
Republic of Korea: Reported and estimated abortions, 1970-2015

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Abstract: This document reviews available abortion data and estimates for the Republic of Korea for 1961-2015, related demographic data for 1953-2015, and other information related to abortion policy.

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) enacted population control policies in the 1960s, and while abortion was authorized for restrictive reasons in 1973, it became common by the late 1970s. This high incidence is related to high frequency of unwanted children, evidenced also in large numbers of Korean children adopted out-of-country. A campaign by physicians was important in the introduction of restrictions on abortion in the 1990s and 2000s, particularly addressing sex-selective abortions, which have contributed to male-female population imbalance. Below is a brief summary of changes to abortion policy as well as adoption policy.

- 1953: criminal code banned abortion;
- 1961: population control policy adopted;
- 1962: national family planning program implemented;
- 1966: effort to legalize abortion was rejected;
- 1970: effort to legalize abortion was rejected;
- 1973: abortion law amended to permit exceptions for cases of rape, incest, severe genetic disorders, and health of mother before 24 weeks;
- 1987: law passed addressing sex-selective abortions by limiting fetal testing, prohibiting doctors from revealing fetal gender to mothers;
- 1989: limitations on international adoptions introduced;
- Jan. 1990: medical licenses of 8 physicians suspended for performing sex-determinations on fetuses;
- 1990: presidential decree to address sex-selective abortions;
- Feb. 1995: Korean Medical Association initiated campaign against fetal sex determination;
- 2005: implementation of policies to promote childbirth;
- July 2008: court ruled that the ban on revealing fetal gender is unconstitutional;

- July 2009: some illnesses removed from list of cases of permissible abortion;
- Oct. 2009: GYNOB coalition of medical professionals formed opposing abortion;
- Aug. 2012: new adoption law, restricting international adoptions;
- Oct. 2012: court upholds 1953 abortion law restricting abortion to cases of rape, incest, severe genetic disorders, and health of mother before 24 weeks.

The tables to follow summarize reported, estimated, and derived abortion data and other related demographic data. Available abortion data for the Republic of Korea are mostly estimates based on government or other surveys. These surveys have large sample sizes compared to surveys underlying most published abortion estimates for developing countries, and we assess the Korean estimates to be of higher credibility. Table 1 summarizes the sampling and sample sizes for estimates reported here by source code. For years between years with reported abortion data, we use linear interpolation, and do so also between reported estimates irrespective of differences in methodology for the reported estimates. Estimated abortions for 2011-2015 are based on an annual decrease of 10%, consistent with the median annual decrease for the preceding 5 years. Live birth figures for 1961 to 1969 are derived from reported rates and are incomplete. Estimates of possible excess female abortions (sex-selective abortions) are based on an assumed birth sex ratio of 1.08 in the absence of sex-selective identified abortions. Data with codes for sources are provided in Tables 2-4; “der” indicates derived figures, and estimates by the compiler are highlighted in yellow.

Table 1. Bases for published abortion estimates, Republic of Korea.

A12a	estimates based on survey of abortion providers (25 hospitals, 176 private clinics)
B06a, J10h	estimates based on National Fertility and Family Health Surveys by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs
H79a	estimates based on survey of abortion providers (41 hospitals, 685 private clinics)
H99b	estimates based on survey (ever-married women ages 20-44)
K11a, Y11a	estimates from Ministry of Health and Welfare survey (4000 women)
L89a	estimates based on 1988 National Fertility and Family Health Survey by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs
S07a	estimates based on survey (married women)
T79a	estimates based on survey (6300 ever-married women)

Table 2. Data on live births and international adoptions, Republic of Korea, 1953-2012.

