

Estimates of U.S. Abortion Incidence, 2001–2003

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INTRODUCTION

After abortion was legalized nationwide in 1973, the U.S. abortion rate peaked in 1980. From 1990 onward, the rate declined substantially, and by 2000, it was at its lowest level since 1974.¹ This report uses available data to assess trends in 2001–2003.

Since 1973, the Guttmacher Institute has estimated the number of abortions performed in the United States by conducting a periodic survey of all known abortion providers. The most recent such survey took place in 2001, collecting data covering 1999 and 2000.² Abortion incidence is also tracked by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which aggregates reports from state statistical agencies (usually health departments) for its annual abortion surveillance reports, the most recent of which covered the year 2002.³ The CDC reports are incomplete, however, because state reports vary in completeness, with some lacking information on as many as 40–50% of the abortions that occur in the state.⁴ In addition, California and New Hampshire have no abortion reporting systems and are not included in the CDC totals, and Alaska's reporting system began only in 2003.

The purpose of this report is to provide estimates of U.S. abortion numbers, rates and ratios for 2001, 2002 and 2003, projected from Guttmacher's total for 2000, using state health department data that are reasonably complete and comparably reported over time. Estimates for 2001 and 2002 were published in May 2005; this report updates and replaces that publication with new estimates for 2003.

METHODOLOGY

The most recent Guttmacher survey of abortion providers collected data for 2000. To estimate the change in the number of abortions between 2000 and 2001, we began with the number of abortions occurring in each state, as reported by the CDC,* in each of those two years;⁵ the three states without reporting systems in those years were excluded, as were the states with very incomplete or inconsistent reporting.† We then summed, for each year, the number of abortions that took place in the 44 remaining

* For Delaware, Maryland and Wisconsin, data were obtained directly from the state statistics agencies. The data for Iowa for each year were for residents of the state, rather than abortions that occurred in the state.

† To estimate 2001, Arizona, Maryland and Nevada, as well as the District of Columbia, were excluded.

states. The overall percentage change in those states between 2000 and 2001 was then applied to Guttmacher's more complete nationwide count of 1,312,990 abortions in 2000 to arrive at the national estimate for 2001. The same procedure was used to estimate the change in the number of abortions between 2001 and 2002 and between 2002 and 2003, except that in these cases the data for both years were collected directly from state health departments because the CDC abortion surveillance report for the latest year had not been published.[‡] The states without reporting systems were not included, and as before, we excluded states with incomplete or inconsistent reporting.[§]

To calculate abortion rates (defined as the number of abortions per 1,000 women aged 15–44), we divided the number of abortions in each year by the July 1 population of women in this age-group for that year.⁶ To calculate abortion ratios (defined as the number of abortions per 100 pregnancies ending in abortion or live birth), we used the number of births occurring during the 12-month period starting in July of each year (to match times of conception for pregnancies ending in births with those for pregnancies ending in abortions).⁷

RESULTS

We estimate that the number of abortions performed in the United States in 2003 was 1,287,000, down 0.5% from 1,293,000 in 2002. Between 2000 and 2003, the drop was 2.0%.

We estimate that 20.8 of every 1,000 women aged 15–44 had an abortion in 2003. This represents a decline in the abortion rate of 0.1 points, or 0.6%, from 2002. By comparison, the decline between 2001 and 2002 was 0.2 points or 0.9%. Between 2000 and 2003, the rate declined 0.5 points, or 2.4%.

In 2003, 23.8% of pregnancies (excluding fetal losses) were terminated by abortion. This abortion ratio is 0.4 percentage points lower than the 2002 level of 24.2, and 0.7 percentage points lower than the level of 24.5 in 2000.

To examine the sensitivity of our estimates, we used the methodology described above to project the number of abortions for 1997, on the basis of Guttmacher's 1996 count of abortions and changes in state reports between 1996 and 1997. We also calculated an interpolated figure for 1997 (on the basis of 1996 and 1999 Guttmacher counts). These numbers differed by 13,000 out of 1.3 million abortions, or 1.0%. It is likely that this is an unusually large margin of error, however, because the abortion

[‡] The data for Iowa and Tennessee for both years were for residents.

[§] Arizona, Colorado, Maryland and the District of Columbia were excluded for the 2002 estimate, and Colorado, Maryland, West Virginia and the District of Columbia were excluded for the 2003 estimate. In addition, there were no data for Wyoming for the 2002 and 2003 estimates.

decline was much steeper between 1996 and 1997 than between 1998 and 2003. Therefore, it is likely that our current projections will have a smaller margin of error. Nevertheless, the estimated numbers and rates are preliminary and subject to error, and the error may be larger for 2003 estimates than for 2001 and 2002 estimates because we are projecting an additional year forward since our last provider census in 2000.

DISCUSSION

Between 1992 and 1996, the annualized decline in the abortion rate was 3.4% per year, while between 1996 and 2000 it was 1.2% per year. The annualized decline between 2000 and 2003 was 0.8% per year, suggesting that the rate of decline slowed in these three years, compared with the preceding periods. These results should be interpreted with caution, however, because of possible error in the projections.

