

FAMILY

POLICY

The Socioeconomic Costs of *Roe v. Wade*

John D. Mueller

How America Would Be Stronger Had Abortion Remained Illegal

Since the Supreme Court handed down its historic *Roe* decision in 1973, the debate about abortion has been conducted primarily on two levels: legal and moral. Recently, the debate has moved to a third level, as defenders of legal abortion have added a new twist: pragmatic, utilitarian arguments regarding the alleged social benefits of terminating pregnancies. One highly publicized study, released last September by a prominent legal theorist and a university economist, suggests that legal abortions in the 1970s are responsible for lowering the crime rate in the 1990s.¹

Opponents of abortion are understandably cautious about being drawn into this kind of exchange. As they have long argued, the main point of laws against the taking of human life is that each

person is unique, an unrepeatable creation. Utilitarian arguments essentially hinge on the notion that people are interchangeable or even that some people (or some things) are more important than other people. Therefore, the moral and legal arguments will, and should, remain paramount. At the same time, those who oppose legal abortion should welcome this new phase of the

discussion. The utilitarian arguments in favor of abortion, though well publicized, are miserably weak. Furthermore, the profound social and economic changes set in motion by legalized abortion—changes which will steadily mushroom as long as abortion continues—provide practical, empirical reasons for seeking a reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

After nearly thirty years, the data suggest that abortion has been anything but good for the United

States. By reducing the size of the population, abortion has correspondingly reduced the size of the economy; over time, it will undercut one main cause of the American economy's current dynamism: innovation. By contributing to a sharp drop in the net marriage rate, legalized abortion has already reduced the standard of

If it continues unchecked, abortion will progressively erode both America's relative economic importance and her average absolute standard of living.

living of the average American household. Legalized abortion is also single-handedly responsible for anticipated imbalances in the Social Security retirement system (see sidebar, back cover). Taken in its entirety, legal abortion is perhaps the single largest American economic event of the past century, more significant than the Great Depression or the Second World War. Tracing the

extent of this impact demonstrates that, had abortion remained illegal, the American population would be significantly larger, it would contain a larger share of intact marriages and two-parent families, and average living standards would be higher. In addition, the analysis warns that if it continues unchecked, legal abortion will progressively erode both America's relative economic importance and her average absolute standard of living.

Downsizing the Population

A review of the number of abortions relative to the population is the first step to understanding the social and economic consequences of legal abortion. Because several states had liberalized their abortion laws in the late 1960s, the annual number of abortions in the United States had reached almost 200,000 by 1970.² In 1973, the year *Roe v. Wade* was decided, some 744,600 legal abortions were reported. The number more than doubled to 1,553,900 in 1980 and hit an absolute peak of 1,608,600 in 1990 before declining to 1,365,700 in 1996.³ The 1996 figure represented 26.1 percent of conceptions (legal abortions and live births), down from a peak of about 30 percent in the early 1980s.

Assuming that abortions have continued at the same rate since 1996, a cumulative total of at least 39.7 million legal abortions have been "performed" in America from the late 1960s through 1999. If all these abortions had instead been live births of children who lived normal lives, the population (taking into account the small fraction of natural deaths that might have been expected) would today be about 38.9 million—or 14 percent—larger than the actual population of 275 million.⁴

Estimating the impact of abortion on the population is more complex, however, for two reasons. First, counting only the number of abortions ignores the fact that an abortion not only prevents a child from being born, but also removes all of his or her children, grandchildren, and more remote descendants. Since the country has already entered the second

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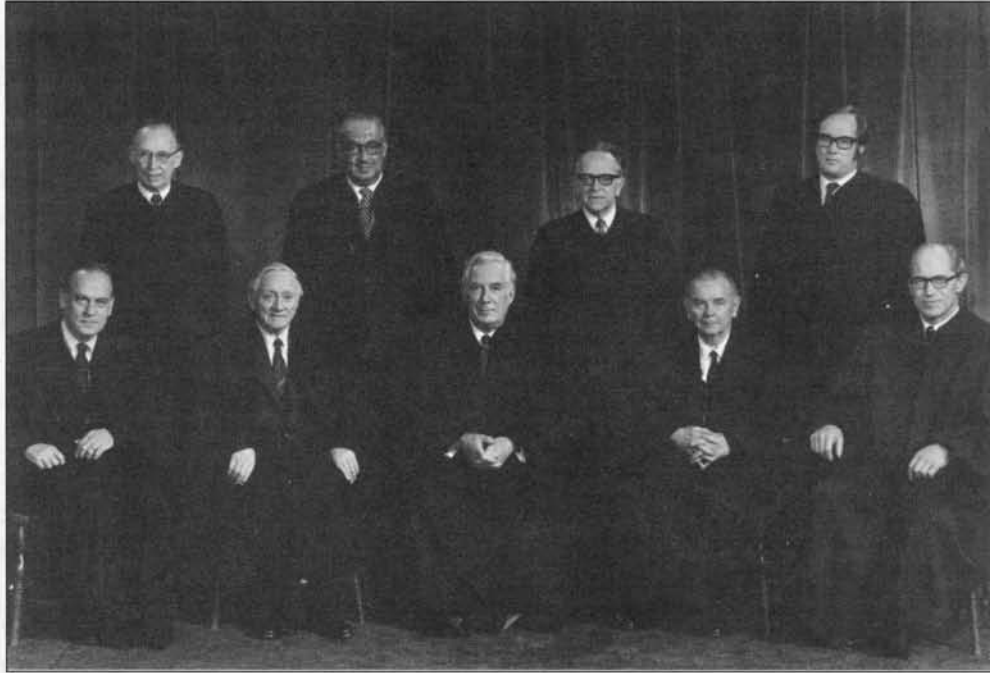
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generation of legalized abortion, the potential offspring of aborted children need to be added to the calculation. The oldest among the 38.9 million aborted children would already have had about 6.5 million surviving children. That would have increased the American population to about 320 million people.

