

Beyond Population Statistics: The Relevance of Qualitative Research in Understanding Lived Experiences

Haruna, Sheidu Abdulkarim¹, Isyaku Idris²

¹ Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria
Email: haruna.sa@ksu.edu.ng

² Department of Sociology, College of Social and Management Sciences, Alqalam University, Katsina State, Nigeria
Email: isiakaidris2013@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

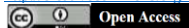
Keywords:

Demographic Studies, Lived Experience, Mixed Methods, Population Statistics, Qualitative Research.

Vol. 01, No.03, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CCBY4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



ABSTRACT

Demographic research has long relied on censuses, surveys, civil registration systems, population registers and statistical models to measure fertility, mortality, migration, ageing and household change. These sources remain indispensable for identifying population patterns and guiding policy. However, aggregate indicators do not always explain how people interpret, negotiate and experience the social conditions that produce demographic outcomes. This conceptual review examines the contribution of qualitative research to demographic explanation and its value in connecting population statistics with lived experience. A narrative-synthesis design was used to review foundational and recent scholarship in demography, anthropological demography, qualitative methodology, phenomenology and mixed-methods research. The paper is anchored in Alfred Schutz's interpretive phenomenology, supported by Berger and Luckmann's social-construction perspective. The review shows that interviews, focus group discussions, observation, life histories, walking interviews and patient-journey approaches can uncover the meanings, relationships and institutional processes concealed by aggregate categories. Qualitative evidence can also improve survey design, clarify unexpected statistical findings and explain why people assigned to the same demographic category may have followed different life-course pathways. Its limitations, including context dependence, researcher influence, translation and restricted statistical generalizability require reflexivity, systematic analysis, ethical care and transparent reporting. The paper argues that qualitative and quantitative approaches are most productive when treated as complementary forms of evidence: statistics establish magnitude and distribution, while qualitative inquiry explains meaning, sequence and mechanism.

Introduction

Demography is the systematic study of the size, composition, distribution and change of human populations. Its core processes are fertility, mortality and migration, although demographic analysis also addresses age structure, union formation, household composition and related social characteristics (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2024; United Nations Statistics Division [UNSD], 2025). Because these processes can be measured, compared and projected, the discipline has developed a strong quantitative tradition centred on censuses, surveys, civil registration and vital-statistics systems, population registers, administrative records and statistical models (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2024; UNSD, 2025). This quantitative tradition has made population change visible at local, national and global levels. Fertility indicators reveal shifts in childbearing, mortality measures describe survival and longevity, and migration statistics show the redistribution of people across places (UN DESA, 2024; UNSD, 2025). Population estimates and projections also support planning for education, healthcare, housing, infrastructure, employment and social protection (UN DESA, 2024). Contemporary population-data systems increasingly combine conventional sources with administrative and geospatial data, creating opportunities for more timely and detailed analysis while raising continuing questions about quality, privacy and inclusion (UNFPA, 2024; UNSD, 2025).

Measurement, however, does not amount to complete explanation. A fertility rate can show that childbearing differs between populations without identifying the marital expectations, religious beliefs, gender relations or financial obligations that influence reproductive behaviour (Coast et al., 2007; Ibrahim, 2020). Migration data can record movement without showing whether it was driven by employment, education, marriage, family responsibility, insecurity or displacement (Fleischer, 2007; McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). Mortality records may identify an immediate biomedical cause while revealing little about delayed care-seeking, transport difficulties or the quality of treatment received (Thaddeus & Maine, 1994; World Health Organization [WHO], 2016). These limitations matter because demographic behaviour occurs within families, communities, institutions and systems of inequality. People respond not only to material circumstances but also to meanings formed through prior experience and interaction with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967). Anthropological demography therefore insists that population outcomes should be interpreted within the cultural and institutional settings in which they are produced (Coast et al., 2007).

Qualitative research offers a systematic way to investigate these settings and meanings. Interviews, focus group discussions, observation, life histories, case studies and mobile methods can show how demographic events are interpreted, negotiated and experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Randall & Koppenhaver, 2004; Sun & Zhu, 2024). Knodel (1997) argued that such methods could enrich demographic analysis without displacing population-level measurement, while Schatz (2003, 2012) demonstrated how qualitative interviews can contextualise survey findings and improve the concepts used in demographic instruments. Recent scholarship confirms the continuing value of this expansion. Angotti et al. (2025) linked survey-derived classifications with qualitative life histories and found that people assigned to the same statistical class had followed different relationship and behavioural pathways. Passarelli-Araujo (2026) similarly argues that demographic transformations should be examined alongside the subjective and relational conditions they create. Qualitative inquiry should therefore be treated neither as a substitute for statistics nor as decorative evidence. Quantitative methods are especially useful for estimating prevalence, distribution and association; qualitative methods are particularly useful for explaining meaning, context, sequence and mechanism (Chakrabarti & Frye, 2017; Randall & Koppenhaver, 2004). This paper examines how the two forms of knowledge can be brought into a more productive relationship.

