

Childfree by choice

by Susan Stobert and Anna Kemeny

"We are a group of adults who all share at least one common desire: we do not wish to have children of our own... We choose to call ourselves 'childfree' rather than 'childless,' because we feel the term 'childless' implies that we're missing something we want — and we are not. We consider ourselves child-FREE — free of the loss of personal freedom, money, time and energy that having children requires."

Thus starts the introductory paragraph of "childfree.net," one of the many Internet sites devoted to providing support and information to individuals who have decided not to have children. Such a support network may be much needed. Although choosing to stay childless may be easier in some ways than it was 30 years ago, having children is still overwhelmingly the norm — 65% of families have children. Those who opt to stay childfree constitute a small minority that often feel obliged to justify their decision to others. It appears that our "kidcentric" society tends to leave those without children feeling inadequate, left out, judged or misunderstood.¹

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What you should know about this study

Data in this article come from the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) on family and friends. In addition to providing a wealth of information on various socio-demographic characteristics of individuals and families, the GSS covered topics such as marital history, common-law unions, biological, adopted and stepchildren, leaving the family home and fertility intentions, to name just a few. The survey was conducted between February and December 2001, and interviewed more than 24,000 respondents aged 15 and over living in private households in the 10 provinces.

One of the questions respondents were asked is "Are you planning on having children?" It is important to realize, however, that birth intentions are not necessarily the same as subsequent actions. As individuals — particularly women — age, it is not unusual for them to change their minds and decide to enter parenthood after all.

Nonetheless, the trend towards fewer children or no children forges ahead. For a variety of reasons — greater education and higher labour force participation for women, effective birth control, and later marriage to name just a few — the fertility rate has been steadily declining over the past century (with the exception of the baby boom). Indeed, the total fertility rate per woman dropped from 3.5 children in 1921 to 1.5 in 1999.² In addition to women having fewer children, more are not having children at all.

Who are Canada's young childfree adults? Using data from the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS), this article

looks at the socio-demographic characteristics — marital status, religion, country of birth, education and income — of Canadians aged 20 to 34 who intended to stay childfree at the time of the survey. It also examines these individuals' childhood experiences and the

1. www.childfree.net (accessed November 2002); Clausen, C. July/August 2002. "To have or not to have." *Utne Reader*. www.utne.com (accessed November 2002).
2. Bélanger, A. (ed.) 2002. *Report on the Demographic Situation in Canada* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 91-209-XPE). p. 23.

importance they place on marriage, children and career.

Only a small proportion of young Canadians intend to remain childfree

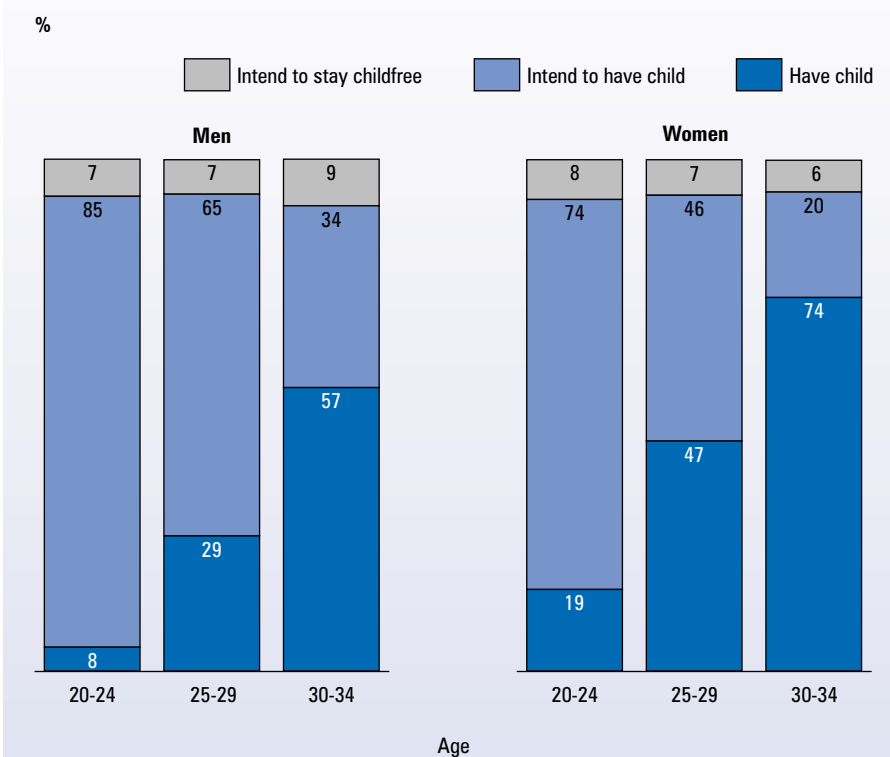
The vast majority of young Canadians report that they intend to have at least one child. In 2001, only 7% of Canadians aged 20 to 34, representing 434,000 individuals, indicated that they did not intend to have children. Although men and women differ in terms of when they become parents — for example, among 30- to 34-year-olds, 72% of women have a child compared with just 54% of men — the proportion not wishing to have children is quite consistent: 7% for women, 8% for men.

