

Childlessness Among Older Women in the United States: Trends and Profiles

In the last 2 decades, the United States has seen an increase in childlessness and first births at older ages. Using the National Survey of Family Growth, we focus on women aged 35 – 44 who are voluntarily childless (expect no children and are fecund or contraceptively sterile). We compare these women to those who are involuntarily childless (fecundity impaired) and to those who are temporarily childless (expect children). Voluntary childlessness grew from 1982 (5%) to 1988 (8%), was stable up to 1995 (9%), and fell slightly in 2002 (7%). Voluntarily childless women have the highest income, prior work experience, and lowest religiosity compared to other women. This has been true since 1982, the earliest time point examined.

Over the last three decades, the United States has seen a steady increase in the proportion of women who are childless at older ages. Data from the Current Population Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau show that in 1976 the percentage of women aged 35 – 39 who were childless was 11, whereas in 2002, this percent had risen to 20. Among those aged 40 – 44, the percent childless grew from 10 in 1976 to 18 in 2002 (Downs, 2003).

There are two basic limitations to many of the studies that describe overall childlessness among women in these older reproductive ages. First, women's expectations for future births are not

always taken into account. Thus, whether the currently childless population is temporarily or permanently childless remains an open question. Research and popular media have often focused on the scenario whereby older childless women desire children (Hewlett, 2002; Kalb, 2001). Recent data on rising first birth rates for older women reveal that the older temporarily childless group has been growing (Martin et al., 2005; Mathews & Hamilton, 2002; Ventura, 1999), indicating growing numbers of older women who fit the temporarily childless classification. The second limitation of many analyses of childlessness is that they do not allow a distinction between childless women who have no known fertility problems from those who do. This is important given that a nontrivial percentage of older childless women has fecundity impairments—12% among those aged 35 – 39 and 18% among those aged 40 – 44, in 2002 (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005). These are likely to be very different women; the fecundity impaired possibly composed of women who would have, or plan to have, children if they were able to do so.

This research addresses these limitations by taking into account both (a) childless women's expectations for future births and (b) their own known biological ability to have children or that of their husband or cohabiting partner (if any). Childless women nearing the end of their reproductive life span are unique because they have had considerable time to invest in domains other than parenthood. Against this backdrop, some are deciding to remain childless, others act quickly to realize childbearing aspirations, and others are coming to grips with the inability to

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have children. For these older women, we present trends in the size of the childless groups, with a focus on those who do not expect children and are either able to have a child or are contraceptively sterile (labeled *voluntarily childless* in this analysis). We examine profiles of the voluntarily childless compared to the other groups, tracking their characteristics across the years from the early 1980s through 2002. Finally, we go beyond basic demographic profiles and present in-depth profiles of characteristics and experiences known to be relevant for delaying and forgoing childbearing.

Previous Studies of Childlessness

Studies of the characteristics of late child bearers show that postponement has occurred among women of all races, ethnicities, and levels of education, but is most pronounced among White women and women with more education (Heck, Schoendorf, Ventura, & Kiely, 1997; Martin, 2000). These studies are not able to compare those who ultimately have births to their counterparts who are childless, some of whom may expect to remain childless.

Research focusing explicitly on the voluntarily childless usually takes into account birth expectations, but not biological ability. Studies using the General Social Survey and the National Survey of Families and Households have shown generally that the voluntarily childless stand out, having higher education, percents working full time, higher occupational prestige, higher income, lower religiosity, and less traditional family views (Heller, Tsai, & Chalfant, 1986; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Rovi, 1994). A recent study by Heaton, Jacobson, and Holland (1999) included childbearing intentions at two time points and found that White women, older women, and those with less stable relationships were more likely to be voluntarily childless at both time points. Contrary to findings from other studies of the voluntarily childless, they found income to be negatively associated with voluntary childlessness. The findings in this group of studies could be confounded by the inclusion of women in the voluntarily childless category who expect no children not because they desire no children, but because they are not able to reproduce. This could at least in part account for some inconsistency in findings between the studies.

