What is people's ideal number of children and do they achieve it?

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: The gap between fertility ideals and realized fertility is central to demographic theory and policy. But the standard measure of fertility ideals, yielding a two-children ideal across high-income countries, suffers from two important limitations restricting its usefulness.

OBJECTIVE: First, the traditional measure forces respondents to pick one single number of children, concealing the relative strength of value preferences across child-numbers, thereby inflating the two-child ideal. We instead ask respondents to rate *each* number of children. Second, because respondents are typically still in childbearing age, the traditional lifetime ideal measure cannot capture the gap between ideals and realized fertility. We therefore also ask respondents about their ideal number of children *until their current age*, enabling individual-level measurement of their fertility gap.

METHODS: To test these measures, we conducted the Italian Trust-Networks-Fertility (ITNF; 2024) and the Fertility-Motivations (Fer-Mo; 2025) survey (Argentina, Germany, Italy, United States; 2025).

RESULTS: We find that while around 60% of respondents select two children in the traditional measure (mean around 2.0), only around 30% of rating points go to two children (mean around 1.8), revealing a flatter distribution and lower ideals overall. The fertility gap of people in their early 20s is around one child and then narrows over the life course – but less so in Italy – suggesting that barriers to achieving fertility ideals are substantial and emerge early.

CONTRIBUTION: We will also investigate on individual-level (also using currently collected UNFPA data) what drives this fertility gap to inform policy.

1 Introduction

The large gap between the number of children people consider ideal and the number they actually have is one of the biggest conundrums in demography. In developed countries, where fertility has declined to unprecedented levels, realized fertility is consistently below people's ideals. The fact that fertility ideals appear centered around two children and relatively stable over time (Sobotka and Beaujouan, 2014) is also inconsistent with major theoretical arguments: the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory argues that a shift from traditional family values to self-realization reduces the desire for children (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa, 1986; Lesthaeghe, 2010). Scholars have consequently increasingly focused on structural problems such as low income and unemployment (Alderotti et al., 2021; van Wijk and Billari, 2024), economic and general uncertainty (Comolli, 2017; Matysiak et al., 2021; Vignoli et al., 2022), or work-family conflict often framed within gender inequality (McDonald, 2013; Esping-Andersen and Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Mencarini, 2018). This literature naturally turns to the role of policy in reducing the fertility gap. The extent to which fertility decline stems from shifting ideals or unaddressed structural problems has fundamental implications, not only for demographic theory but also for designing fertility policies. The stakes are high: low fertility is the main driver of population aging and decline, a major threat to economic sustainability.

The increasing importance of fertility ideals has led to their measurement in many surveys, including major comparative ones. The wording is rather standard (Sobotka and Beaujouan, 2014). In the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), Generation and Gender Surveys (GGS), and Eurobarometer (EB), the question is: "Generally speaking, what do you think is the ideal number of children for a family?" The World Value Survey (WVS) and European Value Survey (EVS) ask: "What do you think is the ideal size of the family? How many children, if any?" Some surveys also explicitly ask for personal rather than general ideals, though results are quite similar (Testa, 2012).

Findings consistently show a two-child ideal across high-income countries, typically chosen by roughly two-thirds of respondents, and rather stable over the past half century (Sobotka and Beaujouan, 2014). However, the standard measure of fertility ideals has two key limitations that may explain this inconsistency with the SDT theory and that drastically restrict its usefulness. We demonstrate both problems and two straightforward solutions using the Italian Trust-Network-Fertility (ITNF) survey we conducted in Italy in 2024 (Aassve et al., 2024).

The first problem is that respondents are forced to pick one single number of children as their ideal. In this case, a respondent slightly favoring two children over one child as ideal would need to select two children, implying that value assessments on other options, including one child, are lost. In reality, people's values – fertility ideals included – involve uncertainty, ambivalence, and indifference (Bernardi et al., 2015). A forced choice – even when allowing second-best choices (Hin et al., 2012) – masks the relative strength of value judgments and may bias the aggregate average ideal, potentially leading to flawed theoretical or policy conclusions.

To address this issue, we ask respondents to rate each potential number of children – from zero to four – on an 11-point scale from "not ideal" (0) to "ideal" (10). The wording of the question is: "Generally speaking, what do you think is the ideal number of children? Now, please rate each total number of children based on how ideal you think it is." This measure captures a more realistic, nuanced view of fertility ideals by observing each respondent's full distribution of ratings across child scenarios – reflecting the relative strength of their value preferences. This "rating each" option approach not only reveals lost information on the strength of preferences – including indifference – compared to the classic "pick-one" question (Maio et al., 1996) but can even *reduce* response burden by not requiring a relative choice (Del Grande and Kaczorowski, 2023). To summarize each respondent's ratings in one variable, we calculate a weighted average ideal number of children, using the respondent's rating points as weights.

