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Małgorzata KRYWULT-ALBAŃSKA\*

## Family and household changes in Poland according to national censuses data

### Przemiany rodzin i gospodarstw domowych w Polsce w świetle danych ze spisów powszechnych

#### Abstract

**Aim.** The article provides an analysis of Polish national censuses data in order to track changes that families and households in Poland have undergone over the past few decades, and in order to answer the question of whether these changes are in compliance with the assertions of the second demographic transition theory.

**Materials and methods.** The article uses data of the National Statistical Office on marriages, divorces, births and deaths, since the processes of marital formation and dissolution, as well as fertility and other demographic trends, impact directly on the number and structure of families and households. Emphasis is on the decade between the last two censuses of 2011 and 2021. Analysis is supplemented by conclusion from relevant research on the same topic.

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\* e-mail: [malgorzata.krywult-albanska@uken.krakow.pl](mailto:malgorzata.krywult-albanska@uken.krakow.pl)

University of the Commission of National Education in Krakow, Institute of Sociology, Podchorążych 2, 30-084 Krakow, Poland

Uniwersytet Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie, Instytut Socjologii, Podchorążych 2, 30-084 Kraków, Polska

ORCID: 0000-0001-7517-6455

**Results and conclusion.** In the first place, changes affecting families and households in Poland are strongly influenced by the aging of the country's population. As a result, the numbers of both households and families are declining. Also, some of the tenets of the second demographic transition theory are evidenced in the changes of the structure thereof: reduced average number of household members, reduced number of children in families, and a dynamic increase in the number of informal unions. These phenomena refer in particular to the inhabitants of urban areas.

**Keywords:** population studies, families, households, second demographic transition, population aging.

### **Abstrakt**

**Cel.** W artykule przedstawiono wyniki analizy danych z polskich spisów powszechnych dotyczących rodzin i gospodarstw domowych. Celem jest w szczególności odpowiedź na pytanie o to, czy zmiany, jakim podlegały gospodarstwa domowe i rodziny w trakcie ostatnich kilkudziesięciu lat, były zgodne z twierdzeniami sformułowanymi na gruncie teorii drugiego przejścia demograficznego.

**Materiały i metody.** Artykuł opiera się na analizie danych zastanych. Oprócz danych ze spisów powszechnych, w analizie wykorzystano dane ze sprawozdawczości bieżącej Głównego Urzędu Statystycznego (na temat małżeństw, rozwodów, urodzeń i zgonów), ponieważ procesy zawierania i rozpadu małżeństw, dzietności kobiet i tym podobne trendy demograficzne wpływają bezpośrednio na omawiane zjawiska. Nacisk położono na dekadę, która upłynęła między dwoma spisami powszechnymi z lat 2011 i 2021. Analizę uzupełniono o wnioski z innych badań prowadzonych na ten temat w ciągu ostatnich kilkunastu lat.

**Wyniki i wnioski.** Zmiany, jakim podlegają rodziny i gospodarstwa domowe w Polsce, wynikają w pierwszej kolejności ze starzenia się populacji kraju. Na skutek tego procesu następuje systematyczny spadek liczby zarówno gospodarstw domowych, jak i rodzin. W ich strukturze widoczne są także symptomy zmian, o których mówi teoria drugiego przejścia demograficznego, takie jak zmniejszanie się przeciętnej liczby osób w gospodarstwach domowych, zmniejszanie się liczby dzieci w rodzinach oraz dynamiczny wzrost udziału związków nieformalnych. Zjawiska te dotyczą w szczególności ludności zamieszkującej miasta.

**Słowa kluczowe:** demografia społeczna, rodziny, gospodarstwa domowe, drugie przejście demograficzne, starzenie się ludności.

## **Introduction**

The changes that have been taking place in the countries of north-western Europe and North America since the 1960s, involving the processes of marriage and marriage breakdown and fertility, have led to a significant transformation of the institution of the family. These consisted primarily of an increase in the age at which marriage takes place, a general decline in the number of marriages, and a decrease in fertility rates. At the same time, there has been an increase in the acceptance of so-called “alternative” forms of relationships, such as cohabitation or same-sex unions, which in many countries has been confirmed by their legal equalisation with “traditional” marriage (understood as a formalised union of a heterosexual couple). Therefore, changes in the sphere of family life have occurred in parallel with the transformation of social and legal norms.

In Poland, as in other Central and Eastern European countries, the processes of family formation, development and breakdown began to undergo intensive transformations after 1989, generally with much greater intensity than previously observed in other European countries (Frejka, Sobotka, 2008; Kotowska, Jóźwiak, 2011; Kotowska, 2017; Matysiak, 2014). Many studies conducted in recent years have documented, among other things, changes in perceptions of family and marriage, attitudes towards informal relationships and transformations in marital and non-marital fertility (see, for example, Brzozowska, 2014; Kotowska, 2017; Matysiak, 2009; Mizielnińska, 2017; Okólski, 2006; Oláh, Richter, & Kotowska, 2023; Sikorska, 2012; Slany, 2002; Sobotka, Toulemon, 2008; Tymicki, 2018, 2021). Meanwhile, a relatively recent source of information on families and households in Poland is data from the National Census of Population and Housing, conducted by the Central Statistical Office (CSO) in 2021. Despite the criticism directed at public statistics data (see, e.g., Schmidt et al., 2018; Sikorska, 2018), population censuses are the most widespread (covering the entire population of Poland) and regularly conducted surveys (every 10 years), providing information on, e.g., the number and structure of families and households. The article analyses these data to answer the question of how they have changed over the last few decades. Additionally, data from the current reporting of the Central Statistical Office (on marriages, divorces, births and deaths) was used. In the analysis of the number and structure of families and households and the demographic trends that condition them (processes of marriage and break-up, female fertility, etc.), the focus was on the decade that elapsed between the two censuses of 2011 and 2021. The analysis was supplemented with the conclusions of other studies conducted on the subject over the past several years.

