

# **“They are not the ones facing a life changing choice”: Public Attitudes to Anti-Reproductive Choice (“Pro-Life”) Protests**



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## Executive Summary

- For respondents to this study, attitudes to restricting Pro-Life<sup>1</sup> protests were not, in general, one of limiting freedom to protest but rather of enforcing appropriate responsibility in selecting sites for protest for this issue.
- Buffer zones were supported by 84% of respondents including 60.9% of those who favoured no restrictions on the freedom to protest.
- Pro-Life protests are viewed significantly more negatively compared to other protests by the general public.
- In both the case of the photograph-based prompt question addressed to the wider public and reflections on actual protests seen, there were broad similarities in the issues raised around Pro-Life protest activities. These included the attributes and nature of material used (particularly inaccurate and/or graphic materials); the emotional response it engendered; the impact on others including service users, staff (through attempts to disrupt legitimate activity) and passers-by; and the imposition of moral or religious conduct/discourse into public spaces.
- Concerns were raised about the amount of disruption that Pro-Life protests caused by “pavement counselling” (Jackson & Valentine 2017) (i.e. handing out leaflets, attempts to engage in conversation etc.) and filming of both building/site users and of those who object to their presence/ tactics/message.
- Intimidation, distress, judgementalism and anger were the most cited emotional responses to seeing Pro-Life protests. There were no positive emotional descriptions of seeing Pro-Life protests (such as, “it made me happy to see this”), even from those who stated they held a Pro-Life position.
- Much of the concern about the wording of visible materials related to the stigmatisation of a legal healthcare choice. As such, the purpose of such material seems to be less to debate the issues than to shame both service users and passers-by who may fit into this category.
- There appears to be no clear requirement for Pro-Life protests to be able to protest directly outside of reproductive choice providers other than the attempt to disrupt both individual’s healthcare choices and the legitimate activities of such providers and anyone else who is co-located with them.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report we have used the terms most commonly used by protestors themselves to describe their stances on the issue, therefore “Pro-Life” will be used for those whose position is about the limiting of reproductive choices and “Pro-Choice” for those whose position is about maintaining or extending (e.g. decriminalisation) of reproductive choices.

## Background

The presence of Pro-Life protests outside reproductive choices providers has become a source of tension in recent years in the UK (Hayes & Lowe 2015), although elsewhere in the world it has been a matter of public debate for far longer (Albert 2005; Finer & Fine 2013). Given this, it is surprising that there has been little research on the issue either in the UK or elsewhere beyond discussions of jurisprudence, political philosophy and healthcare decision making (see also Benyon-Jones 2017). Existing work focuses on the impact on those using the reproductive choice organisations and not the general public. Hayes and Lowe's (2015) report on the impact of Pro-Life protests on users of one reproductive choices providers' clinics provided useful insight for one group who experience such protests. However, the direct service users are not the only group who are affected by protests – the general public, other users of the building/site<sup>2</sup> and staff are also witnesses of and affected by protests at reproductive choice provider premises.

Evidence from the US suggests that such protests set both a hostile environment for workers and users of such organisations and may lead to the closure of services and hence limitations on the right to choice even where such choice is legislatively guaranteed. Evidence from the UK suggests that the presence of 'Pro-Life' protestors politicizes and makes public women's individual, personal decisions about their reproductive choices.

At the current time, there are calls for the Government to legislate for "buffer zones" around reproductive service organisations to protect both staff and clients from 'Pro-Life' protests which have increased in number over the past five years. At the same time there has been a rise in other attempts to limit reproductive choices (including attempts to amend the 1964 Abortion Act, increased presence of anti-abortion campaign groups on University campuses etc.). The basis of the 'buffer zones' proposals is to create safe spaces to allow access to provider organisations whilst simultaneously not limiting protest groups right to hold peaceful, legal demonstrations. Indeed "buffer zones" have been implemented in various other countries (Australia, Canada, some US states) in response to similar contexts (see Jones 2014, Saurette & Gordon 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> As most of these premises were multi-purpose, all targeting of premises uses relate to an indiscriminate targeting of health-care premise users rather than focused campaign against reproductive rights choices users. Indeed some of the sites being protested at provide wide-ranging support and medical interventions ranging from general sexual health through to specific drugs and alcohol services. As such this discussion should be considered in light of the impact on diverse, often vulnerable, health-care users.