The second issue is that the traditional measure offers no insight into the individual's gap to realized fertility, as respondents are typically surveyed while still in childbearing age. Approaches to address this are limited. First, comparing ideals of cohorts in childbearing ages to completed fertility of older cohorts is only possible on aggregate level and conflates the gap with age and cohort effects (Stone, 2018). Second, specifically surveying ideals of individuals past childbearing age would yield only ex-post insights, meaning that policy focusing on reducing the specific gap by acting on barriers for these cohorts could not lead to births, while assuming the same gap and barriers for younger cohorts might not have the intended effects. Third, comparing lifetime ideals with lifetime intentions (Camussi et al., 2023), as a prediction of actual fertility, strongly underestimates the gap, since there is also an intentions-realizations gap. For fertility intentions, respondents take only some barriers to realizing their ideals into account, such that realizations end up being clearly lower. Fourth, measuring the *intentions*-realizations gap through cohort (Beaujouan and Berghammer, 2019; Guzzo and Hayford, 2023) or individual level (Guzzo, 2022)

follow-ups requires repeated cross-sectional or panel data, offers only ex-post insights, and results in a smaller gap, as intentions already reflect expected constraints in realizing ideals (Miller, 2012).

We propose a simple solution: we ask respondents for their fertility ideals *until their current age* – "Generally speaking, what do you think is the ideal number of children for someone of *your current age*? (For example, if you are 31 years old, the question is: What is the ideal number of children for a 31-year-old person?)" The fertility gap for each respondent is then the difference between their "until-age" ideal and their actual number of children. This allows us to assess, at the individual level, to what extent low fertility stems from low ideals or barriers to realizing them and which barriers matter for their fertility gap, for whom, and at what ages. We will conduct such analysis in the upcoming months and aim to present results at EPC2026.

2 Data and Methods

2.1 Data

We use different data sources from surveys we conducted over the course of the last year. These surveys include four measures of fertility ideals: 1) the traditional lifetime "pick one" number of children measure; 2) a lifetime "rate each number" measure; 3) an "until current age" version of the "pick one" measure; 4) an "until current age" version of the "rate each number" measure. They also includes questions on respondents' actual number of children and their lifetime fertility intentions besides background information and other variables not used here.

First, data on 1,166 (for figure 1) and 1,113 (for figures 3 and 4) respondents come from the Italian Trust-Networks-Fertility (ITNF) survey we conducted in Italy in October 2024 (Aassve et al., 2024). We sampled respondents aged 20-55 and stratified the sample by gender, age groups, and education. The sample excludes respondents with dubious information on background variables and those who failed the attention check questions.

Second, data on 7,686 observations come from the Fertility Motivations (Fer-Mo) survey we implemented in Argentina (1,920); Germany (1,955); Italy (1,923); and the United States (1,888) in May 2025 (Mencarini et al., 2025). The respondents are 20-44 years old. Again we stratified the sample by gender, age groups, and education and excluded respondents who failed attention checks.

Third, further data will come from the UNFPA Youth Reproductive Choices Survey implemented in collaboration with UNFPA in around 50 countries in the end of 2025 (UNFPA, 2025).

2.2 Methods

For each respondent, the distribution of rating points across child numbers can be summarized in one measure by the weighted mean: $\frac{\sum_{c=0}^{4} p_c \cdot c}{\sum_{c=0}^{4} p_c} = \frac{p_0 \cdot 0 + p_1 \cdot 1 + p_2 \cdot 2 + p_3 \cdot 3 + p_4 \cdot 4}{p_0 + p_1 + p_2 + p_3 + p_4}$ where the weights p_c denote the rating points assigned to c children. This assumes no rating points for five or more children – a simplification justified in low-fertility contexts such as Italy, where only few individuals have or desire this many children (0.44% in the Italian 2011 Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2014)). Restricting the question to child numbers 0–4 also reduces respondent burden and non-response, while ensuring that any symmetric rating-distribution centered on two children yields a weighted mean of 2, consistent with the two-child ideal. Age-specific means (figure 4) are smoothed using weighted moving averages: $\frac{0.1 \cdot n_{t-2} \cdot v_{t-2} + 0.2 \cdot n_{t-1} \cdot v_{t-1} + 0.4 \cdot n_t \cdot v_t + 0.2 \cdot n_{t+1} \cdot v_{t+1} + 0.1 \cdot n_{t+2} \cdot v_{t+2}}{n_{t-2} + n_{t-1} + n_t + n_{t+1} + n_{t+2}}$ where n_t is the sample size at age t and v_t is the corresponding mean of fertility ideals (i.e. of respondents chosen ideals in the traditional "pick-one" question or of their weighted mean ideals with rating points as weights in the "rate-each" question as described above) across respondents at age t.

