



Overview of Monitoring Data on Abortions (Northern Ireland)

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Reproductive Health Law and Policy Advisory Group

A joint initiative between Queen's University Belfast School of Law and Human Rights Centre and Ulster University School of Criminology, Politics and Social Policy

NORTHERN IRELAND OVERVIEW OF MONITORING DATA ON ABORTIONS

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Author Details: Dr Fiona Bloomer (UU) f.k.bloomer@ulster.ac.uk, Dr Kathryn McNeilly (QUB) k.mcneilly@qub.ac.uk, Dr Claire Pierson (MMU) c.pierson@mmu.ac.uk

Introduction

This briefing paper provides an overview of published data on abortions carried out in Northern Ireland and abortions provided for Northern Ireland residents elsewhere in Europe (including Britain). The data in this briefing has been obtained from two main sources: The Department of Health (Northern Ireland) and the Department of Health (England and Wales). Supplementary material from other sources has been included where necessary.

Summary of key data on abortions

Abortions in Northern Ireland

- During the time period 2006/07 to 2015/16 a total of 368 abortions were carried out by the NHS in Northern Ireland.
- Over 10 years the average number of abortions carried out by the NHS in Northern Ireland was 37.
- In the last reported year (2015/2016) 16 abortions were carried out by the NHS in Northern Ireland.
- Unknown numbers access abortions from the Marie Stopes Clinic in Belfast.
- Unknown numbers access the abortion pill from internet providers such as Women Help Women and Women on Web and self-abort at home. (Combined data for Ireland, north and south, is available from Women on Web. This indicates 5650 requests were made for at-home medical abortions during 2010-2015).

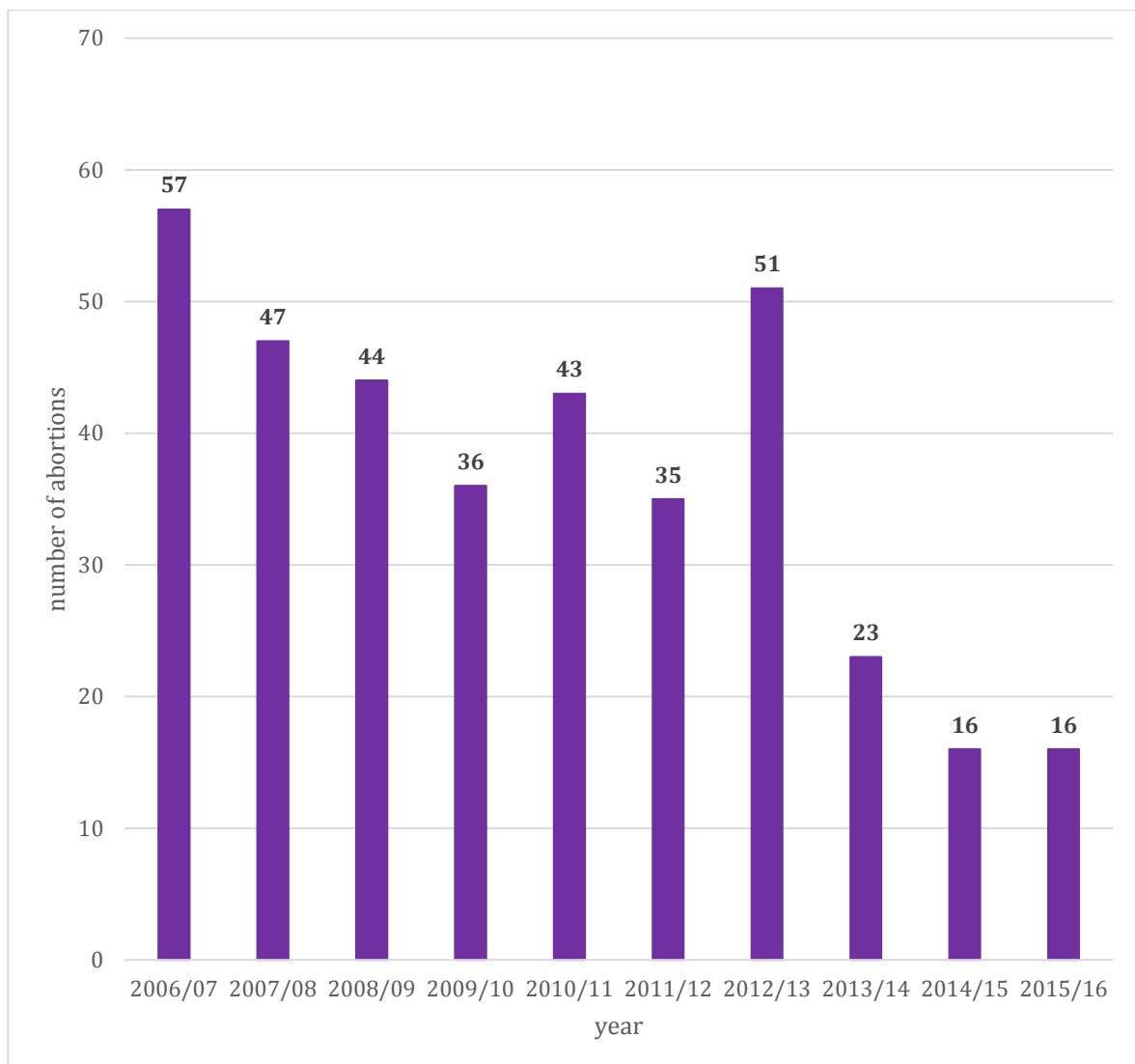
Abortions obtained by those who travel outside of Northern Ireland

