

18th Century Colonial Demography in the Americas

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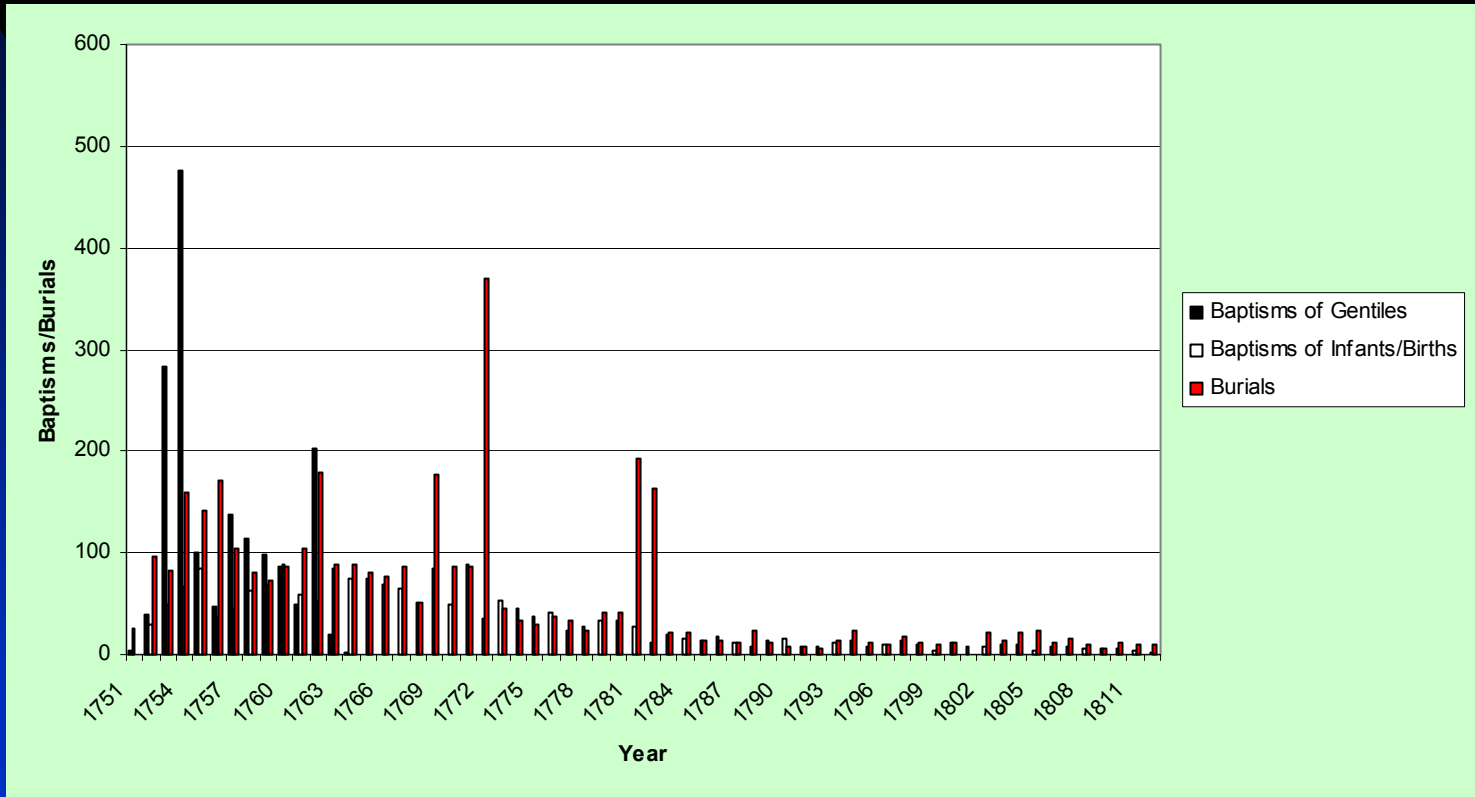
In 1492 Columbus Sailed the Ocean Blue-this little ditty I learned in school many years ago introduces the topic of my lecture, the so called “Columbian Exchange,” the exchange of plants, animals, people, and diseases between the Old and New Worlds.

