

Invitation to Webinar

Family, Fertility and Human Development Initiative

May 18, 2026: 11.00AM-12.00PM CDT / 18.00-19:00 CET

About the Initiative

Led by Professor James J. Heckman, the Family, Fertility and Human Development Initiative is a joint research project between the Center for the Economics of Human Development at the University of Chicago and the Family, Household, and Economy Research Center at Corvinus University.

This webinar is hosted by the Center for the Economics of Human Development at the University of Chicago.

About this Session



Rebecca Sear

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Rebecca Sear is a Professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, where she works within the Department of Population Health. Her research takes a comparative, data-driven approach to understanding the human family, drawing on evolutionary biology, anthropology, and demography to examine how family structure shapes fertility, child health and survival across human populations. She leads the Evolutionary Demography Group at LSHTM, and her work spans small-scale societies in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, historical European populations, and contemporary high-income countries including the UK. She has conducted fieldwork and data analysis across contexts as varied as rural Gambia and Malawi, Indonesia, Guatemala, and urban Britain. Her research is funded by the European Research Council.

Beyond the Nuclear Family: A Comparative, Data-Driven Approach to the Human Family

Abstract: When we search for images of "family," what comes back is almost universally a nuclear family: a mother, a father, and their children. This image of the male breadwinner and female homemaker as the "traditional" family is widespread not only in popular culture but in academia and social policy, and shaped mid-twentieth century evolutionary anthropology's models of human origins. But does this model reflect how human families are, and have been, organized?

This talk takes a comparative, data-driven approach to challenge that assumption. Drawing on evidence from across species and across cultures, she argues that both key features of the nuclear family model - being the pronounced sexual division of labour and the autonomous, "atomised" nuclear household - are not normative in the broader human record. Cross-cultural data show that women's contribution to subsistence is substantial in the majority of societies, and that the male breadwinner model reflects the middle-class norms of a narrow slice of mid-twentieth century Western life rather than any universal human pattern. Too much of what we think we know about families is based on research conducted on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) populations.

Sear presents evidence on the cooperative trend of childrearing and considers what roles fathers actually play across human societies, and what this body of evidence means for our understanding of fertility decline, maternal health, and the potential consequences of the atomised nuclear family form that has come to dominate in high-income countries.

Attend on Zoom

Zoom Link: <https://uchicago.zoom.us/j/95315828212?pwd=5aVnD5MXbarlepBMjFobk5utZXhJD9.1&from=addon>

Meeting ID: 953 1582 8212 | Password: 193428

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