## Theoretical background

In the prosperous countries of the Euro-Atlantic sphere, the dominant family form as late as the mid-20th century was the nuclear family consisting of a married couple with children, with parenthood being experienced by relatively young people\*. This model has been replaced in time by more diverse forms of marital-family life, with varying durations and ages of participants. These forms include reconstituted families (in which at least one of the partners has had the experience of being married and sometimes also has children from that relationship), “living apart together” (LAT), informal relationships (cohabitation) and those formed by same-sex couples. For example, from the 1970s onwards in Northern and Western European countries, informal relationships became increasingly popular, especially among young people forming their first relationships, and gradually replaced formal marriages. Nowadays, informal unions in these countries have become virtually equal in rights to formal relationships and operate alongside them (Kiernan, 2002; Sobotka, Toulemon, 2008). An increase in the number of people living alone has also become noticeable (Klinenberg, 2014).

These changes have been accompanied by an increase in the role of women as breadwinners, made possible by the spread of education and the transformation of the economy through the increasing role of the service sector. As a consequence of these changes, women now generally have a higher level of education than men and, consequently, have more opportunities to develop careers outside the home and earn a high income. The increasing participation of women in the labour market has also been driven by economic necessity – the insecurity and instability of employment since the financial crisis of 2007–2008 has made it difficult or impossible to support a family on a single male breadwinner’s salary (Oláh, Richter, & Kotowska, 2023). On the other hand, there has been an increased awareness of the importance of the father’s participation in caring for and building relationships with children. As a result, in recent years we have seen an increase in men’s involvement in the home, especially in childcare (Sikorska, 2012; CSO, 2015; Oláh, Richter, & Kotowska, 2023). However, the social, market and political contexts shaping motherhood and fatherhood are crucial in the course of these processes.

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\* The definition of the nuclear family was introduced in 1949 by George Murdock. It is a union of two people of different sexes, raising a child or children (biological or adopted) together, who live together and run a household and have sexual relations in a socially acceptable form (in: Sikorska, 2018). According to G. Murdock, the family fulfils four basic functions that determine its functionality for the social system: sexual, economic, reproductive and educational. In doing so, the functions and roles of women, men and children, as well as the division of the work they perform, are precisely defined and result from natural, biological gender characteristics.

The family has lost its importance in many countries and is not seen as an institution that determines a happy life. For example, the majority of Americans look pessimistically at the future of the family in their country, and relatively few see marriage and having children as crucial to a successful life. In an April 2023 survey of a representative sample of US adults, the vast majority of respondents cited job satisfaction and having close friends as extremely or very important for life satisfaction (71% and 61% respectively), while having children and being married considered such by only (respectively) 26% and 23% of respondents (Parker, Minkin, 2023).

The changes affecting family and marriage are described and explained by the theory of the second demographic transition, formulated in the second half of the last century (Lesthaeghe, 1995). This concept predicts changes in demographic behaviour as a result of the spread of individualistic social norms. Changes in value systems lead to a weakening of family ties, which in turn leads to less stable relationships, an increase in divorce and separation rates, lower fertility rates and an increase in the number of people living alone. The precursors of these changes in individual societies are, as noted by researchers adopting this theoretical perspective, generally people with higher education (especially women), the fastest adopters of individualistic values (see e.g., Sandström, Karlsson, 2019).

One of the most important aspects of the changes affecting families, as described by the theory of the second demographic transition, is the disruption of the once-strong connection between marriage and childbearing. At the same time, informal relationships are growing in importance as a context for parenthood – both as a prelude and as an alternative to marriage. The theory predicts that all low birth-rate countries are moving more or less in the same direction: towards heterogeneous forms of family formation, instead of a homogeneous process in which marriage and childbearing are closely related.

For a long time, the theory of the second demographic transition has been the framework for analysing and interpreting the processes taking place in the sphere of marital and family life in European countries (first in Northern and Western Europe and, after the fall of communism, at an accelerated pace also in the rest of Europe). However, research conducted in recent years indicates that the transformations that the family is undergoing are not moving in one direction, nor are they as homogeneous as in previous decades. One of the most important observations concerns the divergence in the processes of family formation and break-up that occur across different social classes and social strata (Smock, Schwartz, 2020; Mogi, Raymo, Iwasawa, & Yoda, 2023). Among those with lower levels of education, serial cohabitation that is not transformed into marriage is more common, and informal unions themselves are more common. In contrast, those with higher levels of education are more likely to marry, more likely to form cohabiting relationships that are then transformed into marriage, less likely to divorce and less likely to have children out of wedlock. They also experience more

stability in family life (instability is understood as the experience of changes in family structure, e.g., due to a [nursing] parent or other relatives moving out or moving in). The disconnection between marriage and having children, which is at the heart of the second demographic transition theory, is increasingly becoming a phenomenon that occurs at the lower rungs of the social ladder, resulting in divergent life chances for children of parents with higher and lower levels of education (McLanahan, 2004).

