

The Demographics of Abortion

The Great Divide Between Abortion Rhetoric and Abortion Reality

By Jim Kessler, Vice President For Policy

With Jessica Dillon, Policy Associate; Jon Kott, Senior Research Analyst; and James Solomon, Third Way Fellow

This issue brief analyzes the demographics of abortion. Who is having them? What is the reason? When do they have them? We believe that a simple recitation of the facts and what these facts imply could be a very useful tool in developing policies that achieve the shared, stated objective of both sides — that of reducing the number of abortions.

For example, while opinion surveys show that only a slight majority of Americans call themselves pro-choice, the sheer number of abortions that occur in America indicates that there are probably few adults in this country who are not related to, or the friend of, someone who has had an abortion. One-third of middle-aged adults either had an abortion or is responsible for impregnating a woman who had an abortion.

More than one in five pregnancies end in abortion. And when miscarriages are factored out, nearly one in four end in abortion. Abortions occur with regularity in every state — liberal or conservative, Catholic or Protestant, wealthy or poor, religious or secular.

The data in this memo illustrate how the divisive abortion debate is focused on hot-button political issues that rarely occur in real life or outside the minds of fervent activists. The social conservatives' focus on so-called "partial-birth abortion" affects, at most, 8 of every 10,000 abortions performed. The social liberals' traditional

There are probably few adults in this country who are not related to, or the friend of, someone who has had an abortion.

defense of abortion on the grounds of rape and incest or the life of the mother is irrelevant in approximately 98 of every 100 abortions. The abortion debate is so far removed from reality that it would be like debating the 2000 Presidential election by discussing only the candidacies of Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan.

The focus on these rare but horrific events — the third-trimester abortion or

the brutal rape — obscures the relatively ordinary circumstances of a typical abortion. And the gap between the political fight and the actual reality of abortion may be so great that average women — even those who have had an abortion — may feel that the political debate is not relevant to them and their circumstances.

Finally, the abortion wars have become so engrossed in tactics designed to win a political battle, that they have almost nothing to do with reducing actual abortions or increasing planned pregnancies. In fact, at least one pro-life political tactic — parental consent — could possibly increase the prevalence of abortions. Indeed, the reason parental consent laws have failed to reduce teen abortions is that parents are often the impetus behind teen abortions, not the barrier.

The average woman who seeks an abortion is 24 years old, unwed, earns a yearly income of about \$25,000, and already is a mother. She is just as likely as not to have had a previous abortion. She has religious beliefs and is a Christian — more likely to be Protestant than Catholic. The typical abortion is performed around the 8th week — well within the first trimester. She could be of any race. And, if she is a minor, her parents not only condoned her decision to have an abortion, they may have demanded it. There may be a variety of specific reasons behind her decision to have an abortion, but they are subsumed within one salient fact: the pregnancy was unwanted and unplanned.

Half of all pregnancies are unplanned, and most unplanned pregnancies end in abortion. A modest 10% reduction in unplanned pregnancies would eliminate the need for 130,000 abortions each year. By way of comparison, this would eliminate as many abortions in three days as would banning late-term abortions over a full year.

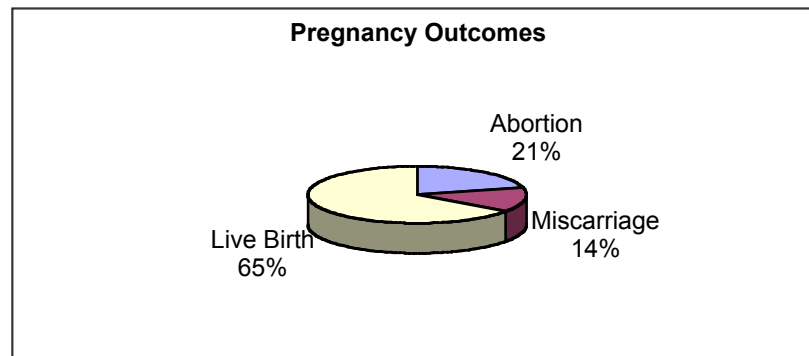
Part I: Who Has Abortions?

