

# Marital status and abortion

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## Abstract

### Objectives

This article examines the marital status of women who obtained abortions between 1974 and 1994, with particular attention to those who were married or in common-law relationships.

### Data sources

The data come from Statistics Canada's publications on abortions, in-patient hospital morbidity data, and reports from the United States.

### Analytical techniques

Crude and age-standardized abortion rates from 1974 to 1994 were calculated by marital status.

### Main results

While abortion rates were highest for single women, those who were married (including common-law and separated) accounted for over one-quarter of all abortions performed in 1994. Since 1974, the age-standardized abortion rate per 1,000 married women aged 15 to 44 almost doubled from 6.6 to 11.2. For most of these women, it was their first abortion, and the majority had taken at least one pregnancy to term.

### Key words

pregnancy termination, common-law

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In Canada, as in most western industrialized countries, abortion patients tend to be single. Nonetheless, a substantial share of women who obtain abortions are married, and over the past two decades, the abortion rate among this group has been rising.<sup>1,2</sup>

Because abortions are concentrated among single women, relatively little has been written about married women who obtain abortions. This article describes trends in therapeutic abortions by marital status from 1974 to 1994, with particular attention to married women (see *Methods* and *Definitions*). Selected demographic and medical characteristics of the women are examined, and Canadian data are compared with those of other industrialized countries.

## Methods

### Data sources

This analysis uses published reports<sup>3-5</sup> and data on abortions maintained by Statistics Canada. The agency began collecting therapeutic abortion statistics in 1970 to monitor the effects of the 1969 amendments to the Criminal Code of Canada, which permitted therapeutic abortions under specific circumstances. Between then and January 1988, when the Supreme Court struck down the 1969 abortion law, hospitals were required to report abortions they performed. Thereafter, some hospitals did not provide Statistics Canada with information about the demographic and medical characteristics of women who obtained abortions.

Before the January 1988 Supreme Court decision, abortion clinics operated only in the province of Quebec. By the end of 1994, abortion clinics were operating in every province except Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan and the two territories. While the number of abortions performed in clinics increased rapidly, very little demographic and medical data were collected about women using these facilities.

From 1974 to 1994, a total of 1,580,591 abortions were reported. Of these, 84.8% were performed in hospitals, 12.0% in clinics, and the remaining 3.2% were obtained by Canadian women in the United States.

### Analytical techniques

Over the 1974-1994 period, complete demographic and medical data were not available for women who had abortions in Canadian clinics, in any facility in the United States, and for about 65,000 women who had abortions in Canadian hospitals. Thus, abortion records were complete for 95% of the women who had an abortion during this period.

The marital status of women who obtained abortions in clinics and hospitals in Ontario and Alberta is available for 1993 and 1994. According to these data, the demographic characteristics of women who had abortions in clinics were generally similar to those of women who had abortions in hospitals. Consequently, to estimate numbers and rates for all abortions, marital status and age were imputed for clinic abortions and American data, based on the distributions from hospital records.

No adjustment for unknown values was made to estimate individual characteristics (for example, previous abortions, previous deliveries, gestation) within a marital status; these data are shown for hospital abortions only.

Revised population estimates that take into account census undercoverage and non-permanent residents were used in the calculation of total abortion rates.<sup>6</sup> In breakdowns of these population estimates by age and marital status, persons who were separated or living common-law were included in the "married" category. Therefore, calculations of rates by marital status for all abortions also use the same marital status groupings. As a result, abortion rates for women who were separated or living common-law are not available. However, hospital data, which offer more marital status detail, are also shown to indicate the proportions of women obtaining abortions who were separated or in common-law relationships.

The data on prior deliveries, prior abortions, and gestation are based on all abortions that occurred during the 1974-1994 period.

The women's demographic characteristics are as of the date of the abortion.

### Limitations

Provincial and territorial health insurance commissions reimburse physicians for performing abortions. Therefore, reporting of the number of abortions from hospitals and clinics is almost complete, although it is possible that a small number were paid for by the patients themselves and may not be included in these records.

Reporting of abortions from the United States is voluntary. However, the fact that there have not been large year-to-year fluctuations in the number suggests that these counts are complete.

About 261,000 cases treated in hospital that were coded "abortion unspecified," including 295 labeled as illegally induced,<sup>7</sup> are excluded. The majority of these were spontaneous abortions (miscarriages).

