

“The future is unstable”: Exploring the mechanisms for changing fertility intentions in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background

- My name's Alyce and I'm interested in the measurement of reproductive decision making
- I fielded a study in January 2020 testing some questions, and this seemed too good an opportunity to miss to see how COVID-19 may have affected childbearing
- In January 2020 there was lots of doom and gloom from emerging findings predicting 'baby bust'
- Could we detect any changes both quantitatively and qualitatively in reproductive decision-making to support this?

Data

- January 2021
- Web-based survey
- Paid participants (£7/hour)
- Can choose characteristics:
 - Not pregnant and partner not pregnant
 - 200 no child, 200 with 1 child, 200 with 2 children, 100 with 3 or more children
 - UK based





PART 1

Quantitative trends in changing fertility intentions

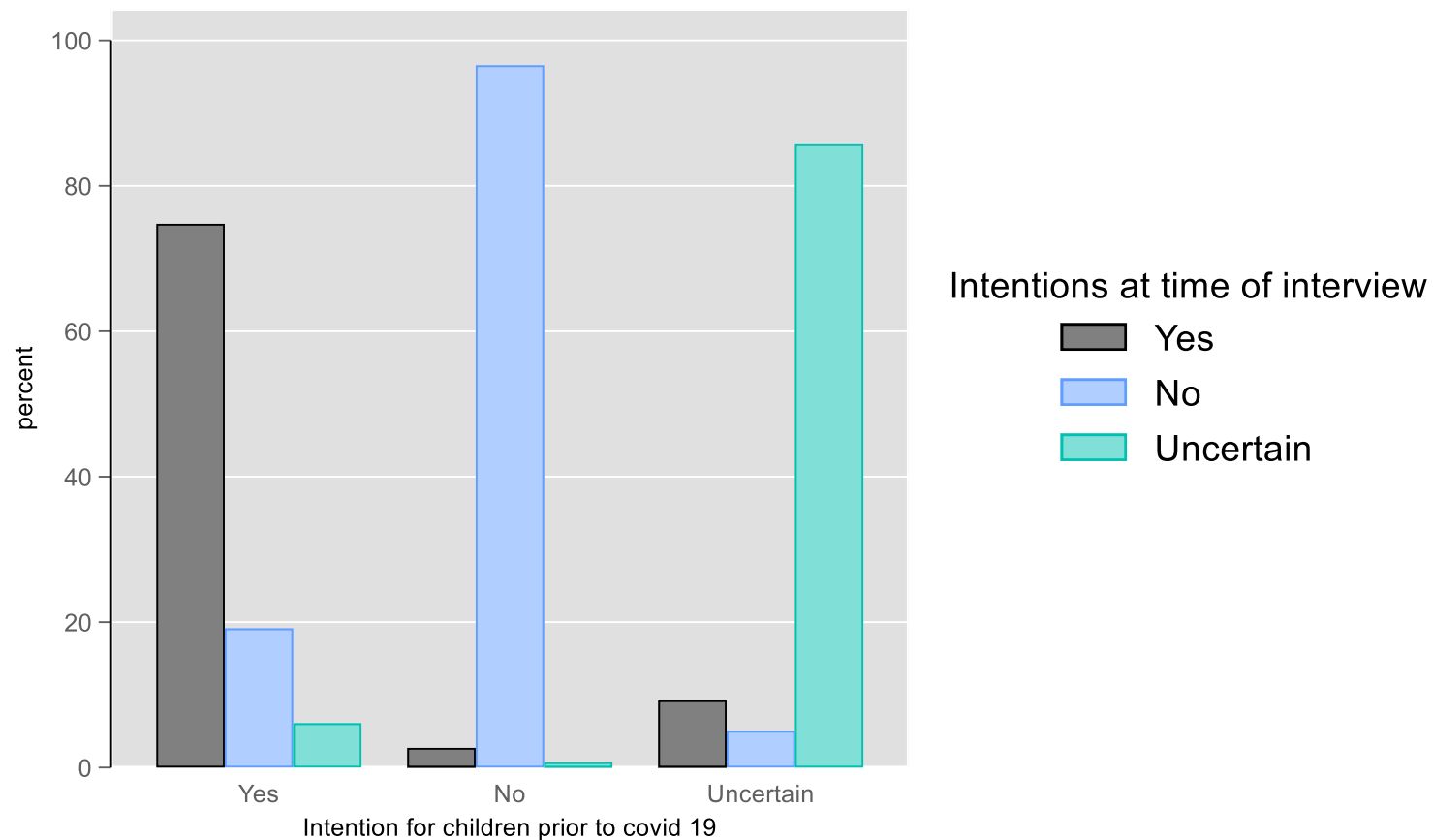
Sample

	Men	Women	Prefer not to say	Total
0 children	80	199	2	281 (36%)
1 child	59	140	1	200 (26%)
2 children	76	124	0	200 (26%)
3+ children	23	78	0	101 (13%)
	238	541	3	782

Directly before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, did you intend to have a (another) child in the next three years?

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Has the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic made you change this intention?

