

Discussion of

**“Declining Fertility:
The Role of Social Comparisons and Intensive Parenting”**

by Mahler, Tertilt, & Yum (MTY)

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Global fertility decline: Universal, societal factors at play

“A sizable literature dating back to Becker (1960) has sought to explain the long-run decline in fertility, emphasizing factors such as the quantity-quality trade-off and rising opportunity costs of time. While these explanations are well-suited to fertility declines over the course of development, they fall short in accounting for the divergent experiences among rich countries in recent decades.

*More recently, a large literature has pointed to **career concerns, family policies, social norms, and shifting priorities** as important determinants of fertility patterns (see Doepke et al. (2023), Bloom, Kuhn, and Prettnner (2024), Kearney and Levine (2025), and Goldin (2025) for recent surveys)....While clearly these are all important factors, in this paper we suggest and explore a novel determinant of fertility decisions related to **comparison motives**.”*

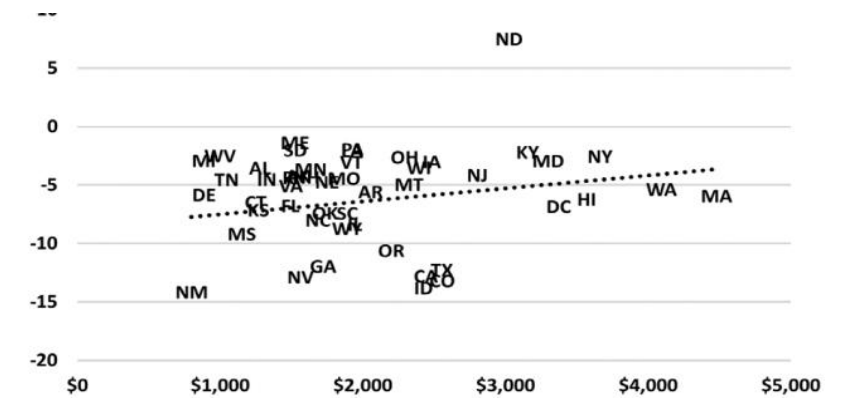
- Mahler, Tertilt, and Yum (BPEA, 2025)

Productive to move away from the standard economic framework and explanations focused on immediate and direct prices & costs.

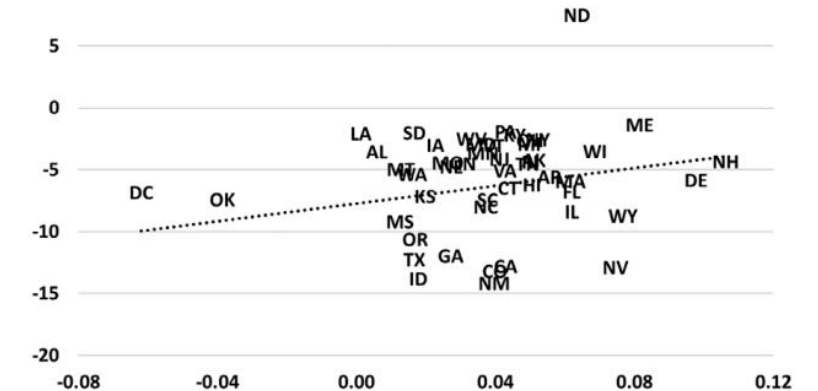
- Note: Simple explanations focused on period-specific factors don't explain the decline (in US)

- Kearney, Levine, Pardue, *JEP* 2020

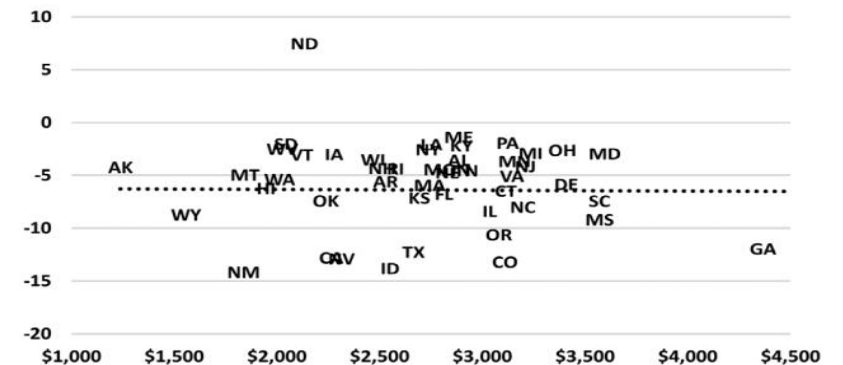
❖ MTY usefully highlights the role of **intensive parenting**, which they posit stems from **comparison motives**.



