



BRIEFING PAPER

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Statistics on Abortion

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1. Current legislation

Abortion is the commonly used term for the termination of an established pregnancy.

The *Abortion Act 1967* came into effect on 27 April 1968, permitting abortion in Great Britain (not including Northern Ireland) by registered practitioners subject to certain conditions. Section 37 of the *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act* (1990) made changes to the Abortion Act. It introduced a time limit of 24 weeks for grounds C and D. Grounds A, B and E are now without limit. Before this change, a 28-week limit had applied for all grounds.

Grounds for permitting abortions under the current UK legislation:

A legally induced abortion must be certified by two registered medical practitioners as justified under one or more of the following grounds:

- A. The continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk to the life of the pregnant woman greater than if the pregnancy were terminated (Abortion Act, 1967 as amended, section 1(1)(c)).
- B. The termination is necessary to prevent grave permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman (section 1(1)(b)).
- C. The pregnancy has not exceeded its twenty-fourth week and that the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated, of injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman (section 1(1)(a)).
- D. The pregnancy has not exceeded its twenty-fourth week and that the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated, of injury to the physical or mental health of any existing children of the family of the pregnant woman (section 1(1)(a)).
- E. There is substantial risk that if the child were born it would suffer from such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped (section 1(1)(d)).

Or in the case of an emergency, certified by the operating practitioner as immediately necessary:

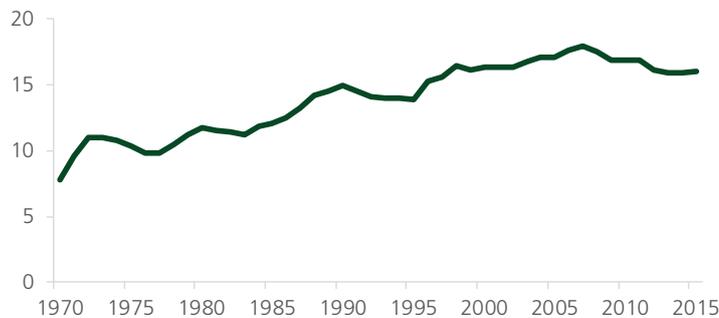
- F. To save the life of the pregnant woman (section 1(4)).
- G. To prevent grave permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman (section 1(4)).

2. Figures for England & Wales¹

There were 191,104 abortions notified as taking place in England and Wales in 2015, 0.5% more than in 2014.

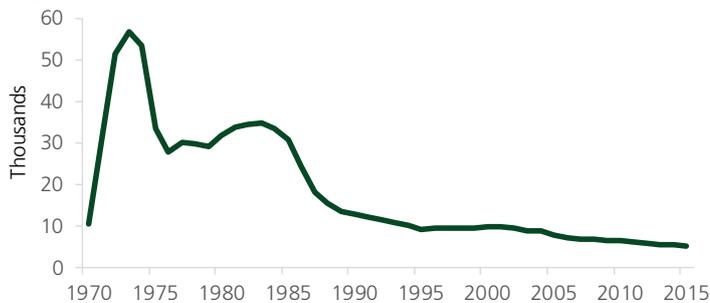
Of these, 185,824 abortions were to residents of England and Wales, representing an age standardised rate of 16.0 abortions per 1,000 resident women aged 15-44 years. Over the past 50 years, the age standardised abortion rate increased from 10.8 in 1974 to a peak of 17.9 in 2007. The rate fell to 17.5 in 2008 and to 16.9 in 2009 where it remained before falling again to 15.9 in 2013 and remaining at this level in 2014. The rise to 16.0 in 2015 is the first increase observed since 2007.

**Age standardised abortion rate per 1,000 population aged 15-44 years
England and Wales, 1970 to 2015**



There were 5,190 abortions to non-residents in 2015, 66.5% of which were for women from the Republic of Ireland and 16.1% from Northern Ireland. The number of abortions to non-residents remained relatively unchanged between 9,000 and 10,000 in the period 1995 to 2003. Since 2004 the number has fallen year on year and the 2015 total is the lowest in any year since 1970.

