

Additional empirical estimates of possible future abortions in Ireland

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Abstract: This report provides empirical estimates of possible abortions in Ireland from 2019 to 2060 with and without a repeal of Ireland's Eighth Amendment. These estimates use UN population projections, recent trends in Ireland abortions abroad, and observed trends in other European countries followed broad legalization of abortion. Though not predictive, these results imply that Ireland is likely to see abortions increase to 6,000-17,000 per year, later approaching 12,000 per year, all well above the quantitative claims of pro-abortion advocates.

Citizens of the Republic of Ireland overwhelmingly voted on 25 May 2018 to repeal their constitutional protection of human life in the womb. The Irish government has stated their intent to seek legislation this year which would broadly permit abortion in the Republic of Ireland in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, plus increase medical reasons under which abortion is permitted up to birth.

The campaign leading to this vote was characterized by significant misrepresentations of facts by the pro-abortion side. Such claims include assertions that women are frequently at risk of death due to Ireland's abortion laws, that the government's proposed changes are necessary to address any such extreme cases, and that numbers of abortions by Irish women will go down with the planned changes. The latter claims in particular have often contradicted other published statements by abortion advocates. These claims about future abortion numbers will be addressed here based on empirical observations from other countries that have made comparable changes to their abortion laws.

For context, Figure 1 shows past abortion percentage (abortions as a percentage of pregnancies ending in live birth or abortion) for Republic of Ireland residents for 1968-2016. These are mostly abortions obtained abroad in England and Wales, a smaller number obtained in the Netherlands, and a still smaller number obtained in Ireland. Note that abortion percentages rose steadily from 1968 to 1995, followed by a decline to current levels about 50% below the 1995 peak.

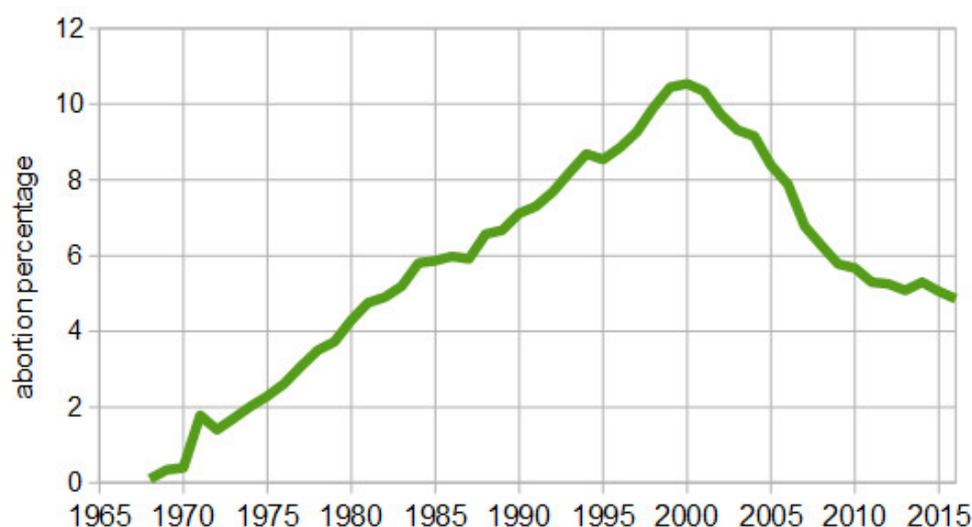


Figure 1. Abortion percentage trends for Republic of Ireland.

Empirical models of future Irish abortions

In AWR WP#18 (Johnston and Jacobson, 2018a), limited speculation was offered regarding possible future trends in abortions with a change in Irish law. Here, we provide results of demographic models in an attempt to quantify estimates of future abortions in the aftermath of the 25 May vote. This modeling is again primarily empirical, based on analogies to other European countries regarding their abortion trends following legalization. Note that these results are possibilities and not predictive; nonetheless, they are far superior to the vague, unfounded, and mutually contradictory assertions of those that advocated changes in Ireland's abortion policy.