Statement of the Problem

Demographic research can estimate population events with considerable precision, yet numerical indicators are sometimes treated as though they fully explain the behaviours they summarise. Statistics can establish the magnitude, distribution and correlates of contraceptive use, maternal mortality, migration or solitary living, but they do not necessarily show how these outcomes developed or how they are experienced (Angotti et al., 2025; Passarelli-Araujo, 2026; Schatz, 2003). Broad categories may also conceal substantial internal diversity. Women classified as contraceptive non-users may include those who want another child, fear side effects, face partner opposition, lack reliable information or cannot obtain an acceptable method (Yalew et al., 2023). People recorded as migrants may have moved for work, education, marriage, family reunification, protection or displacement (Fleischer, 2007; McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). The categories are necessary for comparison, but they can obscure the different routes through which people arrive at the same observed outcome (Angotti et al., 2025).

Measurement is further shaped by definitions, wording and conditions of disclosure. Concepts such as household headship, marital status, reproductive intention and unmet need may not carry identical meanings across settings (Schatz, 2003, 2012). Sensitive topics are especially vulnerable to non-response and social-desirability bias (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Poulin (2010), for example, found inconsistencies between standard survey reports and later in-depth accounts of first sexual experience, while infertility and violence research highlights the influence of stigma, privacy and safety on disclosure (Taebi et al., 2021; WHO, 2023).

Although qualitative research is increasingly visible in population studies, it may still be reduced to isolated quotations rather than treated as an independently analyzed body of evidence. Quotations are meaningful only when they emerge from transparent sampling, data collection, coding and interpretation (Levitt et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007). Qualitative studies should also not be judged solely by whether a purposive sample permits statistical generalization; their contribution often lies in

contextual explanation, analytical generalizations and transferability (Polit & Beck, 2010). The problem addressed by this paper is therefore the limited explanatory capacity of population statistics when used alone. A clearer account is needed of how qualitative evidence can illuminate the meanings and mechanisms behind demographic patterns, improve measurement, refine theory and support policies that respond to people's actual circumstances (Angotti et al., 2025; Coast et al., 2007; Schatz, 2003, 2012).

Research Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to examine the relevance of qualitative research in extending demographic analysis beyond population statistics towards a deeper understanding of lived experiences. The specific objectives are to:

1. identify the limitations of relying exclusively on statistical evidence in demographic studies;
2. review the contribution of qualitative research to the explanation of demographic processes;
3. examine how interpretive phenomenology supports the study of lived experiences in demographic research;
4. discuss the methodological, theoretical and policy implications of integrating qualitative evidence into demographic studies; and
5. demonstrate the complementary relationship between qualitative and quantitative approaches in population research.

Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual review and narrative-synthesis design to integrate literature from demography, anthropological demography, qualitative methodology, phenomenology and mixed-methods research. Narrative reviews are suitable for bringing together diverse concepts and methodological traditions when the purpose, selection criteria and analytical process are clearly stated (Baethge et al., 2019; Snyder, 2019; Sukhera, 2022). Relevant literature was identified through searches of PubMed, Google Scholar and Crossref, supported by targeted searches of Demographic Research, BMJ, SAGE, Springer Nature and official repositories of the United Nations, UNFPA, IOM and WHO. Search terms covered qualitative demography, population statistics, lived experiences, life-history interviews, mixed methods, fertility, migration, phenomenology and maternal health. Foundational studies and relevant publications available up to July 2026 were considered. Sources were included when they examined qualitative methods in population research, combined qualitative and quantitative evidence, explored lived experiences related to fertility, migration, health, ageing or family life, developed relevant interpretive frameworks or provided recognized methodological guidance. Authoritative institutional reports on population data, migration and public health were also included.

The literature was organized around the three central concepts in the title and synthesized according to the six research objectives. A thematic and interpretive approach was used to identify recurring issues relating to measurement, meaning, demographic classifications, life histories, reflexivity, policy relevance and methodological integration (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The review is conceptual rather than systematic and does not claim exhaustive coverage, calculate pooled effects or conduct a formal risk-of-bias assessment. No human participants or identifiable private data were involved; therefore, participant-level ethical approval was not required. However, ethical concerns relating to reproduction, illness, violence, displacement and bereavement were considered in the discussion (Levitt et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007).

Conceptual Review

Population Statistics

Population statistics are numerical data used to describe the size, composition, distribution and change of human populations. They cover events and characteristics such as births, deaths, fertility, migration, marriage, age structure, household composition, education, employment and health (UN DESA, 2024; UNSD, 2025). Their main sources include population and housing censuses, civil registration and vital-statistics systems, household surveys, population registers and administrative records; geospatial and other digital sources are increasingly incorporated into national data systems (UNFPA, 2024; UNSD, 2025). These data provide the breadth and continuity needed to compare populations across places and periods. They support the calculation of indicators such as total fertility, infant mortality, life expectancy, dependency and net migration, and they form the basis of population

estimates and projections used in policy and planning (UN DESA, 2024; UNSD, 2025). Their value depends on clear definitions, standard classifications, data quality and comparability.