But this introduces the second complication. Assuming that all pregnancies that actually did occur would have occurred—and would have resulted in live births—ignores the profound behavioral changes brought about by legal abortion. The legalization of abortion did far more than simply grant women an option that they did not have before. As George A. Akerlof and Janet L. Yellen of the Brookings Institution write, it contributed to a retreat from marriage: “Although many observers expected liberalized abortion and contraception to lead to fewer out-of-wedlock births, in fact the opposite happened [particularly] because of the erosion of the custom of ‘shotgun marriages.’”⁵ By making the birth of a child the physical choice of the mother, Akerlof and Yellen point out, the legalization of abortion had the unanticipated result of making acceptance of the responsibilities of marriage and child support also a *choice* of the father, not the ordinary consequence. While the number and rate of abortions soared and the live birth rate declined immediately, over time the number and proportion of both out-of-wedlock pregnancies and out-of-wedlock births also rose sharply.

The loosening of divorce laws and restraints on contraception at about the same time as abortion was legalized seems to make sorting cause from effect difficult. But the driving role of legal abortion is clear when the rise in the abortion rate is compared with the net marriage rate (the marriage rate minus the divorce rate):



COLLECTION OF THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

The U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, led by Chief Justice Warren E. Burger. Its decision legalizing abortion reaped the single largest economic event of the past century, more significant than the Great Depression or the Second World War.

the net marriage rate fell by 35 percent between 1968 and 1976, exactly the period of the most rapid increase of the abortion rate and decline of the live birth rate. Since 1976, the net marriage rate has fallen an additional 4 percent compared with the rate in 1968.⁶

Excluding miscarriages (for which data are not available before 1976, but which occur in about 13 percent of all pregnancies), 91 percent of conceptions in 1967 resulted in live births to married women, the remaining 9 percent being live births to unmarried women. By 1980, the percentage dropped to less than 60 percent; by 1995 only 52 percent of pregnancies resulted in live births to married women. Before 1980, most of the decline of live births was the result of legal abortions. About 84 percent of abortions are induced upon women who are not married.⁷ But over time, the number of live births to unmarried women has also risen, from 339,000 to 1,257,000 between 1967 and 1997; the proportion of pregnancies resulting in live births to unmarried mothers rose from 9 percent to 23.8 percent between 1967 and 1996.⁸ Thus, the proportion of pregnancies

resulting in live births or legal abortions to unmarried women rose from 9 percent to 45.8 percent between 1967 and 1996.

Recent research confirms Akerlof and Yellen's surmise that legal abortion affected these trends by bringing about the decline of the "shotgun marriage." A 1999 survey of women who were fifteen to twenty-nine years old when they first gave birth reveals that between 1960 and 1964, 10.3 percent of first births were premarital. The rest were born to married women; 15.5 percent were conceived before marriage and 74.3 percent were conceived after marriage. Between 1975 and 1979, 25.7 percent of first births were premarital: 12.0 percent conceived before marriage and 62.2 percent conceived after marriage. Between 1990 and 1994, 40.5 percent of first births were premarital; 12.3 percent were conceived before while 47.2 percent conceived after marriage. This indicates that among women who became pregnant before marriage, the share marrying before birth dropped from 60.0 percent in the early 1960s to 31.8 percent in the late 1970s and to only 23.3 percent in the early 1990s.⁹

Abortion and Live Birth Rates

Legalized abortion, therefore, had two effects upon the live birth rate: it reduced the number of pregnancies resulting in live births, while contributing to an increase in pregnancies, mostly among unmarried women. The pregnancy rate of women of different ages fully reveals this two-fold legacy. Among teenagers, the pregnancy rate rose after the legalization of abortion to exceed the peak levels of the 1950s, the height of the baby boom. But while the average rate of conception for teenagers from 1975 through 1996 was 38.9 percent higher than it had been in 1967-68, the average rate of live births to teenagers fell by 18.4 percent. This suggests that less than one-third of the abortions of teenage mothers actually lowered the birth rate; more than two-thirds were the result of behavior changes associated with the legalization of abortion.

For older women, the average pregnancy rate between 1975 and 1996 was almost exactly

