

History and Geography of the U.S. Fertility

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We investigate the transition process of the fertility rate in the U.S., and estimate the effect of diffusion on geographic variations in fertility. We provide several measures of local and global spatial correlation to establish the existence of a significant geographic pattern in the data. Moreover, we use a spatial-diffusion model to assess the effect of diffusion in shaping fertility variation across about 400 state economic areas from 1870 to 1930. The variation in fertility levels and the fertility potential for each state economic area are measured. Fertility potential is a spatial-effects variable that summarizes each state economic area's geographic proximity to the influence of other high or low fertility areas. The findings support a diffusionist model of fertility. Even when controlling for demographics and economic variables, fertility levels remain sensitive to fertility level of other SEAs', especially proximate ones. Spatial similarity in fertility can result from the spread of fertility related knowledge, or from the diffusion of changing norms related to family size within marriage.

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