

# INCIDENCE OF INDUCED ABORTION IN THE UNITED STATES

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How many legal induced abortions are there in the United States now, 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 has increased dramatically since legalization, as we may see in Table 1.

<i>Table 1. Impact of the Legalization of Abortion on the Number of Abortions (In thousands) 1968-2012, by Number of States With Permissive Laws</i>						
Year	States	Legal Abortions	Year	Legal Abortions	Year	Legal Abortions
1968	5	18	1988	1,590.8	2008	1,212.4
1969	9	50	1989	1,566.9	2009	1,151.6
1970	11	193	1990	<b>1,608.6</b>	2010	1,102.7
1971		480	1991	1,556.5	2011	1,058.5
1972	17	587	1992	1,528.9	Totals 1968-2011 53,974,100	
1973	all	744,6	1993	1,495.0	1973-2011 Corrected for 4% Underreporting 54,751,944	
1974		898,6	1994	1,423.0	<b>Average Daily Rate 1973-2011 3.844</b>	
1975		1,034.2	1995	1,359.4		
1976		1,179.3	1996	1,360.2		
1977		1,316.7	1997	1,335.0		
1978		1,409,6	1998	1,319.0		
1979		1,497.7	1999	1,314.8		
1980		1,553,9	2000	1,313.0		
1981		1,577.3	2001	1,219.0		
1982		1,573.9	2002	1,269.0		
1983		1,575.0	2003	1,250.0		
1984		1,577,2	2004	1,222.0		
1985		1,588.6	2005	1,206.2		
1986		1,574,0	2006	1,242.2		
1987		1,559.1	2007	1,209.6		

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. U.S. DHEW, 1971, p.4). Figures for 1970-72 are from Tietze et al., *Abortion 1974-1975* N.Y. Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1976, p.7; 1973-2011 data are from R. K. Jones and K. 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 and R.K Jones and J. Jerman, "Abortion Incidence and Service Availability in the U.S., 2011, PSRH, 46:1 (March, 2014) online.

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 2,900 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 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 before that. 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 abortion maternal deaths by assuming all of these maternal deaths were 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 only 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 the 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 4 million women over age 35 and alive at that time had an illegal abortion. Hence, the “one million illegal abortions per year” claim is much too high, since it would have produced the 4 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.

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.

Cates, W. Jr. and R.W. Roachat, 1976. “Illegal Abortion in the United States: 1974,” *Family Planning Perspectives*, 8:86-92.

Henshaw, S.K. and G. Martire, 1982. “Abortion and the Public Opinion Polls: Women Who Have Had Abortions,” *Family Planning Perspectives*, 14:60-62.

Tietze, C., 1975. “The Effect of Legalization of Abortion on Population Growth and Public Health,” *Family Planning Perspectives*, 7:123-127.

U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1971. *The Effects of Changes in State Abortion Laws*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

C. McKnight, *Life Without Roe*, Washington, D.C.: Horatio R. Storer Foundation, 1992.

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