



Family Structure as a Result of Marital, Reproductive, and Self-Preservation Behavior of the Population in Russia

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Received 9 June 2023 ♦ Accepted 22 November 2023 ♦ Published 11 December 2024

Citation: Sinelnikov AB (2024) Family Structure as a Result of Marital, Reproductive, and Self-Preservation Behavior of the Population in Russia. *Population and Economics* 8(3):241-260. <https://doi.org/10.3897/popecon.8.e107735>

Abstract

This article analyzes data from the All-Russian population censuses of 2002, 2010, and 2020. The author compares the proportion of families with children under the age of 18 that lack one parent (either father or mother) to the proportion of single spouses among all married individuals. In many cases, the absence of one parent is not due to relationship breakdowns, but rather the temporary migration of one spouse for work. It should not be assumed that such families are without a parent altogether. The author concludes that census data may exaggerate the number of families without one parent, thereby creating the illusion of a growing trend, especially in Moscow. However, even when adjusted for this overstatement, one in five families – both nationwide and in the capital – still lacks one parent. This situation is most common in families with a single child. Even with bad relations between spouses, the first children are born to the vast majority of married women, except for infertile ones. Subsequently, many of these families eventually break up. However, once a child is born, further births typically occur only in the absence of serious marital conflict. Having a second child significantly reduces the likelihood of family breakdown, but the birth of a third or subsequent child has little additional effect on this risk. The instability of marriages and the social acceptability of divorce in Russian society contribute to lower fertility rates. The majority of families have only one or two children, a family structure that does not ensure full generational replacement and is therefore demographically unfavorable. To halt depopulation, Russia's demographic policy should not only encourage childbirth within existing families but also promote legal marriage and the creation of new families, while also addressing the high divorce rate.

Keywords

population census, household, family without one parent, separation of spouses, number of children, stability of marriage

JEL codes: J11, J12, R20, R23

Introduction

The relationship between marital status and health status is both direct and inverse. On one hand, adult family members who live together tend to take care of each other and their children, while single individuals, especially the elderly, receive less support from relatives compared to those who live in a family unit. On the other hand, people who are unable to form or maintain a family due to serious illnesses often remain lonely [Klinenberg, 2012]. The nature of this relationship also depends on which marital status is considered normative in a particular society and what is seen as a deviation from the norm. Awareness of one's perceived inferiority due to loneliness can worsen self-assessment of health, particularly if society believes that everyone should marry by a certain age [Akhtemzyanov, 2023; Zheng, Thomas, 2013]. However, the theory of the second demographic transition generally does not recognize the existence of a normative family model in countries that have undergone this transition [van de Kaa, 2010].

Some scholars consider the term “incomplete family” to be politically incorrect and prefer to use the term “single-parent family” (a translation from the English “one-parent family”). T.A. Gurko and N.A. Orlova refer to fatherless families as maternal and motherless families as paternal, while calling two-parent families normative. However, they also argue that the absence of a father does not interfere with the normal life of children, thus denying the very concept of family “normality” and completeness [Gurko, 2022; Gurko & Orlova, 2011]. Other researchers, however, recognize the negative impact of the absence of a parent on children's behavior and living conditions, and continue to use the term “incomplete family” [Kuchmaeva et al., 2010; Shevchenko, 2019]. This term is also used by some proponents of the second demographic transition who share views similar to those of Gurko and Orlova [Churilova, 2015].

The structure of families and households, based on the presence or absence of married couples and the number of children, results from the marital, reproductive, and self-preserving behavior of the population. This structure reflects the demographic well-being or disadvantage of the population – its ability or inability to reproduce, i.e., to survive, as well as the favorable or unfavorable conditions for the proper upbringing of children by both parents. It is influenced by both medical and social factors. Marriage typically leads to the formation of new, complete families. Of course, families are also formed through the birth of children outside of marriage, especially by single women, but these families initially start as incomplete. The number of children in a family is determined by the reproductive behavior of the spouses or unmarried mothers.

The disintegration of families with children, whether through divorce or other causes, turns them into incomplete families, but they can become complete again if single parents enter into new marriages. The death of one family member reduces its size, and if the family originally consisted of two people, it ceases to exist as a unit. The likelihood of an individual's death at any given age depends on their self-preservation behavior, and if they have a family, it also depends on the care their family members provide for their health.

Data sources

Data from the censuses conducted in 2002, 2010, and 2021 provide information on the distribution of family households by size, demographic types, and the number of children under 18 in each constituent entity of the Russian Federation. However, the accuracy of this data

is questionable. The most recent census, officially called the 2020 All-Russian Population Census, was postponed due to the pandemic and was ultimately held in October–November 2021. During this time, the pandemic was still ongoing. As a result, census takers often had to fill out census forms using data from administrative sources, such as registration records. Some individuals were not recorded in the census at all, while others, who were officially registered at one location, may have taken the census in a different place. This situation led to both undercounting and double-counting. The question remains: do these inaccuracies balance each other out?

According to the latest census, the population of Russia is very similar to the estimates made by Rosstat based on the previous census and data on births, deaths, and migration (including arrivals and departures) during the inter-census period [Andreev, Churilova, 2023]. However, in some regions, the population was larger than estimated, while in others it was smaller [In Rosstat..., 2022]. These discrepancies are partly due to incomplete accounting of migration.

Census data on family composition are less accurate than data on the total population. Since family members are often registered at different addresses, the type and size of family households were not always correctly indicated on the census forms. To analyze dynamic changes and regional differences in family composition – particularly in comparing Moscow, where fertility rates have traditionally been lower than the national average, to the country as a whole – it is essential to account for the accuracy of these data. In Moscow, these data are less accurate than in the rest of the country [Andreev, Churilova, 2023: 16–17], partly because many visitors are living in the capital while being officially registered at their former place of residence. Therefore, data for the capital should be analyzed separately.

In the sixth volume of the results of the 2010 census, it is stated: *“Family units are allocated from private households when processing census materials. A **family unit** is a married couple with children, or a married couple without children, or a mother with children, or a father with children. A family unit can form an independent household or be part of a household where there are other relatives or non-relatives (for example, a grandmother, nephew, nanny)”* [All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 6, 536–537]. The concept of a “family unit” corresponds to the term “family nucleus,” which the UN Statistical Commission recommends using when processing population census materials. *“The family nucleus is considered to be: a) a married couple without children; b) a married couple with one or more never-married children (the full family nucleus); c) one of the parents (father or mother) with one or more never-married children (the incomplete family nucleus)”* [Volkov, 1994: 375–376].

