



Wittgenstein Centre

FOR DEMOGRAPHY AND  
GLOBAL HUMAN CAPITAL



# Infertility and unrealized ideal family size

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# Why do people not always have the number of children that they wanted?

- Unplanned pregnancies (+)
- Social and economic constraints (-)

# Why do people not always have the number of children that they wanted?

- Unplanned pregnancies (+)
- Social and economic constraints (-)
- Difficulty conceiving (-)
  - Infertility may **matter more today** because people are waiting longer to have children (current prevalence is ~ 1 in 5 people)

# Estimating the gap between preferences and outcomes

- Comparisons between family size preferences expressed in young adulthood and later fertility outcomes are problematic
  - Preferences are often uncertain and may change over time
- Our approach compares preferences and outcomes at the end of the reproductive life course
  - This is meaningful because it shows whether a valued life goal was ultimately not achieved.

*By the end of their reproductive years,  
how closely does people's actual family size match  
the number of children they ideally wanted?*

# The gap between ideal and actual family size is relatively similar across countries

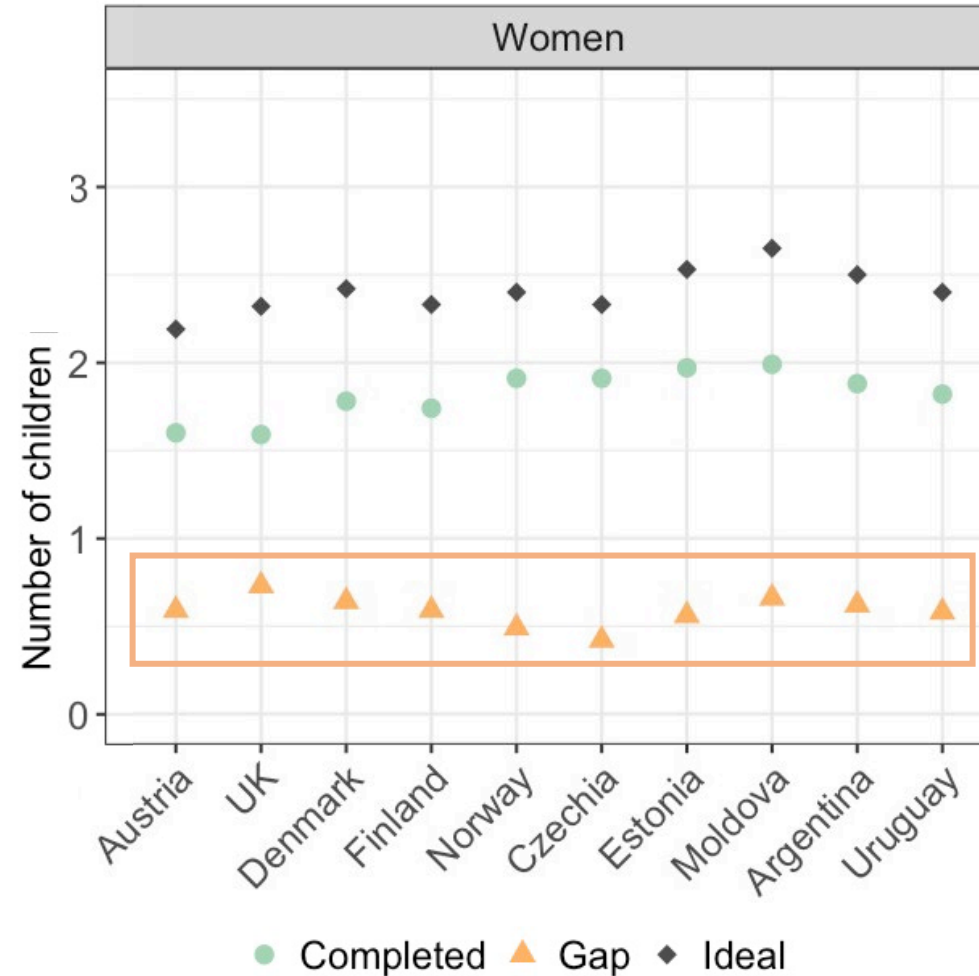


Fig 1a. Mean retrospective ideal and actual family size by age 42-50, selected countries. Source: Lazzari & Beaujouan (2026)

