

Extended Abstract  
**Continuity and Change in Young Women's Family Size Preferences, 1955-1995**

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American family life has undergone dramatic change in recent decades. Delayed marriage, smaller families, increases in mothers' employment, high rates of marital instability and a rise in single parent families are well known features of U.S. family change. Attitudes about family life have also changed. More people approve of sex outside of marriage, working mothers, and nonmarital childbearing (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001). At the same time, young adults still want to marry and become parents. More than half of young women think that it is ideal for families to have two children (Hagewen and Morgan, 2004, Figure 2).

Our paper examines trends in the number of children young women in the United States say they would ideally like to have for the period 1955-1995. We investigate both levels and variation in personal family size ideals and ask if change in women's demographic characteristics account for these trends. We use data from ten national surveys. Because early U.S. fertility surveys were restricted to samples of married women, we conduct two analyses. The first examines trends in married women's personal ideal family size. The second examines trends for all women regardless of marital status. The latter analysis is restricted to data since 1982, but it is important to examine the trends for all women because changes in marriage formation and dissolution are likely to affect attitudes about childbearing.

Studies of change in family size ideals should focus on both the number of children women think is ideal for them as well as the degree of consensus about personal ideals in the population. Cultural shifts toward increasing individualism, combined with the changing demography of U.S. families, may account for smaller family size preferences. At the same time, these forces may increase variation among women in their preferences. Women follow diverse trajectories, with periods of partnered parenting alternating with periods of single motherhood. Decreasing stigma attached to childlessness (Thornton and Freeman, 1983; Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001) and greater acceptance of different types of families contribute to greater individual variation in women's preferences. Greater acceptance of individual variation in family size preferences is also suggested by increases in survey reports that families should have as many children as they want instead of targeting a specific ideal number of children for the average family (Hagewen and Morgan, 2004, Figure 1). Decreasing normative consensus about a two-child ideal for families provides more freedom for individuals to express their preferences based on their own tastes and circumstances.

Fertility preferences can indicate individual or couple demand for children. Preferences are also a leading indicator of population change. Yet efforts to measure preferences have sometimes been out of fashion because of concerns about the validity of survey reports, discrepancies between individuals' expectations about childbearing and actual fertility, and

concerns that surveys do not obtain preferences from all of the relevant actors, such as husbands or the broader kin group. Nevertheless survey reports of attitudes about the types of families that young women want provide insight into family values and individuals' abilities to have the kinds of families they want.

## **Data and Plan of Analysis**

We use data on women 18-24 drawn from ten national surveys: the 1955 and 1960 Growth of American Families studies (GAF), the 1965 and 1970 National Fertility Studies (NFS), the 1975 Value and Costs of Children to Parents Study (VOC), and the 1973, 1976, 1982, 1988, and 1995 National Surveys of Family Growth (NSFG).<sup>1</sup> Each study was specifically designed to investigate fertility attitudes and behavior (Freedman et al. 1959; Whelpton et al. 1966; Ryder and Westoff, 1971; Westoff and Ryder, 1977; Hoffman and Manis, 1979; U.S. DHHS-NCHS, 1977, 1982, 1984, 1990, 1997). Together the surveys represent young women in most of the birth cohorts from the early 1930s through the latter part of the 1970s. We focus on the attitudes of young women because they are in the early stages of forming families. We begin the analysis with subsamples of women 18-24, but we will replicate it for a broader age range, probably 18-28, to take into account period change in the timing of marriage and childbearing that affects sample composition and the quality of reports about ideal family size.

Designs for fertility surveys have changed substantially over the past fifty years. Early surveys included only currently married women or, if they included never married women, the questions posed to them differed from those for married women. For instance the 1955 GAF asked married women, but not single women, how many children they would have if they could choose. Surveys also differ in their inclusion of members of racial and ethnic groups. All of the surveys we use include some nonwhites in the sample universe except the 1955 GAF. Except for this survey, the preliminary descriptive information we include in this abstract includes whites and nonwhites (African Americans and, in some surveys, Hispanics) with sample weights when available to account for unequal probabilities of sample selection and nonresponse. Table 1 summarizes information about the surveys we use. Our full paper will examine race-ethnic differences in family size ideals to the extent possible with these data.