If a family unit lives in the same household with another family unit (for example, spouses and both parents of one of them) or with relatives who do not form a separate family unit (for example, a married couple and one of the parents of the husband or wife), the family is considered extended. However, the nuclear family is viewed as the social norm.

According to the majority of Russian residents, married couples should live separately from their parents immediately after marriage. In a sociological study conducted by RPORC in 2009, when asked, “What, in your opinion, is absolutely necessary to create a family?” 55% of respondents answered, “Housing for separate living from parents” [Lyubov..., 2009].

Most married couples, as well as many single parents, consider only their own family unit as their primary family. Other members of the extended family are regarded as relatives only if cohabitation is forced and temporary, and they should be separated as soon as possible. Therefore, in many cases, the terms “family” and “family unit” will be used synonymously.

Changes in the Structure of Russian Families (2002–2021)

Between 2002 and 2010, the share of single-person households among all private households in the Russian Federation increased slightly, from 22% to 26%.

In Moscow, this share stabilized at 27% (Figure 1). This trend appears plausible.

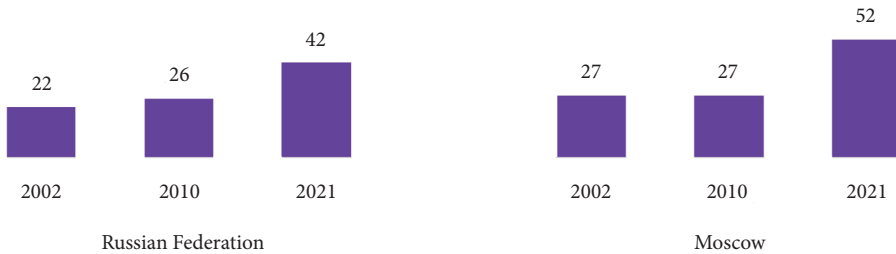


Figure 1. The proportion of single-person households among all private households. *Source:* author's calculations based on: [All-Russian Census... 2002, 2004: Volume 6, Table 1; All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 6, Table 2; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 8, Table 2].

However, the sharp increase in this indicator in 2021 – reaching 42% for Russia as a whole and 52% in the capital – suggests that many married people were mistakenly counted as single in the census. This could have occurred if data about residents were entered into the census forms from administrative sources, where only one person was de jure registered, even though they were de facto living with their family. As a result, their household was recorded as consisting of a single person. Due to the increase in the share of single-person households, the average size of private households has decreased significantly, particularly in Moscow (Figure 2).

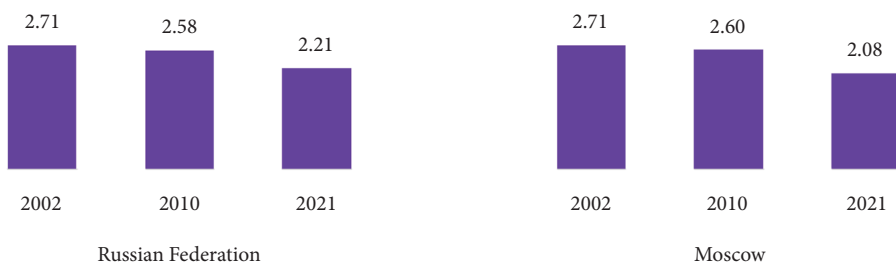


Figure 2. Average size of a private household, including households consisting of one person. *Source:* Author's calculations based on: [All-Russian Census... 2002, 2004: Volume 6, Table 1; All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 6, Table 2; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 8, Table 2].

The average size of a family household (i.e., a household consisting of two or more people) has changed relatively little between 2002 and 2021, both nationwide and in the capital (Figure 3). This observation seems puzzling. If many people had separated from their families to live alone, the average number of family members remaining within such households would be expected to decrease significantly. However, this has not occurred.

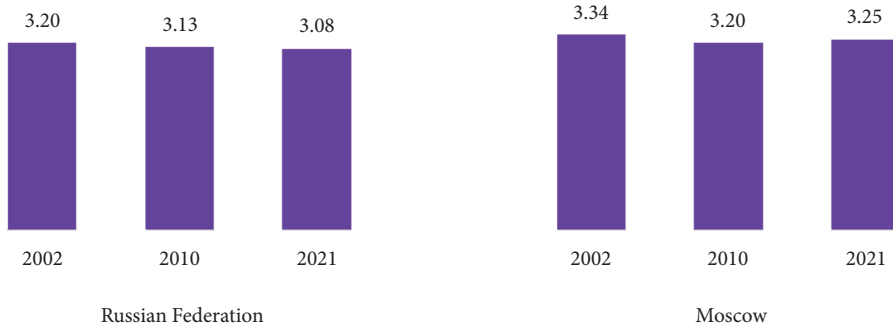


Figure 3. The average size of a private household of two or more persons. *Source:* author’s calculations according to: [All-Russian Census... 2002, 2004: Volume 6, Table. 1; All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 6, Table. 2; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 8, Table 2]

It can be assumed that the likelihood of families being classified as single households depends little on the number of their members. To verify this, it is necessary to compare the number of private households consisting of two or more persons with the number of family units. However, these two figures are not expected to align completely (Figure 4).

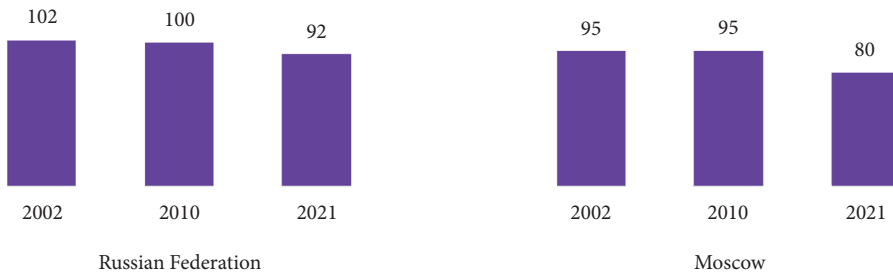


Figure 4. The number of family units per 100 private households of two or more persons. *Source:* author’s calculations based on: [Family..., 2008: Table 1.6; All-Russian Census... 2002, 2004: Volume 6, Table. 1; All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 6, Tables 2, 12, 13; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 8, Tables 2, 9, 10]

Some households consist of two-family units, such as spouses living together with both parents of either the husband or the wife. In other cases, households may not include any family units if their members are not related to each other in any way; for instance, they are neither spouses, nor parents, nor children. Examples include a grandmother and her grandson or two sisters. Additionally, some private households with two or more persons are not classified as family households. For example, groups of students or migrant workers who rent an apartment together and share a common household. In census materials, private households of two or more persons that do not include family units were categorized as “other types of households.”

