

## Wantedness of Births: Comparing Women's and Men's Reports

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Reducing unintended pregnancies and births continues to be a health objective for the United States. Unintended pregnancies are at higher risk of adverse health outcomes, such as low birth weight and high infant mortality, because the mothers are less likely to receive prenatal care and are more likely to expose the babies to harmful substances (Brown and Eisenberg, 1995; Kost, et al., 1998). In the United States, 35 percent of births occurring between 1998 and 2002 were reported as unintended—either occurring too soon or occurring at a time when the woman or man wanted no future births (Chandra, et al., Forthcoming; Martinez, et al., Forthcoming). There is an abundant body of research on the wantedness of births based on women's reports of their own and their partners' desire for children, but no study to date has used men's own reports of the wantedness of births they fathered (for example, see Williams, 1994). In this paper, we use data from the National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 6 to compare men's and women's self-reports of how strongly they wanted the pregnancies that led to live births occurring between 1998 and 2002.

### Research Questions

Previous research has shown substantial differences in the incidence of mistimed and unwanted pregnancies (or births) by characteristics such as race and ethnicity; socioeconomic status, marital status at the time of the pregnancy/birth; and age at the time of the pregnancy/birth (Henshaw, 1998; Burr and Bean, 1996). This paper will look at wantedness of pregnancies leading to live births by men and women by such demographic characteristics. We will first present wantedness divided into two categories: **intended** (the respondent wanted a birth at that time or earlier) and **unintended** (the birth occurred sooner than the man or woman wanted, or the respondent had decided he or she wanted no future births). We will then examine the distribution of the unintended category by its two components: **mistimed** (births occurring sooner than the respondent wanted) and **unwanted** (the birth occurred after the woman/man had reached her/his fertility goals). Going beyond this traditional measure of pregnancy wantedness, we

will also compare men and women on a scale capturing how happy (or unhappy) they were right before they (or their partner) became pregnant. Finally, we will test a multivariate model of the factors that predict whether a woman or a man will have experienced an unintended birth in the past 5 years. This will allow us to explore differences in the process leading to unintended births between men and women.

## **Data**

The data used in this analysis come from Cycle 6 of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) conducted by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) of the University of Michigan for the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). A nationally-representative sample of women and men between the ages of 15 and 44 living in households were interviewed in their homes between March 2002 and March 2003. The response rate was 79% overall—80% for women and 78% for men.

The NSFG is especially appropriate for this analysis because it is the only source of national data providing estimates of unintended births among men and women 15-44 years of age. Although the survey is cross-sectional, the collection of retrospective fertility histories with concurrent measures of the respondent's attitudes towards recent pregnancies, as well as the usual sociodemographic variables, allows us to update our understanding of the wantedness of births among various subgroups of the population. The richness of the NSFG will allow us to look at key characteristics of the respondent including: marital and cohabiting status at the time of the birth, birth order, religious affiliation and importance of religion, educational attainment, and Hispanic origin and race. A weakness of retrospective analysis as we are proposing is the introduction of recall bias by the respondent, that is, whether the respondent remembers how they felt at that time or whether the reporting of his or her feelings are colored by current circumstances. To minimize this problem with recall bias, men and women were only asked these questions for birth that occurred in the 5 years prior to the interview.

The questions asked of men and women to capture wantedness of pregnancies were designed to be comparable. The questions that capture the traditional measure of wantedness ask the respondent to

report his/her feelings about the pregnancy right before the pregnancy began. The first question captures the “wanted/unwanted” dimension:

**Males:** *“Right before (partner's name) became pregnant, did you, yourself, want to have (a/another) child at some time in the future?”*

**Females:** *“Right before you became pregnant, did you, yourself, want to have (a/another) child at any time in the future?”*

Response categories were:

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Probably no
- Definitely no

Births are classified as unwanted if the respondent said “probably” or “definitely” no. If he or she answered “probably” or “definitely” yes—the birth was wanted, the next question to determine the respondent’s view of the **timing** of the pregnancy, was asked:

**Males:** *“Would you say that the pregnancy came sooner than you wanted, at about the right time, or later than you wanted?”*

**Females:** *“So would you say you became pregnant too soon, at about the right time, or later than you wanted?”*

Response categories:

- Too soon
- Right time
- Later
- Didn’t care

Births that the respondents reported were “too soon” are considered “mistimed;” the remainder—births that occurred “about the right time,” “later than wanted,” or the respondent “didn’t care” about the timing—are classified as “timing ok”.

The last dimension of wantedness examined in this paper is based on the “happy to be pregnant” question asked for both women and men. The question was worded:

**Males:** *“Please look at the scale on Card 59. On this scale, a one means that you were very unhappy about that pregnancy, and a ten means that you were very happy about that pregnancy. Tell me which number on the card best describes how you felt when you found out that (name of partner) was pregnant.”*

**Females:** *“Please look at the scale on Card 39. On this scale, a one means that you were very unhappy to be pregnant, and a ten means that you were very happy to be pregnant. Tell me which number on the card best describes how you felt when you found out you were pregnant.”*

These questions are similar for men and women and result in a 10-point scale of the spectrum “very unhappy to be pregnant” to “very happy to be pregnant” for each birth occurring within the five years prior to the interview.

### **Preliminary Analysis**

Table 1 shows the distribution of wantedness status of births in the past 5 years for men and women. Men and women reported similar percents of intended births (65 percent of births reported by men and 65 percent of births reported by women). Births that occurred within a marital union were more likely to be intended than births that did not occurred within a union. This relationship holds true for both men and women. But it is interesting to note that men were more likely to report an intended birth within a cohabiting union (61 percent of births to men in cohabiting unions) compared to women (49 percent of births to women in cohabiting unions). Births to Non-Hispanic white men and women were more likely to be intended than births to Hispanic and Non-Hispanic black men. However, this may be a reflection of compositional differences in levels of education and income among these different groups.

Table 2 is limited to **unintended** births in the past 5 years. Although births, for the most part, were reported as mistimed rather than unwanted, a higher proportion of women reported unintended births as unwanted compared with men. Overall, forty percent of unintended births to women and one-fourth of unintended births to men were unwanted, that is, these pregnancies occurred after the respondent had reached his or her desired number of children (note that this can include "none"). As would be expected, higher proportions of births to younger respondents were classified as mistimed rather than unwanted compared with births to older respondents. In fact, of the births occurring to women aged 30-44 years, over half were **unwanted** compared with one-quarter of births to women under 20. Only in the educational subgroup, college degree or higher, are more births reported as unwanted by men than by women.

## **Summary**

This analysis will look at differences between men and women in reporting of wantedness of births. We go beyond previous research by comparing estimates based on women's reports, to those based on men's own reports, for a national sample of individuals of reproductive age in the United States.

Table 1. Number of births in the 5 years before interview to men and women 15-44 years of age at interview and percent distribution by wantedness status at conception, according to selected characteristics: United States, 2002

Characteristic	Wantedness status							
	Female				Male			
	Number in thousands	Total	Intended	Unintended	Number in thousands	Total	Intended	Unintended
			Percent				Percent	
All births 1/	21,018	100.0	64.9	34.9	19,962	100.0	65.2	33.4
Age at birth								
Under 20 years	2,215	100.0	21.6	78.3	839	100.0	37.5	52.1
Under 18 years	921	100.0	11.9	88.1	209	100.0	31.2	52.8
18-19 years	1,294	100.0	28.6	71.4	630	100.0	39.5	49.5
20-24 years	5,553	100.0	55.8	44.1	3,790	100.0	48.2	48.5
25-29 years	5,726	100.0	73.0	26.7	5,648	100.0	65.0	34.8
30-44 years	7,524	100.0	78.2	21.6	9,685	100.0	74.4	25.0
Marital or cohabiting status at birth								
Married	13,534	100.0	76.6	23.1	14,267	100.0	69.9	29.8
Cohabiting	2,998	100.0	48.8	51.3	3,955	100.0	61.1	38.9
Not married nor cohabiting at birth	4,486	100.0	40.3	59.5	1,740	100.0	36.3	50.2
Poverty level income 2/								
0-149 percent	7,789	100.0	55.4	44.2	6,288	100.0	58.4	39.9
0-99 percent	5,118	100.0	52.3	47.3	4,163	100.0	59.5	38.0
150-299 percent	5,522	100.0	65.1	34.7	6,245	100.0	62.5	36.4
300 percent or higher	6,856	100.0	81.3	18.7	7,215	100.0	73.9	24.9
Education 3/								
No high school diploma or GED	3,024	100.0	57.7	41.8	3,051	100.0	57.3	41.6
High school diploma or GED	5,824	100.0	64.1	35.8	6,641	100.0	56.4	41.7
Some college, no bachelor's degree	5,194	100.0	66.5	33.2	4,947	100.0	65.7	33.0
Bachelor's degree or higher	4,957	100.0	85.3	14.5	4,478	100.0	86.9	13.1
Hispanic origin and race, and age at birth								
Hispanic or Latino	4,242	100.0	56.4	43.3	4,460	100.0	57.5	39.9
Not Hispanic or Latino:								
White, single race	12,309	100.0	70.9	28.8	11,390	100.0	67.3	32.4
Black or African American, single race	2,818	100.0	49.1	50.8	2,151	100.0	55.8	41.7

