

Employment security or family planning?

Employment transitions and desired fertility in South Korea

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Abstract

The desired fertility of young adults is related to their employment status. However, little is known about the effect of employment transitions on desired fertility. Does increased job stability lead to a higher desired number of children? I address how employment transitions between regular employment, non-regular employment, self-employment and non-employment affect the desired fertility of young South Koreans, and how this relationship differs by gender. Using five waves of the *Youth Panel*, 2016-2020, I apply a two-level random effects model to a sample of young adults aged 20-42 years. Compared to those who maintained regular employment, individuals who transitioned from regular to temporary or daily work were about 2.5 times more likely to express a desire to have children. Similarly, those who shifted from regular employment to unemployment showed an increased intention to have children. Wage earners, whether regular or non-regular employees, desired fewer children than the unemployed. The potential for employment change has a greater impact on young people's desired fertility than employment stability itself. While having actual children tends to strengthen the desire for more children, marriage tends to reduce the desired number of children due to practical constraints. These findings indicate that young people's desired fertility in South Korea is highly sensitive to employment transitions, life-course changes, and their direction. Beyond merely providing secure jobs, policies should focus on ensuring flexibility in employment transitions, stability in living conditions, and social support systems that sustain family formation even during periods of unemployment.

Introduction

The intention to have children and the desired number of children are not static but possess dynamic characteristics that change according to an individual's circumstances. Consequently, recent empirical studies are dynamically examining the determinants of the desired number of children using panel data. In particular, they demonstrate how the desired number of children varies according to an individual's life stage (Liefbroer, 2009; Yeatman et al., 2013). Life events such as marriage and childbirth play a crucial role in individual family planning, highlighting the need to analyze desired family size while considering the characteristics of their life stage.

Employment occupies a socioeconomically significant position within an individual's life stage. The negative impact of unstable employment status on fertility is a well-established fact (Steel et al., 2014). Longer working hours are associated with a decrease in young people's desired number of children (Liefbroer, 2009), and women who are wage earners exhibit a higher fertility intention than self-employed women (Yarger and Brauner-Otto, 2024).

While these studies demonstrate that family planning closely relates to an individual's employment characteristics, they do not reflect differences in work trajectories among individuals with specific employment statuses. Both those transitioning from unemployment to wage employment and those continuously employed as wage workers currently hold wage-earning jobs, but their pathways to becoming wage workers differ. Barker and Buber-Ennsner (2024) demonstrate that changes in employment status between unemployment and employment influence the dynamic evolution of individuals' uncertain fertility intentions.

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Therefore, this study empirically examines how the desired number of children among Korean youth changes according to the employment and family formation changes individuals experience from a life course perspective. Specifically, by subdividing employment changes into regular wage employment, temporary and daily wage employment, self-employment, and unemployment, it aims to capture the differences between wage and non-wage workers, as well as the impact of unstable employment status, which previous studies have failed to capture.

It addresses the following two questions: **How do changes in an individual's employment status affect desired fertility? Does transitioning to stable employment positively influence family planning? How do these relationships differ by gender?**

Data and Methods

The analysis targets young adults who responded at least once to the desired number of children question in Waves 10 to 14(2016-2020) of the *Youth Panel* (YP07 cohort). It utilizes 12,041 observations from 4,058 individuals aged 20 to 42 who provided the necessary information on employment changes, marital status, and childbearing changes. The analysis of desired number of children empirically conduct, distinguishing between those with and without fertility intentions. Fertility intentions use the following question: *“Do you plan to have children?”* The desired number of children use the following question: *“Considering your current life and future plans, how many children do you plan to have?”*

This study employs a two-level random intercept model to control for these unobserved individual characteristics. The analysis of fertility intentions applies a binary logit model, with the dependent variable coded as 0 for no intention to have children and 1 for intention to have children. The analysis of desired number of children conduct only for respondents who expressed a desire to have children. A two-level random intercept linear model is used, with the continuous variable of desired number of children as the dependent variable.

Main findings

Figure 1. Average Desired Number of Children by Year: Gender Comparison (left), Employment Status (right)

