

# What Constitutes a Large Family Today? A Multi-Dimensional Approach

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## **Abstract:**

What constitutes a large family? There is no common definition for the size of the family that can be attributed the status of a large family across European countries. In some countries the legislation defines the criteria for a large family (some examples will be provided), in some other countries there isn't any such legislation. However, there are arguments leading the legislators and policy makers to defend their favourite definition (or it lack) of a large family, stemming from different perspectives. This paper aims at discussing the need for legally defining the status of a large family and, mainly, presenting a multi-dimensional approach for arriving to the appropriate size of a family to be named as a large one. These dimensions, which stem from the legal, demographic, utilitarian, and poverty risk / social inclusion perspectives, have direct implications in policy making in the areas of welfare, family, demography and social affairs in general.

*Keywords: large family, demography, social policy*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The size of the family, i.e., the number of children to be acquired, is the result of different forces that shape the appropriate context as well as the desire of parents to acquire children. These forces include:

1. religious, cultural and educational attitudes
2. family policies and measures urging or inhibiting the acquisition of children
3. social acceptance and trends
4. situational circumstances
5. Family settings such as remarried, divorced etc. parents
6. existence or lack of prenatal demographic policies etc.

It is certainly true that living conditions, urbanization, the risk of poverty and several other factors such as lack of time and resources, increased cost of living, prolonged education, unemployment, differentiated personal advancement aspirations, postponed decisions for family creation etc. have significantly reduced the number of children finally acquired by European families. However, it is still the case that Europeans would like to acquire more children than they currently have, according to the Eurobarometer. "Britain now has more families with four or more children than at any time since the 1970s. According to the European statistics agency, Eurostat, there's a growing trend for large families – even though the average family size is getting smaller." [Harker, 2015]

Large families (defined as those having three or more children) nowadays account for about 13 percent of the total European population, although their importance for the entire demographic situation at a national and even European level is significant. "In Germany, decomposition analyses show that the decline of large families (parity 3 or more) has a higher impact on the

decrease of the cohort total fertility rates than increasing childlessness does. (Bujard and Sulak, 2016)" (Schneider et al., 2021). Despite their importance, in most European countries there is no explicit legal definition for a large family. Since "family dynamics are driven by changing institutional opportunities and constraints" (Hank and Steinbach, 2019), a large family is defined differently at times. Defining a large family as a family that has more children than the average family nowadays, such a definition would result in two-children's families to be named as large families, which is obviously not the implicit rationale behind the definition of large families. Therefore, a mere statistical approach is not appropriate; thus, the need for a multi-dimensional approach. This study aims at revealing the true sources of the need to distinguish large families from the others, and how this is better translated into the number of the children of families considered as large.

### DEFINITION OF LARGE FAMILIES IN EUROPE

Although used in practice, the concept of large families is neither defined in law in all European countries, nor defined in the same way, whenever it is defined. Some researchers define large families those with 3 children (Bujard et al. 2019), while others those with four and more children (Curran, 2019), (Bradshaw et.al., 2006). As far as countries as concerned, large families are defined by law in, for example, Germany (3+ children), Greece (4+ children), Spain (3+ children but several categories), Latvia (3+ children), Slovakia (4+ children), Cyprus (4+ children), while it is not defined in Hungary, Romania, Italy, etc. Although not defined in law, Hungarian family policies have special provisions for families with 4+ children in some policy areas. In France, the medal of the French family comes in three classes: "bronze for those raising four or five children, silver for parents of six or seven children, and gold for those with eight or more children."<sup>1</sup>

### THE LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

In shown above, in most / less countries the criteria for attributing to a family the status of a large one is defined in law. It is interesting that there exist some countries where the definition of a large family is more complex than simply the number of children / size of family:

1. Greece<sup>2</sup> (Law 3454/2006)
  - A family with four or more children OR
  - A family with three children when one of the parents has died OR
  - A family with three children when one of the parents has a permanent (lifelong) disability of more than 68% by medical committee estimation
  - A family with two children when both parents have died.
2. Spain<sup>3</sup>
  - with three or more children or
  - two children, one of them with a disability, or disability of one parent;
  - widowers with two children, etc.