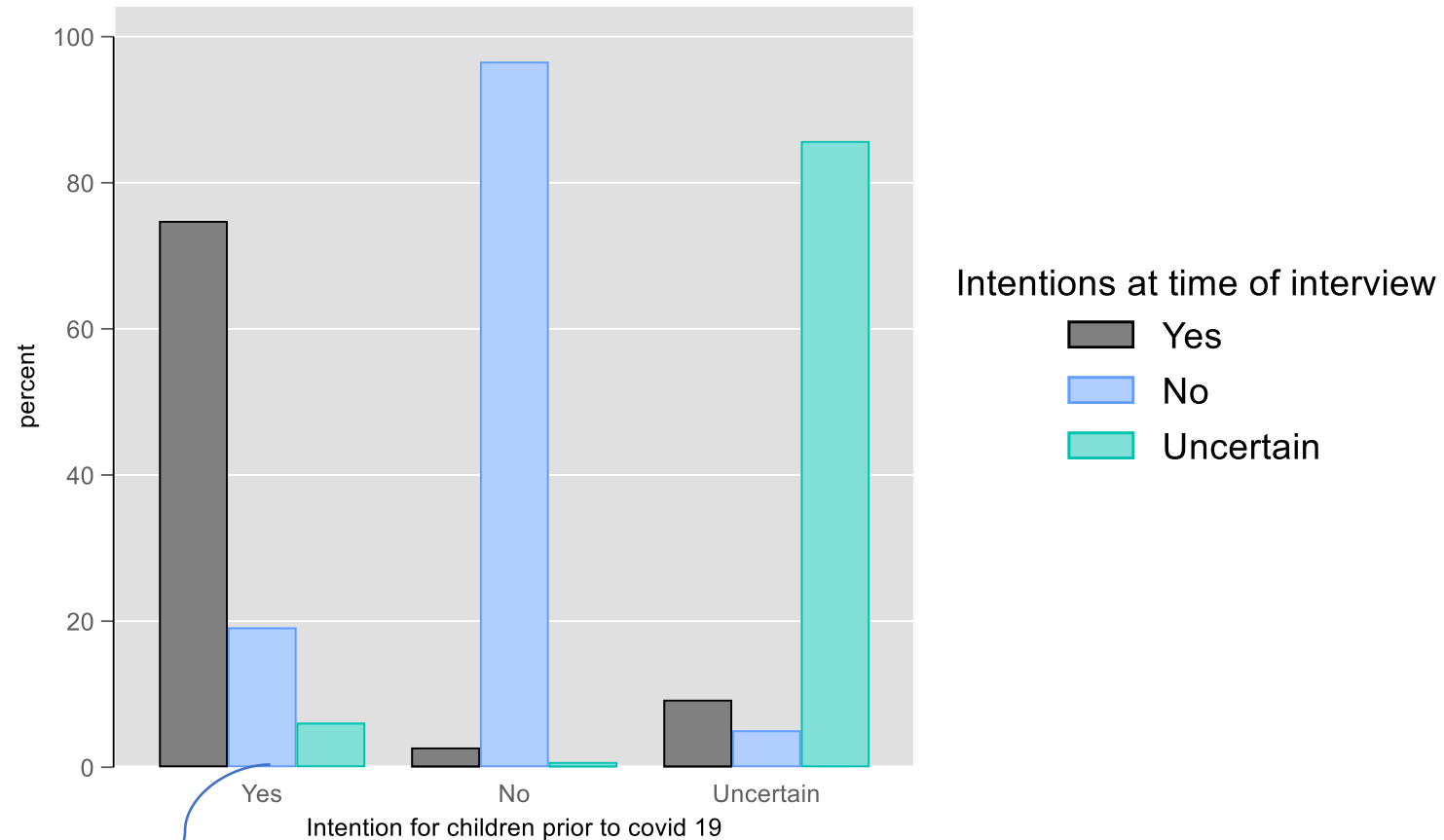


70 people out of 789 changed intentions (8.87%)

