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New Research on the Public-Health Benefits of Pro-Life Laws

By Michael J. New

A recent study published by the Population and Pension Research Institute (PAPRI) of London provides evidence of the public-health benefits of legal protections for the unborn. This study compares public-health outcomes in Britain, Wales, and Scotland — where abortion has been legal since 1968 — with outcomes in Ireland and Northern Ireland, where abortion has been legally restricted. The study demonstrates that the Irish consistently outperform their English, Scottish, and Welsh counterparts on a variety of health measures.

The study begins by nicely showing the effectiveness of pro-life laws. The abortion rate in both Ireland and Northern Ireland is consistently lower than the abortion rate in England, Scotland, and Wales. This even takes into account Irish women who obtain abortions in other countries. Additionally, Ireland and Northern Ireland both have a birthrate that is greater than the birthrate in England, Scotland, and Wales — and consistently approaches or exceeds the replacement rate.

The study then considers a range of public-health measures. In 1971 the stillbirth rate was higher in both Northern Ireland and Ireland than in the other countries. However, by 2010 the stillbirth rate had fallen dramatically in both regions and was considerably lower than the stillbirth rate in England, Scotland, and Wales. The study also showed that Ireland and Northern Ireland also have a consistently lower incidence of both low weight births (under 2500 g) and very low weight births (under 1500 g). Finally, women in Ireland and Northern Ireland also enjoy consistently lower maternal-death rates and breast-cancer rates than their English, Welsh, and Scottish counterparts.

A number of industrialized countries legalized abortion in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This has made cross-country comparisons difficult for researchers who wish to study the public-health effects of legal abortion. However, this study is able to nicely compare a range of public-health outcomes across regions that have pursued significantly different policies regarding abortion. The United Nations and the International Planned Parenthood Federation frequently claim that legal abortion reduces maternal mortality and improves women's health. However, this study provides some very solid evidence of the public-health benefits of effective pro-life laws.

— *Michael J. New is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Michigan–Dearborn, a fellow at the Witherspoon Institute, and an adjunct scholar at the Charlotte Lozier Institute in Washington, D.C.*