

Growing Up Unequal: Family Background and the Formation of Fertility Expectations in the United States

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Abstract

Young adults' fertility expectations are key indicators of demographic change. Although family influences on fertility aspirations are well documented, less is known about how these intergenerational processes vary across social contexts. Guided by an intersectional framework, this study examines role modeling as a mechanism of intergenerational transmission of fertility expectations, situating it within systems of economic and family-structure inequality.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) and its Children and Young Adults (CYA) supplement (N = 13,944), we link mothers born between 1957 and 1964 to their children born between 1972 and 2001. We test whether children from larger families expect to have more children themselves and how this relationship is conditioned by childhood economic resources, family structure, and the intersection of gender and race.

Results show that family size during upbringing is positively associated with fertility expectations among White women and men. In contrast, this association is less pronounced among Black and Hispanic individuals. For Black women, the pattern even reverses: those raised in larger families tend to expect fewer children themselves. Across all groups, the link between family size and fertility expectations is weaker in low-income households and among young adults who grew up with a single mother or experienced parental separation. Overall, these findings demonstrate that the intergenerational reproduction of fertility norms is stratified by inequality, reflecting how family background shapes fertility expectations.

Keywords: Fertility Expectations; Intergenerational Transmission; Family Background; Social Inequality; Childhood Conditions; Gender and Race; Role Modeling; Life Course

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Introduction

Low fertility aspirations among younger cohorts have become a central topic of demographic and public debate over the past decade (Beaujouan & Sobotka, 2018). These discussions matter because future population trends depend on the reproductive intentions and behaviors of young adults in these generations. A growing body of research attributes declining fertility intentions partly to shifting values, suggesting that smaller families—and even voluntary childlessness—are becoming normative preferences among recent cohorts (Savelieva et al., 2023).

However, value change unfolds not only at the societal level but also within families, between parents and their children (Bernardi, 2013). Research documents strong intergenerational continuity in desired family size, largely explained by role modeling: children internalize implicit family-size norms exemplified by their parents’ reproductive behavior. Parental life-course patterns—such as the number of children, timing of births, and partnership stability—serve as behavioral templates that inform how the next generation envisions their own family formation (Liefbroer, 2025; Murphy, 1999). On average, these experiences contribute to higher fertility aspirations among children raised in larger families (Murphy & Wang, 2001).

Yet these intergenerational processes are not uniform. Material disadvantage and family dissolution can weaken the role modeling mechanism. Economic uncertainty and concerns about future stability may further limit young adults’ ability to translate inherited models into fertility expectations (Vignoli et al., 2020). Despite extensive work on fertility transmission, few studies explicitly examine how these processes operate within systems of social inequality and across intersecting social categories such as gender and race. Examining how role modeling operates across social and economic contexts reveals how inequality shapes both the meaning of family size and the ways in which family norms are transmitted across generations.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing how childhood socioeconomic resources and family structure condition the strength of intergenerational fertility transmission from mothers to children. We focus on two dimensions of inequality during childhood (ages 0–14): material hardship, measured by parental income, and family instability, measured by single-parent upbringing or parental separation. We then examine whether their moderating effects vary by gender and race.

By doing so, we make two contributions. First, we extend classic theories of intergenerational transmission by showing that role modeling is contingent on socioeconomic and structural conditions. Second, we provide an intersectional perspective, revealing for whom and under what circumstances this mechanism holds. Together, these contributions illuminate how inequality shapes the intergenerational reproduction of fertility norms.

Theoretical Background

Families of origin form one of the earliest and most enduring social environments, shaping attitudes toward partnership, family life, and parenthood across the life course (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Vollebergh et al., 2001). Research documents intergenerational continuity in fertility as children often reproduce parents’ family-size patterns through *role modeling* (Axinn et al., 1994; Kolk, 2014; Murphy & Wang, 2001). Observing parental behaviours—such as number of siblings, timing of births, and partnership trajectories—provides behavioral templates that can guide fertility expectations in adulthood (Cools & Kaldager Hart, 2016; Kolk et al., 2014). These associations are strongest when parent–child relationships are close and weaken when the relationship is less close (Fasang & Raab, 2014; Keijer et al., 2018).

Yet role modeling does not occur in isolation but is shaped by the socioeconomic context of

childhood, which influences whether parental behaviors appear desirable or feasible to follow. We focus on two key dimensions of early disadvantage: economic resources and family structure. In economically secure households, large families may symbolize cohesion and strengthen the link between family size and expected fertility. In resource-poor settings, the same experience may weaken or even reverse that association. Likewise, family instability—such as parental separation or single parenthood—can strain caregiving capacity and lead children to view large families as a source of hardship rather than a model of family life.

Gender and race further intersect with these conditions. Parenthood has asymmetric costs for women (Aisenbrey et al., 2009; Correll et al., 2007), intensified under economic precarity (Jee et al., 2019), while structural racial inequalities limit the feasibility of family formation for Black and Hispanic individuals (An et al., 2018; Krivo & Kaufman, 2004). We therefore expect the role modeling mechanism to be strongest among socioeconomically advantaged White men and weakest among women of color facing multiple disadvantages.

