Mothers’ Experiences of Unintended Childbearing, 2017

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The majority of births in recent years are intended (FP-21-01), but many mothers nonetheless experience unintended fertility. In this profile, we examine the share of mothers aged 45-49 who have ever experienced unintended childbearing (having any births that are not ‘on time’) for the year 2017, using the 2015-2019 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 an update of FP-17-101 and the third in a series on unintended childbearing.

- In 2017, 45% of all mothers aged 45-49 had experienced at least unintended birth (figure 1).
- Seriously mistimed births were the most common type of unintended birth, with nearly one-quarter of mothers (23%) having had at least one such birth (figure 2).
- About one-fifth of mothers (19%) have had an unwanted birth (figure 2).

In 2017, 45% of all mothers aged 45-49 had experienced at least unintended birth.


Age and Unintended Childbearing
Experiences of unintended childbearing were also reflected in the timing of parenthood.

- Among mothers 45-49 in 2017, those with only intended births had a median age at first birth of 28 years.
- Mothers with any unintended births began childbearing much earlier, with a median age of 20 years.

The 2015-2019 cycle of the NSFG expanded its age range to 49 (up from age 45 in prior cycles) and released a slightly different set of variables on race-ethnicity. As such, the estimates in this profile are not directly comparable to profile FP-17-09.
Education and Unintended Childbearing

There is a clear educational gradient for experiences with unintended fertility among women at the end of their reproductive years in 2017.

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of mothers 45-49 without a high school degree or GED had at least one unintended birth.
- Less than one-third (30%) of mothers with a college degree or higher had any unintended births.

Race and Unintended Childbearing

- Unintended childbearing was least common among White mothers aged 45-49 in 2017. Less than two out of five (37%) White mothers had any unintended births.
- Unintended childbearing was most common among Black mothers – 71% of Black mothers had at least one unintended birth.
- Half of Hispanic, other-race, and multiracial mothers had at least one unintended birth.

Data Sources:

References:

Suggested Citation: