

Austria: Notes on levels of abortion

12 May 2018

Wm. Robert Johnston

Abstract: Reported abortions in Austria yield far lower abortion rates than for any other European country with broadly legalized abortion. These data, however, only cover abortions in public hospitals and are incomplete. Various evidence supports the conclusion that total abortions in Austria are significantly higher than reported numbers, with rates perhaps comparable to those in most other Western European nations.

Some have claimed that the apparently low abortion rates of Austria are more relevant to the Irish abortion debate than the higher rates of the other 15 Western European countries with broadly legalized abortion. **Review of available information makes it abundantly clear that reported abortion rates for Austria are low due to underreporting.**

Available data on known abortions in Austria are limited to official figures for 1989-2005, which show a steady decline from 3,175 abortions in 1989 to 1,780 in 2005 (Council of Europe, 2004; GGP, 2016; Sardon, 2006). These figures correspond to abortion percentages (abortions as a percentage of total live births and abortions) of 3.9% and 2.2%, respectively, among the lowest levels in Europe.

Estimates of abortion in Austria provided in the *Abortion Worldwide Report* (Jacobson and Johnston, 2018; Johnston, 2018) are based on reported data, and these estimates peak at 12,900 per year in 1975-1976 and decline to 1,300 per year in 2015 (regarding peak levels see Johnston, 2017). Figures in this report, however, are limited to actual reported numbers and strictly constrained empirical estimates. Thus, for countries with significant underreporting these will be lower bounds only.

Austria legalized abortion in 1974 and abortions may be performed in hospitals or clinics. However, there is no requirement to report abortions (Tazi-Preve and Kytir, 1999; Sobotka, 2015). The only available figures—those described above for 1989-2005—are only for abortions at public hospitals and public financed hospitals (Tazi-Preve and Kytir, 1999; Tazi-Preve and Rolof, 2002; IPPF, 2009). Data from Marie Stopes International suggests large numbers of unreported private abortions: their Austria clinic claims to have “averted” 791

“unintended pregnancies” in 2017 (MSI, 2018), for a single clinic amounting to nearly half of the last official report of nationwide hospital abortions.

Two published surveys suggest that abortion rates in Austria are consistent with other Western European countries. A 1995-1996 survey of 1,366 women found that 6.7% of respondents would “certainly” abort an “unintentional” pregnancy (Tazi-Preve and Rolof, 2002). This is 2.4 times higher than the reported abortion percentage, and of ten countries surveyed with broad access to abortion, Austria had the highest such ratio. A survey reported in 2016 of 3,019 women found that “the abortion rate in Austria is on European average (9.7 per 1000 women between 15 and 44 per year) and the abortion-birth-quotient is rather high in comparison with other European states” (Wallner, 2015). Although such limited surveys tend to be misleading with regard to estimating nation-wide abortion rates, in this case they tend to affirm that the officially reported data are incomplete.

The Guttmacher Institute and World Health Organization have concluded that abortions are significantly underreported in Austria. Sedgh et al. (2007) stated, “Official estimates for Austria and Greece represent a negligible proportion of all abortions and are not included.” Sedgh et al. (2012) assumed that Austria has an abortion rate of 10 per 1,000 women aged 15-44, comparable to what they estimate for most of Western and Southern Europe. If correct (and we note issues with assumptions in this study), this would imply 16,800 abortions in 2012, or an abortion percentage of 17.5%.

The International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network has gone on record estimating Austria abortions by assuming a similar rate to United Kingdom abortions, yielding an estimate of 19,400 per year in 1980—this being the lowest estimate cited by Tazi-Preve and Kytir (2001). Tazi-Preve and Kytir (1999) estimate 19,000-25,000 per year based on analogy to other Western European countries. Fiala (2015) estimates 30,000-40,000 per year.

Annual abortions in Austria are certainly higher than reported in official figures, likely at least a factor of two higher. Some abortion advocates (when not trying to cite Austria as a success story) claim levels ten times higher or more, but there are methodological problems with those claims.

