

# Older mothers driving abortions to a record high

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The number of abortions carried out in England and Wales last year was the highest on record.

The total of 209,519 abortions was largely driven by the rate among older mothers, according to figures released yesterday by the Department of Health and Social Care.

Groups working with women seeking abortion said that financial instability played a role in their decisions, predicting that the uncertainty caused by Covid-19 might cause further increases.

The statistics showed that the rate of abortion went up slightly, from 17.4 per 1,000 women in 2018, to 18 per 1,000 women last year. That can be largely put down to increased rates among older women. Over the past decade, the proportion of women aged 30 to 34 having abortions has increased from 15.7 per 1,000 in 2009 to 20.9 last year, making this the group with the greatest rise.

For women over 35, the rate increased from 6.6 per 1,000 in 2009 to 9.7 last year. While the abortion rates for those under 18 have fallen over the past ten years, last year's rate remained the same as 2018, at 8.1 per 1,000.

Most women undergoing an abortion were already mothers, at 55 per cent, up from 49 per cent a decade earlier.

Clare Murphy, director of external affairs at the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, said: "The reasons for this increase will be complex but women and their partners, when faced with an

unplanned pregnancy, will make decisions based on the circumstances they find themselves in — and financial instability or uncertainty can often play a key role in those choices.

"Over the years we have seen a shift towards smaller families, which also goes hand in hand with the later age at which women start their families."

The average "completed family" size for women in England and Wales who had reached the age of 45 was 1.89 children per woman in 2018, the latest year for which data is available.

Ms Murphy said that while contraception alone would not prevent the need for abortion services, there was more that could be done "to ensure better access to high-quality services".

The advisory service has called on the government to remove the two-child limit for families to receive child benefit, which they say has led some women to end wanted pregnancies because of financial concerns.

The figures also show that while 74 per cent of abortions took place in the independent sector, 99 per cent were funded by the NHS.

Anti-abortion groups described the numbers as "a tragedy". They pointed to 17 abortions recorded where the foetus had a cleft lip or palate. A bill in parliament is seeking to ban abortions undertaken for this reason.

The groups' opponents say that while many such disabilities can be corrected after birth, the figures are likely to reflect extreme cases.