Some studies of childless women at the national level do take into account birth expecta-

tions and fecundity, but they are dated. One such study by Mosher and Bachrach (1982) used the 1973 and 1976 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and analyzed currently married women. They found that the voluntarily childless stood out in the same way as documented in some of the other studies that did not take into account fecundity. Jacobson, Heaton, and Taylor (1988) used the 1982 NSFG and found in a multivariate analysis that education, mother's education, and White race had positive relationships with voluntary childlessness, but that religious denomination did not. Other earlier analyses documenting the distinctiveness of the voluntarily childless examining findings from multiple data sources including national fertility data and smaller scale data collected expressly for the purpose of studying the voluntarily childless (Houseknecht, 1982).

Factors Associated With Voluntary Childlessness

A primary explanation for the association between socioeconomic status and delaying or forgoing childbearing involves opportunity costs. The incompatibility of women's roles as workers and as mothers has been a primary theme in the literature on women's work (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000) and the literature on fertility (Rindfuss & Brewster, 1996). Although the relationship between socioeconomic status and fertility is generally negative and the two have gone in opposite directions over time (Rindfuss & Brewster; Smith, Downs, & O'Connell, 2001), some findings suggest that women with higher incomes and career attainment may use these resources to facilitate childbearing (Heaton et al., 1999; Martin, 2000). This analysis will explore whether childless older women who do plan to have children differ in socioeconomic status from those who do not plan to do so, even though they are physically able. We compare them on levels of education, work experience, full-time employment, type of occupation, and income.

The notion that fertility and family decisions are influenced not only by cost and benefit analysis but also by attitudes and normative beliefs has received research attention (Heaton et al., 1999; Schoen, Young, Nathanson, Fields, & Astone, 1997; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Attitudes toward gender equality and family issues, including childlessness, men's and women's work, and more tolerance of divergent lifestyles, have also been the subject of trend analysis

(Brewster & Padavic, 2000; Thornton & Young-DeMarco). These studies show that freedom of choice of lifestyles and tolerance of non-traditional family lifestyles typify adult views now more so than two decades ago (Thornton & Young-DeMarco). Earlier studies found more egalitarian attitudes regarding gender issues among the voluntarily childless (e.g., Houseknecht, 1982). Given widespread liberalization of attitudes that studies document, this analysis explores whether contemporary, older, voluntarily childless women's attitudes are distinctive.

The influence of religiosity on fertility is well documented but varies by denomination and has changed over time (Mosher, Williams, & Johnson, 1992). Recent studies show that involvement in religious activities can provide social affirmation of parenthood and social sanctions for those deviating from childbearing norms (Wilcox, 2002). Early religious exposure has an important influence on subsequent childbearing dispositions (Pearce, 2002).

Black, Hispanic, and White women do not differ notably with regard to overall childlessness (19%, 13%, and 19%, respectively, among those aged 40 – 44 in 2002: Downs, 2003). Black and Hispanic women, however, have first births at younger ages (Downs, Mathews, & Hamilton 2002) so those remaining childless until older ages may be distinctive. Furthermore, earlier studies found that White women were more likely than Black women to be voluntarily childless (Jacobson et al., 1988; Mosher & Bachrach, 1982). No studies to date have examined Hispanic women in this regard. This analysis will compare the types of childless older women with respect to race and Hispanic origin.

An increasing proportion of births occur outside of marriage (Martin et al., 2005). This reflects a weakening link between marriage and childbearing and the increased tolerance of diversity in lifestyles (Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Because this suggests that women perceive absence of a partner as less of an obstacle to childbearing now than in the past, we analyze women of all marital statuses and examine childless types by marital status. We acknowledge that because most childbearing still occurs within marriage, many unmarried women who expect no children may have that expectation because they do not expect to get married.

Using the 1982, 1988, 1995, and 2002 cycles of the NSFG, we first address the question of what

proportion of women are voluntarily childless. Then, we examine whether these women have grown in number, both (a) in the overall population of women aged 35 – 44 and (b) as a proportion of childless women aged 35 – 44. Next, we present profiles of the voluntarily childless group, contrasting them with the temporarily childless, across the four points in time. We include basic demographic and socioeconomic characteristics and religiosity. This will help ascertain whether the voluntarily childless women are selective, as earlier studies suggested, or whether they are becoming similar to other older childless women.

Finally, we present detailed profiles contrasting the voluntarily childless not only with the temporarily childless but also with the involuntarily childless. This is important given that earlier studies combined those with and those without reproductive impairments in the category of voluntarily childless. We check for differences and similarities not only in current characteristics but also in *histories* of work and religious affiliation.

