

REPORT



# Little Emperors: Behavioral Impacts of China's One-Child Policy

L. CAMERON, N. ERKAL, L. GANGADHARAN, AND X. MENG [Authors Info & Affiliations](#)

SCIENCE • 10 Jan 2013 • Vol 339, Issue 6122 • pp. 953-957 • DOI: 10.1126/science.1230221



CHECK ACCESS



## Assessing Singletons

The one-child policy introduced by the government of China in 1979 increased the proportion of urban families with an only child; later referred to as "little emperors" in media reports. In 2010, **Cameron *et al.*** (p. [953](#), published online 10 January) recruited approximately 400 residents of Beijing who had been born either before the implementation of the policy (1975 and 1978) or after (1980 and 1983). Using economic games to measure trust, risk, and willingness to compete, they found that the post-1979 cohorts were less trusting and less willing to compete and also more risk averse.

## Abstract

We document that China's One-Child Policy (OCP), one of the most radical approaches to limiting population growth, has produced significantly less trusting, less trustworthy, more risk-averse, less competitive, more pessimistic, and less conscientious individuals. Our data were collected from economics experiments conducted with 421 individuals born just before and just after the OCP's introduction in 1979. Surveys to elicit personality traits were also used. We used the exogenous imposition of the OCP to identify the causal impact of being an only child, net of family background effects. The OCP thus has significant ramifications for Chinese society.

We and our 43 IAB TCF partners store and access information on your device for the following purposes: store and/or access information on a device, advertising and content measurement, audience research, and services development, personalised advertising, and personalised content.

Personal data may be processed to do the following: use precise geolocation data and actively scan device characteristics for identification.

Our third party IAB TCF partners may store and access information on your device such as IP address and device characteristics. Our IAB TCF Partners may process this personal data on the basis of legitimate interest, or with your consent. You may change or withdraw your preferences at any time by clicking on the cookie icon or link; however, as a consequence, you may not see relevant ads or personalized content. You may change your settings at any time or accept the default settings. You may close this banner to continue with only essential cookies. [Privacy Policy](#).

[Storage Preferences](#)  
[Third Parties](#)

- ☒ STORAGE
- ☒ TARGETED ADVERTISING
- ☐ PERSONALIZATION
- ☐ ANALYTICS

SAVE

ACCEPT ALL

REJECT NON-ESSENTIAL

# Summary

Materials and Methods

Supplementary Text

Figs. S1 to S4

Tables S1 to S19

Instructions to Participants

References

## Resources

File (1230221.mp3)

DOWNLOAD

4.83 MB

File (cameron.sm.pdf)

DOWNLOAD

1.28 MB

## References and Notes

1

L. Lee, in *Child Care in Context: Cross Cultural Perspectives*, M. E. Lamb, K. Sternberg, Eds. (Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ, 1992), pp. 355–392.

[GOOGLE SCHOLAR](#)

2

Fan C., Wan C., Lin G., Jin Q., A comparative study of personality characteristics between only and nononly children in primary schools in Xian. *Psychol. Sci.* **17**, 70 (1994) (in Chinese).

[GOOGLE SCHOLAR](#)

3

Wang Q., Leichtman M. D., White S. H., Childhood memory and self-description in young Chinese adults: The impact of growing up an only child. *Cognition* **69**, 73 (1998).

[CROSSREF](#) • [PUBMED](#) • [WEB OF SCIENCE](#) • [GOOGLE SCHOLAR](#)

4

L. Chang, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China* (Spiegel and Grau, New York, 2008).

[GOOGLE SCHOLAR](#)

SHOW ALL REFERENCES

## eLetters (0)

We and our 43 IAB TCF partners store and access information on your device for the following purposes: store and/or access information on a device, advertising and content measurement, audience research, and services development, personalised advertising, and personalised content.

Personal data may be processed to do the following: use precise geolocation data and actively scan device characteristics for identification.

Our third party IAB TCF partners may store and access information on your device such as IP address and device characteristics. Our IAB TCF Partners may process this personal data on the basis of legitimate interest, or with your consent. You may change or withdraw your preferences at any time by clicking on the cookie icon or link; however, as a consequence, you may not see relevant ads or personalized content. You may change your settings at any time or accept the default settings. You may close this banner to continue with only essential cookies. [Privacy Policy](#).

[Storage Preferences](#)  
[Third Parties](#)

- ☒ STORAGE
- ☒ TARGETED ADVERTISING
- ☒ PERSONALIZATION
- ☒ ANALYTICS

SAVE

ACCEPT ALL

REJECT NON-ESSENTIAL



BY SUBO DONG, ZEXUAN WU, ET AL.

