

Premarital Experiences and Family Size Expectations of U.S. Jewish Women: Some Exploratory Comparisons

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Many studies in Jewish demography deal with nuptiality and marital fertility and this focus very often reflects the availability of data. On the other hand, information on the sexual behavior of Jews before marriage is usually limited. This paper deals with aspects of demographic behavior and expectations of never-married Jewish women in the United States.

We could take advantage of the findings from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), Cycle 3, conducted in 1982 by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) on a sample of about 8,000 American women 15–44 years old (Mosher et al, 1981). Unlike Cycles 1 and 2, Cycle 3 covered the non-married female population of the conterminous U.S..

Here we present some exploratory information on entrance into the sexual life of never-married Jewish women. Special attention is devoted to those aged less than 25 years in 1982, who were the large majority of the unmarried female population studied and the likely Jewish brides and mothers during the 1980s and the next decade.

For the sake of comparison, two other subgroups of women were selected: white Protestants and the non-affiliated. We thus excluded black Protestant as well as Catholic (including Hispanic) women from the comparisons with the Jews. The non-affiliated group was selected on the assumption that it might include several Jewish cases and perhaps resemble the Jewish group in structure and behavior. Our total sample included 1,057 never-married women, of whom 117 were non-affiliated and 68 were Jewish. Given the relatively small size of these two latter subsamples, only dichotomous percent distributions and average values are used. Differences singled out in this paper were statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, using a two-tailed test with 39 degrees of freedom. Sample data were weighted according to the distribution of the population.

The comparisons that follow are intended to answer the question: are young Jewish women, who still have a chance to marry, different from comparable groups of white women in the United States insofar as the critical steps of entrance into sexual life are concerned? These steps include menarche, beginning of dating, first intercourse, the first referral to professional contraceptive counselling, as well as family size expectations.

Entrance into Sexual Life

About 90% of the Jewish women under 25 years in 1982 had never been married, as compared with about 65% among the non-Jewish white population. This is indicative of different patterns of entrance into marital life; in turn, the length of spinsterhood may affect sexual behavior before marriage. In Table 1 the three population groups of women are distributed by selected characteristics. Jewish women, especially those below 25, had higher educational achievements and relatively more of them spent their adolescent years in non-disrupted households. Although the available indicator of 'frequency of attendance at religious services in church/synagogue' may be somewhat misleading when applied to the religiosity of Jewish women, they attend religious services less frequently than do white Protestants. Most of these patterns persist among the less-than-25 year old women (right panel of Table 1), but those under 25 display smaller differences in the percentages of those who have already experienced sex. These percentages might be even more similar if the internal age structure of the less-than-25 year olds were controlled.

TABLE 1. NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN AGED 15-44 BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS, U.S., 1982 (PERCENTAGES)^a

Characteristics	Total			Thereof: Age -25		
	Jews	White Protestants	White no religion	Jews	White Protestants	White no religion
Age						
-25	73	82	61			
+25	27	18	39			
Schooling						
-13 years	46	65	46	45	72	62
+13 years	54	35	54	55	28	38
Religious services						
Never	31	13	100	21	13	100
1+ times/year	69	87	-	79	87	-
% living with parents at age 14	87	78	59	83	77	66
Work status						
Full time	17	32	44	(3)	21	23
Part time	27	24	15	31	28	18
Does not work	55	44	41	67	51	59
Had 1st intercourse						
Never	32	46	23	44	50	35
Before age 18	36	32	41	39	35	44
At age 18-19	27	15	25	(10)	11	18
At age 20+	5	7	11	(7)	4	(3)

a. Per 100 women in each group of religious affiliation.

Source: NCHS, National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle III.

We shall inspect the data for sexually experienced single women to answer the questions: When does first intercourse occur, and what are the differences between reli-

gious groups? A total of around 50–60% of these women had their first intercourse before the age of 18 and the differences between Jews and the others are small (Table 3). Among the under-25, the differences almost disappear and the frequency of girls sexually active before the age of 18 rises to 70%, i.e. on the average, the younger cohorts enter into sexual activity earlier than did their seniors. However, since only single women are considered here, any possible relationship between early entrance into sexual activity and marriage has not been taken into account.

