

I Don't Want Any Children... Ever:
Gender Differences in Voluntary Childlessness in the US, 2002

DeAnna L. Gore

Florida State University

ABSTRACT

The voluntarily childless population has been increasing in proportion over the past decades. While empirical research is abundant for women, there has been little in-depth study in males who choose to remain childless. Using the Cycle 6 of the National Survey of Family Growth, 2002, this paper examines various socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the voluntarily childless population with a focus on the gender differences. Preliminary bivariate analysis shows that males are more likely to remain childless over the life course than females. While 18.90 percent of men in the 40 to 44 year age group are voluntarily childless, only 10.27 percent of women are. The characteristics of the voluntarily childless in the sample remain constant with other literature, as they are likely to be white native born with at least a high school diploma, are employed, have a relatively high total family income, and reside in metropolitan areas. In terms of gender differences, voluntarily childless women are more likely to have a higher education and total family income than voluntarily childless men. With relatively similar characteristics, the gender difference in the proportion to remain childless still remains unexplained. There are more stigmas for females to never enter parenthood than there are for males. Motherhood is seen as a sign of achievement and femininity, while a man's accomplishments are viewed through his income and career. This provides more of an incentive for women to have children than men.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional social constructions of “family” have continually been changing in recent decades. Americans have become more tolerant in the concept of family, as cohabiting couples, gay and lesbian families, and single-parent families are becoming increasingly common. Another group that has been slowly growing and gaining more attention is those individuals and couples that remain childless or “childfree” through their lifetime. This movement had gained much attention in empirical research during the seventies and eighties, as numerous studies examined the trends and determinants of childlessness (Ritchey & Stokes, 1974; Veevers, 1980; de Jong & Sell, 1977; Mosher & Bachrach, 1982; Bloom & Trussell, 1984). However, much of the research on childlessness focuses on women. Men are not widely studied on this topic due to the scarcity of data on men’s fertility behavior.

This paper contributes to this undeveloped area using the National Survey of Family Growth, which obtained the fertility history for both males and females in 2002. Various socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the voluntarily childless population are examined with the specific focus of gender differences among the childless. First I will give an overview of the literature on voluntary childlessness, including trends over time and how the characteristics of the childless and parents differ. The motives for not having children are also reviewed, citing several gender differences in these reasons.

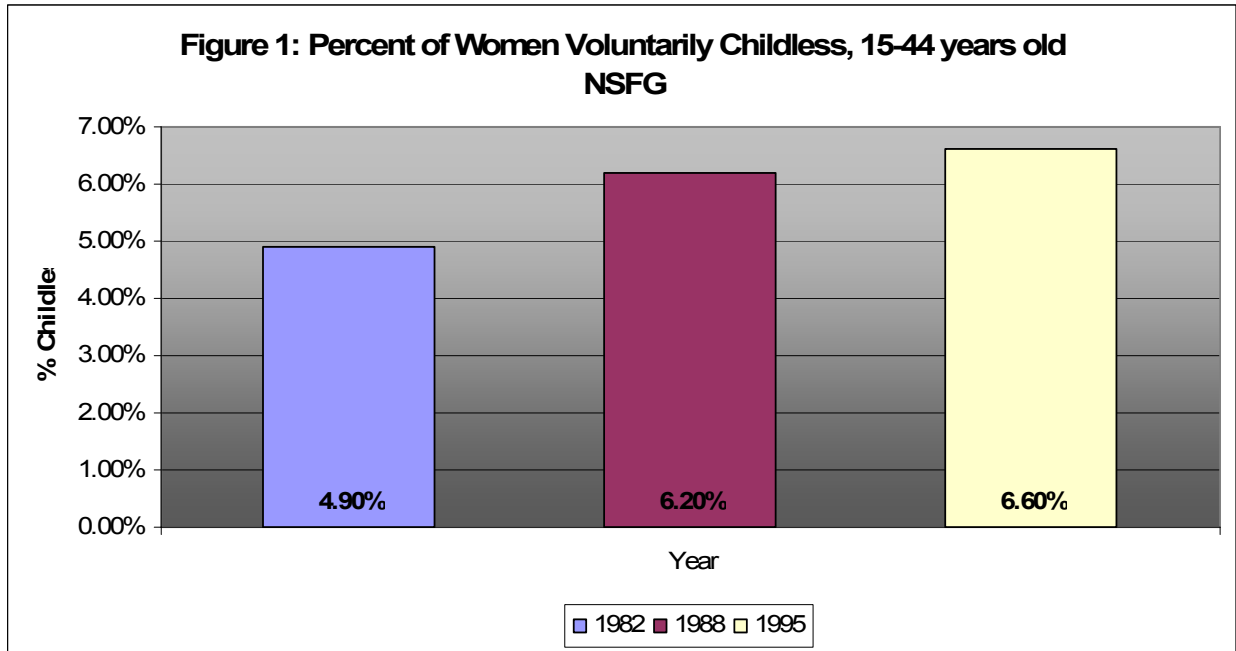
BACKGROUND

There are several different definitions of those who are childless. Ireland (1993) terms those who are not able to have children due to infertility or other health problems