Old World peoples brought a new set of deadly pathogens with them to the Americas, including maladies such as smallpox and measles. These highly contagious crowd diseases killed millions of native peoples in the Americas in one of if not the most catastrophic demographic collapses in world history. The details of much of this tragedy remain undocumented. However, 18th century records provide a glimpse of the demographic collapse of the indigenous populations. For purposes of comparison we will also examine several colonial European populations.

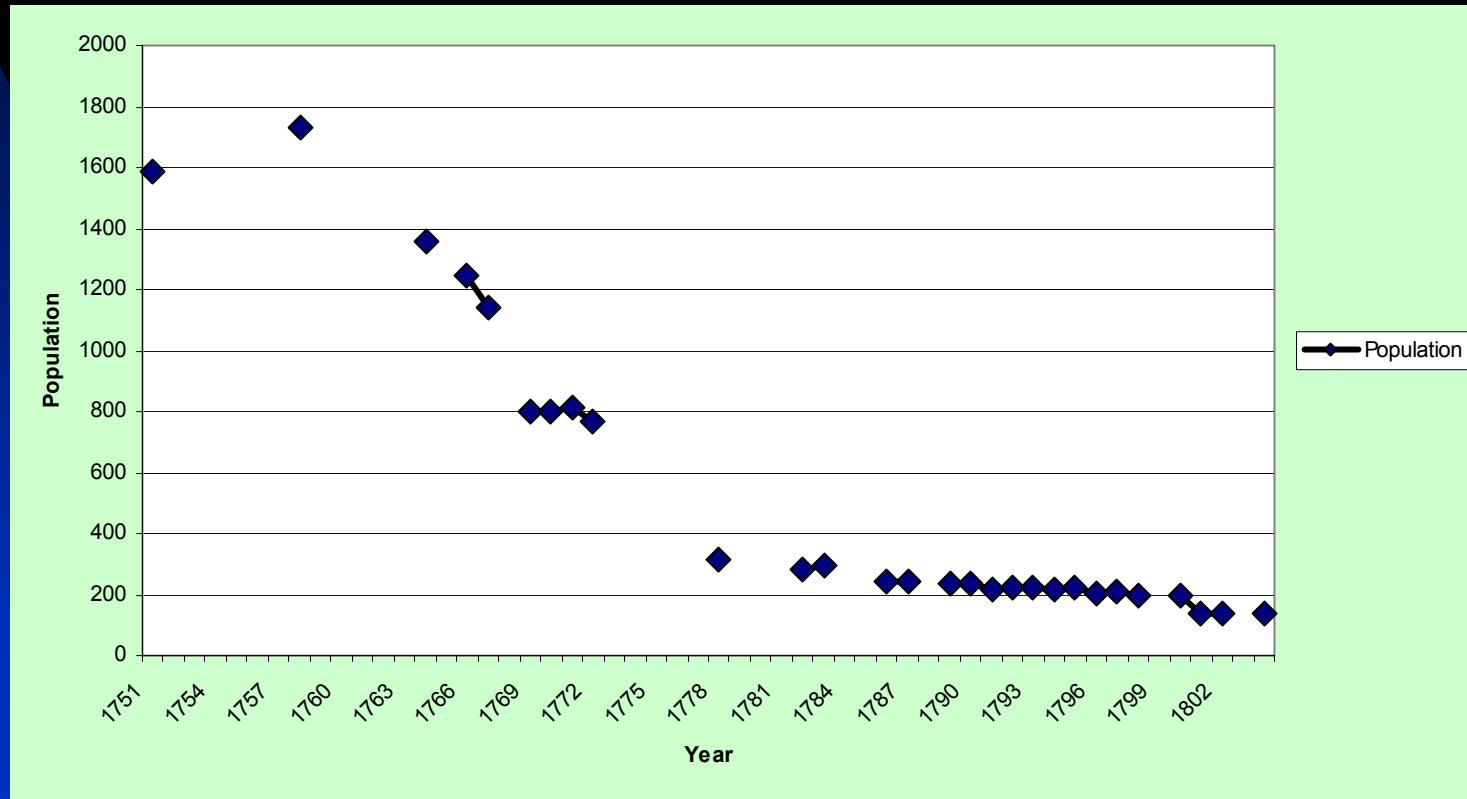
What is the average life expectancy in the United States today?