- During the time period 1970-2016 62,038 abortions were provided in England and Wales to Northern Ireland residents.
- In the last reported year (2016) 724 abortions were provided in England and Wales to Northern Ireland residents.
- Unknown numbers travel elsewhere in Europe.

Abortions in Northern Ireland

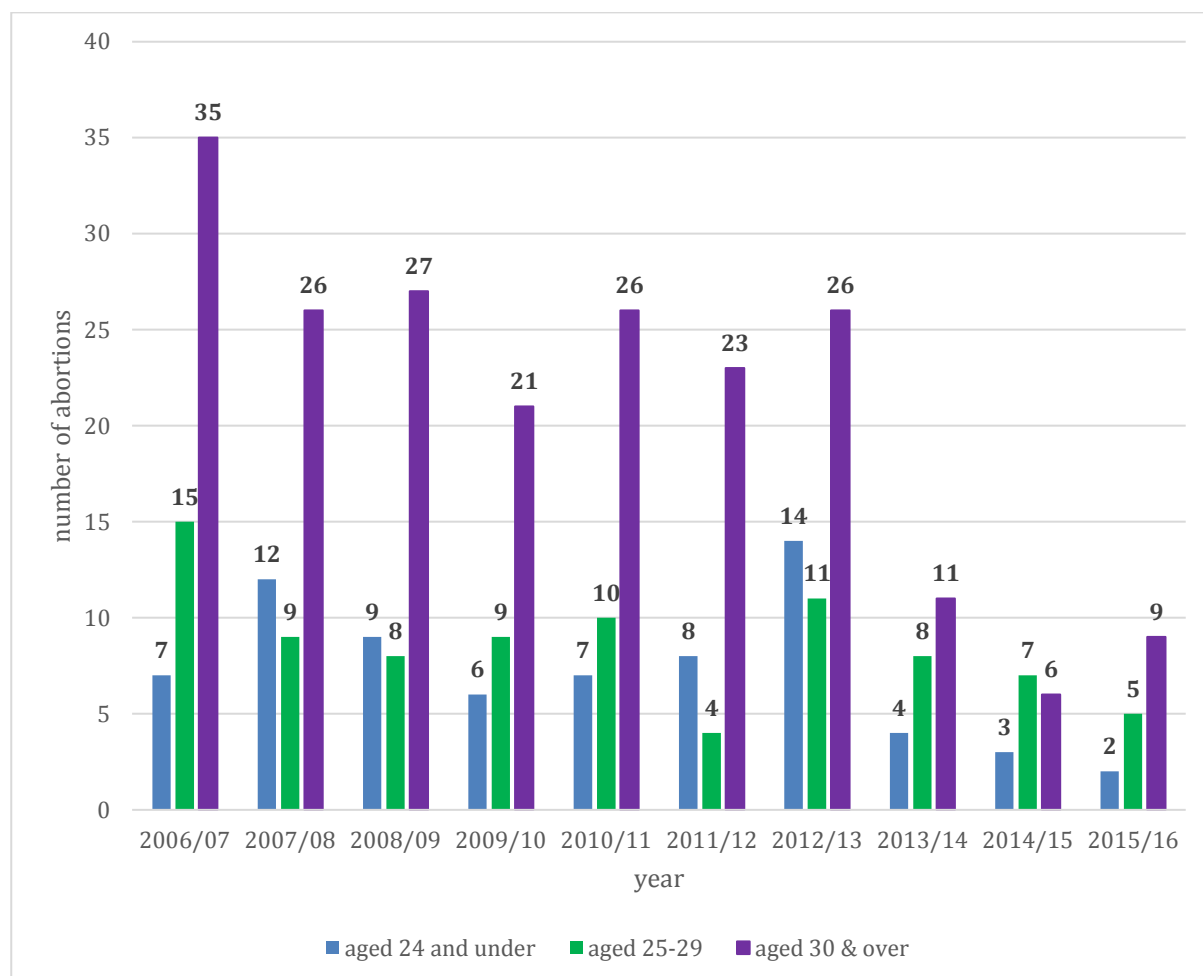
Legal abortions carried out in Northern Ireland in the NHS are rare (chart 1). Data published by the Department of Health (Northern Ireland) indicates that during the reporting periods 2006/07 to 2015/16 **an average of 37 abortions were carried out per year on NHS premises** (Department of Health Northern Ireland, 2017). Earlier data published by the Department adopted different definitions and is not directly comparable.