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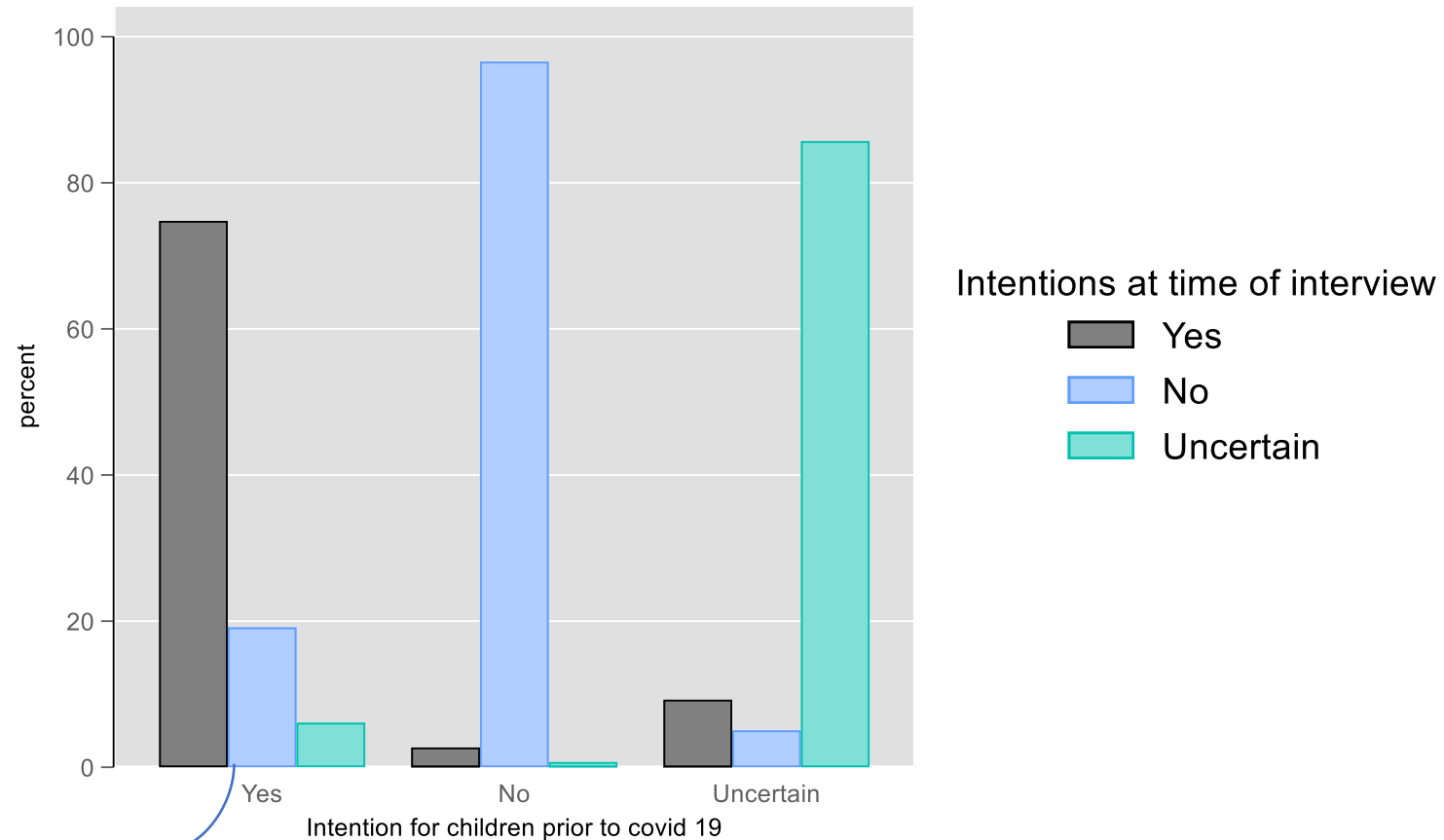


