Is Childlessness Increasing in The Southern Cone of Latin America? Evidence from the New Round of Censuses

Background

During the last decades, Latin American countries converged towards a fertility level close to two children per woman. More recently, several countries in the region show very low total fertility rates. This is the case of the Southern Cone countries, where even ultra-low levels are currently observed (Figure 1).

The declining fertility level of the 1990s was not accompanied by substantive increases in age at first birth or by an increase in permanent childlessness. The leading mechanism behind the decline was the limitation of the number of children. The countries of the Southern Cone maintained very high levels of adolescent fertility for several years, similar to the average for Latin America, and the second highest in the world after Africa. The significant decline of the TFR since the mid-2010s is largely explained by the decline in adolescent fertility, but the fertility rates of women aged 25-39 have also contributed to the decline, showing that there has been a combination of factors affecting the overall reproductive behaviour. In addition to the postponement of childbearing that accompanied the fall in adolescent fertility, the limitation of births of order 2 and above played a relevant role in the decline (Cabella et al. 2024; Grushka et al. 2023). So far, there are no studies addressing the role of the decision not to have children in the recent decline.

This paper aims to contribute to the knowledge of childlessness in Latin America, both in terms of its demographic dynamics and its social profile. To this end, we study women in the countries of the Southern Cone who reach late reproductive age without children and those who end their reproductive life without having had children.

Figure 1: Total Fertility Rate. Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, 2010-2022
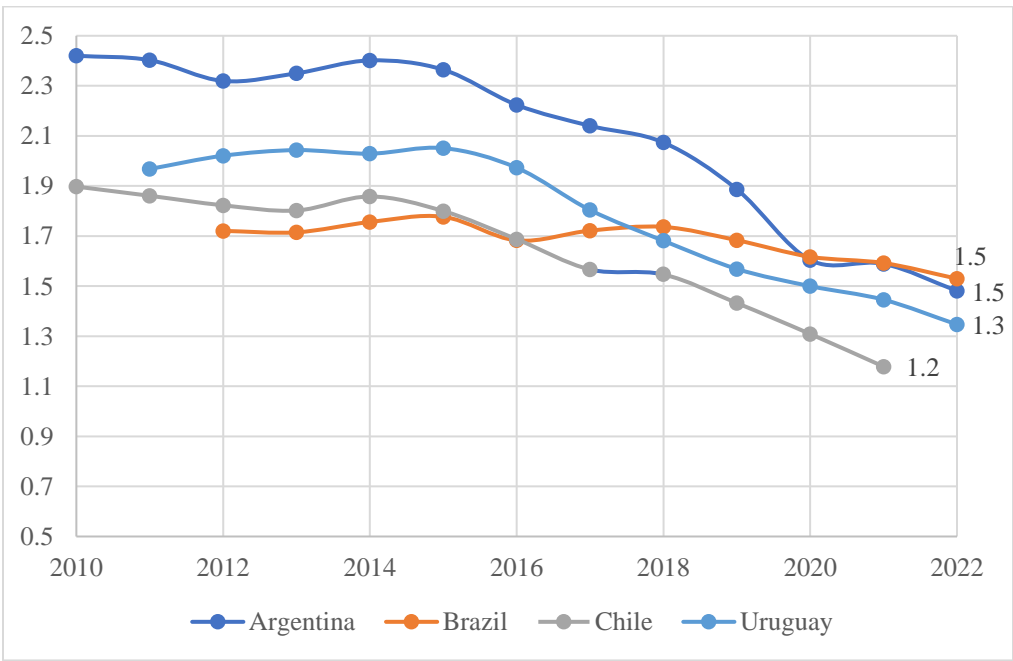
Source: Official vital statistics and CELADE population estimates

Using census data from the 2010 and 2020 rounds, we will estimate the level of childlessness at late reproductive ages by country. We will also examine cross-national educational patterns of childlessness by comparing the proportions of childlessness by age and educational group in each country.

An earlier study covering the period 1980-2010 found that, contrary to expectations, the proportion of women who completed their reproductive years without having children fell significantly in most countries (Binstock and Cabella, 2021). Also contrary to expectations, at least in the light of recent European experience, it was found that the decline in the proportion of childless women was greatest among those with higher education.

