



Fear Free Childbirth

EPISODE 05 · TEN YEARS ON

What happened to *having babies?*

Fertility, reproductive fear, motherhood, agency and the rabbit hole

Episode data pack · fearfreechildbirth.com

TOTAL FERTILITY RATE · ENGLAND & WALES

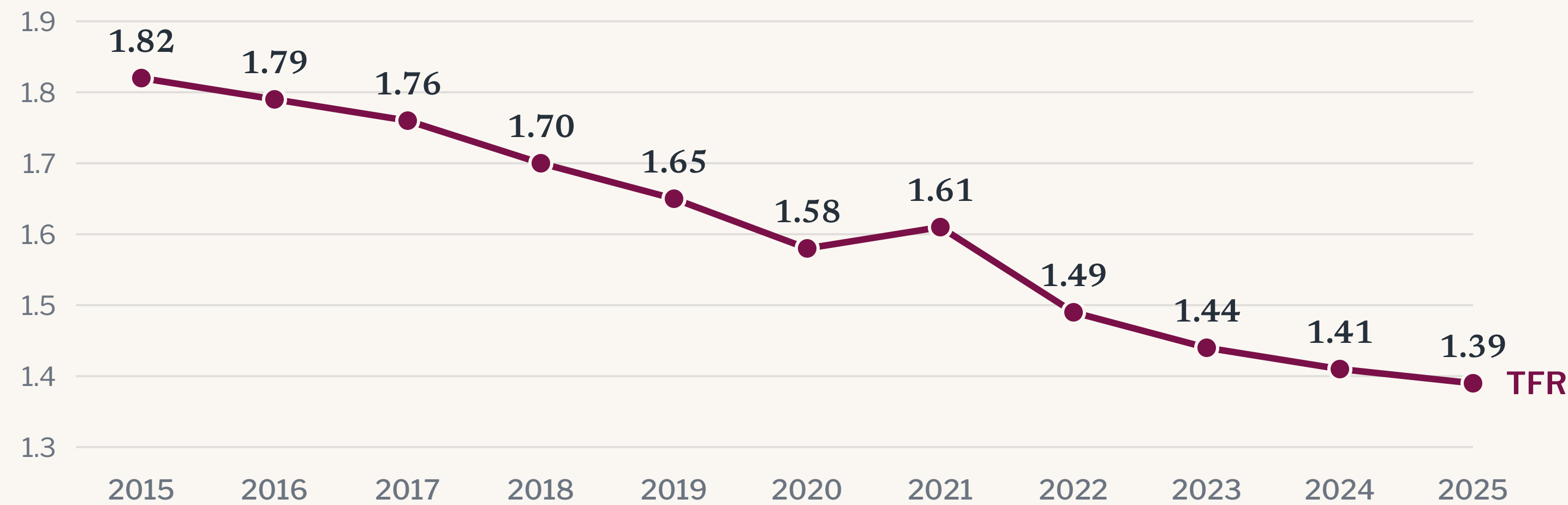
1.82 → 1.39

*From 2015, when Fear Free Childbirth began, to 2025: a fall of
around 24% in ten years.*

Source: ONS, Births in England and Wales 2015 and 2025 (2025 provisional)

