



Fertility intentions and postponed parenthood

Initial findings from Next Steps at Age 32

The age at first birth in the UK has steadily increased over time. Among women born in the early 1990s, 44% have had one or more children before the age of 30, compared with 58% of their mothers' generation (born in mid-1960s) and 81% of their grandmothers' generation (born in late 1930s).

While some individuals might prefer not to have children, others may be uncertain about their childbearing plans, or have reasons for putting them off. Against the backdrop of persistently low fertility rates in England and Wales (1.49 children per woman in 2022¹), understanding people's 'fertility intentions' – their desire to have or not have children – can shed light on potential barriers that might force individuals to postpone or forego having children.

This briefing investigates fertility intentions among 32-year-olds taking part in Next Steps, a nationally representative cohort study following the lives of around 16,000 people in England who were born in 1989-90. It focuses on the reasons why people who do want to have children (or more children) might postpone doing so, within a challenging social and economic context. Higher inflation, the rising cost-of-living and housing prices might strain current and potential parents financially. At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly altered working styles and patterns, with increased remote work and flexible arrangements becoming more common. These changes may influence how individuals balance career and family planning decisions. Additionally, ongoing debates about parental leave policies, childcare costs, and work-life balance are shaping the environment in which this generation is making fertility decisions.

The analysis was conducted on an analytical sample of 7,279 Next Steps respondents, of whom 2,045 reported that they wanted to have children (or more children) but were not currently trying, and their reasons for postponing parenthood.

ABOUT THE DATA

Next Steps Age 32 Sweep

Next Steps is following the lives of around 16,000 people in England born in 1989-90. The Age 32 Sweep took place between April 2022 and September 2023. More than 7,200 study members took part in a 60-minute survey, either online or with an interviewer. Data from this and previous sweeps of Next Steps are available to download from the UK Data Service.

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Key findings

- At age 32, around 54% of respondents had at least one child.
- Among parents, just over a quarter (27%) said that they definitely want to have another child, whereas a third (33%) definitely do not want more children.
- Among the 46% who had not had a child by this age, half said they definitely want a child in the future, compared to 12% who definitely do not.
- Just 1 in 4 of those who wanted (more) children said they were currently trying.
- 'Not feeling ready' to have a child was the most common reason among those who definitely want to have (more) children, but were currently not trying.
- Concerns about finances and their own work or study were more likely to put off women from having (more) children than men (45% vs 40%). Financial and work reasons were also more likely to deter people with degrees compared to those not educated to degree level (55% vs 47%).
- Nearly half (48%) of all respondents were either certain they did not want any (more) children, or unsure of their fertility intentions.

Results

Fertility intentions at age 32

At age 32, approximately 54% of respondents had at least one child. More than a quarter of these parents (27%) reported that they definitely want to have another child, whereas a third (33%) said they definitely do not want to have more children.

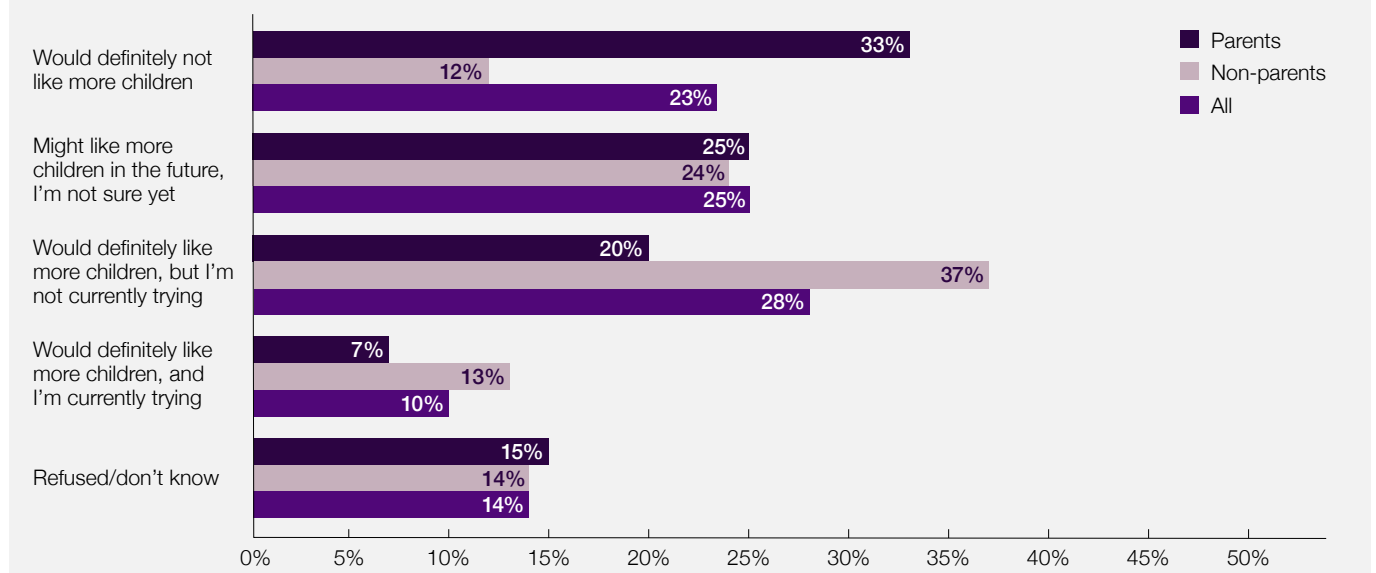
Among the 46% who did not have children at this age, half said that they definitely want a child in the future, compared to 12% who definitely did not. However, just 1 in 4 of those who wanted (more) children said they were currently trying.

