

The Effect of Cognitive Skills on Fertility Timing *

Agustín Díaz Casanueva[†]

February 1, 2026
Latest Version

Abstract

This paper studies how cognitive skills shape the timing of first birth and quantifies the mechanisms behind the steep ability gradient in teen childbearing. In the NLSY79, by ages 14–17, 28% of women in the bottom AFQT quartile have a first birth versus 3% in the top quartile, and mean age at first birth differs by 5.4 years. I estimate a dynamic life-cycle model in which schooling, marriage, labor supply, and contraceptive effort are jointly chosen. The model matches the difference in teen birth and shows that opportunity costs alone are insufficient: allowing ability to raise the effectiveness of contraceptive effort is key for fit. Counterfactuals imply large effects of improved fertility control: equalizing contraception frictions to those faced by high-ability teens reduces pregnancies before age 18 by 52.7% and increases college attendance by 19.8%; aligning both contraception and schooling opportunities raises college attendance by 45.2% and reduces early pregnancies by 60.0%. Welfare gains from improved fertility control are concentrated among low-ability women.

JEL codes: J13, J12, I21, J24, C61.

*I am grateful to my committee members Dirk Krueger, José Víctor Ríos-Rull, and Andrew Shephard for their invaluable guidance. I also thank Agustin Arias, Sofía Bauducco, Sara Casella, Alessandro Dovis, Mario Giarda, Mario Gonzalez, Jincheng Huang, Joachim Hubmer, Min Kim, Sean McCrary, Germán Sánchez, Raül Santaeulàlia-Llopis, Guillermo Ordoñez, and participants at the University of Pennsylvania Macro Seminars, the University of Pennsylvania Population Studies Center Colloquium, Universidad de los Andes, and the Central Bank of Chile, as well as the Midwest Macro Spring Meeting 2023, the European Society of Population Economics Annual Meeting 2023, SEHO 2024, the BSE Summer Forum 2024, the SED Winter Meeting 2024, SECHI 2024, and the Society for the Study of Economic Inequality 2025, for helpful comments and suggestions. The paper received the Étienne van de Walle Prize for best graduate student paper in demography. The views expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Central Bank of Chile. All errors are my own.

[†]Central Bank of Chile, adiaz@bcentral.cl, Address: Agustinas 1180, Santiago, Chile.

1 Introduction

The timing of first birth is a first-order life decision with sizable private and social consequences, and it varies systematically with cognitive ability. In NLSY79, the gradient is already stark in adolescence: by ages 14–17, 28% of women in the bottom AFQT quartile have a first birth versus 3% in the top quartile, and mean age at first birth differs by about 5.4 years across these groups. That pattern is consistent with the strong correlation of ability with schooling and earnings and the well-documented negative gradient between income, education, and fertility. Yet cognitive ability is an early, persistent trait that precedes most market choices,¹ whereas canonical life-cycle models attribute these patterns to differences in schooling, expected earnings growth, women’s work-experience accumulation, and investment in children.²

This paper develops and estimates a structural life-cycle model in which schooling, marriage, fertility, wages, and child investment are jointly determined to test whether these standard channels can account for the observed ability gradient in first-birth timing. The model nests the canonical opportunity-cost mechanisms but also allows ability to shift fertility control directly through the effectiveness of contraceptive effort, letting me separate indirect channels (operating through education and earnings) from direct channels (operating through conception risk). I interpret this “fertility-control” wedge as reduced form: it captures ability-correlated determinants of realized pregnancy risk that are not well proxied by formal schooling or earnings incentives—for example, differences in planning and follow-through, consistency and correctness of use, information processing, and partner negotiation—and that therefore operate beyond the standard opportunity-cost channel.

This question is also central to the broader literature on fertility decline and fertility postponement. A defining feature of recent fertility change in high-income settings is the shift of births away from the teenage years and early twenties toward later ages, with the age at first birth rising and early, often nonmarital childbearing becoming increasingly concen-

¹By “innate” I mean formed before major individual life choices. Innate measures of cognition taken in adolescence account for substantial wage differences, indicating that the relevant skills precede market choices ([Neal and Johnson, 1996](#)). Measured cognitive ability is also highly stable from late adolescence through adulthood ([Almlund et al., 2011](#); [Heckman et al., 2006](#)).

²For a comprehensive review of the negative income–education–fertility relationship and the mechanisms proposed to explain it, see [Jones et al. \(2010\)](#); [Jones and Tertilt \(2008\)](#).

trated among disadvantaged groups (Kearney and Levine, 2015, 2017; Santelli and Melnikas, 2010). Economic explanations for postponement highlight (i) changing incentives in labor and marriage markets—such as higher returns to human capital, steeper wage–experience profiles, and altered matching incentives—which raise the opportunity cost of early childbearing (Caucutt et al., 2002), and (ii) major improvements in reproductive technology and access to effective contraception that reduce unintended early conceptions and facilitate planned delay (Bailey, 2006; Goldin and Katz, 2002; Kearney and Levine, 2009). Distinguishing these forces is crucial for interpreting whether observed “postponement” reflects planned re-optimization (through opportunity costs and marriage markets) versus a relaxation of fertility-control frictions. My estimates imply that both margins matter, but that heterogeneity in effective fertility control is quantitatively central for explaining who becomes a teen mother.

Although cognitive ability correlates strongly with schooling and income, those factors do not fully account for the pronounced ability gradient in the timing of first births. Structural life-cycle models leave sizable residual dispersion in first-birth timing even after conditioning on schooling, wage–experience profiles, and marriage/partner formation³, and the remaining dispersion is systematically related to innate cognitive skills. Consistent with this finding, reduced-form evidence links innate ability to fertility behavior: using the NLSY79, Heckman et al. (2006) show that higher cognitive and noncognitive skills reduce teen motherhood and early marriage, and using ALSPAC, Fe et al. (2022) find that greater cognitive skills lower the probability of pregnancy before age 20 and reduce completed fertility. These relationships remain robust to rich sets of covariates, suggesting that ability captures margins not well proxied by education and income alone. A key goal of this paper is to discipline those margins within a forward-looking model that matches fertility, schooling, work, and marriage jointly.

Fertility timing matters for both mothers and children. Early childbearing reduces women’s educational attainment, flattens wage–experience profiles, lowers labor supply, and reshapes career and family-formation trajectories, and it is associated with worse mental-health outcomes (Adda et al., 2017; Attanasio et al., 2008; Biggs et al., 2017; Black et al., 2008; Eckstein et al., 2019; Foster et al., 2018; Keane and Wolpin, 2010; Levine and Painter, 2003).

³See, e.g., Bloemen and Kalwij (2001); Francesconi (2002); Heckman and Walker (1990); Keane and Wolpin (2010).

For children, being born to young or unprepared parents is associated with lower cognitive achievement and human capital, worse life-course outcomes, and lowered intergenerational mobility (Black et al., 2008; Kearney and Levine, 2017, 2011; Miller, 2009; Di Nola et al., 2025; Regalia et al., 2019; Seshadri and Zhou, 2022). At the aggregate level, early nonmarital births are more prevalent in higher-inequality areas, reinforcing inequality over time (Kearney and Levine, 2011; Di Nola et al., 2025; Seshadri and Zhou, 2022). These facts place the determinants of fertility timing at the center of human-capital accumulation and the intergenerational transmission of inequality. They also imply that identifying the mechanisms behind teen childbearing is essential for evaluating the likely effects of policies that expand contraception access or reduce the costs of postsecondary schooling.

Life-cycle models largely attribute differences in fertility timing to education and opportunity costs. Steeper expected wage-experience profiles raise the price of early births (Becker, 1965), and schooling improves fertility-risk management—via planfulness, contraceptive efficacy, and information—thereby reducing unintended early births (Rosenzweig and Schultz, 1989). In these frameworks, cognitive ability matters only indirectly through its effects on schooling and earnings. But innate cognitive skills may also shift margins that are difficult to proxy with education and wages—such as the precision of expectations, patience and self-control, risk management, and the consistency and effectiveness of contraceptive effort. In my model, this shows up as an ability shifter in effective fertility control: even conditional on education (and thus on the wage profiles that govern opportunity costs), ability captures residual heterogeneity in how intended control translates into realized conception outcomes. If these direct pathways are quantitatively important, attributing the ability-fertility gradient solely to schooling and opportunity costs risks mischaracterizing the relevant policy levers. My estimates support this concern: nested specifications that restrict ability to operate only through schooling and wages cannot reproduce the observed teen-birth gradient, even when contraception costs vary by education; matching the data requires that ability directly raises the effectiveness of contraceptive effort. The point is not that η isolates a biological “technology” of contraception, but that the data require an ability-related wedge beyond formal education and wage-based incentives.

This distinction is directly relevant for debates on whether fertility decline is primarily

driven by rising opportunity costs of childbearing (which would predict broad-based delays tied to wages and careers) or by improved fertility control that disproportionately reduces unintended early births and changes the socioeconomic composition of early childbearing. In the model, improved fertility control primarily reduces unintended early births and yields the largest welfare gains for disadvantaged (low-ability) women, while changes in schooling opportunities mainly operate through educational attainment and longer-run labor-market outcomes.

This paper makes three contributions. First, it documents a set of stylized facts on ability and fertility timing in the NLSY79 that jointly discipline schooling, work, marriage, and contraceptive-related behaviors. Second, it estimates a structural life-cycle model in which the canonical opportunity-cost channels (schooling and wage growth) are nested within a framework that also allows cognitive ability to affect the effectiveness of contraceptive effort. The estimated model matches the difference in teen birth hazards across ability groups and the attenuation of this gradient with age. Third, the counterfactuals show that the direct “fertility-control” channel is quantitatively central: equalizing contraception frictions to those faced by high-ability teens reduces pregnancies before age 18 by 52.7% (35.1% before age 22) and increases college attendance by 19.8%, while aligning both contraception and schooling opportunities raises college attendance by 45.2% and reduces pregnancies before age 18 by 60.0%. Welfare gains from improved fertility control are concentrated among low-ability women. Finally, a cohort decomposition of the 1990s decline in teen pregnancies indicates that improved schooling opportunities (“College Cost”) explain an important additional share; the “Contraception” block explains only a small fraction of the cohort gap. The remainder of the paper presents the empirical facts, the model and estimation, the mechanism and policy counterfactuals, and the cohort decomposition.

I proceed in two steps. First, using the NLSY79—which provides rich measures of cognitive skills, complete fertility histories, and detailed labor-market trajectories—I document salient differences in schooling, work, marriage, and contraceptive-related behaviors between women with early versus later first births. Second, I develop and estimate a dynamic life-cycle model with endogenous schooling, labor supply, on-the-job experience accumulation, marriage formation, child investment, and fertility under imperfect contraceptive control.

Cognitive ability enters as an innate and time-invariant state that (i) shapes schooling and wage growth (opportunity costs) and (ii) shifts the fertility technology by affecting the effort/efficiency of avoiding conception. The estimated model reproduces the joint distribution of first-birth timing, education, wages, and marriage by ability. Quantitatively, the model matches the difference in teen birth hazards between the bottom and top ability quartiles and the attenuation of this gradient with age. Counterfactuals that limit ability to operate only through wages/schooling—even while allowing contraception costs to vary by education—fail to reproduce the observed ability–fertility gradient. Matching the data requires a direct role for ability in the conception hazard beyond standard opportunity-cost and education-specific contraception channels. The paper’s main contribution is to quantify how much of the ability gradient in fertility timing is explained by canonical opportunity-cost mechanisms versus a direct ability channel operating through contraceptive control.

In the model equalizing contraception frictions to the environment faced by high-ability teens reduces pregnancies before age 18 by 52.7% (35.1% before age 22) and increases college attendance by 19.8%. Aligning both contraception and schooling opportunities to the high-ability environment raises college attendance by 45.2% and reduces pregnancies before age 18 by 60.0% (41.5% before age 22). These effects translate into sizable welfare gains that are concentrated among low-ability women.

Finally, I use the estimated model to quantify the two-way causal links between early childbearing and educational attainment. The counterfactuals imply that lowering contraception frictions can substantially reduce early fertility and generates a meaningful schooling response: equalizing contraception costs to the high-ability environment raises college attendance by 19.8% relative to baseline. At the same time, the model indicates that large gains in educational attainment require policies that directly shift schooling opportunities (e.g., college costs and returns), consistent with selection and pre-existing barriers playing an important role.⁴ I then use the model to decompose the U.S. decline in teen pregnancies during the 1990s. Improved schooling opportunities (“College Cost”) explain an important

⁴Levine and Painter (2003) find that a substantial portion of the negative relationship between teen childbearing and educational outcomes is due to preexisting disadvantages. However, the analysis concluded that about half of the very large disadvantages remain when using all methods. Hotz et al. (2005) likewise find that many adverse consequences are much smaller than cross-sectional estimates and largely short-lived—consistent with substantial selection into teen motherhood.

additional share, and the “Contraception” block accounts for only a small fraction of the cohort gap.

2 Literature

This paper contributes to the large literature that models fertility choices as the outcome of forward-looking household optimization. Foundational work places fertility within household decision-making and the quantity–quality trade-off (Becker, 1960; Becker and Lewis, 1973; Ben-Porath, 1976; Willis, 1973). Dynamic structural models then endogenize the timing and spacing of births in a life-cycle framework, including early estimable models and dynamic discrete-choice approaches (Heckman and Walker, 1990; Hotz and Miller, 1988; Wolpin, 1984). Building on this tradition, a subsequent wave of life-cycle models jointly determines family formation and labor-market choices: Van der Klaauw (1996) study women’s marital status and labor supply, Francesconi (2002) estimate married women’s joint fertility–labor decisions, Sheran (2007) develop a model with endogenous schooling, marriage, and fertility, and Keane and Wolpin (2010) integrate schooling, work, marriage, fertility, and welfare participation. Related work quantifies how marriage and labor markets shape family structure and birth timing (Caucutt et al., 2002; Regalia et al., 2019).

This paper contributes to this structural tradition by introducing cognitive ability as a innate, time-invariant state that shapes both opportunity costs (through schooling and wage growth) and fertility control (through an ability-dependent conception hazard). Empirically, I discipline these channels using targeted moments to identify an ability-dependent fertility technology: (i) age-specific first-birth hazards (or the distribution of age at first birth) by ability quartile and education; (ii) schooling attainment by age and ability; (iii) marriage transitions by age and education; (iv) wage–experience profiles by education and ability; and (v) contraceptive use by age and education. In the estimated model, allowing contraception costs to vary by education is not enough: matching the ability gradient in first-birth timing requires a direct ability shifter in the conception hazard, beyond standard opportunity-cost channels.

A second, closely related strand emphasizes imperfect fertility control and policy-driven changes in reproductive technologies. Choi (2017) incorporate fertility risk and abortion,

Ejrnæs and Jørgensen (2020) model abortion as insurance against income risk, and Amador (2017) analyze how abortion and contraception policy affects reproductive choices, schooling, and work. These papers formalize the idea that fertility outcomes reflect both preferences and the effectiveness/cost of avoiding conception. My framework builds on this insight but introduces cognitive ability as a determinant of the effectiveness (or effort cost) of contraceptive control, providing a micro-founded channel that helps explain why similarly educated women display different fertility timing profiles by innate skills. On the interaction between fertility and careers, Adda et al. (2017) quantify the career costs of children; my model complements this by showing that the incentives created by career costs are not sufficient to match the ability gradient without a direct ability channel in fertility control.

Third, the paper relates to empirical work on the income–education–fertility relationship and the role of unintended childbearing. Rosenzweig and Schultz (1989) show that schooling increases contraceptive knowledge and effectiveness in use, and Musick et al. (2009) document that the education gradient in births is primarily driven by unintended childbearing. Policies and technologies that lower the cost of fertility control also shape both timing and human-capital investment: Goldin and Katz (2002) and Bailey (2006) show that pill access delayed first births and facilitated educational and career investment; Kearney and Levine (2009) find that Medicaid family-planning expansions reduced births via increased contraception use; and a recent randomized intervention by Bailey et al. (2023) shows that eliminating out-of-pocket costs at Title X clinics substantially increases uptake of highly effective methods and implies a meaningful reduction in undesired pregnancies. Finally, quasi-experimental evidence on education’s causal effect on fertility finds small or context-dependent effects (Fort et al., 2016; McCrary and Royer, 2011). Relative to this reduced-form literature, I contribute a structural interpretation that explicitly accounts for innate cognitive skills when mapping education and contraception policies into fertility timing and educational attainment.

Fourth, the paper connects to a broader literature documenting that cognitive (and noncognitive) skills predict a wide range of life outcomes.⁵ In this tradition, Heckman et al. (2006) show that higher cognitive and noncognitive skills reduce risky behaviors, including teen pregnancy and early marriage, while Fe et al. (2022) links childhood cognition to

⁵See Heckman and Mosso (2014) for a survey; see also Almlund et al. (2011) and Cunha and Heckman (2007).

adult behaviors and outcomes, including lower fertility in young adulthood. My contribution is to embed these empirical patterns in a disciplined life-cycle model and to rationalize this patterns through a mechanism most consistent the data: an ability-dependent fertility-control technology, that operates in addition to education and wages.

Finally, the paper speaks to the economics of U.S. teen childbearing and its decline [Kearney and Levine \(2012\)](#) provide a synthesis of the evidence and mechanisms, and related work quantifies the roles of improved contraceptive access and changing incentives (e.g., [Kearney and Levine, 2009, 2015](#)). In my estimated model, counterfactual decompositions attribute most of the 1990s decline in teen births to lower contraception costs, with a smaller, complementary role for expanded college access through higher opportunity costs.

3 Empirical Evidence

This section documents the relationship between cognitive skills and fertility using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79), the same cohort used for model estimation. I first describe the survey, sample construction, and key measures—cognitive skills, fertility timing (teen pregnancy and age at first birth), schooling, marriage/partner formation, and work-experience accumulation. I then present descriptive facts linking cognitive skills to early pregnancy and first-birth timing, and how this is related to education, marriage, and on the job experience.

3.1 Data Description

The NLSY79 follows a nationally representative cohort of individuals born between 1957 and 1964 who were ages 14–22 at the initial interview in 1979. The survey provides detailed longitudinal information on schooling, labor market outcomes (employment, hours, and earnings), marital status and partnership histories, and fertility (pregnancies and births). Because the cohort is observed for more than four decades, women have largely completed their reproductive years and much of their working lives, making the NLSY79 well suited to study fertility timing.

Cognitive ability is proxied by the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), obtained from the NLSY79 created ability-score files derived from the ASVAB administered early in

the panel. I treat invalid/nonresponse codes as missing and exclude women with missing AFQT. In the analysis, ability enters as within-cohort AFQT quartiles. After applying these restrictions, the working sample contains 5,634 women. Additional details on sample construction, variable definitions, cleaning conventions, and the mapping to the model's four-year age bins are provided in Appendix A.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics

This subsection documents a set of empirical facts that motivate and discipline the model. The objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between cognitive skills and fertility timing. Since pregnancies interact with schooling choices, labor-market experience accumulation, and marriage formation, the analysis focuses on joint patterns linking cognitive skill, the timing of first births, education, wages, and marital outcomes. Throughout, age bins align with the model's discrete-time structure, and all statistics are computed on the analysis sample described in Appendix A.

3.2.1 Cognitive Skills and Age at First Childbirth

Panel (A) of Table 1 reports conditional first-birth hazards by age bin and cognitive-skill quartile. Each cell is computed among women who are childless at the beginning of the age bin, so differences across ability groups reflect the timing of entry into motherhood. For example, the entry 54% in the first-ability-quartile, ages 22–29 cell means that among bottom-quartile women who had not given birth before age 22, 54% had a first birth between ages 22 and 29. Panel (B) reports summary fertility outcomes by quartile: mean age at first birth (standard deviation in parentheses), the fraction married at first pregnancy, the share with at least one child by age 40, and completed fertility (total number of children).

Table 1. Fertility Timing and Outcomes by Ability Quartile

Age / Outcome	Ability Quartile			
	1	2	3	4
(A) First-birth probability by age (live birth)				

14–17	28%	16%	9%	3%
18–21	49%	38%	25%	16%
22–29	54%	53%	46%	45%
(B) Age at First-birth and Number of Children				
Age at First Child	20.14	21.66	23.45	25.56
	(4.66)	(5.07)	(5.49)	(5.38)
Married at First Pregnancy	0.38	0.56	0.72	0.84
	(0.49)	(0.50)	(0.45)	(0.36)
At least one child at 40	0.87	0.82	0.74	0.72
	(0.33)	(0.38)	(0.44)	(0.45)
Total Number of Children	2.37	1.89	1.58	1.55
	(1.57)	(1.34)	(1.27)	(1.28)

Notes: Panel (A) reports conditional first-birth probabilities by age bin and ability quartile; the denominator is women childless at the start of the bin. Panel (B) reports age-at-first-birth (mean, s.d. in parentheses), the share married at first pregnancy, the share with at least one child by age 40, and the total number of children.

The table shows a strong negative ability gradient in the likelihood of early first births that attenuates with age. At ages 14–17, 28% of women in the lowest quartile versus 3% in the highest quartile have a first birth (a 25 pp gap). The gap shrinks at ages 18–21 (49% vs. 16%, a 33 pp gap) and largely dissipates by ages 22–29 (54% vs. 45%, a 9 pp gap), indicating that higher-ability women predominantly postpone, rather than avoid, first births.

Consistent with postponement, mean age at first birth rises by about 5.4 years from quartile 1 to quartile 4 (20.14 to 25.56). High-ability women are also much more likely to be married at first pregnancy (0.84 vs. 0.38), are less likely to have had a birth by age 40 (0.72 vs. 0.87), and have lower completed fertility on average (1.55 vs. 2.37). These age-specific first-birth hazards by ability (and their attenuation with age) directly discipline the model’s ability-specific conception hazards.

