

## Socio-economic changes in the age-patterns of childbearing in Australia



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Over the past three decades the median age of mothers in Australia has continued to rise, although age-patterns of childbearing vary widely between poorer and wealthier areas. Using data on the number of children ever born to women aged 15 years and over sourced from the 2006 and 2016 censuses, this DemoGraphic examines changes in the timing and quantum of childbearing of Australian mothers across different socio-economic statuses.

In developed countries, fertility has been progressively decreasing at younger ages and increasing at older ages, a phenomenon known as postponement (Kohler et al. 2002). Despite the overall shift towards later childbearing, significant variation in the median age of mothers can be found across different socio-economic groups. There is a vast literature showing that the trend towards postponed childbearing primarily occurs among women with high educational attainment (Heck et al. 1997). Not only are highly educated women likely to start their families later because of their pursuit of education and career (Kaizer et al. 2007), but they also tend to have fewer children due to the natural decline in fertility with age (Steiner and Jukic 2016).

The 2016 Census was used to quantify the number of babies ever born to women aged 15 years and over by the Statistical Areal Level 2 (SA2) of usual residence, as defined by the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) of the ABS. To analyse whether socio-economic circumstances have an effect on the timing of childbearing, I used the Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) developed by the ABS, which ranks areas in Australia according to a set of variables including relative educational and occupational level (ABS 2018). The index is used to group the population into five socio-economic statuses: SES1 (most disadvantaged), SES2, SES3, SES4, and SES5 (most advantaged). The index is based on census data and assigns summary values of socioeconomic conditions to each geographic area.

Between 2006 and 2016, the average age of all women who gave birth increased from 29.8 to 30.5 years old (AIHW 2016). Figure 1 displays the changes over the ten year intercensal period in the proportion of women with one, two and three children by age and socio-economic status (SES) as defined by the 2016 IRSAD index values. Despite a general increase in the median age of Australian mothers across parities, a variation by socio-economic status can be observed, with mothers from wealthier areas experiencing substantially later ages at first, second and third birth compared to

