Family Profile No. 09, 2017

Unintended Births: Variation Across Social and Demographic Characteristics
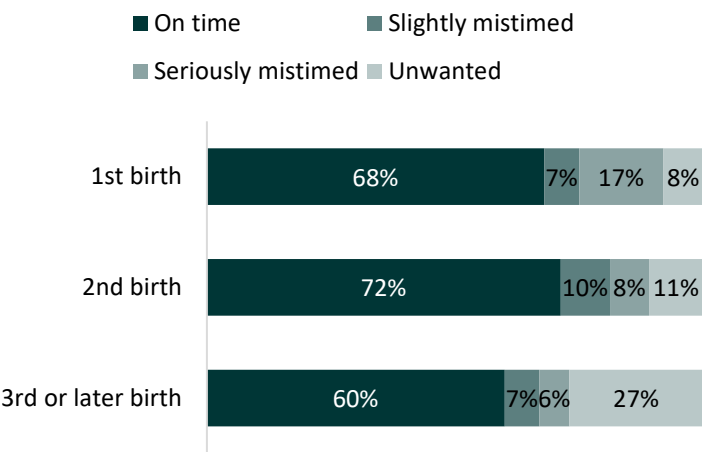
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One of the federal government's Healthy People 2020 initiatives is to reduce the proportion of births that are unintended. In this profile, we examine sociodemographic variation in birth intendedness using the 2011-15 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth, looking at births occurring between 2010-2014. Birth intendedness is based on a series of questions in which women are 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 are 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). Among births in 2010-2014, 67% are characterized as on time (FP-17-08). This Profile is the second 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)
- Women's Experiences of Unintended Childbearing (FP-17-10)

Birth Order & Intendedness

- The majority of births across all birth orders are on time, with the highest proportion of on time births occurring among second births.
- Mistimed births (both slightly and seriously) are most common among first and second births, with slightly mistimed births more common among second births and seriously mistimed births more common among first births.
- Third births are more often unwanted (27%) than second (11 %) or first (8%) births.
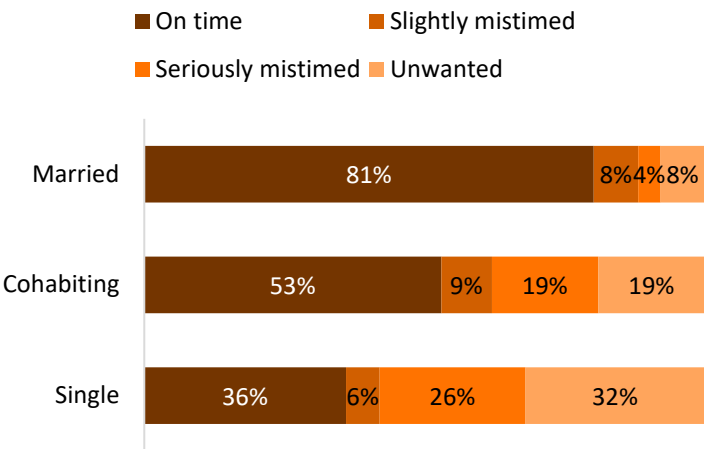
Figure 1. Variation in Intendedness by Birth Order

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

Union Status & Intendedness

Figure 2. Variation in Intendedness by Union Status

- A large majority (81 %) of marital births are on time, compared to just over half (53%) of cohabiting births and just over a third (36%) of single births.
- Mistimed births occur more often among single (32%) and cohabiting (28%) women than married women (12%).
  - Variation by union status in mistiming is greatest for seriously mistimed births. Single women are six times more likely to have a seriously mistimed birth than married women.
- Unwanted births are four times as high among single women than married women.
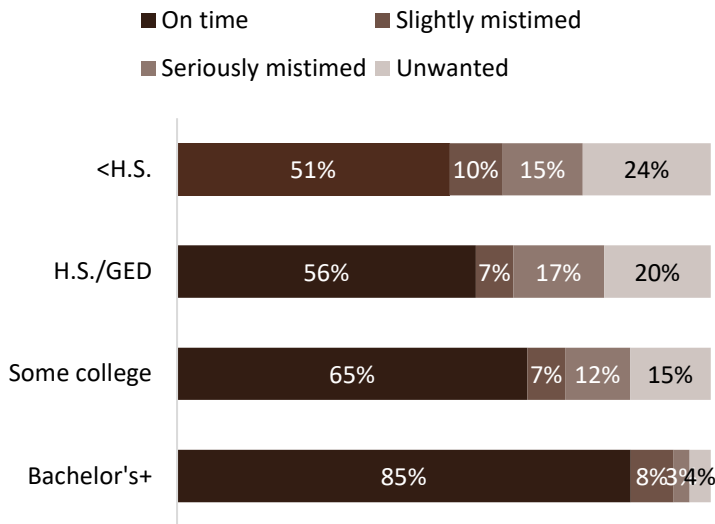 - One-third of children born to single women are unwanted.

