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Childlessness Falls, Family Size Grows Among Highly Educated Women

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
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About This Report

This report describes childlessness and completed family size among U.S. women near the end of their childbearing years. It is based upon data from the Current Population Survey June Supplement, and examines long-term and short-term trends, as well as differences in childlessness and family size by educational attainment and by race and ethnicity.

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Gretchen Livingston, senior researcher, analyzed the data and wrote the report. Kim Parker, director of social trends research, and Claudia Deane, vice president of research, provided editorial guidance. Michael Keegan provided additional graphic support. Number-checking was done by Anna Brown, research assistant. The report was copy edited by David Kent. Michael Suh provided Web support. Find related reports online at pewresearch.org/socialtrends.

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A Note on Terminology

References to respondents who are high school graduates or who have a high school diploma also include those who have earned an equivalent degree, such as a GED (General Educational Development) certificate.

References to respondents with “some college” include those who have a two-year degree.

References to respondents with “postgraduate” degrees include all people who have at least a master’s degree.

All references to whites, blacks and Asians are to the non-Hispanic components of those populations. Asians also include Pacific Islanders. Hispanics are of any race.

Childlessness Falls, Family Size Grows Among Highly Educated Women

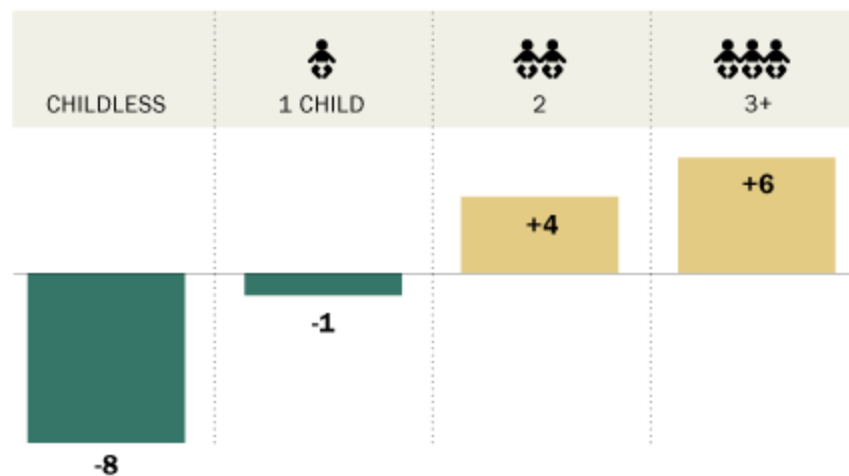
BY *Gretchen Livingston*

Among women in the United States, postgraduate education and motherhood are increasingly going hand-in-hand. The share of highly educated women who are remaining childless into their mid-40s has fallen significantly over the past two decades.¹

Today, about one-in-five women ages 40 to 44 with a master's degree or higher (22%) have no children – down from 30% in 1994, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of newly released Census Bureau data. The decline is particularly dramatic among women with an M.D. or Ph.D. – fully 35% were childless in 1994, while today the share stands at 20%. Not only are highly educated women more likely to have children these days, they are also having bigger families than in the past. Among women with at least a master's degree, six-in-ten have had two or more children, up from 51% in 1994. The share with two

Among the Highly Educated, Declines in Childlessness and Increases in Big Families

Percentage point change in children ever born, among women ages 40 to 44 with a postgraduate degree, 1994-2014



Note: The "1994" timepoint is based upon combined data from 1992, 1994, and 1995. The "2014" timepoint is based upon combined data from 2012 and 2014. A new working paper suggests that Current Population Survey estimates of childlessness may have been somewhat too large until 2012, when the Census Bureau implemented new editing rules. See "About the Data" for more details.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Current Population Survey June Supplements

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¹ Due to data limitations, any woman who has given birth to a child is considered a "mother" for the purposes of this report, while those who have not given birth are counted as "childless." However, many women who do not bear their own children are indeed mothers. [Estimates suggest](#) that 7% of children living with a parent householder in the U.S. are living with either an adoptive parent or a stepparent.

children has risen 4 percentage points, while the share with three or more has risen 6 percentage points.²

This trend has likely been driven by demographic and societal changes. It coincides with women's growing presence in managerial and leadership positions and suggests that an increasing share of professional women are confronting the inevitable push and pull of work-family balance. [Previous Pew Research analysis](#) has found that overall women devote fewer hours to paid work with each additional child they have. On average, a working-age woman with no children spends 27 hours per week in paid work, while a woman with three or more children spends 18 hours working. In addition, [working mothers](#) are more than three times as likely as working fathers to say that being a working parent has made it more difficult for them to advance in their career (51% vs. 16%).

Fueled in part by the increases in motherhood among highly educated women, childlessness among all women ages 40 to 44 in the U.S. is at its lowest point in a decade.³ In 1994, 18% of all women at the end of their childbearing years had not borne a child. That number rose to 20% by the mid-2000s before declining to 15% in 2014. At the same time, the average number of children that U.S. women have in their lifetime has remained quite stable over the past 20 years, at about two children.

The fact that completed family size has changed little since the mid-1990s may seem counterintuitive, given the [amount of attention](#) often directed toward the so-called “Baby Bust” in the post-recession U.S. It is true that analyses based on changes in *annual* fertility rates have shown consistent [declines in childbearing](#) since 2007, suggesting that fertility is at an all-time low. However, these analyses are capturing fertility at [one point in time](#), as opposed to the cumulative measure of lifetime fertility used in this analysis. Part of what accounts for the low fertility indicated by annual rates is the fact that many women are putting off having children until later in life, both due to broad cultural changes (such as increasing education), and due to the Great Recession, which [intensified delayed childbearing](#), particularly [among younger women](#). What remains to be seen is whether these declines in annual birth rates will continue, and will translate into lower lifetime fertility for women at the end of their childbearing years. [Some experts](#) suspect that, as with past economic downturns, women may ultimately “catch up” on their fertility, though

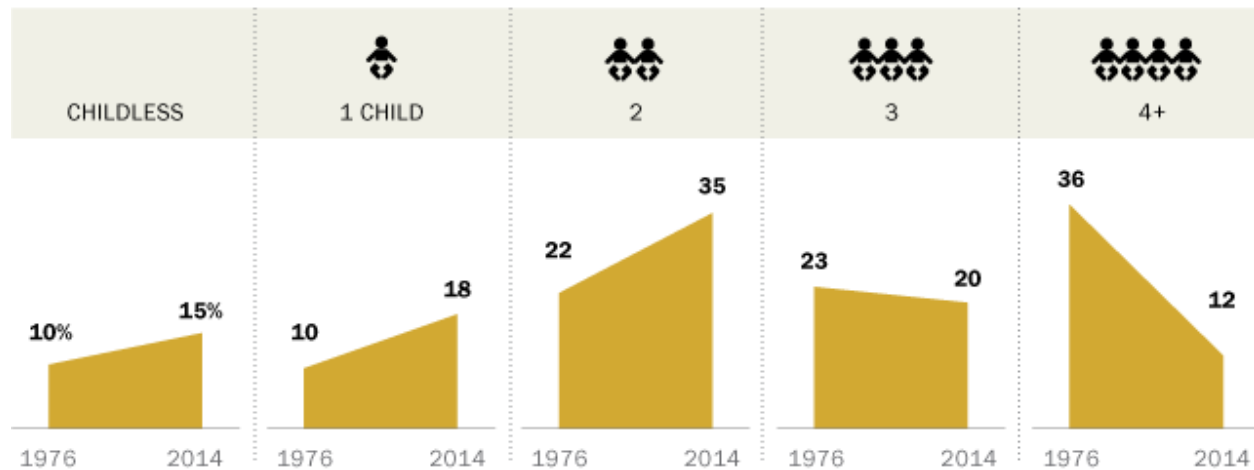
² This report defines women ages 40 to 44 as those who are at the end of their childbearing years. This has been a long-standing tradition in demographic research, given that the vast majority of children are born to women younger than 45. Furthermore, until recently, data regarding completed fertility for older women was not collected. While the age at which women can physically have children is expanding, in 2013, just 0.2 percent of all children were born to women ages [45 and older](#), and analyses from the [Census Bureau](#) show that childlessness among women ages 40 to 50 is similar to childlessness among women ages 40 to 44.

³ [New research](#) suggests that prior to 2012, when new editing protocols were implemented by the U.S. Census Bureau, the Current Population Survey may have overestimated childlessness somewhat. However, simulations suggest that childlessness is lower today than it was in 2004 and 2006, and is at least as low as it was in 1994, even controlling for the changes in editing procedures, though the exact magnitude of the changes are difficult to pinpoint.

one [recent analysis](#) suggests that fertility delayed due to the Great Recession may in fact be fertility foregone.

The Rise of the Two-Child Family, and the Decline of the Four-Child Family

Share of women ages 40 to 44, by children ever born



Note: A new working paper suggests that Current Population Survey estimates of childlessness may have been somewhat too large until 2012, when the Census Bureau implemented new editing rules. See "About the Data" for more details.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Current Population Survey June Supplements

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Regardless of short-term fertility patterns and their implications, there is no denying that the longer-term trend has been toward much smaller American families. Looking back to 1976, the first year for which data are available, the average woman in her early 40s in the U.S. had given birth to three children, and 36% of women in this age range had four or more children. By 2014, the large family sizes that prevailed in the 1970s had been fully supplanted by the two-child family. Now 35% of all women ages 40 to 44 have two children, while just 12% have four or more. At the same time, one-child families have gained ground – today 18% of women at the end of their childbearing years have an only child, up from 10% in 1976. About 20% of women have three children, a number that has remained virtually unchanged.

These findings are based on a Pew Research Center analysis of civilian women near the end of their childbearing years, using data from the 1976-2014 June Supplements of the Current Population Survey. The June Supplement is typically conducted every other year, and produces a nationally representative sample of the non-institutionalized population of the U.S. While the overview and first section of this report analyzes childlessness and fertility among all women, the

final section examines mothers only, focusing on trends and variations in the number of children that they have had in their lifetimes.

Other key findings:

- While fertility trends among highly educated women show a clear pattern of less childlessness and bigger families, the trends among less-educated women are not as clear-cut. Childlessness is down among women lacking a high school diploma and among women with a bachelor's degree, but otherwise family size for these two groups has changed little since 1994. And among high school graduates, the share of women ages 40 to 44 with one child has increased, but there has been no change in the share with bigger families.
- The educational “gaps” in childlessness and in family size have narrowed in the past two decades, but they do persist. The more education a woman has, up to a bachelor's degree, the less likely she is to become a mother. And among mothers, those with more education have fewer children than those with less education. For instance, just 13% of moms lacking a high school diploma have one child, while fully 26% have four or more, while among mothers with a master's degree or more, 23% have only children and just 8% have four or more.
- Fertility patterns differ significantly by race and ethnicity. Some 17% of white women ages 40 to 44 are childless, compared with 15% of black women in the same age group, 13% of Asian women and just 10% of Hispanic women.
- Hispanic and black mothers ages 40 to 44 are especially likely to have large families. Fully 20% of Hispanic moms have four or more children, as do 18% of black moms. In comparison, just 11% of white mothers have four or more children, as do 10% of Asian mothers. Since 1988, there has been a dramatic decline in the share of mothers with four or more children among Hispanics, blacks and whites.

About the Data

Findings in this report are based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's June Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS). The June Fertility Supplement was first administered in 1976 and is typically conducted every other year. Public-use data files prior to 1986 are not readily available, so analyses of pre-1986 timepoints are drawn from census tabulations.

Given the nature of the CPS data, a "mother" is here defined as any woman who has given birth to a child, while those who have not given birth are counted as "childless." However, many women who do not bear their own children are indeed mothers. [Estimates suggest](#) that 7% of children living with a parent householder in the U.S. are living with either an adoptive parent or a stepparent.

This report defines the end of the childbearing years as ages 40 to 44, which has typically been the convention, partly due to the fact that few women have babies beyond these ages, and partly due to the fact that, until recently, data on the completed fertility of women ages 45 and older were not collected. While technology is extending the age at which women can have children, the vast majority still have children before age 45. In 2013, about 0.2% of births occurred to women [ages 45 or older](#), and analyses from the [Census Bureau](#) show that childlessness among women ages 40 to 50 is similar to childlessness among women ages 40 to 44.

Analyses looking at all women, or at all mothers, are based upon data from single years. For the detailed analyses of educational, racial and ethnic differences in fertility, which are the central focus of this report, multiple years of data are combined in order to create sufficient sample sizes. The data from 2012 and 2014 are combined, and referred to as "2014"; data from 1992, 1994, and 1995 are combined, and referred to as "1994"; and data from 1986, 1988, and 1990 are combined and referred to as "1988".

[A new working paper](#) suggests that prior to 2012, when new editing protocols were implemented by the Census Bureau, the Current Population Survey may have overestimated childlessness somewhat. This makes it difficult to determine the exact magnitude of changes in childlessness across time, though simulations suggest that childlessness is lower now than it was in 2004 and 2006, and no higher than it was around 1994, even taking the new editing protocol into account.

In 1992, the Census Bureau introduced a new variable with detailed categories of educational attainment allowing for definitive identification of individuals by whether they have a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, a Ph.D. or an M.D. Prior to that year, analyses of such detailed educational breaks was not possible. As such, the analysis of fertility by educational attainment begins with the 1992 data.

