

Unrealized Fertility Over the Life Course: Experiences, Causes, and Consequences

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LIFE COURSE IMPACTS
OF CHANGES IN
ACCESS TO
CONTRACEPTION

At the core of Reproductive Justice is the belief that all women have

1. the right to have children;
2. the right to not have children and;
3. the right to nurture the children we have in a safe and healthy environment.

REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTHCARE DESERTS
rhdproject.org

UNREALIZED
FERTILITY

Misalignment of Fertility Goals and Outcomes

Desire to avoid pregnancy



Unmet need for contraception



Unplanned fertility

Desire for pregnancy



Unmet need for fertility supports

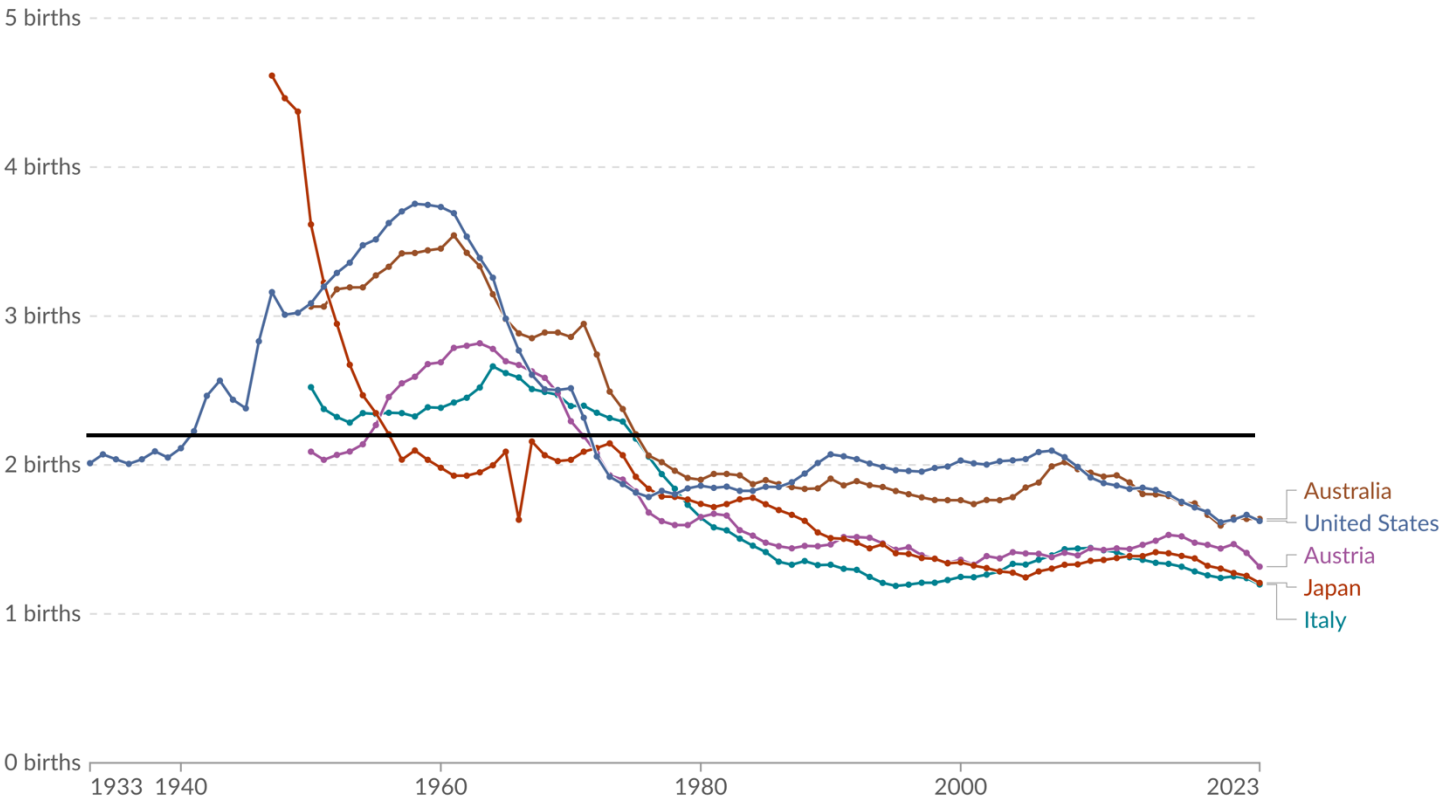


Unrealized fertility

Unrealized Fertility

Fertility rate: births per woman

The total fertility rate¹ summarizes the total number of births a woman would have, if she experienced the birth rates seen in women of each age group in one particular year across her childbearing years.



Data source: Human Fertility Database (2025); UN, World Population Prospects (2024) OurWorldinData.org/fertility-rate | CC BY

Our World
in Data

“IT’S NOT FOR LACK OF WANTING KIDS”

A report on the Fertility Decision Making Project



Report prepared by the Australian Institute of Family Studies
for the Australian Government Office for Women,
Department of Family and Community Services

Measuring Unrealized Fertility

Aggregate:

A1) Period Fertility Gap

A2) Cohort Fertility Gap

Individual:

