

A Quarter Century of Change in Unintended Births

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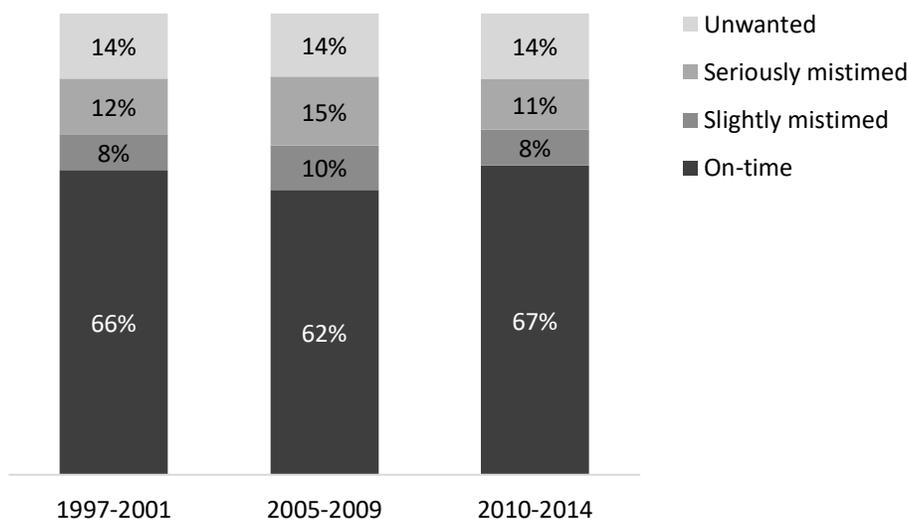
Despite declines in unintended pregnancy and abortion rates in recent years (Finer and Zolna, 2016; Jones and Jerman, 2017), unintended births remain higher in the United States than in other industrialized countries (Sedgh, Singh, and Hussain, 2014). In this profile, we investigate trends in birth intendedness between 1997 and 2014 using the 2002, 2006-10, and 2011-15 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth. Birth intendedness is based on a series of questions in which women were asked to characterize each birth as on-time, mistimed (wanted but occurring earlier than desired), or unwanted (the respondent did not want any births at all, or no additional births). When births were reported as mistimed, women were asked how much earlier than desired the birth occurred, and we categorize mistimed births into two groups: slightly mistimed (less than two years earlier than desired) or seriously mistimed (two or more years too early). This profile is the first in a series of three examining the intendedness of births. Check out the other two profiles in the series:

- Unintended Births: Variation Across Social and Demographic Characteristics ([FP-17-09](#))
- Women's Experiences of Unintended Childbearing ([FP-17-10](#))

In all time periods, the majority of births were characterized as on-time.

- Two-thirds (67%) of births that occurred during 2010-2014 were on time, up from a low of 62% between 2005 and 2009.
- At least two out of ten births were mistimed across birth cohorts. The proportion of births that were mistimed (slightly and seriously) peaked in 2005-2009 at 25%.
- Across the twenty-five-year time span, one in seven (14%) births was unwanted.
 - Among unintended births (all mistimed and unwanted), about two-fifths were unwanted in 2010-2014.

