak correlation between material support and fertility growth. Despite the implementation of the Program and other forms of assistance aimed at families, these initiatives proved insufficient to reverse the negative demographic trend. The increase in the birth rate, observed only in the initial years of the Program's operation, was short-lived; in subsequent years, the birth rate declined again. The results of the analyses confirm that interventions based solely on economic support are insufficient to permanently improve the demographic situation in Poland. Reproductive decisions are influenced by a broad spectrum of social, economic, political, and cultural factors. During the L&J government, these choices were also significantly influenced by actions restricting women's reproductive rights (e.g., restrictions on access to abortion, withdrawal of support for in vitro fertilization), and the lack of comprehensive sexuality education. The strong influence of the Catholic tradition on public debate and social policy also provides a specific context. The dominant narrative in the bioethical debate is still an approach based on Catholic morality, and not on the findings of modern medicine. In this respect, Poland remains one of the European Union countries with the most restrictive regulations regarding reproductive rights. At the same time, today's hyper-modern world with the transformation of the family model, growing individualism, and the postponement of motherhood poses challenges which will not be compensated solely by even well-funded family-friendly programs alone. Effective policy requires a systemic approach that considers also the broadly understood socio-cultural context. The experience of European countries shows that the highest total fertility rates are achieved by those countries that pursue a sustainable and coherent family policy based on two pillars: equal division of parental roles between mother and father and systemic support for combining work with childcare (Sikorska, 2021, p. 1). Thus, summing up, The Family 500+ Program has reached an impasse between these different trends and, for that reason, it serves as a substitute for solving the demographic problem.

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