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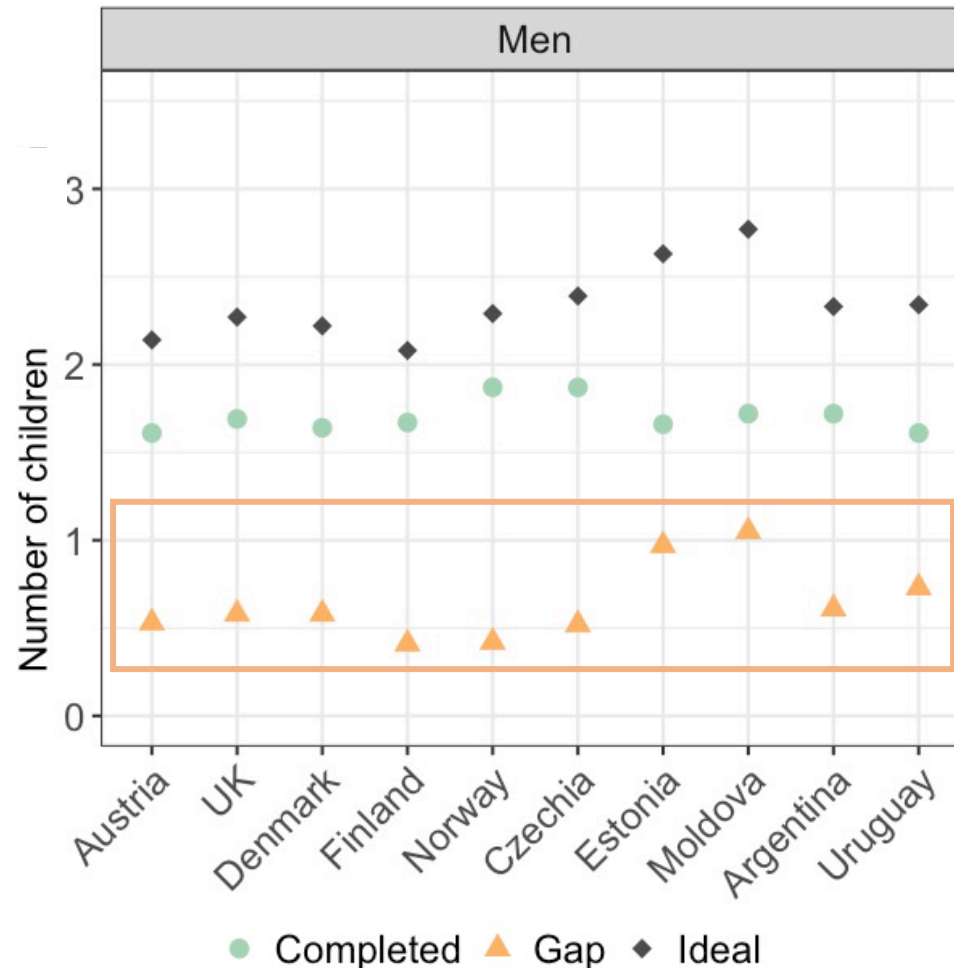


Fig 1b. Mean retrospective ideal and actual family size by age 42-50, selected countries. Source: Lazzari & Beaujouan (2026)

Most people who did not have the number of children they wanted are childless or had only one child

