

Population & Societies

Childlessness: a life choice that goes against the norm

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In France, it is quite rare to be childless and to report not wanting any children. Who are the people concerned? What are the reasons for their choice? Does living with a partner make any difference? Charlotte Debest and Magali Mazuy have analysed this life choice using data from several surveys, notably 2010 the *Fecond* survey, and present their findings here.

Voluntary childlessness, whereby men and women deliberately decide not to become parents, is very rare in France. Although the first child is often born after several years of life with a partner, few women, men or couples make a firm commitment to childlessness without changing their mind at a later date.

There were few sociological studies of this question until recently. [1, 2] Two new surveys (see Box) have helped to fill this knowledge gap: the *Fécondité, contraception et dysfonctions sexuelles* (*Fecond*) survey was conducted in 2010 by INSERM and INED on random samples of 5,275 women and 3,373 men aged 15–49. It explores contraceptive practices from the time of sexual debut, contraceptive failures, planned and unplanned pregnancies, abortion and sexual dysfunction. The qualitative survey on voluntary childlessness conducted between February 2009 and May 2010 involved 51 interviews of 33 women and 18 men aged 30 to 63. The two-hour interviews covered the educational, occupational, family and conjugal trajectories of respondents who had deliberately chosen not to have children. [3]

Five percent of men and women wish to remain childless

Permanent childlessness – having no children at the end of one's reproductive life – is quite rare in France, for women especially: it concerns 13.5% of women born between 1961 and 1965, versus 21.0% of men from the

same cohorts. The proportions have increased slightly in recent years according to INSEE; [4] reported voluntary childlessness, on the other hand, remains a marginal phenomenon.

Box. Data sources

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Note: The *Fecond* survey was conducted by a team whose members were: N. Bajos and C. Moreau (lead researchers), A. Bohet (coordinator), A. Andro, L. Aussel, J. Bouyer, G. Charrance, C. Debest, D. Dinova, D. Hassoun, M. Le Guen, S. Legleye, E. Marsican, M. Mazuy, E. Moreau, H. Panjo, N. Razafindratsima, A. Régnier- Loilier, V. Ringa, E. de La Rochebrochard, V. Rozée, M. Teboul, L. Toulemon, C. Ventola.

For more information on the *Fecond* survey:
<http://www.u822.idf.inserm.fr/page.asp?page=4097>

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** See Box.

The quantitative data of the *Fecond* survey indicate that 6.3% of men and 4.3% of women report not having a child and not wanting one. In a society with clearly assigned gender roles, it is doubtless less stigmatizing for men than for women to announce such a choice.

These findings are consistent with the results of the 2006 Eurobarometer survey, in which 95% of French adults reported wanting or having at least one child [5], and with the French version of the Generations and Gender survey (*Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelles, Erfi*)⁽¹⁾, conducted in 2005. [6]

A strong desire for children at all ages

Even at young ages, most people express a strong desire to have a family, and very few imagine a childless future

