

While giving birth today poses potential risks to both mother and baby, the severity of these risks is significantly lower than it was between 1915 and 1932. Using data from the 1924 census, we can conclude that the percentage of children who died while under the age of one during this year was 7.1%,<sup>1</sup> while the percentage of these deaths in 2016 was only 0.59%.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the primary reason for the staggering difference in these numbers is due to advances in medical technology and understanding of child development, albeit, the lack of support for mothers and babies in the early twentieth century can also be viewed as a cause of the high mortality rate among infants. However, numbers can't show us the direct concerns of American mothers during this time. The letters compiled in Molly Ladd-Taylor's book, "Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mother's Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932" provide a look at these concerns. Evidently the lack of governmental support for mothers and the various struggles they faced daily, as shown in these letters, show American women's need for birth control during the early twentieth century, and the importance of its availability to women today.

During the years between 1914 and 1921 almost one and a half million copies of "Infant Care," a pamphlet created by the Federal Children's Bureau, were distributed within the United States.<sup>3</sup> Mothers were anxious about meeting the highest societal standards in terms of child care; and the establishment of the Children's Bureau in 1912,<sup>4</sup> made access to the most recent

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<sup>1</sup> United States. Bureau of the Census, *Birth Statistics for the Birth Registration Area of the United States: Annual Report* (Washington, DC: Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census; sold by the Supt. of Docs.; U.S. Govt. Print, 1925), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Infant Health" in "National Center for Health Statistics," [<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/infant-health.htm>,] March 31, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Alice Boardman Smuts, *Science in the Service of Children, 1893-1935* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 82.

advice on prenatal and postnatal care for babies as well as obstetric health for mothers available to women all over the country.<sup>5</sup> The advice given out by the Bureau was bible to women living in rural America, often serving as their only connection to professional guidance on the subject. The work of the Children's Bureau and the women behind it kickstarted the era of childcare that we know today, ushering in the idea that children were the future of America, and that their value went beyond economic means.<sup>6</sup> The motto of the Bureau was "A Right to Childhood,"<sup>7</sup> and this became a theme for the way mothers across the country raised their children.

Through the efforts of founder, Julia Lathrop, and many others, the Children's Bureau began to provide women the help they needed. They were getting answers to their questions and they put the advice they received into practice without question. Soon, however, women were asking questions that couldn't be answered in a simple letter or informational pamphlet; they wanted to know how the government was going to help them feed their babies when, despite the back-breaking work themselves and their husbands were enduring, they could not. How was the government going to help them get medical care for their sick babies when they lived miles from the nearest doctor? If the government agreed that their children were the future of America, why weren't they willing to help support them?

It was questions like these that drove the women of the Bureau and their supporters to fight for more government funding, in order to help ease the burden that many of these women and their families carried. However, receiving additional funding would prove to be a fight for

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<sup>5</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 1-6.

<sup>6</sup> Kriste Lindenmeyer, "A Right to Childhood," *The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>7</sup> Kriste Lindenmeyer, "A Right to Childhood," *The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1997), 9.

them, starting not long after the Bureau's formation. In 1914, Lathrop's request for more money was denied by The House Committee on Appropriations. They refused to allow the Bureau more than \$25,000 per year, the minimum amount allowed by law;<sup>8</sup> despite their willingness to allocate much higher quantities of money to things like free seed, receiving \$165,000, and the hog cholera, receiving \$400,000. Though Lathrop agreed that increased amounts of funding for things like hog cholera were necessary, as they would help increase living standards in the country,<sup>9</sup> she was determined to get more help for mothers.

Lathrop didn't let this early rejection stop her from pushing forward and fighting for rural mothers; and with the help of people like first United States Congresswoman, Jeannette Rankin, the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act was passed into law in 1921.<sup>10</sup> Designed in part by Lathrop, this Act would provide increased prenatal and postnatal care for mothers and babies in rural areas.<sup>11</sup> Though more universally effective welfare programs were still years away, this was a step in the right direction. Opponents of the Sheppard-Towner Maternity and Infancy Act were averse to government support of mothers, claiming that motherly love was all women needed to raise their children.<sup>12</sup> While this reaction seems laughable today, it was a popular attitude during this time. Despite the constant opposition, the progress made by proponents of the

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<sup>8</sup> Kriste Lindenmeyer, "*A Right to Childhood*," *The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1997), 53.

<sup>9</sup> Kriste Lindenmeyer, "*A Right to Childhood*," *The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1997), 53.

<sup>10</sup> Kriste Lindenmeyer, "*A Right to Childhood*," *The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1997), 76-77.

<sup>11</sup> Kriste Lindenmeyer, "*A Right to Childhood*," *The U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare, 1912-46* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1997), 76-77.

<sup>12</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 26.

