

INCIDENCE OF INDUCED ABORTION IN THE UNITED STATES

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How many legal induced abortions are there in the United States, and how many induced abortions (legal and illegal) took place prior to the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* decisions, which permit abortion for virtually any reason throughout the nine months of pregnancy? One thing is certain. The number of legal abortions (both surgical and medical) has increased dramatically since legalization, as we may see in Table 1.

Table 1. Impact of the Legalization of Abortion on the Number of Abortions in the U.S., 1968-2010, by Number of States with Permissive Laws

Year	States	Legal Abortions	Year	Legal Abortions	Year	Legal Abortions
1968	5	18,000	1988	1,590,800	2008	1,212,400
1969	9	50,000	1989	1,566,900	2009	1,212,400 (estimate)
1970	11	193,000	1990	1,608,600 (highest)	2010	1,212,400 (estimate)
1971		480,000	1991	1,556,500	2011	1,212,400 (estimate)
1972	17	587,000	1992	1,528,900		
1973	All	744,600	1993	1,495,000		
1974		898,600	1994	1,423,000		
1975		1,034,200	1995	1,359,400		
1976		1,179,300	1996	1,360,200		
1977		1,316,700	1997	1,335,000		
1978		1,409,600	1998	1,319,000		
1979		1,497,700	1999	1,314,800		
1980		1,553,900	2000	1,313,000		
1981		1,577,300	2001	1,291,000		
1982		1,573,900	2002	1,269,000		
1983		1,575,000	2003	1,250,000		
1984		1,577,200	2004	1,222,100		
1985		1,588,600	2005	1,206,200		
1986		1,574,000	2006	1,242,200		
1987		1,559,100	2007	1,209,600		
						Totals
						1968-2011: 54,298,500
						1973-2011: 52,970,500
						Corrected for 4% Underreport
						1973-2011: 55,089,320
						Average Daily Rate
						1973-2011: 3,868 each day
						over this 39 year period.

Sources: 1968 and 1969 figures estimated by the Population Council as reported in *U.S. News and World Report*, Feb. 5, 1973, p. 36. Christopher Tietze estimates there were about 8,000 legal abortions per year in the U.S. prior to 1967 (see *The Effects of Changes in State Abortion Laws*, Washington, D.C. DHEW, 1971, p.4). Figures for 1970-1972 are from Tietze, et al., *Abortion 1974-1975*, Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1976, p.7. 1973-2008 data are from Rachel K. Jones and Kathryn Kooistra, "Abortion Incidence and Access to Services in the United States, 2008," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 43:1 (March, 2011) pp. 41-50. Note: These figures do not include abortions caused by over-the-counter pills such as Plan B and Ella.

Thus, at a daily rate, the number of legal abortions has increased from 22 per day prior to 1967 to 4,407 in 1990 and has since decreased to 3,322 per day in 2011. But have not legal abortions simply replaced illegal abortions so that today we have about the same number of induced abortions (legal and illegal) that we had prior to *Roe v. Wade*? The answer is most definitely, "No."

The late Christopher Tietze (1975:78), an abortion statistics authority, agreed that “to the extent that unintended births are replaced by legal abortions the total number of legal and illegal induced abortions increases subsequent to legalization.” How great this increase is over the total legal and illegal abortions performed prior to 1968 is difficult to say, since no one can state exactly how many illegal abortions occurred then. Earlier “guesstimates” placed the annual number of illegal abortions at from 200,000 to 1.2 million (U.S. DHEW, 1971). More recent estimates suggest this is much too high. Tietze (1975) for example, suggested that the illegal abortion maternal death rate in developed countries is 40 per 100,000 cases. In 1966, the last year before the laws began to change, the National Center for Health Statistics reported a total of 189 maternal deaths due to abortions of all types: legal and illegal induced, and spontaneous. Even if we were to allow for underreporting of illegal abortions and considered all of the 189 to be due to illegal abortions, the total number of illegal abortions in 1966, at a maximum, would have been $189/40 \times 100,000 = 472,500$. Cates and Roachat (1976), utilizing a lower estimate of 30 maternal deaths per 100,000 illegal abortions, state that there were 130,000 illegal abortions in 1972, one year before *Roe v. Wade*, when legal abortion was available only in a few larger cities.

Two surveys asking women about their experience with abortion also indicate that the “one million illegal abortions per year” estimate is much too high. Analyzing combined results from these polls, Henshaw and Martire (1982) note, “Most of the abortions obtained by women under age 35 would have occurred after abortion was legalized nationally, while the majority of abortions obtained by women over 35 would have been illegal.” Four percent of the older women and 14% of the younger women reported having had abortions, an increase of 350% in abortions after legalization. Allowing for underreporting of illegal abortions, Henshaw and Martire (1982) estimate that four million women over age 35 and alive at that time had had an illegal abortion. Hence, the “one million illegal abortions per year” claim is much too high, since it would have produced the four million figure in just 4 to 6 years, allowing for repeat abortions, and would have resulted in a much higher total than four million women. Thus, the “one million illegal abortions” figure would seem to be one of those easy-to-remember, “useful,” oft-repeated, but false numbers presented by the pro-choice movement to advance their cause. (See Nathanson, 1979, p. 197).

Finally, the most comprehensive study done suggests that the best estimate of the total number of abortions (legal + illegal) occurring in 1966, the last year before any laws changed, is about 125,000 (McKnight, 1992). Since permissive laws began to be passed in 1967, therefore, induced abortions have increased 10 to 12 fold.

References

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