3.2.2 Ability and Education

Table 2 shows a strong, monotone relationship between cognitive ability and educational attainment. Relative to women in the lowest AFQT quartile, those in the highest quartile

are far less likely to leave school as high school dropouts (1% vs. 29%, a 28 pp gap) and far more likely to complete college (52% vs. 4%). College attendance also rises sharply with ability—from 11% in quartile 1 to 67% in quartile 4—while the middle of the distribution is concentrated in high-school completion. These gradients imply that education is a key mediator linking cognitive skills to fertility timing, but they also leave room for additional ability-related mechanisms operating beyond schooling. In the model, the education distribution by ability disciplines the mapping from cognitive skills into schooling costs and returns, thereby anchoring the magnitude of education-specific opportunity costs that shape fertility incentives.

Table 2. Educational Attainment by Cognitive Ability Quartile

Education outcome	Cognitive Ability (AFQT) Quartile				Total
	Q1 (lowest)	Q2	Q3	Q4 (highest)	
HS dropout	29%	9%	2%	1%	10%
HS graduate	68%	80%	75%	47%	68%
College attendance	11%	25%	41%	67%	36%
College graduate	4%	11%	23%	52%	22%

Notes: Sample includes women from the NLSY79. Educational attainment is measured as highest degree completed. College attendance includes those who attended college between ages 18-22. Cognitive ability is measured using AFQT percentile scores and divided into quartiles. Entries report the share of women in each AFQT quartile whose completed education falls in the indicated category (column percentages).

3.2.3 Pregnancy Timing and Education

Table 3 summarizes how the timing of the first childbirth varies with completed schooling by reporting, for each education group, the share of women whose first birth occurs in each displayed age bin.⁶

⁶Entries are computed within education groups as shares of all women in the group. The table reports only the displayed age bins, so column totals need not sum to one; the omitted residual corresponds to first births after the last reported bin or no observed first birth by the end of the sample.

Table 3. Conditional Distribution of Age at First Pregnancy by Education Outcomes

Age at First Pregnancy	Education Outcome		
	HS Dropout	HS Graduate	College Graduate
14–17	42%	14%	3%
18–21	32%	31%	8%
22–29	14%	28%	37%

Notes: For each education outcome, entries report the share of women whose first childbirth occurred in the indicated age group.

Two patterns stand out. First, early motherhood is concentrated among less educated women: by ages 14–17, the first-birth share is 42% for high-school dropouts, compared with 14% for high-school graduates and 3% for college graduates. By age 21 (14–17 plus 18–21), roughly 74% of dropouts have had a first birth versus 11% of college graduates. Second, more educated women shift first births into later ages: in the 22–29 bin, the share is 37% for college graduates versus 28% for high-school graduates and 14% for dropouts, consistent with postponement along the education gradient.

These patterns are descriptive and reflect joint determination of schooling and fertility. Early childbearing can lower educational attainment through time and resource constraints, while schooling can delay fertility by raising opportunity costs and by improving the effectiveness of fertility control. Because both channels operate simultaneously and are correlated with cognitive skills, a dynamic framework is needed to disentangle selection from causal mechanisms.

3.2.4 Early Pregnancies and Marriage

Marriage is a central state in the model because it shapes household resources, risk-sharing, and the incentives to invest in schooling and labor-market experience. A long tradition emphasizes that childbearing outside marriage can reduce subsequent marriage prospects by changing economic circumstances and the costs/returns to partner search (Becker, 1991). Consistent with this view, Bronars and Grogger (1994) document that women with unplanned births are less likely to be married when their children are young.

In the NLSY79, I summarize two descriptive relationships by whether a first pregnancy occurs or not before the first marriage: (i) the probability of ever marrying over the observed

life cycle and (ii) spousal earnings conditional on marriage. Throughout, these comparisons are descriptive: they may reflect causal effects of early/OOW fertility, but also selection on background characteristics, marriage-market conditions, and preferences.

Table 4. Probability of Ever Marriage: Premarital Pregnancy vs. No Premarital Pregnancy

Group / Age at Pregnancy	Education Outcome		
	HS Dropout	HS Graduate	College Graduate
(A) First Pregnancy			
14–17	77%	87%	92%
18–21	71%	85%	87%
22–29	64%	75%	85%
(B) No Premarital Pregnancy			
All ages	84%	84%	83%

Notes: Panel A conditions on having a first pregnancy before the first marriage (i.e., the woman is not yet legally married at the time of her first pregnancy). Panel B conditions on having no pregnancy prior to first marriage (including women who never marry during the survey window). For Panel A, probabilities are shown by age at first pregnancy; for Panel B, the probability is pooled across ages. “Ever married” equals one if the respondent reports at least one legal marriage during the survey window.

Table 4 reports the probability of ever marrying separately for women whose first pregnancy occurs before first marriage (Panel A) and those with no premarital pregnancy (Panel B). Two patterns emerge. First, among premarital first pregnancies, ever-marriage rates increase steeply with education and are lower for earlier pregnancies. For example, among high-school graduates with a premarital first pregnancy, the probability of ever marrying declines from 87% (ages 14–17) to 75% (ages 22–29). Second, for women with no premarital pregnancy, ever-marriage rates are high and nearly flat across education groups (83–84%). Taken together, the table indicates that premarital fertility is associated with both a lower likelihood of transitioning into marriage among the least educated and meaningful heterogeneity in marriage outcomes by pregnancy timing.

Table 5. Average Husband Wage by Education and Women's Childbearing Status at Marriage

Age at First Pregnancy	HS Dropout		HS Graduate		College Graduate	
	Out-wed.	No out-wed.	Out-wed.	No out-wed.	Out-wed.	No out-wed.
14–17	35089	34563				
18–21	35806	39064	44602	46000		
22–29	33622	35806	43719	55143	66025	73628

Notes: The table reports husbands' average annual wage (2016 dollars) by the woman's completed education, age at first pregnancy, and whether the first pregnancy occurs out of wedlock. The sample is restricted to women who marry during the survey window and to spouse-years in which the husband works at least 2,000 hours and earns at least \$2.50 per hour (in 2016 dollars), as observed in the NLSY79 spouse/partner earnings module.

Table 5 reports average husbands' annual wages (in 2016 dollars) by the mother's completed education, age at first pregnancy, and OOW status, conditional on marriage. In most education groups and age bins, women with an OOW first pregnancy marry lower-earning husbands on average (the HS-dropout, ages 14–17 cell is a small exception with a negligible difference). The implied spousal-earnings differential is largest for high-school graduates (up to about \$11,000 per year), more modest for college graduates (up to about \$8,000), and smaller for high-school dropouts (around \$2,000).

These marriage and spouse-earnings gradients by pregnancy timing and education motivate modeling partnership formation and household income jointly with fertility timing. In the structural model, they help discipline (i) the gains from marriage (resources) and (ii) assortative matching in spouse earnings capacity, both of which affect the incentives to delay first birth and to invest in schooling.

3.2.5 Education and Labor Market Outcomes

Motivated by [Adda et al. \(2017\)](#), this subsection documents how fertility intersects with women's labor-market careers across the cognitive-ability distribution, highlighting the opportunity cost of time out of work. Table 6 summarizes wage levels, wage growth, and experience accumulation by ability and age; all wage statistics are computed among employed women, using the employment and wage definitions stated in Appendix A.

Panel A shows that earnings are increasing in ability at all ages, with the gradient steepening over the lifecycle. At age 20, the gap between quartiles 4 and 1 is about \$3,354 (\$23,042 vs. \$19,688). By age 40 the gap exceeds \$35,000 (\$65,713 vs. \$30,382).

Panel B shows that returns to experience are substantially steeper at higher ability levels. After 5 years of accumulated experience, average log wage growth is 24% in quartile 1 versus 57% in quartile 4 (a 33 pp gap). After 10 (15) years, the corresponding figures are 39% vs. 78% (47% vs. 90%). This implies that foregone experience early in the career is especially costly for high-ability women.

Panel C documents experience accumulation: higher-ability women accumulate substantially more work experience by a given age. At age 25, quartile one averages 1.85 years versus 3.99 years in quartile 4; by age 40, the gap widens to 7.94 vs. 14.44 years. The stronger attachment at higher ability amplifies the shadow cost of career interruptions.

Panel D reports average wage growth by ability, which increases monotonically across quartiles (2.69%, 3.12%, 3.53%, 4.33%). This pattern is consistent with faster human-capital accumulation at the top of the ability distribution.

Panel E summarizes labor-market dynamics around the first birth. Following maternity-related gaps, mean log wage growth is weak or negative for lower-ability women (e.g., -0.01 to -0.12 after a 5-year gap in quartiles 1–2) and modestly positive for higher-ability women (0.02 and 0.07 in quartiles 3–4). Moreover, time out of the labor force following the first birth is increasing in ability (0.31, 0.50, 0.56, 0.60 years). Thus, high-ability mothers both take longer breaks and face a larger opportunity cost of doing so because their returns to experience are steeper.

The wage and experience profiles by ability discipline the model's earnings opportunities (levels and growth) and the returns to experience; in turn, these objects pin down the opportunity-cost component of fertility timing. The next section asks whether these opportunity-cost forces are quantitatively sufficient to explain the ability gradient in first-birth timing, or whether an additional direct role for cognitive skills—through fertility control—is required.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics by Ability: Labor Market Outcomes

Ability Quartile	1	2	3	4
(A) Wage				

Continued on next page

Table 6 (continued)

Ability Quartile	1	2	3	4
Wage at age 20	19688	21554	22811	23042
	(8072)	(7596)	(8247)	(8775)
Wage at age 25	23954	27850	32250	38412
	(9891)	(12814)	(14502)	(16979)
Wage at age 30	27778	33689	38978	49126
	(16573)	(16776)	(17618)	(28089)
Wage at age 40	30382	40112	46392	65713
	(14564)	(22798)	(26790)	(52591)
(B) Return to Experience				
Log wage growth at potential experience 5 years	24%	35%	45%	57%
	(48%)	(50%)	(51%)	(58%)
Log wage growth at potential experience 10 years	39%	52%	65%	78%
	(53%)	(51%)	(55%)	(64%)
Log wage growth at potential experience 15 years	47%	61%	75%	90%
	(53%)	(54%)	(56%)	(68%)
(C) Experience by Age				
Average work experience at age 25	1.85	3.20	3.85	3.99
	(2.33)	(2.62)	(2.60)	(2.38)
Average work experience at age 30	3.60	6.04	7.20	7.51
	(3.77)	(3.92)	(3.79)	(3.39)
Average work experience at age 40	7.94	12.65	14.64	14.44
	(6.90)	(6.17)	(6.00)	(5.89)
(D) Wage Growth				
Avg. log growth rate	2.69%	3.12%	3.53%	4.33%
	(30.22%)	(30.26%)	(29.80%)	(32.26%)

Continued on next page

Table 6 (continued)

Ability Quartile	1	2	3	4
(E) Pregnancy Labor Gap and Wage Growth				
Log wage growth 1-year gap	0.02 (0.41)	-0.01 (0.45)	0.00 (0.48)	0.04 (0.53)
Log wage growth 3-year gap	-0.02 (0.45)	-0.03 (0.51)	0.05 (0.58)	0.05 (0.66)
Log wage growth 5-year gap	-0.01 (0.56)	-0.12 (0.48)	0.02 (0.53)	0.07 (0.56)
Time out of labor force after 1 child (years)	0.31 (0.36)	0.50 (0.40)	0.56 (0.42)	0.60 (0.44)

Notes: Means by ability quartile; standard deviations in parentheses. “Work” (and thus “experience”) is defined at the year level as averaging ≥ 20 hours per week for at least 26 weeks and earning at least the minimum hourly wage. Panel A reports average wages at ages 20, 25, 30, and 40 for women who satisfy the work definition at that age; Panel B reports log wage growth after $x \in \{5, 10, 15\}$ years of potential experience, defined as $\ln w_{t+x} - \ln w_t$ with t the first year the individual meets the work definition, where “potential experience” cumulates only years that meet the work definition; Panel C reports average cumulative years of work experience at ages 25, 30, and 40; Panel D reports the average annualized log wage growth rate among workers; Panel E reports (i) the change in log wages (“1/3/5-year gap”) between the last working year and 1, 3, or 5 years after a non-working gap, and (ii) “time out of the labor force after 1 child,” defined as total weeks not meeting the work definition during the five years following first birth divided by 52. Ability quartiles are defined as in the main text.

4 Model

I develop a dynamic life-cycle model to quantify how cognitive ability shapes the timing of first birth. Time is discrete in four-year periods. Women enter the model at age 14 with cognitive ability θ and initial assets $a_1 = 0$. They remain fertile through ages 14–37 and can work through age 61. From ages 62 to 78, households are retired and receive Social Security income that depends on educational attainment. The unit of decision-making is the

household. Before marriage, the household is a single-adult unit (the woman). After marriage, it is a two-adult unit (the couple) that pools income and chooses jointly. Throughout, the term “household” refers to the relevant decision unit in a given period (single woman vs. married couple), with marriage changing both the resource pool and policy-relevant rules (taxes/transfers and equivalence scales).

Figure 1 summarizes the timing. Figure 2 provides the within-period sequencing of decisions and uncertainty. In each period t , choices and uncertainty are ordered in three sub-stages. In particular, when partner meetings occur (young-adult fertile ages), the within-period order is meeting/marriage first, then the contraception choice conditional on current-period marital status, and finally the remaining choices after fertility is realized. In sub-stage 1, if the woman is fertile, single, and not enrolled in school, she meets a potential husband with probability μ and, conditional on meeting, decides whether to accept the offer. Marriage is an absorbing state (no divorce). Conditional on the realized marital status from sub-stage 1, the household then chooses contraceptive effort s_t . In sub-stage 2, fertility is realized: conception (and hence a birth) occurs stochastically, with a hazard that declines in s_t and depends on ability θ . In sub-stage 3, after fertility is realized, the household makes its remaining-period decisions. If the woman is enrolled in high school or college, she chooses whether to continue or drop out; the household then chooses female labor supply $l_t \in \{0, 1\}$, consumption c_t , and next-period assets a_{t+1} . Working accumulates experience x_t , which increases future wages; thus, time out of work around childbirth generates dynamic career costs. In retirement, labor supply is fixed at zero and households finance consumption and saving out of Social Security benefits and asset income.

Each woman can have at most one child. If a child is born, the child lives with the mother for one period. During this period, parents choose monetary investment i_t that raises the child’s human capital. Investment is disciplined by parental altruism: the household’s objective values the child’s future well-being (increasing in the child’s human capital when the child leaves home), so i_t trades off current resources against improved child outcomes. Postponing fertility increases expected resources and returns to experience available for investment, but delay is costly because contraception is costly and imperfect, leaving a strictly positive probability of unintended birth.

Contraception costs are modeled in reduced form to capture monetary and non-monetary components (e.g., physical, psychological, and social costs) rather than mapping to a particular method. To maintain tractability, the model abstracts from income uncertainty and divorce. Ability θ is a persistent state variable that (i) increases the returns to schooling and experience—thereby steepening the opportunity cost of early motherhood—and (ii) improves fertility control, reducing unintended conceptions for a given effort level. The model is disciplined using moments on birth timing, schooling, wages, contraception use, and marriage, and it is used to quantify how changes in contraception costs and education/wage opportunities shift fertility timing differentially by ability.

Household resources are mapped from gross (pre-tax, pre-transfer) income to disposable (after-tax, after-transfer) income using a parsimonious approximation to the U.S. tax-and-transfer system, following [Daruich and Fernández \(2024\)](#). Let \tilde{y}_t^0 denote gross *annual* household income, defined as the sum of all market and program incomes accruing to the household before taxes and transfers (female earnings if she works, spousal earnings if married, schooling allowances while enrolled, or Social Security in retirement). Disposable annual income is

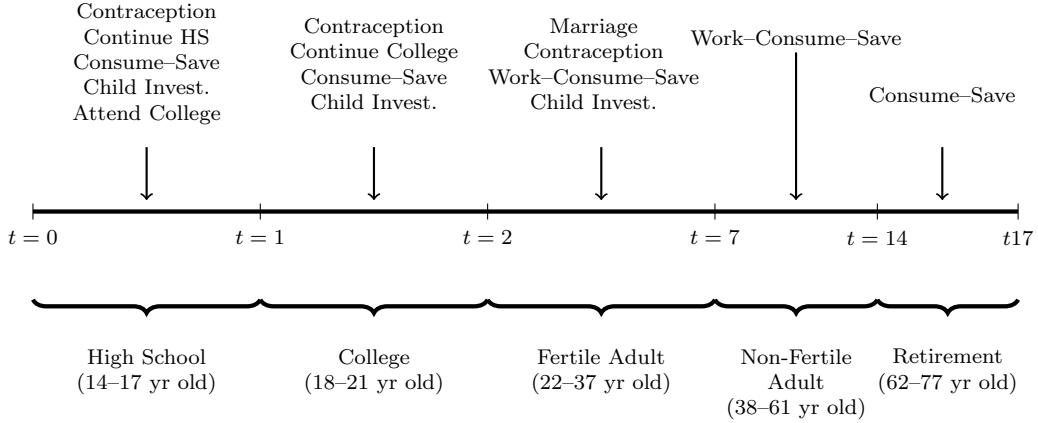
$$\tilde{y}_t = \lambda (\tilde{y}_t^0)^{1-\tau} + T(m_t),$$

where τ governs progressivity, λ scales the average tax level, and $T(m_t)$ is a marital-status-specific lump-sum component (single vs. couple). Progressivity ($\tau > 0$) makes disposable income a concave function of gross income, compressing dispersion in resources and thereby providing reduced-form consumption-smoothing across states induced by education, labor supply, and marriage. The lump-sum term captures the transfer component of the fiscal system and differences in filing/eligibility by marital status; in particular, $T(m_t)$ implies a strictly positive disposable income even when $\tilde{y}_t^0 = 0$, so extremely poor households can finance a minimum level of consumption.

4.1 Environment and Timing

Time is discrete in four-year periods. I index periods by $t \in \{1, \dots, T\}$ and decisions made for $t = 1, \dots, T - 1$. Period $T = 17$ is the terminal (age 78), in which agents consume all

Figure 1. Women Attending College Life Cycle



Notes: The figure describes women's life cycle. The life cycle is divided into four stages: (i) teen, (ii) college age, (iii) young adult, and (iv) rest of life. Above the timeline, we show women's decisions in each period.

remaining resources and die. Fertility is feasible through ages 14–37, i.e. through $t \leq T_F = 6$. A key simplification is that each woman can have at most one child, and the child lives with the mother for *one* period (four years). Hence, child investment is a one-time choice made in the birth period only.

Notation and state space. Let V_t^ℓ denote the value function in period t and within-period sub-stage $\ell \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ (for non-fertile and retirement periods, there is a single sub-stage and I suppress ℓ when convenient). The household state at the beginning of period t is

$$\Omega_{it} = \{a_t, \theta_i, e_t, x_t, m_t, k_t, m_k\},$$

where a_t are assets; $\theta_i \in \{1, 2, 3, 4\}$ is cognitive-ability quartile; $e_t \in \{HSD, HS, C\}$ is education status/attainment; x_t is accumulated labor-market experience (in four-year units); $m_t \in \{0, 1\}$ is current marital status; $k_t \in \{0, 1, \dots, T_F\}$ records whether a first birth has occurred; and $m_k \in \{0, 1\}$ records marital status at childbirth (relevant only if $k_t > 0$). Because the child lives for one period only, the child is present in period t if and only if a first birth occurs in period t ; after that period, the child leaves the household.

Choice variables are next-period assets $a_{t+1} \in [0, \bar{a}]$, consumption $c_t \in [0, \infty)$, female labor

supply $l_t \in \{0, 1\}$,⁷ child investment $i_t \in [0, \infty)$ (only in the birth period), and contraceptive effort $s_t \in [0, \infty)$ (only in fertile periods and only if $k_t = 0$).

Discrete choices and solution method. Several stages feature discrete choices (e.g. $l_t \in \{0, 1\}$, schooling continuation, college entry). I model these discrete choices with i.i.d. Type-I extreme value taste shocks. The model is solved using a hybrid approach: in post-fertile working ages, where the problem takes the standard discrete–continuous form with a smooth savings policy, I use the discrete-choice endogenous grid method (DC-EGM) of Iskhakov et al. (2017); in fertile ages and schooling periods, where additional discrete margins and occasionally binding constraints make the endogenous-grid construction less convenient, I solve the problem by value-function iteration with grid search over savings. Appendix E provides the full computational details and the corresponding algorithm. Concretely, for a discrete choice $d \in \mathcal{D}$ with shocks $\varepsilon_t(d)$ (scale σ_d), I define a choice-specific value net of shocks, $v_t(\Omega, d)$, solve the continuous controls conditional on d using DC-EGM in the DC-EGM stages, and then construct the ex-ante value via the log-sum:

$$V_t(\Omega) = \mathbb{E}_\varepsilon \left[\max_{d \in \mathcal{D}} \{v_t(\Omega, d) + \sigma_d \varepsilon_t(d)\} \right] = \gamma \sigma_d + \sigma_d \log \sum_{d \in \mathcal{D}} \exp \left(\frac{v_t(\Omega, d)}{\sigma_d} \right),$$

where γ is Euler’s constant (choice-irrelevant).

4.2 Retired Households (Ages 62–77; t=13–16)

From age 62 onward, the household is retired: female labor supply is fixed at zero and there are no schooling, fertility, marriage, or child-investment decisions. The only intertemporal choice is savings, which pins down consumption through the budget constraint. Households receive Social Security benefits that depend on education and marital status, capturing reduced-form differences in lifetime earnings. Let $ss_t(e_t)$ denote the woman’s own benefit and $ss_t^h(e_t, m_k)$ denote the additional spousal benefit received when married.

⁷I follow Attanasio et al. (2008) in modeling female labor supply.