Data regarding racial and ethnic groups is available as early as 1986, but the sample sizes for Asian women ages 40 to 44 is so small that even combining multiple years does not produce an adequate sample size. As such, the fertility of Asian women could not be reliably estimated for the 1988 timepoint used in the report.

Childlessness

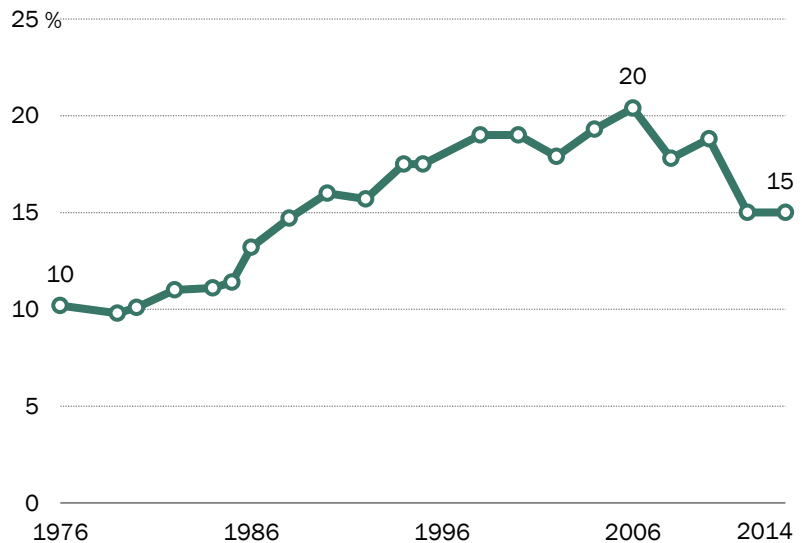
The share of American women in their mid-40s who are childless⁴ appears to be at its lowest point in 20 years. In 2014, 15% of women ages 40 to 44 had not given birth to any children. This is down from 20% in 2005⁵ and similar to the rate of childlessness in 1994.

In the mid-1970s, when data on lifetime childlessness first became available, one-in-ten U.S. women ages 40 to 44 had never had a biological child. Childlessness remained quite low into the 1980s, and rose precipitously thereafter.

While the likelihood of remaining childless has been on the decline recently among women at the end of their childbearing years, childlessness has been [consistently rising](#) among younger women since the 1970s, when data first became available. Delays in childbearing related to increasing educational attainment and women's labor force participation explain much of this long-term trend, though the [recent economic downturn](#) has been associated with a particularly sharp downturn in fertility [among the young](#).

The Rise and Fall of Childlessness

% of women ages 40 to 44 who are childless



Note: A new working paper suggests that Current Population Survey estimates of childlessness may have been somewhat too large until 2012, when the Census Bureau implemented new editing rules; this makes it difficult to track trends over time. However, computer simulations suggest that even when these editing changes are taken into account, childlessness has declined since around 2004 and is no higher than it was around 1994.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Current Population Survey June Supplements

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⁴ Among [childless women](#) ages 40 to 44, about 13% report that they are still planning on having a child, while the rest are equally likely to report that they are either childless by choice, or are involuntarily childless.

⁵ [New research](#) suggests that prior to 2012, when new editing protocols were implemented by the U.S. Census Bureau, the Current Population Survey may have overestimated childlessness somewhat. This makes it difficult to determine the exact magnitude of changes in childlessness across time, though simulations suggest that childlessness is lower now than it was in 2004 and 2006, and at least as low as it was around 1994, even taking the new editing protocol into account.

Educational Differences in Childlessness

For the most part, more education is associated with higher rates of childlessness for women ages 40 to 44. While just 7% of women who lack a high school diploma are childless, this share about doubles, to 13%, for those who graduated from high school or have some college experience. Among women with a bachelor's degree or more, about one-in-five are childless – 19% for those with a bachelor's degree only; 22% for those with a master's degree; and 20% for those with an M.D. or Ph.D.