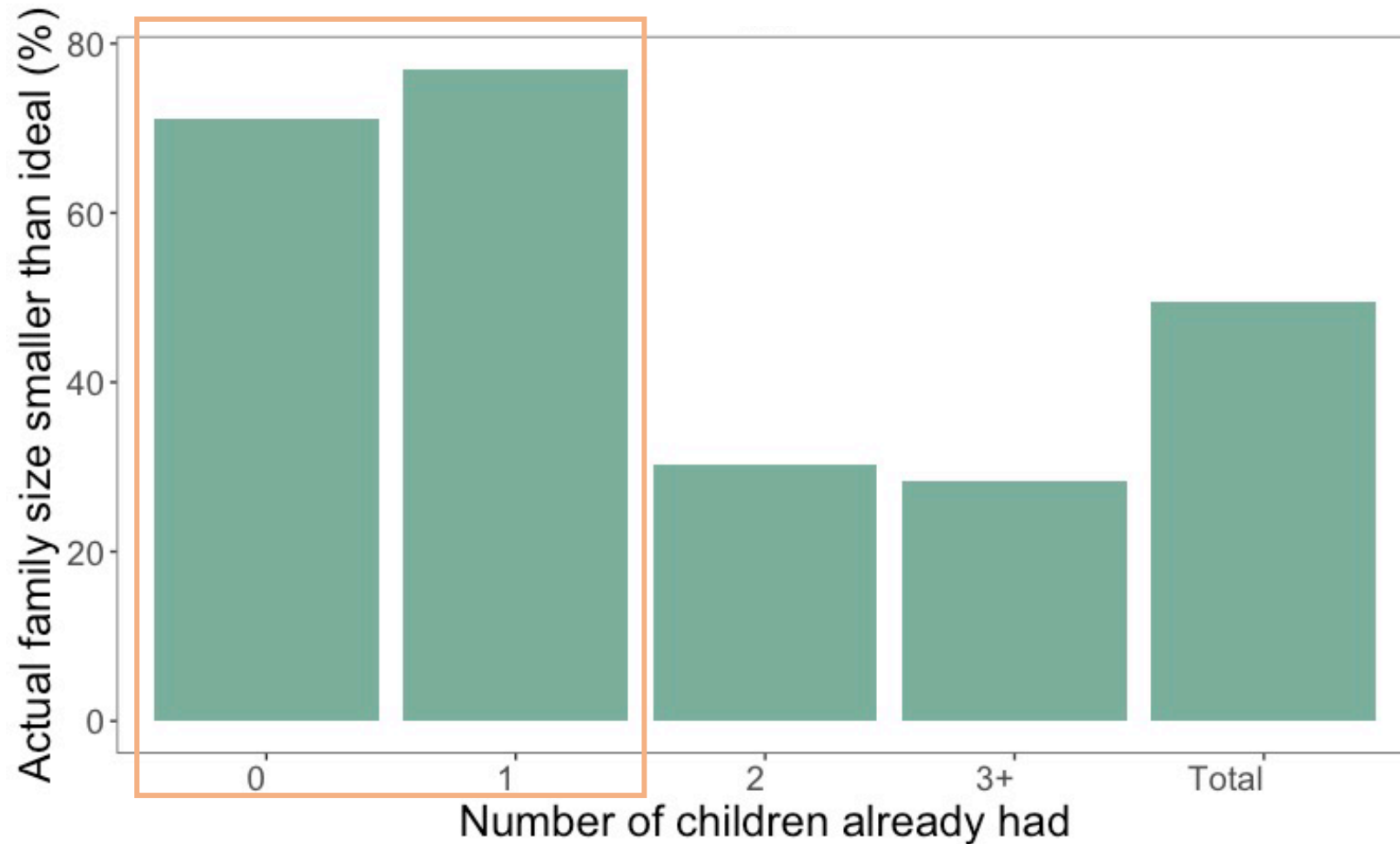


Fig 2. Share of women aged 42-50 with fewer children than ideally wanted, United Kingdom. Source: Lazzari & Beaujouan (2026)

