



CATHOLICS
UNITED

Reducing Abortion in America:
Beyond *Roe v. Wade*

www.catholics-united.org

Joseph Wright¹

August 2008

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Penn State University; Visiting Fellow, University of Notre Dame: jwright8@nd.edu.

Executive Summary

Overturing *Roe v. Wade* would likely only affect 10% of abortion decisions in the United States. The actual number of abortions prevented would be lower.

This brief uses public opinion data and data on reported U.S. abortions in 2002 to estimate that overturning *Roe v. Wade* and passing statewide abortion bans in the 16 states where a majority of residents oppose abortion would affect only 10%, or about 100,000, abortion decisions. The actual decrease in the number of abortions would likely be less than 100,000. In contrast, the strong economy of the 1990s caused the abortion rate to decline at a much greater rate: despite a growing U.S. population, there were more than 300,000 fewer abortions in 2000 than in 1990.

Pro-life public policy should address the socioeconomic factors that affect most abortion decisions

The data reported in this study suggest two implications: (1) pro-life advocates should continue to work to change public opinion on abortion; and (2) any effective strategy to reduce U.S. abortions must address the socioeconomic factors that lead most women to seek abortions. Recent research suggests that increasing economic support for low-income families and pregnant women would decrease the number of abortions by over 300,000 per year. Public policies that address the economic status of low-income families and pregnant women are therefore more likely to effectively reduce abortions in the United States than overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

First, this brief estimates the likely number of abortions that would be affected if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned. We then compare this estimate to the nationwide decrease in abortions that occurred in the 1990s. Finally, we suggest that a comprehensive strategy to reduce and end abortion in the United States must include policies that address the socioeconomic conditions of working families and pregnant women.

How many abortions will be affected by overturning *Roe v. Wade*?

This brief analyzes public opinion data on abortion and the number of abortions in each state in 2002 to estimate how many abortion decisions would be affected if the Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade* and returns the legal status of abortion rights to the states. Table 1 examines some possible effects of overturning *Roe v. Wade* on the U.S. abortion rate by calculating the number of abortion decisions such a move would affect, given that some states would likely seek to restrict or ban abortions and others would not.² We assume that states in which 50% or more of a random sample of survey respondents consider themselves “pro-life” would pass a ban on abortion. We assume that all other states would not pass bans on abortion. In the first two columns, we can see that the ten states that would ban abortion under this assumption represent only 6.3% of all legal, reported abortions in the U.S. in 2002.³ In this scenario, 93% of all abortions nationwide would still remain legal. Reducing the “Pro-Life” threshold to 45% or more yields only a marginal improvement. In this scenario, almost 90% of all abortions would remain legal, while state bans would only affect 10% of all abortions.⁴ A “Pro-Life” threshold of 40% or more shows that even a shift in public opinion of 5-10% towards a complete ban on all abortions in each of these nine additional states would affect just 36% of all legal, reported abortions.⁵ The remaining 64% of abortions would still remain unaffected by overturning *Roe v. Wade*. In this last scenario, even if the 25 most pro-life U.S. states were to ban abortion, 64% of abortions in America would still remain legal.

² The data on abortions are from 2002, the latest year of abortion data released from the Centers for Disease Control; and the state-level opinion data on abortion comes from surveyusa.com and were released 12 September 2005. The CDC data can be found at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5407a1.htm>, and the surveyusa data at <http://www.surveyusa.com/50State2005/50StateAbortion0805SortedbyProLife.htm>.

³ These 10 states are Alabama, Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Utah, and West Virginia.

⁴ In addition to the states listed in the previous footnote, this scenario includes bans on abortion in Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and South Dakota.

⁵ These additional states are Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, Montana, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas.

Table 1: Legal abortions in states that might ban abortions, 2003						
Assumed share of population who consider themselves “Pro-Life” needed to institute abortion ban:	50% or more		45% or more		40% or more	
	Banned	Allowed	Banned	Allowed	Banned	Allowed
States	10	41	16	35	25	26
Total Annual Abortions	64,119	895,609	98,027	861,701	352,353	607,375
Share of National Total (Affected v. Unaffected)	6.7%	93.3%	10.2%	89.8%	36.7%	63.3%

Notes: Total number of abortions nationwide = 959,728. We estimate 220,121 abortions for California, 1807 for New Hampshire, and 1941 for West Virginia, assuming that these states account for the same proportion of total abortions in 2003 as they did in 1996 (22.9%, 0.19%, and 0.20% respectively). Assuming these proportions for 2003 probably *underestimates* the number of abortions in California because California in 2003 contains a larger share of all women in the U.S. than in 1996. Total equals 51 to include the District of Columbia.

Will overturning *Roe v. Wade* reduce the number of abortions?

These figures serve as a useful starting point to estimate the effect of overturning *Roe v. Wade* on the number of abortions. This estimate, however, is only a starting point, as many of these banned abortions would take place in other states or in the extra-legal market for abortions. Thus, even under the optimistic assumption that the 16 most pro-life states would ban abortions, the decrease in abortions would be much less than the 100,000 abortions that occur in these states each year.