TABLE 2. SEXUALLY EXPERIENCED NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN 15–44 YEARS OLD, BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS, U.S., 1982 (PERCENTAGES)^a

Religious affiliation	Total	Religious attendance		Schooling (years)		Age	
		Never	Ever	-13	13+	-25	25+
		White Protestant	54	67	51	48	64
Jewish	68	85	58	51	82	56	99
White no religion	77	77	X	62	90	65	97

a. Per 100 women in each group of religious affiliation.

Source: NCHS, National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle III.

TABLE 3. PERCENT WHO EVER HAD INTERCOURSE AMONG NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN 15–44 YEARS OLD, BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS, U.S., 1982^a

	Total			Thereof: Age -25		
	Jews	White Protestants	White no religion	Jews	White Protestants	White no religion
	1st intercourse					
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Before age 18	53	59	53	69	70	67
At age 18–19	39	28	33	(19)	21	28
At age 20+	(7)	13	14	(12)	9	(4)
% used contraceptive method at 1st intercourse	68	56	56	87	56	61
% ever used any method	98	90	94	99	87	96
% ever pregnant	13	25	29	(6)	24	19

a. Per 100 women in each group of religious affiliation.

Source: NCHS, National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle III.

Jewish women – and especially the youngest ones – are more likely than other white women to use contraceptive protection; this seems to be true for their first sexual experience as well as for later ones. This finding is very consistent with the low rate of pregnancy admitted by the Jewish single women as compared with the others.

Figure 1 presents the first steps in the early sexual experiences, including family planning counselling of the single women in the NSFG survey. The average age at menarche is close to 12.5 years for all the groups and subgroups of women; the very small differences fall well enough within the sampling variance and cannot be ascribed to social, nutritional or ethnic factors.

Sexually experienced Jewish single women under 25 did, however, anticipate the others in dating boys; the average age at first dating is less than 14 for the Jews – at least one year earlier than the others. Despite this, the average age at first sex is very similar for the three religious groups, and perhaps even slightly later for the Jews. This implies that Jewish girls spend a longer period in dating than the others before having their first intercourse – three years on the average, or about twice the time among the white Protestants and non-affiliated. The longer period of mere dating may be one factor leading Jewish girls to more widespread use of contraceptive means, and earlier referrals to contraceptive counselling services. In fact, Figure 1 shows that the average ages at first sex and first contraceptive counselling are practically identical among the Jews; for the white Protestant and the white no-religion groups, the gap is, on the average, about one year.

FIGURE 1. AVERAGE AGES AT FIRST STEPS IN SEXUAL LIFE OF SEXUALLY EXPERIENCED NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN 15-44 YEARS OLD, BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND AGE, U.S., 1982