‘traditional women’; these women are also known as involuntarily childless. Women who are waiting, or childless by delay, are labeled as ‘transitional women,’ (Ireland, 1993) or postponers (Heaton, Jacobson & Holland, 1999). However, sometimes these women become permanently childless, as they may wait until it is too late to physically bear children. The focus of this paper is on women and men who consciously choose not to become parents. While Ireland (1993) labels these women, ‘transformative women,’ they will be called voluntarily childless from here on out.

Trends in Childlessness

In 1990, the US Census figures showed that for the first time, households without children under 18 living in them outnumbered homes with children (from Lafayette, 1995). According to other Census figures, one in five baby boomer women are remaining childless. Figure 1 shows the how voluntary childlessness of women 15 to 44 years of age has increased from 1982 to 1995 (Abma, et. al, 1997). Statistics from the National Survey of Family Growth show that between 1982 and 1988, there was an increase of 1.3% in childlessness. In 1995, 6.6 percent of women were voluntarily childless, while 2 percent were involuntarily childless. The rate of involuntary childlessness has declined, and remained constant at 2 percent, as women are in better health and there is a general decrease in sterility caused by sexually transmitted diseases (Boyd, 1989). Altogether, in 1995, 5.4 million women had no children and expected none in the future (Abma, et. al, 1997). The *American Demographics* magazine projects that by 2010, the number of married couples without children is expected to increase to nearly 31 million (from Lafayette, 1995).



Source: National Survey of Family Growth; Abma, et. al, 1997

Voluntary childlessness also reflects the decision of potential parents, which has varied substantially by period and cohort. Compared to 10 percent of women ages 40 to 44 in 1976, about 18 percent of woman never had a child (Downs, 2003). Much of this increase is due to social changes including increased female labor force participation, higher educational attainment, and an increase in later ages at first marriage (de Jong & Sell, 1977). Later marriages decrease the time during which pregnancy can occur.

The majority of men and women have the intentions of having children, however many change their minds and their behaviors (Heaton, Cardell & Holland, 1999). In their study on persistence and change in the decision to remain childless, Heaton, et al. finds that postponers are the largest group in the analysis. However, as people age, they are more likely to remain childless or switch to a preference for childlessness. The likeliness they will have a child decreases due to biological processes and lifestyle preferences. Thirteen percent of the respondents switched from intending to have a child to the

decision of being childless between the six years of each survey. Seven percent reported consistently not wanting children.

Unfortunately, data on the fertility behavior of men are scarce. Only recently have surveys begun asking males. McAllister and Clarke (1998) acknowledge this, as they cite studies indicating that male and female rates of childlessness differ.

Who doesn't want children?

Compared to those with children, the voluntarily childless have been found to be more educated (Abma, et. al, 1997; Rose, 2003), more likely to be employed in managerial or professional occupations (Bachu, 1999), and earn relatively high incomes (Bachu, 1999). Rose (2003) finds that 81.5 percent of women with 16 years of education were mothers at 44-45 years, while only 63.4 percent of women with a doctorate or a professional degree had children. Another study by Goldin (1991) looks at the effect of college education on career-family choices for women. Those who graduated around 1972 and were between the ages of 37 and 47 at the time of the survey, 29 percent had not yet had a child. For those who continued their education after their Bachelor's, 33.3 percent were without child.

In a 1994 study, researchers found that 61 percent of female American managers were childless; 50 percent of women in academia were reported childless in a 1998 study (from Rabin-Margalioth, 2004). In a Harvard Business Review looking at those in the 41 to 55 year age group, 33 percent of high achievers and 49 percent of ultra achieving women had no children (Hewlett, 2002).¹ However, only 25 percent of high achieving

¹ High achievers make \$65,000 or more a year, while ultra achievers make more than \$100,000 (Hewlett, 2002).

men and 19 percent of ultra achieving men were childless. This shows a significant gender difference in childlessness.

