

Study: One in five adults don't want children—and they're deciding early in life

July 26 2022



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The U.S. Supreme Court's overturning of Roe v. Wade paved the way for limits on abortion but also created uncertainty around the future of birth control. This could have far-reaching implications for many people

as a research team from Michigan State University found over one in five Michigan adults do not want children.

"We found that 21.6% of adults, or about 1.7 million people, in Michigan do not want children and therefore are 'childfree.' That's more than the population of Michigan's nine [largest cities](#)," said Zachary Neal, associate professor in MSU's psychology department and co-author of the study.

The study—published in *Scientific Reports*—used a set of three questions to identify childfree individuals separately from parents and other types of nonparents. The researchers used data from a representative sample of 1,500 adults who completed MSU's State of the State Survey, conducted by the university's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research. Because different types of nonparents are impossible to distinguish in official statistics, Neal explained that this study is one of the first to specifically count childfree adults.

"People—especially women—who say they don't want children are often told they'll change their mind, but the study found otherwise," said Jennifer Watling Neal, associate professor in the psychology department at MSU and co-author of the study. "People are making the decision to be childfree early in life, most often in their teens and twenties. And, it's not just [young people](#) claiming they don't want children. Women who decided in their teens to be childfree are now, on average, nearly 40 and still do not have children."

The study was conducted in Michigan, but according to the 2021 census, Michigan is demographically similar to the United States as a whole. Because of this, Neal said, if the pattern holds up nationally, it would mean 50 to 60 million Americans are childfree.

"Following the U.S. Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, a

large number of Americans are now at risk of being forced to have children despite not wanting them," said Watling Neal. If further precedents are overturned and [birth control](#) becomes harder to access, many [young women](#) who have decided to be childfree may also have difficulty avoiding pregnancy.

Because so many people are childfree, the researchers said this group warrants more attention. They hope future work will expand beyond Michigan and will help the public understand both why people decide to be childfree and the consequences they experience from that decision.

More information: Zachary P. Neal et al, Prevalence, age of decision, and interpersonal warmth judgements of childfree adults, *Scientific Reports* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-022-15728-z](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-15728-z)

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: Study: One in five adults don't want children—and they're deciding early in life (2022, July 26) retrieved 17 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-07-adults-dont-childrenand-theyre-early.html>

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