B. Change in (real) Child Care Costs



D. Change in Female-Male Wage Ratio



E. Change in (real) Per Capita Student Loan Debt



More likely: A complex mix of factors pushing toward a low fertility social equilibrium

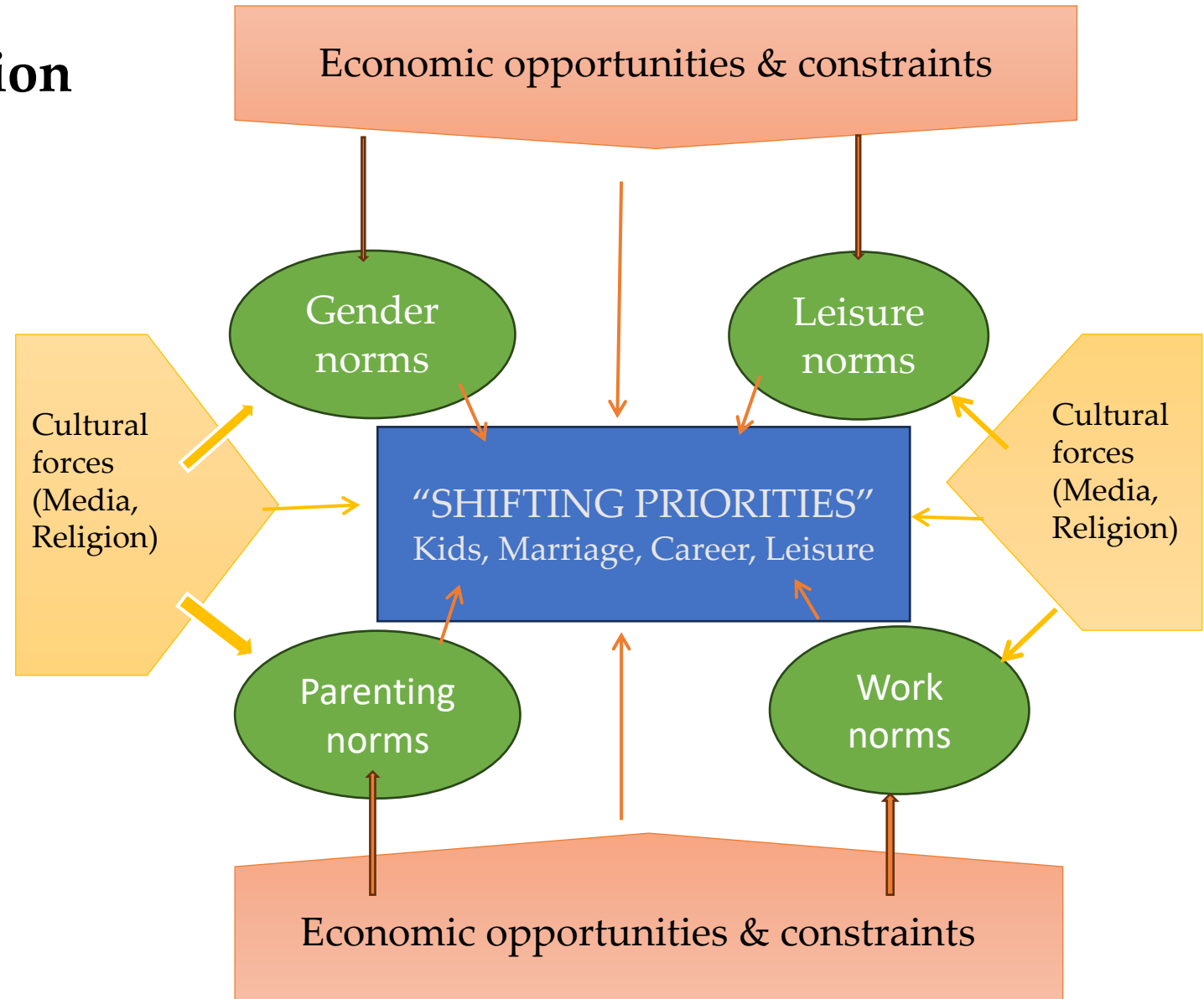
- *Social comparisons and intensive parenting are potentially contributing forces.*

*“The evidence points to a broad reordering of adult priorities with parenthood occupying a diminished role. We refer to this phenomenon as “**shifting priorities**” and propose that it likely reflects a complex mix of changing norms, evolving economic opportunities and constraints, and broader social and cultural forces.”*

- Kearney & Levine, July 2025

Lifetime constrained optimization

- **Norms and expectations** affect priorities through effects on utility function, choice set, and opportunity costs.
- **Economic opportunities & constraints** affect **norms**, and also directly affect costs.
- **Cultural forces** affect norms by affecting the desirability/acceptability of choices
 - Also shape peer effects, which affect utility and costs



What about comparison motives?

Comparison motives

MTY:

