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Environmental Conditions and the Fertility Intentions of Utahns

Mufti Nadimul Quamar Ahmed and Jennifer E. Givens

One of the most important decisions a person may make in their lifetime is whether to have children. Many factors shape fertility intentions and outcomes. A better understanding of individual reproductive intentions can shed light on current fertility patterns, enable more accurate population projections¹⁻² and planning efforts, and improve our ability to address environmental drivers and implications.

Existing studies find that a decreased desire to have children is associated with environmental deterioration and escalating environmental scarcity³⁻⁴. Like many places, Utah is increasingly facing complex environmental problems⁵. According to a 2023 poll, Utahns are highly concerned about environmental issues facing their state, including drought, the drying of the Great Salt Lake, and deteriorating air quality⁶. Coinciding with increasing environmental problems is a decrease in the total fertility rate in Utah, which has dropped by 42.4% since it peaked 50 years ago⁷. Especially, since 2009, it has dropped faster than the U.S. rate⁸. Given these environmental and demographic changes, this brief examines the role of perceptions of environmental conditions in Utahns' fertility intentions using data from the 2023 Utah People and Environment Poll ([UPEP](#)).

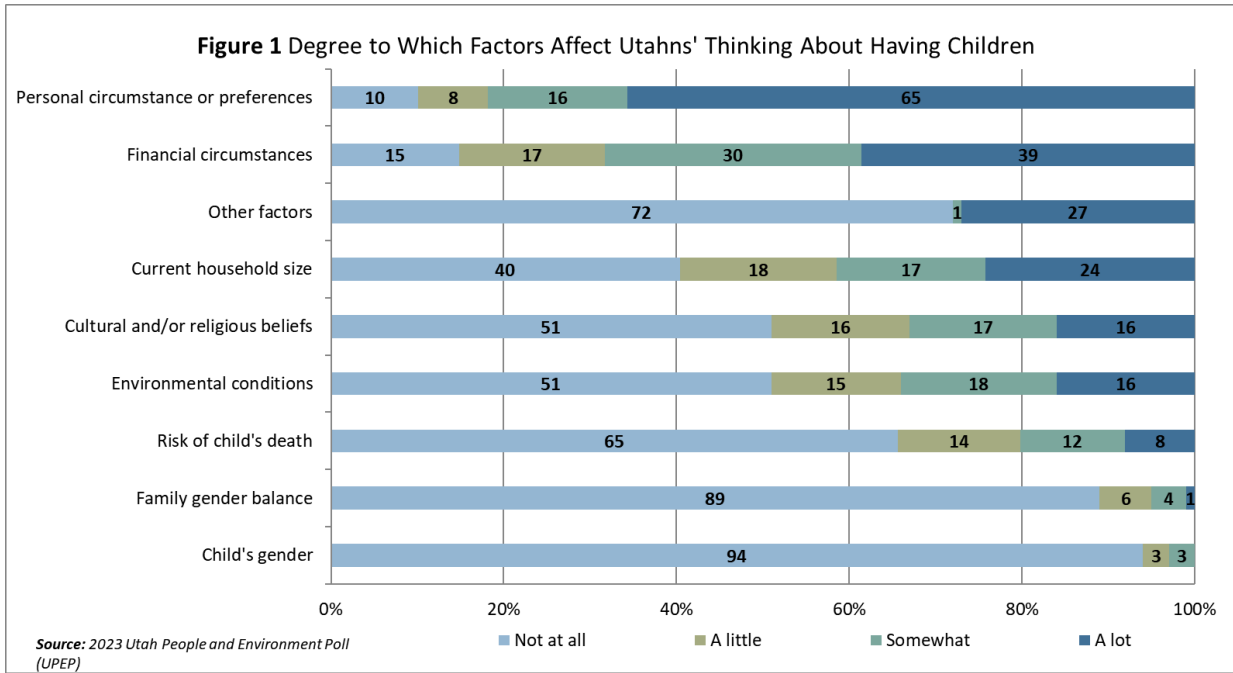
KEY FINDINGS

- In a representative statewide survey, personal preferences and financial circumstances are the two most important factors among Utahns in making their fertility decisions.
- 16% of respondents consider environmental conditions "a lot" when considering having children while about one-half indicate that environmental conditions are not considered at all.

Do Environmental Conditions Matter in Utahns' Fertility Decisions?

Utahns were polled about their perspectives on several factors relevant to their fertility decisions regardless of their current status regarding fertility or having children. These included personal preferences or circumstances, financial circumstances, cultural and/or religious beliefs, environmental conditions (e.g., drought, climate change), current household size (total members in household), family gender dynamics, child's gender, risk of child's death, and other factors.

Figure 1 illustrates how these factors rank for Utahns when considering having children. The highest percentage (65%) of Utah residents consider their personal preferences "a lot" when deciding to have children. Financial circumstances are also often considered (39%).



Approximately a quarter (24%) of respondents consider their current household size. Cultural and/or religious beliefs were cited by 16%. Of particular interest, 16% consider environmental conditions “a lot” in their fertility decisions, including drought, climate change, etc. This indicates that cultural and religious beliefs and environmental conditions may have comparable influence on Utahn’s fertility decisions. The risk of child death, family gender dynamics, and a child’s gender were factors considered less often by respondents.

Apart from these factors, about one-fourth of respondents (27%) consider “other” factors a lot in their fertility decisions. For instance, affordable housing availability, quality of marriage, health of mother/age of father, quality of life for the children, risk of mother's death, world population, human rights, and lack of food were all mentioned in open-ended comments.

Conclusions

A recent study found that women in Utah are delaying having children and are having fewer children overall⁷. In the decade between 2010 and 2020, the state's fertility rate dropped from first to fourth nationally⁹. This brief aims to shed light on some of the reasons behind this declining fertility rate. Results from the survey indicate that Utah residents often consider financial circumstances when deciding to have children. Results also show that 16% of Utah residents consider cultural and or religious beliefs, and 16% also consider environmental conditions as highly important when deciding whether to have children. This finding reflects a possibly overlooked factor in Utahn’s fertility decisions: the consequences of local environmental issues and climate change for future generations. This situation may increasingly affect fertility decisions in Utah and elsewhere. Therefore, as environmental conditions become more precarious, state policymakers should prioritize



environmental protection if there is a desire to maintain and improve the environment for future generations. Moreover, it is also important to track how environmental conditions matter to Utahns' fertility decisions over time to design effective policies and interventions.

Data and Methods

In spring 2023, Utah State University (USU) faculty and students started the Utah People and Environment Poll, or UPEP, to track Utahns' perceptions on environmental issues of importance to the state to help inform policy to address environmental issues. A random sample of 3,750 households were contacted using postal mail to respond to the survey online or on paper. 441 individuals responded to the survey for a final total response rate of 12%. Weights for survey design and to adjust for age, education, and gender representation are applied. To access other briefs and learn more about the UPEP, please visit: <https://chass.usu.edu/sociology/canri/upep>

About CANRI

The Community and Natural Resources Institute, or [CANRI](#), produces and promotes interdisciplinary and applied social science and humanities research focused on challenges at the intersection of people and the environment in the Intermountain West.

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