Another aspect that complicates the picture of family and marriage change within the second demographic transition is the differences that exist between countries (see, e.g., Van Winkle, 2018). From the point of view of the analysis conducted here, the division observed within European countries is particularly relevant. As John Hajnal noted in his 1965 and 1982 work, in the pre-industrial era in Europe there were differences between East and West in terms of family formation patterns. In particular, the regions east of the St. Petersburg-Trieste line were historically characterised by a relatively early age of marriage and the prevalence of this form of union, as well as a high proportion of complex households. In regions to the west of this line, marriage occurred at a later age, a higher proportion of people were unmarried and “simple” household forms predominated (Iacovou, Skew, 2011). An analysis of the structure of households in European countries after the 2004 enlargement suggested\*, that at the beginning of the 21st century, post-communist countries were moving towards later family formation and less stability\*\* (Andersson, Thomson, & Duntava, 2017). The countries admitted to the EU a few years earlier generally (except for the Baltic States) fitted into the previous division into North-Western and Southern European countries, with Poland belonging to a group of countries that were, so to speak, an extreme form of the latter, with a relatively higher average number of people in a household, an older age of leaving the family home and a very low proportion of young people living alone, as well as a high proportion of extended families, mainly three-generation families.

It is worth asking whether this conclusion can be repeated in the third decade of the 21st century, whether there have been any changes in this sphere concerning the beginning of the century, whether the changes described by the theory of the second demographic transition, such as the decline in the importance of marriage, the increase in the number of divorces, changes in attitudes to the family, are

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\* Based on data from the 2008 *European Union statistics on income and living conditions* [EU-SILC] survey and *the Gender and generations programme*; in: Iacovou, Skew, 2011; Andersson, Thomson, & Duntava, 2017.

\*\* An interesting case was Russia, where family formation took place very early on, yet was characterised by very little stability; for example, as many as 42% of children there experienced the break-up of their parents' relationship compared to 25% in Poland (Andersson, Thomson, & Duntava, 2017).

still noticeable today, and whether they are reflected in the number and structure of families and households? These questions are attempted to be answered in the following section of the research paper.

## **Aim and method**

This paper aims to analyse changes in the number and structure of households and families in Poland, especially the transformations taking place during the last decade. The analysis aims to answer the following research questions:

- What is the structure of households in Poland?
- What is the structure of families (concerning the place of residence, composition, number of family members)?
- What changes have taken place in terms of the number and structure of families and households during the last decade?
- Are the processes undergone by families and households consistent with the theories formulated on the grounds of the second demographic transition?

To answer the research questions, we have analysed the data available: statistics from the Central Statistical Office from the censuses, especially from the most recent census of 2021 (NSP 2021). The changes taking place in terms of the number and structure of families and households are first and foremost due to changes in the natural movement processes in Poland (a decrease in the number of births and an increase in the number of deaths, a decrease in the number of marriages). For this reason, when discussing changes affecting families and households, the analysis first takes into account demographic trends: the processes of marriages and fertility leading to the formation and break-up of families. Data on this issue comes from the so-called “current reporting” conducted by the CSO [in Polish GUS – *Główny Urząd Statystyczny*] (data from registry offices and courts on births, deaths, marriages, and divorces). Moreover, in interpreting the observed processes, conclusions from other studies as well as the results of public opinion surveys were used. This is because procreation plans and perceptions regarding, for example, the desired number of children in a family recorded by surveys will have an impact on future trends in this sphere.

## **Definition of families and households in CSO surveys**

Households are distinguished in the statistics of the Central Statistical Office based on the criterion of cohabitation (all persons living in one dwelling are considered

members of the same household)\*. Among those living together, families are further distinguished. “A biological (nuclear) family is defined as two or more persons who are related as husband and wife, cohabiting partners (cohabitants) – persons of the opposite sex or as parent and child” (CSO, 2023b, p. 8). According to the above definition (considering the law in Poland), the following types of biological families are distinguished: marriage without children, marriage with children, non-formalised relationships without children, non-formalised relationships with children\*\*, mother with children, father with children. Children are considered to be those living with their parent(s) regardless of age, provided that they do not live in the same dwelling/household with their partner/partner, spouse, or child.

The census results on families and households presented by the CSO are based on the so-called “national definition of the population” (CSO, 2023b), which includes permanent residents of Poland, including persons who are temporarily abroad (regardless of the duration of their residence), but have retained permanent registration in Poland. At the same time, immigrants temporarily staying in Poland are not included in the population. Due to the magnitude of emigration and immigration to Poland in recent years, this way of conducting research significantly limits demographic analyses. This fact is referred to in the final part of the paper.

## **Families and households in the view of census data**

### ***Changes in the number and structure of households***

Data from the 2011 and 2021 censuses on households reflect the course of demographic processes in Poland in this decade. These processes consist mainly of an overall decrease in population, a decrease in the number of births and the number of marriages (Figure 1) and internal migration. The number of households fell relatively slightly (by 1125) during this period (CSO, 2023c), despite a decrease in the population in the decade between the censuses by around half a million people (to just over 38 million; CSO, 2023a). What is noticeable, however, is the decrease in the number of households in urban areas (by about 120,000) and a similar increase in their number in rural areas, which is a consequence of the urban population moving to areas close to cities. The ur-

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\* The criterion of cohabitation was adopted in the 2021 census. The earlier 2011 census adopted the criterion of shared livelihood. In the comparisons published on the occasion of the 2021 Census, some studies recalculated the 2011 data according to the definition adopted in 2021. However, the change in the definition of a household makes comparisons over the long term more difficult, as will be discussed later.

