



Increasingly, men and women are deciding against starting families. The resulting ageing of the population has major implications for social policy. What reasons are people giving for not having children? Have the reasons changed since the early 1980s, and do they differ according to age? These issues are explored drawing on data from two Institute surveys conducted 15 years apart.

Men's and women's reasons for not

Like other developed countries, the population in Australia is ageing. An ageing population carries with it a number of economic and social challenges. For example, tax payers will be faced with increasing difficulties of supporting a burgeoning retired population unless retirement is delayed, the demands on the health and aged care systems will increase, different types of housing will be required, and industries geared towards young families will decline.

Australia's population is ageing not only because people are living longer, but also because couples are having fewer children and many people are now remaining childless. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2000a), the total fertility rate has now reached an all-time low (1.75 births per woman through her lifetime), and is below replacement level (2.1 births).

In particular, the proportion of women aged 40–44 years having at least four children has decreased (from 26 per cent for those born in the late 1930s to 13 per cent for those born in the early to mid 1950s), while the proportion having no children has increased (from 8 per cent to 12 per cent). Indeed, Merlo and Rowland (2000) maintained that one in five women who are currently in their early child bearing years will not have children.

Although the modern rate of childless women seems high, it is not unique in our history. In fact, 31 per cent of

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all women born between 1900 and 1904 were childless by the time they were 45 years old. In that era, the rate of childlessness was less conspicuous than it is today because it was offset by a high rate of large families (Rowland 1998).

Given trends in fertility, life expectancy, and net overseas migration, the Australian Bureau of Statistics recently predicted that the proportion of the total population aged 65 or more years will increase from 12 per cent to around 25 per cent in 50 years time, while the proportion aged under 15 years will decrease from 21 per cent to around 15 per cent over this period (ABS 2000b).

While there have been calls to increase immigration in order to prevent further ageing of the population, there is also concern about the social and environmental impact of very high rates of immigration (MacKenzie 1999). Furthermore, it appears that the capacity for immigration to affect the age structure is quite limited (Kippen 1999). Kippen has thus argued that attention should be directed to stemming the decline in fertility. If this is to be achieved we need to know more about the causes of fertility decline.

The search for reasons underlying the fall in fertility has mostly focused on circumstances of those with few if any



having children

children and the increasing prevalence of such circumstances in the community. These include the increasing education and labour force participation of women, decreasing attachment to a religion, the rise in the average age at first marriage and at first birth, the fall in the age at last birth, and the widening interval between births.

Other social forces that compete with raising children include changing values and increasing diversity of leisure pursuits, along with the earlier introduction of effective contraception, easier access to abortion, and the constraints on combining work with family life experienced by women (ABS 1999; Coleman 1998; Hugo and Wood 1983; Jain and McDonald 1998, 2000). This “macro” approach often includes examination of international differences in fertility rates and variations between countries in other social trends, norms or policies that may explain differences in fertility rates – including those directed towards workers with family responsibilities.

However, there is insufficient information about ways in which these broad social forces are translated into the decisions individuals make about having children – the “micro-level” dynamics of their everyday choices. This article thus looks at people’s own reasons for not having children.

Given that the social context in which decisions are made evolves with time, are people’s reasons for childlessness changing over time? Do the reasons behind

childlessness differ for those who have reached the most common age for having children (25–34 years), and for younger and older groups?

Two surveys

Data from two surveys conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies were used to explore these issues. Both were based on national representative samples. The Australian Family Formation Study, conducted 20 years ago in 1981, consisted of 2500 respondents aged 18–34 years. The Australian Life Course Study, conducted in 1996, consisted of around 2000 respondents aged 25–50 years.

Survey context

Several social trends leading up to the two survey periods are worth noting, for these trends may have influenced decision-making about having children. In his review of the 1980s, McDonald (1990) maintained that the new social freedoms that emerged in the 15 years preceding 1980 provided much scope for self-interested individualism and led to the perhaps exaggerated portrayal of those entering adulthood at this time as the “Me Generation”. Under these circumstances, we might expect that the freedoms linked with a childless life would loom large in decisions about having children at the time of the first survey.

However, Coleman (1998) maintained that concerns about freedom and self-interest have become increasingly widespread in recent years, helping to explain the continuing rise in cohabitation and ex-nuptial births, among other trends. If such motivations are important factors shaping childlessness, we might expect that they are even more commonly expressed in the 1996 survey than in the 1981 survey.