For $t = 13, \dots, 16$, the retirement problem is

$$V_t(\Omega_{it}) = \max_{a_{t+1} \geq 0, c_t \geq 0} \left\{ u(c_t) + \beta V_{t+1}(\Omega_{i,t+1}) \right\},$$

$$\phi_c(m_t) c_t + a_{t+1} = (1+r)a_t + y_t,$$

where gross annual non-asset income is $\tilde{y}_t^0 = ss_t(e_t) + 1_{\{m_t=1\}} ss_t^h(e_t, m_k)$ and disposable model-period resources are $y_t = \lambda(\tilde{y}_t^0)^{1-\tau} + T(m_t)$ ⁸. $\phi_c(m_t)$ maps expenditures into effective consumption as a function of household composition. Since the child (if any) lives only one period and fertility ends at $t = 6$, no child is present during retirement, so ϕ_c depends only on marital status. At the terminal period $t = T = 17$, agents consume all remaining resources and die.

4.3 Working, Non-Fertile Households (Ages 38–61; t=7–12)

After age 37 ($t \geq 7$), fertility risk is absent, and no child is present in the household under the one-period-child assumption. The household continues to face the labor–savings trade-off. The only discrete decision is whether the woman works, $l_t \in \{0, 1\}$. Conditional on l_t , the household chooses consumption and next-period assets. I solve this discrete–continuous problem via DC-EGM.

At the beginning of period t , the household draws taste shocks $\{\varepsilon_t(0), \varepsilon_t(1)\}$ for labor supply. Let $v_t(\Omega_{it}, l)$ denote the choice-specific value net of shocks. The ex-ante value is

$$V_t(\Omega_{it}) = \mathbb{E}_\varepsilon \left[\max_{l \in \{0,1\}} \{v_t(\Omega_{it}, l) + \sigma_l \varepsilon_t(l)\} \right] = \gamma \sigma_l + \sigma_l \log \sum_{l \in \{0,1\}} \exp \left(\frac{v_t(\Omega_{it}, l)}{\sigma_l} \right).$$

⁸A model period is four years. All Bellman-equation objects are in model-period units: annual flows (earnings, transfers, Social Security) are first evaluated in annual units, and then aggregated as $y_t = 4y_t^a$. In particular, I compute annual disposable income $y_t^a = \lambda(\tilde{y}_t^0)^{1-\tau} + T(m_t)$ using the annual tax–transfer schedule, and then set $y_t = 4y_t^a$. Similarly, $\beta = \beta_a^4$ and $r = (1+r_a)^4 - 1$.

Conditional on l , the choice-specific problem is

$$v_t(\Omega_{it}, l) = \max_{a_{t+1} \geq 0, c_t \geq 0} \{u(c_t) + \psi_l 1_{\{l=1\}} + \beta \mathbb{E}[V_{t+1}(\Omega_{i,t+1}) \mid \Omega_{it}, l, a_{t+1}] \}$$

s.t. $\phi_c(m_t) c_t + a_{t+1} = (1+r)a_t + y_t(\Omega_{it}, l),$

$$x_{t+1} = x_t + 1_{\{l=1\}},$$

where gross annual household income is

$$\tilde{y}_t^0(\Omega_{it}, l) = 1_{\{l=1\}} w(\Omega_{it}) + 1_{\{m_t=1\}} w^h(\Omega_{it}),$$

and disposable model-period resources are

$$y_t(\Omega_{it}, l) = \lambda (\tilde{y}_t^0(\Omega_{it}, l))^{1-\tau} + T(m_t)$$

Here $w(\Omega_{it})$ denotes the woman's wage, which depends on her state (including education e_t and experience x_t). Spousal labor income, $w^h(\Omega_{it})$, is received only when married.⁹ When $m_t = 0$, gross income includes only the woman's earnings (if she works) and the household receives the single transfer T_S ; when $m_t = 1$, the mapping applies to *joint* gross income (female plus spousal earnings) and the household receives the couple transfer T_C . Details on the income processes are provided in Section 5. $\phi_c(m_t)$ accounts for the expenditure needs depending on the household size.

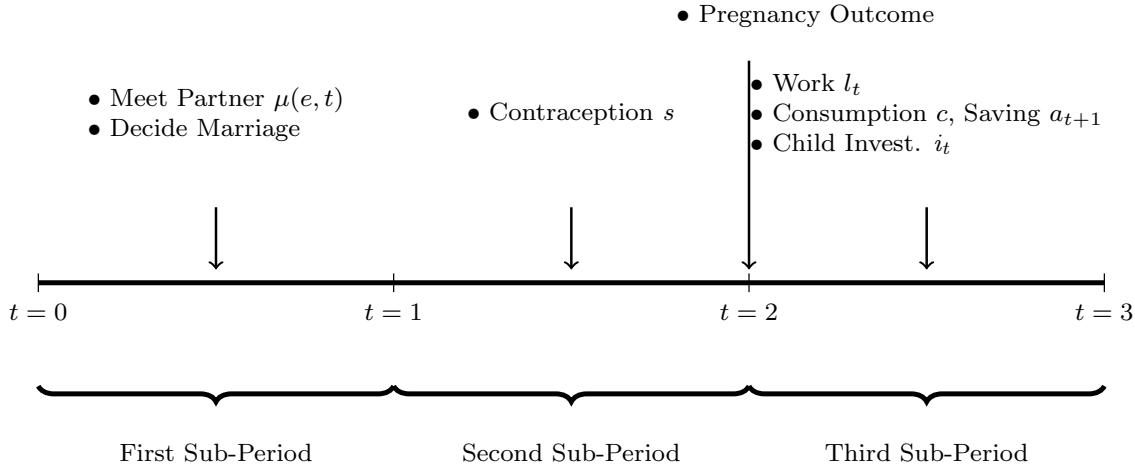
4.4 Young Adult (Ages 22–37; t=3–6)

In young adulthood, schooling is complete, so e_t is fixed and marriage-market and fertility risk are active (until $t = T_F = 6$). Within each period $t \leq T_F$, decisions and uncertainty are ordered in three sub-stages (Figure 2). In sub-stage 1, single households may meet a potential husband and decide whether to marry. In sub-stage 2, childless women choose

⁹I model the husband's earnings—capturing both wage and labor supply—as a reduced-form function of the woman's observed characteristics, as in Adda et al. (2017); Van der Klaauw (1996); Sheran (2007).

contraceptive effort s_t , which determines the probability of a first birth. In sub-stage 3, after fertility is realized, the household chooses labor supply, consumption, and saving; if a birth occurs, parents also choose one-time child investment.

Figure 2. Childless Women Between Ages 22–37: Within-Period Timing



Notes: Each period is divided into three sub-periods: (i) marriage (if single), (ii) contraception (if childless and fertile), and (iii) labor supply, consumption–saving, and (if a birth occurs) child investment.

4.4.1 Sub-stage 3: Labor Supply, Consumption–Saving, and Child Investment

Let $j \in \{k, nk, ok\}$ index the fertility/child-status outcome in period t . Specifically, $j = k$ if a first birth occurs in period t (so a child is present in the household in this period), $j = nk$ if no birth occurs and the woman remains childless, and $j = ok$ if the woman had a child in a previous period and the child has already left the household. Conditional on (Ω_{it}, j) , the household chooses female labor supply, consumption, and savings; in addition, it chooses child investment only when $j = k$. I solve the discrete work decision $l_t \in \{0, 1\}$ using DC-EGM as described above¹⁰. The choice-specific value function net of taste shocks is

¹⁰In post-fertile working ages, the labor-supply choice and the continuous savings decision form a standard discrete–continuous problem, which I solve using DC-EGM. In fertile ages and schooling periods, I instead solve the discrete choice set and savings decision using VFI with grid search (Appendix E).

$$\begin{aligned} c_t + a_{t+1} &= (1+r)a_t + y_t(\Omega_{it}, l) - 1_{\{j=k\}} i_t, \\ x_{t+1} &= x_t + 1_{\{l=1\}}, \end{aligned}$$

where $y_t(\cdot)$ is defined as in the non-fertile section. Investment enters only if a birth occurs ($j = k$). Because the child lives for one period only, this is the only period in which parents choose i_t . The equivalence scale $\phi_c(\cdot)$ is therefore larger in the birth period when $j = k$ (see Section 5.1 for the functional form and parametrization).

4.4.2 Sub-stage 2: Contraception and First-Birth Risk

Only childless women ($k_t = 0$) choose contraceptive effort $s_t \geq 0$. Let $p_t(\theta_i, e_t, s_t)$ denote the probability of a first birth in period t , decreasing in s_t and depending on age (t), ability, and education. Then

$$V_t^2(\Omega_{it}) = \max_{s_t \geq 0} \left\{ -\phi_s s_t + p_t(\theta_i, e_t, s_t) V_t^{3,k}(\Omega_{it}) + (1 - p_t(\theta_i, e_t, s_t)) V_t^{3,nk}(\Omega_{it}) \right\}.$$

If $k_t > 0$ (a first birth already occurred), the household skips contraception:

$$V_t^2(\Omega_{it}) = V_t^{3,ok}(\Omega_{it}).$$

4.4.3 Sub-stage 1: Marriage

In sub-stage 1, if single ($m_t = 0$), the household meets a potential husband with probability $\mu(e)$. Conditional on meeting, it compares continuation values under marriage and singlehood. Let $\Omega_{it}(m)$ denote the state with m_t set to $m \in \{0, 1\}$. Then

$$V_t^1(\Omega_{it}) = \begin{cases} \mu(e) \max\{V_t^2(\Omega_{it}(1)), V_t^2(\Omega_{it}(0))\} + (1 - \mu(e)) V_t^2(\Omega_{it}(0)), & \text{if } m_t = 0, \\ V_t^2(\Omega_{it}), & \text{if } m_t = 1, \end{cases}$$

and marriage is absorbing (no divorce).

Never having a child. In the last fertile period $t = T_F = 6$, I include a reduced-form utility shifter for remaining childless to match the observed mass of women who never have children:

$$V_6^{3,nk}(\Omega_{i6}) + 1_{\{k_6=0\}} \mu_0(e_6).$$

4.5 College Age (Ages 18–21; $t = 2$)

Period $t = 2$ corresponds to ages 18–21 and is the point at which women can be in one of two *education tracks*. Some women enter college (the *college track*), while others do not (the *non-college track*). The tracks differ in within-period decisions and in the relevant budget constraint:

- **Non-college track.** Women who do not enroll in college at $t = 2$ are already in the post-school environment: they participate in the labor market, face marriage-market risk if single, and (since they are still fertile and childless) choose contraception. Thus, at $t = 2$ they follow the same within-period timing as in young adulthood.
- **College track.** Women who enroll in college at $t = 2$ do *not* work during this period. Instead, they receive a student allowance w_C and pay tuition T . After observing the fertility outcome, they decide whether to remain in college (continue and graduate) or to drop out and enter the labor market in this period as a high school graduate. Having a child while enrolled in college raises the (psychic) cost of continuing by $\kappa_{k,C}$.

The remainder of this subsection describes the college track (women enrolled in college at the start of $t = 2$). For these women, within-period timing is: (i) contraception, (ii) after fertility is realized, continue college vs. drop out, and (iii) consumption–saving and (if a birth occurs) one-time child investment.

4.5.1 Sub-stage 3: Consumption–Saving and (if a birth occurs) Child Investment

In this college-track sub-stage, the education decision d determines whether labor supply is a control in the current period: students ($d = G$) do not work ($l_2 = 0$), whereas dropouts ($d = CD$) choose labor supply $l_2 \in \{0, 1\}$ as high-school graduates. Conditional on the

education decision $d \in \{G, CD\}$ from sub-stage 2 (continue/graduate vs. drop out), the within-period problem differs because college students do not work in this period ($l_2 = 0$), while college dropouts choose labor supply as high-school graduates. Specifically, for $d = G$ the household solves

$$v_2^{3,j}(\Omega_{i2}; G) = \max_{a_3 \geq 0, c_2 \geq 0, i_2 \geq 0} \left\{ u(c_2) + 1_{\{j=k\}} u_k(i_2) - 1_{\{j=k\}\kappa_{k,C}} + \beta V_3^1(\Omega_{i3}) \right\}$$

s.t. $\phi_c(m_2) c_2 + a_3 = (1+r)a_2 + (w_C - TC) - 1_{\{j=k\}} i_2,$

whereas for $d = CD$ (drop out and work as HS graduate) the household chooses labor supply $l_2 \in \{0, 1\}$ and solves

$$v_2^{3,j}(\Omega_{i2}; CD) = \max_{l_2 \in \{0,1\}, a_3 \geq 0, c_2 \geq 0, i_2 \geq 0} \left\{ u(c_2) + \psi_l^j 1_{\{l_2=1\}} + 1_{\{j=k\}} u_k(i_2) + \beta V_3^1(\Omega_{i3}) \right\}$$

s.t. $\phi_c(m_2) c_2 + a_3 = (1+r)a_2 + y_2(\Omega_{i2}, l_2) - 1_{\{j=k\}} i_2,$

$x_3 = x_2 + 1_{\{l_2=1\}},$

In the dropout branch, disposable non-asset income is

$$y_2(\Omega_{i2}, l_2) = \lambda(w(\Omega_{i2}, l_2))^{1-\tau} + T(m_2),$$

while in the college-student branch disposable resources are given directly by the student allowance net of direct schooling costs, $w_C - TC$.¹¹

4.5.2 Sub-stage 2: Continue College vs. Drop Out

After observing j , college women choose $d \in \{G, CD\}$ with Type-I extreme value shocks (scale σ_{CD}):

$$V_2^{2,j}(\Omega_{i2}) = \max_{d \in \{G, CD\}} \{v_2^{3,j}(\Omega_{i2}; d) + \sigma_{CD} \varepsilon_2(d)\},$$

¹¹In school periods, the student allowance w_C (net of direct schooling costs TC) is treated as a non-taxable transfer-like payment in the model and therefore enters the budget constraint directly. The tax/transfer mapping is applied to labor-market income when working.

4.5.3 Sub-stage 1: Contraception

At the start of $t = 2$, childless women in the college track choose s_2 :

$$V_2^1(\Omega_{i2}) = \max_{s_2 \geq 0} \left\{ -\phi_s s_2 + p_2(\theta_i, e_2, s_2) V_2^{2,k}(\Omega_{i2}) + (1 - p_2(\theta_i, e_2, s_2)) V_2^{2,nk}(\Omega_{i2}) \right\}.$$

4.6 Teen (Ages 14–17; $t = 1$)

At $t = 1$, all women are in high school. The within-period timing is: (i) contraception, (ii) after observing fertility, continue high school vs. drop out, and (iii) consumption-saving (and child investment if a birth occurs). Teens who remain in school receive an allowance w_{HS} in sub-stage 3; dropouts enter the labor market immediately and begin accumulating experience. As in the college track, only individuals who exit school work in the period, while those who remain enrolled receive a schooling allowance.

4.6.1 Sub-stage 3: Consumption–Saving, Child Investment, and College Entry at $t = 2$

Let $j \in \{k, nk\}$ denote the fertility outcome in $t = 1$. Conditional on the schooling decision $d \in \{HSG, HSD\}$ (stay and complete HS vs. drop out) from sub-stage 2, teens solve

$$\begin{aligned} v_1^{3,j}(\Omega_{i1}; d) = & \max_{a_2 \geq 0, c_1 \geq 0, i_1 \geq 0} \left\{ u(c_1) + \mathbf{1}_{\{j=k\}} u_k(i_1) - \mathbf{1}_{\{d=HSG\}} \mathbf{1}_{\{j=k\}} \kappa_{HS} \right. \\ & \left. + \beta \left[\mathbf{1}_{\{d=HSG\}} V_2^{CD,j}(\Omega_{i2}) + \mathbf{1}_{\{d=HSD\}} V_2^1(\Omega_{i2}) \right] \right\}. \end{aligned}$$

where $y_1(\Omega_{i1}; d) = w_{HS}$ if $d = HSG$ and $y_1(\Omega_{i1}; d) = w(\Omega_{i1})$ if $d = HSD$. High-school dropouts ($d = HSD$) do not face a college-entry node at $t = 2$ and instead transition directly to the non-college track with beginning-of-period value $V_2^1(\Omega_{i2})$.

Because the model is designed to explain the timing of the first birth, I treat “child present” ($j = k$) as a short-lived state that captures the intensive time/psychic burden of a newborn in the birth period. Cognitive ability is a key predictor of college enrollment and completion even conditional on financial incentives, so the model allows ability to shift non-pecuniary education costs through the schooling wedges. In particular, κ_{HS} and $\kappa_C(\theta, j)$

are interpreted as reduced-form “study costs” (psychic/time/effort costs) that summarize barriers to progressing in school and persisting in college—such as academic preparedness, the effort required to meet performance standards, and other non-monetary frictions that vary systematically with cognitive skills.¹²

Importantly, the one-period child assumption does not imply that a teen birth is irrelevant for college: a birth at $t = 1$ affects the college-entry decision at $t = 2$ through the college-cost function $\kappa_C(\theta, j)$. The dependence on j allows a prior birth to raise the effective cost of entering college, capturing persistent non-pecuniary barriers to enrollment for teen mothers even though the newborn is not physically present in the household at $t = 2$. In addition, teen births affect college indirectly through disrupted high-school completion (via κ_{HS}), lower assets at college-entry age, and changes in subsequent marriage prospects and household resources.

At the end of $t = 1$, teens who complete high school ($d = HSG$) draw a Type-I extreme value shock and choose whether to enroll in college at $t = 2$, $d_C \in \{C, NC\}$ (scale σ_C). Let $v_2^1(\cdot)$ denote the beginning-of-period value at $t = 2$ given education choice; then

$$V_2^{CD,j}(\Omega_{i2}) = \max_{d_C \in \{C, NC\}} \{v_2^1(\Omega_{i2}; d_C) - \kappa_C(\theta, j) + \sigma_C \varepsilon_2(d_C)\},$$

Only teens who complete high school ($d = HSG$, so $e_2 = HSG$) face the college-entry decision at $t = 2$ and draw the Type-I extreme value shocks for $d_C \in \{C, NC\}$. High-school dropouts ($d = HSD$, $e_2 = HSD$) do not enter the college node and transition directly to the non-college track with continuation value $V_2^1(\Omega_{i2})$.

4.6.2 Sub-stage 2: Continue High School vs. Drop Out

After observing j , teens choose $d \in \{HSG, HSD\}$ with Type-I extreme value shocks (scale σ_{HS}):

$$V_1^{2,j}(\Omega_{i1}) = \max_{d \in \{HSG, HSD\}} \{v_1^{3,j}(\Omega_{i1}; d) + \sigma_{HS} \varepsilon_1(d)\}$$

¹²Structural models of education commonly introduce heterogeneous psychic costs of schooling that depend on cognitive skills to rationalize enrollment and completion patterns that monetary returns alone cannot explain; see, e.g., Abbott et al. (2019), who estimate ability-related psychic costs for high school and college attendance in an equilibrium life-cycle framework.

4.6.3 Sub-stage 1: Contraception

At the start of $t = 1$, teens choose s_1 :

$$V_1^1(\Omega_{i1}) = \max_{s_1 \geq 0} \left\{ -\phi_s s_1 + p_1(\theta_i, e_1, s_1) V_1^{2,k}(\Omega_{i1}) + (1 - p_1(\theta_i, e_1, s_1)) V_1^{2,nk}(\Omega_{i1}) \right\}.$$

5 Functional Forms, Targets, and Identification

5.1 Functional Forms and Parametrization

I choose functional forms that are flexible enough to match the joint distribution of fertility timing, schooling, marriage, and labor supply, while keeping a transparent mapping between parameters and mechanisms (fertility control, career incentives, schooling costs, and parental altruism). The model features an externally estimated earnings process and 55 structural parameters. A subset of parameters is fixed to standard values (preferences and the risk-free return), while the remaining parameters are estimated using the Simulated Method of Moments (SMM) with 111 empirical targets. The model is therefore overidentified, which provides discipline and allows specification checks through goodness-of-fit across moment blocks.

Preferences and effective consumption. Utility is CRRA over effective consumption:

$$u(c_t) = \frac{c_t^{1-\rho}}{1-\rho},$$

where ρ is the coefficient of relative risk aversion. Household composition affects the expenditure needed to attain a given c_t . I implement this through an equivalence scale in the budget constraint:

$$\phi_c(m_t, k_t) c_t + a_{t+1} = \text{resources}_t,$$

so c_t is what enters utility and $\phi_c(m_t, k_t)c_t$ is the required expenditure. A larger ϕ_c therefore captures higher needs in larger households. I parameterize

$$\phi_c(m_t, k_t) = 1 + \omega_m 1_{\{m_t=1\}} + \omega_{ch} 1_{\{\text{child present in } t\}},$$

where $\omega_m \geq 0$ captures additional needs in a two-adult household and $\omega_{ch} \geq 0$ captures additional needs when a child is present (recall the child lives in the household for one period only).

Child quality and parental altruism. If a first birth occurs, parents choose a one-time monetary investment i_t that increases child “quality.” Parental altruism enters as utility from child outcomes:

$$u^k(i_t) = \omega_0 + \omega_1 i_t^{\omega_2},$$

where ω_0 is baseline utility from having a child, ω_1 scales the marginal value of investment, and $\omega_2 \in (0, 1)$ imposes diminishing returns and ensures an interior investment choice.