METHOD

The data used in this analysis come from Cycles 3 (1982), 4 (1988), 5 (1995), and 6 (2002) of the NSFG, which is conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics. The data were collected from a nationally representative sample of non-institutionalized women between the ages of 15 and 44. The survey was designed to collect data on factors affecting pregnancy and childbearing in the United States, including topics on women's reproductive health. The data allow time trend analysis of the measures of childlessness used here because all the components of this measure were collected at each of the four time points. All cycles include measures that have been shown to be associated with voluntary childlessness, but the 1995 NSFG was unique in its inclusion of retrospective work histories, occupation coding, and attitudes toward family and women's roles. For this reason, the analyses providing detailed profiles of the childless subgroups use the 1995 measures. The Cycle 5 response rate was 79%, resulting in a total sample of 10,847 women. Among these, 4,032 women were aged 35 – 44. The sample sizes for women aged 35 – 44 in the other three cycles are as follows: 1982 contained 1,742; 1988 contained 2,591; and 2002 contained 2,479.

Characteristics included in bivariate tables are age, education (measured as number of years of

school completed), race and Hispanic origin, marital status, employment status (working full time, working part time, and not working, including temporarily not working, unemployed, or out of the labor force), and religiosity (as measured by frequency of attendance at religious services, importance of religion in daily life [available in 1995 and 2002 only], and denomination).

The detailed comparisons of the categories of childless women for 1995 (Tables 3 – 5) include change in religious affiliation between that in which the woman was raised and her current affiliation, the woman's earnings, occupational category, and the total number of months (collapsed into years) she has worked since age 18. Analysis of occupation is limited to women currently working. Occupation is divided into two groups on the basis of 1990 U.S. Census codes: (a) "executive, administrative, and managerial; professional specialty occupations" and (b) all other categories. The total months worked since age 18 is ascertained through questions asking for the beginning and ending dates of each period of work lasting 1 month or more, since age 18. Attitudes and normative beliefs about family and roles for men and women are measured by questions asking for the extent of agreement or disagreement with several statements. These items can be categorized into two conceptual groups: those reflecting equality in opportunities between women and men and those reflecting views on whether women's work outside the home and childrearing should be, or can be, combined. The items used in the profile analysis are not combined to form composite measures because each item yields somewhat distinct interpretations for the current purposes.

For the measure of childlessness, we divide women aged 35 – 44 into four categories as follows: First, women who have had at least one live birth or who were pregnant at the time of the interview are considered to have had children. Second, temporarily childless women are those who have had no live births but who expect one or more births in the future (joint expectation for women who are married or cohabiting). The remaining two categories comprise women who are childless and expect no children in the future. The third category, involuntarily childless women, comprises those with a fecundity impairment, that is, they reported that they are sterile for noncontraceptive reasons; subfecund (meaning she reported physical difficulty conceiving or delivering a baby or difficulty for her husband or partner to father

a baby, or a doctor told her never to become pregnant because it would pose a danger to her, her fetus, or both); or, for married or cohabiting women, they have had a 3-year period of unprotected sexual intercourse with no pregnancy. The fourth category, the voluntarily childless, comprises those who expect no children and are either fecund or surgically sterile for contraceptive reasons. Although fecundity status of the male partner is equally important for defining fecundity for women not in a cohabiting or marital union, this information is not available in this data set and does not exist at the national level.

Some features of the measurement of fecundity warrant elaboration. As measured here, it is not entirely an objective status but relies in part on subjective self-report. Therefore, women who have tried to have a child are the most likely to know their fecundity status because it has been "tested." Never-married women and younger women are less likely than ever-married women and older women to have tried to conceive, thus have untested fecundity status. Our limitation of this analysis to women no younger than 35 years means that the fecundity status is better known and closer to reality.

Any measure involving parity, expectations, and fecundity is subject to change over time because each is a fluid status. Of course, as women age, fecundity declines (Menken, Trussel, & Larsen, 1986), and women aged 35 – 44 are nearing the end of the reproductive ages. Another less obvious source of transience involves union status. For a woman with a cohabiting partner or husband, her fecundity status also incorporates his status; thus, it is dependent on the union.

Fertility expectations have been shown to shift considerably with time (Heaton et al., 1999). Older women are more likely to be consistently childless or to switch from not expecting to expecting a child because they face their last opportunities to do so (Heaton et al.).