If you were a neophyte living at Santa Gertrudis mission in Baja California (1757-1811), your mean life expectancy would have ranged between 1.4 years to 25 years at birth. In most years death rates exceeded birth rates, and the population declined.

Baptisms and Burials Recorded at Santa Gertrudis Mission, 1751-1811

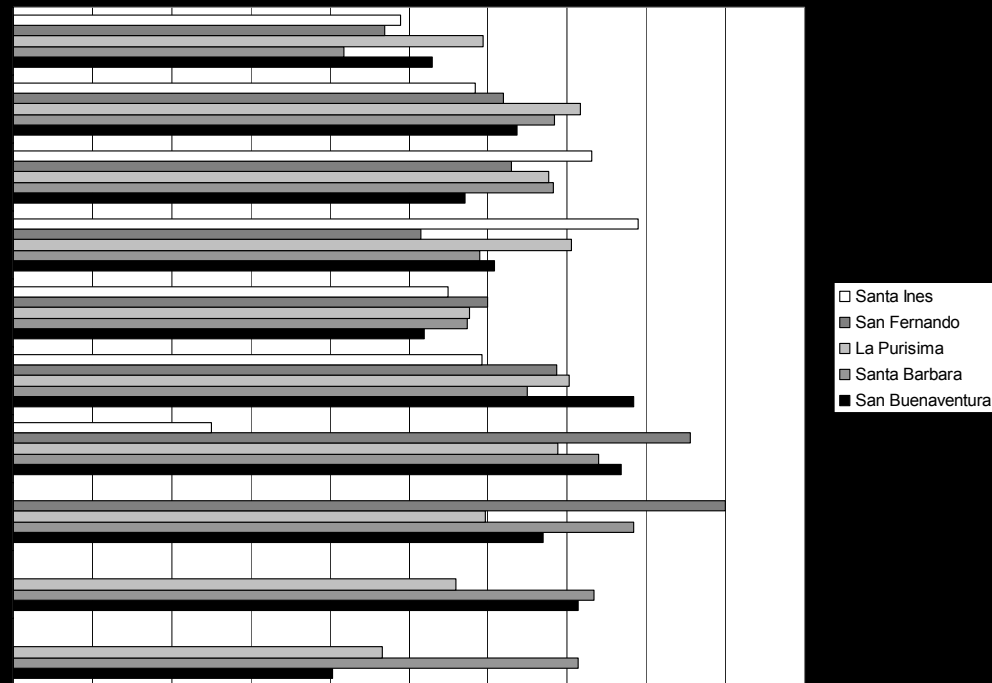


