



Fact Sheet

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Illegal Abortion: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

On his first working day in office, President George Bush called for a Human Life Amendment (HLA) to the Constitution of the United States and said that "Roe v. Wade was wrong and should be overturned."

President Bush and his supporters believe they can stop abortion by granting "personhood" to a fertilized egg through the passage of an HLA and by overturning the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion nationwide. They are wrong. Women who cannot physically, emotionally, or financially afford a child have always had abortions, and they always will.

The question is not whether abortion will exist. The question is whether abortion will be legal and safe -- or illegal and unsafe. We know from our own history, confirmed by the tragic experiences of other countries, that illegal abortion can represent a death sentence for hundreds of American women every year and a serious health risk for tens of thousands more.

ILLEGAL ABORTION YESTERDAY

Until 1845, abortion before "quickening" (when movements of the fetus begin to be felt, usually during the fifth month of pregnancy) was legal in all states. But in those years, before sterilization of medical instruments, abortion was a dangerous procedure.

In 1845, states began passing laws to ban or severely restrict access to abortion -- in order to protect women's lives, not to protect fertilized eggs or fetuses.

By the early 1960s, most states had passed restrictive abortion laws.

- o In 15 states and the District of Columbia, only the person performing the abortion was subject to legal action.
- o But 18 states had established criminal penalties for women who had abortions and/or for those who helped or counseled women regarding abortion.

Between 1845 and 1970, however, desperation forced millions of women to turn to dangerous, back-alley, or self-induced abortions.

- o Thousands of women died, at least 100 each year.



- o Many thousands more suffered mutilation, long-term illness, even sterility.
- o Many women inserted hangers and other sharp instruments into their uteruses, threw themselves down staircases, or swallowed lye, bleach, or turpentine.
- o Until after the turn of the century, when safer abortion techniques were used, the risk of dying from an abortion was 10 to 15 times higher than the risk of dying from a full-term delivery.
- o A 1934 study showed that almost all of New York city's 25 annual deaths from illegal abortion were suffered by married women between the ages of 35 and 39 who were in their sixth, seventh, or eighth pregnancy.
- o In 1969, 18 women a day were admitted to hospitals in New York City alone for treatment of incomplete abortion.
- o In 1972, although abortion by then was legal in at least 11 states, 330,000 illegal abortions were performed nationwide. At least 100 women died.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, when abortion had become much safer for women:

- o 17 states repealed or reformed their abortion laws to make abortions more available.
- o Reform bills were introduced in 28 other states.
- o The Supreme Court's 1973 landmark decision in Roe v. Wade was the culmination of a progressive trend.

ILLEGAL ABORTION TODAY

There is no country in the world where abortions don't occur.

Between 40 and 60 million abortions are performed throughout the world every year. Most are legal.

But 39 percent of the women in the world live in societies where laws forbid them from making their own reproductive decisions.

The recent experience of Romania is an excellent example of what could happen here if abortion were criminalized once again.

- o In 1966 the government of Romania reversed its liberal abortion laws to offset a falling birth rate. The next year, the birth rate jumped from 14.3 to 27.4 per 1000. A year later, however, the birth rate dropped to 26.7, and continued dropping until, in 1983, it had returned to its 1966 level of 14.3.
- o Abortion had moved underground. And women paid with their lives. In 1966 the maternal mortality rate in Romania was 86 per 100,000 live births. By 1983, influenced by severe anti-abortion laws, Romania's maternal mortality rate had doubled to 170.1. That same year, influenced by progressive abortion laws, the maternal mortality rate was 8.6 in England and Wales and 8.0 in the U.S.

- o Beyond the devastating impact on women's lives are the social implications of Romania's anti-abortion laws:
 - . A woman can obtain a legal abortion only if pregnancy presents her with strict medical risks, if she has a defective fetus, or if she is over the age of 45 and already has five children, all under the age of 18.
 - . Women are required to have monthly examinations to determine their pregnancy status.
 - . Prescription contraception is available only to women whose health would be endangered by pregnancy.
 - . Factory physicians receive full monthly salaries only if plant employees attain a monthly birth quota.
 - . Childless couples and unmarried people over age 25 are taxed at a higher rate.
 - . A special unit of the state security police was established to combat high incidence of illegal abortion.
 - . Providers of illegal abortion risk severe prison sentences and even the death penalty.

It is conservatively estimated that 200,000 women worldwide die every year from abortions that are illegal and unsafe. In the U.S., where it is safe and legal, abortion is twice as safe as tonsillectomy and ten times safer than appendectomy.

ILLEGAL ABORTION TOMORROW*

Today's anti-abortion movement, unlike its counterpart of the early 1800s, is not interested in protecting women.

Number of Abortions

Approximately 1.5 million safe and legal abortions are provided each year in the U.S. If abortions were made illegal once again, the number of illegal abortions in the United States would probably soar from the current estimated 20,000 to more than 1,000,000 per year.

Women who can afford it will have access to safe and legal abortion even if it means traveling to other countries. The heaviest burden would fall on young, poor, and minority women, who would be forced to rely on unqualified practitioners, attempt self-induced abortion, or bear unwanted children.

Provision of Abortion

It is doubtful that skilled doctors would continue to perform abortions if it meant risking criminal charges, even prosecution for murder, as anti-abortion zealots demand.

The high cost of illegal abortion would make it an attractive target for organized crime.

Abortion Mortality

Today, depending on a woman's age, abortion is 7 to 28 times safer than giving birth. Because illegal abortion may carry a risk of death as much as 30 times that of legal abortion, as many as 200 women a year would die from complications of illegal abortion.

Abortion Morbidity

Abortion, now one of the safest clinical procedures, would become a source of infection and disease if made illegal. Approximately 125,000 women would suffer major complications, such as hemorrhage, infections of the genitals and reproductive system, and sterility.

Enforcement of Anti-Abortion Laws

All but a handful of states have laws on the books that are unconstitutional in light of Roe v. Wade. These laws ban abortion in most circumstances or place unconstitutional restrictions on abortion, such as waiting periods, spousal consent vetoes, etc. It is unclear how many of these laws would go into effect immediately if Roe were overturned.

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