# A similar pattern across different contexts

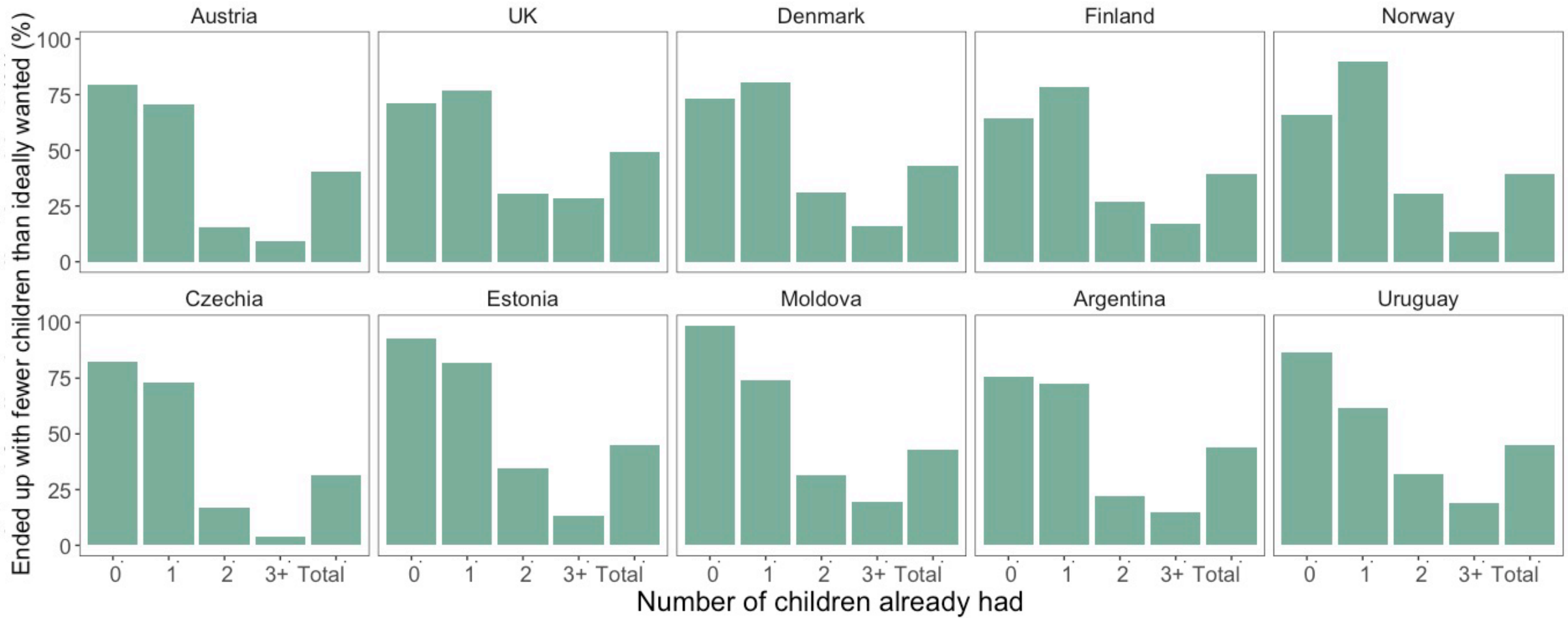


Fig 2. Share of women aged 42-50 with fewer children than ideally wanted, selected countries.

Source: Lazzari & Beaujouan (2026)

*To what extent does infertility contribute to people having fewer children than they ideally wanted?*

