The Plunging Birthrate - The New York Times

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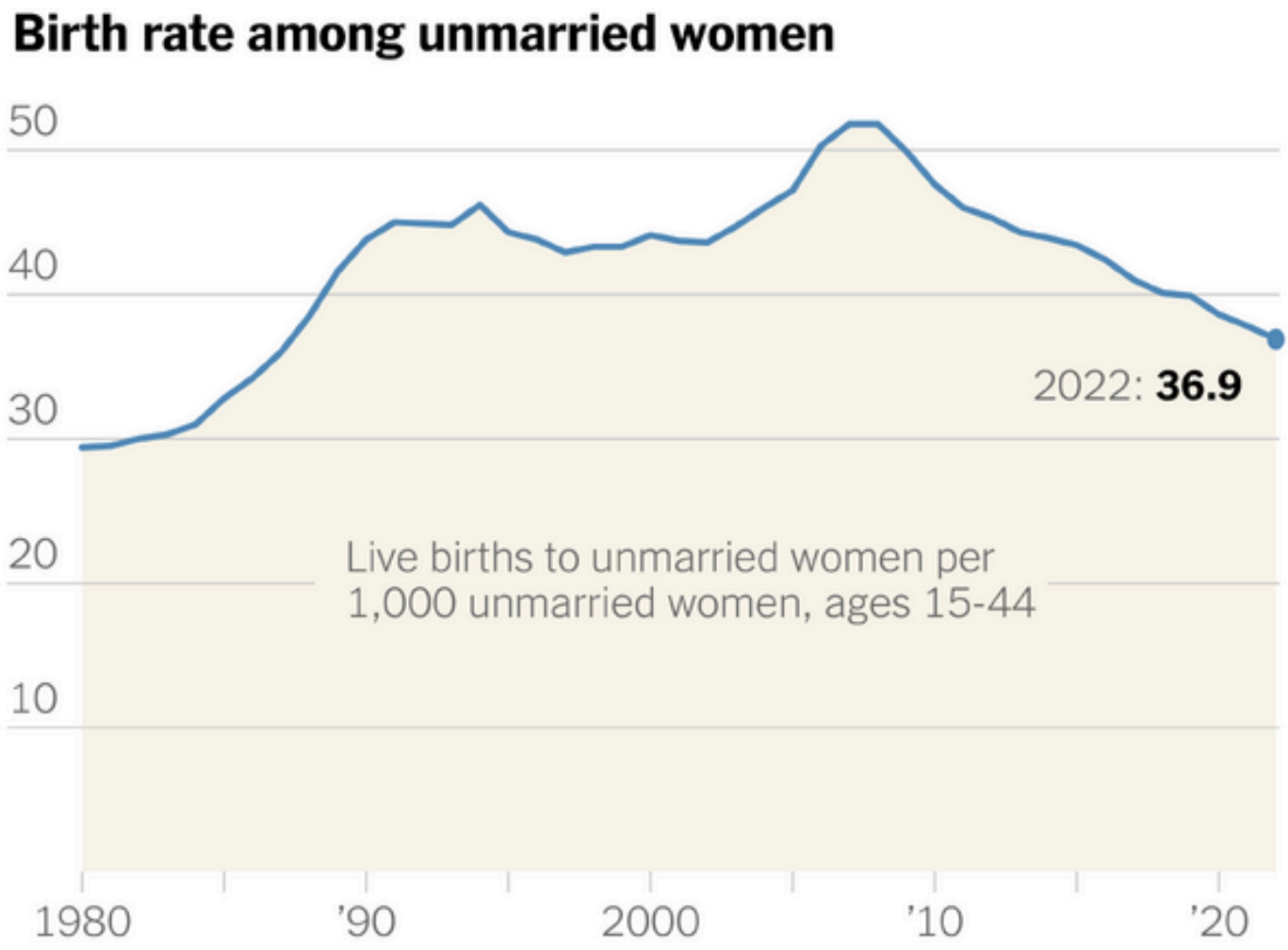
Here's a startling statistic. The nation's birthrate — that is, the number of live births per 1,000 people in a given year — is down by more than 25 percent since 2007, when the decline began.

A falling birthrate looks scary. As our population ages, we'll need workers (and the taxes they pay) to replace and support retirees. Immigrants fill some of the gaps, but the Trump administration is not letting many into the country.

That puts pressure on American women. Some conservatives say the steep decline in our birthrate is the triumph of their selfishness over their sacrifice, my colleague Sabrina Tavernise reports. It's an easy caricature: Privileged, highly educated women have chosen cats over children and are straining the fabric of American society. A paper last month from the Heritage Foundation argued that "when a nation fails to preserve the family, the state soon fails to preserve itself."

But there's another way of looking at the decline: as a success story. A large part of the decrease in births, scholars told Sabrina, comes from teenagers and women in their early 20s, people who are the least likely to want children, or to be able to provide for them.
Those numbers are startling, too: The teenage birthrate is down by 70 percent since 2007. And the unmarried birthrate is down by 30 percent. Remember "16 and Pregnant" on MTV, the whole "Teen Mom" franchise that followed it? That's no longer the story of America.

Image



Credit...Source: Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. Karl Russell/The New York Times

I asked Sabrina about that yesterday. “It used to be that the only people who put off having kids were college girls from more privileged backgrounds,” she told me. “But now it’s everybody, with teenagers and less-educated women leading the charge. The stereotype is a Berkeley Ph.D. poetry student. But the reality is a community-college student, the daughter of Mexican immigrants whose mother had her as a teenager.”

A demographer she spoke to put it differently. “We spent decades shaming women for having kids under the wrong circumstances, for not having their ducks in a row,” she said. “Now they are holding up their end of the bargain.”

Children, eventually

Researchers point to a number of possible explanations for the decline, including the spread of reliable contraception, such as implants and I.U.D.s. (Sabrina talked to one economist who pointed to the rise of the smartphone: For some couples, screen time can be as a substitute for sex.)

Also, women she spoke to said they wanted to establish themselves — to secure a degree or a stable job — before having a child.

Image



Hope BechaverCredit...Rachel Woolf for The New York Times

Hope Bechaver, 30, is one of them. When she was 13, she told Sabrina, she had to care for her younger brothers, 2 and 4, while her father worked. “Sometimes I picture having a kid, and I think of that overload — two kids, both in diapers,” she said. Now married, she said she has no desire to have a child.

Hope is happy, at peace and absolutely not alone. Almost half of the country's 30-year-old women are childless. In 1976, it was just 18 percent.

Still, the overwhelming majority of American women want children eventually, according to surveys — ideally two children. And they're getting them. Another economist Sabrina spoke to worked up a study of two sets of women at the end of their childbearing years: the oldest millennials and the youngest Boomers. She found something surprising. The number of children born to women by the time they turn 44 hasn't dropped at all.
Women in their early 30s now have the highest birthrate of any group. And a woman in her early 40s is more likely to give birth than a teenager. It's too early to say whether those pregnancies will be enough to help the U.S. reverse the ill effects of a falling birthrate. Demography moves slowly.

But Sabrina's a member of Generation X (as I am) and grew up during a moral panic about teen pregnancy. So the data caught her by surprise. "That a woman in her early 40s is more likely to give birth than a teenager," she said, "that is so different from the era I grew up in."

Meet the women Sabrina spoke to here.