



PewResearchCenter

MENU

RESEARCH AREAS

OCTOBER 6, 2015

How abortion is regulated around the world

BY ANGELINA E. THEODOROU ([HTTP://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/AUTHOR/ATHEODOROU/](http://www.pewresearch.org/author/atheodorou/)) AND ALEKSANDRA SANDSTROM ([HTTP://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/AUTHOR/ASANDSTROM/](http://www.pewresearch.org/author/asandstrom/))

The regulation of abortion may vary widely from country to country, but nearly all nations – 96% – allow women to terminate their pregnancies in order to save their lives, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis (<http://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/global-abortion/>) of 196 countries based on 2013 United Nations data. Indeed, only six countries do not allow women to receive abortions under any circumstances.

About a quarter of the countries in the analysis (50 countries, or 26%) *only* allow abortions to save the life of the mother. An additional 82 nations (42%) allow abortions when the mother's life is at risk as well as for at least one other *specific* reason, such as to preserve a woman's physical or mental health, in cases of rape or incest, because of fetal impairment or for social or economic reasons. And three-in-ten countries (58) allow abortions on request or for any reason, although many of these states do not allow women to terminate their pregnancies after a certain point (e.g., 20 weeks).



Explore an interactive map of worldwide abortion policies

The six countries that do not allow abortions under any circumstances are the Latin American nations of Chile, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Nicaragua as well as Vatican City (represented in the U.N. by the Holy See) and Malta, both of which are in Europe.

The Vatican and Malta are exceptions to the norm in Europe, where about three-quarters of countries allow abortions for any reason (73%). France, Germany, Greece and Russia are among the 32 European nations where this is the case.

In a few European states (Ireland, Andorra and San Marino), abortion is only permitted if the mother's life is at risk. Ireland is the only country in Europe with a constitutional ban on abortion

(<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1983/en/act/cam/0008/print.html>) outside of saving a mother's life; women who receive an illegal abortion in the country face up to 14 years' imprisonment (<http://europe.newsweek.com/un-call-irish-referendum-abortion-328535>).

In Latin America, most people believe that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, according to a 2014 Pew Research Center report (<http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/chapter-5-social-attitudes/#views-on-abortion>). Only in Uruguay, which has some of the most liberal abortion laws (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19986107>) in the region, does at least half the public (54%) voice support for legal abortion in all or most cases. In Chile, public opinion is divided on the issue; 47% say that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, while 49% say it should be illegal in all or most circumstances. Elsewhere, clear majorities – ranging from 60% in Argentina to 95% in Paraguay – oppose making abortion lawful. (Abortion is legal for any reason in Cuba, which was not included in the survey.)

Although all countries in the Middle East-North Africa region allow abortions if the mother's life is at risk, only four out of 18 permit abortions in cases of rape or incest, and just two (Bahrain and Tunisia) allow abortion for any reason. Similar trends are seen in sub-Saharan Africa, where 98% of countries allow abortions to save the mother's life, but only 33% permit abortion in cases of rape or incest and just two, Cape Verde and South Africa, allow elective abortions for any reason. (Percentages for sub-Saharan Africa could be slightly higher, but U.N. figures for South Sudan were unavailable.)

A third of countries in the Asia-Pacific region allow abortion for any reason, including Australia, China and Turkey.



Angelina E. Theodorou (<http://www.pewresearch.org/author/atheodorou/>) is a research analyst focusing on religion at Pew Research Center.

[POSTS](#) | [EMAIL](#) | [@ANGTHEODOROU](#)

Aleksandra Sandstrom (<http://www.pewresearch.org/author/asandstrom/>) is a copy editor focusing on religion at Pew Research Center.

[POSTS](#) | [EMAIL](#)

14 Comments



Kate Day • 1 year ago (#comment-659898)

This article is incomplete and somewhat misleading as it offers very little about how abortion is actually regulated. Abortion laws without the qualifier of gestational time makes the reason requirement fairly useless.

Since only 6 countries do not allow abortion at all, a more useful comparison would be the limits on abortion in weeks of gestation, unless wanting the reader to assume abortion without an reason or limit is common. (I do give credit of the slight mention many states may have limits such as 20 weeks, though not given the weight of

the actual impact).

