



Induced abortions in the Nordic countries 2021

The number of induced abortions is declining in the Nordic countries

MAIN FINDINGS

- Finland has fewest induced abortions in Nordic region.
- Induced abortions among teenagers have declined in all Nordic countries in recent years.
- There are significant differences in the abortion legislation among the Nordic countries.
- In Iceland, the new legislation did not increase the number of abortions.
- In Finland, a new legislation will come into effect on 1.9.2023.

Some 53 000 induced abortions were performed in Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland in 2021, that is, 11.5 abortions per thousand women of childbearing age (15–49 years). Finland had the lowest and Sweden the highest abortion rate; there were 6.7 induced abortions per thousand women aged 15–49 years in Finland, while the corresponding figure for Sweden was 15.1. For Denmark, data for 2019–2021 are not available.¹ In 2018, there were approximately 14 300 induced abortions in Denmark (11.4/1000 women aged 15–49).

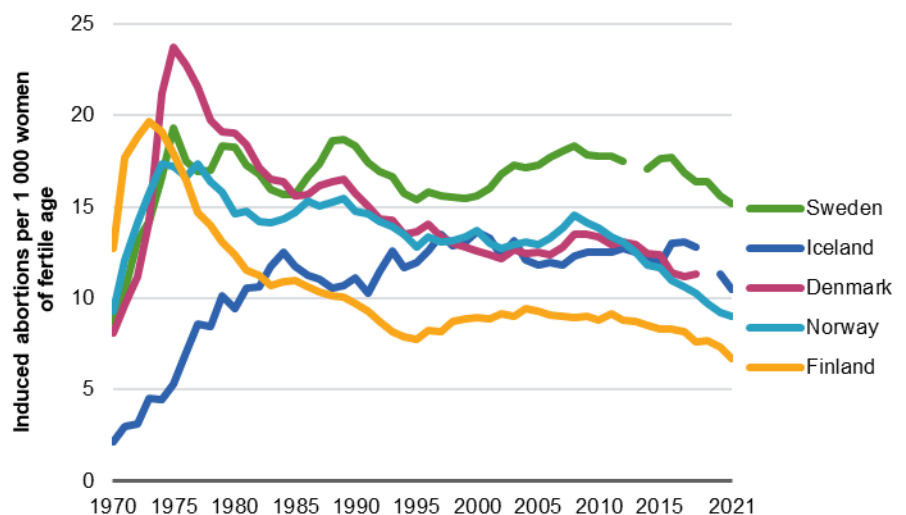
In the 2000s abortions among the under-20s have decreased in all Nordic countries. In 2021, abortion rates among the under-20s in Norway and Finland were lower than in Sweden and Iceland in 2021.

Though the total number of induced abortions is still slightly higher than in early 2000's, the number has decreased in recent years and is currently considerably below the level of the 1970s and 1980s. Back then, between 85 000 and 100 000 induced abortions were performed in the Nordic region each year.

In Iceland, new legislation came into effect in September 2019². According to the new legislation, an induced abortion is available on request until the 22nd weeks of gestation. A more liberal legislation did not cause an increase in the number of abortions in Iceland.

In Finland, legislation on induced abortion is the strictest of the Nordic countries. New legislation will come into effect on 1st September 2023. According to the new legislation, an induced abortion is available on request until the 12th weeks of gestation.

Figure 1. Induced abortions per 1000 women in fertile age (aged 15–49), 1970–2021



No information for Sweden 2013, Denmark 2019–2021 and Iceland 2019.

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¹ There are no 2019–2021 data available for Denmark. Data for 2018 have been partly used for comparisons.

² [The Icelandic legislation on induced abortions](#)

Data in the statistical report

The statistics include data on induced abortions from all Nordic countries.

The statistics are mainly based on information from the national registers on induced abortions. Information on induced abortions is collected to each register based on national definitions.

