

Thesis: Dismantling Legal Constraints to Contraception in the 1900s

Editor's note:

Lakshmeeramya Malladi defended her thesis titled “Dismantling Legal Constraints to Contraception in the 1900s” in April 2017 in front of committee members Jane Maienschein, Erica O’Neil, and Alexis Abboud, earning her a Bachelor’s degree from Barrett, the Honors College. <https://repository.asu.edu/items/42527>

Abstract:

In the late nineteenth century, the Comstock Act of 1873 made the distribution of contraception illegal and classified contraception as an obscenity. Reflecting the predominant attitude towards contraception at the time, the Comstock Act was the first federal anti-obscenity law that targeted contraception. However, social acceptance of birth control changed at the turn of the twentieth century. In this thesis, I analyzed legislation, advocates, and literature pertinent to that social change to report on the events leading up to the decriminalization of contraception. Because of the complexity of social history, I used legislation and court cases to track pivotal movements that reflected a change in the accessibility and acceptability of birth control. I focused on the efforts of two prominent birth control advocates, Margaret Sanger and Mary Dennett, and analyzed the impact of their efforts in that social movement. I learned that they incited court cases that questioned the validity of the Comstock Act and helped influence societal acceptance of birth control. Through my research, I discovered that the medicalization of contraception influenced its decriminalization and acceptance by society.