Leads to intensive parenting/increased educational investments

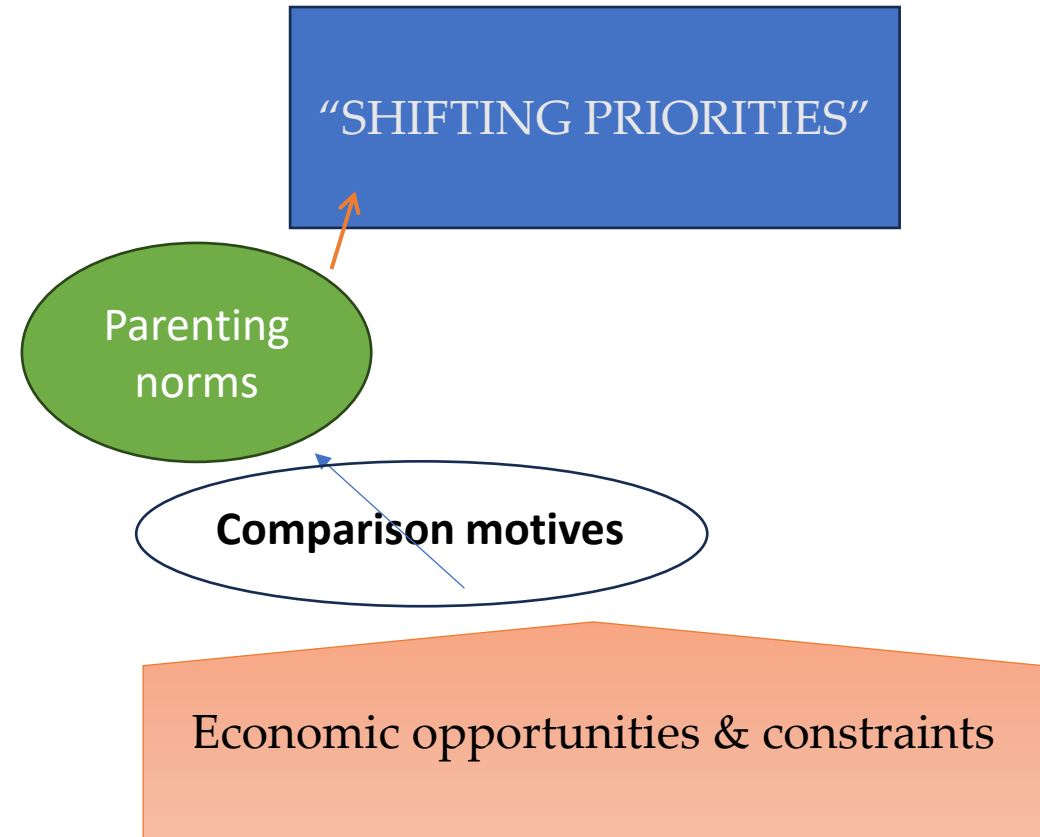
- Raises costs of kids
- Tilts decision toward quality in quality/quantity tradeoff

-> Fewer kids

In shifting priorities framework:

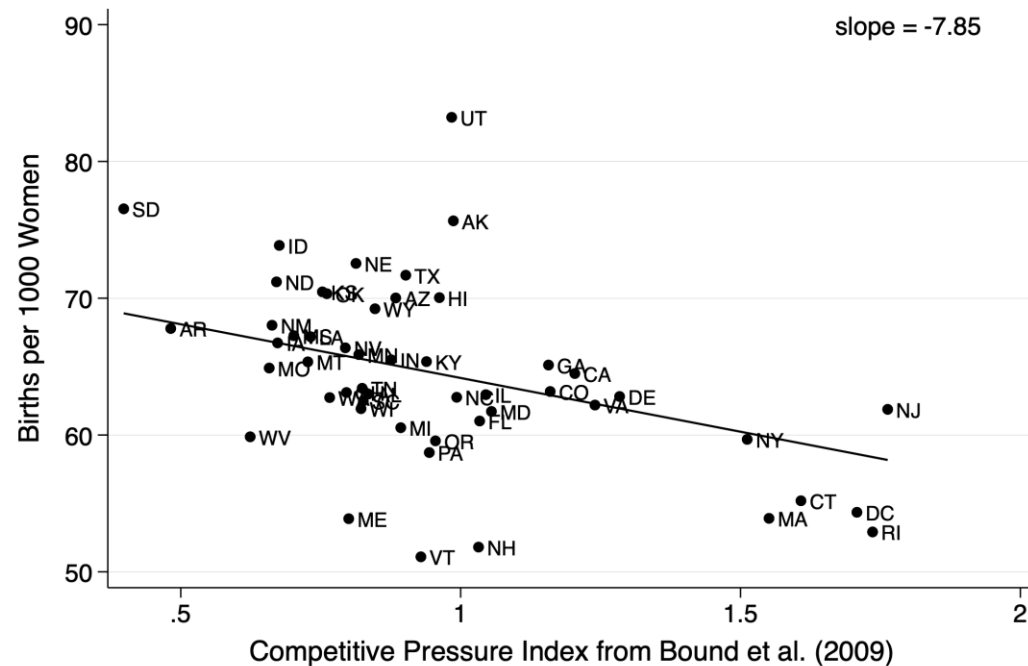
- Potential driver of intensive parenting
- Reduces utility & increases opportunity costs of parenting
- Shifts priority ranking away from parenthood