Ten years of *falling* fertility

Average children per woman



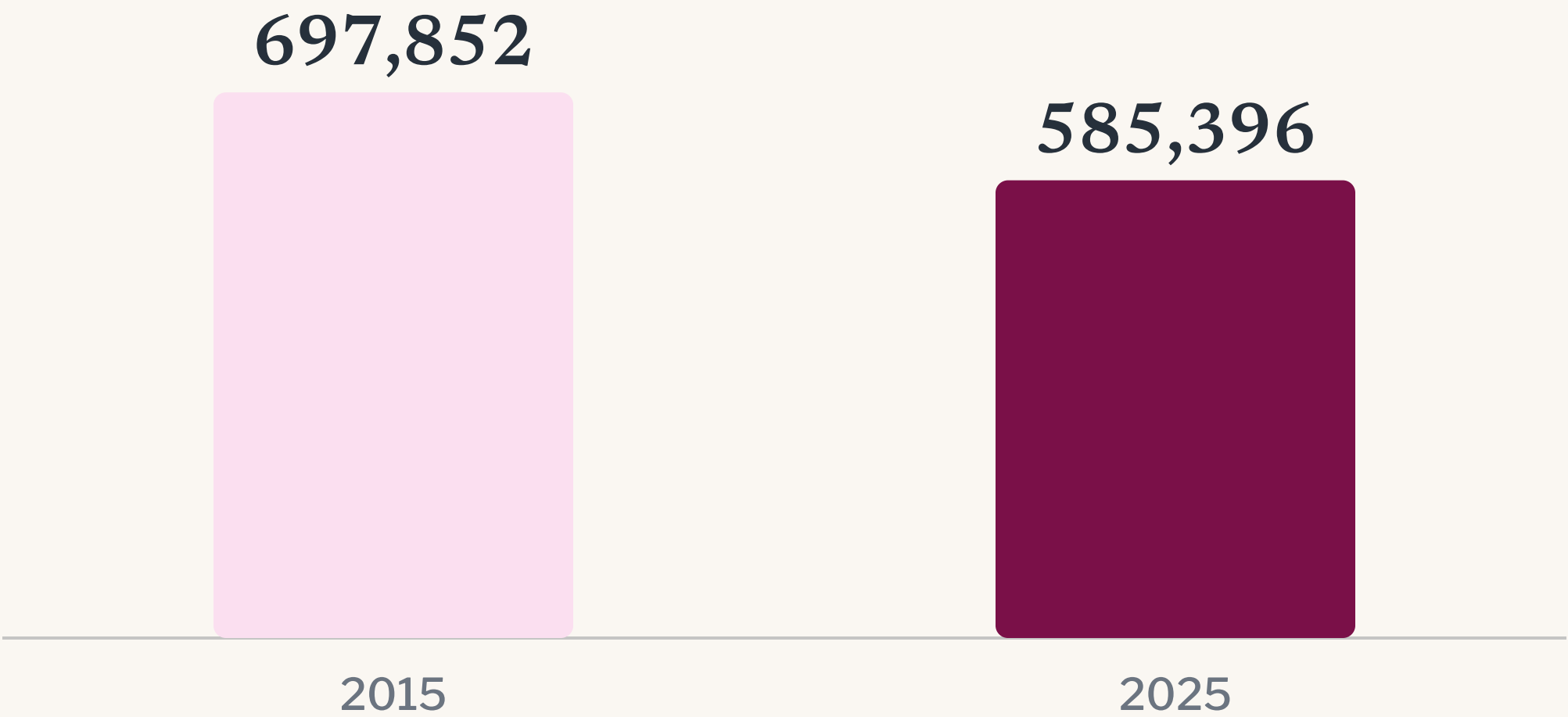
TFR is a period measure. It isn't the number of children any individual woman will go on to have.

Source: ONS, Births in England and Wales 2015–2025 (2025 provisional)