Since *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal nationwide in 1973, there have been more than 40 million abortions in America. One of every three American women will have an abortion by the time they reach 45.ⁱ Assuming that roughly as many men were involved as the father in these abortions, one in three adults between the ages of 45 and 70 has been personally involved in at least one abortion.

Part I, Finding #1

More than one in five pregnancies end in abortion.

- In a typical year there are about 4.1 million live births, 1.3 million abortions, and 900,000 miscarriages.ⁱⁱ



- 21% of all pregnancies end in abortion, 14% in miscarriage, and 65% in birth.
- When miscarriages are factored out, one in four of the remaining pregnancies end in abortion.

Part I, Finding #2

Abortion rates in the U.S. have been steadily declining.

- The number of abortions in America has declined from an all time high of 1.6 million in 1990 to 1.3 million in 2000 (the latest year available).ⁱⁱⁱ
- The abortion rate — that is the number of abortions per woman of childbearing age — has declined by 28% between 1980 and 2000.^{iv} Most of the decline is due to a reduction in teen pregnancies, which is mostly due to declining rates of teen sexual activity and increasing use of contraception among those who engage in sex. Between 1995 and 2002, the percentage of 15-19 year old males who had sex

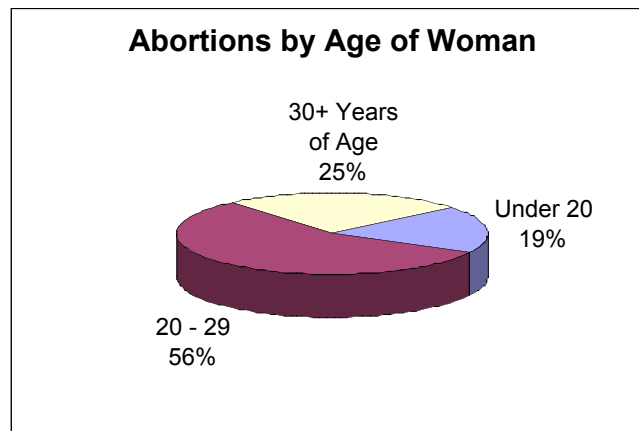
declined from 55.3% to 46.0%. Likewise, the rates for females declined from 51.7% to 46.8%.^v

- The use of the birth control pills for contraception increased from 51.6% to 61.4% over the same period. Other forms of contraceptive use increased as well.^{vi}

Part I, Finding #3

75% of all abortions are to women under 30.

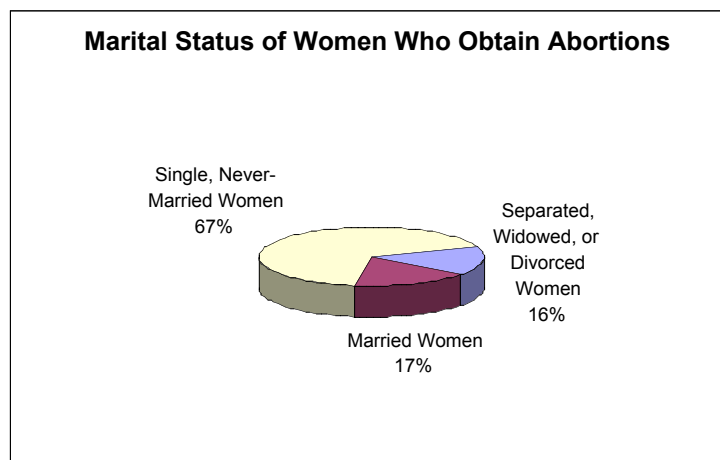
- The median age of a woman who has an abortion is 24.
- Nearly one in five abortions are performed on teenagers. Another one-third are performed on women between ages 20 and 24. Women over 30 constitute one-quarter of all abortions. Girls under 15 represent 0.7% of all abortions. Women over 40 represent 3.1% of all abortions.^{vii}



Part I, Finding #4

Most women who have abortions are unmarried.

Fewer than one in five abortions are performed on married women.^{viii}



Part I, Finding #5

When a teenager becomes pregnant, abortion is a likely outcome.