The number of women who have had an abortion may be slightly underestimated, because some of the "unspecified" abortions reported by hospitals may have been induced, and some clinic abortions are missing from the calculations. The number of women who have had a prior abortion will be underestimated to the extent that they fail to report their abortion histories to their physicians.

The analysis is restricted in that it is confined to an examination of trends in abortion numbers and rates. The administrative sources from which the data were derived contain no information on the factors that may have influenced women's decisions to terminate a pregnancy. Similarly, these sources provide no information about the birth control practices of women who obtain abortions.

## Married rate almost doubles

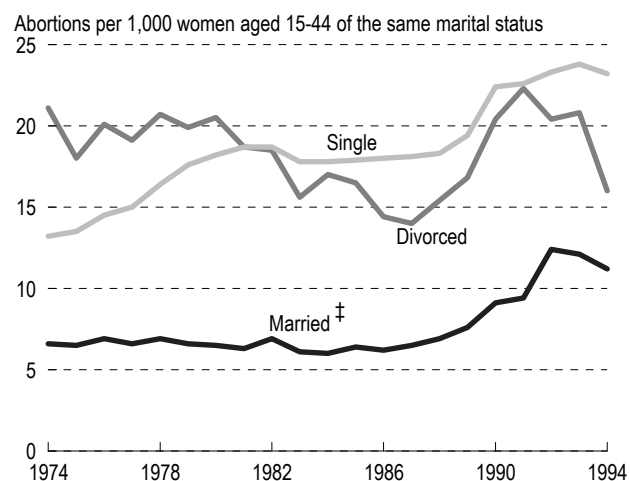
Not surprisingly, over the past two decades, the majority of women who obtained abortions were single. Hospital data, however, indicate that in 1994, about one in four women who had an abortion was married or in a common-law relationship (Table 1).

Canada is not unique in this regard. For instance, in Norway (1993) and France (1988), almost 40% of abortions were obtained by women who were married or living common-law; the figures in the Netherlands (1992) and New Zealand (1994) were close to one-third (Table 2).

In Canada, the percentage of abortions that were obtained by married women has declined between 1974 and 1994. To a certain extent, this reflects a decrease in the percentage of women aged 15 to 44 who are married. When this change in the marital status distribution is taken into account, the age-standardized abortion rate of married women almost doubled (Chart 1). (Crude abortion rates and age-standardized abortion rates by marital status are shown in Appendix, Tables A and B.)

Chart 1

### Age-standardized abortion rates,<sup>†</sup> by marital status of women, Canada, 1974 to 1994



Data source: Health Statistics Division

Note: Consists of abortions performed in Canadian hospitals and clinics plus abortions obtained by Canadian women in the United States.

<sup>†</sup> Standardized to female population aged 15-44 as of July 1, 1991.

<sup>‡</sup> Includes separated and common-law.

Table 1

### Percentage distribution of marital status of women having abortions, Canada, 1974 to 1994

Abortions	Number <sup>†</sup>	Marital status						
		Total	Married	Common-law	Separated	Single	Divorced	Widow
					%			
1974	41,227	100.0	31.3	0.9	6.1	58.2	2.9	0.6
1975	49,033	100.0	31.4	0.9	5.9	58.3	3.0	0.5
1976	54,097	100.0	30.7	1.1	6.1	58.4	3.2	0.5
1977	57,131	100.0	29.0	1.1	5.9	60.2	3.3	0.5
1978	61,806	100.0	27.3	1.1	6.3	61.4	3.4	0.5
1979	64,569	100.0	24.7	1.3	6.0	64.1	3.5	0.4
1980	65,243	100.0	23.8	1.3	5.9	65.2	3.4	0.4
1981	64,554	100.0	23.0	1.6	5.8	65.8	3.4	0.4
1982	65,812	100.0	23.0	2.0	5.9	65.3	3.4	0.4
1983	61,326	100.0	22.4	2.0	5.6	66.1	3.5	0.4
1984	61,822	100.0	22.0	1.9	5.6	66.6	3.5	0.4
1985	60,518	100.0	21.8	2.3	5.4	66.9	3.3	0.3
1986	62,406	100.0	21.4	2.5	5.1	67.5	3.1	0.4
1987	61,635	100.0	21.8	2.7	4.9	67.3	3.0	0.3
1988	60,653	100.0	22.2	2.6	4.6	67.2	3.1	0.3
1989	65,414	100.0	23.0	3.0	4.2	66.5	3.1	0.3
1990	66,384	100.0	23.1	3.4	4.3	65.9	3.1	0.2
1991	65,384	100.0	23.0	3.7	4.3	65.4	3.2	0.3
1992	59,694	100.0	23.1	4.2	4.5	64.6	3.3	0.3
1993	54,444	100.0	23.0	4.1	4.1	65.6	2.9	0.3
1994	55,949	100.0	22.2	4.5	3.5	66.9	2.7	0.3