The study of women according to this snapshot of categories is meaningful in the sense that it represents a woman's valid assessment of the information available in the current situation. As Rovi (1994) argued, stating negative reproductive intentions is "socially difficult" (p. 344) in a society that remains predominantly pronatalist. We contend that this difficulty applies to women both with and without reproductive impairments, in unique ways. Further, the emphasis in this research is not on projections of fertility or on causes of childlessness, but

rather on insights gained from contrasting the subgroups of childless women at each point in time. Defining and stating fertility expectations is likely a more realistic task for older women: They are more likely to have made and acted on decisions in domains such as education and work; therefore, they may face fewer unknowns when thinking about future childbearing. Because women in the younger age range (35 – 39) are likely to differ from those in the older age range (40 – 44) with regard to fecundity and expectations, we present trends in childlessness separately for the two age groups.

Bivariate tabulations include tests of significance for all comparisons that are discussed in the Results section. This was important given relatively small sample sizes among the groups of childless women. Individual *t* tests, with a critical value of 2.326 (.10 level of significance), were used to test these comparisons. Tests were not conducted for comparisons that are not discussed, so lack of comment does not mean the difference was tested and found not to be significant. Caution is warranted in interpreting differences that are not discussed in the text, given these small sample sizes (Table 1; Figure 1).

RESULTS

Trends and Prevalence

Table 1 shows the prevalence of, and trends in, voluntary, temporary, and involuntary childlessness among women aged 35 – 44 of all marital statuses and by age group. Between 1982 and 2002, the percent voluntarily childless was never

more than 9 (in 1995). Considering each of the three categories separately, the percentages of older women in each remained relatively small and stable. The largest change in any category was 4 percentage points (an increase from 1982 to 1995 of the percent voluntarily childless). The percent voluntarily childless among older women peaked in 1995 at 9% and stood at 7% in 2002. Six percent were temporarily childless in 1995, also the peak; temporary childlessness stood at 5% in 2002. Although these percentages are small, they translate to 1.5 million older women voluntarily childless in 2002, a larger group than the 1 million expecting a child in the future.

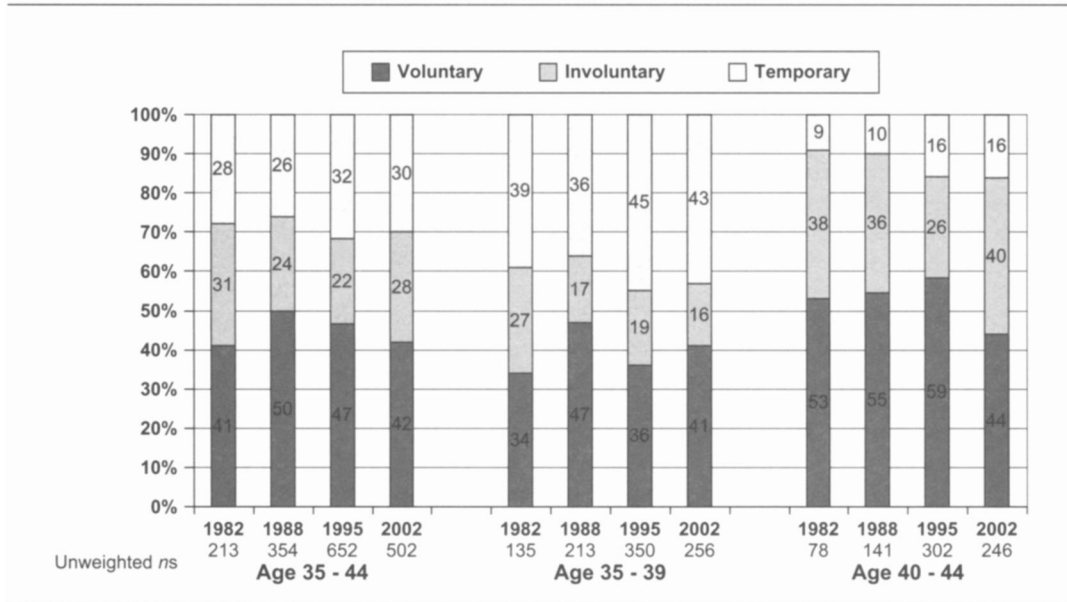
Because women aged 35 – 39 differ from women aged 40 – 44 in terms of fertility expectations and fecundity, we examined the effect of any change in the age distribution from 1995 to 2002 on the trends among the total age group 35 – 44. Each year, the older group of women had higher percents involuntarily childless and the younger group had higher percents temporarily childless. The percents voluntarily childless are similar. Thus, the 3 percentage point increase in women aged 40 – 44 between 1995 and 2002 (Table 3) would have more influence on relative sizes of the temporarily and involuntarily childless groups than the voluntarily childless group. The slight increase in older women in 2002 did not appear to result in higher percents involuntarily childless and lower percents temporarily childless.

