Deliberate control of human population growth by various means (contraceptives, sterilization, and abortion), in order to reduce the birth rate. The majority of developing nations now have governments that support some sort of family planning programme.

Since the early 1950s India has taken the lead among developing nations to control its population growth, with government-sponsored programmes. However, in April 2001, it became the second country after China to have a population of over 1 billion. In China, there is a one-child policy, and couples lose large financial benefits if they have a second child.

According to a 2003 UN report, the average number of births per woman is 1.5 in the industrialized countries, where most women use birth control, compared with 5.0 births per woman in Africa and 2.9 across the developing world.

History English philosopher Jeremy Bentham put forward the idea of birth control in 1797, but it was Francis Place, a Radical, who attempted to popularize it in the 19th century, in a treatise entitled ‘Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population’ (1822). A US publication by Charles Knowlton, ‘The Fruits of Philosophy: or The Private Companion of Young Married People’ (1832) was reprinted in England in 1834. When a Bristol publisher was prosecuted for selling it in 1876, two prominent freethinkers and radicals, Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, had the book published in London in order to provoke a test case in court. A successful outcome, and the resulting publicity, helped to spread information on birth control.

In the UK, family planning and birth control became acceptable partly through the efforts of Marie Stopes, who opened a clinic in London in 1921. Other clinics subsequently opened in England were amalgamated in 1930 to become the Family Planning Association.

In 1912, two articles by Margaret Sanger, ‘What every woman should know’ and ‘What every girl should know’, appeared in the New York socialist newspaper The Call, advocating birth control as one means of female emancipation. In 1916, Sanger opened a clinic in Brooklyn, and helped to found the American Birth Control League.

Attitudes changed gradually from opposition to support: for example, in the 1930s the Family Planning Association in the UK ran clinics in hospitals and health centres; Sweden supported municipal clinics; while the USA set up some state public-health programmes incorporating birth control. In 1965, the United Nations Population Commission recommended the provision of technical assistance on birth control to member nations, and the World Health Organization instigated a programme of research.

Family size Access to family planning is only one of the factors that determine family size. The others are health care for mothers and children, family income, education for women, and women's status in society. Poor people tend to have large families but mothers and children are more likely to be undernourished and vulnerable to disease; women who have had little or no schooling have twice as many children as women who have received higher education; and women whose status in the community depends on their role as wives and mothers have more children than women who enjoy
other social rights and duties.

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Birth and death rates in developing countries

Different methods of contraception

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