

Fertility

Women's fertility declined during the early decades of the century, increased during the baby boom, and declined sharply thereafter.

Early in the century, the total fertility rate stood at 3.8 children per woman, down from about 8 children per woman in 1790. The total fertility rate is an artificial measure of the average number of children that women have during their lifetimes. Specifically, it is the average number of children that a woman would have if, throughout her childbearing years, she experienced the prevailing fertility rate for each age group. A total fertility rate of 2.1 represents the generation-to-generation replacement level, under current mortality conditions. At that rate, a woman would produce one daughter who survives to childbearing age, yielding neither population gain nor loss over time, apart from immigration.

The total fertility rate of 3.8 children per woman in the first decade of the twentieth century was part of a longer-term decline that began during the nation's industrial revolution in the nineteenth century and continued until 1930, hovering near the replacement level during the decade that followed. The baby boom brought the rate up to a peak of 3.8 children per woman in 1957, but an even sharper decline in fertility ensued after 1960. The rate dipped slightly below the replacement level in 1972 and remained in that zone thereafter, reaching a record low of 1.8 in 1976, and then rising slightly in subsequent decades. During the last quarter of the century, the fertility of U.S. women remained below the replacement level.

The total fertility rate of nonwhite women was about one child greater than that of white women in the early 1900s, 4.9 versus 3.6 children per woman. The fertility gap narrowed in the decades that followed, but returned to a difference of one child more per woman from 1953 to 1966. In subsequent years, however, the nonwhite-white gap in women's fertility narrowed steadily. In 1997, the fertility rate for nonwhites was 2.2 children per woman compared with 2.0 for their white counterparts.

Most of the reduction in fertility was accomplished technically by contraception and the advent of legal abortion. Condoms were the most common method of birth control for married couples in 1935. Oral contraceptives replaced condoms as the modal form of birth control by 1973. By the end of the century, surgical sterilization was the most common method of birth control for married couples.

Reliable statistics about abortion in the early part of the century are impossible to obtain. The gradual state-by-state legalization of abortion accelerated suddenly in 1973, when the Supreme Court struck down most restrictions in its *Roe v. Wade* decision. The number of legal abortions began a steep climb, reaching about 1.5 million in 1980, then declining somewhat to 1.4 million in 1996. The principal effect of abortion was to reduce the number of nonmarital births; more than 80 percent of abortion patients were unmarried.

Total Fertility Rate
Lifetime number of children per woman

