Did Abortion Legalization Reduce the Number of Unwanted Children?

ABORTION AND TRENDS IN ADOPTIONS

The Supreme Court handed down the Roe v. Wade decision, giving women across the country legal access to abortion, in January 1973. However, several states had already made abortion legally available (Table 1). In 1970, Alaska, Hawaii, New York and Washington repealed laws declaring abortion illegal or had such laws struck down by their state supreme court; New Jersey and Vermont followed in 1972.8 California did not formally repeal its law declaring abortion illegal before Roe, but abortion was widely available in that state by 1969.10 Fourteen other states and the District of Columbia reformed their abortion laws in the late 1960s or early 1970s to allow for legal abortion in cases such as rape and incest, abortion became legally available to all women in these states after Roe. Abortion did not become legally widely available in the other 29 states until after Roe.11

Before the availability of legal abortion became widespread, relinquishing children for adoption was one of few options open to women with unwanted or mistimed births. The number of adoptions rose from 91,000 in 1957 to 175,000 in 1970, then fell to 130,000 by 1975; the decline of the early 1970s coincided with the legalization of abortion.12 During this period, the population of women of childbearing age (15–49) grew steadily, birthrates among unmarried women rose and total birthrates fell.13 The decline in adoptions appears most dramatic among unmarried teenagers.14 Although few reliable statistics are available on the number of adoptions performed before legalization, the numbers performed between the late 1960s and mid-1970s are believed to represent substantial increases.15

The above statistics on total adoption petitions granted include placements with both relatives of the child and unrelated petitioners. Adoptions granted to unrelated petitioners generally represent unwanted or mistimed births, whereas adoptions granted to relatives often involve a child’s stepparent (in some states) and therefore may not represent undesired children. The proportion of adoptions that were by related petitioners rose from 49% in 1970 to 63% in 1975.16 An increase in the fraction of adoptions granted to relatives would be expected if abortion legalization affected primarily decisions made by women whose relatives would not want to adopt or care for a child they bore.

Because adoptions are infrequent, most individual-level data sets do not contain large enough samples for analysis of the factors that cause women to put their children up for adoption. A study that used the 1982 and 1988 National Surveys of Family Growth, which together included only 124 reports of children placed for adoption, found that unmarried white women were much less likely to place their children for adoption in the 1980s than in the early 1970s, when abortion was illegal in many states.17 Before 1973, 9% of children born to never-married women were placed for adoption, whereas from 1982 to 1988, only 2% of such children were placed for adoption. During 1989–1995, fewer than 1% of children born to never-married women were relinquished for adoption.18 Most of the decline occurred among white women. Black and Hispanic women were less likely than non-Hispanic white mothers to place their children for adoption prior to abortion legalization, and their rates of relinquishment changed little, if at all, over time.

DATA

Our data on adoptions are from U.S. government annual statistics during the period 1961–1975. They were collected by states from court records and were reported to the federal government on a voluntary basis.1 The number of states reporting adoptions ranged from 30 to 39 plus the District of Columbia over the years in this study; as a result, the panel data set is unbalanced. In all, we analyze 521 annual state-level observations that had data available on adoptions and on the determinants of adoptions.

The data available on adoptions include the total number of adoptions in the state, the number of adoptions by the birth mother’s race (classified as white or nonwhite),...