

The Fertility Desires-Intentions Gap in the United States

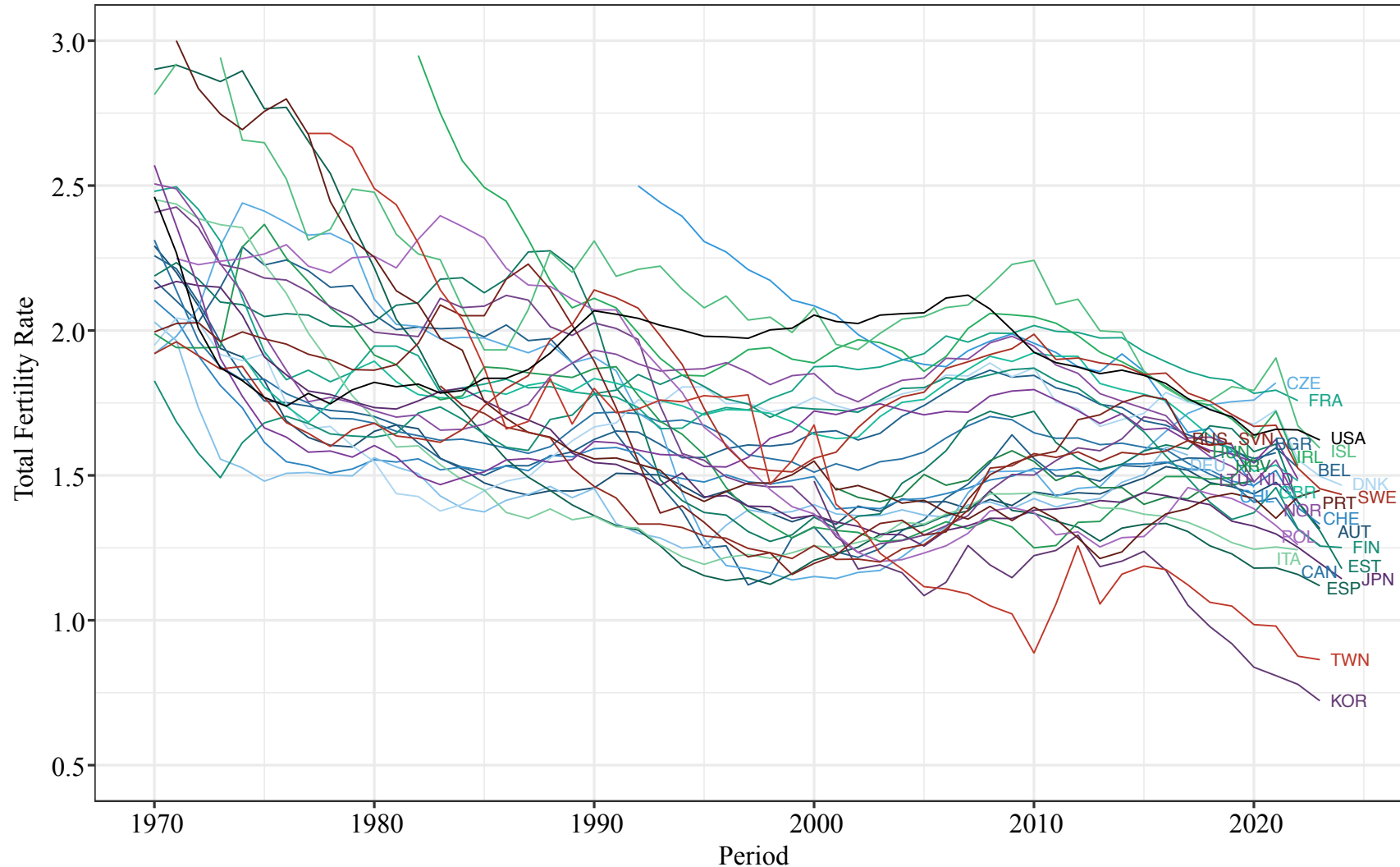
