

Irish Abortion Rates Are Down And It Could Be Because More Women Are Buying Illegal Pills Online

Difficulty accessing abortion and an increased awareness of online abortion pills could account for the decline in official abortion rates.

Posted on June 13, 2017, at 3:58 p.m.



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Clodagh Kilcoyne / Reuters

The number of recorded women who have travelled to abortion clinics in England and Wales from Ireland, where the procedure is illegal, decreased last year.

However, there is concern among campaigners that the decline is due to the number of women who self-administer illegal abortion pills at home, as well as women from Ireland who travel to England for an abortion not giving their home address when they are admitted to a clinic.

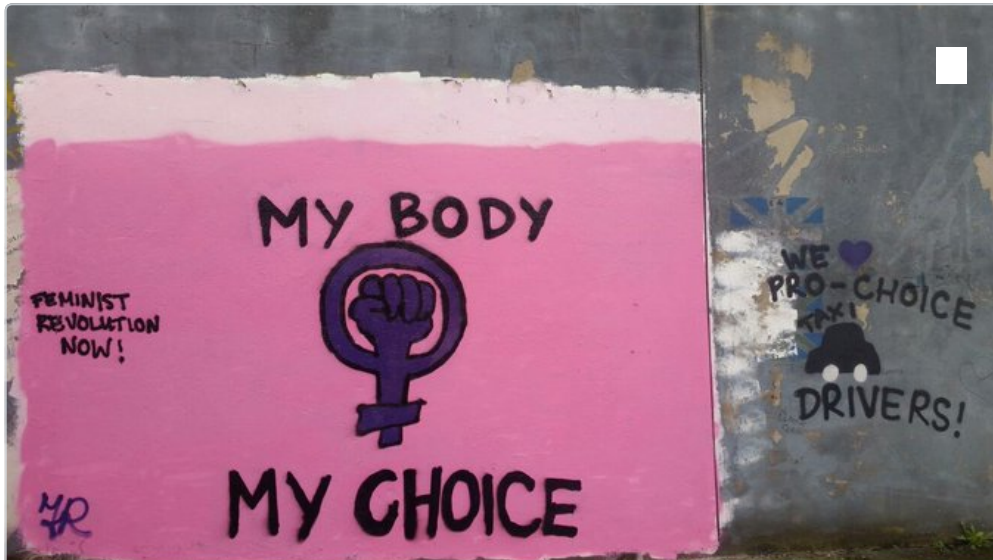
[According to figures](#) released by the Department of Health today, 190,406 abortions were carried out in England and Wales in 2016, compared to 191,014 in 2015. The number of women from outside of England and Wales who received abortions had also fallen from 5,190 to 4,810, with

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"These numbers only tell part of the story," Mara Clarke, who runs the Abortion Support Network, a UK-based charity which assists women from Ireland and Northern Ireland in accessing abortion, told BuzzFeed News.

She said the the number of people contacting the charity for help, which can include funding to travel to England for an abortion, or referral to organisations such as Women On Web, from whom you can obtain abortion pills online, had increased by 24%.



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"They do not give the women who stay with a friend or family member in England and use that address, or the ones who give a fake address," she continued.

"They do not include the increasing number of non-Irish women living in Ireland who go 'home' to other parts of Europe for abortion rather than to England.

"But most tellingly they do not include the thousands of women who are getting safe but illegal early medical abortion pills online [from Women on Web](#)."

Ann Furedi, the chief executive of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS), who provide abortions in the UK, also believed the decline in official figures was as a result in a rise in the use of illegal abortion pills, and called for them to be made more easily available legally.

"In recent years we have seen an increase in the numbers of women safely ending early

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drawn up at a time when no-one could have imagined tablets would be a safe and effective alternative to surgical intervention for women, and today those laws prevent us from providing early medical abortion in the most effective, woman-centred way."

A study [published in the British Medical Journal](#) earlier this year, which looked at data from 1,000 women who had bought abortion pills via Women on Web over the course of two years, concluded that self sourced medical abortion through online telemedicine is highly effective, with low rates of complications, and called for the drug to be made available legally in order to improve women's access to abortion.

"In recent years we have seen an increase in the numbers of women safely ending early pregnancies with medication. Our current abortion laws, 50 years old this year, were drawn up at a time when no-one could have imagined tablets would be a safe and effective alternative to surgical intervention for women, and today those laws prevent us from providing early medical abortion in the most effective, woman-centred way.



