

# Desire, Intention, and Lifestyle Preferences: A Comparative Analysis of Partnered Individuals in Spain

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**Abstract:** This study examines the factors associated with fertility desire and first-birth intentions among childless individuals aged 25-40 in heterosexual partnership in Spain, a country marked by lowest-low fertility, delayed life-course transitions, and persistent gaps between reproductive aspirations and outcomes. We analyse how sociodemographic and family background characteristics, life-course transitions, and lifestyle preferences are associated with desire and intention. Using microdata from the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey (N = 1,645), we estimate logistic regression models for both outcomes and explore interactions between lifestyle preferences and key explanatory variables. Results show that fertility desire is primarily related to age, religious affiliation, education, and family background, while intentions are associated with enabling life-course transitions such as perceived job stability, leaving the parental home, and living with a partner. Lifestyle preferences are also associated with variation in these patterns: family-oriented individuals show a clear positive association with the intention to have a first child during the next three years, even without having completed key life-course transitions, whereas work-oriented individuals display lower desire, but a clear positive association with short-term intentions once stability is achieved. Overall, the findings illustrate the importance of distinguishing motivational from situational stages in reproductive decision-making and point to the potential of work-family balance policies to bridge the gap between reproductive aspirations and their realisation in low-fertility contexts.

**Keywords:** Fertility desire · Reproductive intention · Work-Family · Childlessness · Spain

## 1 Introduction

In Southern Europe, researchers have extensively documented persistently low fertility, delays in family formation, and a significant discrepancy between the number of children individuals desire and the number they have (*Sobotka* 2017; *Beaujouan/Berghammer* 2019; *Beaujouan* 2020). Spain offers a striking example: while the total fertility rate stands at 1.16 children per woman in 2018, the ideal of having two

children remains widespread and the average number of children intended reaches 1.73 according to data from the Spanish Statistical Office (*INE* 2018). This persistent asymmetry between aspirations and realised fertility suggests enduring obstacles to achieving family goals. This gap highlights the importance of understanding the social and structural factors that shape the reproductive decision-making process.

However, inconsistency in the conceptualisation of reproductive decision-making has hindered a clearer understanding of this process (*Philipov/Bernardi* 2012). A further limitation is the scarce engagement of recent studies with existing theoretical and empirical work (*Raybould/Sear* 2021). In research on fertility preferences, both fertility desire and reproductive intention are sometimes used to capture individuals' preferences regarding childbearing (*Hin et al.* 2011). Although more recent research has made important progress in distinguishing between desires and intentions, fewer studies explicitly examine both dimensions simultaneously. In this study, fertility desire refers to the motivational wish to have children, whereas reproductive intention denotes a deliberate decision to act on that desire within a time frame defined as the next three years. This conceptual distinction, grounded in the Traits-Desires-Intentions-Behaviour (TDIB) framework, is central to clarifying the differences between the two phenomena and advancing our understanding of the reproductive decision-making process.

Spain offers a particularly relevant setting to analyse fertility desire and reproductive intention in a context of lowest-low fertility. It combines some of the lowest fertility rates in Europe with persistent delays in key life-course transitions, such as home-leaving and union formation, with marked structural constraints in the labour and housing markets (*González/Jurado-Guerrero* 2006; *del Rey et al.* 2023; *del Rey et al.* 2025). For instance, data from the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey indicate that approximately half of Spanish individuals aged 18-34 still live with their parents (*Esteve/Treviño* 2019). At the same time, shifts in gender relations and work-family arrangements in Spain are rapidly reshaping how people weigh personal aspirations against everyday constraints (*Bueno/García-Román* 2021; *Moreno-Mínguez/Ortega-Gaspar* 2022). This combination of strong structural barriers and evolving social norms makes Spain a useful case for examining how fertility desire and reproductive intention might be associated with different factors within the same social setting.

Building on the distinctive context of Spain, this study aims to deepen our understanding of fertility desire and short-term fertility intention by examining how they differ and relate to distinct individual and social factors. First, it investigates how sociodemographic characteristics, family background, and key life-course transitions are differently associated with desire and intention for a first child in the next three years. Second, it explores how fertility desire and short-term fertility intention vary across lifestyle preferences, drawing on Preference Theory (*Hakim* 2003) and its classification of profiles according to their orientation toward work or family. Finally, the study analyses how these lifestyle preferences interact with sociodemographic, family, and life-course factors, offering a more nuanced perspective on the formation of fertility desire and reproductive intention.

This study contributes to the field of fertility research in several key ways. By distinguishing between fertility desire and short-term fertility intention within a

single analytical framework, it clarifies how distinct stages of reproductive decision-making can be empirically identified and understood. It also advances the theoretical application of Preference Theory by exploring how lifestyle profiles relate differently to desire and intention in contexts where the reconciliation of family life and work is particularly challenging. Finally, by providing updated empirical evidence from a Southern European context marked by persistent low fertility and structural constraints, the study offers valuable insights that extend beyond Spain, informing broader debates on fertility postponement and low fertility in comparable settings.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework and hypotheses; Section 3 presents the data and methods; Section 4 discusses the main findings; and Section 5 concludes with broader implications for research and policy.

## 2 Theoretical background and hypothesis

To address the analytical challenges arising from the conceptual overlap between fertility desire and reproductive intention, the theoretical framework is structured in two parts. First, it draws on the Traits-Desires-Intentions-Behaviour framework (Miller 2011). While the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen 1991) is often used to study reproductive decision-making, its focus lies primarily on intentions and planned actions. In contrast, the TDIB framework allows for a more detailed analysis of the distinction between fertility desire and reproductive intention. Second, the framework incorporates insights from Preference Theory (Hakim 2003), which provides a lens to explore how lifestyle preferences and value systems may shape both terms.

According to the TDIB framework, desire and intention are two sequential but distinct stages in reproductive decision-making. Fertility desire refers to the motivational wish to have a child, shaped by cultural norms, social expectations, and subjective experiences. In contrast, reproductive intentions reflect a decision to act on that desire. They involve planning and deliberation, considering factors such as economic conditions, partnership status, and timing (Miller 2011). This staged process presents methodological challenges, since available datasets often provide only partial insight into the transitions between desires, intentions, and actions, particularly over time. Despite these limitations, empirical research following the TDIB framework has shown that fertility desire is a key antecedent of reproductive intention (Chen/Yip 2017; Mynarska/Rytel 2018).