Figure 1 shows these patterns across time points among only childless women, for ages 35 – 44 and separately for the two age groups 35 – 39 and

Table 1. Number of Women Aged 35 – 44, 35 – 39, and 40 – 44 years and Percent Distribution by Childless Status: 1982, 1988, 1995, and 2002

	1982			1988			1995			2002		
	35 – 44	35 – 39	40 – 44	35 – 44	35 – 39	40 – 44	35 – 44	35 – 39	40 – 44	35 – 44	35 – 39	40 – 44
Total (in thousands)	14,305	7,893	6,412	17,582	9,583	7,999	21,440	11,211	10,230	22,365	10,853	11,512
One or more children	88	86	88	84	82	86	81	81	82	84	83	85
Childless	12	14	12	16	18	14	19	19	18	16	17	15
Permanent (expect 0)	9	9	9	12	11	13	13	11	15	11	9	12
Voluntary	5	5	5	8	8	8	9	7	10	7	7	6
Involuntary	4	4	4	4	3	5	4	4	5	4	3	6
Temporary (expect >0)	3	5	1	4	6	1	6	9	3	5	7	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Unweighted <i>n</i>	1,742	948	794	2,591	1,431	1,160	4,032	2,125	1,907	2,479	1,270	1,209

FIGURE 1. PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF CHILDLESS WOMEN AGED 35 – 44, 35 – 39, and 40 – 44, BY CHILDLESS STATUS: 1982, 1988, 1995, AND 2002.



40 – 44. In 2002, among childless women aged 35 – 44, the voluntarily childless comprised the largest group, at 42%, and the rest were divided almost equally between the involuntarily childless and those expecting children in the future, at 28% and 30%, respectively (Figure 1). Shifts in the relative sizes of these subgroups over the four survey points are slight. They can be described as first away from involuntary toward voluntary and temporary childlessness, then a slight reversal after 1995 with increasing involuntary and decreasing voluntary childlessness. The temporarily childless group stayed relatively stable across the four time points with the largest increase between 1988 and 1995 (4 percentage points). Despite these fluctuations in the relative sizes of these groups over the past two decades, the voluntarily childless has consistently been a larger subgroup than the temporarily or involuntarily childless, among these older childless women.

Figure 1 also shows that the contributions of the two age groups to the patterns among all women aged 35 – 44 are slightly different. The small downturn between 1995 and 2002 in the voluntarily childless aged 35 – 44 reflects this trend among older women (40 – 44) and not those aged 35 – 39. Voluntary childlessness dropped from 59% to 44% among those aged 40 – 44, falling to a smaller percent than in any previous year.

The slight upturn in involuntary childlessness among ages 35 – 44 is also reflecting this trend among the older women only.

Profiles in 2002 and Trends Since 1982

The 2002 columns of Table 2 show that the voluntarily childless, aged 35 – 44, are made up of equal percentages of those in the younger (35 – 39) and the older (40 – 44) groups. The temporarily childless, however, tend to be younger. Both temporarily and voluntarily childless women have higher educations and are less likely to be currently or formerly married than the overall population, presented here for contrast. As earlier studies of broader age ranges found, compared to the temporarily childless and the overall population, the voluntarily childless are disproportionately White, employed full time, and nonreligious, as indicated by higher percents reporting no religious affiliation, never attending religious services, and reporting religion as *not important* in their daily lives.

