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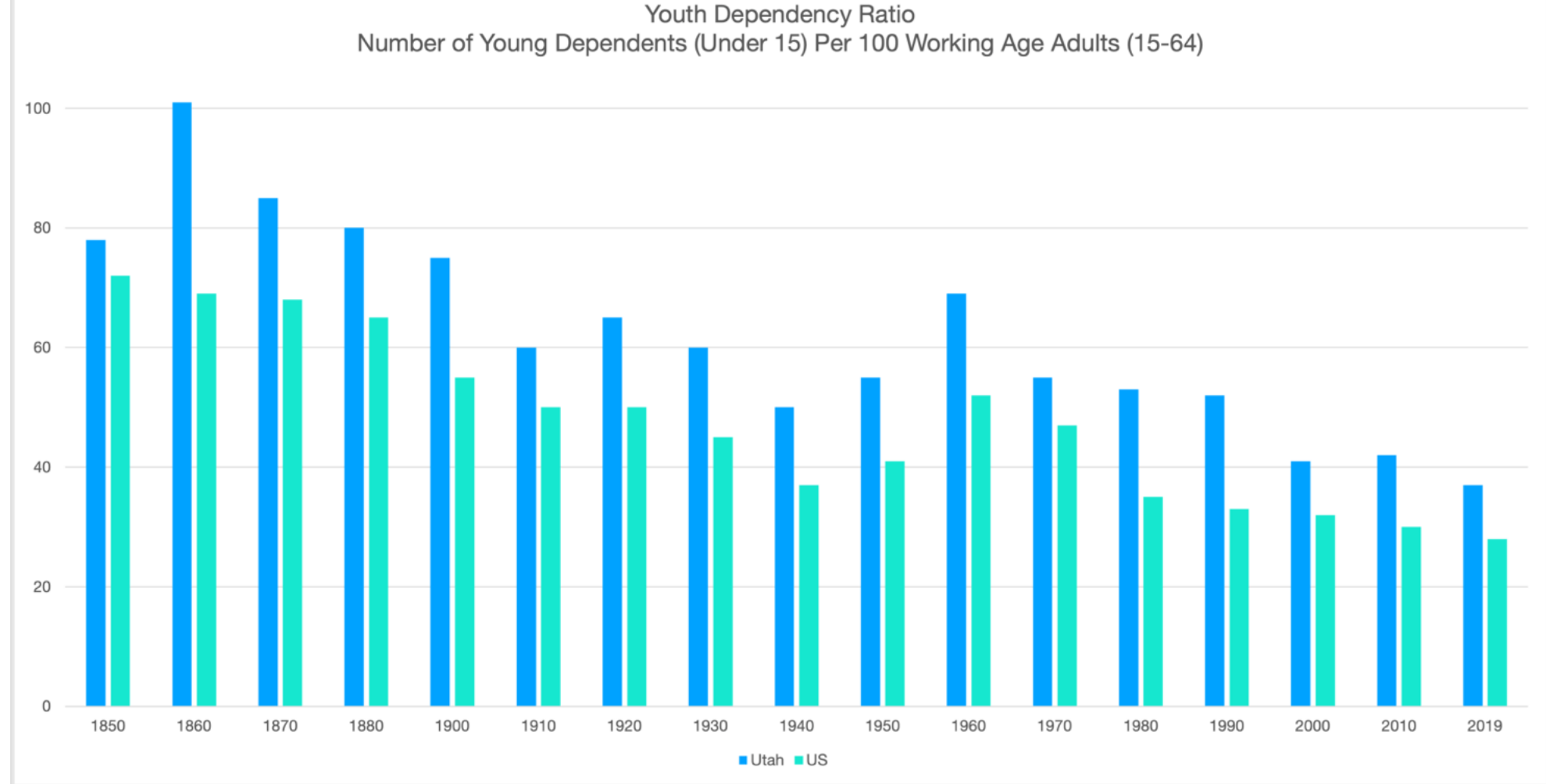
# Filling the Measure of Their Creation In Pioneer Utah

by [Stephen C](#) • December 7, 2021 • [8 Comments](#)