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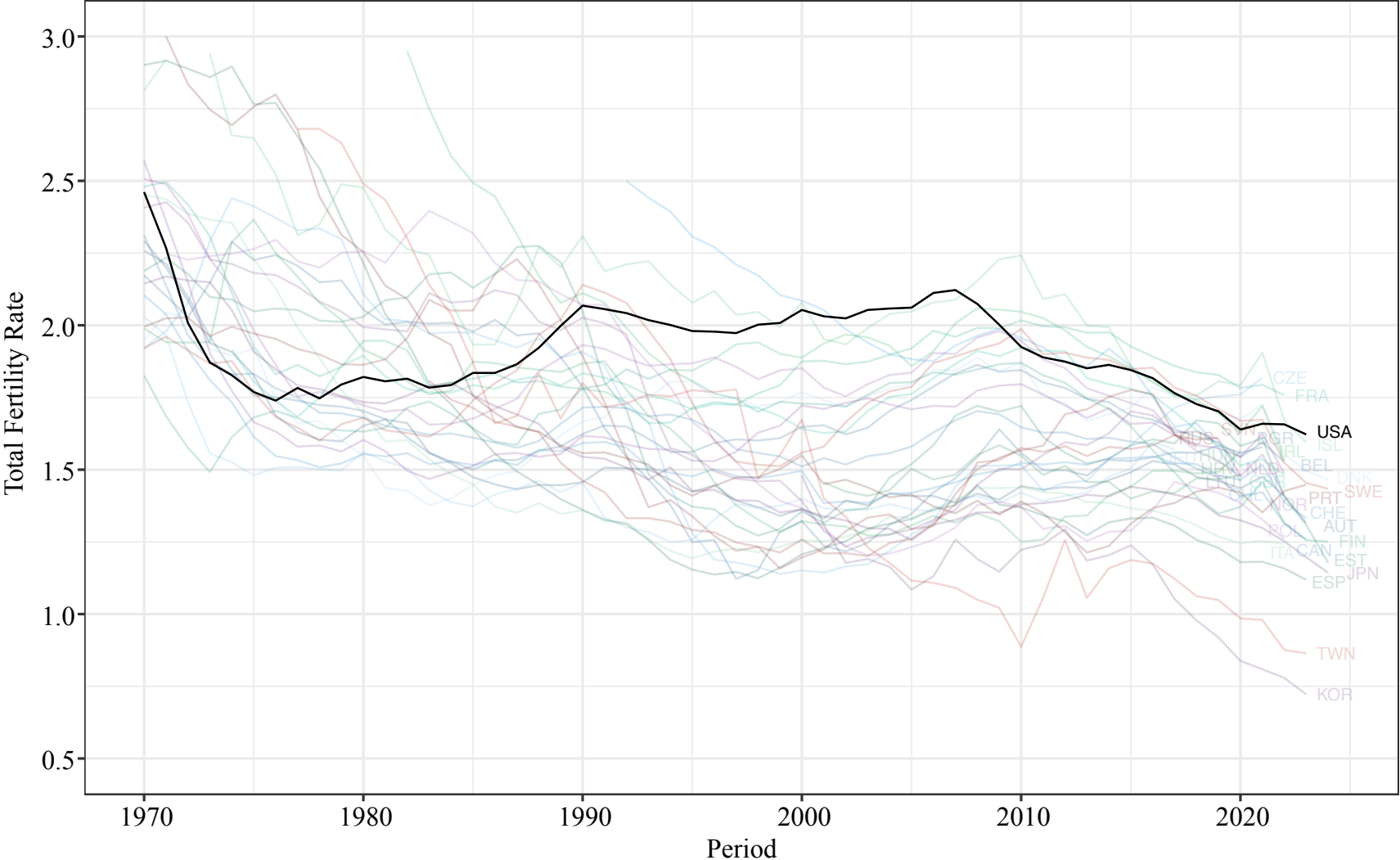