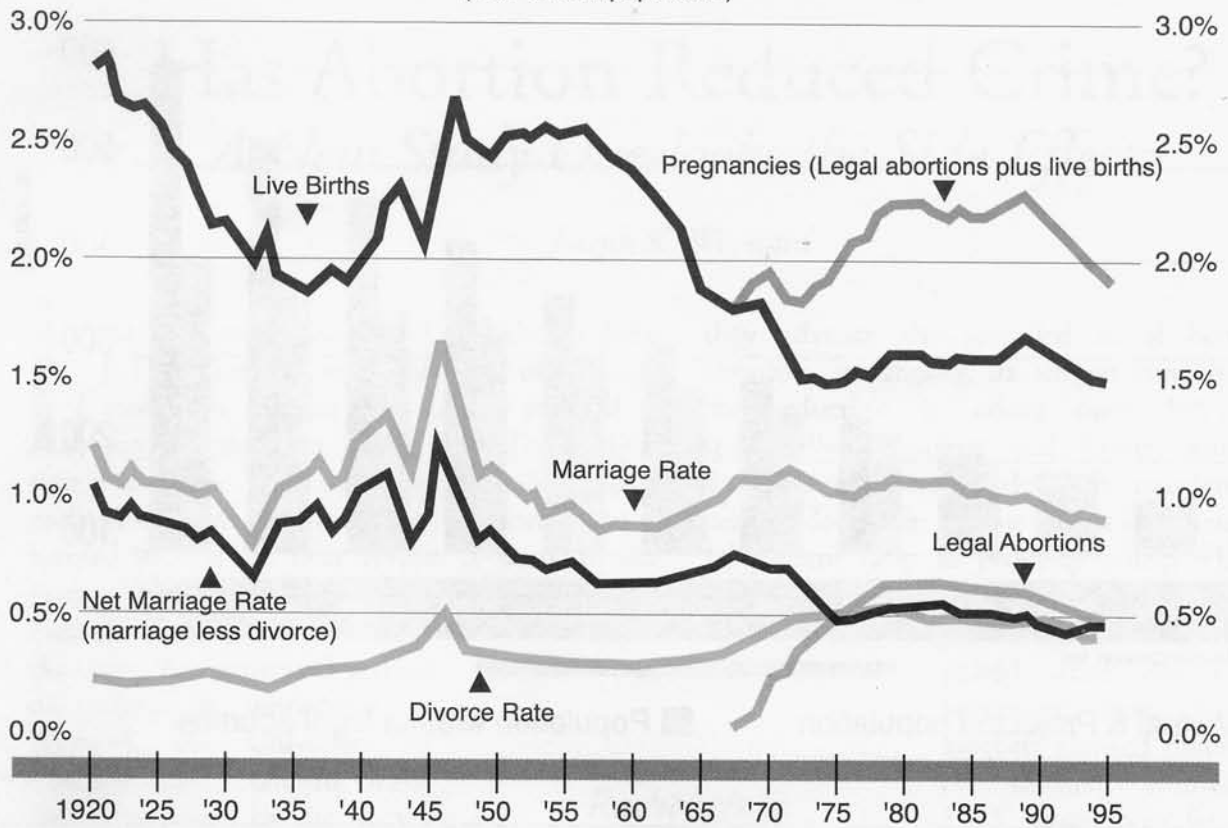
the same as in 1967-68. For women twenty to twenty-nine years of age (the group with the highest rate of conception), the pregnancy rate remained at about the same level as in the late 1960s, while the live birth rate declined sharply, one-for-one with the rise of legal abortions. For women in their thirties, the live birth rate fell sharply until 1975, but has since recovered to about the 1967-68 average. Including legal abortions, the total pregnancy rate in this age group is at levels seen in the late 1940s and early 1960s, at the leading and trailing edges of the baby boom. For women in their forties, the total pregnancy rate initially fell below, but then recovered in the 1990s to about the level of the late 1960s, so the live birth rate remains sharply lower.

Comparing the average for the years between 1975 and 1996 with 1967-68, about 32 percent of abortions among teenagers and 100 percent of abortions among women more than twenty years old reduced the live birth rate. Thus, on balance, about 83 percent of legal abortions reduced the number of live births. But comparing the 1967-68 average only with the most recent year, the net longer-term impact appears to be somewhat smaller. Comparing 1995 with 1967-68, the figures for teenagers are similar: 34.9 percent of abortions reduce live births. But for women more than twenty years old, the net impact of abortion on the live birth rate drops from 100 percent to 79.3 percent, as a result of the recovery of the birth rate among women in their thirties and the rise in births outside of wedlock. Thus, 70.6 percent of abortions reduced the live birth rate for all ages in 1995, compared with 1967-68.

The total fertility rate, a hypothetical measure of lifetime events per woman based on the experience of all women of childbearing age in a given year, puts these factors in perspective. The total fertility rate is usually based on live births, but also can be used to describe lifetime pregnancies per woman including legal abortions. After peaking at about 3.7 live births per woman in the late 1950s, the total fertility rate dropped after the baby boom, but before legal abortion, to about 2.6 live births in 1967-

Legal Abortions, Live Births and Marriage Rates

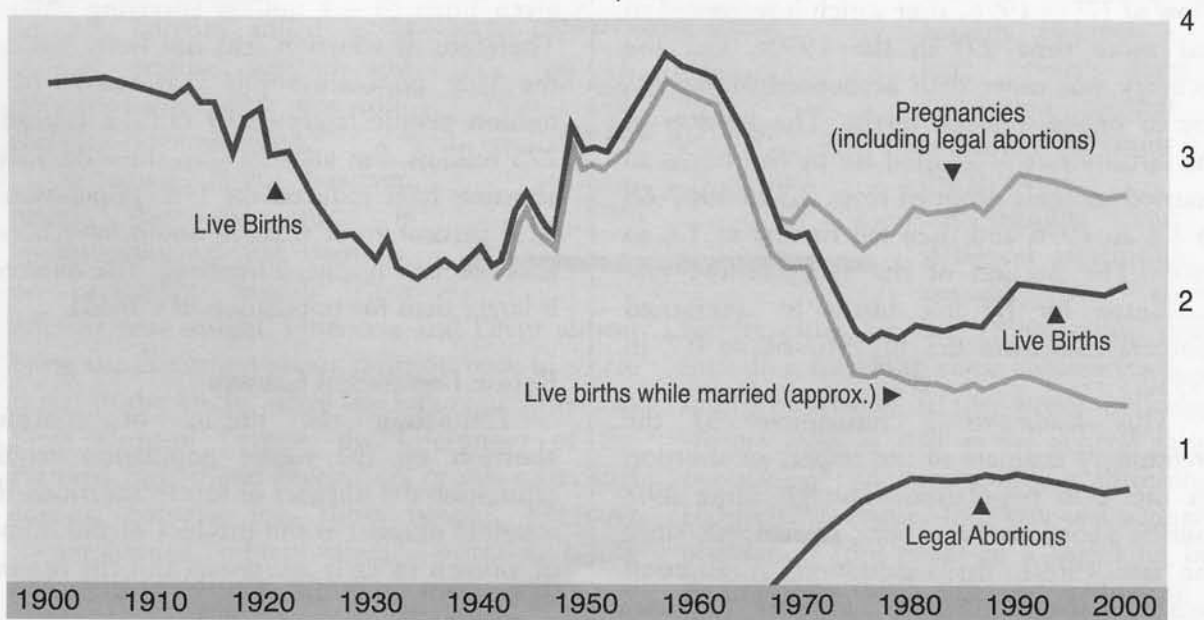
(ratio to total population)