A statistic is nevertheless an abstraction. It is created by defining a concept, choosing indicators and assigning observations to categories (Schatz, 2003; UNSD, 2025). This process makes comparison possible, but it compresses complex histories into countable units. A maternal-mortality measure establishes the scale of deaths associated with pregnancy and childbirth without fully explaining the sequence of decisions and service encounters preceding a death (Thaddeus & Maine, 1994; WHO, 2016). A migration rate measures movement without necessarily communicating separation, insecurity, identity or belonging (Sun & Zhu, 2024). Population statistics should therefore be understood as powerful summaries rather than complete representations of social life. They identify patterns and differences that may require further explanation. Qualitative research becomes particularly relevant when the question moves from how many and where to how, why and with what meaning (Angotti et al., 2025; Schatz, 2003).

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an interpretive approach concerned with how people understand experiences, relationships and social environments. Its defining feature is not simply the absence of numbers but its attention to meaning, context and process (Aspers & Corte, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). It asks how an event developed, how it was interpreted and what conditions shaped the response to it. Aspers and Corte (2019) describe qualitative research as an iterative process in which understanding develops through close engagement with a phenomenon and the construction of meaningful distinctions. Qualitative evidence is therefore analytical rather than anecdotal. It seeks patterns of meaning and process through systematic engagement with participants, settings, texts and practices. Common methods include in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, participant and non-participant observation, life histories, diaries, case studies, document analysis and mobile methods such as walking interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sun & Zhu, 2024). Interviews support detailed personal accounts; focus groups reveal how views are socially negotiated; observation makes practices and non-verbal interaction visible; and life histories locate demographic events within a temporal sequence (Angotti et al., 2025; Randall & Koppenhaver, 2004).

Qualitative evidence is produced through interaction. Participants decide what to disclose, conceal or emphasize, while the researcher's identity and conduct can shape the encounter (Poulin, 2010; Randall & Koppenhaver, 2004). Reflexivity is therefore necessary, as is coherence among the research question, philosophical orientation, sampling, data collection and analysis. Credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability remain useful quality considerations, alongside transparent reporting of researcher-participant relationships and analytical decisions (Levitt et al., 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007; Yadav, 2022). Qualitative studies are not generally designed to estimate population prevalence. Their strength lies in contextual explanation, conceptual development and the identification of mechanisms. The relevance of a small purposive sample is therefore assessed through the adequacy of the analysis and its transferability to comparable contexts, not through automatic statistical generalization (Polit & Beck, 2010).

Lived Experiences

Lived experience refers to the way individuals encounter, interpret and assign meaning to events in everyday life. Phenomenological inquiry is concerned not only with what happened but also with how it was perceived, felt, remembered and understood by the person who experienced it (Moustakas, 1994; Schutz, 1967). The concept is relevant to demography because childbirth, marriage, migration, infertility, widowhood, ageing and living arrangements possess subjective and relational dimensions in addition to their measurable features. Childbearing may signify fulfilment and family continuity while also generating anxiety or concern about the cost of raising children (Ibrahim, 2020; Saeed et al., 2024). Marriage and cohabitation may carry different moral, symbolic and practical meanings even when both are treated as partnership categories (Berrington et al., 2015). Migration can be experienced as opportunity, duty, separation, insecurity or a search for belonging. Fleischer (2007) found that migration decisions could be embedded in extended-family obligations, while Sun and Zhu (2024) show how place-based interviews illuminate identity, inclusion and exclusion. Living alone likewise should not be

equated automatically with loneliness; household arrangement and subjective connectedness are related but distinct conditions (Passarelli-Araujo, 2026).

Experience is shaped by social position, relationships and time. Age, gender, economic circumstances, religion, health, family status and place influence how events are encountered. Reproductive decisions may be negotiated with partners and relatives; care-seeking may depend on money, permission and advice; and migration may serve family obligations rather than individual ambition alone (Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; Fleischer, 2007; Stein et al., 2014; Yalew et al., 2023). Meanings can also change as relationships, health and material circumstances evolve. Life-history research is valuable precisely because it captures these sequences and reveals different pathways into the same demographic category (Angotti et al., 2025).

Literature Review

The literature is organized in the order of the specific objectives, allowing each subsection to address a defined aspect of the paper's argument.

Population Statistics, Qualitative Research and Lived Experiences

Population statistics, qualitative research and lived experience represent different but connected levels of demographic knowledge. Official data systems provide aggregate evidence for monitoring, comparison and planning, while qualitative inquiry examines the meanings and processes that aggregate categories cannot fully convey (UNFPA, 2024; UNSD, 2025). Knodel (1997) argued that demographers could use interviews and focus groups to investigate motivations without abandoning population-level analysis. Schatz (2003) subsequently identified three contributions of qualitative evidence: comparison across methods, contextualization of quantitative results and improved conceptualization of measures. Schatz (2012) further showed how semi-structured interviews can be nested within surveys and censuses so that personal accounts remain linked to population data. Empirical studies illustrate the value of this layered approach. Saeed et al. (2024) documented fear, uncertainty and disrupted daily life among mothers experiencing postnatal anxiety, while Passarelli-Araujo (2026) situates loneliness within demographic processes such as ageing, migration, childlessness and changing social ties. Quantitative evidence can establish prevalence and distribution; qualitative evidence reveals how a condition is understood and incorporated into everyday life. When deliberately integrated, the two can produce insights unavailable from separate analyses (Angotti et al., 2025; Chakrabarti & Frye, 2017; Feters et al., 2013).

