

Knowledge of current abortion law and views on abortion law reform: a community survey of NSW residents

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Abortion law in Australia

- Abortions laws differ across Australia.
 - This results in varying availability of abortion services across the different states and territories.
- In NSW laws regarding abortion are governed by the Crimes Act 1900.
- All other states (except Queensland) have undertaken abortion law reform
- Notably ACT(2002), Victoria (2008) and Tasmania (2013) which removed abortion from their respective Crimes Acts

Abortion law reform in NSW

- Dr Mehreen Faruqi (Greens MP for NSW) introduced a bill to the NSW Parliament to reform the laws regarding abortion.
- The Bill provided for
 - abortion to be removed from the Crimes Act.
 - recognised the right of medical practitioners to exercise a conscientious objection to providing abortion while ensuring women would be given referrals and objective information about options for unplanned pregnancy regardless of the personal views of their healthcare provider.
 - provided for protection from harassment for women seeking abortion, and protestor exclusion zones around abortion clinics.
- The Bill was debated but defeated in May 2017

Survey of NSW community views on abortion

- To inform the preparation of the Bill, Dr Faruqi's office commissioned a survey
- The survey was conducted between 1 and 10 September 2015 by a commercial market research agency using a sample derived from an on-line survey panel with a large membership base in Australia
- Panel members are not aware of the survey content before agreeing to participate and receive a small payment for each survey completed.
- Eligible participants were adult (18 years and over) men and women resident in NSW who belonged to the online survey panel.
- Eligible panel members were invited to participate and the sample was monitored to achieve the desired sample size and to meet quotas based on age, gender and location (metropolitan Sydney, regional/rural).
- The survey was carried out in accordance with the ISO standard for market, social and opinion research (ISO 20252).

Survey questions

- Attitudes towards
 - decriminalisation of abortion in NSW (removing it from the Crimes Act 1900),
 - the obligations of medical practitioners with conscientious objections to abortion to provide information to patients,
 - the establishment of exclusion zones around abortion clinics so women accessing the services can be protected against intimidation and invasion of privacy.
- Further questions were included on
 - participants' opinions and knowledge about abortion more generally.
 - a single item question asking for an opinion about women obtaining abortion was worded to be consistent with previous surveys to facilitate comparison of opinion with other surveys.
 - participant demographics

Where response options were lengthy and/or multiple their order was randomised.

Demographics of participants (n=1015)

Characteristic	N	% (Unweighted)	% (Weighted)
Age			
<25	98	9.7	11.8
25-34	203	20.0	18.6
35-44	187	18.5	17.4
45-54	186	18.4	18.4
55-64	192	18.9	18.8
65+	149	14.7	14.9
Gender			
Male	431	42.5	49.1
Female	584	57.5	50.9
Area of residence			
Sydney	595	58.6	64.5
Other NSW	420	41.4	35.5

Demographics of participants (n=1015)

Characteristic	N	% (Unweighted)	% (Weighted)
Relationship status			
Married or living with partner	632	62.3	61.5
Not married (Never/separated/divorced/widowed)	383	37.7	38.5
Educational attainment			
School qualification only	256	25.2	24.8
TAFE or Technical qualification	329	32.4	31.5
University qualification	382	37.6	39.0
Missing or undisclosed	48	4.7	4.7
Household Income before tax			
<\$40,000	217	21.4	20.8
\$40,000-\$99,999	378	37.3	36.9
>\$100,000	266	26.2	27.1
Unknown, missing or undisclosed	154	15.2	15.3
Identify with a particular religious belief			
Yes	399	39.3	39.6
No	527	51.9	51.7
Missing or undisclosed	89	8.7	8.8

Page 7

Respondents knowledge and views about abortion, abortion law and law reform (weighted percentages)

Question	Response options	%	95% CI
Views and knowledge			
Do you know anyone who has ever had an abortion?	Yes	47.1	44.0-50.3
	No	45.8	42.7-49.0
	Don't know/not sure	7.0	5.4-8.8
Which of the statements best describes your current views about abortion?	Women should be able to obtain an abortion readily when they want one	57.9	54.7-61.0
	Abortion should be allowed only in special circumstances	29.0	26.1-31.9
	Abortion should not be allowed under any circumstances	5.6	4.2-7.1
	Don't know/not sure	7.5	5.8-9.2
Abortion is currently listed as a criminal offence under the NSW Crimes Act (1900). Before today were you aware of this?	Yes	24.5	21.7-27.2
	No	75.5	72.8-78.3
In your opinion, do you think abortion should be removed from the Act (decriminalized) and regulated within the health care services?	Yes	72.8	70.0-75.6
	No	13.4	11.3-15.6
	Don't know/not sure	13.8	11.6-16.0

Respondents knowledge and views about abortion, abortion law and law reform (weighted percentages)

Question	Response options	%	95% CI
Rights and responsibilities of medical practitioners			
Medical practitioners should have the right to refuse abortion if they conscientiously object to the principle of abortion	Strongly agree	16.2	13.8-18.5
	Agree	34.4	31.4-37.4
	Disagree	18.6	16.2-21.1
	Strongly disagree	17.5	15.1-19.9
	Don't know/not sure	13.3	11.2-15.4
There should be a legal obligation for medical practitioners, regardless of their personal views on abortion to provide referrals and objective information on options for unplanned pregnancies	Strongly agree	40.0	36.9-43.1
	Agree	38.3	35.2-41.4
	Disagree	7.9	6.2-9.6
	Strongly disagree	4.0	2.7-5.2
	Don't know/not sure	9.8	7.9-11.7

Respondents knowledge and views about abortion, abortion law and law reform (weighted percentages)

Question	Response options	%	95% CI
Anti-abortion lobbyists and protestors			
Women seeking abortion should be protected from any form of harassment or threatening behaviour	Strongly agree	55.2	52.0-58.3
	Agree	33.6	30.6-36.6
	Disagree	4.1	2.8-5.4
	Strongly disagree	1.0	0.4-1.7
	Don't know/not sure	6.1	4.6-7.6
Protestor exclusion zones should be introduced around abortion clinics to protect women from harassment and threatening behaviour	Strongly agree	46.9	43.8-50.0
	Agree	34.1	31.2-37.1
	Disagree	5.5	4.1-7.0
	Strongly disagree	2.4	1.5-3.4
	Don't know/not sure	11.0	9.0-13.0
Anti-abortion protestors are exercising their rights to freedom of opinion and expression when they approach women entering and exiting abortion service providers	Strongly agree	7.7	6.0-9.4
	Agree	27.9	25.1-30.8
	Disagree	25.0	22.3-27.7
	Strongly disagree	26.9	24.1-29.7
	Don't know/not sure	12.4	10.4-14.5

Summary

- 76% of respondents were unaware that abortion is listed as a criminal offence in the NSW Crimes Act 1900
- 73% of respondents thought it should be decriminalised and regulated as a healthcare service
- High levels of support for decriminalisation was consistent across men and women, all age groups, residents of metropolitan/regional and rural areas, and all levels of educational achievement
- There was strong support for women seeking abortion to be protected from harassment (89%) and for protest exclusion zones around abortion clinics (81%)
- Support for decriminalisation and protection of women seeking an abortion was higher among regional/rural residents than Sydney based respondents
- A higher proportion of regional/rural residents than Sydney based respondents knew someone who had ever had an abortion

Conclusion

- NSW residents are largely unaware that abortion is a criminal offence in their state.
- Most believe it should be decriminalised and that women should be able to access abortion services without persecution.