

The Meaning and Measurement of Unrealized Fertility

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Short Abstract

Almost a third of women in the U.S. report having fewer children than they desire, a demographic phenomenon known as *unrealized fertility*. Unrealized fertility is measured in myriad ways across social and international contexts, resulting in a broad range of interpretations for individual and population health and well-being. In this paper, I review and compare previous approaches to the demographic measurement of unrealized fertility. I then examine the prevalence of this phenomenon by investigating the fertility goals of a nationally representative sample of women ages 40-49 in the United States. I use multiple logistic regression to consider both social and biological determinants of unrealized fertility, including socioeconomic indicators of race/ethnicity, relationship status, educational attainment, and household income as well as reproductive health conditions and previous experiences of pregnancy loss and infertility. After demonstrating the sensitivity of unrealized fertility to survey questions (desires versus intentions to have more children) and a range of social characteristics and past reproductive experiences, I propose a conceptual framework that accounts for biological, social, and psychological factors that contribute to unrealized fertility. Demographic measurement and reporting have important implications for public interpretation and response to individual needs and preferences for family building. Changes in preferences and prioritization of other life goals is qualitatively different than socioeconomic challenges and health conditions that constrain desired childbearing. To better support people's ability to have (or not have) children and form the families they desire, response to these challenges requires improved measurement and conceptualization that accounts for these disparate causes.