# Byproduct of Hyper-Low Fertility in Korea : Aristocracy or Meritocracy?

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**[Abstract]**

South Korea's birth rate has plummeted to the lowest in the world, yet the socio-economic and cohort backgrounds of parents and their broader societal impact have received little attention. Preliminary analysis reveals that parents who continue to have children predominantly belong to the social elite with higher socio-economic status, contributing to what is known as the "prepared parent" phenomenon. This shift is expected to exacerbate existing polarization within Korean society, as these children, set to enter school from 2024, are likely to further widen socioeconomic disparities.

Although previous research has explored the relationship between income levels and birth rates, the societal implications in terms of timing, scale, and long-term consequences remain underexplored. Understanding these dynamics requires looking beyond just the numbers. Therefore, starting from birth statistics analysis and forecasting, this study will incorporate Focus group interviews to qualitatively assess how "prepared parents" influence educational and societal structures. By combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this research offers a comprehensive analysis, providing insights into the growing polarization and fostering discourse on how policies can better address the challenges posed by this demographic shift.

**[Background]**

In South Korea, the number of births remained above 400,000 per year until 2016 (TFR 1.17). However, in 2017, the number of births suddenly dropped to 350,000 and has not recovered since. By 2020, the figure had fallen to the 200,000 range, and as of 2023, it stands just above 200,000 (TFR 0.72).[1] This sharp decline of - 43.4% in birth rates since 2017 (Fig 1) signals more than just a numerical change—it reflects a significant shift in the characteristics of the parents who are still choosing to have children.

Preliminary analysis shows that in the past, childbearing was more evenly distributed across income levels. However, in recent years, higher-income households are more likely to have children, and they tend to have more than one child as well.When looking at households with preschool-aged children (ages 0-6) in 2022, only 31.5% of households in the lowest-income bracket (1st decile) have children, while 60% of households in the 10th decile have children (Fig 2). Moreover, the higher the income, the more likely a household is to have two children. Recently, especially in 2021 and 2022, there has been a more pronounced rise in two-child households among wealthier groups (Fig 3).[2]

In addition, in 2023, the average maternal age at childbirth was 33.64 years, and the proportion of births by mothers aged 35 or older was 36.3%, a significant increase from 2000 (29.03 years, 6.8%).[3] This suggests that parents are delaying marriage and childbirth until they feel financially stable, only starting families once they have secured the conditions necessary for childrearing. Consequently, marriage and childbearing are increasingly concentrated among those who are socio-economically prepared, with only the most well-prepared choosing to have children.

A notable generational shift among parents is also underway. Currently, the majority of mothers with children entering elementary school are from Generation X (57%). However, by 2025, the proportions of Generation X and Millennial mothers will nearly equalize (49.2% vs. 49.1%). From 2026 onward, Millennial mothers will make up the majority, accounting for over 56.3% of school-age children's parents.[4] This trend is expected to continue for at least the next 15 years, with Millennials dominating the cohort of parents with school-age children.

In Korea, Millennials are known for having higher educational attainment compared to previous generations. They grew up amid intense competition and a culture of high educational fervor, leading to a strong tendency to strive for success and a perfect life. This suggests that these highly educated parents will play a significant role in shaping the educational and social environments in which their children are raised.

This phenomenon, known as the "prepared parent" syndrome (Huh, 2004), has become much more pronounced in recent years. "Prepared" refers to parents with higher socio-economic status, who set expectations for their children far beyond the societal average. As Sandel (2020) points out in *The Tyranny of Merit*, the issue with meritocracy is not simply the wealth gap but how society's belief in merit shapes its approach to inequality. In South Korea, the socio-economic divide is defined not just by wealth, but also by the belief that success in childrearing and education is a result of merit. This distorted 'meritocratic' view deepens the divide between prepared parents who can provide their children with significant advantages and those who are less equipped. As these "prepared children" enter school from 2024, they are expected to dominate the educational system, potentially widening socio-economic disparities within the school-age population.

This extreme polarization of children born after 2017 will manifest not only upon entering school but also from early childhood and preschool years. These divides will likely create societal ripple effects as these children grow. Public education, traditionally tailored to the average student, may face challenges when the expectations of parents and students differ significantly from the norm. In a society that views meritocracy as a path to success, these differences could intensify conflicts between students, teachers, and parents, creating friction in the educational system.

As Cho (2016) argues in *Predetermined Future*, the critical issue isn't merely recognizing population decline but preparing for the inevitable changes it brings. While demographic shifts like declining birth rates are unavoidable, it is how society prepares for these changes that truly matters. According to Cho, the demographic future is already "set," but by precisely anticipating when and how these shifts will affect various sectors, effective strategies can be developed to minimize the impact.

