

## “IDEALS” ABOUT FAMILY SIZE IN THE DETROIT METROPOLITAN AREA: 1954

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**I**N A country in which most married people make some use of family limitation practices, the values held about “ideal family size” are likely to be important in influencing family growth and population trends. Until we have data on *personal* expectations and desires about family size, information about the more generalized values in this area may be useful in describing the framework within which the personal decisions are made. Since research about family size “norms” or “ideals” is likely to become increasingly important, it may be useful to report the results of asking different kinds of questions in this field.

In a recent article,<sup>1</sup> two of the authors analyzed the information obtained by asking a cross-section sample of Detroit area adults the following question in the spring of 1952:

People have different ideas about children and families. As things are now, what do you think is the ideal number of children for the average American family?

The present paper deals with the comparative results of asking this somewhat different question of a similar sample in the spring of 1954:

In your opinion, what would be the ideal number of children for a young couple to have, if their standard of living is about like yours?

The wording of this question was intended to lead the respondent to use as his point of reference the group with which he identifies his standard of living. But the question is not a personal expectation as such. It may make the respondent think only in terms of the number of children X dollar units can support on the average. There are obviously other factors

<sup>1</sup> Freedman, Ronald and Sharp, Harry: Correlates of Values About Ideal Family Size in the Detroit Metropolitan Area. *Population Studies*, VIII, July, 1954, pp. 35-45.

in family life, at various income levels, that will also affect the desired number of children.

It is possible, however, that the standard of living question does elicit a more personal response than the question used in 1952. In short, this report is in some ways a replication of the 1952 study, but in other respects the present report should and does yield different results.

To summarize the findings: the 1952 and 1954 data lead to comparable conclusions in the following general areas:

1. There is an overwhelming consensus among all major strata of the population that two, three, or four children are "ideal." Families larger than four are considered "ideal" by very few.

2. Catholics in all major socio-economic strata express a significantly higher "ideal" family size than comparable Protestants.

3. Women in the labor force express a lower family size "ideal" than those not in the labor force.

4. In all major strata, ever-married women who are forty years old or over have had *fewer* children on the average than they now consider "ideal."

5. If the mean "ideal" family size were realized in the average Detroit area family, the population would grow considerably without migration, but this would not result in "large" families.

The 1954 data yield important conclusions differing from those of 1952 on the following points:

1. "Ideal" family size is directly rather than inversely related to measures of socio-economic status.

2. "Ideal" family size is not significantly different for persons of southern rural background than for persons from all other backgrounds.

3. Negroes state a much lower "ideal" family size than do whites.

The 1954 data also yield at least one result not covered in the 1952 study. That is, the rather large Catholic-Protestant differences in "ideal" family size depend entirely on the differences in "ideals" between Catholics and Protestants who attend church frequently.

These general findings are documented in more detail in the following discussion.

### THE DATA

The data for this report are from interviews taken with a probability sample of the adult population in the tracted area of metropolitan Detroit.<sup>2</sup> These interviews were taken as part of the annual sample survey of the Detroit Area Study.<sup>3</sup>

#### MEAN "IDEAL" FAMILY SIZE

The mean "ideal" number of children of 2.94 for 1954 is somewhat smaller than the 1952 figure of 3.15.<sup>4</sup> While this overall decrease is comparatively slight, its sources are sufficiently patterned to deserve comment. As Table 1 indicates, the decrease results from a significantly larger proportion of respondents expressing an "ideal" of two or less children and a smaller percentage stating an "ideal" of three or four children in 1954 as compared with 1952. The proportion favoring an "ideal" of more than four is unchanged.

These variations result almost entirely from a decrease in expressed "ideal" among persons in relatively low income, educational, and occupational strata. This is indicated by the data in Table 2. The "ideal" stated by higher strata is fairly stable between 1952 and 1954; the "ideal" of lower strata, however, shows a consistent decrease.

Those persons expressing an "ideal" number of children of less than two appear as a significant group in 1954, although

<sup>2</sup> The sample was based on a three-stage probability design. Census tracts and blocks were selected with probabilities proportional to size. Approximately three dwelling units were selected in each block. The respondent in each household was selected randomly. In the 1952 study, 749 interviews were taken; in 1954, interviews were obtained from 764 respondents.

<sup>3</sup> The Detroit Area Study is associated with the Survey Research Center of the Institute for Social Research of the University of Michigan. The Study has been supported by funds granted to the University by the Ford Foundation for the development of training in the behavioral sciences. For a more complete description of the project, see *A SOCIAL PROFILE OF DETROIT: 1954*. Ann Arbor: The Detroit Area Study, 1954. (Available from the University of Michigan Press); and Freedman, Ronald: *The Detroit Area Study: A Training and Research Laboratory in the Community*. *American Journal of Sociology*, LIX, July, 1953, pp. 30-33.