Information from the National Survey of Family Growth helps explain the decline in the abortion rate between 1994 and 2001. During this period, the overall rate of unintended pregnancy was unchanged. The drop in the abortion rate resulted from the fact that a greater proportion of women with unintended pregnancies had unplanned births rather than abortions in 2001 compared with 1994. Among teenagers, abortions, unintended pregnancies and births all fell, while among women aged 25–34, unintended pregnancies and births increased and abortions changed little.⁸

It is important to note that these trend estimates are averages for the whole country; it is likely that there are significant variations from the national trend within individual states and within particular population subgroups. For example, while the abortion rate declined among most groups between 1994 and 2000, it increased among poor women and women on Medicaid.⁹ We now know that this increase was likely driven by increases in unintended pregnancy among the same groups.¹⁰ Additional research is necessary to determine if these subgroup trends have continued.

The estimates presented in this report are subject to some limitations and should be considered provisional. First, not all states are included; the estimates assume that changes in abortion incidence in the excluded states are similar to the overall trend seen in the reporting states. Second, the completeness of abortion reporting to state health departments can vary from year to year. We attempted to exclude all states that had inconsistent reporting, but if (for example) reporting improved in some states we included, it would mean that earlier state reports were too low and that the percentage decline we calculated was too small. In such cases, our new estimates of the number of abortions would be too high.

The Guttmacher Institute is currently fielding the next round of its abortion provider survey, which will collect data for 2004 and 2005.

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TABLE 1. Number of reported abortions, abortion rate and abortion ratio, United States, 1973–2003

Year	No. (in 000s)	Rate*	Ratio†
1973	744.6	16.3	19.3
1974	898.6	19.3	22.0
1975	1,034.2	21.7	24.9
1976	1,179.3	24.2	26.5
1977	1,316.7	26.4	28.6
1978	1,409.6	27.7	29.2
1979	1,497.7	28.8	29.6
1980	1,553.9	29.3	30.0
1981	1,577.3	29.3	30.1
1982	1,573.9	28.8	30.0
1983	(1,575)	(28.5)	(30.4)
1984	1,577.2	28.1	29.7
1985	1,588.6	28.0	29.7
1986	(1,574)	(27.4)	(29.4)
1987	1,559.1	26.9	28.8
1988	1,590.8	27.3	28.6
1989	(1,567)	(26.8)	(27.5)
1990	(1,609)	(27.4)	(28.0)
1991	1,556.5	26.3	27.4
1992	1,528.9	25.7	27.5
1993	(1,495)	(25.0)	(27.4)
1994	(1,423)	(23.7)	(26.6)
1995	1,359.4	22.5	25.9
1996	1,360.2	22.4	25.9
1997	(1,335)	(21.9)	(25.5)
1998	(1,319)	(21.5)	(25.1)
1999	1,314.8	21.4	24.6
2000	1,313.0	21.3	24.5
2001	[1,303]	[21.1]	[24.5]
2002	[1,293]	[20.9]	[24.2]
2003	[1,287]	[20.8]	[23.8]

*Abortions per 1,000 women aged 15–44 as of July 1 of each year. †Abortions per 100 pregnancies ending in abortion or live birth; for each year, the ratio is based on births occurring during the 12-month period starting in July of that year (to match times of conception for pregnancies ending in births with those for pregnancies ending in abortions). *Notes:* Figures in parentheses are estimated by interpolation of numbers of abortions; figures in brackets are preliminary. *Sources:* **All data, 1973–2000**—reference 1. **Number of abortions, 2001–2003**—see Methodology. **Population data, 2001–2003**—reference 6. **Birth data, July 2001–June 2004**—reference 7.

¹ Finer LB and Henshaw SK, Abortion incidence and services in the United States in 2000, *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 2003, 35(1):6–15.

² Ibid.

³ Strauss LT et al., Abortion surveillance—United States, 2001, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 2004, 53(SS-09):1–32.

⁴ The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), The limitations of U.S. statistics on abortion, *Issues in Brief*, New York: AGI, 1997.

⁵ Elam-Evans LD et al., Abortion surveillance—United States, 2000, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 2003, 52(SS-12):1–32; and Strauss LT et al., 2004, op. cit. (see reference 3).

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Annual estimates of the population by sex and five-year age groups for the United States: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2003, 2004, <<http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/NC-EST2003/NC-EST2003-01.xls>>, accessed May 11, 2005.

⁷ Martin JA et al., Births: final data for 2001, *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 2002, Vol. 51, No. 2; Martin JA et al., Births: final data for 2002, *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 2003, Vol. 52, No. 10; Martin JA et al., Births: final data for 2003, *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 2005, Vol. 54, No. 2; and Ventura S, National Center for Health Statistics, Hyattsville, MD, personal communication, June 20, 2006.

⁸ Finer LB and Henshaw SK, Disparities in rates of unintended pregnancy in the United States, 1994 and 2001, *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 2006, 38(2):90–96.

⁹ Jones RK, Darroch JE and Henshaw SK, Patterns in the socioeconomic characteristics of women obtaining abortions in 2000–2001, *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 2002, 34(5):226–235.

¹⁰ Finer LB and Henshaw SK, 2006, op. cit. (see reference 8).