

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

- Evidence indicates that abortion is a safe, common medical procedure in the United States
- Despite this, beliefs about abortion safety range from perceiving it as very safe to very unsafe.
- Existing research demonstrates that the public often overestimates the risks of abortion procedures,
- Few studies have analyzed why people think abortion is safe or unsafe.

OBJECTIVES

- Examine the reasons individuals give about why they believe that abortion is safe or unsafe.
- Increase knowledge of public understandings of abortion safety to provide information for producing more effective public health messaging.

METHODOLOGY

STUDY POPULATION

- Data from the Ohio Survey of Women, a population-based survey conducted from October 2018 through June 2019 by NORC at the University of Chicago.
- Assessed reproductive health and contraceptive practices among a population-representative sample of women 18-44 years of age in Ohio.
- Study population was selected with address-based sampling to randomly select households.
- Used statistical weights to ensure that the sample represents the demographics of women 18-44 years of age in Ohio.

DATA ANALYSIS

- Participants answered the question: "Based on what you know or have heard, how safe or dangerous do you think abortion is in your state?" with options ranging from "very safe" to "very dangerous."
- Then provided a write-in response to explain why they selected this response.
- We classified write-in responses into twenty-seven themes using a process of loose coding to identify emergent themes within the meta-theme of whether abortion was safe or unsafe.
- We then calculated the frequency and weighted percentage of responses within each theme to assess general patterns in respondents' reasoning related to abortion safety.

RESULTS

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

- 2,466 responded to the closed-ended question on abortion safety
- Participants were predominantly white (65%)
- Nearly half (45%) of respondents reported low SES
- 1,368 provided a response to the open-ended question of why women believed that abortion was safe or unsafe (Tables 1 & 2).

ABORTION SAFETY

- 35% thought abortion was safe compared to 15% who thought abortion was dangerous (Figure 1)
- Women who reported low SES were more likely to believe abortion was dangerous
- There were no differences in age, race/ethnicity, rural Appalachian residence and abortion safety rating

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ABORTION LEGALITY

- Although abortion is legal in Ohio up to 22 weeks after the last menstrual period, public perceptions about abortion legality may have been affected by the various proposed restrictions on abortion over the past few years (e.g. the "heartbeat bill")

"Unsure as it is illegal at this time. I feel as it is illegal the options wouldn't be safe or medically regulated."

– white woman, 30-34 years old, "somewhat dangerous"

ABORTION SAFETY BELIEFS AND MEDICALIZATION

- There's growing support for expanding access to abortion by de-medicalizing medication abortion
- Although abortion can be safely performed without a healthcare professional, our findings indicate public perceptions of abortion safety are nonetheless closely tied with its medicalization

"It's safe because it is legal. There are specific and safe ways to do it by a qualified medical professional. Anything less would not be safe."

– white woman, age 18-24, "very safe"