Figure 1. Trends in Birth Intendedness 1997-2014



Source: NCFMR analyses of NSFG 2011-2013 and NSFG 2013-2015

Age & Intendedness

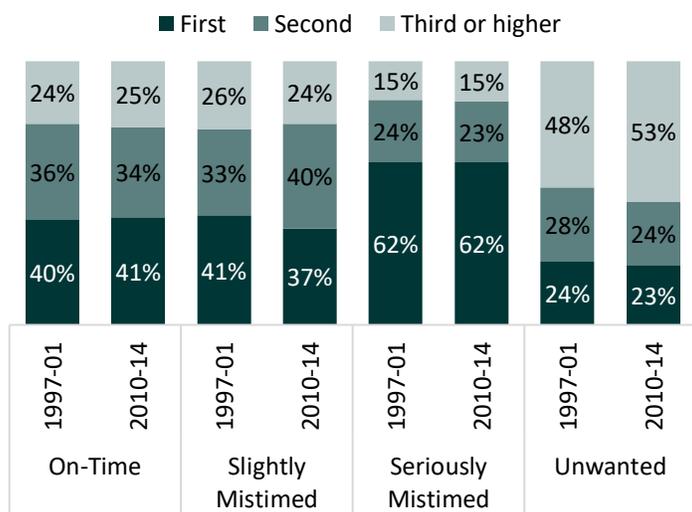
Mothers who had births on-time tended to be older than mothers who had unintended births.

- The median age for on-time births was 29.6 years in 2010-2014, for slightly mistimed births 27.8 years, and for unwanted births 27.0 years. Seriously mistimed births occurred at the youngest ages at 21.9 years in 2010-2014.
- The median age gradually increased since the late 1990s for on-time, slightly mistimed, and seriously mistimed births, but there was no clear trend for unwanted births.

Birth Order & Intendedness

- Most on-time births were first or second births, about three-quarters in both time periods.
- The percentage of slightly mistimed births that were first births declined slightly from 41 % to 37%.
 - In 2010-2014, slightly mistimed were most often second births.
- The majority of seriously mistimed births were first births (62%) in both birth cohorts.
- Just over half (53%) of unwanted births were third births in the most recent period, up slightly from 48% in the late 1990s accompanied by a small decline in the proportion that were second births.

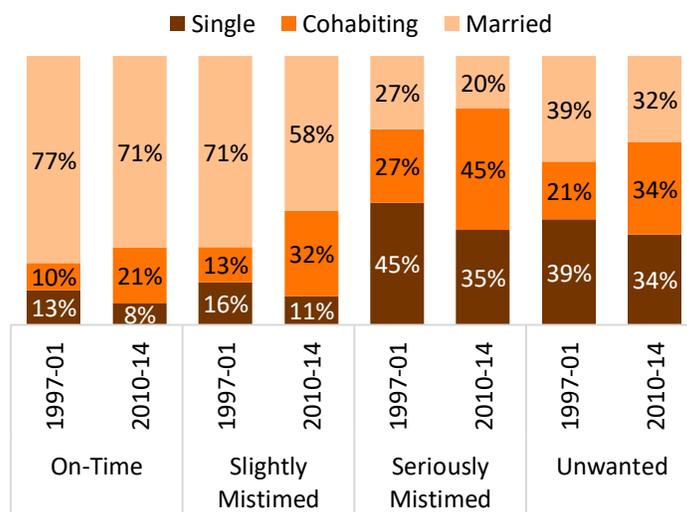
Figure 2. Trends in Parity by Birth Intendedness



Union Status & Intendedness

- The overwhelming majority of on-time births in both periods were to married women. Marital on-time births declined from 77% to 71%, whereas cohabiting on-time births doubled from 10% to 21%.
- The majority of slightly mistimed births were also marital births in both periods, but the decline in the proportion of marital births was larger, decreasing from 71 % among births in the late 1990s to 58% in the most recent birth cohort.
 - The proportion of slightly mistimed births to cohabiting women more than doubled, rising from 13% to 32%.
- Seriously mistimed births occurred most often to single women (45%) in 1997-2001, but by 2010-2014, such births were most common among cohabiting women.
- Cohabiting births accounted for a third of unwanted births in the recent period, up from one-fifth of births in the late 1990s.

Figure 3. Trends in Union Status by Birth Intendedness



Source: NCFMR analyses of 1997-2001, NSFG 2002; 2005-2009, NSFG 2006-10; 2010-2014, NSFG 2011-2013 and NSFG 2013-2015

References:

- Finer, L. B., & Zolna, M. R. (2016). Declines in unintended pregnancy in the United States, 2008-2011. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 374(9), 843-852.
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