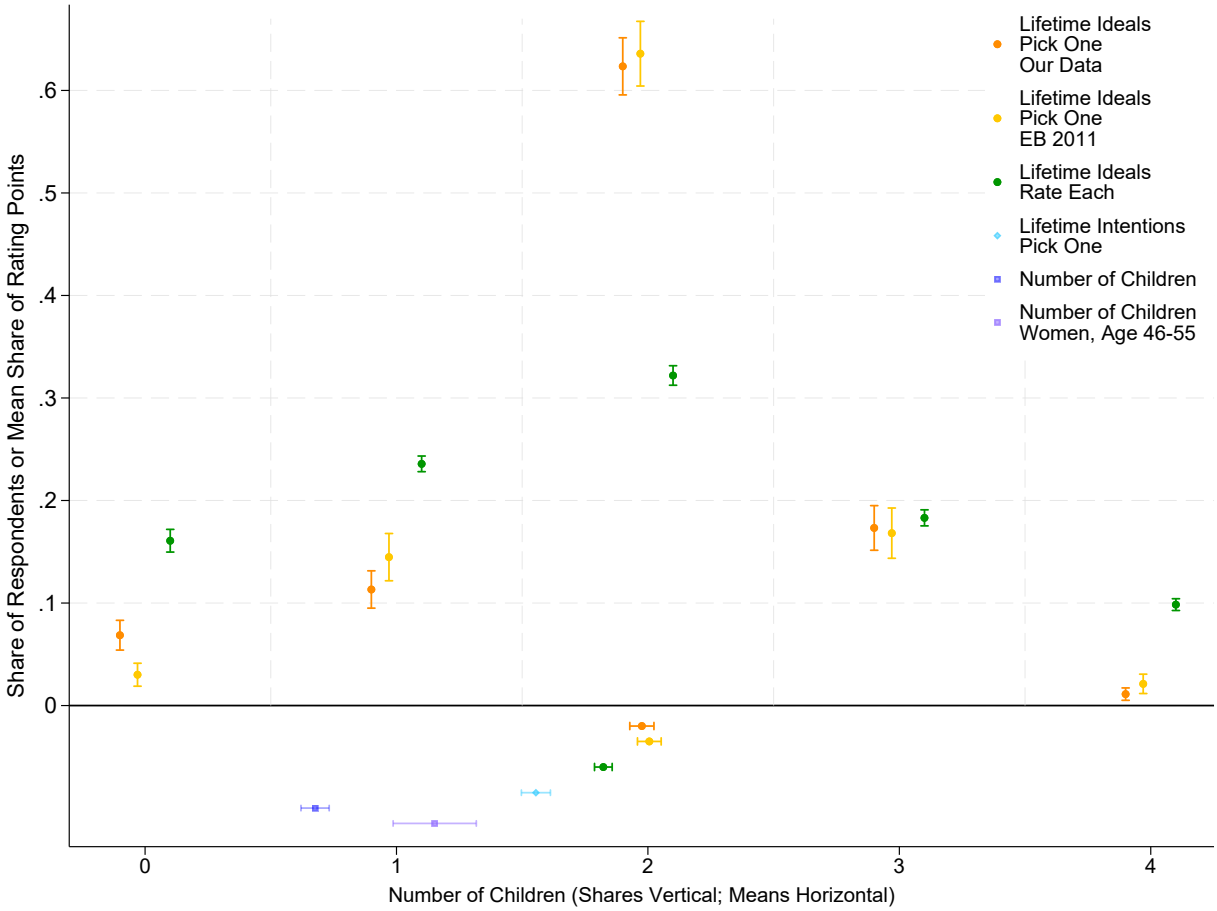
We will follow up on these descriptive results with an individual-level analysis on drivers of fertility ideals and the fertility gap.

3 Results

3.1 What is People's Ideal Number of Children?

Figure 1 shows lifetime fertility ideals based on the traditional "pick one" question (orange and yellow) and our new "rate each" question (green). For the traditional "pick one" measure, dots with vertical 95% confidence intervals (CIs) indicate the share of respondents who consider the respective number of children as ideal. Consistent with previous research, a strong two-child ideal emerges from our data (orange): 62% of the respondents select two children as ideal, and much fewer pick three (17%), one (11%), none (7%), or four children (1%). The mean ideal is 1.98 (horizontal) – just below the replacement level. These results closely match those of the

Figure 1: Distributions of lifetime ideals, lifetime intentions, and number of children in Italy in Dec 2024.



