

No Nest? The Growth of Childlessness in America

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Population Association of America
Annual Meeting, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2013

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Abstract

Changes in family formation reveal a decreased centrality of childbearing in Americans' lives in the recent decades. Yet, relatively few scholars have focused on the factors associated with childlessness for recent cohorts of women. Similarly, due to scarcity of data, few studies analyze changes in childlessness over time. In this paper we examine childlessness using recent data from the NSFG. Our purpose is twofold, first to describe the childless population using 2006-2010 data and identify the factors that are associated with childlessness; and second, we analyze how these associations have changed over time using data from previous waves. Our preliminary results indicate that among recent cohorts of women ages 35-44, 16.4% were childless; however 48.4% of them reported a desire to have at least one child, implying that nearly half of them are involuntarily childless. Compared with mothers, childless women exhibit higher educational attainment, are more likely to be employed, and report higher income. This study sheds new light in the recent contextual factors associated with childlessness among American women.

Background

Most of the studies in fertility have focused on mothers and their fertility behaviors, and relatively little attention has been paid to childless women. However, since the 1970s the proportion of childless women has significantly increased (Kirmeyer and Hamilton 2011). The recent trends have been accompanied by increases in women's education and labor force participation, as well as changes in norms, values, and favorable attitudes towards greater independence and self-fulfillment (Klinenberg 2012; Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell 2007; Lesthaeghe 1995). These changes have been accompanied by a decreased centrality of marriage and childbearing in American's lives (Cherlin 2010). It has become more acceptable for individuals to eschew commitment both to marriage and parenthood to pursue educational and occupational goals. Parenthood is increasingly seen as a voluntary choice and as a means for self-realization (Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell 2007). At the same time, individuals are facing an increased demand in time devoted to work and family that has contributed to the further postponement of childbearing, especially among college educated and career women (Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan 2004; Martin 2000). Despite the higher prevalence of childlessness, childless women have received little attention compared mothers as fertility research has conventionally focused on women with children.

Our purpose in this study is twofold. First we describe the childless population using recent data from the NSFG 2006-2010 and identify the factors associated with childlessness. Second, we analyze how these associations have changed over time as the socio-demographic and cultural context of childlessness have evolved using data from previous waves of the NSFG 1982, 1988, 1995 and 2002 from the Integrated Fertility Survey Series (IFSS).

As Table 1 shows, during 2006-2010, of all women ages 35-44, 16.4% were childless. However, 48.4% of childless women reported a desire to have at least one child, implying that nearly half of them are involuntarily childless. Although women in this age group can still bear children, the chances of doing so are greatly reduced especially after age 40 as rates of infecundity rapidly increases. In fact, 16.9% of childless women in this sample reported having problems to carry a pregnancy to term, almost twice the percentage among mothers (8.8%). As several studies have found, the increased postponement of childbearing until education and career goals have been achieved has caused a higher prevalence of involuntary childlessness and well as increased levels of psychological distress (Hagestad and Call 2007; Martin 2000; McQuillan et al. 2003). Childless women's demographic characteristics have historically differed from those of mothers. Childless women were more likely to be white, have higher education, work full-time, and have never been married compared to women with children. Recently, except for Hispanics, the differences in childlessness rates across races have greatly leveled off (Lundquist, Budig, and Curtis 2009; U.S. Census Bureau 2010), and childlessness has increased among women of different educational levels (Martin 2000). The rate of childlessness among married women has also substantially increased, nonetheless, being married is still strongly associated with childbearing, while being single or divorced are strong predictors of childlessness (Hagestad and Call 2007; Lundquist, Budig and Curtis 2009). Childless women are less likely to attend religious services, and more likely to have been raised by a mother with higher education than women with children. With this study we want to contribute to the research in fertility by shedding new light in the contextual factors associated with childlessness in the past and in more recent times.

Table 1. Percent Distribution of Childless Women Aged 35-44 by Demographic Characteristics, NSFG 2006-2010*

	All Women (in 1,000s)	Mothers	%	Childless	%
Total weighted <i>n</i>	21,190	17,718	83.6	3,472	16.4
Wants child(ren)	5,923	4,241	23.9	1,682	48.4
Have difficulty to have a baby	2,150	1,563	8.8	588	16.9
Race/Ethnicity					
Hispanic	3,225	3,008	17.0	218	6.3
White	13,445	10,986	62.0	2,460	70.8
Black	2,921	2,402	13.6	519	15.0
Other	1,598	1,322	7.5	276	7.9
Foreign Born	3,922	3,473	19.6	449	12.9
Education					
Less than high school	3,480	3,205	18.1	275	7.9
High school	5,090	4,436	25.0	654	18.8
Some college	5,784	4,886	27.6	897	25.8
College	6,836	5,190	29.3	1,647	47.4
Work status					
Currently employed	15,692	12,757	72.0	2,934	84.5
Marital status					
Currently married	13,544	12,050	68.0	1,494	43.0
Cohabiting	1,588	1,316	7.4	272	7.8
Formerly married	3,607	3,099	17.5	509	14.6
Never married	2,450	1,253	7.1	1,197	34.5
Mothers' education					
Less than high school	6,111	5,475	30.9	636	18.3
High school graduate	7,933	6,548	37.0	1,385	39.9
Some college or bachelors' degree	7,059	5,633	31.8	1,426	41.1
Mother worked when R was 15					
Full time	9,967	8,194	46.2	1,774	51.1
Part time	3,770	3,130	17.7	640	18.4
Not worked or missing	7,453	6,394	36.1	1,059	30.5

Lived childhood with both parents	11,846	2,290	65.9	14,136	66.7
Religion Importance					
Important	17,154	14,642	82.6	2,513	72.4
Not important	811	539	3.0	272	7.8
Other	3,224	2,537	14.3	688	19.8
Religion (raised)					
No religion	1,630	1,348	7.6	282	8.1
Catholic	7,558	6,324	35.7	1,234	35.5
Protestant	10,142	8,536	48.2	1,606	46.2
Other	1,860	1,509	8.5	351	10.1
Current attendance					
Never attends religious services	4,184	3,197	18.0	987	28.4
Total unweighted <i>n</i>	3,484	2,748		736	

* All percentages are weighted

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