Total Fertility Rate Across High-Income Countries



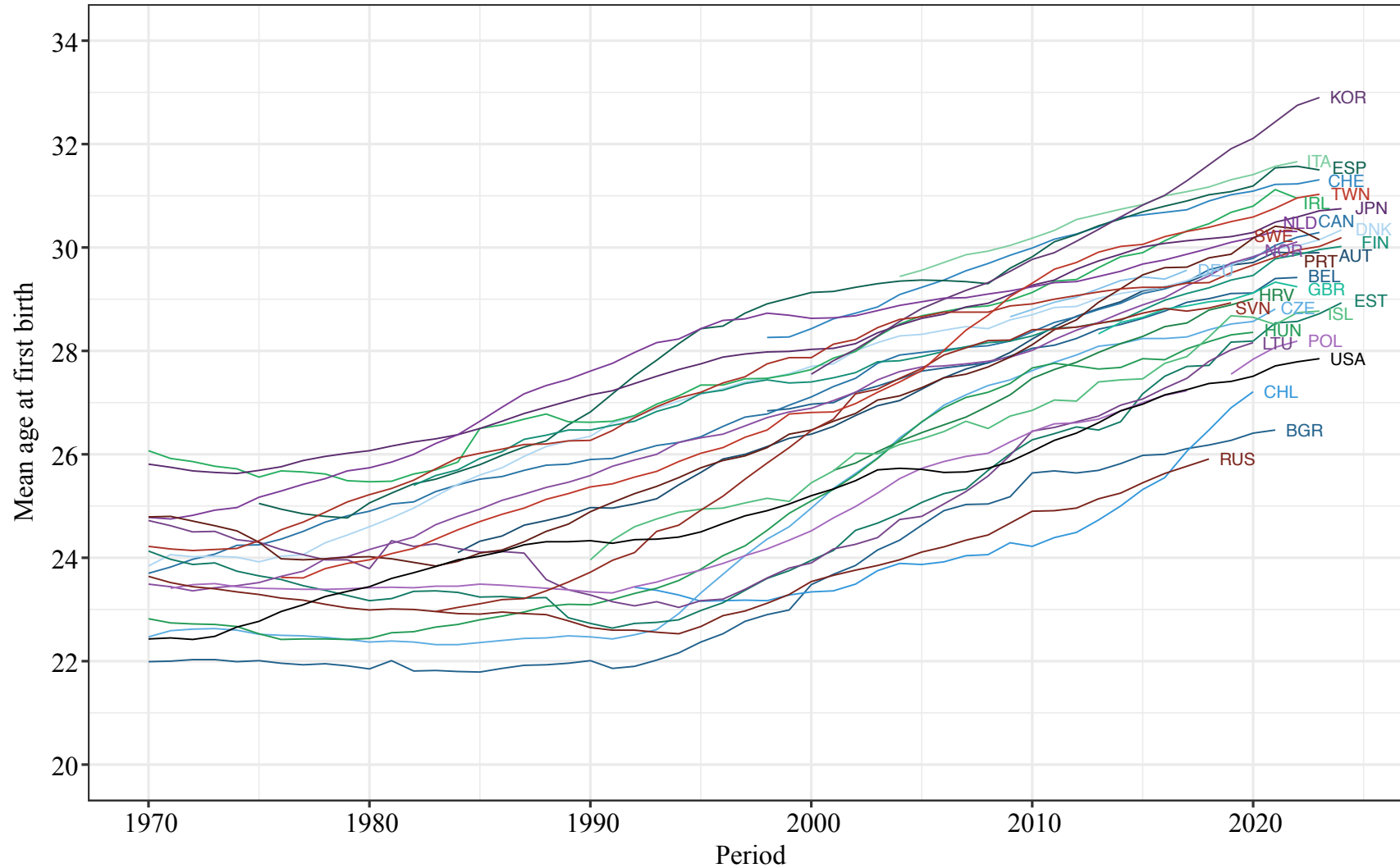
Source: Human Fertility Database (Data accessed March 2026)