➔ Fewer kids, more childlessness

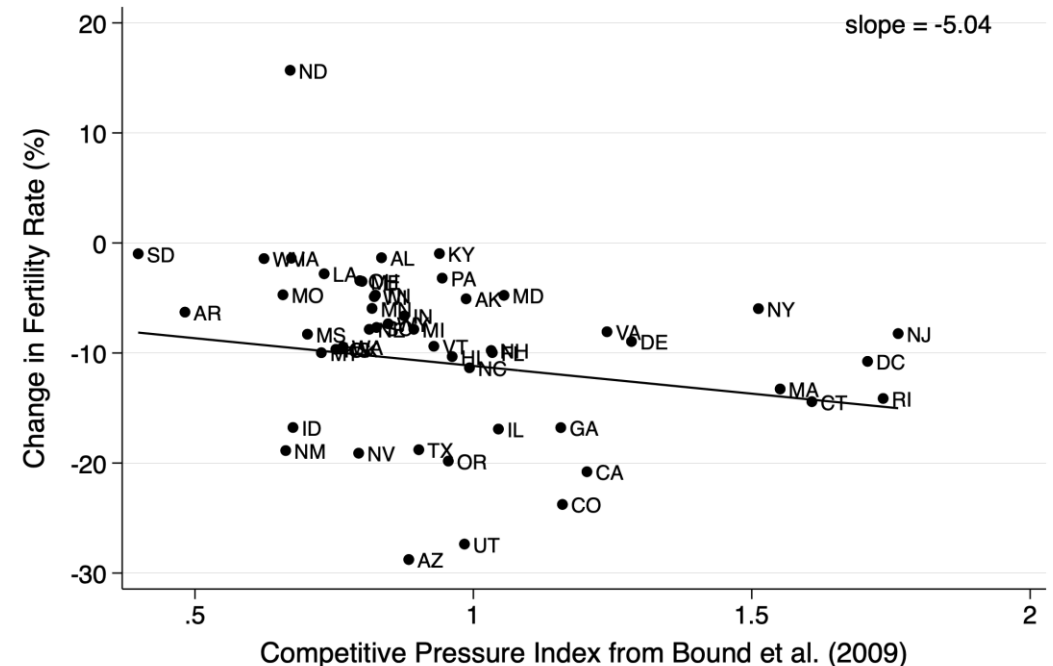


More competitive pressure, comparison motives -> Lower fertility

MTY make the case that fertility is lower in places with more competitive pressure, comparison motives