The first survey was also conducted during a period when unemployment was rising while the second survey occurred when unemployment was falling. Nevertheless, the unemployment rate was lower at the time of the first survey than the second (5.2 per cent compared with 8.0 per cent in June 1981 and 1996 respectively). By February 1983, the unemployment rate had reached its highest level since the Depression of the 1930s (10.7 per cent), and after falling until 1989, it then increased to an even higher level in late 1992, reaching a peak of 12.2 per cent in February 1993 (ABS 1986, 1996).

According to McDonald (2000), uncertainties about the future may lead some people to “err on the side of caution” when making decisions about having children. Thus trends in sense of job insecurity are particularly relevant. On the basis of Morgan Polls, Wooden (1999) showed that perceptions of job insecurity were quite similar around the time of the two survey periods. Consistent with these trends, McDonald (1990) argued that the beginning of the 1980s began with a tempering of the burst of individual freedom emerging in the previous 15 years.

Furthermore, compared with the 1990s, women in the early 1980s experienced greater social pressures to give up paid work when they had a child – as those only 20 years older had done (Birrell 2000) – and the difficulties of combining work with family life were even more marked in the early 1980s than in the mid-1990s. McDonald (2000) maintained that, in countries where educational and work opportunities for women are similar to those for men, but are seriously diminished for women if they have a child, then women will have fewer children than otherwise.

Between the two survey periods, several policies were developed to help workers to fulfil their family responsibilities. It was only a couple of years prior to the 1981 survey that maternity leave was established for a majority of women. In 1990, Australia ratified the International Labour Organization Convention 156, and thereby became obliged to develop national policies to remove discrimination in the workplace against workers with family responsibilities. However, it was not until 1994 that fathers were given the same leave as mothers (52 weeks unpaid parental leave for those employed continuously for 12 months).

Not surprisingly, increasing numbers of women with pre-school age children remained in paid work (from 29 per cent to 46 per cent of married mothers during this period), and the decade prior to the second survey saw a marked reduction in the lifetime earnings that women would forego by starting a family (Chapman et al. 1999). Nevertheless, fertility rates fell between the time of the two surveys (from 1.94 in 1981 to 1.80 in 1996).

Survey details

These days, most men and women have their first child when they are in their late 20s or early 30s, and both of the Institute's surveys included men and women in this age group. The earlier survey also included younger respondents, while the more recent survey included older respondents. This analysis thus focuses on four groups: those aged 18–24 years and 25–34 years who participated in the 1981 survey, and those aged 25–34 years and 35–44 years who participated in the 1996 survey.

Participants in each survey were asked whether or not they intended to have children and, if not, what the reasons were for their decision.

Only 3–7 per cent of men and women in the two surveys said that they did not intend having children. A higher proportion of women than men in each survey had children (58 per cent compared with 34 per cent in the 1981 survey; 83 per cent compared with 68 per cent in the 1996 survey).

Table 1 provides a brief socio-demographic profile of the men and women who did not intend having children and those who already had or intended having children.

Not surprisingly, the majority of respondents who had children were living with partners, and mothers were less likely to be in paid work compared with women without children. Consistent with ABS (1999) data, women who had children were more likely to lack post-school qualifi-

cations than women without children. Apart from the men in the 1996 survey, respondents who did not intend having children were significantly more likely than those who had or wanted children to report that they had no religious affiliation – a trend also apparent in ABS data.

While Table 1 suggests several differences in the circumstances of participants in the two surveys, such differences may have been a function of either the different age ranges of respondents in each survey, or the period in which each survey was conducted. As explained above, each survey included a sub-sample of respondents aged 25–34 years (around 23 women and 19 men). The two groups of women in this age range who intended to remain childless differed markedly in terms of educational status and attachment to religion: the 1996 survey participants were 3.5 times as likely as participants in the earlier survey to have tertiary qualifications (48 per cent compared with 14 per cent), and were more than twice as likely to have no religious affiliation (70 per cent compared with 32 per cent). Given the small numbers of relevant men, trends were not assessed for men.

Explanations for remaining childless

A variety of reasons for remaining childless were provided. These covered practical considerations, dislike of children, “lifestyle choices”, and the belief that the world is not good for children (Table 2). Such explanations obviously varied in terms of level of specificity, with perhaps the most general reason offered – a preference for a life without children – incorporating any of the other reasons listed in Table 1. Thus, the different categories of reasons listed in Table 2 are somewhat arbitrary and by no means mutually exclusive.