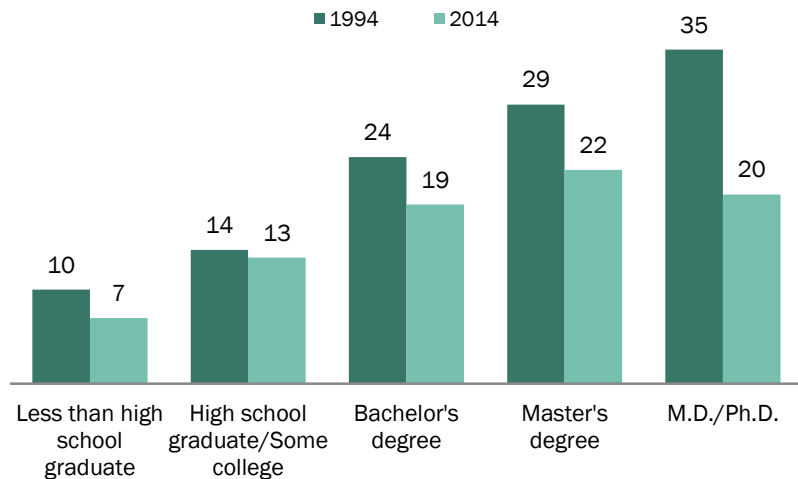
While the educational differences in childlessness persist, the gap has narrowed significantly since the mid-1990s. Across all educational groups, childlessness has

either remained constant or declined in the past two decades, with the biggest declines occurring among more educated women. In 1994, fully 35% of women ages 40 to 44 with an M.D. or Ph.D. were childless, but by 2014, this number had dropped to 20%. Childlessness dropped by 7 percentage points among women with a master's degree, and by 5 percentage points for those with a bachelor's degree. Changes in childlessness have been smaller for those with less education. Among women who did not finish high school, childlessness dropped by 3 percentage points, and for those who have a high school diploma, rates of childlessness are essentially unchanged from 20 years ago.

Declining childlessness among highly educated women is driven in part by the changing composition of these women. While at one time obtaining an advanced degree was something that

For the Highly Educated, Dramatic Declines in Childlessness

% of women ages 40 to 44 who are childless



Note: A new working paper suggests that Current Population Survey estimates of childlessness may have been somewhat too large until 2012, when the Census Bureau implemented new editing rules. See "About the Data" for more details. The "1994" timepoint is based upon combined data from 1992, 1994 and 1995. The "2014" timepoint is based upon combined data from 2012 and 2014. High school graduate/Some college includes those with a two-year degree.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1992, 1994, 1995, 2012 and 2014 Current Population Survey June Supplements

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few did, it is becoming more common. On a related note, the share of highly educated women who marry—and who are thus more likely to have children—has also increased. Furthermore, advances in reproductive technology, which allow women to delay childbearing, have likely played a role in the increasing share of highly educated women who become mothers, many of whom wait until older ages to do so.

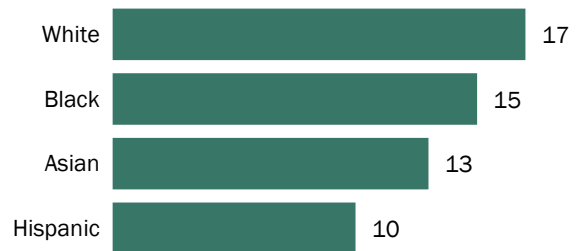
Racial and Ethnic Differences in Childlessness

The prevalence of childlessness varies by race and ethnicity as well. Hispanic women are far less likely to remain childless throughout their childbearing years than are non-Hispanic whites or blacks. Just 10% of Hispanic women ages 40 to 44 now report having had no biological children. At the other end of the spectrum, fully 17% of white women in this age range report the same. Some 15% of black women are childless, as are 13% of Asian women.

Across major racial and ethnic groups, childlessness today appears to vary no more than a few percentage points from what it was in 1994, or even 1988, the first year for which detailed fertility data are available. In the late 1980s, 15% of white women ages 40 to 44 were childless, as were 14% of black women and 11% of Hispanic women. Fertility data on Asian women are not available for 1988, but in 1994, some 14% of these women were childless.⁶

Childlessness by Race and Ethnicity

% of women ages 40 to 44 who are childless



Note: Whites, blacks and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2012 and 2014 Current Population Survey June Supplements

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⁶ The sample size of Asian women ages 40 to 44 in the 1980s was too small to measure the cumulative fertility of this group.

Family Size Among Mothers

In the late 1970s, the average mother at the end of her childbearing years had given birth to more than three children. Since that time, average family size has declined, driven largely by declines in families with four or more children. Now, moms have 2.4 children on average – a number that has been fairly stable for two decades.

In 1976, four-in-ten mothers ages 40 to 44 had four or more children. One-fourth had three children, and a similar share (24%) had two children. Only 11% of mothers at the end of their childbearing years had had only one child.

