

October 25, 2018

How Many Children Do U.S. Women REALLY Want?

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The author and the one child she chose to have, 30 years ago. Concern about overpopulation was a factor in her choice.

“How many children do you want?” is a question that simply has not been asked of women in the United States. And even similar questions are not likely to yield an accurate answer. Consider the following scenario: it’s evening, dinner’s brewing, and Gallup Poll or General Social Survey, the two most respected, least biased U.S. polling organizations, call, asking, “What do you think is the ideal number of children for a U.S. family to have?” How often does a U.S. woman even consider this question – and, given probably less than a minute to answer, how likely is she to produce a thoughtful answer? Yet this is the closest question these two organizations have posed to U.S. women that might possibly indicate their personal preferences on the number of children they themselves desire.

This serious dearth of current data on U.S. women’s personal desires for family size has become fertile ground for some to infer answers through misleading rationalization. For example, in a non-refereed analytical [blog](#) on a [right-wing funded](#) website, a cited European [study](#) of 2011 data on the desired number of children within a family indicates polled national ideals closely

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correlate with personal preferences. Can we assume the same for U.S. women? Ultimately, the blog author does, equating ideal with desired fertility, and notes that intended fertility drops well below desired fertility after 2013. He concludes that women are now settling for roughly 0.3 fewer children than they desire.

This tenuous string of assumptions about U.S. women's desires has started permeating more mainstream media such as the New York Times, where this same author [asserts](#) a gap between U.S. women's desired and actual fertility, without citing any refereed, factual study. More recently, another New York Times author, discussing how economics affects the fertility choices of U.S. middle class women, also [claims](#) an uncited gap.

If there is a gap between desires/ideals and reality, intentions track the compromise between them. Now, the question becomes: "How many children do you intend to have, considering the real-world conditions that affect you and the child you might create?" Numerous studies worldwide indicate that women's intentions are being thwarted significantly: roughly half the pregnancies in the world, including U.S. pregnancies, are unintended. Such levels can be directly [correlated](#) with lack of easily accessible and affordable, highly effective contraceptives.

In the meantime, can U.S. women agree on any answer to the question of how many children women want? Assuming that most women want the best future for the children they have -- or even the first child they might want -- one can ask how many children in a family will fulfill that wish.

Here, a wider picture emerges of the various factors shaping that future. On a global scale, humanity has already exploded to unsustainable levels, with consequences that are degrading the future of all our children, both present and future, as illustrated for example in the world scientists' [second warning to humanity](#). Those unsustainable levels, combined with increasing human consumption, are seriously [degrading](#) the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land we farm, the food we raise, the climate we need to survive, and the systems we need to maintain those vital resources. Our planet is an emerging picture of large scale pollution and destruction of our vital resources. The crash of humanity is ever more inevitable as the crush of humanity escalates. That's the current future for our children.

Where are the humane solutions to their future? They lie not in technology, but in ourselves. A transition to clean energy can help, IF it is done fast enough. Conserving and recycling and consuming less can also help. A thousand more small actions and innovations can add up.

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But current social trends show that we are not changing nearly enough to make a dent in the large-scale changes currently underway. Consumption is not declining; the increasing concentration of wealth among the few is ensuring the proliferation of poverty and rate of wasteful consumption associated with it. Marketing to encourage increased consumption continues to rise with our numbers. The sharing of resources with those facing increasing catastrophes, whether due to loss of homes, food, or water, is also [declining](#). These are uncomfortable, inhumane facts.

Given that few of us are likely to support increasing numbers of economic refugees – the desperate children, women and men in need -- resulting from increasing global degradation and social imbalance, the only humane solution is to embrace a contraction of our numbers in all countries to humanely sustainable levels, beginning with how we view the size of our own families here in the U.S., where the consumptive footprint of one child can equal that of six or more in developing countries.

How many children women may want emotionally is a deliberation rarely connected to how safe a future those children will have, based on such choices throughout our society. How do your choices reflect on your children's future? If you and your partner decide to produce two or more children, you are voting, viscerally if not consciously, for the current unsustainable levels of humanity, and the crash that will ensue. And yet, when choice is easily accessible, many choose to have 2 or more children, because the choice is usually based on emotional imagination, rather than reasoning or even rational hopes.

The good news is that some women are recognizing that connection, and basing their choices on it, but far more action is needed on at least two levels. Education is needed for this connection to be recognized and become a deep, heart-felt one that influences far more families and society in general. It is a message that needs to permeate our culture deeply, broadcast from highway billboards to printed and video formats on the array of offline and online venues. Secondly, far greater and easier access is needed, both economic and physical, to family planning information and materials that allow women to make intentional choices. Our children's future depends on both approaches.

How many children do U.S. women really want? We simply do not know. The U.S. needs far more data, and far less vague speculation before any accurate picture emerges on the subject.

But we do know that our children's future depends on U.S. women thinking just as profoundly with their minds as with their hearts when deliberating the answer.

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