

Author admits flaws in abortion rate study, but challenges critics: Stassen says sources limited at the time

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A controversial study suggesting that the abortion rate has increased since President Bush took office was off the mark, its author now admits. But he also says new figures vindicate some of his contentions.

A recent study of the abortion rates in several states since President Bush took office revealed figures slightly different from those that ethicist Glen Stassen found in a study of a smaller number of states last fall.

Stassen, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary near Los Angeles, originally extrapolated data from 16 states to suggest that the national abortion rate has risen slightly since Bush took office in 2001 after falling for several years under his predecessor.

Prominent Democrats have cited Stassen's figures as recently as mid-May in criticizing Bush. Partially in response, the Alan Guttmacher Institute released its own study of abortion rates May 18. The group, affiliated with Planned Parenthood, tracks abortion statistics, which are released only every ten years on the national level.

The Guttmacher study found that while the abortion rate hasn't increased under Bush, it has declined more slowly under his presidency than under that of predecessor Bill Clinton, who unlike Bush favors abortion rights.

"Between 1992 and 1996, the annualized decline was 3.4 percent per year, while between 1996 and 2000, it was 1.2 percent per year," the Guttmacher study said. "The annualized decline between 2000 and 2002 was 0.9 percent." The authors of the Guttmacher study noted that it is "subject to some limitations and should be considered provisional."

Stassen, who first published his findings in *Sojourners* magazine, then in the *Century* (February 22) and several other news outlets, defended his work by saying his resources were limited at that time. He noted that some states had not made their most recent abortion statistics available at the time he conducted the study. The Guttmacher study extrapolated a national abortion rate from figures in 44 of the 50 states.

Groups opposing abortion rights have charged that Stassen's study is flawed. Family Research Council president Tony Perkins criticized Democrats, such as New York senator Hillary Clinton and former presidential candidate John Kerry, for using the figures "to attack President Bush and to promote condom use."

"Professor Stassen also used wrong figures in several states—old, dated statistics," Perkins said in the May 27 edition of his e-mail newsletter. "In some cases the absent-minded professor used birth rates when he meant to cite abortion rates."

Stassen disputed Perkins's claim, telling an Associated Baptist Press reporter that it was "simply untrue." Stassen, however, has previously admitted mistakenly reporting increases in the 2002 abortion rates in two states that actually showed decreases.

He said the public response to findings about abortion rates "separates those who want to reduce abortions from people who want to defend this Republican administration."

Added Stassen: "If I am right that the rate of reduction has stalled, that puts pressure on the administration to do more to support mothers and babies and reduce abortions. Pro-life people like me should cheer on the pressure this generates."

Sharon Camp, the Guttmacher Institute's president, had a different perspective. "It takes time for political decisions to be reflected in statistical data, so it is too soon to tell what the impact of Bush administration policies will be on U.S. abortion rates," she said.

Stassen said on June 7 that Bush's presidency may not have reversed the historic decline in abortion rates, but the apparent near-stall in their decline may reflect economic factors that are connected to the president's policy decisions.

The seminary professor pointed to studies suggesting that the abortion rate has paralleled the unemployment rate since the Supreme Court legalized abortion nationwide more than 30 years ago. He said 21 percent of women who had abortions in the U.S. cited financial problems as their prime motive.

He also said his wife had endured a difficult pregnancy, and their ability to provide financial support for their disabled son had an impact on their decision not to abort.

Calls to the White House and the Family Research Council requesting comment were not immediately returned. *-Associated Baptist Press*