Women's Experiences of Unintended Childbearing

Although we know the majority of births in recent years are intended (FP-17-08), less is known about how many women experience unintended childbirth. In this profile, we examine the proportion of mothers aged 40-44 who have ever experienced unintended childbirth (having any births that are not ‘on-time’) using the 2011-15 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth. Unintended births were identified from 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 too early, 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 third in a series of three examining the intendedness of births. Check out the other two Profiles in the series:

- A Quarter Century of Change in Unintended Births (FP-17-08)
- Unintended Births: Variation across Social and Demographic Characteristics (FP-17-09)

Nearly half of all mothers aged 40-44 had at least one unintended birth, while the other half of mothers had only intended births.

Serious mistimed births were the most common type of unintended birth, with one-quarter of mothers having had at least one such birth.

About one-fifth of mothers (21%) have had an unwanted birth.

![Bar chart showing experiences of unintended births among mothers aged 40-44](image)

Figure 1. Experiences of Unintended Births Among Mothers Aged 40-44

- Any unintended births: 48%
- Any slightly mistimed births: 12%
- Any seriously mistimed births: 25%
- Any unwanted births: 21%


Age and Unintended Childbearing

Experiences of unintended childbearing were also reflected in the timing of parenthood. Mothers with only intended births entered parenthood substantially older than mothers with any unintended births.

- Mothers who had only intended births had a median age at first birth of 28.4 years.
- Mothers with any unintended births began childbearing much earlier, with a median age of 21.1 years.
Education and Unintended Childbearing

- Unintended childbearing varied by educational attainment. The lowest levels of unintended childbearing existed among mothers with at least a Bachelor’s degree.
- There was little variation in having ever had an unintended birth among mothers who do not have a Bachelor’s degree, as about half of women without a Bachelor’s degree had at least one unintended birth.

Race, Ethnicity, and Unintended Childbearing

- Unintended childbearing was least common among White mothers aged 40-44. Two out of five (41%) White mothers had at least one unintended birth.
- Unintended childbearing was most common among Black mothers. Nearly 70% of Black mothers had at least one unintended birth.
- About half of Hispanic mothers had at least one unintended birth.

Figure 2. Educational Differences in Experiencing Any Unintended Births Among Mothers Aged 40-44

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>% of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;HS</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS/GED</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bach+</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Racial and Ethnic Differences in Experiencing Any Unintended Births Among Mothers Aged 40-44

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>% of Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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References:


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National Center for Family & Marriage Research

Family Profiles: Original reports summarizing and analyzing nationally representative data with the goal to provide the latest analysis of U.S. families. These profiles examine topics related to the NCFMR’s core research themes. http://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr.html

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