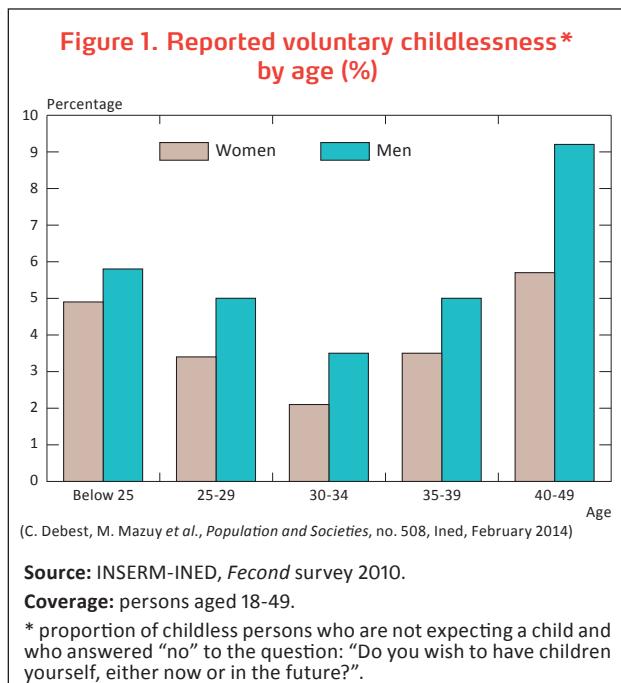


Table 1. Reported voluntary childlessness, by educational level and union status (%)

Educational level	Women			Men		
	In a union	Not in a union	Overall	In a union	Not in a union	Overall
Lower secondary	2.3	7.0	3.3	4.6	19.2	7.0
Upper secondary	4.2	15.0	5.7	5.0	16.8	5.7
3 years in higher ed.	3.2	11.3	4.3	6.9	20.4	4.3
4+ years in higher ed.	3.7	19.1	5.7	4.5	9.0	5.7
Overall	3.1	10.6	4.4	5.0	17.6	6.8

Source: INSERM-INED, *Fecond* survey 2010.
Coverage: persons aged 30 to 49.

Note: For the results taking account of union status and educational level, analyses are restricted to persons aged at least 30. Differences by educational level for partnerless women are significant at the 5% level.

for themselves (Figure 1). Social pressure to have children is very strong at all ages, especially in the “peak reproductive years”, i.e. between ages 25 and 35, and voluntary childlessness is especially rare at this time of life. This injunction is accompanied by representations of a “good” parent: [7] having a partner, being in a stable relationship, timing births to occur at the “right” age and at the “right” time, as part of a planned family. This set of social norms corresponds to a desire to “found a family” that is broadly shared by the French population as a whole.

Being in a union reduces the frequency of reported voluntary childlessness

Very few persons with a partner at the time of the survey reported wishing to remain childless: just 3% of women and 5% of men (versus 10% and 17% for persons without a partner) (Table 1). These figures have been stable since 1995 [2] and indicate that the birth of a first child still forms part of a “normal” conjugal trajectory (and considered as such by the couples themselves and by their families), the absence of a child being seen as a sign of medical or relational difficulties within a stable couple. While the majority of couples are childless at the time of union formation, couples without children become a minority over time as their peers enter parenthood. A gradual, diffuse pressure is exerted upon these couples, considered to be at the “right time of life” to start a family.

A larger share of partnerless individuals report not wanting a child. They correspond to a variety of profiles. They may prefer to remain childless because they have no life partner, or because, in their view, a stable relationship – which at the very least means having a partner – is an essential prerequisite for family formation. Alternatively, being partnerless and not wishing to have a child may reflect a reluctance to conform to the traditional norms of marriage and the family.