Data source: Health Statistics Division

Note: Estimates based on records for abortions performed in hospitals only. Because of rounding, detail may not add to totals.

<sup>†</sup> Includes marital status unknown.

Table 2  
Percentage distribution of marital status of women having abortions, selected countries and years

Country (year)	Marital status						
	Total	Married	De facto married	Sep- arated	Single	Div- orced	Widow
	%						
Canada (1994)	100.0	22.2	4.5	3.5	66.9	2.7	0.3
England and Wales (1994)	100.0	23.0	..	3.9	68.0	4.9	0.3
France (1988)	100.0	38.4	..	2.3	52.3	6.3	0.7
Netherlands† (1992)	100.0	32.6	..	1.8	57.4	8.2‡	..
New Zealand (1994)	100.0	19.3	9.7	8.7	59.3	2.6	0.4
Norway (1993)	100.0	22.7	16.5	..	54.8	6.0§	..
United States (1992)	100.0	16.8	..	..	83.2††	..	..

**Data sources:** The Alan Guttmacher Institute and Health Statistics Division, Statistics Canada  
 † 15.8% never married and living with partner; 1.8% widowed or divorced and living with partner  
 ‡ Includes widowed.  
 § Previously married; not clear where separated are counted.  
 †† Includes separated, divorced, widowed.  
 .. Data not available

### Definitions

In this analysis, the term *abortion* refers to a therapeutic abortion, which is a pregnancy termination induced to avoid risk to the woman's health, performed by qualified physicians in hospitals or clinics in Canada. Legal abortions obtained by Canadian women in the United States are also included.

The *abortion rate by marital status* is the number of abortions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 of a given marital status.

The *age- and marital status-specific abortion rate* is the number of abortions per 1,000 women of a given age and marital status.

The *gestation period* is the interval (in weeks) between the first day of the last normal menses and the date of the abortion. When the date of the last normal menses is unknown, the attending physician estimates the length of gestation.

In 1994, the abortion rate per 1,000 married women aged 15 to 44 was 11.2. This was much lower than the rate for single women (23.2), but both rates had risen steeply since. By contrast, among divorced women, rates fluctuated.

### Sharp increases among young women

Increases in abortion rates were particularly pronounced among young women. At ages 15 to 19, few women are married. However, since 1974, the abortion rate for this group more than doubled so that by 1994, it almost matched the rate for their single counterparts (Table 3).

The rising abortion rate among young married women may be partially attributable to the inclusion among the married group of women who were

Table 3  
Abortion rates among married, single and divorced women, by age group, Canada, selected years, 1974 to 1994

	Age at time of abortion					
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44
	Per 1,000 women of the same marital status					
<b>Married†</b>						
1974	9.2	8.5	7.5	6.5	5.3	2.7
1979	9.5	9.2	8.3	6.4	4.3	2.2
1984	9.4	8.4	7.1	5.8	4.1	1.6
1989	14.6	11.3	8.2	6.5	4.5	1.6
1993	18.1	18.3	11.9	9.4	6.3	2.3
1994	18.3	20.4	12.5	9.0	6.4	2.5
<b>Single</b>						
1974	14.3	21.4	21.1	13.1	6.1	2.1
1979	17.7	27.5	27.7	19.4	9.5	2.0
1984	15.9	25.8	26.7	20.5	12.1	3.8
1989	17.6	28.6	28.0	21.2	14.9	4.1
1993	20.6	34.8	34.5	27.2	16.6	6.2
1994	22.0	34.9	33.9	27.8	18.2	5.8
<b>Divorced</b>						
1974	34.4	35.3	25.6	16.8	12.3	4.7
1979	19.7	42.5	27.4	17.0	10.1	3.5
1984	23.0	36.8	21.2	13.1	7.3	2.8
1989	25.4	34.3	24.5	12.8	6.7	2.4
1993	23.7	38.7	23.0	14.6	7.7	2.2
1994	23.8	31.6	21.7	13.1	7.2	1.9