Empirical studies analysing fertility desire and reproductive intention separately reinforce the conceptual distinction between the two. Although most research on fertility desire focuses on ideal family size, age consistently emerges as a key determinant, with desired fertility declining as individuals grow older (Iacovou/Tavares 2011; Gray *et al.* 2013). Regarding gender, findings vary depending on the variables considered. Nitsche and Hayford (2020) found no gender differences when controlling for age. However, differences appeared when considering education: highly educated women who desired children were less likely to become mothers than their less educated counterparts – a pattern not observed among men.

Similarly, *Kuhnt et al.* (2017) identified gender-based differences in fertility desires, shaped by distinct factors – such as partnership status for men, and satisfaction with economic situation for women. With respect to education, *Berrington and Pattaro* (2014) reported a positive effect of educational attainment on fertility ideals in early adulthood, though intended family size later in life remains unclear. They also highlighted a strong influence of family background: individuals from larger families tend to express higher fertility desires in early adulthood. Finally, *Heiland et al.* (2008) confirmed the importance of early socialisation and family background and found a positive effect of religious affiliation on early fertility desires.

In the case of reproductive intentions, religiosity also exerts a positive influence, although its effect tends to weaken with age (*Buber-Ennser/Berghammer* 2021; *Bein et al.* 2023). By contrast, economic conditions and contextual factors show a more consistent and widespread impact. *Beaujouan and Berghammer* (2019) link the high unemployment rates in Southern European countries to larger gaps between intended and actual childlessness. Their influence can transcend the effect of age, as older individuals facing economic uncertainty are often less likely to intend childbearing than younger ones (*Vignoli et al.* 2020). *Novelli et al.* (2021) observed no gender differences in reproductive intentions with respect to age but found variations linked to employment status. In their study, the couple's employment situation played a more significant role in shaping men's intentions than women's. Similarly, *Fahlén and Oláh* (2018) and *Busetta et al.* (2019) reported that economic uncertainty had a stronger negative effect on men. However, *Matera et al.* (2023) suggested the opposite: women appeared more cautious in expressing reproductive intentions under uncertain economic conditions. *Comolli* (2023) finds that the effect of economic uncertainty on the intention to have a child may depend on parity. Although results diverge depending on variables considered, the effect of socioeconomic conditions on reproductive intentions appears more robust than on fertility desires. In this regard, *Hu and Chiang* (2021) found that income had no significant impact on fertility desire during transition to parenthood, due to limited awareness of actual childrearing costs. Finally, housing stability also supports more positive reproductive intentions (*Du et al.* 2024).

These contextual factors shaping reproductive intentions relate to key preconditions for parenthood, such as leaving the parental home or securing job stability (*González/Jurado-Guerrero* 2006). The TDIB framework holds that such life-course transitions can be particularly relevant during the transition to parenthood for translating fertility desires into reproductive intentions. In Spain, as in other Southern European countries, the delay of these transitions can contribute to a widening gap between fertility desire and reproductive intention, especially at older ages considering parenthood postponement. Empirical evidence from Spain supports this trend: *García-Gómez et al.* (2022) find that after age 40, this gap becomes significantly pronounced, reflecting increasing constraints related to delayed life transitions. Additionally, higher educational attainment is associated with stronger reproductive intentions at older ages (*Testa* 2014). This also reflects a tendency to postpone reproductive intentions to later stages in the life course. Overall, while factors such as gender or religiosity may produce inconsistent findings,

the TDIB framework – together with recent research – helps to identify distinct sets of variables affecting desire and intention.

H1. We expect that among childless partnered individuals in Spain, sociodemographic and family background characteristics will be more consistently associated with fertility desire than with three-year first-birth intention, whereas life-course transitions will be more closely associated with short-term intentions than with desires.

While several factors are recognised as important in shaping fertility desires and intentions separately, lifestyle preferences within these stages of reproductive decision-making have received limited empirical attention. Nevertheless, lifestyle preferences are considered important for understanding fertility behaviour, as they reflect enduring orientations toward work or family, and are closely linked to broader life goals and value systems that shape reproductive choices (*Lesthaeghe* 1994). According to Preference Theory, lifestyle preferences are a key determinant of fertility behaviour in societies where individuals – particularly women – can freely choose among competing life goals (*Hakim* 2003). Within this framework, individuals can be broadly classified into three attitudinal profiles: family-oriented, work-oriented, and adaptive. Family-oriented individuals prioritise parenthood and are more likely to pursue it; work-oriented individuals focus on career and tend to have fewer children; and adaptive individuals seek to balance both spheres, adjusting reproductive plans in response to changing circumstances. This framework remains relevant in Spain due to the weak welfare state, which makes it difficult to balance work and family life, as well as the prevalence of single-income and dual-income families (*Bueno* 2020; *Bueno/Brinton* 2019; *del Rey et al.* 2023; *del Rey et al.* 2025; *Lozano et al.* 2024).

An empirical study by *Hakim* (2002) based on a national British survey identified these profiles. Her findings suggested that lifestyle preferences were key predictors of both employment patterns and fertility outcomes. Most subsequent research analysing this dimension of reproductive decision-making does not use *Hakim's* typology explicitly. Instead, studies often examine related aspects such as workplace conditions or gender-role attitudes in relation to either fertility desires or reproductive intentions. For example, *Galovan et al.* (2015) find that workplace policies promoting work-life balance – such as flexible hours and supportive parental leave – encourage fertility desires. Using European Social Survey data, *Begall and Mills* (2011) show that higher perceived job control and lower job strain are associated with stronger fertility intentions, particularly among childless women. *Matysiak et al.* (2016) further demonstrate that work-family conflict moderates the link between intentions and actual behaviour, as expected from within the TDIB framework.

Other studies present mixed or contradictory findings that call into question the explanatory potential of Preference Theory. *Kan* (2007) found partial support for the theory: family-oriented women maintained strong domestic attitudes over time, while work-oriented women showed signs of discontinuity in their careers. At the same time, other authors argue that lifestyle preferences alone are insufficient to explain reproductive decision-making. *Verweij et al.* (2021), for example, found that working women are more likely to remain childless, but not because of low

desire. Instead, education and work were identified as constraints that hinder the fulfilment of fertility desires. These results have also been observed in the case of reproductive intentions in low fertility contexts. In this regard, *Yu and Kuo (2017)* found a positive association between jobs involving potential family-work conflict and the intention to marry and have children. Finally, *Vitali et al. (2009)*, using data from several European countries, replicated Hakim's profiles and found that while lifestyle preferences were associated with actual fertility outcomes, they were less predictive of intentions.