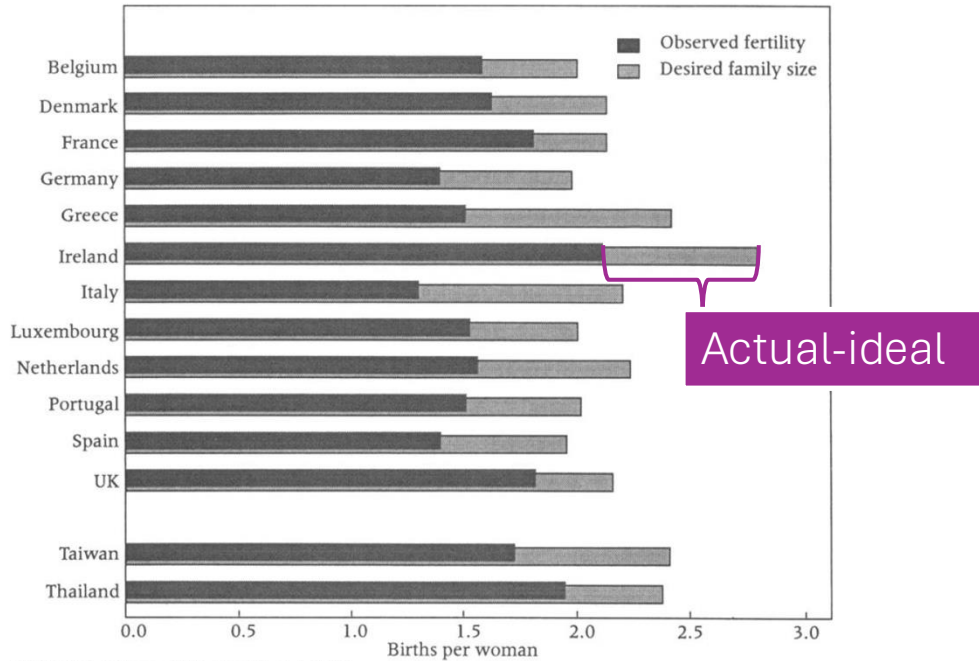
I1) Individual Number Approach

I2) Individual More Approach

I3) Individual Longitudinal Approach

A1: Period Fertility Gap

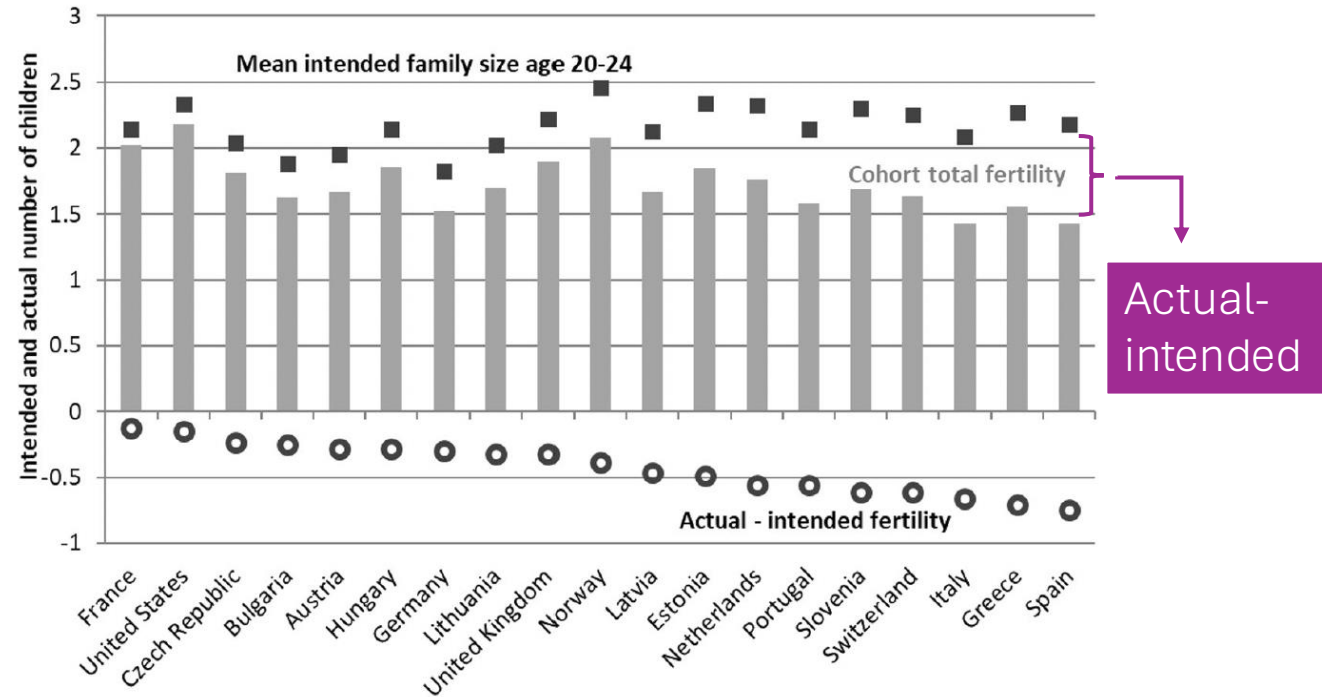
FIGURE 3 Observed fertility and desired family size for selected countries, ca. 1990



SOURCES: Coleman 1996; Knodel et al. 1996.

Examples: **Bongaarts 2001** (Europe, Asia)
Hagewan and Morgan 2005 (US)
Bongaarts 2008 (Europe)

A2: Cohort Fertility Gap



Examples: **Beaujouan and Berghammer 2019** (Europe, US)
Bongaarts 2002 (Europe, US, Oceania)
Morgan and Rackin 2010 (US)
Guzzo and Hayford 2023 (US)

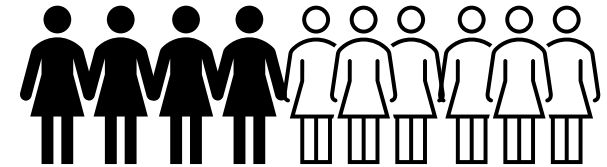
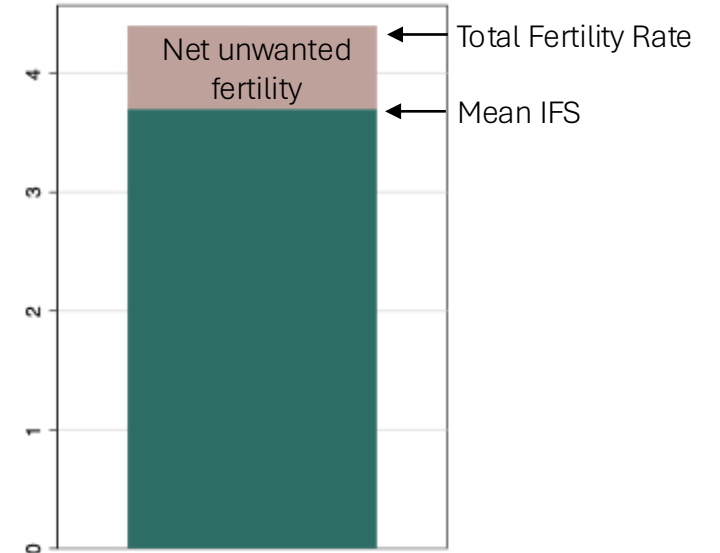
Measuring Unrealized Fertility

Aggregate:

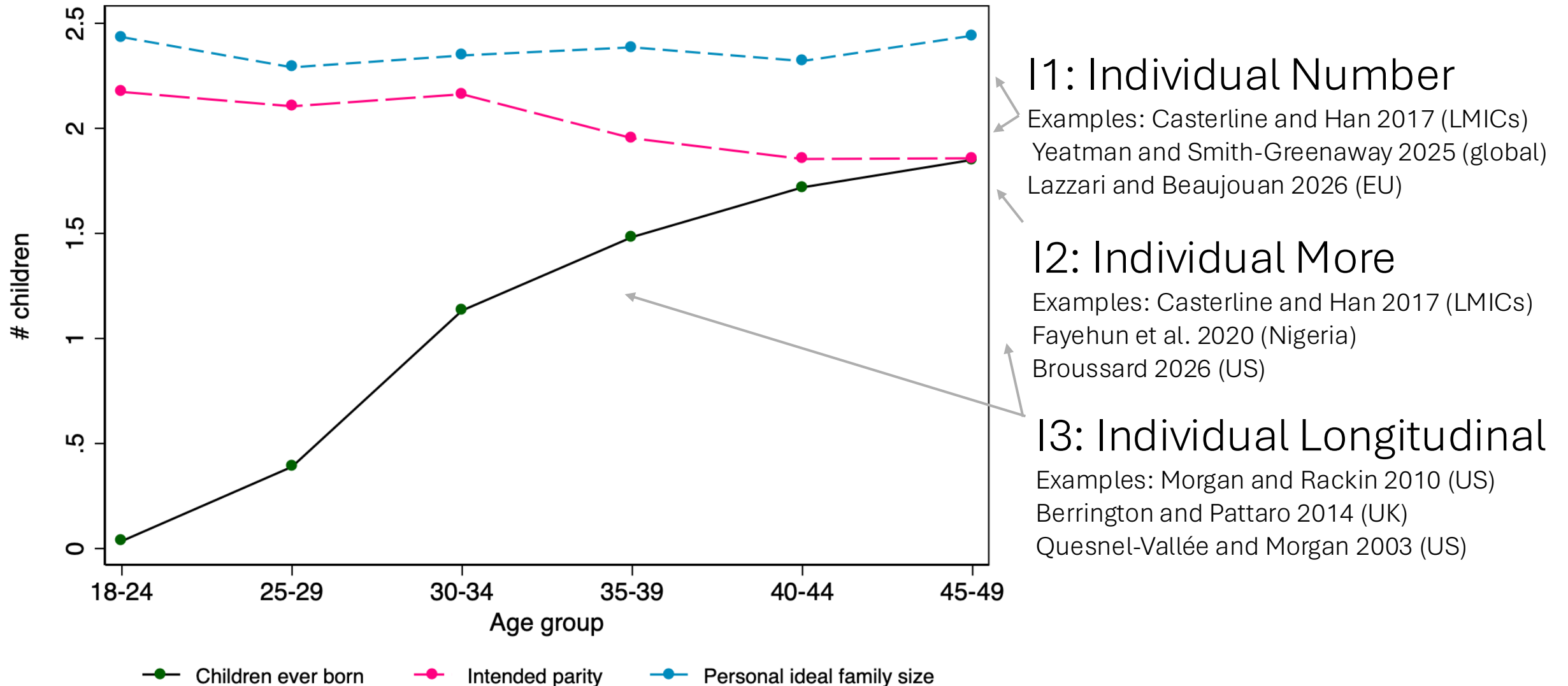
- A1) Period Fertility Gap
- A2) Cohort Fertility Gap

Individual:

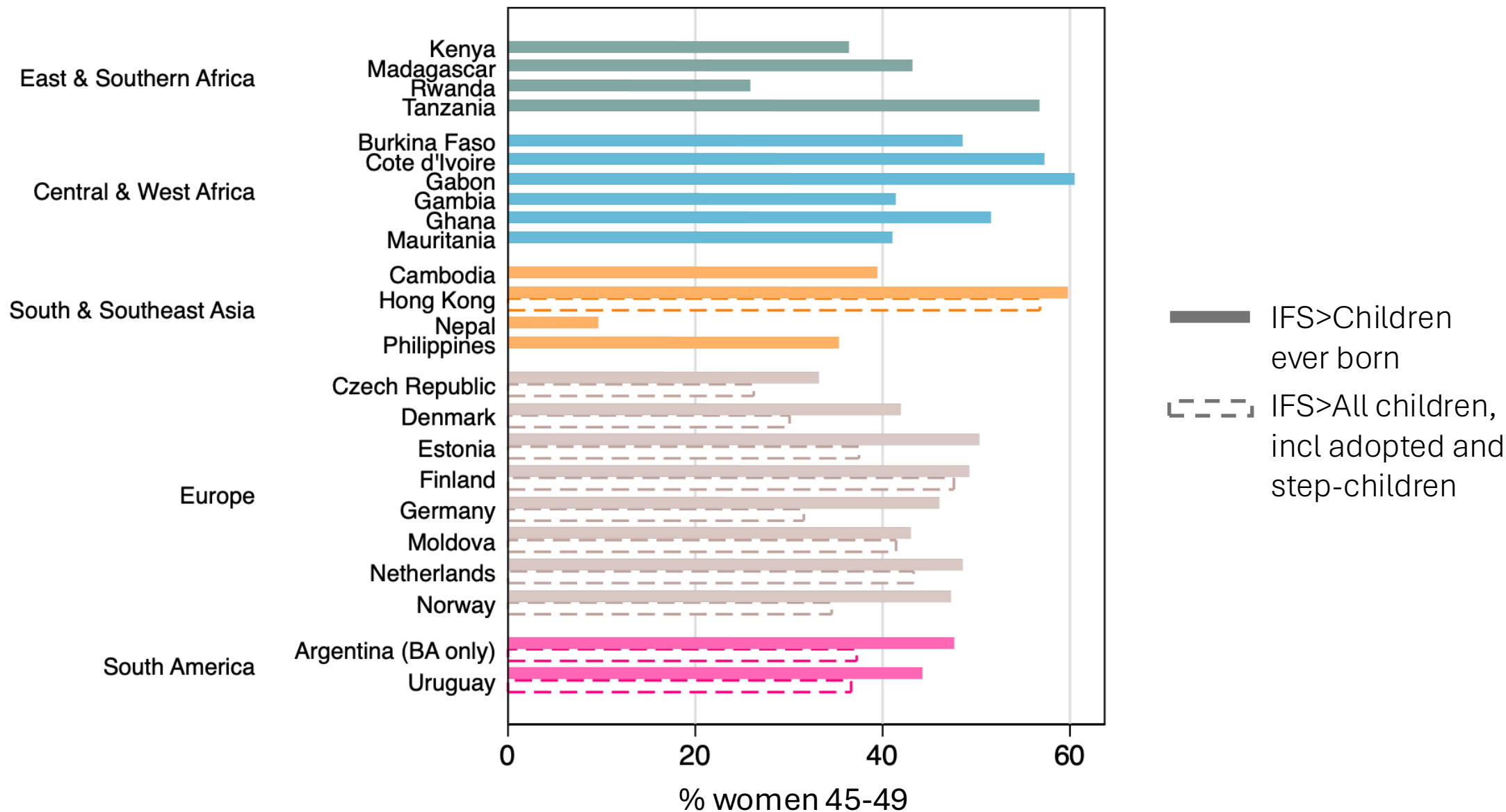
- I1) Individual Number Approach
- I2) Individual More Approach
- I3) Individual Longitudinal Approach



Individual-Level Approaches



Unrealized Fertility Using Individual Number Approach (I1)



Source: Demographic and Health Surveys (2020-2022); Generations and Gender Surveys (2020-2023)

Does Unrealized Fertility Exist Earlier in the Life Course?

- Postponement transition and delayed entry into parenthood and into higher-order parenthood
 - Danger of inferring desires from action!
- Potential consequences for:
 - Relationship stability and happiness
 - Health and wellbeing
 - Family relationships
- Fertility timing gap; ideal timing of motherhood (Feltrin et al. 2026; Temmesen et al. 2026)

Unrealized Fertility in the U.S.