Each survey includes a question about the number of children that the respondent thinks would be ideal for her. Question wording differs across surveys (see Table 1). Only the most recent NSFG uses the word "ideal" in the question stem. The other surveys ask respondents what number would be most desirable for them or the number they would have if they could choose exactly how many to have. Our emphasis on personal ideals is consistent with efforts to document the transition to below-replacement fertility preferences in Europe (Goldstein et al. 2003). The table indicates whether the survey also included questions about ideal family size for the average American family. When available, we will compare personal preferences with ideals for an average family to determine the extent to which women distinguish between what is ideal for their lives and what would be ideal for a hypothetical average family. Evidence from

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<sup>1</sup> The wording of the questions about fertility preferences in the 2002 NSFG differs substantially from that for 1995 (see [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nsfg/C6female\\_capiliteMar03final.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nsfg/C6female_capiliteMar03final.pdf)). For that reason we do not plan to add this survey to our time series for this analysis.

earlier periods suggests that ideal family size for the average family and a woman's preferences for her own life differ substantially for some subgroups (e.g., Campbell, 1969; Rindfuss, 1974).

Our analysis provides a detailed description of trends and differentials in personal family size ideals. We adopt a regression framework beginning with OLS regression and using a variety of transformations of desired family size to take account of the skewness of this variable. We will also explore other techniques that take into account that family size preference is not a continuous variable. We describe the association between a woman's ideal family size and age, education, religion, race, and survey source. As noted above, we examine married women's attitudes for the full time series. For the more recent years we explore the associations between demographic characteristics and attitudes for all women, regardless of marital status. Because actual childbearing may affect fertility attitudes, we also investigate the effects of parity on family size preferences. This is especially important to consider in light of changes in the timing of childbearing for the period we are studying.

The analysis is a conventional decomposition in the sense that we use the regression results to show how changes in family size preferences can be accounted for by change in women's sociodemographic characteristics and in the effects of these characteristics on their preferences. We pay particular attention to whether gaps between groups, for instance by education, are expanding.

We explore variability in women's family size preferences by decomposing changes in the variation in family size ideals into the variation implied by changes in levels and effects of women's sociodemographic characteristics and changes in the residual, unexplained variation. This enables us to determine if there is less consensus about desired family size now than in earlier periods, and, if so, whether the increase is due to increasing disparity between sociodemographic groups or to increasing heterogeneity within groups.

## **State of the Analysis**

The analysis files for this project are nearly complete. We have constructed a pooled file that uses standardized definitions of all key variables for eight of the ten data sources we will use. We are in the process of incorporating the 1973 and 1976 NSFG data in the file. This is a straightforward task that builds on our work with the more recent NSFG files. With the possible exception of the VOC data, all of the data sets include a sufficient number of cases to support the analyses (samples of 18-24 year olds range from about 500 in the early surveys to about 2000 in the more recent surveys). The 1973 and 1976 NSFG surveys include more women from cohorts who are also represented in the VOC, which has just under 400 women 18-24. Therefore we may exclude the VOC from the analysis and rely instead on the NSFG data to represent young women in the 1970s. We also anticipate having to make some compromises on the number and coding of explanatory variables in the model to take account of small numbers of non-whites in some of the surveys.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of women's personal family size ideals for the eight datasets we now have. Nearly half of young married women in 1995 think it would be ideal if they had two children. This is slightly less than the percentage of wives who preferred two

children in the 1988 survey. Figure 1 does not show clear evidence of a recent trend toward greater variability in family size preferences, but we are in the process of exploring the detailed distributions more thoroughly and examining preferences for all women, regardless of marital status. We expect to have the analysis completed and a full paper well before the deadline for the PAA meetings.

