Beyond the abortion controversy, statistics tell a story

By CHARLES LEROUX

Beyond the angry faces and heightened rhetoric on both sides of the abortion issue, a mass has been brought to the floor by the recent Supreme Court decision. Statistics tell a story to tell.

There are about 1.5 million legal abortions a year performed nationally. The number that has remained factually exact through the '70s. The great change in the number of women obtaining legal abortions came, of course, after Roe v. Wade and other Supreme Court decisions of 1973 made the procedure much more widely obtainable. The 587,899 abortions of 1972 became more than 1.5 million by 1975.

Each year, about 1 percent of American women between the ages of 15 and 44 undergo an abortion. Forty-three percent have had previous abortions and 49 percent have had children. Abortion is 10 times more common than appendectomy and about a third as common as childbirth (there were 1,719,000 births in 1974).

Forty-six percent of the women in this country will have had an abortion by the time they are 45. About half the pregnancies nationwide are estimated to be unintended, and about half of those are terminated by abortion. The abortion rate, the number of women per 1,000 who get abortions, is now about 27, one of the highest rates among developed nations.

Who gets an abortion in the United States?

Most are younger than 35, white, unmarried, urban and poor, a portrait painted with statistics supplied by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, an independent, non-profit research and education corporation in New York. Their figures take into account data on pregnancies and abortions from the

Abortion

CONTINUED FROM 1A

Centers for Disease Control.

Dig deeper into the Guttmacher figures — most of which are only as recent as 1973-74 — and the portrait refines.

The abortion rate is more than twice as high for non-white women as it is for whites — 67 versus 31 per 1,000.

A fifth of all women undergoing abortion are over 39. They show a declining rate of abortion because more pregnancies in this age group now are carried to term.

Slightly more than a tenth of all women who get an abortion come from households of $9,000 or more income. Forty-five percent of women become pregnant terminate their pregnancy by abortion. This compares to 19 percent who go on term figures exclude miscarriages and stillbirths.

If you look at 15- to 19-year-olds, you'll see an abortion rate that rises sharply and then levels off. The rates are 14 per 1,000 for 15-year-olds, 31 for 16-year-olds, 45 for 17-year-olds, 62 for 18-year-olds and 41 for 19-year-olds.

For white towns between 15 and 19, the rate declined slightly during the 1960s while it increased slightly for minority towns.

Among 15-year-olds, those who claimed they were sexually active increased from 21 percent in 1962 to 28 percent in 1974, an increase that outstripped both the abortion and birthrate increases.

During the same period, the abortion rate for those younger than 15 increased for all races — from 8.4 per 1,000 in 1960 to nearly 10 per 1,000 in 1971. If divided along racial lines, the rate for non-whites was 4.6 times that for whites.

Women who do not state a religious affiliation have a higher rate of abortion than those who mention affiliations. Catholic women get as many abortions as the average for women nationally.

Protestants and Jews obtain fewer abortions than the average. Women who described themselves as born-again or Evangelical Christians get far as many abortions as the national average. Hispanic women — a majority of whom are Catholic — are 66 percent more likely than non-Hispans to have an abortion.

Why do they choose to abort?

Most give at least three reasons. Most dominate that a baby would interfere with work, school or other responsibilities; Seventy-six percent gave that reason. Timing seems to be the essence of that rationale. Seventy-nine percent of those obtaining an abortion said they intended to have a child at some time in the future.

The second most common reason for abortion, given by about two-thirds of those surveyed, is financial concern. A 1989 Chicago Tribune poll on attitudes covering abortion found 44 percent of Illinois citizens polled thought an abortion should be denied if cost was not a factor because the woman or the parents could not afford to raise a child.

About half of those undergoing an abortion said they did not want to be a single parent or insists a relationship with a husband or partner. Thirty-five percent of those polled by the Chicago Tribune thought abortion should be denied to those who sought it because they were unmarried. Nearly five times as many abortions are performed on unmarried women as it is married women.

Other reasons for abortion included: defective fetus, 1 percent; fetuses may have been harmed by medication or other cause, 3 percent; pregnancy due to incest or rape, 1 percent;

Where do girls have an abortion?

About two-thirds visit specialized abortion clinics, a number that increased each year since 1973. About 25 percent of abortions are done in doctor's offices. That number has been fairly constant through the '80s. A greatly declining percentage, now about 1 percent, involve in hospitals.

Between 1980 and 1988, there was a 19 percent decrease in the number of abortion providers in rural areas, 30 percent drop when compared to 1977, the peak year for this category. The number of urban providers dropped, too, only by 8 percent.

Eighty-three percent of U.S. counties, where 21 percent of the female population of childbearing age resides, have no abortion services. If identified as urban and rural, half of all U.S. counties and 93 percent of rural counties have no abortion services.

This means travel. In 1989, for non-hospital abortion patients, 27 percent had to travel 50 miles or more for their procedure; 18 percent had to travel 100 miles or more; 39 percent traveled more than 100 miles. When one of two physicians performed abortions in South Dakota, retired women in the west and central parts of the state had to travel up to 200 miles to get an abortion. In that state as well as in other poorer, rural states where access to abortion facilities is limited — Arkansas, Rhode, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, West Virginia and Wyoming — 20 percent of the women have the procedure performed out of state.

Travel sometimes means delay in a country in which slightly more than half of those getting an abortion do so after eight or fewer weeks of gestation. That delay increases the risk of death for the woman. At eight weeks gestation or less, the risk is 1 in 250,000 but rises to 5 per 1,000 after 21 weeks.

Delays sometimes are due to financial considerations. An estimated 22 percent of Medicaid-eligible women seeking second trimester abortions would have had first trimester abortions were they not delayed in raising funds.

The cost of a first-trimester non-elective abortion ranged, in 1989, from $350 to more than $1,100 with an average of $826. An abortion at 10 weeks gestation in a hospital averaged $1,372.