This study aims to test the hypothesis that the extreme polarization of childbearing and childrearing, driven by the qualitative characteristics of "prepared parents," will shape the future of Korean society. It seeks to lay the groundwork for addressing these societal shifts and mitigating potential negative outcomes. Indeed, there has long been substantial research and theories linking fertility rates with economic status. Beginning with Leibenstein (1957) and Becker (1960), subsequent studies identified a negative correlation between income and fertility (e.g. Butz and Ward, 1979; Robinson, 1997). More recent research, however, suggests that this trend may be reversing. This shift appears particularly relevant in developed countries (Doepke et al., 2022) and is evident in Korea, where birth rates are lowest among the bottom income quantiles (Lee, 2022).

Despite these findings, little attention has been paid to how this phenomenon will affect future society in terms of timing, scale, and direction. Additionally, previous studies on social polarization have focused largely on resource distribution, with a small upper class holding the majority of wealth. This research shifts the focus to the extreme polarization in birth and childrearing, where the middle class is increasingly absent from these trends. Understanding these dynamics is critical to addressing the socio-economic inequalities that will shape the future of Korean society.

**[Research Objectives]**

This study aims to predict the size, demographic characteristics, and timeline of changes in the school-age population and parents who will shape the education market until 2040. By doing so, the study aims to validate the relevance of the "prepared parent" phenomenon and the ensuing extreme polarization. Furthermore, it seeks to analyze the impact of the "prepared children" population on South Korean society as they progress through their school years and eventually grow into the adult population.

**[Research Methodology]**

1. **Empirical Validation of the "Prepared Children" Phenomenon (Preliminary)**
   Using national surveys and statistics (e.g., Household Income and Expenditure, Population Trend, Labor Panel), this stage compares socioeconomic status and demographics of children and parents born before and after 2017 to assess the significance of the "prepared children" phenomenon.

2. **Estimation and Projection of "Prepared Children" (To be conducted)**

   Based on Stage 1 findings, time series population projections are used to estimate the number of "prepared children" by 2040, predicting future impacts on childrearing practices and educational environments.

3. **In-depth Analysis of Extreme Polarization in Childbearing and Childrearing (To be conducted)**

   Conduct an in-depth verification of hypotheses through qualitative research (Focus group interviews) designed based on the quantitative levels of 'prepared children/parents' identified in previous stages. This study aims to define the characteristics of parents and understand how the quantitative and qualitative differences in childrearing and education in polarized families manifest in real life. Additionally, the study will explore how extreme polarization affects not only childrearing and education but also future societal changes. A comparative framework, including middle-class couples without children and low-income parents with children, will demonstrate the long-term effects of polarization on child development.
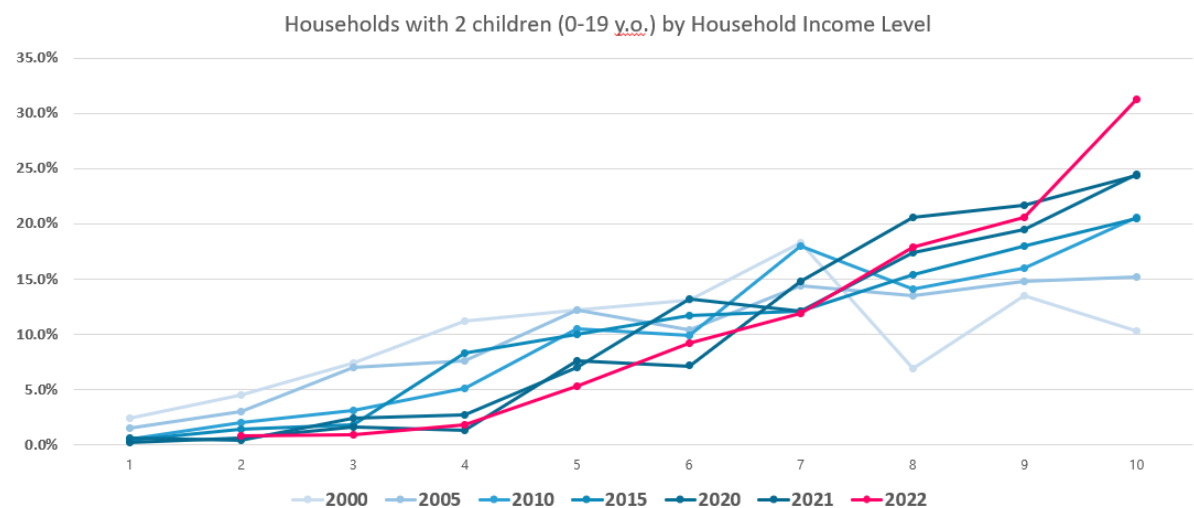
**[Figure 1] Number of Births in South Korea (2010~2023)**



