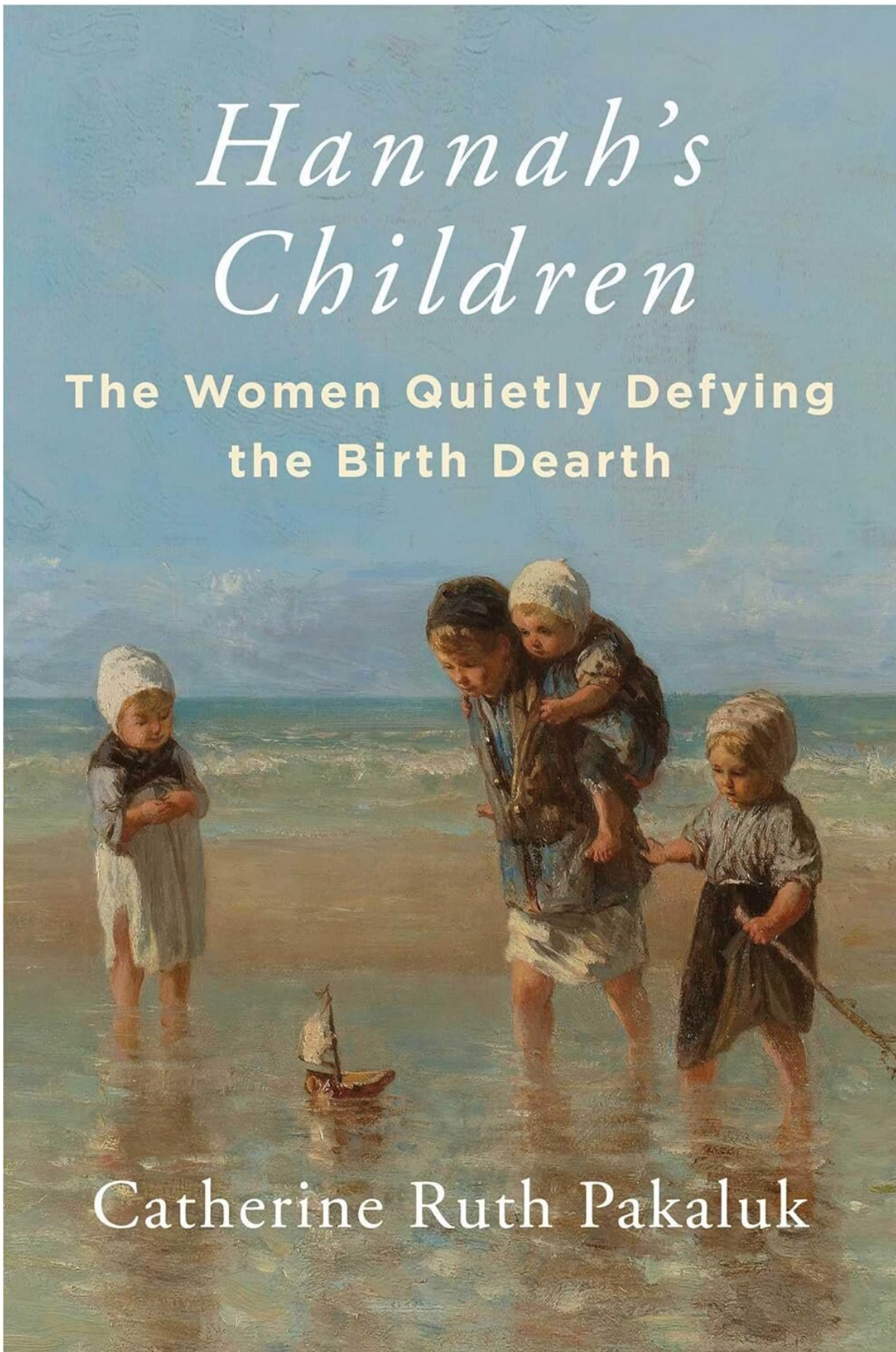


Researcher: I interviewed moms with five or more kids—what I learned about women who are quietly going against the grain

May 9 2024, by Catherine Ruth Pakaluk

Hannah's Children

**The Women Quietly Defying
the Birth Dearth**



Catherine Ruth Pakaluk

Credit: Regnery Gateway

Commentators link [America's declining birth rate](#) to a number of factors: [a lack of support for mothers in the workplace](#), [expensive child care](#), [delayed marriage](#) and a [rising cost of living](#).

But what about women in the U.S. who, despite these obstacles, have bucked the trend and managed to have all the children they want?

I count myself in that camp: I have eight kids of my own. But I wanted to learn how other American women were able to reach their childbearing goals. So beginning in 2019, I decided to talk to some of [the 5% of U.S. women who have five or more kids](#).

My recent book, "[Hannah's Children: The Women Quietly Defying the Birth Dearth](#)," is an account of what I learned.

The fertility gap

In April 2024, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the agency that counts annual births in America, released its [provisional estimate of the total babies born in 2023](#).

At 1.62 expected children per woman—down from 3.8 in 1957—the [fertility rate](#) is the lowest it's been [since the government started tracking it in the 1930s](#). Americans simply aren't having enough children to replace themselves.