The proportion of such households in Russia increased from 7% in 2002 to 10% in 2010 and further to 14% in 2021. In Moscow, the respective figures rose from 10% to 16%

and then to 28% (Figure 5). The last figure seems unusually high, but this can partly be explained by the large number of people in the capital who move there for study or work.



Figure 5. The proportion of households of “other types” (without family units) among private households of two or more persons, in %. *Source:* author’s calculations based on: [All-Russian Census... 2002, 2004: Volume 6, Table. 3; All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 6, Table. 3,4; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 8, Tables 3,4]

There is reason to believe that many of them have spouses and children at home, as renting an apartment for the whole family is too expensive, especially for large and relatively low-paid “guest workers” from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. While the significant proportion of “other” households in the capital is not in doubt, the fact that this proportion increased so dramatically between the 2010 and 2021 censuses raises questions. Even before this period, many people moved to Moscow for extended periods without bringing their families.

Some private households consisting of two or more persons are not family households. In 2021, only in the rarest cases (0.2% both nationwide and in the capital) did they include children under the age of 18. Nationwide, the average size of such households was 2.71 people, which is significantly smaller than the average for all households (3.08). In Moscow, the average size of “other” households was 3.12, very close to the average size of all households (3.25).¹

Family units are categorized based on the presence or absence of children into three groups: those without children, those with only adult children, and those with children under the age of 18, including families where adult children also reside (Figure 6).

Between 2002 and 2021, the proportion of families without children among all family units, including single-parent families, increased from 28% to 31%. Among married couples, this figure rose from 37% to 45%. However, according to the 2021 census, only 9% of married women in Russia and 15% in Moscow have never given birth.² It is important to note that some parents have outlived their children. According to the author’s calculations based on Rosstat data, the probability of losing a son at the age-specific mortality rates of 2020 was 11% for fathers and 22% for mothers, while the probability of losing a daughter was 5% and 10%, respectively. Judging by the average age of children who died during their parents’ lifetimes – 39–40 years for fathers and 46 years for mothers – most of these tragic cases occur after adult children have already left the parental home [Sinelnikov, 2022: 71]. In census data, married couples whose children have moved out are categorized as families “without children,” regardless of the children’s subsequent circumstances. While most of these cou-

1 Author’s calculations are based on: [All-Russian Census... 2002 (2004). Volume 6, table. 3; All-Russian Census... 2010 (2012). Volume 6, Tables 3 and 4; All-Russian Census... 2020 (2022), Volume 8, Tables 3 and 4].

2 Author’s calculations based on: [All-Russian Census ... 2020 (2022), Volume 9, Table 3].

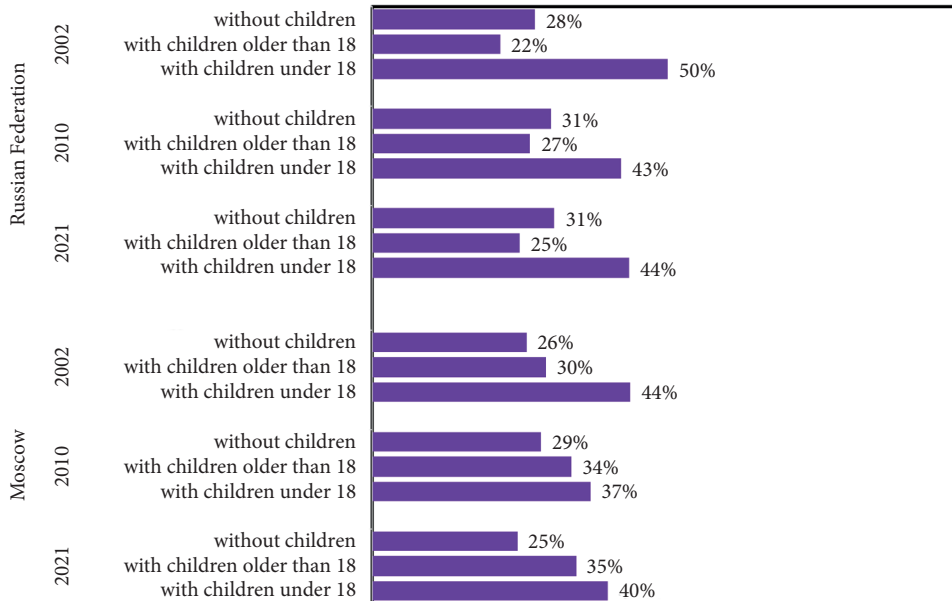


Figure 6. Distribution of family units by the presence of children under 18 and over 18 years of age, in %. *Source:* author’s calculations based on: [Family..., 2008: Table 1.6; All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 6, Tables 12, 13; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 8, Tables 9, 10]. *Note:* due to rounding, the sum of the percentages may not always equal 100%.

ples do have children, they are classified this way because their offspring no longer live with them.

Significantly more people move from Russian regions to Moscow and other major cities than from the capital to the regions. In 2021, among those who reported their place of birth in the census, 13% lived in regions of the Russian Federation other than where they were born. However, this figure reflects only interregional migration – moves from one republic, territory, or region to another – and does not account for local relocations within the same region or republic. Internal migration also includes movement within native territories, such as from smaller towns to regional centers. For instance, only 8% of those born in Moscow resided outside the capital at the time of the census, with 6% living in the Moscow Region.³ Due to the high cost of housing in Moscow, some Muscovites seeking to live independently from their parents opt to purchase property in the Moscow Region.

According to the 2021 census, in Moscow, only 25% of all families, including single-parent families, do not have children. Among married couples, this figure rises to 44%. Additionally, families in Moscow are significantly more likely to include only children aged 18 and older compared to the national average (35% versus 25%). This trend may partly be attributed to the higher average life expectancy of Muscovites. In 2022, the life expectancy in Moscow was 74.46 years for men and 81.62 years for women – approximately seven years longer than the national averages of 67.57 years for men and 74.51 years for women.⁴

3 Calculated based on: All-Russian Census... 2020 (2022), Volume 6, Table 1.

4 Calculated based on: Appendix to the compendium “Demographic Yearbook of Russia.2023”. Table 2.3.

The longer people live, the longer generations coexist, often within the same household if there is no opportunity to live separately. In Moscow, this situation is significantly influenced by the high cost of purchasing and renting housing. As a result, many adult children, including married ones, continue living with their parents for extended periods.