Population of Santa Gertrudis Mission, 1751-1808

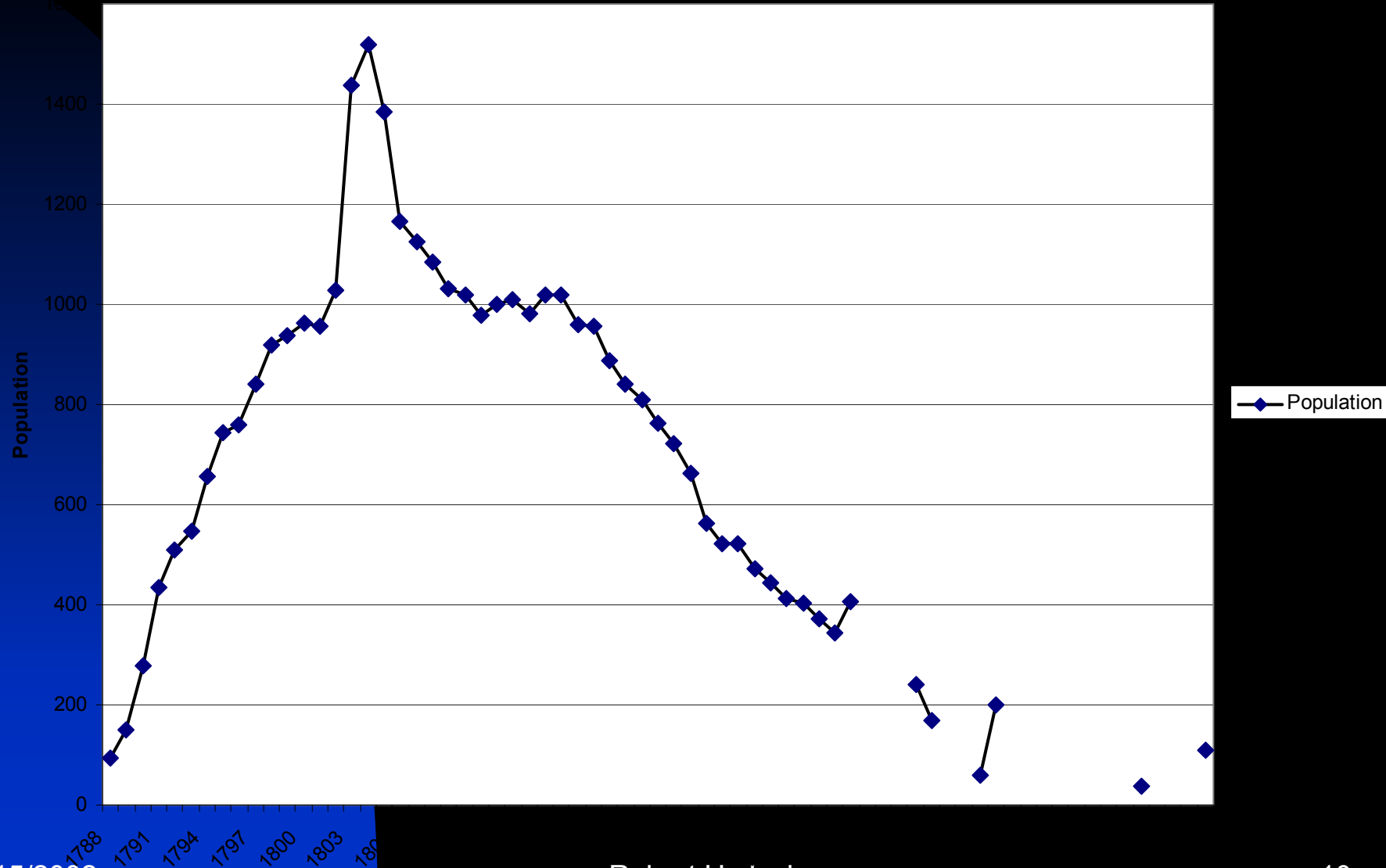


Most children born in the United States live well past their 10th birthday. Some 46-72% of the children born at La Purisima mission in California died before their 4th birthday.

Percentage of children born at La Purisima Mission Dead by Age four.