Number of Births in South Korea
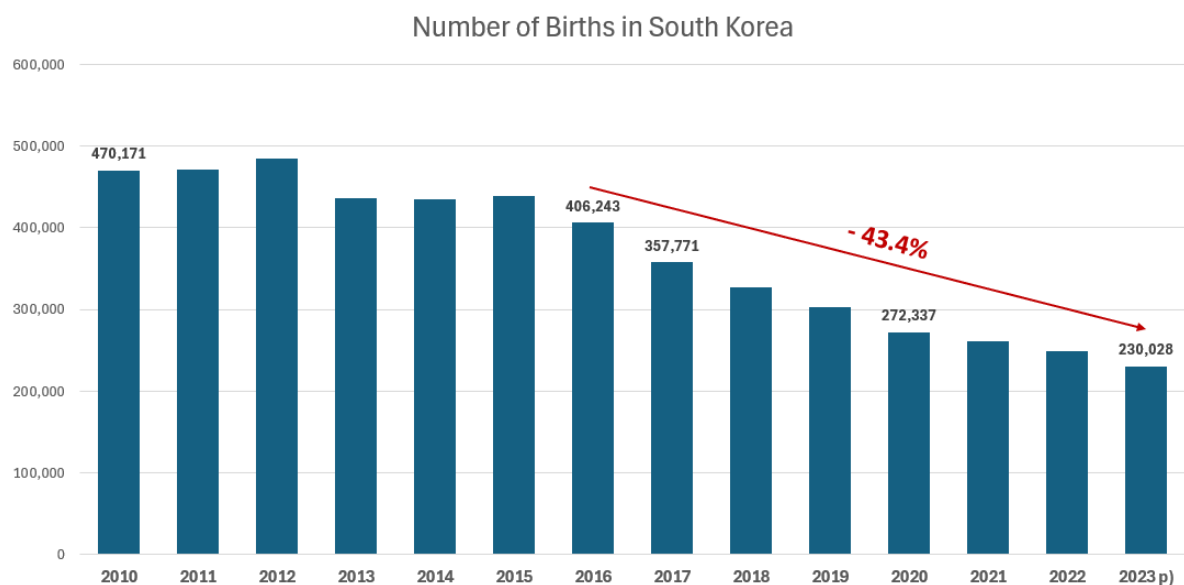
**[Figure 2] Without vs. With Pre-school Child(ren) by Household Income Level (2022)**



Without vs. With Child(ren)
by Household Income Level (2022)
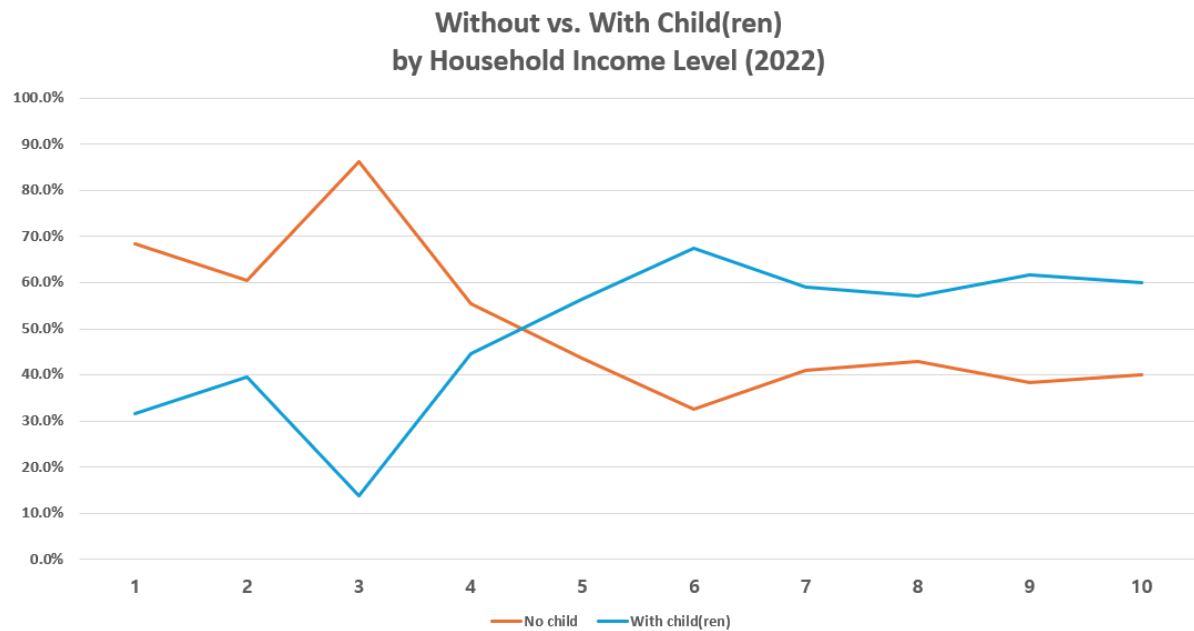
**[Figure 3] Households with two child(ren) 0-19 y.o. by Household Income Level (2022)**



Households with 2 children (0-19 y.o.) by Household Income Level

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