TABLE OF CONTENTS >

## LATEST NEWS

NEWS | 2 JAN 2026

[As deep-sea mining race ramps up, mission will assess whether ecosystems recover afterward](#)

SCIENCEINSIDER | 30 DEC 2025

[After legal deal, NIH to review grant proposals frozen, denied, or withdrawn because of Trump directives](#)

NEWS | 30 DEC 2025

[Science’s favorite news visuals of 2025](#)

NEWS | 1 JAN 2026

[Blood-cleansing method faces its first test as cancer vaccine](#)

SCIENCEINSIDER | 30 DEC 2025

[Is ‘open science’ delivering benefits? Major study finds proof is sparse](#)

SCIENCEINSIDER | 29 DEC 2025

[Firing of neuroscience institute chief adds to NIH’s leadership vacuum](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

## RELATED JOBS

Associate Professor, Full Professor of Biomedical Sciences & Director of NIH CORE (CIBDD)

We and our 43 IAB TCF partners store and access information on your device for the following purposes: store and/or access information on a device, advertising and content measurement, audience research, and services development, personalised advertising, and personalised content.

Personal data may be processed to do the following: use precise geolocation data and actively scan device characteristics for identification.

Our third party IAB TCF partners may store and access information on your device such as IP address and device characteristics. Our IAB TCF Partners may process this personal data on the basis of legitimate interest, or with your consent. You may change or withdraw your preferences at any time by clicking on the cookie icon or link; however, as a consequence, you may not see relevant ads or personalized content. You may change your settings at any time or accept the default settings. You may close this banner to continue with only essential cookies. [Privacy Policy](#)

[Storage Preferences](#)  
[Third Parties](#)

- ☐ STORAGE
- ☐ TARGETED ADVERTISING
- ☐ PERSONALIZATION
- ☐ ANALYTICS

SAVE

ACCEPT ALL

REJECT NON-ESSENTIAL



GET OUR NEWSLETTER

NEWS

- [All News](#)
- [ScienceInsider](#)
- [News Features](#)
- [Subscribe to News from Science](#)
- [News from Science FAQ](#)
- [About News from Science](#)
- [Donate to News](#)

LIBRARIANS

- [Manage Your Institutional Subscription](#)
- [Library Admin Portal](#)
- [Request a Quote](#)
- [Librarian FAQs](#)

CAREERS

- [Careers Articles](#)
- [Find Jobs](#)
- [Employer Hubs](#)

ADVERTISERS

- [Advertising Kits](#)
- [Custom Publishing Info](#)
- [Post a Job](#)

COMMENTARY

- [Opinion](#)
- [Analysis](#)
- [Blogs](#)

RELATED SITES

- [AAAS.org](#)
- [AAAS Communities](#)
- [EurekAlert!](#)
- [Science in the Classroom](#)

JOURNALS

- [Science](#)
- [Science Advances](#)
- [Science Immunology](#)
- [Science Robotics](#)
- [Science Signaling](#)
- [Science Translational Medicine](#)
- [Science Partner Journals](#)

ABOUT US

- [Leadership](#)
- [Work at AAAS](#)
- [Prizes and Awards](#)

AUTHORS & REVIEWERS

- [Information for Authors](#)
- [Information for Reviewers](#)

HELP

- [FAQs](#)
- [Access and Subscriptions](#)
- [Order a Single Issue](#)
- [Reprints and Permissions](#)
- [TOC Alerts and RSS Feeds](#)
- [Contact Us](#)



© 2026 American Association for the Advancement of Science. All rights reserved. AAAS is a partner of HINARI, AGORA, OARE, CHORUS, CLOCKSS, CrossRef and COUNTER. Science ISSN 0036-8075.

[Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Cookie Preferences](#) | [Accessibility](#)

We and our 43 IAB TCF partners store and access information on your device for the following purposes: store and/or access information on a device, advertising and content measurement, audience research, and services development, personalised advertising, and personalised content.

Personal data may be processed to do the following: use precise geolocation data and actively scan device characteristics for identification.

Our third party IAB TCF partners may store and access information on your device such as IP address and device characteristics. Our IAB TCF Partners may process this personal data on the basis of legitimate interest, or with your consent. You may change or withdraw your preferences at any time by clicking on the cookie icon or link; however, as a consequence, you may not see relevant ads or personalized content. You may change your settings at any time or accept the default settings. You may close this banner to continue with only essential cookies. [Privacy Policy](#).

[Storage Preferences](#)  
[Third Parties](#)

- ☐ STORAGE
- ☐ TARGETED ADVERTISING
- ☐ PERSONALIZATION
- ☐ ANALYTICS

SAVE

ACCEPT ALL

REJECT NON-ESSENTIAL