

A Primer on “Abortion Distortion”— The Myths That Helped Soften Public Opinion and Overturn Protective Abortion Laws

BY Dave Andrusko

The engine that powers the pro-abortion wrecking machine is a high octane, fuel-injected mythology that is as powerful as it is inaccurate. This faux-history softened public opinion, leveled abortion statutes during the 1960s, and offered courts a convenient justification for overturning protective abortion laws.

This tissue of lies was comprised of equal parts made-up factoids, distortions, and out-and-out lies, such as that tens of thousands of women died from millions of illegal abortions.

But (to switch metaphors) garments woven together with duplicities and omissions will eventually begin to fray. Mistakes must never be straightforwardly admitted, but can be alluded to as part of a campaign to reweave a convincing narrative.

I have a full plate of pro-abortion samplings to choose from, but my selection is from a couple of years ago written by the Boston Globe's redoubtable pro-abortion columnist Ellen Goodman. Although she never uses the word “mistake” or even “revision,” she tells us that a previous column she'd written contained a statement that needs ... clarification? As someone who describes herself as both “pro-choice and pro-facts,” can we expect a mea culpa from one of the most partisan, take-no-prisoners pro-abortion scribes?

Goodman assumes the posture of truth-teller. Were a modern day Diogenes on the lookout for an honest man, Goodman's tone tells us, he'd need go no further than the offices of the Globe.

In that earlier column, she wrote, “I referred to the bad old days when 10,000 women a year died of illegal abortions. Kaboom. The number—10,000 deaths—produced a mother lode of e-mails insisting that it was either a lie or propaganda or an ‘urban legend.’”

Why such a tidal wave of reaction? The 1960s abortion movement toppled protective state abortion laws based on two lies which acted like battering rams: that there were 10,000 abortion-related deaths and a “million” illegal abortions each year. Like wrecking balls they demolished state statutes, some over a century old. To this day these lies refuse to die, continually popping up in pro-abortion legal briefs.

What makes unwary readers initially drop their guards is that Goodman freely admits that in 1972 “the Centers for Disease Control reported that 39 women died from illegal or self-induced abortions.” So, why am I looking a gift horse—the admission that in the year before Roe was decided, the number was not 5,000 or 10,000, but 39—in the mouth?

Because Goodman insists that the 10,000 figure was correct for the “bad, bad, bad old days,” citing “Dr. Frederick Taussig, circa 1936.” Even though she concedes that the data “was admittedly skimpy by today's standards,” Goodman accepts the figure of 10,000 deaths on its face.

But to get to this extraordinary figure, Taussig used a number of illegal abortions that was much too high. There were numerous problems with his methodology, but we'll mention just two.

As one scholar, Daniel Callahan, pointed out in his book *Abortion: Law, Choice & Morality*, Taussig “arrived at a figure of 8,179 deaths each year, and then added in an extra 2,000 to be on the cautious side: 10,000.” Second, the total included deaths from spontaneous abortions—miscarriages—a crucial distinction which virtually never gets mentioned.

With the alleged number of deaths associated with these abortions. Taussig hypothesized, without much proof, a very high death rate (1.2%). The rate was so high because Taussig assumed that as many deaths would be concealed as were detected.

According to Callahan, and Germain Grisez in *Abortion: The Myths, the Realities, and the Arguments*, other researchers estimated much smaller rates. Clearly, Taussig's chain of evidence included many questionable links.

According to Grisez (quoting Taussig), in 1942 Taussig seriously lowered his estimates, "particularly as to the number of abortion deaths in which I attempted to find concealed abortion deaths under other causes of death. ... I think we can positively say that there do not occur over 5,000 abortion deaths annually in this country." Even that halved number was based on very thin data.

Taussig's flawed numbers are still bandied about, and not just by Goodman. In 1989 the *Washington Post* stated, "more than 1.2 million women are estimated to have had illegal abortions each year before *Roe v. Wade*, and approximately 5,000 died annually as a result."

Two years later, in a brief submitted in the Supreme Court's *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* case, the figure cited was 5,000 to 10,000 deaths.

Back to Goodman: "Over the decades, the numbers shrank to hundreds and then dozens," she wrote. As noted Goodman conceded that by 1972 the number of deaths from illegal abortions was only 39.

But her penchant for half_truths shrinks to one_third truths when she explains the reasons why. The one explanation she has correct is that the invention of penicillin was pivotal.

However, the decline was not "because doctors began performing abortions." That had long been the case. As Grisez noted, many studies referring to the period before World War II "indicat[ed] that in every case the majority of illegal abortions was the work of physicians, midwives, or other professional abortionists."

Even Mary Calderone, Planned Parenthood medical director from 1953–64, wrote about "the decline in deaths between 1921 and 1951, and she explained it by drugs and by the large proportion of abortions performed by physicians," according to Grisez.

"Abortion is no longer a dangerous procedure," Calderone wrote in 1960. "In 1957 there were only 260 deaths in the whole country attributed to abortion of any kind." Other studies have shown that after 1950 there were not even as many as 300 recorded deaths in any year.

Pro-abortion demographic statistician Christopher Tietze noted that, officially, there were 189 deaths from abortion in 1966. "[I]n my judgment," he wrote, "the true total number of deaths due to illegal abortions, recorded and hidden, cannot be much larger than twice the reported number, or about 400 per year."

A Million Illegal Abortions

The myth of one million illegal abortions came from Taussig's estimate of 681,600 abortions per year, adjusted upward in light of a larger population. Taussig extrapolated from two small studies, then used a wildly unrepresentative sample of 10,000 case histories drawn from the Margaret Sanger Birth Control Clinic in New York City, and projected this onto the entire urban population.

For the rural ratio, Taussig used the results of questionnaires sent to Iowa physicians. This small sample of doctors gave their own estimates for the ratio of abortions to pregnancies, Grisez tells us, which Taussig applied to the whole rural population.

Note that Taussig did not limit the estimated total of abortions to illegal abortions. His figure also included miscarriages (25–30%) and "therapeutic" [legal] abortions (10–15%), according to Grisez. Those who projected Taussig's figures onto the now_much larger nation typically wrote as if all had all been illegal abortions. The "one million" figure assumed a life of its own.

The truth? A very careful, scholarly analysis written in 1981 by Barbara J. Syska, Thomas W. Hilgers, and Dennis O'Hare concluded that "a reasonable estimate for the actual number of criminal abortions per year [prior to 1967] would be from a low of 39,000 (1950) to a high of 210,000 (1961) and a mean of 98,000 per year."

Instead of genuinely correcting her error, Goodman shuffled, backtracked, and backfilled. Her response fell right in line with those who for a half_century cynically inflated the number of illegal abortions and abortion_related deaths.

Pro_lifers care about both mother and child. That's why it grieves us that any woman would die, whether from a legal or an illegal abortion. We never talk about "only" x number of deaths.

Truth matters, whether we're talking about partial_birth abortion, fetal pain, or the campaign to grossly inflate the number of deaths and illegal abortions. To those on the other side, I would offer the sage advice of the legendary Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn: "Son, always tell the truth. Then you'll never have to remember what you said the last time."