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Family Size and Well-Being: Evidence from Thailand

SMALL families are wealthier and have better-educated children than large families with similar backgrounds, a study from Thailand shows. The study carefully controlled for other factors that affect family wealth and education to examine the effects of family size.

Working in rural Thai villages in 1988, researchers from the Institute for Population Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok surveyed equal numbers of large and small families from each village. After controlling for differences in background characteristics, the researchers found that the small families owned more consumer

goods and saved more money than the large families. The children in small families were more likely than those in large families to stay in school beyond the primary level.

"Many Thai couples believe that if they have smaller families, they will be able to obtain a better education for their children, as well as save more of their income and purchase more consumer goods. These beliefs are well founded, the research demonstrates."

Parents who had only one or two children were better able than those with four or more children to switch from low-status occupations such as laborer to higher status jobs in farming, trading, or salaried occupations, the researchers also found.

The results of the Thai study imply that as national fertility levels fall, family savings and consumption will rise, and a growing share of the population will receive an education, furthering national development goals. These findings have important implications for family planning programs and policymakers in Thailand and other developing countries.

Family Size and Rural Well-Being

IN rural areas of developing countries, many couples still believe that having large families is important to ensure family well-being and achieve economic security. But many other couples are having fewer children in the belief that it will make possible a better quality of life. How does declining fertility affect opportunities for education, employment, saving, and consumer spending? A study in rural Thailand provides answers to these important questions.

Researchers Napaporn Havanon, John Knodel, and Werasit Sittitrai studied family size and well-being as part of the Project on Socio-Economic Consequences of Fertility Decline for the Thai Family, conducted by the Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University. The goal of the project is to gain an understanding of the consequences of the recent decline in fertility in rural Thailand.

Many couples in rural Thailand have already experienced the consequences of limiting their family size, because the fertility decline there began more than two decades ago. By comparing these couples with other couples from similar backgrounds who did not limit their family size to the same extent, the researchers were able to learn how the circumstances of Thai families differ according to the number of children they have.

In 1988, the researchers surveyed 612 couples divided equally between large families and small families. Small families here are defined as those with one or two living children; large families as those with four or more. All of the families lived in two selected provinces of Thailand: Lamphun Province in the north, where fertility declined particularly early and rapidly, and Supanburi Province in the central

region, where the fertility decline was somewhat later and slower.

The sample included only married couples whose first child was born between 1962 and 1978. The project was designed to minimize differences in the general background characteristics of the small and large families selected for the study. Within each village, equal numbers of small and large families were selected and were matched by the age of their oldest child, assuring that they all started their families at the same time. All couples interviewed were Buddhist, spoke a major Thai dialect, had no adopted children, nor any living children from former marriages. Both groups of parents came from large families themselves. The vast majority of couples in each group expected to have no more children.

Despite the careful matching, couples with small families came from somewhat more advantaged backgrounds than couples with large families. The parents with few children were slightly better educated than those with many children. Analysis of the survey took these family background differences into account to the extent possible, so that the findings reflect differences in family size net of these other differences.

Percentage of children still in school, by age of child and family size

Child's age	Small families	Large families
10-12 years	82%	82%
13-15 years	38%	25%
16-18 years	24%	13%
19-21 years	10%	5%

Source: Knodel, Havanon, and Sittitrai, (1989).

Note: These statistics do not reflect controlling for differences in background characteristics.

Education

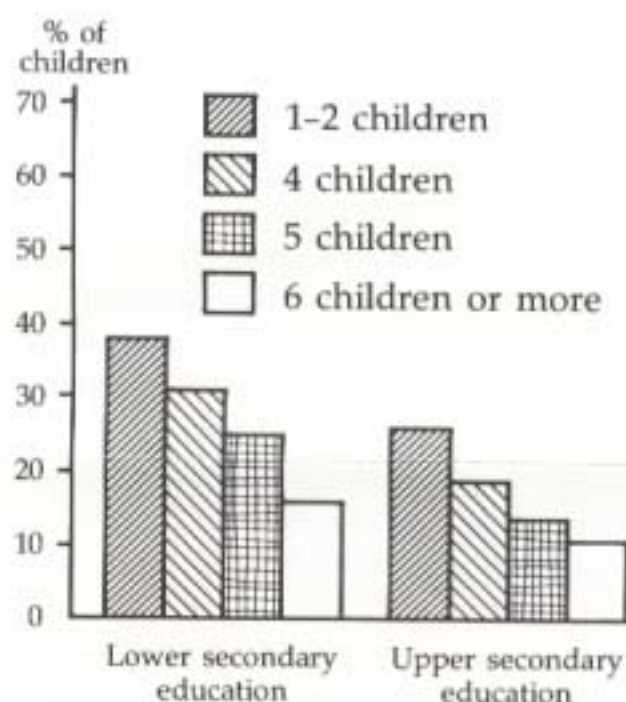
PRIMARY education is compulsory and has become nearly universal in Thailand. Children from small and large families alike attend school for at least six years. But the educational attainment of children beyond the primary level differs significantly by whether they come from small or large families.