There are two categories of large families:

- **General Large Family:** families of up to 4 children (\*)  
Families of 4 children whose annual income, divided by the number of members of the family unit, does not exceed 75 percent of the IPREM (Public Indicator of Multiple Effects),

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia "The Médaille de la Famille française"

<sup>2</sup> [www.aspe.gr/information/25-Συχνές%20Ερωτήσεις/627-who-is-identified-as-a-multi-child-person](http://www.aspe.gr/information/25-Συχνές%20Ερωτήσεις/627-who-is-identified-as-a-multi-child-person)

<sup>3</sup> [www.familiasnumerosas.org/titulo-de-familia-numerosa/](http://www.familiasnumerosas.org/titulo-de-familia-numerosa/)

including extraordinary payments, will be considered as a Special Category Large Family (same as with 5+, see below).

- **Large Family Special Category:** families with 5 or more children.

In both of these cases, the lawmaker has in mind that since large families require special care by the State, they have opted in attributing the status of a large family to families with smaller sizes if there is some disability or lack of a parent in such a family. So, the status of a large family has been used to offer wider social protection and acknowledgement also to families other than those having three or four or more children. However, families where one parent has died are considered as single parent families, who receive a lot of attention in the recent years. In such cases where a family can be supported both as a large family as well as in another capacity, such as a single parent one, or a disability-related one, then law should define each capacity prevails or that the law provisions apply cumulatively. Ideally, a definition that solely relies on the size of a family would be more preferable in the sense that it would be easier to apply cumulatively all the policies that apply to the various family situations and statuses (such as disability, widowhood, financially precarious etc) on top of the special care for a large family due to demographic and family policies.

### THE DEMOGRAPHIC APPROACH

From a demography point of view, families with two children are supporting the sustainability of the population size since the parents can be replaced by the two children. Any child beyond the second has the potential of increasing the population. That is why a family with three children can be considered as a large family. However, this argument is fundamentally wrong because it is based on the underlying assumption that all families have two children; therefore, any one in excess increases the population. It is obvious that, from a demographic perspective, the 3<sup>rd</sup> child of a family replaces the second child that is missing from a family with one child. And the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> children of a large family with four children replace the missing children of a childless couple. Without any complex statistics, it is the fourth child which makes the difference from the demographic perspective, if the aim is to stabilize the size of the population. Therefore, if the definition of large families is going to be used for the design of demographic policies, then measures for supporting families with 1, 2 or 3 children can be included into a general demographic policy and policies for the fourth and subsequent children should be aimed at a special demographic policy that will provide for stronger motives and support of large families with four or more children.

### THE STATISTICS APPROACH

"In the EU, 12.6 % of the households with children in 2020 consisted of households with three or more children. Ireland, Finland, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Sweden\* and Croatia recorded the highest share of households with three children or more, all above 15.0 %; this was also the case of North Macedonia. In Portugal (6.3 %), Bulgaria (7.4 %), Italy (8.1 %), Spain (9.3 %), Lithuania (9.4 %) and Greece (9.8 %), less than one in ten households with children had three children or more."<sup>4</sup>

Combining this information with total fertility rate in the following table, shows that large families account for a higher percentage of the families in countries with higher total fertility rates and

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<sup>4</sup>[ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Household\\_composition\\_statistics#Presence\\_and\\_number\\_of\\_children](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Household_composition_statistics#Presence_and_number_of_children)

certainly higher than the European average. Countries with low TFR and certainly lower than the European average, meaning that these countries do not have effective demographic and family policies, the number of large families is smaller.

1 <sup>st</sup> group-above 15% of households with three or more children	% Share of households with three children or more	Total Fertility Rate (TFR) <sup>5</sup>
Ireland		1.80
Finland		1.44
Belgium		1.72
France		1.84
Netherlands		1.67
Sweden		1.84
Croatia		1.42
<b>Europe-average</b>		<b>1.61</b>
2 <sup>nd</sup> group - less than 1 in 10 households with three or more children		
Greece	9.4%	1.27
Spain	9.3%	1.37
Italy	8.1%	1.30
Bulgaria	7.4%	1.60
Portugal	6.3%	1.33

There is an exception to the observation, since Bulgaria, which is before last in the second group, has higher TFR than Finland and Croatia from the first group, as shown markedly by the red figures. However, this exception does not destroy the general tendency as described above. Unfortunately, there are no data distinguishing large families of three and of four or more children to analyze the issue further.

