The Great Recession and Fertility in the United States

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Introduction

The Great Recession, which began in 2007 resulted in a variety of significant and ongoing shifts in the United States and throughout the developed world, not the least of which was a decline in fertility rates beginning around 2009.

- Fertility among women under thirty is the most influenced by recession, although among women between ages thirty and forty-four second births are associated with unemployment.
- Differences in fertility by marital status, and race, with certain aspects of their social position and the economic situation working in concert to determine the fertility choices of women in the US.
- Declines in fertility associated with recession are typically temporary, and reflect postponement of fertility rather than choosing not to have children, although caution should be used in applying understandings of previous recession related fertility shifts to the Great Recession because it is both greater in magnitude and more far reaching than any other prior recession besides the Great Depression.
- Women during the Great Depression never reached their desired fertility levels.
- With the average age of first birth twenty-eight, declines in the welfare state and increases in the age of retirement in many countries, it is possible that the effects of the Great Recession may reverberate in the fertility rate beyond the recession.

Research Questions

Does the decline in fertility vary by location, and specifically by the size of the county?

Do the most recent data show any indication of a recovery in fertility rates and does that vary by location?

Are there specific characteristics of the mothers who are postponing or opting out of fertility as a result of the recession (marital status, age, race, education level, etc.) and are any of these groups showing signs of increasing fertility post-recession independently of other women?

Trends by Age

The above chart examines the relationship between age and fertility rates across the Great Recession.

- Age specific fertility rates decreased for women under 30.
- The greatest decrease in fertility was among women in their early 20’s or college aged women, continuing but accelerating a trend that began before the recession.
- Fertility among those over 30 remained relatively stable across the recession.

Data: CDC/National Center for Health Statistics, ACS Annual Population Estimates

How Do the Fertility Trends Map Locally?

The maps above chart the trends in fertility and migration before and after the recession by county.

- There is more variation at the county level post recession than at the national level, but overall trends are the same, in most counties fertility decreased after the recession.
- These maps represent comparisons of the counties to themselves, as a result a county that shows an apparent anomaly with the overall patterns, such as Artoscoiggin County, ME which is increasing fertility rates and gaining more or losing less migrants may represent either a county that is doing well through the recession and attracting individuals, or a county that was doing poorly prior to the recession and fewer individuals are able to leave the county post-recession.

Data: Estimates of the Components of Population Change, US Census Bureau

Why are Fertility Rates Dropping?

The above table provides some explanation of the factors associated with delaying fertility as a result of economic factors. Holding all the other variables constant:

- Older individuals are more likely to have delayed fertility
- Males are less likely to have delayed fertility
- Married individuals are more likely to have delayed fertility
- Those with other children are less likely to have delayed fertility
- Those with a lower income and who do not own their home are more likely to have delayed fertility

Data: PEW Youth and Economy Survey, Conducted Dec, 2011, Released 2013

Conclusion and Acknowledgements

The Great Recession resulted in a decline in fertility nation wide in the US, these trends appear to be consistent across state and county levels with some variation in the influence on the location. There is no apparent variation in fertility by county size as it relates to the recession, the number of births in all counties decreased proportionately. One possible cause of the decline in fertility in the US is the choice to delay fertility during the recession, which is associated with age, income, and marital status.

I intend to continue exploring this project, including further examination of race, and county level variations.

Dr. Johnson is the professor for the Demography course offered by the Sociology Department.

Recommended Literature


