



REAL GEOGRAPHY

EXPLORING THE GEOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

McGraw-Hill Higher Education

The Shrinking American Family by Jon C. Malinowski, Ph.D.

Discussions of population and demography often make a distinction between the low birthrates of the developed world and the high birthrates of the developing world. While this true, for the most part, it's important to remember that the birthrates of the developed world only recently declined.

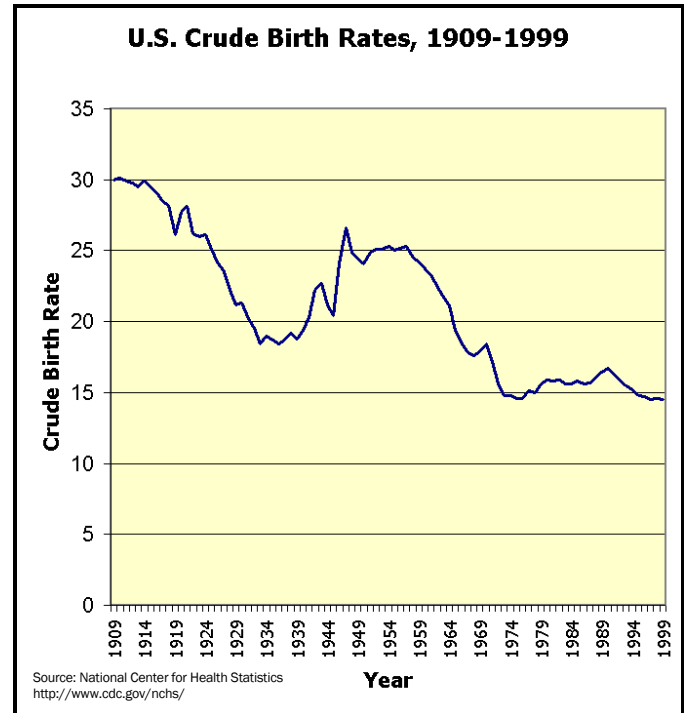
In the United States, birthrates have changed drastically since colonial times. At the beginning of the 19th century, women in the United States averaged over seven births during a lifetime. This had dropped to about 3.5 in 1900, and today that number

is just about two.

The table at right shows how birthrates have declined during the past century. In 1909, the birthrate was about 30 births for every 1000 people in the United States. This level is quite similar to the numbers shown by many developing countries today. Births declined fairly steadily until World War II, when births increased a bit.

Following the war, birthrates shot up again, marking the period known as the "Baby Boom", which lasted until the early 1960s. Following the Boom, birthrates declined and have generally stayed around 15 per 1000 since the 1970s. Notice, however, that there is a small increase in the late 1980s and early 1990s as many of the Baby Boomers started families.

The reasons for declining birthrates in the United States are numerous. During the past century, a greater percentage of Americans found themselves living in urban areas, where large families can present space problems. Corresponding to this was a decline in the



number of full-time farm families, who typically had large families to help with farm labor.

In addition, the past century has seen an increase in the availability and use of contraception by Americans. This is particularly relevant for the for the period of the late 1960s, when oral contraceptives became widely available.

Educational and employment opportunities for women outside of the home have also increased, delaying the age that a woman would likely have a first child. Some scholars have also suggested that Americans are increasing choosing to forgo having children to enjoy the material benefits of our consumer-oriented economy.

Further Research

1. Do a survey in your class or dorm about the family sizes of your peers. Ask about the size of their families, then about the sizes of their parents and grandparents families. Does the data reflect the changes discussed in this article?
2. Investigate how urban and rural populations have changed in the past two centuries. Does this have any connection to birthrates?
3. Now that you know a bit more about how birthrates have declined in the past two centuries, how have mortality rates changed during the same period? Can declining death rates affect birth rates? How?

Links:

- Statistical Abstract of the United States <http://www.census.gov/statab/www/>
- Ameristat <http://www.ameristat.org>
- Historical Census Browser <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/>