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Institutions and the transition to adulthood: Implications for fertility tempo in low-fertility settings

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Abstract

The number of countries experiencing very low fertility has been rising in recent years, garnering increasing academic, political and media attention. There is now widespread academic agreement that the postponement of fertility is a major contributing factor in the very low levels of fertility that have occurred, and yet most policy discussions have been devoted to increasing the numbers of children women have. We discuss factors in three institutions—the educational system, the labour market and the housing market—that may inadvertently have led to childbearing postponement. We highlight important components of the timing of childbearing, including its changing place within the transition to adulthood across countries and the significance of the demands of *childbearing* versus *childrearing*. Using illustrations from Europe, North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, we argue that the following all lead to younger childbearing: 1) an open education system whereby it is relatively easy to return to school after having dropped out for a while; 2) a shorter, smoother, easier school-to-work transition; 3) easier re-entry into the labour market after having taken time out for childrearing or any other reason; 4) greater capability of integrating childrearing into a career; 5) easier ability to obtain a mortgage with a moderately small down payment, moderately low interest rate and a long time period over which to repay the loan; and 6) easier ability to rent a dwelling unit at an affordable price. Conversely, reversing any or all of these factors would lead, other things being equal, to postponement of childbearing.

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