Chart 1 Number of abortions on NHS premises in Northern Ireland 2006-2016



The majority of the abortions during the time period 2006/07 to 2015/17 were carried out on women aged 30+ (chart 2). Whilst data is collated on other variables such as which health trusts the abortion was carried out in and country of origin the small numbers within each category are not sufficient for statistical analysis (Department of Health Northern Ireland, 2017).

Chart 2: Age profile for those who obtained abortions on NHS premises in Northern Ireland 2006-2016



Those unable to obtain an abortion on the NHS access abortions by other means:

- Some obtain early medical abortions (up to 9 weeks 4 days gestation), from **Marie Stopes International** in its sexual health clinic in Belfast (Bloomer and O'Dowd, 2014). These abortions are provided within the current legal framework. Data on these abortions has not been published.
- Many seeking abortion obtain the abortion pill (also referred to as medical abortions) from internet-based providers such as Women on the Web and Women Help Women in order **to self-abort at home**. Women Help Women do not publish data monitoring data thus the number of users of its service in Northern Ireland is unknown. Women on the Web have not published Northern Ireland specific monitoring data, however in a study published in 2015 it indicated that in Ireland north and south it during the time period **January 2010 to December 2015, 5650 women requested at-home medical abortions**. (Aiken et al, 2016)
- Research in the Republic of Ireland indicates **up to 6% of women who have abortions travel to elsewhere in Europe** (McBride et al., 2012). No comparable data is available for Northern Ireland residents.