<sup>4</sup> This difference is significant at the 5 per cent level. In computing significance tests an allowance was made for the effect of "clustering" in the Detroit Area Study's sample which probably underestimates the significance of differences in some cases.

"IDEAL" NUMBER OF CHILDREN	1952 SAMPLE PER CENT	1954 SAMPLE PER CENT
Less Than Two	2	6
Two	31	35
Three	34	29
Four	26	24
Five	3	2
Six or More	4	4
Total	100	100
Mean "Ideal" Number	3.15	2.94
Number of Cases	683	718

Table 1. Mean "ideal" number of children for the Detroit area as reported in 1952 and 1954.

they were negligible in 1952. They are definitely a lower status group, with a median income of \$3,400 compared with \$5,040 for the total sample; moreover, 18 per cent of this group are white collar workers as compared with 38 per cent in the total population.<sup>5</sup>

While it is possible that these downward shifts in the expressed "ideal" of lower status groups may result from a change in the "times" between 1952 and 1954, we think that it is more likely to be a function of the difference in the questions which were asked.

It should be pointed out that the mean family size expressed as "ideal" by the total sample in both years is above that needed for population replacement, even if allowance is made for the sterile and for those who do not marry. If such an average family size were actually realized, the population would grow fairly rapidly. The fact is that rather small differences in the average number of children may affect population growth substantially, given our low mortality rates. However, an "ideal" of approximately three children certainly does not presage a return to the "large family" pattern.

#### CONSENSUS ON "IDEAL" FAMILY SIZE

As in 1952, all groups in the 1954 study share a strong con-

<sup>5</sup> These statements are based on data not shown in this paper.

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS	SAMPLE YEAR AND MEAN “IDEAL” NUMBER OF CHILDREN			
	1952		1954	
	Mean “Ideal”	Number of Cases	Mean “Ideal”	Number of Cases
<i>Annual Income of Family Head</i>				
Less than \$3,000	3.21	127	2.59	116
\$3,000–\$3,999	3.17	188	2.64	88
\$4,000–\$4,999	3.00	133	2.92	143
\$5,000–\$6,999	3.01	132	3.17	192
\$7,000 and More	3.19	67	3.15	149
<i>Occupation of Family Head</i>				
Operatives, Service Workers and Laborers	3.11	261	2.64	248
Craftsmen, Foremen and Kindred Workers	3.14	163	2.99	203
Clerical, Sales and Kindred Workers	3.16	83	3.30	80
Professionals, Proprietors, Managers and Officials	3.13	140	3.24	160
<i>Education (Years of School)</i>				
Less Than 7 Years	3.56	80	2.82	92
7–8 Years	3.20	144	2.81	124
9–11 Years	3.05	168	2.82	168
12 Years	3.08	207	3.11	226
More Than 12 Years	3.04	85	3.10	105
<i>Rural-Urban Background</i>				
Only Urban Experience	3.10	471	2.98	506
Some Rural Experience	3.25	204	2.84	212
Southern U. S. Rural	3.56	75	2.88	80
Other Rural	3.08	129	2.83	132
<i>Race</i>				
Negro	3.32	74	2.28	101
White	3.13	609	3.05	617
<i>Age (in Years)</i>				
21–29	3.08	191	2.73	172
30–39	3.11	177	2.94	205
40–49	3.11	148	2.98	138
50–59	3.37	87	3.42	100
60 and Over	3.23	79	2.79	103
<i>Labor Force Status of Women</i>				
Member of Labor Force	3.20	125	2.78	124
Non-Member of Labor Force	3.32	240	3.16	256

Table 2. Mean “ideal” number of children for the Detroit area as reported in 1952 and 1954 by income, occupation, education, rural-urban background, race, age and labor force status of women.

sensus on an "ideal" of two to four children. In no subgroup considered is there less than 79 per cent expressing a preference within that range. There is further evidence of consensus in the relatively small but important differences between the mean "ideal" size of various subgroups. While the *patterns* of differences to be discussed in this paper are significant, the range of these differences is not great. As in the case with the total population, there are no subpopulations expressing a family size "ideal" which could be described as "large" in any historical perspective (none are as large as four, on the average). Yet small as these differences may be among the sub-groups, they are usually large enough to make the difference between population decline and population growth, if "ideals" were realized in actual family size.