**Abortions to non residents
England and Wales, 1970 to 2015**



¹ Department of Health [Abortion statistics for England and Wales 2015](#)

2.1 Age, marital status & ethnicity

The crude abortion rate in 2015 was highest at 27.5 per 1,000 for women aged 20-24. The under-16 abortion rate was 2.0 per 1,000 women and the under-18 rate was 9.9 per 1,000 women, in both cases the lowest rate over the past decade. Conversely, rates among women aged 30 and above have increased over the past decade

Table 1 shows the abortion rate per 1,000 women by age, for residents of England and Wales between 2005 and 2015.

Table 1: Abortion rates (crude rate per 1,000 women) by age, England and Wales (residents) 2005 to 2015

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	% change 2005 to 2015
Under 16	3.7	3.9	4.4	4.2	4.0	3.9	3.4	3.0	2.6	2.5	2.0	-45.9%
Under 18	17.8	18.2	19.8	18.9	17.6	16.5	15.0	12.8	11.7	11.1	9.9	-44.4%
18-19	31.6	33.3	34.3	33.3	31.6	30.7	28.8	25.9	24.8	23.9	24.2	-23.4%
20-24	32.0	32.5	32.6	31.6	30.0	30.2	30.1	29.0	28.5	28.0	27.5	-14.1%
25-29	23.6	24.3	24.3	23.9	22.8	22.5	22.9	21.8	22.6	22.8	23.2	-1.7%
30-34	14.5	15.1	15.1	15.6	15.7	16.5	17.2	16.4	16.5	16.5	17.1	+17.9%
35 or over	6.8	6.9	6.9	6.7	6.6	6.7	6.9	6.9	7.1	7.4	7.8	+14.7%

Source: DH Abortion Statistics, England and Wales 2015, Table 3b

78% of abortions in 2015 were carried out for single women - of which 24% were single without a partner and 54% with a partner (3% did not state whether they had a partner), a proportion that has been rising from about two thirds since 1997.

The recording of ethnicity, as self-reported by the women involved, was introduced in 2002. In 2015, among women with ethnicity recorded, 75% of those having an abortion were White, 9% Asian or Asian British and 8% Black or Black British.

2.2 Gestation period

The majority of abortions (92% in 2015) are performed at or under 13 weeks gestation. In 2015, 80% were at or under 10 weeks and a further 11% at 10-12 weeks. The proportion of abortions at under 10 weeks has increased since 1997, and the proportion at over 13 weeks has reduced.

Abortions where gestation has exceeded its twentieth week account for 2% of the total. There were 2,877 such abortions in 2015.

2.3 Statutory grounds for abortion

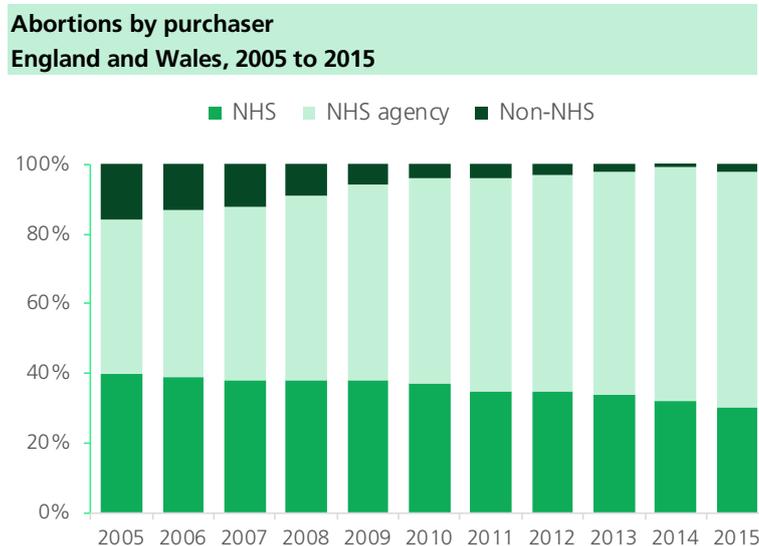
The majority of abortions (98%) in 2015 were under ground C. The proportion of ground C abortions has risen steadily since 1997, with a corresponding reduction in ground D cases.

3,213 abortions (2%) were under ground E, risk that the child would be born handicapped. Congenital malformations were reported for 45% of cases under ground E and chromosomal abnormalities in 37%. Down's syndrome (21% of all ground E cases) was the most commonly reported chromosomal abnormality. Ground F or G abortions are rare: only three cases in 2015.