5.1.1 Fertility and contraception

Fertility is stochastic and can be controlled imperfectly through contraceptive effort $s \geq 0$. For a woman who has not yet had a first birth, the probability of conceiving in model period t depends on age (through the age-group index $g(t)$), education e , and effort s , while cognitive ability θ affects how effectively effort translates into pregnancy prevention. I model conception risk using a logit-style mapping from effort to the probability of no conception, scaled and bounded to allow for imperfect control and baseline fecundity differences.¹³

Let $\lambda_h(g, e)$ denote baseline conception risk (absent effort) for age group $g = g(t)$ and education e , and let $g(t) \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ index broad age groups (e.g., $g = 1$ for ages 14–22, $g = 2$

¹³Related life-cycle models with imperfect fertility control and contraceptive effort use logit-type mappings for conception risk; see, e.g., Choi (2017); Ejrnæs and Jørgensen (2020); Seshadri and Zhou (2022).

for 22–30, $g = 3$ for 30–38). Define

$$\begin{aligned}\pi(t, \theta, e, s) &= \frac{1}{1 + \lambda_h(g(t), e) \exp(-\eta_{\theta, g(t)} s)}, \\ \bar{p}(t, \theta, e, s) &= 1 - \pi(t, \theta, e, s) = \frac{\lambda_h(g(t), e) \exp(-\eta_{\theta, g(t)} s)}{1 + \lambda_h(g(t), e) \exp(-\eta_{\theta, g(t)} s)}, \\ p(t, \theta, e, s) &= \min \left\{ \lambda_{\max}, \max \left\{ \lambda_{\min}, \lambda_{\max} \bar{p}(t, \theta, e, s) \right\} \right\}.\end{aligned}$$

Here $\pi(t, \theta, e, s)$ is the probability of no conception, $\bar{p}(t, \theta, e, s)$ is the unbounded conception probability implied by the logit mapping, and $p(t, \theta, e, s)$ is the bounded conception probability used in the model. This guarantees $p(\cdot) \in [\lambda_{\min}, \lambda_{\max}]$ and $p(\cdot)$ decreasing in s . Age and education shift baseline risk through $\lambda_h(g, e)$, while ability shifts the effectiveness of contraceptive effort through $\eta_{\theta, g}$.

Parameter interpretation. Baseline fecundity varies by education e and age group $g(t)$ through $\lambda_h(g, e)$, so larger values of $\lambda_h(g, e)$ raise conception risk at any given effort level for women in age group g and education group e . The parameters $\eta_{\theta, g}$ govern how contraceptive effort translates into pregnancy prevention: they scale how strongly a marginal increase in effort s reduces conception risk, allowing this semi-elasticity to vary by ability type θ and age group g . To impose that higher ability weakly increases the productivity of effort, I parameterize $\eta_{\theta, g}$ monotonically across ability quartiles via increments $\delta_{q, g} \geq 0$, for example $\eta_{1, g} = 1$ and $\eta_{q, g} = 1 + \sum_{k=2}^q \delta_{k, g}$ for $q = 2, 3, 4$. Finally, λ_{\min} and λ_{\max} bound conception probabilities away from 0 and 1, capturing imperfect control even at high effort and limiting baseline fecundity differences, while s is the household's chosen contraceptive effort. $\phi_s s$).

Linking ability to the behavioral response of contraception. Ignoring the outer bounds,

$$\frac{\partial p(t, \theta, e, s)}{\partial s} = -\lambda_{\max} \eta_{\theta, g(t)} \frac{\lambda_h(g(t), e) \exp(-\eta_{\theta, g(t)} s)}{(1 + \lambda_h(g(t), e) \exp(-\eta_{\theta, g(t)} s))^2},$$

so $\eta_{\theta, g(t)}$ directly scales the marginal effectiveness of effort (at the bounds, $\partial p / \partial s = 0$ by construction). In the household's optimality condition for s , the marginal cost of effort is equated to the marginal benefit from reducing the pregnancy probability, which is proportional to $-\frac{\partial p}{\partial s} \times (V^{\text{no child}} - V^{\text{child}})$. Ability therefore affects contraception behavior (chosen

s) both mechanically, by changing the productivity of effort via $\eta_{\theta,g}$, and indirectly, because ability shifts the value gap between the “child” and “no child” states through expected returns to schooling and experience.

5.1.2 Marriage market

A single woman meets a potential husband with probability $\mu(e)$. I parameterize $\mu(e)$ parsimoniously with three education-specific parameters.

5.1.3 Labor supply

Labor supply is discrete, $l_t \in \{0, 1\}$, with Type-I extreme value taste shocks (scale σ_l). Work disutility varies by education and age.

- **Work disutility** (ψ_l). Three age bins \times three education groups.
- **Work–child interaction** (ψ_{lk}). Additional disutility from working when a child is present, varying by education.

5.1.4 Schooling decisions: college and high school

College choices are disciplined by a student allowance w_C , tuition T , and an ability-dependent psychic cost. I model the psychic cost of college attendance as

$$\kappa_c(\theta, k_t) = \frac{\xi_c}{\theta \omega_c} + 1_{\{\text{child present in college}\}} \phi_{kbac},$$

and allow continuation (graduate vs. drop out) to be differentially costly when a child is present via an additional wedge. Discrete schooling choices are subject to Type-I extreme value shocks with education-stage-specific scale parameters.

5.1.5 Progressive taxes and transfers

To approximate the U.S. tax-and-transfer system, I adopt the parametric schedule in [Daruich and Fernández \(2024\)](#). Let \tilde{y}_t^0 denote gross *annual* household income before taxes and transfers (labor earnings, spousal earnings if married, schooling allowances when enrolled, or Social

Security in retirement). Disposable annual income is

$$\tilde{y}_t = \lambda(\tilde{y}_t^0)^{1-\tau} + T(m_t),$$

so the corresponding net-tax function is $\mathcal{T}(\tilde{y}_t^0, m_t) = \tilde{y}_t^0 - \tilde{y}_t$. Progressivity ($\tau > 0$) generates an implicit insurance/redistribution channel by making after-tax resources less sensitive to fluctuations in gross income, while $T(m_t)$ captures the transfer component of the fiscal system and differences by marital status. In particular, $T(m_t)$ provides a reduced-form safety net: if $\tilde{y}_t^0 = 0$, the household still receives $\tilde{y}_t = T(m_t)$ and can finance strictly positive consumption.

5.2 Externally Set Parameters and Earnings Process

Time and units. One model period corresponds to four years. Monetary variables are measured in thousands of dollars (annual units) and then aggregated to the four-year model period by multiplying by 4.

5.2.1 Externally set parameters

Table 7 reports parameters that are fixed outside the SMM procedure. I discipline (i) preferences and financial conditions using standard values from the structural life-cycle literature, (ii) policy and institutional objects (tuition, taxes, and transfers) using external data or established functional-form calibrations, and (iii) biological constraints by imposing bounds on conception probabilities that rule out both perfect control and deterministic fecundity.

Table 7. Externally Set Parameters

Parameter	Value	Source / interpretation
Discount factor β_a	0.959 (annual),	Standard annual discount factor (Adda et al., 2017).
Risk aversion ρ	1.98	CRRA curvature (Adda et al., 2017).
Risk-free rate r_a	0.04 (annual)	Annual real return (Adda et al., 2017).
College tuition TC	\$10.200	Annual tuition (2016 \$) (Vandenbroucke, 2023).
Tax parameters (τ, λ)	(0.18, 0.85)	τ controls progressivity and λ pins down average tax levels (Daruich and Fernández, 2024).
Transfer floor $T(m)$	$T_S = \$8.634, T_C = \12.943	Annual transfer floor (2016 \$) for singles vs. couples (SSI maximum; annualized).
Conception bounds $(\lambda_{\min}, \lambda_{\max})$	(0.05, 0.80)	Pregnancy risk and contraceptive failure rates (NHS, 2026 ; Trussell, 2004).
Contraception cost ϕ_s	$\phi_s = 0.001$	Normalization

Notes: Monetary values are in dollars per year (at 2016 prices). Annual flow values are converted to four-year model.

5.2.2 Externally estimated earnings process

A key input to the model is an earnings process estimated outside the model. I estimate reduced-form earnings profiles in the NLSY79 and use the fitted values to parameterize the model's deterministic component of earnings as a function of observed states. Specifically, I predict annual real wage-and-salary earnings and treat the fitted profiles as the earnings opportunities faced by women and husbands/partners in each model period.

Women's earnings. Let \tilde{w}_t^f denote predicted annual earnings for women. The specification is designed to capture lifecycle growth, experience accumulation, and heterogeneity by education and cognitive ability. Earnings depend flexibly on age, education, experience, cognitive-ability quartile, and interactions. To allow earnings to vary systematically with family formation, I also include reduced-form indicators for marriage and nonmarital first birth. Thus,

$$\tilde{w}_t^f = X_t^f \hat{\beta}^f,$$

where X_t^f includes age and age-squared, education and ability indicators, experience and interactions (education \times experience, ability \times experience, education \times ability).

Husbands' earnings. Husbands' earnings are modeled as a reduced-form function of the wife's observed characteristics and the marital status at the time of first pregnancy (or first birth, depending on the moment used), allowing assortative mating and marriage selection to map into spousal resources:

$$\tilde{w}_t^h = X_t^h \hat{\beta}^h,$$

where X_t^h includes age (and a quadratic), the wife's education, and interactions with an indicator for whether the first pregnancy occurs out of wedlock. This reduced-form specification parsimoniously captures systematic differences in spousal earnings associated with education, age, and the timing/context of family formation. Appendix B provides full details on the estimation sample and specification choices.

Household disposable income with progressive taxes and transfers. Let y_t^0 denote pre-tax household income in the model period. Outside school, it is the sum of female earnings when she works and spousal earnings when married:

$$\tilde{y}_t^0(\Omega_{it}, l_t) = 1_{\{l_t=1\}} w_t^f(\Omega_{it}) + 1_{\{m_t=1\}} w_t^h(\Omega_{it}),$$

where \tilde{y}_t^0 is in annual units (in 000). Disposable annual income is $y_t = \lambda(\tilde{y}_t^0)^{1-\tau} + T(m_t)$, so disposable model-period resources entering the budget constraint are

$$y_t(\Omega_{it}, l_t) = \lambda(\tilde{y}_t^0(\Omega_{it}, l_t))^{1-\tau} + T(m_t).$$

In school periods, gross income is replaced by the schooling allowance net of direct schooling costs, consistent with the model timing; the same tax/transfer mapping applies to obtain disposable resources. More details in Appendix B.

5.3 Estimation and identification

Let $m^{data} \in \mathbb{R}^{111}$ denote the empirical moment vector and $m^{sim}(\Theta)$ the model-implied counterpart for parameter vector Θ . I estimate Θ by minimizing a weighted distance between $m^{sim}(\Theta)$ and m^{data} . The loss is a weighted sum of scaled squared deviations:

$$\hat{\Theta} = \arg \min_{\Theta} \sum_{q=1}^{111} w_q \left(\frac{m_q^{sim}(\Theta) - m_q^{data}}{m_q^{sim}(\Theta) + 0.01} \right)^2,$$

with uniform weights $w_q \equiv 1$.¹⁴

Moment blocks. The 111 SMM targets are grouped into blocks that map to the model's mechanisms and parameter blocks:

- **Schooling and early fertility.** HS dropout by pregnancy-at-14 status; college attendance by pregnancy-at-14 status; college graduation by pregnancy-at-18 status; and college attendance by ability quartile.
- **Child investment.** Relative investment ratios (HS/HSD and College/HSD).
- **Fertility timing.** First-birth probabilities by ability quartile \times age.
- **Marriage.** Fraction married by education \times age.
- **Labor supply.** Working rates by education \times age.
- **Contraception .** Contraception use by education \times age.

This organization is useful for identification because it clarifies which moments are most informative about each mechanism, while all parameters are ultimately pinned down by the joint fit across blocks through the model's cross-equation restrictions. In particular, the schooling, labor-supply, and marriage moments are especially informative about opportunity costs and selection, and the fertility-timing and contraception moments are especially informative about the conception technology and fertility-control parameters. Although the model

¹⁴The small constant avoids division by zero when a simulated moment is near zero.

is written in terms of a latent conception risk, the moments are defined on first live births; accordingly, the estimated conception technology should be interpreted as a reduced-form birth-producing conception hazard that matches birth-based hazards in the data.

Identification: separating opportunity costs from fertility control. A central identification challenge is that cognitive ability affects fertility timing through multiple channels that can look similar in reduced-form correlations. Ability shapes schooling choices and thus lifecycle wages, the opportunity cost of childbearing given the externally estimated earnings process, and a distinct effective fertility-control channel that shifts the mapping from contraceptive effort to realized conception risk. The strategy therefore disciplines the schooling and opportunity-cost environment outside the fertility block, so that the model cannot match the ability gradient in pregnancy hazards by reallocating fit through education selection or wage incentives alone.

Following [Low and Meghir \(2017\)](#), I build identification on mapping between mechanisms and moments, exploiting cross-equation restrictions implied by the life-cycle structure and using overidentifying restrictions for specification discipline. The model is overidentified (111 moments for 50 parameters), so inference comes from the joint fit across margins rather than any single target.

Disciplining the opportunity-cost environment outside the fertility block. I first discipline the economic objects that govern the return to delaying fertility. Most importantly, I parameterize earnings opportunities using an externally estimated earnings process that flexibly depends on age, education, experience, and ability (Appendix B). This anchors the opportunity-cost channel with earnings that are not chosen in the structural model, thereby providing identifying content beyond discrete choices. Given this earnings environment, labor-supply disutility parameters are pinned down by employment profiles by education and age, and marriage meeting parameters are pinned down by marriage profiles by education and age.

Identifying schooling selection to avoid confounding ability with education composition. Because ability strongly predicts educational attainment in the data, it is cru-

cial to match the joint distribution of ability and education before attributing remaining ability gradients in fertility to fertility-control parameters. I therefore target college attendance by ability quartile and schooling outcomes conditional on early fertility shocks (dropout/attendance/graduation by pregnancy-at-14/18). These moments discipline schooling costs and education-stage taste-shock scales, limiting the extent to which the model can generate ability gradients in fertility timing purely through endogenous sorting into education.

Identifying fertility-control parameters using pregnancy hazards and contraceptive behavior. Conditional on the disciplined earnings environment and schooling selection, the fertility-technology parameters $\{\lambda_h(t, e), \eta(\theta, t), \phi_s\}$ are identified by the joint behavior of (i) first-pregnancy hazards by age bin and ability quartile and (ii) contraception use by age and education. Here $\lambda_h(t, e)$ governs baseline age–education conception risk absent effort, ϕ_s governs the marginal cost of contraceptive effort and hence the overall level of use, and $\eta(\theta, t)$ governs how effectively effort lowers conception risk by ability. Thus, conditional on wages, schooling, labor supply, and marriage, within-education differences in pregnancy hazards discipline $\eta(\theta, t)$: given common costs ϕ_s and a fixed baseline $\lambda_h(t, e)$, the model can match large early ability gradients only if effort is more effective for higher-ability women.

The key overidentifying restriction is that the same fertility-control parameters must jointly rationalize (a) the ability gradient in pregnancy timing and (b) the education gradient in contraception use. Table 8 summarizes the primary mapping from moment blocks to parameter blocks.

Interpretation: an ability wedge beyond education. A natural concern is whether the ability shifter η should be interpreted as “contraceptive productivity” in a narrow technological sense. In this model, η is a reduced-form ability wedge in effective fertility control: it captures ability-correlated determinants of realized pregnancy risk that operate within education groups (and thus conditional on the associated wage profiles and opportunity costs) and are not separately measured in the data. This includes heterogeneity in correct and consistent use, adherence, planning, partner negotiation, and related behaviors that affect the mapping from intended control into realized conception outcomes.

If ability mattered only through education and the implied opportunity costs, conditioning on education would largely remove systematic ability gradients in fertility timing. Instead, substantial differences in pregnancy hazards and contraception-related outcomes remain within education groups. Accordingly, the key conclusion is that matching the joint patterns in schooling, fertility timing, and contraception behavior requires an ability-related wedge that operates beyond education and the standard opportunity-cost channel, not that ability changes biology per se.

Consistent with this interpretation, in the nested specifications shutting down η forces the model to fit within-education pregnancy gradients using only baseline-risk and opportunity-cost components, which worsens the fit of contraception-related moments.

Table 8. Estimation Targets and Main Sources of Identification (SMM)

Moment block	#	Ages	Empirical targets	Parameters primarily disciplined
Schooling and early fertility	10	14–21	(i) HS dropout by pregnancy at age 14 (2); (ii) college attendance by pregnancy at age 14 (2); (iii) college graduation by pregnancy at age 18 (2); (iv) college attendance by ability quartile (4).	HS/college cost wedges (e.g. κ_{HS} , $\kappa_c(\cdot)$, $\kappa_{k,C}$), schooling taste-shock scales ($\sigma_{HS}, \sigma_C, \sigma_{cd}, \sigma_{cg}$).
Child investment	2	birth period	Relative child investment ratios across schooling states (HS/HSD and C/HSD).	Child-quality curvature/scale (ω_1, ω_2) and stage-specific investment wedges (e.g. $\phi_{khsd}, \phi_{kd}, \phi_{kbac}$).
Fertility timing	28	14–37	First-birth (or pregnancy) rates by ability quartile \times age bin.	Fertility technology and effort costs: $\lambda_h(t, e), \eta(t, \theta)$.
Marriage	17	22–37	Share married by education \times age bin.	Meeting probabilities $\mu(e)$ (and interaction with the externally estimated spousal earnings process).
Labor supply	36	14–61	Work rates by education \times age bin.	Work disutility by age \times education (ψ_l), work-child interaction (ψ_{lk}), and shock scale (σ_l).
Contraception	18	14–37	Contraception use by education \times age bin.	Effort-cost and effectiveness parameters governing the mapping from s to conception risk (primarily ϕ_s and $\lambda_h(t, e)$, and their interaction with $\eta(t, \theta)$).

Notes: The model is overidentified: 111 empirical targets discipline 50 structural parameters (with the earnings process estimated externally). Moment blocks mirror the key mechanisms in the model (schooling costs, fertility control, marriage, labor supply, and parental investment).

6 Results

Three findings emerge from the estimated model. First, the model accounts for the sharp ability gradient in early fertility—teen first-pregnancy hazards are an order of magnitude larger in the bottom than in the top ability quartile—and for the fact that this gradient attenuates with age because higher-ability women primarily postpone rather than avoid motherhood. Second, this pattern cannot be rationalized by schooling choices and wage-based opportunity costs alone: nested fit comparisons show that allowing cognitive ability to directly shift the fertility-control technology delivers a sizable improvement in overall fit (Table 10) while preserving the model’s ability to match education, marriage, labor supply, and contraception profiles jointly. Third, the implied heterogeneity in effective fertility control is economically large. In consumption-equivalent terms, policies that reduce contraception frictions generate welfare gains measured in several percent of lifetime consumption, and the estimated “ability wedge” corresponds to very large permanent consumption changes (Figure 7).

The remainder of the section documents model fit and then quantifies how opportunity costs and ability-driven fertility control shape fertility timing, translating these mechanisms into welfare measures across education and ability groups.

6.1 Model fit

I organize fit around the main empirical relationships the paper targets: (i) fertility timing by ability, (ii) schooling and child-related outcomes, and (iii) marriage, contraception use, and labor-market profiles. In the figures, solid lines denote model-implied moments and markers denote their empirical counterparts in the NLSY79.

6.1.1 Fertility timing by cognitive ability

Figure 3 compares first-pregnancy hazards by age bin and ability quartile, conditional on being childless at the beginning of each bin. The model reproduces the key non-monotonic pattern emphasized in the paper: higher-ability women exhibit lower teen and college-age pregnancy rates and a shift of first births into later ages. The fit is tight for ages 14–17 and 18–21, where the ability gradient is steepest and most informative about fertility control.

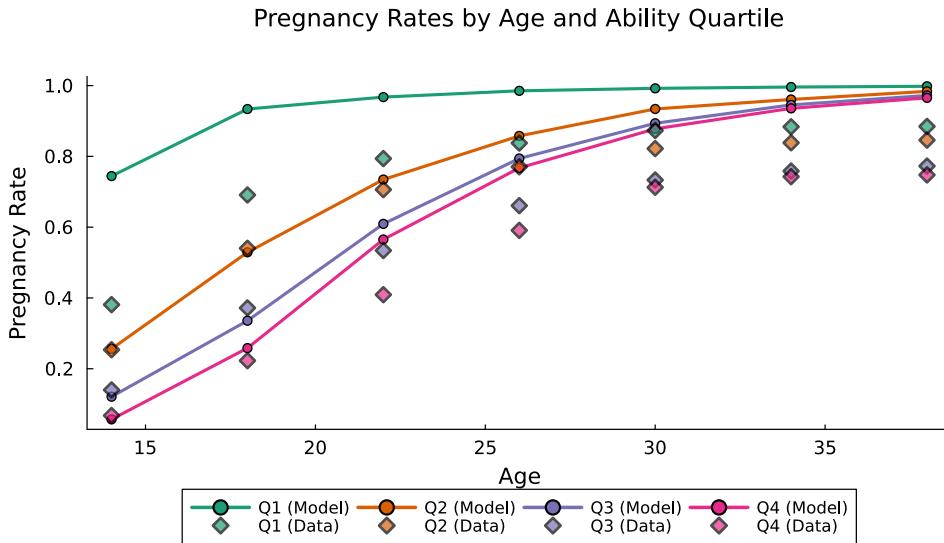


Figure 3. Model fit: pregnancy rates by age and cognitive ability quartile

Notes: Fraction experiencing a first pregnancy by age bin and ability quartile, conditional on being childless at the beginning of the bin. Solid lines show model predictions; markers show NLSY79 moments.

6.1.2 Schooling and child-related outcomes

Table 9 evaluates whether the model captures the joint distribution of schooling attainment and early fertility. The model matches the concentration of teen childbearing among low-ability women and reproduces that early pregnancy is associated with worse educational outcomes. A main shortcoming is that the model underpredicts college attendance for the top ability quartile, consistent with abstracting from parental resources and financial constraints that covary strongly with measured ability in the data.

I discipline child-investment differences across education groups using external evidence on expenditure gradients. The resulting child-investment moments line up closely for the college-versus-dropout comparison, while the model overstates the high-school-versus-dropout gradient, consistent with compressing child-related expenditures into a single child period.