Around a quarter of respondents were not sure whether they would like to have (more) children in the future. Previous research has shown that a high proportion of individuals who have uncertain fertility intentions in their 20s and 30s, or

postpone having children, end up not having children at allⁱⁱⁱ. Taken together, our findings suggest that we might expect to see a smaller average family size and a higher proportion of individuals without children among this cohort compared to older generations (around 18-20% of women born in 1960s and 1970s never had children^{iv}).

It is important to understand why people who want to have children are not currently trying to conceive, and whether any of the reasons they mention for postponing their childbearing are associated with structural constraints that could be tackled at the policy level.

FIGURE 1: FERTILITY INTENTIONS AT AGE 32

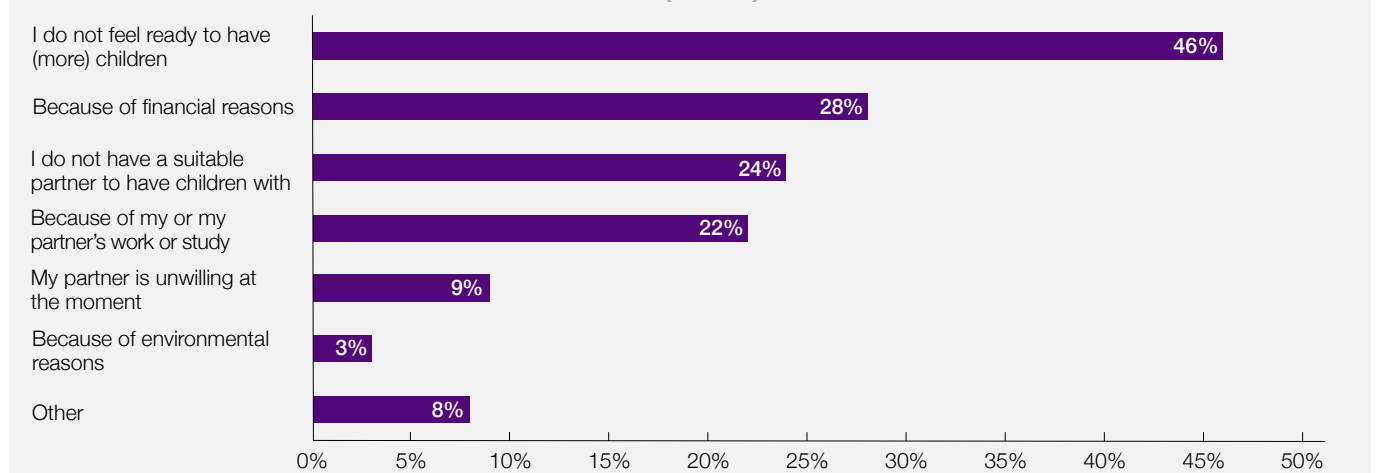


Reasons for postponing having children

Respondents who reported that they definitely want to have (more) children but are not currently trying were asked additional questions about why this was the case.