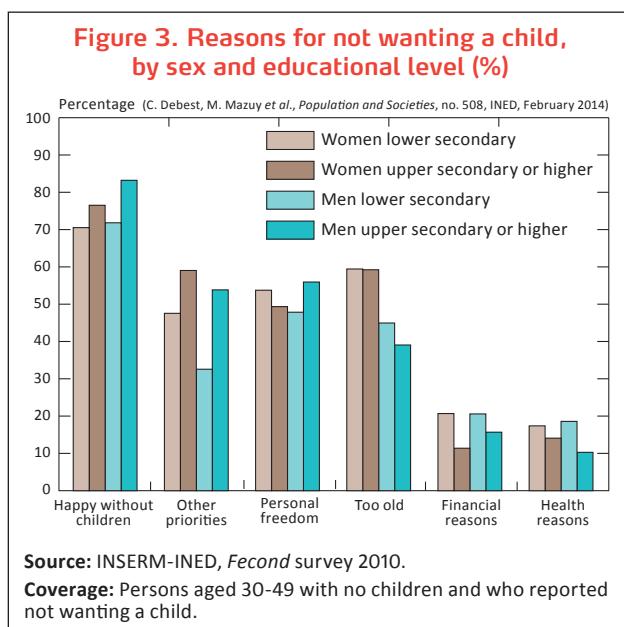
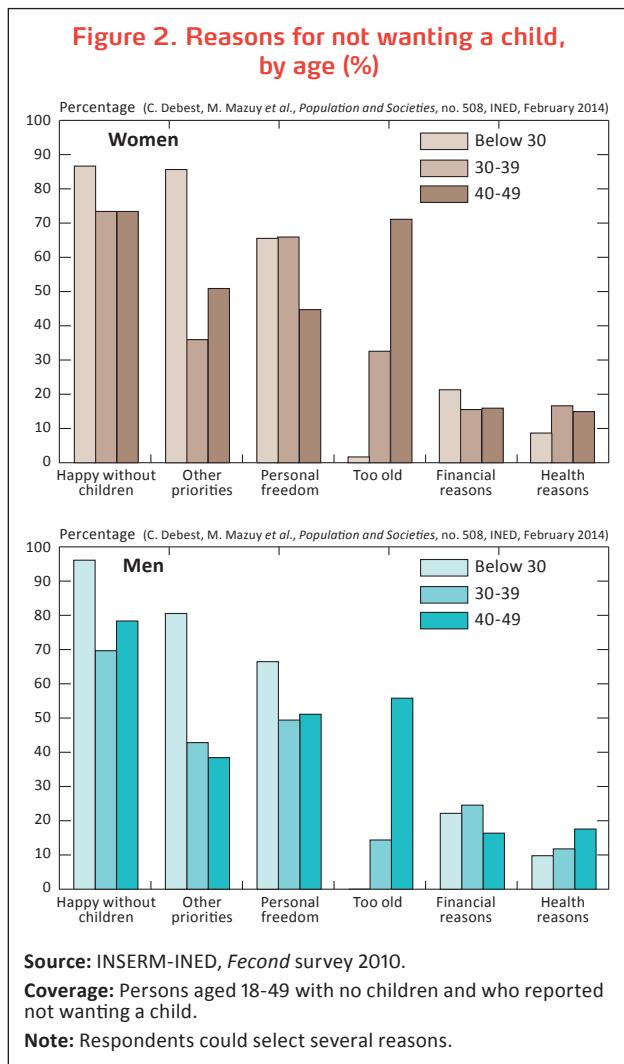
Education and voluntary childlessness: a complex effect

For men and women in a union, the frequency of reported voluntary childlessness varies little by educational level. After age 35, practically all men and women with partners want to be parents (or are so already), whatever their socioeconomic status.

By contrast, among women without a partner, it is the most educated who most often report wanting to remain childless (Table 1). Beyond a lower propensity to form a union, they more frequently live their lives outside the traditional patterns of socialization

(1) <https://erfi.web.ined.fr/>

assigned to women from an early age. Educated childless women more often prefer to focus on their professional career without having to manage the complex problems of reconciling work and family life.



The effect of educational level is reversed for men, with a stronger preference for childlessness at all educational levels. This preference is less marked for the highest educated men, however.

Childlessness is also more frequently preferred by persons who, through their social position, are further from the ideal of the “good parent” as conveyed by today’s society – a moderately educated woman with fewer professional responsibilities, perceived as being more available to her family, and a more educated man seen as a “good” breadwinner.

These findings on preferences are consistent with observed levels of permanent childlessness, which are higher for educated women, but lower for men at the bottom of the social hierarchy. [4]

“Happy” without children

The *Fecond* survey respondents were able to choose, without giving an order of priority, several reasons for deciding to remain childless, ranging from relatively subjective “libertarian” motives, such as the desire for personal freedom, to apparently more objective reasons such as age, union status, financial or material constraints. Health reasons were also given (Figure 2).