Completed cohort fertility 0.3-0.5 children below early life intentions [A2] (Guzzo and Hayford 2023)

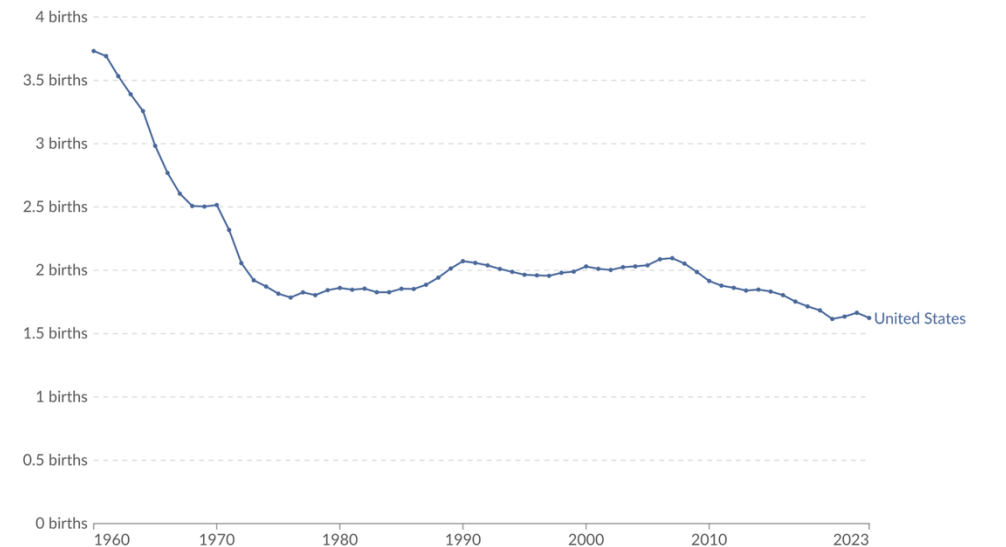
➤ 35% of women and 43% of men have under-achieved early life goals [I3] (Morgan and Rackin 2010)

~10% more were childless than had intended [A2] (Beaujouan and Berghammer 2019)

➤ 38% childless had wanted kids at some point [I1ish] (Minkin et al. 2024)

Total fertility rate: births per woman

The total fertility rate¹ summarizes the total number of births a woman would have, if she experienced the birth rates seen in women of each age group in one particular year across her childbearing years.



Data source: UN WPP (2024); HFD (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/fertility-rate | CC BY

1. **Fertility rate:** The total fertility rate is a period metric; it summarizes data from one particular year. For a given year, the total fertility rate represents the total number of children born to a hypothetical woman on average, if she (1) lived to the end of her childbearing years, and (2) experienced the same age-specific fertility rates throughout her whole reproductive life as the age-specific fertility rates seen in that particular year. It is different from the average number of children born to women that eventually have across their childbearing years, which is the cohort fertility rate.
Read more in our article: Why the total fertility rate doesn't necessarily tell us the number of births women eventually have and on our page on the Fertility Rate.

This Study:

- How common is unrealized fertility in the U.S.?
- Does it vary across the life course and sociodemographic characteristics?
- What are its perceived causes?
- For whom is it most problematic?

Data: Unrealized Fertility Module

- Partnered with a marketing firm
- Pilot tested: August 2024, data collected: March 2025
- Quota sampling to balance to US population on age, gender, income
- 2,700 respondents, age 18-69



Collaborator: Tom Anderson



Prevalence of Unrealized Fertility:

Do you wish you had had (more) children? (45+*)

Do you wish you had had (more) children by now? (<45)

Response options: yes, no, unsure

*55+ for men

Extent of Unrealized Fertility:

How many children do you wish you had had? (45+*)

How many children do you wish you had had (by now in your life)? (<45)

*55+ for men

Perceived Causes:

I've had fewer children than I want (at this point in my life) because...

Health & Biological Factors (6)

Partner-Related Reasons (5)

Resources & Costs (5)

Environmental & Social (2)

Emotional & Psychological Factors (2)

Personal Goals & Priorities (5)

Other

Perceived Consequences:

How has not having had the number of children you would like affected your satisfaction with life?

It has greatly decreased my long-term life satisfaction

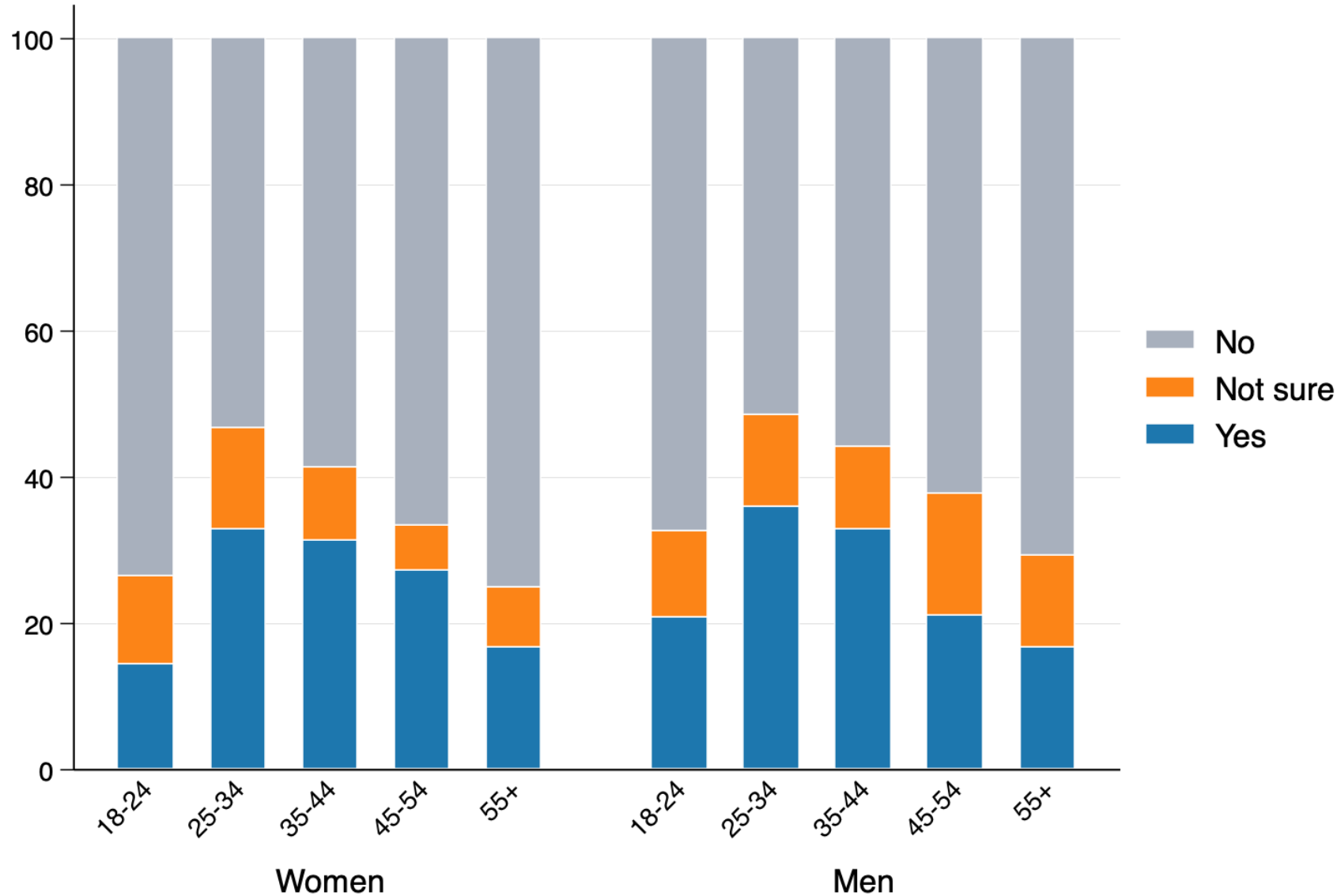
It has somewhat decreased my long-term life satisfaction

