

Number of Children and Later Life Health in 20 Countries

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Background

- Several studies demonstrate that children are often an important source of support to ageing parents.
- Although having children has documented benefits, parenthood is also linked to increased stress and therefore may reduce health.
- Studies (Grundy et al 2017, Albertini & Arpino, 2019) suggest the critical role of the number of children for health in later life.

Objectives

- In this study we assess how number of children influences health in later life, compared to being childless in later life.
- We assess whether there is an optimal threshold in the number of children for parents' health.
- We hypothesize that smaller numbers of children may be less stressful than larger numbers of children, but that these patterns vary by context.

Conclusions

- Our results suggest the existence of a **threshold effect of number of children that likely varies by national context** (e.g., economic supports, norms about childbearing) and the potential burden of the health outcome of interest.
- Yet, in several countries, **we did not find a statistically significant** relationship between number of children and health.

Methods and Materials

- Harmonized data from the family of Health and Retirement Surveys across the United States (HRS, wave 11), Europe (SHARE, waves 4 and 5), Mexico (MHAS, wave 3), and China (CHARLS, wave 2)
- Total sample of adults aged 50 and older across 20 countries amounted to 109,648.
- Logistic regression models to estimate the association between number of children and poor health.
- Number of children – categorical variable with cut off at 4 or 5.
- Five binary health measures are:
 - poor self-rated health,
 - 1 or more ADL limitations,
 - 1 or more IADL limitations,
 - 1 or more chronic conditions,
 - being depressed.

Results

- Having a greater number of children is associated with worse health in multiple countries (e.g., Hungary, Mexico, Italy, Portugal)
- Having fewer children (1 or 2) is associated with better health in other countries (e.g. China, Czechia, Spain).
- In some cases 1 or 2 children is associated with better health and 4 or more with worse health.
- These patterns also vary by the health outcome examined, with nearly half of nations showing an association between more children and elevated depression and chronic conditions, whereas more children is associated with poorer self-rated health in only a few countries (e.g. USA, Mexico).

Figure 1. Summary of associations between number of children and **Self-Rated Health** (reference category – childless)

	Effect		
	positive --> POOR HEALTH	negative --> GOOD HEALTH	not signifi cant
Austria			✓
Belgium	4+ children		
China			✓
Czechia			✓
Denmark	1 child		
Estonia			✓
France		3 children	
Germany			✓
Hungary	1 + children		
Italy		1 or 2 children	
Luxembourg			✓
Mexico	4+ children		
Netherlands			✓
Poland		3 or less children	
Portugal			✓
Slovenia			✓
Spain		2 children	
Sweden			✓
Switzerland		2 children	
USA	1 or 4+ children		

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