Public protests, such as Pro-Life ones, ultimately aim less to change the viewpoint of individual service users (although many such protests do claim they are acting as a 'last line of defence' to try and change users minds) and more to influence the general public in terms of general opinions on reproductive choice. As Armstrong and Boyle (2011) note, protesters do have the ability to provoke interest in particular issues and sometimes to enact change. This research was based on the idea that a better understanding of the impact of seeing 'Pro-Life' protests by wider members of the public would help inform both discussions about buffer zones and ongoing discussions about safety and impact of the increasing Americanization of British Pro-Life protests.

## Research Design & Methods

Prompted by discussion in localities in which researchers were based, we compiled a mixed-methods online survey relating to questions about general attitudes to protests, attitudes to specific forms of protests and experiences of seeing Pro-Life protests. The survey therefore had two major audiences: the general public in relation to widespread views on protests and the public who had seen Pro-Life protests in operation. The survey was reviewed and approved by the University of Gloucestershire Ethics Committee.

The survey was open to the public from mid-July to mid-September 2016 and was advertised via general social media sites plus on sites focusing on three major groups: those relating to areas in which Pro-Life protests had been publically discussed (local newspapers etc.) as happening; Pro-Life interest groups; and Pro-Choice interest groups. Although the use of an online survey does mean some degree of sample bias (via the digital divide and through the pattern of snowball sampling of respondents), it was determined that this was the best way to conveniently gather a national sample on this topic and to enable snowball sampling as completers shared the survey link with others who may be interested in completing the survey. Sample recruitment was open to all; those who have not witnessed an anti-reproductive choice protest completed questions aimed at assessing overall feeling about public protests.

In total, 166 completed responses were received with 89 responses from people who had seen recent Pro-Life protests. The data was then analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively, the latter using an inductive thematic analysis.

The response rate was lower than had been hoped, due probably to the timing of the survey within the year, but not significantly lower than other online questionnaires conducted with limited resources.

The respondents who completed the survey were predominantly women.

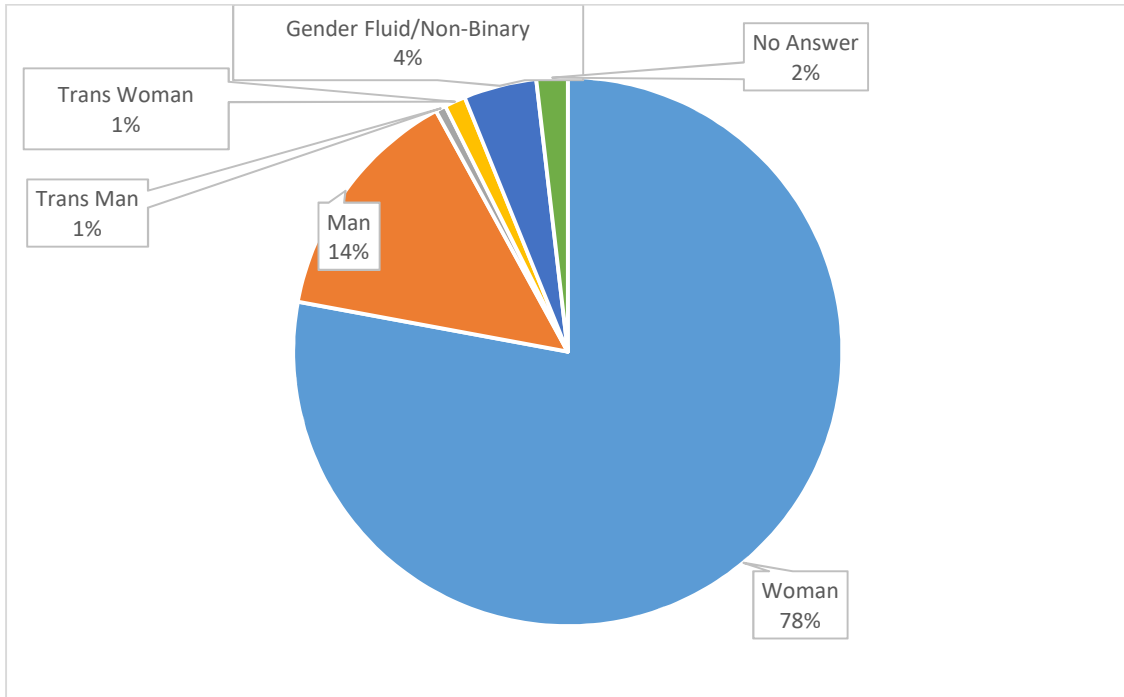


Figure 1 Gender Make-up of Sample

The age profile of respondents is shown below and there was an even spread of genders throughout each age group. As the purpose of this research was not to assess the demographic