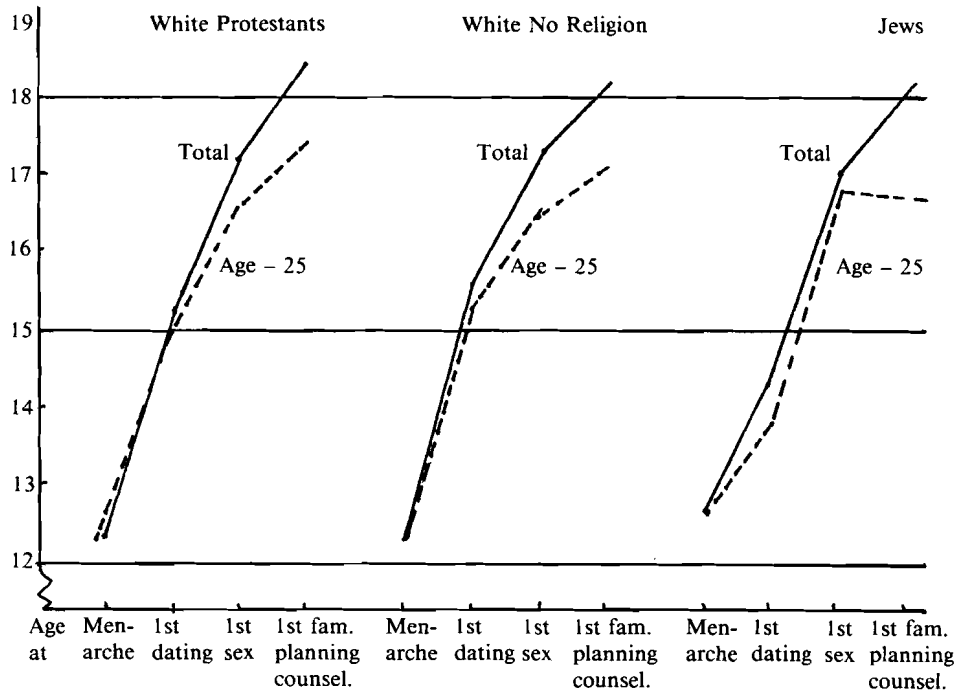


Table 4 presents data on average ages at first intercourse and at first contraceptive counselling, by selected characteristics. Many of the unmarried Jewish women had their first sexual experience at a later age, and/or their first contraceptive counselling at an earlier age, than the others.

In the right-hand panel of Table 4, the average intervals between ages at first contraceptive counselling and at first sex are shown. On the average, and as negative intervals by some characteristics indicate, only Jews seek contraceptive counselling before having their first sexual intercourse. The intervals between the two steps are fairly systematic in direction, though very small in all cases except perhaps for the women who had their first intercourse without use of any contraceptive means.

Cohort Comparisons

We have seen that currently never-married Jewish women under 25 are not so different from their peers of other affiliations in timing their entrance into sexual activity. Does this hold for the women who in 1982 were no longer single? Table 5 shows that the average age at first intercourse among those Jewish women who married during the 1970s up to the early 1980s was 21 – an age higher than that of those still never-married in 1982 by about four years. The corresponding difference for white Protestants amounted to only 1.5–2 years. Furthermore, the first referral to contraceptive counselling services occurred later among the married than among the currently non-married young women. In fact, the earlier the marriage year the later the age at first counselling for Jews and white Protestants alike.

For both first sex and first contraceptive counselling, the average age of married Jewish women was higher than that of white Protestants. But for the two religious groups, the interval between first intercourse and first contraceptive counselling decreased over time, more quickly for the Jews than for the Protestants. The frequency of entrance into sexual activity before age 18 rose from one marriage cohort to a later one (again somewhat more for the Jews) and it reached 70% among the still unmarried women, Jews and Protestants alike.

All the women surveyed, married or never-married, were asked to state the number (or the mostly likely range) of children expected. The value of this kind of information has often been challenged or even denied; criticism is stronger for data elicited from non-married women, but less so when highly educated people are involved (O'Connell and Rogers, 1983). These reservations notwithstanding, data indicate that the unmarried Jewish women stated, on the average, the highest expected number of offspring for the three groups – 2.3 children per woman. Should this number be attained, it would allow for replacement if no more than 10%¹ of these women remain childless. Less surprising was the finding that the white non-affiliated had the lowest expectations of the three groups – two children per woman (Table 6).

The differences between the religious groups are quite small, yet it may be observed that a similar ranking of achieved and expected fertility was found among married couples as well, after controlling for a few critical variables (Sabatello, forthcoming).

TABLE 4. AVERAGE AGE AT FIRST INTERCOURSE AND AT FIRST CONTRACEPTIVE COUNSELLING AND AVERAGE INTERVAL BETWEEN THEM, AMONG SEXUALLY EXPERIENCED NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN LESS THAN 25 YEARS OLD, BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION, U.S., 1982