\*\*In previous censuses, informal relationships were defined as partners with or without children.



banisation processes observed in the second half of the 20th century came to a halt towards the end of the century and are currently being reversed (suburbanisation). Compared to 2011, the urban population has decreased by around 1 percentage point to the benefit of the rural population (currently less than 60% of Poland's population lives in cities).

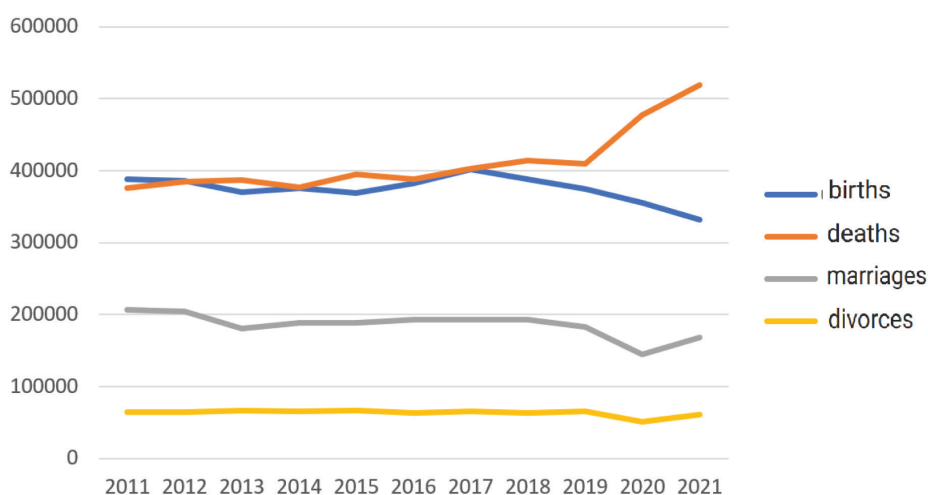


Figure 1. Processes of natural movement in Poland in 2011–2021.

Source: Author's own study based on the Local Data Bank (CSO, 2024b).

The average household in Poland consists of three members. Until the 2011 census, a very slow, gradual decline in the average number of persons per household had been recorded, but due to the aforementioned change in the way a household is defined (the economic concept based on joint livelihoods has been replaced by the housing concept), it is difficult to say unequivocally whether anything has changed in this respect in the long term. In the shorter term, based on data from 2021 and 2011 (the latter recalculated according to the housing concept), the trend seems to have continued (a decrease from 3.05 to 2.99) (CSO, 2023c)\*.

It is similarly difficult to assess changes in the structure of households over several decades. Table 1 presents data from 1970 to 2011, which indicated a systematic increase in the share of the smallest (one- and two-person households) and a decrease in the share of the largest households, (four- and five-person households and larger) understood as a group of people sharing a common source of income.

\* Table 1 for 2011 indicates data calculated according to the economic concept: 2.82 persons.

Table 1

*Household structure according to size (in %) and average household size by census 1970–2011*

	Year in which the census was carried out				
	1970	1978	1988	2002	2011
Households in thousands	9 376.3	10 948.1	11 970.4	13 337.0	13 568.0
Population in households in thousands	31 750.6	34 095.0	37 114.3	37 812.7	38 291.4
Households by number of persons in %					
1-person households	16.1	17.4	18.3	24.8	24.0
2-person households	18.8	21.7	22.3	23.2	25.7
3-person households	20.2	22.8	20.3	19.9	20.2
4-person households	21.0	21.2	22.0	18.0	16.2
5 or more persons	23.9	16.9	17.1	14.1	13.9
Average number of persons in the household	3.39	3.11	3.10	2.84	2.82

*Source:* Author's own study based on the CSO (CSO, 2023b).

However, a comparison of 2021 and 2011, for which a household is understood as a group of people living together, leads to slightly different conclusions. Compared to the previous census, the share of both the smallest and largest households (one- and five-person households and larger) has decreased. By contrast, the share of two-person households increased by more than 4 percentage points and very slightly (by about 0.3–0.4 percentage points) of the remaining households, i.e., three- and four-person households. There are clear territorial differences: in the countryside, households are not only on average larger by about one person (3.71 versus 2.65), but five-person and larger households dominate, accounting for almost 30 % of the total. Meanwhile, two-person and one-person households predominate in urban areas (the latter being the smallest in rural areas). At the same time, it is worth noting that in Poland as a whole, one in four households consists exclusively of elderly people (aged 60 and over), with such a situation applying to more than 55% of one-person households (slightly more in rural areas than in urban areas: 59.7% and 54.1% respectively). However, more than half of all households (52.3%) contained an elderly person, and their number increased by 19% compared to 2011. These data thus reflect the progressive ageing of the Polish population, in which 22.3% of people are in the post-working age (CSO, 2023a). Due to the longer life expectancy of women on average (81 years

compared to 73 for men in 2022; CSO, 2022), women outnumber men in the oldest age categories and more of them live alone.

Table 2

*Households (group of people living together) by number of persons (in % of total households) in 2011 and 2021*

Date of census	Number of members in the household				
	1	2	3	4	5 or more
	Total				
2011	25.5	20.9	18.7	15.9	19.1
2021	22.6	25.1	19.0	16.3	17.0
	Cities				
2011	28.8	23.5	20.1	15.2	12.4
2021	26.9	28.2	19.5	14.5	11.0
	Rural				
2011	18.3	15.2	15.5	17.3	33.6
2021	13.5	18.5	18.2	20.2	29.6

*Source:* Author's own study based on CSO data (CSO, 2023c).