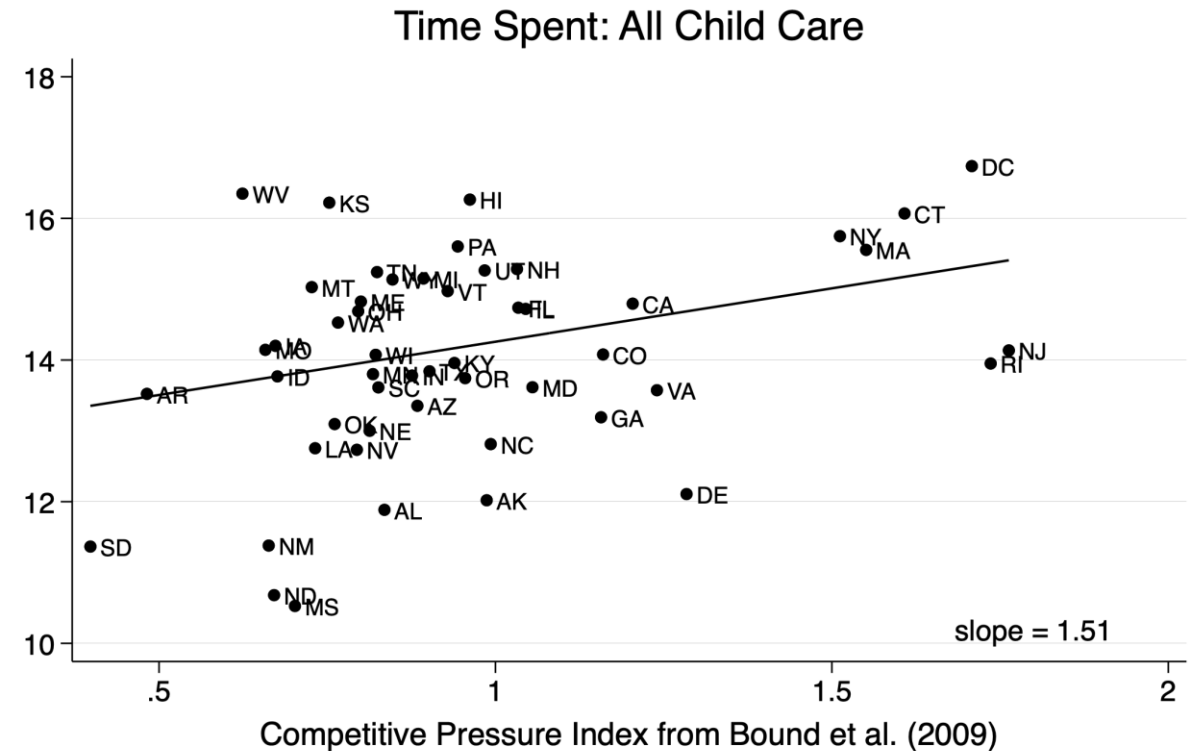


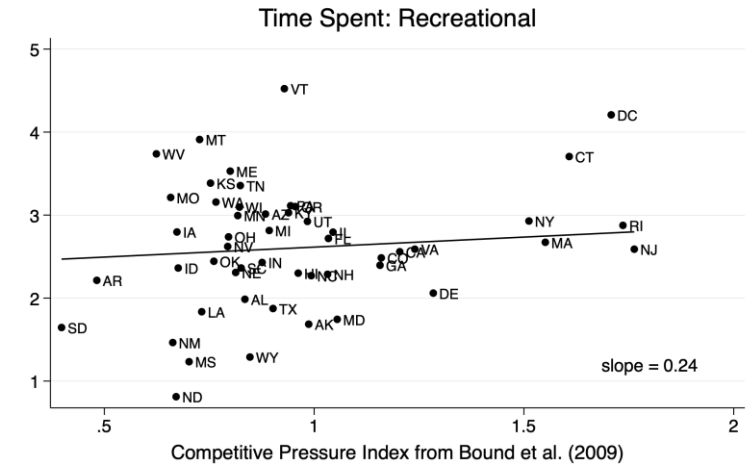
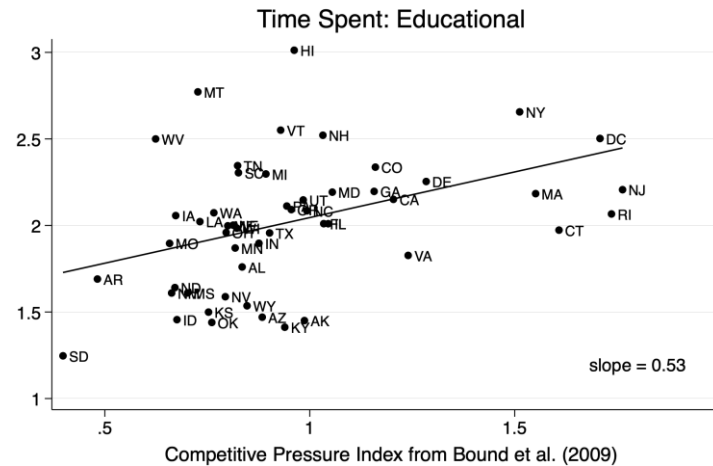
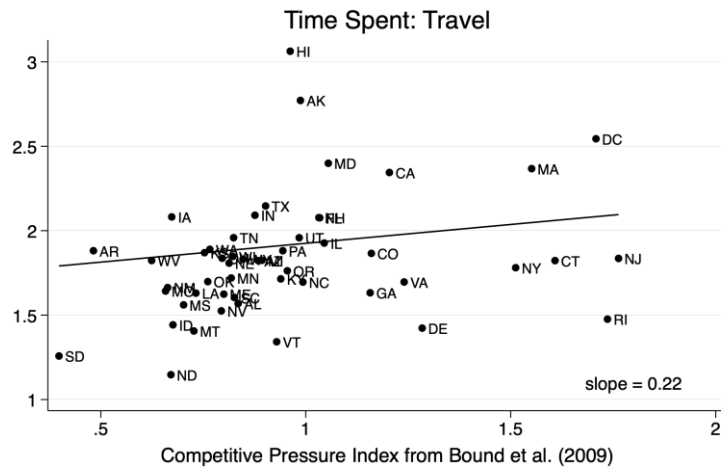
And it does look like fertility rate has fallen by more in more competitive places -



But maybe it's about
parenting intensity, not a
comparison motive per se.

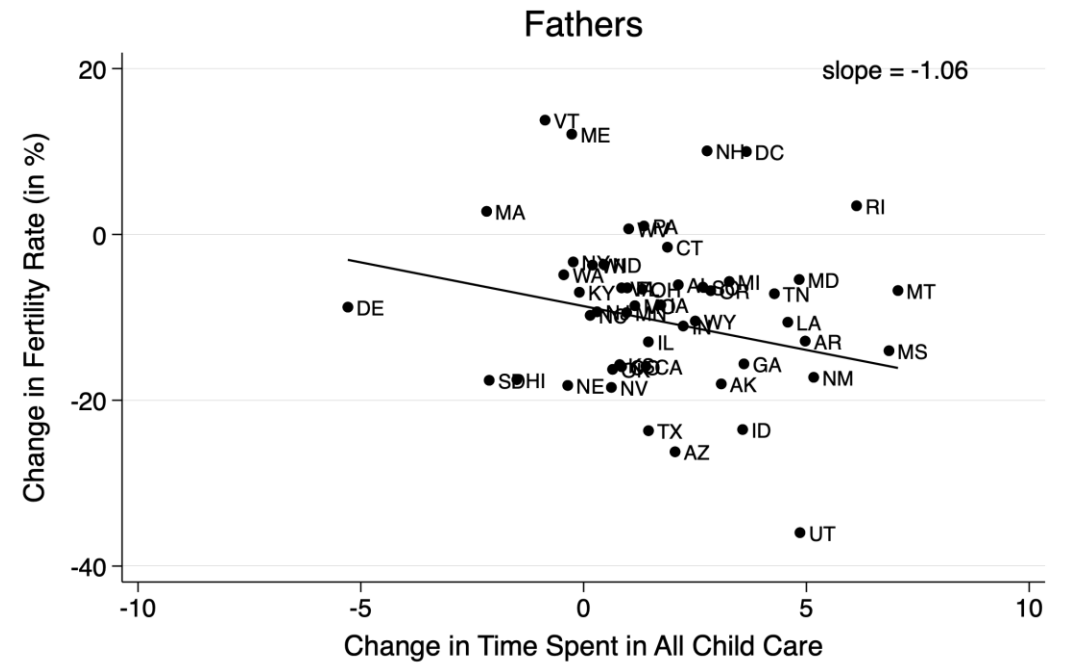
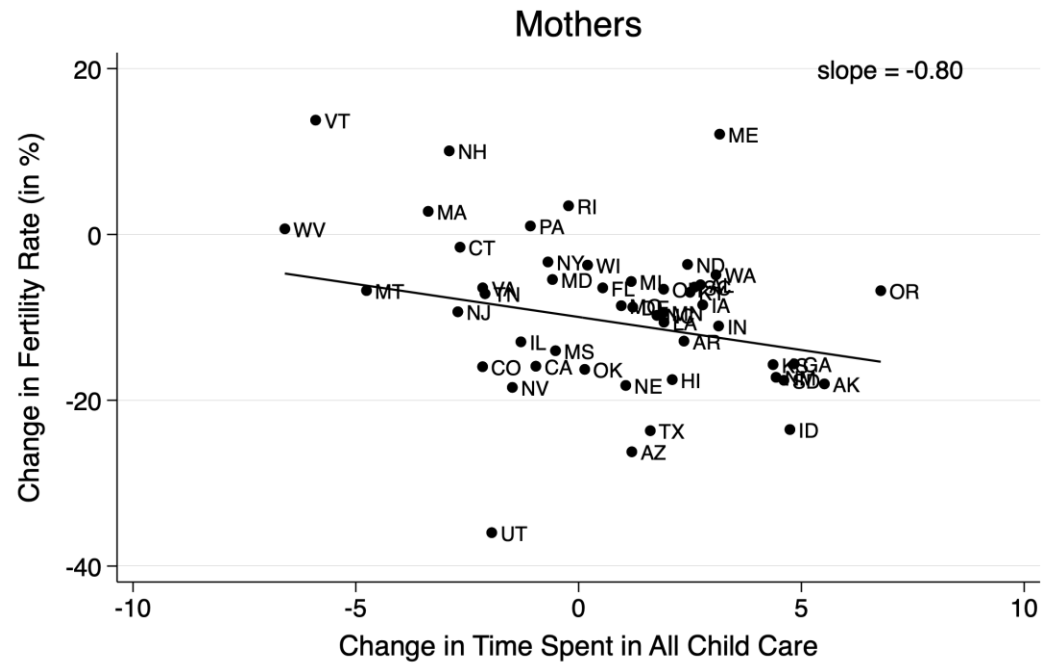
- More competitive places
have more time intensive
parenting (ATUS data)