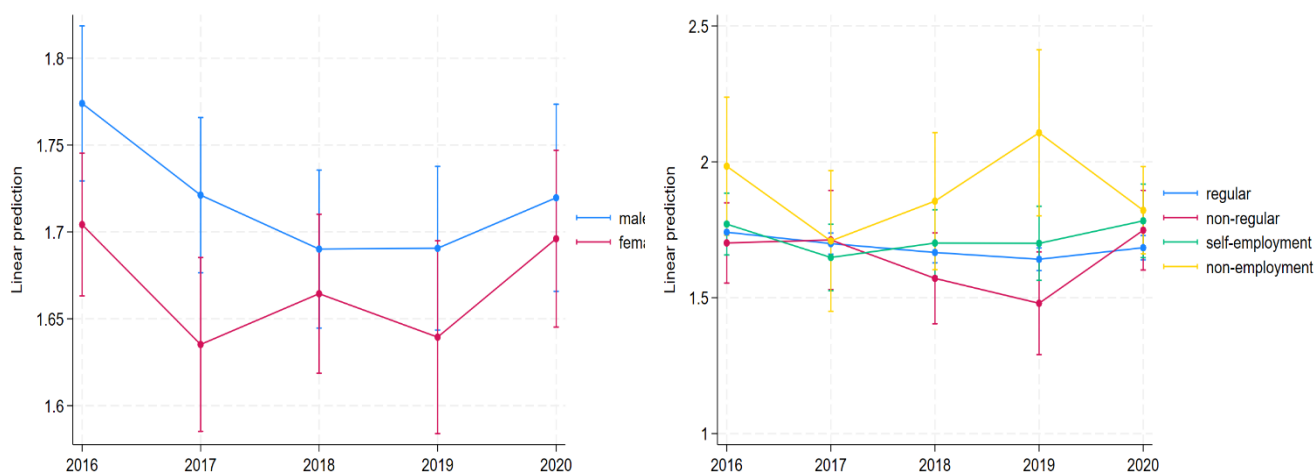


Table 1. Determinants of Fertility Intentions and Desired number of children

	Fertility intentions(OR)		Desired Number of Children
Employment Change		Employment Change	
Non-employment Maintenance	0.906 (-0.24)	Maintaining Stability Entry	-0.165* (-2.40)
Non-employment → Regular employment	0.789 (-0.76)	Maintaining Instability/Entering Instability	-0.178* (-2.14)
Non-employment → Non-regular employment	0.451 (-1.40)	Non-employment retention/entry	
Non-employment → Self-employed	2.566 (1.43)	Self-employment maintenance/entry	-0.142 (-1.88)
Regular employment maintained (reference)			
Regular employment → Non-regular employment	2.487* (2.28)		
Regular employment → Self-employment	0.697 (-0.99)		
Regular employment → non-employment	2.114 (1.75)		
Non-regular employment maintained	0.742 (-1.43)		
Non-regular employment → Regular employment	0.873 (-0.55)		
Non-regular employment → Self-employment	0.380 (-1.45)		
Non-regular employment → non-employment	4.911 (1.53)		
Self-employment maintained	0.738* (-2.00)		
Self-employment exit	0.470 (-1.77)		
Marital Status Change (r: Remaining Unmarried)		Marital Status Change (r: Remaining Unmarried)	
Unmarried → Entering Marriage	0.703* (-2.49)	Unmarried-→Married Entry	-0.136*** (-6.34)
Marriage Maintenance	0.285*** (-9.84)	Marriage Maintenance	-0.232*** (-10.00)
Marriage-to-Divorce/Separation Transition	0.301 (-1.66)	Marriage-to-Divorce/Separation Transition	-0.672*** (-5.18)
Marriage dissolution maintenance	0.0754*** (-3.99)	Marriage dissolution maintenance	-0.256 (-1.14)
Dissolution->Remarriage/Relationship Restoration	0.417 (-0.97)	Dissolution->Remarriage/Relationship Restoration	-0.131 (-0.55)
Change in Children (r: Remaining Childless)		Change in Children (r: Remaining Childless)	
No children → Having children	0.197*** (-11.75)	Childless->Childbirth	0.194*** (6.69)
Remaining childless	0.0221*** (-28.19)	Childbirth & Child Maintenance	0.423*** (12.82)
Female (r:Male)	0.510*** (-7.34)	Female (r: male)	-0.0878*** (-4.54)
	9.610***	_cons	3.819*** (7.04)
		lns1_1_1	
Individual-level random intercept variance	(9.73)	_cons	-1.211*** (-24.11)
		lnsig_e	
		_cons	-0.742*** (-28.04)
N	12041	N	5391

Note: Exponentiated coefficients; t statistics in parentheses. Education level, age, region are also controlled.

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Compared to those who maintained regular employment, individuals who transitioned from regular to temporary or daily work were approximately 2.5 times more likely to express a desire to have children. Similarly, those who shifted from regular employment to unemployment also showed an increased intention to have children. Conversely, those who continued self-employment showed a 26% lower intention to have children. This indicates that individuals tend to reconsider family planning at points of employment change or transition rather than when employment is stable. Furthermore, the longer self-employment persisted, the lower the intention to have children became. This suggests that ‘potential for employment change’ has a greater impact on family formation intentions than the mere presence of stable employment.

Compared to unstable employment, the desired number of children was higher among the unemployed, who on average desired about 0.18 more children. Conversely, wage earners, whether regular or non-regular employees, desired fewer children than the unemployed.

In summary, **employment transition and flexibility**—that is, the points where life trajectories shift—have a greater impact on young people's childbearing intentions and desired number of children than employment stability itself. Family formation plans are more actively discussed during periods of changing employment status than when employment is fixed, and the tendency to desire more children is more pronounced during periods of unemployment or life transitions. These findings suggest that family planning support policies for young adults should not merely focus on providing ‘stable jobs’. Instead, they should be designed around **creating conditions that enable family formation choices during life transitions**—such as strengthening safety nets during employment interruptions and expanding work-family transition support systems.

The intention to have children was significantly lower among those who entered or maintained marriage compared to those who remained unmarried, with the likelihood of having children decreasing by over 70% for those maintaining marriage. Compared to those who remained unmarried, entering marriage reduced the desired number of children by an average of 0.14, and maintaining marriage reduced it by 0.23. Notably, the desired number of children tended to decrease more significantly with longer marriage duration or experiences of dissolution such as divorce or widowhood.

The desire for additional children decreased significantly among those who already had children, showing a clear tendency not to plan for more children after the birth of the first. Conversely, the experience of having children increased the desired number of children. This indicates that while having actual children tends to strengthen the desire for more children in the future, marriage itself tends to reduce the desired number of children due to practical constraints.

These results indicate that young people's desired number of children is more sensitive to employment transitions, life-course changes, and their direction. Beyond simply providing jobs, there is a need to focus on ensuring flexibility in employment transitions and stability in living conditions, as well as building social support systems that can sustain family formation even during periods of unemployment.