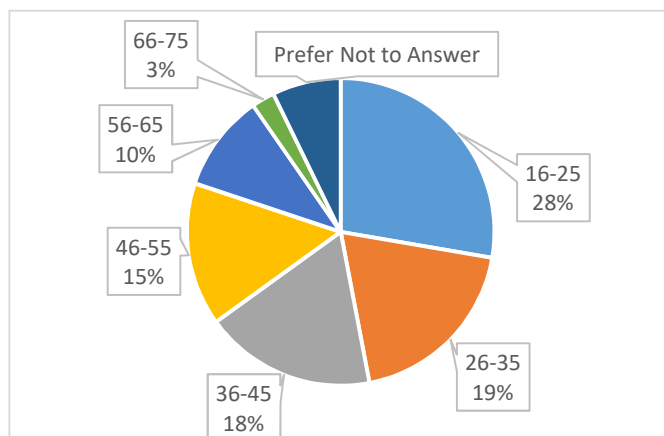


Figure 2 Age Make-up of Sample

breakdown of those who hold particular views on the issue of reproductive choices, the survey asked for such information only as a way of categorising later answers to ensure we could fairly represent all viewpoints who took part.

## Discussion of “Buffer Zones”

There was an overall commitment to free expression of belief. When broken down by general stance on reproductive rights, the highest proportion of any stance who believed in controls with

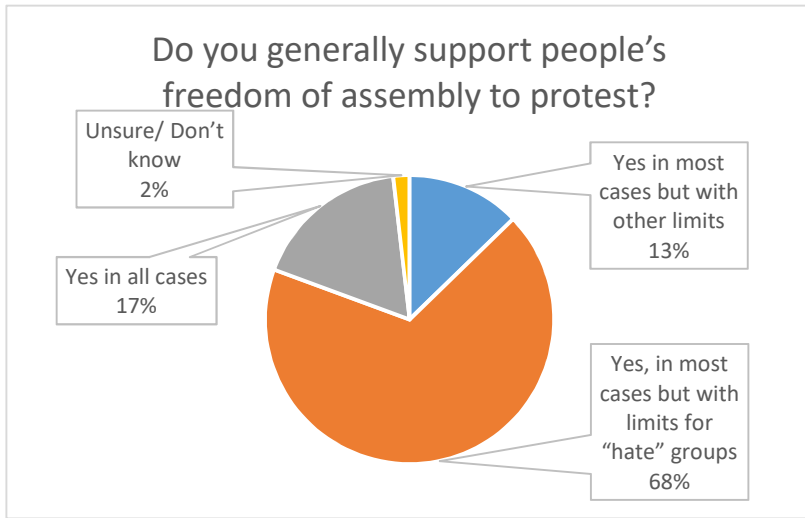


Figure 3 General viewpoint on freedom to protest

limits other than only for “hate groups” were those who were Strongly Pro-Life (25% of group) or Generally Pro-Life (33% of group). These were also the groups with the largest proportion (within group) also favouring total freedom of assembly to protest (50% of Strongly Pro-Life, 67% of Generally Pro-Life). Those

favouring freedom of assembly to protest with limits for hate groups included those who’s reproductive rights stance was Conflicted (100%), Undecided (100%), Generally Pro-Choice (75%) and Strongly Pro-Choice (73.28%) (see Table 1 in Appendix).

When asked directly about support for “buffer zones” around reproductive choices providers, across the whole sample (n=144 for this question) only 16% did not favour compulsory exclusion zones. As Table 2 (in Appendix) shows, 60.9% of those who supported freedom of assembly to protest in all cases also supported “buffer zones” rising to 81% of those who supported freedom of assembly with wider limits and 90% of those who supported freedom of assembly with limits for hate groups.

“they have a right to express their beliefs...as much as I disagree with them”

39 year old, strongly Pro-Choice woman

What this suggests is a widespread support for “buffer zones” across all viewpoints relating to freedom of assembly to protest. However, when analysed in relation to stance on reproductive choices including abortion, the figures show an inclination towards group-interest with 83.33% of those who are strongly Pro-Life being against “buffer zones” and 91.35% of those who are strongly Pro-Choice being in favour irrespective of their viewpoint on freedom of protest. Of interest, however, 100% of those who were generally Pro-Life or Undecided also favoured “buffer zones”, as did 75% of those who were Conflicted and 87.5% of those who were generally Pro-Choice.