- Not just educational time
- Nor is it just college educated moms (not shown)
- Suggests a more intensive parenting norm in more competitive places

Places where parenting time has increased by more have had larger fertility declines (2003-2019)



More relevant: consider parenting norms across cohorts and lifecycle fertility

Changing Rhythms of American Family Life (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006)

Mothers' time -

	Paid work	Childcare	Leisure
1975	16.1	8.6	37.7
1985	20.9	8.4	36.0
1995	25.7	9.6	34.4
2005	22.4	13.9	31.2

Father's time -

	Paid work	Childcare	Leisure
1975	45.4	2.6	35.7
1985	39.9	2.6	36.9
1995	39.5	4.2	42.9
2005	42.1	6.8	32.0

In Shifting Priorities
framework:

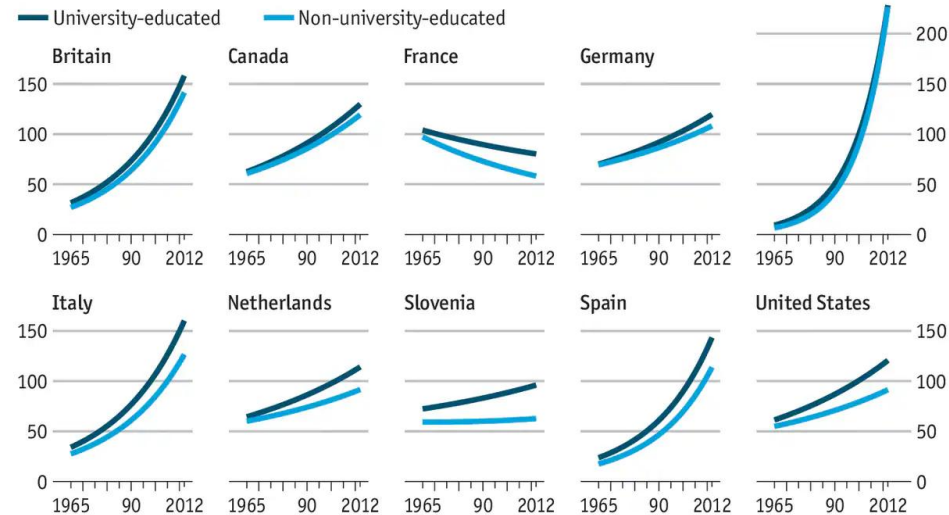
Work, Parenting &
Leisure are more likely
to come into conflict
for more recent cohorts

