

Kids? A Growing Number of Americans Say, 'No, Thanks.'

A new study breaks down the reasons more U.S. adults say they are unlikely to have children.

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Paola Chapdelaine for The New York Times



By Christina Caron

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When Jurnee McKay, 25, imagines having children, a series of scary scenarios pop into her mind: the “horrors” of childbirth, risks associated with pregnancy, a flighty potential partner, exorbitant child care costs.

[Abortion care restrictions](#) are also on her list of fears. So Ms. McKay, a nursing student in Orlando, decided to eliminate the possibility of an accidental pregnancy. But the first doctor she consulted refused to remove her fallopian tubes, she said, insisting that she might change her mind after meeting her “soul mate.”

“For some reason,” she said, “society looks at women who choose not to make life harder for themselves as crazy.”

Next week, she will speak with another doctor about sterilization.

Like Ms. McKay, a growing number of U.S. adults say they are unlikely to raise children, according to [a study released on Thursday](#) by the Pew Research Center. When the survey was conducted in 2023, 47 percent of those younger than 50 without children said they were unlikely ever to have children, an increase of 10 percentage points since 2018.

When asked why kids were not in their future, 57 percent said they simply didn't want to have them. Women were more likely to respond this way than men (64 percent vs. 50 percent). Further reasons included the desire to focus on other things, like their career or interests; concerns about the state of the world; worries about the costs involved in raising a child; concerns about the environment, including climate change; and not having found the right partner.

The results echo [a 2023 Pew study](#) that found that only 26 percent of adults said having children was extremely or very important to live a fulfilling life. The U.S. fertility rate has been falling over the last decade, dipping to about 1.6 births per woman in 2023. This is the lowest number on record, according to [the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). And it is less than what would be required for the population to replace itself from one generation to the next.

The decision to raise kids is shifting from “something that’s just an essential part of human life to one more choice, among others,” said Anastasia Berg, an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of California, Irvine.

She and Rachel Wiseman, a magazine editor, surveyed nearly 400 people for their new book, “What Are Children For?,” and found that many younger people without children were cautiously weighing the pros and cons, worried about how a child would affect their identity and their choices. Many were “averse to embracing the kinds of risks that having children implies,” said Dr. Berg, who is a millennial and a mother of two.

America’s waning desire for children should not come as a surprise, said Jennifer Glass, a professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. [Her research](#), published in 2021, showed that about 70 percent of American mothers would be their household’s primary earner at some point during their first 18 years of motherhood. At the same time, they also [devote more time to caregiving than men](#).

“It’s really an impossible burden,” Dr. Glass said. For some, she added, it can feel as though “there is no way out except a birth strike.”

In addition, research has shown that in the United States, people who aren’t parents are generally happier than those who are. [Dr. Glass’s 2016 study](#), which examined the happiness gap in 22 countries, found that the disparity was larger in the United States than in any other industrialized country.

In the Pew study, most of those surveyed said that not having kids had made it easier for them to afford the things they wanted, make time for their interests and save for the future.

For some, having children is simply not an option: 13 percent of those surveyed by Pew who were under age 50 said they didn't plan to have children because of infertility, and 11 percent said that it was their partner or spouse who did not want kids.

The study also included responses from adults 50 and older without kids. For them, the top reason they hadn't had children was because it just hadn't happened.

"I never actively made a choice to not have children," said Therese Shechter, a 62-year-old filmmaker in Toronto who spoke to child-free women in the United States and Canada about reproductive freedom and the pressure to have children in her recent documentary "[My So-Called Selfish Life](#)."

In her case, she had a list of things she wanted to accomplish, but being a mother wasn't on it. Even so, she assumed that one day it would happen.

"I just always felt like that was the thing hanging over my head," she said. By the time she entered her late 30s, "I realized that, no, I actually didn't have to do that."

Trey Simmons, 54, said being child-free in his hometown, Augusta, Ga., made him a rarity.

"Most people think I'm off my rocker," he said. After he and his wife divorced — she also did not want children — he had difficulty finding someone else to date who did not already have kids. Finally, he met someone online who lives in Detroit, and he plans to move there.

"I've just never been fond of children at all," he added.

On average, research has shown that men appear to have fewer qualms about parenthood. Earlier this year, another [Pew study](#) found that among young adults without children, it was the men — not the women — who were more likely to want to be parents someday.

Corinne Datchi, a professor of psychology at William Paterson University and a couples therapist, said that in her private practice, she was seeing a growing number of women in their 30s who were starting to question whether they should ever have children, while their male partners seemed more open to the idea.

There is a “level of mistrust,” she said, where the women are skeptical that their male partners would be willing to sacrifice as much as they would to help raise their families. But there is also apprehension about losing their sense of self and worries about what pregnancy and childbirth would do to their bodies.

As for Ms. McKay, who has already made up her mind to remove her fallopian tubes, she said she would feel relieved when she no longer had to think about the implications of becoming pregnant or raising children.

Getting the procedure “will be a weight off my shoulders,” she said. “I think I’ll feel at peace.”

Christina Caron is a Times reporter covering mental health.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/25/well/mind/child-free-adults-pew-study.html>

This will stir things up; 723 comments already. The ignorance of JD Vance...

I do not see how not having children suggests something is likely wrong with you; nor, how wanting children means something must be right about you.

Personally, I have never felt the need to bring more children into the world, to have some of “my own.” Raising *me* has always seemed like a daunting task. If I had married younger, and my wife had wanted children, I would have gladly complied: that child would have become the next “most lovely creature” for me. When I reached forty, I concluded it would be irresponsible of me to risk fathering a child. When I did thereafter marry, my wife already had two near-grown children; they remained enamored of their father, so I “got no joy” from them. Of our parting, I have quipped “we got divorced to make the kids happy.”

Yet when it comes to loving children, I think I have done more than most. All the years I spent as a “crisis intervention specialist” working with depressed and suicide-risk youth—I never lost a kid, though one soon realizes taking credit in these arenas is for fools—I felt like I had a multitude of children of my own, in that my wards tended to, at least temporarily, become closer to me than to their own parents (if they had such in their life at all). When itinerant, I liked to be by the doors in the morning at Elementary schools—the kids were a delight—though there tended to be much less point to this in high schools! TJB