### THE UTILITARIAN APPROACH

This approach tries to identify practical issues that differentiate families with three children from those with four or more.

First of all, the most common family cars have five seats, meaning that a family with three children can be safely transported. A fourth child creates immediately a need for a bigger car with seven seats, meaning an additional cost for the replacement of the car with a new one. Subsidizing the car cost with the same amount of money for families with three or more children is against common sense, since it is a discrimination against families with four or more children. Moreover, toll fees in roads are usually defined in terms of the car length, meaning that a 7- or 9-seat car has to pay more to get through. Such a fee calculation does not take into account that bigger cars are not necessarily professional or commercial cars; large families with four or more children are using bigger and longer cars to transport their family rather than for luxury or professional purposes.

When it comes to housing, significant issues arise for large families. International as well as civil society organizations consider that 25 square meters represents the least decent housing space per person – which is, unfortunately, far from reality for several European countries. Therefore, a family of five persons with three children has to be accommodated in a house of 125 sq.m. Such a house is wrongly considered as luxury living conditions in some countries; when a property tax

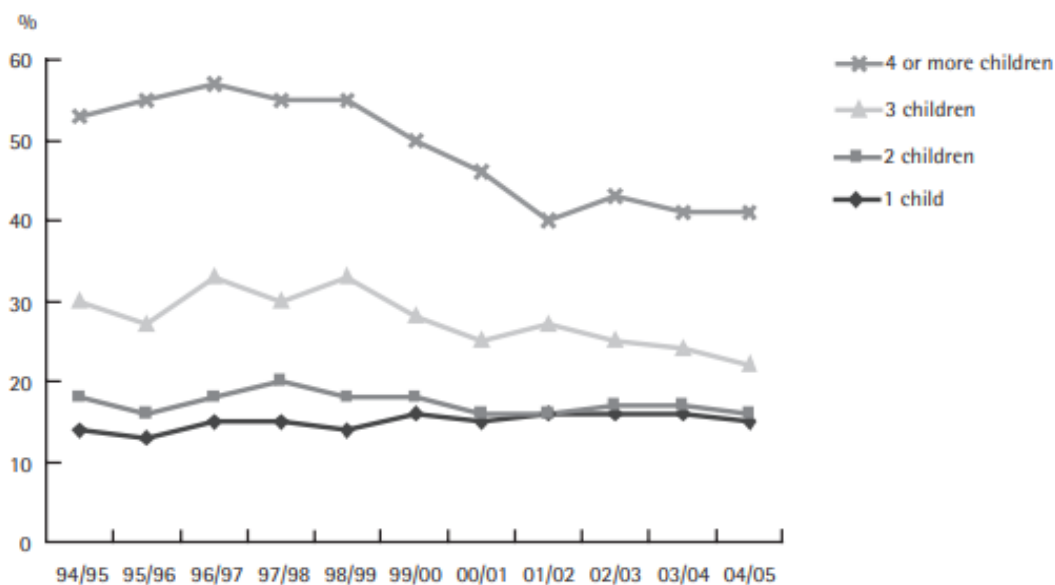
<sup>5</sup> <http://www.statista.com/statistics/612074/fertility-rates-in-european-countries/>

applies, large families' needs are rarely taken into account, incurring additional cost and, thus, negative discrimination against large families. For families with three children, one could say that a spacious enough two-bedroom house would be adequate; but for four children it is obvious that more is needed; for large families with four or more children, a house with at least three bedrooms is necessary. The utilitarian approach examines practical issues in daily life that differentiate the needs between families with three and those with four children. That is why a policy that subsidizes in some way the cost of a car or a house cannot follow a proportional logic based on the number of children. The acquisition of the fourth child has a jump forward effect on the daily needs of a family; hence, there is a clear line separating large families with three children from those with four or more children.