Data for Finland are available from 1973 onwards. The Norwegian register from 1967 onwards, the Icelandic register from 1972 onwards and the Swedish and Danish registers from 1973 onwards and.

In additions to these registers, statistics from national statistical authorities, Eurostat, OECD, WHO and ESHRE (European Society for Human Reproduction and Embryology) are used in this report.

Some 53 000 induced abortions were performed in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Iceland in 2021; approximately 33 700 in Sweden, 10 800 in Norway, 7 600 in Finland and 900 in Iceland. In Denmark, approximately 14 300 induced abortions were performed in 2018. The countries' shares of all induced abortions in the Nordic countries have remained relatively unchanged during the 2000s though Sweden's share has increased slightly as other countries' shares have decreased slightly. (Sotkanet indicator [10101](#))

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In Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland, 11.5 abortions per thousand women of childbearing age (15–49 years) were performed in 2021. Finland had the lowest and Sweden the highest abortion rate; there were 6.7 induced abortions per thousand women aged 15–49 years in Finland, while the corresponding figure for Sweden was 15.1. For Denmark, data for 2019–2021 are not available. In 2018, there were 11.4 abortions per 1000 women aged 15–49. (Figure 2, Sotkanet indicator [10053](#))

Figure 2. Induced abortions in Nordic countries per thousand women aged 15–49 in 2021, for Denmark 2018

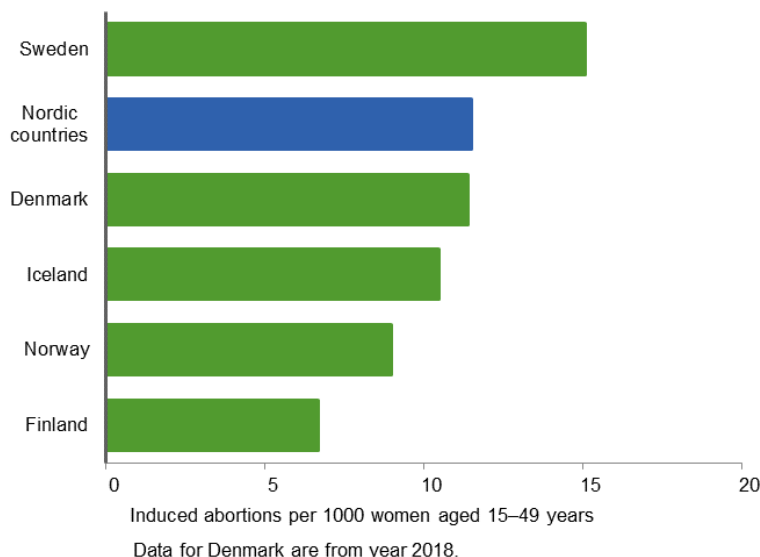
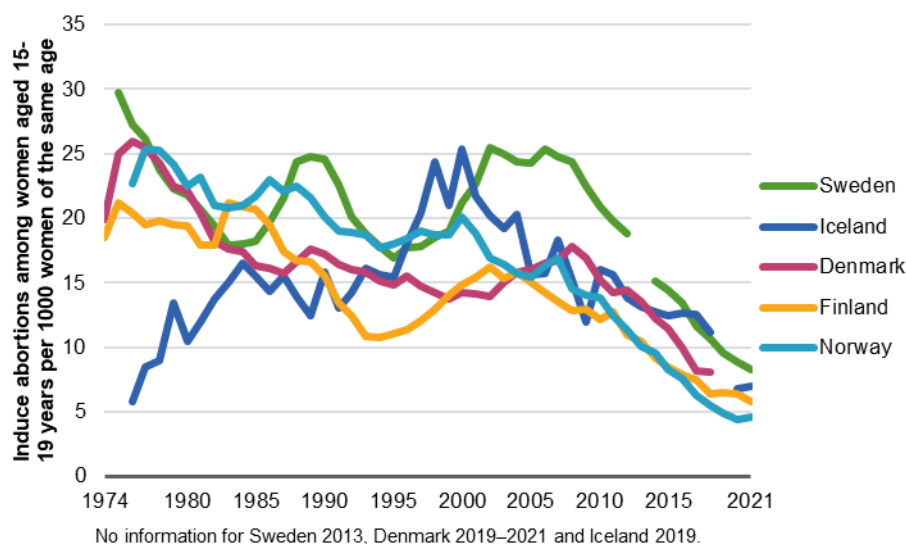


