

# From Not Being Parented to Not Being a Parent: The Lasting Impact of Early Psychosocial Deprivation

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## Introduction:

Early childhood adversity, such as abuse or neglect, can influence whether someone has children and the age at which someone becomes a parent, as well as the number of children they get (De Jong & Bijleveld, 2015; Küffer et al., 2016). The specific consequences of experiences of psychosocial deprivation in early childhood on parenthood is unclear. This study aims to explore the impact of infant institutionalization under psychosocial deprivation on the likelihood and timing of parenthood, as well as the factors related to institutionalization that may explain these outcomes.



## Study Cohort: Marie Meierhofer Children's Institute (MMI)

**Wave 1: 1958-1961**  
N = 431 institutionalized infants  
Variables:  
• Reason for institutionalization  
• Family visits  
• Going home



**Wave 2: 1971-1973**  
N = 143 (subsample)  
Variables:  
• Length of institutionalization  
• Number of changes in placement



**Wave 3: 2019-2022**  
N = 127  
Variables:  
• Demographics  
• Parenthood



## Control Cohort: Zurich Longitudinal Studies (ZLS)

N = 399 children raised in families  
Continuous assessments between ages 0-18

**Wave 3: 2019-2022**  
N = 197

## Methods:

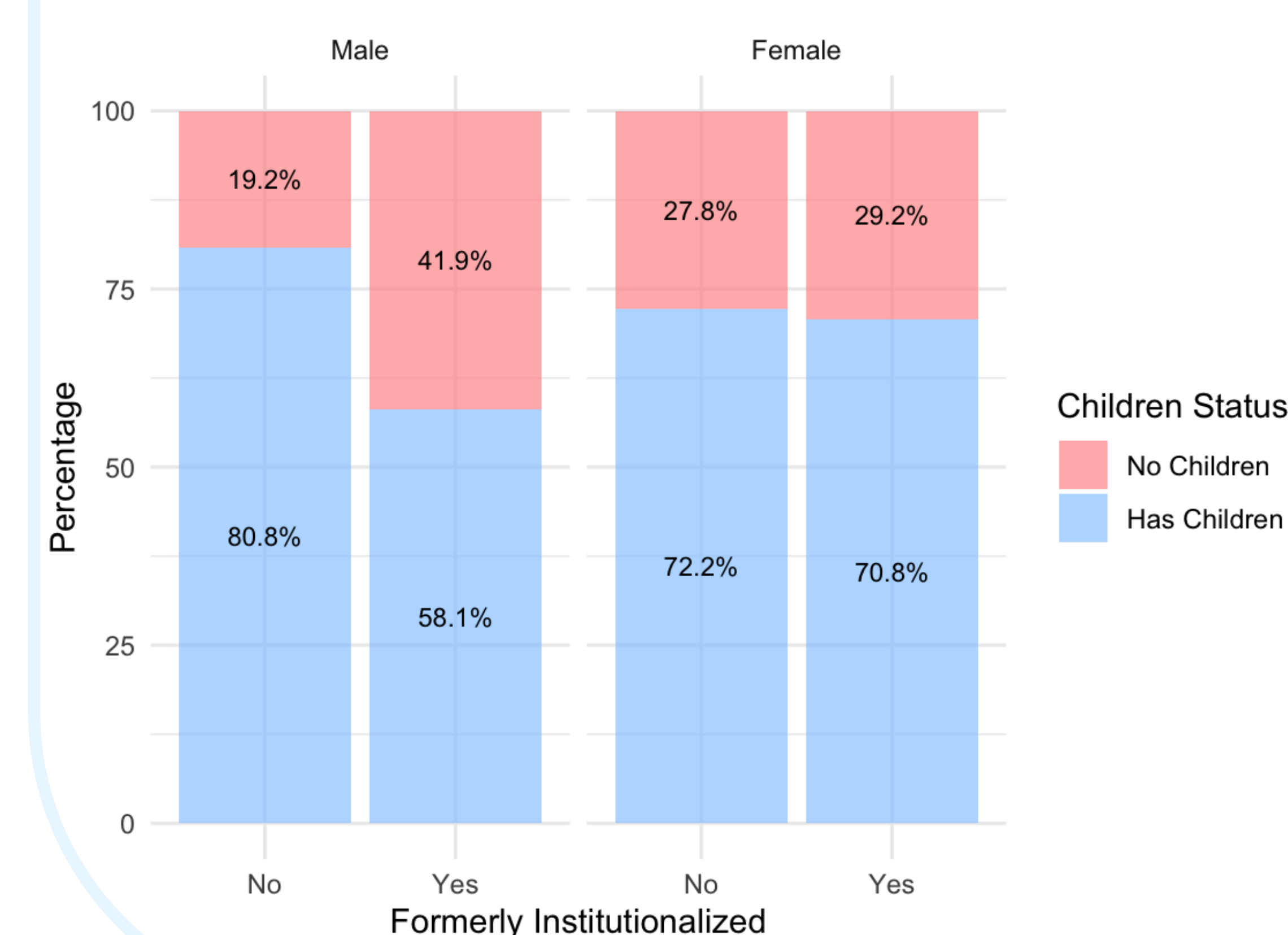
This study draws from a population-based, 60-year longitudinal study of institutionalized infants exposed to psychosocial deprivation with a comparison group conducted since the 1950-ies in Zürich, Switzerland (Lannen et al., 2021). At the time, it was not uncommon to place children in institutions at a very young age, often mandated by the state under the law of Social and Compulsory Measures until law reform in 1981 (UEK, Administrative Versorgungen (2019)).