# Infertility is strongly associated with unrealized ideals

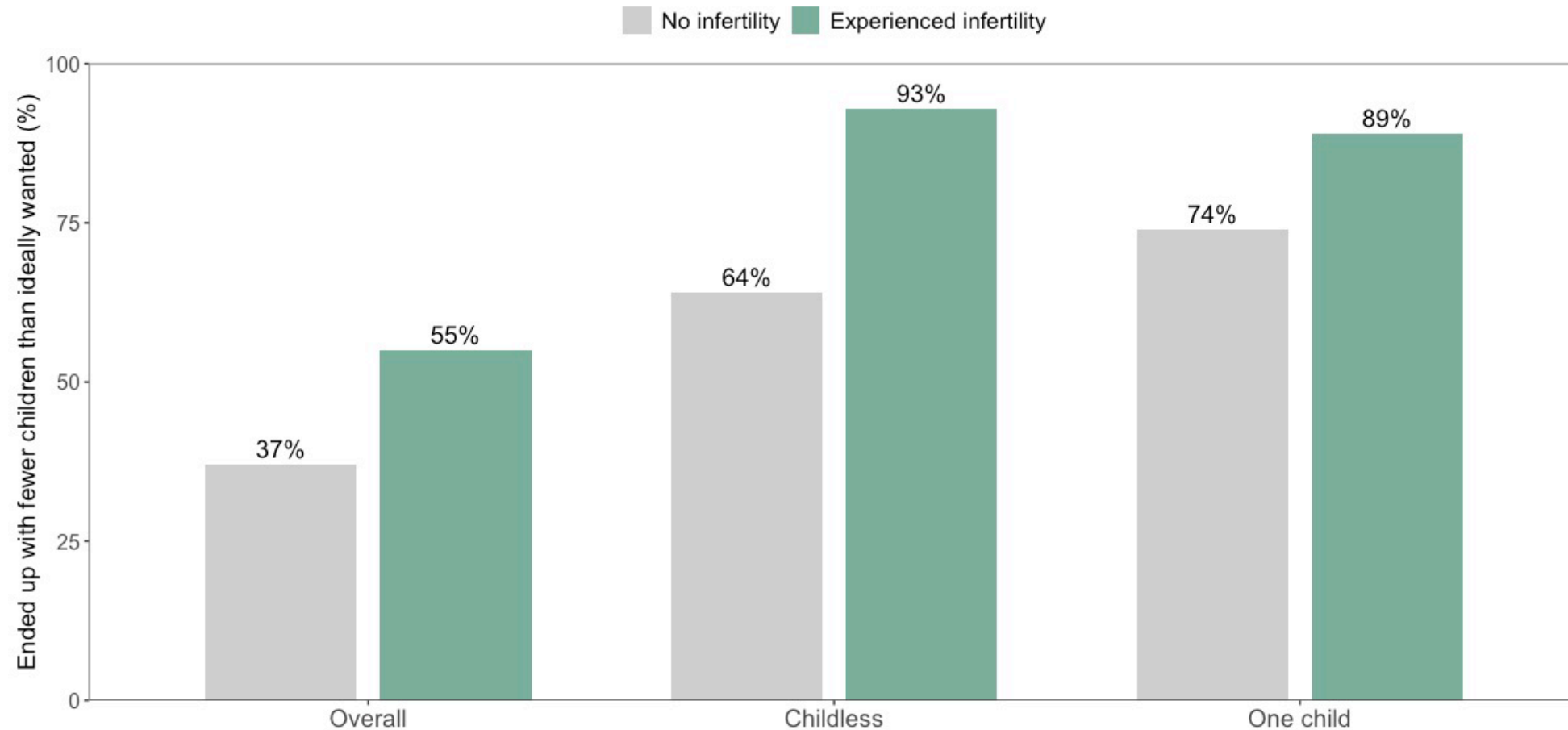


Fig 3. Share of women aged 42-50 with fewer children than ideally wanted, by infertility experience. Source: Lazzari & Beaujouan (2026)

*What role does assisted reproduction play in narrowing the gap between reproductive ideals and outcomes?*

# Evidence from Japan

- Clear gap between ideal and actual family size (~20%)
- Increasing use of assisted reproduction: ~ 1 in 5 couples have used it

