

Unintended Pregnancy and Abortion in Comparative Perspective

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My 10 minutes... A view from “20,000 feet”

- Four Points
- A Little U.S. Trend Data

- Four points # 1

Controlling the timing/number of births is important for individuals, families, and populations. Births have externalities/consequences .. and thus are targets of social control and individual strategizing.

- Four points # 2

The task of “birth control” is not easy! Unintended pregnancies occur. Their prevalence varies across populations. The U.S. has high levels of unintended pregnancy – roughly ½ of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unintended at conception... and this has been true for 40 years!

- Four points # 3

Abortion = Prob (UnPreg) * Prob (Abort/UnPreg)

Part A of understanding variation in abortion is variation in unintended pregnancy.

Part B: By definition an unintended pregnancy is a “conjuncture” (-- a combination of circumstances or events usually producing a crisis, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary). How can the conjuncture be resolved?

- *Four points # 3 contid*

- How can the conjuncture (unintended pregnancy) be resolved?

- a. suicide
- b. infanticide / maltreatment



A live birth does not guarantee appropriate care and nurturing.

These are five-month old girl-boy twins. The mother-in-law took the girl at birth and bottle fed her. The son stayed with his mother.

Fig. 13.2 At birth the female twin was taken by the mother-in-law and bottle-fed, while the son remained with his mother and was breast-fed. When they were reunited at five months of age at a clinic, the difference between them was all too apparent. Intervention was too late. The bottle-fed daughter, long and marasmus, died shortly after this photograph was taken. (Photograph by G. Neger Rahmes, courtesy of Dr. Markey & Ellen, Children's Hospital, Montreal)

Hoby, Mother Nature. 1999. p323

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- How can the conjuncture (unintended pregnancy) be resolved?

- a. suicide
- b. infanticide / maltreatment
- c. **infant abandonment / adoption (historical)**



Foundling wheel at the "[Ospedale degli Innocenti](#)" in [Florence](#).

Kertzner (1993; Table 5.1) counted 1163 "wheels open in early 19th century" Italy – almost all in the north.

Less than 1/2 of abandoned infants survived a year. "Established to prevent infanticide, the foundling homes became slaughterhouses themselves." (Kertzner 1993:138. *Sacrificed for Honor*)



Le Départ en Nourice (The Departure for the Wet Nurse), by Jean Baptiste Greuze, 1780

Mortality of infants sent to the countryside to be wet nursed was very high.

Contemporary adoption seems a much more promising option for 21st Century babies... but it is a rare choice for a U.S. woman to "give her baby up" for adoption (at birth to nonrelatives). Why? Clearly viewed as unnatural/inappropriate in the U.S. context.

Maybe 10,000 (?) U.S. babies adopted per year by nonrelatives... Roughly a 2 or 3 per 1,000 births (Remember 50% of pregnancies are unintended!)

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- How can the conjuncture (unintended pregnancy) be resolved?
 - a. suicide
 - b. infanticide / maltreatment
 - c. **infant abandonment / adoption**
 - d. abortion
 - e. legitimating (shot gun) marriage/union
 - f. single parenthood
 - g. (and for the "married") ..a couple can have a birth earlier than planned or a family size larger than planned

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- Four points # 4

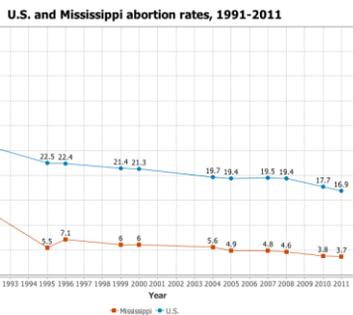
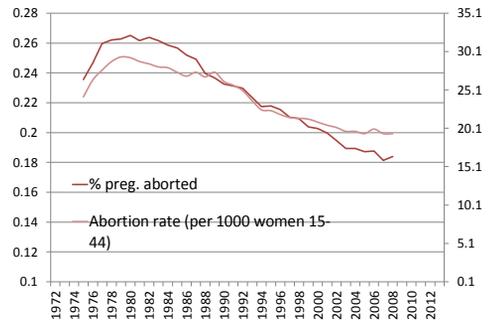
These are not desirable options! (And this is an exhaustive list!) A "good choice" is the "best choice" -- choices are constrained by ideological and material aspects of the culture and by the circumstances of the pregnant woman.

Thus abortion varies dramatically across place, time and social location.

U.S. Trend Data

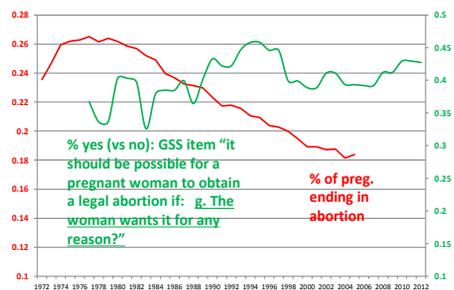
Allan Guttmacher Institute
<http://www.guttmacher.org/>

Abortion Trends over the last 40 years



<http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/sfaa/mississippi.html>

Abortion trends and Attitudes: The last 40 years



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