Trying under pressure: recession, age, and fertility behavior

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Contribution: Separate intentions, behavior, and outcomes

The key behavioral step is the decision to start trying to conceive.

Fertility intentions
stated preferences
"I want a child soon"

≠

Trying to conceive
behavioral action
stop contraception
time intercourse
seek treatment

≠

live birth
Observed outcome
what most fertility studies observe

Intentions ≠ behavior
because not all intentions become action

Outcomes ≠ behavior
because biology filters outcomes after trying

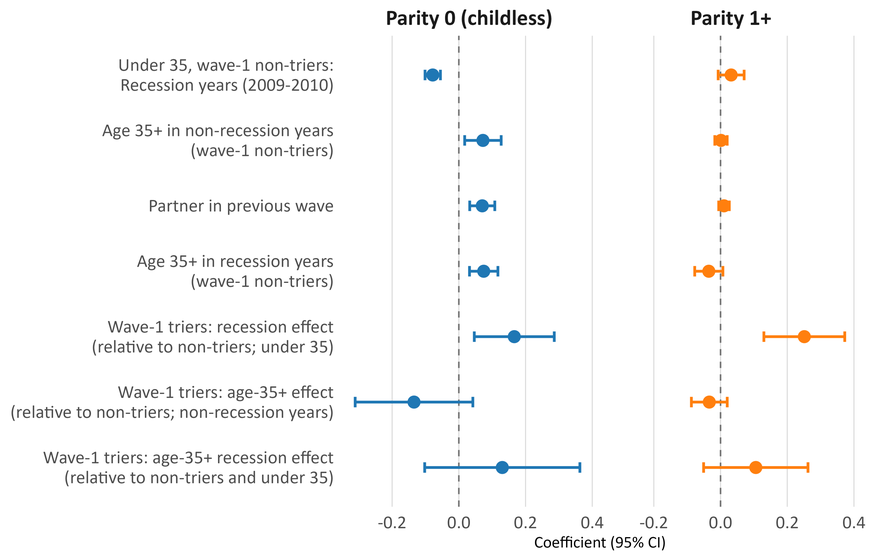
Biological constraints at higher ages: Longer Time-to-pregnancy; Higher miscarriage risk

Why this matters

- Most recession-fertility studies **observe births, not behavior**
- **Using trying** to conceive helps **identify behavioral responses** to economic downturns more directly.
- **This matters because birth outcomes also reflect biology, especially at older ages.**

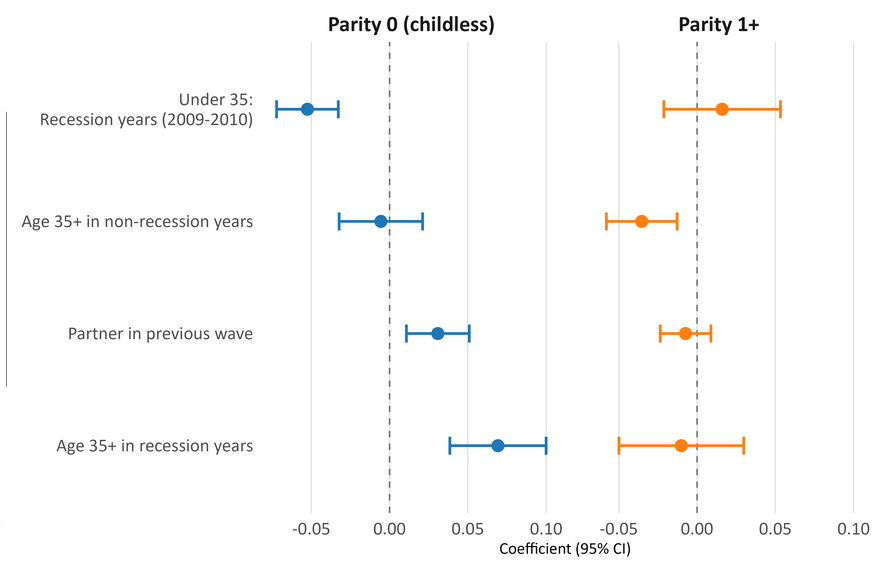
Trying and childbearing responses to recession vary by age and parity

Figure 1. Fixed effects model. Probability of trying



Reference group: *under 35, wave-1 non-triers.*

Figure 2. Fixed effects model. Probability of successful childbearing



Data and design

- Using **pairfam waves 1–13**, we analyze women observed around the 2008–2010 economic uncertainty in Germany. Models **compare recession and non-recession waves** and estimate **within-person change** by age, parity, and baseline trying status.
- Results are **robust to alternative specifications**, including continuous age and interaction models.

Table 1. Description of sample

Variable	Value	Variable	Value
Women	3,505	Mean age	37.3
Observations	23,631	Age 35+	66.7%
With partner (lagged)	82.7%	Trying in wave 1	10.3%
Parity 1+	74.2%	In recession waves	15.0%
Mean survey year	2014.2	Survey years	2009–2019

Conclusion

Recession narrowed or reversed age gaps in trying and childbearing.

Among prior non-triers, younger childless women reduced trying, while younger mothers increased it.

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