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Medical and Social Health Benefits Since Abortion Was Made Legal in the U.S.

Despite the claims of anti-choice ideologues, many demonstrable health benefits — physical, emotional, and social — have accrued to Americans since 1973, when the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion in its decision, *Roe v. Wade*.

The most important benefit, of course, has been the end of an era that supported the proliferation of “back alley butchers” who were motivated by money alone and performed unsafe, medically incompetent abortions that left many women dead or injured. And compassionate mainstream physicians, who provided clandestine, medically safe abortions, who did not exploit their patients, and who were motivated by principle rather than by financial concerns, no longer had to fear imprisonment and the loss of their medical licenses for performing abortions after *Roe* was decided (Joffe, 1995). Today, as the 32nd anniversary of this landmark decision approaches, it is important to remember how far *Roe* has brought us as a society and to note some of the many benefits that resulted from the legalization of abortion.

***Roe v. Wade* did not “invent” abortion.**

- Estimates of the annual number of illegal abortions in the 1950s and 1960s range from 200,000 to 1.2 million (Cates, et al., 2003; Rock & Jones, 2003; Tietze & Henshaw, 1986).
- In 1969, one year before New York State legalized abortion, complications from abortions accounted for 23 percent of all pregnancy-related admissions to municipal

hospitals in New York City (Institute of Medicine, 1975).

- After California liberalized its abortion law in 1967, the number of admissions for infection resulting from illegal abortion at Los Angeles County/University of Southern California Medical Center fell by almost 75 percent (Seward, et al., 1973).

Since *Roe v. Wade*, women have obtained abortions earlier in pregnancy when health risks to them are at the lowest.

- In 1973, only 36 percent of abortions were performed at or before eight weeks of pregnancy (CDC, 1999).
- Today, 88 percent of all legal abortions are performed within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, and 59 percent take place within the first eight weeks of pregnancy. Only 1.4 percent occur after 20 weeks (CDC, 2004).

Deaths from abortion declined dramatically during the past two decades.

- In 1965, when abortion was still illegal nationwide except in cases of life endangerment, at least 193 women died from illegal abortions, and illegal abortion accounted for nearly 17 percent of all deaths due to pregnancy and childbirth in that year (NCHS, 1967).

- In 1973, the risk of dying from an abortion was 3.4 deaths per 100,000 legal abortions. This rate fell to 1.3 by 1977 (Gold, 1990). Today, abortion is one of the most commonly performed clinical procedures, and the current death rate from abortion at all stages of gestation is 0.6 per 100,000 procedures. This is eleven times safer than carrying a pregnancy to term and nearly twice as safe as a penicillin injection (AGI, 2004; Rock & Jones, 2003; Paul et al., 1999; Gold, 1990).

Medically safe, legal abortion has had a profound impact on American women and their families.

- Couples at risk of having children affected with severe and often fatal genetic disorders have been willing to conceive because of the availability of amniocentesis and safe, legal abortion (Milunsky, 1989).
- Following the legalization of abortion, the largest decline in birthrates were seen among women for whom the health and social consequences of unintended childbearing are the greatest — women over 35, teenagers, and unmarried women (Levine, et al., 1999). Today, thirty percent of the abortions in the U.S. are provided to women over 35 and to teenagers (CDC, 2004).
- More than half of all abortions are performed at or before eight weeks of pregnancy, when the procedure is the safest — 0.2 deaths per 100,000 procedures (Gold, 1990).
- Half of all pregnancies in the U.S. each year are unintended, and about half of these are terminated by medically safe, legal abortions. In 2000, 1.31 million abortions took place, down from an estimated 1.61 million in 1990. From 1973 through 2000, more than 39 million legal abortions occurred (AGI, 2004; Henshaw, 2003).
- If safe, legal abortion were not available, more women would experience unwanted childbearing, and unwanted childbearing affects the entire family. Mothers with unwanted births suffer from higher levels of depression and lower levels of happiness than mothers without unwanted births. They

spank and slap their children more often than other mothers, and spend less leisure time outside the home with their children. Lower-quality mother/child relationships are not limited to the child born as a result of the unwanted pregnancy — all the children in the family suffer (Barber, et al., 1999).

- The legalization of abortion has also improved the average living conditions of children. Because of increased access to abortion, cohorts born after 1973 are less likely than those born before 1973 to be in single-parent households, to live in poverty, and to receive welfare. They also experience lower infant mortality rates (Gruber, et al., 1999).
- In 1973, the majority of abortions were performed in hospitals. Today, most abortions are performed in clinics. This change in locale has also allowed more women to have access to comprehensive reproductive health services, including, but not limited to, contraceptive counseling, family planning services, and gynecological care (Cates, et al., 2003).

The health and well-being of women and children suffer the most in states that have the most stringent anti-abortion laws.

- Compared to pro-choice states, anti-abortion states spend far less money per child on a range of services such as foster care, education, welfare, and the adoption of children who have physical and mental disabilities (Schroedel, 2000).
- The states that have the strongest anti-abortion laws are also the states in which women suffer from lower levels of education and higher levels of poverty, as well as from a lower ratio of female-to-male earnings. They also have a lower percentage of women in the legislature and fewer mandates requiring insurance providers to cover minimum hospital stays after childbirth (Schroedel, 2000).

The legalization of abortion was a significant factor in the dramatic drop in crime in the U.S. in the 1990s.

- Previous research has established that a strong link exists between an adverse family environment and future criminal behavior; that maternal rejection is counted among the various qualitative aspects of parenting that provide the most accurate predictors of juvenile delinquency; and that having been born of a pregnancy that was unwanted by one's mother is a circumstance that increases a person's risk of committing violent crime (David, et al., 1988; Donohue & Levitt, 2001).
- At least one study reported that legalized abortion can account for about half the observed decline in crime in the U.S. since 1991. Homicide rates have fallen more than 40 percent, and violent crime and property crime have fallen more than 30 percent.
- The timing of the drop in crime corresponds to the period in which the first generation of children born after the legalization of abortion are reaching what are considered to be the peak ages of criminal activity (18–24 years old). Furthermore, states that legalized abortion before the rest of the nation did so were also the first states to experience decreasing crime rates.
- States with high abortion rates have seen a greater fall in crime since 1985, even after taking into account other factors that would be expected to influence the crime rate. Furthermore, these declines in crime rates in high-abortion states are disproportionately concentrated among those under the age of 25 (Donohue & Levitt, 2001).

In sum, no amount of controversy over abortion can negate the evidence that American women, men, children, and families have reaped great benefits to their physical, mental, and social health from the U.S. Supreme Court's historic decision in *Roe v. Wade*. Any erosion of a woman's right and access to medically safe, legal abortion jeopardizes the health of women, their families, and the nation as a whole.

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