

Women in rich countries are having fewer kids, or none at all. What's going on?

May 10 2024, by Leah Ruppanner



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A [recent report](#) from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows US fertility rates dropped 2% in 2023. With the exception of a temporary increase in the fertility rate at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US fertility rate has been falling steadily since 1971.

Australia exhibits a [similar pattern](#). Fertility has declined since 2007 despite government attempts to invest in a "baby bonus" to encourage Australian women to have more children.

Taking a more global perspective, we can see similar patterns across other industrial nations: Japan, South Korea and Italy have some of the [lowest global fertility rates](#).

So, what is going on here? Despite highly valuing children and our roles as parents, why are women having so few babies? And, importantly, why should we care?

How much fertility is good for a country?

On my recently launched podcast [MissPerceived](#), I discuss why fertility rates rule the world. For a population to [maintain its current size](#)—that is, neither shrink nor grow—the total [fertility rate](#) needs to be above 2.1 births per women. This is because we need to have enough babies to replace both parents after they die—one baby to replace the mother and one to replace the father, and a little extra to account for infant mortality.

In short, if we want a population to grow, we need women to have more than two children. This was [exactly what happened](#) in many Western nations, such as Australia, the UK and US, following the second world war. Women were having more than 2.1 births, which resulted in a baby

boom. Many families grew to three or more children.

This type of population structure, replacement or some growth, is critical to creating a healthy-working age population to support the young and old.

But, in many countries, the fertility rate is less than replacement level, which means the population is shrinking. In the US and Australia the current fertility rate is [1.6](#). In the UK it is [1.4](#). And in South Korea it is [0.68](#).

So, these countries are shrinking, and in the case of South Korea, shrinking quickly. What this means is that more people are dying in these countries than being born. As a result, the population is getting older, poorer and more dependent on others for their care.

For a country like South Korea or Italy, this is a problem for the present. And, in Australia, this will be a problem for the [near future](#). Someone will have to care for the aging population. The question of who and how will be of increasing policy importance.

Why is fertility declining?

So, why aren't women having more babies? Well, there are a few answers:

1. Women are better educated now than ever before. Women's education has been rising steadily for decades, with Australian [women now better educated](#) than men. Australia has some of the most educated women in the world.

Education delays fertility for multiple reasons. First, it pushes out the age of first birth since women are spending a longer time in school.

Second, it gives women more resources they then want to trade on the market after finishing a degree. Simply, women are often not having babies in their [teens and early 20s](#) because they are getting their education and launching their careers.

2. Young people are being delayed in, well, everything. It is much harder for young people to achieve the traditional markers of adulthood—stable jobs and buying a first home. Often these are factors that are identified as critical to having a first child. So, many young people are [delaying fertility](#) due to economic and housing insecurity.

Further, we now have safe and effective contraception, which means sex outside of marriage is feasible and sex without procreation can be almost guaranteed. All of this means parenthood is delayed. Women are having babies later and fewer of them.

3. Children are expensive and time-consuming. In many industrialized nations, the cost of children is astronomical. Average childcare costs in Australia have [outpaced inflation](#). School tuitions, [even for public schools](#), absorb a significant portion of [parents' budgets](#).

If you multiply this by more children, the costs go up. [Intensive parenting norms](#), which guide how many people parent, emphasize significant time investments in children that are one-on-one. Simply, we spend more time interacting with our children in intense ways than previous generations.

And all of this is on top of greater time spent in paid employment. So, to do parenting "right," according to current social norms, is to be deeply invested in our children in terms of time, energy and resources, including money.

4. Workplaces and policies are slow to adapt to supporting

caregiving. Our workplaces still expect significant face-to-face time at work and long hours. Although the pandemic ushered in more remote work, many workplaces are rolling back this provision and mandating people return to work in some capacity. This is despite Australians [highly valuing access to remote and flexible work](#), in part because they spent less time commuting and report significantly higher levels of burnout.

A nuanced approach is needed

Because the reasons behind declining fertility are not simple, the solutions can't be simple either. Offering baby bonuses, as Australia and other nations have done, is pretty [ineffective](#), because they don't address the complexity of these interlocking issues.

If we are serious about supporting care, we need better career and housing pathways for young people, more investment in child and aged care infrastructure, technological innovations to support an aging population, and workplaces that are designed with care at the core. This will create a culture of care to support mothers, fathers, children and families alike.

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