The respondents could choose multiple reasons (which explains why the percentages in Figure 2 do not add up to 100).

FIGURE 2: REASONS FOR NOT TRYING TO HAVE (MORE) CHILDREN NOW



Overall, 'not feeling ready' was the most common reason for not currently trying to have a child (46%), followed by financial concerns (28%), not having a suitable partner (24%), and work or study (22%).

Respondents who reported 'not feeling ready' often also reported financial and work reasons (on average, 1 in 4 of those who didn't feel ready also mentioned one or both of these reasons). This highlights the role economic circumstances are playing in 32-year-olds' decisions to put off having children.

However, over half (54%) of those who reported 'not feeling ready' did not report any other reasons. It is difficult to know precisely why these individuals did not feel ready to have

(more) children. Previous research suggests this could be linked to trends in postponing other 'key milestones' in the transition to adulthood, such as leaving the family home, finding stable work, and forming relationships^v.

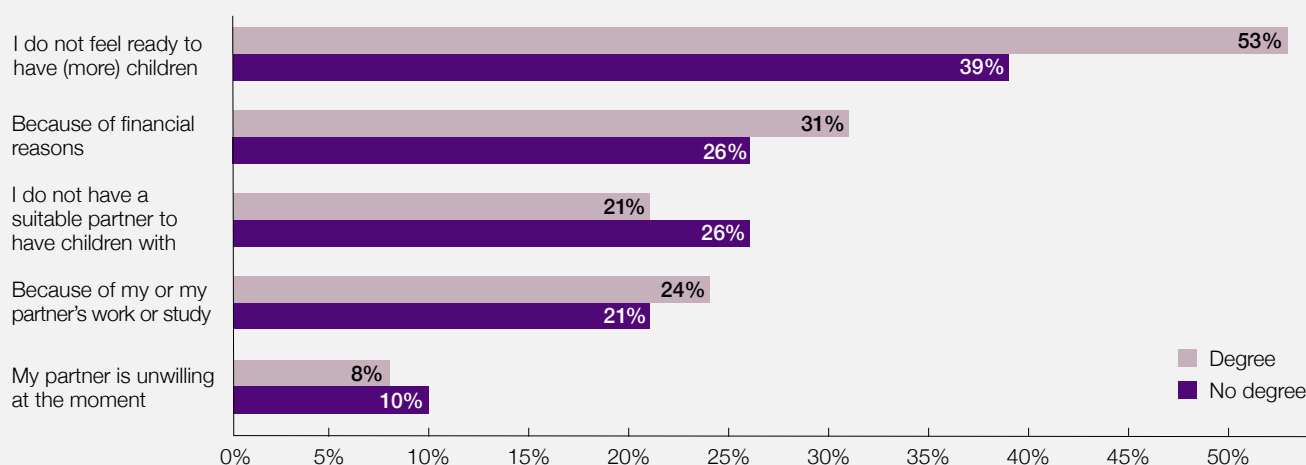
Just under 1 in 10 respondents said their partner was unwilling to have children at the moment, and 3% listed environmental concerns as a reason for not currently trying. Other less frequently reported reasons for not trying for (more) children included housing circumstances, health issues (including those related to infertility and affordability of fertility treatments), and the importance of getting married first. These 'other' reasons were cited by 8% of respondents combined.

Differences by educational qualifications

There were some notable differences by respondents' level of education. Overall, individuals with a university degree were more likely to report 'not feeling ready' than those with lower qualifications (53% vs 39%). They were also more likely to report financial (31% vs 26%) and work reasons (24% vs 21%), compared to their peers without degrees.

In contrast, individuals without a degree were more likely to cite not having a suitable partner (26% vs 21%) or that their partner was unwilling to have children at the moment (10% vs 8%), compared to individuals with a degree.

FIGURE 3: REASONS FOR NOT TRYING TO HAVE (MORE) CHILDREN NOW, BY DEGREE STATUS



These findings suggest that the perceived obstacles and motivations for having children, and the timing of children, can vary based on socioeconomic factors like education level. For the highly educated, the key deterrents seem to revolve around achieving certain milestones of personal and professional readiness before embarking on parenthood. For those without degrees, unstable or unsuitable partnerships may pose more significant barriers.