To conclude this section, it is worth noting that the vast majority of households in Poland are formed by at least one family, while slightly less than one in three (27.5%) are non-family households (consisting of one or more persons, also related but not forming a family). Here, too, however, there are significant urban-rural differences: almost 33% of urban households are non-family households, compared to less than 17% in rural areas.

Considering the above data, it can be concluded that in the changes in the structure of households in Poland, it is difficult to see advanced symptoms of individualisation, as discussed by the theory of the second demographic transition. What is noticeable, meanwhile, is the ageing of the Polish population and the continuing disparities between urban and rural areas. Urban residents are up to twice as likely as rural residents to form small (one- and two-person) households, and almost three times less likely to form five-person or larger households. In turn, they are twice as likely to live in non-family arrangements (alone or with others).

### ***Number and structure of families according to census data***

Between the last two population censuses (2011 and 2021), the number of families decreased by 3.2% (in absolute numbers, the decrease was 354,000: from almost

11 million to 10.6 million). This decline can also be attributed (at least in part) to the overall decline in Poland's population over this period. Internal movements are also represented by changes in the place of residence of families: while the number of families in urban areas decreased by 6.6%, the number of families in rural areas increased slightly (by 2.3%), as a result of movements from urban to rural areas (most often to suburban municipalities around large cities).

Table 3

*Families according to type in 2011 and 2021*

	1970	1978	1988	2002	2011	2021
Families in thousands	8 196.6	9 319.6	10 226.2	10 457.6	10 972.5	10 618.5
according to family type in %						
couples without children	20.5	22.3	22.8	22.7	24.6	23.5
married couples with children	66.8	64.3	61.8	56.0	49.7	43.9
non-formalised couples without children*				0.8	1.3	3.1
informal couples with children*				1.1	1.6	5.3
mothers with children	11.3	11.9	13.6	17.2	19.8	20.7
fathers with children	1.4	1.5	1.8	2.2	3.0	3.5

*Note:* \* In the 2011 census in the typology of families, this category was defined as partners with or without children.

*Source:* Author's own study based on CSO data (CSO, 2023b).

What is particularly noteworthy in the structure of families is the decrease in the share of married couples: from 74.3% of the total number of families in 2011 to 67% in 2021, and the simultaneous dynamic increase in the share of informal relationships: from 2.9% to 8.4% (the latter is discussed in the next subsection). The most common type of family in Poland is married couples with children (their share in the family structure was 44% in 2021, with just over 39% of total families in urban areas and 51.1% in rural areas, i.e., more than half). Compared to the 2011 census, the number of marriages with children decreased significantly (by 14.5%, and in absolute numbers by 793,100). A larger decrease was recorded in urban areas (by 20%, in rural areas by 7.3%). There was also a decrease in the number

and share of marriages without children, but it was relatively insignificant (by about 1 percentage point). The number of single parents with children decreased, but their share in the family structure remained at a similar level (about  $\frac{1}{4}$ ).

The above figures reflect the systematic decline in fertility rates observed in Poland for several decades. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of births declined from over 388,000 per year to just over 331,000 (in the meantime, it alternated between slightly falling and rising, especially towards the end of the decade, before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; CSO, 2024)\*. At the same time, the number of women of childbearing age is decreasing and the age at which women decide to have a child is increasing: the average age of women giving birth to their first child increased from 26.6 to 28.5 years between 2011 and 2021.

As in 2011, in 2021 more than half of all families with children were families with one child (54%). The share of families with two children increased by 1.6 percentage points (to 35.2%), while the share of families with three, four and more children decreased by less than a percentage point (to 8.3% and 2.3% respectively). However, there are significant differences between urban and rural areas. Families with many children (with at least three children) are much more common in the countryside than in the city, while families with one child are less common (Figure 2; CSO, 2023b).

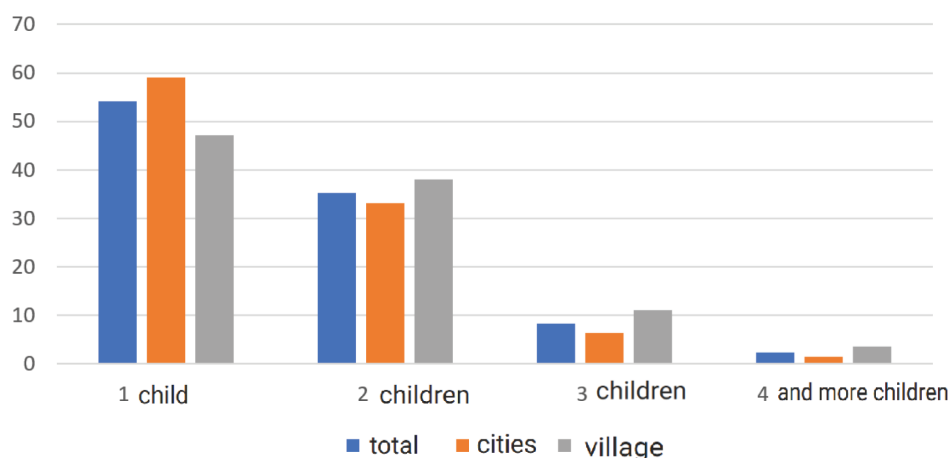


Figure 2. Families with children by number of children and place of residence in 2021.  
Source. Author's own study based on CSO data (CSO, 2023b).

\* The decline continues, with a record-low number of births in 2023: 272,100 (CSO, 2024a).