Of the 84% of the sample who did support compulsory exclusion zones, 57% supported “buffer zones” determined by distance and 43% determined by line of sight. Reasons for supporting buffer zones in the main related to protection of

“When analysed in relation to stance on reproductive choices including abortion the figures show an inclination towards group-interest with those who were strongly Pro-Life favouring no “buffer zones” and all other groups strongly favouring “buffer zones”

building users, empathy for those making reproductive choices decisions and freedom from harassment/intimidation. A sizable minority of those supporting buffer zones also talked about the balance between freedom to protest and protection for service users, with a consensus being that there were plenty of spaces in which such protests could take place but limited places to seek out healthcare services. Of those who did not support buffer zones, those who were not Pro-Life focused on absolute rights to protest and not allowing government intrusion into that. Those who were Pro-Life generally talked about last minute/doorstep conversion of people seeking reproductive choices advice.

“If you have a buffer zone, that means that they won't have that last minute choice to save their baby, and that means more women having much mental agony later in life” (19 year old woman, strongly Pro-Life)

What this suggests, at minimum, is that entrenched viewpoints on reproductive choice rights is unlikely to deliver a way forward and other models of decision-making need to be found which access the impact on such protests. One way of doing this is by exploring the nature of the protests and what is acceptable in locations providing legitimate and legal healthcare services.

## Attitudes Towards Protests Generally

All respondents were asked for their responses to four photographs of different protests, one of which was a Pro-Life protest. The photographs were chosen to vary elements of the protests including size (small to large), visible presence of children (yes/no) and specific interest group (yes/no) (See Table 4 in Appendix).

The Pro-Life protest had the lowest mean score of the four photographs (1.82, sd=1.03) compared to the other three photographs (combined mean 2.77. sd=0.83). When represented as a box-and-whisker plot (below), it is clear the immediate response to Pro-Life protests is significantly less positive than for other types of protest.



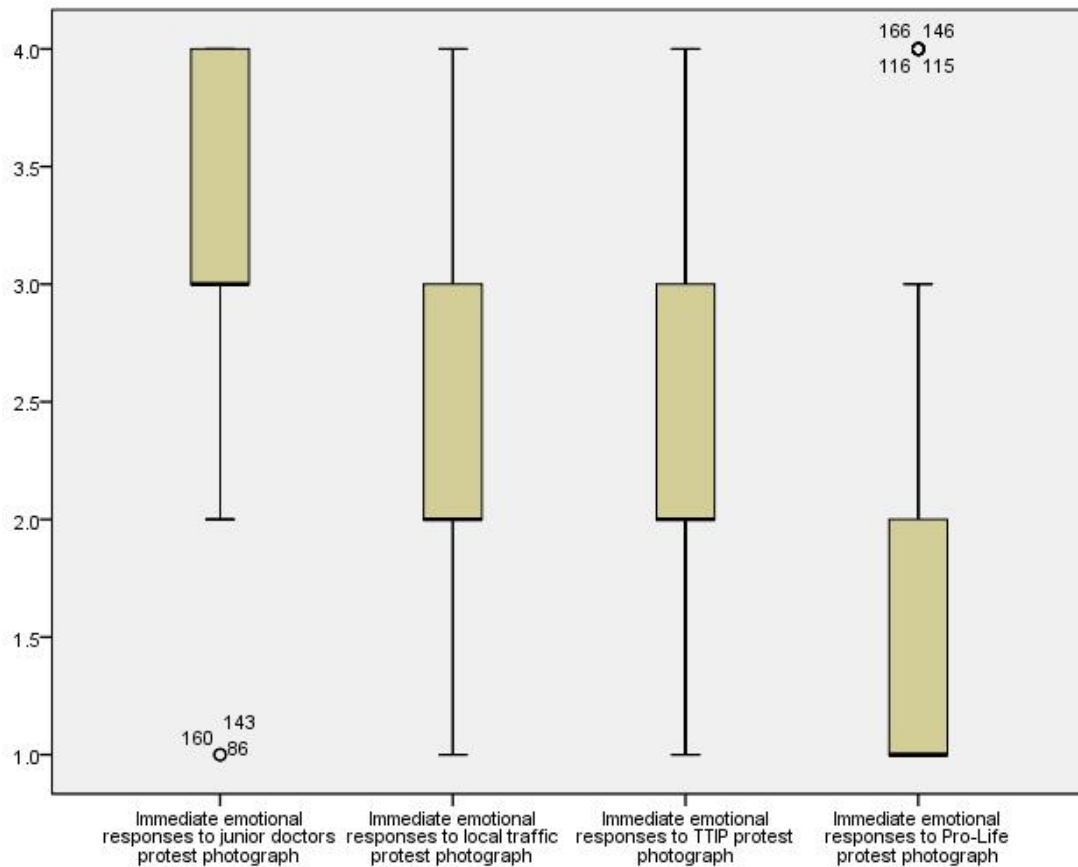


Figure 4 Immediate emotional response to photographic prompts

5 = Strongly Positive, 1= Strongly negative

This suggests that even for people who are generally otherwise supportive or neutral about public protests, Pro-Life protests engender negative emotional responses.

