

Encouraging News from the CDC: Abortions Down Again in 2003

BY Randall K. O'Bannon, Ph.D.

With a minimum of fanfare and virtually no media attention, the U.S. government's Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has released its latest abortion surveillance report for the year 2003. The 33-page report strongly indicates that the number of abortions, as well as abortion rates and ratios, continue to drop to levels not seen since the early days after Roe.

CDC figures always have to be understood in context. Neither California nor New Hampshire has reported abortions to the CDC since 1997, and West Virginia is missing from the latest count. In addition, because the CDC receives data—rather than actively seeking data out, as does the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI)—its numbers will always be lower than the real totals.

Those weaknesses notwithstanding, statistical information gained by the CDC's annual survey is highly useful for spotting patterns and trends.

The total number of abortion reported to the CDC for 47 reporting areas¹ in 2003 was 839,713—nearly six thousand fewer than the number the CDC found in 47 reporting areas in 2002. (The national abortion number is believed to be closer to 1.29 million, the estimate coming from the AGI, which surveys abortion clinics in all fifty states directly rather than relying on state health departments.)

But whether one relies on figures from AGI or the CDC, the trend lines are definitely pointing down.

As we look to the future, there are other figures that are helpful. The CDC also calculates the abortion rate and the abortion ratio.

The abortion rate is the number of abortions per 1,000 women of reproductive age, defined as 15-44.

For 2003, the abortion rate reported by the CDC was 16 abortions per 1,000 women, the same as it has been every year since 2000. This is important, for you'd have to go back to 1973, the first year of Roe v Wade, to find a lower rate.

The CDC defines the abortion ratio as the number of abortions for every 1,000 live births. In 2003 that dropped considerably from 246 the previous year to 241 abortions for every thousand live births.

To understand the significance of this figure, during most of the 1980s the abortion ratio hovered between 350 and 360 abortions per thousand live births. Again, one has to go all the way back to 1973 to find a lower abortion ratio than that recorded by the CDC for 2003.

CDC figures show that 59.8% of women having abortions have already had at least one previous live birth. At least 43.6% were known to have had at least one prior abortion. In recent years, the percentage of women having repeat abortions has hovered around 45 %.

The CDC provides a great deal of demographic data to show which categories of women are having abortions. For example, women between the ages of 20 and 24 account for a third (33.5%) of all abortions. The majority of abortions are performed on minorities (37.1% of aborting women are black, 18.1% are Hispanic), even though minorities only represent about a quarter of the U.S. population. In addition, unmarried women continue to account for more than eight out of ten abortions (82.1%).

Six in ten abortions (60.5%) are performed at eight weeks gestation or less, while 11.8% occur in the second trimester or later. The most common method of abortion is still suction curettage (88.3%).

However, the percentage of women using "other" procedures, including chemical methods, such as RU486, climbed to 9.1%. By comparison, in 1993, "other" methods constituted just 0.3%.

Data collected by the CDC shows that different states face different problems and that situations are dramatically worse in some areas than others. For example, the abortion ratio [the number of abortions for every 1,000 live births] for New York City was an astonishing 758—over three times the national ratio.

Other areas with particularly high abortion ratios included Delaware (369), Florida (416), New York state (509), Rhode Island (419), and the District of Columbia (672). Ratios were quite low in places such as Idaho (42), Kentucky (66), Mississippi (89), South Dakota (74), and Utah (72).

Iowa had a high number of abortions performed at eight weeks gestation or less (70.7%), while Kansas had more than three times the national percentage of abortion at 21 weeks gestation or more (4.8% for Kansas versus 1.4% nationally)

Several states reported high percentages of "medical" abortions—the euphemism for chemical abortions. This included Alaska (18.5%), Arizona (24%), Massachusetts (14.9%), Missouri (14.2%), Oregon (15.9%), South Carolina (18.1%), Utah (25.6%), and Vermont (20.4%).

Over seven out of ten women who aborted women in Maryland had undergone at least one previous abortion (70.4%). Eighteen percent reported having three or more previous abortions. In New York City, 15% of women who underwent an abortion in 2003 had had at least three previous abortions.

Figures for abortion-related maternal mortality run a year behind the CDC's other figures, but they show nevertheless that women continue to die from legal abortion. The CDC says that nine women died of legal abortions in 2002, bringing the total number of maternal deaths from legal abortion since 1972 to 377.

That the abortion rates and numbers of overall abortions continue to drop is a testament to the effectiveness of pro-life people and pro-life policies. A testimony to that faithfulness is that there are children alive who otherwise would have been lost.

Pro-lifers will not rest until the "trend" culminates not in the reduction of abortion but its elimination.

Footnotes

1 Usually states, though New York City and the District of Columbia report separately.