As a baseline estimate for future abortions had Ireland not acted to broadly legalize abortion, we first model abortions with these assumptions:

- UN population projections for female age by population are used;
- abortion rates by Irish residents in the UK in 2007-2016 are fit to an exponential fit and this is used to extrapolate abortion rates by age group to 2060. This captures the decline since 2000 of rates for mothers ages 15-35 and the relatively constant rates in recent decades for older women.
- abortion numbers are derived from the above then increased by 10% to address underreporting.

Results are shown in Figure 2. The latest reported figures for abortions by Republic of Ireland residents is about 3,300 per year in 2016. The rate of decline is slower after 2020 in part because as the female population ages, more of them are in age ranges showing less decline in abortion rates.

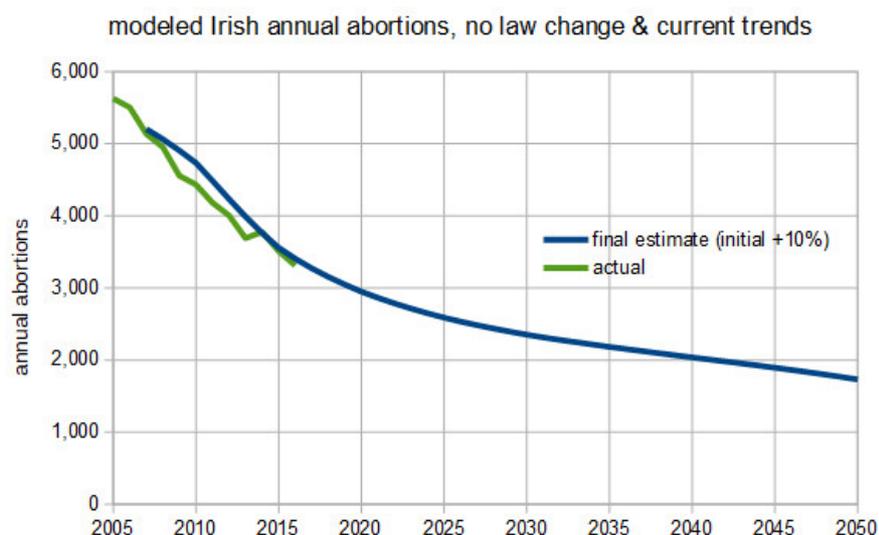


Figure 2. Modeled annual abortions with no law change, Republic of Ireland, 2019-2060.

To estimate future Irish abortions with the law change, we model abortions with these assumptions:

- Total pregnancies are based on annual live births derived from the UN population projections, plus the annual abortions estimated in the baseline case above (projections have live births dropping to 55,000 per year around 2025, then peaking at 68,000 per year in 2042)
- Possible trends in abortion percentage over time are based on analogy to observed trends in other European countries following abortion legalization:
 - Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, and Switzerland, which each enacted abortions laws similar to the Ireland governments proposal (broad legalization up to 12 weeks' pregnancy);
 - Portugal, which has a largely Catholic population (like Ireland) and is the last European country prior to Ireland to broadly legalize abortion;
 - The United Kingdom, which is culturally similar to Ireland despite having a less similar law.
 - Austria is not included despite having a similar law because reported figures fail to include most abortions (Johnston, 2018).
- Average, low, and high estimates are based on the above country trends from the year of legalization. After the first 4 years, trends are smoothed with a 4-year running average.

Figure 3 shows the abortion percentage trends for the eight countries used (Johnston and Jacobson, 2018b). Though some countries quickly reach a peak in abortions then decline, a majority of the listed countries maintain higher abortion levels which is evidenced in the average trend. Some countries with short time series (e.g., Portugal) do not contribute for the entire time period.