year	live births	source	births to married mothers	source	births to unmarried mothers	source	unknown marital status	source	adopted abroad	source
1953									4	H06a
1954									8	H06a
1955									59	H06a
1956									671	H06a
1957									486	H06a
1958									930	H06a
1959									741	H06a
1960									638	H06a
1961	990,000	der							660	H06a
1962	969,000	der							254	H06a
1963	944,000	der							442	H06a
1964	918,000	der							462	H06a
1965	899,000	der							451	H06a
1966	860,000	der							494	H06a
1967	886,000	der							626	H06a
1968	864,000	der							949	H06a
1969	880,000	der							1,190	S06a
1970	1,006,645	K09a							1,932	H06a
1971	1,024,773	K09a							2,725	H06a
1972	952,780	K09a							3,490	H06a
1973	965,521	K09a							4,688	H06a
1974	922,823	K09a							5,302	H06a
1975	874,869	K09a							5,077	H06a
1976	796,331	K09a							6,597	H06a
1977	825,339	K09a							6,159	H06a
1978	750,728	K09a							5,917	H06a
1979	862,669	K09a							4,148	H06a
1980	862,835	K09a							4,144	H06a
1981	867,409	ROK13a	857,668	K09a	9,741	K09a	0	K09a	4,628	H06a
1982	848,312	ROK13a	839,310	K09a	9,002	K09a	0	K09a	6,434	H06a
1983	769,155	ROK13a	761,122	K09a	8,033	K09a	0	K09a	7,263	H06a
1984	674,793	ROK13a	667,930	K09a	6,863	K09a	0	K09a	7,924	H06a
1985	655,489	ROK13a	648,844	K09a	6,645	K09a	0	K09a	8,837	H06a

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1986	636,019	ROK13a	629,462	K09a	6,557	K09a	0	K09a	8,680	H06a
1987	623,831	ROK13a	617,972	K09a	5,859	K09a	0	K09a	7,947	H06a
1988	633,092	ROK13a	627,841	K09a	5,251	K09a	0	K09a	6,463	S06a
1989	639,431	ROK13a	634,270	K09a	5,161	K09a	0	K09a	4,191	H06a
1990	649,738	ROK13a	643,585	K09a	6,151	K09a	2	K09a	2,962	S06a
1991	709,275	ROK13a	702,014	K09a	7,259	K09a	2	K09a	2,197	H06a
1992	730,678	ROK13a	722,374	K09a	8,304	K09a	0	K09a	2,045	S06a
1993	715,826	ROK13a	707,021	K09a	8,799	K09a	6	K09a	2,290	H06a
1994	721,185	ROK13a	711,904	K09a	9,272	K09a	9	K09a	2,262	H06a
1995	715,020	ROK13a	706,247	K09a	8,748	K09a	25	K09a	2,180	S06a
1996	691,226	ROK13a	684,890	K09a	6,290	K09a	46	K09a	2,080	H06a
1997	668,344	ROK13a	664,148	K09a	4,196	K09a	0	K09a	2,057	H06a
1998	634,790	ROK13a	630,362	K09a	4,428	K09a	0	K09a	2,443	S06a
1999	614,233	ROK13a	608,155	K09a	4,716	K09a	1,362	K09a	2,409	S06a
2000	634,501	ROK13a	627,336	K09a	5,540	K09a	1,625	K09a	2,360	H06a
2001	554,895	ROK13a	547,779	K09a	5,330	K09a	1,786	K09a	2,436	S06a
2002	492,111	ROK13a	483,152	K09a	5,184	K09a	3,775	K09a	2,365	S06a
2003	490,543	ROK13a	480,110	K09a	6,082	K09a	4,351	K09a	2,306	S06a
2004	472,761	ROK13a	463,245	K09a	6,116	K09a	3,400	K09a	2,258	S10b
2005	435,031	ROK13a	425,653	K09a	6,459	K09a	2,919	K09a	2,101	S10b
2006	448,153	ROK13a	438,735	K09a	6,805	K09a	2,613	K09a	1,899	S10b
2007	493,189	ROK13a	483,275	K09a	7,774	K09a	2,140	K09a	1,265	S10b
2008	465,892	ROK13a			8,400	L11a			1,250	S12a
2009	444,849	ROK13a			8,900	L11a			1,421	S12a
2010	470,171	ROK13a			9,639	K12a			1,154	S12a
2011	471,265	ROK13a	460,228	ROK13a	9,959	ROK13a	1,078	ROK13a		
2012	484,300	Y13a								

