

Release

What Reduces Abortions?

By Richard M. Doerflinger

Sometimes election years produce more policy myths than good ideas. This year one myth is about abortion. It goes like this: The Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision is here to stay, and that's fine because laws against abortion don't reduce abortions much anyway. Rather, "support for women and families" will greatly reduce abortions, without changing the law or continuing a "divisive" abortion debate.

Various false claims are used to bolster this myth. It is said that over three-quarters of women having abortions cite expense as the most important factor in their decision. Actually the figure is less than one-fourth, 23%. It is said that abortion rates declined dramatically (30%) during the Clinton years, but the decline stopped under the ostensibly pro-life Bush administration. Actually the abortion rate has dropped 30% from 1981 to 2005; the decline started 12 years before Clinton took office, and has continued fairly steadily to the present day.

The steepest decline is among minors. Is it plausible that economic factors reduced abortions for teens but not their older sisters, or their mothers who support them?

The reality is this: In 1980 the Supreme Court upheld the Hyde amendment, and federally funded abortions went from 200,000 a year to nearly zero. With its decisions in *Webster* (1989) and *Casey* (1992), the Court began to uphold other abortion laws previously invalidated under *Roe*. States passed hundreds of modest but effective laws: bans on use of public funds and facilities; informed consent laws; parental involvement when minors seek abortion; etc. Dr. Michael New's rigorous research has shown that these laws significantly reduce abortions. In the 1990s, debate on partial-birth abortion – kept in the public eye, ironically, by President Clinton's repeated vetoes of a ban on this grisly late-term procedure – alerted many Americans to the violence of abortion and shifted public attitudes in a pro-life direction, just as growing concern over AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases was giving new force to the abstinence message for teens. Now the Court has upheld a partial-birth abortion ban, and signaled that other laws to save unborn children and their mothers from the horrors of abortion may be valid. If *Roe* is reversed outright, that will allow more laws that can further reduce abortions.

By contrast, a pending federal “Freedom of Choice Act” (FOCA) would knock down current laws reducing abortions, and require public programs for pregnant women to fund abortion. No one supporting that bill can claim to favor reducing abortions.

Many women are pressured toward abortion, and they need our help. The pressures are partly, but only partly, economic in nature. Women are influenced by husbands, boyfriends, parents and friends, and by a culture and legal system that tells them the child they carry has no rights and is of no consequence. Law cannot solve all problems, but it can tell us which solutions are unacceptable – and today Roe still teaches that killing the unborn child is an acceptable solution, even a “right.” Without ever forgetting the need to support pregnant women and their families, that tragic and unjust error must be corrected if we are to build a society that respects all human life.

Mr. Doerflinger is Associate Director of the Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Go to www.usccb.org/prolife to learn more about the bishops’ pro-life activities. For more on FOCA see www.nchla.org/issues.asp?ID=50.

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