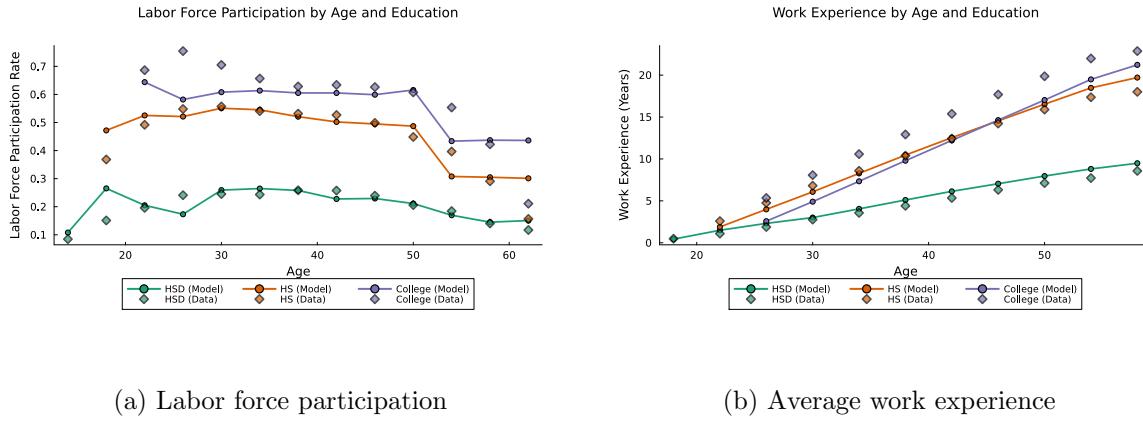
Table 9. Education Moments: Model Fit

Moment	Data	Model
<i>High School Dropout (Age 14)</i>		
HS Dropout (No Pregnancy)	0.070	0.104
HS Dropout (Pregnancy)	0.290	0.553
<i>College Attendance</i>		
College Attend (No Pregnancy at 14)	0.410	0.447
College Attend (Pregnancy at 14)	0.080	0.097
College Attend (Ability Q1)	0.110	0.132
College Attend (Ability Q2)	0.250	0.347
College Attend (Ability Q3)	0.410	0.439
College Attend (Ability Q4)	0.670	0.460
<i>College Graduation (Given Attendance)</i>		
College Grad (No Pregnancy at 18)	0.620	0.995
College Grad (Pregnancy at 18)	0.260	0.290
<i>Child Investment (Relative to HSD)</i>		
Child Inv: HS/HSD Ratio	1.20	2.29
Child Inv: College/HSD Ratio	4.60	3.20

Notes: Data moments from NLSY79. Child investment ratios from [Caucutt and Lochner \(2020\)](#).

6.1.3 Labor-market profiles: participation and experience

Figure 4 evaluates life-cycle labor force participation and accumulated experience by education. The model tracks the average profiles and reproduces the ranking by education group. Because experience is a state variable and wages depend on experience, this fit provides an indirect validation of the dynamic career-cost channel: childbirth-induced interruptions reduce experience accumulation and feed back into wages over the remainder of the working life.



Notes: Labor outcomes by age and education. Solid lines show model predictions; markers show NLSY79 moments.

6.1.4 Marriage and contraception use

Figures 5 and 6 compare marriage rates and contraception use by education over the life cycle. The model matches the broad life-cycle shapes of both objects and reproduces the positive education gradient in contraception take-up. In the model, contraception use is an endogenous policy outcome—women choose contraceptive effort to trade off its contemporaneous utility/resource cost against the expected value of avoiding a conception—and the simulated take-up moments discipline the level and education-profile of fertility-control. A remaining discrepancy is that the model underpredicts marriage among college graduates, indicating that the current specification assigns too little surplus from marriage for high-education types (e.g., through partner earnings, match quality, or the insurance value of marriage).

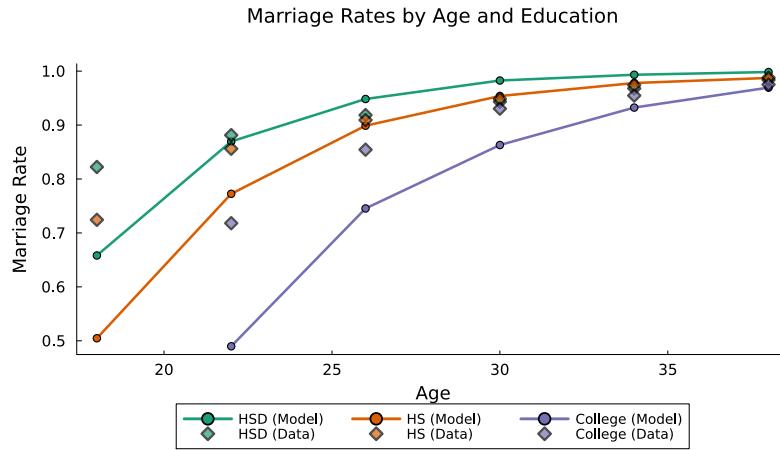


Figure 5. Model fit: marriage rates by education

Notes: Solid lines show model predictions; markers show NLSY79 moments.

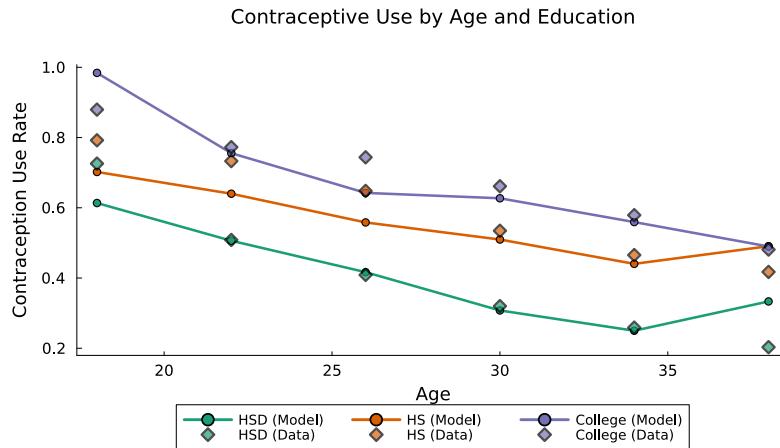


Figure 6. Model fit: contraception use by education

Notes: Solid lines show model predictions; markers show NLSY79 moments.

6.2 Why ability must enter fertility control: mechanism and identification evidence

A central question is whether the ability gradient in fertility timing can be explained solely through standard channels—schooling choices and wage-based opportunity costs—or whether

the data require ability to directly shift fertility-control technology. To assess this, I estimate nested model variants and evaluate their fit using the normalized sum of squared errors (SSE),

$$\text{SSE}(\hat{\vartheta}) = \sum_i \left(\frac{m_i - m_i(\hat{\vartheta})}{m_i} \right)^2,$$

where m_i are empirical moments and $m_i(\hat{\vartheta})$ are their model counterparts under parameter vector $\hat{\vartheta}$.

Table 10 reports SSE decompositions. Moving from an age-only fertility-control specification to education-dependent fertility control improves fit, but the improvement is limited and uneven across blocks. Allowing fertility control to depend on both education and ability generates a substantial additional improvement and aligns fit across the pregnancy/ability, education, and marriage blocks. The key interpretation is that the ability gradient in fertility timing is not simply a byproduct of schooling and wages: matching the data requires an additional margin that operates through pregnancy risk conditional on effort.

Table 10. Decomposing the Model Fit

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline
	+ Educ. Het.	+ Educ. Het.	+ Ab. Cont.
Total SSE	5.51	5.44	3.76
Pregnancies and Ability Moments SSE	1.44	1.08	0.93
Education Moments SSE	1.10	0.59	0.79
Marital Moments SSE	0.38	0.31	0.49
Labor Market Participation SSE	2.27	2.27	1.24
Contraception Use SSE	0.32	1.19	0.31
Fit Improvement $\left(1 - \frac{\text{SSE}_i}{\text{SSE}_1}\right)$	+ Educ. Het.	+ Ab. Cont.	
Total Fit		1%	32%
Pregnancies and Ability Moments		25%	35%
Education Moments		47%	28%
Marital Moments		18%	-28%
Labor Market Participation		0%	45%
Contraception Use		-271%	4%
Corr(P_{14-17} , Ability) Data=-0.26	-0.09	-0.05	-0.53
Corr(P_{18-21} , Ability) Data=-0.27	-0.17	-0.17	-0.49
Corr(P_{22-29} , Ability) Data=-0.07	-0.13	-0.11	-0.22
Corr(P_{14-29} , Ability) Data=-0.24	-0.13	-0.11	-0.22

Notes: “Fit improvement” is computed relative to the baseline specification in column (1) as $1 - \text{SSE}_i / \text{SSE}_1$ for $i \in \{2, 3\}$. Thus the entries in “+ Educ. Het.” and “+ Ab. Cont.” both use the same baseline reference; marginal gains from moving from (2) to (3) are obtained by comparing the SSE levels in columns (2) and (3) directly.

6.3 Welfare interpretation: contraception wedges in consumption-equivalent units

Finally, I translate estimated differences in fertility-control frictions into consumption equivalent units. I compute the permanent proportional change in lifetime effective consumption that makes an individual indifferent between her estimated contraception environment and an alternative contraception environment.

Figure 7 reports two exercises. First, equalizing the contraception environment across education groups to the level faced by college graduates yields sizable welfare gains that are highly concentrated among low-ability women. The implied consumption-equivalent increases are 19.2% for ability Q1, 6.3% for Q2, 1.5% for Q3, and essentially zero for Q4. This pattern indicates that education-related differences in effective fertility control matter primarily for women at the bottom of the ability distribution.

Second, the implied ability wedge is also economically meaningful but smaller than the education-based wedge in the previous exercise. A low-ability teenager would require a 9.6% permanent increase in lifetime consumption to be indifferent between her baseline contraception environment and the environment faced by a high-ability teenager; the corresponding values are 3.1% for Q2 and 0.8% for Q3 (with Q4 normalized to zero). Overall, the welfare evidence reinforces that heterogeneity in effective fertility control is most consequential for low-ability women.

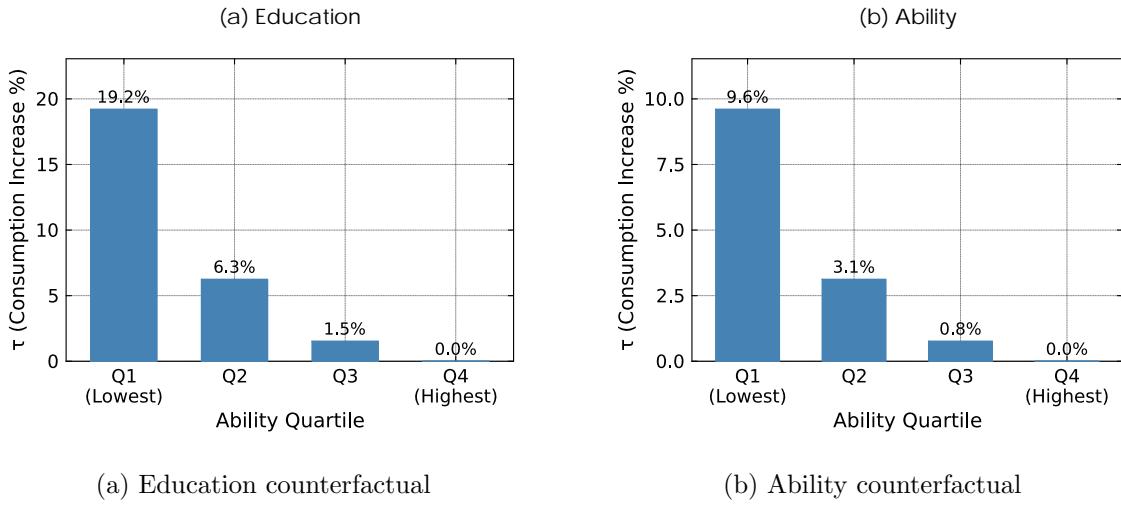


Figure 7. Consumption-equivalent value of improved fertility control

Notes: Left panel: lifetime consumption equivalent of giving all women the contraception environment of college graduates. Right panel: lifetime consumption equivalent for a low-ability teen of achieving the pregnancy risk of a high-ability teen.

The next section uses the estimated model to disentangle selection from causal effects in the teen pregnancy–education relationship and to evaluate counterfactual reductions in contraception frictions. The key message is that policies that reduce teen pregnancies need not mechanically raise college attainment if the primary barrier for low-ability women is the cost of schooling rather than childbirth per se; however, such policies can have large effects on early fertility and welfare.

7 Do Teen Pregnancies Lead to Lower Academic Performance or Vice-versa?

Single motherhood and teen childbearing are central policy concerns, but interpreting the strong negative correlation between early fertility and schooling is complicated by selection. Adolescents who become teen mothers differ from their peers along observed and unobserved dimensions (family background, prior achievement, expectations), so naive comparisons may overstate the causal impact of childbearing on education. Consistent with this concern, Hotz et al. (2005) use miscarriages as an instrument and find limited long-run effects of teen births on completed schooling. Similarly, Levine and Painter (2003) use within-school propensity

score matching and conclude that a substantial share of the raw association between teen childbearing and low educational attainment reflects selection rather than causation, while still finding meaningful negative effects on college attendance.

I use the model to evaluate whether early pregnancies primarily depress schooling (a “childbearing-to-schooling” channel) or whether low expected schooling opportunities primarily increase early fertility (a “schooling-to-fertility” channel). To do so, I conduct three counterfactual experiments in which I equalize specific ability-related margins while holding the remaining environment fixed:

1. **High ability for contraception:** all women face the contraception cost schedule of the top-ability group, holding fixed college costs and wage profiles.
2. **High ability for education and wages:** all women face the college cost and wage profile of the top-ability group, holding fixed contraception costs.
3. **High ability for contraception, education, and wages:** all women face the top-ability schedules for contraception, college costs, and wages.

Table 11 reports the results. Column 1 shows that equalizing contraception costs produces a large decline in early fertility: pregnancies by age 18 fall by 52.7% and pregnancies by age 22 fall by 35.1%. College attendance rises by 19.8% relative to baseline, a sizable increase that indicates a meaningful schooling response when early pregnancies are reduced. Column 2 isolates the education-and-earnings channel. Equalizing college costs and wage profiles strengthens schooling incentives and increases college attendance by 18.3% relative to baseline. However, its effect on early fertility is comparatively modest: pregnancies by age 18 fall by 9.1% and pregnancies by age 22 fall by 6.8%. Thus, improving schooling opportunities alone generates a substantial proportional increase in college-going but only limited reductions in early pregnancies.

Column 3 combines both channels. When contraception costs and schooling opportunities are simultaneously equalized, the model delivers a large increase in college attendance (+45.2% relative to baseline) together with sizeable reductions in early fertility (pregnancies by age 18 fall by 60.0%, and by age 22 fall by 41.5%). Overall, the counterfactuals imply that (i) contraception costs are the first-order driver of early fertility outcomes, while (ii)

sizable improvements in educational attainment require policies that directly affect the costs and returns to schooling, and (iii) the strongest joint improvements arise when both margins move together.

Table 11. Counterfactual Results

	High Ability Contraception	High Ability Education/Wages	High Ability Both
College Attendance (pct. change)	+19.8%	+18.3%	+45.2%
Pregnancies Before 18 (pct. change)	-52.7%	-9.1%	-60.0%
Pregnancies Before 22 (pct. change)	-35.1%	-6.8%	-41.5%

Notes: All rows report percentage changes relative to the baseline economy. The three counterfactuals (i) equalize contraception costs, (ii) equalize college costs and wage profiles, and (iii) equalize both sets of margins.

8 The Decline in Teen Pregnancies During the 1990s

Between 1990 and 2005, teen births in the United States declined sharply (about 32%) ([Santelli and Melnikas, 2010](#)). To discipline the mechanisms behind this change, I re-estimate the model using the NLSY97 cohort (women born 1980–1984), who were teenagers during the 1990s and entered adulthood in the early 2000s, and I compare the estimated environment to the NLSY79 benchmark. Relative to NLSY79, the NLSY97 estimates imply (i) a lower effective cost of fertility control at young ages (consistent with much higher contraceptive use by age 18) and (ii) substantially improved schooling opportunities, reflected in large increases in college attendance throughout the cognitive-skill distribution.

Table 12 summarizes the key cross-cohort shifts in the moments targeted in estimation. Three patterns stand out. First, early childbearing declines in every ability quartile, but the relative disparity by skill widens: the ratio of first-birth risk at age 18 for Q1 versus Q4 rises from 5.62 to 9.66. Second, college attendance increases markedly, especially among lower-ability women (e.g., Q1 rises by 23 pp and Q2 by 41 pp), and even conditional on early pregnancy at age 14 college attendance rises by 19 pp. Third, contraceptive use at age 18 rises strongly across education groups (by 11–20 pp), consistent with a substantial cross-cohort improvement in effective fertility control.

Table 12. Comparison of Calibration Moments: NLSY79 vs. NLSY97

Moment	NLSY79	NLSY97	Change
<i>Educational Outcomes</i>			
HS dropout rate (no pregnancy at 14)	0.070	0.060	-0.010
HS dropout rate (pregnancy at 14)	0.290	0.370	+0.080
College attendance (no pregnancy at 14)	0.410	0.660	+0.250
College attendance (pregnancy at 14)	0.080	0.270	+0.190
College attendance, Q1 ability	0.110	0.340	+0.230
College attendance, Q2 ability	0.250	0.660	+0.410
College attendance, Q3 ability	0.410	0.760	+0.350
College attendance, Q4 ability	0.670	0.780	+0.110
College graduation (no pregnancy)	0.620	0.670	+0.050
College graduation (pregnancy)	0.260	0.200	-0.060
<i>Teen Pregnancy</i>			
Pregnancy ratio Q1/Q4 at age 18	5.62	9.66	+4.04
<i>Teen Pregnancy by Ability</i>			

Continued on next page

Table 12 (continued): Comparison of Calibration Moments: NLSY79 vs. NLSY97

Moment	NLSY79	NLSY97	Change
Fraction with child at 18, Q1	0.381	0.307	-0.074
Fraction with child at 18, Q2	0.254	0.166	-0.088
Fraction with child at 18, Q3	0.140	0.099	-0.041
Fraction with child at 18, Q4	0.068	0.032	-0.036
Fraction with child at 22, Q1	0.691	0.607	-0.084
Fraction with child at 22, Q2	0.540	0.437	-0.104
Fraction with child at 22, Q3	0.372	0.272	-0.100
Fraction with child at 22, Q4	0.223	0.138	-0.085
<i>Marriage</i>			
Married at 22, HSD	0.822	0.823	+0.001
Married at 22, HS	0.724	0.710	-0.014
Married at 22, College	0.446	0.508	+0.062
Married at 30, HSD	0.918	0.965	+0.047
Married at 30, HS	0.909	0.943	+0.033

Continued on next page

Table 12 (continued): Comparison of Calibration Moments: NLSY79 vs. NLSY97

Moment	NLSY79	NLSY97	Change
Married at 30, College	0.854	0.902	+0.048
<i>Labor Force Participation</i>			
Working at 22, HSD	0.196	0.199	+0.003
Working at 22, HS	0.492	0.433	-0.059
Working at 22, College	0.686	0.445	-0.241
Working at 30, HSD	0.245	0.308	+0.062
Working at 30, HS	0.557	0.512	-0.045
Working at 30, College	0.705	0.705	-0.000
<i>Contraception</i>			
Using contraception at 18, HSD	0.726	0.928	+0.203
Using contraception at 18, HS	0.792	0.956	+0.164
Using contraception at 18, College	0.880	0.991	+0.111

Notes: This table presents the key data moments used in the calibration of the structural model for both NLSY79 and NLSY97 cohorts. HSD = high school dropout, HS = high school graduate, and Q1–Q4 refer to ability quartiles. All values are proportions unless otherwise stated. The Change column reports (NLSY97 – NLSY79).

To estimate the model in NLSY97, I keep fixed the preference and parameters set ex-

ternally, re-estimate the income process, and target the same set of moments used in the previous sections. Appendix D provides details on the NLSY97 estimation results.

8.1 Cohort decomposition

To quantify which mechanisms account for the cohort differences, I partition parameters into six blocks—wages, child utility, college costs, contraception technology, labor disutility, and residual factors—and decompose the change in outcomes using a Shapley-value decomposition (an order-invariant attribution rule that averages marginal effects over all possible orderings of block replacements).¹⁵

Table 13 reports the Shapley contributions in percentage points (pp) and as shares of the total cohort gap. Shares can be negative or exceed 100% because some mechanisms offset others; by construction, the contributions sum exactly to the total cohort change.

The decomposition implies three substantive lessons. First, the residual block labeled *Other Factors* explains the largest share of the decline in teen childbearing (-32.05 pp; 156.9% of the gap) and a large share of the rise in college attendance (+15.53 pp; 167.3%). In this partition, *Other Factors* bundles changes outside wages, college costs, contraception technology, and labor disutility (including meeting probabilities and remaining preference/technology parameters), so the result indicates that cross-cohort shifts in these residual margins are quantitatively central for matching the joint change in fertility and schooling.

Second, improved schooling opportunities play an important role: the *College Cost* block accounts for -9.13 pp (44.7%) of the decline in teen childbearing and +8.50 pp (91.6%) of the increase in college attendance, consistent with a strong schooling-opportunity channel that both raises college-going and increases the incentive to avoid early births.

Third, some blocks move outcomes in the opposite direction and therefore offset the main forces above. In particular, *Child Utility* increases teen childbearing (+20.98 pp) and reduces college attendance (-12.55 pp), implying that cohort shifts captured by that block work against the observed trends. The *Wage Process* and *Labor Disutility* blocks are quantitatively smaller and also include offsetting effects.