According to the 2021 population census, 80% of all complete family households in Russia that included married couples (one or more) were nuclear, consisting solely of a married couple with or without children. The remaining 20% were extended households, which also included the parents of the spouses (one or both) and/or other relatives. In Moscow, the proportion of extended families was notably higher, reaching 34%, likely due to the elevated housing costs in the capital.⁵ Among single-parent families, the share of households that include the parents and/or relatives of a single mother or father is significantly higher than among nuclear families.

As early as 2002, only half (50%) of family units in Russia included children under the age of 18. By 2021, this share had decreased to 44% due to population ageing. In Moscow, the proportion was 44% in 2002, dropping to 37% by 2010, but rising again to 40% in 2021 (Figure 6).

Today, families with underage children are a minority both in Russia and in Moscow. This trend can be partly attributed to an increase in life expectancy, which extends the family life cycle. Additionally, declining fertility rates mean that the vast majority of families have no more than two children. Consequently, the period during which families have minor children at home is shorter than the period parents live together after their children become adults.

According to 2002 census data on family units, only the number of minor children in families was recorded [Family in Russia, 2008: Table 1.6]. Based on these indicators, it can be concluded that single-child families have predominated in both Moscow and Russia as a whole throughout the period from 2002 to 2021 (Figure 7).

If adult children living in the same households are included, the situation changes significantly (Figure 8).

In 2010, the majority of Russian families (59%) had only one child. By 2021, this share had decreased to 47%. At the same time, the proportion of families with two children increased from 33% to 38%, and those with three or more children rose from 8% to 15%. In Moscow, the share of single-child families dropped from 64% to 53%, though they still constitute the majority. Meanwhile, the share of families with two children increased from 30% to 35%, and with three or more children from 6% to 12%. This increase in the proportion of families with multiple children is largely driven by a rise in second and subsequent births, encouraged by various benefits and allowances for such families. Among the key demographic policy measures is the law on maternity (family) capital, which has been in effect since 2007. Prior to 2020, families were eligible for capital after the birth of their second child, but from 2020 onwards, the capital became available after the birth of the first child. If the second child is born, the amount of capital increases. In many regions of Russia, regional maternity capital is provided after the birth of the third child. Additionally, new benefits and allowances for families with children are periodically introduced, and as a result of indexation, the amount of maternity capital and certain other benefits have increased.

5 Calculated according to: All-Russian Census... 2020 (2022), Volume 8, Tables 3 and 4.

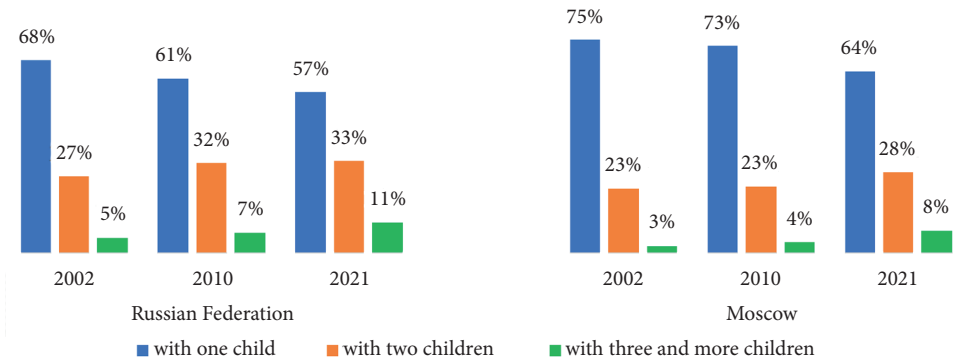


Figure 7. Distribution of family units with children under 18 years of age, by number of children of this age group, in %. *Source:* author’s calculations based on: [Family..., 2008: Table 1.6; All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 6, Tables 12, 13; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 8, Tables 9, 10]. *Note:* due to rounding, the sum of percentages may not equal 100%.

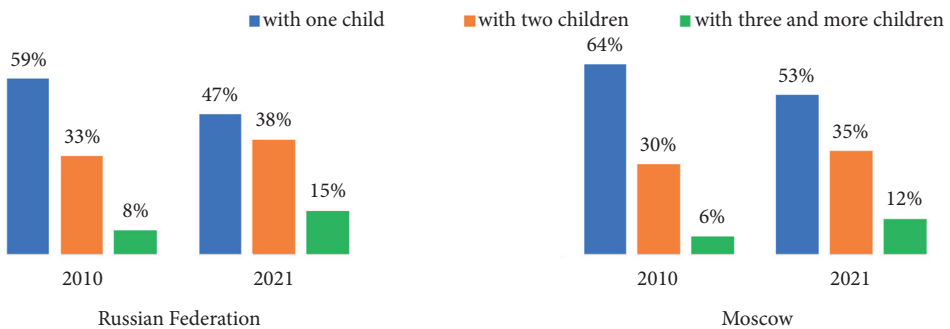


Figure 8. Distribution of family units with children under 18 years of age by total number of children (of any age) living in them, in %. *Source:* author’s calculations based on: [All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 6, Tables 12, 13; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 8, Tables 9, 10].

The average number of children of all ages in families with children under 18 in Russia increased from 1.53 to 1.73, and in Moscow, from 1.44 to 1.62.⁶ It should be noted that not all of these families have completed their formation, and in many cases, adult children live separately and are not counted in the census as part of their parents’ family unit.

These figures apply only to families with children. When considering childless families, the average number of children is slightly lower. The shift from single-child families to two-child families highlights the influence of family demographic policies on fertility.⁷ This trend

6 Author’s calculations are based on: [All-Russian Census ... 2010 (2012), Volume 6, Tables 12 and 13; All-Russian Census... 2020 (2022), Volume 8, Table. 9 and 10].

7 Family demographic policy is a set of demographic policy measures taken to influence the family demographic (marital, divorce, reproductive) behaviour of the population. This refers to the behaviour of people aimed at getting married or refusing a marriage proposal, at dissolving a marriage or at keeping the other spouse from divorce, at having a child or at preventing or terminating an unwanted pregnancy [Sinelnikov, 2022:118-119, 328-339].

is also reflected in the dynamics of the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for specific generations (Figure 9).