The main themes that emerged from qualitative comments on the Pro-Life protest photograph included

- inaccurate information being visually displayed by the protest
  - “the blatant “Abortion Kills Children” lie immediately makes me suspicious of their motivations”
  - “they look peaceful enough, but their signs are inaccurate”
  - “Abortion doesn’t kill children. War, poverty, neglect, disease, accidents kill children. Efforts should be directed to supporting children rather than hectoring women whose circumstances they know nothing of.”
- bullying/intimidation/aggressive imposition of views on women
  - “Implies a very aggressive hostile outgoing message, even while people are standing quietly.”
  - “Intimidatory stances, looks grim, the message is generally negative by its nature.”
  - “Looks peaceful but message is one of hate and intimidation”
- A right to protest is mediated by the location of protest
  - “I disagree with them but they have as much right to an opinion as I.”

- “Again [they have a] right to protest. Maybe the protesters should be promoting safe sex rather than using emotive banners”
- “if they are outside a clinic that is wrong, but if they are in another public place it is ok”
- “Annoyance in the extreme. But if they aren't within earshot or line of sight of people accessing medical care they have the right to be annoying and wrong”
- “they have a right to peaceful protest but nowhere near an abortion clinic, you are allowed to express your views in this country but when it comes to intimidation we must draw a line.”
- Affect responses (anger, sadness)
  - “People don't know the reasons for someone's choice to abort. I feel it is completely unfair for a person who has decided upon this option to be faced with the emotional repercussions of seeing this protest”
  - “I feel furious that these people, most of whom appear to be men and/or too old to bear children themselves, should dare to pass judgement on those who do, or who choose not to.”
  - “I am very sad when I look at this picture. I am thinking that these people are not knowledgeable about the range of (difficult) situations that can be the reason for an abortion “
  - “Sad, anger, shocked”
  - “It just makes me sick. I want them all to go. How dare they!?”
  - “Fury and distress and fear.”
- Concern for impact on others
  - “this image shows a protest that could be shaming or emotionally damaging.”
  - “a woman may already be feeling strong guilt however there are situations in which the adult is more in need of care and would not be able to provide care for said child if abortion was not an option”
  - “Women fought for many years for the right to choose, they have no right to incite guilt for them making the choices that the law has allowed them.”
  - “someone who has decided to end pregnancy for reasons such as financial hardship, age, rape etc., may have made a very difficult decision and could be harbouring feelings of guilt already and just seeing this could potentially make things so much worse for them.”
- Imposition of morality and religion
  - “horror, bigoted moralising trying to bully people into not having access to the rightly entitled treatment”
  - ““Abortion kills children" is a religious belief, predominantly propagated by the Catholic church, in my experience. I think it is wrong. I abhor the attempt of these people to impose their religious views on those who do not share them.”
  - “I feel furious that these people should dare to pass judgement on those who do, or who choose not to.”
  - “oversimplified rhetoric used in signs and self-righteousness of people protesting outside clinics”

### Experiences of Seeing Pro-Life Protests

Those respondents who reported having seen Pro-Life protests were asked a series of questions about what they had seen and their reactions to it. The reactions questions were designed to be non-directive and asked for qualitative narrative answers to prompts such as, “we would like you to list your thoughts feelings and behaviours in response to witnessing or experiencing this demonstration”. Eighty-nine responses were received in relation to Pro-Life protests seen by people over nine sites in the United Kingdom.

### Nature of Anti-Reproductive Rights Protests

Overall, there was a significant degree of similarity between protest activities—this is unsurprising given the national organisations which co-ordinate and support such actions and the orchestrated nature of these protests. The descriptions of protests seen were coded thematically on an inductive basis (working from the data upwards rather than analysing for pre-determined codes). This resulted in eight themes being identified which were:

- attributes of the protests (including size, non/confrontational, Police presence, etc.)
- the nature of the materials displayed by protestors
- emotions provoked by the protests
- contact initiated by protest (wanted and unwanted)
- recording of the protests (photographers, videographers and whether consent was asked for recording of images)
- religiosity of Pro-Life protests
- disruption of legitimate activity (including physical disruption (blocking of pavements, pathways, entrances) and noise/visual disruption (noise designed to be heard inside clinics, etc.).
- the demographics of protestors (older, white, predominance of men, presence of children, etc.)

### *Attributes of the protests & nature of the materials displayed by protestors*

The protests commented upon ranged from small groups to large pickets— in line with Hayes and Lowe’s (2015) findings more commentary tended to be given where protests utilised graphic imagery and messaging. However, nationally the types of materials and the nature of protests did not vary much in terms of activities but only by intensity.