The proportions of families with one child and two children are more equal among married couples with children (43% and 44% respectively) than in informal relationships (54% and 36%). In contrast, single parents are most likely to be raising one child (66% mothers, 74% fathers).

According to the census data, almost 1.3 million children were aged 18–24 and dependent on their parents (more than 10% of all children in families). Of the almost 8 million families with children, around 62% had dependent children aged up to 24. Both figures demonstrate a downward trend: the number of dependent children under 25 years of age decreased by more than 10% compared to the previous census, and the share of families with such children in the total number of families by less than 5 percentage points.

It is worth noting at this point that Poland is one of the countries where a relatively large number of young people live with and depend on their parents. According to Eurostat data, in 2021, more than 64% of 18–34 year-olds in Poland lived with their parents (Hatfield, 2023). The top-ranked 24 European countries are: Croatia, with 76.5%, as well as several other Southern and Eastern European countries (including Italy, Bulgaria, Portugal and Greece). At the opposite end of the spectrum are Northern and Western European countries – in Sweden, Denmark and Finland, for example, about 17–18% of people in this age bracket live with their parents. In the USA, on the other hand, one in three 18–34-year-olds lives with their parents (approximately 33%). In every country surveyed, this was more often the case for men than for women\*.

### ***Informal relationships***

As mentioned above, the decrease in the share of marriages in the family structure between 2011 and 2021 was accompanied by a dynamic increase in the share of informal relationships. The share of the latter, according to data from previous censuses, usually did not exceed 2–4%, while in 2021 they already accounted for 8.4% of the total number of families (895,500). The share of informal unions increased 2.5 times in cities and 4.5 times in rural areas.

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\* Cultural factors (social norms, family bonds) are responsible for the differences between countries, on the one hand, and structural factors such as the housing market or the welfare system, on the other. Studies (Schwanitz, Rampazzo, & Vitali, 2021) have noted differences between north-western Europe and southern and eastern Europe (however, the situation in Poland was not analysed).

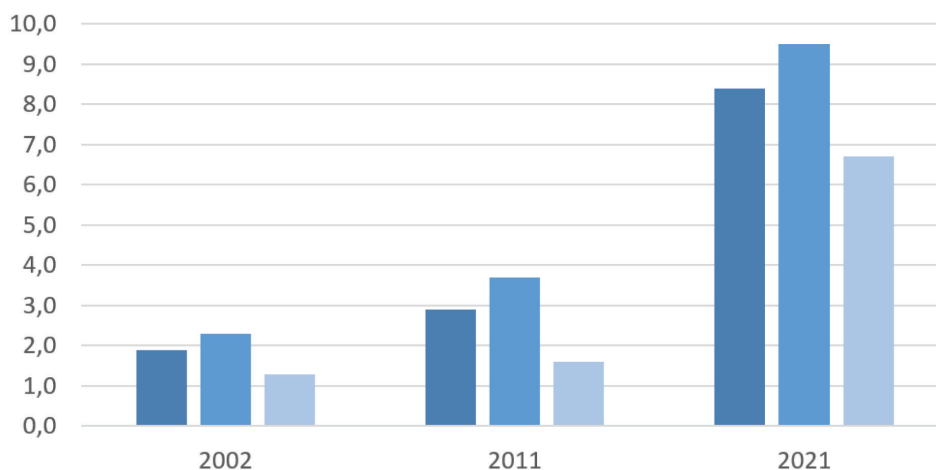


Figure 3. Informal relationships in % of total families in 2002–2021 by place of residence. Source. Author's own study based on CSO data.

There are indications that the above data do not reflect the true scale of the phenomenon. Attention has already been drawn to the fact that previous population censuses significantly underestimate the actual number of couples in informal relationships (Mynarska, Bernardi, 2007; Matysiak, 2009). The situation is also similar in the case of other sources based on cross-sectional data, as cohabitation is sometimes a short-term phenomenon (e.g., before marriage) and the marriage itself or its break-up may take place within a few years. Researchers of the issue attempt to measure themselves by collecting accounts of the experience of cohabitation ever in the life of the respondents or of the beginning of the current relationship with cohabitation (Smock, Schwartz, 2020). Analyses of this type generally indicate a much higher proportion of cohabiters than cross-sectional studies reveal.

Previous censuses and cross-sectional studies conducted in Poland, as mentioned above, recorded the share of informal relationships among total relationships in the range of 2–4%. However, qualitative research conducted at the beginning of the 21st century among young Polish women and men on opinions and meanings attributed to cohabitation suggested that the phenomenon may have been more widespread, although usually of a temporary nature. Although cohabitation became a period for partners to “test” each other, attitudes towards it were very ambiguous, and the preferred form of relationship was formally contracted marriage (Mynarska, Bernardi, 2007). The informal relationship was accepted as a temporary solution, as a prelude to marriage, which was the only desirable form of being together.

A slightly later, retrospective study on the history of partnership formation confirmed the conjecture that cohabitation is much more common than the censuses suggest. In a sample of 3,000 women born between 1966 and 1981, approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  started their relationship with cohabitation (Matysiak, 2009). Since the early 1990s, the frequency of cohabitation among first relationships has been increasing at the expense of formal marriage. A marked increase in the frequency of such relationships was then recorded among all social strata, although they were most common and longest-lasting among those with primary and vocational education.

