

## Evidence of social influence driving Israeli fertility trends

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Continuous population growth ensures standing and status in relation to other countries around the world, the “demographic balance” (Yuval-Davis, 1996). Continuous population growth also poses environmental or economic challenges for countries with limited territory or resources (e.g., Singapore, Israel, Iran). In contrast, declining population numbers raise specters of potential economic challenges in ensuring the social safety net for retirees remains fully funded as the workforce population dwindles (e.g., Japan, Western Europe, Russia). Policy efforts to manage population growth or decline attempt to leverage the most applicable incentive to drive behaviors.

Economists (Becker, 1960, 1991; Easterlin, 1975; Ermisch, 1988; Willis, 1973) have emphasized the rational assessment of the opportunity cost of additional children as the central economic factor at play; newer perspectives focusing on parity in employment opportunities (McAllister, Pepper, Virgo, & Coall, 2016), reduced social inequality (Macias, 2015), or breaking from traditional gender roles (D’Addio & D’Ercole, 2005). Increasing access to education for girls and women is believed to result in declining fertility rates (Meisenberg, 2008; Sheikh & Loney, 2018) as they are able to shift fertility trends and behaviors (Basu, 2002). Cultivating a conscious collective through cultural and religious mores are theorized to influence fertility and family size decisions (Landau, 2003; McAllister et al., 2016; Okun, 2017; Potts, 1997), with declining birthrates in China, Singapore, and Iran taken as proof of the role of social influence and the adoption of new norms preferring smaller family size (Karamouzian, Sharifi, & Haghdoost, 2014; Wong & Yeoh, 2003; Yap, 2003). The difficulty in isolating the specific aspect of social influence at work in fertility behaviors makes identifying or quantifying the role played by social influence elusive. This research postulates that social influence drives fertility behaviors in Israel.

Israel is the lone OECD country with an increasing fertility rate throughout the last decade (OECD, 2021), and is projected to become one of the most crowded countries on the planet (Ben-David, 2018). The complicated history of fertility policies in Israel includes tensions between immigrant ethnic groups resulting in a two-faced fertility policy (Birenbaum-Carmeli & Carmeli, 2010; Hashash-Daniel, 2010), a desire to replace those lives lost in the Holocaust, the demographic war with the Arab population, and provide enough soldiers for the physical wars and conflicts with the neighboring Arab states (Kraft, 2018; Landau, 2003; Orenstein, 2004; Sperling, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 1996). Today, Israel is a deeply pro-natal and family-oriented country, with those choosing not to have children deemed “selfish” or “barren” (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2004; Granek & Nakash, 2017; Granek, Nakash, & Carmi, 2017; Kraft, 2018; Sperling & Simon, 2010).

In Israel the Jewish sector continues to have high fertility rates while birthrates in the non-Jewish sectors have declined. Income levels and economic incentives do not appear to influence family size (Cohen, Dehejia, & Romanov, 2013). Gender disparity in education is not present in Israel, in fact women outnumber men in higher education (Ilan, 2019). What remains to consider is the role of social influence in fertility behaviors. Bernardi and Klausner (2014) identified social learning, pressure, contagion, and support as potential factors to include in fertility models. Based on Okun’s (2017) findings relative to the influence of social factors in family size choices within the national religious (modern orthodox) sector in Israel, the influence of social networks appears to be prevalent in Israel. In addition, Berman (2000) argues that fertility in the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) sector in Israel is a club good, whereby the number of children in a family is requisite for membership in the community and all the benefits that come with such belonging.

This research applies the concept of social influence as a demographic factor in Israel to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the current demographic situation. One

particularly useful framework is to see populations as a fundamentally open and dynamic network of interacting individuals. In this case the concept of “open” is that the interactions between individuals in a society result in the patterns and behaviors observed, fundamentally that human populations are complex and adaptive systems (Grow & Van Bavel, 2016). Beliefs and behaviors concerning fertility behaviors are interdependent and shaped by social interactions that occur within social network structures (Nomes, Grow, & Van Bavel, 2019). Furthermore, the denser one’s social network, the greater the influence from that social network. Social network influence is not specifically an overt kind of influence, but more typically a passive influence due predominantly to proximity.

Statistical analyses of a national survey revealed a strong correlation between desired and ideal family size for all demographic factors as well as the question related to the perceived average size of families in one’s community. Factors that influence one answer also affect the other, with similar effect sizes. Those coming from larger origin family size (i.e., more siblings) reported larger desired and ideal family sizes compared to those from smaller origin families (i.e., fewer siblings). Respondents from larger origin families also reported larger average family sizes in their communities.

Those who reported having more children, who are also more typically older and so farther into the role of parenting and the establishment of families, indicated larger desired and ideal family sizes. Respondents desired between 0.23 and 0.25 more children per additional child already in their family. The same is true in relation to ideal family size, where we see an influence of 0.21 to 0.24 more children in an ideal family for each additional child a family already has.

The larger the reported average family size in one’s community correlated to a larger reported desired number of children. For each additional child reported in the community average, respondents indicated a desire for between 0.19-0.25 more children. The same trend

exists when asked about ideal family size. For each additional child perceived in one's community, the ideal family size increased by 0.26-0.29 children.

Finally, it is important to note that in contrast to the positive correlation between desired, ideal, and community family size preferences and perceptions, respondents unequivocally deny the encouragement of the State as an influence on their family size preferences. Across all demographic factors, 82% of the entire sample answered that the State DOES NOT encourage one to have more children.

Israel must address its emergent social order and see this reality as our path forward to a sustainable population policy. As Macy and Wilder (2002, p. 148) argue, the more that we see interactions socially embedded in a society, the greater occurrence of trust, cooperation, and collective action as a result of this emergent social order. The desire to have a larger family and to maintain natal parity both within one's community and within the larger Israeli society in the absence of strong top-down influences confirms the emergent nature of Israel's social order. This reveals a critical piece of the population management policy puzzle of how to best encourage smaller families in Israel.

Far too often, the influential power of "peer group effects" are disregarded, even as research has shown that social networks are a key mechanism for explaining fertility (Fent, Diaz, & Prskawetz, 2013). These survey results reveal the strength of social networks in Israel. This understanding of the factors driving fertility behaviors in Israel can help inform policy makers to develop an appropriate population management policy such that Israel can balance its demographic ambitions with its environmental limitations into the future.

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