Figure 3. Induced abortions among under-20s per 1000 women aged 15–19, 1974–2021

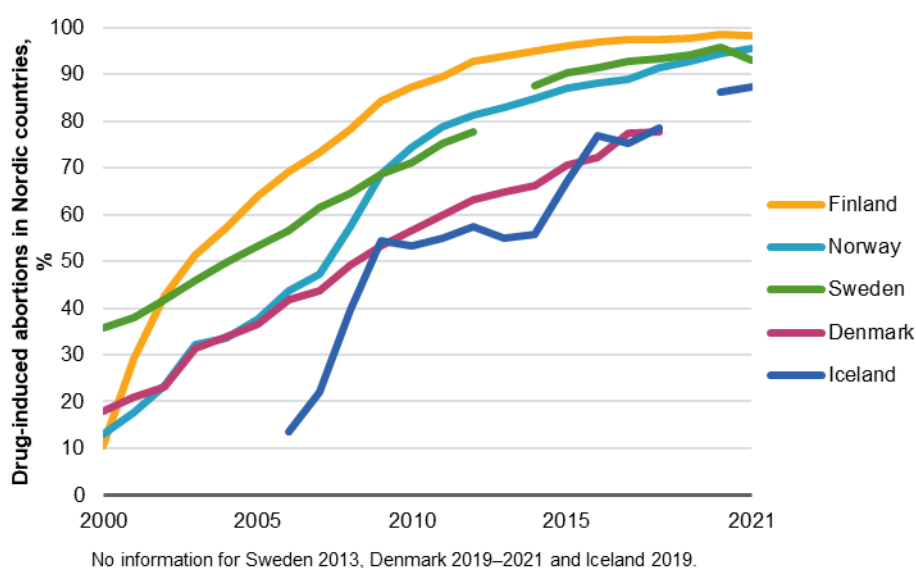


In the 2000s abortions among the under-20s have decreased in all Nordic countries. In 2021, abortion rates among the under-20s in Norway and Finland were lower than in Sweden and Iceland in 2021. (Sotkanet indicator [10052](#))

The proportion of induced abortions carried out before the 9th week of pregnancy has increased in all the Nordic countries. Comparing Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland, in 2021 the proportion of early abortions was the highest in Iceland (88.7%). The proportion of early abortions is the lowest in Finland (77.5%). The proportion of abortions performed after 12 full weeks of gestation has remained relatively stable in the Nordic countries.

Drug-induced (pharmaceutical) abortions have been available in all the Nordic countries since 2006 when Iceland adopted the method. The number of drug-induced abortions has increased each year. The proportion of drug-induced abortions was highest in Finland (98.2%) and the lowest in Iceland (87.4%). (Figure 4.)

Figure 4. Drug-induced abortions in Nordic countries 2000–2021, %



Legislations on induced abortions

Since the 1970s, the legislation on induced abortions in the Nordic countries has been fairly liberal. The current legislation on induced abortions, valid until autumn 2023, dates from 1970 and 1985 (Finland), 1973 (Denmark), 1975 (Sweden), 1978 (Norway) and 2019 (Iceland). However, the legislation varies from one country to another.

In Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and since 2019 also in Iceland, an induced abortion can be carried out upon the request of the pregnant woman. In Denmark and Norway, an induced abortion can be performed up to the 12th week of gestation, in Sweden up to the 18th week and in Iceland up to the 22nd week. An induced abortion can also be carried out at a later date, but this requires the permission of a national or regional authority.