While the proportion of Canadians who have children increases with age (18% of 20- to 24-year-olds had one or more children compared with 64% of 30- to 34-year-olds), the percentage of those who do not intend to have any stays surprisingly constant over these 15 years: about 7% and 8% for women and men, respectively. However, between the ages of 20 and 34, the proportion of individuals who do not currently have a child but intend to have one in the future drops markedly from 75% to 27%.

The reasons for not intending to have children are diverse. For some, medical conditions may preclude the possibility. Others, despite never having consciously decided to forego children, may now find themselves in a situation that is not conducive to child rearing, such as not having met the right partner, living with a partner who does not want children, or having a career that is too fulfilling or demanding to allow time for the care of a child. Then there are those who always knew they would not want children. This group includes individuals who simply do not like kids, as well as those who cite religious or environmental reasons for their decision to stay childfree.³



The intention to remain childfree stays constant between the ages of 20 and 34



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

While the reasons for not planning a family may result from any of the above points, childlessness arising from medical problems is very rare in this age group; only about 2% of young Canadians reported that either they or their partner could not bear children. It is therefore more likely that 20- to 34-year-olds would plan on having no children because they actively chose not to or because of any number of unanticipated circumstances mentioned earlier.

Nearly one in 10 singles expects to have no children

According to data from the GSS, a clear relationship exists between marital status and fertility intentions. Almost always, single (never-married) individuals are more likely to report that they do not expect to have children than those who are in committed

relationships. In 2001, some 9% of singles reported not expecting to have children compared with 5% of those in a marriage or common-law relationship.

This, of course, is not unexpected. Although parenthood outside of marriage is increasing, and decisions about parenthood and marital status are becoming less interdependent, most childbearing still occurs in a committed relationship. According to Heaton and colleagues, “the practical considerations of caring for children while making a living are most easily resolved in a partnership, and children

3. Cain, M. 2001. *The Childless Revolution: What It Means to be Childless Today*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Publishing. p. 15-23.

	% of 20- to 34-year-olds intending to stay childfree
Total	7
Men	8
Women	7
Married/common-law	5
Single (never married)	9
Have religious affiliation	6
No religious affiliation	12
Born in Canada	8
Born outside Canada	5
University or college degree	7
High school graduate	7
Less than high school education	7

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

tend to be better off if they live in a household with two parents.”⁴

Religious Canadians more likely to want children

Religious traditions are generally linked with values and attitudes that support marriage and parenthood. Research shows that there is a positive association between religious participation and traditional attitudes about family formation. For example, data from the 1995 GSS found that weekly attenders of religious services — both men and women — placed greater importance on lasting relationships, being married, and having at least one child than those who never attended.⁵

Indeed, the 2001 GSS confirms that Canadians with no religious affiliation (another measure of religiousness) are more likely not to plan a family than their religious counterparts: Among 20- to 34-year-olds, 12% of those with no religious affiliation expected to stay childfree versus 6% of religious Canadians.

Different cultures give rise to different realities, values and aspirations.

While in many developed countries families have been getting smaller, in several other parts of the world large families are still the norm. Women’s roles, economic conditions, religion, social security systems and the availability of effective contraceptives are just a few of the possible factors that may affect fertility. Many of these factors vary from place to place. The decision to have or not to have children does, therefore, depend at least partly on the country where an individual was born. Indeed, according to data from the 2001 GSS, place of birth did make a difference when it came to planning families: 5% of persons born outside Canada reported not intending to have children compared with 8% of their Canadian-born counterparts.