#### GROUP DIFFERENTIALS IN "IDEALS" FOR FAMILY SIZE

Tables 2 and 3 show the variation in mean "ideal" size for specific population sub-groups. The most striking feature of these data is the reversal of customary socio-economic fertility differentials. In general, studies of actual fertility in the modern period have shown an inverse correlation with socio-economic status. The 1952 data on "ideal" size of family also had this pattern. Our present analysis, however, shows a direct correlation between "ideal" family size and such measures of status as income, education and occupation.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, while we usually expect fertility rates to be higher for persons of rural background than for those of urban background (this was the case in our 1952 data for both "ideal" and actual family size), Table 2 shows that the small difference which exists in the 1954 study is in the direction of a higher "urban" mean.<sup>7</sup>

Table 2 also shows a much lower mean "ideal" size for Negro than for white respondents.<sup>8</sup> This reverses sharply the 1952

<sup>6</sup> The extreme categories are significantly different at the .05 level for income and occupation, but not for education.

<sup>7</sup> Not statistically significant.

<sup>8</sup> Statistically significant.

SELECTED CONTROLS	RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE AND MEAN "IDEAL" NUMBER OF CHILDREN			
	Catholics		Protestants	
	Mean "Ideal"	Number of Cases	Mean "Ideal"	Number of Cases
TOTAL SAMPLE	3.29	284	2.73	405
<i>Annual Income of Family Head</i>				
Less Than \$4,000	2.92	74	2.48	122
\$4,000-\$5,999	3.44	116	2.75	136
\$6,000 and More	3.39	84	2.96	127
<i>Occupation of Family Head</i>				
Blue Collar Worker	3.11	185	2.59	251
White Collar Worker	3.70	87	3.02	139
<i>Education (Years of School)</i>				
Less Than 9 Years	3.04	93	2.67	112
9-11 Years	3.17	77	2.57	87
12 Years or More	3.58	113	2.83	204
<i>Age (in Years)</i>				
Less Than 40 Years Old	3.26	152	2.57	212
40 Years or Older	3.31	132	2.90	193
<i>Rural-Urban Background</i>				
Only Urban Experience	3.36	219	2.70	264
Some Rural Experience	3.03	65	2.77	141
<i>Church Attendance</i>				
Attends Every Week	3.58	191	2.94	132
Attends Once or Twice Monthly	2.68	41	2.76	107
Attends Rarely or Never	2.69	51	2.55	165
<i>Parochial School Attendance</i>				
Either Parents or Children Attended	3.44	209	—	—
Neither Parents nor Children Attended	2.87	69	—	—

Table 3. Mean "ideal" number of children for the Detroit area as reported in 1954 by religious preference with selected controls.

comparison and is the largest differential found between any major strata analyzed in the 1954 study. Furthermore, 40 per cent of those persons who stated "ideals" of less than two children were Negroes, whereas Negroes comprise only 14 per cent of the Detroit area population.<sup>9</sup>

What is interesting about the whole set of differentials dis-

<sup>9</sup> These data are not shown in the text.

cussed up to this point is that they are what some observers have expected may develop under conditions of uniform urbanization, universal effective control of family size, and rational action based on family resources.<sup>10</sup> The socio-economic differentials in particular are consistent with the kinds of relationships found for the "number and spacing planned" families in the Indianapolis fertility study.<sup>11</sup> It may be that in answering the standard of living question about "ideal" family size, each stratum in the population tends to project what it feels its own group *ought* to do in an urban setting.

The relationship of age to statements about "ideal" family size is the same in the 1952 and 1954 data. There is a gradual increase with age up to age sixty<sup>12</sup> and then a rather abrupt decrease after that point.<sup>13</sup> One may speculate that this sharp drop is associated with the special problems and frustrations of older people for whom we make no satisfactory family living arrangements in our culture.

The participation of women in the labor force is associated both with a lower "ideal" family size<sup>14</sup> (Table 2) and lower completed family size<sup>15</sup> for ever-married women forty years of age or older (Table 4). The data do not permit us to determine which way the relationship runs: whether those who have fewer children for other reasons are able to enter the labor force, or whether interest in work or the need to work leads to smaller families which are thereafter rationalized as "ideal."

The traditional Catholic-Protestant fertility differentials persist in these 1954 "ideal" family size data as they did in 1952.<sup>16</sup> The differences remain under controls for occupation, income,

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Hawley, Amos: *HUMAN ECOLOGY: A THEORY OF COMMUNITY STRUCTURE*. New York: The Ronald Press, 1950, pp. 114-120; Thompson, Warren: *POPULATION PROBLEMS*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1953, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> Kiser, Clyde V.: *The Indianapolis Fertility Study—An Example of Planned Observational Research*. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, xvii (Winter, 1953-54), pp. 496-510.