The study uses data from three waves of data collection to compare the likelihood and timing of parenthood between the two cohorts. It analyzes partially imputed institutionalization-related factors to predict parenthood and the age of becoming a parent, controlling for sex and education level.

## Results:

A logistic regression model revealed that institutionalized individuals were 67% less likely to have children (Estimate = -1.11,  $p = 0.002$ ), with an odds ratio of  $\approx 0.33$ . This effect was particularly pronounced in males, as shown by a significant interaction between institutionalization and sex (Estimate = 1.04,  $p = 0.04$ ). A linear regression model indicated a non-significant negative effect of institutionalization on the age of transitioning to parenthood (Estimate = -1.70,  $p = 0.096$ ). Formerly institutionalized individuals tended to become parents 1.7 years earlier on average. Of those who did have children, no significant difference was found in the number of children between formerly institutionalized individuals and the control group,  $t(153.98) = 0.011$ ,  $p = 0.99$ . Within the group of institutionalized individuals, none of the included variables predicted whether someone became a parent. In institutionalized individuals who later became parents, the reason for institutionalization (specifically, being born to an unwed mother) was a significant predictor of a younger age at transition to parenthood (Estimate = 0.1961,  $p = 0.042$ ), while all other factors showed no predictive value.

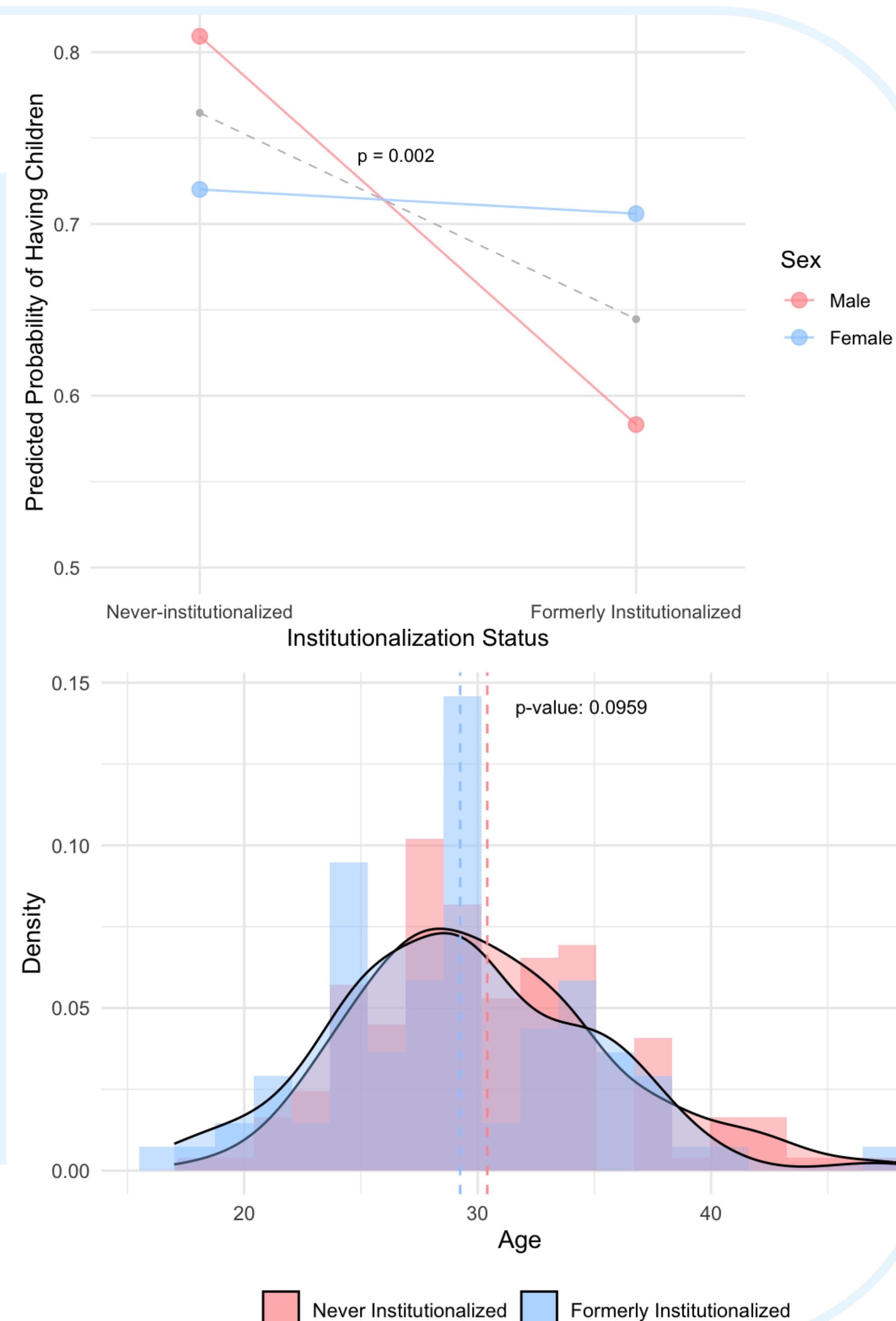
	MMI ♂ (N=62)	MMI ♀ (N=65)	ZLS ♂ (N=99)	ZLS ♀ (N=97)
Parents	36 (58.1%)	46 (70.8%)	80 (80.8%)	70 (72.2%)
Fertility rate	1.16	1.48	1.59	1.57
Mean Number of Children	2	2.11	1.96	2.17
Mean Age Parenthood	31.1	27.7	32.7	27.8
Young Parenthood (<25 years)	3 (4.84%)	9 (13.8%)	2 (2.02%)	17 (17.3%)