Such misinformation can lead to the media frenzy we saw when Texas proposed limits of 20 weeks, as though it is a throwback to the dark ages. The fact that abortion greater than 20 weeks gestation is not all that common in the rest of the world, would diminish the argument.

This has much more meaning on actual policy: [lozierinstitute.org/internationalabortionnorms/](http://www.lozierinstitute.org/internationalabortionnorms/)
(<http://www.lozierinstitute.org/internationalabortionnorms/>)



Federico • 1 year ago (#comment-659205)

In Uruguay a woman can legally have an abortion on request, the interactive map is outdated.



Acevedo-Pena • 1 year ago (#comment-659030)

“In Latin America, most people believe that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases, according to a 2014 Pew Research Center report. Only in Uruguay, which has some of the most liberal abortion laws in the region, does at least half the public (54%) voice support for legal abortion in all or most cases. Elsewhere, clear majorities – ranging from 60% in Argentina to 95% in Paraguay – oppose making abortion lawful. (Abortion is legal for any reason in Cuba, which was not included in the survey.)”.

That’s incorrect since it’s not “elsewhere” though. According to your same source, Chileans are very divided regarding abortion legislation. Chile is -along with Uruguay- the other Latin American country where there isn’t a clear majority against abortion in all or most cases.



Aleksandra Sandstrom • 1 year ago (#comment-659045)

Thank you for your comment – you are correct and we have updated the piece to reflect the information about Chile.



Seanmom • 1 year ago (#comment-659028)

It seems curious, considering that the primary political question in play on abortion in the US right now is the attempt to ban abortion after 20 weeks. Perhaps it is inconvenient to mention that only 6 other countries generally permit abortion after 20 weeks: China, North Korea, Singapore, Vietnam, The Netherlands and Canada.



Jim • 1 year ago (#comment-659001)

Abortion for any reason is not permitted under UK law, but this doesn’t correspond very well to practice – things like “risk to mental health” can be applied extremely broadly.



Joyce Arthur • 1 year ago (#comment-658942)

This is a great resource, thank you!

Three things to point out though:

1. Abortion law often does not translate to abortion practice. Even “liberal” laws may not be very well implemented, such as in India and South Africa, where there are plenty of illegal unsafe abortions because access and knowledge are insufficient.
2. In general, countries that “allow” abortion only to save a woman’s life, are responsible for significant maternal mortality due to unsafe abortion (i.e, the law does the opposite).
3. The article assumes the existence of laws that criminalize or restrict abortion to at least some extent, but several countries have no such laws at all, including Canada, China, North Korea, and 2 states in Australia. This deserves highlighting.



Vincenzina Santoro • 1 year ago (#comment-658936)

Can you tell me where you discovered this information?



Aleksandra Sandstrom • 1 year ago (#comment-658958)

All of the information came from the United Nations. You can download the data [here](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/policy/world-abortion-policies-2013.shtml) (<http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/policy/world-abortion-policies-2013.shtml>) .



Vincenzina Santoro • 1 year ago (#comment-659051)

I had written my own analysis on abortion information in a report two years ago!
I represent a pro-life NGO at the UN.



Packard Day • 1 year ago (#comment-658924)

Few ever consider the positive eugenics benefits of legalized and heavily subsidized abortion. Not having an extra four or five million unwanted American indigenous urban people, who will grow up to become perpetual wards of the state, is a good thing. If it were not so socially awkward to do, we might all thank Planned Parenthood (in this country) for their unique contribution to advancing that end.



roibin • 1 year ago (#comment-661931)

You can only thank Planned Parenthood if you are lucky enough to have a mother who chose not to use their "Services"



ange • 1 year ago (#comment-658917)

Abortion for any reason is NOT legal in Australia. In a number of states in Australia, abortion is a crime. In these states an abortion is generally regarded as lawful if performed to prevent serious danger to the woman's physical or mental health.



Aleksandra Sandstrom • 1 year ago (#comment-658923)

This analysis looks at country-level laws. In several countries, states may make their own laws. This analysis also does not purport to examine the availability of abortions, only laws governing them. Data used in this analysis is available [here](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/policy/world-abortion-policies-2013.shtml) (<http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/policy/world-abortion-policies-2013.shtml>) . For more information on Australia in particular, [this analysis](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp9899/99r) (http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp9899/99r) might be helpful.