LIVE BIRTHS · ENGLAND & WALES

112,456 fewer babies than in 2015

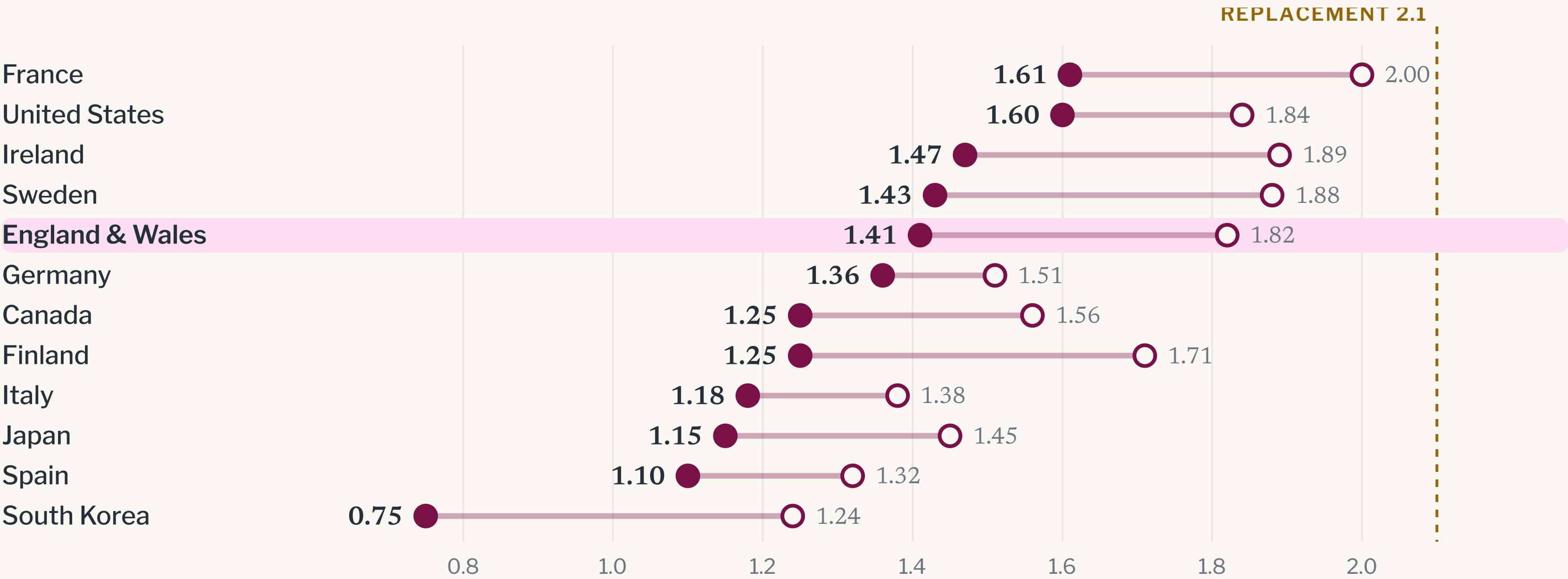
Registered live births



Source: ONS, Births in England and Wales 2015 and 2025

It isn't just us: *falling almost everywhere*

Total fertility rate, around 2015 (open circle) and 2024 (filled). European countries compare 2014 with 2024



Source: Eurostat via Euronews (European countries, 2014 and 2024); ONS; CDC/NCHS; Statistics Canada; Japan MHLW; Statistics Korea

FERTILITY · THE WHOLE WORLD

3.31 → 2.25

*The global fertility rate in 1990 and today. The world as a whole is now **only just above** replacement level.*

Replacement level is about 2.1 children per woman. Many countries are now well below it, while others, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, are still well above.

Source: UN DESA, World Population Prospects 2024

UNFPA · 14-COUNTRY SURVEY · 2025

1 *in* 5

*people expected **not to have** the number of children they wanted.*

Source: UNFPA, State of World Population 2025: The Real Fertility Crisis



UNFPA · 14-COUNTRY SURVEY · 2025

More than half

*of those people cited **economic issues** as a barrier. Others named:*

Housing

Job insecurity

Concern about the future

No suitable partner

Unequal caregiving

Source: UNFPA, State of World Population 2025

THE QUESTION THAT CHANGES

What is getting between people and *the families they want?*

Wanted family size can be higher or lower than actual. Reproductive agency means supporting freely chosen family size.

THE THING THAT STARTED BOTHERING ME

Where is *fear* on the list?

“I want the baby. I’m just terrified of what I have to go through to get one.”

Pregnancy

Childbirth

Pain

Injury

Death

Hospitals

Intervention

Loss of control

Bodily change

Maternity care

Tokophobia

If a survey doesn’t offer that reason clearly, where does that woman go in the data?

PRECONCEPTION FEAR OF CHILDBIRTH · SWEDEN · 2022

9

*women who had never given birth, wanted children, and were **hesitant to become pregnant** because of fear of childbirth.*

A small qualitative study. What matters is that these women exist. They described avoiding pregnancy, and very limited support, because fear-of-childbirth care is mostly organised around women who are already pregnant.