Childlessness is also more prevalent in urban than rural areas (Taeuber, 1971; DeOllas and Kapinus, 2002). This association emphasizes the relative advantage of children in rural areas as compared to urban. There are more opportunities in the more developed areas for a more varied life style.

Marital status is a very important predictor of childlessness. Although births outside of marriage are common, many women would prefer to be married when starting a family. Women who have never been married are more likely to be childless than women who have been married (Bachu, 1999)

Why they choose childlessness

For some people, the decision to not become parents occurs early on in life, while others have reported that being childless was not a conscious decision for them. Many times, one's career dictates the path of childlessness in their personal lives. Hewlett finds that 31 percent of ultra achieving women 41-55 years reports still wanting to have a child, while only 14 percent of high achieving women agreed that their decision to remain childless occurred early on when they graduated from college². However, career satisfaction and success as a motive to remain childless is described more so by women, than men (Park, 2005). Thus, despite the increase in labor force participation by women, they usually have to balance career and family more. Not having the ability to achieve this balance this is a conviction expressed by some women in Park's research.

While some do not want to sacrifice their career, others choose to remain childless to maintain the benefits of an adult-oriented, childfree lifestyle. As one male interviewee

² See note 1

responded, “the benefits of having children would not outweigh not having them” (Park, 2002: 393). Houseknecht (1987) reviewed the childlessness literature of twenty-nine studies published between 1971 and 1981, and found that in 79 percent of these studies, females and males nearly equally mentioned greater opportunity for self-fulfillment and spontaneous mobility. However, Park (2002) finds that more women than men express these benefits; more men find that their lack of maturity and undeveloped sense of responsibility as their benefit of maintaining an adult lifestyle. Personality traits including impatience, anxiousness, and perfectionism were also seen as contrasting to those for good parenting.

Females are also more likely than men to mention early socialization and the influence of parenting models in their choice for childlessness (Park, 2002; Houseknecht, 1987). These women may have interpreted the experiences of some mothers, including their own, in a way that affected their decision. For one woman, she “perceived her mother as a woman without her own identity, who lives through her children in a manipulative way” (Park, 2002: 387). Others are daunted by the stories of friends and family on the difficulties of raising children. By not having children, they avoid these strong negative feelings.

For more female subjects than males, their discomfort or lack of interest in children is a key motive for their decision (Park, 2002). Conversely, other researchers found that this general dislike of children mentioned by males more often. Houseknecht (1987) found 43 percent of the male samples in the articles mentioning this as a motive, compared to only 26% of the female samples. This gender-related finding was also found by Lunneborg (2000)

DATA

The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) is conducted by the National Center for Health Statistic (NCHS). Cycle 6, which is used for this analysis, is based on an area probability sample that represents the household population of the United States. Respondent consisted of 7,643 females and 4,928 males between the ages of 15 and 44 years, with the in-person interviews occurring from January 2002 to March 2003. The female questionnaire of the NSFG covers topics related to factors affecting birth and pregnancy rates and women's reproductive health, while the male questionnaire includes topics of fatherhood.

The main focus is on the population who are voluntarily childlessness through their entire life course. While there are women and men at all ages who are childless, this may only be temporary as they are postponing childbearing. Since most women are finished with childbearing in their forties, this paper will focus on men and women 40 to 44 years old. It is important to note that it is possible for men over the age of 44 years to have children, however men past this age were not interviewed in this survey. To date, the NSFG is one of the few surveys that include questions concerning male fertility. Based on this, there are several assumptions that needed to be considered when examining both male and female voluntary childlessness. There are some instances that people at these older ages still want to have a child. These respondents were identified through the question "If it were possible, would you, yourself, want to have a/another baby at some time in the future" and were excluded from the childless sample. In

addition, those respondents who were living with a partner who has at least one child were also excluded, as s/he may be playing some type of parent role to the child.

Another group of women to take into consideration are those who are sterile. Women who were surgically sterile for contraceptive reasons are considered to be voluntarily childless, while women who were surgically sterile for non-contraceptive reasons or were non-surgically sterile are considered involuntarily childless and are excluded from the final analysis. Similar questions regarding sterility were also asked of male respondents. Those who were sterile at the time of the interview were excluded from the final sample. After taking these groups of respondents into consideration, the final sample size included 743 women with at least one child, 85 childless women, 339 males with at least one child, and 79 childless males. The proportions across various socioeconomic and demographic variables are examined between men and women among those who are voluntarily childless.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Figure 2 shows the percentage of males and females who are childless across the cohorts born from 1958 to 1987. These include those who are voluntarily, involuntarily, and temporarily childless. Those at the older ages have the lowest proportion of childlessness. 24.8 percent of the men who were born in 1958 were childless in 2002, while only 13.2 percent of women were. These percentages remain fairly constant through the younger cohorts, until about 1972 when the slope becomes steeper for both genders. In 2002, many of these respondents were in their late twenties and early thirties, which are the average ages when people are getting married and starting a family. For