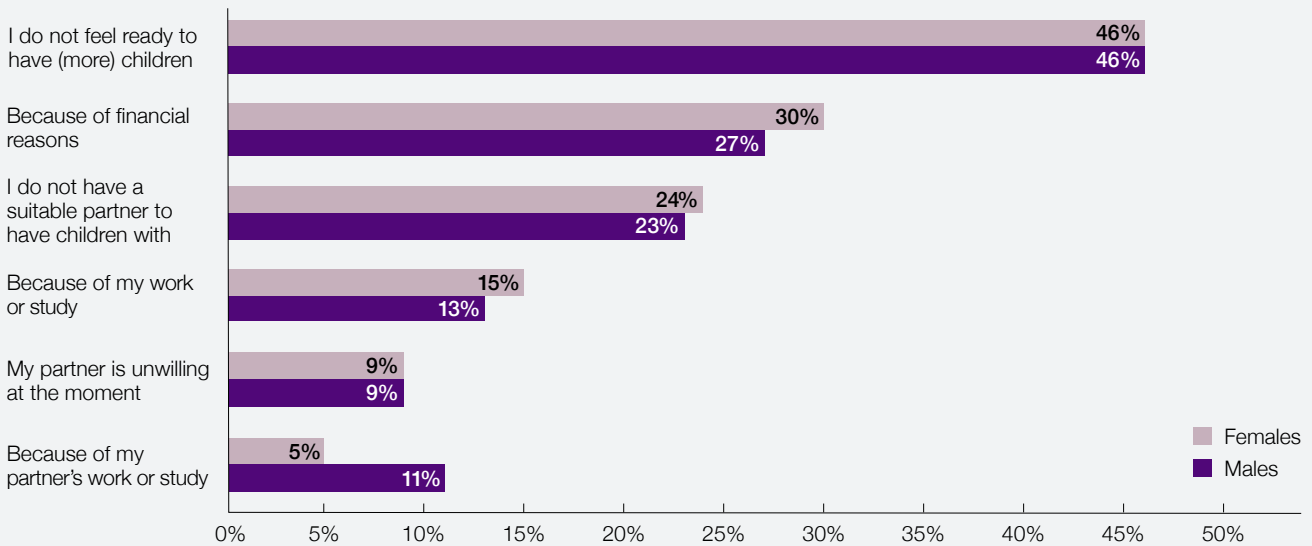
Overall, our findings underscore the complex interplay between socioeconomic status, personal priorities, and the perceived prerequisites for starting or expanding a family in contemporary societies.

Differences by sex

Men and women gave similar reasons for not currently trying for (more) children, with some exceptions. Women were more likely to report financial concerns than men (30% vs 27%), and their own work or study (15% vs 13%). Notably, more than twice as many men than women (11% vs 5%) reported that their partner's work was the reason they were not currently trying.

These findings highlight the significant role that finances and employment play in the decision on when to start trying for a(nother) child. The slightly higher prevalence of these concerns among women may reflect existing evidence that women's careers often suffer setbacks in income and career progression after childbirth^{vi}.