Table 3. Sex ratio at birth, male and female live births, published abortion estimates, and childbearing age female population, Republic of Korea, 1961-2011.

year	sex ratio at birth	source	male live births	source	female live births	source	estimated abortions	source	female population age 15-44	source
1961							104,000	T79a	5,330,000	der
1962							127,000	T79a	5,450,000	der
1963							152,000	T79a	5,590,000	der
1964							191,000	T79a	5,740,000	der
1965							223,000	T79a	5,880,000	der
1966							252,000	T79a	6,010,000	der
1967							264,000	T79a	6,150,000	der
1968							293,000	T79a	6,310,000	der
1969							315,000	T79a	6,450,000	der
1970	109.5	B06a	526,100	der	480,500	der	331,000	H88c	6,610,000	der
1971	109.0	G09b	534,500	der	490,300	der				
1972	109.5	G09b	498,000	der	454,800	der				
1973	104.6	G09b	493,600	der	471,900	der	390,000	H88c		
1974	109.5	G09b	482,300	der	440,500	der				
1975	112.4	B06a	463,000	der	411,900	der	584,000	der	9,140,000	der
1976	110.6	G09b	418,200	der	378,100	der	533,000	H79a		
1977	104.2	G09b	421,200	der	404,100	der	558,000	H88c		
1978	111.3	G09b	395,400	der	355,300	der	631,000	H88c		
1979	106.4	G09b	444,700	der	418,000	der				
1980	105.3	B06a	442,600	der	420,200	der				
1981	107.1	der	448,655	ROK13a	418,754	ROK13a	620,000	der	9,700,000	est
1982	106.8	der	438,077	ROK13a	410,235	ROK13a				
1983	107.3	der	398,194	ROK13a	370,961	ROK13a				
1984	108.3	der	350,775	ROK13a	324,018	ROK13a	503,000	der	10,020,000	der
1985	109.4	der	342,506	ROK13a	312,983	ROK13a				
1986	111.7	der	335,588	ROK13a	300,431	ROK13a				
1987	108.8	der	325,038	ROK13a	298,793	ROK13a	435,000	der		
1988	113.2	der	336,203	ROK13a	296,889	ROK13a				
1989	111.8	der	337,475	ROK13a	301,956	ROK13a				
1990	116.5	der	349,617	ROK13a	300,121	ROK13a	410,000	der	11,300,000	est
1991	112.4	der	375,276	ROK13a	333,999	ROK13a				
1992	113.6	der	388,573	ROK13a	342,105	ROK13a	230,000	H99a	11,669,500	K13a
1993	115.3	der	383,365	ROK13a	332,461	ROK13a	396,000	der	11,759,600	K13a

1994	115.2	der	386,080	ROK13a	335,105	ROK13a			11,893,000	K13a
1995	113.2	der	379,604	ROK13a	335,416	ROK13a			12,037,900	K13a
1996	111.5	der	364,433	ROK13a	326,793	ROK13a	239,000	der	12,202,400	K13a
1997	108.3	der	347,491	ROK13a	320,853	ROK13a	280,000	ROK99a	12,338,500	K13a
1998	110.2	der	332,803	ROK13a	301,987	ROK13a			12,324,100	K13a
1999	109.6	der	321,194	ROK13a	293,039	ROK13a	212,300	S07a	12,255,200	K13a
2000	110.2	der	332,647	ROK13a	301,854	ROK13a			12,180,400	K13a
2001	109.1	der	289,461	ROK13a	265,434	ROK13a			12,069,100	K13a
2002	110.0	der	257,821	ROK13a	234,290	ROK13a			11,939,400	K13a
2003	108.7	der	255,515	ROK13a	235,028	ROK13a			11,791,700	K13a
2004	108.2	der	245,705	ROK13a	227,056	ROK13a			11,619,100	K13a
2005	107.8	der	225,685	ROK13a	209,346	ROK13a	342,433	A12a	11,488,800	K13a
2006	107.5	der	232,173	ROK13a	215,980	ROK13a			11,400,000	K13a
2007	106.2	der	253,999	ROK13a	239,190	ROK13a			11,350,500	K13a
2008	106.4	der	240,119	ROK13a	225,773	ROK13a	241,000	K11a	11,277,800	K13a
2009	106.4	der	229,351	ROK13a	215,498	ROK13a	188,000	K11a	11,276,900	K13a
2010	106.9	der	242,901	ROK13a	227,270	ROK13a	169,000	K11a	11,209,200	K13a
2011	105.7	der	242,121	ROK13a	229,144	ROK13a				