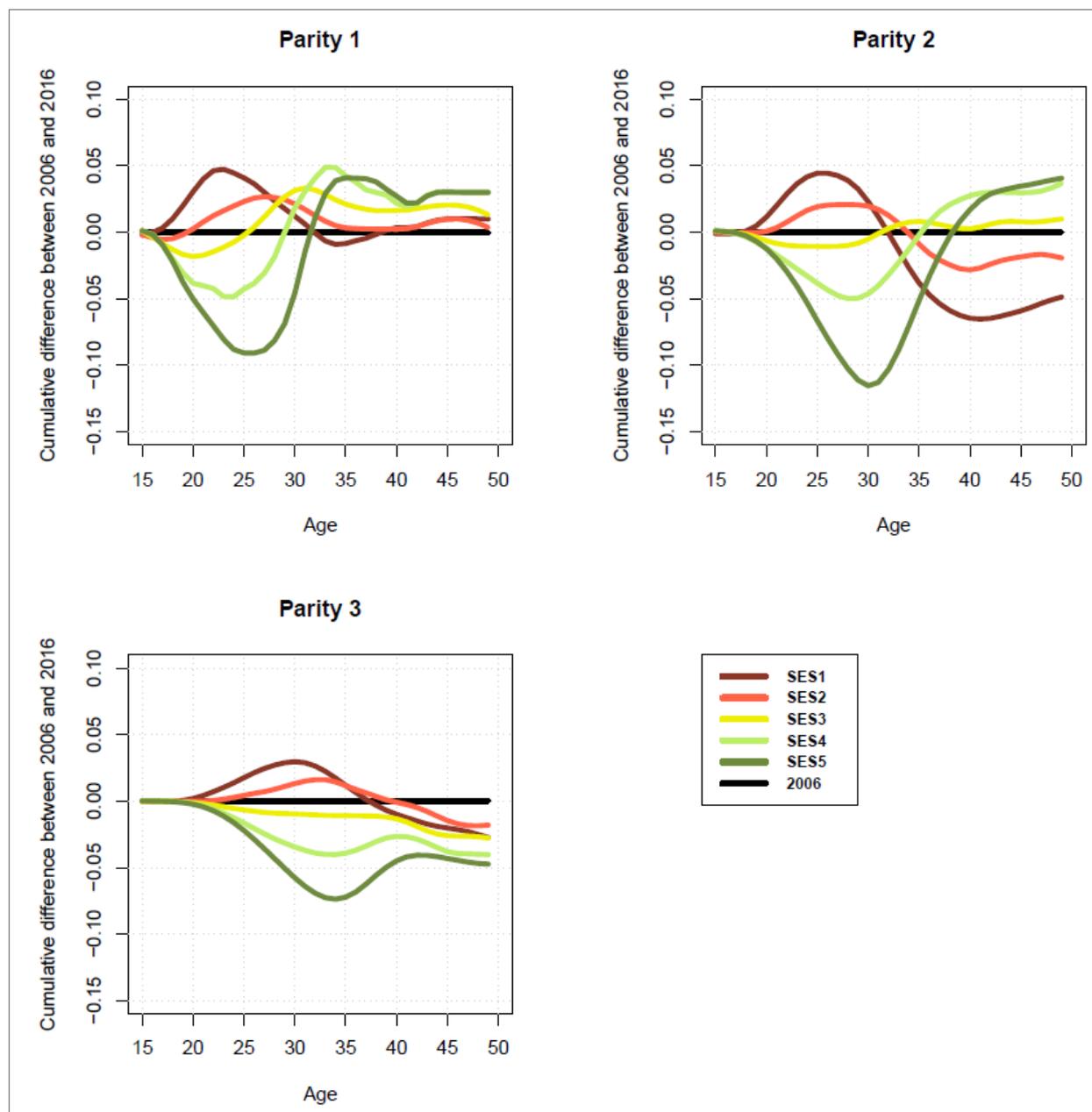


Figure 1: Cumulative difference in the proportion of children ever born between 2006 and 2016 by socio-economic status and parity

Source: Calculated by the author using data extracted from the 2006 and 2016 censuses using TableBuilder

women from poorer areas. At the SES5 level, the gap in the proportion of first-time mothers between 2006 and 2016 was at its greatest at the age of 26 (9.3 per cent). A recuperation trend can be observed after age 26, with the proportion of mothers slightly increasing until age 36, when 4.5 per cent more women were first-time mothers than in 2006. Similar patterns can be observed at parity 2 and 3, even though recuperation at parity 3 is rather modest and the proportion of third-time mothers never surpasses that of 2006. By contrast, at the SES1 level, the peak of first-time births was reached at the age of 22 at parity 1, 25 at parity 2 and 30 at parity 3, showing an anticipation rather than a postponement in childbearing compared to the benchmark year.

Socio-economic circumstances seem to have different impacts on the probability of entry into motherhood in different periods of life. The trend of childbearing postponement differs across socio-economic groups and the increase in the age at birth of Australian mothers is driven by women with high socio-economic status. Low socio-economic status was associated with entry into motherhood at younger ages, while high socio-economic status was associated with childbearing postponement and increased fertility at older ages. Interestingly, fertility was lower among the most disadvantaged groups, suggesting that socio-economic circumstances affect both timing and quantum of fertility. By the end of the reproductive years, there were 2.5 per cent more first-time mothers and 9.2 more second-time mothers in the SES5 than in the SES1, while only a slightly higher proportion of women in the SES1 gave birth to a third child by the age of 49 (1.8 per cent). The decrease in the total fertility rate from 1.87 in 2006 to 1.79 in 2016 (ABS 2017) seems to be driven by women with low socio-economic status, which despite having their first child relatively young, have fewer children overall than women in higher SES groups. Family policies tend to mainly favour working women and, hence, it has been argued that women in higher socio-economic statuses account for these observed fertility patterns (McDonald and Moyle 2019).

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