Limitations of Relying Exclusively on Statistical Evidence

A central limitation of exclusive reliance on statistical evidence is the distance between association and explanation. Statistical models may show that education is related to contraceptive use, yet several mechanisms may account for that association. Lamidi (2015) found socioeconomic variation in modern contraceptive use across Nigerian states; Ikamari (2005) linked education with delayed marriage in Kenya; and Saleem and Bobak (2005) found that women's decision-making autonomy predicted contraceptive use in Pakistan without fully explaining the educational gradient. Contextual evidence is needed to determine how knowledge, marriage timing, resources, communication and autonomy interact in particular settings. Statistical categories can also conceal internal diversity. Angotti et al. (2025) linked survey-derived latent classes with qualitative life histories and found that people assigned to the same class had followed different relationship and health pathways. Similarly, an unintended pregnancy may follow contraceptive failure, restricted access, misinformation, partner pressure, stigma or changing intentions. Yalew et al. (2023) identified interacting personal, family, sociocultural, economic and health-service influences that could not be represented adequately by a single binary category.

Migration data may identify origin, destination and duration while overlooking obligations to non-resident relatives or the meaning of place. Gillespie and Mulder (2020) found that family members living elsewhere can motivate migration, and Sun and Zhu (2024) show that walking interviews reveal migrants' agency, identity and belonging in ways that residential codes cannot. Standardized data collection is especially vulnerable when questions concern sexual behaviour, infertility, violence and other sensitive topics. Privacy concerns and social-desirability pressures can produce non-response and reporting error (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Poulin (2010) found discrepancies between survey and in-depth reports of first sexual experience, while Taebi et al. (2021) documented the influence of infertility stigma on women's accounts. WHO (2023) consequently treats violence-against-women surveys as

specialized studies requiring careful attention to safety and data quality. The limitation is not that population statistics are weak. Their strength lies in standardization, estimation and comparison (UNSD, 2025). The problem arises when one instrument is expected to provide both a population estimate and a complete explanation of the social processes behind it. Surveys and censuses prioritize comparability across many cases; qualitative methods are better suited to examining how categories are understood and why people within them differ (Randall & Koppenhaver, 2004; Schatz, 2003).

Contribution of Qualitative Research to Demographic Explanation

Qualitative research contributes to demographic explanation by identifying the mechanisms through which beliefs, relationships and institutions translate wider conditions into decisions and outcomes (Coast et al., 2007; Schatz, 2003). Fertility research offers a clear example. Ibrahim (2020) used focus groups and interviews to examine reproductive motivations among Yorùbá farmers in southwestern Nigeria. The financial responsibilities of feeding and educating children were central to changing fertility attitudes, challenging assumptions that rural farming populations necessarily prefer high fertility. Hilevych (2020) likewise found that entry into parenthood in Ukraine was shaped by family relationships and perceived security. Similarly, migration studies reveal processes that individual economic models may overlook. Fleischer (2007) found that migration from Cameroon to Germany was embedded in kinship obligations and reciprocal expectations. Gillespie and Mulder (2020) also show that non-resident family members can shape decisions to move, while mobile methods connect migrants' accounts of belonging and exclusion to the places in which they are experienced (Sun & Zhu, 2024).

In maternal-health research, qualitative methods illuminate the pathway preceding an outcome. The three-delays framework shows that maternal outcomes may be shaped by delays in deciding to seek care, reaching a facility and receiving appropriate treatment (Thaddeus & Maine, 1994). WHO (2025) recommends qualitative approaches to maternal morbidity because pregnancy and childbirth are embedded in cultural expectations, family relationships and health-system encounters. Ope et al. (2026) extend this work in Nigeria by mapping women's journeys across the continuum of maternal care and identifying gaps that are not visible when encounters are examined separately. Qualitative research also refines the study of family and partnership. Berrington et al. (2015) found that formal categories such as marriage and cohabitation did not fully capture participants' understandings of commitment, which were shaped by security, parenthood, moral expectations and biography. Such studies show that qualitative evidence contributes not merely illustrative quotations but explanations of how similar observable outcomes can emerge from different histories.