It has had little to no impact on my long-term life satisfaction

Not sure

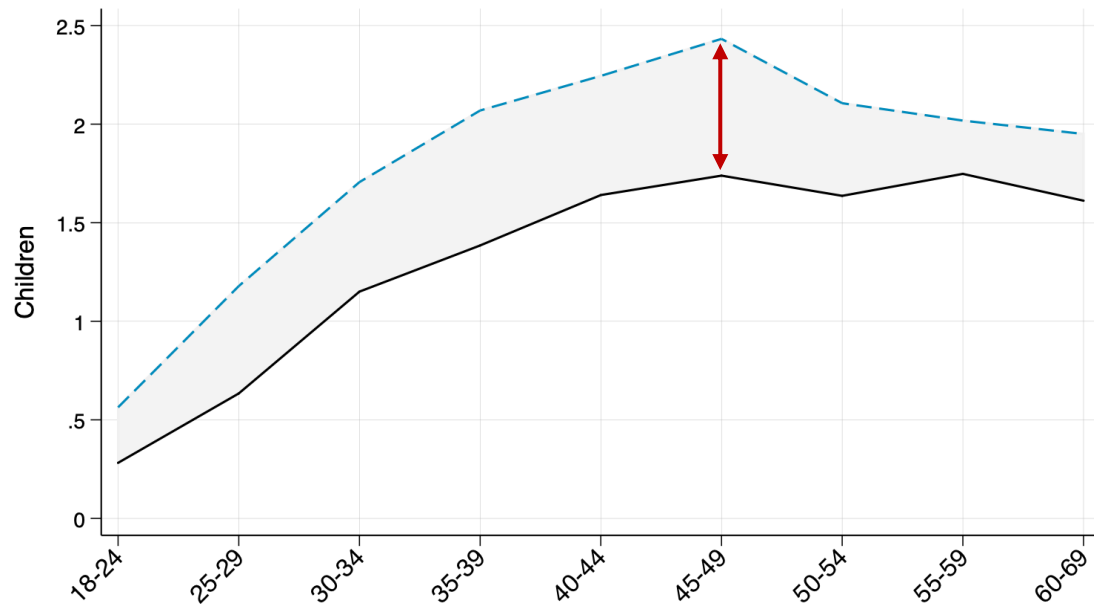
Prevalence of Unrealized Fertility

Do you wish you had had (more) children (by now)?

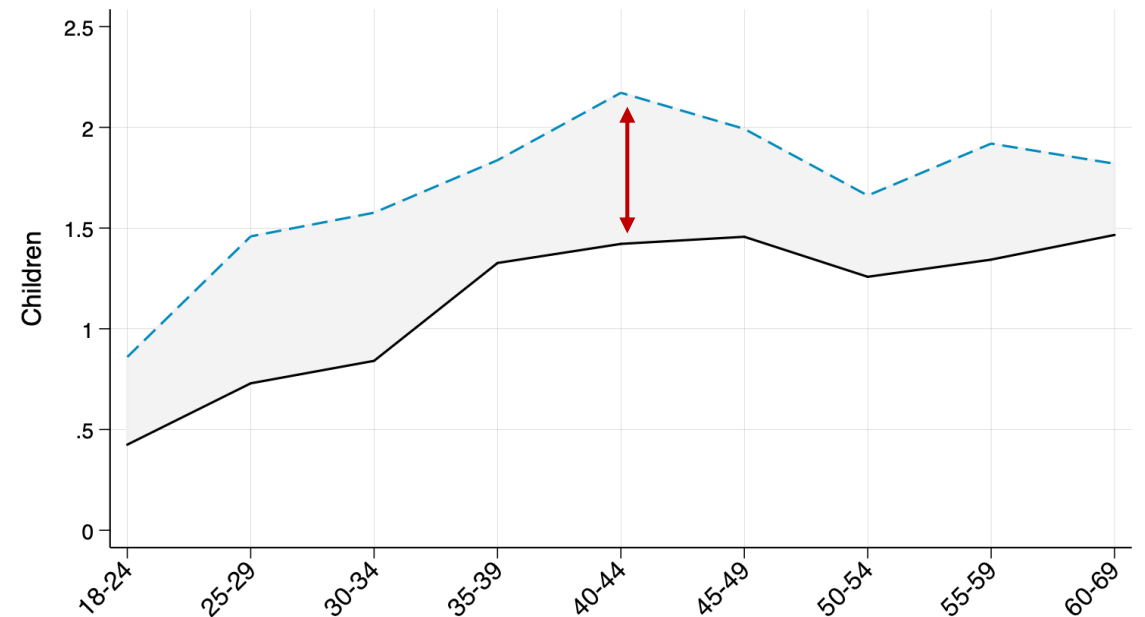


How many children do you wish you had had (by now in your life)?

