

Child-free women feel intense pressure to have kids—but rarely stress over it

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Women who choose to be permanently childfree perceive more social pressures to become mothers than other women, but feel less distress about not having kids than women who are childless from infertility or other reasons, a new national study shows.

The study, from a [national survey](#) of nearly 1,200 American [women](#) of reproductive age with no children, identified various reasons why women have no children, from medical and situational barriers to delaying [pregnancy](#) to choosing to be childfree. It sought to determine if those reasons contributed to different types of concerns about being childless.

"[Motherhood](#) is so highly connected with adult femininity in the United States that many women feel that they need to be mothers," said Julia McQuillan, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln [sociologist](#) and the study's lead author. "Yet we also found that there are women who have low or no distress about not being mothers, even if their friends and family want them to have children."

In recent years more U.S. women – estimates suggest about 20 percent – are ending childbearing years without having children. Some can't conceive because of biomedical [infertility](#); others simply delay because of financial concerns, educational demands, job demands, not finding the right partner or other situational barriers. Though all the women were in the same [social situation](#) – not being mothers – researchers questioned if the specific reason for not having children shaped how they

experienced their situation.

The study found that the reason for having children did matter for distress related to not having children, but only because reasons were associated with how important motherhood is to women's identities. Women who were involuntarily childless because of biomedical reasons put the highest importance on motherhood, and had the highest distress.

Researchers were surprised that pressure from others was not a bigger factor in explaining differences in distress, since many American women face social pressures to have children. But the study showed that influence from others to have children was associated with distress only if the women considered motherhood important. That key factor overrode many others – social pressures, income, age, race and education level – as the most important attribute in judging childlessness concerns.

The results of the study, the first to closely examine the different reasons behind childlessness and their social effects on women, raise questions about what room there is in American culture for women to have successful, fulfilling lives without being mothers, McQuillan said.

"This highlights that not all women without children are the same. While some may be devastated, others are content and finding fulfillment through other avenues such as leisure or career pursuits," she said.

"Rather than assume that women without children are missing something, society should benefit from valuing a variety of paths for adult women to have satisfying lives."

Also in the study:

- The proportion of Hispanic and African-American women was lowest among those who were voluntarily childfree, but was

highest among women with biomedical fertility barriers. That pattern was the opposite for white women.

- The average age of voluntarily childfree women was about four years older than the average age among childless women with biomedical barriers, and about six years older than childless women with or without situational barriers.
- Family income was highest among voluntarily childfree women and lowest among women with medical barriers.
- Women who considered themselves more religious actually perceived fewer average social messages stressing the importance of having children, compared with less religious women.

"Listening to a broad spectrum of American women about the degree of importance of motherhood in their lives and the meanings of not having [children](#) is reshaping how we think about opportunities for meaningful adult [femininity](#)," McQuillan said. "Just as reproductive options have increased, both for limiting fertility and overcoming fertility barriers, we are learning what is devastating for some women is a relief for other women."

More information: The study was published this month in *The Journal of Marriage and Family*.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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