Complications Method, we generated state-level estimates of abortion incidence that can provide important context in debates concerning abortion policies in the 31 states with restrictive laws. Estimates of age-specific abortion rates also can provide guidance to policymakers, because they help identify the women in each region and state (including the Federal District) who are most likely to have abortions, and toward whom the greatest efforts for prevention of unplanned pregnancies should be directed.

Nationally, an estimated 1,026,000 abortions were performed in Mexico in 2009, equivalent to an annual rate of 38 per 1,000 women aged 15–44. The rate was largely stable between 2006 and 2009 (after adjustment for methodological changes), and was higher than the rate for Latin America as a whole (32 per 1,000 in 2008).22

Abortion incidence was higher in the more developed regions of the country than in the less developed ones, probably because women in these regions are more strongly motivated to have small families and to time their births. Moreover, regional variations were undoubtedly related to wide differences in socioeconomic conditions. For example, in Mexico City, where 54% of women have had 10 or more years of schooling and 67% of working people live above the poverty line, the abortion rate was twice that in Region 6, where a much smaller proportion of women have had 10 years of education (27%) and poverty is much more prevalent (only 28% of the working population is above the poverty line).12,23

In some regions, abortion rates varied widely among states, although for the most part we found the expected pattern of states with higher levels of development having higher abortion rates. A few extreme results revealed the limitations of available data; in particular, the sample of the Health Professionals Survey was not large enough nor widely enough distributed across the country to adequately represent conditions for all states. For example, two border states, Chihuahua and Nuevo León, had very low abortion rates, probably because many women in these states obtain abortions in the United States. Other outliers also have plausible explanations. Tabasco had the highest abortion rate in the country, which may be related to the rapid social and economic changes and high levels of internal migration occurring in this state. The very low abortion rate estimated for Yucatán might be explained by cultural differences that affect abortion incidence, such as that a large proportion of the population is Mayan or that the stigma against abortion may be much stronger in this state than elsewhere. More in-depth research is needed to understand whether results for states with very high or very low rates are real, or whether they are due at least in part to reporting or estimation issues.

Age-specific data on abortion in Mexico, which are available here for the first time, showed an inverted J-shaped pattern, both nationally and in all six regions; rates were elevated among adolescents, reached their highest levels among women aged 20–24 and steadily declined among older women. In addition, at every age, rates were much higher in more developed regions than in less developed ones. The age-specific pattern and level of abortion incidence in Mexico is consistent with historical patterns in developed countries. For example, in the United States, the abortion rate in 1990 was 39 per 1,000 among adolescents, peaked at 57 among 20–24-year-olds, fell to 34 among 25–29-year-olds and continued to decrease with age.24 Similarly, in 1995, the abortion rate in Estonia was 34 per 1,000 among adolescents, reached its highest levels among women aged 20–24 and 25–29 (87 each), and then declined to 64 among 30–34-year-olds and to still lower levels among older women.24 More recent data for the United States continue to show an age pattern similar to that currently found for Mexico, but at a much lower level. In 2008, the U.S. abortion rate was 20 per 1,000 among adolescents, peaked at 40 per 1,000 among 20–24-year-olds, fell to 29 among 25–29-year-olds and continued to decline with age.25

The high rates of abortion in Mexico among women aged 15–24 may be related to a number of factors. The...