- There are 8 abortions for every 10 live births to girls under 15.
- There are 4 abortions for every 10 live births to girls between 15 and 19.^{ix}

Part I, Finding #6

Women who have abortions tend to be low income, but that could be a factor of their age rather than their poverty status.

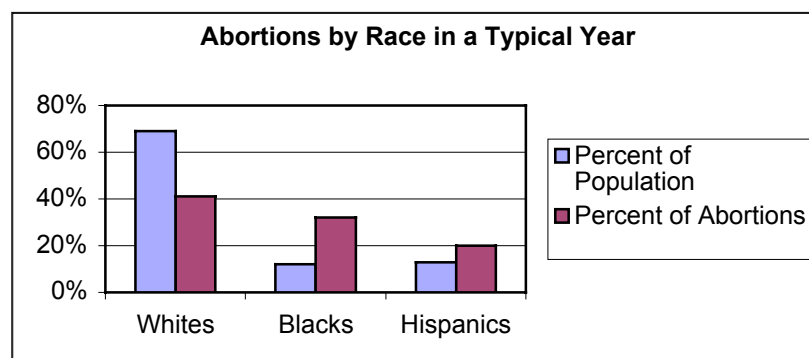
57% of women who seek an abortion have incomes that are below twice the federal poverty level. However, the portrait that it paints of them as poor could be misleading. 52% of women who have an abortion are under the age of 25. Young people simply earn less than older people and single people earn far less than married people. For example, a 2003 census bureau study found that those under 25 with a bachelor's degree earned on average \$22,000 while those between 25 and 29 with the same degree earned \$39,000.^x Thus, these women could have low incomes, but they could also have wealthy or middle class parents.

- Only one in four women who sought an abortion had income levels above 300% of poverty (\$42,000).
- Only 21% of women said inadequate finances was the main reason for choosing an abortion.^{xi}

Part I, Finding #7

Whites account for the most abortions, but relative to their population, Blacks and Hispanics have a disproportionate share of abortions.

- Though whites represent 69% of the population, they account for only 41% of the nation's abortions.
- Blacks are 12% of the nation's population and had 32% of the nation's abortions.
- Hispanics are 13% of the population and had 20% of the nation's abortions.^{xii}



Part I, Finding #8

There is a vast gap between the rhetorical positions that religious leaders take on abortion and the actual practices of the laity in those religions.

Catholics and Protestants have abortion rates that are roughly commensurate with their share of the population.

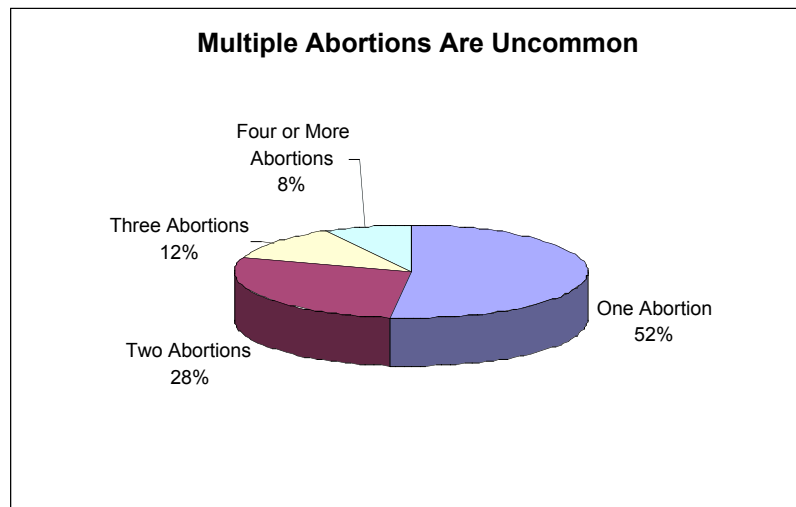
- Catholics represent 24% of the population^{xiii} and 27% of those having abortions — roughly 350,000 per year.^{xiv}
- Protestants represent 49% of the population^{xv} and 43% of those having abortions — roughly 560,000 per year.^{xvi}
- 13% of those having abortions are self-described Born-Again or Evangelical Christians — roughly 170,000 per year.^{xvii}

Part I, Finding #9

At the time most women have an abortion they already have a child. Half have had a previous abortion.