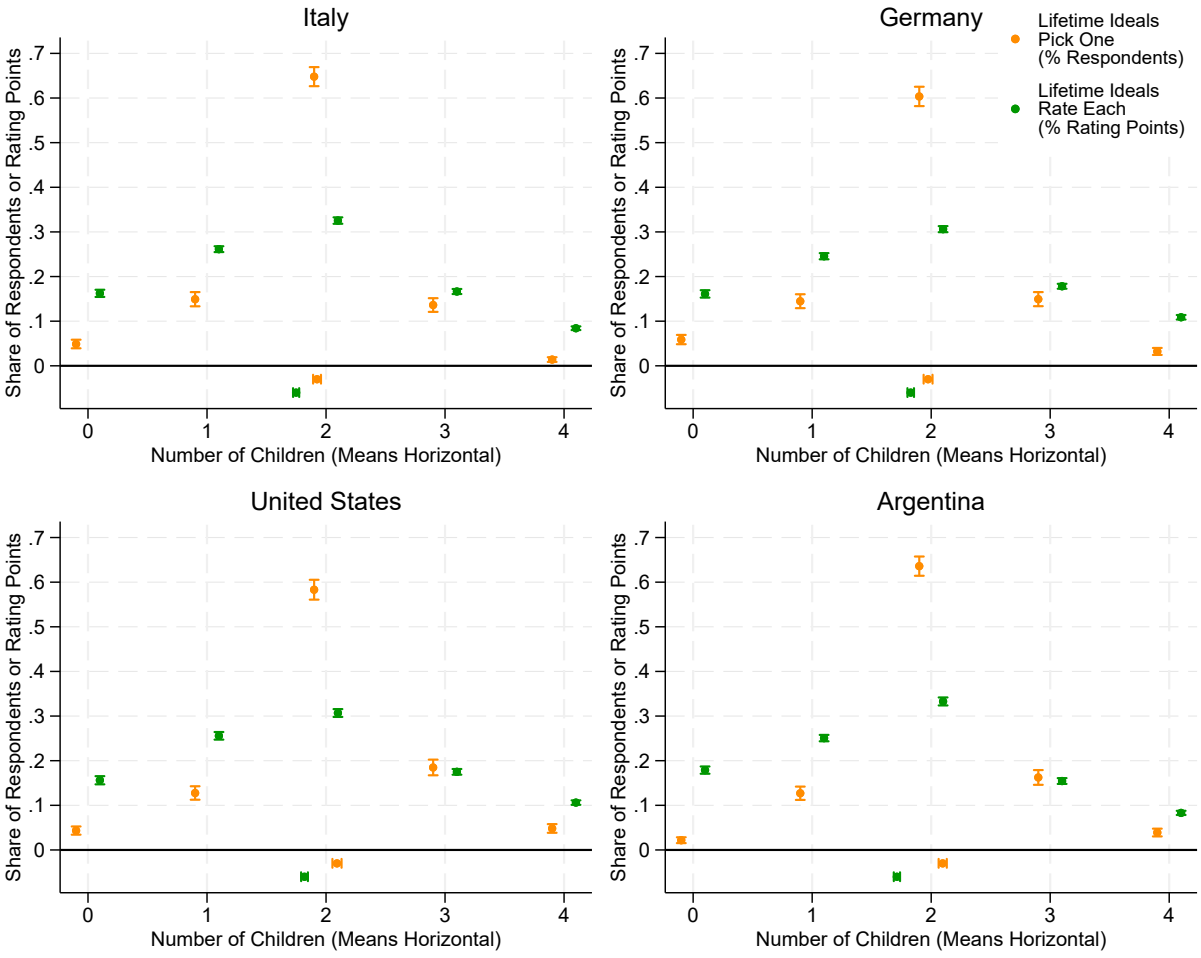
Notes: 95%-CIs are shown. The sample includes 1,166 observations. *Data source:* 2024 Italian Trust-Networks-Fertility (ITNF) survey (Aassve et al., 2024) and Italian 2011 Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2014).

Italian 2011 Eurobarometer (yellow) (European Commission, 2014), in which the share picking childlessness is slightly lower (3%) and the share selecting one child is slightly higher (14%), while other shares and the mean (2.01) are not significantly different from our data. This gives us confidence in the quality of our survey data and suggests that fertility ideals did not change much between 2011 and 2024. This might, however, be an artifact of the traditional survey measure for which the classic 2-child ideal outweighs the other choices so drastically.

