

Abortion Numbers Continue to Decline

BY Dave Andrusko and Randall K. O'Bannon, Ph.D.

In early August, the Alan Guttmacher Institute (Planned Parenthood's "special research affiliate") distributed a report entitled "Estimates of U.S. Abortion Incidence, 2001-2003."

AGI's latest report, written by Lawrence F. Finer and Stanley K. Henshaw, confirms that abortions have continued to fall after reaching a 1.6 million peak in 1990. For 2003, the latest year studied, Guttmacher estimates that figure to be 1,287,000, about six thousand less than AGI believes there were in 2002.

(Not to get too technical, but AGI's last "census" of abortion providers was performed in 2000.

Its "interim estimates for 2001-2003" reflect, we're told, a combination of "2000 data with more recent, but incomplete, federal and state government data.")

Abortion rates (the number of abortions per 1,000 women of reproductive age) dropped. So did abortion ratios, which represents the number of babies aborted out of every 100 pregnancies (excluding miscarriages and stillbirths).

Both continued to drop to levels not seen since the early 1970s. To be sure, the decline was more pronounced in the early 1990s than in recent years, but AGI reports the direction as downward in 12 out of 13 years, with 1996 being the sole exception.

The number of pregnancies, births, and abortions all fell among teenagers. Among older women, pregnancies and births increased while abortions remained about the same, according to AGI.

It is very informative to read the report in conjunction with a separate AGI press release. In its haste to promote its own policy agenda, the press release misses altogether what the study showed—that the drop in abortions was because fewer unintended pregnancies were aborted.

The report uses data from the National Survey of Family Growth in 1994 and 2001 and concludes, "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...."

This is highly important. If the AGI analysis is correct, it means that abortion declines were not due to fewer pregnancies but because there were tangible changes in the attitudes and behaviors of pregnant women towards their unborn children led to fewer abortions.

Before we ask what accounts for the change in attitudes that resulted in over 300,000 fewer abortions from one decade to the next, it should be noted that AGI put out a press release to accompany the study.

So why are more women choosing life? A number of states have passed right-to-know laws, guaranteeing that women get a chance to hear about positive, realistic alternatives that may be safer for both them and their child.

Many states have parental involvement laws in place, to try to make sure that pregnant teens have the benefit of their parent's advice. Other studies have also shown these laws to be effective. (See, for example, www.nrlc.org/News_and_Views/March06/nv030906.html.)

In addition, popular knowledge about fetal development has increased over the past several years, with the widespread use of ultrasound technology and fetal heartbeat stethoscopes.

Volunteers at the thousands of pregnancy care centers scattered across the country have helped many women find the support and assistance they need to carry through their pregnancies to term. All this is proof that the education, legislation, and outreach done by the pro-life movement have been effective.

As noted, AGI also said in its report that while abortions have dropped significantly for teens, helping to drive the national rate down, abortion rates for poor women and women on Medicaid have increased.

This may be part of the reason why the national decline was so steep early on, when many states were passing parental involvement laws, but has slowed once these had been in place for a number of years.

It should continue to decline as more states pass or improve their laws on minor abortions, informed consent, waiting periods, etc., but other means may more directly address remaining high-risk populations such as the poor.

"There is some good news here," said Dr. Randall K. O'Bannon, director of education and research for the National Right to Life Educational Trust Fund. "It shows that the hard work done by the pro-life movement has been effective, that it has saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of unborn children. But it also shows that we've got a long way to go, and that we're going to have to continue to pass laws, to get the message out, and to reach out to those who feel they have no hope and no alternatives."