Declining male births with increasing geographical latitude in Europe

Victor Grech, P Vassallo-Agius, Charles Savona-Ventura

Abstract

Objective—Demographic studies in various industrialised countries have shown a decline in male births in the latter half of the 20th century from the expected ratio of 0.515 (males/total). This study analyses trends in this ratio over the period 1890 to 1995 in Malta, and also analyses this ratio for Western European countries for the period 1990–1995.

Methods—Births subdivided by sex were obtained from official Maltese publications. European countries were grouped according to geographical latitude by banding countries into three groups: Northern Mediterranean, Central European and Scandinavian. Births by sex for these countries were also analysed for the period 1990–1995.

Results—No decline in the ratio of male births to total births was noted in Malta over the period 1916–1995. However, the ratio was higher than expected (n=151 766, ratio=0.517 (95% confidence intervals 95% CI): 0.514, 0.519). Moreover, during the period 1890–1899 (n=66 874), the ratio was 0.523 (95% CI: 0.519, 0.527), even higher than observed during the 20th century (χ²=8.3, p=0.004). Analysis of European births showed a much higher ratio of male births in the south of Europe than in the north (χ²=87.2, p<0.0001).

Conclusions—The findings were unable to explain the higher incidence of male births in the south of Europe, but it is speculated that ambient temperatures may not only affect fertility, but also influence sex ratios at birth.

Recent studies from various countries have shown a decline in male births, with a drop in the ratio of male to female births from the traditional 1.06:1 over the past three to five decades.¹ ²

Malta is a small island in the central Mediterranean with a total area of 246 km² and a relatively closed population of around 370 000. Registration of births is mandatory, and accurate demographic records have been kept for many decades, making this an ideal location for epidemiological studies.

The aims of this study were to test two null hypotheses: that there has not been a decline in male births in Malta over the period 1890–1995, and that there are no significant differences in the ratio of male births to total births in Europe associated with geographical latitude.

Results

M/F IN MALTA

Annual births ranged between 11612 (1947) and 4613 (1995). The annual M/F varied between 0.503 and 0.530 for the period 1916–1995, with an overall M/F of 0.517 (95% CI: 0.514, 0.519). No declining trend was obtained from the United Nations Demographic Yearbook for those years when these data were reported.

Stillbirths are not included in this study. The quadratic equations of Fleiss were used to calculate exact 95% confidence intervals (95% CI).³ The χ² test for trend was used to analyse changing trends in M/F. A p value ≤ 0.05 was taken to represent a statistically significant result.

Table 1 European countries banded by latitude

<table>
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<th>Latitude</th>
<th>Portugal</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Austria</th>
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<th>Switzerland</th>
<th>Spain</th>
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References


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present for the period 1916–1995. The data were subdivided into three eras that reflect mayor social upheavals in Malta: the pre-second world war period with a high emigration rate because of unemployment, 1916–1935; the period around the second world war, 1936–1955; and the more modern era with the grant of independence from the British Government, 1956–1995 (fig 1). There were no differences in M/F in these three periods, although M/F in all eras was greater than the expected 0.515.

During the period 1890–1899 (n=66 874), M/F was 0.523 (95% CI: 0.519, 0.527). This was significantly higher than the ratio observed during the 20th century ($\chi^2=8.3$, $p=0.004$) (fig 1).

For all of the years available (1890–1899 and 1916–1995), M/F was 0.519 (95% CI:0.517, 0.521), significantly higher than the expected value of 0.515.

M/F BY GEOGRAPHICAL LATITUDE IN EUROPE

A highly significant decline in M/F was found for births by increasing latitude ($\chi^2$ for trend=80.2, $p<0.0001$) (fig 2).

Discussion

M/F IN MALTA

A decline in male births over varying time frames during the second half of the 20th century has been noted in various developed countries, including Denmark, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States.1–4 It is known that the male fetus is more susceptible to environmental insults,4 and indeed the male fetus is generally more fragile and prone to be stillborn. Toxic byproducts of industrialisation causing increased loss of male fetuses has been put forward as a cause for the observed decline in male births. No such trends were present in Malta in the 20th century. However, the M/F was consistently greater than the expected value of 0.515 (fig 1), and for this reason, M/F was analysed for European countries according to broad geographical regions, based on latitude.

M/F BY GEOGRAPHICAL LATITUDE IN EUROPE

The countries to the south of Europe have a significantly higher number of male births than those towards the north of Europe. This finding has not been previously reported, to the best our knowledge. It is not possible to identify factors that have led to the differences in these sex ratios at birth. An obvious potential factor is that of temperature, and studies relating to sex ratios at birth, and not just to fertility, may help to elucidate the findings of this study.10 11

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