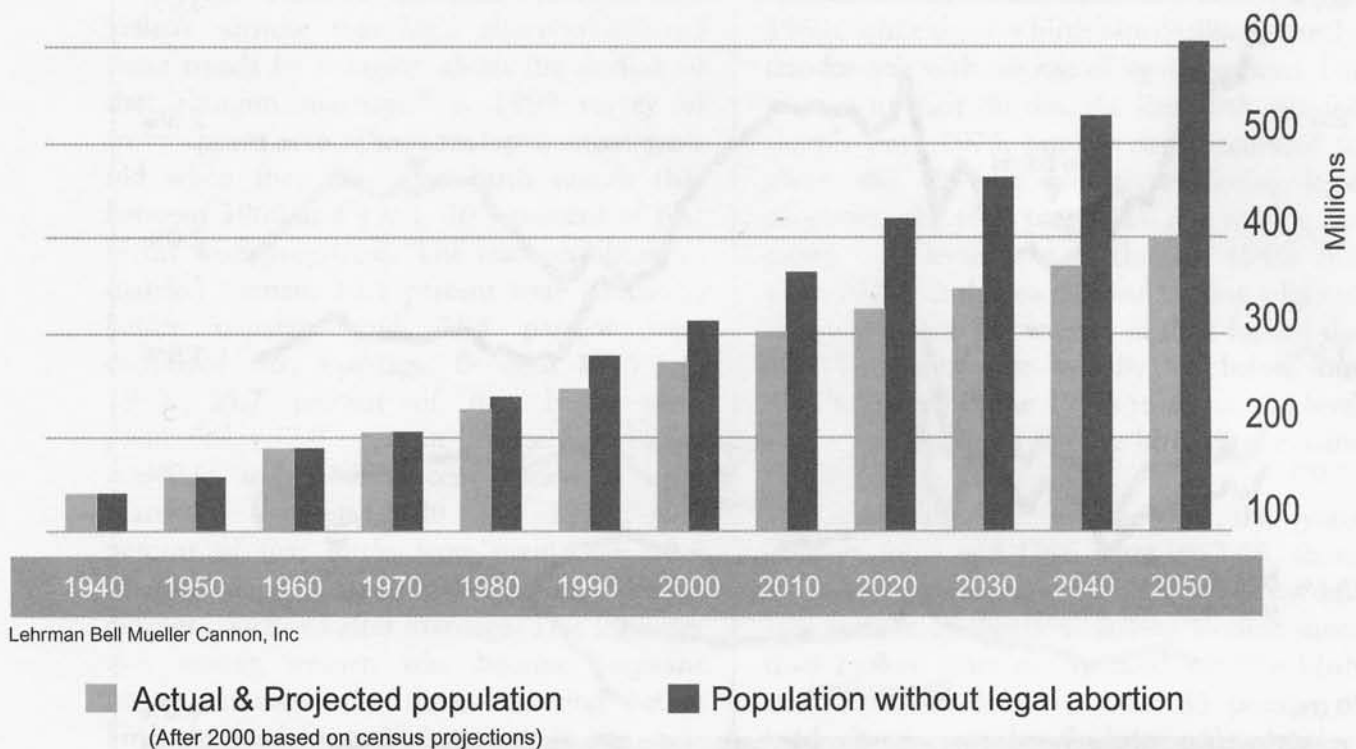
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Total Fertility Rate

Lifetime events per woman



The Impact of Legal Abortion on U.S. Population



68. The fertility rate including legal abortions continued to fluctuate around the same level, dipping to 2.34 in 1976 and then rising as high as 2.9 in the early 1990s. Counting only live births, the rate dropped from 2.6 in 1967-68 to a low of 1.7 in 1976, after which it recovered to just more than 2.0 in the 1990s. But the recovery was more than accounted for by the rise in out-of-wedlock births. The portion of the fertility rate accounted for by live births to married mothers dropped from 2.3 in 1967-68 to 1.5 in 1976 and then fell further to 1.4 in 1995. The portion of the total fertility rate accounted for by live births to unmarried mothers rose from 0.2 in 1967-68 to 0.7 in 1995.

This leads to a refinement of the preliminary estimate of the impact of abortion on the U.S. population. Though some 39.7 million abortions have been carried out since the late 1960s, the legalization of abortion decreased the number of live births by some 31.1 million since the 1960s, after taking

behavioral changes into account. Allowing for the small number that could have been expected to die of natural causes, the net decrease comes to about 30.5 million. But the oldest among these could be expected to have given birth to 4.4 million surviving children. Therefore, if abortion had not been legalized, the U.S. population this year would be 35 million people larger—310 million instead of 275 million. Put another way, three decades of abortion have reduced the U.S. population by 11.3 percent from what it would have been if abortion had not been legalized. The difference is larger than the population of Canada.

