

# **Abortion Ratios Worldwide in 2008**

June 21, 2012

This memo presents estimated abortion ratios for the world and for major regions and subregions as of 2008 (the most recent year for which estimates are available), and assesses trends in abortion ratios since 2003.

## **Data Sources and Measures**

Key data sources are recently published estimates of the numbers of safe and unsafe abortions<sup>1,2</sup> and of live births<sup>3</sup> for the same year and geographic regions. Trends are assessed using comparable figures for 2003.<sup>4,5</sup> The abortion ratio is calculated as the number of abortions performed for every 100 live births. High abortion ratios can be expected where abortion incidence is high or fertility is low, or both.

## **Abortion Ratios**

Worldwide, 32 abortions were performed for every 100 live births in 2008 (Table 1). Safe and unsafe abortion ratios were the same (16). The abortion ratio in developing countries was much lower than that in developed countries (31 vs. 44), because birth rates were higher in the former.

The abortion ratio was highest in Eastern Europe (93 per 100 live births), which had a high incidence of abortion and low fertility. The lowest abortion ratios were in Africa, where subregional ratios ranged from 16 (Western Africa) to 21 (Eastern Africa); although Africa has relatively high levels of abortion, high fertility rates contributed to these low ratios.

While there was little or no change in the global abortion ratio between 2003 (when it was 31 abortions per 100 live births) and 2008, the ratio appears to have declined in developed countries (from 50 to 44), especially in Eastern Europe (from 105 to 93), and to have risen nominally in developing countries (from 29 to 31),<sup>4</sup> even though the abortion rate (number of abortions per 1,000 women of reproductive age) held steady in both categories.<sup>1</sup> A small increase in the annual number of births and a small decrease in the number of abortions contributed to the declining ratio in developed countries.

In Middle Africa and Central America, the higher abortion ratios in 2008 than in 2003 were due at least in part to better information on abortion rates for 2008. Notable declines in Eastern Europe and Southern Africa mirror declines in the abortion incidence in these areas.

## **Conclusions**

Globally, approximately three births occur for every abortion performed, and half of all abortions are unsafe. In Africa, which has the lowest regional abortion ratio, about five births occur for every abortion, and nearly all abortions are unsafe. The provision of family planning services, safe abortion and postabortion care will contribute to the Millennium Development Goal of improving maternal health by 2015.

## **References**

1. Sedgh G et al., Induced abortion: incidence and trends worldwide from 1995 to 2008, *Lancet*, 2012, 379(9816):625–632.
2. World Health Organization (WHO), *Unsafe Abortion: Global and Regional Estimates of the Incidence of Unsafe Abortion and Associated Mortality in 2008*, sixth ed., Geneva: WHO, 2011.
3. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision*, New York: United Nations, 2009.
4. Sedgh G et al., Induced abortion: estimated rates and trends worldwide, *Lancet*, 2007, 370(9595):1338–1345.
5. WHO, *Unsafe Abortion: Global and Regional Estimates of the Incidence of Unsafe Abortion and Associated Mortality in 2003*, fifth ed., Geneva: WHO, 2003.

**TABLE 1. Estimated overall, safe and unsafe abortion ratios (abortions per 100 live births) worldwide and by region and subregion, 2008**

Region and subregion	Abortion ratio		
	Total	Safe	Unsafe
<b>World</b>	32	16	16
<b>Developed countries*</b>	44	41	3
Excluding Eastern Europe	30	30	0
<b>Developing countries*</b>	31	14	17
Excluding China	27	7	20
<b>Africa</b>	18	1	17
Eastern Africa	21	1	20
Middle Africa	18	0	18
Northern Africa	18	0	18
Southern Africa	17	7	10
Western Africa	16	0	16
<b>Asia</b>	35	21	14
Eastern Asia	51	51	0
South-central Asia	26	9	17
South-eastern Asia	46	18	28
Western Asia	26	10	16
<b>Europe</b>	54	50	5
Eastern Europe	93	81	12
Northern Europe	28	28	0
Southern Europe	37	37	0
Western Europe	23	23	0
<b>Latin America</b>	41	2	39
Caribbean	49	26	22
Central America	34	0	34
South America	43	0	43
<b>Northern America</b>	29	29	0
<b>Oceania</b>	21	18	3†

\*Developed countries include all countries in Europe and Northern America, as well as Australia, Japan and New Zealand; all others are classified as developing countries.

†The estimated unsafe abortion ratio in Oceania (7) published by the World Health Organization excludes Australia and New Zealand.

Note: Regions and subregions are as defined by the United Nations.

Source: Special tabulations of data presented in Sedgh G et al., Induced abortion: incidence and trends worldwide from 1995 to 2008, *Lancet*, 2012, 379(9816):625–632.