1/ Includes births to women of other or multiple race and origin groups and births with missing information on how much too soon, not shown separately.

2/ Limited to births to women/men 20-44 years of age at time of interview.

3/ Limited to births to women/men 22-44 years of age at time of interview.

4/Total will not add to 100 because men that did not know about the pregnancy until after the child was born were not asked about intendedness.

Note: Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Table 2. Number of unintended births in the 5 years before interview to men and women 15-44 years of age at interview and percentage distribution by whether the pregnancy was unwanted or mistimed at conception, according to selected characteristics: United States, 2002

Characteristic	Females				Males			
	Number in thousands	Total	Unwanted	Mistimed	Number in thousands	Total	Unwanted	Mistimed
			Percent	Percent			Percent	Percent
Total 1/	7,333	100.0	40.5	59.5	6,776	100.0	26.9	73.1
Age at birth								
Under 20 years	1,736	100.0	27.3	72.7	437	100.0	*	*
20-24 years	2,443	100.0	39.0	61.0	1,840	100.0	14.6	85.4
25-29 years	1,532	100.0	39.0	61.0	1,965	100.0	17.5	82.5
30-44 years	1,622	100.0	58.2	41.8	2,421	100.0	42.1	57.9
Marital or cohabiting status at birth								
Married	3,128	100.0	39.0	61.0	4,250	100.0	24.8	75.2
Cohabiting	2,669	100.0	35.3	64.8	1,538	100.0	27.1	72.9
Not married nor cohabiting at birth	1,537	100.0	45.2	54.8	988	100.0	35.4	64.7
Education 3/								
No high school diploma or GED	1,265	100.0	45.8	54.2	1,269	100.0	37.4	62.7
High school diploma or GED	2,084	100.0	45.0	55.0	2,811	100.0	22.7	77.3
Some college, no bachelor's degree	1,724	100.0	42.0	58.0	1,700	100.0	21.0	79.0
Bachelor's degree or higher	719	100.0	41.5	58.5	586	100.0	49.8	50.2
Poverty level income 2/								
0-149 percent	3,445	100.0	44.7	55.3	2,545	100.0	32.2	67.9
0-99 percent	2,418	100.0	49.1	50.9	1,584	100.0	35.1	64.9
150-299 percent	1,917	100.0	41.0	59.0	2,340	100.0	25.6	74.4
300 percent or higher	1,276	100.0	37.4	62.6	1,804	100.0	21.9	78.1
Hispanic origin and race, and age at birth								
Hispanic or Latino	1,839	100.0	38.8	61.2	1,788	100.0	30.6	69.4
Not Hispanic or Latino:								
White, single race	3,546	100.0	37.3	62.7	3,719	100.0	23.9	76.1
Black or African American, single race	1,434	100.0	51.6	48.4	974	100.0	27.8	72.2

\* Figure does not meet standard of reliability or precision.

1/ Includes births to respondents of other or multiple race and origin groups and births with missing information on how much too soon, not shown separately.

2/ Limited to births to women/men 20-44 years of age at time of interview.

3/ Limited to births to women/men 22-44 years of age at time of interview.

Note: Percents may not add to 100 due to rounding.

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