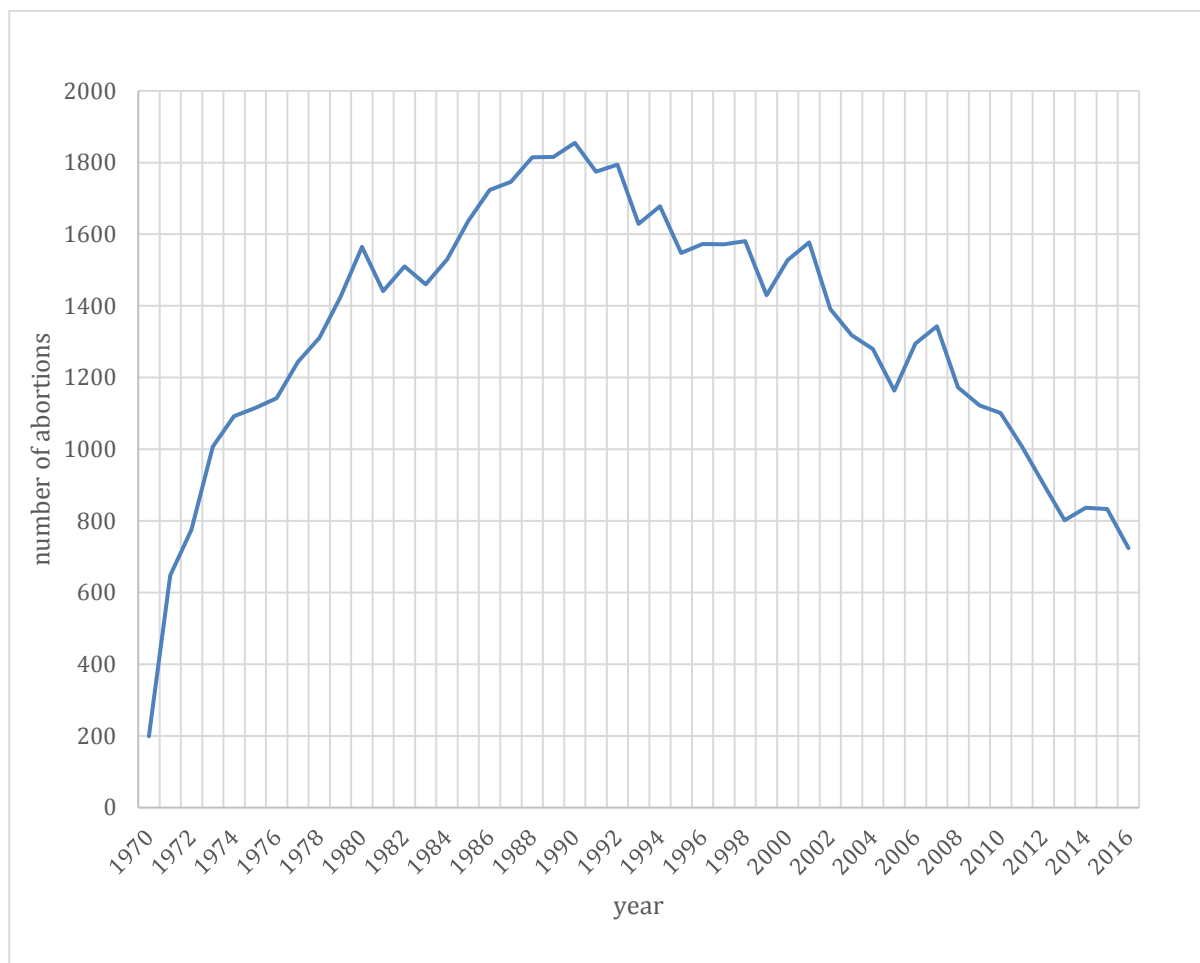
ABORTIONS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

Data on those who travel to England and Wales is provided to the Department of Health (England and Wales) by abortion providers throughout its jurisdiction.

During the period 1970 (when data was first recorded) to 2016 a total of 62,038 cases were recorded (chart 3). This data is thought to be an under-representation of all who travel, as they may for various reasons, not wish to disclose their home address.

The data from 1970-2016 indicates a fluctuating pattern particularly noticeable from 1980 onwards. At its peak in 1990 1,855 cases were recorded. In recent years an overall decrease has been observed. The reasons for this are unknown but could be ascribed to increased access to contraception, the opening of the Marie Stopes Clinic and increased use of the abortion pill from internet-based providers.