It can be suspected that also the most recent census, although recording a clear upward trend, still does not reflect the real scale of the occurrence of informal unions. One of the indications allowing for such a hypothesis is the increase in the share of extra-marital births in Poland in recent years, despite the lack of growth in the number of single parents. On the other hand, the census itself indicates a dynamic increase in the share of cohabiting parents with children. According to the Census 2021, the number of single parents decreased between 2011 and 2021, while their share in total families remained at a similar level, i.e., around  $\frac{1}{4}$ . At the same time, there was a dynamic increase in the share of informal relationships with children during this period, much higher than that of relationships without children (Table 3). In 2021, more than 63% of informal relationships were couples with children (60% in urban areas and almost 72% in rural areas). Figure 4 illustrates the dynamics of informal relationships with and without children between 2002 and 2021.

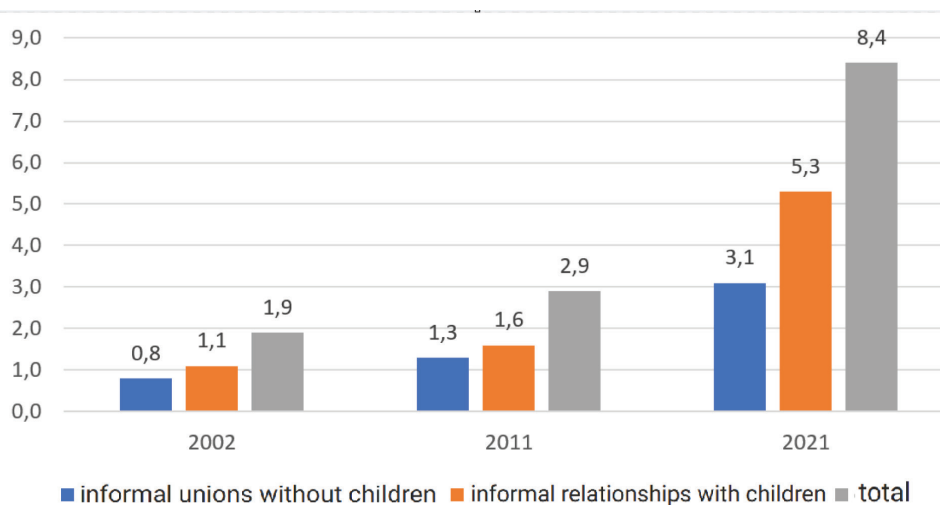


Figure 4. Informal relationships as % of total families in 2002–2021.

Source. Author's own study based on CSO data.



The number of extra-marital births in Poland itself has been growing systematically since the beginning of the 1980s. During almost the entire communist period, their share of the total number of births fluctuated around 5%, while from the beginning of the 1990s, it began to rise systematically to reach the level of 28% at the beginning of the third decade of this century\*. A greater decline in marital fertility relative to non-marital fertility (Boleslawski, 2001; Kotowska, Józwiak, Matysiak, & Baranowska-Rataj, 2008) and a decline in the propensity to marry when a partner becomes pregnant, as normative pressures to legitimize children conceived outside of marriage diminish (Tymicki, 2018, analysis for 1985–2016), were mainly responsible for this increase\*\*. Expressed another way, the intense increase in the proportion of non-marital births was mainly due to an increase in the share of births by unmarried women with a partner. In contrast, the share of births by women without a partner among total births remained stable at around 3–5% between 1985 and 2010 (Brzozowska, 2014; Tymicki, 2018). As Zuzanna Brzozowska (2014) noted based on her analysis, single motherhood has become a phenomenon more prevalent in the youngest age category and among women with the lowest level of education\*\*\*.

## Summary and discussion

Over the last decade, along with the decline in Poland's population, the number of families and households has also decreased. Based on census data analysed over a longer period, it should be noted that the average size of households is gradually decreasing, and two- and one-person households have been dominating in their structure for some time. Simultaneously, large disparities between urban and rural areas persist: almost a third of households in rural areas are five-person households and larger, while two- and one-person households are most common in urban areas. Similar variations apply to the dominant family type (with or without children) and the number of children in families – married couples with children and families with many children are much more common in rural areas than in urban areas.

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\* According to 2022 (CSO, 2024b).

\*\* However, large differences were noted between women depending on their level of education: for women with a lower level of education, becoming a mother mainly takes place outside marriage, whereas women with a higher level of education most often give birth within marriage.

\*\*\* In 2010, half of single mothers had primary education and  $\frac{2}{3}$  were under the age of 25. Girls aged 15–17 were the only category of women for whom the likelihood of single motherhood was increasing.

One of the most important changes concerning the structure of families in Poland in the decade between the censuses is the dynamic increase in the share of informal relationships among the total number of couples, which seems to indicate a growing acceptance of this type of relationship. The particularly dynamic increase in the share of informal relationships with children indicates, in turn, a growing loosening of the relationship between marriage and fertility. The census data seem to support the assumption that acceptance of cohabitation as a normatively acceptable environment for having children has increased in recent years. These changes would therefore be consistent with the predictions of the second demographic transition theory\*. Concurrently, recent analyses of non-marital births suggest that there may be large social inequalities in this regard (Brzozowska, 2014; Tymicki, 2021). Out-of-wedlock births are concentrated in the lower social strata, while women with higher education are more likely to have partners and have children within marriage. There is therefore reason to believe that, as in other European countries and the USA, the disconnection between marriage and having children, which is at the heart of the second demographic transition theory, is increasingly becoming a phenomenon occurring mainly at the lower rungs of the social ladder. However, this issue requires further research.