Our new "rate each" measure of lifetime ideals reveals a fundamentally different distribution. Dots and vertical CIs (green) show the average share of rating points assigned to each child number. "Two children" still receive the largest share (32%). But compared to the corresponding "pick one" respondent shares, the two-child option receives a much lower share of rating points and one child (24%), childlessness (16%), and four children (10%) receive much higher shares. For three children (18%) there is no significant difference between traditional "pick one" and

our new "rate each" measure. The mean across respondents (of their rating-based weighted means) is 1.82 children, significantly lower than the mean of 1.98 obtained with the traditional measure. As expected, the distribution is less centered on a two-child ideal, yet respondents are not indifferent between positive numbers, as instead suggested by recent findings (Aassve et al., 2024) on family ideals more broadly. The two-child ideal remains, but a much more nuanced picture emerges where adjacent options are not considered much less ideal. Our measure also better captures the increasing positive attitudes towards childlessness (Szalma et al., 2025) and more closely reflects the increasing intentions (Rybińska, 2021) and prevalence (Jalovaara and Miettinen, 2024) of childlessness.

Figure 2: Distributions of lifetime ideals across countries in May 2025.



Notes: 95%-CIs are shown. The sample includes 7,686 observations: Argentina (1,920); Germany (1,955); Italy (1,923); United States (1,888). *Data source:* 2025 Fertility Motivations (Fer-Mo) survey (Mencarini et al., 2025).

Figure 2 shows the distributions and means for the "pick one" and "rate each" measures for Italy, Germany, the United States, and Argentina, four countries with distinct fertility trajecto-

ries and socio-economic conditions. But despite some differences, fertility ideals are remarkably similar across countries. The overall pattern is the same as in Figure 1. Based the traditional "pick one" measure, a seemingly clear two-child ideal emerges with around 60% of respondents choosing two children as ideal. And the means based on this measure range from just below 2 in Italy and Germany to just above 2 in the United States and Argentina. The "rate each" measure again reveals a more nuanced picture. Still most rating points go to the two-children option, but the other options receive much more rating points then the respondent shares from the "pick-one" measure would suggest. Especially one child and childlessness are rated much less negatively then previously thought. Therefore, the means from the "rate each" measure are lower than from the "pick one measure". This difference is especially large in the U.S. (2.09 versus 1.82) and Argentina (2.10 versus 1.71). Argentina, according to the "rate each" measure is even the country with the lowest mean fertility ideal (1.71) followed by Italy (1.75), the U.S. (1.82) and Germany (1.83).

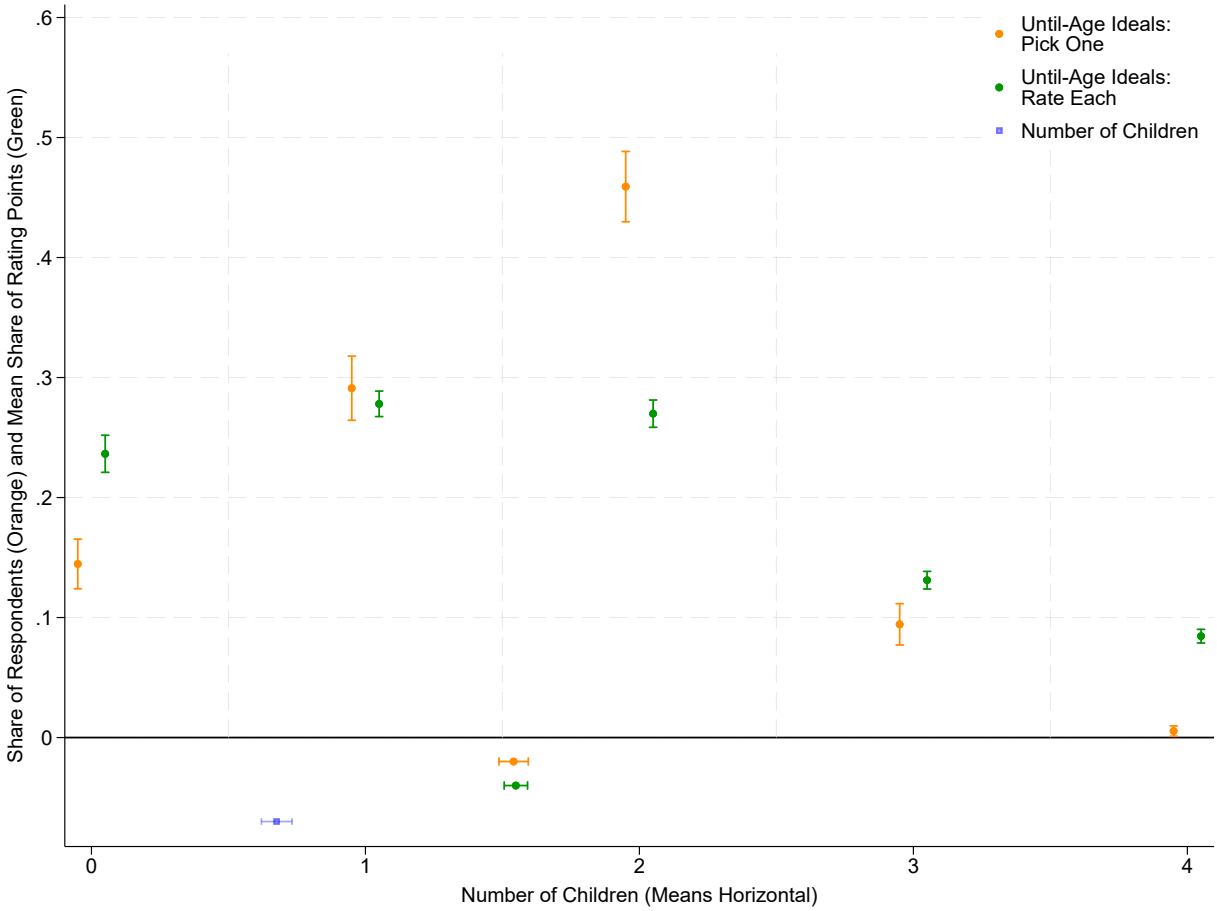
While the rating measure offers nuanced insight into the relative strength of ideals across child numbers, it cannot reveal the ideals-realizations gap, as respondents typically are still in childbearing age. And the ideals-intentions gap is a poor proxy for it, as mean lifetime intentions (Fig 1, light blue), though below ideals, are far above realized fertility (Fig 1, dark blue) – even among women beyond childbearing age (Fig 1, violet). That means, while the difference between ideals and realizations emerges from barriers to childbearing, respondents take these barriers only very partially into account when reporting fertility intentions.