Luppi et al. (2020) : 38-58% of their sample from Germany, UK, France and Spain had postponed their intentions for children. 17-29% had foregone their intentions altogether.

Directly before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, did you intend to have a (another) child in the next three years?

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Has the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic made you change this intention?

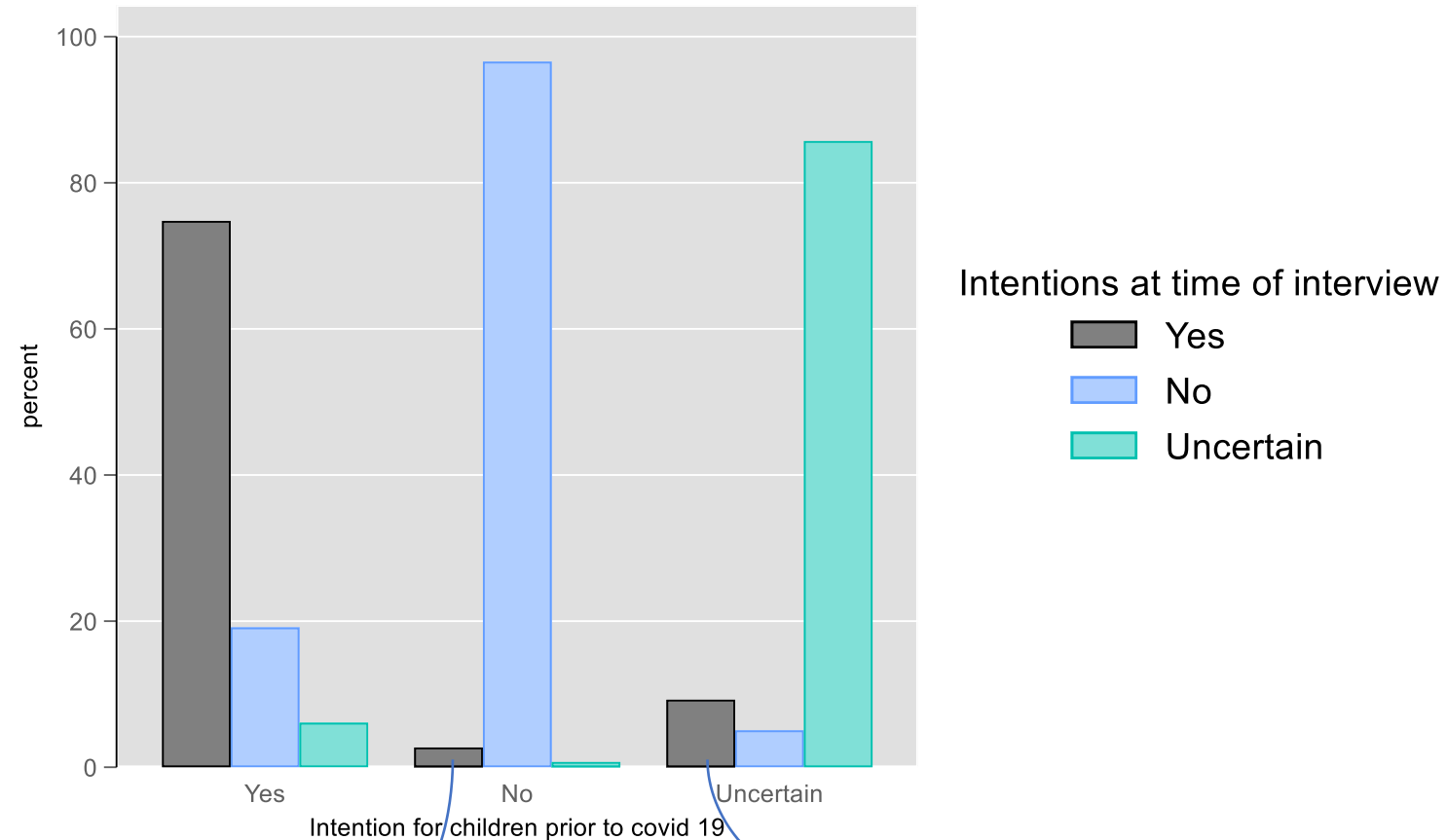


Lindberg et al. (2020) found **34% of women** in their US sample had postponed or foregone their intentions for children.

Directly before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, did you intend to have a (another) child in the next three years?

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Has the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic made you change this intention?