In Finland, women must always apply for permission, which can be granted on indication defined under legislation: before the 12th week of gestation, such permission can usually be granted by one or two physicians, whereas after the 12th week, permission by a national authority (Valvira) is required. In Finland, a new legislation will come into effect on 1st September 2023. According to the new legislation, an induced abortion is available on request until the 12th weeks of gestation.

In Finland, it is possible to terminate pregnancy due to a foetal defect of until the 24th week of pregnancy. In Sweden, induced abortions due to foetal defect are possible until the 22nd week of pregnancy. In Iceland, Norway and Denmark, no upper limit is specified.

Induced abortions in Europe

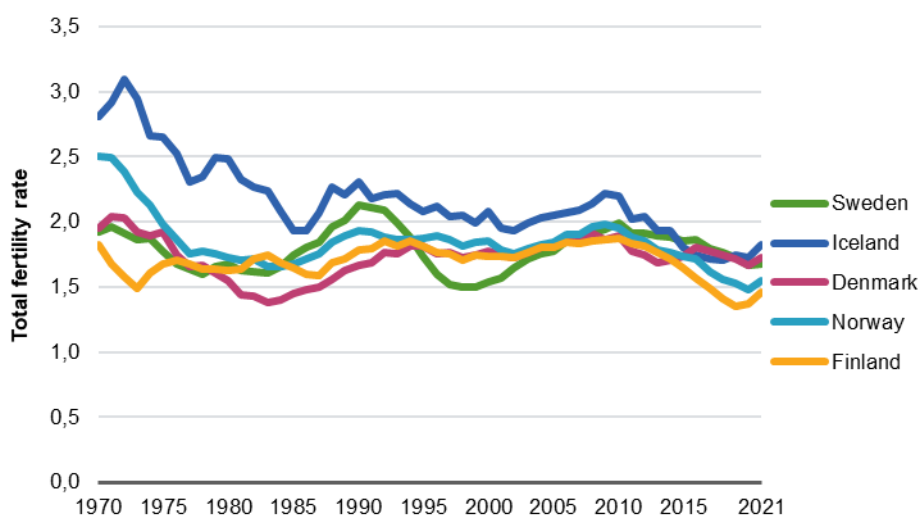
Compared to rest of Europe, the abortion rate is relatively low in the Nordic countries. However, there are significant differences in the legislation of the European countries, which affects the number of registered abortions.

The abortion rate is the highest in the countries of the former Soviet Union and the lowest in Malta and Poland. In these countries abortion is in practice illegal or access is very restricted. Ireland approved a legislation allowing an induced abortion in December 2018, and since then the number of abortions has increased in Ireland³, but still clearly less in proportion to the population than, for example, in the Nordic countries. In Western Europe the abortion rate is lower than in Finland in e.g. Germany and Switzerland where the legislation is quite liberal (e.g. early abortion on woman's own request is allowed).^{4,5}

Birth rates in the Nordic countries

In 2021, live births totaled in 288 500 in the Nordic countries (Sotkanet indicator [10074](#)). In 2021, the total fertility rate (the number of live births per woman during her reproductive period) was the highest in Iceland (1.21) and the lowest in Finland (1.46). (Figure 5, Sotkanet indicator [10072](#))

Figure 5. Total fertility rate, 1970–2021



During the corona pandemic fertility increased in all Nordic countries. Even though the total fertility rate has decreased below the level of 2010s in all the Nordic countries (except Finland), it is still relatively high compared to other European countries. In 2020, the average total fertility rate in EU 27 countries was 1.50. In 2020, the highest rate was in France (1.83). The lowest total fertility rate was in Malta (1.13)⁶.

³ [Health Act 2018 - Annual Report on Notifications 2021](#)

⁴ [Eurostat database/Abortion ratio](#) [Accessed 9.2.2023.]