3.2 Do People Achieve their Ideal Number of Children?

To measure the fertility gap for each respondent, we thus turn to the "pick one" and "rate each" measures *until the respondent's current age*. Figure 3 shows these measures' distributions and means. As before, the "rate each" distribution is flatter than that of the "pick one" measure, though the means are now similar. Across both measures, childlessness and one child are now rated more ideal – and higher parities less ideal – than for the lifetime measures, suggesting respondents correctly interpret the question as "until-age" ideals.

Figure 4 correspondingly shows that the mean "until age" ideals from both measures increase with age. Comparing these with actual fertility (blue) now gives us the fertility gap (red dashed line and dot showing the mean across age). Among respondents in their early 20s, "until-age"

Figure 3: Distributions of "until-age" ideals in Italy in Dec 2024.

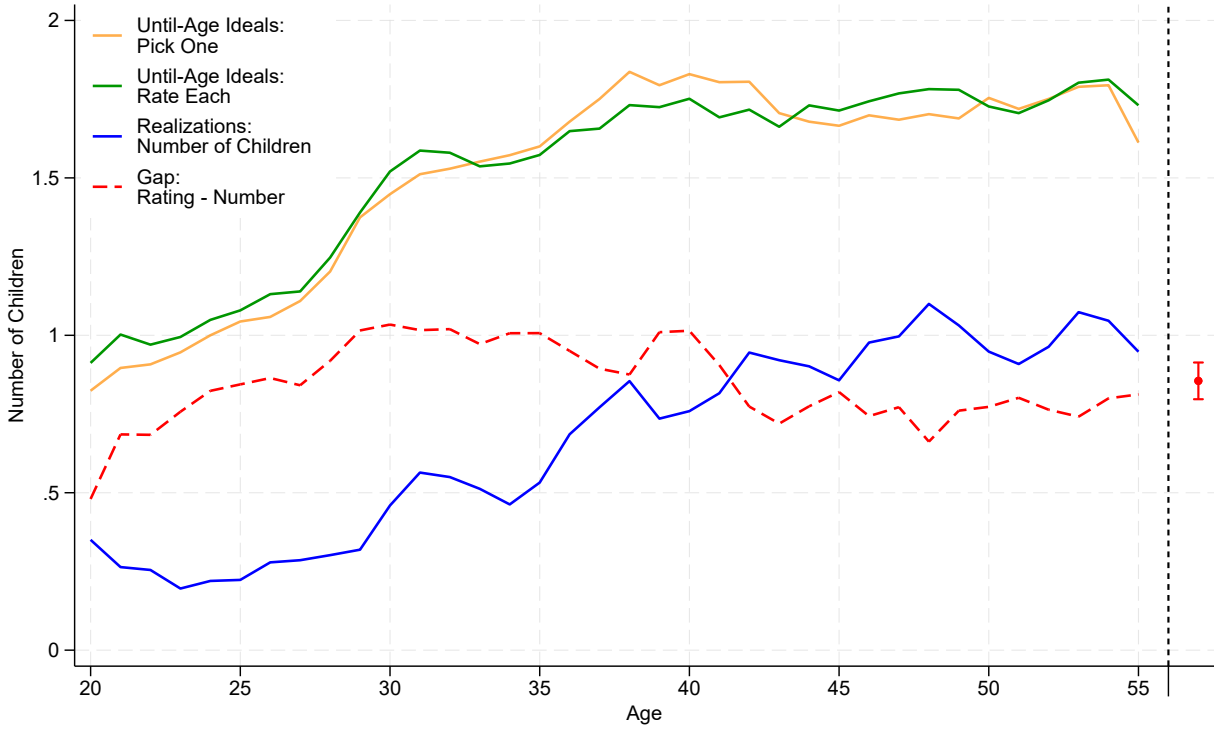


Notes: 95%-CIs are shown. The sample includes 1,113 observations. *Data source:* 2024 Italian Trust-Networks-Fertility (ITNF) survey (Aassve et al., 2024).

