

Incidence and Recent Trends in Legal Abortion Worldwide

Gilda Sedgh
Stanley Henshaw
Susheela Singh
Alyssa Tartaglione

Introduction

According to recent estimates, nearly four in ten unintended pregnancies end in an induced abortion.¹ In order to monitor trends of unintended pregnancy it is necessary to monitor trends in abortion incidence. Information on abortion levels and trends also informs our understanding of its changing role relative to contraception in fertility control.

Where abortion laws are highly restrictive a variety of approaches have been developed to estimate its incidence. However in many countries with broadly liberal abortion laws, information on abortion incidence is available from official statistics surveys of women. While these statistics and estimates are not always complete, they form a basis for understanding patterns both in abortion incidence and abortion reporting.

The most recent published report of abortion trends in countries where the procedure was legally available covered incidence up to 2003.² Findings from that assessment indicated that abortion rates had been falling in many countries, and that these trends were often attributed to increasing prevalence of contraceptive use or increasing effectiveness of use. Abortion rates had increased in a few developed countries, such as the Netherlands and New Zealand.

This article will present and assess available statistics on the level of legal induced abortion in 2008 in at least 40 countries and territories where legal abortion is broadly legal,* and will examine trends between 2003 and 2008 in countries for which data from both time periods are available.

Data and Methods

We employed methods of data collection similar to those used in our previous review of the incidence of abortion worldwide.³ We sought to obtain total numbers of abortion, estimates of the female populations of reproductive age, and the numbers of live births in countries with populations of at least 200,000 where abortion was broadly legal in 2008. For each country, we searched for abortion data from the national statistical offices or relevant government agencies from published reports or official websites. If data were unavailable from these sources, we sent special requests to the government agencies, sometimes with the help of local contacts. We employed a standardized questionnaire for this purpose. For a few countries, we used abortion statistics available from the United Nations Statistical Division up to 2007.⁴

* Dependent territories with separate abortion statistics or legislation are treated here as “countries.”

As part of the data collection, we asked local experts for an assessment of the extent to which the reported statistics represented all legal abortions that had taken place in the country. We also ensured that published statistics did not include spontaneous abortions and confirmed that they included menstrual regulations or “mini-abortions” where these are widely practiced and recorded separately. This information was used to distinguish countries where the reports are judged to miss more than 20% of the legal abortions that actually take place or where the completeness of reporting is in doubt although the extent of underreporting is unknown.

For a few countries with official statistics that were deemed incomplete or were not available at all, we used abortion estimates from nationally representative surveys if they were available. Survey-based estimates, while at times superior to government reporting systems, are also considered incomplete because some women do not report their experiences with abortion in these surveys.

So far we have obtained data from close to 50 of more than 70 countries eligible for inclusion in this study. We also obtained estimates of the population of women aged 15–44 and numbers of live births to calculate abortion rates and ratios. When available, we used demographic data from country statistical offices. Where these were unavailable or were not considered reliable, we used estimates published in the United Nations Demographic Yearbook. We interpolated where necessary to obtain midyear population estimates.

Preliminary results

Findings to date suggest the following:

(a) The pace of decline in the abortion rate in Eastern Europe has slowed down considerably since 2003, compared with the pace of decline in 1996 to 2003.

(b) According to statistics from the Ministry of Health, the abortion rate has increased in China. Experts in the country attribute this in part to disruption in access to contraceptive services faced by migrants to urban areas, and increased sexual activity among young, unmarried women.

(c) With some exceptions, abortion rates remain low and stable in most of Western and Northern Europe.

(d) The abortion rate has continued to decline modestly in the United States, but remains higher than in most Western and Northern European countries.

(e) Some developed countries with liberal laws have seen an increase in the abortion rate, or sustained rates that are moderate or high, due to high rates among ethnic minorities and recent immigrants from developing countries.

(f) As health care services have shifted to the private sector in some countries, abortion reporting has become increasingly unreliable. New strategies will be necessary if we are to continue to monitor the abortion trends worldwide.

Discussion

We will identify the broad patterns and anomalous trends uncovered by the findings, and we will discuss the implications of the findings for family planning services, contraceptive needs, unintended pregnancy, reproductive health, and total fertility.

¹ Singh S, Wulf D, Hussain R, Bankole A and Sedgh G, *Abortion Worldwide: A Decade of Uneven Progress*, New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2009.

² Sedgh G, Henshaw SK, Singh S, Bankole A and Drescher J, Legal abortion worldwide: Incidence and recent trends, *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 2007, 33(3):106-116.

³ Ibid.

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Table 13. Legally induced abortions: 1998-2007," in *United Nations Demographic Yearbook 2007*, United Nations (New York, NY), online at *United Nations Statistics Division* <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/dyb2007/Table13.pdf>