

Abortion Totals, Rates, Ratios Drop to Lowest Levels in Decades

Number of partial-birth abortions triples

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On the heels of encouraging, though somewhat incomplete, abortion data for 1998 and 1999 provided by the federal government, the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI) has released data from its own 2000 survey of abortionists confirming the continued decline in abortion totals, rates, and ratios.

According to AGI, there were 1,312,990 abortions performed in the U.S. in 2000. This is about 47,000 fewer than it recorded in its last survey in 1996 and nearly 300,000 fewer than the 1990 AGI estimate of just over 1.6 million abortions.

AGI's figures are markedly higher than those reported by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), but are more accurate. AGI directly surveys abortionists, rather than using voluntary reports from state health departments as the CDC does. In addition, recently the CDC has been unable to get numbers from several large states.

CDC's numbers, thus, always represent an undercount. CDC numbers are helpful, nonetheless. (See **NRL News**, January 2003.) AGI, a special research affiliate of abortion mega-chain Planned Parenthood, has the advantage of being an industry insider.

Beyond the raw totals, AGI data on the abortion *rate* also show this downward trend. According to AGI, the abortion rate for 2000 was 21.3 abortions per 1,000 women of reproductive age (ages 15-44).

While just a tenth of a point below the rate AGI estimated for 1999, that is substantially below the rates reported for the early 1980s, which ranged from 28/1,000 to 29.3/1,000. One actually has to go back to the earliest days post-*Roe* (1974) to find a year with a lower reported abortion rate (19.3)

Arguments can and have been made, however, that there might be fewer abortions simply because there are fewer women in the age category or fewer pregnancies altogether (due to abstinence, contraception, etc.). The lower abortion rate shows that not just fewer women but that a smaller overall percentage of fertile women are having abortions. Taken alone, this indicates that abortion is less common among that group, but does not tell us why.

However, additional data reported by AGI show that this rate reduction is not simply due to there being fewer pregnancies, but due to an increased likelihood that a pregnant woman will choose to let her baby live. This shows up in the abortion *ratio*.

For example, according to AGI, for every 100 pregnancies ending in either birth or abortion¹ in 2000, there were 24.5 abortions. That is to say, 24.5 babies were aborted, and 75.5 babies were delivered. AGI refers to this as its abortion *ratio*.²

[Without getting too deep into minutiae, AGI's way of arriving at its abortion *ratio* figure is different from the way CDC arrives at its abortion *ratio* figure.]

Again, while only a tenth of a point below the ratio AGI estimates for 1999 (24.6), in the late 1970s and early 1980s that figure hovered around 30. A lower ratio has not been reported since 1974 (22).

State and regional data collected by AGI show similar trends. Comparing AGI's 1996 and 2000 surveys, abortion totals and rates declined in the Northeast, the South, the Midwest, and the West.

In only 15 states did the abortion rate increase between 1996 and 2000, usually by 5% or less.³ Several states, such as Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, Wisconsin, Colorado, and Wyoming, along with the District of Columbia, showed declines in their abortion rates of 20% or more. Wyoming led the way with 64% drop.

For the second survey in a row, AGI asked abortionists how many of what it calls "Dilation and Extraction" (D&X) abortions the abortionists performed. These are partial-birth abortions. AGI projects there were some 2,200 performed in 2000, which it says represents only 0.17% of all abortions. This is misleading on at least two grounds.

First, AGI uses a definition so convoluted that partial-birth abortions performed by the inventor of the technique might not qualify. Second, the fact that survey responses were entirely voluntary may be further reason to think this number low.

Nevertheless, even this probably much-underestimated 2,200 figure represents a three-fold increase over the estimate of 650 AGI reported in 1996. Either AGI grossly underestimated the first time or the problem is growing worse. Though AGI reports these numbers as relatively inconsequential, Americans would hardly sit idly by if there were some virus or environmental agent killing a similar number of babies each year.

In light of the Clinton Administration's approval of RU486, the French abortion pill, in late 2000, AGI also surveyed doctors to see how many chemically induced abortions they performed in the first half of 2001. AGI says it found about 37,000 abortions of that type, reflecting about 6% of all abortions done in that six-month period.

About half of all clinics reported performing such abortions, yet only about 20% of hospitals and private practice doctors doing abortions indicated they also did chemical abortions. In no case did AGI find abortionists doing chemical abortions who were not already performing surgical abortions.

Abortion industry efforts to develop and promote methods that work earlier and earlier in pregnancy reflect the pounding they took as the truth about partial-birth abortions emerged. The line drawings and descriptions of partial-birth abortion that went out all

over the country made the humanity of the unborn child and the inhumanity of the technique's defenders patently obvious. In the face of such facts, the abortion industry has been promoting methods such as chemical abortifacients and "manual vacuum aspiration" which work much earlier when the child is younger and less developed. This may be part of the reason declines slowed in the latter half of the 1990s.

Overall, however, the numbers show that the pro-life message is having an impact. Legislation, education, and outreach that in any way gives a young, pregnant woman the time or opportunity to reflect on the decision she is making, on the risks involved, on the long-term consequences, on positive alternatives for her and her child, and on the preciousness of the life she carries make a real difference. The numbers don't lie.

NOTES:

1. Miscarriages or stillbirths are not included in this total.
2. The CDC calculates its abortion ratio differently, as the number of abortions per 1,000 live births.
3. Maine, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Iowa, Kansas, North Dakota, Delaware, Florida, Maryland, North Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, Idaho, New Mexico, and Oregon.