

Estimates of U.S. Abortion Incidence in 2001 and 2002

By Lawrence B. Finer and Stanley K. Henshaw
The Alan Guttmacher Institute
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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 Information on abortion incidence since 2000 is limited, however. To assess whether the downward trend has continued, additional analyses are necessary.

Since 1973, The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI) has estimated the number of abortions performed in the United States by conducting a periodic census 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 U.S. 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 2001.³ The CDC reports are incomplete, however, because the state reports collected by the agency vary in completeness, with some lacking information on as many as 40–50% of the abortions that occur in the state.⁴ In addition, Alaska, California and New Hampshire have no abortion reporting system at all and are not included in the CDC totals.

The purpose of this report is to provide estimates of U.S. abortion numbers, rates and ratios for 2001 and 2002, projected from AGI's total for 2000, using state health department data that are reasonably complete and comparably reported over time.

METHODOLOGY

The most recent AGI 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 were excluded. We eliminated the states with very incomplete or inconsistent reporting (Arizona, Maryland and Nevada, as well as the District of Columbia), and summed, for each year, the number of abortions that took place in the 44 remaining states. The percentage change between 2000 and 2001 was then applied to AGI'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, except that the data for both years were collected directly from state health departments because the CDC abortion surveillance report for 2002 has not been published.[†] For 2002, no data were available for Wyoming (in addition to the states with no reporting systems), and we eliminated Arizona, Colorado, the District of Columbia and Maryland because of inconsistent reporting. We used the remaining 43 states for our calculations.

To calculate abortion rates (defined as the number of abortions per 1,000 women aged 15–44), we divided the number of abortions by the July 1 population of women in this age group for each 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

* The data for Iowa for both years were for residents of the state, rather than abortions that occurred in the state.

† The data for Iowa and Tennessee for both years were for residents.

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 2001 was 1,303,000 (Table 1). This represents a decline of 0.8% from the 1,313,000 abortions performed in 2000. The number of abortions declined another 0.8% in 2002, to 1,293,000.

We estimate that 21.1 of every 1,000 women aged 15–44 had an abortion in 2001. This represents a decline of 0.2 points, or 1.0%, from the 2000 rate of 21.3. The 2002 abortion rate is estimated to be 20.9, a decline of 0.2 points, or 0.9%.

The 2001 abortion ratio was 24.5 abortions per 100 abortions and births, identical to the 2000 figure. The 2002 abortion ratio was 24.2, a decrease of 0.3 points, or 1.4%, from 2001.

To examine the sensitivity of our estimates, we used the methodology described above to project the number of abortions for 1997, based on AGI's 1996 count of abortions and changes in state reports between 1996 and 1997. We also calculated an interpolated figure for 1997 (based on the 1996 and 1999 AGI 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 decline was much steeper between 1996 and 1997 than between 1998 and 2002. Therefore, it is likely that our current projections will have a smaller margin of error.

DISCUSSION

The declines in abortion incidence seen in 2001 and 2002 were continuations of declines seen in the 1990s. Between 1992 and 1996, the annualized decline was 3.4% per year, while between 1996 and 2000, it was 1.2% per year. The annualized decline between 2000 and 2002 was 0.9% per year, suggesting that the last two years reflect a continuation of the trend of the late 1990s, albeit at a slightly slower rate of decline.

Reasons for changes in the abortion rate and the abortion ratio are hard to determine without placing the data in a broader context. Abortion may decline because fewer women experience unintended pregnancies, or because fewer women faced with unintended pregnancies end these pregnancies by abortion. The most recent estimates of unintended pregnancy rates were for the year 1994;⁸ analyses to update those estimates are currently under way.

It is also 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 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 nonreporting 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 is too small. Thus, our new estimates of the number of abortions would be too high.

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⁸ Henshaw SK, Unintended pregnancy in the United States, *Family Planning Perspectives*, 1998, 30(1):24–29 & 46.

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*, 34(5):226–235.

TABLE 1. Number of reported abortions, abortion rate and abortion ratio, United States, 1973–2002

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]

*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 provisional. *Sources:* **All data, 1973–2000:** reference 2. **Number of abortions, 2001–2002:** see Methodology. **Population data, 2001–2002:** reference 6. **Birth data, July 2001–June 2003:** reference 7.