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"Repeal of legal restrictions would support the safest and most equitable abortion care for women in Irish jurisdictions," researchers wrote. "Until then, for the first time in history, women of all social classes in a legally restricted yet high resource setting have equitable access to a reasonable alternative: medical abortion guided by physicians through telemedicine."

Rita Harrold is a campaigner with Rosa, an Irish organisation which has run several campaigns to help improve women's access to the abortion pill, including [driving an "abortion pill bus" around Ireland](#) earlier this year. She told BuzzFeed News that she believed increased awareness of organisations such as Women on Web, as well as the relative safety of abortion pills, could have contributed to a decline in official figures.

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travelled in the past and now using pills at home," she said. "We have more and more people contacting us for assistance in accessing pills."

The pills however, are still illegal, and women face up to life in prison if they are found to have purchased them online. A mother in Northern Ireland is currently facing prosecution after she accessed abortion pills for her pregnant, then-15-year-old daughter, and was reported to police by her GP.



Clodagh Kilcoyne / Reuters

In March this year, on International Women's Day, [police in Northern Ireland raided several addresses](#) of people who were thought to have purchased medical abortion drugs from Women on Web. While there has been a steady decrease in the number of abortion pills seized by customs in the Republic of Ireland, from 1,107 in 2014, to 505 in 2016, this could be because women in the Republic are now having them delivered to addresses in Northern Ireland, and obtaining them by hand, [according to the Irish Times](#).

In England, Wales and Scotland, there was a 75-fold increase in the number of abortion pills purchased online that were seized by authorities. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) found that 645 abortion pills were seized by UK authorities in 2015 and 2016 compared to just five in 2013.

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performed outside a clinical setting and without the authorisation of two doctors, and those found to have bought the drug online can face life imprisonment.



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Prior to this year's snap general election, Labour MP Diana Johnson had put forward a ten minute rule bill on the decriminalisation of abortion in England and Wales, which was widely supported by parliament. While she hopes to reignite the bill when a new parliament begins, there is now concern that the anti-abortion Democratic Unionist Party, with whom Conservative prime minister Theresa May is currently trying to form a government after her party lost its Commons majority, could halt those plans.

Johnson believed that today's figures were not a true reflection of abortion numbers across the UK and Ireland.

"Whilst these figures show that the long-term decline in abortions is continuing, the number of abortion pills being seized by authorities has in fact risen considerably – something which isn't reflected in this data," Johnson told BuzzFeed News.

"It is clear that many women, some in desperate situations, are resorting to other means to terminate a pregnancy. This fact alone highlights the need for a reasoned, grown-up debate about decriminalisation."

There is also concern that the increased influence of the DUP could make it difficult for the UK government to extend abortion rights to Northern Ireland where the procedure is still prohibited in almost all circumstances, and that an increased awareness of the distribution of illegal pills by

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"The DUP are the drivers behind Northern Ireland's excessively punitive abortion laws and the culture that has allowed prosecutions of women who have ordered safe but illegal early medical abortion pills online," the ASN's Clarke said. "Because of the very real fear that they could be charged and convicted of a criminal offence, many women in both Ireland and Northern Ireland no longer feel safe ordering these medications online, even from reputable organisations."

In the Republic of Ireland, it is expected that a referendum on the legalisation of abortion could take place next year after [a government committee resoundingly concluded](#) that the country should relax its highly restrictive abortion laws. A survey by Amnesty last year [suggested](#) 70% support a change in the law.

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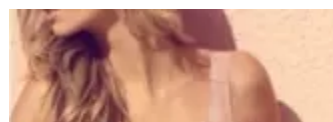
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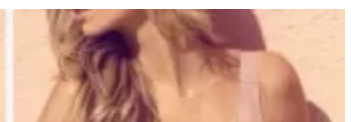
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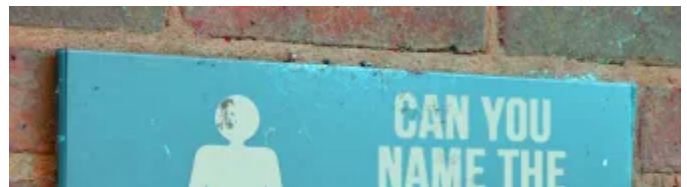
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