Activity	No of sites (out of 9)
Banners & Placards	All
Religious Activity	7
Intimidation of Building Users	5
Leaflets	5
Involvement of children	2

Figure 5 Activities observed by respondents at different protest sites

Broken down by area this was constituted by:

Site	Material/Activity Type	Examples of Messaging Discussed
Belfast	Banners & Placards	Misleading “graphic depictions of ‘aborted’ fetuses”
	Religious Activity	Religious Materials
Birmingham	Banners & Placards	Foetus-in-utero images Miscarriage images used as abortion images “Human life is precious” slogans
	Intimidation of building users	“When shopping I saw a women very aggressively shout at women entering the building, they got in the women's face she was quite obviously upset by the actions”
	Religious Activity	Priest praying over passers-by
	Other	“Misinformation about the risks of abortion being given out, e.g. that it caused mental health issues”
Cardiff	Banners & Placards	'aborted fetuses' with images of slavery and Hitler “pictures of a bloody, mangled fetus' claiming that was what an abortion was” “banners about going to hell” “Let the Baby Live” slogans "Praying to end human abortion" slogans
	Intimidation of building users	Placards " clearly visible to those in the clinic”

		"I was called a "murderer", more than once, by people on the demonstration"
	Involvement of Children	"Using children to sing christmas carols with words changed to Pro-Life slogans"
	Leaflets	"unsolicited offering leaflets to passers-by" Pictures of embryos "Pictures of a dead foetus - misleading since they were very developed" "it's not too late" slogans
	Religious activity	"prayers and singing at a volume loud enough to be heard from the approach and entrance to the clinic" "had a cross held up in my direction and prayers directed at me" "demonstrators regularly kneeling on the pavement and praying"
	Other	"A man about 45-50 approached me and came really close to me, in an intimidating manner, and told me the others had a right to protest. He walked away without even let me reply. That was unsettling, he seemed really angry" "Passers-by stopped and told about the presence of the clinic in the building and the activity that took place there."
Glasgow & Edinburgh	Banners & Placards	Pictures of foetuses Graphic images – gore Pictures of stages of foetal formation
	Intimidation of building users	"haranguing people as they passed - fairly clingy and in your face"
	Religious Activity	Banners with slogans about what the pope thought about it
Gloucestershire	Banners & Placards	"Murderer"
	Leaflets	
	Religious activity	

Manchester	Banners & Placards	Graphic pictures “murder and right to life” slogans
	Leaflets	
	Other	“They approached children and people on their own to hand out badges of little feet they said were the size of a foetus at 12 weeks”
Merseyside	Banners and placards	Blood images Bible quotes
	Intimidation of building users	Shouting at those entering building Leaving only small gap in picket to access pathway
	Religious Activity	Chanting at passers-by
	Other	Picketing building, blocking pavement
Oxford	Banners & Placards	Late-term foetus images Images of dead children Doll models of babies “Men holding placards saying ‘I can live without abortion’” “Abortion destroys two lives; the mother’s and the baby’s” “My mummy chose life” slogans
	Leaflets	“Counselling” services which are not impartial
	Involvement of Children	
	Religious activity	Prayer Using rosary beads and chanting Priest Monks in habits
	Other	Filming of passers-by particularly targeting those who disagree
London	Banners & Placards	Images of foetuses Handmade posters showing pictures of babies being thrown in a big waste bin “we can help” slogans
	Intimidation of building users	“Four protestors stood/sat on folding chairs across the road from the clinic, with one man stood on the same side as the clinic right near the door” “he was talking at me, trying to get to take his leaflets”

		<p>"I've been given rosary beads and a plastic foetus (unwanted)."</p> <p>"forcefully getting in the way of people"</p>
	Leaflets	<p>Claim abortion causes breast cancer</p> <p>Claim abortion can make it so that you won't be able to conceive again</p>
	Religious Activity	<p>Placards with Christian scripture</p> <p>Prayer</p> <p>Rosary beads and a large image of the Virgin Mary</p>

When asked to reflect on the presentation of the protests, representative examples of respondent's answers included:

"I thought the banners and placards were misleading and hurtful. Their leaflets included pictures of a dead foetus, which was upsetting but also misleading since they were very developed" (46 year old woman, Cardiff)

"I felt that the pictures of foetuses were distressing, and could upset people" (60 year old woman, Glasgow)

"I was shocked at the banners and placards they were displaying, I didn't think it truly represented a normal abortion." (37 year old woman, Birmingham)

"the mood of the Pro-Life campaigners was emotional and their materials were emotive" (49 year old woman, Oxford)

One strongly Pro-Life participant made comment about the conduct of a protest she saw in Oxford saying:

"I was pleased to see how peaceful it was and how caring the lady talking to the rape victim was. It was silent and the protesters were really polite, and it showed that they really cared for the hurt women suffered after abortion" (32 year old woman).