Future Population Growth

Estimating the impact of continued abortion on the future population requires estimating the number of future abortions. The absolute number is the product of the number of women in each age group and the behavior

continued on page 13

of women within each age group. The behavior of women in most age and social groups (except teenagers) shows a great deal of continuity, while the number of women in those groups can change quite a bit. If behavior in all age groups had remained unchanged, the absolute number of abortions would have leveled off from about 1980 through 2010 because the number of women of childbearing age will have been flat during this period. However, the total number of women of childbearing age should begin rising again after 2010, as the relatively small Generation X will be succeeded by what has been called the baby boom echo, which is about the same size as the baby boom generation. The number of women is also expected to increase because of immigration. Most of the drop in the rate of abortions since the mid-1990s has been among teenagers, but only one in three of the conceptions in this group actually affects the net number of live births. Among older women, for whom abortions have had two to three times as much impact on the net number of live births, the abortion rate has remained steady since the 1970s. Since the practice of abortion is likely to continue without some change in the law and in attitudes, the most reasonable forecast would seem to be to project the current abortion rate into the future.

According to the Census Bureau, the population will grow to about 394 million by 2050. Because the birth rate is currently close to the replacement rate—the birth rate that will ultimately result in a stable population—this increase is largely due to the assumption that immigration will continue at about 880,000 a year on top of the natural change in population due to births and deaths. If women in each age group continue to have abortions at the same rate as in 1995, the annual number of abortions, after having fallen below 1.5 million in 1994, will stay at about 1.4 million for several years, then rise again steadily to 1.5 million in about 2015, reaching about 1.8

million a year in 2050.

Under these assumptions, American women will have undergone about 120 million legal abortions between 1970 and 2050. Taking into account the behavioral changes brought about by legal abortion, abortion will have reduced the net number of live births by about 87 million, of whom 81 million could be expected to be living in 2050, along with 130 million surviving descendants. The cumulative reduction in U.S. population due to legal abortion will have reached about 211 million by the year 2050, more than three-quarters the current population of the

United States. In other words, the Census Bureau's estimated population of 394 million in 2050 would represent a reduction of about 35 percent compared to what the population would be if abortion had not been legalized.

The cumulative reduction in U.S. population due to legal abortion will have reached about 211 million by the year 2050.

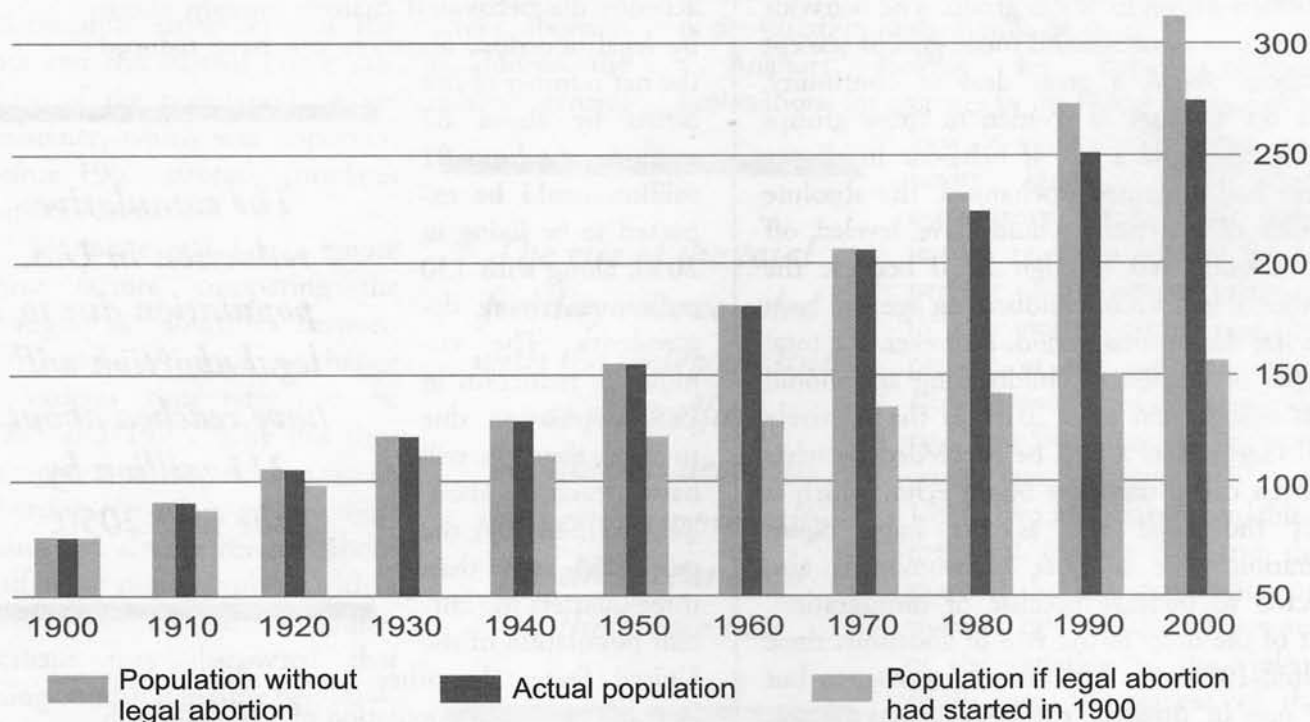
If Roe Had Been Decided in 1900

Because population projections are difficult to grasp, another method of assessing the socioeconomic impact of abortion is to consider how the country would look today if *Roe v. Wade* had been decided much earlier, say, in 1900, when the population was only 76 million. Assume that abortions occurred among each age group of women at the rate they did in 1995, except for those years in which the actual abortion rate was higher. Assume also that people were born, died, and migrated at the rates that actually occurred over the past century. Under these assumptions, the number of legal abortions would have started at just under a half million in 1900, since the number of women at the time was much smaller.

