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Financial strain plays important role in abortions

By David Crary

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NEW YORK — In American pop culture, the face of abortion is often a frightened teenager, nervously choosing to terminate an unexpected pregnancy. The numbers tell a far more complex story in which financial stress can play a pivotal role.

Half of the roughly 1.2 million U.S. women who have abortions each year are 25 or older. Only about 17 percent are teens. About 60 percent have given birth to at least one child prior to getting an abortion.

A disproportionately high number are black or Hispanic. And regardless of race, high abortion rates are linked to hard times.

"It doesn't just happen to young people, it doesn't necessarily have to do with irresponsibility," said Miriam Inocencio, president of Planned Parenthood of Rhode Island.

"Women face years and years of reproductive life after they've completed their families, and they're at risk of an unintended pregnancy that can create an economic strain."

Activists on both sides of the abortion debate soon will be marking the 35th anniversary of the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, which established a nationwide right to choose an abortion.

In recent years, the number of abortions has fallen; the 1.2 million tallied for 2005 was down 8 percent from 2000, and the per-capita abortion rate was the lowest since 1974.

But overall, since the *Roe* ruling on Jan. 22, 1973, there have been roughly 50 million abortions in the United States, and more than one-third of women are estimated to have had at least one.

Who are these women?

Much of the public debate focuses on teens, as evidenced by the constant wrangling over parental notification laws and such movies as the current hit "*Juno*," in which the pregnant heroine heads to an abortion clinic, then decides to have the baby.

In fact, the women come from virtually every demographic sector. But year after year, the statistics reveal that black women and economically struggling women — who have above-average rates of unintended pregnancies — are far more likely than others to have abortions. About 13 percent of American women are black, yet new figures from the Centers for Disease Control show they account for 35 percent of the abortions.

Black anti-abortion activists depict this phenomenon in dire terms — "genocide" and "holocaust," for example. But often the women getting the abortions say they act in the interests of children they already have.

"It wasn't a hard decision for me to make, because I knew where I wanted to go in my life — I've never regretted it," said Kimberly Mathias, 28, a black single mother from Missouri.

She had an abortion at 19, when she already raising a 2-year-old son.

"It wasn't hard to realize I didn't want another child at that time," Mathias said. "I was trying to take care of the one I had, and going to college and working at the same time."

She was able to graduate, now has an insurance job, and — still a single mother — has a 3-year-old son as well as her firstborn, now 11.

By contrast, Alveda King, a niece of Martin Luther King Jr., calls herself a "reformed murderer" for undergoing two abortions when she was young.

Now an outspoken anti-abortion campaigner, King said the best way to reduce abortions among black women is to dissuade more of them from premarital sex.

"We give free sex education, free condoms, free birth control," she complained. "That's almost like permission to have free sex, and the higher the rate of sexual activity, the higher the rate of unintended pregnancy."

Anti-abortion activist Day Gardner of the National Black Pro-Life Union said many blacks are unaware of their community's high abortion rate.

"We don't talk about it," Gardner said. "It's a silent killer among us."

She contends that abortion-rights supporters tempt black women into abortion by suggesting they can't afford to raise the child. But Gardner also acknowledges that some black women make this argument on their own.

"We had the whole civil-rights movement — now we're in a place where we're moving further toward equality," Gardner said.

"So women think, 'For once, I can see the American dream. I can have the house and the job, but it would postpone it to have another child. I can't afford to take time off.' "

Dr. Vanessa Cullins, a black physician who is Planned Parenthood's national vice president for medical affairs, said the allegations of "black genocide" do not help women meet day-to-day challenges.

"These actions take attention away from medically proven ways to reduce unintended pregnancy — comprehensive sex education, affordable birth control and open and honest conversations about relationships," she said

Looking beyond racial dividing lines, Cullins views the right to abortion as an important component in the ability of all American women to determine the right size for their family.

"Groups that become assimilated in U.S. culture and experience economic opportunities naturally decide to limit family size, because they want to take part in the American dream," she said.

"If you're a single mother, achieving the dream is all the harder, so it makes sense to limit family size so you can shower as much support as you can on the children you have."

Georgette Forney, who had an abortion when she was 16 and is now an anti-abortion campaigner leading Anglicans for Life, said she often sees economic pressures triggering abortions, even in middle-class families.

"In one situation, the husband was adamant that they were on track to pay for their two sons' college education, and a third child would throw off his whole calculation," Forney recounted.

"So that baby was aborted, and that woman was devastated. It was a five-year process to recover."

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