

Birth Control

Baby Boom

1960



Birth Rate Per Thousand Women

Age 15-44, White Women, 1955-1990

Rate Per
1,000

150

100

50

0

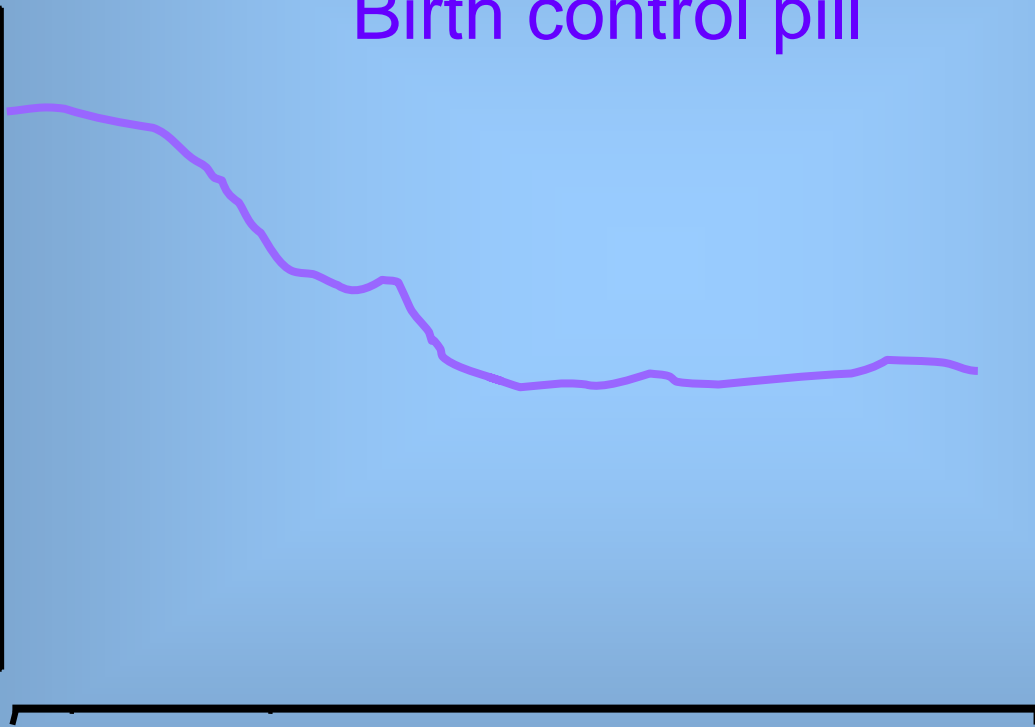
Birth control pill

1960

1970

1980

1990





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Health News

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Four Decades of the Birth Control Pill

By Jeanie Lerche Davis
WebMD Medical News

May 8, 2000 – It was in 1960, the cusp of the women's movement and the sexual revolution, when "the pill" was given formal blessing by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. On May 9, the birth control pill celebrates its 40th birthday. During those four decades, experts say, the pill has been a revolutionary force in the lives of many baby boomer women – and now, their daughters. And its best years may still be ahead.

In 1962, Gloria Feldt was one of the first to try oral contraceptives; today, she is president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

"I'd had three children in a four-year period. I was 20 years old. The pill saved my life ... and my sanity," she says, laughing. "I took those pills instantly with very little question of their safety.

"The pill was the most socially significant medical advance of the century for women," Feldt tells WebMD. "I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that women's reproductive history has changed more since the advent of the pill than in all of previous history. ... When a woman cannot control her fertility, she has very little control over anything else in her life. At last, it was possible for women to control childbearing by taking a pill, safely and very effectively."

Women were also maturing earlier than ever before, says Feldt. "Biologically, we are different than we were a century ago. The pill came along at exactly the right time. Because of the pill's effectiveness, it allowed women to have many choices in life." And many women accepted it immediately, she remembers. "By the time it had been on the market 10 years, there were already 10 million women taking it. It's continued at about that level ever since."