Several trends revealed in Table 2 are noteworthy. Across the survey points, whereas the voluntarily childless have been disproportionately White across the four survey years, between 1995 and 2002 the percentage of the voluntarily childless who were Black increased to be

Table 2. Percent Distribution of Voluntarily and Involuntarily Childless Women, and All Women Aged 35 – 44 by Demographic Characteristics, Work Status, and Religiosity: 1982, 1988, 1995, and 2002

	1982		1988		1995		2002	
	All Women	Voluntary	All Women	Voluntary	All Women	Voluntary	All Women	Voluntary
Age								
35 – 39	55	53	88	56	85	43	78	50
40 – 44	45	47	12	44	15	57	22	50
Education								
Less than high school	18	17	8	2	7	4	7	7
High school	42	30	27	29	19	27	31	24
Some college or higher	40	52	65	70	74	69	63	69
Work status								
Working full time	45	74	80	87	76	76	68	76
Working part time	16	6	5	4	8	8	11	6
Other	39	19	15	9	16	16	20	18
Race and Hispanic origin								
Hispanic	7	5	6	3	5	4	8	7
Non-Hispanic White	79	87	84	85	75	84	68	79
Non-Hispanic Black	11	6	10	8	12	8	15	11
Religion importance								
Religion not important	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	9	7	4
Current attendance								
Never attends religious service	12	25	10	23	7	31	22	35
Religion								
None	4	8	2	9	13	21	8	30
Catholic	29	25	38	33	32	26	37	22
Protestant	61	58	59	53	44	47	45	40
Other	7	9	-	5	10	6	10	6
Marital status								
Currently married	74	31	37	37	38	33	41	39
Formerly married	20	20	18	23	13	20	14	17
Never married	6	50	45	40	50	46	45	43
Unweighted n	1,742	76	60	162	96	304	201	210
				2,591		4,032		2,479

Note: n/a = not available in survey year.

equivalent to their percents in the total population aged 35 – 44. Hispanic women are underrepresented among the voluntarily childless in all survey years. Both temporarily and voluntarily childless older women have had higher percents working full time than those in the overall population at this age, since 1982. In 1982, the voluntarily childless were not distinctive with regard to levels of full-time employment, but this began to change after that point: Since at least 1988, they have stood out as having the highest percents working full time, even compared to the temporarily childless. In 2002, 76% of the voluntarily childless worked full time, compared to 63% among the temporarily childless and 51% among all older women.

Throughout the three-decade period, the voluntarily childless have been characterized by lower religiosity in relation to the overall population and in relation to the temporarily childless, consistent with earlier studies. Finally, older voluntarily childless women were distributed evenly across the age groups 35 – 39 and 40 – 44 in 2002, with only minor fluctuations over the 4 years in these relative percents.

Detailed Profiles

Adding the involuntarily childless to the picture reveals some differences along the characteristics examined in Table 2 and underscores the importance of considering fecundity status in studying permanent childlessness. Table 3 shows that involuntarily childless older women have a distribution across race and Hispanic origin similar to that of the overall population of older women, in contrast to the voluntarily childless, who are disproportionately White. The involuntarily childless have much higher percents ever married, which includes those currently and formerly married, compared to the other childless groups. Eighty percent of the involuntarily childless were ever married, compared to 53% among the voluntarily childless and 55% among the temporarily childless. The involuntarily childless do not resemble the voluntarily childless in their religious affiliation. They have a smaller percent reporting no religious affiliation (6%) than the voluntarily childless (21%). The involuntarily childless also differ from the voluntarily childless with respect to work status: 62% were working full time in 1995 compared to 76% among the voluntarily childless.

Table 3 shows that voluntarily childless women are distinct with respect to changes in reli-

gious affiliation over their lifetimes. No differences existed among the childless groups in religion in which they were raised. Compared to all other groups, however, a higher percentage of voluntarily childless women switched to no religious denomination after having been raised with a particular religious denomination.

Table 4 shows that among older women, the voluntarily childless have the highest individual and family incomes, highest percent in professional and managerial occupations, and most extensive past work experience, compared to the temporarily and involuntarily childless and the parents.

On individual earnings in the past year, voluntarily childless women had the highest percentages in the highest category: 57% earned \$25,000 per year or more, compared to 41% among the temporarily childless and 36% among the involuntarily childless. Just 26% of the parents had this income level. This table shows that the voluntarily childless are selective not only with regard to current labor market characteristics but also with regard to their history of labor market participation. Eighty-four percent had worked for a total of 15 years or longer since age 18, compared to 72% among the temporarily childless and 57% among the parents. Although it is true that the temporarily childless are younger on average, so have had less time to accumulate months of work experience, we examined these two groups on the percentage of months worked since age 18 (not shown). The finding remained true: The voluntarily childless had significantly more work experience than the temporarily childless.