I like people; that's why I got a PhD in demography. My ideal existence is some rural village where my bevy of kids play outside in the streets with all the other neighborhood kids while the adults chat on front porches, where life is essentially an expanding cycle of weddings, births, and reunions (which according to my reading, is essentially what the celestial kingdom is). While most people aspire to some complex mix of competing goods in an attempt to "have it all," the simple archetype for my ideal life is an [old Jewish woman](#) in New York City with 2,000 descendants for whom faith and family were everything, while the my antitype for society is the childless, future-less dystopia portrayed in the PD James book/movie *Children of Men*.

This attitude is to some extent embedded in our theology and culture, and I think that's one reason why our birth rates are so high. Not as high as the Hutterites, Amish, or Ultra-Orthodox Jews, but still high nonetheless. From the folklore and early histories I absorbed being raised in Utah Valley (and from my and my children's love of *The Great Brain* Series) I've always envisioned Pioneer-era Utah as a golden age for this kind of family-centered, youthful communitarian existence. (And yes, like all golden ages I'm sure it was complicated). Maybe because I'm raising my bevy of children in a relatively childless environment outside of DC and I'm pining for the small village, I've been wondering just how many kids and big families there actually were in early pioneer Utah.

Thanks to the good folks at [IPUMS](#), a project that provides user-friendly census data, this is actually pretty easy to get numbers on. I ran a cross-tab showing percent of the population in Utah that was 14 and under, percent that is 15-64, and percent that is 65+. The former category divided by the middle category creates the "youth dependency ratio," or the number of youth per working age adult. This is a pretty standard measure that allows us to compare Utah with other countries and areas. I ran the numbers and calculated the ratios for each of the decennial censuses from 1850 on, both for the US and Utah.



A few caveats: often censuses have back stories that may affect results (for example, I assume the 1890 Census is missing because a fire destroyed most of those records), so I'm not sure how accurate the 1850 Utah census was given that it was taken shortly after the entry into Utah, but I think overall this paints an accurate picture. Also, later in the 19th century there were more non-Latter-day Saint settlers, so these numbers are "conservative" in the sense that the Latter-day Saint population was even younger once you filter out the heavily adult male miners in Park City.

Even so, my image of settlements bursting with children appears to be pretty accurate. (As a side note, sometimes faithful members seem to take the view that polygamy is a great mystery whose divine reasons we should just "put on a shelf" when in my view the both D&C and the Book of Mormon are pretty clear about its purpose: to raise up seed, and raise up seed it certainly did as marriage rates for women were about as high as could be; for example, in her analysis of Manti Utah, Kathryn Daynes could only find one woman in the early Utah years who never married). In 1860 there were *more* children than working-age adults in Utah. This is incredibly high. As a point of comparison, the only country in the world right now [that can say the same](#) is Mali.

If there was a golden age of Latter-day Saint frontier life it was probably 1860s Utah (the fact that the Civil War was keeping the "gentiles" occupied probably had something to do with this). It was after the starvation era (unless you were in St. George) and the Utah War, but before the anti-polygamy persecutions. As seen, as time progressed we tracked general trends and had fewer children (and the coming of the railroad probably dampened Utah's distinctiveness of non-Latter-day Saints moved in). During my childhood in 1990s Orem we still had about 1/2 a child per working age adult—still enough to provide ample fodder for neighborhood night games and bus stop culture. Now, we have about 1/3 of a child per working age adult, in comparison to the US' 1/4 of a child per working age adult. At this point I've kind of given up on trying to replicate my youth for my kids, and have consigned myself to the fact that planned play dates and driving to another neighborhood to trick or treat is the reality of 21st century parenting, but in my own house of six kids and not enough adults we try to carve out a little piece that existence.

