

Germany's Baby Bust

Why Aren't Germans Having Babies?

By Jody K. Biehl

Germany's birthrate is plunging. Yet, amid the grim numbers, report after report has claimed that Berlin's hip Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood has found the magic formula for increasing births. Though the neighborhood's streets are packed with strollers, the numbers tell a different story.

Six baby strollers are parked outside an upscale children's store. Inside, six chicly dressed mothers claw -- literally scratch -- at each other to get what they came for: a coveted pair of Winnie the Pooh rubber rain boots. They're the only boots their 2-year-olds will wear and the rainy season has just begun.

Welcome to Berlin's sciniest scene, the hottest neighborhood in town, Prenzlauer Berg -- Germany's answer to London's Notting Hill or New York's East Village. Here - - in shocking contrast to other parts of this graying country -- children and their doting parents are everywhere. In the past eight years, the number of under-three-year-olds has risen close to threefold in this former working class neighborhood of 134,000. Organic markets and toy stores abound. Playgrounds pop with life. Newspaper kiosks even sell diapers. One Indian restaurant has an indoor jungle gym as a gimmick to attract clients.

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Germany's newspapers have hailed Prenzlauer Berg as the nation's "boomingist" baby center. Could it, they have also asked, also hold the answer to Germany's increasing fertility problem? If the magic of Prenzlauer Berg could be squeezed, bottled and marketed, not only could Germany become the world's hippest nation, but the country could also waylay its darkest fear: that there will soon be no young people to care and pay for its fast-aging population.

Where are all the babies?

Konrad Adenauer -- Germany's post-World War II chancellor -- once famously quipped that the government didn't need to offer lavish benefits for families because "Germans will always have children." He was dead wrong. Currently, one-third of German women are childless. It's the highest rate of childlessness in the world. Were it not for the influx of foreigners and longer life spans, Germans -- like many Europeans -- would be a dying breed. Germany's current birth rate is half what it was 40 years ago. Worse, 44 percent of Germans interviewed recently by the prestigious Forsa and Allensbach institutes said they were happy without kids and planned to remain childless.

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Babies aren't the only answer

Why aren't more babies being born elsewhere? "Maybe people just don't want to have children anymore," said Karsten Hank, a demographic expert and sociologist at the University of Mannheim. "Maybe its not as natural as we think it is." Still, many feel guilty if they don't because it is "still socially expected that people want to have children, regardless of if they do or don't."

A well-known statistic that often gets bantied about in Germany is that 40-45 percent of women with university degrees are childless. "I'm pretty sure most of these women planned to have children, but then didn't," either because of their career or their advanced age when they started trying to get pregnant, Hank said. As a rule, university cities and urban centers have lower fertility rates than rural areas without higher education options. The closest Hank can come to a miracle formula for fertility is: don't get an education, marry early and live on a farm. Hardly a tempting life plan.

A lack of good childcare possibilities is another reason often cited for low birthrates and in recent months the German government has sworn to help families by offering more preschool and year-round school slots. Hank spent five years studying the subject and has this to say: "I thought childcare would be it. I thought it would be easy. But what I found is that it had absolutely no effect." Another fascinating fact about German fertility is that German women tend either to have no children or two or more, he said. "The crucial decision in Germany is if you have one child or none," he said. "Once you have one, you already have all the difficulties of trying to balance family and career. So you might as well have another."

Could society be to blame for many women's aversion to motherhood? Certainly many women are simply burned out or terrified by the responsibility and burden they think motherhood brings. Others aren't willing to give up their careers. "It's too much pressure for many women," Hank said. "It's too hard to be a good mother, a perfect wife, a good lover and hold down a successful job." In Germany -- where many believe mothers should care for their children until they are three -- there is a particularly nasty phrase often attached to mothers who work. They are labeled "*Rabenmutter*," or inattentive, unloving, "unnatural" mothers. "Maybe all of this pressure has pushed women to make a choice," said Hanks. Rather than being bad mothers, they are simply choosing not to be mothers at all.

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