⁵ Terminations of pregnancy in the European Union (2012). Gissler M, Fronteira I, Jahn A, Karro H, Moreau C, Oliveira da Silva M, Olsen J, Savona-Ventura C, Temmerman M, Hemminki E; REPROSTAT group. BJOG. 2012 Feb;119(3):324-32

⁶ [Eurostat Database/Total Fertility Rate](#)[Accessed 9.2.2023.]

Terms and definitions

Induced abortion: Artificially induced termination of pregnancy which is not a birth and which results in the death of one or more foetuses (≥ 1) and in which there is no indication of intrauterine foetal death before the termination. (According to the Finnish definition.)

Length of gestation: The length of gestation is calculated from the first day of the last normal menstrual period and is given in full weeks and days (weeks+days). The length of gestation can be assessed also with the help of an antenatal ultrasound scan or on the basis of an antenatal clinical examination. (According to the Finnish definition.)

Medical abortion: Medical abortion in the first trimester refers to termination of pregnancy with the combination of antiprogestin (mifepristone) and prostaglandin (miso-prostol) before the 12th week of gestation ($\leq 12+0$). Usually there is no need for a surgical procedure when induced abortion is performed this early.

Medical abortion in the second trimester refers to termination of pregnancy on the 12th week of gestation or later ($12+1-24+0$) by using an abortifacient (usually mifepristone) as well as prostaglandin and other drugs. A surgical procedure is also performed, if necessary. (According to the Finnish definition.)

www.thl.fi/statistics/nordiccountriesabortions



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Quality Description (OSF)

Induced abortions in the Nordic countries

Relevance of statistical data

The Induced abortions in the Nordic countries statistics are maintained by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) and updated every two years, describing the number of induced abortions annually in all Nordic countries. In addition to the figures, the abortions are presented by age group per 1,000 women of the equivalent age group.

The statistical report also presents figures on the time of abortion by weeks of pregnancy, the proportion of drug-induced abortions and the number of abortions relative to live births. The end of the statistical report presents data on birth rates in the Nordic countries (number of live births and total fertility rate)⁷. The data content of the statistics has been defined so that the data can be compiled comprehensively for all Nordic countries. For this reason, the statistics do not include all variables collected in national abortion statistics.

The report is aimed at health care practitioners, authorities, planners and researchers working with reproductive health who need up-to-date information on abortions and need to relate country-specific information to the international situation.

In Finland, the operation of the abortion register is based on the Act on the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (668/2008) and the Act on Abortion (239/1970). Information on the bases of data collection in other Nordic countries is available on the relevant websites.

Description of methods

The latest information has been updated based on official statistics from each country, which the contact persons of the countries have submitted to THL. The contact persons represent organisations responsible for collecting abortion data in each country:

- Iceland: [Directorate of Health](#) and [Statistics Iceland](#)
- Norway: [Norwegian Institute of Public Health](#) and [Statistics Norway](#)
- Sweden: [National Board of Health and Welfare](#) and [Statistics Sweden](#)
- Finland: [Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare](#) and [Statistics Finland](#)
- Denmark: [Danish Health Data Authority](#) and [Statistics Denmark](#)

Statistics in each country are collected using different methods. In Denmark, in recent years, abortion data have been collected directly through a national hospital register containing personal identity codes. In Finland, information related to abortions is collected using a separate form that also contains the identity of the person. In Norway and Sweden, individual-level data are collected on the form, but the personal identity data are not stored in the national register. In Iceland, a separate data collection form was used before 2019, but with the reformed Termination of Pregnancy Act in 2019, the Icelandic Care Register became the data source.

The concepts and definitions used are presented in the text of the statistical report. In relating the data to the population, average population figures by age groups of five have been used. The population data are based on the figures reported by the countries to Nomesco (Nordic Medico-Statistical Committee), and the total fertility figures follow the total fertility figures reported to Eurostat and are mainly based on the figures of each country's statistical authority^{8,9}.