ideals are below 1, but rise sharply to around 1.5 by age 30, while actual fertility remains very low – widening the gap from 0.5 to 1 child. Between ages 30 and 40, the gap stabilizes around 1 child, as ideals rise more gradually (reaching about 1.75) and fertility begins to catch up. After 40, the gap narrows slightly, as ideals flatten while fertility still increases until the late 40s. To exemplify, we can take, for instance, the 286,000 female births happened in 2005 in Italy (i.e., the 2005 women cohort, being 20 today in 2025). In the hypothesis that these women will experience the above described fertility gaps over their life course, this would imply, for this cohort alone, abound 296,000 "missing births" by their age 30, and still 221,000 by completed childbearing at age 50.

Figure 5 shows fertility ideals and realizations across countries. With an exception of Italy, "until-age" ideals from the "rate each" measure are slightly lower than from the "pick one" measure. "Until-age" ideals increase with age, especially in Italy where ideals are even below

Figure 4: Weighed moving means of "until-age" ideals (of shares for "pick one" and of weighted mean rating points for "rate each"), realizations, and fertility gap by age in Itay in Dec 2024.



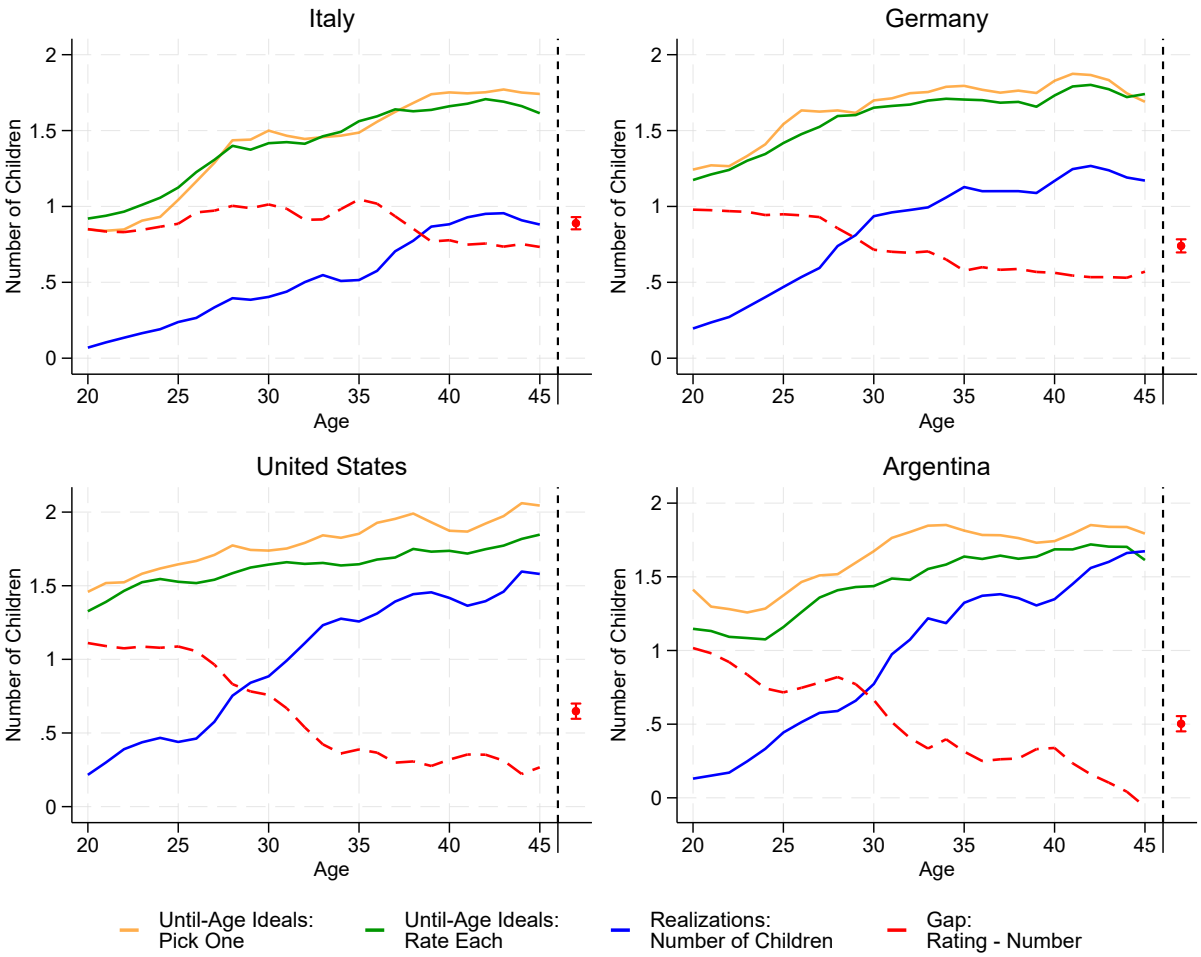
Notes: 95%-CIs are shown. The sample includes 1,113 observations. *Data source:* 2024 Italian Trust-Networks-Fertility (ITNF) survey (Aassve et al., 2024).

