

For over two decades, many developed countries have experienced persistently low birth rates. Young people are choosing to become parents at an increasingly later age, or not at all. This decline in births has significant long-term effects on the population structure, impacting the labor market, education system, and social security. Understanding why more young people are opting out of parenthood has become a crucial question for researchers.

Studies have shown that the decision to have a child is affected by various factors, such as job status, income, and availability of childcare. However, researchers are increasingly recognizing that these decisions can be shaped by early childhood experiences. The family environment we grow up in plays a key role in shaping our views on family and parenthood. This project aims to analyze how experiences in our family of origin, both past and present, can affect the decision to have children. Specifically, we focus on the phenomenon of parentification—when a child takes on the role of caring for their parent(s).

Parentification occurs when a child assumes parent-like responsibilities at the expense of their own needs. These responsibilities can involve household tasks (like shopping or doing laundry) or emotional support (like comforting a parent or mediating family conflicts). A child's caregiving role can begin in early childhood and continue into adulthood. Our project seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Is caring for one's parent(s) during childhood linked to an individual's views on parenthood? Does the type of care matter?
2. Is caring for one's parent(s) in adulthood related to an individual's plans to have children? Does the type of care matter?

To explore these questions, we will survey around 1,500 childless adults aged 20-35 across three countries: Poland, Italy, and Finland. We will ask about their opinions on parenthood and their plans to have children. We will also inquire about their experiences with caregiving in their family of origin, both in childhood and currently, to see if they have experienced parentification. Additionally, we will ask how they perceive their family relationships, both past and present (e.g., whether their help was appreciated and if they felt they could rely on their parents).

By examining the role of caregiving in the family of origin, this project will enhance our understanding of reproductive decision-making across different cultural and institutional contexts. This research will provide insights into how these decisions can develop over a person's life and help identify common and unique pathways that shape reproductive choices. Ultimately, our findings aim to inform evidence-based policies, early prevention strategies, and family planning support services.