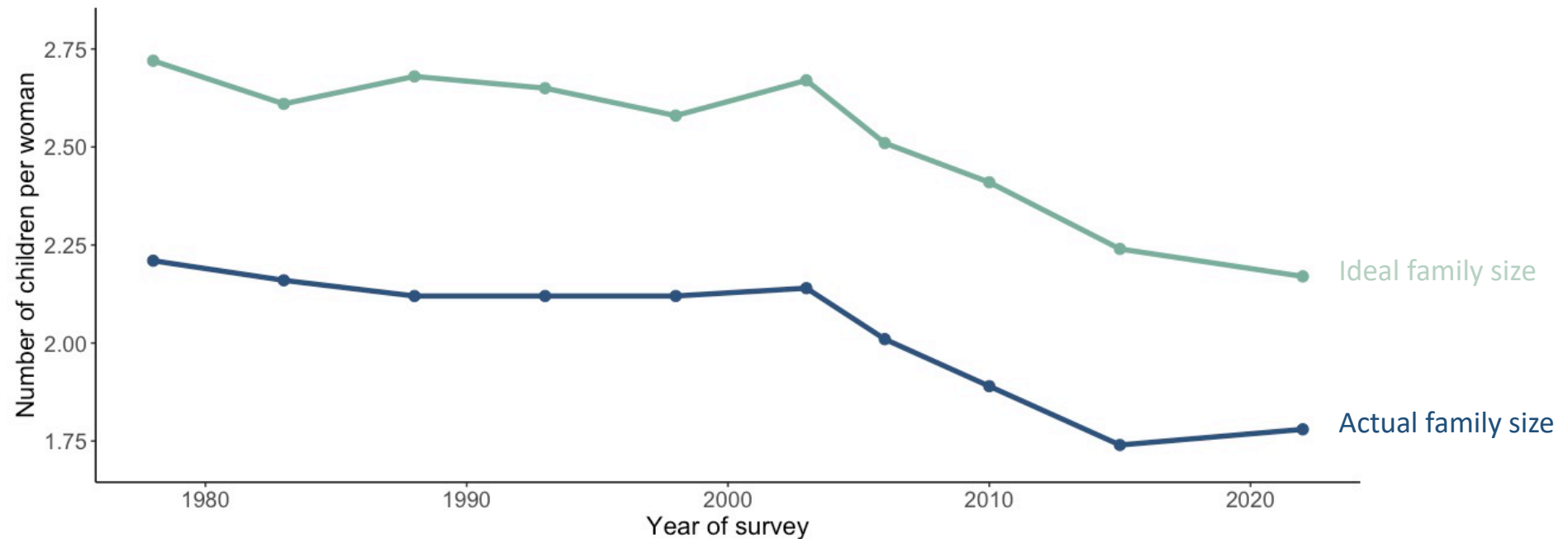
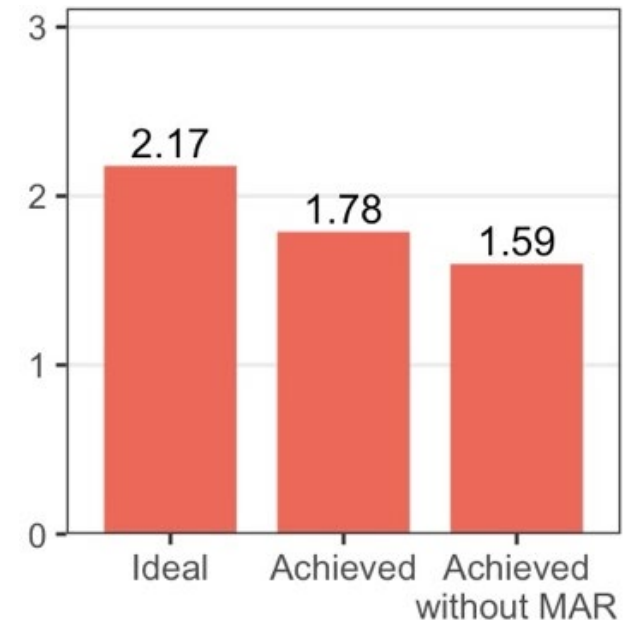


Fig 4. Mean retrospective ideal and actual family size by age 40-49, Japan. [Source: Lazzari et al. \(forthcoming\)](#)

# Assisted reproduction helps narrow the gap, but access is unequal

- Assisted reproduction helps reducing the gap between ideal and actual family size by about one-third
- Yet, infertility remains a common reason why women fall short of their ideal family size
- Higher educated women are more likely to use treatment when infertile, which may widen reproductive inequalities



**Fig 5.** Mean ideal and achieved family size by age 40-49 with and without births conceived using assisted reproduction, 2021.  
Source: Lazzari et al. (forthcoming)

# Conclusion

- Unrealized fertility ideals are common
- Childlessness and one-child families are often considered not ideal outcomes
- Infertility plays an important role
- This pattern is consistent across countries, despite differences in family norms and policies
- Assisted reproduction (partially) helps reduce the gap but access to treatment is unequal

Lazzari E & Beaujouan E. (2026). Infertility and unrealized family size. *Population and Development Review*. DOI: 10.1111/padr.70043

Lazzari E, Shohei Y, Fukuda S, & Raymo J. (forthcoming). A Research Note on the Role of Infertility and Medically Assisted Reproduction on the Realization of Ideal Family Size in Japan. *Demography*