Given that patterns of results were mostly similar for men and women, these two groups are combined in this analysis, with the few sex differences that emerged being noted in the discussion.

Practical reasons

Three practical reasons were offered for not wanting children – age, lack of a partner or secure relationship, and the fact that their partner already had children.

“Too bloody old.” (42-year-old male, 1996 survey)

“I have not found the right person.” (28-year-old female, 1996 survey)

Table 1 Characteristics of respondents in the 1981 and 1996 surveys

	1981						1996					
	Men			Women			Men			Women		
	Had children (%)	Want children (%)	Not want children (%)	Had children (%)	Want children (%)	Not want children (%)	Had children (%)	Want children (%)	Not want children (%)	Had children (%)	Want children (%)	Not want children (%)
No post school qualification	48	55	43	67	59	55	49	45	41	65	46	46
Degree or higher education	9	11	23	7	9	9	24	30	19	17	35	37
Living with a partner	93	25	43	84	28	27	87	53	55	88	67	59
No religious affiliation	16	19	49	10	11	45	30	32	36	26	22	54
In paid work	92	80	84	28	75	69	91	89	97	65	87	85
Number of respondents	364	675	35	813	526	56	405	146	42	705	97	46

Note: Excludes homosexual respondents and those unable to have children
 'Want' refers to intentions rather than desires

Source: Australian Family Formation Project 1981 and Australian Life Course Study 1996

“My wife already had two children when we married. If not, we might not have had any children anyway.” (34-year-old male, 1981 survey)

Not surprisingly, concerns about being too old to have children increased with the age of the respondents. Age was mentioned by 25 per cent of all respondents in the oldest group (35–44 years), all of whom participated in the most recent survey, by only 8–10 per cent of those aged 25–34 years, and by no respondents who were under 25 years. Given the relevance of women’s age for child bearing, feeling too old to have children was mentioned by more women than men, but this issue was important to some men (32 per cent of women compared with 18 per cent of men in the oldest group).

More than half of those in the 1996 survey who cited age as a reason for not wanting children were not in a relationship at the time of the survey – indeed, advancing age and lack of partner were often mentioned together.

“I’m not married and I’m getting older. It’s just bad luck.” (32-year-old female, 1996 survey)

Some respondents explained that they had postponed notions of having children in order to focus on career or other interests, until they felt that age or changed circumstances intervened.

“I’m 44 and it’s a bit late now. When we were younger we were very tied up in our careers and were moving around the world.” (44-year-old female, 1996 survey)

Active dislike of children

Close to one in five respondents in each of the groups represented in Table 2 indicated that their plans to remain childless were at least partly based on the fact they did not like children. That is, an active dislike of children did not appear to vary according to the age of the respondents or the survey period. With the exception of the 25–34-year-old group interviewed in 1981, women were more likely than men to express a dislike of children (27 per cent compared with 7 per cent of those in the younger 1981 survey group; 26 per cent compared with 13 per cent of those in the younger 1996 survey group; and 23 per cent compared with 14 per cent of those in the older 1996 survey group).

Respondents expressed their dislike of children in various ways.

“I don’t like kids. They are not well-mannered these days. How the parents bring them up – they are dreadful.” (32-year-old male, 1981 survey)

“I don’t like them. They scream, shit and want food.” (19-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“I hate children. No way!” (21-year-old male, 1981 survey)

These respondents appeared to be very confident in their decision that children provided no benefits for them: the behaviour of children represented an intolerable cost overshadowing any possible benefits.

Lifestyle choice

Many respondents indicated that they lacked any interest in being a parent or in having children, often explaining this outlook by focusing on the loss of freedom that would result or on concerns about the responsibilities involved in raising children and personal incompetence in fulfilling

such responsibilities. Financial and career costs of having children were also mentioned. Although it could be argued that virtually all reasons offered for opting for childlessness reflect a lifestyle choice, the concerns listed in this section seem to be particularly pertinent to this issue.

Lack of interest

The preference for a life without children was often expressed in terms of a general lack of interest in being a parent or in having children. Given the breadth of such sentiments, it is not surprising that they were the most commonly reported of all reasons for remaining childless.

Those who elaborated on their lack of interest in parenting or preference for a life without children often expressed concern about the loss of freedom incurred by having children.

