

Executive Summary

The first stage of a major in-depth investigation of Australians' attitudes to abortion was conducted in December 2004.

The key findings from this research are:

Majority support for abortion on demand significantly softer than anticipated.

When asked if they supported abortion on demand, 62% said yes. This *in principle* support softens when particular circumstances are considered. Nearly half the population (45%) are 'moderate' in their attitude to abortion in that they somewhat agree or somewhat disagree or are neutral in their attitude to abortion on demand. Put another way, 63% of Australians either oppose or are not strongly supportive of abortion on demand.

Strong community support for a reduction in abortion numbers without restricting access.

64% to 73% of Australians think that the abortion rate is too high. 87% believe that it would be a good thing if the number were reduced while at the same time protecting existing legal rights to freely choose abortion.

Very strong support for the necessity of legal abortion.

7 out of 10 Australians agree with arguments for legal access to abortion based upon women's rights and the idea that abortion is 'a necessary evil', while 75% agree with the argument that it gives women control over their own lives. However, 58% do not accept the 'foetus is not a person' argument.

Australians deeply conflicted on morality of abortion.

Although supportive of legal access to abortion, Australians are deeply ambivalent about the morality of abortion. Apart from 'hard cases' involving a danger to the mother's health or foetal disability, fewer than 1 in 4 thinks abortion is morally justified.

Overwhelming support for abortion for foetal disability.

Support for legal abortion is strongest in the cases of severe foetal disability (85%) or mild foetal disability (60%). But only 15% believe abortion is morally acceptable when the foetus is healthy and there is no abnormal risk to the mother.

Experience of parenthood affects support for abortion.

| Adults who have had children are significantly less supportive of abortion on demand (58%), compared to those who do not have children (74%).

Near unanimous support for serious consideration of all the alternatives before choosing abortion.

| While 75% of Australians believe access to abortion gives women control over their lives, 94% think all the alternatives should be seriously considered before exercising this option.

Strong community support for women who choose alternatives to abortion.

| While 61% to 74% of Australians feel positively towards women who choose alternatives to abortion, only 28% are positive towards women who choose to have an abortion.

Significant considerations for a woman are health and personal circumstances.

| The community believes that significant considerations informing a woman's choice to have or not to have an abortion are:

- | the woman's health (96%);
- | the consequences for the unborn child (80%);
- | the woman's personal circumstances (78%);
- | moral considerations (71%); and
- | religious considerations (53%).

Near unanimous support for counselling prior to abortion.

| 99% of the community believe that women contemplating an abortion should have access to counselling. Of these:

- | 78% believed women *should* have counselling; and
- | 21% believed access to counselling should be *voluntary*.

| Among those who are strongly pro-abortion:

- | 72% said counselling *should* be provided; and
- | 27% said it should be *voluntary*.

Near unanimous support for information on abortion health risks.

| 98% of the public think that women should be advised of any health risks involved in having an abortion before choosing an abortion.

Low level of awareness of alternative services to abortion.

| Most of the community believes that a woman contemplating abortion should seek advice from more than one source, such as a health professional independent of the abortion

provider, a relative or friend, or a professional counselling service. But most (58%) indicate that they themselves would not know where to refer a woman for alternative support services during or after a pregnancy.

Overwhelming support for a continuing and inclusive debate.

Only 22% of Australians think they are very well informed on the topic of abortion. Despite recent moves to ‘shut down’ public discussion of abortion, most (71%) support greater public discussion and most (76%) believe men have an equal right to public comment.

While on the surface there may appear to be considerable public support for legal access to abortion, underneath there is substantial unease about the abortion rate and some of the circumstances in which women avail themselves of this option. Australians favour both genuine choice and lowering the number of abortions. Taken together this suggests that there is a very large constituency for social policy initiatives which enhance choice without restricting access. In the present context, however, the public’s strong desire for a reduction in the number of abortions is accompanied by a clear preference for this to be achieved by non-coercive means. The case for providing a greater range of alternatives to abortion, and promoting those options much more widely, is strongly supported by the research data.

Australians are not persuaded that the present situation guarantees real choice. Most think women need more information, and more independent sources of information, about the implications, risks and alternatives to abortion. Women should be assisted to consider seriously a range of choices, including carrying through the pregnancy to term and bringing up the child themselves (with appropriate community support), or placing the child for adoption. Making such choices real and viable will also entail embedding the issue of abortion in wider issues such as taxation and income policy, family assistance, social security, demographic issues, family-friendly work arrangements, and improved access to child care.

The present research data suggest strong public support for counselling before deciding to have an abortion. Consent to abortion requires more than a simple ‘yes’: the Australian public also expects that it be an informed choice, after serious consideration of:

the risks and alternatives;
the consequences both for the woman and the unborn child; and
the moral issues involved.

Were government and other major institutions to enable and encourage genuine choice for pregnant women, they would not only help to reduce the abortion rate but also satisfy the public that the abortion decision is not being forced upon any woman through lack of information and viable alternatives. Even the strongest supporters of abortion on demand want it to be a last rather than a first resort, and social policy should be recalibrated to ensure this.