**Data source:** Health Statistics Division  
**Note:** Consists of abortions performed in Canadian hospitals and clinics plus abortions obtained by Canadian women in the United States.  
 † Includes separated and common-law.

living common-law. In recent years, the number of common-law couples, especially at younger ages, has increased substantially. Premarital cohabitation has a transitory element, and is associated with a higher risk of first marriage dissolution.<sup>8-11</sup> The prospect of a birth in a relationship that is unstable may be a factor in the decision to terminate the pregnancy.

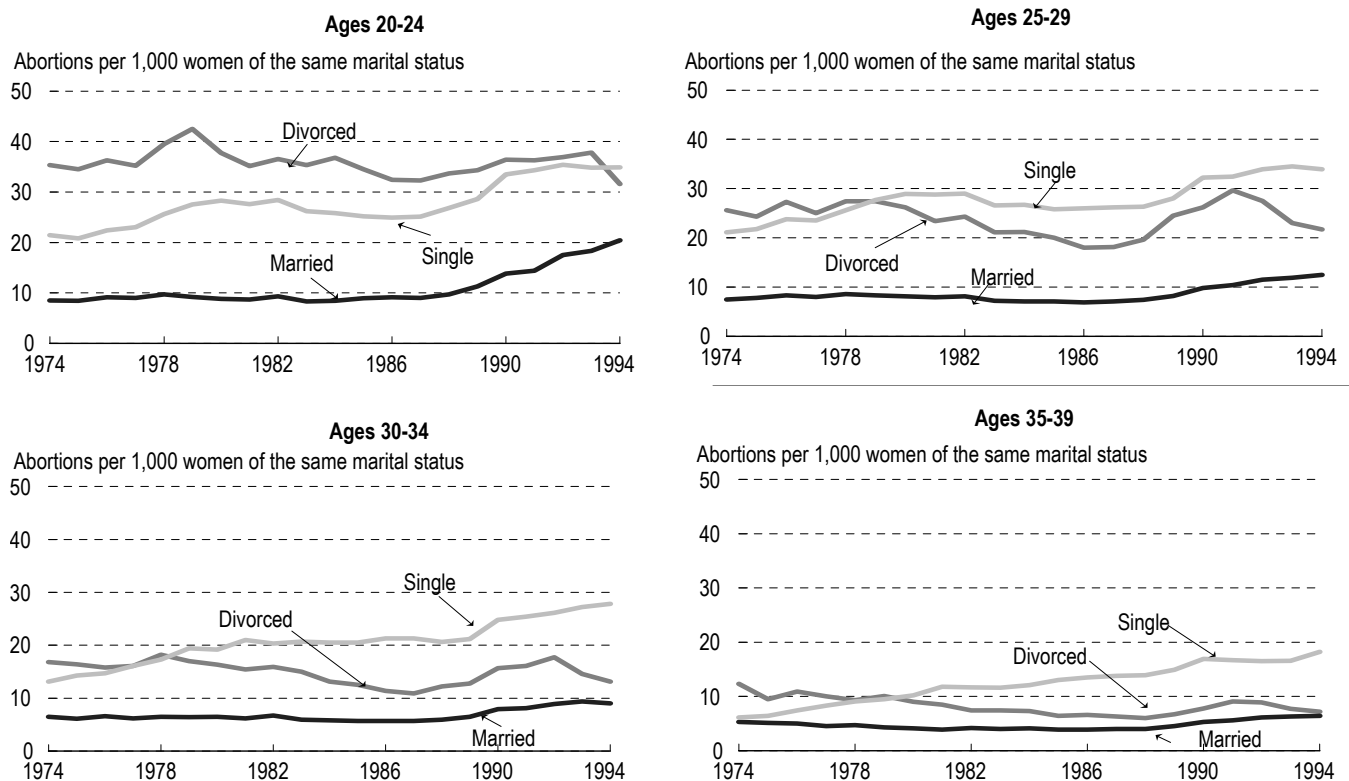
The increase in married women's abortion rate was even steeper at ages 20 to 24. Despite this rise, the rate remained well below that of single women in the same age range (Chart 2). Even at ages 25 to 29, married women's abortion rate rose considerably, although it was only about a third of that of single women. At older ages, married women's abortion rates were much lower, and increases since 1974 were relatively modest.

