

# Social classes and transition to adulthood in Spain



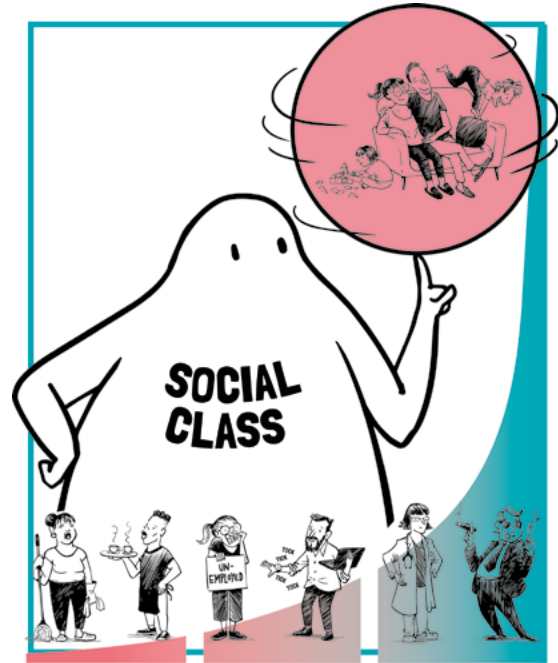
**Andrés F. Castro Torres**  
*Researcher Beatriu de Pinós (CED)*



**Carlos Ruiz Ramos**  
*Researcher in Training (CED)*

A research project, “Interconnected Inequalities and Family Life Courses in Spain” (INTERINEQ) headed by Andrés Castro, a researcher at the Centre for Demographic Studies (CED) offers a new look at transition to adulthood and low fertility in Spain. From a quantitative and multivariate perspective, this study identifies six social classes among people aged between 29 and 35 in Spain: one consolidated upper class, three middle classes, and two lower classes. The research shows that plans for having a family and their coming to fruition depend on these social classes and, in particular, on the relative advantages and disadvantages in the middle classes. Relative disadvantages are associated with late emancipation and couple formation, and fewer children than desired. In the lower classes, there are no delayed family formation patterns or fertility gaps.

## Social stratification and transition to adulthood



**Figure 1.** Social classes and inequality. Explanatory video available at: <https://ced.cat/projectes/interineq/>. Author: Atxe

Compared to other parts of the world, European societies are relatively egalitarian but the distribution of resources and opportunities for forming new families is a long way from being just. Current demographic regimes reflect increasing social inequality as a product of decades of expanding global finance capitalism (Fraser 2022).

In this context of growing inequality, study of the relationship between the demographics of different countries and social classes and inequality has become necessary (Therborn 2013).

One characteristic of Europe’s demographics is low fertility. In 2021, an average of less than two children per woman was recorded for all countries in the continent, which could entail delayed generational replacement. This low fertility coincides with delayed transition to adulthood (Beaujouan 2020). Today’s young people take longer than earlier generations to become emancipated, live with a partner, and have children. Since these three transitions require material resources, social inequality is arguably both cause and consequence of some people making these transitions faster than others.

In order to understand the role played by social classes in transition to adulthood, we analyse information from more than 2,500 people aged between 29 and 35 using the 2018 Fertility

Survey (National Institute of Statistics, 2018).

First, we identify groups of people with comparable living conditions in keeping with eight socioeconomic variables that determine their social position: place of birth; educational level; occupation; size of home; conditions of access to housing; place of residence; monthly household income; and educational level of the parent with higher qualifications. We refer to these groups as *probable social classes* (Bourdieu 2005).

Second, we study the percentages of emancipated, cohabiting people, with children in each probable social class. This analysis shows that binary divisions between native and immigrant people, those with or without higher education, and owners and non-owners, are not sufficient to describe and explain transition to adulthood in Spain.

### Probable social classes in Spain

There are strong correlations between all the eight variables analysed. Children of highly educated people tend to have a high level of education and prestigious, well-paid jobs. This means greater stability of employment and better access to housing. Likewise, there are groups whose social position is determined by the confluence of disadvantages. Nevertheless, these correlations are not definitive. There are many combinations of privileges, disadvantages and specific conditions like immigration which allow identification of social groups with distinct living conditions.