The argument that abortion is widely used as a method of birth control is not borne out by the data. Slightly over half of those having an abortion will have only one. Of the remaining group that has had more than one abortion, more than half will have only two. It is more likely that a woman who has an abortion has already had a previous birth than a previous abortion.

- 61% of women who have an abortion have had a prior birth
- 48% of women who have an abortion have had a previous abortion.^{xviii xix}



Part II: Why Do Women Have Abortions?

While there are many reasons and circumstances that may lead a woman or a couple to choose an abortion, the overwhelming fact is that when a pregnancy is unplanned, abortion is the likely outcome. Abortions based on rape, incest, life of the mother, or abnormality of the fetus are uncommon. Reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies by 10% would eliminate more abortions in three days than would banning late term abortions over the course of a full year.

Part II, Finding #1

Half of all pregnancies are unplanned; most unplanned pregnancies lead to abortion.

In America, nearly half of all pregnancies are accidental. When an unplanned pregnancy occurs, the most likely outcome is abortion.

- For every 100 pregnancies in America, 52 were planned and 48 were unplanned.^{xx}
- Among the 48% of pregnancies that were unintended, the percentage of abortions to live births is 54% to 46%.^{xxi}

Part II, Finding #2

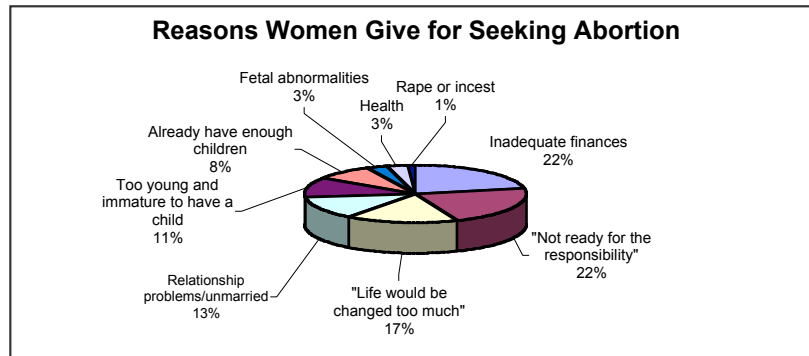
Very few abortions are performed because of fetal abnormalities, health of the mother, rape or incest.

Of the 1.3 million abortions in America each year, about 90,000 occur due to the health of the fetus, mother, or rape or incest.

- 3% cited fetal abnormalities
- 3% cited health
- 1% cited rape or incest.^{xxii}

Part II, Finding #3

There is no single dominant reason that women choose to have an abortion, but there is one overwhelming factor: the pregnancy was



unplanned.

Part II, Finding #4

When a teenager has an abortion, parents are often a factor in the decision.

Those espousing parental consent laws as a way to reduce teenage abortions may be surprised to know that it is not uncommon for the teenager to wish to carry the pregnancy to term and for the parents to recommend or demand an abortion.

- 30% of minors seeking abortions attributed their decision in part to the fact that their parents wanted them to have abortions.^{xxiii}
- Upon learning of their daughters' pregnancies, parents favored abortion over childbirth by a 4 to 1 ratio.^{xxiv}
- The most common repercussion that a pregnant teen feels after disclosing the pregnancy to her parents was not being beaten, punished, forced from the home or even discomfort about living at home. Rather, it is that her parents are demanding that she have an abortion.^{xxv}

Part III: When Do Women Have Abortions?

Abortions are typically performed at about the 8th week of gestational age (weeks since the last menstrual period). Nearly all abortions occur in the first trimester. Third-trimester abortions are exceptionally rare.

Part III, Finding #1

Roughly 9 out of 10 abortions are performed in the first trimester.