### Reproductive history

A substantial share of the women who had abortions did not do so for the first time. Over the entire 1974-1994 period, the percentages of married and single women who had had a previous abortion were almost the same (20% and 19%), but below the figure for divorced women (26%). However, the married category includes women who were separated or living common-law. Hospital data, which provide finer marital status breakdowns, show that a relatively high percentage (32% by 1994) of abortions obtained by women who were separated or living common-law were repeat abortions (Chart 3).

Almost 80% of the married women who had abortions in the 1974-1994 period had had at least one previous delivery (Table 4). This was also true for divorced and widowed women. By contrast, the

Chart 2  
Abortion rates, by marital status† and age group, Canada, 1974 to 1994



Data source: Health Statistics Division  
† Married category includes separated and common-law.

majority of single women who obtained abortions had never given birth. These percentages, of course, largely reflect the age distributions of the various groups, with most of the single women being relatively young.

Married women were slightly less likely than single women to have an abortion after their first trimester of pregnancy. Just 10% of married women who had an abortion did so after 12 weeks of pregnancy, compared with 14% of single women.

**Economic and lifestyle factors**

Other reports have shown that economic factors may be important in the decision to terminate a pregnancy, regardless of marital status. An Australian study found that a majority of women who had abortions, particularly those younger than 30, cited financial concerns.<sup>12</sup>

The rising abortion rate among young married women may reflect the desire to delay childbearing until the family is more financially secure. It is also consistent with decreased fertility rates among young women.<sup>11,13</sup>

Chart 3  
Percent of abortions to women who had at least one prior abortion, by marital status of women, Canada, 1974 and 1994

**Data source:** Health Statistics Division  
**Note:** Estimates based on records for abortions performed in hospitals only.

The desire to achieve education and career goals may also be a factor, as young women in favourable economic circumstances are more likely than others to abort a pregnancy.<sup>14,15</sup> In fact, the likelihood of pregnancy termination has been shown to increase with educational attainment, although this relationship tends to be stronger for unmarried than married women.<sup>16</sup>

As well, disposable personal income per capita and unemployment rates in specific areas have been significantly associated with local abortion rates.<sup>17</sup>

Table 4  
Percentage distribution of abortions performed from 1974 to 1994, by selected characteristics of women, Canada

	Marital status				
	Total	Married†	Single	Divorced	Widow
	Number				
<b>Total hospital abortions</b>	1,250,152	397,162	808,212	40,222	4,556
	%				
<b>Age of patient</b>					
15+	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
15-19‡	25.1	3.2	37.2	0.5	1.0
20-24	31.3	20.9	37.5	12.7	11.8
25-29	21.1	29.9	16.2	31.4	25.4
30-34	13.1	24.9	6.4	30.8	26.8
35-39	7.0	15.3	2.3	18.8	21.6
40+	2.4	5.7	0.5	5.8	13.3
<b>Previous deliveries</b>					
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
0	57.1	20.4	77.2	21.2	16.0
1	17.7	24.8	13.4	33.4	26.3
2	14.6	33.7	4.4	28.5	31.4
≥3	7.5	18.5	1.7	14.7	23.9
Unknown	3.0	2.6	3.3	2.3	2.4
<b>Previous therapeutic abortions</b>					
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
0	77.2	76.7	77.8	71.0	79.3
1	15.3	15.2	15.2	19.6	13.6
≥2	3.9	4.5	3.5	6.4	4.1
Unknown	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.0	2.9
<b>Gestation (weeks)</b>					
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Under 13	86.8	89.0	85.5	89.4	86.8
13-20	12.3	9.7	13.6	10.0	12.5
21+	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.2
Unknown	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.5	0.5

**Data source:** Health Statistics Division  
**Note:** Estimates based on records for abortions performed in hospitals only. Because of rounding, detail may not add to totals.  
† Includes separated and common-law.  
‡ Includes girls younger than 15.