Still, women have not always completely trusted the pill. In the 1970s, as women began wondering about its long-term effects, many turned to intrauterine devices (IUDs). When problems developed with those, many returned to the easy-to-take, once-a-day contraceptive pill, despite their worries.

This all happened against a backdrop of profound social change. But did the birth-control pill bring about the sexual revolution? No, Feldt says. "To imply that the pill caused the revolution has the emphasis on the wrong syllable," she says. "Most human beings have sexual relationships, and most of the time they don't want to risk pregnancy every time they have sex."

"It certainly gave women more freedom, and that is an advance in social justice that is in keeping with democratic values," Feldt tells WebMD. "Can a woman now feel sufficient power over her reproductive capacity that she can make other life choices for herself, like whether she will or will not stay in a bad relationship? Yes."

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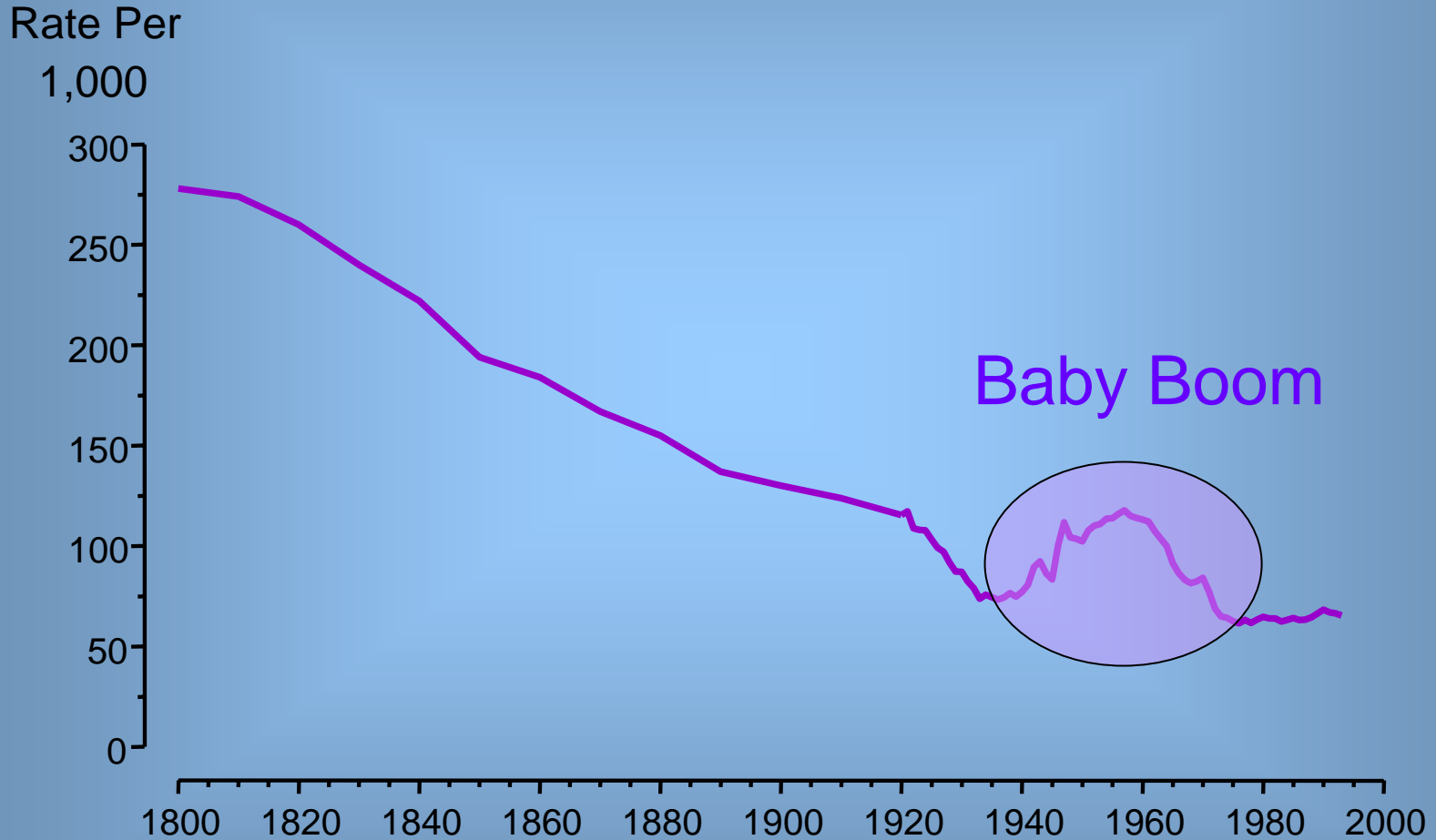
While the pill has changed millions of women's lives and lifestyles, many remain distrustful today. But attitudes are shifting as research reveals the pill's health benefits.

