

## Abortion in the U.S.

October 2002

About half (49%) of the approximately 5.4 million pregnancies occurring in the United States each year are unintended.<sup>1</sup> Fifty-four percent (54%), or approximately 1.4 million, of these unintended pregnancies ended in abortion in 1996.<sup>1</sup> While abortion remains one of the most common surgical procedures in this country, abortion rates have declined.

Between 1992 and 1997, the number of abortions performed annually dropped from 1.5 million to about 1.2 million nationwide.<sup>3</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 884,273 abortions were performed in 1998 in the 46 states and two municipalities that voluntarily report abortion data. This is a two percent (2%) decrease from the 900,171 abortions reported in 1997 by the same 48 reporting areas.<sup>2</sup> (The CDC does not have 1998 data for the entire nation, so national trend data after 1997 is not available from that source CDC; see Abortion Statistics box). A number of possible factors have been cited for the recent declines, including the aging of the population, greater acceptance of unwed childbearing, shifts in attitudes, legislation restricting abortion access, and a decrease in the number of abortion providers.

### Incidence and Trends

- Between 1992 and 1997, the abortion rate (the number of abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-44) decreased from about 26 per 1,000 to 20 per 1,000 nationwide, or from 1.5 million to about 1.2 million abortions (see Chart 1).<sup>3</sup> For both 1997 and 1998, the abortion rate for the new 48 voluntary reporting areas was 17 per 1,000 women aged 15-44.<sup>2</sup>
- The abortion ratio (the number of abortions per 1,000 live births) in 1998 was 264 per 1,000, compared with 274 abortions in 1997 for the same 48 reporting areas.<sup>2</sup>
- It is estimated that 43 percent of women in the U.S. will have an abortion by age 45 and that more than 30 million have had an abortion since the procedure was legalized in 1973 (based on 1992 rates.)<sup>4</sup>
- Abortion rates vary significantly throughout the world. Among countries with comprehensive statistics, abortion rates per 1,000 women aged 15-44 in 1996 ranged from a low of 6.5 in the Netherlands to a high of 77.7 in Cuba. U.S. rates for that year (20.0-22.9) were inter-mediate, but higher than most other industrialized nations.<sup>5</sup>

### Methods

- There are two general types of abortion available to women in the U.S.: surgical and non-surgical (also known as "medical") abortions.
- The vast majority (99%) of abortions performed in the U.S. today are surgical.<sup>2</sup> The most common surgical methods include vacuum aspiration, dilation and curettage (D&C), and dilation and evacuation (D&E).<sup>6</sup> A much less common surgical method used for later abortions is dilation and extraction (D&X), a D&E variant.

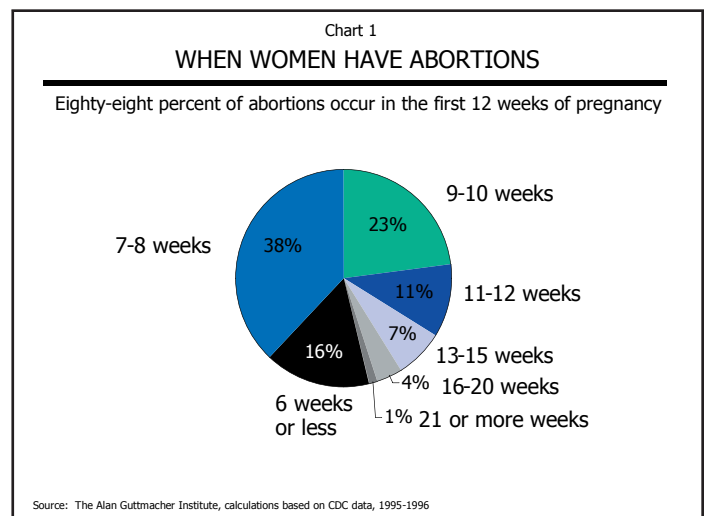
- In September 28, 2000, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved mifepristone, the first drug specifically designed for use as a method of medical abortion. The CDC does not yet have data regarding medical abortions since the then, but the drug's distributor reports that more than 100,000 medical abortions were completed in the two years after it was approved.<sup>18</sup>