Beginning with a half a million abortions in 1900, and counting for the lost offspring of aborted children, by 1930 the country would have reached a population of 110 million,

If Abortion Had Been Legalized in 1900

U.S. Population in Millions



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instead of the actual 123 million. The difference of 13 million below the actual population equals the current size of New York City and Boston combined. The proportional reduction in population—10.6 percent—would have been about the same as estimated earlier for the year 2000, three decades after the actual legalization of abortion. By 1950, the U.S. population would have been reduced by 21 percent or 31 million people; instead of reaching the actual 152 million, the population would have been only 121 million. By 1975, the loss to the population through abortion would have reached 75 million people or 35 percent of the actual population of 216 million. If abortion had not been legalized in 1973, the loss from abortion since 1900 would be even greater, about 78 million or 36 percent of an abortion-free population of 219 million. This seventy-five year estimate, from 1900 to 1975, is proportionally very similar to the earlier projection, using the Census Bureau's popu-

lation estimates, for the impact of actual abortions between 1970 and 2050.

Therefore, if abortion had been legalized for the entire century, the U.S. population would today stand at 156 million, 43 percent lower than the actual 275 million. That figure would represent a reduction in population of almost 50 percent from the no-abortion baseline of 311 million. Based on the Census Bureau's middle population projection, by 2050, after 150 years of legal abortion, the U.S. population would be reduced by 69 percent compared with what the population would be if abortion had never been legalized. Roughly speaking, then, legal abortion cumulatively reduces the population by about 11 percent every generation.

As abortion has been practiced for just thirty years—not a full century—a population of 275 million people makes the United States the third most populous nation; only China, with a population of 1.3 billion, and India,

with 1 billion people, are larger. Indonesia (219 million) and Brazil (178 million) rank fourth and fifth. However, had America started the deadly practice of abortion in 1900, her abortion-adjusted population of 156 million people today would rank only fifth, scarcely larger than Russia (146 million) and only two-fifths as large as the fifteen-nation European Union (375 million).

The Economic Impact

While the role of abortion in lowering the American population is clear, its role in weakening the economy may not be as clear. Economists of all stripes agree that, as a first approximation, the effect of population changes on the economy is approximately proportional. That is, if the population is reduced by 10 percent, the size of the economy will correspondingly be reduced by about 10 percent. No evidence suggests, in a modern economy at least, that a larger population has any adverse impact on per capita income. To the contrary, advanced countries with faster growing populations appear to have more rapidly increasing standards of living.¹⁰

What this means to abortion is revealing. Almost three decades of legal abortion have reduced the U.S. population by about 11 percent. Therefore, since total output and total income in the United States amounted to about \$9.2 trillion in 1999, this figure represents a net loss of at least \$1.17 trillion compared to what it would have been if the U.S. population had not been reduced by abortion. The difference, the current size of the economy of California, will continue to grow, as the proportional diminution of the economy due to abortion will more than triple over the next fifty years.

The absolute size of a nation's economy, of course, depends not only on population, but also on average living standard. China and India, for example, have much larger populations than the United States, but much smaller economies. Measured in dollars with the same buying power, the U.S. gross national product in 1998 was twice as large as China's economy and about five times as large as

India's.¹¹ The reason: China's and India's average living standards are far lower than that of the United States. But the effect of legal abortion is to reduce America's relative economic importance by reducing the relative size of the population. Had it been legal for a century instead of three decades, abortion would have reduced the U.S. population by one-half instead of one-ninth. In that case, the U.S. economy would be about the same size of China's, instead of twice as large.

A similar calculation can be applied to the relative economic importance of the United States and the newly formed European Union. Though the European Union represents a population of 375 million, its larger population is offset by a lower average living standard. The 1997 per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was \$29,326 in the United States; \$20,546 for the European Union. As a result, U.S. GDP in 1997 was \$7.8 trillion, compared with \$7.7 trillion for the European Union.¹² If the U.S. population had not been reduced by

11 percent by three decades of legal abortion, the U.S. economy might have been as large as \$8.8 trillion in 1997. If abortion had been practiced for a full century, the size of the U.S. economy would have been only \$3.9 trillion in 1997, barely half the size of the economy of the European Union.

While economists agree about the long-term impact of population change on the size of the economy, they disagree as to how and when this comes about. Some economists hold to the neoclassical theory that most people are largely passive recipients of economic progress. In their view, the impact of the population on the economy comes about primarily through its effect on the size of the labor force. Taking the labor force as a given, they assume that output

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and income per worker are largely determined by the ratio of the stock of nonhuman capital (plant and equipment) to the number of workers and by advances in technology. According to this theory, a change in the population, brought about by a difference in the rate of live births, affects the economy only after a couple of decades, after the change in births translates into change in the size of the labor force. For example, the three-quarters of a million abortions that occurred in 1973 cut the annual growth of the labor force by up to 400,000 workers beginning in 1989. Now nearly one million fewer workers enter the labor force annually because of abortions sixteen years earlier, which means fewer goods and services produced and information processed as well as less money earned.