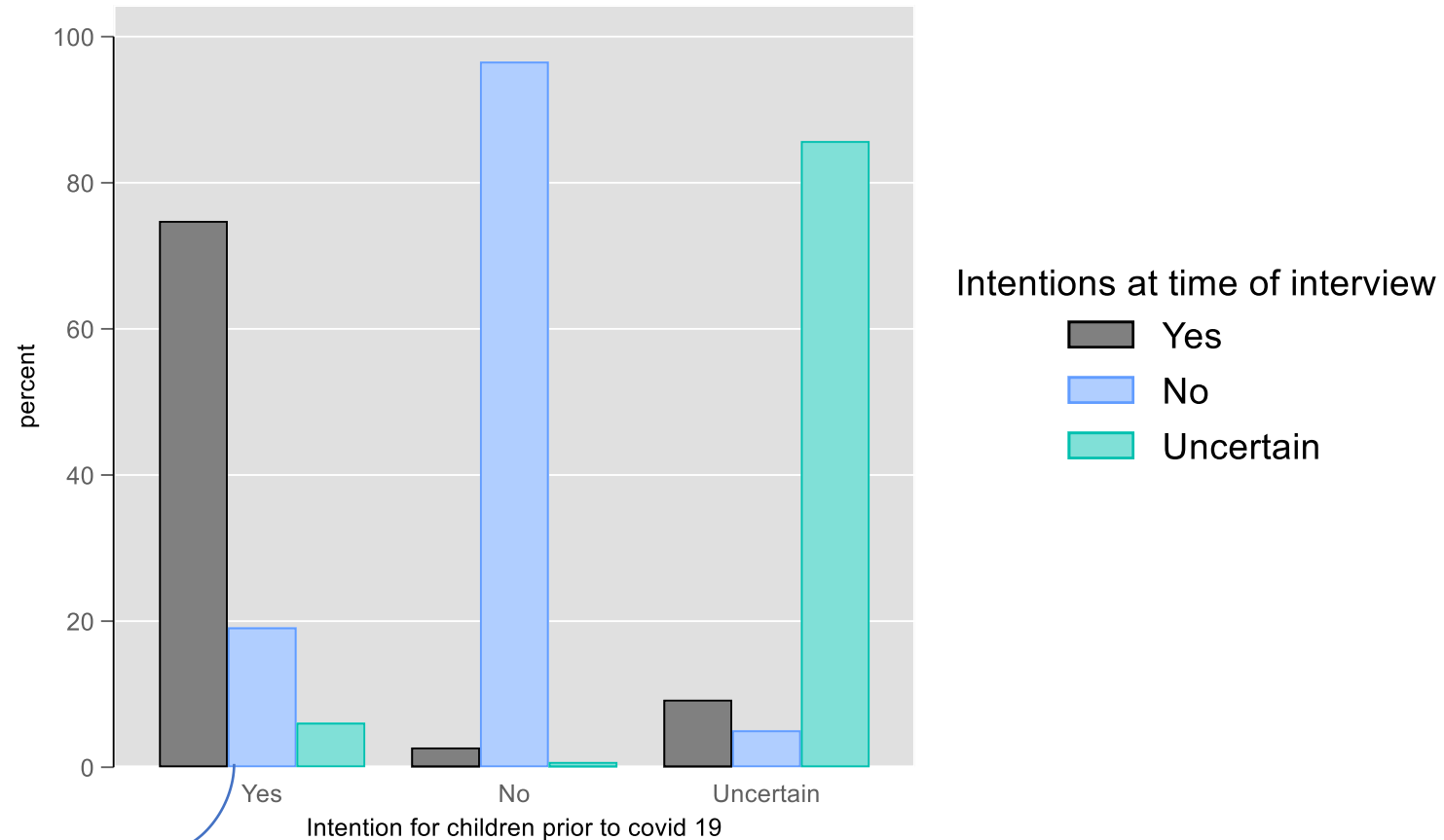


They also found 17% of their sample wanted to have children sooner than they originally planned in response to the pandemic.

Directly before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, did you intend to have a (another) child in the next three years?

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Has the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic made you change this intention?



Malika et al. (2021) found in Poland 16% postponed intentions and 3% foregone intentions

