

Women Who Are Fecund but Do Not Wish to Have Children Outnumber the Involuntarily Childless

Seven percent of U.S. women aged 35–44 are voluntarily childless: They have never given birth and do not expect to, and either are fecund or have undergone contraceptive sterilization. Voluntarily childless women make up a larger share of 35–44-year-olds than do women who have fecundity impairments (the involuntarily childless) or nulliparous women who expect to have children (the temporarily childless). Voluntarily childless women have higher incomes, are more likely to be employed in professional or managerial positions, and have longer work histories than other childless women or women with children. These are among the main findings of an analysis based on data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG).¹

Several features of the NSFG afforded the analysts the opportunity to expand on previous work on childlessness among U.S. women in the late childbearing years. First, the survey's four most recent rounds (conducted in 1982, 1988, 1995 and 2002) permitted the examination of trends in childlessness. Second, with the available data, women could be classified by their childbearing expectations and by their biological ability to have children, factors not taken into consideration in earlier research. Third, variables unique to the 1995 survey yielded an unprecedentedly detailed profile of the characteristics of voluntarily childless, involuntarily childless and temporarily childless women. The analysts used bivariate tests of significance to assess differences among these groups and women with children.

Between 1982 and 1995, the proportion of 35–44-year-old women who were voluntarily childless rose from 5% to 9%; by 2002, it had declined to 7%. Similarly, the proportion temporarily childless increased from 3% to 6% between 1982 and 1995, and then declined to 5%. The proportion involuntarily childless was stable, at 4%, over the entire period. In 1995 and 2002, involuntary childlessness was more common among

women in their early 40s than among those in their late 30s, and temporary childlessness was more common among the younger than among the older women.

Data from 1995 reveal significant demographic differences among the groups of childless women aged 35–44. Involuntarily childless women were less likely than the voluntarily childless to be white (79% vs. 84%), and they were the most likely of all childless women ever to have married (80% vs. 53–55%). Voluntarily childless women were more likely than involuntarily childless women to claim no religious affiliation (21% vs. 6%) and more likely than any other childless women to say that they had been raised in a particular religion but adhered to none now (17% vs. 6–11%).

Voluntarily childless women differed from both other childless women and parents on several measures related to careers and earnings. They were the most likely to report an annual salary of at least \$25,000 (57% vs. 26–41%) and to hold managerial or professional jobs (11% vs. 6–9%). Furthermore, some 84% of the voluntarily childless had worked for 15 or more years since age 18, compared with 72–77% of other childless women and 57% of parents.

Childless women expressed more open attitudes toward gender equality than did parents, but differences among childless women were not statistically significant. Some 77–84% of childless women disagreed that men, but not women, can make long-range plans and agreed that young girls deserve as much independence as boys; by contrast, the proportions among parents were 72–75%. Women who were voluntarily childless were more likely than any other group, including parents, to disagree that women are happier if they stay home and take care of their children (87% vs. 75–77%). The proportions of women who disagreed that preschoolers suffer if their mothers work (57–62%), agreed that women should not let childrearing stand in the way of their careers (81–91%) and felt

that free child care should be available to enable women to work (60–64%) did not differ among groups.

The analysts point out that their focus was biological parenthood and did not take into account women who had stepchildren or adopted children. Furthermore, they note that childbearing intentions can change, and their profiles of childless women relied on data for a single point in time. Nevertheless, they draw two key conclusions. First, some adult women may view their lives as “complete and preferable without the addition of children.” At the same time, the slight decline in voluntary childlessness between the most recent surveys could partly reflect that the acceptability of women's combining childbearing and work is increasing. —D. Hollander

REFERENCE

1. Abma JC and Martinez GM, Childlessness among older women in the United States: trends and profiles, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 2006, 68(4):1045–1056.