Total Fertility Rate Across High-Income Countries



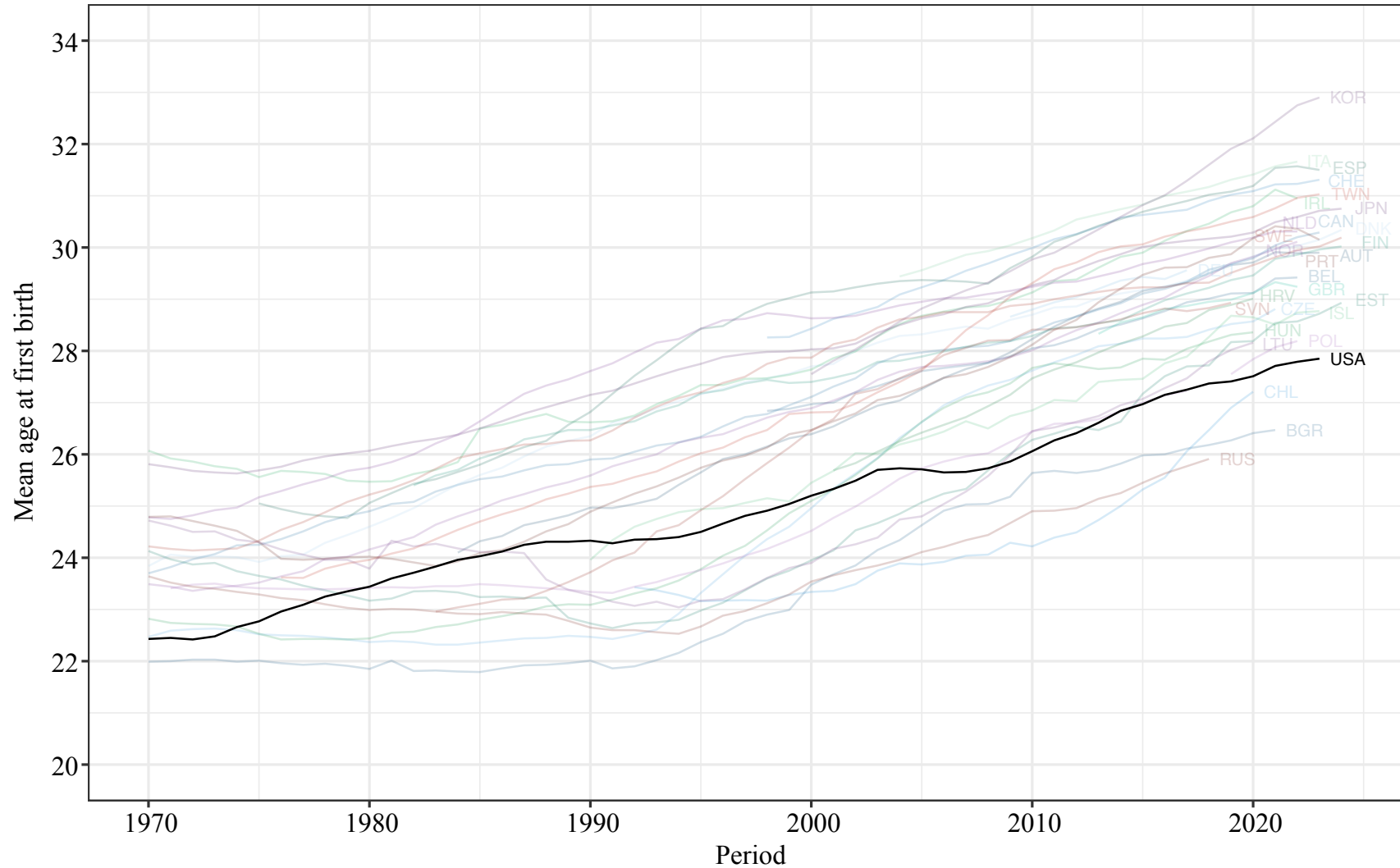
Source: Human Fertility Database (Data accessed March 2026)

Mean Age at First Birth Across High-Income Countries



Source: Human Fertility Database (Data accessed March 2026)