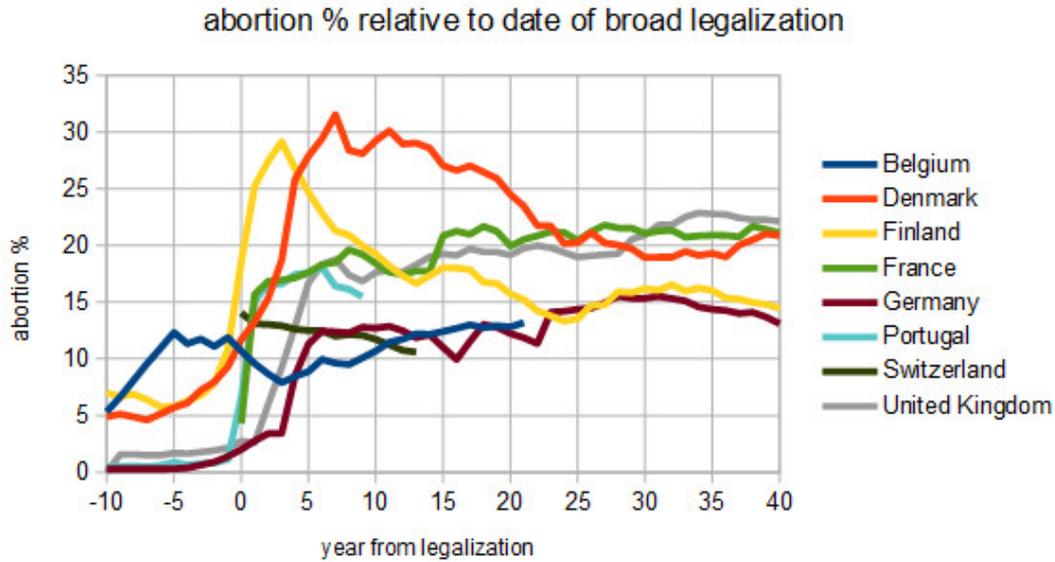


Figure 3. Observed past trends in abortion percentage from year of broad legalization, eight European countries.

Figure 4 shows resulting trends applied to Ireland. For the models with legalization of abortion occurring, the median estimate is for a rise to double current abortions by 2020, to 10,000 abortions per year by 2025, and a long term level of 12,000 per year. Levels in the late 2020s could be from 6,000 to 17,000 per year, though both high and low end estimates are tending to converge by 2050 (this is partly a reflection of actual country trends and partly an artifact of having few country trend series to rely on for 30 years).

Irish officials have stated they will not revisit the abortion issue via a referendum for 35 years. For the next 35 years, modeled total numbers of abortions are as follows:

- without law change: 78,000
- with law change: 380,000 (range 256,000-553,000)
- additional abortions with law change: 303,000 (range 179,000-476,000)

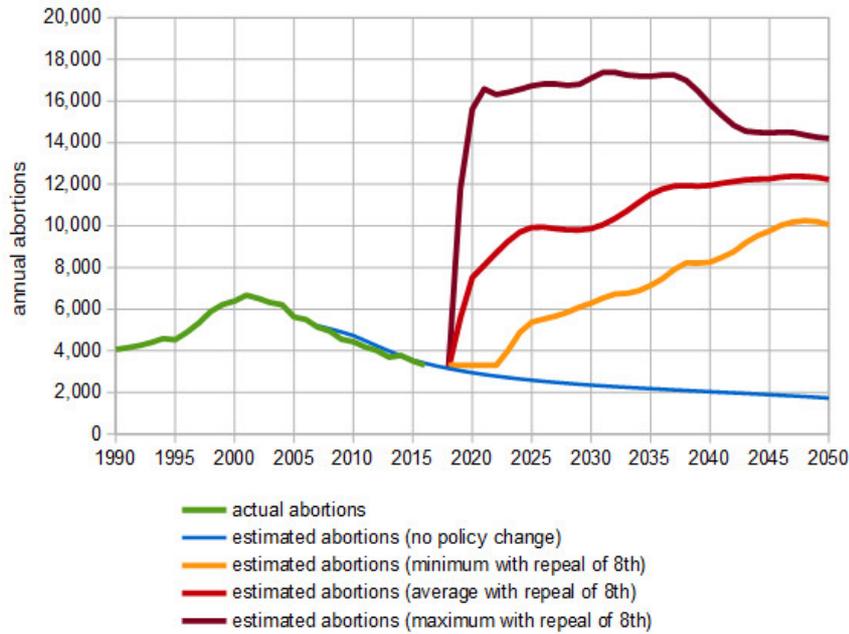


Figure 4. Modeled annual abortions with broad abortion legalization, Republic of Ireland, 2019-2060.

