

Changes in lifetime probability of abortion for Australian women

Results from the Australian Longitudinal Study of Health and Relationships

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Aim

- To describe the rates of pregnancy termination for different birth cohorts of Australian women in relation to the legal status of the procedure, social factors likely to influence the need for terminations and availability of services

Background

- During the past 50 years Australia has witnessed a dramatic change in the availability and acceptability of pregnancy termination and methods of contraception
- Before 1969, the procedure was illegal across Australia. Since 1969 legislative changes or legal precedent in most states and territories mean that women have access to medical services for safer pregnancy terminations
- Australia has also witnessed a marked change in the social context surrounding pregnancy, including the types and availability of contraception:
 - post 1960's greater reliability and convenience of the pill increased the likelihood and incidence of premarital sex
 - 1972 removal of sales tax on oral contraceptives
 - 1980's concerns over HIV/AIDS increased condom usage
 - 2002 pre-packaged emergency contraception (EC) became available by prescription; 20% of Australian women had reported using EC
 - 2004 pre-packaged EC became available over the counter
- Using data from a national representative sample of Australian women, we have investigated the history of termination of pregnancy and the variation in termination history in relation to a range of sociodemographic characteristics

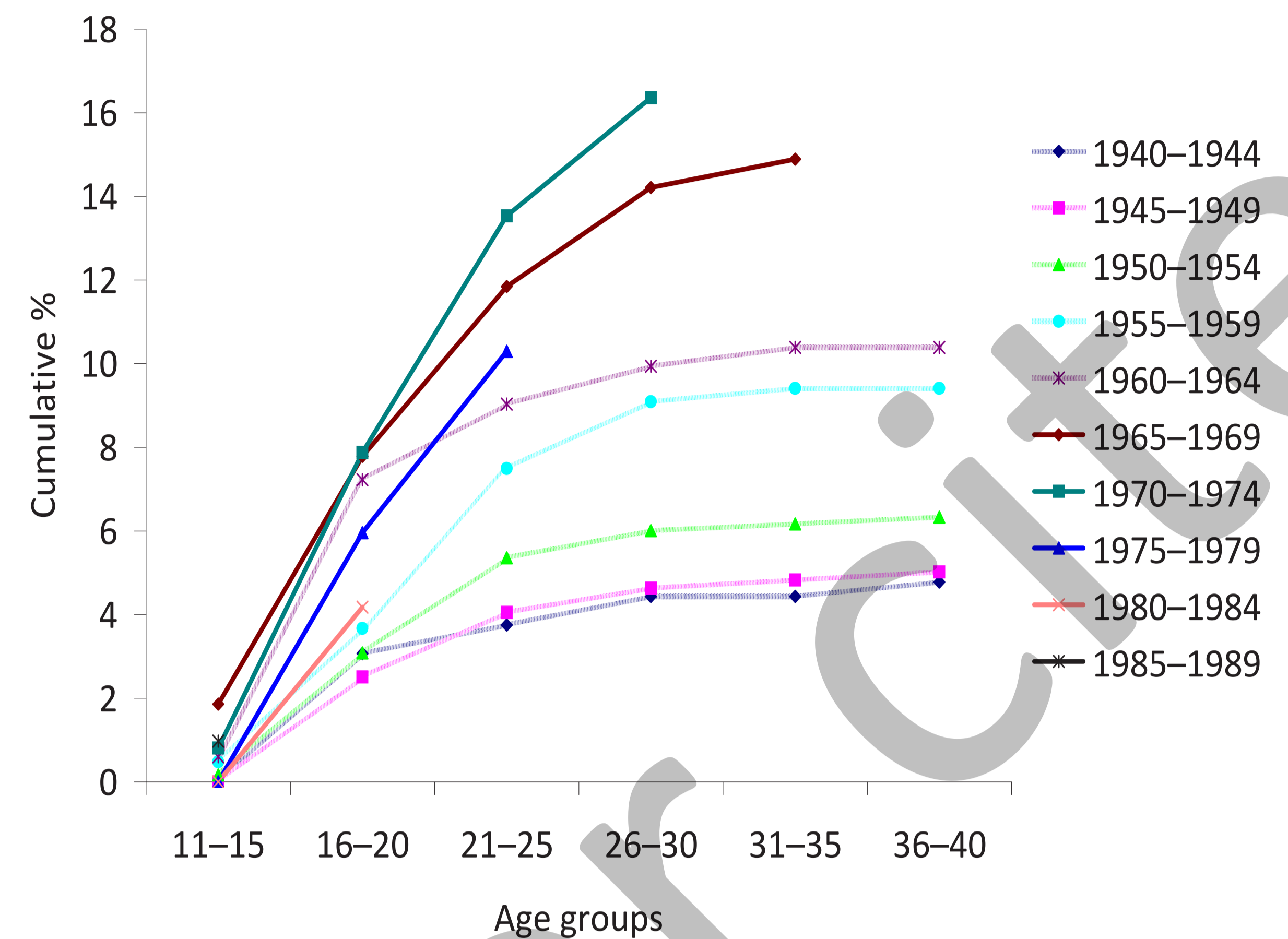
Method

- Representative household sample
- 4366 Australian women aged 16–64
- Selected by random digit dialling
- Computer-assisted telephone interview
- Data is weighted n=4302