Table 5 addresses the question of whether, among older women, the voluntarily childless are distinctive in attitudes toward work and family, and equality between genders. These older childless women as a whole shared more egalitarian views than the parents: Higher percents disagreed with the statement that a man can make long-range plans but a woman cannot and agreed that young girls are entitled to as much independence as young boys. The voluntarily childless, however, were not distinctive on these attitudes.

Among older childless women, the voluntarily childless women were distinctive with regard to one dimension of beliefs about compatibility between work and childrearing: Higher percents of voluntarily childless disagreed with the statement "Women are happier if they stay at home and take care of their children" than was true

Table 3. *Percent Distribution of Women Aged 35 – 44 Years Within Childless Status, by Demographic Characteristics and Religiosity: 1995*

	All Women	Women With Children	Childless Women		
			Voluntary	Temporary	Involuntary
Age					
35 – 39	52	52	43	78	47
40 – 44	48	48	57	22	53
Race and Hispanic origin					
Hispanic	9	10	4	8	4
Non-Hispanic White	74	73	84	68	79
Non-Hispanic Black	13	13	8	15	14
Marital status					
Ever married	88	95	53	55	80
Currently married	68	74	33	41	65
Never married	12	5	46	45	20
Religion importance					
Not important	8	7	18	7	15
Current attendance					
Never attends	20	18	30	22	30
Current religion					
None	9	8	21	8	6
Protestant	55	56	47	45	51
Catholic	30	27	26	37	26
Other	6	6	6	9	8
Religion raised					
None	4	4	6	3	6
Protestant	56	56	55	51	61
Catholic	35	35	36	40	30
Other	4	4	3	6	3
Change in religion					
Raised religious, none now	7	6	17	6	11
Raised none, religious now	2	2	2	1	2
None consistently	2	2	4	2	3
Religious consistently	88	90	77	91	83
Unweighted <i>n</i>	4,032	3,380	304	201	147

for the temporarily childless, involuntarily childless, and the parents (87% disagreed among the voluntarily childless compared to 77% among the temporarily childless and 76% among the involuntarily childless). For the other items related to compatibility in these domains, all the groups of these older women appear to be similar to each other, including those with children.

DISCUSSION

This research provides empirical evidence to inform a topic that has been highly debated in popular media and has been a frequent subject of family and fertility research: voluntary, perma-

nent childlessness. Given the lack of updated studies that differentiate not only intentions for future births but also biological ability to reproduce, this descriptive analysis fills a void by describing the prevalence of voluntary childlessness in contrast to temporary and involuntary childlessness. Further, it examines characteristics of voluntarily childless women in relation to those delaying childbearing and those unable to have children.

The percentage of all women aged 35 – 44 who are voluntarily childless is relatively small (7% in 2002) but larger than the 5% who are childless at this age and expect to have children. Across all 4 years spanning 1982 to 2002, the voluntarily

Table 4. *Percent Distribution of Women Aged 35 – 44 Years Within Childless Status, by Human Capital and Labor Market Characteristics: 1995*

	All Women	Women With Children	Childless Women		
			Voluntary	Temporary	Involuntary
Education					
Less than high school	16	18	4	7	8
High school	35	36	27	31	32
Some college or higher	49	46	69	63	60
Work status					
Working full time	56	52	76	68	62
Working part time	16	18	8	11	13
Other	28	30	16	20	24
Individual earnings					
Not currently working	25	27	11	18	20
\$13,999 and less	24	25	12	18	23
\$14,000 – \$24,999	21	21	19	23	21
\$25,000+	29	26	57	41	36
Occupation					
% Managerial/professional occupation	7	6	11	9	6
Total years worked across all periods of work					
0 – 2 years	5	6	4	2	3
2 – 8 years	10	11	5	9	4
8 – 14 years	23	26	7	17	15
15+ years	61	57	84	72	77
Unweighted <i>n</i>	4,032	3,380	304	201	147

childless has always been a larger group than the temporarily or involuntarily childless. A slight downturn in the percent voluntarily childless after 1995 primarily resulted from an increase in involuntary childlessness, among the older women (40 – 44 years). Trends toward delaying first births (Mathews & Hamilton, 2002) mean that over the past decade or so more older women will have “tested” their fecundity by trying to have a baby. This could be underlying a shift to involuntary childlessness among these older women in addition to the shift toward older childbearing (for those who succeed).