#### *Emotions provoked by the protests*

Whereas Hayes and Lowe (2015) focused on the impact on BPAS service users, our research asked for a wider range of respondents. Those who had witnessed a Pro-Life protest were asked to recall their thoughts and feelings at the time they saw it.

Word (including stem and synonyms)	Frequency	% of those who had seen protests
Angry	29	35.8
Distress	20	22.5
Intimidated	19	21.3
Judged	14	15.7
Saddened	10	11.2
Anxious	10	11.2
Disgust	9	10.1
Shock	9	10.1
Harassed	8	9.0
Frustration	7	7.9
Stress	4	4.5
Uncomfortable	2	2.2

Figure 6 Frequency of descriptive words for protestors actions

*Contact initiated by protest (wanted and unwanted)*

Often at issue was not just that the protest was taking place, but the way in which protestors interacted with passers-by—this ranged from offering leaflets respectfully (but without solicitation from the passer-by) to protestors trying to verbally engage passers-by. A 34 year old woman in London recounted protestors “were force fully getting in the way of people, being aggressive towards the users, and pushing their view on to others” and a 62 year old woman in Cardiff said “Passers-by were stopped and told about the presence of the clinic in the building and the activity that took place there”. In Manchester, protestors “approached children and people on their own to hand out badges of little feet they said were the size of a foetus at 12 weeks” (33 year old woman).

Where passers-by directly try to engage with the Pro-Life protestors, responses seem not to be positive:

“The first few times, I tried to talk to people, to try to understand why they felt the need to do this, to point out that some of their statements were misleading/incorrect/dangerous. But after a while, it became clear that this was having no effect” (30 year old gender-fluid person)



“I talked to them, without giving my own opinions on abortion. They were extremely naive, thinking that the need for abortion would simply go away if it was banned. The protestor I spoke to was an old man who didn't seem malicious but had absolutely no idea why women would need abortion. (29 year old woman)

#### *Recording of the protests and other actions towards those who disagreed with protests*

Such visible—and for some respondents intrusive—protests were clearly in some locations met with counter-protests by those articulating a Pro-Choice stance. In some areas this led to friction between the two groups. Often the experience of Pro-Choice protestors of their Pro-Life counterparts was that they were, as might be expected, a mixture, as one man in Cardiff noted: “I found some of the people on the vigil were very civil, some friendly, some angry and some very aggressive”. However, particular attention was drawn by respondents to what happened when aggression or intrusiveness become blatant. For example, in Cardiff one woman said,

“I spent about three hours standing adjacent to the "pro life" demonstration on the first occasion that I witnessed them. During that time I was personally pushed off the kerb into the road by one of the demonstrators. I had a cross held up in my direction and prayers directed at me; I was called a "murderer", more than once, by people on the demonstration.”

Another woman witnessing a different protest said, “I became angry at the Pro-Life protestors filming the Pro-Choice protestors and complained to the police (who were watching from another pavement nearby). I also politely asked the protestors filming to stop. They just filmed me”. The taking of still and moving images of Pro-Choice presences and unauthorised publication of them on the internet, often with derogatory descriptions of counter-protestors (Oxford protest, personal communication 2017), has become a particular flashpoint in these protests.

#### *Religiosity of Pro-Life protests*

Albert (2005) notes that abortion protest often has religious associations and many Pro-Life protestors believe themselves to be called to such action by their faith or their god. As Hayes and Lowe (2016) identified in relation to BPAS clinic users, whilst religious observation can be a source or expression of comfort, support and compassion, within these protest sites it is seen as intrusive and inappropriate. It is important to note that many of these Pro-Life actions avoid the word *protest* in favour of *prayer vigil* or religious *witness* as explanation for their actions and to attempt to distinguish their actions from those of any counter-presence (in the sense of ‘we are praying’ but ‘they are protesting’).

In our data, some of the respondents who expressed Pro-Life views also expressed concern about overt religious actions in these settings which were considered *out of place* for religious activities (such as pavements and outside healthcare provision).