Additionally, Spanish evidence further illustrates the complexity of the relationship between preferences, constraints, and reproductive decision-making. *Bueno and García-Román (2021)* find that dual-earner couples exhibit fertility patterns like those of traditional single-earner households, indicating that economic security and role negotiation may matter more than declared orientations. Moreover, recent decades have seen significant shifts in gender relations in Spain, including rising female labour-force participation and more diverse family arrangements. These changes have redefined the terms of the work-family balance, now increasingly shaped by new masculinities and growing male involvement in caregiving roles (*Moreno-Mínguez/Ortega-Gaspar 2022*).

Despite the limitations and mixed findings discussed above, Preference Theory warrants empirical testing as a framework for examining how long-term lifestyle orientations may shape both fertility desire and short-term fertility intention. Although widely cited, Hakim's attitudinal classification has rarely been assessed in relation to fertility desire, and even for intentions, empirical evidence remains limited, particularly in Southern European contexts. Revisiting this framework is therefore timely, particularly considering recent shifts in gender roles and family dynamics in the Spanish context. As emphasised in the TDIB framework, fertility desire reflects a motivational and abstract dimension of reproductive decision-making. Fertility desire can be shaped by broader cultural and value-based orientations, such as religiosity (*Heiland et al. 2008*). Preference Theory complements this view by conceptualising lifestyle preferences as long-term values guiding individuals' life goals, including reproductive decision-making. Since fertility desires express general motivations rather than concrete plans, they are expected to show a stronger association with lifestyle preferences. At the same time, empirical evidence, including *Vitali et al. (2009)*, suggests that lifestyle preferences show little or no association with reproductive intentions. As a result, lifestyle preferences are expected to be more strongly associated with fertility desires than with reproductive intentions.

H2. We expect that lifestyle preferences will have a stronger positive association with fertility desire than with three-year first-birth intention. Specifically, family-oriented individuals will report the highest probability of desire, followed by adaptive and work-oriented individuals. Finally, differences in intentions between profiles are expected to be minimal or nonsignificant.

### 3 Data and methods

#### 3.1 Data selection

This analysis uses microdata from the 2018 Fertility Survey conducted by the Spanish Statistical Office. A key strength of this survey is the inclusion of a specific section that clearly distinguishes between fertility desires and short-term reproductive intentions, which is central to the aims of this study. Unlike previous editions, the 2018 survey includes both women and men, allowing fertility desires and intentions among men to be considered in the analysis. While the relatively small sample size of men reduces the scope for systematic gender-based comparisons, their inclusion extends the analysis beyond the traditional focus on women in studies of fertility desires and intentions.

The sample was selected based on three main criteria: age, partnership status, and parity. The analysis focuses on individuals aged 25 to 40 who are in heterosexual partnerships and have no children. Although partners are not part of the analytical sample, respondents do describe them; all partners are childless, and 77.3 percent are also aged 25-40. This age range broadly corresponds to a life stage in which the transition to parenthood is often considered, though not necessarily realised. Furthermore, this sample reflects key life-course patterns in Spain, where late home-leaving and delayed union formation contribute to a prolonged transition to adulthood. The decision to restrict the analysis to partnered individuals is motivated by the fact that having a partner remains a key precondition for parenthood in low-fertility contexts such as Spain (*Baizán et al. 2003; Mynarska et al. 2015*). This restriction ensures that the analysis focuses on individuals for whom parenthood is a feasible option, making the results more specific and enhancing the robustness of the findings. As a result, individuals without a partner – who represent a substantial share of the original sample (52.5 percent of men and 40.9 percent of women) – are excluded from the analysis. The final analytical sample comprises 1,645 observations.

#### 3.2 Measures

In keeping with the TDIB framework, this study analyses two distinct dependent variables, each capturing a different stage of the reproductive decision-making process. The first variable, fertility desire, measures the general wish to have children (*Would you have liked, or would you like to have children?* [Survey reference: Q.7.5.1]). The second, short-term intention, reflects a concrete plan to have children within the next three years (*Do you intend to have children in the next three years?* [Survey reference: Q.7.5.11]). Both variables are coded dichotomously (yes/no), as the available data do not allow for the examination of finer gradations in fertility desires or intentions. However, as these measures are self-reported, they may be subject to reporting bias, including social desirability or recall errors, which should be considered when interpreting the findings.

As shown in Table 1, 79 percent of individuals express positive fertility desire, while only 58 percent report a positive intention. When examining the distribution across

**Tab. 1:** Distribution of fertility desire and short-term intention for childless individuals aged 25-40 in heterosexual partnership in Spain

Fertility desire (%)	Short-term intention (%)		Total	
	No	Yes	%	N
No	17.9	2.9	20.7	341
Yes	24.3	54.9	79.3	1304
Total	42.2	57.8	100	1645

Source: Authors' analysis based on survey data (Fertility Survey, *INE* 2018)

both variables, it is notable that 24 percent of those with positive fertility desire do not intend to have children within the next three years. Finally, only 55 percent of the sample show both a positive desire and intention. These differences highlight that even among partnered, childless adults, structural or situational barriers in Spain may limit the translation of desires into intentions.

The independent variables are grouped into three sets (sociodemographic and family background variables, life-course transition variables and lifestyle preferences). The first two sets correspond to Hypothesis 1, including variables commonly used in empirical fertility research and aligned with the TDIB framework. The third set relates to Hypothesis 2 and includes attitudinal profiles based on work-family orientation.

First, sociodemographic and family background variables are included in the analysis. Within sociodemographic characteristics, the study includes gender (men/women), age (continuous), higher educational attainment (yes/no), and religious affiliation. This last variable was coded based on the question "What is your religion, if you have one?". Categories distinguish between religious, if respondents considered themselves to belong to any religion; non-religious, if they answered "None"; and no response. For family background, parental divorce (yes/no) and number of siblings (none, one, or two or more) were considered.

