

Introduction

In this paper we compare retrospective and prospective unwanted fertility measures. Traditional measures of unwanted fertility are often complicated by a desire to report a birth or pregnancy was wanted when it was not or women may change their minds about the wantedness of the conception after the birth. Many problems have been noted with this measure; nevertheless, unwanted fertility affects many aspects of life at the individual level. At the aggregate level unwanted fertility powerfully impacts the total fertility rate. Because of the importance and bias found in traditional unwanted fertility measures we propose to test the robustness of this retrospective measure by examining its congruence with a prospective measure of unwanted fertility.

We use the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79). This nationally representative survey of youth age 14-22 in 1979 has data on retrospective measures of wantedness of each birth for women. Also, the NLSY79 has data on intentions to have another birth for 17 waves and follows women from the beginning until nearly the end of their reproductive years (age 41+ in 2006).

Births are defined as retrospectively unwanted if the mother said that she wanted no more births at the time of conception. Mothers are asked this question about each birth or pregnancy either after they are pregnant or have given birth. Prospectively unwanted births are defined as births in which the mother intended no more births for at least two time periods before the birth occurred (a time period is either 1 or 2 years). The prospective measure is a more objective measure of wantedness, while the retrospective reports are more subjective and depend on factors other than if the pregnancy was actually wanted at the time of conception.

We find that out of 6,328 births with data on retrospective and prospective measures of fertility, 932 (14.7%) births are defined as prospectively unwanted whereas 611 (9.7%) were retrospectively unwanted. There are also conflicting reports as to which births are prospectively unwanted and retrospectively unwanted. For example, 687 births are prospectively unwanted but not retrospectively

unwanted and 366 births are retrospectively unwanted but not prospectively unwanted. Surprisingly, only 245 of these births actually agree on both the retrospective and prospective unwanted reports. This means of the retrospectively unwanted births (611) only about 40% were congruent with the prospective unwanted data. Also, when unwanted fertility is measured prospectively nearly a quarter (24.5%) of women have had unwanted births, in contrast, only 14.1% of women have had unwanted births when using the retrospective measure. If prospective unwanted births are defined more leniently by allowing intentions of no more children to be stated only one time period before the birth rather than two, we find that 19.3% of births are prospectively unwanted and 10.1% of births are retrospectively unwanted.