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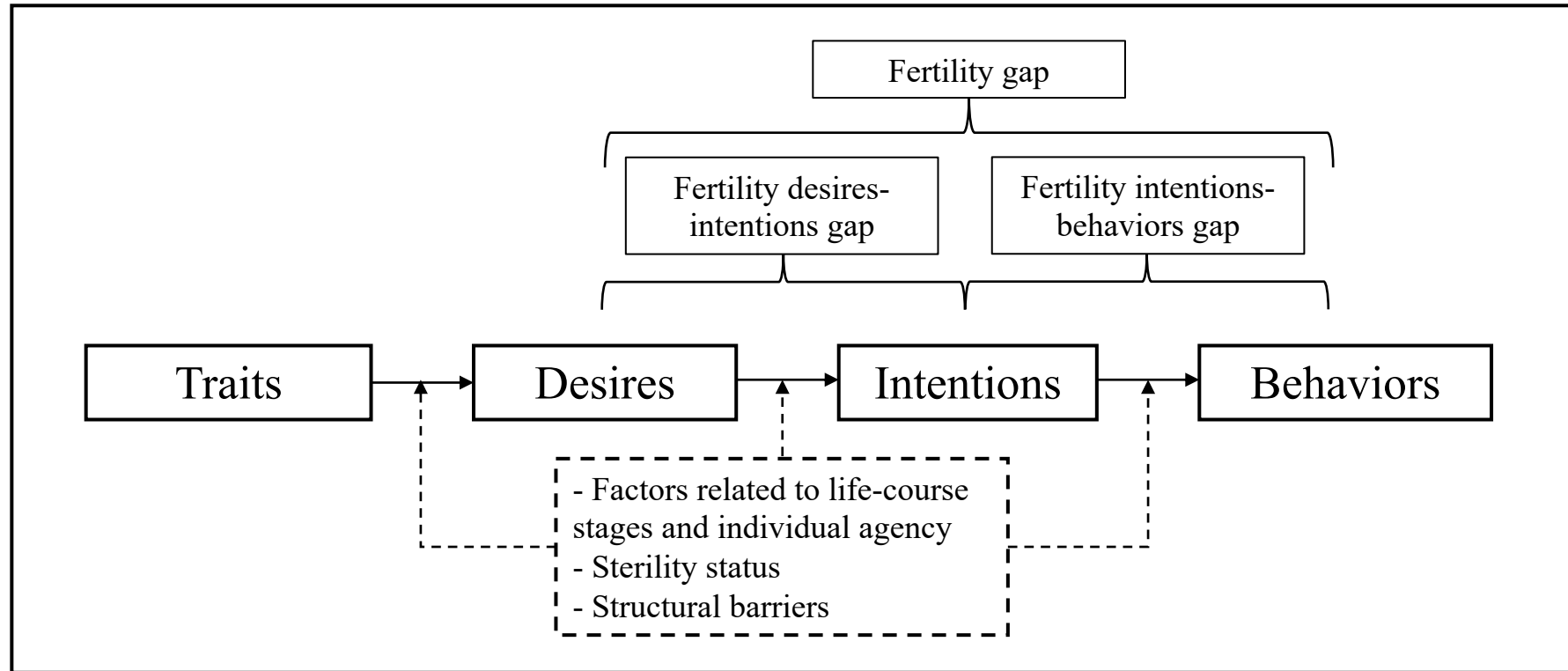
Fertility Goals: Central Tools in Demographic Research

Fertility goals: an umbrella term encompassing people's reproductive plans, attitudes, and aspirations.

- A **demographic** perspective: To understand current and predict future fertility trends.
- A **reproductive health** and **justice** perspective: Gaps between goals and behaviors (e.g., unwanted/unintended or unrealized fertility) are consequential for both individuals and societies.
- A **policy** perspective: Necessary to inform policy interventions.

But...measuring fertility goals is complex.