Data and Methods

We use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) and its Children and Young Adults (NLSYCYA) supplement, linking mothers born in 1957–1964 to their children born in 1972–2001. Fertility expectations are taken from NLSYCYA waves (1996–2020). The analytic sample comprises 13,944 person-year observations from 5,900 children nested within 2,920 mothers, restricted to respondents aged 19–24 and observed before parenthood.

The outcome is the respondent’s expected number of children. The key predictor is the number of children in the household at age 14, capturing parental role modeling. Childhood economic resources (average household income from birth to age 14) and family instability (a binary indicator for whether the respondent lived continuously with both biological parents from birth to age 14) serve as moderators. Analyses are stratified by gender and race and include controls for birth cohort, birth order, and age.

We therefore estimate six linear mixed-effects models (LMEMs), one for each gender–race combination, with random intercepts for mothers and children. These models test how the association between family size and fertility expectations varies across economic and family contexts.

Results

The descriptive results reveal heterogeneity in both fertility expectations and childhood family environments. Across the full sample, young adults expect about 2.2 children on average. Compared to the sharp decline in actual fertility across cohorts, fertility expectations have remained relatively stable. However, the gender gap in expected family size has narrowed considerably over time, with men’s and women’s expectations now largely converging (see Figure 1a). Childhood conditions also differ by race and class: Hispanic and Black respondents grew up in larger and poorer families, and were more likely than White respondents to experience parental separation.

Regarding our main mechanism—role modeling—descriptive correlations show that family size is positively linked to young adults’ fertility expectations, but the strength and direction of these links vary across groups. Among White respondents, especially women, fertility expectations rise with the number of siblings, consistent with a role-modeling mechanism (see Figure 1b). Among Hispanic young adults, the pattern is similar though weaker. For Black women, by contrast, the relationship turns negative, suggesting that growing up in larger families does not necessarily lead to higher fertility expectations and may instead reflect divergent experiences of constraint.

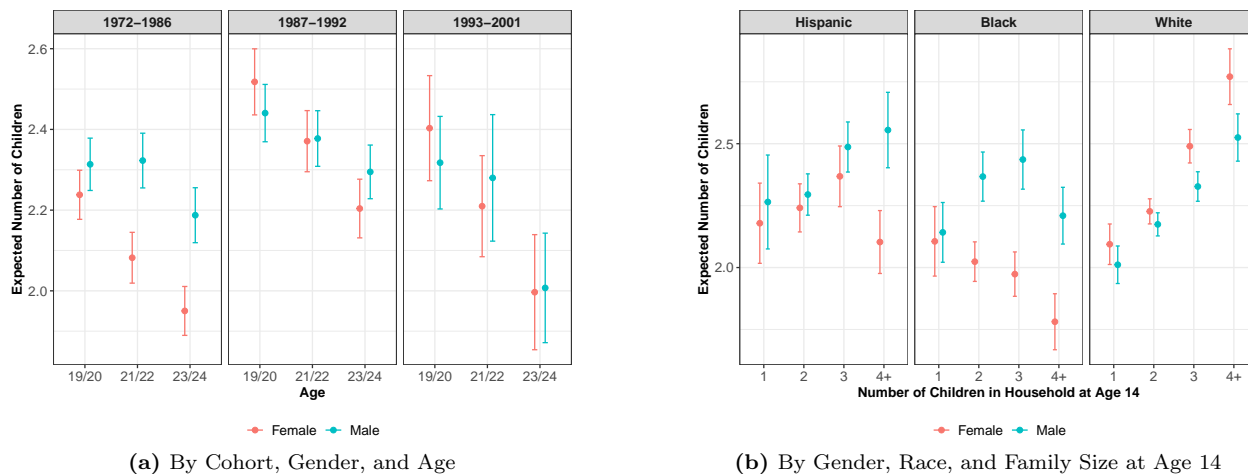


Fig. 1. Fertility Expectations across Cohorts, Gender, Age, and Race. *Source:* NLSY79 and NLSY79CYA; $N = 13,944$.

Results from LMEMs (Figure 2) confirm the descriptive trends. Across groups, family size remains a strong predictor of fertility expectations, but only for White women and men does the association hold consistently once covariates are controlled. Among Black Women, the relationship reverses: larger family size is associated with lower fertility expectations. We find no clear trend for Hispanic respondents. Interacting family size with income and family structure reveals some interesting results.

First, the positive association between family size and fertility expectations is strongest among those raised in higher-income households. Under economic security, each additional sibling corresponds to higher fertility expectations in young adulthood (see Figure 2a). In contrast, in low-income contexts—particularly among women—the relationship weakens or reverses, suggesting that resource scarcity transforms large-family experiences from “desirable” to “burdensome.” Second, family stability strengthens these patterns: respondents from two-parent households show a clearer association between family size and fertility expectation than those who experienced parental separation or instability (see Figure 2b).