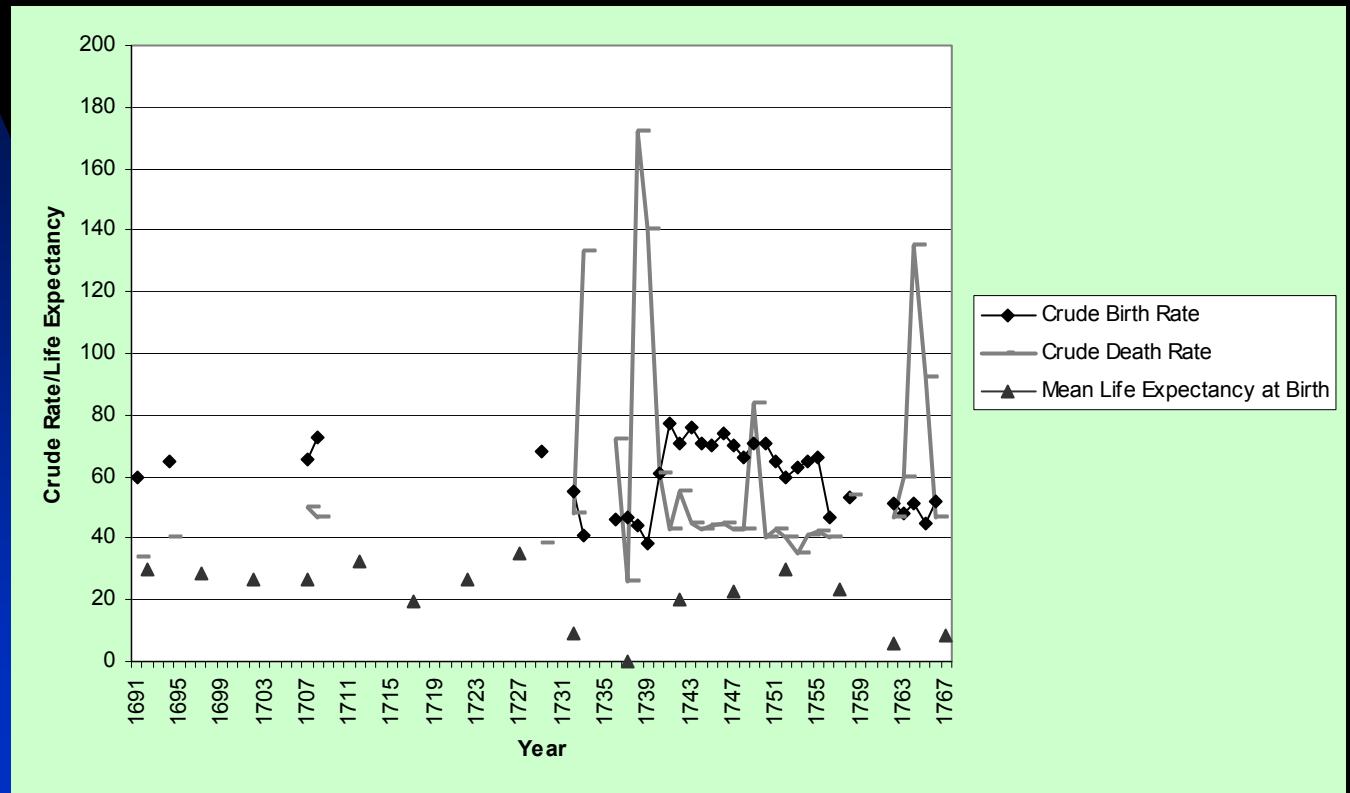


Population of La Purisima mission in California



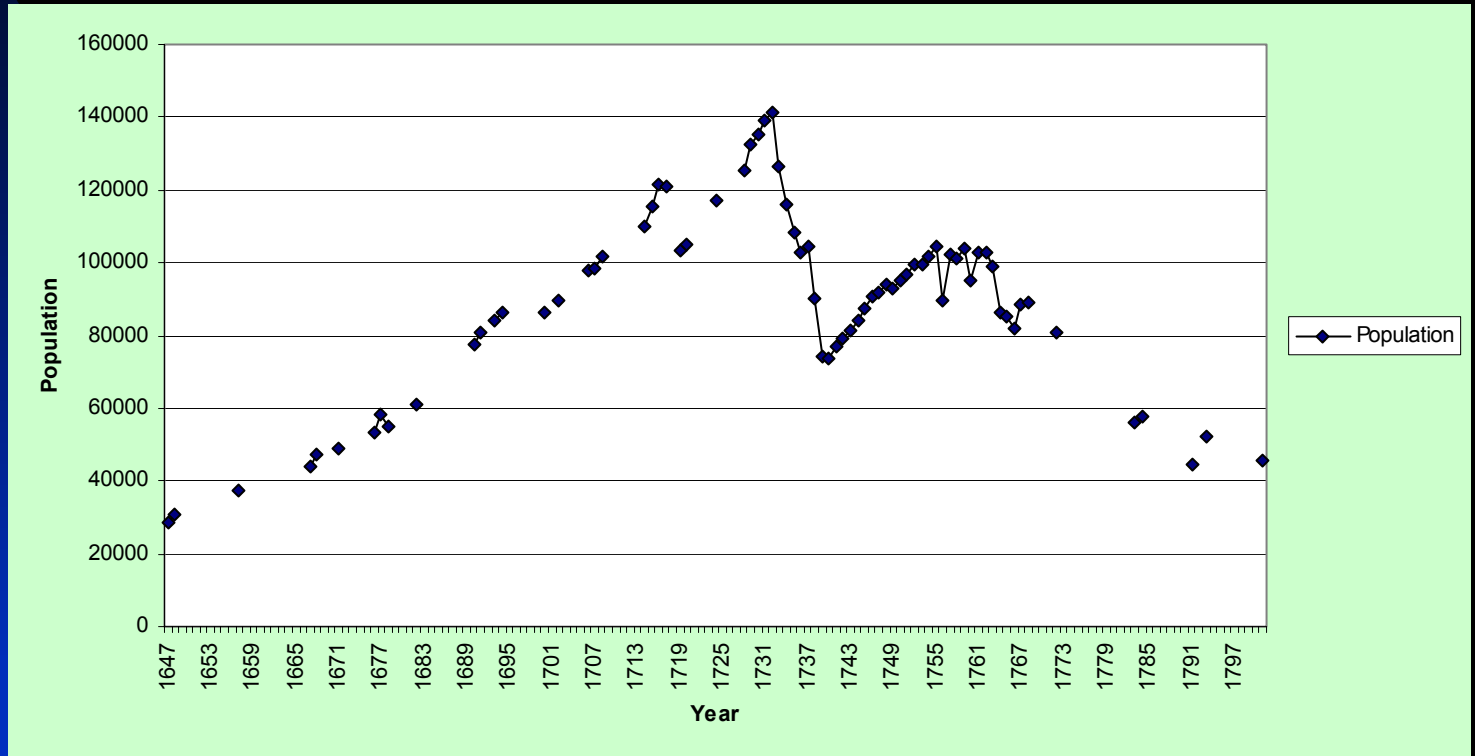
Not all native populations, however, experienced drastic decline. One example is the Guarani mission populations of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil, the