Children's Bureau would open the door to continued progress for the welfare of mothers and babies in the years to come.

While the establishment of the federal Children's Bureau provided more aid to mothers than ever before, its lack of support due to the conservative values of the time<sup>13</sup> left it unable to provide women with many necessary services such as proper medical care, assistance in providing food for their children, and more. Women all over the country voiced their worries and discontent to the government, while often relying solely on the information in pamphlets circulated by the Children's Bureau<sup>14</sup> to raise their families. Most of these problems appear to be the result of parents' inability to control the size of their families, according to author and historian David E. Kyvig, there was a substantial drop in the American birth rate between 1900 and 1929, as well as a drop in the size of upper- and middle-class families.<sup>15</sup> This drop in the birth rate elicits the conclusion that many families decided the potential struggles of raising a family made avoiding pregnancy worth it. We can also guess that upper-and middle-class families were more likely to have access to birth control, contributing to the decrease in the size of their families prior to the Great Depression.

Among the concerns of the mothers featured in Ladd-Taylor's book was the proper care of their babies, both in and out of the womb and the process of labor and childbirth itself, however women had another, very prevalent question. They wanted to know how to prevent

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<sup>13</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 2.

<sup>15</sup> David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940, How Americans Lived Through the "Roaring Twenties" and the Great Depression* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 137.

pregnancy. We see this question asked in several different ways, including through concerns about providing for numerous children,<sup>16</sup> the fear of having more children due to negative experience during a previous birth,<sup>17</sup> and the outright personal desire to avoid becoming pregnant.<sup>18</sup>

The women writing these letters to the Children's Bureau came from all over the United States, however, most of them were the wives of poor farmers living in rural parts of the country.<sup>19</sup> A large portion of the letters in the book mention a lack of finances; and as noted by Ladd-Taylor, there is a direct correlation between poverty and infants' inability to thrive. According to a study in Johnstown, Pennsylvania in 1913 implemented by the Children's Bureau, the baby of a family who brought in under \$521 per year was nearly two times as likely to die in infancy than one born to family living on an annual income of \$1,200 or more. The same study also concluded that an infant living in a home that lacked running water had a 40% higher chance of death.<sup>20</sup> Ladd-Taylor quotes Julia Lathrop in describing that infant deaths were caused by "a coincidence of underpaid fathers, overworked and ignorant mothers, and those hazards to the life of the offspring which parents could not avoid or control because they must be remedied by community action."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 183.

<sup>17</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 161-179.

<sup>18</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 181.

<sup>19</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>20</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 19.

<sup>21</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 20.

From 1915 to 1932 the Bureau received approximately 125,000 letters from mothers with questions and concerns about their children,<sup>22</sup> and their main concern was clearly was the health and wellbeing of their babies.<sup>23</sup> The number of mothers looking for current advice on childrearing, led the Children's Bureau to estimate that by 1929, as many as one half of the babies in the United States had benefitted from their guidance.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Molly Ladd-Taylor's initial interest in the letters written to the Children's Bureau was sparked when she came across a letter to them, written by her grandmother, Alice Ladd-Taylor. In her letter, Alice referred to the information provided by the Bureau as "invaluable" to her when she became a new mother.<sup>25</sup>

Many letters were derived from the incessant struggling endured by poor families, often resulting in the desire to avoid having more children .One of the most common reasons for these hardships was the financial burden of raising a family. While the circumstances that befell each family ranged, many mothers found themselves asking the women of the Children's Bureau if they had answers to their crises. Unfortunately, the women responding to these letters could do little more than offer their sympathy. A woman from Illinois wrote that due to the scarce amount of food she consumed, she was physically unable to nurse her baby; who instead of growing, was rapidly losing weight.<sup>26</sup> Another woman from North Carolina, called Mrs. G.H., mailed the Bureau a lengthy, heart-wrenching letter about her inability to feed her sickly and starving

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<sup>22</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 149.

children because of her abusive husband's refusal to provide for his family.<sup>27</sup> Other letters contained the pleas of women who couldn't provide food or clothing for their children because they were widowed or had been abandoned by their husbands.<sup>28</sup> The contents of these letters provide a first-hand example of the life that so many of them endured. We often look at the twenties as a time of glamour and excitement, and for some people it was; but as shown in these letters, for many it was a time of pain and hardship. Today the image of the "Roaring Twenties" takes center stage while this suffering lies in its shadow.