### Safety and Effectiveness

- The overall failure rate for surgical abortion is about one percent; the overall failure rate for medical abortion—those not successfully completed in a given period of time—is five percent.<sup>5</sup>
- The risk of death associated with abortion between 1993 and 1997 was 0.6 per 100,000 abortions, making it one of the safest surgical procedures in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> For comparison, the risk of maternal death from childbirth is 6.7 per 100,000 deliveries. The risk of a major complication associated with abortion in the U.S. is also less than one percent.<sup>7</sup>

### Timing

- Eighty-eight percent (88%) of abortions are performed in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy, with 54 percent in the first eight weeks. Just one percent of all abortions occur at twenty-one weeks or later.<sup>8</sup>



### Abortion Patients

- About 19 percent of women having abortions in the U.S. are teens; 33 percent are between the ages of 20 and 24; and 48 percent are aged 25 and older. Approximately 83 percent are unmarried and 41 percent are white. About 61 percent of women have given birth before.<sup>17</sup>

- Fifty-eight percent (58%) of women who had an abortion in 1994 said that they used contraception in the month that they conceived.<sup>1</sup>
- About 14,000 women in the U.S. have abortions each year following rape or incest.<sup>9</sup>

### Abortion Statistics: Methods and Most Current Data

The most reliable national data on the number of abortions performed in the U.S. come from two sources: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a federal agency, and The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), a private reproductive health research organization. CDC data are collected annually, primarily from state health department reports, and analysis is generally available with a two to three year delay; 1998 is the most recent. AGI data, based on a survey of all known abortion providers, are collected less frequently; new data from 2000-01 is expected at the end of 2002.

Because the CDC data are subject to the reporting limitations of the state health departments, the AGI estimates, which are generally higher, have been considered more reflective of the true statistics. States collect data differently, including in terms of how complete their reporting is and how they calculate gestational age or categorize abortion methods.<sup>15</sup>

The CDC recently made an important change in the way that it calculates abortion data, making comparisons before and after 1997 more difficult. For 1997, the CDC reported a total of 1,186,039 abortions nationwide. But starting with 1998, the CDC no longer calculated for the four states – Alaska, California, New Hampshire, and Oklahoma – that do not report abortion data to the CDC. Had the 1997 data been calculated *only* for the 48 areas available for 1998, only 900,171 abortions would have been reported. The elimination of California is believed to account for most of the difference.<sup>2</sup>

### Abortion Sites and Providers

- Most abortions in the U.S. are performed in independent clinics that specialize in abortion services. In 1996, 90 percent of reported abortions were performed in clinics, seven percent took place in hospitals, and three percent were performed in the private offices of physicians.<sup>8</sup>
- Between 1992 and 1996, the number of abortion providers<sup>10</sup> in the U.S. decreased by 14 percent. The largest decrease was among physicians' offices (26%), followed by hospitals (18%) and non-hospital facilities (12%). Public hospitals experienced a greater decrease (23%) than private hospitals (16%).<sup>8</sup>
- Eighty-six percent (86%) of all U.S. counties have no abortion provider, and 32 percent of women of reproductive age (15-44) live in these counties.<sup>8</sup>
- Older ob/gyns are more likely than their younger colleagues to have performed an abortion in the past five years: 39 percent of ob/gyns 65 and older report doing so, as compared with 20 percent of those under 40. Overall, 58 percent of ob/gyns who performed an abortion in the past five years are 50 or older.<sup>11</sup>
- Seventy percent (70%) of residency programs in obstetrics and gynecology offered training in first-trimester abortion in 1991-1992. The proportion that included abortion as a standard part of residency training had declined from 25 percent to 12 percent since 1985.<sup>12</sup>
- A majority (55%) of non-hospital abortion providers reported experiencing one or more forms of harassment in 1992. Among providers performing more than 400 abortions annually, 86 percent said they experienced one or more forms of harassment.<sup>13</sup>