Interpretive Phenomenology and the Study of Lived Experiences

Interpretive phenomenology provides a framework for examining the meaning of demographic events. Schutz (1967) describes the lifeworld as the taken-for-granted social world in which people draw on prior knowledge and interaction to interpret situations. Contraception, migration, marriage and healthcare are therefore encountered through beliefs, memories, cultural expectations and previous experiences rather than as neutral variables. The framework also emphasizes intersubjectivity: meanings are formed with others. Reproductive decisions may be negotiated between partners and influenced by social networks (Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; Stein et al., 2014). Migration may involve obligations to extended family (Fleischer, 2007), while the experience of living alone may depend on the quality of social connections rather than household size itself (Passarelli-Araujo, 2026). Empirical phenomenological studies support this interpretation. Yalew et al. (2023) showed that unintended pregnancy was understood through family relationships, stigma, economic insecurity and healthcare encounters. Saeed et al. (2024) showed that postnatal anxiety was lived through fear, disrupted routines and limited support. These studies demonstrate why demographic explanation must consider the meanings through which people respond to measurable conditions.

Methodological, Theoretical and Policy Implications of Integrating Qualitative Evidence

Methodologically, qualitative evidence can strengthen demographic measurement before, during and after a survey. Preliminary interviews can identify locally meaningful concepts and response options, while nested or follow-up interviews can clarify unexpected statistical findings (Schatz, 2003, 2012). Angotti et al. (2025) provide a strong example by linking interviews directly to survey classifications, and Chakrabarti and Frye (2017) show how computational text analysis can be combined with close interpretation. Theoretically, qualitative findings challenge models that assume fixed,

internally consistent and socially independent preferences. Fertility decisions may be revised and negotiated between partners, and social networks influence norms, support and perceptions of parenthood (Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; Stein et al., 2014). Migration may be both an individual strategy and a family obligation (Fleischer, 2007). Qualitative evidence therefore helps demographic theory account for relationships, culture, identity and institutional power.

Health-service use illustrates the policy value of this evidence. A global qualitative synthesis identified dignity, privacy, communication, informed consent and respect for women's choices as central elements of maternity care (Shakibazadeh et al., 2018). Nigerian healthcare providers likewise reported that disrespect and abuse could damage women's wellbeing and trust in services (Orpin et al., 2019). Expanding infrastructure may therefore have limited effect if transport, cost, communication, privacy and treatment remain unresolved. WHO (2025) and Ope et al. (2026) show how women's accounts can identify gaps across the care pathway and support more responsive interventions. These benefits depend on methodological rigour. Sampling, researcher characteristics, recording, transcription, coding, reflexivity and the treatment of contradictory cases should be reported clearly. COREQ, SRQR and the APA reporting standards provide recognized guidance for transparent qualitative and mixed-methods reporting (Levitt et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2014; Tong et al., 2007). Detailed narratives also create ethical risks of deductive identification, requiring careful decisions about confidentiality, quotation and the representation of vulnerable participants.

Complementarity of Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

Quantitative methods are suited to estimating prevalence, testing associations and comparing population patterns, whereas qualitative methods examine meanings, contexts and processes. Mixed-methods research integrates these forms of evidence when the question cannot be answered adequately by either approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013). Recognized designs provide different routes to integration. In an exploratory sequential design, qualitative findings inform a later quantitative phase, including instrument development. In an explanatory sequential design, qualitative inquiry follows statistical analysis to explain important or unexpected results. In a convergent design, both forms of evidence are collected within a similar period, analyzed separately and brought together during interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013). Integration must be substantive rather than presentational. A report does not become mixed methods simply because it contains tables and participant quotations. The components should be connected at the level of design, sampling, analysis or interpretation, and the researcher should explain whether the findings confirm, complement, expand or challenge one another (Fetters et al., 2013; Greene et al., 1989). Joint displays and linked narrative analyses can make integrated inferences explicit (Guetterman et al., 2015).

Contradictory findings should not be suppressed to produce a neat account. Discordance may reveal measurement problems, temporal change, subgroup differences or a gap between public reports and private experience. Wagner et al. (2012) showed that apparently incongruous qualitative and quantitative results can generate new explanations when investigated carefully. Method selection should therefore follow the research question: statistics are required to establish magnitude and distribution, while qualitative evidence is required when the aim is to explain meaning, mechanism and contextual variation.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored in Alfred Schutz's interpretive phenomenology and supported by Berger and Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality. The framework is appropriate because the paper concerns the relationship between measurable demographic events and the meanings those events acquire in everyday life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967). Schutz (1967) argues that people live within a lifeworld: a taken-for-granted world of ordinary experience shared with others. Individuals approach new situations with a stock of knowledge acquired through family, culture, religion, education and prior experience. This knowledge supplies the categories through which circumstances are interpreted and decisions are made. Demographic behaviour occurs within this lifeworld. Contraception may be understood as protection, danger, disobedience or a threat to future fertility; migration may signify advancement, family duty or forced separation; and living alone may represent autonomy or abandonment. Such interpretations influence behaviour alongside material conditions (Passarelli-Araujo, 2026; Yalew et al., 2023).

A second principle is intersubjectivity. Meanings are developed through interaction, so demographic decisions are relational rather than wholly individual. Childbearing may be negotiated between partners and influenced by social networks (Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; Stein et al., 2014); care-seeking may depend on advice, money and permission; and migration may be undertaken to support relatives living elsewhere (Fleischer, 2007; Gillespie & Mulder, 2020).