References

- Council of Europe, 2004, "Austria, Table 2: Births, deaths and legal abortions," in *Recent Demographic Developments in Europe: Demographic Yearbook 2003*, on line at COE [http://www.coe.int/t/e/social_cohesion/population/ATAB2.xls].
- Fiala, Christian, Aug. 2015, “Schwangerschaftsabbruch in Österreich,” *Abtreibung.at*, on line [http://abtreibung.at/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/Abbruch_in_Oe_2015.pdf].
- GGP, 2016, "GGP Contextual Database," *Generations and Gender Programme*, on line [<http://www.ggp-i.org/data/ggp-contextual-database>].
- International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network, Jan. 2009, “Abortion legislation in Europe,” on line at *SPDC* [https://www.spdc.pt/files/publicacoes/Pub_AbortionlegislationinEuropeIPPFEN_Feb2009.pdf].
- Jacobson, Thomas W., and Wm. Robert Johnston, eds., 2018, *Abortion Worldwide Report*, GLC

Publ. (West Chester, OH).

- Johnston, Wm. Robert, 29 May 2017, "Austria: Estimated abortions, 1974-2015," AWR Working Paper #5, on line at *Global Life Campaign* [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/cacd2b_157336d172a54fdebdd0aa9e08848b31.pdf].
- Johnston, W. R., 25 March 2018, "Historical abortion statistics, Austria," on line at *Johnston's Archive* [<http://www.johnstonsachive.net/policy/abortion/ab-austria.html>].
- Marie Stopes International, 2018, "Austria," *Marie Stopes International*, on line [<https://mariestopes.org/where-we-work/austria/>].
- Prskawetz, Alexia, Tomas Sobotka, Isabella Buber, Henriette Engelhardt, and Richard Gisser, 2008, "Austria: Persistent low fertility since the mid-1980s," *Demographic Research*, 19:293-360 [<https://www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol19/12/19-12.pdf>].
- Sardon, Jean-Paul, 2006, "Recent demographic trends in the developed countries," *INED Population*, 61:197-266, on line at INED [https://www.ined.fr/fichier/s_rubrique/235/popf.3_2006_sardon.en.en.pdf].
- Sedgh, Gilda, Stanley K. Henshaw, Susheela Singh, Akinrinola bankole, and Joanna Drescher, 2007, "Legal abortion worldwide: Incidence and recent trends," *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 33(3):106-116.
- Sedgh, G., S. Singh, I. H. Shah, E. Ahman, S. K. Henshaw, and A. Bankole, 2012, "Induced abortion: Incidence and trends worldwide from 1995 to 2008," Supplementary webappendix, *The Lancet*, 379(9816):625-632.
- Sobotka, Tomas, 2015, "Low fertility in Austria and the Czech Republic: Gradual policy adjustments," Vienna Institute of Demography working paper 2/2015 [https://www.oeaw.ac.at/fileadmin/subsites/Institute/VID/PDF/Publications/Working_Papers/WP2015_02.pdf].
- Tazi-Preve, Irene M., and Josef Kytir, 1999, "Schwangerschaftsabbruch in Österreich: „Alte“ Streitpunkte— „neue“ Konfliktlinien," *Demographische Informationen*, 1997/1999:20-29, cited by Fiala (2015).
- Tazi-Preve, Irene M., and Josef Kytir, 2001, "Schwangerschaftsabbruch—Gesellschaftspolitische Aspekte und empirische Befunde," *SWS-Rundschau*, 4/2001:435-458.
- Tazi-Preve, Irene M., and Juliane Rolof, 2002, "Abortion in West and East Europe: Problems of access and services," CICRED Seminar [<http://www.cicred.org/Eng/Seminars/Details/Seminars/Bangkok2002/32BangkokTazi&Rolof.pdf>].
- Wallner, Katrin Susanna, 2016, "Schwangerschaftsabbrüche in Österreich," doctoral thesis, Medical University of Graz [https://online.medunigraz.at/mug_online/wbabs.getDocument?pThesisNr=52217&pAutorNr=76939&pOrgNR=1].

AWR and working papers:

Abortion Worldwide Report working papers on specific nations and groups of nations are available at: "Abortion Worldwide Report" page of the Global Life Campaign website: www.GlobalLifeCampaign.com.

The *Abortion Worldwide Report* book is available through GLC Publications at: www.GLCPublications.com.