According to Rosstat, during the crisis years of the 1990s, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) declined, reaching its lowest point of 1.16 in 1999. The recovery from the crisis in the early 2000s was accompanied by a slight increase in fertility, largely due to the implementation of deferred births. After the introduction of the maternity (family) capital law on January 1, 2007, the increase in fertility became much more pronounced. The TFR rose from 1.31 in 2006 to 1.78 in 2015. However, after 2015, the TFR began to decline and reached 1.42 in 2022. Despite this decrease, the 2022 TFR is still higher than in 2006. The TFR fluctuates due to changes in the average age of mothers at the birth of their first child and the intervals between subsequent births. Therefore, it is important to calculate the TFR not only on an annual basis, but also over longer periods. On average, during the 16 years preceding the activation of family and demographic policy (1991-2006), the TFR was 1.33, while in the following 16 years (2007-2022), it increased to 1.59. The number of births increased from 22.5 million in the first period to approximately 27 million in the second. Although family demographic policy has had a positive effect, it has not been sufficient to reverse depopulation.

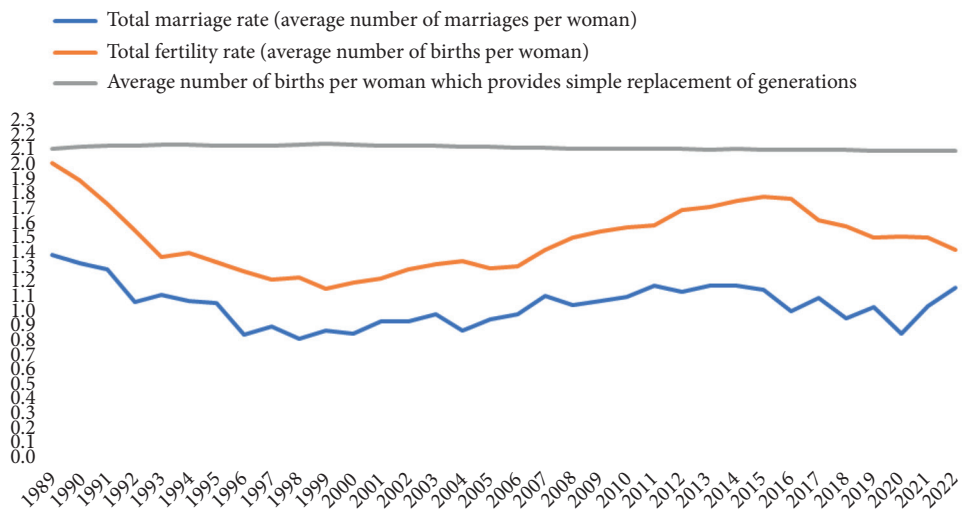


Figure 9. Total marriage and fertility rates in Russia, 1989-2022. *Source:* Calculated by the author according to Rosstat data: [Demographic Yearbook, 2023, Tables 1.5, 2.6, 3.4, 4.5; Demographic Yearbook, 1999: 32-33, 50, 89, 126-127; Population..., 2023: Tables 1.1.1, 1.1.2], as well as similar publications from Rosstat for the relevant years.

The natural population decline continues, while the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) remains well below the level of simple generational replacement (2.1). The average total number of children born per woman by the end of reproductive age in all real generations also remains below the level required for simple reproduction [Zakharov, 2023].

The correlation coefficient between the dynamics of the total marriage coefficients (TMC) for 1989-2021 and fertility for 1990-2022 is 0.81, confirming the close relationship between these demographic processes. The correlation coefficient between the dynamics of the TMC

for 1989–2005 and the TFR for 1990–2006 was 0.93, and for 2006–2021 and 2007–2022, it was 0.73. In most cases, fluctuations in the TFR mirror (with a one-year lag) fluctuations in the TMC, which represents the average number of marriages per woman over a lifetime. This indicator is calculated for a conditional generation in the same way as the TFR. After the introduction of the maternity capital law in 2006, which came into force in 2007 and provided benefits after the birth of a second child, this relationship became somewhat less clear. The proportion of second and subsequent children among newborns increased, and, unless twins are born, these children can only be born a year after marriage in the case of remarriage.

According to the author of this article, “There are many factors that should weaken this influence, including:

- Not all families have children.
- Many married couples postpone the birth of their first child for several years.
- The dynamics of marriage primarily affect the fertility dynamics of first-born children, rather than all children in general.
- In recent years, more than 30% of marriages in Russia, for both men and women, are remarriages. Many families formed through remarriage do not have children together.
- More than 20% of children are born outside of a registered marriage.
- Many children are born into migrant families whose marriages were not registered in Russia” [Sinelnikov, 2022:318].

However, despite all of this, the correlation coefficients between the dynamics of the TMC and the TFR exceed 0.7. This indicates a significant influence of marriage on fertility. Current family and demographic policies promote the birth of children within existing families but do not significantly stimulate the creation of new families. The decline in marriage and fertility rates is not only due to the entry of smaller generations, born in the 1990s, into the age range of 20 to 34 years (which accounts for most marriages and births). The total marriage and fertility rates, which are independent of the age structure of the population, are also decreasing, and very synchronously. This is largely due to the gradual shift from legal marriages to cohabitation. The average number of children among couples living together without formal registration is noticeably lower than among legally married couples of the same age. Many of these cohabiting couples do not marry or have children together due to doubts about the stability of their relationship, a factor that is much more prevalent in non-registered unions compared to legal marriages [Sinelnikov, 2019: 28–32; Population of Russia, 2019, 2022: 106].

Among married couples, the transition from single-child families to two-child families is more pronounced than in all family units (both complete and incomplete). The vast majority of single-parent families are single-child families (Figure 10).

In 2010, more than half of complete families in Russia (52%) had one child. By 2021, this share had decreased to 39%. The predominant family type in the country was a married couple with two children, which accounted for 43% of families. This shift may be the result of support for two-child families, the vast majority of which are complete families, through maternity capital and other benefits and allowances. Even in Moscow, in 2021, single-child married couples, who represented 56% in 2010, became a minority, comprising 43%. The share of families with three or more children roughly doubled, reaching 18% in the country as a whole and 16% in the capital. However, the complete replacement of generations is only possible if more than half of married women give birth to at least three children by the end of their reproductive years [Sinelnikov, 2019: 27–28].

