
Changes in desired family size during the life course

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The Dutch Minister for Youth and Families, André Rouvoet (Christian Union), is in favour of government policy designed to raise the number of children. He believes this would alleviate the disadvantages of an ageing population in the future. Many people in the Netherlands say, however, that the number of children people want is a private matter. At the same time, research has shown that on the whole couples want more children than they ultimately realise. The findings of a study recently conducted at NIDI to look for an explanation for this phenomenon could be useful in determining whether government policy could help people fulfil their wishes.

photo: Wim de Jonge

Many people have fewer children than they would ideally like to have, but they tend to adjust the number of children they say they would like during the course of their lives. Trends in the desired and actual number of children over time can be charted with the aid of the findings of a longitudinal survey held among young adults (see Box page 5). In 1987, people aged 18, 22 and 26 at the time were asked how many children they wanted to have. They were subsequently interviewed every four to five years to find out how many children they actually had and how many more they wanted.

Whereas women and men born in 1961 said at the age of 26 that they wanted an average of 2.4 and 2.3 children respectively, they were found to have an average of 1.9 and 1.8 children by the time they were 44 (see Figure 1). The difference between the number desired and the actual number of children was therefore about half a child on average. The percentage of women and men who had fewer children than initially desired was 44 and 37 percent respectively; the percentage who had the exact number of children they wanted was 42 and 48 percent respectively, and 13 percent of the women and 15 percent of the men ended up having more children than they said they wanted at the age of 26.

Figure 1 also shows that men and women adjust their ideal family size downwards over time. As a result, the desired number of children gradually drops to two, and ultimately equals the actual number of children. The study

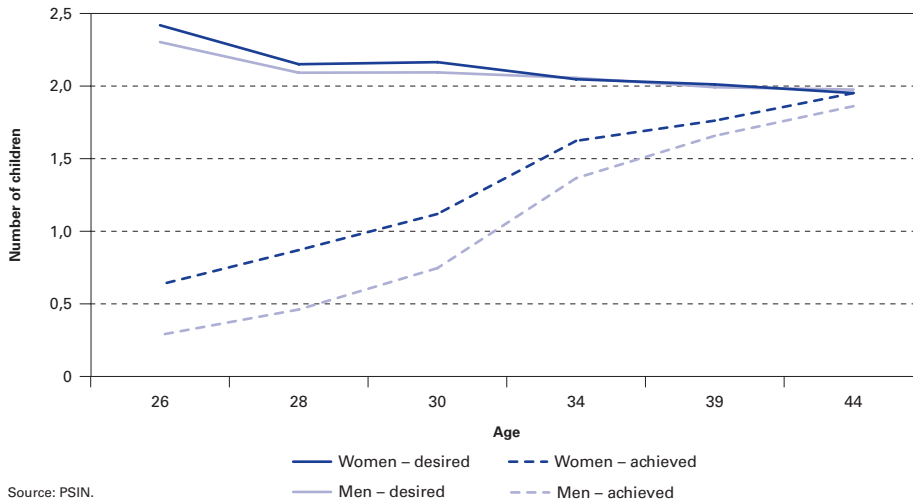


examined which men and women adjust their expectations downwards and which do not. Two factors were found to play a role: Developments in family life itself and developments in education and work.

Family life

The number of children young adults ideally want depends on developments within their

Figure 1. Desired and achieved number of children among men and women born in 1961



Source: PSIN.

own family lives. At age 20 the difference in terms of the ideal family size between single men and women and men and women who have a partner is very small. On average, both single and married men and women want about 2.4 children. By the time they are 35, the desired number of children has dropped among both groups, but the decline is much sharper among single people than among married couples: whereas married couples want an average of 1.8 children, single people want an average of 1.4 children. This seems to suggest that people who are single at age 35 realise that a big family is not –or no longer– a realistic option for them.

On average people living together outside of marriage wanted 0.2 fewer children than they had initially said they wanted than married couples. This difference remains more or less constant over the life course, suggesting that young cohabiting couples have other priorities in life than married couples.

People’s experiences in having –or not having– children influence the number of children they ideally want. People who remain childless for many years tend to adjust their ideal family size downwards during the course of their lives, either because they find out they are subfertile

or infertile, or because they prefer a life without children. People with only one child also sometimes adjust their wishes downwards. This could possibly be explained by the fact that they had unpleasant experiences during pregnancy and childbirth, that raising a child turned out to be less of a joy than expected, or that combining a child and a job was more difficult than expected.