¹⁵In the code implementation, the Shapley weight on a coalition marginal contribution is proportional to $|S|!(n - |S| - 1)!/n!$ and the contribution of block i is the weighted average of $v(S \cup \{i\}) - v(S)$ across all coalitions $S \subseteq N \setminus \{i\}$.

Finally, the *Contraception* block explains a small share of the cohort gap in this Shapley attribution (-0.72 pp, 3.5% for teen childbearing; +0.44 pp, 4.7% for college attendance).

Table 13. Cohort Decomposition

Mechanism	Teen Pregnancy		College Attendance	
	pp	% of Gap	pp	% of Gap
Wage Process	-1.27	6.2%	-1.20	-12.9%
Child Utility	20.98	-102.7%	-12.55	-135.3%
College Cost	-9.13	44.7%	8.50	91.6%
Contraception	-0.72	3.5%	0.44	4.7%
Labor Disutility	1.75	-8.6%	-1.43	-15.4%
Other Factors	-32.05	156.9%	15.53	167.3%
Total	-20.43	100.0%	9.28	100.0%

Notes: Shapley values report the average marginal contribution of each mechanism across all possible orderings of block replacements. Values sum exactly to the total change between cohorts. Contributions can be negative (or exceed 100%) when mechanisms offset each other in the nonlinear equilibrium mapping from parameters to outcomes.

9 Conclusion

This paper asks whether the standard economic channels emphasized in life-cycle models—schooling choices and wage-based opportunity costs—can explain why women with higher cognitive skills delay first births, and it quantifies the policy-relevant mechanisms behind the large skill gradient in teen childbearing. Using the NLSY79, the data show a steep negative relationship between AFQT and early fertility that attenuates with age: low-skill women are much more likely to enter motherhood as teenagers, while high-skill women predominantly postpone first births into later ages. These facts coexist with strong skill gradients in schooling attainment, marriage, and completed fertility, motivating a framework in which these outcomes are jointly determined.

To interpret these patterns, I develop and estimate a dynamic model in which young

women make decisions over schooling, marriage, fertility, labor supply, and contraceptive effort. A central feature is a fertility-control technology in which age and education shift baseline conception risk, while cognitive ability shifts the productivity of contraceptive effort. The model is estimated by simulated method of moments to jointly match fertility timing by ability, education outcomes, marriage profiles, labor supply, and contraception use. This joint discipline matters: it ties the ability gradient in fertility timing to observed behavior in schooling, work, and contraceptive take-up, rather than attributing it to a reduced-form correlation.

The estimated model delivers three main conclusions. First, it accounts for the sharp ability gradient in teen first-birth hazards and the subsequent attenuation of this gradient with age, consistent with postponement among higher-ability women. Second, the model shows that opportunity costs alone cannot rationalize the data: nested fit comparisons indicate that allowing cognitive ability to directly shift fertility control is necessary to match the joint set of moments. Third, differences in effective fertility control are economically meaningful in welfare terms, with gains from improved contraception access concentrated among low-ability women.

The counterfactual analysis clarifies the direction of causality between early fertility and schooling. When all women face the contraception environment of the highest-ability group, the model predicts large reductions in early fertility: pregnancies before age 18 fall by 52.7% and pregnancies before age 22 fall by 35.1%. College attendance rises by 19.8%, indicating that lowering early pregnancy risk can generate meaningful schooling responses. In contrast, equalizing college costs and wage profiles to the highest-ability group raises college attendance substantially but produces comparatively modest declines in early fertility. The largest joint improvements arise when both margins move together: equalizing both contraception and schooling opportunities increases college attendance by 45.2% while reducing pregnancies before age 18 by 60.0% and before age 22 by 41.5%. Two policy lessons follow. Policies that primarily reduce teen pregnancies need not mechanically generate large gains in educational attainment if the main barrier for low-ability women is the cost of schooling; conversely, policies that improve schooling incentives without addressing fertility control generate limited reductions in early pregnancies.

Finally, I use the model to shed light on the large decline in teen pregnancies during the 1990s by re-estimating key elements for the NLSY97 cohort and decomposing cross-cohort changes. In the model, improved schooling opportunities explain an important share of both the decline in teen childbearing and the rise in college attendance, while other residual cohort shifts (captured outside wages, college costs, contraception technology, and labor disutility) are quantitatively central for jointly matching the trends. This decomposition underscores that understanding changes in early fertility requires accounting for simultaneous movements in education incentives and other cohort-specific forces that shape preferences, family formation, and behavior.

Overall, the paper contributes a quantified mechanism linking cognitive skills to fertility timing through heterogeneity in effective fertility control, disciplined by a model that matches fertility, schooling, marriage, labor supply, and contraception profiles jointly. The findings imply that interventions that lower contraception frictions can deliver large reductions in early fertility and sizable welfare gains for disadvantaged women, but that sustained improvements in educational attainment are most likely when policies also alter the costs and returns to schooling.

References

- Abbott, Brant, Giovanni Gallipoli, Costas Meghir, and Giovanni L Violante**, “Education policy and intergenerational transfers in equilibrium,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 2019, 127 (6), 2569–2624.
- Adda, Jérôme, Christian Dustmann, and Katrien Stevens**, “The career costs of children,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 2017, 125 (2), 293–337.
- Almlund, Mathilde, Angela L. Duckworth, James J. Heckman, and Tim Kautz**, “Personality Psychology and Economics,” in Eric A. Hanushek, Stephen Machin, and Ludger Woessmann, eds., *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, Vol. 4, Elsevier, 2011, pp. 1–181.
- Amador, Diego**, “The Consequences of Abortion and Contraception Policies on Young Women’s Reproductive Choices, Schooling and Labor Supply,” Technical Report 2017-43, Universidad de los Andes, Facultad de Economía, CEDE June 2017.
- Attanasio, Orazio, Hamish Low, and Virginia Sánchez-Marcos**, “Explaining changes in female labor supply in a life-cycle model,” *American Economic Review*, 2008, 98 (4), 1517–1552.
- Bailey, Martha J.**, “More Power to the Pill: The Impact of Contraceptive Freedom on Women’s Life Cycle Labor Supply,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2006, 121 (1), 289–320.
- Bailey, Martha J, Vanessa Wanner Lang, Alexa Prettyman, Iris Vrioni, Lea J Bart, Daniel Eisenberg, Paula Fomby, Jennifer Barber, and Vanessa Dalton**, “How Costs Limit Contraceptive Use among Low-Income Women in the U.S.: A Randomized Control Trial,” Working Paper 31397, National Bureau of Economic Research June 2023.
- Becker, Gary S**, “An economic analysis of fertility,” in “Demographic and economic change in developed countries,” Columbia University Press, 1960, pp. 209–240.
- , “A Theory of the Allocation of Time,” *The economic journal*, 1965, 75 (299), 493–517.
- , *A treatise on the family: Enlarged edition*, Harvard university press, 1991.
- and H Gregg Lewis, “On the interaction between the quantity and quality of children,” *Journal of political Economy*, 1973, 81 (2, Part 2), S279–S288.
- Ben-Porath, Yoram**, “Fertility response to child mortality: micro data from Israel,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 1976, 84 (4, Part 2), S163–S178.
- Biggs, M Antonia, Ushma D Upadhyay, Charles E McCulloch, and Diana G Foster**, “Women’s mental health and well-being 5 years after receiving or being denied an abortion: A prospective, longitudinal cohort study,” *JAMA psychiatry*, 2017, 74 (2), 169–178.

- Black, Sandra E, Paul J Devereux, and Kjell G Salvanes**, “Staying in the classroom and out of the maternity ward? The effect of compulsory schooling laws on teenage births,” *The economic journal*, 2008, 118 (530), 1025–1054.
- Bloemen, Hans and Adriaan S. Kalwij**, “Female labor market transitions and the timing of births: a simultaneous analysis of the effects of schooling,” *Labour Economics*, 2001, 8 (5), 593–620.
- Bronars, Stephen G and Jeff Grogger**, “The economic consequences of unwed motherhood: Using twin births as a natural experiment,” *The American Economic Review*, 1994, pp. 1141–1156.
- Caucutt, Elizabeth M and Lance Lochner**, “Early and late human capital investments, borrowing constraints, and the family,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 2020, 128 (3), 1065–1147.
- Caucutt, Elizabeth M., Nezih Guner, and John A. Knowles**, “Why Do Women Wait? Matching, Wage Inequality, and the Incentives for Fertility Delay,” *Review of Economic Dynamics*, 2002, 5 (4), 815–855.
- Choi, Sekyu**, “Fertility risk in the life cycle,” *International economic review*, 2017, 58 (1), 237–259.
- Cunha, Flavio and James J. Heckman**, “The Technology of Skill Formation,” *American Economic Review*, 2007, 97 (2), 31–47.
- Daruich, Diego and Raquel Fernández**, “Universal basic income: A dynamic assessment,” *American Economic Review*, 2024, 114 (1), 38–88.
- der Klaauw, Wilbert Van**, “Female labour supply and marital status decisions: A life-cycle model,” *The Review of Economic Studies*, 1996, 63 (2), 199–235.
- Eckstein, Zvi, Michael P. Keane, and Osnat Lifshitz**, “Career and Family Decisions: Cohorts Born 1935–1975,” *Econometrica*, 2019, 87 (1), 217–253.
- Ejrnæs, Mette and Thomas H. Jørgensen**, “Family Planning in a Life-Cycle Model with Income Risk,” *Journal of Applied Econometrics*, 2020, 35 (5), 567–586.
- Fe, Eduardo, David Gill, and Victoria Prowse**, “Cognitive skills, strategic sophistication, and life outcomes,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 2022, 130 (10), 2643–2704.
- Fort, Margherita, Nicole Schneeweis, and Rudolf Winter-Ebmer**, “Is Education Always Reducing Fertility? Evidence from Compulsory Schooling Reforms,” *Economic Journal*, 2016, 126 (595), 1823–1855.
- Foster, Diana Greene, M Antonia Biggs, Lauren Ralph, Caitlin Gerdts, Sarah Roberts, and M Maria Glymour**, “Socioeconomic outcomes of women who receive and women who are denied wanted abortions in the United States,” *American journal of public health*, 2018, 108 (3), 407–413.

Francesconi, Marco, “A Joint Dynamic Model of Fertility and Work of Married Women,” *Journal of Labor Economics*, 2002, 20 (2), 336–380.

Goldin, Claudia and Lawrence F Katz, “The power of the pill: Oral contraceptives and women’s career and marriage decisions,” *Journal of political Economy*, 2002, 110 (4), 730–770.

Heckman, James J. and James R. Walker, “The Relationship between Wages and Income and the Timing and Spacing of Births: Evidence from Swedish Longitudinal Data,” *Econometrica*, 1990, 58 (6), 1411–1441.

Heckman, James J and Stefano Mosso, “The economics of human development and social mobility,” *Annu. Rev. Econ.*, 2014, 6 (1), 689–733.

—, **Jora Stixrud, and Sergio Urzua**, “The effects of cognitive and noncognitive abilities on labor market outcomes and social behavior,” *Journal of Labor economics*, 2006, 24 (3), 411–482.

Hotz, V. Joseph and Robert A. Miller, “An Empirical Analysis of Life Cycle Fertility and Female Labor Supply,” *Econometrica*, 1988, 56 (1), 91–118.

Hotz, V Joseph, Susan Williams McElroy, and Seth G Sanders, “Teenage childbearing and its life cycle consequences exploiting a natural experiment,” *Journal of Human Resources*, 2005, 40 (3), 683–715.

Iskhakov, Fedor, Thomas H Jørgensen, John Rust, and Bertel Schjerning, “The endogenous grid method for discrete-continuous dynamic choice models with (or without) taste shocks,” *Quantitative Economics*, 2017, 8 (2), 317–365.

Jones, Larry E, Alice Schoonbrodt, and Michèle Tertilt, “Fertility Theories: Can They Explain the Negative Fertility-Income Relationship?,” in John B Shoven, ed., *Demography and the Economy*, University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 43–100.

— and **Michele Tertilt**, “Chapter 5 an economic history of fertility in the united states: 1826–1960,” in “Frontiers of family economics,” Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2008, pp. 165–230.

Keane, Michael P and Kenneth I Wolpin, “The role of labor and marriage markets, preference heterogeneity, and the welfare system in the life cycle decisions of black, hispanic, and white women,” *International Economic Review*, 2010, 51 (3), 851–892.

Kearney, Melissa S and Phillip B Levine, “Subsidized contraception, fertility, and sexual behavior,” *The review of Economics and Statistics*, 2009, 91 (1), 137–151.

— and —, “Why is the teen birth rate in the United States so high and why does it matter?,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 2012, 26 (2), 141–166.

Kearney, Melissa S. and Phillip B. Levine, “Investigating Recent Trends in the U.S. Teen Birth Rate,” *Journal of Health Economics*, 2015, 41, 15–29.

- Kearney, Melissa S and Phillip B Levine**, “The economics of nonmarital childbearing and the marriage premium for children,” *Annual Review of Economics*, 2017, 9, 327–352.
- Kearney, Melissa Schettini and Phillip B. Levine**, “Income Inequality and Early Non-Marital Childbearing: An Economic Exploration of the “Culture of Despair”,” NBER Working Paper 17157, National Bureau of Economic Research 2011.
- Levine, David I and Gary Painter**, “The schooling costs of teenage out-of-wedlock childbearing: Analysis with a within-school propensity-score-matching estimator,” *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 2003, 85 (4), 884–900.
- Low, Hamish and Costas Meghir**, “The Use of Structural Models in Econometrics,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, May 2017, 31 (2), 33–58.
- McCravy, Justin and Heather Royer**, “The Effect of Female Education on Fertility and Infant Health: Evidence from School Entry Policies Using Exact Date of Birth,” *American Economic Review*, 2011, 101 (1), 158–195.
- Miller, Amalia R**, “Motherhood Delay and the Human Capital of the Next Generation,” *American Economic Review*, 2009, 99 (2), 154–158.
- Musick, Kelly, Paula England, Sarah Edgington, and Nicole Kangas**, “Education differences in intended and unintended fertility,” *Social Forces*, 2009, 88 (2), 543–572.
- Neal, Derek A. and William R. Johnson**, “The Role of Premarket Factors in Black–White Wage Differences,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 1996, 104 (5), 869–895.
- NHS**, “Trying to get pregnant,” January 2026.
- Nola, Alessandro Di, Georgi Kocharkov, Jan Mellert, and Haomin Wang**, “Teenage childbearing and the welfare state,” *Macroeconomic Dynamics*, 2025, 29, e31.
- Regalia, Ferdinando, José-Víctor Ríos-Rull, and Jacob Short**, “What Accounts for the Increase in the Number of Single Households?,” 2019. Manuscript.
- Rosenzweig, Mark R and T Paul Schultz**, “Schooling, information and nonmarket productivity: contraceptive use and its effectiveness,” *International Economic Review*, 1989, pp. 457–477.
- Santelli, John S and Andrea J Melnikas**, “Teen fertility in transition: recent and historic trends in the United States,” *Annual review of public health*, 2010, 31, 371–383.
- Seshadri, Ananth and Anson Zhou**, “Intergenerational mobility begins before birth,” *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 2022.
- Sheran, Michelle**, “The career and family choices of women: A dynamic analysis of labor force participation, schooling, marriage, and fertility decisions,” *Review of Economic Dynamics*, 2007, 10 (3), 367–399.
- Trussell, James**, “Contraceptive failure in the United States,” *Contraception*, 2004, 70 (2), 89–96.

Vandenbroucke, Guillaume, “The return on investing in a college education,” *The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis*, <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/regional-economist/2023/mar/return-investing-college-education>, 2023, pp. 379–400.

Willis, Robert J., “A New Approach to the Economic Theory of Fertility Behavior,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 1973, 81 (2, Part 2), S14–S64.

Wolpin, Kenneth I., “An estimable dynamic stochastic model of fertility and child mortality,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 1984, 92 (5), 852–874.

A Data Construction and Cleaning: NLSY79 and NLSY97

This appendix documents the cleaning and construction of the data used in the paper analysis.

A.1 Data sources and cohort coverage

NLSY79. The NLSY79 follows a nationally representative cohort of individuals born 1957–1964 who were ages 14–22 at the first interview in 1979. Interviews are annual from 1979–1994 and biennial thereafter, with rich topical modules covering schooling, labor market outcomes, family formation, and fertility.

NLSY97. The NLSY97 follows a nationally representative cohort born 1980–1984 who were ages 12–16 as of December 31, 1996, first interviewed in 1997–98. Interviews are annual from 1997–2011 and biennial thereafter.

A.2 Panel structure and alignment to model time

For each cohort, I construct an annual panel indexed by individual i and calendar year t and compute age at interview as:

$$\text{Age}_{it} = t - \text{BirthYear}_i.$$

In NLSY97, the birth year is taken directly from the created birth-date variables. In NLSY79, birth year is inferred from the respondent’s age in the baseline year and then used to back out age in all years when age is missing.

Because the structural model uses four-year periods starting at age 14, I map annual observations into four-year “age bins”:

$$\text{AgeBin}_{it} = 14 + 4 \left\lfloor \frac{\text{Age}_{it} - 14}{4} \right\rfloor,$$

so that the bins are 14–17, 18–21, 22–25, When a model object is defined at the period level (e.g., employment, experience, fertility hazard), I aggregate annual measures within the bin using consistent rules described below.

A.3 Global cleaning conventions and special codes

NLS variables commonly use negative values to encode nonresponse and survey routing (e.g., refusal, don't know, valid skip, non-interview). In both cohorts I apply the following conventions before constructing analysis variables:

1. **Invalid / nonresponse codes:** values < 0 are treated as missing unless they have a structural interpretation in the paper (e.g., “no spouse” for spouse income).
2. **Structural zeros:** variables that are economically meaningful zeros (e.g., spouse income when no partner is present) are explicitly set to 0 rather than missing, and retained in household aggregates.
3. **Deflation:** nominal dollar amounts are converted to real 2016 dollars using CPI-based deflators merged by calendar year.

A.4 Cognitive ability

NLSY79. I use the AFQT measure available in the NLSY79 created score files. Observations with invalid AFQT codes (negative values) are dropped. I then form within-cohort quartiles of the AFQT distribution ($q \in \{1, 2, 3, 4\}$), which is the ability measure used throughout the empirical moments and wage estimation.

NLSY97. I use the created variable `ASVAB_MATH_VERBAL_SCORE_PCT`, a percentile score constructed by NLS staff from four CAT-ASVAB subtests; the documentation describes the construction using age-group normalization and sampling weights and yields a 0–99 percentile scale. I drop invalid (negative) codes and form within-cohort quartiles analogously to NLSY79.

A.5 Education

Education is measured as highest grade completed and mapped into three mutually exclusive groups:

$$\text{HSD} : < 12, \quad \text{HSG} : 12 \leq \text{HGC} < 16, \quad \text{COL} : \text{HGC} \geq 16.$$

In NLSY79, I use the individual-specific maximum of reported grade completed over the panel to reduce spurious year-to-year reporting noise. In NLSY97, I use the “ever” created schooling measure and drop observations with invalid schooling codes.

Additionally, I construct an indicator for college attendance between ages 18 and 22, defined as

$$1 \{ \exists t \text{ s.t. } 18 \leq \text{Age}_{it} \leq 22 \text{ and } \text{HGC}_{it} > 12 \},$$

i.e., it equals one if the respondent reports completing more than 12 years of schooling at any interview conducted when she is ages 18–22, and zero otherwise.

A.6 Fertility and pregnancy histories

First birth timing. In NLSY79, I use the created child-birth-date variables for the first child (month/year) to define:

$$\text{AgeAtFirstBirth}_i = \text{BirthYearChild1}_i - \text{BirthYear}_i,$$

and I set $\text{AgeAtFirstBirth}_i = 99$ for women with no recorded birth in the observation window.

In NLSY97, I use the created child birth-date variables (year and month) for the first child and collapse repeated values across rounds to a single first-birth year/month. Negative/invalid codes are treated as missing and dropped when they imply inconsistent dates.

Wantedness and contraception. To discipline moments on pregnancy intentions and contraceptive behavior, I construct pregnancy-level indicators using the fertility and contraception modules and then aggregate them to the model’s age bins.

(i) *Wantedness.* For each pregnancy p of woman i , let $\text{Wanted}_{ip} \in \{0, 1\}$ indicate whether the respondent reports that the pregnancy was wanted at the time of conception.¹⁶

(ii) *Contraception at conception.* For each pregnancy p , define

$$\text{NoContraception}_{ip} \equiv 1 \{ \text{no contraceptive method at the time of conception} \},$$

¹⁶When the survey distinguishes *mistimed* from *unwanted* pregnancies, I code $\text{Wanted}_{ip} = 0$ for both categories and report robustness separating the two. Responses coded as “don’t know”, “refused”, or survey skips are treated as missing.

where “contraceptive method” includes any reported method (e.g., pill, condom, IUD, rhythm-withdrawal, etc.). Invalid/non-response codes are set to missing.

NLSY97 harmonization. In NLSY97, contraceptive use at conception is reported in the self-administered fertility questionnaires by (a) the respondent and, in some rounds, (b) the partner. I form a single pregnancy-level measure by prioritizing the respondent report when non-missing; if it is missing, I use the partner report. If both are observed but disagree, I code $\text{NoContraception}_{ip} = 0$ (i.e., “some method used”) to avoid classifying a conception as unprotected when either source reports contraceptive use.

Mapping to the model. The model features a period-level contraception choice that applies to women who are *at risk* of conception. The NLSY measure used in Table A5 reports contraception use among sexually active women who are not currently pregnant. Accordingly, the targeted moments are constructed as at-risk non-use rates:

$$\Pr(\text{NoContraception}_{it} = 1 \mid \text{AtRisk}_{it} = 1, \text{age bin } b, \theta_i, \text{Educ}_{it}),$$

where $\text{AtRisk}_{it} = 1$ indicates that the woman is fertile and has not yet had a first birth. In the model, $\text{AtRisk}_{it} = 1$ corresponds to periods in which the household is in the fertile stage and first birth has not yet occurred, so the model-implied moments are computed over the same at-risk set. This definition matches the denominator underlying Table A5.

