

# INTERPRETING ABORTION DATA

From The President's Desk

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The most controversial social issues of our day, namely abortion and gay marriage, are overwhelmingly funded and researched by those who are advocates for these causes. Similarly, those who report on these subjects, as well as those who teach about them in the classroom, are also mostly partisans for these causes. It is difficult, then, to get a clear picture of what is really happening. Still, with perseverance, it can be done.

Take for example the recent report on abortion that was published by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The CDC is an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services, and it is run by a pro-abortion extremist, Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. Moreover, the CDC cites as reliable the work of the most prominent pro-abortion research group in the nation, the Guttmacher Institute (formerly the research arm of Planned Parenthood).

Does this mean they cook the books, making up data to suit their politics? No. But it does mean that the lines of inquiry that they pursue, and their interpretation of the data, can readily be challenged.

On November 21, the CDC published a report, "Abortion Surveillance—United States, 2009." It offers the most recent data on abortion nationwide. Far and away its most significant finding was the 5 percent decrease in abortions between 2008 and 2009, the largest single-year decrease in a decade. Also of importance was the finding that 18 percent of all pregnancies end in abortion; the rate among African Americans, who have the highest rate, is four times that of whites, who have the lowest rate.

The data, while important, did not include figures from California, Delaware, Maryland, and New Hampshire; those states account for 21 percent of all the abortions. However, by relying on the research of the Guttmacher Institute, the CDC was able to consider the numbers from these states. Mississippi had the lowest abortion rate, and Delaware had the highest.

Media coverage of the report was revealing. Here is how the Associated Press (AP) reported on one CDC finding: "The majority of the abortions are performed by the eighth week of pregnancy, when the fetus is about the size of a lima bean." This is true but it is incomplete. More important, it is incomplete for entirely ideological reasons.

What AP didn't say is that at eight weeks the baby's heartbeat is beating at approximately 150 times a minute, double that of the mother's. Nor did it mention that the baby's fingers and toes are poking out of his or her hands and feet. It also failed to say that the baby's eyelids practically cover his or her eyes, and that breathing tubes extend from the throat to the developing lungs. Similarly, it did not cite the fact that nerve cells in the brain are branching out to connect with one another. What accounts for these glaring omissions? To mention them would get in the way of their preferred "lima bean" optic.

The CDC report attributed the dramatic decline in abortions to contraception, restrictive state laws, the availability of abortion providers, the economy, access to health services, etc. The media focused almost entirely on contraception.

I was curious about the role played by abortion providers, so I did a little digging. One of the endnote sources that the CDC relied on regarding this factor came from a 2008 study. After I found where it was posted on the Internet, and paid \$35 to download it, what I uncovered was insightful.

The study was co-authored by current and former Guttmacher Institute researchers. They found that the number of abortions peaked in 1990 and has been declining ever since. The number of abortion providers peaked in 1982, and while they have been steadily declining, a leveling off has been evident since 2005.

The good news is that 27 states and the District of Columbia have experienced a decrease in abortion providers; nine have shown an increase and 14 witnessed no change. The only part of the country where abortion providers are increasing is in the west, largely because of a 23 percent increase in California.

In general, a decrease in abortion providers has led to a decrease in abortions. This matters if for only one reason: Catholic liberals who claim to be pro-life, but who are nonetheless associated with the politics of abortion, have long argued that the best way to stem abortion is to push for an economic safety net for the poor. Yet there is much more evidence showing that the number of abortions declines when the number of abortion providers declines; the relationship is not one-to-one, but it is impressive.

Finally, the co-authors of the abortion-provider study are quick to denounce any efforts to deny women access to abortion, listing “harassment” as the lead problem. Not until you actually read the data do you learn that in their minds the number-one form of “harassment” is picketing, a basic First Amendment right.

Don’t give up praying and protesting. While the pace of change is not fast enough, keep in mind that our side is winning. And remember, those statistics represent human beings, not lima beans.