Figure 2 shows the location of *probable social classes* along two axes that represent their economic conditions. The labels indicate their positions in the social space: upper, middle, and lower, as well as a particular characteristic of the socioeconomic condition in each case. The ellipses refer to the heterogeneity of each class and the lower classes are the most heterogeneous. Overlap of ellipses indicates similarity.

The consolidated upper class represents 15% of the population aged from 29 to 35 and includes highly educated people with highly educated parents. In this class, 17% are immigrants, a value that is similar to that (19%) for people born outside Spain in the total population being studied. Most of the advantages in terms of educational attainment, occupation, income, home space, and conditions of access to housing come together in this class.

This consolidated upper class is followed by an upwardly mobile, highly educated middle class but with progenitors

whose educational levels are mid-level. This class represents 21% of the population being studied. The degree of indebtedness related to access to housing is considerably higher in this class when compared to the consolidated upper class. In this regard, it is an upwardly mobile class that enjoys fewer privileges. People born outside of Spain account for less than 4% of this class.

In the urban and unemployed middle classes, educational level, conditions for access to housing, prestige of occupations, and income level are all lower than in the upwardly mobile middle class. In the urban middle class (23%), we find that employment is almost universal while, in the other middle class sector (17%) more than a third of its members are unemployed (unemployed middle class). People born outside of Spain represent less than 3% of these two classes.

The two lower classes stand out because one shows people born outside Spain as a majority (75%). This is a class of medium and low educational level, employed in low-wage jobs that mostly pay the rent, with restricted living space in their homes in terms of square meters per person, and living in urban areas (urban lower class, 13%).

The excluded lower class, in addition to being renters with limited living space, is the class with the lowest levels of income and education, and with the highest percentages of unemployment (42%) and inactivity (43%). In this regard, it is a class that is excluded from the educational system, the job market, and the benefits of the Spanish economy (excluded lower class, 12%). In this class, 58% of its members were born in Spain.

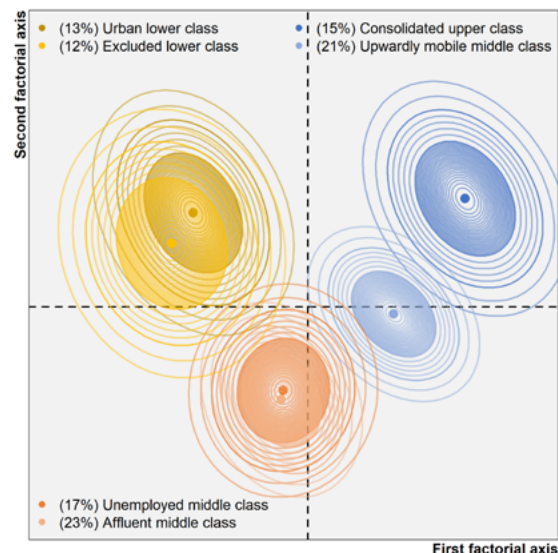


Figure 2. Social space and *probable social classes*.

To sum up, the adult population in Spain is not homogenous. To this evident result one less obvious one can be added. The differences appearing in this population come from a confluence of privileges and disadvantages. Confluence is a key word as it defines the *probable social classes*. While a sector of the population enjoys socially privileged conditions like a high level of education, early access to home ownership as well as highly paid, stable jobs, and intergenerational social mobility, other sectors of the population show a confluence of opposite conditions: low educational levels, large economic burdens due to rent and loan payments, unemployment, inactivity, and low incomes.

Immigration appears as an additional layer within this class system. The population of African origin appears only in the lower classes, while the Latin American population appears in both lower and upper classes, together with immigrants from the European Union, North America, and Asia.

### Which social classes can become emancipated, cohabit, and have children?

The answer to this question is not simple. As Figure 3 shows, the unemployed middle class has the lowest levels of emancipation and cohabitation with a partner, of 57% and 35% respectively. As for the numbers of people who are able to leave the parental home, it is followed by the excluded lower class with 67%. The factor of high unemployment common to these two classes possibly explains why almost a third of adults therein are not emancipated. In terms of percentage of married and unmarried co-residing partners, it is followed by

the consolidated upper class with 49%, which suggests that not cohabiting can be associated with both precarity and privilege.