the respondents born in this cohort, 40.5 percent of males and 26.4 percent of females had no children. The percentages increase as the cohorts become younger. Many of these respondents have not had as much time in their childbearing years, and may also be postponing having children to concentrate on their education and careers. In addition to the cohort variations, it is quite apparent that there are gender differences in childlessness. With the youngest ages as an exception, males have a higher proportion of childlessness than females.

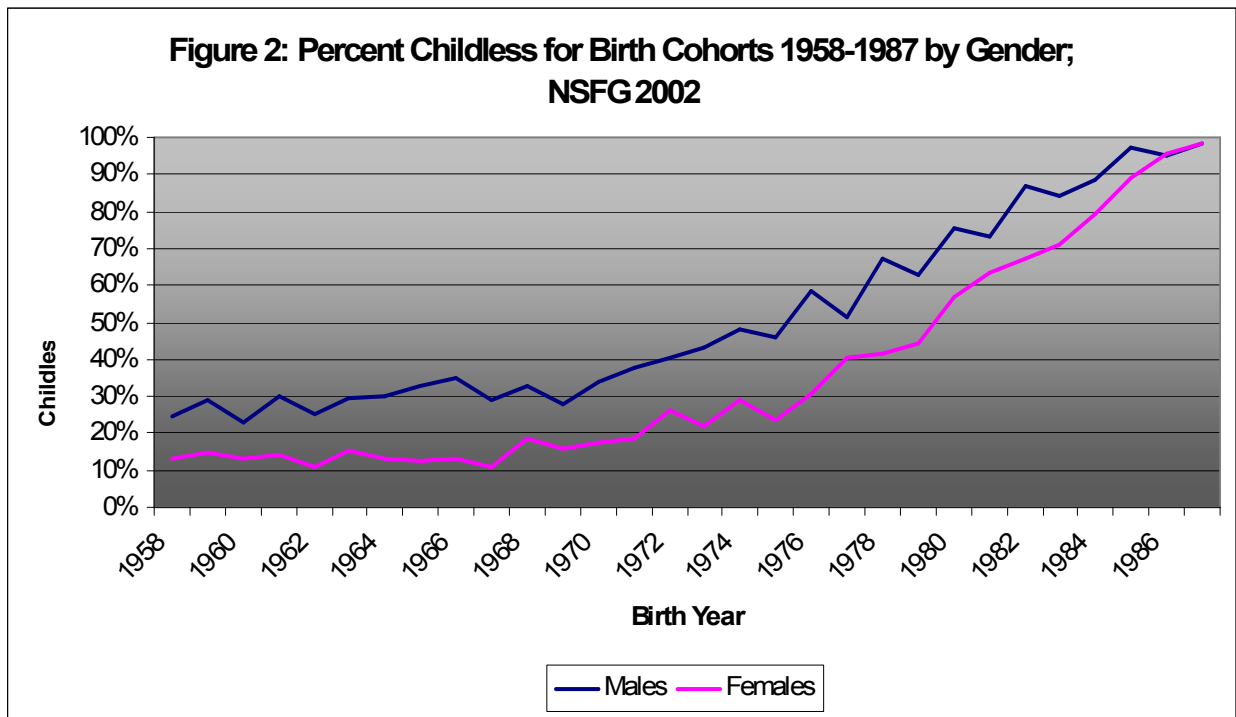


Table 1 presents the proportions of females and males between the ages of 40 and 44 who are voluntarily childless across several various socioeconomic and demographic variables. While 18.90 percent of men are childless, only 10.27 percent of women are. These results are matching to those of Figure 1, where a higher percentage of men are childless.

While there presents to be no significant difference in marital status for females (both never married and ever married at roughly 50 percent each), almost 10 percent more childless males have never been married. The percentage of voluntarily childless respondents is high for both men and women who only have a high school diploma (50.63 percent and 47.06). However, 41.17 percent of childless females have earned a Bachelor's or higher degree, compared to only 34.18 percent of men. Almost 50 percent of childless women have a total family income of \$50,000 or greater compared to about 38 percent of men. This is in accordance with findings from previous studies where childless women are more likely to have a higher education and total family income than voluntarily childless men. There are no major gender differences in labor force status among this group.