### THE POVERTY RISK / SOCIAL INCLUSION APPROACH

"The UK child poverty rate for large families is among the highest in the OECD. [...] Given the UK government's commitment to the abolition of child poverty by 2020, the report discusses how the tax and benefit system might be adapted in favour of large families so that this target might be achieved." (Bradshaw et al., 2006) In this study, the child poverty diagram according the size of the family is provided, as follows:

**Figure 2: Child poverty (% living in households with <60% of contemporary median household income, BHC) rate by number of children in the family**



Source: DWP (2006), Table E4.1

Source: [www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/9781861348777.pdf](http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/9781861348777.pdf)

Looking at the graph, it is clear that the risk of poverty is not proportional to the number of children, because the distance between the lines / curves of the graph are not the same. It is clear that distance between the curve of four or more children is bigger than the distance of the curves between two- and three-children's families. Therefore, from a poverty risk perspective, large families had better be defined as four or more children's families. The same study reveals that in the UK in 2003/04, 51% of children in 4+ child families were poor compared with only 24% in three-children's families. Children in 4+ child families constituted 41% of all poor children. If the policy of reducing poverty risk is to be achieved then attention needs to be paid to larger families.

The problem with the relationship between large families and poverty risk is that large families are not a homogeneous group. According to a study in Germany [Bujard et al., 2019], the following types of large families can be distinguished:

- large families with little education of the parents and precarious economic conditions,
- large middle-class families with good educated parents who, despite higher incomes, have to improvise,
- large families of the elite with high economic resources and the intensive use of household and care services,
- Large families with a migrant background, low educational qualifications and strong religious, Muslim character,
- Large families in rural areas (often with religious characteristics) and with comprehensive living space,
- single mothers with three or more children, and
- Continuation families.

The risk of poverty is different for each of these subsets of large families, so a mean value of risk poverty for all of them may not convey meaningful and actionable information. Instead of looking only at the poverty risk, it is important to acknowledge that large families are vulnerable, regardless of whether they live in poverty, or close to the poverty line, or above of it. Most of them definitely not the large families of the elite, who represent an extremely small percentage of them are vulnerable to macro-economic conditions, especially so in the price of goods and services. The energy crisis which has risen significantly the cost of electric power as well as of petrol, natural gas etc. has shown how vulnerable most large families are to these changes. The size of the family magnifies the cost for the consumption of goods, services, utilities etc. absorbing a big chunk of the family budget unexpectedly. Safety nets that provide special care for large families to utilities (electricity, water, telecoms etc.), services (such as health- and education- related) and goods should always be active, otherwise sudden surges of costs easily derail the large families' financial planning, causing social exclusion.

The vulnerability of large families to changes of their financial context of living and macro-economic environment modify significantly the ability to cope with poverty risk of large families. Therefore, large families should only be treated according to their poverty level and poverty risk, but their vulnerability should be taken into account when designing social, demographic and family policies.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

On behalf of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.g., the Federal Institute for Population Research has dealt with large families. Under the title "Three children and more families from the middle of society", the study comes to the conclusion that "large families are heterogeneous. There is no such thing as "the" large family. On the one hand, the proportion of double academic couples among three-child families has increased, on the other hand, almost 1/4 of couples with 4 or more children do not have a vocational qualification, so that 18% of large families are at risk of poverty and are thus higher than in two-child families with 16%."

Unfortunately, Eurostat and other national statistics authorities collect data for families with 1, 2 and 3 or more children, without distinction between families of three and four children; so there is a lack of more data to analyze whether the 4th child is disproportionately more costly as compared to the previous ones in order to base the argument about the definition of large families

definition on this discontinuity. However, there are other family costs, such as housing, car ownership and usage that indicate significantly higher costs for families of with four children against those with three. After all, definitions matter only when policies are decided to support realistically and objectively a decent way of life of all sizes of families as well as their non-discrimination. In this area, there is a tremendous policy deficit in most European countries, leaving ample room for poverty risk and social exclusion. This is confirmed by statistics showing that large families have higher risk as compared to the rest of the families. Moreover, provisions for large families had better be based on the vulnerability of large families to fluctuations of macro-economic parameters and price levels for utilities, goods and services.

Each country has its own peculiarities in family size, making a global definition of large families non-relevant. Taking into account the dimensions identified in this study, each country takes the decision about the definition of a large family based on the 3<sup>rd</sup> or the 4<sup>th</sup> child according to her own situational characteristics aiming to comply with some global specifications:

- Families should be able to have as many children as they want to,
- Families should not be discriminated based on the size of the family, i.e., the number of children,
- Societies need to have a stabilized and non-ageing population; therefore, large families with four and more children are desperately needed,
- Social inclusion must also take into account the special needs of large families, because, “nothing is more unequal than the equality of unequals” (Aristotle).

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