Source: Rondung, Magnusson & Ternström, Reproductive Health, 2022

27%

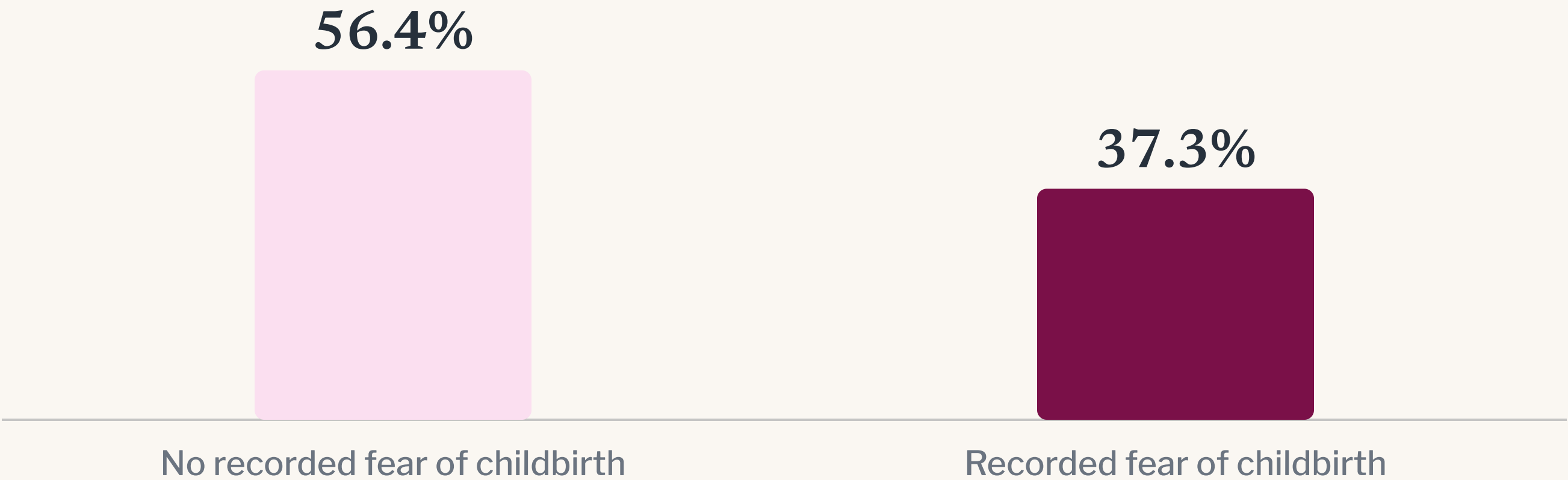
*of mothers with one child said fear of childbirth **or their previous birth experience** had delayed trying for another child they still wanted.*

The survey question combines fear with previous birth experience. It doesn't mean 27% have tokophobia.

Source: Finnish Family Barometer 2022, cited in Silvan et al., Reproductive Health, 2025

After fear in a first pregnancy, *fewer second births*

Women who had a second pregnancy ending in delivery during follow-up, by fear of childbirth recorded in their first pregnancy



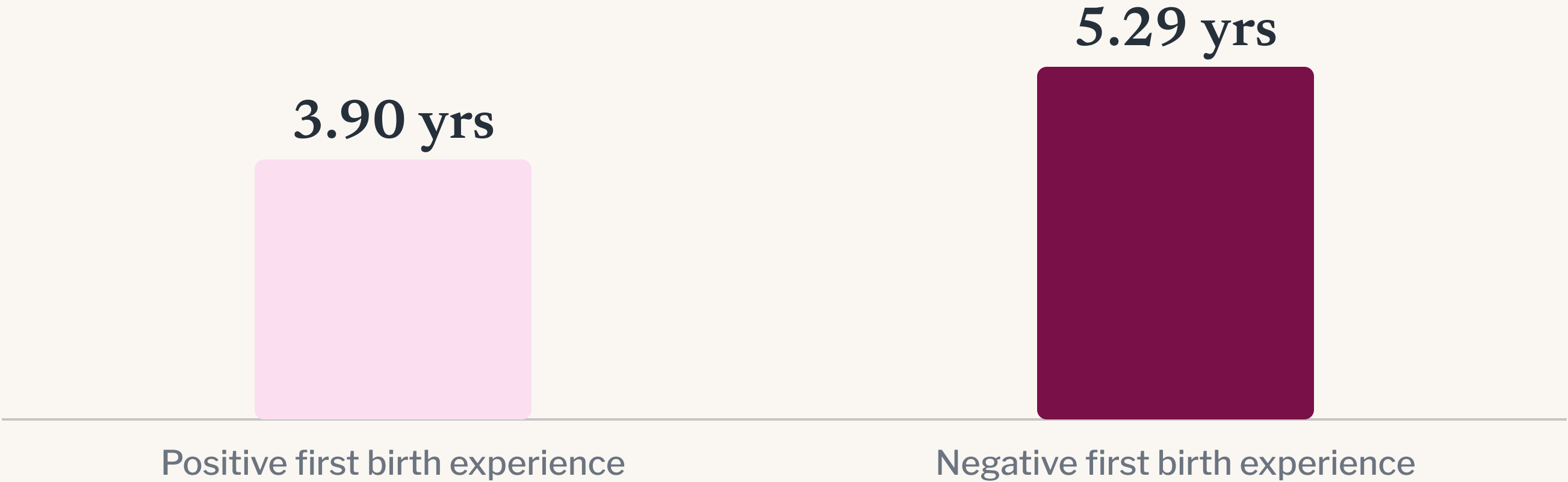
Adjusted hazard ratio 0.61. An association, not proof that fear caused every missing birth.