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**TABLE 1. SURVEY CHARACTERISTICS FOR DATA ON FAMILY SIZE PREFERENCES**

Birth Cohorts for 18-24 Year Olds in Sample	Data Source	Universe Sampled		Type of Family Size Preference	Question Wording
		Race	Marital Status		
1930-1937	1955 Growth of American Families	Whites	Currently Married Never Married <sup>1</sup>	Personal Desire and American Family Ideal	Now if you could start your married life all over again and choose to have just the number of children you would want by the time you were 45, how many would that be?  What do you think is the ideal number of children for the <u>average</u> American family?
1935-1942	1960 Growth of American Families	Whites Non-Whites	Currently Married Previously Married (but married in 1955)	Personal Desire and American Family Ideal	If you could live your life over again, and have everything just the way you would like it to be, how many children would you have in all?  What do you think is the ideal number of children for the <u>average</u> American family?
1940-1947	1965 National Fertility Study	Whites Non-Whites	Currently Married	Personal Desire and American Family Ideal	If you could have exactly the number of children you want, what number would that be? (asked if R had no children) Have you had all the children you want? (asked if R had children) IF NO: What number of children would you really want? IF YES: Would you just as soon have had fewer? IF NO: If you could have exactly the number of children you want, what number would that be? IF YES: What number of children would you really want?  What do you think is the ideal number of children for the <u>average</u> American family?
1945-1952	1970 National Fertility Study	Whites Non-Whites	Ever Married	Personal Desire and American Family Ideal	Given the circumstances of your life, how many children <u>in all</u> would you really consider the most desirable for you and your husband?  What do you think is the <u>ideal</u> size of a family – a husband, a wife and how many children?
1948-1955	1973 National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle I	Whites Non-Whites	Ever Married Never Married <sup>2</sup>	Personal Desire and American Family Ideal	The number of children people expect is not always the same as the number they would most like to have. Now, if you could start over, knowing things would turn out just about the way they have for you (and your husband), how many children would you most like to have by the time you are through having children?  What do you think is the ideal number of children for the average American family?

