In the first weeks after the public health measures and economic lockdowns began in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the social life of millions of adults was suddenly halted and many started spending every day at home. This led some to wonder about whether, in about nine months, we would see a spike in births. Could there be a “Coronial” generation, a baby boom due to couples spending more time together?1

Although many couples have been spending more time together, they have also been experiencing a variety of challenges and difficult transitions never experienced by our current generations: the health care system was heavily impacted by the pandemic, children were suddenly out of daycare or school and in need of homeschooling, some adults needed to work from home while caring for young children in the household, and many others had difficulty with their family finances, as they found themselves unemployed, working fewer hours or making less income.

Indeed, millions of workers were left without employment or working fewer hours than normal as a result of the lockdowns, and the unemployment rate reached a historic high of 13.7% in May 2020, up from 5.6% only three months prior. About half of the self-employed saw a reduction in the number of hours worked, accompanied in most cases by a loss of income. As a result, more than 1 in 5 adults lived in a household reporting financial difficulty to meet basic obligations such as rent, mortgage and groceries that month.2

“In this context, I would be really surprised if family projects did not change,” says Benoît Laplante, a family demography professor at the Institut national de la recherche scientifique in Montreal. Indeed, evidence suggests it is very unlikely that fertility will increase nine months after the lockdowns started. On the contrary, past research shows that a reduction of the total fertility rate can be expected in the short term. Economic downturns and recessions, labour market uncertainty and, more broadly, general societal uncertainty and negative expectations about the future have all been associated with a postponement of childbearing plans, and thus with reductions in the number of births within a population.
Labour market uncertainty impacts childbearing plans

A recent meta-analysis on the impacts of unemployment and temporary employment on fertility in Europe showed that people who have experienced episodes of unemployment tend to delay planned births. As unemployment results in a loss of income and increased uncertainty about future job prospects, plans for starting or expanding the family are more likely to get halted until better financial times.

This was particularly true among heterosexual couples when the male partner became unemployed, and it had an impact not only on their decision to have their first child, but also among those with children who had planned on expanding the family. Data also showed that unemployment became increasingly more detrimental for childbearing between 1970 and 2015, as conditions in the labour market became more challenging and permanent jobs less common.

On the other hand, women in some countries leveraged their periods of unemployment as an opportunity to carry out their fertility plans and have their planned children in that moment, as time for childbearing and childrearing became more available and the opportunity costs diminished (in terms of the time spent in the labour market developing experience that allows advancing their professional careers). However, this was not true in the countries hardest hit by the 2008 Great Recession in Southern Europe (i.e. Italy and Spain), which were also those with the lowest fertility levels.

People with temporary jobs were also found to be less likely to have children during periods of economic uncertainty, particularly when having a second or third child, which the study suggests is the result of the increased financial impact of expanding the family. Men were more impacted by unemployment than by having a temporary job; especially in contexts where men are expected to be the main financial providers of the household, having a job, regardless of its characteristics, is better than having none in order to start or expand the family.

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Great Recession associated with fertility decline in Europe

Economic crises can impact fertility intentions and actual childbearing, even when individuals are not personally affected by the loss of a job or income, as downturns translate to a reduction in GDP growth and an increase in unemployment. In times of uncertainty about the economic future and labour market stability, people might become risk averse and avoid any long-term commitments, of which having a child is the most irreversible one. Negative expectations about the future may lead many families to postpone childbearing plans until times of greater certainty.

An interesting recent example of this can be found in Europe, where fertility rates had been increasing since the first years of the 2000s. During and after the Great Recession of 2008–2009, fertility rates stagnated and then decreased in most European regions, particularly those most affected by the recession.

A recent article on the impact of this recession on fertility in 28 European countries analyzed the effects of unemployment, long-term unemployment and GDP decline on fertility rates between 2000 and 2014. The study found that when unemployment increased, fertility rates decreased significantly. Moreover, the effect of unemployment was stronger during the period of the recession (between 2008 and 2014) than before its start, suggesting that the negative impact of unemployment on fertility behaviour may be magnified during times of recessions.
Research suggests that “fundamental uncertainty” impacts childbearing plans

While the European economy recovered after the Great Recession, fertility did not bounce back in many European countries and, in fact, it continued to decline. This was especially true in some Nordic countries, where the effects of the Great Recession were mild and where fertility decline started later and continued past 2014, after the macro economic conditions had improved. This led some researchers to focus on the presence of “fundamental uncertainty” regarding the future and its impact on family aspirations. Their argument is that fundamental uncertainty regarding the future of the economy, but also of political systems at a global level, can have an impact on the narratives, perspectives and worldview of individuals, regardless of whether they have experienced a precarious job or unemployment themselves. As “narratives of uncertainty” become widespread, births are delayed, even if and when the economy recovers.6