Schutz's concept of typification is equally relevant. Everyday life depends on classifying people and situations into recognizable types. Demography performs a related scientific operation when it classifies people as migrants, widows, contraceptive users or older adults living alone. These categories enable comparison but cannot contain the full experience of those classified (Angotti et al., 2025; Schutz, 1967). Berger and Luckmann (1966) extend this point by showing how repeated interpretations become institutionalized as expectations concerning family size, gender roles, marriage, parenthood and care.

The framework does not deny structural constraints. Poverty, gender inequality, law, insecurity and health-system weakness place real limits on action. Interpretive phenomenology asks how these constraints are encountered and understood. A shortage of money is material, but its consequences for fertility, migration or care-seeking also depend on the obligations and expectations through which it is interpreted (Fleischer, 2007; Ibrahim, 2020; Schutz, 1967).

Three propositions follow. First, demographic events possess subjective and relational as well as measurable dimensions. Second, population behaviour is shaped through interpretation and social interaction. Third, statistical categories are indispensable but incomplete representations of lived reality. Qualitative research is relevant because it provides access to the meanings and processes that connect social conditions with demographic outcomes.

Discussion and Implications

The literature demonstrates that qualitative research strengthens demographic inquiry by connecting aggregate patterns with the processes through which they are produced. Its contribution is not to weaken population statistics but to clarify the questions they cannot answer alone (Angotti et al., 2025; Randall & Koppenhaver, 2004; Schatz, 2003). One implication is that demographic explanation should distinguish association from mechanism. Statistical relationships may support several plausible interpretations. Education, for example, may influence reproductive behaviour through knowledge, marriage timing, economic resources, communication or decision-making power, and these pathways can vary across settings (Ikamari, 2005; Lamidi, 2015; Saleem & Bobak, 2005). Qualitative inquiry can examine which mechanisms participants recognize and how those mechanisms interact, while avoiding unsupported causal claims. A second implication concerns contextual validity. Standard concepts such as household headship, union status, intended pregnancy and dependency may not be understood uniformly. Qualitative work conducted before a survey can identify locally meaningful language and categories, while nested interviews can reveal when an apparently clear measure has omitted an important dimension of experience (Schatz, 2003, 2012). Qualitative research therefore contributes to measurement rather than merely commenting on results after data collection.

The evidence also supports a relational view of demographic behaviour. Fertility, migration and healthcare decisions are made within partnerships, families, networks and institutions (Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; Fleischer, 2007; Stein et al., 2014). Ibrahim (2020) shows how financial responsibilities shape fertility motivation, while Ope et al. (2026) demonstrate that maternal-health experience develops across multiple points in a care system. Models centred only on isolated individual preference are therefore incomplete. For policy, the distinction between scale and experience is crucial. A high level of unmet need may justify service expansion, but qualitative evidence can explain why existing services remain unused. Additional facilities may have limited effect where transport, cost, partner opposition, poor communication, disrespect or lack of privacy remain barriers (Orpin et al., 2019; Shakibazadeh et al., 2018; Yalew et al., 2023). Policies informed by both population measures and service experience are more likely to respond to the problem as people encounter it. The findings also have implications for demographic training. Statistical competence remains essential, but researchers who study human behaviour benefit from skills in interviewing, observation, reflexivity, thematic analysis and qualitative ethics. Qualitative researchers working in population studies likewise benefit from knowledge of sampling, rates and demographic structure. Methodological exchange is more productive than treating the traditions as rivals (Coast et al., 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Methodological pluralism nevertheless requires discipline. The research objective should determine the design. Representative quantitative methods are needed for population estimates; qualitative methods are appropriate for questions of meaning and experience; and mixed-methods designs are justified when both distribution and explanation are central (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013). Qualitative studies must keep claims proportionate to purposive samples, explain researcher influence and translation, and protect participants from deductive disclosure (Levitt et al., 2018; Polit & Beck, 2010; Tong et al., 2007). Integration should also be visible in the analysis. Where qualitative and quantitative findings differ, the contradiction may reveal measurement problems, temporal change, subgroup variation or a difference between publicly reported behaviour and private experience. Investigating such discordance can strengthen mixed-methods inference rather than weaken it (Fetters et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2012).

Taken together, the evidence supports a simple but consequential position: population statistics describe the scale and distribution of demographic phenomena, while qualitative inquiry explains the routes through which people enter, interpret and live those phenomena. Demography is more complete when these levels of knowledge are connected.

Conclusion

Population statistics remain indispensable because they reveal the magnitude, distribution and direction of fertility, mortality, migration, ageing and family change and support comparison, projection and planning (UN DESA, 2024; UNSD, 2025). Yet demographic events are also lived within families, institutions and cultural systems, and the same observable outcome may emerge from different histories (Angotti et al., 2025; Schatz, 2003). The literature reviewed shows that qualitative inquiry contributes to demography by explaining mechanisms behind statistical associations, testing the adequacy of categories, revealing relational and cultural influences and supporting more responsive policy. It can be linked directly with surveys and statistical classifications rather than treated as an illustrative afterthought (Angotti et al., 2025; Schatz, 2012).