Education, income and the expectation to have children interrelated

The relationship between income, education and childlessness is not straightforward. On the one hand, more educational attainment, and the higher earnings that generally result from it, increase the opportunity cost

(e.g. lost wages) of having children. On the other hand, raising a child is an expensive undertaking; it is estimated that it costs over \$150,000 to raise a child to the age of 18 in Canada and those with greater economic resources can more easily meet these expenses.⁶ Because of these two competing tendencies, the effects of income and education tend to cancel out each other.⁷

According to the 2001 GSS, individuals’ level of education did not seem to be associated with their fertility intentions. Whether people aged 20 to 34 were college or university graduates or had a less than high school education, 7% in each group expected not to have children. Those in the middle of the educational spectrum — high school graduates or those with some college or trade school courses — also showed the same trend: 7% intended to stay childfree.

Education also may influence attitudes and behaviours for non-economic reasons, particularly for women. Results of numerous studies indicate that women are likely to delay having children if they pursue academic studies and, likewise, are more likely to delay educational attainment if they become parents. Time constraints tend to inhibit the mutual roles of student and parent; as well, education may alter beliefs about the importance of children and may offer alternative goals, especially for women. In contrast,

4. Heaton, T., C. Jacobson and K. Holland. May 1999. “Persistence and change in decisions to remain childless.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, 2: 533.

5. Clark, W. Autumn 1998. “Religious observance, marriage and family.” *Canadian Social Trends*. p. 2-7.

6. Vanier Institute of the Family. *Profiling Canada’s Families*. Chapter 59. www.vifamily.ca/profiling (accessed December 4, 2002).

7. Heaton et al. p. 532.

	% of 20- to 34-year-olds intending to stay childfree
Had a happy childhood	7
Did not have a happy childhood	9
Reported being close to their father	7
Reported not being close to their father	8
Reported being close to their mother	7
Reported not being close to their mother	10
Happiness in life depends on being married	4
Happiness in life does not depend on being married	15
Happiness in life depends on being part of a couple	6
Happiness in life does not depend on being part of a couple	26
Happiness in life depends on having a child	1
Happiness in life does not depend on having a child	35
Happiness in life depends on having a job	7
Happiness in life does not depend on having a job	5

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

increased earning potential that often results from higher education may be greater for men. And favorable economic conditions increase the likelihood that men will get married and have children.⁸

Importance couples place on relationship affects plans to have children

Childhood experiences are believed to affect nearly all facets of life including adult relationships, parent-child interactions and, one might expect, the desire to have children. Interestingly, data from the 2001 GSS show that memories of a happy childhood make no difference in the decision to have a family; although 7% of those who had a happy childhood, and 9% of those who did not, expected to stay childfree, this difference was not statistically significant. Similarly, memories of being emotionally close to one's mother or father were not associated with different patterns of family planning.

The importance individuals placed on marriage, however, did have a significant impact on plans to start, or not to start, a family. While only 4% of Canadians who rated marriage as important or very important to their happiness reported not wanting children, 15% of those who felt that marriage was not very important or not at all important to their state of happiness did so.

The difference was even more pronounced between those who felt that being part of a couple was important or very important for their happiness and those who did not. Just 6% of individuals who felt that their happiness in life depended on a lasting relationship as a couple expected to stay childfree compared with 26% of those who stated that being part of a couple was not important or not at all important for their happiness.

Summary

Canadians between the ages of 20 and 34 who choose to stay childfree

represent a small, but significant, proportion of the population. Many diverse reasons account for why individuals decide not to have children, including never having wanted one, not finding themselves in the right circumstances, and religious or environmental concerns.

Despite a weakening link between children and marriage, childbearing is still associated with a committed relationship, and it is reasonable to find less childlessness among those who are married. Individuals without a religious affiliation are more likely to plan on not having children than do their religious counterparts. As well, Canadians who feel that being married or being part of a couple is not at all important to their happiness are considerably more likely to expect to stay childfree than those to whom these relationships are very important.

8. Heaton et al. p. 532-33.