A study of the effects of a financial crisis in Italy in 2011 to 2012 showed that, as individuals googled the technical term “spread” (an indicator used by economists to measure the lack of confidence in a financial system), births fell sharply nine months later. They estimated that births were reduced between 2.5% and 5% as a consequence of these “narratives of uncertainty.”7

Recent research shows the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting childbearing plans

A recent survey of adults aged 18 to 34 years old in several European countries (i.e. Italy, Spain, France, Germany and the U.K.) estimated the proportion of births that were planned for 2020 that are being delayed. Adults who had declared in early 2020 (i.e. before the coronavirus outbreak) that they were planning on conceiving or having a child by the end of the year were asked whether the pandemic had altered these plans in any way. The study found that individuals did indeed change their fertility plans in all studied countries, either by delaying or abandoning the plan for this year.

The impact varied across countries, but in Italy and Spain, nearly one-third of those who were planning a birth for 2020 abandoned the project for the year. Half or more of respondents in Germany, France, Spain and the U.K. declared that their plan to have a child still stood, but they were postponing it for later in the year.8

In societies where a higher share of births are occurring among women in their 40s, some of the planned births that were already delayed might not ever happen.

Planned births among mothers aged 40 and older may be significantly impacted

Experiences from past economic and sanitary crises (e.g. the 1918 flu pandemic) have shown that some of the births that are postponed in times up upheaval are caught up with later on.9 People sometimes wait until times are less uncertain before going forward with births that had previously been planned.

Laplante points out that the difference between delaying a birth and abandoning the project to have a child altogether may become especially blurry in the current circumstances. “What’s most likely is that people will delay or abandon (their reproductive plans) ... and when you delay, after a while, you may end up abandoning ... now, everyone is living in uncertainty, and when will we have a vaccine? In two years, maybe.”

Laplante’s reasoning is that, if women in their 30s were planning to have two children, and then decide to wait until a vaccine becomes available to have their next birth, they might run out of time to have either their first or their second child before they reach a biological limit.

It is therefore possible that some of these birth plans might not be “recovered.” In many Western countries, women are increasingly waiting longer to have their first child, as many choose to develop their professional and educational paths beforehand. Even births at age 40 and older have increased in the past few decades, representing an increasing share of first births.10 In 2014, an estimated that 3.6% of all births in Canada were to mothers aged 40 years and over.11
For women aged 40 years and older, an important proportion of births is facilitated by assisted reproductive technology. Given that many of these procedures were interrupted for months on end in the midst of the pandemic, births at older ages might be more acutely impacted. In societies where a higher share of births are occurring among women in their 40s, some of the planned births that were already delayed might not ever happen: the biological clock might run out before both the labour market and health systems go back to previous standards.

Data from Quebec and Ontario show impact on fertility beyond economic recovery

The total fertility rate is a “snapshot” indicator, an estimate of how many children women would have on average, over their lifetime, if fertility conditions at the moment persisted during their entire reproductive life. That is why we can expect a reduction of fertility rates during a period of social and economic turbulence and/or uncertainty, followed by an uptake once the crisis is over: at least a portion of the births that were postponed are simply “caught up with” – so long as reproductive plans and ideals remain intact.

Laplante cautions that in Quebec and Ontario, fertility rates started falling in the 2008 Great Recession, and, as happened in European countries, continued falling once the economic downturn was over and unemployment rates were low. He is now investigating why the fertility decline did not reverse in these two Canadian provinces: are there more fundamental changes under way that are not just the product of temporary upheaval?

Only time will tell if the generations impacted by the COVID-19 crisis will have the same number of children they had been planning, but at a later time, or if their ideal number of children will change in these circumstances. If some adults decide to forego childbearing altogether as a response to the new challenges brought about by the pandemic and its associated economic crisis, younger generations might be more likely to not have children. It is currently too early to tell, but research on changes in fertility intentions before and after the pandemic will be of crucial importance to understand this aspect of family life.

Ana Fostik, PhD, Vanier Institute on secondment from Statistics Canada

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Notes

5 Francesca Luppi, Bruno Arpino and Alessandro Rosina. The Impact of COVID-19 on Fertility Plans in Italy, Germany, France, Spain and UK (2020).
8 Francesca Luppi, Bruno Arpino and Alessandro Rosina. The Impact of COVID-19 on Fertility Plans in Italy, Germany, France, Spain and UK (2020).
11 Eva Beaujouan and Tomáš Sobotka. “Late Childbearing Continues to Increase in Developed Countries,” Population and Societies, no. 562 (January 2019).
12 Eva Beaujouan. “Latest–Late Fertility? Decline and Resurgence of Late Parenthood Across the Low–Fertility Countries.”