	Age at 1st sex				Age at 1st contraceptive counselling				Interval (in years) contraceptive counselling - 1st sex			
	White		White no		White		White no		White		White no	
	Jews	Protestants	religion	religion	Jews	Protestants	religion	religion	Jews	Protestants	religion	religion
Total	16.8	16.6	16.5	16.5	16.7	17.4	17.2	17.2	-0.1	0.8	0.7	0.7
Years of schooling												
-13	15.7	15.9	16.1	16.1	15.8	16.9	16.8	16.8	0.1	1.0	0.7	0.7
13+	17.2	17.9	16.9	16.9	17.1	18.6	17.4	17.4	-0.1	0.7	0.5	0.5
Religious services												
Never	17.7	16.5	16.5	16.5	16.2	17.0	17.2	17.2	-1.5	0.5	0.7	0.7
1+ times/year	16.4	16.6	X	X	16.9	17.5	X	X	0.5	0.9	X	X
Living with parents age 14												
Both parents	17.3	16.8	16.7	16.7	17.3	17.7	17.8	17.8	0.0	0.9	1.1	1.1
One or neither	15.3	15.9	16.2	16.2	15.4	16.7	16.3	16.3	0.1	0.8	0.1	0.1
Work status												
Full time	15.0	17.5	17.0	17.0	15.0	18.7	18.1	18.1	0.0	1.2	1.1	1.1
Part time	17.0	16.6	15.8	15.8	16.7	17.5	16.8	16.8	-0.3	1.1	1.0	1.0
Does not work	16.8	16.0	16.4	16.4	16.9	16.5	16.5	16.5	0.1	0.5	0.1	0.1
Used contraceptive method at first intercourse												
Yes	17.0	16.9	16.3	16.3	16.7	17.6	16.8	16.8	-0.3	0.7	0.5	0.5
No	15.8	16.1	16.7	16.7	17.1	17.2	17.9	17.9	1.3	1.1	1.2	1.2
Ever pregnant												
Yes	(17.0)	15.7	15.6	15.6	(17.5)	17.2	16.6	16.6	(0.5)	1.5	1.0	1.0
No	16.8	16.9	16.7	16.7	16.7	17.5	17.3	17.3	-0.1	0.6	0.6	0.6

Source: NCHS, National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle III.

TABLE 5. AGE AT FIRST STEPS IN SEXUAL LIFE OF SEXUALLY EXPERIENCED NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN AND OF MARRIED WOMEN, BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION, U.S., 1982

Step and religious group	Age 15-44, married:			Age <25, never married
	Before 1968	1969-73	1974+	
Average age at 1st intercourse				
Jews	19.5	20.9	20.6	16.8
White Protestants	18.0	18.4	18.0	16.6
Average age at 1st contraceptive counselling				
Jews	23.1	22.9	21.1	16.7
White Protestants	21.9	20.7	19.8	17.4
Interval (in years) between 1st sex and 1st contraceptive counselling				
Jews	3.6	2.0	0.5	-0.1
White Protestants	3.9	2.3	1.8	-0.8
% had 1st sex before 18				
Jews	┌──22──┐		28	69
White Protestants	┌──40──┐		44	70

Source: NCHS, National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle III.

TABLE 6. AVERAGE NUMBER OF CHILDREN EXPECTED BY NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN LESS THAN 25 YEARS OLD, BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND SCHOOLING, U.S., 1982

Schooling	Jews	White Protestants	White no religion
Total	2.27	2.14	1.97
Less than 13 years	2.21	2.07	1.92
13+ years	2.32	2.30	2.06

Source: NCHS, National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle III.

Concluding Remarks

From preliminary analytical efforts to inquire into the type of background more likely to lead unmarried girls to start sexual experience, eight variables have emerged and were selected and run through a stepwise analytical model.

This analysis indicates that the predictor variables for first intercourse overlap to some extent with regard to Jews and white Protestants. Relatively poor schooling and a disrupted family background during adolescence serve as the most powerful antecedents for early sex and, usually, for delayed referral to contraceptive counselling services. Another conclusion from this study is that the entrance into sexual activity of the white non-affiliated population differs both from that of white Protestants and of Jews. In particular, among the never-married, the non-affiliated start sex earlier and with less contraceptive protection than the Jews and their birth expectations are lower.

Our exploratory data suggest that the unmarried Jewish girls of the 1980s share

with their white Protestant and non-affiliated peers the age of entering into sexual activity, but have a clear advantage – in terms of education, awareness and being brought up in unbroken homes to effectively control unwanted premarital pregnancies.

Finally the data on fertility expectations presented here suggest that never-married white American women of the early 1980s, regardless of their religious affiliation, intend to have, if and when married, a number of children that would fall within narrow, and close-to-replacement boundaries; hence, the Jewish women entering marriage in the late 1980s or early 1990s do not seem oriented toward smaller family size than the general white Protestant population of the United States.

Note

1. Available census data for Canadian Jews (who are often considered demographically similar to U.S. Jews) indicate that in 1981, 7.4% of Jewish women 35–44 years old had never been married (Davids, 1985).

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