

Changes in U.S. abortion rates by subgroup, 2000 and 2008

Introduction

Abortion is one indicator of unintended pregnancy and variations by subgroups can help identify groups most in need of assistance in avoiding unintended pregnancies. We provide updated estimates of abortion rates by subgroup and compare rates in 2008 to 2000, the most recent year data was collected from a nationally representative sample of women having abortions.

Methods

We calculated subgroup abortion rates in 2008 by applying the percentage distribution of abortion patients within each subgroup to the number of abortions estimated to have occurred nationally; this figure was divided by the number of women of all age in the relevant subpopulation.

Information on the characteristics of women obtaining abortions comes from the Guttmacher Institute's 2008 Abortion Patient Survey. Between April 2008 and May 2009, the data were collected from 9,493 women obtaining abortions at 95 facilities across the United States. The survey had a response rate of 74%, and weights were constructed to make the data representative of all women obtaining abortions in the United States (Jones, Finer and Singh, 2010).

Estimates of the total number of abortions in 2008 also come from the Guttmacher Institute (Jones and Kooistra, forthcoming). The Institute maintains a list of all known abortion providers and conducts a census, typically every three to five years, to find out the number of abortions performed at each facility as well as information about other aspects of abortion care.

Information on the characteristics of all women aged 15-44 comes from two surveys, the Current Population Survey and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). The CPS is a monthly government survey of about 50,000 households conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. We relied on the March Supplement of the 2008 CPS to estimate age group, race and ethnicity, education (among women aged 20 and older) and foreign-born status for U.S. women aged 15-44. We relied on the 2009 CPS to estimate poverty levels in 2008 as the CPS collects information about income in the year preceding the survey. The NSFG collects data on pregnancy, childbearing, and other issues from a national sample of 7,356 U.S. women 15-44 years of age between July 2006 and July 2008. We used the 2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth to estimate union status and religious affiliation.

The denominator for the total number of women aged 15-44 was based on adjusted Census estimates for July 1, 2008, and subgroup denominators were calculated by applying the relevant distributions from the CPS and NSFG surveys.

Our analysis focuses on changes in subpopulation abortion rates for the time period between 2000 and 2008, and abortion rates for 2000 come from a previously published study (Jones, Darroch and Henshaw, 2003).

Preliminary Findings

Between 2000 and 2008 the national abortion rate decreased 8%. Abortion rates among subgroups of women, however, varied, sometimes considerably.

Age. Most women obtaining abortions in 2008 were in their 20s (58%), and women in their 30s were the second most common age group (22%) (Table 1). Women aged 20-24 had the highest abortion rate, 40 abortions per 1,000, followed by women aged 18-19. Women aged 30 and older had rates lower than the national rate, and women 40-44 had the lowest abortion rate (3 per 1000). Patterns in abortion by age were similar to prior years.

The abortion rate declined between 2000 and 2008 for all age groups except women aged 30-39. Declines were more pronounced for women under age 20, due largely to the decline in the abortion

rate among minors, or those aged 15-17 year, down 26% from 15 per 1000 in 2000 to 11 per 1000 in 2008.

Marital status. Only 15% of abortion patients were married in the month they got pregnant, though an additional 30% were living with a male partner at that time. Married women had the lowest abortion rate of 7 abortions per 1000. Cohabiting women continued to have the highest abortion rate of all the marital groups examined, 52 abortions per 1000. Unmarried, non-cohabiting women not currently married have rates slightly higher than the national rate, 28 for never-married women and 23 for previously married women. Between 2000 and 2008, abortion rates decreased substantially for all marital groups except for women who reported being previously married and not cohabiting.

Race and ethnicity. Non-Hispanic white women were the most common racial and ethnic group among abortion patients (41%), but they were underrepresented compared to the larger population of all women aged 15-44 and actually had the lowest abortion rate of the four groups examined (12 per 1,000). Non-Hispanic black women had the highest rate (40 per 1,000) and Hispanic women fell in between (29 per 1,000). Women of all races and ethnicities experienced declines in abortion between 2000 and 2008, and the largest decline, 18%, was seen among Non-Hispanic black women.

Foreign-born status. The overwhelming majority of women having abortions were born in the United States (84%) and foreign-born women had an abortion rate slightly lower than US-born women. Notably, 31% Hispanic women obtaining abortions were foreign-born (8% of all abortion patients, not shown), and the abortion rate for this group, 18 per 1,000, was substantially lower than the abortion rate for all Hispanic women. This was the first time that information on foreign-born status was collected from abortion patients; thus, no comparisons to previous years can be made with this data.