Table continued

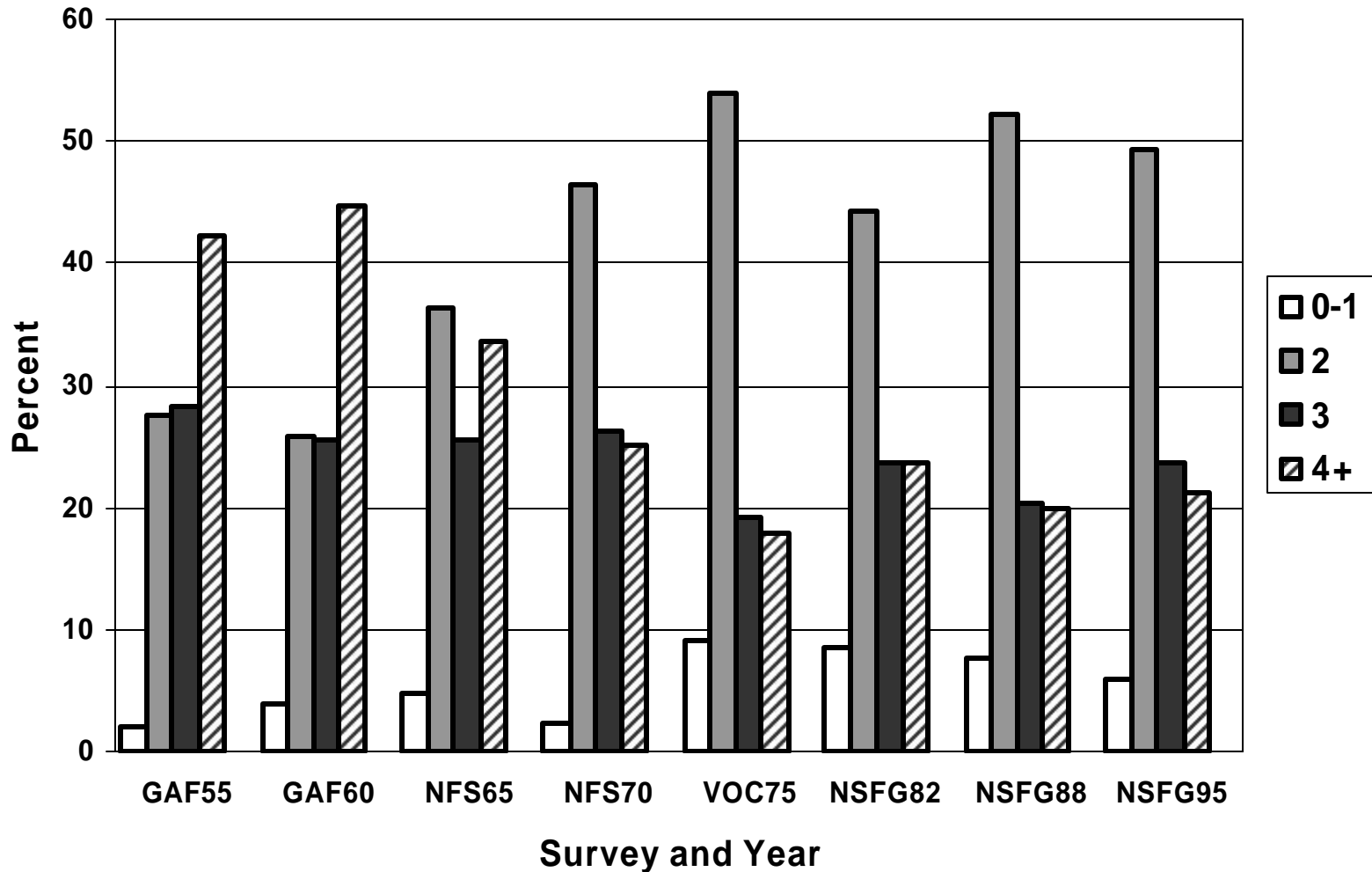
TABLE 1, CONTINUED

Birth Cohorts for 18-24 Year Olds in Sample	Data Source	Universe Sampled		Type of Family Size Preference	Question Wording
		Race	Marital Status		
1951-1957	1975 Value and Costs of Children to Parents	Whites Non-Whites	Currently married or semi-permanently cohabiting with a man	Personal Desire	<p>IF R CHILDLess: If you could have just what you wanted how many children would you like to have (counting this pregnancy)?</p> <p>IF R HAS CHILDREN: Looking back now, supposing you were just married and had no children. Knowing what you know now, would you want to have any children? (Yes/No)</p> <p>IF YES: Again, if you were starting your family all over, things being pretty much as they were, how many children would like to have?</p>
1951-1958	1976 National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle II	Whites Non-Whites	Ever Married Never Married <sup>2</sup>	Personal Desire and American Family Ideal	<p>The number of children people expect is not always the same as the number they would most like to have. Knowing how other things are for you (and your husband), if you could choose exactly the number of children to have in your whole life, how many would you choose now.</p> <p>What do you think is the ideal number of children for the average American family today?</p>
1957-1964	1982 National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle III	Whites Non-Whites	Ever Married Never Married	Personal Desire	<p>The number of children people expect is not always the same as the number they would most like to have. Knowing how other things are for you (and your husband), if you could choose exactly the number of children to have in your whole life, how many would you choose now?</p>
1963-1970	1988 National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle IV	Whites Non-Whites	Ever Married Never Married	Personal Desire	<p>The number of children people expect is not always the same as the number they would most like to have. Knowing how other things are for you (and your husband/partner), if you could choose exactly the number of children to have in your whole life, how many would you choose now?</p>
1970-1977	1995 National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle V	Whites Non-Whites	Ever Married Never Married	Personal Desire	<p>The next questions ask about the number of children a woman considers <u>ideal</u> for herself. This could be more or less than she has or more or less than she expects to have. Knowing how other things are for you now, if you yourself could choose <u>exactly</u> the number of children to have in your whole life, how many would you choose? (<i>emphasis original</i>) (asked if R was not sterile)</p> <p>The next questions ask about the number of children a woman considers <u>ideal</u> for herself. This could be more or less than she has or more or less than she expects to have. If you yourself could choose <u>exactly</u> the number of children to have in your whole life, how many would you choose? (<i>emphasis original</i>) (asked if R was sterile)</p>

<sup>1</sup>Never married women were only asked about the ideal family size for the average American family.

<sup>2</sup>Never married women included only if they were mothers with a child in the household.

**Figure 1: Personal Family Size Desires by Survey Source, Currently Married Women 18-24**



Notes: The 1955 GAF data are for whites only. Other data sources include non-whites. Distributions use weighted data.