- 57.6% of abortions occur within 9 weeks.
- 77.9% occur within 10 weeks.
- 88.1% occur within 12 weeks — the end of the first trimester.
- 0.08% occur after 24 weeks — the end of the second trimester.

Part III, Finding #2

The reason most women give for having an abortion after 16 weeks was not realizing they were pregnant.

Only 5.8% of all abortions are performed after the 16th week. Women often give multiple reasons for relatively late abortions, but not realizing they were pregnant was number one.

- 71% cited not realizing they were pregnant as the reason for having an abortion after the 16th week.
- 48% cited difficulty in making the arrangements to have an abortion.
- 33% said they were afraid to tell their partner.
- 24% said they needed time to make a decision.
- 8% said they hoped their relationship with their partner would change.
- 2% cited a late diagnosis for fetal abnormality.^{xxvi}

Part III, Finding #3

The most likely person to have a later term abortion is a girl under age 15.

- Nearly 14.7% of all abortions performed on girls under the age of 15 occur after the 16th week of gestation.
- 8.5% of abortions for older teens occur after 16 weeks.
- Only a tiny percentage of women over 20 have an abortion after the 16th week.^{xxvii}

- The number of later term abortions (abortions after 16 weeks) for teens may have to do with not knowing or not believing they are pregnant. It could also have to do with the trauma of telling their parents, deciding whether or not to have an abortion, finding a location to have an abortion, or navigating parental notification laws in particular states.

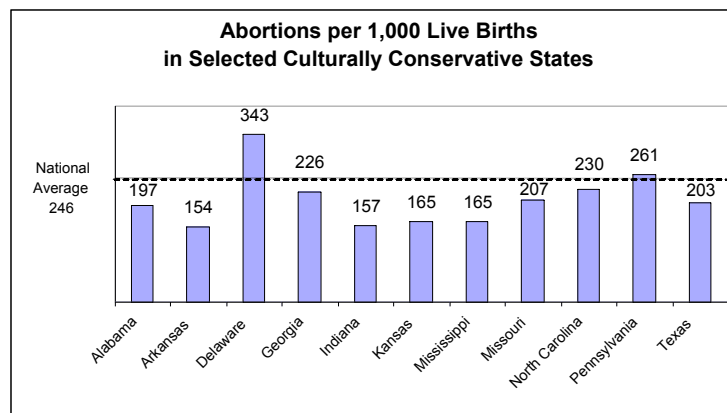
Part IV: Where Do Women Have Abortions?

Abortion rates vary by state, in part due to racial and ethnic backgrounds that seem to determine abortion rates and in part due to the availability of abortion clinics or hospitals that perform abortions. Some states have very few abortion providers. Women in these states often have abortions performed in other states. Cultural influences likely play a role as well in state abortion rates.

Part IV, Finding #1

Though abortion rates are generally lower in culturally conservative states, they are still very high.

Women from places like Alabama and North Carolina have fewer abortions than the national average, but the number and rate of abortions in many of these states is closer to the national average than one would expect based on public opinion polling and the behavior of voters. Thus, while some in these states may wish to believe that abortion is really a Northeast or West Coast phenomenon, it is occurring with regularity almost everywhere.^{xxviii}



Part IV, Finding #2

Most abortions occur in the state where the woman lives.

91.3% of all abortions occur in the woman's home state. Several states stand out as destinations for non-residents seeking abortions.* They include Kansas, Delaware, Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia.^{xxix}

* Alaska, California, and New Hampshire do not report the residency of those having abortions.

- Over half of all abortions in D.C. are performed on out-of-state residents.
- Nearly half of all abortions in Kansas are performed on out-of-state residents.
- Nearly 40% of all abortions in North Dakota are performed on out-of-state residents.
- Nearly 30% of all abortions in Delaware are performed on out-of-state residents.
- Nearly one in four abortions in Rhode Island are performed on out-of-state residents.
- Nearly 20% of all abortions in Tennessee and Alabama are performed on out-of-state residents.^{xxx}

Part IV, Finding #3

It is unclear whether strict parental consent laws have an impact on teen abortion rates.