Why did we find minimal change?

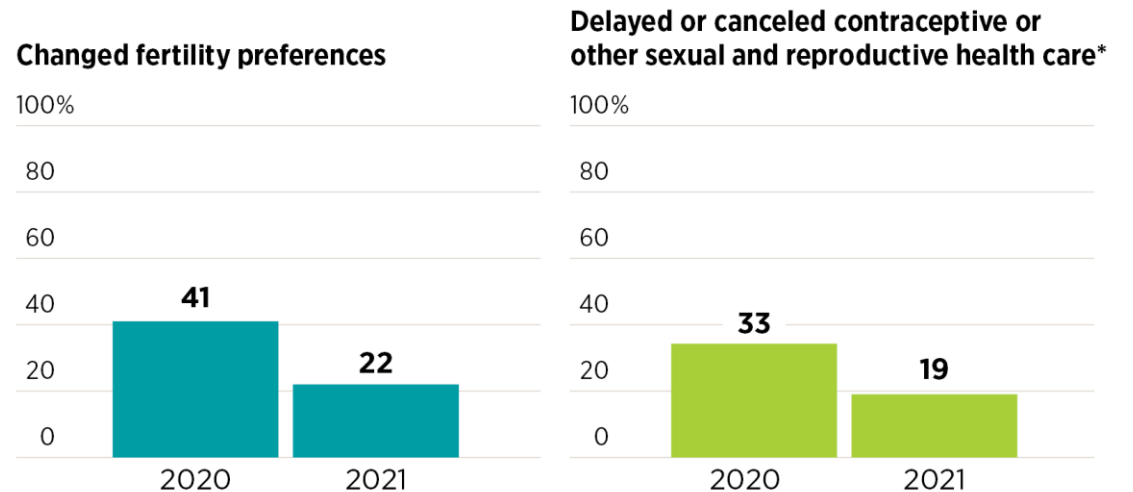
1. Time frame for intention

- My study next 3 years
- Luppi et al. over next year
- Lindberg asked generally how preferences changed

2. Time frame of reference

- My study March 2020 vs 'now' January 2021 (recall bias and different point of pandemic)
- Luppi et al. and Lindberg studies in Spring 2020

FIGURE 2. Fewer respondents in 2021 than in 2020 reported any pandemic-related changes to their fertility preferences or barriers to their sexual and reproductive health care.