Despite the high growth rate in the number and share of informal relationships, they still account for a relatively small proportion (just over 8%) of the family structure. Marriages with children are dominant, although their number has significantly decreased compared to the previous census. As was the case a decade ago, the most common family model is 2+1. The share of families with many children (with three or more children) is gradually decreasing. Poland is a country with a very low birth rate, in which, at the same time, there is still a strong relationship between marriage and fertility\*\*.

The most important demographic process affecting changes in households and families in Poland is the ageing of the Polish population. It is a consequence of increasing life expectancy (with a temporary decline caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) and decreasing female fertility rates, with a simultaneous decline in the number of women of childbearing age and an increase in the age at which the first child is born. On the other hand, the processes of international migration –

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\* Families in the censuses are identified among persons living together, therefore it is not possible to obtain information on other family configurations, e.g. people who form unions but do not live together (LAt – *living apart together*).

\*\* The situation is similar in East Asia, for example, but here the rate of non-marital births is only about 6%.  
(Mogi, Raymo, Iwasawa, & Yoda, 2023).

initially mainly emigration, and more recently also the inflow of refugees from Ukraine to the territory of our country – have had a significant impact on the shaping of the birth rate in Poland in recent decades.

From a demographic point of view, international migration affects the population directly, on the one hand, by changing its status and age structure, and indirectly, on the other hand, by affecting the total number of births in the future. The former effect is temporary, while the latter has long-term consequences (Fihel, Janicka, & Kloc-Nowak, 2018). If women of reproductive age, or women who have not yet reached that age, emigrate, they will not give birth to children in their country of origin, but – if they have them – in the host country\*. In contrast, the indirect impact of emigration translates into smaller future cohort sizes.

Until the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, Poland was a country with a negative migration balance, with the dominance of departures over arrivals. However, the direct impact of emigration from Poland on population ageing, despite the massive nature of departures, was temporary and smaller than the impact on fertility and mortality (Fihel, Janicka, & Kloc-Nowak, 2018). As estimated by Agnieszka Fihel, Anna Janicka, and Weronika Kloc-Nowak (2018), under conditions of complete absence of emigration since 1980, the population over 65 would have been 1.1% smaller in 2015 than it was. However, the long-term significance of emigration was large, as Poland lost 10% of births in the period 2005-2014 alone (394,000) as a result of emigration. Mass emigration has therefore exacerbated the importance of the so-called “cohort factor” for fertility decline in Poland, which is reduced to the fact that large numbers of cohorts of women born during the baby boom of the early 1980s are now ending their so-called “reproductive careers.” Meanwhile, cohorts of younger women have generally been less and less numerous since the last boom\*\*.

Despite declining fertility trends and opinion polls heralding their deepening (see, e.g., Omyła-Rudzka, 2023a, 2023b), not all demographic trends in Poland herald a decline in the number of families and households and the number of children in families. It should be emphasised at this point that census data do not take

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\* For example, among Polish women who immigrated to Norway as part of family migration (family reunification), the fertility rate in the first few years after arrival was higher than among Polish women and Norwegian women (Tønnessen, Mussino, 2020). After several years of residence, the fertility of women arriving for reasons other than family reunification was also higher. Similar patterns were found for immigrant women from Lithuania and Germany.

\*\* There was a slight increase in the number of births only between 2008 and 2010 and later in 2017 – these periods saw the introduction of new measures in family-friendly policies – the extension of maternity and paternity leave and the introduction of the 500+ benefit.

into account immigrants who settled in our country and appeared in Poland in large numbers after the escalation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As mentioned in the introduction, the census surveys are based on the so-called “national population definition,” which, on the one hand, includes *de facto* absentees from Poland (temporarily residing abroad, regardless of the period of residence, but retaining permanent registration in the country), but excludes immigrants temporarily residing in Poland (CSO, 2023b). During the previous population census (in 2011), this way of conducting surveys might have seemed unproblematic. At that time, the number of foreigners registered in Poland for permanent residence was estimated, according to that census, at 55,000 people, and the second largest number were those temporarily residing in Poland (Górny, Kołodziejczyk, Madej, & Kaczmarczyk, 2019). Eurostat data show that as recently as 2015, Poland was one of the last places in the European Union in terms of the share of immigrants in the population (there were approximately 110 thousand foreign residents in Poland, which translated into approximately 0.3% of the population).

However, this situation started to change at the beginning of the previous decade. As a result of a combination of various conditions, there was an unprecedented increase in immigration from Ukraine to Poland\*. According to CSO estimates, the number of foreigners residing in Poland at the end of 2016 exceeded 740,000 (with a clear dominance of migrants from Ukraine; CSO, 2018). In 2017 and 2018, during the peak season, more than 1.5 million foreign workers (mainly Ukrainians) could stay in Poland, and these trends continued in 2019 (Górny et al., 2019). According to Eurostat, Poland was the European leader in terms of the number of so-called “first residence permits” issued (635,000 in 2018) and overtook countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom. It became a *de facto* immigration country, and this escalated after the escalation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As of 31 March 2023, there were almost one million (997,737) Ukrainian residents under temporary protection in Poland (CSO, 2023d). It was mainly mothers with children who came to Poland – women accounted for 65% of the total migrants, and children and young people (up to 18 years of age) for almost 42%. It is therefore necessary to carry out further analyses to determine to what extent the influx of immigrants has affected the rejuvenation of Poland’s population, as well as research on the structure of their families and households. This would provide a more complete picture of the discussed phenomena in Poland.

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\* These determinants include: falling unemployment, rising wages and an increase in the number of job vacancies in Poland, the social, economic and political crisis in Ukraine caused by the war (since 2014) and favourable changes in Poland’s immigration policy.

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