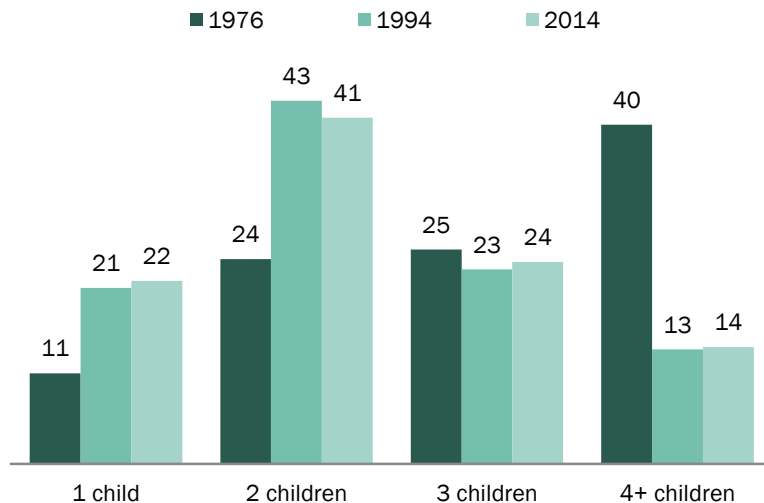
Flash forward to 2014, and the situation has changed

dramatically. The once-dominant four-child family has been replaced by the two-child family. A plurality (41%) of moms at the end of their childbearing years now report having two kids, while just 14% have four or more children. Meanwhile, the share of mothers at the end of their childbearing years who have one child has doubled – from 11% to 22%. As has been the case for many decades, about one-fourth of mothers have three children (24%).

Most of the change in family size occurred between 1976 and the mid-1990s. Family size since that time has remained quite stable.

Among Mothers, Family Size is Shrinking

% of mothers ages 40 to 44 with...



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Current Population Survey June Supplements

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Number of Children, by Educational Attainment

The more education a mother has, the fewer children she will have on average in her lifetime. While fertility drops somewhat with each additional level of education, the biggest fertility gap occurs between women who lack a high school diploma and those who have completed high school.

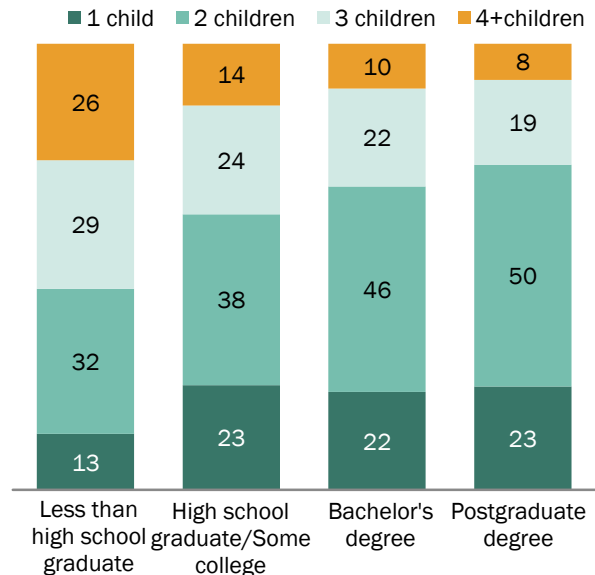
Moms ages 40 to 44 who lack a high school diploma have about 2.9 children in their lifetimes, on average, while those with a high school diploma or some college have about 2.4 kids. Mothers at the end of their childbearing years who have a bachelor's degree or higher have about 2.2 children on average.

The two-child family is the most common family type among moms with a high school diploma or more, and it is particularly prevalent among women with a bachelor's degree or higher. Some 46% of women ages 40 to 44 with a bachelor's degree have two children, as do half of those with at least a master's degree. One third (32%) of women who lack a high school diploma have two children, as do 38% of those with a high school diploma or some college experience.

More than half (55%) of mothers who lack a high school diploma have three children or more – 29% have exactly three children, and 26% have four or more. The likelihood of having such large families declines markedly at higher levels of education. Among mothers with a high school diploma or some college experience, 24% have three children and another 14% have four or more children, while about one-third (32%) of mothers with a bachelor's degree have three or more children. Meanwhile, mothers with advanced degrees are half as likely as those lacking a high school diploma to have three or more children – just 27% do. Some 19% have three children, and 8% have four or more.

Moms with Less Education Have Bigger Families

% of mothers ages 40 to 44 with ...



Note: High school graduate/Some college includes those with a two-year degree. Postgraduate degree includes those with at least a master's degree. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2012 and 2014 Current Population Survey June Supplements

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While the association of education and family size remains a strong one, in fact the educational “gap” in fertility has narrowed in the past two decades, driven in part by increases in family size among the highly educated.