Table 4. Abortion rates and ratios and percentage of married women who have had abortions, Republic of Korea, 1961-2010.

year	abortion rate (W15-44)	source	abortion rate (married)	source	abortion rate (single)	source	% of married women who have had abortions	source	abortion ratio	source
1961	19.5	T79a							105	T79a
1962	23.3	T79a							131	T79a
1963	27.2	T79a							161	T79a
1964	33.3	T79a					6	B06a	208	T79a
1965	37.9	T79a							248	T79a
1966	41.9	T79a							293	T79a
1967	42.9	T79a							298	T79a
1968	46.4	T79a					16	B06a	339	T79a
1969	48.8	T79a							358	T79a
1970	50.1	T79a							370	T79a
1971							26	B06a		
1972										
1973							30	B06a	404	der

1974										
1975	63.9	H99b							667	D82a
1976							39	B06a	669	der
1977									676	der
1978									841	der
1979							48	B06a		
1980										
1981	64.0	H99b							715	der
1982										
1983										
1984	50.2	H99b							746	L89a
1985							53	B06a		
1986										
1987									698	L89a
1988							52	B06a		
1989										
1990	36.5	H99b							631	der
1991							54	B06a		
1992									315	der
1993	33.7	H99b							553	der
1994							49	B06a		
1995										
1996	19.6	H99b							346	der
1997	22.7	der					44	B06a	419	der
1998										
1999	17.3	der							346	der
2000							39	B06a		
2001										
2002										
2003							40	J10h		
2004										
2005	29.8	A12a	28.6	A12a	31.6	A12a	34	J10h	787	der
2006										
2007										
2008	21.9	K11a	28.1	Y11a			26	J10h	517	der
2009	17.2	K11a	20.7	Y11a	12.7	K11a			423	der
2010	15.8	K11a	17.1	Y11a	14.1	K11a			359	der

Table 5. Reported abortions and abortion estimates, estimated sex-selective abortions, and abortion percentages, Republic of Korea, 1961-2015.

year	abortions, interpolated estimates	source	possible excess female abortions	source	abortion %	source
1961	104,000	T79a			9.5	der
1962	127,000	T79a			11.6	der
1963	152,000	T79a			13.9	der
1964	191,000	T79a			17.2	der
1965	223,000	T79a			19.9	der
1966	252,000	T79a			22.7	der
1967	264,000	T79a			23.0	der
1968	293,000	T79a			25.3	der
1969	315,000	T79a			26.4	der
1970	331,000	H88c			24.7	der
1971	351,000	est			25.5	est
1972	370,000	est			28.0	est
1973	390,000	H88c			28.8	der
1974	487,000	est			34.5	est
1975	584,000	der			40.0	der
1976	533,000	H79a			40.1	der
1977	558,000	H88c			40.3	der
1978	631,000	H88c			45.7	der
1979	627,000	est			42.1	est
1980	624,000	est			42.0	est
1981	620,000	der			41.7	der
1982	581,000	est			40.6	est
1983	542,000	est			41.3	est
1984	503,000	der	800	der	42.7	der
1985	480,000	est	4,200	der	42.3	est
1986	458,000	est	10,300	der	41.9	est
1987	435,000	der	2,200	der	41.1	der
1988	427,000	est	14,400	der	40.3	est
1989	418,000	est	10,500	der	39.5	est
1990	410,000	der	23,600	der	38.7	der
1991	320,000	est	13,500	der	31.1	est
1992	230,000	H99a	17,700	der	23.9	der
1993	396,000	der	22,500	der	35.6	der