*In the past 12 months.

guttmacher.org

Lindberg, L. D. *et al.* (2021) 'The Continuing Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States: Findings from the 2021 Guttmacher Survey of Reproductive Health Experiences'. New York. doi: 10.1363/2020.31482.



PART 2

Qualitative reasoning for changing intentions

Sample

If the COVID-19 pandemic has made you change your intentions related to childbearing, please explain how and why?

	Men	Women	Prefer not to say	Total
0 children	80	199	2	281 (36%)
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2 children	76	124	0	200 (26%)
3+ children	23	78	0	101 (13%)
	238	541	3	782

	Men	Women	Total
0 children	6	24	30 (31%)
1 child	5	20	25 (26%)
2 children	12	23	35 (36%)
3+ children	2	5	7 (7%)
	25	72	97

12% of total sample

1) Health Concerns

- Concerns about being ill (3 women)

“I was unwell with 'influenza A' Feb 2020, whilst 7 months pregnant. I would not want to experience this again whether it was the flu or covid etc.”

Woman, 33, 1 child – Before uncertain, now no intention

1) Health Concerns

- Concerns about being ill (3 women)
- Concerns COVID-19 would harm baby (3 women)

“I wouldn't want to be pregnant during the pandemic, or to risk harming my unborn baby if I caught COVID-19 during pregnancy”

Woman, 30, no children – Before intended, now still intending but postponed

1) Health Concerns

- Concerns about being ill (3 women)
- Concerns COVID-19 would harm baby (3 women)

“Services such as stay and play, social stimulation for children are closed and I feel this could impact a child’s development”

Woman, 29, no children – Before intended, now uncertain

1) Health Concerns

- Concerns about being ill (3 women)
- Concerns COVID-19 would harm baby (3 women)
- Concerns about taking the vaccine while pregnant (4 women)

“Due to the vaccine questioning female’s fertility I have been questioning my intentions of becoming a mother in future much more.” **Woman, 32, no children – Before uncertain, now uncertain**

1) Health Concerns

- Concerns about being ill (3 women)
- Concerns COVID-19 would harm baby (3 women)
- Concerns about taking the vaccine while pregnant (4 women)
- Access to health services (11 participants)

“We got pregnant with our second just before the outbreak with a first terrible pregnancy. I hoped for better than being pregnant in a pandemic with all the uncertainty, it was horrible having no support at appointments and worrying more about your health. I wouldn’t wish to go through all that again.”

Woman, 24, 2 children – Before intended, now no longer intending

1) Health Concerns

- Concerns about being ill (3 women)
- Concerns COVID-19 would harm baby (3 women)
- Concerns about taking the vaccine while pregnant (4 women)
- Access to health services (11 participants)

“I feel the NHS has so much pressure currently I wouldn’t want to be a burden”

Woman, 30, no children – Before intended, now still intending but postponed

2) Costs of the pandemic

- Financial difficulty (5 participants)

“Financial security is a big factor. We are having some cutbacks this year so [having another child is] subject to what happens with employment”

Man, 36, 2 children – Before intended, now still intending but postponed

2) Costs of the pandemic

- Financial difficulty (5 participants)
- Increased childcare burden (7 participants)

“Working from home and also trying to look after a toddler whose nursery has closed has been an absolute nightmare and affected my mental health very badly, so the thought of doing the same but with more than one child is terrifying.”