Childlessness can be attributed to two broad groups of causes: biological and socio-cultural. Biological causes include difficulties or inability to conceive or carry a pregnancy to term, which have been alleviated to some extent by the development of assisted reproductive technologies (ART). Social and cultural causes include the separation of sexuality and reproduction and the relaxation of cultural norms that previously restricted reproduction within the family, as well as changes in preferences and social acceptability with regard to not having children at late reproductive age or not having children at all. In European countries where the proportion of childless women is increasing, there has been a significant increase in the number of studies covering an increasingly diverse range of reasons that lead women and couples to decide not to have children. Among the most common reasons are the competition between reproductive projects and other individual projects, including a higher valuation of leisure time (Basten, 2009; Tanturri et al., 2015; Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017), the difficulty of finding a suitable partner to raise children with (Mynarska, 2010; Kapitany and Speder, 2012), or the perception that parenthood is incompatible with a successful professional career for women (Greulich, 2017; Preisner et al., 2018; Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017).

Studies highlight the main drivers of childlessness as the postponement of the first birth to ages when fertility starts to decline (Berrington, 2004). In addition, there is an increasing number of women who choose not to have children as a life project (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017; Hakim, 2003; Basten, 2009; Merz & Lifbroer, 2012).

Since the mid-2000s, the European literature has begun to address different perspectives on the phenomenon of childlessness, both to assess its impact on fertility decline and to explore interpretations of its increase. In Latin America, on the other hand, this debate has not gained prominence, even though several countries have already reached very low total fertility rates. In recent years, several studies have shown that women with higher levels of education are postponing family formation and delaying their first birth (Cavenaghi and Alvez, 2009; Rosero-Bixby et al., 2009; Nathan, 2014; Nathan et al., 2016; Binstock, 2013). Regarding childlessness, three recent studies based on cohort analyses show a slight increase in the proportion of childless women in cohorts that have completed their reproductive years in several Latin American countries, comparing the 2000 and 2010 censuses (Fanta and Sacco, 2018; Lima et al., 2018; Reher and Requena, 2018).

Our main research questions are:

- Have both the percentage of childless women in their late reproductive years and permanent childlessness increased?
- How do the levels of childlessness differ in the countries of the Southern Cone?
- What has been the evolution over time of the educational gradient of childlessness in these countries?

Data and methods

Building on the results discussed in the previous section, the current research examines the extent to which the pattern observed until the early 2010s has changed over the last decade in Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Argentina. The study includes census data from the 2020 round, which are already available for Argentina. The Brazilian census was conducted in 2022, the Uruguayan one in 2023, and the Chilean one in 2024. The microdata for the first two countries will be available by the end of this year. In the absence of census microdata from Chile in the coming months, we will use data from the official CASEN household survey, which includes data on lifetime fertility. Data from the Generations and Gender Survey for Buenos Aires and Montevideo, conducted almost simultaneously in 2021 and 2022, are also available. This survey includes questions linking childlessness to marital history and indicators such as religion and gender attitudes. The GGS in Uruguay was carried out on 4575 women, of whom 1552 were between 30 and 49 years of age; in Argentina it was carried out only in the city of Buenos Aires on 1394 women, of whom 529 were between 30 and 49 years of age. Although the samples are small, it is expected that this survey will provide some interpretative insights to complement the census information.

Preliminary results

Table 1 shows the evolution of the proportion of women who have not had children at different ages in the last three Argentinian censuses. The national results are compelling, showing a significant delay in both the age at which women have their first child and the proportion who complete their reproductive lives childless.

Indeed, the proportion of women aged 30-34 who were childless increased by 50 per cent, from 19.6 per cent to 29.5 per cent, over the last 20 years, i.e. between 2001 and 2022. The results also show a 20 per cent increase in the proportion of childless women aged 45-49. One in ten women end their reproductive years without children.

These patterns are much more pronounced in the case of the city of Buenos Aires. This is not surprising, given that it is the country's capital and a jurisdiction that has been at the forefront of all the demographic indicators related to the decline in fertility, as well as high levels of education and more tolerant social and cultural patterns that are less attached to traditional values. Here, the proportion of childless women aged 30-34 rose by 29% over the last two decades. As Table 1 shows, although this increase has been somewhat smaller than that observed at national level, it is notable that just over half of women in this age group are now childless (compared with 30 per cent at national level).