Teenage Parenthood (<20 years)	0	4 (6.15%)	0	1 (1.02%)



Formerly institutionalized individuals, particularly men, are significantly less likely to become parents.

Formerly institutionalized individuals tended to enter parenthood at a younger age.

Only the reason for institutionalization (being a child of an unwed mother) significantly predicted a younger age at transition to parenthood; factors like duration of institutionalization and family visits were not predictive.



## Discussion:

This study found that formerly institutionalized individuals are less likely to become parents. If they do, they tend to do so at a younger age, although this effect wasn't significant. The only significant predictor for the age of transitioning to parenthood was the reason for institutionalization, with no institutional factors predicting whether individuals became parents.

Previous research suggests a motivation toward parenthood in those with early abandonment experiences and a younger age of becoming parents after severe childhood adversity (Horowitz, 2011; Sherr et al., 2018), although some have found conflicting results (Despax et al., 2020). This study, which included both sexes, found that foremost institutionalized males are more likely to remain childless. Although anecdotal evidence from interviews with our cohort indicated childhood experiences influenced their decisions about parenthood, the reasons for the sex differences are yet unclear and require further investigation.

Lastly, the age of transitioning to parenthood was significantly linked to the reason for institutionalization. While studies have shown that childhood factors influence later parenting behaviours and attitudes toward parenthood (Lomanowska et al., 2017), it is topic of further research how and why different reasons for institutionalization affect the timing of parenthood.

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