subject of the Hollywood film from the mid-1980s “The Mission.”

Crude Birth and Death Rates and Mean Life Expectancy in the Guarani Missions



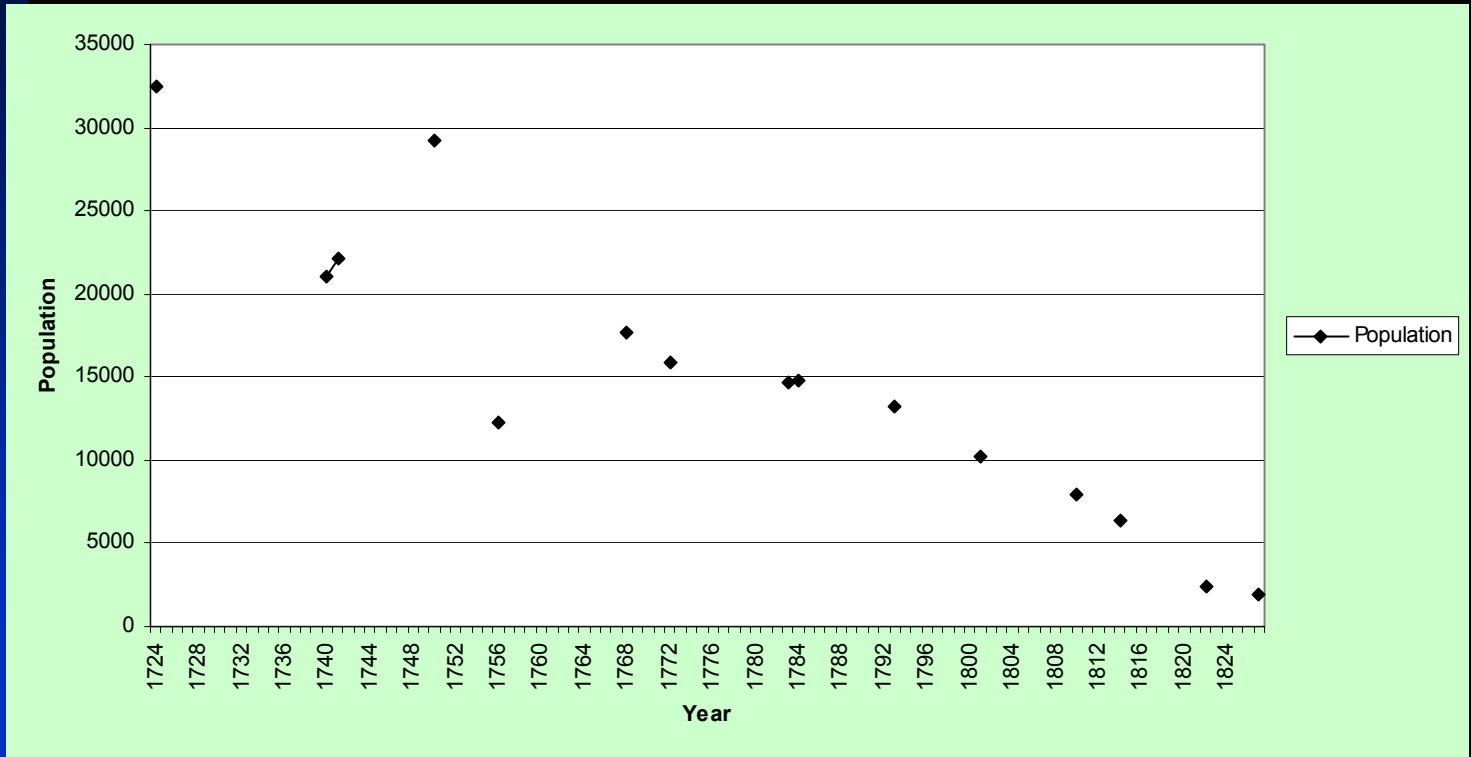
As the previous graph shows, birth rates in the Guarani missions generally exceeded death rates, except in epidemic years. However, unlike the previous mission populations examined, the Guarani mission populations rebounded or recovered from epidemic mortality. In most years mean life expectancy ranged between 20-30 years from birth, which was close to contemporary European populations.