2.4 Location and funding

Treatment for the termination of pregnancy can only be carried out in an NHS hospital, NHS agencies (approved independent sector places under NHS contract) and approved places in the private sector. After 24 weeks, terminations can only be performed in an NHS hospital.

30% of abortions in 2015 were performed in NHS hospitals and 68% in NHS agencies, totalling 98% of abortions. The remaining 2% were privately funded. The proportion performed under NHS contract has been rising steadily since the early 1990s while the proportion of NHS hospital and private abortions has been falling.



2.5 Method of abortion

Different methods exist to terminate a pregnancy, depending on the duration of gestation and personal circumstances of women involved. The main medical method involves the use of the abortifacient drug Mifegyne (mifepristone, also known as RU486). The main surgical methods are vacuum aspiration (recommended at up to 15 weeks

gestation) and dilatation and evacuation (D&E) (recommended where gestation is greater than 15 weeks).²

Medical abortions accounted for 55% of the total in 2015. There has been a continuing upward trend in medical abortions since 1991 when Mifegyne was licensed for use in the UK. The proportion of medical abortions has more than doubled in the last five years.

Surgical abortions accounted for 45% of the total in 2015 and vacuum aspiration was used for 40% of these surgical abortions in 2015 and dilatation and evacuation in 5% of cases.

2.6 Repeat abortions

38% of women undergoing abortions in 2015 had one or more previous abortions. The proportion has risen over the last decade from 32% in 2005.

Among women who had experienced a previous abortion 29% were under 25 and 71% were over 25.

Older women were more likely to have had a previous abortion: 46% of those aged 30 and above compared with 7% of those aged under 18.

2.7 Place of residence

In 2015, Clinical Commissioning Groups in London had the highest abortion rates per 1,000 women aged 15-44 in England; including NHS Barking & Dagenham (29.4), NHS Lewisham (25.6), NHS Waltham Forest (25.2) Note that the age standardised abortion rate for England and Wales in 2015 was 16.0 per 1,000 women aged 15-44.

3. Figures for Scotland³

There were 12,082 abortions performed in Scotland in 2015, a 2.6% increase on the 2014 figure of 11,776 which was the lowest reported since 1995. The abortion rate per 1,000 women aged 15-44 also increased from 11.3 in 2014 to 11.6 in 2015.

The increase in terminations in 2015 mainly occurred in women living in the most deprived areas of Scotland. Of the increase of 306 abortions in 2015, 264 involved women living in the two most deprived index of deprivation quintiles.

There is a clear link between abortion rate and levels of deprivation. The 2015 abortion rate is 15.4 per 1,000 women in areas of high deprivation, compared to 8.7 per 1,000 women for the least deprived areas in Scotland.

² D&E may be used in combination with vacuum aspiration (such cases are recorded in the statistics as D&E).

³ <http://www.isdscotland.org/isd/1918.html>

The rate of terminations is highest among women aged 20-24 (19.5 per 1,000 women) and those aged 25-29 (15.6 per 1,000 women). Lower rates are seen in women aged 35-39 (8.1 per 1,000 women) and in women aged over 40 (2.5 per 1,000 women).

The rates of terminations per 1,000 women aged 15-44 are highest in NHS Tayside (13.9). The next highest was Lothian (13.0). The Island Boards (Orkney, Shetland and Western Isles) have the lowest rate at 4.4 per 1,000. The lowest mainland board is NHS Borders (7.9).

The proportion of early terminations has been rising steadily over the past decade, with 80.6% of all terminations performed at less than 10 weeks in 2015, compared to 67.3% in 2005. Only 0.6% of abortions were performed at 18 weeks or more.

The vast majority (98.3%) of terminations are undertaken under Ground C.

4. Further information

[Department of Health Abortion statistics, England and Wales](#)⁴

[Abortion Law](#)⁵

5. Statistical appendix

[Department of Health Abortion Statistics tables](#)⁶

[ISD Scotland Termination of Pregnancy Statistics 2015](#)

⁴ [Report on abortion statistics in England and Wales for 2014](#)

⁵ [Abortion Act 1967](#)

⁶ [Abortion statistics, England and Wales: 2014](#)

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