Abortion's Immediate Impact

Other economists argue that the impact of legal abortion on population triggers economic consequences much sooner than

neoclassical economists think. Changes in the rate of real economic growth in the United States over the past seventy years closely paralleled changes in the fertility rate.¹³ Changes in fertility seem to cause changes in the economy immediately, not after a couple of decades. This newer, "total capital" theory takes into consideration both nonhuman and human capital. This theory

maintains that investments made (mostly by parents) in human capital—child-rearing and education, health, safety, and mobility—add to output and income right away, long before those investments could possibly begin to reap a return in the form of compensation earned after the children became adults and found employment for the skills in which the earlier

investments had been made. This total capital model is more consistent with the U.S. economic boom from the late 1940s to the late 1960s, as well as with the sharp slowdown in the growth of output per worker that began in 1973. The model also helps explain the re-acceleration of the economy in the 1990s, which has coincided with rising birth rates. Other factors are at work, of course, but the relationship works both ways. A larger population does not merely represent so many new mouths to feed or so many workers for whom jobs must somehow be created. It also represents an immediate investment in the number and quality of future workers, investors, employers, inventors, and entrepreneurs.

As with nonhuman capital, the economic value of human capital should equal the value of the current and future income it generates. The stock of tangible nonhuman capital is today worth roughly three times the gross national product (GNP); it takes more than \$27 trillion worth of physical wealth to produce today's annual \$9.2 trillion American economy. According to John Kendrick, a leader in the total capital school of economics, the human capital that contributes to the GNP can be valued at roughly two-and-one-half times the stock of human capital.¹⁴ Therefore, if the current human capital stock is worth \$69 trillion and if the drag on the economy by past abortions is roughly 11.3 percent, the value of human capital lost to past abortions is about \$7.9 trillion. By 2050, the lost output will total about \$24 trillion (\$69 trillion times 35 percent) in today's dollars, almost three times the value of today's GNP.

But the economic impact of abortion is more than quantitative. A large body of literature argues that technological progress is more dynamic in an economy with a growing population than in one with a stagnant or shrinking population. A commonsense way to see this advantage is to list four creative Americans in any field: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt; Samuel Morse, George Washington Carver, Thomas Edison,

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and Jonas Salk; Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, and Toni Morrison; George Gershwin, Scott Joplin, Duke Ellington, and Aaron Copland. Take away one person from each group and imagine the difference. By the law of averages, one out of each four would not have existed if current abortion practices had existed in the past. Consequently, American life and culture would have suffered without the contributions of these creative Americans.

This means that over time, legal abortion undermines a primary source of America's high standard of living relative to the rest of the world: innovation. Several European countries have per capita living standards almost as high as the United States yet trail in information technology. The United States leads the revolution in information technology, not merely because she had higher living standards to take advantage of new technology when it came along, but also because her companies enjoy the economies of scale that come from a large domestic market. By developing those technologies within a large and growing market, U.S. companies acquired the financial strength, know-how, and trained personnel necessary to leverage these advantages. But these advantages relative to other advanced countries will diminish if legal abortion continues.

Countries that legalized abortion earlier than the United States teach lessons about the long-term consequences of abortion. Japan's legalization of abortion in 1948, a generation earlier than the United States, is the main reason why Japan did not have an extended postwar baby boom, as did the United States. Yet Japan's experience during the 1940s and 1950s was much like what the United States experienced after *Roe v. Wade*: the rate of conceptions stayed about the same after abortion was introduced, but the birth rate fell sharply.¹⁵ The demographic imbalances resulting from Japan's more rapidly aging population are a large part of the reason for Japan's spectacularly diminished economic performance in recent years. Those born in the late 1940s, before legal abortion, remain Japan's



REUTERS/CORBIS

Economic Lessons from Tokyo? Demographic imbalances resulting from Japan's rapidly aging population, a consequence of the Pacific Rim nation's legalization of abortion in 1948, are a major factor in Japan's recent diminished economic performance.

largest age group, which is now in the phase of peak pre-retirement saving; but because the population below fifteen years of age averages only about three-fifths as large, the demand for domestic investment of that retirement saving is falling. The population is expected to shrink by 20 percent in the next fifty years.¹⁶ A similar prospect looms for most countries of Europe. Though America's greater openness to immigration also plays an important role, much of the difference, demographically speaking, is simply the time at which abortion was legalized.

Lower Living Standards

Though legal abortion is beginning to reflect slippage in America's relative economic importance, its impact is already apparent in America's standard of living as measured by average household income. Comparisons using the broader measure of gross product per capita are useful only if other things remain the same. But legal abortion not only led to a decline in the net marriage rate, it also increased the rate

of births outside of marriage. These social changes have had profound negative consequences for the level and buying power of average household income.

Consider what happens when a man and a woman divorce after marrying or fail to marry in the first place. Assume at first that they have the same education and, therefore, the same earning power as before. Living together, their income is combined into one household; after divorce, or as separate individuals, their income is split between two households. The difference is more than merely mathematical, however, because two people can live in one household more cheaply than in two separate households. The official poverty level in 1998 for an adult living alone was \$8,478; for a household of two adults it was \$10,634, far less than the poverty level for two separate households, which would be \$16,956.¹⁷ Thus, with the same income in both cases, the combined standard of living declines by at least \$6,322 after a couple divorces or fails to marry, even if they have no children. (The difference in the cost of living will normally be larger for those above the poverty line, so this estimate represents a minimum.)