The highest levels of emancipation, cohabitation with a partner, and parenthood are observed in the urban lower class owing to the greater proportion of immigrants in this class (75%). It is well known that migration and family formation projects are closely related (A. F. Castro Torres and Gutierrez-Vazquez 2022).

In terms of transition to parenthood, the social class gradient is clear, with the highest percentages being among the lower classes, where more than half the members are mothers or fathers. Then again, the unemployed middle class and the consolidated upper class show the lowest figures (22% and 26%), which suggests that postponement of having the first child is observed in situations of both privilege and privation.

Long-term and short-term fertility plans also follow a social class pattern. As Figure 3 shows, more than 65% of people in the upper classes indicated they planned to become parents in the next three years. In the unemployed middle class and excluded working class, these intentions are less clear, with figures of barely 57% and 53%. One consistent trend is that one in five members of the unemployed middle class does not want to have children. This percentage is similar to that for the upwardly mobile middle class, which once again draws attention to the complex relationship between social class and the dynamics of family formation.

In sum, delays in timetables for transition to adulthood in Spain are not the result of separate effects of immigration, educational attainment, unemployment, and barriers to access

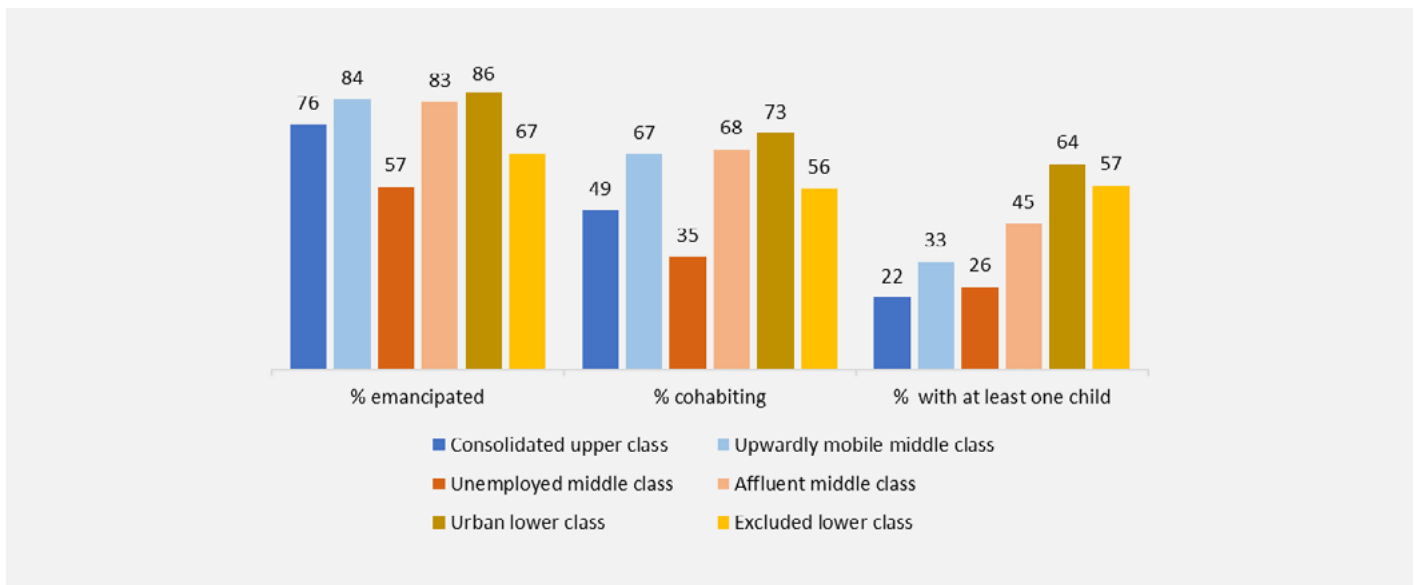


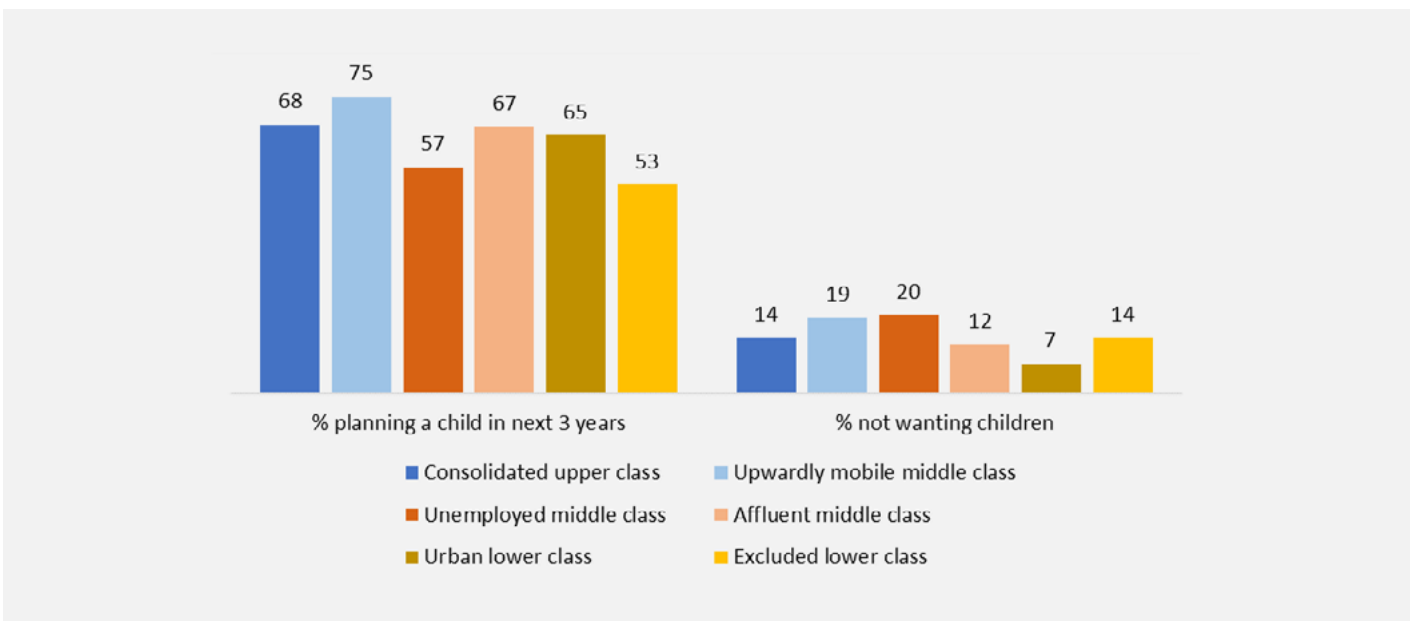
Figure 3. Percentage of emancipated people co-residing with a partner and with at least one child by probable social classes.

to housing in the population as a whole. It is the confluence of these factors in specific social groups that contributes to a heterogeneous pattern of transition to adulthood.