Second, life-course transition variables include perceived job stability (never stable, stable for two years or less, stable for more than two years), whether the respondent has left the parental home (yes/no), and living with a partner (yes/no). Perceived job stability was based on the question *At what age do you consider you reached a stable job situation?* We computed years in stable employment and classified them as "Never stable", "Stable  $\leq 2$  years", and "Stable  $> 2$  years", using a two-year threshold to distinguish recent from more consolidated stability. Rather than focusing solely on isolated socioeconomic indicators, this approach emphasises life-course transitions, offering a more dynamic understanding of how timing and sequencing of key events can be associated with individuals' transition to parenthood (Venne/Hannay 2023).

Third, lifestyle preferences are captured through attitudinal profiles reflecting orientations towards work and family roles. This categorical variable is based on four items measuring agreement with statements on gendered roles in work and family life (Vitali et al. 2009): "A woman has to have children to be fulfilled"; "For a woman,

family should be a higher priority than her career"; "A working mother can have just as close a relationship with her child as a mother who does not work"; and "Taking care of the home and family is just as fulfilling as paid work" [Survey references: 10.3.3; 10.3.8; 10.3.10; 10.3.12]. Each of the four attitudinal items was measured on a three-point ordinal scale, distinguishing between agreement, neither agreement nor disagreement, and disagreement. For analytical purposes, all items were recoded to ensure a common directional scale ranging from work-oriented to family-oriented responses.

Based on respondents' combined answers across the four items, lifestyle orientation profiles were derived by examining response patterns across the statements. Individuals were classified as family-oriented when at least three out of the four items reflected family-oriented responses, allowing for a limited number of neutral or work-oriented answers. Conversely, respondents were classified as work-oriented when at least three items reflected work-oriented responses, again allowing for some deviation. All remaining response patterns – characterised by mixed orientations or the absence of a clear majority – were classified as adaptive. This category captures respondents whose orientations towards work and family roles are not clearly polarised and may reflect greater flexibility or ambivalence.

Rather than reproducing *Hakim's* original typology, this classification captures respondents' normative orientations toward gendered work-family roles, which are interpreted as indicative of broader work-family value orientations relevant to reproductive decision-making. Although most of the items refer explicitly to women, the indicator is applied to both male and female respondents. Gender is not used to define the lifestyle profiles themselves, but is included analytically to examine potential heterogeneity in the associations between lifestyle orientations and fertility desire or short-term intentions. Some degree of gendered bias in the measurement of preferences cannot be entirely ruled out, as attitudinal items may reflect prevailing normative expectations rather than stable individual goals (*McRae* 2003).

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of the lifestyle preferences indicator on fertility desire and *short-term* intention by gender for this sample. A greater proportion of women report a positive desire and intention to have a first child compared to men. Among women, the distribution of lifestyle preferences follows a clear gradient: the proportion of women with a positive desire range from 76 percent to 89 percent across profiles, while intentions range from 53 percent to 73 percent. Among men, this pattern is less consistent: family-oriented men show lower desire than other profiles, and adaptive men report lower intentions than expected from the gradient. Cross-gender differences are modest, with the most notable gap appearing among the family-oriented group, where the proportion of women with a positive desire and intention is clearly greater. Despite some deviations, gender differences in the distribution of lifestyle profiles and fertility preferences remain moderate and do not preclude a joint analysis. Nevertheless, the smaller male sample size does not allow firm conclusions regarding men.

Finally, the models include a set of control variables to account for additional relevant socioeconomic factors that may be associated with fertility desire and intention: employment status (public sector worker, private sector worker, self-

**Tab. 2:** Distribution of fertility desires and intentions by lifestyle preferences and gender among childless individuals aged 25-40 in heterosexual partnership in Spain (N = 1645)

	Lifestyle preferences						Total			
	Work		Adaptive		Family		%		N	
	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
<i>Fertility desire</i>										
No	26.0	23.9	18.2	17.4	29.6	10.8	23.2	20.3	59	282
Yes	74.0	76.1	81.8	82.6	70.4	89.2	76.8	79.7	195	1109
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	254	1391
<i>Short-term intention</i>										
No	45.0	47.1	49.1	37.1	40.9	26.7	46.1	41.5	117	577
Yes	55.0	52.9	50.9	62.9	59.1	73.3	53.9	58.5	137	814
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	254	1391

Note: M = Men, W = Women

Source: Authors' analysis based on survey data (Fertility Survey, *INE* 2018)

employed or entrepreneur, unemployed, student, other), monthly income level (less than €1500, €1500-2500, more than €2500), housing regime (rented or owned), and urbanisation status. This latter variable is coded as urban or non-urban based on the official classification of municipalities by the INE, with urban areas defined as those with more than 10,000 inhabitants. The distribution of the sample across these measures is presented in Table 3.

### 3.3 Analytical strategy

To examine how individual characteristics relate to reproductive desire and intentions, two logistic regression models were estimated: one for the desire to have a first child, and another for the intention to do so within the next three years. While the conceptual distinction between desire and intention has been discussed earlier, analysing them in parallel using the same sample and set of independent variables allows for a direct comparison of how different factors operate at these stages of the decision-making process.

Predicted probabilities were calculated to examine interactions between lifestyle profiles (family, adaptive, and work orientations) and selected variables from the three analytical blocks: sociodemographic and family background (gender, religious affiliation and number of siblings), and life-course transitions (expected job stability, leaving the parental home, and living with a partner). These variables were selected based on their documented relevance in previous studies on fertility desire and intention, as outlined in Section 2. This approach allows to explore patterns of association between lifestyle preferences and these variables across these two stages of reproductive decision-making.