The data on where teens have abortions are scarce, so it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of parental consent/notification laws and out-of-state teen abortion rates. However, nine of the ten states that attract the most out-of-state abortions have moderate to strict parental consent laws.

- Of the ten states with the highest rates of out-of-state abortions, only one — D.C. — has minimal or no parental notification/consent laws.
- Four of the ten — North Dakota, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Alabama — have strict parental consent laws.
- Five of the ten — Kansas, Delaware, Colorado, Arkansas, and Nebraska — have moderate parental notification laws.^{xxxi}

Part V: What Does It Mean To Be Pregnant and Unmarried?

Roughly 1 of every 3 births in the U.S. is out-of-wedlock. Nearly 1 of 4 white births, nearly 7 of 10 black births, and more than 4 of 10 Hispanic births are to unwed mothers.^{xxxii}

Part V, Finding #1

There is no correlation between out-of-wedlock births and abortion rates.

Six Southern states are among the top 10 in out-of-wedlock births. But there is no correlation between states that have many of out-of-wedlock births and abortion rates.

States with the highest percentage of births to unmarried women have abortion rates near the national average (2001)^{xxxiii}

State	% Births Out of Wedlock	Abortion Rank*
Louisiana	46.3% of births out-of-wedlock	32 nd in state abortion rate
Mississippi	46.3	33 rd
New Mexico	46.3	19 th
South Carolina	40.1	28 th
Delaware	39.9	3 rd
Arizona	39.5	42 nd
Florida	39.0	2 nd
Georgia	37.3	17 th
Nevada	37.2	9 th
Arkansas	36.1	36 th
Mean	40.8% of births out-of-wedlock	22nd in state abortion rate

States with the lowest percentage of births to unmarried women have abortion rates near the national average (2001)^{xxxiv}

State	% Births Out of Wedlock	Abortion Rank
Utah	17.4% of births out-of-wedlock	45 th in state abortion rate
Idaho	22.0	46 th
New Hampshire	24.2	n/a
Colorado	25.0	47 th
Minnesota	26.3	20 th
Massachusetts	26.7	7 th
Nebraska	27.7	38 th
North Dakota	27.9	41 st
Iowa	28.8	34 th
Washington	28.8	5 th
Mean	25.5% of births out-of-wedlock	31st in state abortion rate

* Abortion statistics unavailable for California, New Hampshire, and Alaska. Louisiana and Florida figures include out-of-state residents who had abortions performed in those states.

Part VI: Do Abortion Laws Affect Abortion Rates?

The evidence suggests that laws may affect abortion rates, but only modestly. *Third Way* will be preparing a future issue brief on this subject but thought a few facts were worth noting here. Women in states with restrictive laws will travel to other states to have abortions. And even in foreign countries that restrict abortions entirely, millions of abortions are performed.

Part VI, Finding #1

Nearly half of all abortions are performed in countries that have banned the procedure.

- 97% of all abortions occur outside the United States.
- Of the 46 million abortions that are performed each year, 20 million (44%) occur in countries where the procedure is illegal.^{xxxv}

Part VI, Finding #2

The ratio of teen abortions to adult abortions is the same in states with strong, moderate, and weak parental consent laws.

Teen abortion rates in states with strict parental consent laws are nearly half that of states with no consent or notification laws in place. But teen abortion rates may have less to do with the local laws and more to do with local views and demographics that reduce the incidence of abortion in general. For example, though states with strict consent laws have lower teen abortion rates than states with no laws, the ratio of teen abortions to all abortions in these two sets of states is roughly the same.