one child in people's early 20s. Therefore, despite fertility realizations are also lower in Italy for young respondents, the fertility gap for them is slightly narrower in Italy with just below one child not realized. Elsewhere the fertility gap for young adults is around one child (Germany and Argentina) or just above one child (U.S.). This is striking (and somewhat different than what we observed in Fig 4): Already young adults have around one child less than what they consider ideal for their age. This suggests that barriers to fertility are drastic and emerge early.

Over the course of people's life courses "until-age" ideals increase but realizations even more so, implying that the gap narrows. In Italy the gap only gets slightly smaller, despite ideals being lower than in other countries, suggesting that individuals struggle to overcome barriers to fertility realizations. In Germany the gap narrows from around 1 to 0.5 children; in the U.S. even from just above 1 to around 0.3 children; and in Argentina the gap of around 1 child for young adults completely vanishes when for individuals at age 45.

However, what we are showing in figures 4 and 5 are aggregate patterns, and age and cohort effects are confounded. Still, these figures already illustrate important patterns and the strength of our approach: by measuring the gap for each respondent, we can further investigate at the

Figure 5: Weighed moving means of "until-age" ideals (of shares for "pick one" and of weighted mean rating points for "rate each"), realizations, and fertility gap by age across countries in May 2025.



Notes: 95%-CIs are shown. The sample includes 7,686 observations: Argentina (1,920); Germany (1,955); Italy (1,923); United States (1,888). *Data source:* 2025 Fertility Motivations (Fer-Mo) survey (Mencarini et al., 2025).

individual level what factors drive it and for whom.

3.3 Do People Achieve their Ideal Number of Children?

We will follow up on these descriptive results with an individual-level analysis on drivers of fertility ideals and the fertility gap.

4 Conclusion

Fertility policies – central in many high-income countries – must distinguish between supporting fertility ideals and addressing structural barriers to realizing them. Yet the traditional measure of fertility ideals is poorly suited to inform such policies about the relevance of the two components

– ideals and realizations – of low fertility. First, forcing respondents to pick a single ideal number as their ideal inflates the two-child ideal, whereas our rating-based measure reveals more nuanced and generally lower aggregate ideals. This implies that value-change in fertility ideals over time has been larger, but it remains unclear how far the traditional measure has overstated the two-child ideal over the last decades. Second, the traditional measure offers only limited indirect insight into the fertility gap between ideals and realizations, while our age-specific approach allows for direct construction of the individual-level fertility gap.

Here we present only aggregate patterns to illustrate these new measures, not being able to distinguish between age and cohort effects. Still, these descriptive results already demonstrate the strengths of our measures. First, aggregate results are already revealing interesting patterns about fertility ideals and the fertility gap overall and across the life course. A substantial fertility gap emerges already at quite early age in people's lives, hovering around one "unrealized" child in their 30s, and only narrowing slightly afterwards. This suggests a desire for earlier childbearing and existence of important barriers to childbearing already among young individuals, addressable by specific policies.

Second, beyond aggregate patterns, our new measures allow deeper *individual-level* analyses of what drives the relative strength of ideals across child numbers – including childlessness – and of the individual fertility gap. This can give important insights into enabling factors and restrictive barriers to childbearing and for whom they matter. Our new measures therefore can have a broad relevance for demography and related research on family values and socio-economic structural constraints. Findings from such research can then provide a crucial and strong foundation for more effective policy design to narrow the fertility gap.

We will follow up on these descriptive results with an individual-level analysis on drivers of fertility ideals and the fertility gap.

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