### Abortion Costs and Coverage

- The cost of an abortion will vary depending on factors such as location, timing, and type of procedure. A first-trimester abortion at a Planned Parenthood ranges from \$225-\$575. The average cost for a medical abortion at Planned Parenthood ranges from \$350-\$575.<sup>14</sup>
- Thirty-one percent (31%) of Americans with employer-based insurance are covered for abortion services.<sup>15</sup>
- About one in five women (18%) in the U.S. aged 17-44 are uninsured.<sup>16</sup> Most states fund abortions through Medicaid in very limited circumstances such as rape, incest, or a threat to the life of the woman.<sup>13</sup>

### References

- <sup>1</sup> CDC, Abortion surveillance: preliminary analysis—United States, 1996. MMWR, 1998, 47: 1025-1028, 1035. While CDC abortion data is available through 1998, the most recent The most recent abortion data available is from 1998 but many detailed secondary analyses – which provide more details of trends – of abortion data are based on 1996 figures data.
- <sup>2</sup> CDC, Abortion Surveillance—United States, 1998. MMWR, 2002, 51(SS03);1-32.
- <sup>3</sup> CDC, Abortion surveillance: preliminary analysis—United States, 1997. MMWR, 2000, 48, No. 51 and 52.
- <sup>4</sup> Henshaw SK, Unintended Pregnancy in the United States, Family Planning Perspectives, 1998, 30:24-29, 46.
- <sup>5</sup> Alan Guttmacher Institute, Sharing Responsibility: Women, Society and Abortion Worldwide. New York: AGI, 1999.
- <sup>6</sup> Hatcher RA et al., Contraceptive Technology, Seventeenth edition, New York: Ardent Media, Inc, 1998.
- <sup>7</sup> National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Statistics of the United States, 1991. Washington D.C.: US Public Health Service, 1991, p.2.MM: do we have anything more recent, i.e. equiv. or closer to CDC 1998 data re abortions?
- <sup>8</sup> Henshaw SK, Abortion incidence and services in the United States, 1995-1996, Family Planning Perspectives, 1998, 30(6): 263-70.
- <sup>9</sup> Torres A and Forrest JD, Why do women have abortions? Family Planning Perspectives, 1988, 20:169-176.
- <sup>10</sup> The term "abortion provider" is a place where abortions are performed; it includes hospitals, clinics, and doctors' offices. "Providers" in this context are different from "physicians."
- <sup>11</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation. 1995 Survey of Obstetrician/Gynecologists on Contraception, and Unplanned Pregnancy, Attitudes and Practices with Regard to Abortion, Menlo Park, CA: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, June 1995/2000. MM: date seems awfully strange, since 2000 but 1995 survey?
- <sup>12</sup> MacKay HT and McKay AP, Abortion training in obstetric and gynecology residency programs in the United States, 1991-1992, Family Planning Perspectives, 1995, 27:112-115.
- <sup>13</sup> Henshaw SK, Factors hindering access to abortion services, Family Planning Perspectives, 1995, 27:54-59, 87.
- <sup>14</sup> Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc. 2002. Medical Abortion -Questions and Answers.
- <sup>15</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation and Health Research and Educational Trust, Survey of Employer-Sponsored Health Benefits 2001, Menlo Park, CA: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001.
- <sup>16</sup> Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation estimate based on Urban Institute analyses of the March 2000 Current Population Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- <sup>17</sup> Jones RK et al., Patterns in the socioeconomic characteristics of women obtaining abortions in 2000-2001, Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 2002, 34:226-35.
- <sup>18</sup> Danco Laboratories, "Dear Colleague letter," Sept. 23, 2002.

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