Source: Vaajala et al., Annals of Epidemiology, 2023

FINLAND · 45,947 FIRST-TIME MOTHERS

After a negative birth, *a longer wait* for the next baby

Median time to the next birth



A negative first birth experience was also linked with a 19% lower adjusted likelihood of a subsequent birth (adjusted HR 0.81).

Source: Joensuu et al., BMJ Open, 2023

SWEDEN · 2026 · WOMEN WHO HAVE ALREADY GIVEN BIRTH

8

*women who strongly wanted more children but were postponing or avoiding another pregnancy because of fear of childbirth. **Two had decided against it. Six were still unsure.***

Source: Ternström, Aarseth & Rondung, Reproductive Health, 2026

What will motherhood *do to my life?*

- Will I lose my identity?
- Will I become the default parent?
- What happens to my relationship?
- Can I afford the version of motherhood I see around me?
- Will I still be taken seriously at work?
- What happens to my income, career and independence?
- Will everybody stop seeing me and only see “mum”?

PREGNANCY & MATERNITY DISCRIMINATION · UK · 2016

3,000+

*mothers and 3,000+ employers took part in the research into
pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage.*

Source: BIS / EHRC, Pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage, 2016

STATUTORY MATERNITY PAY · 2026/27

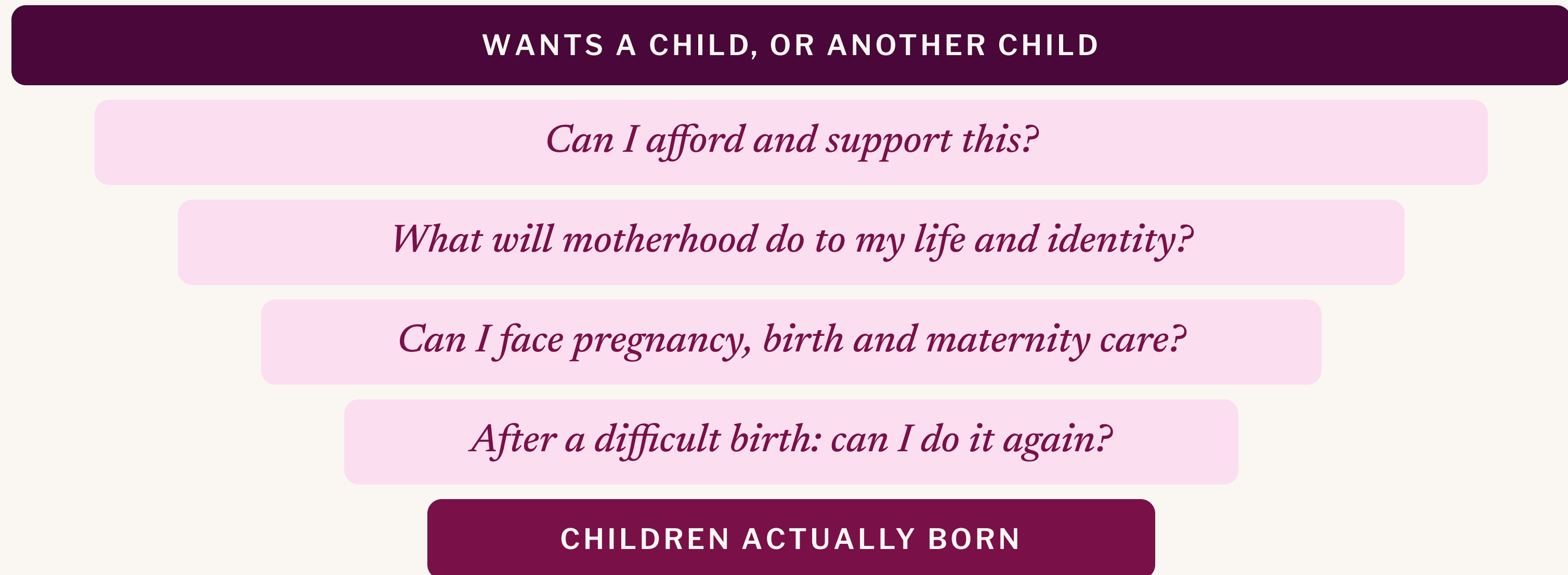
£194.32

*a week after the first six weeks, or 90% of earnings if that's lower. The **first six weeks** are paid at 90% of earnings.*

Source: GOV.UK, Rates and thresholds for employers 2026 to 2027

Where do people who want children *fall out*?

A map of questions, not a tested model



What the evidence *does* say

- Fertility in England and Wales has fallen markedly over the podcast's ten years.
- Many people around the world expect to have fewer children than they want.
- Some women want children but avoid pregnancy because of fear of childbirth.
- Some women want another child but postpone or avoid another pregnancy because of it.
- In Finland, 27% of one-child mothers said fear or a previous birth delayed a still-wanted second child.
- Large Finnish studies link fear and negative birth experiences with fewer or later subsequent births.
- We still have no clean population estimate of wanted babies forgone because of fear.

What the evidence *doesn't* say

- That tokophobia caused the fall in fertility in England and Wales.