Surveys have found that as recently as 1985, three-quarters of women believed there were "substantial health risks" associated with pill use. In 1993, 54% of women distrusted the pill; in April 2000, 41% of women said they feared it. Women still cite cancer as their number one fear, when, in fact, studies have shown the pill has protective effects against certain types of cancer, says the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

Since 1970, ovarian cancer incidence and deaths have declined among U.S. women between the ages of 35 and 59. A few studies have shown that the duration of contraceptive pill use is a key factor in reducing the risk of ovarian cancer.

Stanford University researchers are among many working to further pinpoint the pill's protective effects. "The study shows

Birth Rate Per Thousand Women Age 15-44, White Women, 1800-1993



Navy Office to obtain sexual favors from the contractors. Yet though he feared getting his no use of contraception. Instead he preferred to men whose pregnancy could be attributed to use frustration, he refrained from penetration sense of contraceptive practices, the birth rate European populations was low, at only thirty to use of the other features of the *European mar-* lows:

First marriage for women: typically 24–26.
 Women to never marry: typically 10–25 percent.
 : typically 3–4 percent of births.

ly large-scale abstinence from sex outside mar- men of reproductive age were unmarried. ore than half of all possible births simply from ed in figure 4.1. The horizontal axis is the num- ir ages. The area of the rectangle gives the total per hundred women, assuming women are fer-

ed nearly a third of possible births. Eschewing at of the remaining births. Thus fertility was re- ne marriage pattern. In addition, since the years ity for women, the proportion of births avoided se would suggest.

1 age at first marriage of women in various Eu- Also shown is the number of children a woman first marriage would have if she lived to age 45- ; the number of children born to the average s roughly calculated, taking into account the il-

