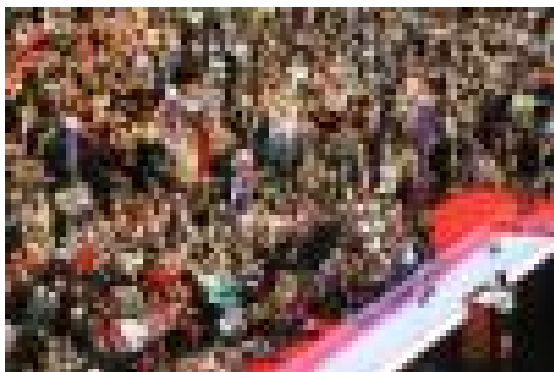


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Criminalizing versus reducing: The abortion debate continues

by Michael Humphrey



St. Paul, Minn.

Wednesday, in a conference call from Washington, D.C., Catholics United unveiled a new study stating that overturning *Roe v. Wade* would not be an effective way to reduce the number of abortions.

But back in St. Paul, Minn., where the Republican National Convention reaches its final day today, the study was not exactly dampening passions about making abortion illegal. Just as Catholics United was finishing up their call, the Catholic Working Group was beginning a meeting at the Hilton Garden Inn in downtown St. Paul. The speakers at that meeting made it clear that changing the makeup of federal courts, and passing antiabortion laws at the state and federal, will remain a top priority.

‘This is the human rights issue of this generation,’ Rep. Christopher Smith, R-N.J., told the group of approximately 200 attendees. ‘We must do everything we can to defend life at every level.’



The basic premise of the study titled "Reducing Abortion in America:

Beyond *Roe v. Wade*," is that improving social conditions for women, including housing, health care and economic security, is a more effective way of mitigating abortions.

"This study confirms what many have suspected for some time: that pursuing legal restrictions on abortion services is a generally ineffective strategy of addressing abortion in the United States," said Joe Wright, the study's author and assistant professor of political science at Penn State University.

Back at the convention, the idea of addressing root causes of abortion was welcomed, at least in principle.

"I don't think that (overturning *Roe v. Wade*) is the magic wand," Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., told *NCR*. "Clearly we need to do a lot better with the way we work with kids and families and values."

When asked if bolstering social programs is part of the solution, Coleman said, "I presume the study is saying (I haven't read it) that when you help people build up their life, and you can do it also with a moral component, that's beneficial. I don't think that's rocket science. I think most people would accept that without a study."

Wright would agree that there's some accepted wisdom in the study. But no one to this point had put numbers to that wisdom, Wright said.

Those numbers, outlined in the report, make a strong point that the amount of time and money used for striking down *Roe v. Wade* would not produce the kinds of results people might expect, he said. The best the Supreme Court can do, he said, is give states the ability to make their own decisions. Wright looked at which states would most likely abolish abortion, by finding where polling showed more than 45 percent opposed to the procedure. Sixteen states qualified.

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"A total ban on abortions in those states would result in a 10 percent decrease in abortions overall in the United States," Wright said. "Then we looked at the most optimistic scenario, where the top 25 most pro-life states banned abortion. In that scenario, the number of abortions would drop 37 percent nationwide. That is roughly 370,000 abortions reduced each year, at best."

Wright's partner study, done for Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, noted that according to the Centers for Disease Control, abortions dropped approximately 21 percent (or 300,000) from 1990 to 2000, which had nothing to do with *Roe v. Wade*.

That study asserted that "economic supports such as benefits for pregnant women and mothers and economic assistance to low-income families have contributed significantly to reducing the number of abortions in the United States over the past 20 years."

Catholics United executive director Chris Korzen said that both studies show that abortion may be a powerful political tool, but that using it as such has done very little to solve the problem.

"The categories of pro-life and pro-choice are not serving the public well," Korzen said. "I think in large part the study's most important outcome would be coming to the table with Americans who hold different political views and finding common ground on this issue."



But finding common ground about the basics "like what did cause the

abortion rate to drop" may not be so easy. Michael Steel, former Maryland lieutenant governor and FOX News contributor, told *NCR* that activists who have fought for the antiabortion cause on many different fronts deserve credit.

"I say that (reduction in abortions) has happened on a number of fronts," Steel told *NCR*. "One, by very important advocacy, being a voice out there to express the faith and say, "This is the teaching on life and this should be considered part of the public policy in this country." It's a result of education. It's a result of families being grounded in their faith and appreciating the preferential option for life."

Wright said there may be some validity to Steel's opinion, based on what he called a proxy study in Kansas two years ago. Unable to find sufficient data to show communities that were largely pro-life, he used Catholics as the proxy, assuming that pro-life teaching was more prevalent in those households.

"What we found is that communities with more Catholics had fewer incidents of abortions," Wright said. "But it's a very preliminary study and there are many factors you can't account for."

Wright said it's more certain that communities with better social programs had decreased abortion rates over the period of 1982 to 2000. And it wasn't just women who were predictors.

"The findings also suggest," the Wright report states, "that in the 1990s, states with more generous grants to women, infants and children under the age of 5 as provided by the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program had a 37 percent lower abortion rate. Finally, higher male employment in the 1990s was associated with a 29 percent lower abortion rate."

And this is the point, Korzen said. Communication among all parties about these issues might put a dent in the number of abortions that political fighting simply can't do.

“Unfortunately, the abortion issue tends to be deployed by surrogates from both parties as a way to wedge voters,” he said. “We’ve been asking the wrong question for 35 years.”

Korzen praised Democrats for adding language to their platform that commits them to reducing abortions in America. At the same time, he wondered why Republicans removed from their platform the following statement about abortion: “We invite all persons of good will, whether across the political aisle or within our party, to work together to reduce the incidence of abortion.”

There appeared to be some objections from some delegates during the platform session on Monday afternoon, but there was no discussion before the motion for a vote.

New Jersey’s Rep. Smith said that statement was not needed.

“It’s what we do automatically,” Smith told *NCR*. “We do pre-natal care, adoption policy, these are all easy lifts. I’m all for it. To put that in there, it becomes a distraction of the real issue. It’s very clear that there’s a stark difference – the Republican Party is the culture of life. When you look at the Democrat’s actual policies, it’s clear that (Sen. Barack) Obama will be the abortion president. He uses the language that soothes, but it still kills.”

But it’s not clear, Korzen said, that the distinction is that stark. And it won’t be clear until politics is taken out of the equation.

“The only way we can pursue a pro-life policy is to find the root causes of abortion,” Korzen said. “It’s about giving women and families the tools they need to make the right decision.”

(Humphery is a Kansas City, Mo.-based freelance writer covering the Republican Party convention for NCR.)

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