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Press Release

More Pressure, Fewer Children: How Competition Between Parents Is Lowering the Birth Rate

A new study by Mannheim economist Michèle Tertilt and colleagues shows: social comparison between parents and competition for the best education for their children result in families planning or having fewer children.

A new study by Professor Michèle Tertilt from the University of Mannheim and her colleagues Professor Minchul Yum and Dr. Lukas Mahler shows: Parents would often like to have more children—but choose not to because they feel they cannot keep up with other parents and their investments in education, tutoring, and childcare. The comparison between families thus contributes significantly to the worldwide decline in birth rates.

The study published in the journal *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* analyzes why in many countries fewer children are being born, even though families would, in principle, like to have children. The economists explain that not only financial burdens or a lack of childcare facilities play a role in this but above all social pressure to make exceptionally high investments for each individual child—for example in education, extracurricular activities, or private tutoring.

According to the study, one reason for the increase in pressure is the growing role of social media—especially that of “momfluencers.” The latter present idealized images of modern motherhood on platforms such as Instagram or TikTok: creative early education, home-cooked organic food, and perfectly designed nurseries.

“In many countries, it is now considered necessary to invest a lot of money and time in children’s tutoring so that they can keep up. This changes how families think about having children—and how many children they consider having,” Tertilt explains. The social pressure put on parents does therefore not only lead to stress and financial burdens but can also contribute to the population shrinking in the long term.

This pressure is particularly high in the competition for study places in societies with high-stakes examinations—i.e. school systems where test results are decisive for school careers and future opportunities, as is the case in South Korea and the US, for example.

At the heart of the study is an economic model that simulates families' decisions on how many children to have and how much time, money, and energy to invest in each. The results show: the greater the social comparison, the higher is the investment pressure per child—and the lower are the birth rates.

The model is supplemented by empirical analyses that show, for example, that birth rates are particularly low in countries where parents are particularly concerned about their children's education and invest a lot of their own money in education. These include South Korea and the US. This correlation can also be observed within the US: In regions with a high level of social networking, the number of children is particularly low, even in the case of comparable incomes. Conversely, the number of children in rather rural regions with less intense comparison behavior and less competition for educational opportunities is higher, even in the case of comparable income levels.

From the researchers' point of view, political interventions to reduce comparison pressure in the educational system could contribute to parents rather choosing to have children. This includes, for example, reforms to examinations and the expansion of public education and tutoring services. Open discussion about how much "parental investment" is reasonable and necessary could also help create more realistic expectations.

Mahler, L., Tertilt, M., Yum, M. (2025). *Policy Concerns in an Era of Low Fertility: The Role of Social Comparisons and Intensive Parenting*: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/5_Mahler_Tertilt_Yum_unembargoed.pdf

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