Voluntarily childless men and women are significantly more likely to be native born, compared to only between five and seven percent of the childless respondents being born outside of the United States. White Non-Hispanic males and females make up the majority of the voluntarily childless population, while Hispanics comprise of the least proportion of the childless, excluding the 'Other' category. For both nativity and race and ethnicity, there appear to be no large gender differences among this growing population.

Another aspect to examine is residence; whether s/he lives in a metropolitan area or not. As in previous research, the voluntarily childless are more likely to live in areas that are considered central cities, with the lowest proportion residing in non-metropolitan areas. While previous studies state that the childless are less likely to report being affiliated with a religion, these results are conflicting. Only 18.82 percent of women

reported having no religion, while 34.18 percent of voluntarily childless men stated this. For those who are affiliated with a religion, Protestants are more likely to be voluntarily childless than Catholics.

Table 1: Proportions Voluntarily Childless Across Predictors by Gender; 40-44 Years; NSFG 2002

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Females (%)</i>	<i>Males (%)</i>
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Never Married	49.41	59.49
Ever Married	50.59	40.51
<i>Educational Attainment</i>		
Not HS graduate	5.88	8.86
High school graduate	47.06	50.63
Associate's degree	5.88	6.33
Bachelor's degree	25.88	17.72
Graduate	15.29	16.46
<i>Nativity</i>		
Native	92.94	94.94
Foreign born	7.06	5.06
<i>Race/ Ethnicity</i>		
White	70.59	79.75
Black	18.82	11.39
Hispanic	10.59	6.33
Other	0.00	2.53
<i>Total Family Income</i>		
Under \$19,999	20.00	21.52
\$20,000 - \$49,999	30.59	40.51
\$50,000 or more	49.41	37.97
<i>Labor Force Status</i>		
Employed	84.71	83.54
Unemployed	7.06	10.12
Not in Labor Force	8.24	6.33
<i>Metropolitan Residence</i>		
MSA – City	48.24	46.84
MSA – Other	37.65	37.97
Non-metropolitan	14.12	15.19
<i>Religion</i>		
No Religion	18.82	34.18
Catholic	25.88	22.78
Protestant	44.71	35.44
Other	10.59	7.59
<i>Observations</i>	85	79

<i>Percent Childless</i>	10.27	18.90
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(PRELIMINARY) DISCUSSION

Overall, the voluntarily childless are more likely to be educated, employed, have relatively high total income, be native born and white, and live in metropolitan areas. This is the same for both males and females. However, there are still exists a gender gap in the proportion of men and women who are childless. A higher proportion of males than females are voluntarily childless. In addition, these females are more likely to be better educated with a higher total family income that their male counterpart.

For many people, choosing to not become parents is associated with an increase in stigma. Voluntarily childless individuals and couples are seen as less socially desirable, less nurturing, and less mature, as well as more selfish, materialistic and individualistic (Houseknecht, 1987; Callen, 1985; Veivers, 1980). However, although findings are not entirely consistent, child-free women appear to be more stigmatized for their childlessness than do males (Houseknecht, 1987). Men's masculinity is usually seen through their career and income accomplishments. For them to not want children is okay in the public eye. However, much of a woman's femininity is seen through them becoming a mother. McMahon (1995) argues that motherhood is symbolized through caring, self-sacrifice, and tenderness; all are also signs of femininity.

However, for those childless women, they have to somehow show that they are also accomplished, although not by motherhood. These women who decide not to have children are usually more educated and obtain managerial or professional careers. It is through this path that they show where their achievements are. One can argue that career women do not want children or that childless career women understand the responsibilities of raising children will hinder their career prospects and therefore make the decision to not have children. However, research shows that most childless women do not deliberately choose to remain permanently childless (Goldin, 1991). As one woman states:

“When I look back, I realize that I did not choose childlessness but I chose other things that gave meaning to my life. In other words, I decided on the conditions in which I could have a child but never made a real effort to create those conditions. Childlessness was an obvious outcome.” (Wager, 2000: 393)

The future of childless appears to be slowly increasing over time. However, with fertility levels already at replacement level in the United States, population policies may become more important when providing incentives for women to have children. In the next couples of decades, this area will have to be examined very closely. Also, as this paper provides evidence of, there exist gender differences in childlessness. With this area still relatively untouched, more work needs to be done to determine the exact causes of why and how more men are remaining childless. Although childlessness has been in the literature since the sixties, it is still a new and growing trend that deserves more attention.

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