Since 1994, the share of mothers with at least a master’s degree who have just one child has declined from 28% to 23%. At the same time, the share having three or more children has increased from 22% to 27%. Highly educated women are the only group in which this clear pattern emerges, with a declining share having one child and a rising share having three or more.

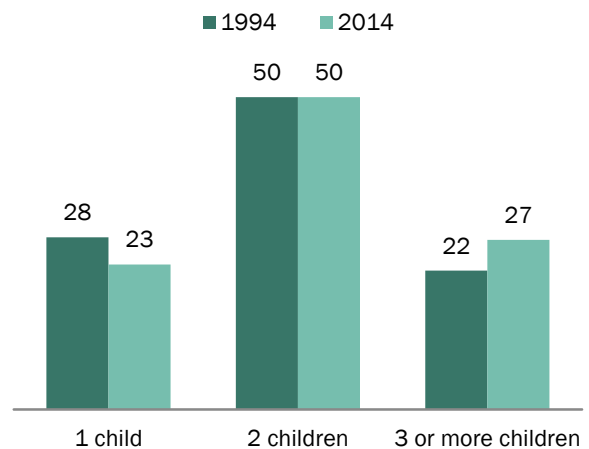
Among mothers who lack a high school diploma, the share having four or more has declined by 5 points, while the share having exactly three children has increased by 5 points. There has been little change in the share with fewer children.

Interestingly, among mothers with a high school diploma, the share having two children has declined by 5 percentage points, down from 43% in 1994. This decline is accompanied by an increase in the share having just one child.

Fertility patterns have remained virtually unchanged since 1994 for mothers with a bachelor’s degree.

Among Highly Educated Moms, Families are Getting Bigger

% of mothers ages 40 to 44 with a postgraduate degree with ...



Note: The “1994” timepoint is based upon combined data from 1992, 1994, and 1995. The “2014” timepoint is based upon combined data from 2012 and 2014. Includes all mothers with at least a master’s degree.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1992, 1994, 1995, 2012 and 2014 Current Population Survey June Supplements

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Fertility Patterns Among Mothers by Race and Ethnicity

Among mothers near the end of their childbearing years, Hispanics and blacks have the largest families. On average, a Hispanic mother ages 40 to 44 has had about 2.6 children. By comparison, black mothers have had about 2.5. White and Asian mothers have families that are a bit smaller, on average. White mothers have 2.3 children, and Asian mothers have 2.2 children.

When looking at the distribution of family size by race and ethnicity, the distinctiveness of the Hispanic family becomes particularly apparent. Among mothers ages 40 to 44, Hispanics are the least likely to have only one child – just 17% do. In contrast, fully 25% of black moms have had just one child, as is the case for 23% of white moms and 22% of Asian moms.

Conversely, Hispanics are far more likely than others to have large families. Fully half of Hispanic mothers have three or more kids, compared with 40% of blacks. About one-third (33%) of whites have three or more kids, and just 27% of Asian moms do.

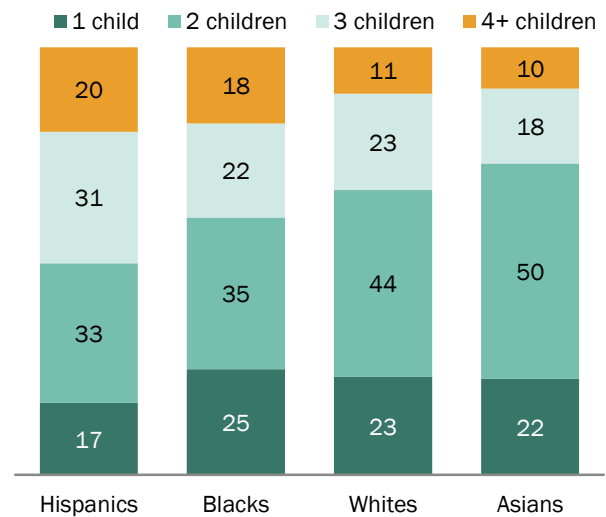
Among whites, blacks and Asians, having two children is the most common outcome for mothers. Asian moms are the most likely to have two children – fully half do. Some 44% of white moms ages 40 to 44 have two children, as do about one-third of black moms.

Looking at changes in fertility over time, it's apparent that families with four or more children are in decline for whites, blacks, and Hispanics. However, there are variations in which family sizes are “gaining ground” as very large families are on the wane.