Outlawing abortion in these states will not lead to a one-off decline in actual abortions. Some of these women would choose not to have an abortion if they get pregnant or would not get pregnant in the first place. But some might obtain an illegal abortion in their own state or a legal abortion in a state where abortion remained legal. Laws banning abortions, including the level of enforcement and the degree of penalty for having an abortion, would vary by state. Thus the deterrent effect, if it exists at all, would also vary by state. Even under the “best-case” scenario, the decline in the number of abortions would certainly be less than 100,000. In contrast, the number of abortions fell by over 300,000 per year in the 1990s when the economy was strong. Thus the decrease in the abortion rate in the 1990s is much larger than the reduction in the number of abortions in the United States that might ever be accomplished by overturning *Roe v. Wade* and attempting to ban abortions in the most pro-life states.

There are no good U.S. data to help us understand how the abortion rate would respond to state-wide bans on abortion procedures. We do, however, have

evidence from other countries. In South American countries, such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Peru, where abortions are illegal, abortion rates are consistently more than twice that of the U.S.⁶ These countries are also much poorer than the U.S. and provide fewer social services; and a larger proportion of their population lives in poverty. In Western European countries, in contrast, where more social services are provided and fewer women live in poverty, the abortion rates are consistently much lower than in the U.S.⁷

Conclusion

The findings in this brief suggest two policy implications for Americans who support policies to reduce and end abortion. First, advocates for lower abortion rates need to continue to work to change public opinion in favor of life. There are some hopeful trends. Public opinion data indicates that while younger Americans are typically *less* conservative on many social issues – civil rights for gays and lesbians, for example – they are more inclined to possess some degree of moral opposition to abortion than older cohorts, suggesting that over time, public opinion may shift.⁸ There is also some evidence that a stronger current of “pro-life” opinion directly reduces the abortion rate – even without any changes to the legal status of abortion.⁹

A second implication of this brief suggests that a successful strategy to reduce abortions should address the socioeconomic factors that help reduce abortions. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has long advocated for a comprehensive strategy to reduce abortions. In addition to seeking legal restrictions on access to abortion, they have suggested that an effective effort to reduce abortions would “include nutritional, prenatal, childbirth and postnatal care for the mother; nutritional and pediatric care for the child; adoption and foster care services; counseling and spiritual assistance; opportunities for teenage parents to continue their education during pregnancy and after childbirth; and support for

⁶ The abortion rate in the U.S. fell from 25 per thousand in 1990 to 16 per thousand in the 2000. In predominantly Roman Catholic countries in South America the abortion rate ranges from roughly 36 per 1000 in Brazil to 56 per 1000 in Peru. See <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/25s3099.html>.

⁷ For example, in Belgium, Ireland, and the Netherlands the abortion rate is less than 7 per 1000 women; in Finland the rate is 10, France 11, Germany 7, and Switzerland 8. Only in Denmark (16), Norway (15), and Sweden (18) do we see abortion rates as high as in the U.S. (16) in 2000 – after the steep decline from 25 in the 1990s.

⁸ Clyde Wilcox, “Non-Combatants in the Culture Wars: The Conflicted Middle in Debates on Abortion and GLBT Rights.” Prepared for delivery at the Going to Extremes Conference, Rockefeller Center for Public Policy and the Social Sciences, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, June 19-21, 2008.

⁹ A Catholics United study of abortion reduction in Kansas finds that counties with more pro-life residents had lower abortion rates: <http://www.catholics-united.org/files/Reducing-Abortion-in-Kansas.pdf>.

victims of rape and other forms of abuse and violence.”¹⁰ A recent study published by Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good finds that increasing economic assistance to support working low-income families could reduce abortions by up to 200,000.¹¹ The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 allowed states to impose a cap on the number of children eligible to receive economic assistance in low-income families. Removing this family cap could decrease abortions by up to 150,000 nationwide. Similarly, the study finds that grants to women, infants and children under the age of five as provided by the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program and increased male employment both substantially reduce abortions. Abolishing the family cap together with increasing economic assistance to low-income families could decrease the abortion rate by over 30%.

Together, these implications suggest that we need a more comprehensive policy approach to reduce the number of abortions. A strategy that focuses exclusively on overturning *Roe v. Wade* is inadequate to successfully address the tragedy of abortion in the United States. Economic and social support for low-income working families and pregnant women will prove more effective in reducing the number of abortions than overturning *Roe v. Wade*. While changing the legal status of abortion is certainly a laudable goal, protecting the unborn requires the commitment of our political community to ensure that women have the necessary support and opportunities to carry all pregnancies to birth.

¹⁰ “Bishops adopt revised plan for pro-life activities”:
<http://salt.claretianpubs.org/sjnews/2001/12/sjn0112c.html>.

¹¹ This study is available at: http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/files/CACG_Final.pdf.