A return to the concepts of class and class inequalities are necessary for understanding delayed transitions and low fertility in Spain. On the one hand, the role of adverse circumstances in delayed transitions can be seen in patterns of transition to adulthood in the unemployed middle class. Job insecurity and barriers to access to housing prevent these people from proceeding with life plans that involve emancipation, cohabitation, and parenthood. Social class

can thwart both transitions and aspirations, including those of the excluded lower class. It is in the middle classes that fertility gaps can materialise or, in other words, at the end of reproductive life, the number of children people have is less than what they desired. In other parts of the social space, namely among lower classes and upper classes, fertility gaps do not seem to exist.

The complete results of this study and further information can be found in Castro Torres and Ruiz-Ramos (2024) and on the website of the INTERINEQ of the Centro de Estudios Demográficos (Centre for Demographic Studies, CED).



**Figure 4.** Percentages of people planning to have a child in the next three years and those who do not want to have children by probable social classes.

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**Editors**

Andreu Domingo y Albert Esteve

**Correspondence to:**

Andrés F. Castro Torres  
 acastro@ced.uab.cat  
 Carlos Ruiz Ramos  
 cruiz@ced.uab.cat

**Credits**

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**Layout**

Xavier Ruiz y Eva Albors

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**Twitter**

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**Contact**

Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics.  
 Carrer de Ca n'Altayó, Edifici E2  
 Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona  
 08193 Bellaterra / Barcelona  
 España  
 +34 93 5813060  
 demog@ced.uab.es  
<https://ced.cat/eng/>