- That 27% of one-child mothers have tokophobia.
- That every link between birth experience and later fertility is causal.
- That every woman who stops at one child secretly wants another.
- That falling fertility is inherently bad, or that women owe society babies.
- That psychological preparation can make up for unsafe, disrespectful or poor maternity care.

THE RABBIT HOLE

We still don't know how many wanted babies aren't being born *because fear changes the decision.*

Fertility research rarely separates out fear of pregnancy and childbirth. Fear-of-childbirth research mostly starts once women are already pregnant.

WHERE THIS GOES NEXT

Following the thread *down the rabbit hole*

- Talking to the researchers behind these studies.
- How fertility intentions are measured, and whether fear is even on the list.
- What we know about tokophobia before a first pregnancy, and about birth trauma.
- Whether maternity experience belongs in the fertility-policy conversation.

TO CLOSE

If we want to understand why fewer babies are being born, perhaps we need to stop assuming that not having a baby always means not wanting one, and start asking *what gets between wanting a child and feeling able to have one.*

SOURCES

Where the numbers *come from*

ONS – Births in England and Wales: 2015 and 2025

ons.gov.uk (2025 figures provisional)

CDC / NCHS · Statistics Canada · Japan MHLW · Statistics Korea

National fertility releases, 2015–2025

UNFPA – State of World Population 2025

The Real Fertility Crisis · unfpa.org/swp2025

Silvan et al., 2025

Fear of childbirth and psychiatric disorders decrease the likelihood of subsequent births · Reproductive Health (cites Finnish Family Barometer 2022)

Joensuu et al., 2023

Effect of the maternal childbirth experience on a subsequent birth · BMJ Open

BIS / EHRC, 2016

Pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage · gov.uk

Eurostat – Fertility 2024

ec.europa.eu/eurostat (2014 comparisons via Euronews, March 2026)

UN DESA – World Population Prospects 2024

un.org/development/desa/pd

Rondung, Magnusson & Ternström, 2022

Preconception fear of childbirth · Reproductive Health

Vaajala et al., 2023

Birth rate among women with fear of childbirth · Annals of Epidemiology

Ternström, Aarseth & Rondung, 2026

The lasting effects of fear of childbirth · Reproductive Health

GOV.UK – Rates and thresholds 2026 to 2027

Statutory maternity pay