

Contraceptive Use among Mormons, 1965-75

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THROUGH THE MID-1960s the Utah birth rate has paralleled that of the nation as a whole. Since 1965, however, the Utah birth rate has risen, diverging sharply from the U.S. rate which has generally stabilized. The U.S. rate was probably affected by the use of new, more effective contraceptives (such as birth control pills and IUDs). The rising Utah birth rate, on the other hand, may be a reaction to the anticontraceptive statements published during the mid-1960s by leaders of the LDS Church. (See First Presidency statement of 14 April 1969 and *Church News* editorials during the late 1960s and early '70s.) If Church members whole-heartedly accepted these statements, one would expect to see a decline in the use of birth control among Mormons during the early seventies.

To examine patterns of contraceptive use, we extracted all data for women who classified themselves as Mormon in the 1965, 1970, and 1975 National Fertility Studies. Unfortunately, reliable data since that time are unavailable. The National Fertility Study was discontinued in 1975 and replaced by the National Survey of Family Growth. But in that study the Church of Christ, The Church of Jesus Christ, and The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints responses have also been categorized as Mormon. To reduce any confounding influence of marital status or race, data for those women whose first marriage was not still intact and nonwhites were excluded. The sample sizes are very small (ranging from 70 to 117). Furthermore, studies of contraceptive use and fertility which contain a reliable sample of Mormons,

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and which permit comparisons over time, are nonexistent. Thus, the observations cannot be regarded as conclusive.

The percentages in Table 1 do not support the hypothesis that the Utah fertility rate is a consequence of a particular Mormon theology opposed to birth control. In 1965 and 1970, the percentage of Mormon couples who had ever used birth control was comparable to that of white married Protestant couples and ten percent higher than that of Catholics. By 1975, 96 percent of the Mormons had at some time used contraceptives — a slight increase over time. Thus, the high usage of birth control among Mormons suggests that their high fertility is the result of some factor other than acceptance of an anticontraceptives ideology.

Table 2 shows the patterns and timing of the use of birth control methods among Mormons in this sample. We have ranked birth control methods according to their effectiveness and modernity with 1 being the most effective and modern and 3 being the least. Those reporting no use are ranked as 4. Each case was categorized by the one most effective method used by the respondent in the specified interval. Between marriage and the birth of the first child (the first interval), half of the women did not use any method of birth control. For the period between the first and second child (the second interval), both an overall shift toward more effective methods and a 20 to 30 point decrease in the percentage of respondents in category 4 are evident. Yet another shift toward more effective methods is evident, over time, among those who have ever used birth control. (See the third column of the table.) The difference between first-interval and second-interval contraceptive use is increased use of condoms, diaphragms, and foam. The difference over time, for those respondents who have ever used birth control methods, is increased use of the pill, IUDs, or sterilization. Considering that some of these respondents had few

TABLE 1
PERCENT OF PROTESTANTS, CATHOLICS, AND MORMONS
WHO HAVE EVER USED BIRTH CONTROL
(white married couples)

	YEAR		
	1965	1970	1975
Protestants†	87%	88%	—‡
(n)	(2666)	(3708)	
Catholics†	77%	81%	—‡
(n)	(1090)	(1225)	
Mormons	87%	90%	96%
(n)	(70)	(117)	(71)

† Source: Charles F. Westoff and Larry Bumpass, "The Revolution in Birth Control Practices of U.S. Roman Catholics," *Science* 179:41-44. (Table 5)

‡ Comparable Protestant and Catholic 1975 National Fertility Study data are not yet published.

TABLE 2
 CONTRACEPTIVE USE AMONG MORMONS DURING THE
 FIRST AND SECOND BIRTH INTERVALS,
 AND THOSE WHO HAVE EVER USED BIRTH CONTROL

	<i>First Interval</i>	<i>Second Interval</i>	<i>Ever Used</i>
1965			
1. Pill, IUD, Sterilization	3%	8%	34%
2. Condom, Diaphragm, Foam	36%	51%	46%
3. Rhythm, Abstinence	10%	14%	7%
4. None	51%	28%	13%
(n)	(70)	(65)	(70)
1970			
1. Pill, IUD, Sterilization	24%	25%	64%
2. Condom, Diaphragm, Foam	18%	38%	21%
3. Rhythm, Abstinence	6%	9%	5%
4. None	52%	28%	10%
(n)	(117)	(97)	(117)
1975			
1. Pill, IUD, Sterilization	23%	23%	66%
2. Condom, Diaphragm, Foam	24%	45%	20%
3. Rhythm, Abstinence	4%	13%	10%
4. None	49%	19%	4%
(n)	(71)	(64)	(71)

or no children at the time of the survey, the percentage of those who never used birth control is very low.

The major change across time is a shift toward the use of more effective and modern methods of birth control. Especially between 1965 and 1970 is this evident. Among those who ever used contraceptives, there is a 30 point increase in the use of the pill, IUD, and sterilization from 1965 to 1970. Similar increases were also apparent in the data for both the first- and second-interval percentages. Patterns of use changed little from 1970 to 1975. It thus appears that Mormons, like other groups, accepted advances in birth-control technology during the latter part of the 1960s.

Bush concludes that high Mormon fertility rates are more a consequence of the value Mormonism places on children than of polemics against birth control. He goes on to note that for many Mormons "the greatest personal impact of the Church stand on birth control has been the emotional discomfort caused by the strained rationalizations used to reconcile personal practices with their view of the Church position."¹ There is qualified support for this position.

¹ Lester E. Bush, "Birth Control Among the Mormons: Introduction to an Insistent Question," *DIALOGUE* 10 (Autumn 1976): 12-44.

Mormons appear as likely as other religious groups to practice some form of birth control and are willing to try the most modern, effective methods. Yet they continue to have substantially larger families than the national norm because they adopt contraceptive use relatively late.

For some families, delaying birth control until after the arrival of the first or second child is undoubtedly consistent with a desire to begin a family soon after marriage. In other cases, however, failure to practice birth control during the first and/or second birth intervals may be based on a belief that to do so would be contrary to Church teachings. Perhaps only when these individuals are faced with the reality of caring for children do they reconsider the acceptability of birth control. In these cases, an anticontraceptives theology may result in shorter birth intervals and subsequent higher fertility than would occur in the absence of the theology. Whatever the rationale, there is no evidence in these data that the use of birth control methods by Mormons has decreased since 1965.