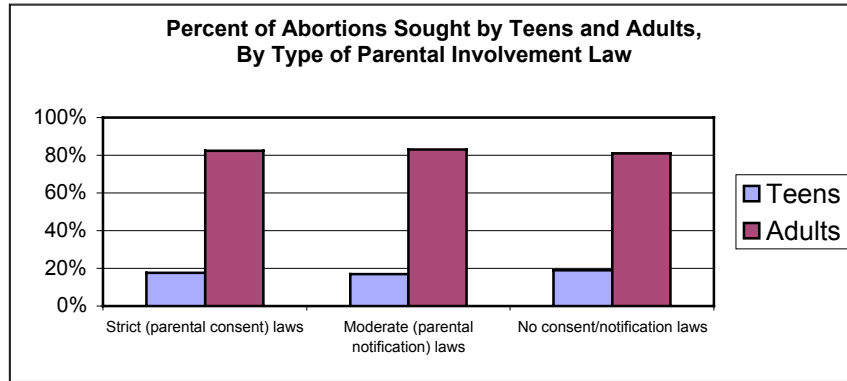
The reason for this could be because parents of pregnant teens often demand that their child undergo an abortion. It is quite possible that if teens were forced to notify parents of a pregnancy, abortion rates would go up, not down.

- In 2001, abortions were performed on 33 out of 10,000 teens in states with strict parental consent laws.
- In 2001, abortions were performed on 39 out of 10,000 teens in states with moderate parental notification laws.
- In 2001, abortions were performed on 63 out of 10,000 teens in states with no

consent/notification laws.^{*xxxvi}

But as a percentage of overall abortions in each of these categories of states, teen abortions are close to the same suggesting that consent and notification laws have little impact on abortion.

In 2001, teens represented 17.6% of all abortions in states with strict parental consent laws, 17.0% of all abortions in states with moderate parental notification laws, and 19.1% of all abortions in states with no consent/notification laws.^{xxxvii}



* Alabama, Arizona, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming require the consent of at least one parent and allows for a judicial bypass. Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, and West Virginia require the notification of at least one parent and all except Utah allow for a judicial bypass. Alaska, California, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington either have no law or a law that was struck down by the court. Abortion data are unavailable for Alaska, California, Florida, and New Hampshire.

Sources:

- ⁱ Kaiser Foundation, "Abortion in the U.S. Fact Sheet," January 2003.
- ⁱⁱ Alan Guttmacher Institute and Physicians for Reproductive Choice, "An Overview of Abortion in the United States," 2003.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, "Abortion in the U.S. Fact Sheet," January 2003.
- ^{iv} Guttmacher et al, "An Overview of Abortion in the United States," 2003.
- ^v National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, "2002 National Survey of Family Growth," December 2004.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Guttmacher, et al.
- ^{viii} Source: Alan Guttmacher Institute and Physicians for Reproductive Choice, "An Overview of Abortion in the United States," 2003.
- ^{ix} Centers for Disease Control, "Abortion ratio by age group of women who obtained a legal abortion," 2001.
- ^x Peter Kosik, "Differences in Income by Age," 2003.
- ^{xi} Ibid.
- ^{xii} Guttmacher, et al.
- ^{xiii} Gallup Poll, 12,000 interviews, yearly survey of religious preferences, 2003.
- ^{xiv} Guttmacher, et al.
- ^{xv} Gallup, 2003.
- ^{xvi} Guttmacher et al.
- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} Source: Centers for Disease Control, "Reported legal abortions, by number of previous legal induced abortions," 2001.
- ^{xx} Guttmacher, et al.
- ^{xxi} Ibid.
- ^{xxii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiii} William Saletan, *Bearing Right: How Conservatives Won the Abortion War*, page 192, University of California Press, 2003.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid.
- ^{xxv} Ibid.
- ^{xxvi} Guttmacher, et al.
- ^{xxvii} Centers for Disease Control, Abortion Surveillance.
- ^{xxviii} Source: National Center for Health Statistics, 2002.
- ^{xxix} Centers for Disease Control, "Reported number, ratio, and rate of legal abortions by residence and occurrence," 2001.
- ^{xxx} Ibid.
- ^{xxxi} State parental consent laws were obtained from website for the Center for Reproductive Rights.
- ^{xxxii} National Vital Statistics Report, December 17, 2003.
- ^{xxxiii} National Center for Health Statistics, 2002.
- ^{xxxiv} Ibid.
- ^{xxxv} Guttmacher, et al.
- ^{xxxvi} Centers for Disease Control, Report legal abortions, by age group of women who obtained an abortion and state of occurrence, 2001.
- ^{xxxvii} Ibid.