Parenthood was taxing physically, emotionally and financially even before the arrival of a child during the late 1910's and 20's as the act of giving birth created a fiscal dilemma for many. Giving birth in a hospital was quickly becoming popular for young, middle class mothers living in cities, as it appeared to provide the safest environment for mother and baby, while the presence of nurses to care for newborns allowed mothers to rest after giving birth.<sup>29</sup> Many physicians were pushing for mothers to choose a hospital for labor and delivery, stating that the use of "forceps, episiotomy,<sup>30</sup> and anesthesia could ease the process."<sup>31</sup> However, many mothers in rural America didn't have the option of traveling to a hospital to give birth due to geographic and financial obstacles, though some began to desire the presence of a doctor during their labor

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<sup>27</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 153.

<sup>28</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 141-161.

<sup>29</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 15.

<sup>30</sup> An incision of the perineum to prevent tearing during birth.

<sup>31</sup> David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940, How Americans Lived Through the "Roaring Twenties" and the Great Depression* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 142.

and deliveries,<sup>32</sup> which also posed a financial problem for many who lived in the more rural parts of the country. While mothers may have wanted to give birth in a hospital or to have the assistance of a physician, they could usually not afford this luxury. The cost of giving birth in a hospital during the 1920s typically ranged between \$15 and \$35, the average usually being \$25,<sup>33</sup> depending on the area. For rural families, having a doctor travel to their homes was usually around the same cost, if not more, due to the travel fees they were typically charged.<sup>34</sup> Rural farming mothers often opted to have a mid-wife present instead, as the cost was significantly lower, approximately \$8,<sup>35</sup> and because many midwives stayed at the home to help the mother for a short period following birth. The inability to afford the best care during labor and delivery went hand in hand with the fear of pain and injury during birth felt by many of these women.

The medical practices at the time made giving birth and the possible resulting injuries dangerous and incredibly painful. In hospitals, the use of drugs and forceps posed risks of complications and injuries,<sup>36</sup> and the lack medical assistance during birth at home left women open to lasting trauma due to untreated injuries sustained during birth. Most women knew of these dangers and many experienced them first-hand. Injury during birth comes in many forms, one of the most common and terrifying to mothers being the tearing of the perineum, cervical wall and other parts of the female anatomy. A few of the letters in Ladd-Taylor's book discuss

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<sup>32</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 15, 134-137.

<sup>34</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1986), 137.

<sup>35</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 15.

<sup>36</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 16.

such injuries, with one woman writing of her experience sustaining a bad tear during birth and not receiving necessary medical care following the incident. The lack of care caused lasting pain that interfered with her ability to work and care for her children.<sup>37</sup> Another woman experienced a similar trauma during birth; and though she recovered, the pain it caused left her panicked at the thought of becoming pregnant again.<sup>38</sup> Today women who go through these ordeals have the option to undergo a caesarian operation in place of vaginal birth, or to acquire birth control, often at no cost, if they wish to avoid such occurrences; but many women in the early twentieth century lived in constant fear of becoming pregnant, as they had no other options.

One group of letters featured in the book are the devastating inquiries of mothers desperate to stop having children. In 1928, a young mother of three living in Kansas, referred to as Mrs. E.S., asked, “Don’t you think it better to be parents of 3 which we are willing to work & do all we can for them, to raise & provide for us all, then to hafto have 6 or more that would take us down into the grave and leave 6 or more for poverty.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, why do I have no choice but to bring more children into the world than I am able to support? Mrs. E.S.’s problem is, thankfully, one that mothers in modern day America don’t usually face, but in the 1910’s and 1920’s, her problem was not unique. Not only did families living in rural regions of the country not have access to birth control, many of them didn’t know it existed. Mrs. E.G. in Indiana wrote, “I often hear people [are] not having baby. What do they do to not have them?”<sup>40</sup> In 1921 Mrs. T.M. of North Dakota wrote,

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<sup>37</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers’ Letters to the Children’s Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 163.

<sup>38</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers’ Letters to the Children’s Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 49.

<sup>39</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers’ Letters to the Children’s Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 183.

<sup>40</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers’ Letters to the Children’s Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 52.

“I am the mother of seven and only 22 years old. I did not want any more after I had two.”<sup>41</sup> In an equally dire letter, Mrs. M.L. of Louisiana noted, “I have children so fast it is wrecking my life.”<sup>42</sup> The distress in the words of these forlorn mothers is palpable, and though intense, these words offer only a miniscule glance into the pain and desperation of so many women during this time.

Though we touched briefly on the issues of gender and femininity in class, the topic of motherhood and the fight for rights to resources that would allow women to raise and support healthy children provides a more detailed image of the restricted lives many women lived during the turn of the century. Looking at the most documented issues in these letters, we can conclude that the legalization and distribution of birth control would have eased the suffering of many women/ Today we can look to the trials and tribulations of these women as evidence for the necessity of continued support for women and children.

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<sup>41</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 180-181.

<sup>42</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Raising a Baby the Government Way, Mothers' Letters to the Children's Bureau, 1915-1932* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 181-182.