Race and gender further shape these patterns. Among White women and men, family size and income interact to reinforce one another: the positive association between growing up with more siblings and expecting to have more children is strongest among those from higher-income households (see Figure 2a). For Hispanic men, a similar but weaker interaction emerges. Among Black and Hispanic women, the association between family size and fertility expectations is small or absent, and for Black women it even reverses—those from larger families tend to expect fewer children. For these groups, economic resources play a greater role than family size; for example, Black women raised in higher-income households expect more children regardless of how many siblings they had. These findings show that intergenerational role modeling depends on broader social and economic contexts, as material disadvantage and structural inequality shape how family experiences translate into fertility expectations.

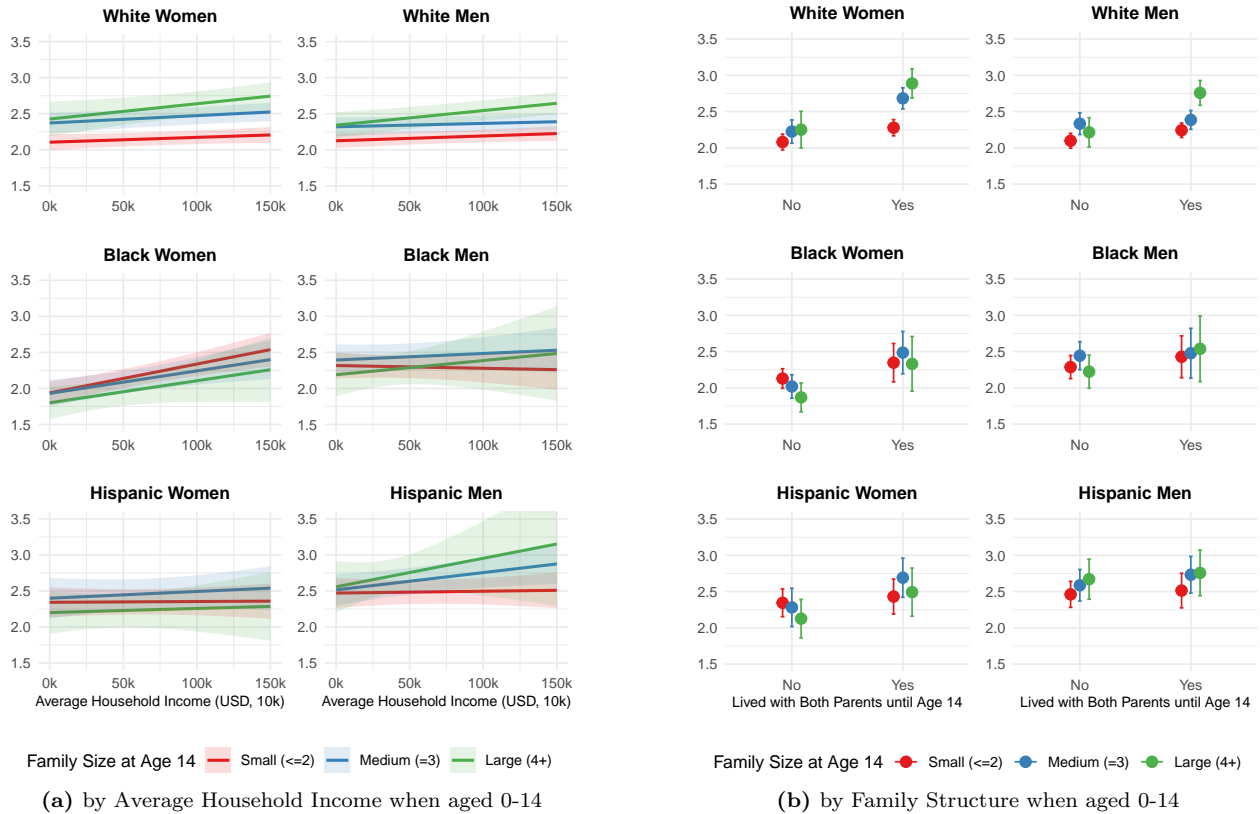


Fig. 2. Model-predicted fertility expectations by childhood family size, income, gender, and race. All models control for birth order, age at interview, and cohort. *Source:* NLSY79 and NLSY79CYA; $N = 13,944$. All analyses weighted.

Conclusion

This study shows that the transmission of fertility ideals is deeply shaped by structural inequality. The positive association between childhood family size and fertility expectations—role modeling—persists primarily among socioeconomically advantaged White individuals, but weakens or reverses under conditions of economic hardship and family instability. For women and racialized minorities, large-family backgrounds often signify constraint rather than continuity, reflecting the ways in which material disadvantage and social exclusion reshape the meaning of family size across generations.

These findings highlight that fertility expectations are not merely expressions of individual preference or parental influence, but reflections of unequal opportunities to pursue family life. By situating role modeling within a stratified life-course framework, this study demonstrates how social position mediates the transmission of family-size norms and underscores that fertility ideals are formed within—and constrained by—systems of inequality.

More broadly, the results suggest that declining fertility expectations among younger cohorts cannot be understood solely through value change or cultural shifts. They also reflect persistent disparities in opportunities. Recognizing the structural mediation of fertility expectations offers a more comprehensive framework for demographic research and underscores the need for policies that expand both material security and the conditions under which fertility intentions can be realized.