Variation in Birth Spacing by Family Context

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Since the late 1980s, the median spacing between births has generally become slightly longer.
- The number of months between first and second births and second and third births was very similar, at 33 and 38 months, respectively, in 2013.
- The median spacing between second and third births increased 3.4 months since 1988.
- Birth spacing for fourth and fifth births was consistently shorter than spacing for second and third births across the period.
- Spacing between third and fourth births increased between 1988 and 2013 by three months, but spacing between fourth and fifth births decreased by two months.

Birth Spacing by Union Status at Prior Birth

- For second births, women who were single at their first birth had the longest median spacing, at 41 months.
- Spacing was similar for cohabiting and married women, at 34 and 33 months, respectively.
- For third births, women who were cohabiting at their first birth had births more quickly than single or married counterparts, with a median spacing of 32 months.
- Single and married women had their third births just over three years after their prior births.

Birth Spacing by Intendedness of Prior Birth

- The median spacing between first and second births was shorter for women who intended their first birth (36 months) than for women whose first birth was unintended (40 months).
- Among those with third births, the opposite was true—spacing was slightly shorter for those with unintended second births (34 months) than for those with intended second births (36 months).

Shorter spacing between births... was associated with a greater number of children

Birth Spacing and Number of Children

Shorter spacing between births was associated with a greater number of children (not shown).
- Between their first and second births, mothers with only two children had a median spacing of 40 months whereas those with five or more children had a median spacing of 24 months.
- The median number of months between the second and the third birth was 39 months for mothers with only three children but was 25 months for mothers with five or more children.

Data Sources:

Suggested Citation:

National Center for Family & Marriage Research
Family Profiles: Original reports summarizing and analyzing nationally representative data with the goal of providing the latest analyses of U.S. families. These profiles examine topics related to the NCHS’s core research programs.
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