## Family formation

Among women who are in a marital relationship, the decision to abort a pregnancy may be related to the stability of the relationship. Other research has shown the expectation of single parenthood to be the strongest determinant for choosing abortion, independent of age and parity.<sup>2</sup>

As a percentage of all couples, those living common-law more than doubled from 6.3% to 14.3% between 1981 and 1995. The number of common-law couples increased during this period from 355,000 to more than a million.<sup>18</sup> The high rate of second and subsequent abortions among women living common-law (Chart 3) may reflect instability in those relationships.

Of course, marriages, too, are subject to instability. If 1991 divorce rates prevail, an estimated 31% of couples who married that year will ultimately divorce.<sup>19</sup> Divorce is most likely in the early years of marriage, and for women, divorce rates are highest among those in their twenties. The fact that the abortion rate among married women also peaks at ages 20 to 24 suggests that marital instability may have been a factor in the decision to terminate their pregnancies.

## Family size and contraceptive failure

Some married women who had an abortion may have done so because they had already attained their desired family size.<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in the finding that around 80% of married women who had an abortion had taken at least one pregnancy to term. On the other hand, comparatively low abortion rates for women in their thirties may reflect delayed childbearing. In fact, the fertility rate of women in their thirties, unlike women in their twenties, has risen steadily since 1980.<sup>13</sup>

The decision to abort a pregnancy may also indicate the lack of use or improper use of contraceptives, or contraceptive failure.<sup>20,21</sup>

## Concluding remarks

While single women accounted for the majority of abortion patients in 1994, a substantial share (more than a quarter) were women who were married or in common-law relationships. For both groups, abortion rates were highest in the early twenties.

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**Appendix**

**Table A**  
**Crude abortion rates, by marital status of women, Canada, 1974 to 1994**

	Marital status			
	Married†	Single	Divorced	Widow
Per 1,000 women aged 15-44 of the same marital status				
1974	6.3	16.6	16.7	7.6
1975	6.3	16.6	15.3	6.3
1976	6.6	17.8	16.4	8.2
1977	6.3	18.1	15.4	7.9
1978	6.7	20.0	16.5	8.2
1979	6.3	21.3	16.1	8.0
1980	6.2	21.9	14.9	8.0
1981	6.0	21.7	13.5	8.1
1982	6.3	22.2	13.2	8.0
1983	5.6	20.6	11.7	7.1
1984	5.4	20.6	11.1	7.5
1985	5.4	20.4	9.9	6.0
1986	5.3	20.4	8.9	7.0
1987	5.3	20.4	8.5	6.0
1988	5.4	21.0	8.8	6.1
1989	6.0	22.4	9.3	6.3
1990	7.1	25.7	10.7	6.4
1991	7.3	25.9	11.2	8.8
1992	8.1	26.7	11.4	8.1
1993	8.3	26.9	9.8	9.0
1994	8.3	27.3	8.8	8.7

**Data source:** Health Statistics Division  
**Note:** Consists of abortions performed in Canadian hospitals and clinics plus abortions obtained by Canadian women in the United States.  
 † Includes common-law and separated.

**Table B**  
**Age-standardized abortion rates,† by marital status of women, Canada, 1974 to 1994**

	Marital status			
	Married†	Single	Divorced	Widow
Per 1,000 women aged 15-44 of the same marital status				
1974	6.6	13.2	21.1	10.8
1975	6.5	13.5	18.0	9.0
1976	6.9	14.5	20.1	11.6
1977	6.6	15.0	19.1	11.5
1978	6.9	16.4	20.7	12.7
1979	6.6	17.6	19.9	12.3
1980	6.5	18.2	20.5	12.3
1981	6.3	18.7	18.7	12.0
1982	6.9	18.7	18.5	13.4
1983	6.1	17.8	15.6	11.5
1984	6.0	17.8	17.0	12.1
1985	6.4	17.9	16.5	10.0
1986	6.2	18.0	14.4	11.3
1987	6.5	18.1	14.0	10.3
1988	6.9	18.3	15.4	9.3
1989	7.6	19.4	16.8	9.6
1990	9.1	22.4	20.4	9.7
1991	9.4	22.6	22.3	15.5
1992	12.4	23.3	20.4	12.4
1993	10.8	23.8	20.8	15.8
1994	11.2	23.2	16.0	14.2

**Data source:** Health Statistics Division  
**Note:** Consists of abortions performed in Canadian hospitals and clinics plus abortions obtained by Canadian women in the United States.  
 † Standardized to July 1, 1991 female population aged 15-44.  
 ‡ Includes common-law and separated.