

Fertility of Ultra-Orthodox Jews in USA

The paper by Lyman Stone presents the case of an ethno-linguistic group with very high fertility in the USA, identified in the American Community Survey (ACS) [Stone 2023]. This case study was rather unexpected in a developed country in the 21st century. This group is labeled 'Haredi', who are ultra-Orthodox Jews, defined by speaking Yiddish at home. Other such groups with outstanding fertility were documented in the past, the most well known being the Hutterites, who so far hold the world record of marital fertility, and are used as a reference of maximum natural fertility [Eaton and Meyer 1953]. We calculated the fertility rates (births last year / women) by ethnolinguistic group in the USA from all 22 ACS surveys available, using the IPUMS-USA on-line facility [Ruggles et al. 2013]. The fertility of the Haredi (TFR= 7.13) appears way above any other ethno-linguistic group in the USA over the 2000-2021 period, the next groups being 'Hamitic' (East-Africans) (TFR= 4.73), and 'Shoshonean/Hopi' (American Natives) (TFR = 4.68). Stone discusses the question whether the Haredi fertility is natural or hides some fertility control.

Here, using the same dataset, we compared the marital fertility (births last year / married women) of the Haredi with that of the Hutterites (1926–1940) and with that of the rural population of Niger (1982–2012), also known as a record high fertility (TFR= 8.56) [Garenne 2017]. Figure 1 displays the age patterns of marital fertility from age 20 to 49. The figure clearly shows three parallel patterns of natural fertility, with no family limitation. The Haredi pattern falls 25% below that of the Hutterites, which implies 33% longer birth intervals, and is 12% above that of rural Niger, which implies 10% shorter birth intervals. Several reasons could explain the differences in average length of birth intervals: breastfeeding, post-partum abstinence, short-term post-partum contraception, fecundability, or coital frequency. Note that since there is virtually no contraception in rural Niger, there is no need to invoke contraception for explaining the Haredi pattern. It would be interesting to know the details of this outstanding behavior.

Natural fertility is the result of a social (often religious) ideology imposed on women for maximizing the fertility of the group. It is surprising to see such a behavior emerging in 21st century USA, when most societies underwent a fertility transition leading to low levels around or below replacement.

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References

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Figure 1: Age patterns of marital fertility: Haredi, Hutterites and Niger-rural