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

Education and Intendedness

There is a clear educational gradient to unintended fertility.

- Most births (85%) to women with a college degree are on time compared to half (51 %) of births to women without a high school degree.
- Just 3% of births to women with a college degree are seriously mistimed, with much higher percentages among women with less than a college degree (ranging from 12-17%).
- Only 4% of births to women with a college degree are unwanted, while a quarter (24%) of births to women without a high school degree are unwanted.
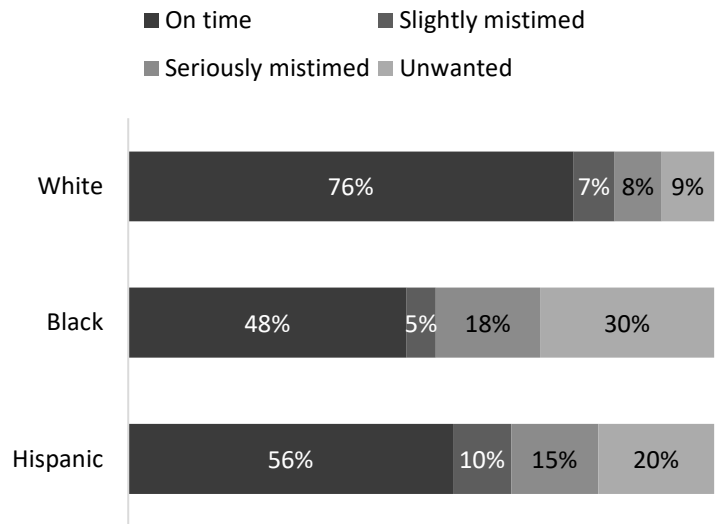
Race, Ethnicity, and Intendedness

- The proportion of births that are on time ranges from just under half among Black women to about three fourths among White women.
- Mistimed births occur more often among Hispanic and Black women (25% and 23% of all births, respectively) and least often among White women (15%).
- Unwanted births comprise the largest percentage of all births among Black women (30%) and the lowest percentage among White women (9%).

Figure 3. Variation in Intendedness by Education

Legend: On time, Slightly mistimed, Seriously mistimed, Unwanted

	On time	Slightly mistimed	Seriously mistimed	Unwanted
<H.S.	51%	10%	15%	24%
H.S./GED	56%	7%	17%	20%
Some college	65%	7%	12%	15%
Bachelor's+	85%	8%	3%	4%

Figure 4. Variation in Intendedness by Race-Ethnicity

Legend: On time, Slightly mistimed, Seriously mistimed, Unwanted

	On time	Slightly mistimed	Seriously mistimed	Unwanted
White	76%	7%	8%	9%
Black	48%	5%	18%	30%
Hispanic	56%	10%	15%	20%

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

Among births in 2010-2014, 67% are characterized as on time.

References:

Guzzo, K. B. (2017). A quarter century of change in unintended births. *Family Profiles*, FP-17-08. Bowling Green, OH: National Center for Family & Marriage Research. http://www.bgsu.edu/ncfmr/resources/data/family-profiles/guzzo-quarter-century-change-unintended-births-fp-17-08.html

Guzzo, K. B. (2017). Women's experiences of unintended childbearing. *Family Profiles*, FP-17-10. Bowling Green, OH: National Center for Family & Marriage Research. https://doi.org/10.25035/ncfmr/fp-17-10

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