**Tab. 3:** Distribution of independent variables by fertility desire and intention for childless partnered individuals aged 25-40 in Spain

	Fertility desire		Short-term intention		Total	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	%	N
<i>Gender</i>						
Men	23.2	76.8	46.1	53.9	15.4	254
Women	20.3	79.7	41.5	58.5	84.6	1391
<i>Educational attainment: higher education</i>						
No	22.6	77.4	42.8	57.2	48.8	802
Yes	19.0	81.0	41.6	58.4	51.2	843
<i>Urbanisation status</i>						
Not urban	20.9	79.1	40.0	60.0	46.5	765
Urban	20.6	79.4	44.1	55.9	53.5	880
<i>Religious affiliation</i>						
Religious	27.2	72.8	49.9	50.1	35.9	591
No religious	16.3	83.7	36.2	63.8	53.0	872
No answer	20.9	79.1	45.6	54.4	11.1	182
<i>Parental divorce</i>						
No	20.1	79.9	41.1	58.9	82.7	1360
Yes	23.9	76.1	47.4	52.6	17.3	285
<i>Number of siblings</i>						
0	28.9	71.1	48.9	51.1	11.6	190
1	19.7	80.3	42.8	57.2	61.7	1015
2 or more	19.5	80.5	38.0	62.0	26.7	440
<i>Employment status</i>						
Manager	19.7	80.3	37.6	62.4	13.9	229
Private employee	20.6	79.4	41.0	59.0	48.0	790
Public employee	18.1	81.9	32.1	67.9	13.4	221
Student	29.1	70.9	69.1	30.9	6.7	110
Unemployed	18.7	81.3	46.1	53.9	11.7	193
Other	24.5	75.5	47.1	52.9	6.2	102
<i>Household income</i>						
<1500€	20.6	79.4	45.3	54.7	35.9	591
1500€-2500€	21.3	78.7	41.9	58.1	31.9	525
>2500€	20.2	79.8	38.9	61.1	32.2	529
<i>Perceived job stability</i>						
Never stable	21.3	78.7	49.8	50.2	55.3	909
2 years or less	19.7	80.3	38.5	61.5	14.5	239
More than 2	20.1	79.9	30.0	70.0	30.2	497
<i>Living arrangement</i>						
Owner	19.2	80.8	38.8	61.2	26.9	1202
Not owner	21.3	78.7	43.4	56.6	73.1	443
<i>Left parental home</i>						
No	22.1	77.9	56.4	43.6	32.2	550
Yes	20.1	79.9	35.4	64.6	67.8	1115

**Tab. 3:** Continuation

	Fertility desire		Short-term intention		Total	N
	No	Yes	No	Yes	%	
<i>Living with partner</i>						
No	21.4	78.6	51.7	48.3	49.7	818
Yes	20.1	79.9	32.8	67.2	50.3	827
<i>Lifestyle preference</i>						
Work	24.2	75.8	46.9	53.1	50.6	832
Adaptive	17.6	82.4	39.1	60.9	39.5	649
Family	15.9	84.1	30.5	69.5	10.0	164
Total	20.7	79.3	42.2	57.8	100	1645

Source: Authors' analysis based on survey data (Fertility Survey, *INE* 2018)

## 4 Results

Table 4 presents the results from logistic regression models for fertility desires and short-term intentions among childless and partnered individuals in Spain. The results reveal differences in the statistical significance of the sets of explanatory variables. Sociodemographic and family background factors – such as age, religious affiliation, education, and number of siblings – are generally significantly associated with fertility desire but show weaker or no associations with intentions. In contrast, life-course transitions – including leaving the parental home, living with a partner, and perceived job stability – are only significantly associated with short-term intentions.

Among sociodemographic and family background variables, age, educational attainment, and having at least one sibling are significantly associated with fertility desires but not with short-term intentions. In keeping with previous research, fertility desire declines as individuals grow older (*Iacovou/Tavares* 2011; *Gray et al.* 2013). Having at least one sibling and higher educational attainment show a positive and statistically significant association with fertility desire, which is also consistent with previous research (*Berrington/Pattaro* 2014). Notably, coming from a large family (two or more siblings) is significantly associated with both desires and intentions, although the estimated coefficients and statistical significance are higher for fertility desires (0.586\*\* vs. 0.403\*). Religious affiliation also shows a positive and statistically significant association with both fertility desires and intentions.

Although gender does not reach statistical significance in the model for fertility desires, it is significantly associated with short-term intentions, with women being more likely to intend having a child in the next three years. This result aligns with earlier findings on fertility desire (*Nitsche/Hayford* 2020) and partially contrasts with previous research reporting no gender differences in reproductive intentions (*Novelli et al.* 2021; *Matera et al.* 2023).

In turn, life-course transition variables – such as perceived job stability, leaving the parental home, and living with a partner – are significantly associated only with

**Tab. 4:** Logit coefficients of regression models on fertility desire (model 1) and reproductive intention (model 2) for childless individuals 25-40 in heterosexual partnership in Spain

M1 ref.: No fertility desires M2 ref.: No reproductive intentions within 3 years	M1: Fertility desire	M2: Short-term reproductive intention
Constant	2.052*** (0.555)	-1.768*** (0.482)
Gender (ref.: Men)		
Women	0.119 (0.173)	0.311* (0.151)
Age	-0.067*** (0.016)	0.013 (0.013)
Educational attainment: higher education (ref.: No)		
Yes	0.293* (0.138)	0.093 (0.118)
Religious affiliation (ref.: No religious)		
Religious	0.633*** (0.137)	0.516*** (0.117)
No answer	0.359- (0.215)	0.175 (0.184)
Number of siblings (ref.: No siblings)		
1	0.577** (0.186)	0.268 (0.171)
2 or more	0.586** (0.210)	0.403* (0.189)
Employment status (ref.: Private Employee)		
Manager	0.104 (0.194)	0.214 (0.163)
Public Employee	0.148 (0.204)	0.380* (0.171)
Student	-0.556* (0.258)	-0.571* (0.242)
Unemployed	0.170 (0.230)	0.135 (0.186)
Other	-0.239 (0.266)	-0.250 (0.232)
Perceived job stability (ref.: Never stable)		
2 years or less	-0.052 (0.201)	0.357* (0.165)
More than 2 years	0.073 (0.166)	0.494*** (0.140)
Left parental home (ref.: No)		
Yes	0.153 (0.171)	0.405** (0.142)

**Tab. 4:** Continuation

M1 ref.: No fertility desires M2 ref.: No reproductive intentions within 3 years	M1: Fertility desire	M2: Short-term reproductive intention
Living with a partner (ref.: No)		
Yes	0.112 (0.154)	0.457*** (0.129)
Lifestyle preferences (ref.: Work-oriented)		
Adaptive	0.425** (0.139)	0.303** (0.116)
Family-oriented	0.538* (0.241)	0.719*** (0.199)

Note: N = 1645 – Childless individuals aged 25-40 in heterosexual partnership  
Control variables: Urbanisation status, parental divorce, household income and living arrangements

p<0.001 '\*\*\*\*' p<0.01 '\*\*\*' p<0.05 '\*\*' p<0.1 '.' p<1 (Significance codes)

Source: Authors' analysis based on survey data (Fertility Survey, *INE* 2018)

short-term intentions. These variables show no statistically significant associations with fertility desires, in keeping with the findings of *Hu and Chiang* (2021). Consolidated job stability (more than two years of stable employment) and living with a partner are positively associated with short-term intentions, while leaving the parental home shows smaller but still positive associations with the intention to have a child in the next three years (*Du et al.* 2024). Overall, short-term intentions tend to be higher among individuals who have experienced key life-course transitions, as these transitions capture contextual characteristics and material circumstances that are associated with whether they consider themselves ready to act on their fertility goals. The significant association of current employment status is consistent with this interpretation: coefficients are larger for public employees compared to private-sector workers, and lower for students. Its association is still weaker than that of other life-course transitions, highlighting the importance of broader transition processes during the move towards parenthood in Spain, consistent with previous research in this context (*del Rey et al.* 2023; *del Rey et al.* 2025).

These findings provide empirical support for the TDIB framework (*Miller* 2011) by showing that variables associated with fertility desires and short-term intentions differ in systematic ways. Analysing both outcomes within the same modelling strategy reveals that background characteristics are more associated with fertility desires, whereas reproductive intentions are strongly associated with life-course transitions. However, this distinction is not clear-cut, as religious affiliation or coming from a large family also shows significant associations with reproductive intentions. Overall, the analysis is consistent with Hypothesis 1, showing that these stages of the reproductive decision-making process are associated with distinct dimensions of individual and contextual factors.

Finally, the estimations for lifestyle preferences reveal a differentiated association with fertility desires and short-term intentions. Although lifestyle preferences are

associated with both outcomes, the patterns vary across stages of the reproductive decision-making process. In the case of fertility desires, both adaptive (0.425\*) and family-oriented profiles (0.538\*) are positively associated, with relatively similar magnitudes. By contrast, for reproductive intentions, the association is more pronounced for family-oriented individuals (0.719\*\*\*) than for those with adaptive profiles (0.303\*\*).

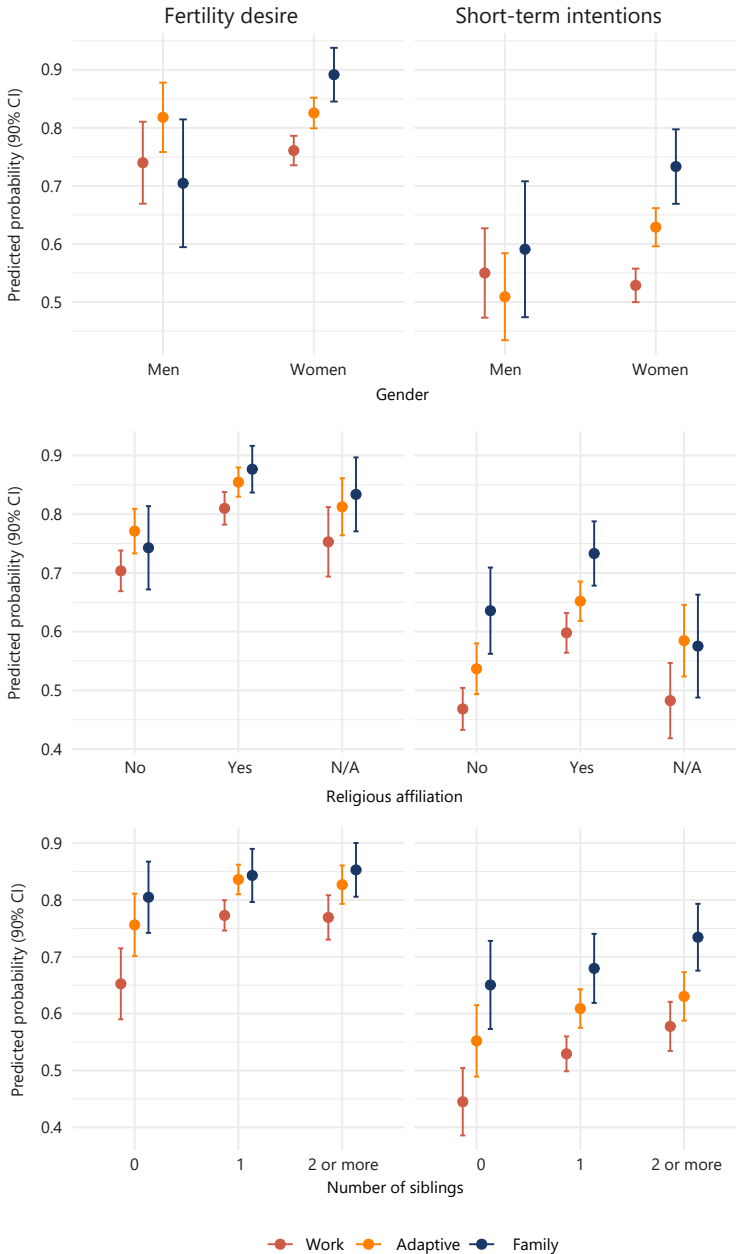
This pattern provides only partial support for Hypothesis 2 and diverges from earlier findings (*Vitali et al.* 2009). At the same time, the stronger association between lifestyle preferences and intentions among family-oriented individuals is more consistent with previous evidence highlighting the role of work-family balance constraints in shaping reproductive decision-making (*Yu/Kuo* 2017; *Verweij et al.* 2021). These results indicate that the observed associations between lifestyle preferences and fertility outcomes vary across stages, and the predicted probabilities presented below – both within and between lifestyle profiles – provide a more detailed view of these patterns.

Figure 1 presents predicted probabilities of fertility desire and short-term reproductive intention across lifestyle profiles by gender, religious affiliation, and number of siblings. The figure shows clear differences across lifestyle profiles among women for both outcomes, whereas no statistically significant differences are observed among men. Differences associated with religious affiliation and number of siblings are more limited and tend to appear only for specific lifestyle profiles. Overall, differences between lifestyle profiles are more clearly observed for reproductive intention than for fertility desire.

Gender displays a distinct pattern in the association between lifestyle profiles, fertility desire, and short-term reproductive intention. Among women, statistically significant differences across lifestyle profiles are observed for both outcomes, in line with earlier evidence documenting heterogeneity in women's orientations toward work and family and its relevance for fertility-related outcomes (*Hakim* 2002, 2003). Work-oriented women show the lowest predicted probabilities of desiring and intending to have a first child within the next three years, whereas family-oriented women display the highest probabilities, particularly for reproductive intention. Among men, differences across lifestyle profiles are not statistically significant for either outcome, although these results should be interpreted with caution given the smaller male sample size.

