

# Young people's views and knowledge about abortion



## Key points

- There are significant gaps in young people's knowledge about abortion relating to basic information on the where, when and how abortions are provided in Scotland.
- Most of the young people we spoke to were not straightforwardly for or against abortion but presented a range of views which depended upon the circumstances of the pregnancy and the perceived consequences of terminating or continuing the pregnancy.
- In discussing abortion, young people drew on moral debates around rights, responsibilities and choice, and on gender stereotypes relating to norms of sexual behaviour.
- Gaps in young people's knowledge and the way they frame abortion using moral and gender debates act as barriers to them making informed choices and accessing services in the context of pregnancy decision-making and outcomes.

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## Background

While the teenage abortion rate in Scotland has been in decline since 2008, the rate among 16-19 year olds remains the third highest of all age groups (ISD 2015). Moreover, there exists an almost inverse relationship between teenage abortion rates and birth rates by level of deprivation: around 30% of young women living in the most deprived (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 1) areas of Scotland currently abort a conception, compared with 70% of young women from the least deprived (SIMD 5) areas (Macpherson 2013). The factors surrounding decision-making in relation to teenage pregnancy, including abortion, are complex and inter-related. Previous research with pregnant young women indicates that socioeconomic circumstances (particularly deprivation), family and community views, and availability of services are key factors in shaping these decisions. Young women from deprived backgrounds – and who are more likely to have disengaged from education – may view pregnancy and parenthood as a positive outcome, and a child as an opportunity to give and receive affection which may be otherwise absent in their lives (Lee et al. 2004). This patterning of abortion by area of socioeconomic deprivation may also point to social and cultural barriers to abortion services facing young women from the most deprived areas that are not experienced by young women from more affluent backgrounds. Little research to date has addressed the views and attitudes of young people in Scotland toward abortion.

## The study

The primary aim of this qualitative study was to gain insight into the views of young people from contrasting socioeconomic backgrounds about abortion and access to abortion services. The study set out to assess the barriers facing young people in using services to ensure that their views are included in the development of the new Scottish Government's Teenage Pregnancy and Young Parent Strategy.

Fifty young women and men aged 14-19 were recruited between March and May 2015 from youth groups across the NHS Lothian and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde areas. Twenty-seven participants were recruited from areas of high deprivation and 23 from areas of least deprivation. Thirty-six were female, 14 were male, and most were white Scottish, reflecting the predominant ethnic composition of the recruitment areas. Thirty-five gave 'none' as their religion, 10 'Roman Catholic', one 'Muslim' and four non-specific 'Christian'.

Friendship group interviews (two to five per group) were conducted in specific age/gender/socioeconomic configurations to enable comparisons. A topic guide and a range of group activities were used to encourage discussion, including a word association and card-sorting exercise based on materials from the young people's sexual health charity Brook (Education for Choice 2013). All quotations presented here have been anonymised and are identified by interview group composition in terms of socioeconomic status, gender and age range.

## Findings

### What is abortion?

As can be seen from the word cloud representation, when asked specifically about 'what' abortion is, the language used by young people was often negative and highly emotive, including phrases such as "killing the baby" or "abortion is shan" (a shame/going too far). For example when one participant described it as "losing the baby" this was challenged by others in the group. The young people described abortion as "controversial" or a moral "issue". However, the strongly polarised views they described being aware of did not necessarily correspond with their own views, and the majority of groups tended to emphasise the women's right to choose, and the significance of particular circumstances and contexts. There were no groups that

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