The Finnish data contains data for Åland Islands, but the Danish data does not contain data for the Faroe Islands or Greenland¹⁰.

⁷Alternately with these statistics, [Perinatal statistics in the Nordic countries](#) are published in even years, with detailed information on births and newborns in the Nordic countries.

⁸ Nordic population statistics can be found on the [Nomesco/Nososco website](#). [As of 9 Feb 2023.]

⁹ [Further information on Eurostat birth rate statistics](#)

¹⁰ Information on abortions in the Faroe Islands and Greenland can be found in [Nomesco's Nordic data-base](#).

Sweden's data on abortions for 2013 are missing as data collection was suspended in Sweden in spring 2013. The detailed nature of the data collection and the protection of privacy were examined, and it was decided that data collection would continue at the beginning of 2014 with reformed data content.

Iceland's data for 2019 are missing. The absence of Iceland's data is connected to Iceland's reformed 2019 legislation and the related reform of data collection. The data for 2019 will not be published, but from 2020 onwards, the data will be reported on the basis of the reformed data collection.

Denmark's data for 2019–2021 are missing, which is related to the reform of the Danish abortion register. The data for 2019–2021 will be obtained retroactively after the register reform is completed.

In Finland, abortion data have been collected from all Finnish health care units in which abortions are performed. In accordance with the Act on Abortion and the decree issued under it, the health care unit in which the procedure is performed must submit a notification of the procedure to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) using a form approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health within one month of the completion of the procedure.

Correctness and accuracy of data

Each Nordic country's statistical institution is responsible for their own national data collection and accuracy of data. Each country's contact person checks and approves the information to be published before it is published.

Any errors found in the statistics will be corrected. Due to the notification delay, statistics for previous years are also updated retroactively. However, these corrections do not significantly affect the overall trend of the number of abortions.

Timeliness and promptness of published data

The Induced abortions in the Nordic countries statistics are produced by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare once every two years (odd years). The statistics are published once the national statistics of all Nordic countries are completed and published. As an exception, the statistics for 2021 will be published without Danish data for 2019–2021, as they have not yet been completed due to the Danish register reform.

Availability and transparency/clarity of data

The Induced abortions in the Nordic countries statistics have been published since 1999. The statistical report will be published on [the website of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare \(THL\)](#).

More detailed information on abortions in Finland can be found on [THL's website](#). For the first time in connection with this publication, the tables related to the statistics have been replaced by [Sotkanet indicators](#).

[Findata](#) can grant researchers permission to use the data in the Finnish abortion register for scientific research. The statistical authority of each country is responsible for the use of data from said country.

Comparability of statistical data

The Nordic abortion statistics can be used to estimate the number of abortions from the 1970s until today and to compare the number of abortions between the countries. The tables have been designed and defined between Nordic partners, with the aim of defining the variables uniformly.

There may be minor differences in the availability of individual variables. The data content of the statistics has been updated, for example, as medical methods evolve (drug-induced abortion was only introduced in the early 2000s). There have been no significant changes in the concepts used in the statistics during the collection of the statistics.

Finland's current Act on Abortion dates back to 1970. The most significant amendment to this act is the Act on the Amendment of the Act on Abortion (572/1985), which allowed

fetal-based termination before the 24th full pregnancy week ($\leq 24+0$). The abortion data maintained by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare are available in electronic format beginning with 1983.

Clarity and consistency/cohesion

The statistical report contains comprehensive information on abortions in the Nordic countries. The data from previous years are updated retrospectively as necessary, but changes to previous years have been found to be relatively small.

Special issues concerning the 2021 statistics

Denmark's data for 2019–2021 are missing. The Danish data will be completed at a later date and will be added to the next statistical report, to be published in 2025.

Sweden's 2020 statistics show that 2.7% of abortions lack information on the person's age, which means that the figures per age group for Sweden are slightly lower than in reality.

For the first time in connection with this statistical publication, the table appendices have been replaced by [Sotkanet indicators](#).