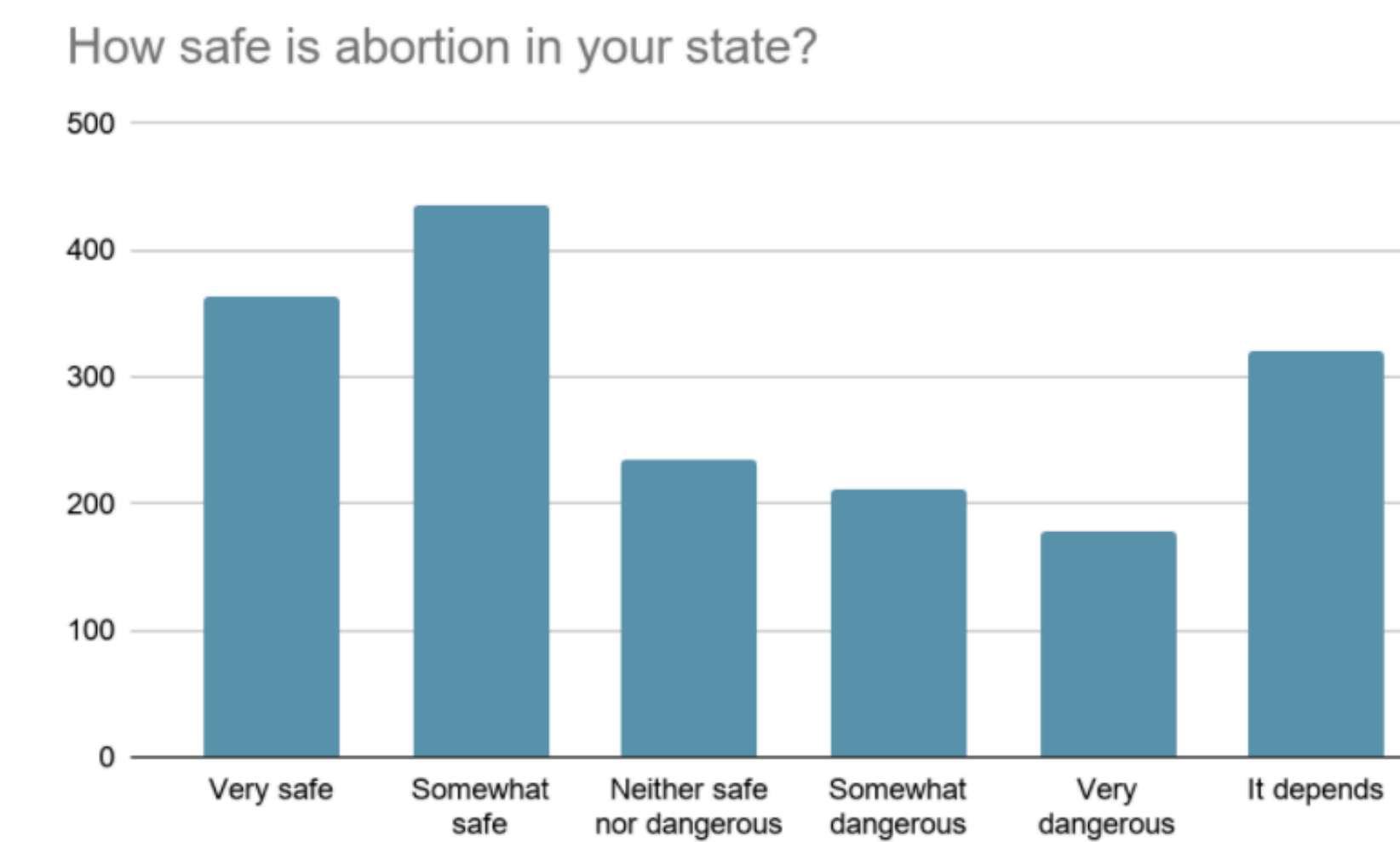


Figure 1. Response counts to the closed-ended question of abortion safety in Ohio

NARRATIVES ABOUT ABORTION INCREASE PERCEPTIONS OF ITS SAFETY

- Participants who had abortions themselves, knew someone who had an abortion, or had experiences as a healthcare professional were more likely to think abortion was safe than unsafe
- Consistent with previous literature highlighting the power of abortion narratives, experiences and storytelling
- Narratives about abortion also provide "pseudo-experiences" in which individuals can visualize themselves in a similar situation and empathize

"Mine & my friends' abortions went great."

– white woman, age 25-29, "very safe"

VIEWS ABOUT ABORTION'S MENTAL HEALTH TOLL FALL ON A SPECTRUM

- Despite the lack of evidence that abortion causes emotional harm, this idea remains common in the public and within our sample
- Several respondents spoke instead to the emotional toll of abortion stigma without any mention of harm stemming from abortion itself
- Highlights the fact that even people who are not concerned with the safety or morality of abortion itself may be deterred from seeking an abortion due to the perception of possible emotional harm related to abortion stigma

"I think the way we approach access to abortion and the stigma around it presents serious mental and other health issues to women."

– white woman, 30-34 years old, "somewhat dangerous"

Reasons respondents think abortion in Ohio is safe	Weighted % of respondents stating reason	N (529)
Performed by doctor/well-trained professional, under regulations, or in safe environment, uses modern technology	47%	275
Because legal	9%	60
Has risks, but risks are reasonable/low	15%	71
Haven't heard of problems	10%	52
Experience of friend, family	7%	30
Routine/common/easy procedure, similar to miscarriage	6%	35
Mentions Planned Parenthood	6%	35
Personal experience	7%	16
Respondent is medical provider or worked in healthcare setting	1%	8
You can pay to have it done	< 1%	2
Safer than pregnancy/childbirth	< 1%	3
It's done in private	2%	1

Table 1. Reasons women think abortion is safe in Ohio

Reasons respondents think abortion in Ohio is unsafe	% of respondents stating reason	N (370)
Causes unspecified health problems, carries unspecified risks	19%	87
Medical procedures (or invasive procedures), all carry risks, anything could go wrong	14%	82
Depends on gestational age/pre-existing conditions/method used	19%	99
Protestors/stigma make unsafe	7%	49
Unethical/opposed to abortion/morally wrong	7%	42
Causes mental health issues, depression or emotional, spiritual toll	9%	51
Kills baby/unsafe for baby	9%	52
Clinic/physician makes it unsafe	5%	34
Limited access/restrictions/few clinics make it dangerous	6%	35
Because illegal or uncertain about legality	8%	38
Causes infertility	6%	16
Causes infection	3%	13
Causes bleeding	2%	12
Risk of death for mother	2%	7
Abortion is unnatural	< 1%	6

Table 2. Reasons women think abortion is unsafe in Ohio

CONCLUSION

- This study is the first to examine qualitative data describing why women hold specific beliefs about the safety of abortion
- Many women had misconceptions regarding the legal status of abortion in Ohio
- Many women view abortion's safety as a result of medicalization
- Women who believed abortion was safe relied on personal narratives about abortion
- Some women believed that abortion was unsafe because of the toll of experiencing abortion stigma
- These findings indicate that misconceptions about abortion safety and legality are still common.
- Understanding why people hold particular beliefs regarding abortion is an important step for identifying and addressing the sources of abortion misinformation.