Education. Just under one in five women aged 20 and older and obtaining an abortion had a college degree in 2008 and, most commonly, women in this group had some college or an associate's degree (40%). Among women aged 20 and older, those that had not completed high school and women with at least some college or an associate's degree had abortion rates of 24 per 1000 women, slightly higher than the national rate. College graduates had the lowest abortion rate of all the education groups, 12 abortions per 1000. Between 2000 and 2008, there were slight increases in the abortion rates for women with a high school degree or less.

Parity. The majority of women having abortions in 2008 (61%) had previously given birth one or more times. Women with only one prior birth had an abortion rate almost twice as high as women with no or more than one prior birth.

Religious affiliation. The majority of women having abortions in 2008 had a religious affiliation, most commonly Protestant (37%), and Catholic women and those with no religious affiliation were represented in approximately equal proportions, 28%. Protestants and women reporting "other" as their religious affiliation had the lowest abortion rates of the religious affiliations examined. Women with no religious affiliation had a higher abortion rate than those with any affiliation, 32 per 1000.

Poverty. Poor women (those falling at < 100% of the federal poverty level) represented 42% of women having abortions in 2008, and this group had one of the highest abortion rates of all the subgroups examined, 52 abortions per 1000 women. As income levels increased, the abortion rate decreased, and women with family incomes at or above 200% of the federal poverty level had a rate just under half of the national rate at 9 per 1000. The abortion rate increased 18% for poor women over the eight year time period while it decreased at a higher than average rate for each of the two higher income groups.

Future Analyses. Future analysis will examine abortion rates among non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic women according to age group and poverty status. Additionally, we will provide an updated estimate of the lifetime incidence of abortion, or the proportion of women expected to have an abortion by age 45.

Discussion

Abortion rates continue to be highest for women who are: aged 20-24, cohabiting, poor, or non-Hispanic black. These same groups also have higher rates of unintended births and, in turn, unintended pregnancy (Finer and Henshaw, 2006). The national decline in abortion was observed among most, but not all, groups of women. In particular, abortion rates for poor women, who now make up 42% of abortion patients, increased 18%. The current analysis is unable to identify the causes behind this trend, but it could be due to several circumstances. Poor women could have even greater difficulties preventing unintended pregnancy in 2000 than in 2008. Similarly, the economic recession occurring in 2008 may have led poor women to terminate an unintended pregnancy they might have carried to term in better economic times. Forthcoming information on unintended births and abortions will provide insights into these dynamics. Most poor women obtaining abortions lack health insurance (Jones, Finer and Singh, 2010) and the increase in abortion among this group suggests that at least some are nonetheless able to access these services despite potential financial barriers. At the same time, that abortion is increasingly concentrated among this vulnerable population also means that they experience the greatest impacts when legal restrictions around abortion are implemented.

References

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Table 1. Percentage distribution of U.S. women obtaining abortions, abortion rate, and percentage change between 2000 and 2008, by selected characteristics

Characteristic	Women obtaining abortions		Abortion rate		
	2000	2008	2000	2008	% change
Age-group					
<15	0.7	0.4	na	na	na
<20	19.1	17.6	25	20	-19
15–17	6.5	6.2	15	11	-26
18–19	12.0	11.0	39	34	-12
20–24	33.0	33.4	47	40	-15
25–29	23.1	24.4	32	29	-11
30–34	13.5	13.5	17	17	0
35–39	8.1	8.2	9	10	7
≥40	3.1	2.9	4	3	-17
Union status (NSFG)					
Married	17.0	14.8	8	7	-16
Cohabiting, not married	25.4	29.2	60	52	-13
Never-married, not cohabiting	46.6	45.0	28	24	-16
Previously married, not cohabiting	10.9	11.0	23	26	9
Race and ethnicity					
Non-Hispanic white	40.9	36.1	13	12	-11
Non-Hispanic black	31.7	29.6	49	40	-18
Non-Hispanic other	7.3	9.4	29	26	-11
Hispanic	20.1	24.9	33	29	-14
Foreign-born					
No	na	83.6	na	20	na
Yes	na	16.4	na	18	na
Hispanic and foreign-born	na	8.0		18	
Education					
<high school	12.7	12.3	23	24	1
High school graduate/GED	30.3	28.3	20	21	5
Some college/associate degree	40.6	39.5	26	24	-8
≥college graduate	16.4	19.9	13	12	-7
Prior births					
0	39.1	39.1	19	17	-10
1	27.4	26.5	32	30	-9
≥2	33.5	34.5	18	17	-4
Religious affiliation (NSFG)					
Protestant	43.0	37.4	18	15	-14
Roman Catholic	27.1	28.2	20	22	10
Other	7.4	6.9	27	13	-52
None	22.5	27.5	34	32	-5
Family income as % of federal poverty level					
<100	26.6	42.4	44	52	18
100–199	30.8	26.5	38	28	-27
≥200	42.6	31.1	13	9	-28