Chart 3 Number of abortions obtained by Northern Ireland Residents who travel to England (1970-2016)

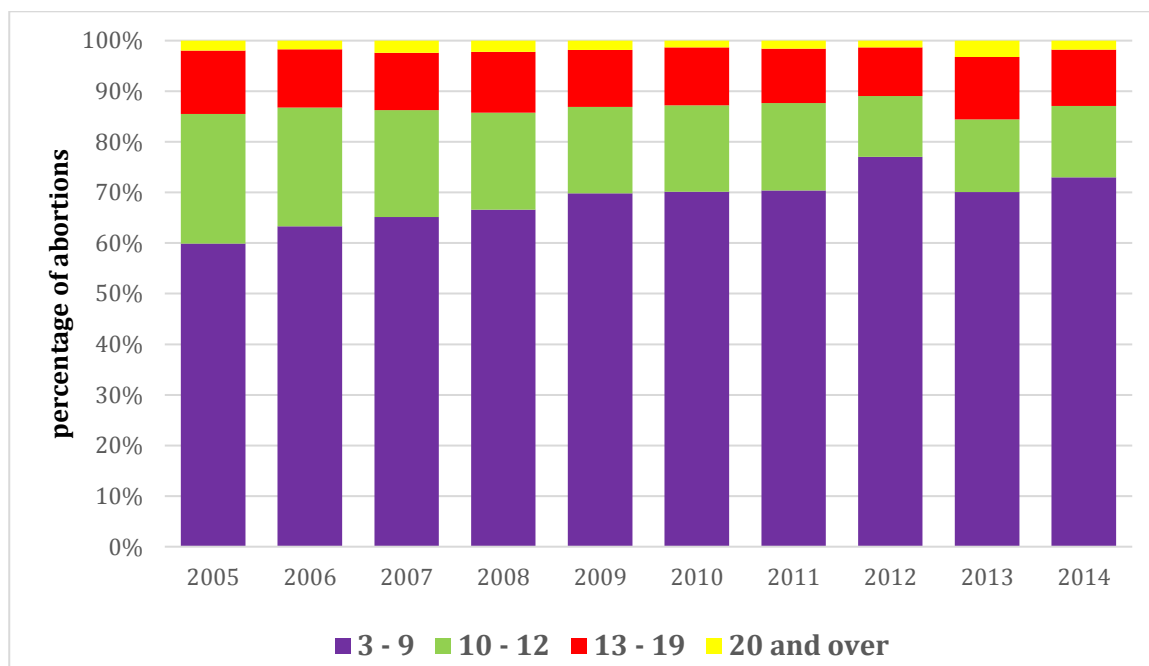


(Source: data provided to authors by the Abortion Statistics Unit, Department of Health, England and Wales)

Analysis of **gestation trends** over a 10 year period provides additional insight into those who travel to England and Wales (Bloomer and Hoggart, 2016).

- Most abortions are within the time period of **3-9 weeks gestation**, with overall almost 90% within 12 weeks gestation (Chart 4).
- Of particular note are the very small percentages of abortions carried out at later gestations. These are largely thought to comprise cases of fatal / serious foetal abnormality which is often diagnosed at 20 weeks gestation.

Chart 4 Gestation (weeks) Northern Ireland residents who travel to England (2005-2014)



Bloomer and Hoggart (2016), note that in the previous decade figures were noticeably lower for the earlier gestation time. This change in earlier gestation times is ascribed to the increasing availability of information on abortion services and financial support from Abortion Support Network, reducing the burden on lower income families to gather funds for travel and clinic costs. The gestation time is generally higher than that observed elsewhere in the UK. This is thought to be the result of limited access to information, time needed to arrange travel plans and time needed to raise funds for the procedure / travel.

Conclusions

The data presented in this briefing offers insight into the need for abortion services in Northern Ireland. Gaps are evident, we do not know how many abortions are provided at the Marie Stopes Clinic; the extent to which abortions are being conducted using medication obtained from online providers is also unknown in

terms of specific data for Northern Ireland. The data provided by the Department of Health, Northern Ireland indicates that abortion on NHS premises are rare and becoming more so in the last few years. In contrast it is clear that those who go to England for abortions are travelling in substantial numbers, though the overall trend is decreasing.

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