Studies have shown how, without enough immigration to offset the loss, this [will cause the population to shrink](#), which in turn can lead to [economic stagnation](#), [political instability](#) and [social fragmentation](#). But falling birth rates go along with one more troubling pattern: [the so-called "fertility-gap."](#)

The gap refers to the fact that [women widely report](#) having fewer children than they intended to have when they were younger. In the U.S., [women say](#) that about 2.5 kids is ideal, and that they realistically plan to have around 2.0 kids. They end up having 1.62, leaving a gap of about 0.4 to 0.9 kids.

This discrepancy exists mainly because women are [getting married later than ever in history](#)—near the age of 28 for the average American woman—which has moved back [the median age of having their first child to 30](#).

Despite the rosy rhetoric of [influencers boosting child-free lives](#), this fertility gap can be a big deal—particularly for women.

Having children [usually matters more to women's happiness than to men's](#), and [women are generally more bothered by childlessness](#).

So, low birth rates aren't just a crisis for societies and economies. They tell a deeply personal story about [women failing to reach their goals for motherhood](#).

Going against the grain

Motivated by these circumstances, I interviewed 55 women with five or more children who lived in all parts of the U.S., from the Pacific Northwest to the Carolinas to New England. Their homes were in a range of socioeconomic areas, including wealthy, middle class and low-

income ZIP codes. Some of them worked full time, others were part-time employees, and some didn't work at all. Their husbands held blue-collar jobs, white-collar jobs and everything in between.

What they had in common was [religious faith](#)—they belonged to Jewish, Catholic, Latter-day Saint, evangelical and mainline Protestant communities. They also tended to value having a big family above other things they could do with their time, talents and money.

One woman I spoke to, a mother of five named Leah, has no regrets about having a large family. (The names used in my book are pseudonyms in accordance with best practices and federal regulations for the protection of human subjects in academic research.)

"I think our culture really values the sort of very rigid perception of success, and has started to devalue a mother's contribution to society," she told me. "It's almost, like, radical and feminist to say that my contribution is healthy, well-balanced children. Coming from a divorced family, that was a big motivation for me in choosing this life: the family unit being the priority above career and personal identity."

The women bucking the trend weren't necessarily wealthier and didn't seem to face lower childbearing costs. Rather, they believed that children were blessings from God and the main purpose of their marriages. As Leah told me: "Every child brings a divine gift into the world that nobody else can bring."

Most of them ended up having more children because they valued having a big family so highly. They didn't plan their family sizes around other life goals—they planned other life goals around having children. And the very high accord they granted to childbearing ordered their priorities in ways that made it more likely for them to get married and have kids, even while meeting career and financial milestones.

Gains and losses

Prior to my study, it was known that [women who have more children than average are more likely to go to church.](#)

Less understood was why. Most churches today do not prohibit the use of contraception in marriage. None of the women in my sample reported having a large family because they believed family planning was wrong.

[The economic theories](#) of 1986 Nobel laureate James Buchanan helped me see the women I interviewed as rational actors like all other women—not as blind adherents to religious dogma.

According to Buchanan, people size up the gains and losses to the choices they make. Anything that adds value to one course of action tips the scale in favor of that choice. Incentives don't have to be monetary. They can come from ideas and convictions, including religious values.

Conversely, anything that detracts value from a course of action makes it less likely. Disincentives can be monetary, like the price of a good. But the cost of missing out on other things can factor even more heavily.

Tipping the scales

Whether the women I interviewed were rich or poor, they often cited the costs of missing out when they chose to have an additional child.

They gave up or put aside hobbies, professions, alone time and financial status—not to mention eight hours of sleep each night—when they decided to have more kids.

They didn't report not valuing those things. They felt the sting of being

misunderstood, overwhelmed and limited in their work options.

What stood out in the interviews was how much worth they accorded to having another child. They got to higher numbers of kids because they had something on the other side of the scale that weighed more than the losses.

A mom named Esther summed it up: "The three big blessings that we talk about in Judaism are children, good health and financial sustenance. I don't feel like you could ever have too much of any of those things. These are blessings. They're God's expression of goodness."

Clearing the way

Drawing on these insights, my interviews suggested how mothers in my sample managed to defy the country's declining [birth rate](#) and fertility gap.

First, because having a big family mattered so much to them, they pursued marriage deliberately. They chose colleges, churches and social settings where others prioritized marriage, increasing the chances of finding a partner in time to have kids.

Second, they sought partners who also wanted high numbers of kids. One mom, a devout Catholic, told us she fell in love with a Protestant guy in college who wanted a big family. She had known what she wanted from her life partner.

Finally, the women overcoming the fertility gap adjusted their careers to fit their childbearing goals. They didn't try to squeeze their kids around professional milestones. As such, they tended to select careers that were more flexible, such as teaching, nursing, graphic design or running a small business out of the home.

Though not all Americans share the religious convictions that tipped the scales for the women in my study, lessons from understanding their motivations may have tremendous value for the millions of young Americans aspiring to be mothers.

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