

Figure is recognized to be hundreds of thousands of abortions too low: CDC Figures Show Slight Abortion Increase for 2002

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In its annual Abortion Surveillance, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that there were 854,122 legal induced abortions in 2002, an increase of just 637, or 0.1%, over the number reported by the CDC for 2001.

The CDC's estimate is based on reports from state health departments. However some, such as California, do not report abortions to the CDC, and others vary in the quality of their data collection. Thus the figure is recognized to be hundreds of thousands of abortions too low.

By contrast the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), which surveys abortionists directly, reports a number closer to 1.3 million. Still, because the CDC collects and reports its data every year (AGI surveys are sporadic) and regularly tracks demographic and medical data, its numbers are considered useful in identifying and following certain trends.

There are factors, however, which indicate that this reported increase may reflect better reporting rather than an actual increase.

Of the states (plus Washington, D.C.) that reported, more actually showed decreases (27) in their abortion totals from 2001 to 2002 than increases (20). Two states, Colorado and Arizona, which made special efforts to enforce or encourage compliance with state reporting regulations saw increases of 3,124 and 2,375, respectively, themselves more than accounting for the reported increase. This does not mean that fewer abortions actually occurred than what the states or the CDC reports for 2002, only that previous reports from those states missed some abortions and may have made national totals appear lower in earlier years.

Abortion Rate

When calculating the abortion rate, the CDC means the number of abortions per 1,000 women of reproductive age (ages 15–44). That number was the same in 2002—16 per 1,000—as it was in 2001. This remains the lowest figure from any year since 1973, when *Roe v. Wade* was decided.¹

Abortion Ratio

When calculating the abortion ratio, the CDC means something different: the number of abortions per 1,000 live births. The abortion ratio increased slightly in 2002, from 246 per thousand in 2001 to 247 in 2002. The last time the CDC reported a lower abortion ratio was in 1974, when it was 242.2. It is impossible to know definitively, but better reporting, rather than increased abortions, may account for this slight increase as well.

Demographic data generally showed breakdowns similar to previous years. Nearly half (49.1%) of abortions were to women 25 and older. Another 17.5% went to teenagers or younger. Over four out of five (81.9%) went to unmarried women, although it should be noted that 60% went to women who had already had at least one previous live birth.

At least 43.8% had had at least one previous abortion, according to the CDC. And 7.5% reported having three or more previous abortions.

Minorities accounted for the majority of abortions. The CDC reports that 36.6% of aborting mothers were black in 2002, although census figures say African-American women represented just 13.7% of the population of reproductive aged women in 2000. The same census puts the population of Hispanic women of reproductive age at 12.8% of the national total, although the CDC says 18.1% of the abortions in 2002 were done on Hispanics.

The CDC says that nine out of ten abortions were done by suction curettage, also known as vacuum aspiration. The U.S. distributor of the abortifacient RU486 placed chemical abortions in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand a year,³ but the CDC reports that the number of “medical (nonsurgical) procedures” for 2002 was just 36,297.

Just over six in ten (60.5%) abortions were performed on women at eight weeks gestation or less. 11.5% of abortions reported to the CDC were done in the second or third trimester, with at least 1.4% of all abortions being done after 21 weeks.

Significant declines in the rate, ratio, and total number of abortions over the past decade and a half⁴ are surely a testament to the effectiveness of pro-life education, legislation, and outreach. Parental involvement legislation, fetology booklets, and pregnancy care centers have all had an enormous impact. The numbers show us that countless lives have been saved.

The statistics also show that we still have quite a ways to go and many challenges ahead. The women who are having abortions are generally older than they were 30 years ago, when abortion first became legal and they were about as likely to be a teenager as to be over 25. Today’s aborting woman typically have already given birth to at least one child.

The more women realize what abortion is, what it does to them and to their child, the more they’ll be open to answers and alternatives. Let’s make sure we continue to be there with helping hands and open hearts. It makes a difference.

Footnotes

1 This, like the abortion totals, does not include data from California, New Hampshire, and Alaska, which have not reported to the CDC since 1998. The rate was 20 with those states in 1997 but 17 in 1998 without them (and without Oklahoma, missing from CDC figures for 1998 and 1999).

2 The abortion ratio with all fifty states in the mix in 1997 was 306 abortions per 1,000 births. When California, New Hampshire, Oklahoma and Alaska dropped out in 1998, the ratio dropped to 264. Oklahoma began reporting again in 2000.

3 Abortion pill distributor Danco has reported that over 460,000 women have used RU486 to abort their children since the pill was approved for sale in the U.S. in late 2000.

4 According to AGI, there were 1.6 million abortions in 1990, but recent figures place the number at just under 1.3 million a year. The decline in raw numbers is harder to follow with the CDC, owing to the disappearance of several states from the totals in 1998. Abortion ratios tracked by the CDC, however, began to drop in the late 1980s, followed by the rate, which started downward in 1991.