

Desired Family Size in Japan: Evolving Patterns and Fertility Outcomes

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This study provides initial insights into the evolving patterns and fertility outcomes of women's desired family size in Japan. We first provide detailed descriptions of changes in women's desired family size over the life course and achievement of desired family size. We then estimate multivariate models to examine the socio-demographic correlates of changes in, and achievement of, desired fertility. These analyses are based on recently available panel data from nearly 13,000 women aged 20-34 during the period 2002-2011.

Our descriptive analysis shows that nearly 80% of women changed their desired family size at least once during the 9-year period of observation. Our fixed-effect Poisson model shows that desired family size decreases rapidly with women's age after controlling for key covariates and a change in the way in which the question on family size was asked. Marriage also contributes to a convergence in desired number of children to two, either by lowering or raising women's initial desires. In most cases, childbirth has a positive effect on women's desired family size, but we did not find any effects of women's employment status on their desired family size.

Comparing similar studies from the U.S., the U.K., and the Netherlands, our descriptive analysis reveals a large discrepancy between desired and actual fertility around age 40 in Japan. For example, we find that the average number of desired children among women aged 38-40 is 2.09, while their observed number of children born is 1.46. Only 30% of women achieved or over-achieved their initial desired family size after 9 years of observation. Even among those women who were married for at least 5 years by wave 10, only about a half of them achieved or over-achieved their desired fertility measured at the time of marriage. However, we find that about half of those unachieved married women eventually meet their desired fertility by lowering their expectations later in their marriage. Our multinomial logit models show that, in addition to demographic covariates such as wife's age and marriage duration, wife's employment has a strong negative effect on achieving desired fertility. Also, unlike in some other countries, husbands' desired fertility plays an important role in whether wife's desired fertility is realized.

In conclusion, marriage is one factor positively associated with both fertility desires and outcomes in Japan. We also find that women's employment hampers achievement of desired fertility. Therefore, policy efforts to facilitate women's ability to balance work and family lives should be an effective strategy for coping with Japan's low fertility. Furthermore, because women's fertility desires deteriorate with age, those policy measures may be most effective if they target younger women.