Women



Men

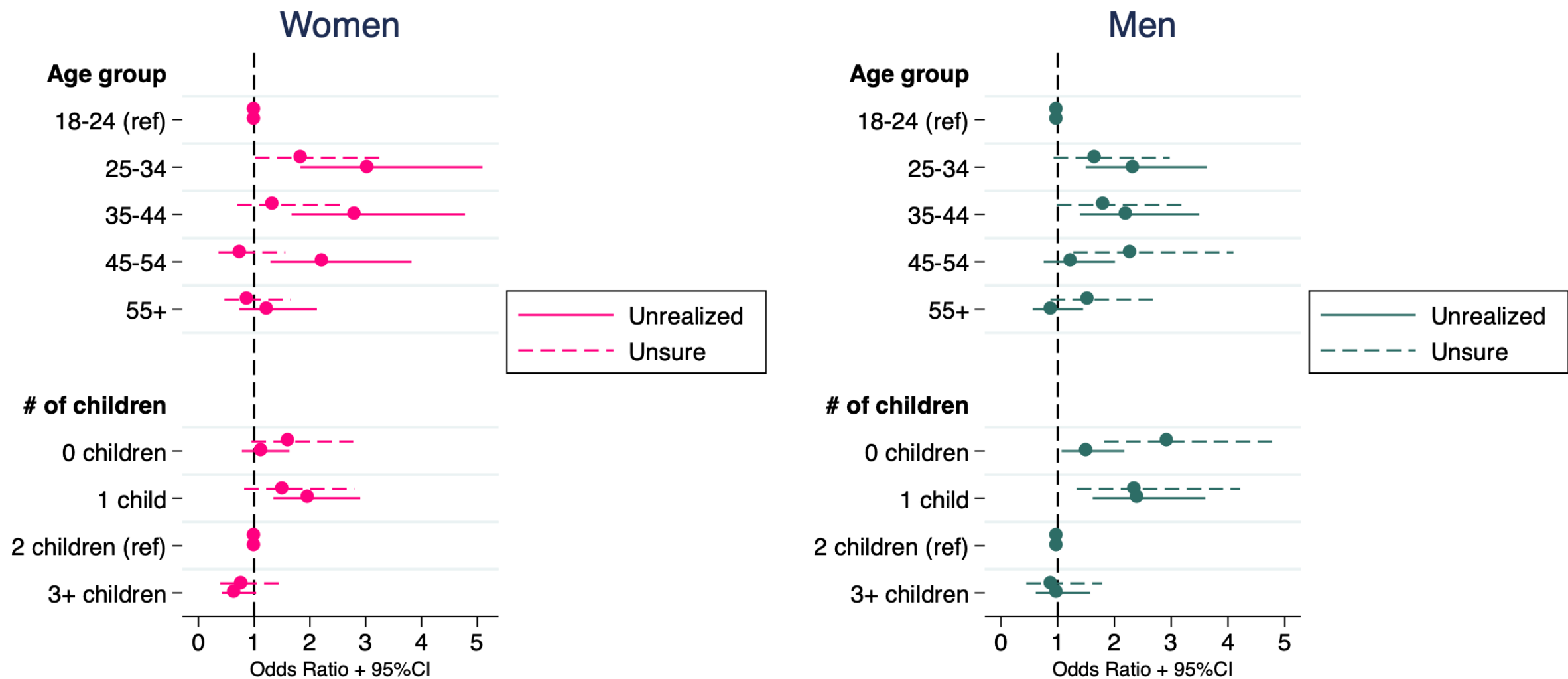


Unrealized gap

Children ever born

Children desired

Predictors of Having Fewer Children Than Desired



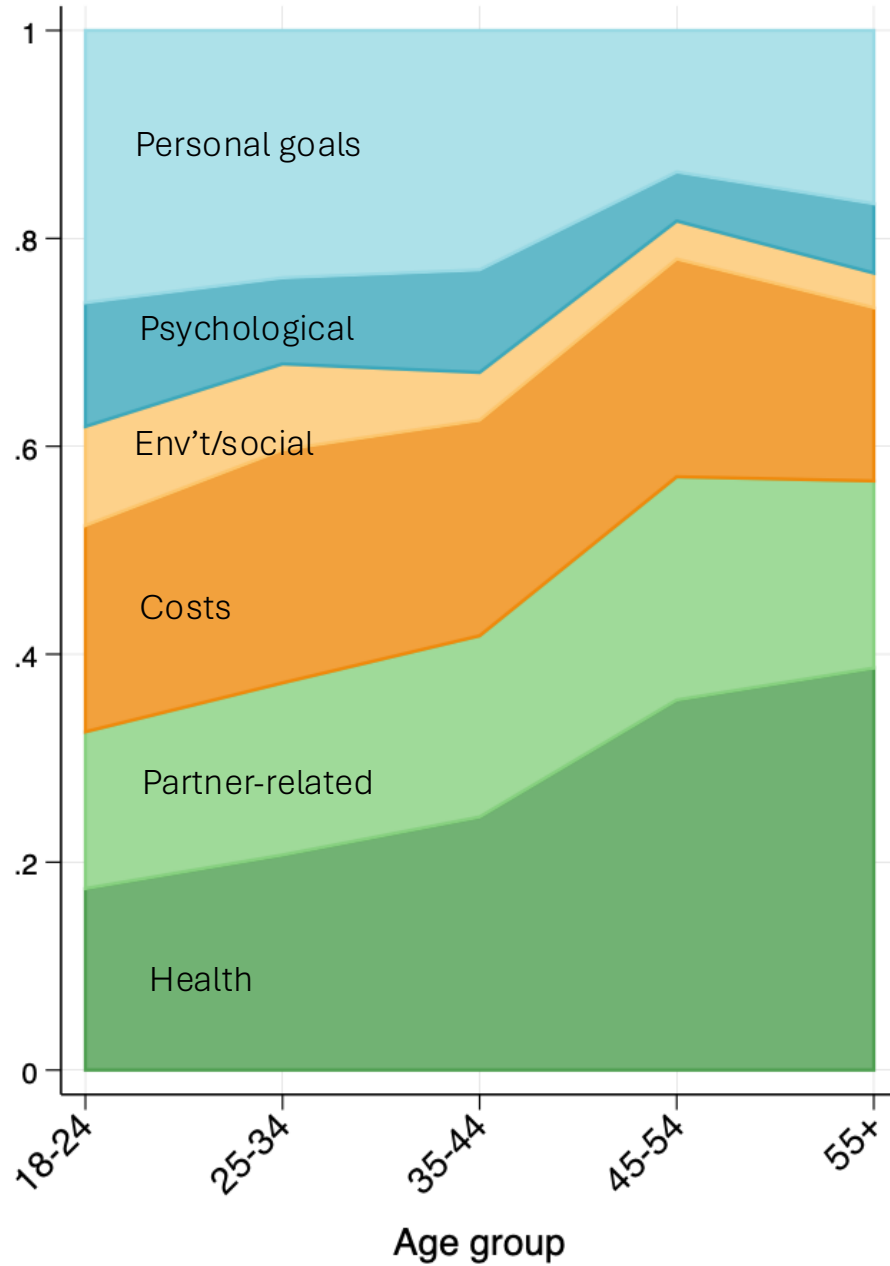
Models also control for education, employment, and marital status