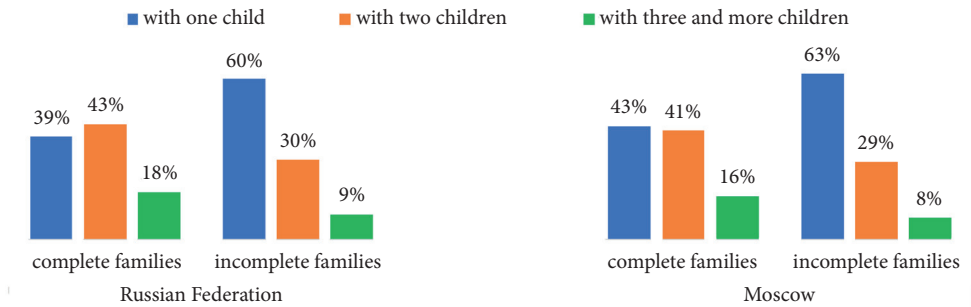


Figure 10. Distribution of full and incomplete family units with children under 18 years of age, based on the number of children of any age living in them, in %. 2021. *Source:* author's calculations based on: [All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 8, Tables 9, 10]. *Note:* Due to the rounding performed, the sum of the fractions is not always equal to 100%.

According to the 2002 and 2010 censuses, the differences between the structure of full and single-parent families in terms of the number of children were similar to those observed in 2021. During the censuses, many families of separated spouses were categorized as incomplete, although the reasons for separation include not only the actual disintegration of the family but also the temporary departure of a spouse. Figure 11 shows that both indicators – the proportion of single-parent families and the frequency of separation – tend to increase synchronously, though the proportion of single-parent families is 16-22% higher than the frequency of separation. This difference can be considered a minimum estimate of the actual proportion of single-parent families.

This conclusion is supported by the results of a survey conducted by T.A. Gurko in 2022, which found that 21% of Moscow high school students lived in single-parent families [Gurko, 2022]. According to the 2021 census, 51% of children under the age of 18 in Moscow lived in families where one parent was absent from the household. This proportion is slightly lower than the share of single-parent families among all family units with children (54%)⁸, as the average number of children in single-parent families is smaller than in complete families. It appears that the 2021 census overestimates the proportion of single-parent families in Russia by about half, and in Moscow by 2.5 times. In previous censuses, this overestimation was less pronounced. The increase in the share of single-parent families in 2021, compared to 2010 and 2002, may reflect not actual changes in family structures but rather differences in how families were counted in the census. This discrepancy is particularly noticeable in Moscow, where the proportion of single-parent families is much higher than the national average. The total share of widows, divorced individuals, and those separated among Muscovites of reproductive age (under 50 years) whose marital status was recorded in the census was 12% (10% for men and 14% for women). In Russia as a whole, the corresponding figures were 12%, 9%, and 15%, respectively.⁹ Incomplete families also arise when women who have never been married give birth. In Moscow, the proportion of children born out of wedlock was 20.5% in 2021, compared to 22% in the entire country.¹⁰ It appears

8 Author's calculations based on: [All-Russian Census... 2020 (2022). Volume 8, tables 9 and 10].

9 Author's calculations based on: [All-Russian Census... 2020 (2022). Volume 2, Table 5. Volume 8, tables 9 and 10].

10 Author's calculations based on: [Natural...2021(2022), Table 4].

that the actual share of single-parent families in Moscow is roughly the same as in Russia as a whole.

Often, both spouses live at the same address. According to the rules, the census is conducted at the address of actual residence, but it can be difficult to enforce this when filling out census forms based on data from administrative sources. As noted by E.M. Andreev and E.V. Churilova, “at least one in every six residents of Russia had their gender and date of birth recorded solely from administrative sources. <...> However, the incompleteness of the census coverage varies by region, with a third of the population in federal cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg missing from the data” [Andreev, Churilova, 2023: 16-17]. In the 2002 and 2010 censuses, administrative data were also used, though less frequently than in the 2021 census [Andreev, 2012; Bogoyavlensky, 2008; Mkrtychyan, 2011].

According to the 2020 census, there were 29,933 thousand men and 30,127 thousand women in Russia who were married or in an informal marital union. The census forms are filled out by respondents, and since they are not backed by documentary evidence, the number of women who consider themselves married exceeds the number of men who claim the same status. The number of complete family units, meaning married couples living together, was 24,241 thousand, representing 81% of the total number of married men and 80% of the total number of married women. Among married individuals, 19% of men and 20% of women lived separately from their spouses. These figures are clearly overstated, especially when compared to data from previous censuses (Figure 11).

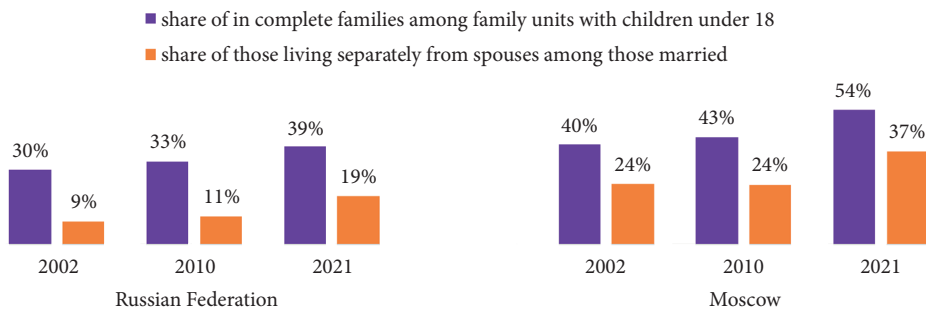


Figure 11. Proportion of single-parent families with children under 18 years of age and single spouses among married people, in %. *Source:* author’s calculations based on: [Family..., 2008: Table 1.6; All-Russian Census... 2002, 2004: Volume 2, Tables 3, 4; All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 2, Table.5; Volume 6, Tables 12, 13; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 2, Table.5; Volume 8, Tables 9, 10].

In 2002, 9% of married people in Russia as a whole lived separately from their spouses, and 24% in Moscow. In 2010, these figures were 11% for Russia and 24% for Moscow. However, by 2021, the proportion of married people living separately had risen to 19% in Russia and 37% in Moscow. It is hard to believe that the majority (54%) of Moscow families with children under 18 are incomplete. This figure is much higher than in Russia as a whole (39%). The data on families in which children live with their father but not with their mother are particularly concerning. The share of such families among all single-parent families is close to the share of married men living separately from their wives (Figure 12).