“I have to put up with 27 each day at school. I could happily live a fulfilling life without them. I prefer a lifestyle without them.” (23-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“I love kids but they are too much responsibility. I have too much in life I want to do.” (19-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“I have no maternal urges and I am just too busy with other things.” (32-year-old female, 1996 survey)

“I have a cat. I don’t feel like it. I’m too selfish.” (35-year-old female, 1996 survey)

“I don’t want children. Everything is perfect as it is.” (35-year-old male, 1996 survey)

Similar statements were commonly made in small-scale studies conducted by MacKay (1994) and Moore and Moore (2000). MacKay (1994) concluded that dual income earners who wish to remain childless are determined to preserve a lifestyle that is characterised by financial prosperity, freedom and a sense of control.

Table 2 Explanations provided by childless respondents for not wanting children, by age and year of survey

	1981		1996	
	18-24 years %	25-34 years %	25-34 years %	35-44 years %
Practical reasons				
too old	0	10	8	25
no partner/not right partner	0	2	8	16
partner has children	0	5	3	5
Dislike children	20	24	21	18
Lifestyle choice				
not interested/prefer life without children	67	71	49	46
financial	0	7	10	7
career	0	2	10	7
World not good for children	20	7	3	2
Number of respondents	49	42	39	44

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 because respondents often provided more than one answer
Excludes homosexual respondents and those unable to have children
‘Want’ refers to intentions rather than desires
Source: Australian Family Formation Project 1981 and Australian Life Course Study 1996

A lack of interest in children and associated concerns about preserving personal freedom were mentioned by a significantly higher proportion of respondents in the 1981 survey than in the 1996 survey (67–71 per cent compared with 46–49 per cent). It seems unlikely that the different modes of interviewing employed for the two surveys (face-to-face in 1981; telephone interviewing in 1996) could explain this difference. Respondents in the 1981 survey may have been more inclined at the time to hold or at least to acknowledge goals that reflected self-interest. Possibly the more widespread concerns about the impact of children on their freedom amongst the 1981 sample stemmed partly from the fact that it was more difficult for women to combine work and family life in 1981 than in 1996.

McDonald (2000) maintained that lack of confidence in parental responsibilities may deter people from having children. Such lack of confidence was apparent in some of the comments of respondents who were not interested in parenting, although other respondents seemed fairly certain that they would not be suitable parents.

“I wouldn’t be a very good mother anyway.” (22-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“I am not maternal and I am not patient.” (27-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“I don’t think I would be a very good mother. I’d be looking for someone to mind them.” (21-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“I do not think I would handle the responsibility too well.” (40-year-old female, 1996 survey)

Although numbers are small, most of those who referred specifically to parental responsibilities were women, although men sometimes referred to children being a “hassle” or “burden”.

Financial and work-related costs

While a general preference for a child-free lifestyle may often reflect concerns about financial or career-related costs of children, some respondents specifically focused on these negatives, although neither of these issues was commonly mentioned.

“I am more career-minded than children-minded.” (26-year-old female 1996 survey)

“For reasons of economics we can’t afford to have children.” (25-year-old male, 1996 survey)

“I would prefer not to have kids unless I was comfortable financially.” (29-year-old male, 1996 survey)

A hostile world for children

Some respondents expressed concerns about raising children in today’s world. This issue was more commonly mentioned by the youngest group (18–24 years old) than by older groups (20 per cent compared with 2–7 per cent), although with such small numbers the difference was not statistically significant. The pattern of results is consistent with the argument that young adults are more prone than other age groups to pessimism, disillusionment and disengagement (Eckersley 1997). If this is the case, these decisions are particularly likely to be unstable.

“Who’d want to bring kids into this kind of world? It’s neck-to-neck for jobs. Marriages aren’t permanent. Life today is just rubbish.” (19-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“I don’t think much of the world at the moment. It’s not a good place to bring up kids.” (18-year-old male, 1981 survey)

“It’s not a fit world to bring children into these days.” (27-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“I like children – but not for me. I do not want to bring up children in today’s world. The world is so career-oriented.” (29-year-old male, 1996 survey)

Ironically, some of these respondents seemed to have decided against having children because of the widespread emphasis on individualism and pursuit of narcissistic goals – goals that other respondents had adopted and articulated as reasons for remaining childless.

Combinations of reasons

The different reasons listed above have been artificially separated, because decisions about having children tended to be based on a complex array of considerations. These included issues specifically relevant to more than one theoretical perspective.