The “libertarian” reasons include being happy without children, the desire for freedom, having other priorities. Some 79% of women and 83% of men wishing to remain childless state that they are “happy without children” – the notion of personal fulfilment is a strong underpinning theme. These reasons are given very often, whatever the level of education (Figure 3), but by the highly educated especially. Persons with strong social capital more often adopt a libertarian attitude, as they have more resources to achieve what they desire. These findings tie in with the analyses of the qualitative survey.

Voluntarily childless people highlight the tension between two competing values of contemporary society: personal freedom and the family. Personal freedom, associated with the ideal of individual control over one’s life, goes hand in hand with notions such as personal fulfilment, independence, professional and conjugal mobility, while family values tie in more closely with professional and conjugal stability, availability for others and filial obligation.

The youngest men and women very often evoke the fact of having other priorities (Figure 2). For women, there is a persistent tension between the personal, professional and family spheres and they are often forced to give priority to one over another. For men, it is always important to have a stable job before starting a family. Last, men and women wait for the “right” moment to have a first child, after taking advantage of a child-free period in the couple relationship.

Feeling too old to have children is an argument often advanced by the over-40s, women especially. More than men, women are under “biological” pressure to have children before the end of their reproductive period. The qualitative survey shows that the families of voluntarily childless people often mention the problems of conceiving beyond a certain age to instil in women both the fear of regret and the desire to have a child. The quantitative data reveal the tendency, among men especially, to report voluntary childlessness at the end of reproductive life, as if not having children became more acceptable beyond a certain age. This may tie in with the negative representations of “late parenthood”, [8] and late motherhood in particular.

Material constraints and health problems are rarely cited, even by the youngest respondents who may still not earn a decent income or enjoy financial independence. They are also rarely mentioned by respondents in the qualitative survey.

Half of the voluntarily childless men and women (all ages) are in a union (60% above age 30). For two-thirds of those not in a couple, their conjugal situation is given a reason for not wanting a child.

Among persons in a union, the partner is already a parent in one-third of cases, and this is the reason for remaining childless reported by three-quarters of respondents in this situation. Being a stepparent can be seen as a less committed form of parenthood, involving minimal and adjustable investment in the stepchildren’s education. For women and men alike, the fact of not wanting a child and of forming a union with a partner who is already a parent may be a means to avoid potential disagreement about whether or not to start a family, and to enjoy life as a couple without having to address this question.

Contrary to men, women’s union status has little impact on the reasons given for not wanting to have children. The qualitative survey shows clearly that, via their socialization, women think about future parenthood at an earlier age than men, often when still at primary school, while the question rarely arises for boys before forming a stable couple in adulthood.

Conclusion

Voluntary childlessness remains rare in France and its prevalence is not increasing. The desire to have children is strong at all ages. While being in a stable relationship is an important precondition for considering parenthood, half of the persons who

report not wanting children have a partner. People who choose to remain childless rarely mention material or health problems as reasons for this choice. Being too old, a reason often mentioned by women aged 40 and above, may reflect the relative stigmatization of late parenthood, thus giving a certain legitimacy to the decision to remain childless.

Last, freedom and personal fulfilment are often given as reasons – notably by persons with a strong cultural capital – reflecting the desire of voluntarily childless people to affirm a positive life choice.

References

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Abstract

In France, only a minority of people wish to remain childless, and the proportion reporting this choice has remained stable for the last two decades. In statistical terms, reporting a wish to remain childless is more frequent among persons who are not in a union, among highly educated women and among men with a low educational level or at the end of their reproductive life. Data from the *Fecond survey* (2010) and from a qualitative interview-based survey indicated that more than half of the persons reporting a wish to remain childless are in a union and that the majority give “libertarian” reasons for this choice, such as being “happy without children” and a “desire for freedom”. Running counter to the “family” norm, these people affirm a positive life choice focusing on personal fulfilment.