



# SPOTLIGHT

## Research Brief

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### Are Obese Young Women Less Likely to Have Children?

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Obesity is one of the largest population health problems facing the United States because of its consequences for health and longevity. Obesity also has a profound impact on childbearing. Clinicians have documented physical problems that impede obese women’s ability to become and stay pregnant when they attempt to conceive. Michelle Frisco, a Penn State Population Research Institute (PRI) research associate, has collaborated with Margaret Weden at the RAND Corporation and several alumni of Penn State’s dual-degree Demography PhD program to further understand how obesity affects childbearing. Results from these studies suggest that obesity has long-ranging consequences for lifetime childbearing, not simply consequences at the time of attempted conception. This work also shows that contextual factors can modify the way that body weight influences childbearing.

#### Obese Young Women Have Fewer Children during Their Childbearing Years

Frisco and Weden analyzed data from a national sample of young women ages 20–25 in 1982 to understand how early adult obesity influences lifetime childbearing. These women were followed over time and were at the end of their childbearing years in 2006 when they ranged in age from 44–49. Study results indicate that young women who were obese in 1982 had lower odds of having any children by 2006 compared to young women who were not obese. Obese young women also had

#### Did You Know?

- One in three women ages 20–39 are currently obese.
- One in three adolescents ages 12–19 are currently overweight, and 17% of girls this age are obese.
- Having children is still an important part of US family life: most couples still want to have two children, and few women remain voluntarily childless.
- **Sources:** See references.

#### Related Articles

- Frisco, M. and M. Weden. (2013). [“Early Adult Obesity and U.S. Women’s Lifetime Childbearing Experiences”](#) in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 75, issue 4, pp. 920–932.
- Kane, J. and M. Frisco. (2013). [“Obesity, School Obesity Prevalence, and Adolescent Childbearing among U.S. Young Women”](#) in *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 88, pp. 108–115.
- Frisco, M., M. Weden, A. Lippert, and K. Burnett. (2012). [“The Multidimensional Relationship between Early Adult Body Weight and Women’s Childbearing Experiences”](#) in *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 74, issue 11, pp. 1703–1711.

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fewer children than they intended to have between 1982 and 2006. Frisco and Weden drew from demographic theory on fertility determinants to argue that these long-term consequences of early adult obesity were likely the result of biological factors, such as those uncovered by clinicians, and social factors, such as obese women's reduced ability to find sexual partners.

## **Do Social Settings Influence the Relationship between Obesity and Having Children?**

To further evaluate whether part of the connection between obesity and childbearing is due to social factors, Frisco and her colleagues also examined whether obesity is less consequential in social settings in which women are more likely to find partners. This research has shown that there are cohort differences in the relationship between early adult obesity and lifetime childbearing. Among the individuals studied, early adult obesity was more consequential for the first and second births of women who reached early adulthood before the spike in obesity in the United States in the early 1980s. The findings from this study also indicate that obesity was more consequential for marriage for these women, which suggests that partnership is an important link in the relationship between obesity and childbearing. In another study, Frisco and her colleague Jennifer Buher Kane analyzed data from a national sample of US high school students to show that obese female high school students' odds of childbearing increase as the proportion of obese students in their schools increases. In settings with more obese students, young women have more opportunities to find sexual partners and more opportunities to become pregnant because they are less likely to use contraception than young women who are not obese.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the research of Frisco and her colleagues suggests that the relationship between obesity and childbearing is complicated. Obesity not only impedes women's ability to have children when they attempt conception, but it also has long-term consequences for childbearing over the life course as well as consequences that vary in contexts where young women are more likely to be able to find sexual partners.

## **References**

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