The decline in the share of moms with four or more kids has been particularly dramatic among black mothers. In 1988, three-in-ten black mothers ages 40 to 44 had four or more children, but

Among Hispanics, Big Families are the Norm

% of mothers ages 40 to 44 with ...



Note: Blacks, whites and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2012 and 2014 Current Population Survey June Supplements

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by 2014, just 18% did. At the same time, the share of black mothers with one child rose by 5 percentage points (from 20% to 25%), as did the share with two children.

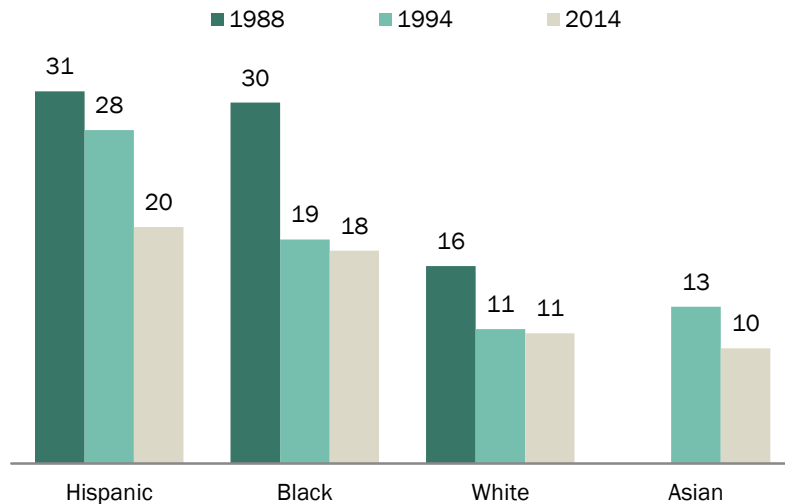
The decline in the share of mothers with four or more children has been notable among Hispanics as well. In 1988, fully 31% of Hispanic moms had four or more children. That share dropped to 20% by 2014. At the same time, there was an 8-percentage-point increase in the share of Hispanic moms with exactly three children – suggesting that many mothers were opting for three kids instead of four or more.

Among white mothers, the 6-point decline in families with four or more children has been totally offset by the 6-point rise in only children.

Data on Asian mothers are unavailable for 1988, but since 1994, there has been no significant change in the size of their families.

Across All Racial and Ethnic Groups, Dramatic Declines in Very Large Families

% of women ages 40 to 44 with four or more children



Note: The “1988” timepoint is based upon combined data from 1986, 1988, and 1990. The “1994” timepoint is based upon combined data from 1992, 1994, and 1995. The “2014” timepoint is based upon combined data from 2012 and 2014. Blacks, whites and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Data on Asians for 1988 not shown, due to insufficient sample size.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1995, 2012 and 2014 Current Population Survey June Supplements

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Appendix A: Additional Tables

Family Size, by Education

% of mothers ages 40 to 44, by number of children they have had ...

	Number of children	1994	2014
Less than high school graduate	1	15	13
	2	30	32
	3	24	29
	4+	31	26
High school graduate/ Some college	1	21	23
	2	43	38
	3	23	24
	4+	13	14
Bachelor's degree	1	21	22
	2	47	46
	3	23	22
	4+	9	10
Postgraduate degree	1	28	23
	2	50	50
	3	16	19
	4+	7	8

Note: The "1994" timepoint is based upon combined data from 1992, 1994, and 1995. The "2014" timepoint is based upon combined data from 2012 and 2014. High school graduate/Some college includes those with a two-year degree. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1992, 1994, 1995, 2012 and 2014 Current Population Survey June Supplements

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Family Size, by Race and Ethnicity

% of mothers ages 40 to 44, by number of children they have had ...

	Number of children	1988	1994	2014
White	1	17	21	23
	2	42	46	44
	3	25	22	23
	4+	16	11	11
Black	1	20	25	25
	2	31	34	35
	3	19	23	22
	4+	30	19	18
Asian	1	*	22	22
	2	*	47	50
	3	*	18	18
	4+	*	13	10
Hispanic	1	16	14	17
	2	30	31	33
	3	23	27	31
	4+	31	28	20

Note: The "1988" timepoint is based upon combined data from 1986, 1988, and 1990. The "1994" timepoint is based upon combined data from 1992, 1994, and 1995. The "2014" timepoint is based upon combined data from 2012 and 2014. Whites, blacks and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. The symbol * indicates insufficient number of observations to provide a reliable estimate. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1986, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1995, 2012 and 2014 Current Population Survey June Supplements

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