In each type of family, 82 percent of children of primary school age (10-12) were still attending school. But in the 13-15 age group, when children attend secondary school, 38 percent of the children from small families were still in school, versus just 25 percent of children from large families. Similar differences occur at older ages (see table). For children from small families, the average final number of years of schooling completed was 8.1; for children from large families, it was only 6.8 years. Among large families, children from families with four or five children remained in school longer than those with six or more.

Although these statistics do not control for differences in background characteristics, and therefore somewhat exaggerate the relationship between family size and educational attainment, the relationship remains quite pronounced even after controlling for background characteristics. Children from wealthier households are more likely to attain a secondary education than children from poorer households. Thai couples tend to stress these differences in wealth, rather than family size, as the reason some families have better educated children than others. However, the research makes it clear that for families at all levels of wealth—whether rich, poor, or in the middle—the larger the family the less chance children have of going beyond the compulsory primary level.

Figure 1

School completion by family size

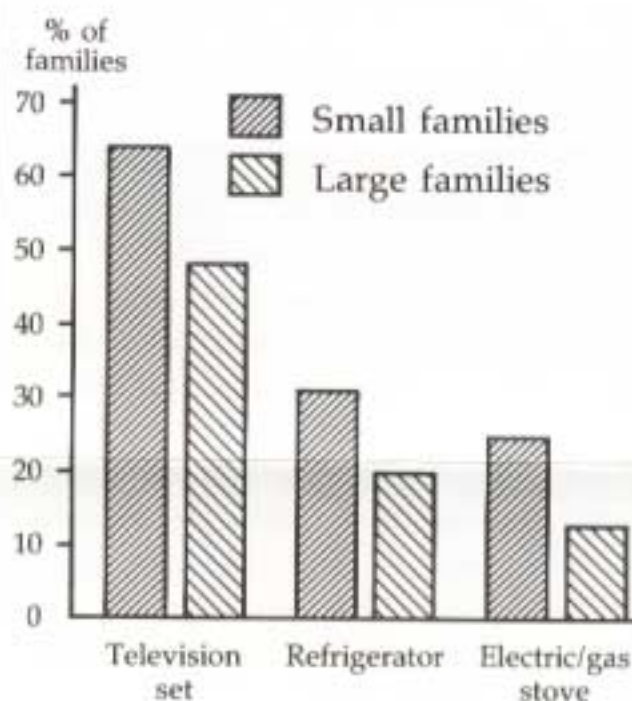


Source: Knodel, Havanon, and Sittitrai (1989)

Note: Adjusted to control for economic background differences five years after marriage.

Figure 2

Ownership of modern consumer goods by family size

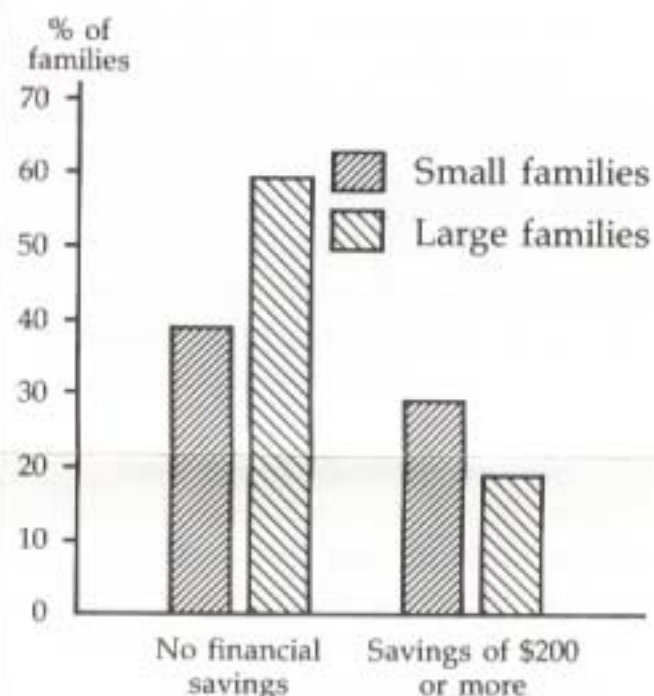


Source: Havanon, Knodel, and Sittitrai (1989).