A.7 Marriage and partner outcomes

Marital status. Marital status is defined annually using marriage start/end dates. I construct:

$$\text{Married}_{it} = 1\{t \in [\text{MarriageStart}_i, \text{MarriageEnd}_i)\},$$

treating an open-ended marriage (missing end date with a valid start date) as ongoing.

Partner earnings and work. Partner wage-and-salary income is taken from spouse/partner earnings modules when available. “No spouse” codes are set to 0; invalid negative codes are dropped. Partner weeks worked and hours worked are used for partner employment definitions in the wage-process estimation below.

A.8 Labor market outcomes: hours, earnings, employment, experience

Annual hours. In NLSY79, annual hours are constructed from the Work History / Weekly files, producing (i) total annual hours and (ii) annual weeks worked. The weekly labor-force status and wage measures in NLSY79 are documented in the topical guides.

Annual earnings. I use annual wage-and-salary income (respondent and spouse/partner) and deflate to 2016 dollars.

Interpolation and internal consistency checks (NLSY79). Because annual earnings can exhibit missingness and occasional spurious zeros in years with positive hours, I implement two consistency checks before estimation and aggregation: (1) set annual earnings to 0 when annual hours are 0; (2) treat earnings as missing in “very low hours” years when earnings are recorded as zero, and linearly interpolate earnings over time within individual (only across years with valid neighboring information). This step is designed to reduce measurement-error spikes while preserving low earnings when corroborated by low hours.

Employment and experience. A woman-year is classified as employed if it satisfies: (i) at least 26 weeks worked; (ii) average weekly hours > 20 ; and (iii) real annual wage-and-salary income at least 10,500(2016 dollars). I then define annual experience as $\text{ExpYear}_{it} = \mathbf{1}\{\text{employed}\}$ and cumulative experience as $\text{CumExp}_{it} = \sum_{\tau \leq t} \text{ExpYear}_{i\tau}$.

B Wage Process Estimation

This appendix describes how I estimate the (cohort-specific) wage profiles used to parameterize the earnings opportunities in the structural model. The goal is to recover flexible conditional mean earnings profiles by age, education, ability, and experience, separately for women and (when relevant) husbands/partners.

B.1 Wage measures and estimation samples

Women. Let w_{it} denote **real annual wage-and-salary income** (2016 dollars). The wage estimation sample includes woman-years that meet the employment definition in Appendix A

(minimum weeks worked, minimum hours, and minimum annual earnings). The dependent variable is in levels (annual dollars), consistent with how the model is parameterized.

Husbands/partners. Let w_{it}^m denote partner annual wage-and-salary income (2016 dollars). The husband/partner wage estimation sample is restricted to years in which the woman is married and partner earnings exceed the same annual earnings threshold used for women.

B.2 Baseline specification: NLSY79 women

For NLSY79 women, I estimate:

$$w_{it} = \alpha_t + \beta_1 \text{Age}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{Age}_{it}^2 \\ + \sum_{e \in \{\text{HSD, HSG, COL}\}} \sum_{q=1}^4 (\gamma_{eq} + \delta_{eq} \text{CumExp}_{it}) \mathbf{1}\{\text{Educ}_i = e, \text{Ability}_i = q\} + \varepsilon_{it},$$

where α_t are calendar-year fixed effects capturing aggregate wage growth and inflation residual to CPI deflation (and other cohort-wide shifts). The interaction structure $\text{CumExp} \times \text{Educ} \times \text{Ability}$ allows returns to experience to vary flexibly across education and cognitive-ability quartiles.

B.3 Baseline specification: NLSY79 husbands/partners

For husbands/partners in NLSY79 I estimate:

$$w_{it}^m = \alpha_t^m + \sum_{e \in \{\text{HSD, HSG, COL}\}} (\beta_{1e}^m \text{Age}_{it} + \beta_{2e}^m \text{Age}_{it}^2) \mathbf{1}\{\text{Educ}_i = e\} \\ + \sum_{e \in \{\text{HSD, HSG, COL}\}} \kappa_e^m \mathbf{1}\{\text{Educ}_i = e\} \times \mathbf{1}\{\text{MarryBeforeBirth}_i = 1\} + u_{it},$$

with year fixed effects α_t^m and an indicator $\mathbf{1}\{\text{MarryBeforeBirth} = 1\}$ capturing systematic differences in spouse earnings associated with marrying prior to first birth (a reduced-form

proxy for assortative matching on earnings capacity around family formation). This parsimonious specification intentionally omits separate education intercepts for husbands' earnings; education enters through education-specific age profiles and the MarryBeforeBirth \times Educ interaction.

B.4 NLSY97 estimation and cross-cohort harmonization

NLSY97 respondents are observed over a shorter portion of the lifecycle in many waves relative to NLSY79. To stabilize age-profile estimation and facilitate comparisons across cohorts, I proceed in two steps:

1. **Impose NLSY79 age profile.** Using estimates from (B.2) (women) and (B.3) (husbands), I compute the predicted age component $\hat{f}_{79}(\text{Age})$ (and education-specific components for husbands).
2. **Estimate remaining parameters on age-demeaned wages.** Define $w_{it}^\perp = w_{it} - \hat{f}_{79}(\text{Age}_{it})$ and regress w_{it}^\perp on the remaining terms (experience and interaction structure) with year fixed effects. This yields cohort-specific returns that are comparable by construction while preserving the common lifecycle shape implied by NLSY79.

I apply the same procedure for husbands/partners in NLSY97: subtract the education-specific NLSY79 age profile and estimate the remaining terms (education and marriage-timing differentials) with year fixed effects.

B.5 Retirement income process

The NLSY wage-and-salary measures do not capture the older-age components of retirement resources (Social Security benefits, employer pensions, and other transfers) because the survey population has not reached that age.

To ensure computational tractability, I model retirement income in reduced form as an education-specific replacement rate applied to pre-retirement earnings capacity, separately for women and husbands/partners.

Let T_R denote the first retirement period (the last N_{retired} model periods). For each education group $e \in \{\text{HSD}, \text{HSG}, \text{COL}\}$, I compute a baseline pre-retirement earnings level as

the average predicted annual labor income in the final working period,

$$\bar{w}_e \equiv \mathbb{E}[\hat{w}_{it} | \text{Educ}_i = e, t = T_R - 1], \quad \bar{w}_e^m \equiv \mathbb{E}[\hat{w}_{it}^m | \text{Educ}_i = e, t = T_R - 1],$$

where expectations are taken over the model state distribution in that period (ability, accumulated experience, and other discrete states relevant for the wage grids).

In retirement periods $t \geq T_R$, individual labor income is replaced by a deterministic benefit level:

$$w_e^R = \phi_e \bar{w}_e, \quad (w^m)_e^R = \phi_e \bar{w}_e^m,$$

held constant over all retirement ages.

Social Security replacement rates (NLSY79 vs. NLSY97). To discipline retirement income in the model, I calibrate education-specific replacement rates using the Social Security Administration Office of the Chief Actuary's Replacement Rates, which reports replacement rates (first-year retired-worker benefits as a percent of wage-indexed career-average earnings). The model does not implement the statutory benefit formula (AIME/PIA) directly; instead, I use the SSA replacement-rate statistics to discipline education-specific multipliers ϕ_e in a reduced-form retirement-income rule. In particular, ϕ_e should be interpreted as a replacement rate relative to late-career earnings in the model, proxied by \bar{w}_e , rather than literally relative to wage-indexed career-average earnings.¹⁷

In retirement periods $t \geq T_R$, individual labor income is replaced by a deterministic benefit level:

$$w_e^R = \phi_e \bar{w}_e, \quad (w^m)_e^R = \phi_e \bar{w}_e^m.$$

B.6 Model inputs and aggregation to four-year periods

The estimated coefficients from the above regressions are used to generate predicted annual earnings paths by (age, education, ability quartile, cumulative experience). In the model, each period corresponds to four years; I therefore interpret the predicted annual earnings

¹⁷Because \bar{w}_e is a proxy for earnings capacity at the end of the working life rather than AIME, the mapping from the SSA tables into ϕ_e is an approximation that preserves the education gradient in replacement rates while maintaining a parsimonious retirement-income process.

at the period's representative age (the start-of-bin age) as the period-specific annual earnings opportunity, and update cumulative experience using the model-consistent experience accumulation rule.

For retirement periods, I do not predict the wage regressions. Instead, I replace labor earnings with an education-specific deterministic retirement-income level constructed from the pre-retirement predicted wage arrays, as described in Appendix [B.5](#).

C Model Fit

C.1 Targeted Moments

This appendix presents a detailed comparison between the empirical moments used to calibrate the model and their corresponding model-generated counterparts. The estimation procedure employs the Simulated Method of Moments (SMM), which minimizes the weighted distance between 111 empirical moments from the NLSY79 data and their model analogues.

The targeted moments are organized into six categories: (i) schooling and early fertility decisions, (ii) child investment, (iii) fertility timing by ability, (iv) marriage patterns by education, (v) labor force participation by education, and (vi) contraception use by education. This comprehensive set of moments disciplines the model's ability to jointly capture the key life-cycle patterns that characterize women's decisions regarding education, fertility, marriage, labor supply, and family planning.

Tables [A1–A5](#) report the data moments and model moments for each targeted statistic. The model achieves a reasonable fit across all moment categories, capturing both the levels and the heterogeneity across education and ability groups.

Appendix Table A1. Model Fit: Schooling, Early Fertility, and Child Investment

Moment	Data	Model
<i>Panel A: High School Dropout by Pregnancy Status at Age 14</i>		
No pregnancy at 14	0.070	0.063
Pregnancy at 14	0.290	0.458
<i>Panel B: College Attendance by Pregnancy Status at Age 14</i>		
No pregnancy at 14	0.410	0.471
Pregnancy at 14	0.080	0.088
<i>Panel C: College Attendance by Ability Quartile at Age 18</i>		
Quartile 1 (lowest)	0.110	0.112
Quartile 2	0.250	0.345
Quartile 3	0.410	0.472
Quartile 4 (highest)	0.670	0.504
<i>Panel D: College Graduation by Pregnancy Status at Age 18</i>		
No pregnancy at 18	0.620	0.987
Pregnancy at 18	0.260	0.240
<i>Panel E: Relative Child Investment by Education</i>		
HS Graduate / HS Dropout	1.200	2.330
College Graduate / HS Dropout	4.600	3.696

Notes: Data moments are computed from the NLSY79. Child investment ratios are based on estimates from [Caucutt and Lochner \(2020\)](#).

Appendix Table A2. Model Fit: Fraction with Children by Ability Quartile and Age

Age	Quartile 1		Quartile 2		Quartile 3		Quartile 4	
	Data	Model	Data	Model	Data	Model	Data	Model
14	0.381	0.744	0.254	0.256	0.140	0.121	0.068	0.057
18	0.691	0.934	0.540	0.529	0.372	0.336	0.223	0.258
22	0.794	0.967	0.706	0.735	0.534	0.609	0.409	0.565
26	0.838	0.985	0.770	0.858	0.661	0.794	0.591	0.767
30	0.873	0.992	0.822	0.934	0.733	0.893	0.713	0.878
34	0.884	0.996	0.838	0.961	0.759	0.945	0.743	0.936
38	0.885	0.998	0.846	0.984	0.773	0.972	0.748	0.965

Notes: Data moments are computed from the NLSY79. Ability quartiles are based on AFQT scores. Quartile 1 is the lowest ability group and Quartile 4 is the highest.

Appendix Table A3. Model Fit: Fraction Married by Education and Age

Age	HS Dropout		HS Graduate		College Graduate	
	Data	Model	Data	Model	Data	Model
18	0.633	0.658	0.394	0.505	—	—
22	0.822	0.870	0.724	0.773	0.446	0.490
26	0.881	0.948	0.856	0.899	0.718	0.745
30	0.918	0.983	0.909	0.954	0.854	0.863
34	0.943	0.993	0.949	0.978	0.930	0.932
38	0.968	0.998	0.974	0.987	0.955	0.969

Notes: Data moments are computed from the NLSY79. College graduates enter the marriage market at age 22.

Appendix Table A4. Model Fit: Labor Force Participation by Education and Age

Age	HS Dropout		HS Graduate		College Graduate	
	Data	Model	Data	Model	Data	Model
14	0.084	0.108	—	—	—	—
18	0.151	0.265	0.368	0.472	—	—
22	0.196	0.205	0.492	0.525	0.686	0.644
26	0.241	0.173	0.548	0.521	0.754	0.582
30	0.245	0.259	0.557	0.551	0.705	0.608
34	0.243	0.265	0.541	0.545	0.657	0.614
38	0.259	0.258	0.532	0.521	0.628	0.605
42	0.258	0.228	0.527	0.502	0.634	0.605
46	0.239	0.229	0.499	0.495	0.626	0.599
50	0.206	0.211	0.448	0.487	0.607	0.616
54	0.184	0.170	0.397	0.308	0.554	0.434
58	0.140	0.145	0.291	0.305	0.422	0.437
62	0.117	0.151	0.157	0.301	0.211	0.436

Notes: Data moments are computed from the NLSY79. HS dropouts can work from age 14, HS graduates from age 18, and college graduates from age 22.

Appendix Table A5. Model Fit: Contraception Use by Education and Age

Age	HS Dropout		HS Graduate		College Graduate	
	Data	Model	Data	Model	Data	Model
18	0.726	0.614	0.792	0.702	0.880	0.984
22	0.508	0.506	0.733	0.640	0.773	0.756
26	0.409	0.417	0.648	0.558	0.744	0.642
30	0.320	0.308	0.535	0.510	0.661	0.627
34	0.259	0.250	0.465	0.440	0.579	0.559
38	0.203	0.333	0.417	0.491	0.481	0.490

Notes: Data moments are computed from the NLSY79. Contraception use is measured among sexually active women who are not currently pregnant.

D Estimated Parameters: NLSY79 vs. NLSY97

This appendix compares the structural parameters estimated on the NLSY79 and NLSY97 cohorts using the same model, moments, and SMM objective. The goal is to summarize how the estimated fertility, marriage, education, and preference primitives differ across cohorts, and to provide a compact input for the cohort-change counterfactuals. Throughout, parameters are reported in the model's units; interpretation follows the definitions in the main text.

Table A6 reports the full set of SMM-estimated parameters for each cohort. Parameters are grouped by economic block. The first block (λ_h) governs the baseline conception risk by education and age; the second block (η) shifts the effectiveness of contraceptive effort by ability quartile and age. The marriage parameters ($\omega_0, \omega_1, \omega_2$) summarize cohort differences in household formation and equivalence scales. The child block (ϕ_k^e, ξ_{cf}) governs the mapping from parental characteristics into child outcomes and fixed costs. The remaining blocks capture cohort differences in the distribution of ability conditional on education (μ), policy/price shifters that move schooling incentives (HS and college allowances), preferences for children (ω_{ch}), labor-supply disutility shifters (ψ_ℓ and $\psi_{\ell k}$), and the standard deviations of idiosyncratic shocks.

Appendix Table A6. Comparison of Estimated Parameters: NLSY79 vs. NLSY97

Parameter	NLSY79	NLSY97
<i>Baseline conception risk by education and age (λ_1)</i>		
λ_1 HSD increment, ages 14–22	5.0060	3.0187
λ_1 HSD increment, ages 22–30	3.6768	4.5661
λ_1 HSD increment, ages 30–38	1.8960	3.1715
λ_1 HS increment, ages 14–22	2.5305	2.8868
λ_1 HS increment, ages 22–30	0.9868	0.7732
λ_1 HS increment, ages 30–38	0.0747	5.9446
λ_1 College base, ages 14–22	5.6717	7.6044
λ_1 College base, ages 22–30	6.0935	7.4359
λ_1 College base, ages 30–38	4.3309	6.0734
<i>Contraceptive-effort effectiveness by ability and age (η)</i>		
η Q2 increment, ages 14–22	0.5596	1.3641
η Q3 increment, ages 14–22	1.0588	1.0861
η Q4 increment, ages 14–22	1.4836	1.0232
η Q2 increment, ages 22–30	1.3559	1.1607
η Q3 increment, ages 22–30	1.1874	1.3191
η Q4 increment, ages 22–30	0.0643	0.2723
η Q2 increment, ages 30–38	1.2492	0.7680
η Q3 increment, ages 30–38	1.0089	1.0574
η Q4 increment, ages 30–38	1.4708	0.6666
<i>Marriage and equivalence scales (ω)</i>		
ω_0 marriage intercept	-0.0115	-0.2106
ω_1 equivalence scale, married	0.2167	0.3910
ω_2 equivalence scale, children	0.0914	0.0156
<i>Child block (production and fixed costs)</i>		
ϕ_k^{HSD} child ability, HSD mother	-0.3004	-0.2738
ϕ_k^{HS} child ability, HS mother	-0.4905	-0.3873
ϕ_k^{BA} child ability, college mother	-0.4662	-0.2424
ξ_{cf} child fixed cost	-0.4591	-0.0688
<i>Mean ability by education (μ)</i>		
μ ability, HSD	0.6372	0.6339
μ ability, HS	0.5498	0.5962
μ ability, College	0.5109	0.5007
<i>Schooling incentives and preferences</i>		
HS allowance (HS education subsidy)	40.1299	26.1049
College allowance (college education subsidy)	73.1557	94.9635
ω_{ch} utility weight on children	1.1822	1.8595
<i>Labor-supply disutility shifters (ψ)</i>		
ψ_ℓ HSD, ages 14–26	-0.0224	-0.0180
ψ_ℓ HSD, ages 30–50	-0.0149	-0.0142
ψ_ℓ HSD, ages 54–62	-0.0173	-0.0167
ψ_ℓ HS, ages 14–26	-0.0055	-0.0097
ψ_ℓ HS, ages 30–50	-0.0042	-0.0050
ψ_ℓ HS, ages 54–62	-0.0116	-0.0108
ψ_ℓ College, ages 14–26	-0.0002	-0.0002
ψ_ℓ College, ages 30–50	-0.0001	-0.0014
ψ_ℓ College, ages 54–62	-0.0071	-0.0081
ψ_{ek} education 1	-0.5430	-0.8806
ψ_{ek} education 2	-1.2873	-0.2042
ψ_{ek} education 3	-0.0545	-0.9948
ϕ_{nk} education 1	0.2500	0.4324
ϕ_{nk} education 2	0.2711	0.4355
ϕ_{nk} education 3	0.2699	0.1653
<i>Shock standard deviations (σ)</i>		
σ_ℓ labor supply shock	0.0091	0.0088
σ_{cd} child ability shock, divorced	0.3550	0.2908
σ_{cg} child ability shock, general	0.2144	0.4911
σ_{cgh} child ability shock, husband	0.0857	0.1019

Notes: This table reports the parameters estimated by Simulated Method of Moments (SMM) for the full model separately on the NLSY79 and NLSY97 cohorts. “HSD,” “HS,” and “College” denote education groups as defined in the data section. Age ranges refer to model periods mapped to ages in the data. Parameters are grouped by economic block: baseline conception risk (λ_h), contraceptive-effort effectiveness (η), marriage and equivalence scales (ω), child block (ϕ_k^e and ξ_{cf}), mean ability by education (μ), schooling incentives (allowances), labor-supply shifters (ψ), and shock standard deviations (σ).

E Computational Details: Solution and Calibration

This appendix documents the numerical solution, simulation, and calibration procedures used to solve and estimate the model. The implementation is in Julia and is modularized into four main scripts: (i) `main_code.jl` (master script for solving and simulating at the estimated parameters), (ii) `vfi_dcegm.jl` (solution algorithm and policy-function construction), (iii) `simulationF.jl` (forward simulation), and (iv) `calibration_hpc.jl` (HPC calibration and optimization).

The overall workflow is:

$$\text{calibration_hpc.jl: } x \mapsto \{\text{solve} \rightarrow \text{simulate} \rightarrow \text{moments} \rightarrow \text{loss}\} \Rightarrow \hat{x},$$

followed by

$$\text{main_code.jl: } \hat{x} \mapsto \{\text{solve} \rightarrow \text{simulate} \rightarrow \text{tables/figures}\}.$$

E.1 State space, grids, and timing

Time is discrete in four-year periods, indexed by $t = 1, \dots, T$. The mapping from period to age is $\text{age}_t = 10 + 4t$, so $t = 1$ corresponds to age 14.

The individual state is

$$s_t \equiv (a_t, \theta, e_t, x_t, m_t, m_{k_t}, k_t, t),$$

where a_t is assets at the beginning of t , θ is cognitive ability type (discrete), e_t is education (dropout / HS / college), x_t is experience (discrete, accumulated when working), m_t is marital status (single/married), m_{k_t} is an indicator for whether the first birth occurred out of marriage, and k_t is child status. In the implementation, $k_t \in \{1, 2, 3\}$ corresponds to: no child; newborn in the current period; and older child in later periods.

The continuous state a_t is discretized on an exogenous grid $\mathcal{A} = \{a^1, \dots, a^{N_a}\}$ with cubic spacing:

$$a_j = a_{\min} + (a_{\max} - a_{\min}) \cdot (j/N_a)^3, \quad j = 0, \dots, N_a.$$

This concentrates grid points near the borrowing constraint where policy functions are steep-

est. Policy functions are stored on \mathcal{A} and evaluated off-grid by linear interpolation in simulation.