Increase in parental time use across Western countries from 1965-2012

- Economist chart, based on data in Dotti Sani and Treas, *JMF* 2016

Mother nature

Daily child care by mothers, by education level, minutes

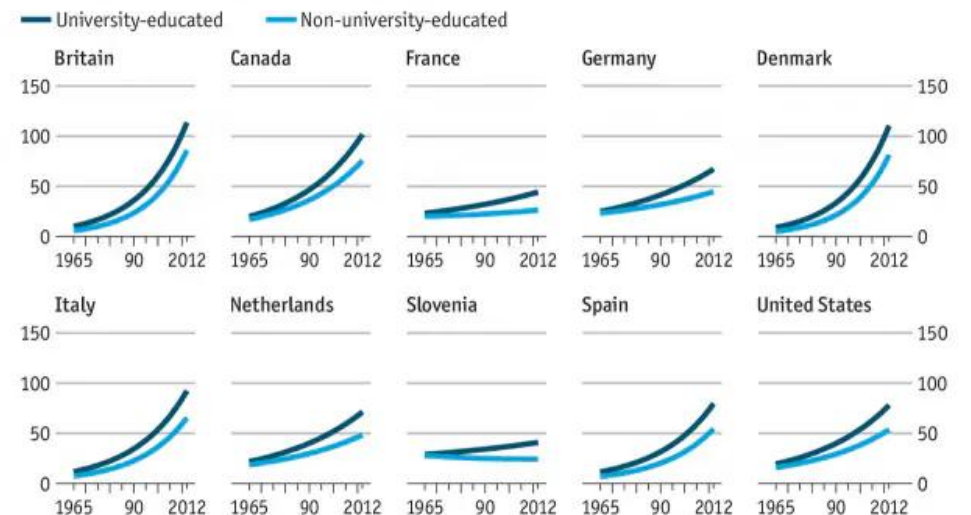


Source: "Educational Gradients in Parents' Child-Care Time", by G. M. Dotti Sani and J. Treas

Economist.com

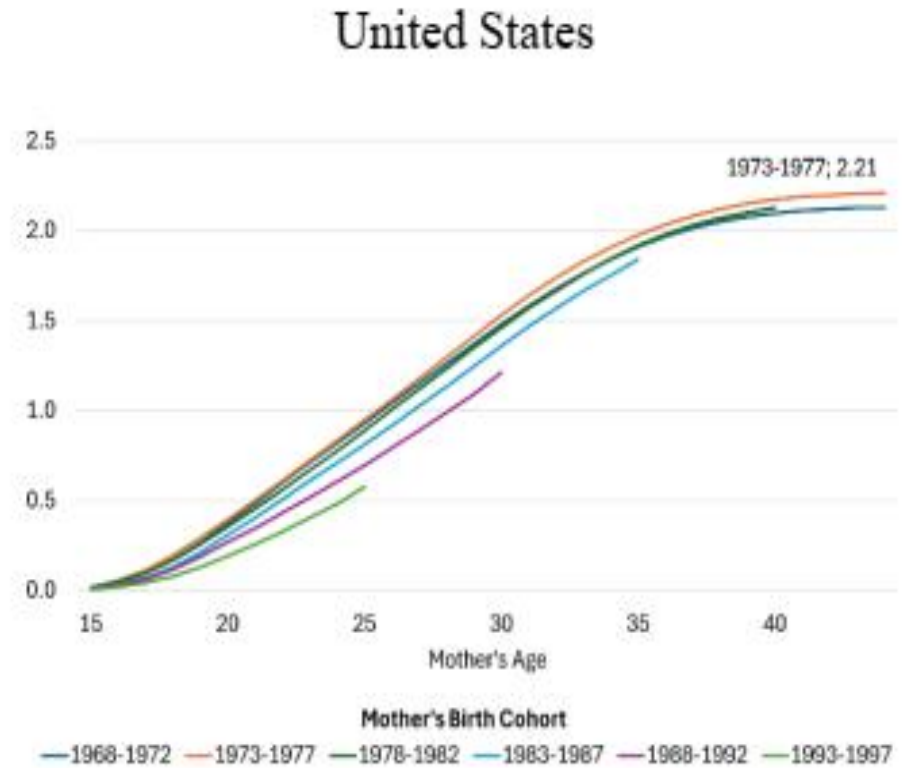
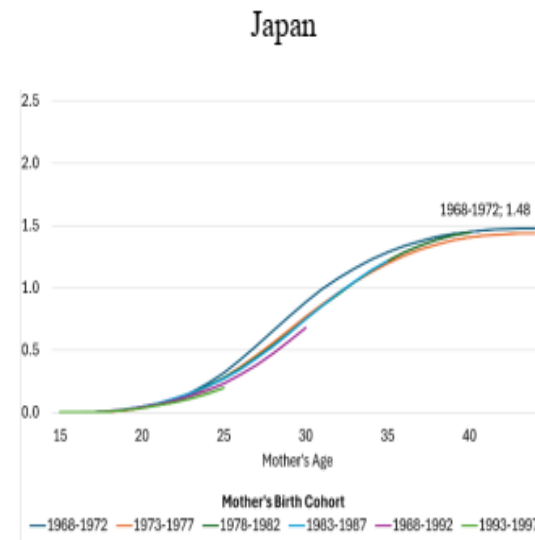
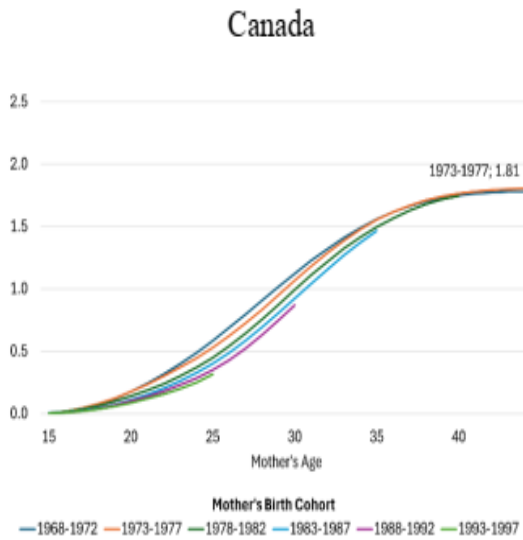
Father time