<sup>12</sup> Statistically significant.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS	MEAN ACTUAL AND MEAN “IDEAL” NUMBER OF CHILDREN		
	Mean Actual	Mean “Ideal”	Number of Cases
<i>Annual Income of Family Head</i>			
Less Than \$5,000	2.49	3.17	94
\$5,000 and More	2.25	3.40	63
<i>Occupation of Family Head</i>			
Blue Collar Worker	2.76	3.04	93
White Collar Worker	1.97	3.40	67
<i>Education (Years of School)</i>			
Less Than 12 Years	2.85	3.17	110
12 Years or More	1.79	3.26	62
<i>Rural-Urban Background</i>			
Only Urban Experience	2.40	3.28	111
Some Rural Experience	2.56	3.02	62
<i>Labor Force Status</i>			
Member of Labor Force	1.62	3.04	45
Non-Member of Labor Force	2.75	3.23	126
<i>Religious Preference</i>			
Catholic	3.03	3.58	64
Protestant	2.06	2.97	101
<b>TOTAL</b>	2.46	3.19	173

Table 4. Mean actual number of children ever born and mean “ideal” number of children for ever-married Detroit area women forty years of age or older by selected social characteristics.

education, age, and rural-urban background (Table 3).<sup>17</sup>

The Catholic-Protestant differential can be attributed to those Catholics whose close tie to the church is indicated by weekly attendance. Catholics who reported attending church infrequently or “never” did not express a significantly different family size “ideal” than did Protestants with similar records of church attendance. The overall higher “ideal” family size for Catholics results from the fact that most persons who express a Catholic preference attend church weekly in Detroit, as they do over the country as a whole.<sup>18</sup> Protestants, on the

<sup>17</sup> While many of the differences are not significant, their direction remains unchanged.

<sup>18</sup> The Catholic Digest Survey: Do Americans Go to Church? *Catholic Digest*, xvii (December, 1952), pp. 1-7.

other hand, are decidedly less likely to attend church frequently than are Catholics.

For Protestants there is a regular decrease in "ideal" family size with decreasing frequency of church attendance. Among Catholics, however, there is no significant difference between those who attend church only once or twice a month and those who never attend. The significantly higher family size "ideal" for Catholics is confined to those who attend church every week. It may also be noted that Catholics who sent their children to parochial school or who had attended themselves also expressed a higher "ideal" than did other Catholics.

In connection with the above, Dudley Kirk has provided evidence that the reduction or elimination of Catholic-Protestant fertility differences expected by demographers is not occurring as yet—even in urban places.<sup>19</sup> Data on actual fertility in the Detroit area for 1954 (Table 4) are consistent with Kirk's estimates of religious differentials for the national population.

Catholic norms about family size as measured by either of our "ideal" family size questions are also consistent with the maintenance of higher Catholic fertility. Moreover, the critical factor in the high Catholic "ideal" appears to be a close tie to the church which is maintained by most Catholics.

There is nothing in our material on religious differentials to indicate the cause-effect direction of the relationship. It may well be that those persons—either Catholic or Protestant—who have more children as a result of non-religious factors are then drawn into the church and its related institutions by their children.

#### COMPARISONS OF "IDEAL" AND ACTUAL FAMILY SIZE

How does completed family size compare with statements about "ideal" family size? In Table 4, we compare actual and "ideal" family size for ever-married women, forty years of age or older. Perhaps the most significant fact emerging from these 1954 data is the confirmation of the 1952 finding that in every

<sup>19</sup> Kirk, Dudley: Catholic Fertility in the United States. (A paper read at the meeting of the American Sociological Society, Urbana, Illinois, September 8-10, 1954.)

sub-group considered, the "ideal" is higher than the achieved family size. This may indicate that "ideals" need to be discounted to a certain extent in assessing what is likely to happen to future population growth. It is, of course, also possible that these women over forty would have more children if they could "start over." These kinds of questions can best be answered with longitudinal studies in which we collect data on "ideals," intentions, and performance at various stages in the family life cycle.

### CONCLUSIONS

In the present paper, we have analyzed the data obtained by asking respondents to state the number of children they would consider "ideal" for families at their own standard of living. The most striking finding is that the answers to this question assume a pattern which is the reverse of that based on historic fertility differentials. In fact, the pattern approaches that which has been predicted for "rational," urban populations. The traditional Catholic-Protestant differentials, however, are maintained under a variety of socio-economic controls. These religious differences in "ideal" family size appear to be a function of closeness in ties to the church, as indicated by church and parochial school attendance.

We recognize that data on "ideals" or "norms" cannot be taken at face value as a basis for predicting fertility. They can only be used as background information which help to set limits on what is probable. Actual family size, however, is not likely to go much beyond the "ideal" in a society in which most families make some use of birth control.