The decline in living standards hurts the woman more than the man, as average lifetime earnings for men are nearly twice as high as for

women. For those born in 1955, the average married man can expect lifetime earnings to average about \$29,809 in 1998 dollars; the average married woman, \$14,714. Together, the couple can expect a combined average lifetime income of \$44,523.¹⁸ For two unmarried people with the same age and education, average expected lifetime earnings are \$26,620 for the man and \$15,785 for the woman, a total of \$42,405. The differences are due to the fact that married men work more hours than unmarried or divorced men; unmarried or divorced women work more hours in the labor market than married women. Thus, as the result of failing to marry or getting a divorce, the average annual lifetime standard of living of such a couple would decline by at least \$8,440, or 19 percent, due to lower earnings and a higher cost of living.

When children are present, the problem is especially acute for households headed by divorced or unmarried mothers. The poverty threshold for a married couple with two children was \$16,530 in 1998. For the same four people split into two households, the combined poverty threshold was \$21,449: \$8,316 for a man living alone, and \$13,133 for a mother with two children. The woman's earnings are a little higher than when married because she is forced to work more hours in the labor market, but her share of the family's cost of living is substantially higher. In this example, the mother and children typically go from a household with income equal to 269 percent of the poverty level to a household with income only 112 percent of the poverty line. All these reasons explain why the poverty rate is much higher for female-headed households than for married-couple households or for households headed by unmarried men. In many cases, compensation from the father is either nonexistent or poorly enforced. But even enforcement of child support or alimony, or any division of income, cannot prevent a decline in this family's combined standard of living, which falls by at least \$7,037, or 15.8 percent of the family's initial income.

One might argue that the decline in the net marriage rate and the birth rate which were

Forthcoming in FAMILY POLICY

- May–June: Bruce Frohnen assesses whether “smart growth” will make suburban living a better deal for the American family.
- July–August: Maggie Gallagher, author of *The Abolition of Marriage*, explains why parents need to focus on transmitting marriage as a way of life to their children.
- September–October: William Saunders explores the bioethical challenges of the unintended byproducts of in vitro fertilization: frozen embryos and stem cell research.

associated with legal abortion have produced some compensating effects. First, by freeing women to pursue education for a longer time, it would increase their earning capacity. Second, with fewer children, women would also be free to spend more time in the labor market. Third, the decision to have fewer children—half a child per family, on average, according to the total fertility rate—would lower living costs.

But such considerations do not change the conclusion. U.S. Census data suggest that average educational attainment for those born in 1955 is about 13.4 years, compared with 12.3 years for those born in 1935, who would have been too old to be affected by legal abortion.¹⁹ But that increase was only about half as large as for those born in 1935, compared with the 10.4 years of education of those born in 1915—indicating that the improvement in educational attainment actually slowed down for the first generation exposed to legal abortion. Moreover, attributing the whole increase in educational attainment to the impact of legal abortion is implausible, since the steady increase in life expectancy must also have played an important role, by increasing the lifetime value of the earnings resulting from education. Life expectancy at birth increased from 54.5 years for those born in 1915 to 61.7 years for those born in 1935 and to 69.6 years for those born in 1955, an increase of about 13 percent in each twenty-year interval.²⁰ But even if the whole increase in educational attainment for women could be attributed to legal abortion, the difference in average lifetime earnings would be \$1,162, only one-sixth as large as the drop in the standard of living in the example above.

What about the other factors? The example already took into account the changes in labor force participation. Having an average of half a child fewer per family only lowers the poverty threshold by \$1,462. Taking all this into account, the standard of living for the average family still declines by a minimum of \$4,483, about 10 percent. The drop in the net marriage rate thus far suggests that in the long run, 39 percent of American households will be affected

this way. Therefore, the social changes triggered by legal abortion are lowering the average standard of living for all Americans by at least 3.9 percent.

Taken in its entirety, the foregoing demographic and economic analysis suggests that pragmatic arguments are strongly against legal abortion. Legal abortion has begun drastically to reduce the relative economic importance of the United States, lowered the average standard of living of American households, and unleashed socially destructive behavior. After three decades of such destruction, these changes may appear irreversible; nothing can bring back 40 million Americans, their hopes and creativity, or their children and grandchildren. But the country can keep from compounding the

terrible mistake to ensure that over the next fifty years her population will not continue to hemorrhage. If the legalization of abortion were reversed twenty-seven years after *Roe v. Wade*, the United States would be able to begin repairing the damage to her economic foundation caused by legalized abortion.

The scenario in which *Roe v. Wade* had been decided in 1900 helps explain how reversing legalized abortion would help the country. Had abortion been practiced only from 1900 to 1930, the population would have been reduced by about 11 percent, but the impact would have continued to grow because of abortion's effect in removing not only the children aborted, but also their children and grandchildren. Yet the proportional impact of abortion on the U.S. population would have peaked at about 15 percent after seventy-five years, instead of reaching 35 percent had abortion remained legal. Thanks to the baby boom, the net impact on population would

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actually have declined to about 11 percent by 2050, instead of rising to 69 percent.

The results of ending abortion today, however, would not be as favorable, because the hypothetical example of ending abortion in 1930 implicitly assumed that abortion would not have been practiced by the baby boom generation. Since abortion actually began to be practiced by the largest generation in U.S. history, even if abortion were made illegal today, its drag on population growth, now about 11 percent, would increase to about 23 percent in 2050. Ultimately, the population would be reduced by about 25 percent, compared with what it would have become without legal abortion. If abortion continued,

however, the population and economy of the country would decrease by 35 percent by 2050, 50 percent by 2075, and 70 percent by 2100. Therefore, although the socioeconomic effects of abortion are profound and lasting, ending legal abortion even after three decades would significantly lessen its permanent impact, keeping a firm foundation for what is now the world's pre-eminent economy. **FP**

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