Woman, 32, 1 child – Before uncertain, now uncertain

2) Costs of the pandemic

- Financial difficulty (5 participants)
- Increased childcare burden (7 participants)
- Trouble meeting a partner (2 participants)

“You cannot meet a partner during covid and I am going on 42 this year.”

Woman, 41, no children – before uncertain, now yes

3) Work-life priorities

- 'Robbed' of career and social opportunities (2 women)

"[Because of] Covid 19 [I've] almost lost a year of my life. I have lost career and social options. So it is making me want to have a child when I am even older than I wanted it before."

Woman, 21, no children – Before no intention, now uncertain

3) Work-life priorities

- 'Robbed' of career and social opportunities (2 women)
- Pandemic made them more appreciative of their current life (2 women)

"They have made me realise more than ever I do not ever want another child. Spending all this extra time with my daughter and it being just us have been a beautiful thing, I wouldn't wish anyone else to come in between that."

Woman, 31, 1 child – Before no intention, now no intention

3) Work-life priorities

- ‘Robbed’ of career and social opportunities (2 women)
- Pandemic made them more appreciative of their current life (2 women)
- Pandemic made them re-evaluate priorities in favour of family (6 participants)

“It has made me more aware that time with family is precious and I should have more children if I want them sooner rather than later.”

Woman, 37, 3 children – before uncertain, now intending

3) Work-life priorities

- ‘Robbed’ of career and social opportunities (2 women)
- Pandemic made them more appreciative of their current life (2 women)
- Pandemic made them re-evaluate priorities in favour of family (6 participants)

“Made me realise life is short and precious. Now I would like another child.”

Woman, 38, 2 children – before no intention, now intending

4) Perceived poor state of society

- Most common reason given (12 participants)

“Why would I want to bring an innocent life into this world when things like covid can break out so easily?”

Woman, 19, no children – Before no intention, now no intention

4) Perceived poor state of society

- Most common reason given (12 participants)

“The Government have been total scum to expecting mothers and their partners. Absolutely inhumane.”

Woman, 34, 1 child – Before intended, now no intention

4) Perceived poor state of society

- Most common reason given (12 participants)

“The future is unstable I feel more now than ever”

Woman, 26, 1 child – Before intended, now uncertain

Rich qualitative findings despite minimal findings in quantitative data

- Highlights value of mixed-method research
- High proportion of responses from women citing issues particular to women.
 - The number of concerns raised by women provides some support to previous findings that the pandemic has had more detrimental effects for women

Rich qualitative findings despite minimal findings in quantitative data

- Two competing mechanisms – one that re-evaluates priorities away from childbearing and one towards it (particularly among those in 30s). Hypothesised previously (Rotkirch, 2020; Berrington *et al.*, 2021), and now demonstrated.

Perceived / actual reduced access to contraception and abortion services	No
Less sex as fewer opportunities to socialise outside the home due to lockdowns	Yes
Increased inter-generational co-residence, less time alone for adults	No
Difficulties in finding and moving to a new home	No
More opportunity for sex among those who moved in together at start of lockdown	No
Concerns re health risks of pregnancy / access for male partners to hospital	Yes
Postponed marriages	No
Isolation from social support, informal childcare less available	Yes
Increased economic uncertainty – job loss, reductions in working hours: Difficulty in affording direct costs of children	Yes
Increased economic uncertainty – job loss, reductions in working hours: Reduced opportunity costs of children	Yes
Working from home could encourage re-thinking of work life balance and less postponement	Yes
More time spent with partner in home	Yes
Wealthier families saving more for costs of children	No

Rich qualitative findings despite minimal findings in quantitative data

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More time spent with partner in home	Yes
Wealthier families saving more for costs of children	No
<i>Perceived poor state of society</i>	Yes

Conclusion

Quantitative and qualitative findings on fertility intentions from a large UK sample

Highlight potential mechanisms for further causal analysis

Bibliography

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