Population of the Guarani Missions, 1647-1801



Politics in the larger Rio de la Plata region modified demographic patterns in the Guarani missions. This occurred in the mid-1750s as a result of a treaty between Spain and Portugal that was to transfer seven missions of Portugal. This resulted in an uprising known as the “Guarani War,” loosely interpreted in the movie “The Mission.”

Population of the Seven Trans-Uruguay River Missions, 1724-1827

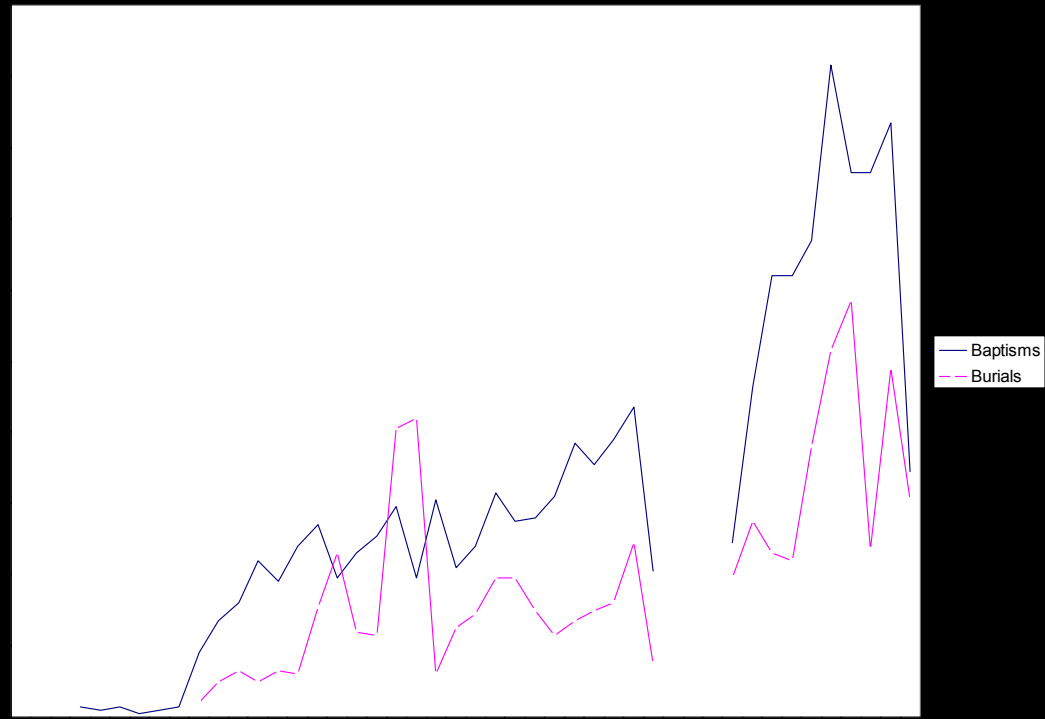


How did contemporary European colonial populations compare?

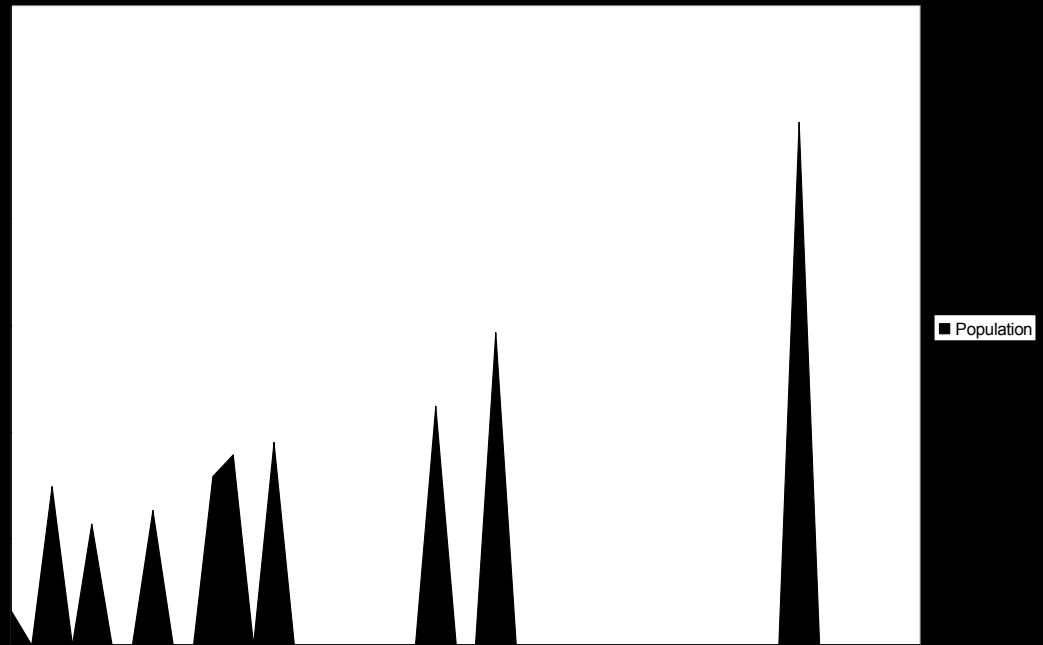
The Spanish established four military garrisons in California between 1769 and 1782, colonized by non-indigenous peoples from northern Mexico. The populations of the four military garrisons reproduced rigorously, and birth rates exceeded death rates. Mean life expectancy at birth ranged between 24 and 39 years at birth.

In non-epidemic years mean life expectancy of the population of the French military outpost of Louisbourg (Nova Scotia) ranged between 29 and 39 years at birth. The French garrisoned Louisbourg with soldiers brought from Europe.

In most years baptisms exceeded burials at Louisbourg, and the population rebounded following epidemics.



The population of Louisbourg grew as a result of migration to the colonial outpost, as well as natural reproduction.



Medical advances in the late 19th and 20th centuries altered the pattern of high fertility and high mortality populations, and life expectancy has increased. Modern medicine controls or has eliminated maladies that were killers in the 18th century, such as smallpox. In 1977, the World Health Organization announced the last case of smallpox in Somalia. Unlike the 18th century, most children in the United States can expect to live long lives.

Improvements in public health have resulted in what is called the demographic transition, characterized by changes in fertility and mortality patterns, family formation, and the role of children in society.