



## Demographic change calls for change in the demographic research landscape – a German perspective

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### New challenges for demographic research

Demographic change has become one of the major social policy challenges confronting Germany. Its future will prove demanding for society, the state, politicians, academics, and every individual, as the population will age more rapidly over the next 20 years, while also shrinking in size. Furthermore, there is currently no appreciable resurgence in the birth rate, egalitarian gender roles will continue to become more common, a further increase in (healthy) life expectancy is probable, greater mobility will be required, more resources will be invested in integration, and demographic change will unfold in extremely diverse ways across Germany's regions.

These demographic trends will bring changes to the everyday lives of each of the country's inhabitants. While the state and society will need to develop appropriate strategies to manage these changes, new opportunities for shaping the future will open up, and these will need to be recognised and grasped. Changes must be implemented – especially in the education system, the labour market, the healthcare systems, infrastructure areas, the administrative and finance systems, and in security matters. There will be significant differences in the forms these changes take between one region and the next.

These challenges and changes also require a change in Germany's demographic research landscape, which has seen an increase in the number of institutions addressing these issues as well as a broadening of the spectrum of research topics. What are these changes? The hitherto classical principle of genealogy is becoming the focus of research activity. Theoretical research needs to be specified, the focus on research activity must intensify, and research must align more closely with the objective of advising on future policy. In particular, research into the consequences of demographic change is gaining prominence. Other new topics are the role of the family in the network of inter-generational relations, the impact of role models on reproductive behaviour, the impact of geographical mobility on family development and research into the potential benefits of demographic ageing.

One important objective is to inform and advise Germany's federal government and the federal ministries. This requires better coordination of contract research and

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theoretical research. In order to achieve this goal, there must be comprehensive monitoring of demographic change as well as of current methodological developments and theories.

The goal is to achieve a better understanding of Germany's demographic situation by analysing the change in demographic structures and demographic behaviour patterns in a comparative international context. Demographic behaviour patterns must be explained more clearly, which is where differential analyses can be of help. Most of the differential analyses conducted to date suffer from their design as cross-sectional studies. The processes involved in migration or family development are thus largely ignored. Further research must therefore be conducted in the form of longitudinal studies, with a larger share of surveys designed to collect panel data. The objective of such research is to investigate demographic processes along their lines of development.

Furthermore, methodological pluralism is required. Analyses based predominantly on quantitative methods must be supplemented with qualitative research elements. Official statistical data should be strategically linked with surveys conducted by other institutions. The reappraisal of methodological approaches must include references to international comparisons and differential analyses.

## **Seven mega-trends for demographic research**

### *1. Population ageing*

Population ageing is producing new challenges for social security systems, especially pension, health, and long-term care insurance schemes. The elderly citizens of today and tomorrow constitute an impressive reservoir of potential that must be tapped if the ramifications of demographic change are to be dealt with. The opportunities presented by demographic ageing must be seized rapidly.

### *2. Low fertility situation*

The causes of the low birth rate need to be investigated. Research should focus on the impact of changing values, the shift in notions of what constitutes an ideal family and ideal family upbringing, on the one hand, and differential analyses of fertility, on the other.

### *3. Changes in family constructs and lifestyles*

Changes in family constructs and lifestyles, which refer to individualisation, pluralisation, and deinstitutionalisation, need to be addressed. Within the framework of differential analyses of fertility, more research needs to be conducted into the conditions and causes of the emergence of different lifestyles, their social situations and the consequences for the individuals and their reproductive decision-making.

#### *4. Increasing life expectancy*

Another issue to be addressed are the future opportunities that stem from the growing number of elderly people. Research should be focused on those age cohorts who have already retired or will soon leave the workforce. The imperatives are to identify the potentials of these cohorts and to determine the conditions – especially the influence of the labour market – under which the generations of retirees are prepared to translate their potential into active participation.

#### *5. Inter-generational relationships under demographic change*

The shared lifetimes of grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren have increased significantly, thereby creating the opportunity for more diverse and differentiated inter-generational relations. The key areas will be the analyses of inter-generational relationships according to lifestyle, from the perspective of gender roles, of family constructs, socio-structural differentiation, and the formation of inter-generational relationships outside the traditional family. Another avenue of research is to investigate the potential assistance that elderly people without children of their own can offer, as well as what elderly people can do for one another.

#### *6. Mobility and migration*

Three primary issues related to mobility and migration must be addressed. First, internal migration and immigration can influence population numbers and structures (age structure, regional distribution, structure of lifestyles, proportions of the population with a migration background) as well as regional population distribution. However, emigration and inward immigration have a limited impact on demographic ageing. Second, the competition for skilled personnel has gained a new level of importance. In Germany, the debate focuses especially on the loss of highly qualified human resources (the brain drain). Third, the demands for job-related geographical mobility appear to be increasing.

#### *7. Regional demographic trends*

Regions in which the population is ageing and shrinking are expected to undergo a relative decline in their economic vibrancy and the range of public services they offer. Furthermore, these regions will become less attractive to new companies seeking business premises, while the regional ties of established companies will weaken as its workforce is ageing swiftly and highly skilled specialists leave the region. It is demographic change, not only in regions with shrinking populations, that generally results in new demands for the maintenance of public services. Regional planning, which has hitherto often been geared towards *expected growth*, must focus more closely on managing the processes of *population shrinkage*.

From Grey to Silver

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