

Working-Time Pressure and Fertility: Can Grandparents Help?

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Long abstract

Research objective: This study examines whether, and under what conditions, grandparental support can buffer the negative impact of time-demanding work on family expansion in the United Kingdom. Specifically, we ask whether grandparental proximity, frequency of contact and specific help provided enables mothers and fathers in time-pressured jobs (long working hours, non-standard schedules) to have a second child.

Background

The organisation of work has been profoundly reshaped in the past decades. Under the traditional industrial model, work hours were largely confined to a standard Monday-to-Friday, nine-to-five schedule, creating clear boundaries between paid work and family life (Rubery et al., 2005). However, globalisation and technological advances prompted calls for more flexibility, leading to deregulation reforms that have significantly altered work-time structures (Kalleberg, 2009). As a result, the duration of workdays has become increasingly varied, with both shorter and longer work days becoming more common (Lee et al., 2007), while work hours extended beyond the standard work schedule (Riekhoff et al., 2021). Additionally, the intensity of paid work has gradually increased, with tasks compressed into shorter timeframes (Adăscăliței et al., 2021).

The consequences for families are profound. Long and unsocial working hours drain energy, generate stress, and erode family and social ties. Although greater flexibility has enabled some workers to better align schedules with personal needs, such benefits are limited to specific occupations (Lopes et al., 2014). For many, the increased demands of longer hours, non-standard schedules, and time pressure generate conflicts between paid work and personal life (Anttila et al., 2015). This conflict is particularly acute for working parents. Research shows that parents working long hours (Tammelin et al., 2017) or outside standard schedules (Taiji & Mills, 2019) report high levels of work–family conflict and parental stress. While parents typically rely on institutional childcare to balance paid work and family life, these services rarely match irregular schedules and thus provide limited support for those facing intense work-time demands (Verhoef et al., 2015). From a demographic perspective, such conditions make the decision to have a second child particularly difficult and may help explain persistent fertility stagnation in many advanced societies.

In this context, grandparents have become a particularly important source of support. They can provide flexible, trusted, and on-demand childcare that is otherwise unavailable, particularly when formal childcare hours do not align with non-standard work schedules or when unexpected challenges arise (Gambaro et al., 2024). Research shows that such informal childcare can reduce parental stress (Craig & Churchill, 2018), improve well-being (Ryser & Heers, 2023), enhance satisfaction with work–life balance (Arpino & Luppi, 2020). However, this support is not equally accessible to all parents, as its availability depends on geographic proximity, the health and employment status of grandparents, and the quality of intergenerational relationships. Moreover, tensions may arise when parenting values or approaches diverge across generations. These complexities raise an important research question: to what extent can grandparents buffer the negative effects of demanding jobs on fertility behaviour?

Theoretical Framework

To answer this question we are guided by three complementary perspectives. First, **role theory** (Biddle, 1986) explains why work–family conflict arises. Parents are expected to fulfil multiple roles, and when demands in one domain interfere with responsibilities in another, conflict emerges. This is particularly the case when long or non-standard hours reduce the time parents can spend with their children or partners. Such conflicts are expected to lower the likelihood of progressing to another birth. Second, the **Job Demands–Resources model** (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) conceptualizes how resources can buffer the negative impact of demands. While long hours, evening or weekend work create fatigue, stress, and less family time, the presence of resources can offset some of these costs. The question we pose is whether grandparental support can act as such a buffer, reducing the stress generated by demanding jobs and enabling parents to expand their families. According to the **evolutionary theory** of cooperative breeding (Hrdy, 1999), grandparents are such a resource. The theory highlights the long-standing role of kin in child-rearing. Humans evolved to raise children collectively, and the involvement of grandparents, especially a grandmother has historically been crucial. A growing body of evidence confirms that grandparental support reduces time pressure and stress (Riem and Straaten, 2024), facilitates compatibility between work and family roles (Pavelea et al. 2025), supports maternal employment (Zhang & Emery, 2023), and is positively linked to first (Schaffnit & Sear, 2017) and second births (Rutigliano, 2024). This literature provides a strong basis for considering grandparents as an “evolved buffer” in high-pressure labour markets.

We draw on these theories and hypothesise that **H1**: *Workers with time-demanding jobs (long or non-standard schedules) are less likely to progress to a second birth*, and **H2**: *Grandparental support increases the chance that individuals in time-demanding jobs will have another child*.

Data and Methods

The study draws on data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study (2009–2023). We focus on partnered first-time mothers and fathers and follow them to observe whether and when they progress to a second birth. The analysis uses mixed-effects discrete-time complementary log-log models.

First, we examine mothers’ and fathers’ work-time demands separately. Work-time demands are measured along two dimensions: the duration of work, captured by total weekly hours including overtime, and the timing of work, captured by engagement in non-standard schedules such as evenings, weekends, or irregular shifts. In a second step, we focus on dual-earner couples and consider their combined work-time demands to capture the joint influence of partners’ work conditions on second-birth transitions. Grandparental support is measured using three indicators: geographic proximity, frequency of contact (both in-person and remote), and the provision of practical support, including childcare, housework, and financial assistance. For a mother, these measures refer to her own parents (the maternal grandmother and father), and for a father, to his own parents (the paternal grandmother and father).

Control variables include the individual’s age, health, education, and ethnicity; the partner’s education and labour market status; the grandmother’s age; the age of the first child; the time period; the type of union; women’s career orientation; use of formal childcare; and the amount of time usually spent providing care to sick, disabled, or elderly persons, most often the elderly parents.

Results

Contrary to our expectations, we find that mothers' long working hours and non-standard schedules are not significantly associated with a lower probability of having a second child. Nonetheless, our results provide evidence that grandparental support is positively associated with the likelihood of a second birth among mothers facing high work-time demands. Specifically, mothers who work long hours are more likely to have a second child if they maintain frequent in-person or remote contact with their own mothers, compared to those whose mothers are deceased or reside abroad. For mothers working non-standard schedules, both proximity to and contact with their mothers are associated with a higher probability of a second birth. In contrast, no significant associations are observed for analogous measures concerning grandfathers, nor for indicators of actual support received.

For fathers, we find no significant associations between work-time demands and the probability of having a second child. Additionally, we find little evidence that grandparental support influences fertility decisions. For fathers working long hours, as well as those with non-standard schedules, none of our indicators of grandparental support are significantly associated with the likelihood of having a second child. The only notable exception is that fathers with long working hours are more likely to have a second child if they live in close proximity to their fathers.

In subsequent analyses, we plan to examine the role of grandparental support in mitigating the combined work-time demands of both parents, focusing on dual-earner couples in which both partners face time constraints.

Conclusion

Our preliminary findings underscore the importance of grandparental support in enabling parents with high work-time demands to have a second child. In particular, support from the maternal grandmother appears especially beneficial for mothers facing long working hours or non-standard schedules. By contrast, we find little evidence that grandparental support plays a comparable role for fathers, highlighting the persistent differences in gender roles across generations. By identifying both the potential and the limits of grandparental involvement, this study contributes to our understanding of how kinship networks interact with labor market conditions to shape fertility decisions. We will further explore these relationships to present a comprehensive set of findings at the conference.

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