

Inequality and Unintended Births in the United States

In the United States, despite generally high levels of access to contraception, nearly one in three births takes place to women who did not want to have a child at the time, a proportion that has remained largely stable since the 1980s. Unintended births are an indicator of constraints on autonomy and self-determination. They take place disproportionately to women with lower levels of education and economic resources, and they are associated with worse outcomes for both mothers and children. Early unintended births are also linked to distinctive patterns of later childbearing and family formation. Thus, unintended births compound inequality in the United States.

In this presentation, I describe trends over time in the distribution of unintended births in the United States and the degree to which early unintended births are followed by distinctive childbearing and family trajectories. I consider the extent to which these patterns may be explained by access to contraception and abortion, as well as the contributions of larger systems of inequality. I reflect on these findings in the context of growing constraints on reproductive autonomy and justice in the United States.