Demographic impacts

Estimates of changes in live births can be derived from the above model results for abortions with and without a law change. Here, we assume that the overall number of pregnancies is unchanged. In reality, data from European countries shows that abortion increases after legalization are often greater than the drop in live births, which implies in these cases that many of the abortions represent pregnancies that would not have occurred in the absence of a law change. Nonetheless, with the prior assumption the future live births for the Republic of Ireland are estimated in Figure 5. The additional abortions over 35 years are 6.4% (range 3.7–10.0%) of the current Irish Republic population. The projected low births around 2025 is lower than the prior low in 1994, which itself is the lowest number of live births in Ireland in about 250 years.

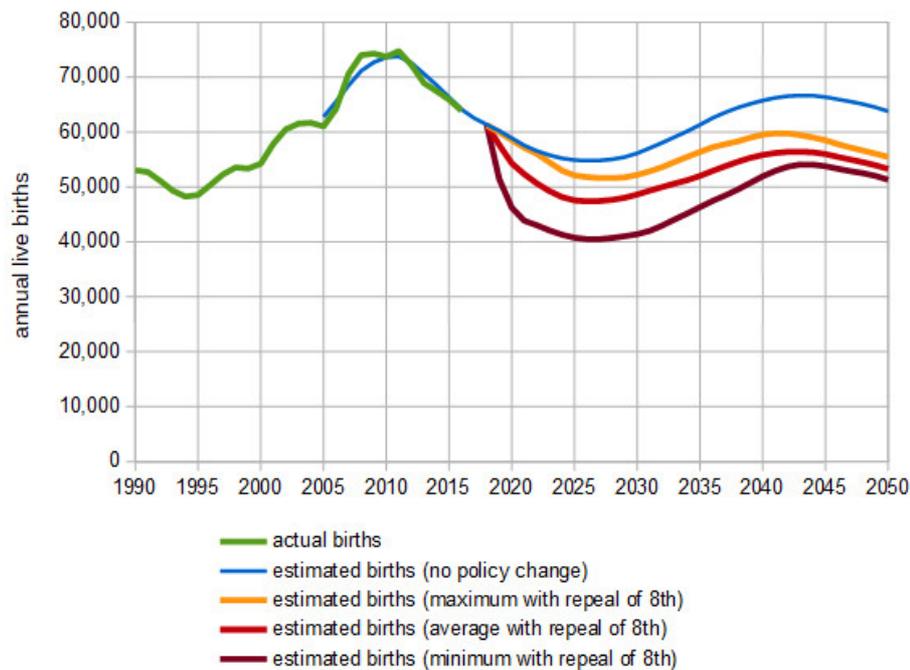


Figure 5. Modeled annual live births with broad abortion legalization, Republic of Ireland, 2019-2060.

Conclusions

In this report we have applied empirical modeling to estimate future Irish Republic abortions following abortion legalization, based on other European country trends after they legalized abortion. Findings include:

- Irish abortion rates have been trending downward for the last 15 years, with current known abortions at 3,300 per year. This trend will be reversed with legalization.
- Median estimate is for abortions to rise rapidly to 10,000 per year in the late 2020s and eventually peak at 12,000 per year in the late 2040s. Upper and lower estimates range from 6,000 to 17,000 per year in the late 2020s and from 10,000 to 14,000 per year in the late 2040s.
- In the next 35 years, an additional 300,000 total abortions are estimated over the baseline case for no policy change, with a range of 180,000 to 475,000. These figures amount to 6.4% (range 3.7% to 10%) of the current Irish Republic population. If median to higher estimates come to pass, Ireland in the coming decades will likely see the lowest numbers of live births in the last 250 years (surpassing the last low point occurring in 1994).

References

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