Interpretive phenomenology provides a coherent basis for this contribution. People act within a lifeworld shaped by prior knowledge, social interaction and institutional expectations; demographic behaviour is therefore both measurable and meaningful (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schutz, 1967). Qualitative research has limitations, but these call for careful sampling, reflexivity, systematic analysis, ethical representation and transparent reporting rather than dismissal of the method (Levitt et al., 2018; Polit & Beck, 2010; Tong et al., 2007). Qualitative and quantitative methods should therefore not be treated as rivals. Statistics establish how much, how often and among whom; qualitative inquiry explains how, why and with what meaning. Going beyond population statistics does not mean abandoning measurement. It means ensuring that the people represented by demographic figures are not lost within them.

References

1. Angotti, N., Houle, B., Schatz, E., & Mojola, S. A. (2025). Unpacking the black box of latent class analysis using qualitative life history interviews: A data-linked explanatory approach examining sexual behaviour in rural South Africa. *Demographic Research*, 53, 343-372. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2025.53.13>
2. Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is qualitative in qualitative research? *Qualitative Sociology*, 42, 139-160. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7>
3. Baethge, C., Goldbeck-Wood, S., & Mertens, S. (2019). SANRA-A scale for the quality assessment of narrative review articles. *Research Integrity and Peer Review*, 4, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41073-019-0064-8>
4. Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.
5. Bernardi, L., & Klärner, A. (2014). Social networks and fertility. *Demographic Research*, 30, 641-670. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2014.30.22>
6. Berrington, A., Perelli-Harris, B., & Trevena, P. (2015). Commitment and the changing sequence of cohabitation, childbearing, and marriage: Insights from qualitative research in the UK. *Demographic Research*, 33, 327-362. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2015.33.12>

7. Chakrabarti, P., & Frye, M. (2017). A mixed-methods framework for analyzing text data: Integrating computational techniques with qualitative methods in demography. *Demographic Research*, 37, 1351-1382. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2017.37.42>
8. Coast, E., Hampshire, K., & Randall, S. (2007). Disciplining anthropological demography. *Demographic Research*, 16, 493-518. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2007.16.16>
9. Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
10. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
11. Feters, M. D., Curry, L. A., & Creswell, J. W. (2013). Achieving integration in mixed methods designs: Principles and practices. *Health Services Research*, 48(6, Part 2), 2134-2156. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.12117>
12. Fleischer, A. (2007). Family, obligations, and migration: The role of kinship in Cameroon. *Demographic Research*, 16, 413-440. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2007.16.13>
13. Gillespie, B. J., & Mulder, C. H. (2020). Nonresident family as a motive for migration. *Demographic Research*, 42, 399-410. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2020.42.13>
14. Greene, J. C., Caracelli, V. J., & Graham, W. F. (1989). Toward a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation designs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11(3), 255-274. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737011003255>
15. Guetterman, T. C., Feters, M. D., & Creswell, J. W. (2015). Integrating quantitative and qualitative results in health science mixed methods research through joint displays. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 13(6), 554-561. <https://doi.org/10.1370/afm.1865>
16. Hilevych, Y. (2020). Entrance into parenthood at the onset of low fertility in Ukraine: The role of family relationships and perceived security. *Demographic Research*, 42, 799-826. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2020.42.29>
17. Ibrahim, F. M. (2020). “Everyone tries to avoid responsibility”: The attenuating role of financial obligations in fertility change among Yorùbá farmers of southwestern Nigeria. *Demographic Research*, 43, 745-778. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2020.43.26>
18. Ikamari, L. D. E. (2005). The effect of education on the timing of marriage in Kenya. *Demographic Research*, 12, 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2005.12.1>
19. Knodel, J. (1997). A case for nonanthropological qualitative methods for demographers. *Population and Development Review*, 23(4), 847-853. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2137386>
20. Lamidi, E. O. (2015). State variations in women’s socioeconomic status and use of modern contraceptives in Nigeria. *PLOS ONE*, 10(8), e0135172. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0135172>
21. Levitt, H. M., Bamberg, M., Creswell, J. W., Frost, D. M., Josselson, R., & Suárez-Orozco, C. (2018). Journal article reporting standards for qualitative primary, qualitative meta-analytic, and mixed-methods research in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 73(1), 26-46. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000151>
22. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
23. McAuliffe, M., & Oucho, L. A. (Eds.). (2024). *World migration report 2024*. International Organization for Migration.
24. Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658>
25. O’Brien, B. C., Harris, I. B., Beckman, T. J., Reed, D. A., & Cook, D. A. (2014). Standards for reporting qualitative research: A synthesis of recommendations. *Academic Medicine*, 89(9), 1245-1251. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ACM.0000000000000388>
26. Ope, B. W., Attwood, P., Mullins, E., Hirst, J. E., Norton, R., & Peden, M. (2026). Beyond the doctor’s office: A longitudinal study mapping women’s experiences of the maternal healthcare journey as a pathway to reducing maternal mortality in Nigeria. *BMJ Open*, 16(3), e104174. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2025-104174>
27. Orpin, J., Puthussery, S., & Burden, B. (2019). Healthcare providers’ perspectives of disrespect and abuse in maternity care facilities in Nigeria: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Public Health*, 64, 1291-1299. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-019-01306-0>