Religious affiliation and number of siblings show similar patterns across lifestyle profiles. For fertility desire, religiosity is positively associated with higher predicted probabilities across all lifestyle profiles, consistent with earlier findings (*Heiland et al.* 2008). In contrast, coming from a large family shows no significant association among family-oriented individuals. For reproductive intention, these associations are more restricted: being religious is positively associated only among work-oriented and adaptive individuals, while a positive association of coming from a large family is observed only among work-oriented individuals. Importantly, particularly among individuals from large families, work-oriented individuals display a considerably weaker association with short-term fertility intentions than adaptive and family-oriented individuals.

**Fig. 1:** Predicted probabilities of desired fertility (left) and short-term reproductive intention (right) by gender, religious affiliation, and number of siblings for childless individuals aged 25-40 in heterosexual partnership in Spain, considering lifestyle preferences (N = 1645)



Source: Authors' analysis based on survey data (Fertility Survey, INE 2018)

Taken together, Figure 1 indicates that fertility desire and short-term reproductive intention are associated with lifestyle profiles and background characteristics in different ways. Overall, in keeping with the results reported in Table 4, being religious and coming from a large family are associated with a higher probability of both desiring and intending to have a first child within the next three years across lifestyle profiles. However, differences between profiles are more persistent for reproductive intention than for fertility desire, with work-oriented individuals remaining clearly differentiated from adaptive and family-oriented individuals, particularly among women.

Figure 2 presents predicted probabilities of fertility desire and short-term reproductive intention across lifestyle profiles by perceived job stability, leaving the parental home, and living with a partner. Overall, clear between-group differences across lifestyle profiles emerge, particularly for work-oriented individuals. Within-group variation related to life-course transitions is more pronounced for reproductive intention than for fertility desire, consistent with earlier findings on the stronger role of socioeconomic conditions for reproductive intentions (*Hu/Chiang 2021; Comolli 2023*).

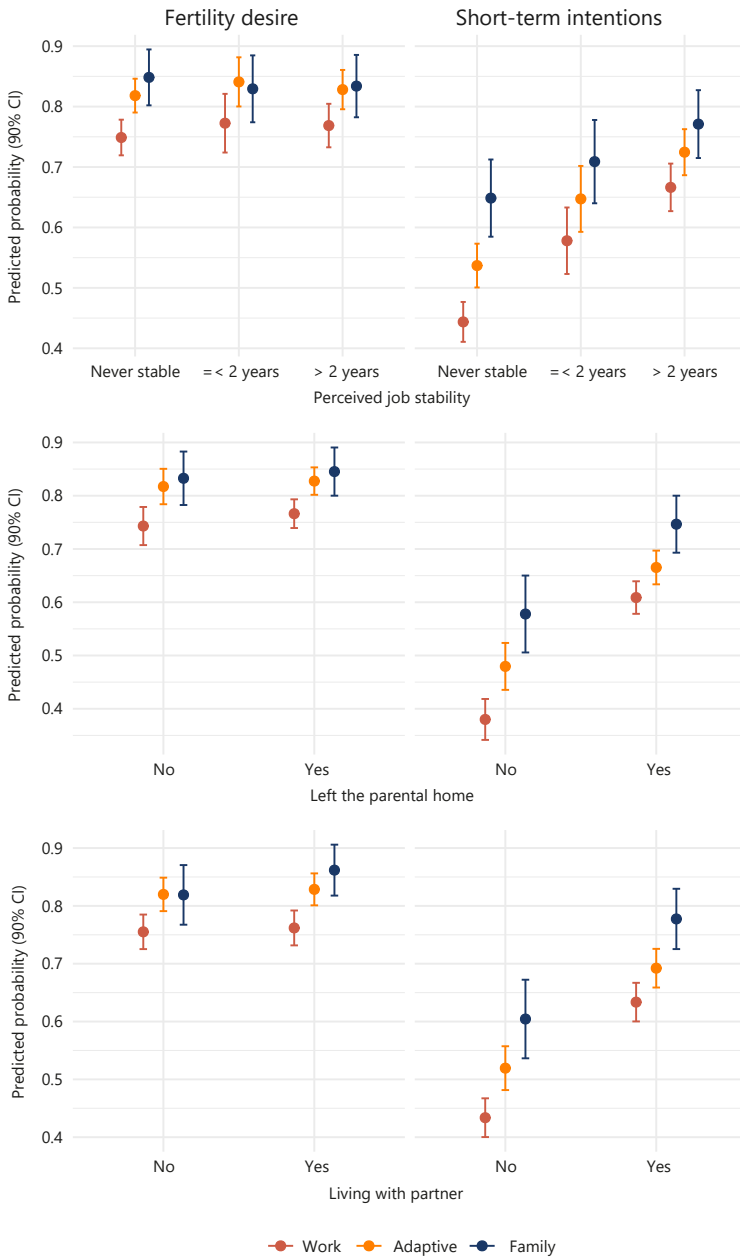
For fertility desire, differences across lifestyle profiles are mainly observed between groups. Work-oriented individuals display significantly lower predicted probabilities of desiring a first child than adaptive and family-oriented individuals when they have not achieved perceived job stability, and these lower probabilities persist even when they have left the parental home or are living with a partner. In contrast, within-group differences associated with life-course transitions are limited.

For short-term reproductive intention, perceived job stability shows a pattern combining between-group and within-group differences. Among individuals who have never achieved perceived job stability, a clear gradient across lifestyle profiles emerges, with work-oriented individuals displaying significantly lower predicted probabilities of intending to have a first child than adaptive and family-oriented individuals. Within lifestyle profiles, achieving perceived job stability is associated with higher predicted probabilities of reproductive intention among work-oriented and adaptive individuals, whereas no statistically significant change is observed among family-oriented individuals. This result accords with evidence highlighting the importance of economic security as a precondition for reproductive intention (*Fahlén/Oláh 2018; Busetta et al. 2019; Du et al. 2024*).

Leaving the parental home and living with a partner show similar patterns for reproductive intention. Work-oriented individuals who have not experienced these transitions display significantly lower predicted probabilities than individuals in the other lifestyle profiles. At the same time, higher predicted probabilities are observed across all profiles among those who have left the parental home or are living with a partner. Despite these within-group differences, contrasts between lifestyle profiles remain statistically significant for work-oriented individuals.