Level of education and labour force participation

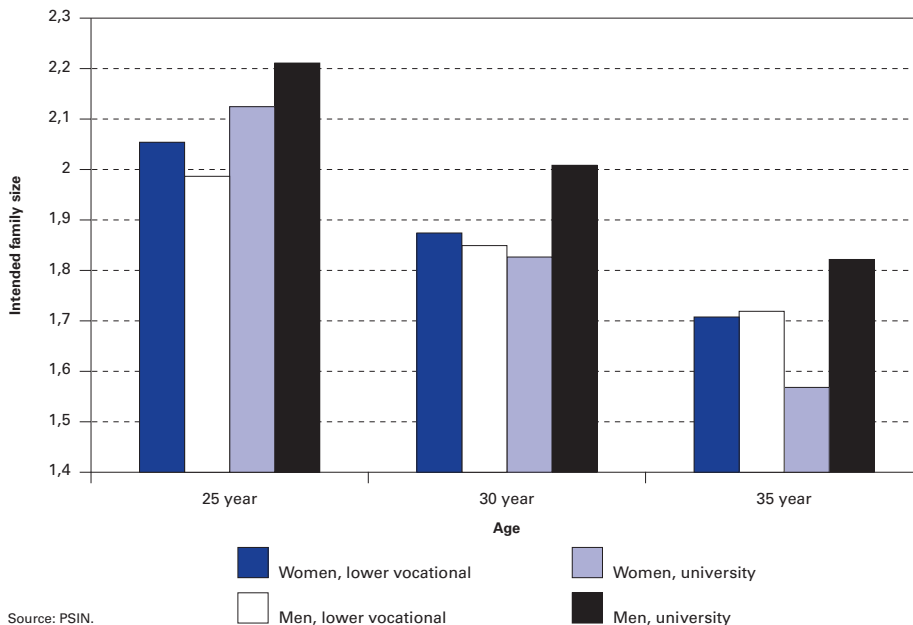
At the age of 25, men and women with a university degree wanted more children than those with lower vocational education (Figure 2). Men who had graduated from university wanted 2.2 children on average, women with university education wanted 2.1 children and men and women with lower vocational education wanted about 2.0 children. Here too, the differences become bigger as people grow older. At age 35 men and women in all educational groups were found to have adjusted their ideal family size downwards. This decline was particularly strong among women with university education, whose ideal family size dropped from 2.1 children when they were 25 to less than 1.6 by the time they were 35. This suggests that it is particularly difficult for highly educated women to combine motherhood and a career.

A similar pattern was found among people with and without a paid job. Whereas differences in desired family size are small at age 30, men and women with a paid job are found to adjust their wishes downward more strongly as they grow older than people without a job. This could again be explained by the fact that combining family duties and work turns out to be more difficult than expected.

A possible role for government

The finding that many women and men adjust their ideal family size downwards and often have fewer children than they initially said they wanted to have may have several reasons: they have not found a suitable partner, they have found a partner who already has children, they want to do too much in life, leaving little room for children, or they are infertile or subfertile. Research has shown that combining parenthood and a career makes it more difficult to achieve one’s ideal family size, in particular among highly educated women. Their initial wishes appear to be virtually impossible to combine with the requirements of a successful professional career. Other data from this longitudinal study showed that women who expect that having a child will have a negative impact on their careers tend to delay having children longer than women who do not believe that this is the case. In this light high-quality, affordable and widely available childcare could help people whose careers stand in the way of them having children achieve their ideal family size. A recent Norwegian study reports that women living in towns with good childcare facilities had children at a younger age than women in towns

Figure 2. Desired number of children, by level of education, sex and age



Source: PSIN.

PSIN stands for 'Panel Study of Social Integration of Young Adults in the Netherlands'. The study was initiated at Amsterdam's Vrije Universiteit in 1987, and was later continued jointly by researchers from Utrecht University, Tilburg University and NIDI. During the study a group of more than 1,750 young adults, aged 18, 22 or 26 in 1987, were interviewed up to six times during the course of 18 years, enquiring after developments in their lives. More than 750 people still participated in the study in 2005. As the participants were asked in detail about their plans for the future in the very first interview, the PSIN offers a unique possibility of examining the extent to which their plans have come true. The figures presented about differences in the desired number of children by family situation, level of education and employment status are based on the outcomes of multivariate Poisson regression models for all birth cohorts included in the survey. These results can be obtained from the author on request.

with a less dense network of childcare providers (*Demography*).

Rather than focusing on measures to raise the number of children, the government would do better to help couples achieve their ideal family size by offering better childcare. A policy of this kind could, additionally, counteract the negative effects of an ageing population. If adequate childcare is available, women are more likely to participate in the labour force and remain in employment longer, and to have more children on average. This would help reduce the costs of population ageing. And that, in turn, would lead to a happy end: A happy society, happy couples and a happy government minister.

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