FIGURE 4: REASONS FOR NOT TRYING TO HAVE (MORE) CHILDREN NOW, BY SEX

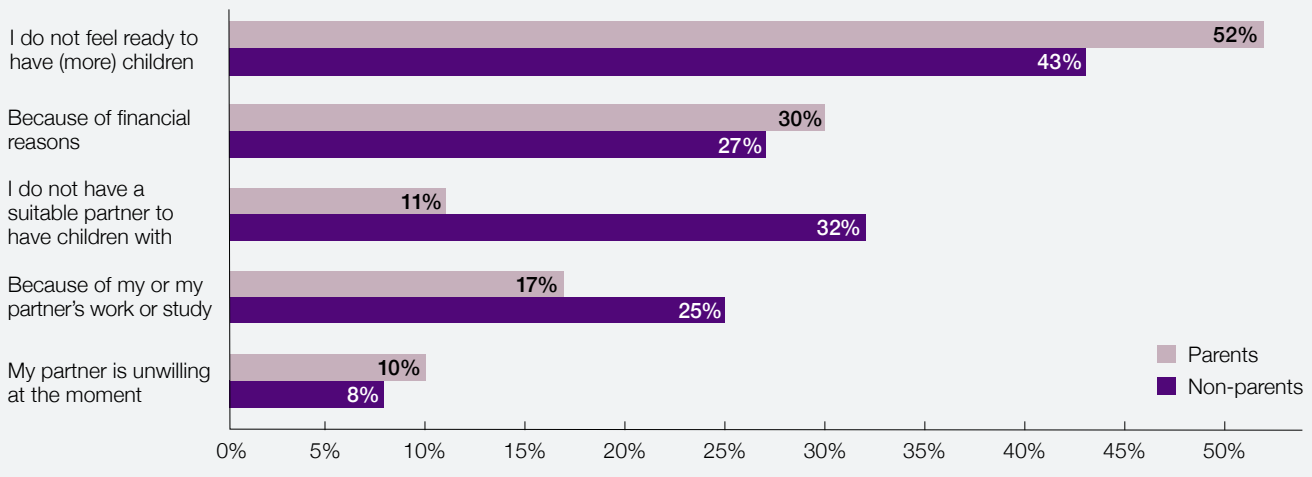


Differences by parenthood status

Parents were more likely to mention 'not feeling ready' (52% vs 43%) and financial concerns (30% vs 27%) as the main reasons for not currently trying to have another child.

In contrast, those without children were more likely to cite not having a partner (32% vs 11%) and work reasons (25% vs 17%) as reasons for postponing having a child.

FIGURE 5: REASONS FOR NOT TRYING TO HAVE (MORE) CHILDREN NOW, BY PARENTHOOD STATUS



These findings highlight the distinct challenges faced by parents and non-parents in their fertility decisions. For parents, the hesitation to have another child seems rooted in psychological readiness and financial stability, possibly reflecting the realities of raising children. Their experience with parenthood may make them more aware of the emotional and financial demands of expanding their family.

Those without children, on the other hand, appear to face different kinds of barriers. The lack of a suitable partner emerges as a significant obstacle, underscoring the importance of relationship status in fertility decisions. Work-related reasons also feature prominently, suggesting that career considerations play a crucial role in the timing of first births.

These contrasts reflect the evolving nature of fertility decisions across the life course. While those without children may be navigating the complexities of finding a partner and establishing their careers, parents are grappling with the realities of balancing existing family responsibilities with the prospect of additional children. Moreover, these patterns may point to broader societal trends, such as delayed partnership formation, increased focus on career development before parenthood, and the growing awareness of the financial implications of raising children.

Considerations for policymaking

A recent United Nations Population Fund report^{vii} advocates reframing discussions around current fertility trends from alarming rhetoric about low fertility rates to acknowledging individual reproductive decisions and addressing barriers faced by those who want children. Our analyses contribute to this debate by enhancing our understanding of the reasons behind individuals' reproductive choices, which may help policymakers address and overcome the barriers faced by those who want to become parents.

At age 32, many respondents in our study may still intend to have children, just later than previous generations. Our findings provide further evidence that financial and employment constraints are viewed as major challenges and key reasons for postponing parenthood. This is of particular interest given that easing the financial burden of childcare is a priority for policymakers across the political spectrum.

However, such measures alone may not fully alleviate the economic uncertainty that can deter people from having (more) children. Previous research has highlighted the persistent gender pay gap and stalling of women's career progression after childbirth^{viii}, underscoring the need for additional policies and workplace reforms to better accommodate working parents and, particularly, women's careers.

Opportunities for future research

Using data from the Next Steps Age 32 Sweep, researchers can investigate how various economic and socio-demographic characteristics are associated with individual fertility intentions and transition to parenthood. This may include exploring how factors like ethnicity, partnership quality, health characteristics, labour market trajectories, and home ownership might be linked to childbearing plans and decisions.

Future work can also investigate how number and age of children are associated with the reasons why parents might be postponing having more children.

About Next Steps

Next Steps, previously known as the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, follows the lives of around 16,000 people in England born in 1989-90. The study has followed cohort members since secondary school, collecting information about cohort members' education and employment, economic circumstances, family life, physical and emotional health and wellbeing, social participation and attitudes. Next Steps began in 2004 when cohort members were aged 13/14, and was originally managed by the UK Department for Education. Since 2015, the study has been managed by the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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