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## 8 comments for "Filling the Measure of Their Creation In Pioneer Utah"

**SDS says:**  
*December 7, 2021 at 9:36 am*

Thanks, Stephen, for an analysis that was both informative and, for me at least, poignant.

**Robert says:**  
*December 7, 2021 at 10:08 am*

I have a sudden urge to binge Little House on the Prairie.

Stephen, your vision of an ideal lifestyle exactly matches my own. While most of modern society dreams of movin' on up to the east side, I want nothing more than to stay in the neighborhood where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came.

**Sterling says:**  
*December 7, 2021 at 3:00 pm*

Thanks for sharing this interesting post. I know our culture assumes that plural marriage increases the number of kids, but I've heard there are other times and places in human history when polygamy has not boosted fertility rates. Can you elaborate on how and why "there were more children than working-age adults in Utah." For instance, would you say that polygamous husbands were more fertile than monogamous husbands? I'm also wondering if the liberalization of divorce laws in territorial Utah increased the percentage of women who were having kids with the men they wanted to.

**Stephen C says:**  
*December 7, 2021 at 3:19 pm*

The general consensus on this question is that polygyny decreases the number of children ever born for later wives compared to non-plural or first wives, so polygyny can decrease children ever born for some women. However, polygynous societies have much higher marital rates, so there are less single women, and this effect more than offsets the fertility decline of later plural wives, so on the whole polygynous societies tend to have many more babies.

**PWS says:**  
*December 7, 2021 at 11:38 pm*

This is about your introduction rather than the actual point of the article. I'm the type of person who reads footnotes. So... "life is essentially an expanding cycle of weddings, births, and reunions (which according to my reading, is essentially what the celestial kingdom is)."

I'd be interested in your sources for this. I'm not saying you're wrong. It just that outside of non-doctrinal sources, I'm not remembering a lot of details about the Celestial Kingdom.

**Jack says:**  
*December 8, 2021 at 12:24 am*

I love that ideal. I think the civil engineering involved should have as one of its highest priorities a layout that allows for optimal trick or treating.

**IDIAT says:**  
*December 8, 2021 at 2:02 pm*

...when in my view the both D&C and the Book of Mormon are pretty clear about its purpose: to raise up seed, and raise up seed it certainly did as marriage rates for women were about as high as could be...

I have come to the same conclusion. Look at Joseph F. Smith as an example, and I'm sure there are plenty of others. It's not like these men were in their '50s marrying other 50 year olds. They were generally marrying young women who were in their prime child bearing years. And yes, in today's culture, it is totally creepy to envision a young lady marrying a man 30 years her senior. But if the objective is to pop out children, then it makes good sense. All of my family line are non-members, yet in the late 1800's I have an instance where a 64 year old male marries a 25 year old woman, and they proceed to pop out 7 kids. So, to say it was only a "thing" among Mormons would not be accurate. I'm too lazy to do the reading and research, but what would be fascinating is to understand the logistics of plural marriage, including (obviously) the sex stuff. My wife of almost 40 years grumbles about plural marriage but does understand it was the Lords's wisdom then as it was to create the 12 tribes of Israel.

**Stephen C says:**  
*December 8, 2021 at 5:48 pm*

@ PWS: Canonically I'm basing this on the centrality of "eternal increase" and "continuation of the seeds" to the idea of exaltation in D&C 132. In terms of "Hadith", there are various quotes along these lines, one of my favorites is from Parley P. Pratt:

During these interviews he taught me many great and glorious principles concerning God and the heavenly order of eternity. It was at this time that I received from him the first idea of eternal family organization, the eternal union of the sexes at those times inexpressible endearing relationships which none but the highly intellectual, the refined and pure in heart, know how to prize, and which are at the very foundation of everything worthy to be called happiness.

Till then I had learned to esteem kindred affections and sympathies as appertaining solely to this transitory state, as something from which the heart must be entirely weaned, in order to be fitted for its heavenly state.

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