Note: These statistics do not reflect controlling for differences in background characteristics.

Figure 3

Financial savings by family size



Source: Havanon, Knodel, and Sittitrai (1989).

Note: These statistics do not reflect controlling for differences in background characteristics.

For example, controlling for background differences, the researchers found that 38 percent of children in small families (one or two children) had attained a lower secondary education, versus 31 percent of children in families with four children. Only 25 percent of children in families with five children had attained a lower secondary education. The differences by family size were comparable for attainment of an upper secondary education (see Figure 1).

Wealth

THE researchers found that among couples who possessed approximately the same amount of land and other assets at the time they began child-

bearing, those who had only a few children fared better economically than those who had many children. Small families spent more on consumer goods and also saved more than large families.

Ownership of modern consumer goods has become an important indicator of household wealth in rural Thailand. The extension of electrification, public transportation, and roads throughout the country has brought a growing number of modern goods to rural markets. Rural people have become intensely aware of the availability of these goods, and modern consumer values are rapidly taking hold. Rural people have great interest in owning such items as stoves, refrigerators, and television sets.

The study showed that small families owned more modern consumer goods than large families

from similar economic backgrounds. Before controlling for other background factors that affect wealth, the researchers found that nearly two-thirds of small families owned a television set, for example, versus less than one-half of large families. Nearly one small family in three owned an electric or gas stove, versus only one large family in five. One-fourth of small families owned a refrigerator, nearly twice the proportion of large families (see Figure 2). Even after controlling for other factors that determine how much wealth households accumulate, small families remained well ahead of large families in ownership of consumer items.

To some extent, these findings may reflect the fact that small families are more modern in their tastes than large families, rather than reflecting differences in accumulation

of wealth. However, small families are also able to accumulate more savings than large families. Nearly 60 percent of large families had no financial savings at all, versus only about 40 percent of small families. About 30 percent of small families had saved \$200 or more, versus about 20 percent of large families (see Figure 3). Though the differences are somewhat less after controlling for background characteristics, the researchers found no evidence to suggest that large families prefer saving their money to spending it on consumer goods.

Having fewer children also makes it easier to achieve occupational mobility, the researchers found. Parents who had only one or two children were better able to switch from a lower occupational

status, particularly laboring status, to a higher status job such as farming, trading, or working in a salaried occupation.

Policy Implications

RAISING children has become expensive in rural Thailand, and a growing number of Thai parents perceive that large families are a burden instead of an asset. Many Thai couples believe that if they have smaller families, they will be able to obtain a better education for their children, as well as save more of their income and purchase more consumer goods. These beliefs are well founded, the research demonstrates.

When asked to compare their current economic status with that after only five years of marriage, over 80 percent of the parents with small families responded that they were better off now. Only 10 percent felt worse off. In contrast, under 70 percent of respondents in large families felt better off, while nearly 20 percent felt worse off than earlier in their marriage.

Research has shown that family planning programs help improve the health of mothers and children. The study in Thailand provides evidence that fertility reduction also helps improve family well-being. These findings imply that family planning programs help achieve national development goals by encouraging savings and educational attainment.

Asia-Pacific

POPULATION & POLICY

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Knodel, John, Napaporn Havanon, and Werasit Sittitrai (1989) *Family Size and the Education of Children in the Context of Rapid Fertility Decline*, Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University (forthcoming).

Havanon, Napaporn, John Knodel, and Werasit Sittitrai (1989) *The Impact of Family Size on Wealth Accumulation* (draft), Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University (forthcoming).

The study also included the effect of family size on the wife's employment, not covered in this bulletin. Further information about the research project is available from the authors. The project is conducted by the Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University and is funded by the United Nations Population Fund. Technical assistance was provided through Family Health International with funds provided by the Agency for International Development.

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