Perceived Causes

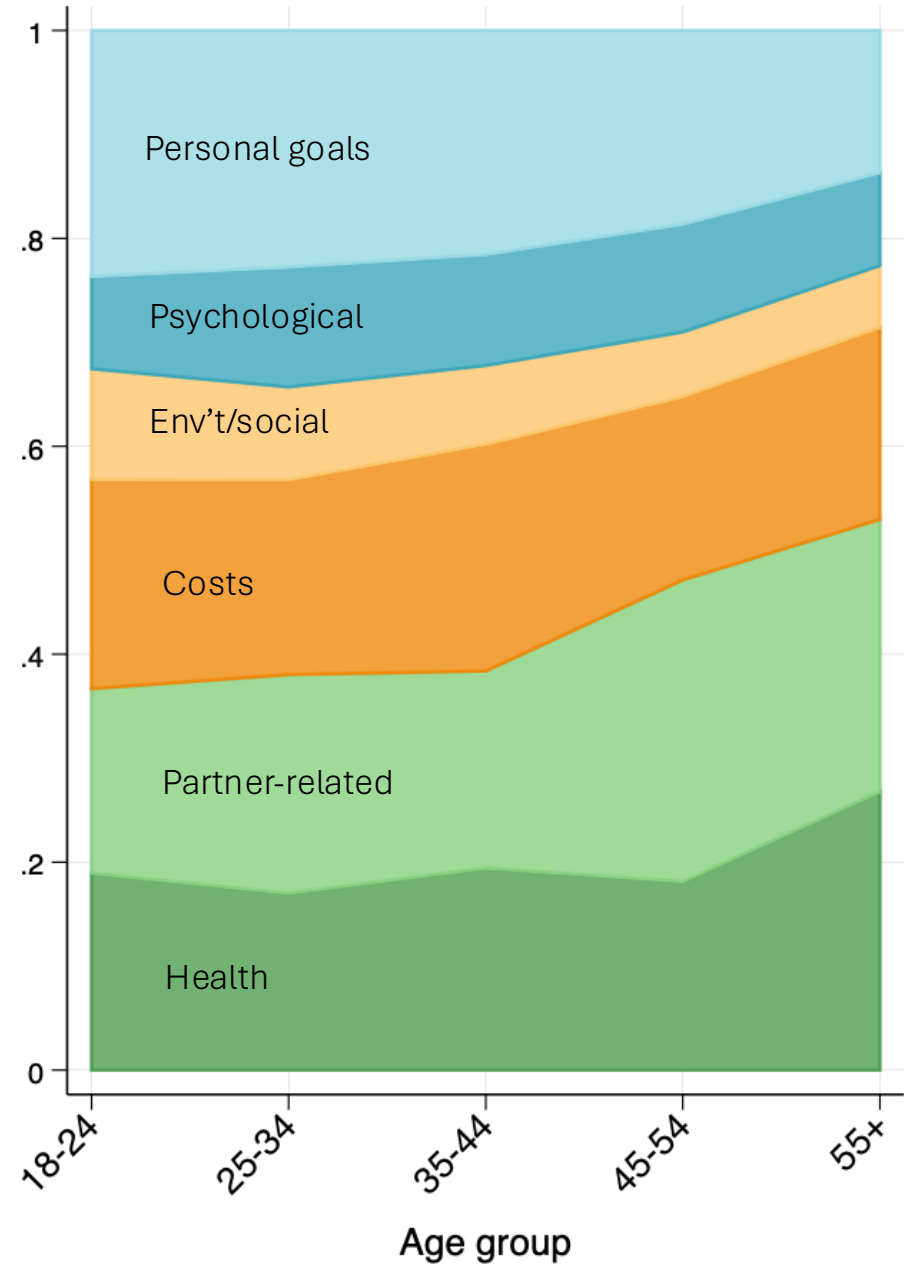
I've had fewer children than I want because...

Health & Biological Previous traumatic experience with childbirth or parenting I had health issues I got too old Fear of passing on genetic disorders or hereditary conditions Difficulty conceiving or carrying a pregnancy Difficulty adopting	Partner-Related I didn't meet/didn't have the right partner My partner already had children My partner had health issues My partner didn't want more Uncertain relationship with partner	Emotional & Psychological Unsure about parenting abilities Not emotionally/psychologically ready for more
Personal Goals & Priorities Focused on my education I still want/intend to have more children Desire to spend my time/money on existing children I didn't want to lose my freedom or opportunities to do other things (e.g., travel, hobbies) Focused on my career	Resources & Costs Insufficient social support network (e.g., extended family, community support) Inadequate housing or space for more children Too expensive to have more Lack of access to medical care or reproductive health services Too physically burdensome to have more (e.g., childcare, housework)	
	Environmental and Social Concerns Concerns about overpopulation Social pressure/stigma to have smaller family	