Findings related to measures of women’s labor force experience and religious background underscore the uniqueness of the voluntarily childless. The older voluntarily childless and the temporarily childless have in common the absence of childrearing demands competing with accumulating work experience. Those expecting no children, however, had accumulated more work experience. This suggests that commitment to work may precede fertility decisions and can perhaps shape them as work is accumulated. Rel-

atively high levels of socioeconomic status and work experience among the temporarily childless could be consistent with the notion that women may be anticipating and realizing greater compatibility of work and later childrearing through first gaining higher levels of education, more highly skilled careers, and more seniority in the workplace (Martin, 2000). It is also the case that women who delay childbearing are selective with regard to education (Heck et al., 1997) and that some will regret not having started childbearing earlier even if it would have meant curtailment of workplace attainment. But more commonly among those at the highest levels of workplace investment (exhibited by the voluntarily childless) either women stop planning to combine the domains or they never planned to combine them, but instead always focused on career goals.

This study documents the uniqueness of the voluntarily childless with respect to religiosity at every survey point beginning with 1982. This reinforces earlier studies’ findings of married women aged 15 – 44 (Mosher & Bachrach, 1982) and underscores the importance of religion

Table 5. Percent Distribution of Women Aged 35 – 44 Years Within Childless Status, by Attitudes: 1995

	All Women	Women With Children	Childless Women		
			Voluntary	Temporary	Involuntary
Egalitarianism					
A man can make long-range plans, a woman cannot (% disagree)	74	72	82	84	79
Young girls entitled to as much independence as boys (% agree)	76	75	84	77	83
Compatibility of female work and childrearing					
A preschool child likely to suffer if mother works (% disagree)	57	57	61	62	61
Woman should not let childrearing stand in the way of career (% agree)	82	81	88	83	91
There should be free child-care centers so women could take jobs (% agree)	62	62	63	64	60
Women are happier if they stay at home and take care of their children (% disagree)	76	75	87	77	76
Unweighted <i>n</i>	4,032	3,380	304	201	147

in one's life for shaping childbearing attitudes and vice versa (Pearce, 2002). The fact that the temporarily and voluntarily childless started out similar in childhood religious affiliation, but diverged, with the voluntarily childless more often becoming nonreligious, suggests interesting further study on the reciprocal influences of religious involvement over the life course, and childbearing decisions and attitudes.

There are caveats regarding the categorization of childlessness used here, some of which can be addressed in future research. First, this analysis centers on biological parenthood and does not take into account the possibility of parenthood of nonbiological children such as stepchildren and adopted children. Second, childbearing desires are shaped over time and can fluctuate (Heaton et al., 1999). This analysis involved profiles of the subgroups according to childless status at one time point. Patterns found in this analysis were distinct, despite the fact that women in the categories had varying strength and consistency of fertility plans.

The fact that voluntary childlessness increased by 1988, held steady and then declined slightly after 1995, could in part reflect an increase over the recent decade in the acceptability and the feasibility of combining childbearing and work for women. For the past decade, women have been returning to work after the first child much more commonly than

was true two decades ago. In 1976, only 31% of mothers with infants were in the labor force, whereas this percentage increased to 51 in 1988 and was relatively stable up to 2002 (Downs, 2003). Easing of the tension between job and family roles could come from various sources. Family-friendly workplace policies have been adopted such as the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993. Child care has become more widely available (Rindfuss & Brewster, 1996). Thus, to the degree women are envisioning labor force participation as an important part of adult life, economically necessary, and as a background to planning their fertility, it is possible that forgoing children altogether is being seen as less of a necessity for such participation, or at least the mutual exclusivity between these domains may have plateaued. Not all women's decisions to remain childless, however, are a result of weighing the costs of combining work and childrearing. There may be no work-childrearing decision making relevant for them, if they are envisioning their adult lives to be complete and preferable without the addition of children. Increasing tolerance among Americans of diversity in adult paths and lifestyles (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001) should render the childless lifestyle an increasingly acceptable option. Thus, perhaps the voluntarily childless are becoming increasingly composed of women who are satisfied

with their situation rather than those feeling they have sacrificed for the sake of a career.

NOTE

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