

## Fertility Intentions: If, When and How Many?

At some point in their lives, nearly all Canadians will contemplate having children. Indeed, the “if and when and how many” of childbearing have emerged as three of the most consequential questions of our time.

As this Table shows, nearly nine in ten women between the ages of 20 and 24 have not given birth (see table). Just 30 years ago, this was a common age for childbirth. But today’s 20-24 year old women (and men) are more likely to be pursuing further education, jobs, or other career goals and personal interests. In general, the majority of women under 30 have not had a child, and the majority of those 30 and over have.

While women may be waiting longer to have children – the average age of mothers at first birth increased from 23 in 1976 to 28 in 2004 – most still *intend* to have at least one. Among women between the ages of 20 and 24, 86% said they intended to have at least one child, 7% “didn’t know”, and only 7% said they did not intend to have children.

| Fertility Intentions, Females aged 20-39, 2006, Canada                                  |                      |       |       |       |                  |
|---|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|------------------|
|   | Females by Age group |       |       |       | Total aged 20-39 |
|   | 20-24                | 25-29 | 30-34 | 35-39 |                  |
| Number (millions)   | 1.1                  | 1.1   | 1.1   | 1.2   | 4.5              |
| How many children have you given birth to?  |                      |       |       |       |                  |
| None  | 88%                  | 61%   | 31%   | 20%   | 50%              |
| One   | 9%                   | 20%   | 24%   | 22%   | 19%              |
| Two   | 2%                   | 13%   | 31%   | 38%   | 21%              |
| Three or more   | 1%                   | 6%    | 14%   | 20%   | 10%              |
| Do you intend to have a / another child?  |                      |       |       |       |                  |
| Yes   | 87%                  | 75%   | 42%   | 19%   | 55%              |
| Don't Know  | 3%                   | 7%    | 13%   | 7%    | 7%               |
| No  | 10%                  | 19%   | 45%   | 74%   | 38%              |
| What is the total number of children you intend to have (including those you have now)? |                      |       |       |       |                  |
| None  | 7%                   | 5%    | 5%    | 9%    | 7%               |
| One   | 7%                   | 7%    | 9%    | 15%   | 10%              |
| Two   | 45%                  | 46%   | 45%   | 45%   | 45%              |
| Three   | 23%                  | 23%   | 15%   | 17%   | 19%              |
| Four or more  | 11%                  | 7%    | 9%    | 5%    | 8%               |
| Don't know  | 7%                   | 12%   | 17%   | 9%    | 11%              |
| Average number intended   | 2.3                  | 2.3   | 2.2   | 1.9   | 2.2              |

Source: Prepared by the Vanier Institute of the Family using Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, Cycle 20, microdata file.

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There is a significant gap between the number of children Canadians say they want to have compared to the number they actually have. On average, the number of children women intend to have is 2.2 (among men, this figure is remarkably similar, at 2.1). Both of these averages are considerably higher than Canada’s current fertility rate of 1.6 children per woman. The gap between ‘intentions’ and outcomes raises an important question. Are intentions simply inaccurate predictors of behaviour, or are there other forces at work? For example, after health considerations, household finances and work family balance are among the most important factors in deciding “if, when and how many”.