Women



Men

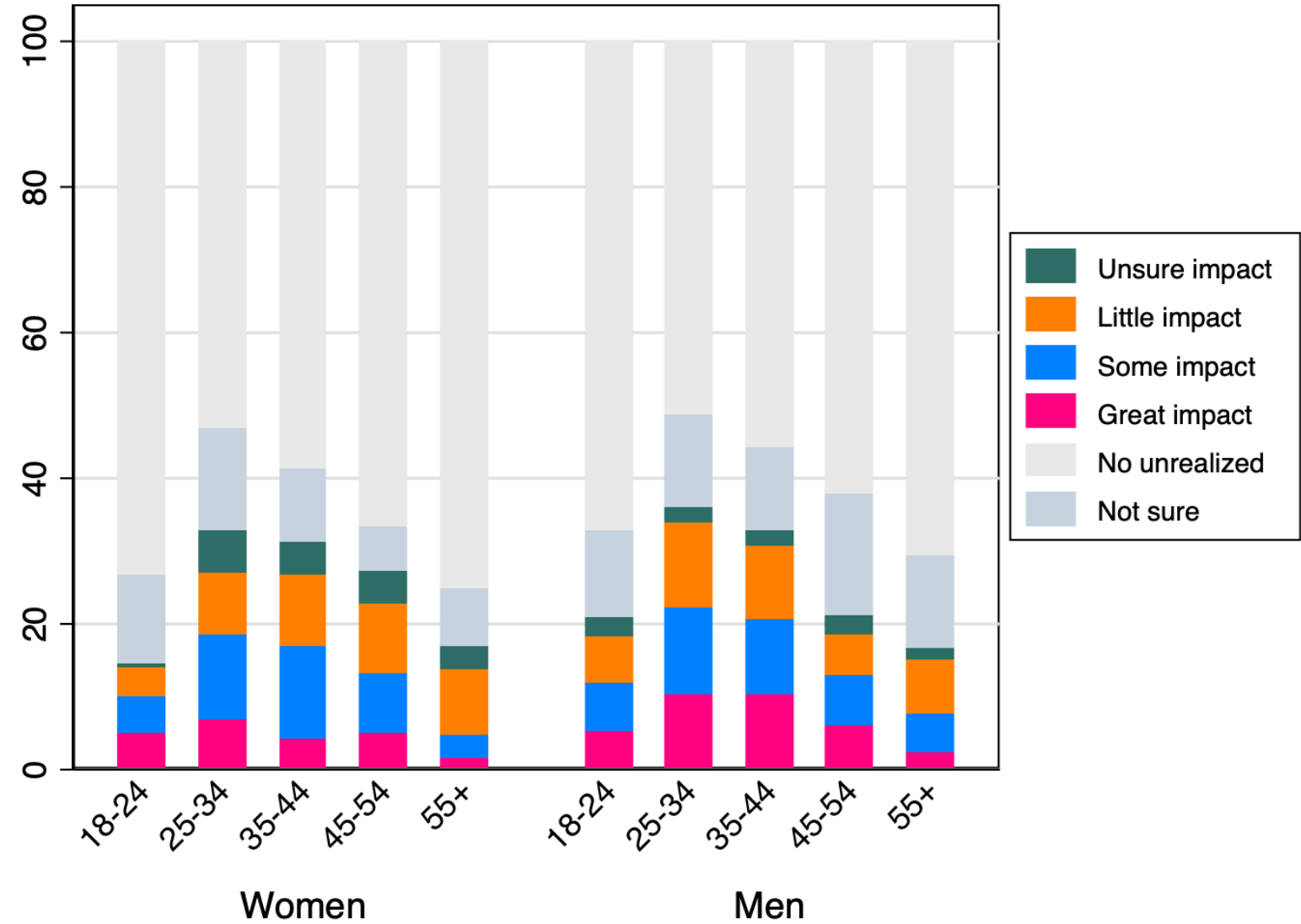


Men 18-24	Men 25-34	Men 35-44	Men 45-54	Men 55+
I didn't want to lose my freedom	I still intend to	Focused on my career	My partner already had children	I didn't meet the right partner
I still intend to	Was not emotionally ready for more	I still intend to	My partner didn't want more	My partner didn't want more
Unsure about parenting abilities	Unsure about parenting abilities	Was not emotionally ready for more	My partner had health issues	Too expensive
Unstable relationship	My partner didn't want more	I didn't meet the right partner	I didn't meet the right partner	I got too old
Social pressure to have smaller family/delay	Focused on my career	Social pressure to have smaller family/delay	Was not emotionally ready for more	Health issues

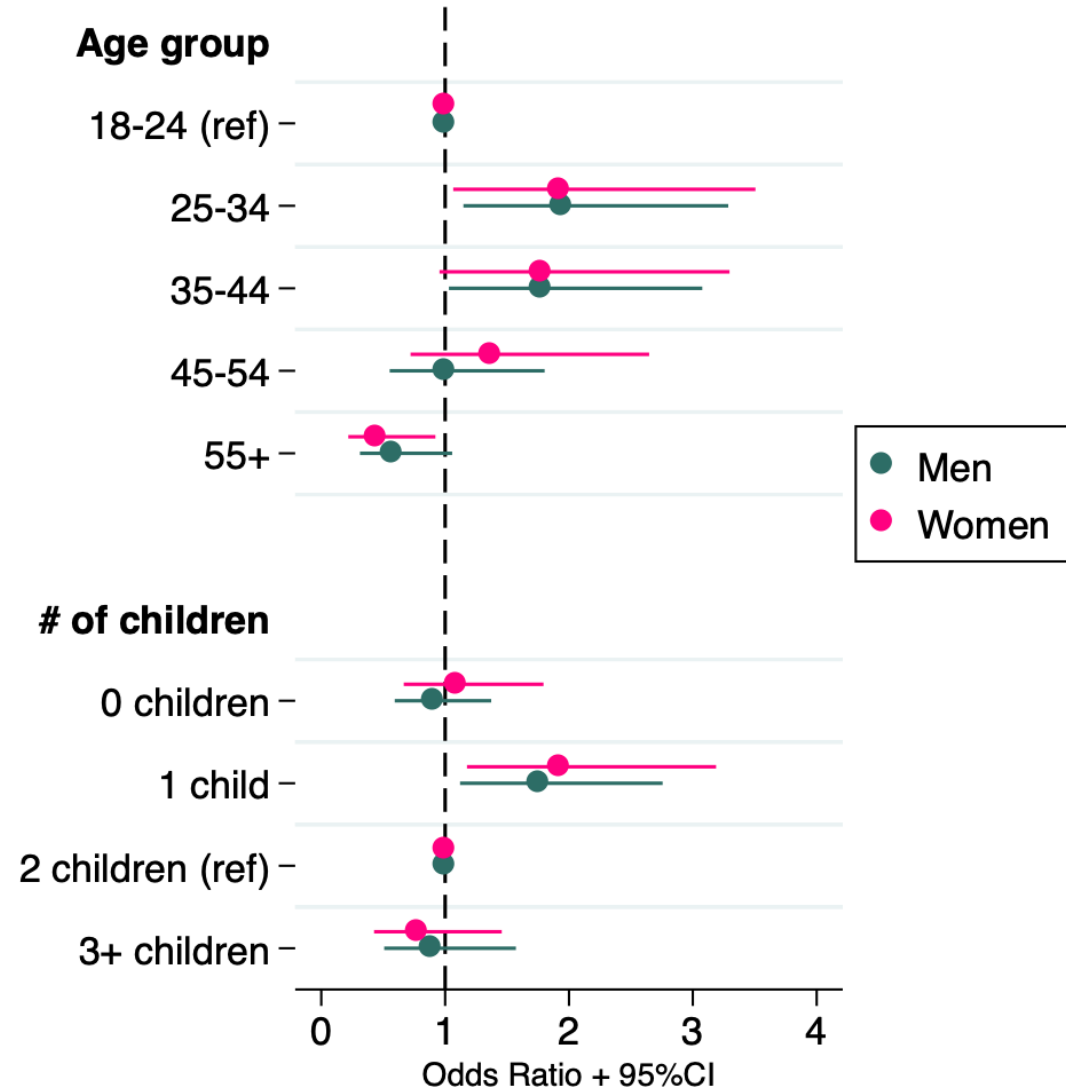
Women 18-24	Women 25-34	Women 35-44	Women 45-54	Women 55+
Was not emotionally ready for more	I didn't meet the right partner	I didn't meet the right partner	I didn't meet the right partner	I got too old
Previous traumatic experience with childbirth or parenting	Fertility issues	I had health issues	I got too old	Fertility issues
Unstable relationship	Too expensive	Too expensive	I had health issues	Health issues
I didn't want to lose my freedom	Inadequate housing	Inadequate housing	Fertility issues	Too expensive
Social pressure to have smaller family/delay	I still intend to	I still intend to	Too much housework/childcare	Focused on my career

Perceived Consequences

How has not having had the number of children you would like affected your satisfaction with life?



Predictors of experiencing unrealized fertility that greatly or somewhat reduced life satisfaction



Summary of Findings for the U.S.

- Unrealized fertility is common across the reproductive life course
- It is highest during peak reproductive ages and declines at older ages
 - It is perceived as most problematic during those years as well
- Most common (and most problematic) among those with 1 child
- People (especially men) are frequently unsure about whether they wished they had had more children
- Perceived causes patterned across the life course and by gender

Concluding Thoughts

- Unrealized fertility can be measured directly and doing so can reveal new insights into the process of behaviors and desires misaligning
- People can identify the perceived causes of unrealized fertility in their lives
- Not all unrealized fertility is problematic
 - Important to differentiate between types
- It remains important to measure what people want, even (especially!) if it doesn't align with what they do