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Wives' household income contributions and higher order births in the United States

Introduction

The latter half of the 20th century was marked by dramatic increases in women's labor force participation, especially among married women (Goldin 2006). Many households shifted away from the traditional male breadwinner model, in the process changing both levels of absolute household income and the relative income shares that each spouse contributed. In 1970, husbands were the sole source of income for 56% of couples and provided more than half (at least 60%) of income in an additional 31% of couples (Raley et al. 2006). By 2001 the equivalent figures were 25% sole-male income couples and 39% majority-male income couples (Raley et al. 2006). The balance of spousal income contribution continues to shift, and research has documented a trend of increasing female breadwinnership among married couples (Bloemen and Stancanelli 2008a; Brennan et al. 2001; Raley et al. 2006; Winslow-Bowe 2009). Data from the 2011 American Community Survey suggest that among married couples in the United States, almost a quarter of wives out-earn their husbands (24.3%), an increase from 6.2% in 1960 (Wang et al. 2013).

Research has examined how gendered differences in labor market participation and income relate to family functions and structures, including the division of household labor and the likelihood of divorce. There has also been substantial theoretical and empirical work examining the causal relationship between total household income and fertility (Becker 1960; Becker 1993; Schultz 1974; Jones et al. 2011). In this paper we bring these two research agendas together, beginning to answer a fairly broad question: how do changes in the gendered composition of household income affect fertility? We focus on two particular elements of this question. First, what impact does gender have on income and labor market participation as predictors of subsequent childbearing? Second, do higher relative and absolute incomes increase the likelihood of achieving desired fertility, and does this effect vary by gender?

We focus here on higher-order childbearing in the United States. The United States has comparatively low rates of cohabitation and high fertility rates, as well as a normative pattern of transition to marriage and first birth. The prevalence of marriage and normative transition to first birth makes it a compelling case for the study of transition to higher order births. Second, women throughout the developed world often face challenges in achieving work-life balance which may be a reason for postponing or stopping childbearing. Poor maternity leave policies, expensive childcare, and potential loss of career advancement factor into the decision to limit fertility, and few developed countries are as regressive as the U.S. on all of these factors. As such we expect the effect to be especially pronounced in this case, though perhaps also a harbinger of trends to expect given the weakening of the social safety net (and pro-natalist policies in particular) in other parts of the developed world. Furthermore, due to the challenges faced by women who combine work and motherhood in the United States, households

where women provide the majority, or a very significant share, of income are particularly important to study.

In this paper, we explore the theoretical arguments as to why spouse-specific income contributions and labor market involvement, not only total household income, might affect continued childbearing. We focus on the role of wives' income contributions, since these have been documented in the literature as having predictive power in relation to other family processes, including marital quality (Brennan 2001), household expenditure decisions (Phipps and Burton, 1998), household labor (Killewald and Gough 2010; Killewald 2011), and risk of marital dissolution (Teachman 2010; Kalmijn et al. 2007; Heckert et al. 1998). We offer hypotheses as to why spousal contributions may affect continued childbearing among married couples. We then test our hypotheses using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 cohort, which offers detailed information on labor market participation, income, and biographical factors for both spouses, as well as fertility for the couple. We close by discussing our results in the context of current spousal income trends in the United States.