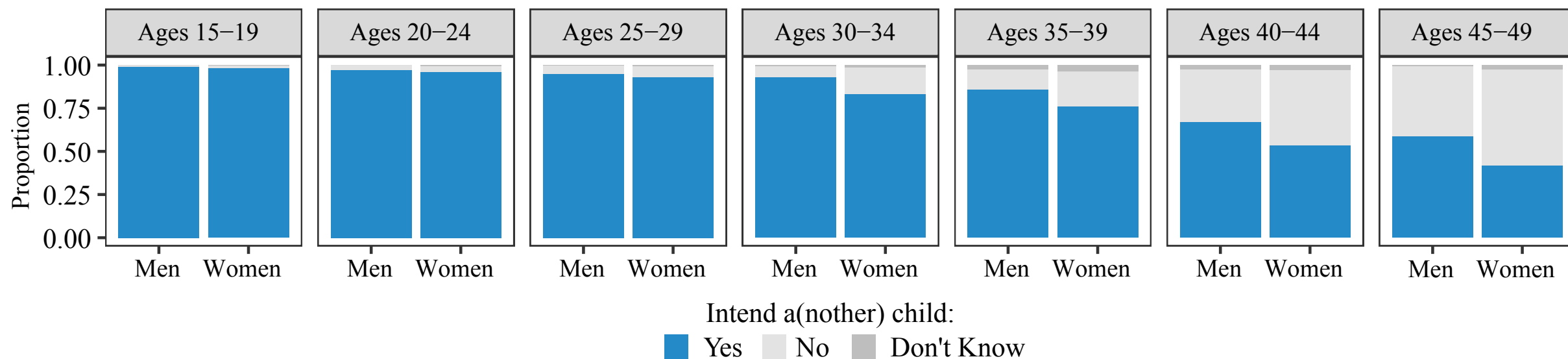
Measuring The Fertility Gap



Note: The fertility desires–intentions gap: Conceptual and analytical framework starting from the traits–desires–intentions–behaviors framework (Miller 2012).

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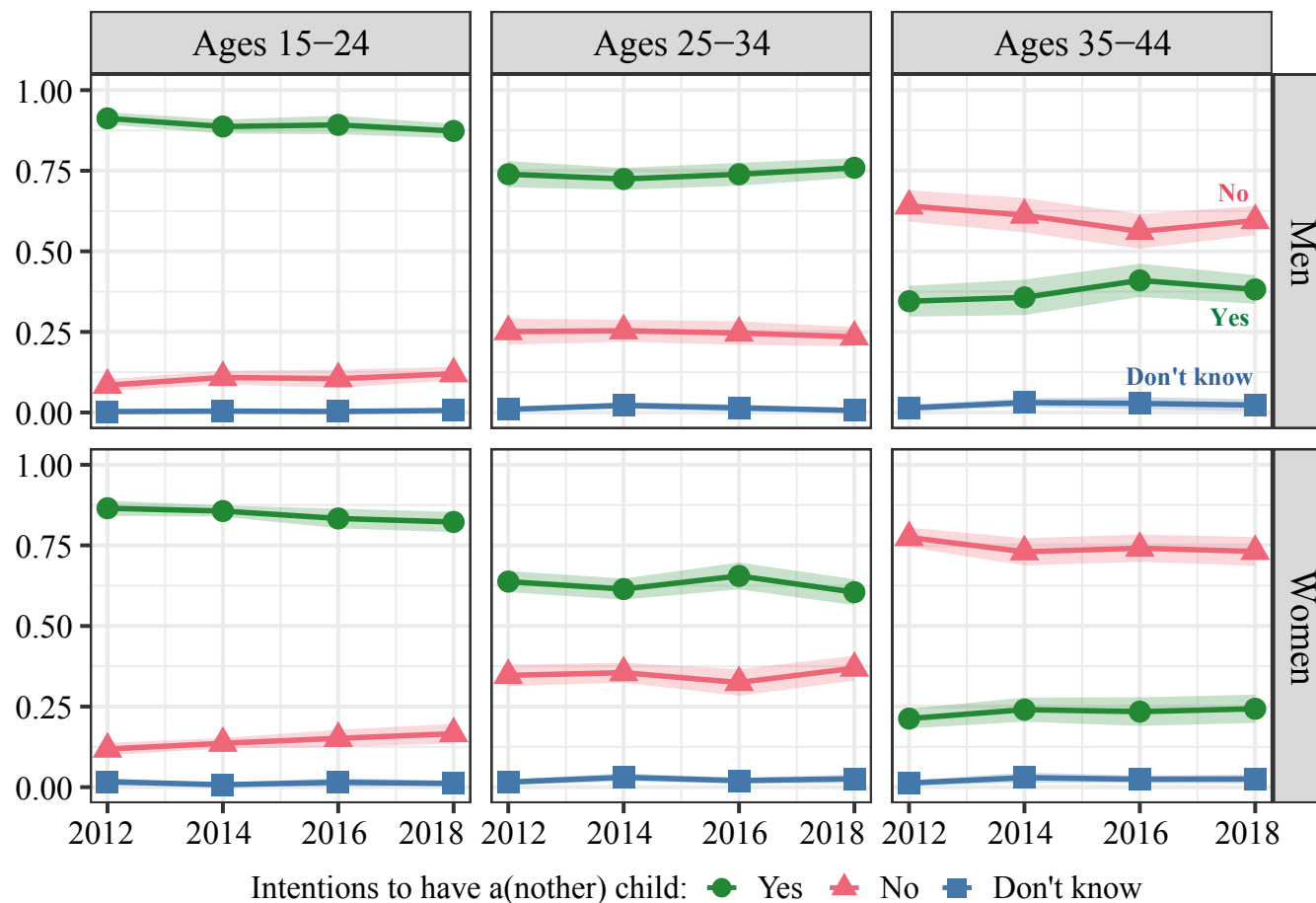
Figure. Weighted age-specific estimates of the fertility desires–intentions gap in the US among men and women aged 15–49 who (and whose partners, if any) are physically able to have children and want (more) children.