28. Passarelli-Araujo, H. (2026). The demography of loneliness: Rethinking social connections in population research. *Demographic Research*, 54, 133-158. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2026.54.5>
29. Polit, D. F., & Beck, C. T. (2010). Generalization in quantitative and qualitative research: Myths and strategies. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 47(11), 1451-1458. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2010.06.004>
30. Poulin, M. (2010). Reporting on first sexual experience: The importance of interviewer-responder interaction. *Demographic Research*, 22, 237-288. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2010.22.11>
31. Randall, S., & Koppenhaver, T. (2004). Qualitative data in demography: The sound of silence and other problems. *Demographic Research*, 11, 57-94. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2004.11.3>
32. Saeed, Q., Shafique, K., & Chaudhry, N. (2024). Lived experiences of mothers with postnatal anxiety: A qualitative phenomenology study from Pakistan. *BMJ Open*, 14, e078203. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2023-078203>
33. Saleem, S., & Bobak, M. (2005). Women's autonomy, education and contraception use in Pakistan: A national study. *Reproductive Health*, 2, Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1742-4755-2-8>
34. Schatz, E. (2003). Comparing, contextualizing, and conceptualizing: Enhancing quantitative data on women's situation in rural Africa. *Demographic Research*, Special Collection 1, 143-174. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2003.S1.5>
35. Schatz, E. (2012). Rationale and procedures for nesting semi-structured interviews in surveys or censuses. *Population Studies*, 66(2), 183-195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2012.658851>
36. Schutz, A. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world*. Northwestern University Press.
37. Shakibazadeh, E., Namadian, M., Bohren, M. A., Vogel, J. P., Rashidian, A., Nogueira Pileggi, V., Madeira, S., Leathersich, S., Tunçalp, Ö., Oladapo, O. T., Souza, J. P., & Gülmezoglu, A. M. (2018). Respectful care during childbirth in health facilities globally: A qualitative evidence synthesis. *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, 125(8), 932-942. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.15015>
38. Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333-339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
39. Stein, P., Willen, S., & Pavetic, M. (2014). Couples' fertility decision-making. *Demographic Research*, 30, 1697-1732. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2014.30.63>
40. Sukhera, J. (2022). Narrative reviews: Flexible, rigorous, and practical. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 14(4), 414-417. <https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-22-00480.1>
41. Sun, Y., & Zhu, W. (2024). Using walking interviews in migration research: A systematic review of the qualitative research literature. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241282931>
42. Taebi, M., Kariman, N., Montazeri, A., & Alavi Majd, H. (2021). Infertility stigma: A qualitative study on feelings and experiences of infertile women. *International Journal of Fertility & Sterility*, 15(3), 189-196. <https://doi.org/10.22074/IJFS.2021.139093.1039>
43. Thaddeus, S., & Maine, D. (1994). Too far to walk: Maternal mortality in context. *Social Science & Medicine*, 38(8), 1091-1100. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(94\)90226-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(94)90226-7)
44. Thomas, J., & Harden, A. (2008). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 8, Article 45. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-8-45>
45. Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): A 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 19(6), 349-357. <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzm042>
46. Tourangeau, R., & Yan, T. (2007). Sensitive questions in surveys. *Psychological Bulletin*, 133(5), 859-883. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.133.5.859>
47. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2024). *World population prospects 2024: Summary of results* (UN DESA/POP/2024/TR/NO. 9). United Nations.
48. United Nations Population Fund. (2024). *Navigating megatrends: The ICPD Programme of Action for a sustainable future-ICPD30 brief: The future of population data*. UNFPA.

49. United Nations Statistics Division. (2025). Principles and recommendations for population and housing censuses (Revision 4). United Nations.
50. Wagner, K. D., Davidson, P. J., Pollini, R. A., Strathdee, S. A., Washburn, R., & Palinkas, L. A. (2012). Reconciling incongruous qualitative and quantitative findings in mixed methods research: Exemplars from research with drug-using populations. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 23(1), 54-61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2011.05.009>
51. World Health Organization. (2016). Time to respond: A report on the global implementation of maternal death surveillance and response. WHO.
52. World Health Organization. (2023). Checklist for ensuring the quality of violence against women surveys. WHO.
53. World Health Organization. (2025). Conducting qualitative research on maternal morbidities: A manual. WHO.
54. Yadav, D. (2022). Criteria for good qualitative research: A comprehensive review. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 31, 679-689. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-021-00619-0>
55. Yalew, A. Z., Olayemi, O. O., & Yalew, A. W. (2023). Reasons and prevention strategies of unintended pregnancy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: A phenomenological qualitative study. *BMJ Open*, 13(7), e072008. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2023-072008>