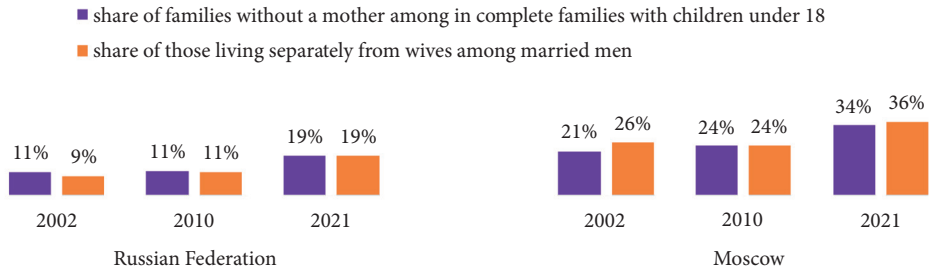


Figure 12. Proportions of motherless families among single-parent families with children under 18 years of age and the share of married men living separately from their wives, in %. *Source:* author's calculations based on: [Family..., 2008: Table 1.6; All-Russian Census... 2002, 2004: Volume 2, Tables 3, 4; All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 2, Table.5; Volume 6, Tables 12, 13; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 2, Table.5; Volume 8, Tables 9, 10].

Many people avoid registering their spouses at their apartment addresses, fearing that such registration could lead to claims over property division in the event of a divorce. This is despite the fact that, unlike in Soviet times, registration at a residence is no longer a basis for property division. These fears often lead to couples choosing not to formally register their marriage, particularly if one partner is a newcomer. If there is no official marriage registration, there can be no divorce or subsequent division of property. The calculations in this article are based on data from the 30th round of the RLMS HSE-2021 study, published by the Higher School of Economics (HSE). This longitudinal study, conducted in 2021, was a collaborative effort between the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Demoscope LLC, and the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The study found that, among respondents aged 18 to 39 who consider themselves Russian and live in the localities where they were born, 9% of men and 12% of women live together without marriage registration. Among respondents of the same age group who are not local natives and have lived in their current location for over 15 years, the figures were 26% for men and 22% for women. Similar differences were observed among individuals aged 40 to 49 [Sinelnikov, 2024: 90-9]. At the same time, children are often registered at the same address, particularly to facilitate enrollment in kindergarten or school. As a result, in Moscow – a city with a large number of non-local residents – the proportion of married men and women living separately from their spouses, but with children, is exceptionally high. This overrepresentation significantly inflates the proportion of single-parent families.

In the case of a divorce between spouses with minor children, only 5-6% of the time do children remain with their fathers by court decision [In the Russian Federation in the courts ..., 2021]. If a child is born out of wedlock, the likelihood that the father will take custody of the child and raise them alone is even lower. According to the 2021 census, among men and women of reproductive age (up to 49 years old), there were 6.3 million divorced or separated individuals, as well as 572 thousand widows, including 443 thousand widows and 130 thousand widowers.¹¹ In Russia, in 2002 and 2010, families without a mother accounted for 11% of all single-parent families. If these statistics – similar to those in the United States and Western Europe [Shevchenko, 2019: 233] – suggest that children in Russia stay

¹¹ Author's calculations based on: [All-Russian Census ... 2020 (2022), Volume 2, Table 5].

with their fathers less often after divorce than in other countries, the overestimation of single fatherhood in Russia is not substantial.

However, in Moscow, even then, these figures were 21% and 24%, respectively. It is especially difficult to believe the data from the 2021 census, which indicates that one in five single-parent families in Russia (19%) and one in three in Moscow (34%) consist of a single father with one or more minor children. It seems likely that a significant portion of the census forms were filled out based on registration data, which does not always reflect the actual family composition.

In reality, a complete family can be classified as incomplete in the census, regardless of the number of children. However, the differences in the proportions of single-parent families with varying numbers of children more or less correctly reflect the likelihood of divorce or separation between the parents, even though these proportions may be somewhat overestimated. For a more accurate comparison of the stability of families with different numbers of children, it is necessary to ensure that all families are at the same stage of the life cycle – i.e., all the children are minors (Figure 13). If there are adult children, the average age of the parents will be higher, and the probability of the family becoming incomplete due to the death of a parent increases, compared to families where all children are under 18. Widowhood may turn a complete family into an incomplete one, but this is not a result of the anti-family behavior of one parent, nor does it relate to a crisis in the social institution of the family.

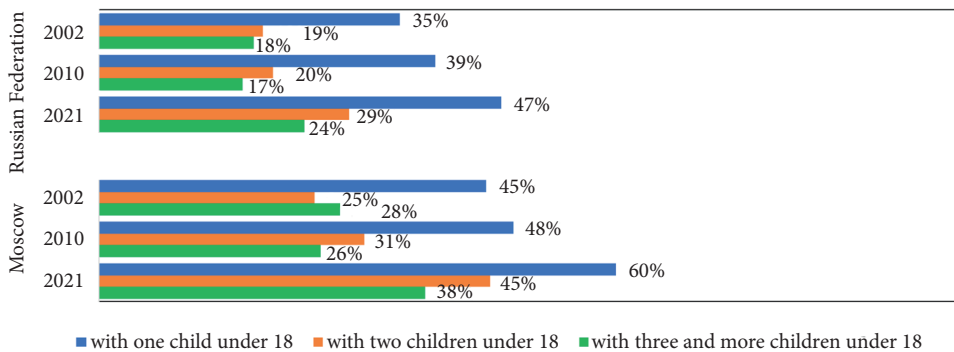


Figure 13. Proportion of single-parent families with one, two, three or more children, in %. *Source:* author’s calculations based on: [Family..., 2008: Table 1.6; All-Russian Census... 2010, 2012: Volume 2, Table.5; Volume 6, Tables 12, 13; All-Russian Census... 2020, 2022: Volume 8, Tables 9, 10].

According to all censuses, both in the entire country and in its capital, families with one child break up most often. The birth of a second child significantly reduces the likelihood of family breakdown, but the appearance of subsequent children does little to further strengthen family stability. In a society where the social norm is a family with one or two children [Kalabikhina, Kuznetsova, 2023], and where large families are relatively rare, exceeding this norm often occurs due to remarriages. Contrary to popular belief, these remarriages break up at least as often as the first [Population of Russia 2013, 2015: 76-77].

A risk factor for such families may be issues in the relationship between the stepfather and the wife’s children [Shevchenko, 2019: 216-221].

In 2007-2009, the Department of Family Sociology and Demography at the Faculty of Sociology of M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University interviewed about a thousand par-

ents with many children. The results showed that in 86% of cases where the first marriages of mothers with many children ended in divorce, the initiative for divorce came from the mothers themselves [Family studies, 2009: 343]. Large families are not always stable. Therefore, it is not surprising that in 2002, among Moscow families with three or more children, the proportion of single-parent families was even slightly higher (by 3%) than among families with two children.

