

A new normal?

The Rising Age of Motherhood in Wisconsin

Since 1936, the Gallup organization has polled Americans on births and family size. Its 2023 poll showed that 45% of Americans thought the ideal family size included three or more children. That was the highest percentage with this perspective since 1971 when 52% of Americans shared this view. What may be more surprising is that 52% of those aged 18-29 considered families with three or more children to be ideal.

But the recent survey also found a twist — while just 8% of all U.S. adults did not want children, 16% of those aged 18 to 29 expressed that preference. Compared to every other age group surveyed, the youngest adult population is the most divided. Most think the ideal family is relatively large with three or more children, but a significant portion do not want children.

While the survey results are interesting, do Wisconsin birth and fertility patterns confirm or refute them?

► Wisconsin birth trends

Wisconsin births have been declining since 2007. From that year through 2021, the number of births fell 15%, from 72,752 to 61,814.¹ Within that general decline, though, are some interesting patterns that speak to the Gallup poll findings.

First, most of the nearly 11,000 decline in births can



be explained by young women under 25 not having children, at least in their early adult years. The number of first-born babies of mothers under 25 fell by more than 6,700 during 2007-2021, accounting for more than

61% of the overall drop in births.

This change is illustrated in the accompanying chart. In 2007, 48.1% of all first-born babies were to mothers under 25 years of age. By 2021, that share had fallen to 30.8%.

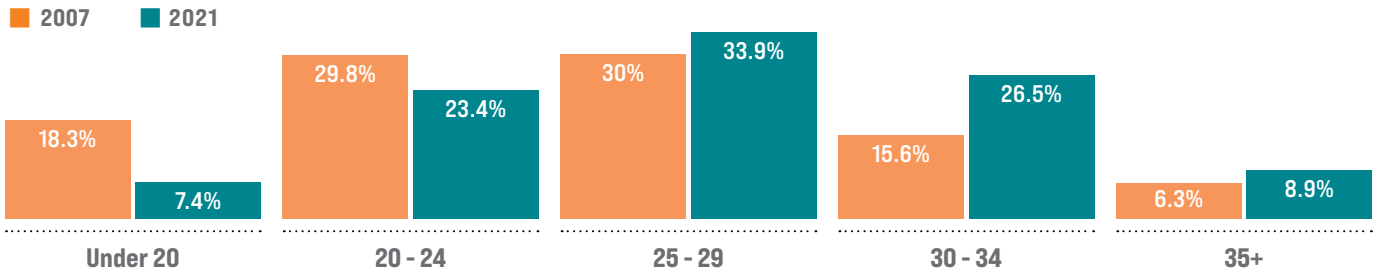
Add in the fewer first-born babies among women 25 to 29 years of age and more than 70% of the overall drop in births is explained.

Although it does not confirm it, this pattern is consistent with the Gallup finding of 16% of women aged 18 to 29 not wanting children. However, there is much more at work here. Research has shown much of the decline in young women ages 18-24 giving birth has been driven by their desire to attend college and start their careers. Many young women are postponing starting a family in order to pursue these goals, at least in their early 20s.

At the same time, we are seeing more women starting families in their 30s. Between 2007 and 2021, the number of women having their first child when they are over 30 rose 26% from 6,221 to 7,864. In 2021, more than a third of first-born children were born to women in that demographic.



Age of mother when first baby was born



► Are larger families out of fashion?

With births falling and young adults starting families later, one might expect declines in the number of large families. Yet, in Wisconsin, the number of new babies who are the fourth child or more is growing. In 2007, there were 8,518 such babies born in Wisconsin. By 2019, that figure had risen to more than 9,500 and 15% of all births. The number has since declined slightly in 2021 but was still 7.6% higher than in 2007.

This pattern changes when we add third-born children to the mix. The number of births that were a third child or more declined slightly from 20,810 in 2007 to 19,739 in 2021. That said, this figure has been consistent over an even longer time frame. Over the past three decades, the number of third-born or higher babies has ranged from a low of 18,513 in 1997 to a high of 20,953 in 2016. In other words, large families do not appear to have gone out of fashion.

► Final thoughts

While not confirming them, Wisconsin's birth patterns appear to be consistent with the Gallup poll findings. Birth rates among young women have plummeted while the number of "large" families do not appear to have declined. However, the net effect has been fewer and fewer births each year. Reasons for the changes vary from the overall preferences of younger Wisconsinites and the desire for more formal education or career advancement to financial barriers such as the cost of child care. Regardless of the root cause, the overall decline in the birth rate will have long-term effects on the state, including a declining workforce and tax base. ■

Forward Analytics is a Wisconsin-based research organization that provides state and local policymakers with nonpartisan analysis of issues affecting the state.

1. In 2022, the number of births fell further to 59,933. However, detailed information about the mother and child are not yet available for this analysis.

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