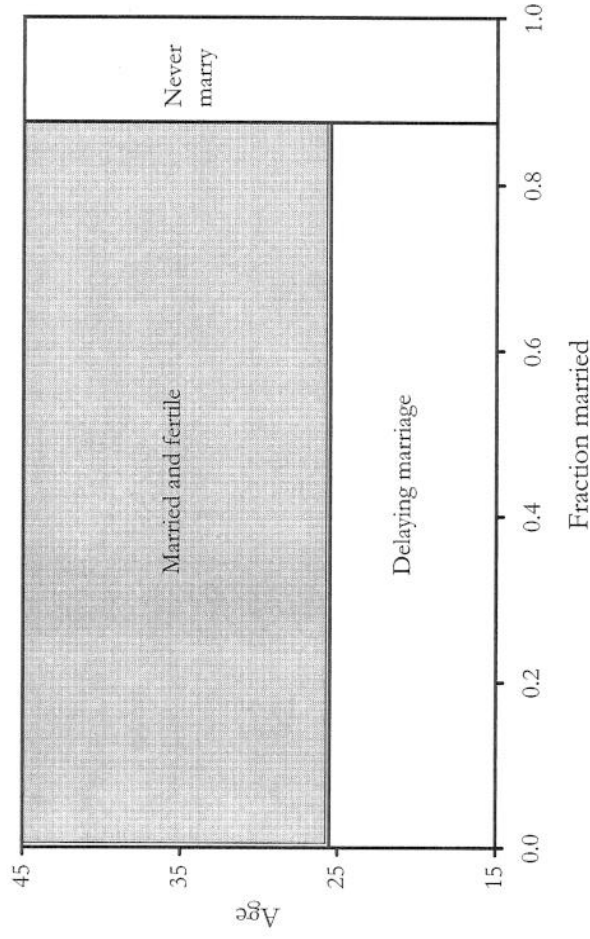


Figure 4.1 The European marriage pattern and fertility.

legitimacy rate and the likely fraction of women never marrying. Before 1790 women in northwestern Europe who survived to age 50 gave birth to between 4.5 and 6.2 children, with a median of 4.9. The median corresponds to a crude birth rate of about 32 per thousand. By implication birth rates in Belgium and France were about 40 per thousand.

East Asian Fertility

When Malthus wrote his various editions of the *Essay on the Principle of Population* he assumed that China represented the full misery of the Malthusian Trap, and that oriental life was miserable as a result of high fertility. Research over the past thirty years, however, suggests that, like preindustrial western Europe and like many forager societies, both China and Japan avoided many potential births. Indeed Asian fertility rates, though arrived at through completely different mechanisms, were likely as low as those in northwestern Europe.

TABLE 8.1

Number of Children under 5 Years Old per 1,000 White Women Age 20-44
in the United States and Various Geographic Regions and in Urban
and Rural Areas, 1800-1940

Region	1800	1810	1820	1830	1840	1910	1920	1930	1940
United States	1,281	1,290	1,236	1,134	1,070	609	581	485	400
Urban	845	900	831	708	701	469	471	388	311
Rural	1,319	1,329	1,276	1,189	1,134	782	744	658	551
New England	1,098	1,052	930	812	752	482	518	441	347
Urban	827	845	764	614	592	468	500	417	321
Rural	1,126	1,079	952	851	800	566	602	541	443
Middle Atlantic	1,279	1,289	1,183	1,036	940	533	539	424	320
Urban	852	924	842	722	711	495	501	386	286
Rural	1,339	1,344	1,235	1,100	1,006	650	680	590	457
East North-Central	1,840	1,702	1,608	1,467	1,270	555	548	458	388
Urban	...	1,256	1,059	910	841	470	485	400	326
Rural	1,840	1,706	1,616	1,484	1,291	672	668	605	533
West North-Central	...	1,810	1,685	1,678	1,445	630	584	495	431
Urban	1,181	705	426	416	365	324
Rural	...	1,810	1,685	1,703	1,481	760	711	614	538
South Atlantic	1,345	1,325	1,280	1,174	1,140	760	694	593	464
Urban	861	936	881	767	770	485	458	401	305
Rural	1,365	1,347	1,310	1,209	1,185	894	851	744	596
East South-Central	1,799	1,700	1,631	1,519	1,408	817	734	655	539
Urban	...	1,348	1,089	863	859	469	441	414	33
Rural	1,799	1,701	1,635	1,529	1,424	922	846	781	648
West South-Central	...	1,383	1,418	1,359	1,297	845	686	584	474
Urban	...	727	866	877	846	504	445	410	342
Rural	...	1,557	1,522	1,463	1,495	977	823	723	591

Source: Donald Bogue, *The Population of the United States* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959): 307.

not long after intensive settlement has begun, when perhaps as little as 20 to 40 percent of the cultivable farmland has been settled, when the land is far from "full settled" (Figure 8.3). Fertility decline is especially marked when less than 40 percent of the potential cultivable land remains.

Population trends in the South have tended to be ignored in the debate over differences between eastern and midwestern fertility rates. The data for

FIGURE 8.8

A Schematic of Demographic Transition