“I don’t particularly wish to be a parent. Apart from what they cost, I haven’t really met anyone who would make me feel I wanted to be a parent.” (22-year-old male, 1981 survey)

“The whole economy, the violence around . . . I just don’t want to bring them into this world. I would love to have a child but I don’t think it is fair to the child. I would like to travel more.” (26-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“We are both selfish – we’d rather get ahead ourselves. We’ve already discussed together that we would not have children. My husband feels that he wouldn’t make a good father. Well, he has never liked kids.” (24-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“I have a lot to do. I would have to find more money and I would worry about their future and my future.” (29-year-old female, 1981 survey)

“I’m not in a relationship where I would marry. I have a mortgage and could not give up work, and I’m too selfish.” (39-year-old female, 1996 survey)

“Financial reasons, being with someone who doesn’t like children, and too much worry to deal with.” (34-year-old female, 1996 survey)

“Nothing is permanent but change”

No matter how adamant some people may feel about remaining childless, decisions may be reversed as a result of changing priorities. That is, the decision to remain childless is not necessarily fixed until time runs out for the female partner. Even a vasectomy can be reversed, and the need for the development of such a procedure highlights the fact that those of child bearing age who are convinced that they will never want children may change their minds.

Fifty-eight per cent of the participants in the 1981 survey were followed up ten years later. Qu et al. (2001) found that, when followed up, nearly half of those who planned to remain childless in 1981 either had children or intended to have children. Those who were single in 1981 and had found a partner by the time of the second survey were particularly likely to have changed their minds (33 per cent had children and 22 per cent wanted children). Of respondents who opted for childlessness as a lifestyle choice, 19

per cent had children and another 19 per cent reported that they wanted children when followed up ten years later.

Conclusions

Five key findings emerge from these results. First, a general lack of any interest in parenting or raising children formed the most commonly mentioned reason for remaining childless. Many respondents simply found their lifestyle of freedom and autonomy too enjoyable to lose by having a child. The desire to pursue a lifetime of freedom and autonomy was more commonly expressed by respondents in the 1981 survey than by those in the 1996 survey. This trend is consistent with the "Me Generation" stereotype attached to those who entered adulthood in the years preceding the 1981 survey. The greater emphasis in the 1981 survey on freedom and autonomy issues may also stem from the workplace conditions of that time which were less supportive of workers with family responsibilities.

However, the fact that concerns about freedom were more evident in the earlier survey is inconsistent with the argument that the progressive fall in fertility rates in recent times reflects a growing desire for autonomy and the pursuit of narcissistic goals. Possibly, respondents in the later survey may have been more cautious in admitting to these motivations.

Second, some respondents expressed concerns about their ability to cope with the responsibilities of parenting or simply felt that they would not be suitable parents. It seems reasonable to suggest that confidence in handling parental responsibilities would increase with increased opportunities to share these responsibilities with others. As Soriano and colleagues show elsewhere in this edition of *Family Matters*, access to family and community support in parenting is very much valued by parents.

Third, concerns about the financial risks of having children were not commonly expressed, although for some respondents, such concerns may have been behind a general desire to preserve the freedom allowed by their current financial circumstances. MacKay (1994) argued that couples who postpone having children (rather than those who intend remaining childless) are the most likely to be worried about taking risks: they want to ensure their financial security before they start a family. Of course, this delaying strategy often leads to permanent childlessness, as reflected in the responses of some of the older respondents.

Fourth, despite concerns expressed in the literature about the negative impact on fertility of difficulties women face in combining a career with raising children, such issues did not emerge as a major theme in the comments of survey participants. Once again, career concerns may well underlie other explanations provided by respondents, such as lack of interest in being a parent. This difficulty highlights the need for a greater understanding of the considerations behind reasons people give for preferring to remain childless.

Finally, practical explanations for childlessness covered age, lack of a partner, or the fact that their partner already had children. Any rise in relationship instability is likely to result in an increase in the numbers of people who remain childless because they lack a partner or because their new partner already has children. The follow-up survey of 1981 respondents underscores the fact that decisions are not necessarily fixed. Further, Qu et al. (2001) showed that changes in relationship status often result in changes in decisions about having children. If effective, access to prevention and early intervention programs, along with

strategies that encourage the use of these programs, may not only strengthen relationships but also enable couples in these relationships to have children.

Considerable attention has focused on societal forces that may explain differences between countries in fertility rates. However, people faced with decisions about whether or not to start a family may be quite oblivious to societal or "macro" forces. It is the personal circumstances and goals, regardless of the broader factors that may underpin them, that will be the immediate forces that drive their choices.

While the search for macro-level factors that contribute to low fertility is clearly important, unless the micro-level decision-making processes are understood, any policies directed towards stemming the increase in childlessness may miss the mark.

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