Overall, Figure 2 highlights the coexistence of within-group and between-group dynamics in the association between life-course transitions, lifestyle preferences, and reproductive intention. While key transitions are associated with higher predicted probabilities within lifestyle profiles, they do not eliminate differences

**Fig. 2:** Predicted probabilities of desired fertility (left) and reproductive intention (right) by life-course transitions (perceived job stability, leaving the parental home and living with a partner) for childless individuals aged 25-40 in heterosexual partnership in Spain, considering lifestyle preferences (N = 1645)



Source: Authors' analysis based on survey data (Fertility Survey, INE 2018)

between profiles. In particular, work-oriented individuals display significantly lower predicted probabilities of reproductive intention than adaptive and family-oriented individuals in the absence of key life-course transitions, consistent with previous research emphasising preconditions for parenthood (*González/Jurado-Guerrero 2006*).

Taken together, these findings indicate that lifestyle preferences are associated with both fertility desire and short-term reproductive intentions, although these associations differ between the two outcomes. In most interactions, a statistically significant gradient is observed, with family-oriented individuals displaying the highest predicted probabilities, followed by adaptive and, lastly, work-oriented individuals. As sociodemographic and family background characteristics are introduced, predicted probabilities increase across all profiles; however, patterns differ across profiles and between desire and intention, with differences being more pronounced for reproductive intentions, particularly among women. When life-course transitions are taken into account, differences in fertility desire across profiles are no longer statistically significant, whereas for reproductive intentions both within-profile gradients and between-profile differences remain. In particular, in the absence of key life-course transitions, work-oriented individuals display significantly lower predicted probabilities of short-term intentions than their adaptive and family-oriented counterparts. Overall, these results provide partial support for H2 and indicate that differences related to lifestyle preferences are more clearly observed in reproductive intentions than in fertility desires once life-course transitions are considered.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

This study offers a comparative perspective on the distinction between fertility desire and short-term intentions during the transition to parenthood. It presents a multivariate analysis of both outcomes, combining sociodemographic and family background characteristics, life-course transitions, and lifestyle preferences. The analysis focuses on Spain, an illustrative case due to low fertility, high childlessness, and a notable gap between fertility desire and reproductive intention.

These findings confirm the importance of distinguishing between fertility desires and short-term intentions as two distinct stages in the reproductive decision-making process, while also revealing elements of continuity between them. In particular, fertility desires are more closely associated with sociodemographic and family background characteristics, whereas intentions are clearly associated with life-course transitions, supporting Hypothesis 1. Yet certain factors – such as religious affiliation – appear relevant to both stages. Building on *González/Jurado-Guerrero's* (2006) notion of preconditions for parenthood, the results are consistent with a twofold conceptual distinction: fertility-desire dispositions, linked to early socialisation and background characteristics, and intention-enabling conditions, such as job, housing, and partnership stability, which are closely associated with short-term intentions. This distinction provides a useful lens for interpreting the

observed differences across stages and complements the TDIB framework (Miller 2011).

The results provide partial support for Hypothesis 2. Specifically, lifestyle preferences are associated with fertility desires, and the expected gradient across the work-family profiles is observed, with family-oriented individuals showing the highest predicted probabilities, followed by adaptive and work-oriented profiles. These findings align with Preference Theory (Hakim 2002, 2003), showing heterogeneity in orientations toward family and work, especially for women. At the same time, the results also reveal associations with short-term reproductive intentions. Moreover, differences in fertility desires across profiles tend to weaken when life-course transitions are taken into account, whereas reproductive intentions remain more closely aligned with lifestyle orientation. This pattern shows that lifestyle preferences are more clearly observed in short-term intentions under specific material and temporal conditions.

In addition, the results nuance existing theoretical assumptions regarding lifestyle preferences, in support of previous research (Kan 2007). Rather than operating as fixed motivational orientations, lifestyle preferences appear to be linked to short-term intentions in interaction with life-course transitions. A clear asymmetry is observed between profiles: family-oriented individuals display consistently higher short-term intentions, whereas work-oriented individuals show lower predicted probabilities, even when enabling conditions are present. Within profiles, progression through key life-course transitions is associated with higher short-term intentions, particularly among work-oriented individuals. In the Spanish context – characterised by delayed and precarious transitions to adulthood – these patterns suggest that lifestyle preferences are also expressed within a constrained opportunity structure.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings, in addition to those already acknowledged in previous sections. First, the cross-sectional design prevents assessing how reproductive desires and short-term intentions change over time and limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Second, the analysis is based on self-reported measures of desires, intentions, and attitudinal items, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Third, the models do not account for certain potentially relevant variables, such as partners' desires or intentions or relationship dynamics, which may also be associated with these two stages. Finally, the operationalisation of lifestyle preferences relied on items originally designed with a focus on women's roles and choices, which may introduce gender bias in measurement and interpretation. Future research should rely on gender-neutral attitudinal batteries explicitly designed to capture men's work-family preferences and could benefit from longitudinal designs, improved measurement tools that avoid gender bias, and the inclusion of additional relevant variables such as partner preferences.

These findings have important implications for work-family balance policies, which should be understood not only as instruments of family support but also as frameworks facilitating individuals' navigation of key life-course transitions. In Spain – characterised by a pronounced gap between fertility desires and reproductive

intentions – priority should be given to policies that enhance job and housing stability among young adults, addressing structural constraints that limit the translation of fertility desires into short-term intentions. More broadly, these results provide insights for other lowest-low fertility contexts, highlighting the importance of understanding reproductive aspirations and how structural conditions interact with individual orientations toward work and family when designing policies. On this basis, integrated approaches, including measures enabling work-family reconciliation, may help align reproductive aspirations with outcomes, contributing to more genuine opportunities for family formation.

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### **Availability of data and materials**

The 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey from the National Institute of Statistics is available at: [www.ine.es](http://www.ine.es). Authors of articles will provide code and data for replication.

### **CRedit authorship contribution statement**

Raquel Vidal-Ruiz: Original idea, first manuscript, analytical strategy, data preparation, data analysis, first author

Rafael Grande and Alberto del Rey: Analytical strategy, data preparation, data analysis, writing and review, second author and third author

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