Daily child care by fathers, by education level, minutes



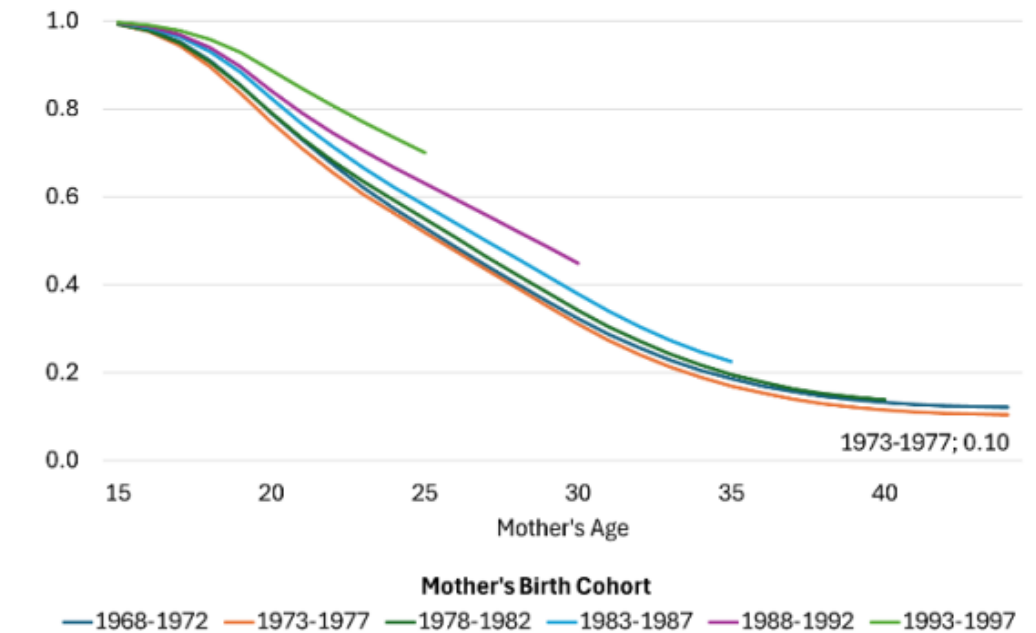
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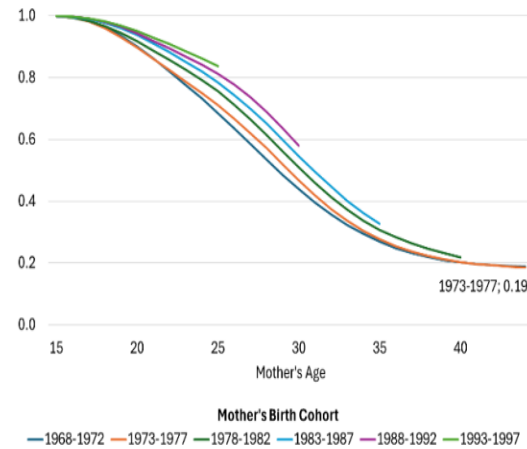


Cohort fertility is declining

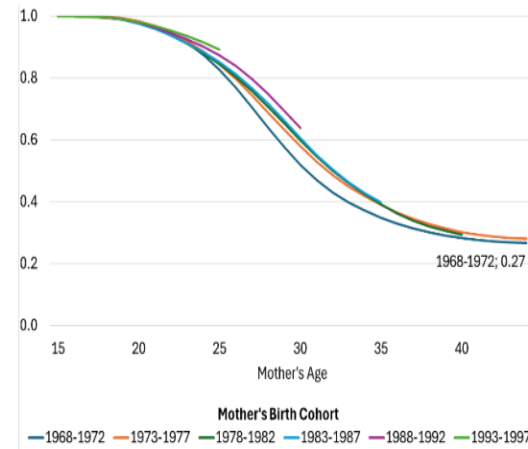
United States



Canada



Japan



Rise in childlessness across the lifecycle

Suggestive of lifestyle choice

- More people choosing childfree lifestyle
 - Could be driven by preferences or constraints
- This might suggest a different interpretation of how intensive parenting is affecting fertility choice than MTY
 - Less about quality/quantity trade-off driven by comparison motive,
 - and more about being deterred from parenthood by intense parenting lifestyle and increased conflict between (intensive) parenting and career or leisure goals

On welfare implications and policy in MTY

- I agree with MTY that current low fertility equilibrium might be suboptimal
 - Norms/pressures potentially leading to “wasteful” investments and lots of stress such that people are choosing fewer children than they would otherwise like to have
 - This is about personal welfare (not positive externalities of kids)
 - Suggests that perhaps people would be happier with a different social equilibrium of less parenting intensity/more children
- Survey data show that desired and intended fertility is higher than realized fertility.
 - Interpretation not obvious, but not as simple as people just preferring fewer kids than in the past.

❖ **Bottom line: This is a very interesting paper that pushes the literature away from standard explanations in a valuable and thought-provoking way.**