1994	344,000	est	22,400	der	32.3	est
1995	291,000	est	16,100	der	28.9	est
1996	239,000	der	10,600	der	25.7	der
1997	280,000	ROK99a	900	der	29.5	der
1998	246,000	est	6,200	der	27.9	est
1999	212,000	S07a	4,400	der	25.7	der
2000	234,000	est	6,200	der	26.9	est
2001	255,000	est	2,600	der	31.5	est
2002	277,000	est	4,400	der	36.0	est
2003	299,000	est	1,600	der	37.9	est
2004	320,000	est	400	der	40.4	est
2005	342,000	A12a			44.0	der
2006	308,000	est			40.7	est
2007	275,000	est			35.8	est
2008	241,000	K11a			34.1	der
2009	188,000	K11a			29.7	der
2010	169,000	K11a			26.4	der
2011	150,000	est			24.1	est
2012	135,000	est			21.8	est
2013	125,000	est				
2014	110,000	est				
2015	100,000	est				

Totals for several statistics over the available data periods specified are:

- Live births, 1961-2010: 36,655,255
- International adoptions (ROK sending), 1961-2010: 161,814
- Abortions, 1961-2015: 18,367,000
- Sex-selective abortions (minimum estimate), 1984-2004: 195,500

Figure 1 shows abortion and live birth numbers for 1961-2015.

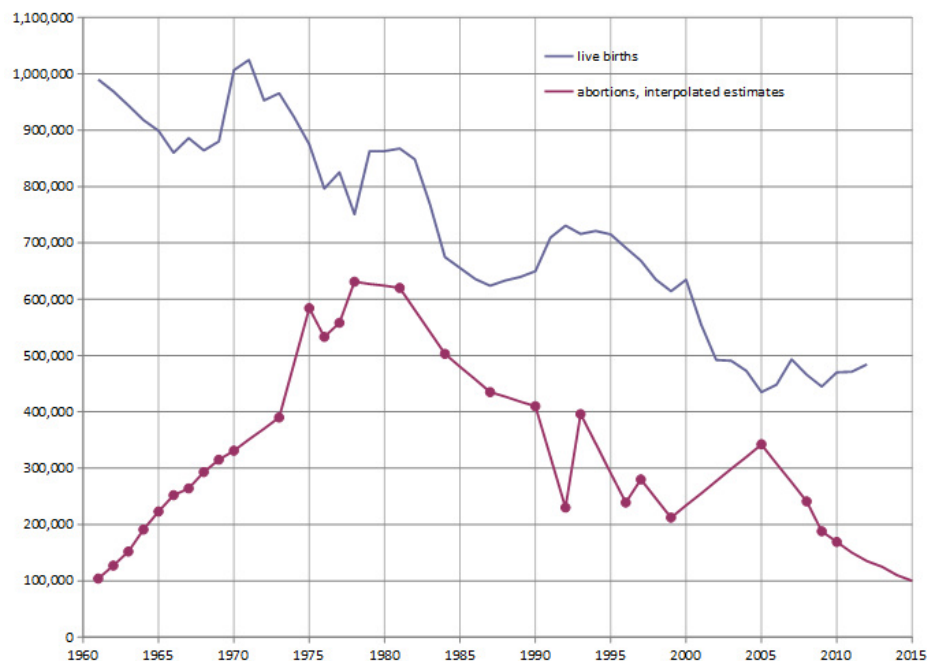


Figure 1. Republic of Korea live births and abortions, 1961-2015.

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