Note. National Survey of Family Growth 2011–13 to 2017–19 (N = 23,970).

Increasing Trend in Intended Childlessness

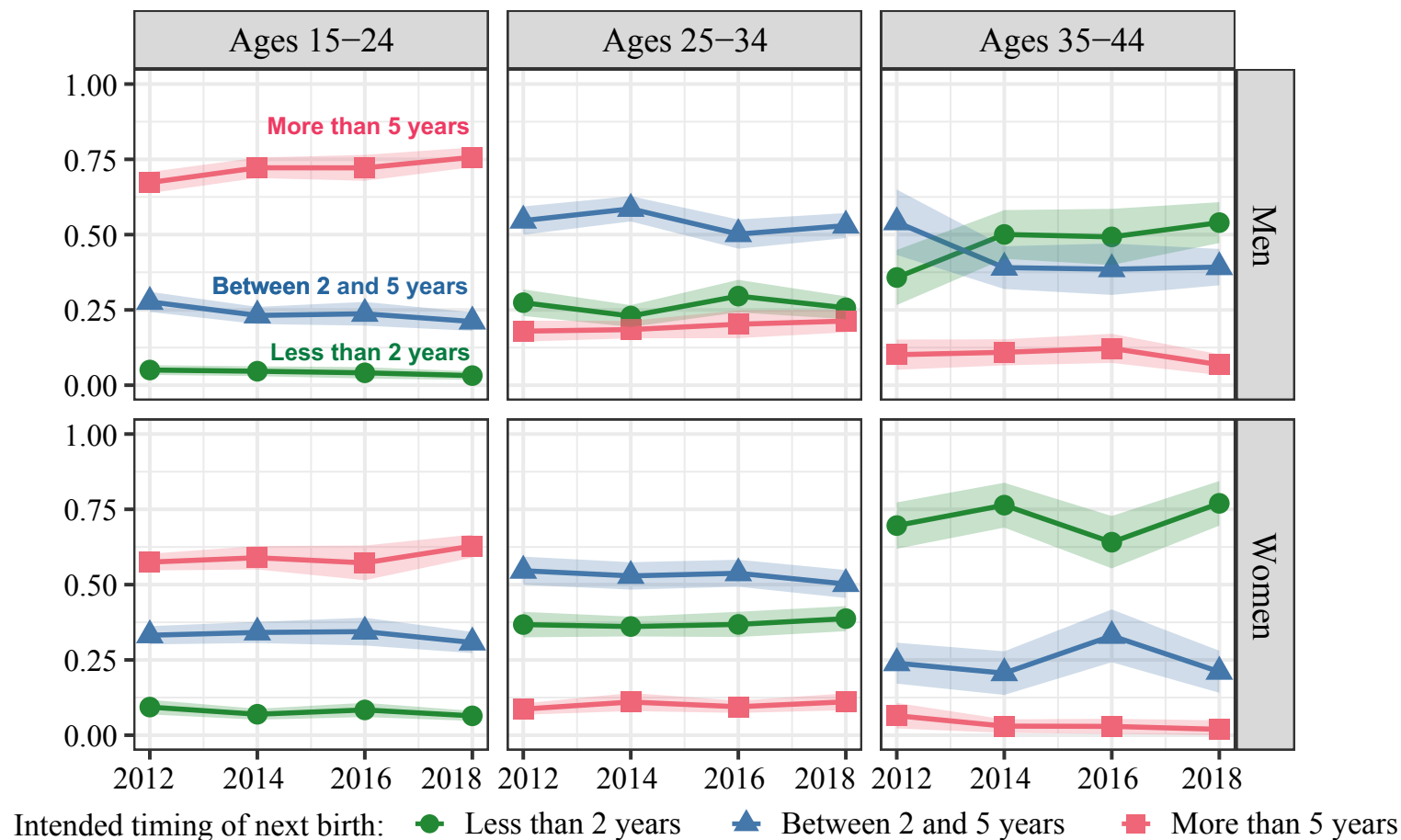
Figure. Trends in intentions to have a(nother) child by age group. Weighted proportions and 95% C.I.