A common stereotype is that parents with many children are irresponsible towards their children [Smoleva, 2019]. However, between 2002 and 2021, the number of large families increased significantly both in Moscow and throughout Russia, mainly due to families with three children. It can be assumed that the attitude of the majority of the population toward this “minimal” option of having many children has become more positive. However, since these families are still relatively few in number (Figure 8), most people do not take them as examples to follow.

As a rule, at the time of the birth of a child (if the child is not the first), the marriage is typically strong enough. Otherwise, the wife might not have felt confident enough to have a child. However, over time, the conditions and lifestyle of the family, as well as the relationship between the spouses, may deteriorate to such an extent that the family breaks up. No number of children can fully guarantee against this outcome. Both in Russia as a whole and in Moscow, in 2010 and 2021, the proportion of single-parent families among two-child families was significantly lower than among one-child families, but only slightly higher than among families with three or more children. Among spouses whose marriage was dissolved, if they had children under the age of 18, their average number of children ranged from 1.2 to 1.25 [Population of Russia 2019, 2022: 108]. The vast majority of family breakups with children occur in married couples with only one child.

According to a survey conducted in 2022 by the Public Opinion Foundation (POM), nearly half of respondents consider “exhausted feelings” or “new love” to be significant reasons for divorce [Divorces..., 2022]. A study by the Discourse Sociological Center in 2016 found that about half of women under the age of 37 with one, two, or three children believe a wife has a moral right to divorce her unloved husband, even if he has done nothing wrong and they have children together. A questionnaire on family values and child-rearing conducted by the Department of Family Sociology and Demography at the Faculty of Sociology of Moscow State University in 2018-2019 included a similar question, but without mentioning the spouse’s innocence. About 70% of respondents stated that, even in a family with children, a wife has the moral right to divorce her unloved husband, and similarly, a husband has the right to divorce his unloved wife [Sinelnikov, 2022:85-86, 197-201].

It is difficult for a woman to decide to have a second or third child if she fears that her husband may stop loving her and leave her for someone else. Creating a stable environment for one child without a father, or finding a stepfather to replace the biological father, is more feasible in such cases [Gurko, 2022; Shevchenko, 2019]. However, for mothers with multiple children, both options are much less likely.

Even if the marriage does not ultimately break down, the fear of divorce significantly reduces the likelihood of having a second or subsequent child. This is one of the key reasons for the decline in fertility rates, leading to the prevalence of one-child families or, at most, two-child families. This results in incomplete generational replacement, where each generation is numerically smaller than the previous one, contributing to a natural decrease in the population and the aging of its age structure.

Discussion

The impact of father absence on children's lives remains a debated issue from sociological, psychological, and pedagogical perspectives. When comparing families without a father or mother to those where children are raised by both parents, it is important to consider that most married couples have two or more children, while single mothers and fathers often have only one child. Marriage, as the foundation of a complete family, is crucial for both parents to care for several children, ensuring a proper quantitative and qualitative replacement of generations. Without this, long-term population survival becomes impossible. However, in families with only one child, the responsibility typically falls on one parent, usually the mother, to care for them. The absence of a father complicates the situation in single-parent families, but this issue is more severe for families with multiple children than for those with only one. Families with two or more children are less likely to break up than single-parent families. While a father can leave a family regardless of the number of children, it is typically harder for a mother with multiple children to decide to end her relationship with her husband compared to a woman with one child. Moreover, second and subsequent children are usually born in families where the relationship between the spouses is relatively stable at the time of the decision to have a child, although future conflicts remain possible.

There is reason to believe that in a society where the majority of families have only one or two children, about two-thirds of marriages end in divorce, and public opinion supports the moral right of individuals to divorce their spouses without fault or consent, even when they have minor children together, the population faces a demographically unfavorable situation due to incomplete self-reproduction. Furthermore, the conditions for the proper upbringing of children by both parents are deteriorating.

Conclusion

Data from population censuses conducted in 2002, 2010, and especially in 2021 exaggerate the number of families in which children live without one parent. These data contribute to a misconception about the number of spouses living separately and, consequently, the growing proportion of families without one parent. It is also misleading to claim that in Moscow such families make up more than half of all families with minor children. Given the scale of this exaggeration, it seems more likely that families without one parent account for about a fifth of all families with children under 18, a figure that is not increasing, and that in Moscow, it is about the same as in the rest of Russia.

While the data from all three censuses exaggerate the number of single-parent families, they do not distort the differences in the probability of family breakdown with different numbers of children. On the contrary, if some complete families – where the spouses are not registered together – are classified as incomplete, this would likely minimize the differences between the structure of complete and incomplete families in terms of the number of children. The nature of these differences is supported by both divorce statistics and data from sample studies.

Single-child families are the most likely to break up among families with children. The birth of the first child is a social norm for most young and healthy couples, even if their relationship is strained. However, the decision to have second and subsequent children is not considered mandatory and is often seen as desirable only under favorable circumstances.

Many women, fearing their husband's departure, limit themselves to one or, at most, two children.

Measures of family and demographic policy in Russia are still largely limited to benefits for families with children. While this does encourage childbearing within existing families to some extent, such policies can only achieve partial and temporary success unless additional measures are taken to promote marriage and prevent divorce.

Many couples choose not to register their marriage to avoid losing property, such as apartments, in the event of divorce. However, these couples tend to have fewer children on average, and the likelihood of relationship breakdown is much higher than for legally married couples [Sinelnikov, 2019].

The Family Code of the Russian Federation allows for prenuptial agreements, which can stipulate separate ownership of property. This means that in case of divorce, each spouse would retain the property acquired with their personal funds after marriage registration. Property owned before marriage or inherited from parents is not subject to division without such an agreement. However, the suggestion of a prenuptial agreement may be seen as an insult, leading to a perception of distrust, which could prevent the marriage from taking place. Therefore, it is essential to make the conclusion of such an agreement mandatory for marriage registration. Marriage with a binding contract is a better option than cohabitation without any legal obligations. Additionally, the divorce process should be made stricter. Currently, it is a simple formality, and the behavior of the person initiating the divorce is often morally acceptable, even when children are involved and the other spouse is blameless and wants to preserve the family.

For the demographic survival of Russian society, it is crucial to foster a more positive attitude towards large families and to encourage a more responsible approach to entering and dissolving a legitimate marriage, which is the foundation of the family. There is no alternative.

Financing

The work was carried out within the framework of the project funded by the Russian Scientific Foundation, titled "Social Construction of Life Strategies for Families with Different Numbers of Children: Socio-Demographic Research" (grant no. 23-28-00518 from the Russian National Science Foundation).

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