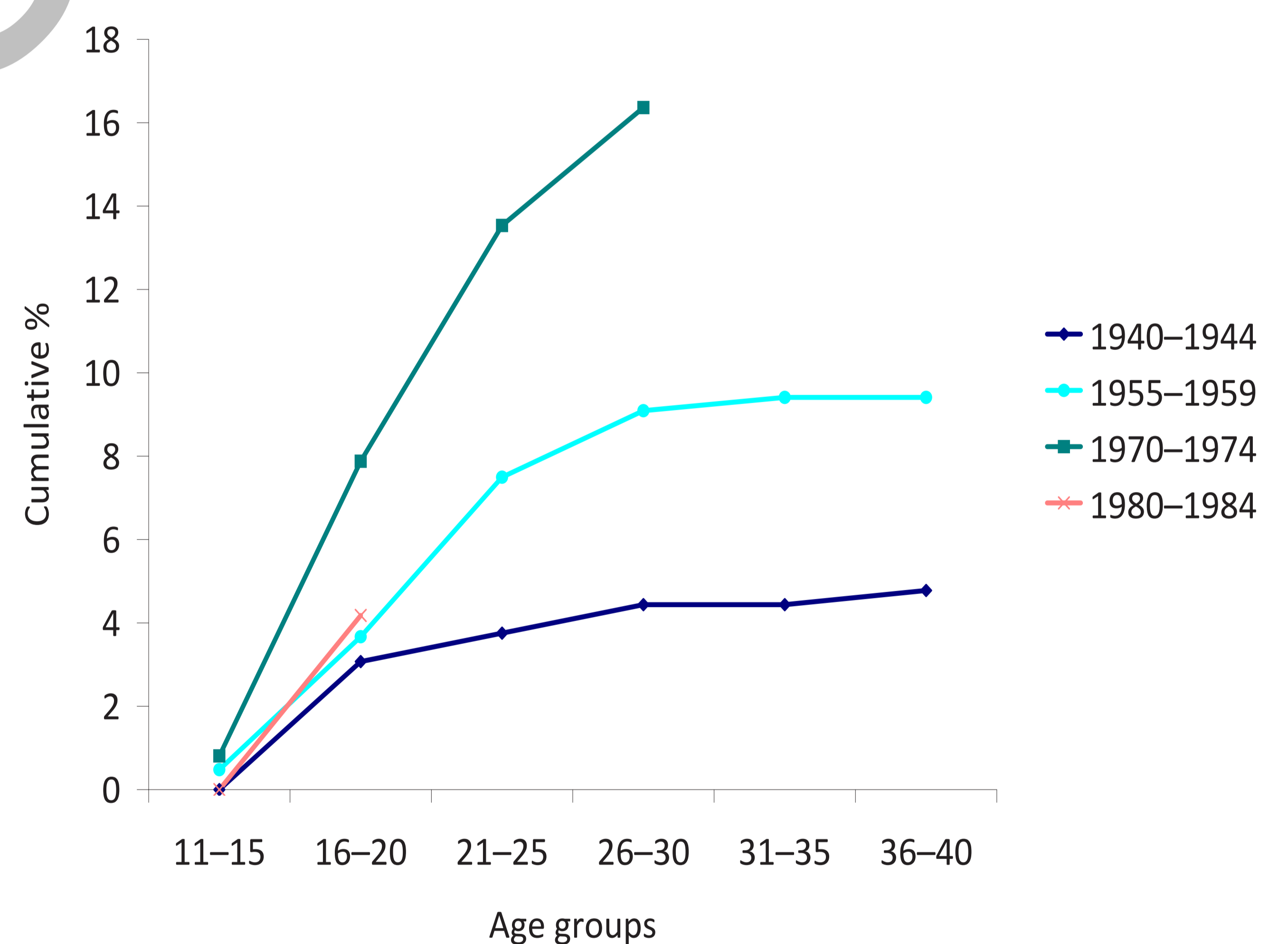
Results

- 75% of all women had been pregnant at least once
- 9% of all women reported having at least one termination
- Of women ever pregnant 12% reported having at least one termination
- The number of terminations reported ranged from 1 to 11
- Age at first reported termination ranged from 11 to 39
- 70% of women who had a termination had only had one
- 1 in 5 women aged 36-40 reported at least one termination

Termination prevalence by birth cohort



- The low proportion of terminations reported by women born prior to 1950 is most likely the result of terminations being illegal and not widely available
- Termination rates increase for each cohort born between 1950 and 1974. This reflects the *sexual revolution*: greater availability and access to safe termination procedures; social change; availability of oral contraceptives
- The reduced rates of terminations for those born after 1974 is likely a result of increased condom use due to concerns over HIV/AIDS and better sex education in schools



- This figure highlights that the youngest cohort (1980–1984) have termination rates similar to those born 1955–1959 and almost half to those born 1970-1974

Conclusions

The data suggest that reproductive histories of Australian women of different generations have been affected by

- Changes in legality and accessibility of terminations
- Social change: change in contraception, education and sexual practices

ALSHR is based at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne.
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