Within-period timing and sub-stages. The code solves a three-substage problem within each fertile working period:

1. **Stage 3:** Given marital status and realized fertility outcome (child/no child), the household chooses labor $l_t \in \{0, 1\}$, savings a_{t+1} , consumption c_t , and (if a newborn arrives) child investment i_t .
2. **Stage 2:** Prior to the fertility realization, the household chooses contraception effort s_t which governs pregnancy probability; the stage-2 value integrates stage-3 values over the birth realization.
3. **Stage 1:** If single and eligible to meet, the household draws a meeting opportunity and chooses whether to marry; the stage-1 value integrates the stage-2 value over meeting opportunities and the marriage decision rule.

E.2 Household problem and key first-order conditions

Preferences are CRRA in consumption, $u(c) = c^{1-\rho}/(1 - \rho)$, where ρ is the coefficient of relative risk aversion for the woman. Per-adult-equivalent consumption is implemented via an equivalence-scale denominator

$$\text{den}(m_t, k_t) = 1 + \mathbf{1}\{m_t = \text{married}\}\phi_{ca} + \mathbf{1}\{k_t = 2\}\phi_{ck}.$$

Thus, the child-related equivalence-scale term ϕ_{ck} enters the budget constraint only in the birth period ($k_t = 2$), consistent with the “one-period child in the household” assumption. After the birth period, the state moves from $k_t = 2$ to $k_{t+1} = 3$ (child has left the household), so that $\mathbf{1}\{k_{t+1} = 2\} = 0$ in all subsequent periods.

Let y_t denote disposable (post-tax/post-transfer) income in period t (four-year total). Gross income is transformed by a progressive tax-transfer function:

$$y_t = \tau(\text{gross}_t, m_t) = \lambda \cdot \text{gross}_t^{1-\tau} + T_{m_t},$$

where $\tau = 0.18$ is the progressivity parameter, $\lambda = 0.85$ is the scale parameter, and T_m is the guaranteed minimum income (\$8.606 thousand for singles, \$12.898 thousand for couples, yearly in 2016 dollars).

The stage-3 budget constraint is

$$c_t \cdot \text{den}(m_t, k_t) + i_t + a_{t+1} = (1 + r)a_t + y_t.$$

Child investment subproblem (stage 3, newborn only). When $k_t = 2$ (newborn in period t), child investment enters the continuation value through

$$V_k(i_t) = \omega_0 + \omega_1 i_t^{\omega_2}, \quad \omega_2 < 1.$$

The household's problem is

$$\max_{c_t, i_t} u(c_t) + V_k(i_t) + \beta V_{t+1}(a_{t+1}) \quad \text{s.t.} \quad c_t \cdot \text{den}(m_t, k_t) + i_t + a_{t+1} = (1 + r)a_t + y_t.$$

The first-order condition equates marginal utility per dollar:

$$\frac{u'(c_t)}{\text{den}(m_t, k_t)} = V'_k(i_t) \iff c_t^{-\rho} = \text{den}(m_t, k_t) \omega_1 \omega_2 i_t^{\omega_2 - 1}.$$

Solution method. Given a_{t+1} , the budget constraint implies $c_t \cdot \text{den} + i_t$ = available, where available $\equiv (1 + r)a_t + y_t - a_{t+1}$. Substituting into the FOC yields a single equation in i_t . The code solves this via *bisection* on $i_t \in [10^{-6}, 0.9999 \times \text{available}]$:

1. Compute $c_t(i_t) = (\text{available} - i_t)/\text{den}$.
2. Evaluate FOC residual: $r(i_t) = c_t(i_t)^{-\rho} - \text{den}(m_t, k_t) \omega_1 \omega_2 i_t^{\omega_2 - 1}$.
3. Update bracket: if $r(i_t) < 0$, increase i_t (consumption too high); else decrease.
4. Terminate when $|r(i_t)| < 10^{-10}$ or bracket width $< 10^{-10}$ (max 50 iterations).

The solution is unique because $r(i_t)$ is strictly increasing in i_t : $c_t(i_t)$ is decreasing in i_t , so $u'(c_t(i_t))$ rises, while $V'_k(i_t)$ falls when $\omega_2 < 1$.

Solution method. Given a_{t+1} , the budget constraint implies $c_t \cdot \text{den} + i_t$ = available, where

available $\equiv (1 + r)a_t + y_t - a_{t+1}$. Substituting into the FOC yields a single equation in i_t . The code solves this via *bisection* on $i_t \in [10^{-6}, 0.9999 \times \text{available}]$:

1. Compute $c_t(i_t) = (\text{available} - i_t)/\text{den}$.
2. Evaluate FOC residual: $r(i_t) = c_t(i_t)^{-\rho} - \omega_1 \omega_2 i_t^{\omega_2 - 1}$.
3. Update bracket: if $r(i_t) < 0$, increase i_t (consumption too high); else decrease.
4. Terminate when $|r(i_t)| < 10^{-10}$ or bracket width $< 10^{-10}$ (max 50 iterations).

The solution is unique because $c_t(i_t)$ is decreasing in i_t (budget constraint) and $V'_k(i_t)$ is decreasing in i_t ($\omega_2 < 1$), so $u'(c_t)$ is increasing and $V'_k(i_t)$ is decreasing, guaranteeing a single crossing. The upper bound on investment is determined by the budget constraint.

Contraception choice (stage 2). Let $p_t(s_t)$ be the pregnancy probability. Given stage-3 values with and without a birth, $(V_t^{\text{birth}}, V_t^{\text{nobirth}})$, the stage-2 objective is

$$V_t^{(2)} = p_t(s_t) V_t^{\text{birth}} + (1 - p_t(s_t)) V_t^{\text{nobirth}} - \phi_s s_t,$$

with an interior FOC $p'_t(s_t) (V_t^{\text{birth}} - V_t^{\text{nobirth}}) = \phi_s$. The code uses a closed-form solution for s_t under the implemented $p_t(s)$ specification.

Labor choice with taste shocks. In periods solved by DC-EGM, the labor decision has i.i.d. type-I extreme value taste shocks with scale $\sigma_l(e)$, implying an inclusive value (log-sum) aggregator and a logit work probability:

$$V_t = \sigma_l(e) \log \left(\exp(V_{t,l=0}/\sigma_l(e)) + \exp(V_{t,l=1}/\sigma_l(e)) \right),$$

$$P_t(l=1) = \frac{\exp(V_{t,1}/\sigma_l(e))}{\exp(V_{t,0}/\sigma_l(e)) + \exp(V_{t,1}/\sigma_l(e))}.$$

E.3 Solution algorithm (backward induction)

This section documents the solver `VFI_P_DCEGM` in `vfi_dcegm.jl`. The algorithm proceeds by backward induction, but uses different numerical routines depending on age.

Overview. Let T_R be the number of retired periods, and let T_{NF} denote the number of working periods after fertility ends. The code partitions the horizon into: (i) retirement ($t > T - T_R$), solved by EGM; (ii) non-fertile working ages ($T - T_R - T_{NF} < t \leq T - T_R$), solved by DC-EGM; (iii) fertile ages ($t \leq T - T_R - T_{NF}$), solved by VFI with grid search (plus analytical or one-dimensional inner problems for i_t and s_t).

Algorithm 1 (Retirement, EGM). In retirement, labor is absent and the problem is a standard consumption-saving model with a borrowing constraint. The EGM step for each discrete state (θ, e, m, mk, k) is:

1. Fix the exogenous grid for next-period assets $\mathcal{A} = \{a'\}$.
2. For each $a' \in \mathcal{A}$, compute expected marginal utility next period using the already-solved consumption policy $c_{t+1}(\cdot)$, and invert the Euler equation

$$u'(c_t(a')) = \beta(1 + r) \mathbb{E}[u'(c_{t+1}(a'))]$$

to obtain $c_t(a')$.

3. Use the budget constraint to map $(a', c_t(a'))$ into the endogenous current asset level $a_t(a')$.
4. Interpolate from the endogenous grid back to the exogenous grid, impose the borrowing constraint, and store $c_t(a)$, $a_{t+1}(a)$, and $V_t(a)$.

Algorithm 2 (Non-fertile working ages, DC-EGM). In working ages after fertility ends ($t \in \{T - T_R - T_{NF} + 1, \dots, T - T_R\}$), the household chooses labor $l_t \in \{0, 1\}$ and savings. Because labor is discrete and shocks are extreme value, the continuation value involves an inclusive value and choice probabilities. The code implements DC-EGM following [Iskhakov et al. \(2017\)](#), Algorithm 1.

For each period t (going backward) and each discrete state (θ, e, x, m, mk, k) :

1. Choice-specific EGM step. For each current labor choice $l_t \in \{0, 1\}$:
 - (a) Compute disposable income $y_t(l_t) = \tau(\text{gross}(l_t), m)$ where $\tau(\cdot)$ is the progressive tax-transfer function.

- (b) For each $a' \in \mathcal{A}$ (exogenous next-period asset grid), compute expected marginal utility at $t + 1$:

$$\mathbb{E}_t[u'(c_{t+1})] = \sum_{l'=0}^1 P_{t+1}(l' = 1 \mid a') \cdot u'(c_{t+1,l'}(a')),$$

where $P_{t+1}(l' = 1 \mid a')$ is the work probability from the previous iteration (logit).

- (c) Invert the Euler equation to obtain consumption on the endogenous grid:

$$c_{t,l_t}(a') = [\beta(1+r)\mathbb{E}_t[u'(c_{t+1})]]^{-1/\rho}.$$

- (d) Map to endogenous current assets using the budget constraint:

$$a_{t,l_t}(a') = \frac{c_{t,l_t}(a') \cdot \text{den}(m, k) + a' - y_t(l_t)}{1+r}.$$

- (e) Construct the choice-specific value on the endogenous grid:

$$V_{t,l_t}(a_{t,l_t}(a')) = u(c_{t,l_t}(a')) + \mathbf{1}\{l_t = 1\}\psi_l(t, e) + \beta V_{t+1}(a').$$

2. *Upper envelope.* The endogenous grid $(a_{t,l}, c_{t,l}, V_{t,l})$ may be non-monotonic when labor decisions change discontinuously. Apply the upper-envelope method:

- (a) Sort by endogenous assets $a_{t,l}$.
- (b) Check monotonicity: if $a_{t,l,j+1} \geq a_{t,l,j} - 10^{-10}$ for all j , use direct interpolation.
- (c) Otherwise, for each exogenous grid point $a \in \mathcal{A}$, compute $V_t(a) = \max_j V_{t,l}(\text{segment}_j(a))$ over all segments.

3. *Credit constraint region.* For $a < \min(\{a_{t,l}(a')\})$, set $c_t = (a(1+r) + y_t - \underline{a})/\text{den}$ and $a_{t+1} = \underline{a}$.

4. *Logit aggregation.* Aggregate choice-specific values with Type-I EV taste shocks (scale

$\sigma_l(e))$:

$$V_t(a) = \sigma_l(e) \log(\exp(V_{t,0}(a)/\sigma_l) + \exp(V_{t,1}(a)/\sigma_l)),$$

$$P_t(l=1 | a) = \frac{\exp(V_{t,1}(a)/\sigma_l)}{\exp(V_{t,0}(a)/\sigma_l) + \exp(V_{t,1}(a)/\sigma_l)}.$$

Algorithm 3 (Fertile ages and schooling, VFI with grid search). In fertile ages (and in early schooling periods), the code switches to grid-search VFI because the within-period structure (meeting/marriage, contraception and pregnancy risk, newborn investment, schooling decisions, and experience dynamics) generates non-convexities and additional discrete margins that are not well suited for DC-EGM.

For each fertile period t (going backward) and each discrete state (θ, e, x, m, mk, k) :

1. *Stage 3 (given marital and fertility outcome).* For each labor choice $l_t \in \{0, 1\}$, the code searches over $a_{t+1} \in \mathcal{A}$ and computes implied consumption from the budget. If $k_t = 2$ (newborn), it solves (c_t, i_t) jointly using the FOC (bisection method described above) for each candidate a_{t+1} . It stores the maximizing a_{t+1} , c_t , i_t and the resulting choice-specific value.
2. *Labor aggregation.* For each state, it aggregates across l_t using the log-sum formula with scale $\sigma_l(e)$.
3. *Stage 2 (contraception and pregnancy risk).* For states with no child ($k_t = 1$), it computes V_t^{birth} and V_t^{nobirth} from stage 3 and solves for optimal contraception analytically. It then forms the expected value integrating over the realized birth.
4. *Stage 1 (meeting and marriage).* For eligible singles, it applies the meeting probability $\mu_{t,e}$ and compares the stage-2 value under marriage versus remaining single, generating the marriage policy and the beginning-of-period value.
5. *Schooling decisions.* In the first periods, it solves high-school continuation and college attendance/continuation decisions using choice-specific value comparisons with extreme-value taste shocks.

Numerical details. (i) Grid search is accelerated by breaking when consumption turns negative and by exploiting local monotonicity in a' . (ii) The child-investment inner problem uses bisection with tolerance 10^{-10} and maximum 50 iterations. (iii) All consumption values are floored at 10^{-10} before utility evaluation to prevent numerical overflow.

Convergence and numerical tolerances. The solver employs the following numerical tolerances:

- *Consumption positivity:* $c_t \geq 10^{-10}$ (machine epsilon floor)
- *Child investment FOC:* Bisection terminates when $|u'(c_t) - V'_k(i_t)| < 10^{-10}$ or bracket width $< 10^{-10}$ (maximum 50 iterations)
- *Upper envelope:* Segments are considered monotonic if $a_{t,j+1} - a_{t,j} > -10^{-10}$
- *Interpolation:* Weights clamped to $[0, 1]$ using $w = \min(\max(w, 0), 1)$
- *Logit aggregation:* Uses log-sum-exp trick to prevent overflow: $\log(\sum_j \exp(x_j)) = x_{\max} + \log(\sum_j \exp(x_j - x_{\max}))$

E.4 Forward simulation

The function `simulationF` takes the policy objects produced by `VFI_P_DCEGM` and simulates N life histories. It uses pre-drawn uniform random variables for fertility, meeting, and labor choices to ensure reproducibility across parameter vectors. In early periods, schooling continuation and college continuation/dropout are stage-3 policies that are indexed by the realized fertility outcome $j \in \{k, nk\}$; accordingly, these schooling rules are evaluated after the fertility draw and conditional on the realized j (see Section 4 and Appendix E.3).

Algorithm 4 (Simulation). For each simulated woman $i = 1, \dots, N$:

1. Initialize $(a_1, \theta, e_1, x_1, m_1, mk_1, k_1)$ and store deterministic objects (age mapping, IDs).
2. For $t = 1, \dots, T$:
 - (a) Evaluate policy functions at the current asset level by linear interpolation on \mathcal{A} .

- (b) If eligible and single, realize a meeting draw and apply the marriage decision rule (sub-stage 1).
 - (c) If in fertile ages and without a child, apply the contraception policy, compute $p_t(s_t)$, and realize conception with the fertility draw (sub-stage 2), obtaining $j \in \{k, nk\}$.
 - (d) Apply schooling decisions in early periods using the stage-3 policy rules conditional on the realized j (high-school continuation, college attendance/continuation/dropout).
 - (e) Realize labor supply using $P_t(l = 1)$ and the labor draw. Update experience deterministically when working.
 - (f) Given realized discrete outcomes, update assets using the savings policy; store consumption, income, and other outcomes.
3. After simulating all individuals, compute model moments from simulated histories.

E.5 Calibration (SMM) and optimization

Target moments and loss function. Let $m^{\text{data}} \in \mathbb{R}^{111}$ denote the vector of empirical moments and $m(\vartheta) \in \mathbb{R}^{111}$ the simulated moments under parameter vector ϑ . The SMM loss function is

$$\mathcal{L}(\vartheta) = \sum_{j=1}^{111} w_j \left(\frac{m_j(\vartheta) - m_j^{\text{data}}}{m_j(\vartheta) + 0.01} \right)^2,$$

where all weights $w_j = 1$ (equal weighting). The additive constant 0.01 in the denominator prevents division by zero for near-zero moments and scales the loss to be approximately unit-free. This formulation emphasizes *percentage fit* rather than absolute deviations, which is appropriate given the wide range of moment magnitudes (e.g., pregnancy rates $\sim 0.05\text{--}0.30$ vs. college attendance $\sim 0.10\text{--}0.70$).

Algorithm 5 (SMM objective evaluation). Given a candidate parameter vector ϑ :

1. Map ϑ into model objects (e.g., the conception technology parameters, labor preference/taste-shock scales, meeting probabilities, and child-investment parameters).
2. Solve the model to obtain value and policy functions (Algorithm 1–3).

3. Simulate outcomes (Algorithm 4).
4. Compute $m(\vartheta)$ from simulated histories and return $\mathcal{L}(\vartheta)$.

Global optimization and parallelization. The file `calibration.hpc.jl` runs a global search using differential evolution through `BlackBoxOptim.jl` (variant: `de_rand_1_bin`). The algorithm operates as follows:

1. Initialize 47 parallel workers, each with a perturbed starting parameter vector.
2. Each worker runs an independent differential evolution search with population size 10–15.
3. Terminate when all workers complete their allocated time budget (7 days per worker) or when the loss improvement falls below 10^{-6} for 1000 consecutive evaluations.

E.6 Parameter identification

The model’s 50 calibrated parameters are identified by distinct patterns in the data:

Fertility parameters (λ_h, η). The baseline pregnancy probability matrix λ_h (education \times age) and the ability shifter $\eta(\theta, t)$ are identified from pregnancy rates by education–age–ability cells (28 moments for ability \times age, covering ages 14–38) and contraception use rates (18 moments).

Labor supply ($\psi_l, \psi_{lk}, \sigma_l$). Labor force participation by education-age (36 moments) identifies the deterministic labor disutility ψ_l . The additional disutility with children ψ_{lk} is identified by differences in work rates between mothers and non-mothers at the same age–education. The taste shock scale σ_l controls the smoothness of participation profiles.

Education decisions ($\phi_k^{hsd}, \phi_k^d, \phi_k^{bac}, \xi_{cf}, \sigma_{cd}, \sigma_{cg}, \sigma_{cgh}$). High school dropout (2 moments: conditional on pregnancy at 14), college attendance (4 moments: by ability quartile), and college graduation (2 moments: conditional on pregnancy during college) separately identify the utility costs of education with children (ϕ_k), the cognitive cost of college (ξ_{cf}), and the taste shock scales (σ_c).

Child investment ($\omega_0, \omega_1, \omega_2$). The three child investment utility parameters are identified by: (i) the *level* of investment (moment: mean investment by education), and (ii) the *gradient* across education groups (2 moments: relative investment HS/HSD and College/HSD from [Caucutt and Lochner \(2020\)](#)).

Marriage (μ, ω_{ch}). Marriage rates by education-age (17 moments) identify the meeting probabilities μ by education. The spousal consumption weight ω_{ch} is identified by the joint distribution of marriage and fertility timing.

Other parameters. The terminal utility for remaining childless ϕ_{nk} by education is identified by the fraction of women who never have children, which varies by education. Allowances (*hs_allow*, *coll_allow*) are identified by enrollment rates conditional on assets.

E.7 Computational performance and implementation

Hardware and software. Estimation was performed on a high-performance computing cluster with Intel Xeon Gold 6248R processors (48 cores per node, 3.0 GHz base frequency). The code is implemented in Julia 1.9.3, leveraging multithreading for EGM/DC-EGM steps and distributed parallelism for calibration. Key packages: `Interpolations.jl` (v0.14), `BlackBoxOptim.jl` (v0.6), `Distributed.jl` (standard library).

Solution time. A single model solution at the estimated parameters requires:

- *VFI (backward induction):* \sim 15–20 seconds (30 asset grid points)
- *Simulation (10,000 agents):* \sim 8–12 seconds
- *Total (solve + simulate + moments):* \sim 25–35 seconds per parameter vector

Calibration runtime. The SMM estimation uses differential evolution (`de_rand_1_bin`) with 47 parallel workers, each running independent searches from perturbed starting values. Total calibration time: approximately 8064 CPU-hours (168 hours wall-clock time with 48 cores). The algorithm evaluates approximately 420,0000 parameter vectors before convergence.

Grid density and accuracy. The baseline specification uses $N_a = 30$ asset grid points with cubic spacing: $a_j \propto j^3$ to concentrate points near the borrowing constraint. Robustness checks with $N_a = 50$ yield moment differences $< 0.5\%$ for all targeted statistics, confirming numerical convergence. Child investment is solved analytically via the first-order condition (bisection with tolerance 10^{-10}), avoiding discretization error.

Numerical stability. To ensure stability: (i) All consumption values are floored at 10^{-10} before utility evaluation. (ii) Logit aggregation uses the log-sum-exp trick: $\log(\sum_j \exp(x_j)) = x_{\max} + \log(\sum_j \exp(x_j - x_{\max}))$ to prevent overflow. (iii) Interpolation weights are clamped to $[0, 1]$. (iv) The bisection algorithm for child investment uses robust bracketing with explicit checks for corner solutions.

Computational requirements.

- *Minimal replication:* Single model solution requires < 1 minute on a standard laptop (4 cores, 16GB RAM)
- *Full estimation:* Requires HPC access (48+ cores recommended); wall-clock time 168 hours wall-clock.
- *Memory:* Peak usage $\sim 8\text{GB}$ per worker (solution), $\sim 2\text{GB}$ (simulation)

Random number generation. All stochastic elements (simulation draws for fertility, marriage, labor, education) use pre-generated uniform random variables with fixed seed (4546), ensuring exact replicability across parameter vectors. This design ensures that changes in moments reflect only parameter changes, not simulation noise. Calibration uses pseudo-random perturbations for initial parameter values (seed set per worker ID).

Software dependencies. Core packages with versions: `Parameters.jl` (0.12), `Interpolations.jl` (0.14), `BlackBoxOptim.jl` (0.6), `Distributed.jl` (standard library), `DataFrames.jl` (1.5), `Distributions.jl` (0.25), `CSV.jl` (0.10). Full environment specified in `Project.toml` in the replication package.