Table 1. Argentina and Uruguay. Percentage of childless women by age group and census year

	Argentina				Buenos Aires City			
	30-34	**35-39**	**40-44**	**45-49**	**30-34**	**35-39**	**40-44**	**45-49**
2001	19,6	12,2	9,7	9,1	40,6	26,4	20,1	18,1
2010	23,2	13,9	10,6	9,6	47,2	29,5	22,3	20,2
2022	29,5	18,3	12,7	11,0	52,6	36,7	26,8	22,8
Buenos Aires City (GGS, 2022):					*61.7*	*30.6*	*14.3*	*14.1*

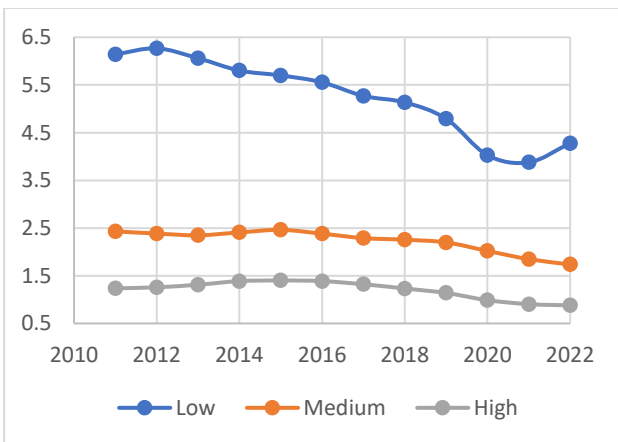|	Uruguay			
	30-34	**35-39**	**40-44**	**45-49**
1996	17.9	11.8	10.6	11.1
2011	25.1	15.0	11.8	10.4
2022 (GGS)	*30.0*	*16.6*	*8.0*	*9.3*

Source: National population censuses, except Uruguay 2022, Generation and Gender Survey.

Our expectation is that the 2020 censuses in Brazil, Chile and Argentina will show similar results to Argentina, with an increase in the number of childless women over the age of 30.
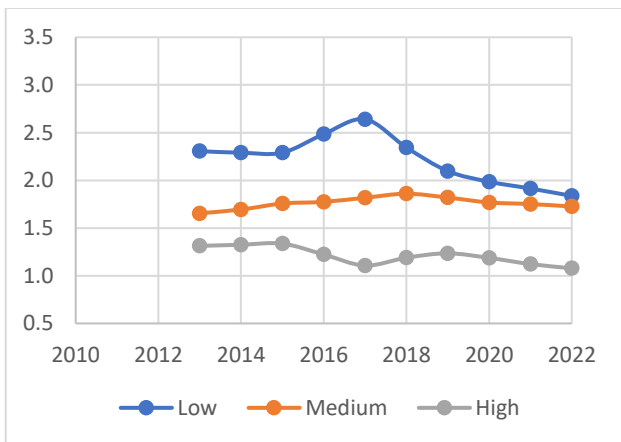
Period data show that, across all nations, women with greater levels of education experience a consistent delay in fertility. However, it is unclear whether the association between education and childlessness documented in past censuses, which showed that more education led to a smaller proportion of women ending their reproductive lives childless, has reversed. We hypothesise that this relationship will be reversed, but we expect to see different proportions of childlessness between education groups due to different rates of educational expansion across countries.

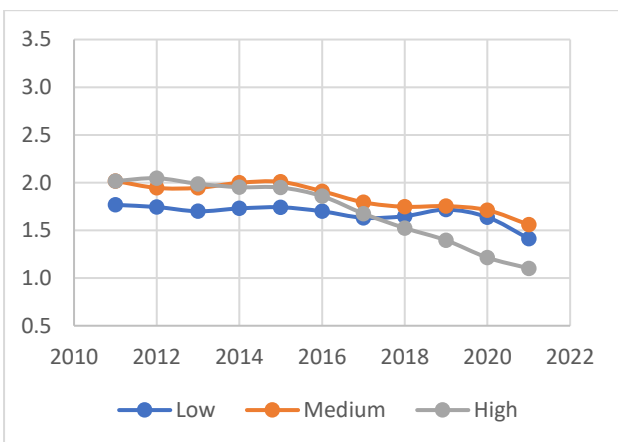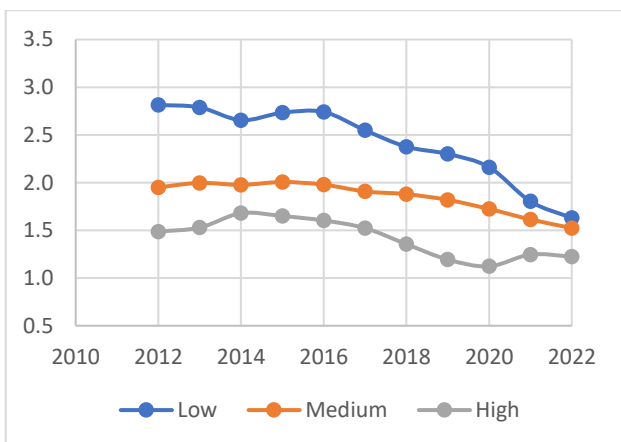**Figure 3: Total Fertility Rates by education (circa 2010-circa 2022)**