Note. National Survey of Family Growth 2011–13 to 2017–19 men and women aged 15–44 who (and whose partners, if any) are physically able to have children (N = 33,123).

Increasing Trend in Intentions to Delay

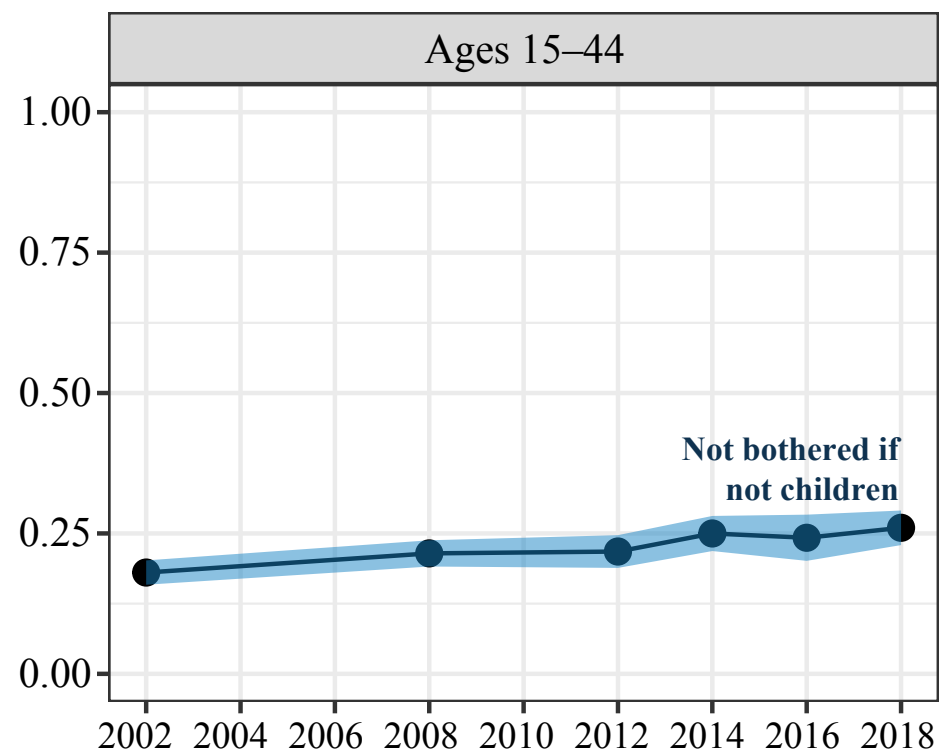
Figure. Trends in intended timing of next birth by age group. Weighted proportions and 95% C.I.



Note. National Survey of Family Growth 2011–13 to 2017–19 men and women aged 15–44 who intend to have more children (N = 22,355).

A growing proportion of “not bothered”

Figure. Trends in fertility intentions intensity among childless women who intend one or more children. Weighted proportions and 95% C.I.



Note. National Survey of Family Growth 2002 to 2017–19, childless women aged 15–44 who intend to have children (N = 13,795).

Wrapping Up and Looking Forward

- Although fertility goals have slightly changed, most Americans still want to become parents: There is a large **fertility gap**.
- Even when people want to have children, they do not always translate desires into intentions (**Desires ≠ Intentions**).
- Monitoring **fertility goals** *and* understanding the underlying **mechanisms** remain key priorities.
- What drives the fertility gap? A closer look at **structural** barriers and **cultural** changes.