Some Christian people – I think this because there is a man in clothing that may be a priest and holding rosary beads and sort of chanting. I find them scary since they are telling me that they know what is best for me and denying me a choice. (59 year old Strongly Pro-Choice woman)

Pro life demonstration by monks in habits. Despite being pro life myself Just passing them was extremely intimidating. (52 year old Strongly Pro-Life woman)

The tactics that have brought Pro-Life protests from the political realm into the public realm such as visible, often graphic, materials has been noted previously to have caused a schism within Pro-Life supporters. Jackson & Valentine (2017) cite another Pro-Life supporter saying

I personally think that standing outside abortion clinics shouting at the women or holding up pictures of plastic foetuses . . . or whatever. I think that's beyond the normal kind of demonstration isn't it? I mean normally you walk along the street holding your placards and things like that. You don't actually stand outside a place where people are going to have treatment and so I think targeting the women is wrong. (Mary, DWCA)

#### *Disruption of legitimate activity*

As noted in Hayes and Lowe's (2015) report on the experiences of protests on reproductive choices clinics (BPAS) users, many comments related to the appropriateness of the site of the protest whilst supporting the general right to protest. This viewpoint is summarised by various respondents:

"I feel that whilst entitled to their opinion, outside a clinic is not an appropriate place to get your views across" (47 year old woman, Birmingham)

"I felt the placing of the protest was disrespectful; like a form of trying to shame women." (25 year old man, Gloucester)

This was supported by all responses reflecting on the experience of witnessing a protest. Indeed, there several reported other site users and passers-by reflecting the same idea, for example, "People who stopped by made comments about protests like theirs being done in front of an abortion clinic, saying it was really bad of them to protest there" (46 year old woman, Cardiff).

Several respondents highlighted that even if the protestors were attempting to target reproductive rights provision and clients, they had made wrongful assumptions about the premises they were protesting outside:

“I tried to ask them why they were picketing what was essentially an STI and contraceptive clinic. They began talking loudly and violently about infant murder and how it all happened there (it didn't, I had already been to this clinic and it's about the size of a postage stamp with like 2 nurses)” (25 year old woman, Merseyside protest)

“I thought they were stupid as they were stood outside a hospital that doesn't offer abortions or pregnancy advice” (34 year old woman, Cheltenham protest)

“Initially they targeted the building which provided a range of healthcare services on a day of the week when they did male contraception services, specifically vasectomies, rather than female contraceptive services. However they eventually worked that out and switched days” (40 year old woman, Oxford protest)

#### Impact on Clinical Facilities Users

All comments showing empathy towards the premises users came from those who were Pro-Choice. Generally, such comments expressed concern about the mental health of users and the targeting of them at a time when they may already be vulnerable. These comments related to all the sites at which protests had been seen across the countries (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland).

Examples included:

“I felt that their presence didn't really help anyone who may have been going into the hospital” (60 year old woman, Glasgow protest site)

“The poor women subjected to this though. I felt sad and angry on their behalf” (39 year old woman, Cheltenham)

“Putting pressure on women, already making a difficult and very individual decision, was incredibly uncompassionate thing to do” (38 year old woman, Cardiff)

Only one respondent talked about a direct impact on someone seeking a termination—this was from a friend who had accompanied the woman seeking a termination in Oxford who said, “she was upset by the protests. They didn't necessarily know that was why we were there, but they knew the timing of abortions, and clearly considered it the likely

33 year old woman,  
having seen a protest  
site in London

The middle aged man was holding a placard that said 'we can help'. At the time, I was with my 4 month old daughter - a baby that my husband and I wanted and had financially and emotionally prepared for. However, having a child has still been the hardest thing I have ever done and for someone to stand there saying they can 'help' really annoyed me. If I hadn't wanted a baby these strangers outside the clinic are not going to be there night after night when you have a tiny baby that won't sleep and cries for hours and you don't know what to do to make it fall asleep and stop crying.

### One example from Merseyside

“They were obviously told they couldn’t outright block the door as there was a small gap in their picket where the pathway was. They would stand quietly unless someone walked past, in which case they would chant, or if someone went in, they would shout directly at them. Everything was borderline threatening.”

reason for our presence”. However, we know from Hayes and Lowe (2015, p.28) “the presence of an action outside a clinic, irrespective of the way it is designed, is in itself likely to be emotionally distressing for BPAS service users, and experienced as a form of harassment”.

Another area of regular comment was the ways in which the protest disrupted legitimate work in the buildings and or on the sites of the protests (also see above for discussion of mis-targeted protests). Protests are designed to cause disruption, but some activities commented on seemed to be illegitimately targeting the legitimate work taking place in these spaces. For example, a woman who saw the Cardiff protest said, “I overheard one demonstrator boasting to another about having rung the clinic for information, pretending that he was ringing on behalf of his wife”. It was noted by a number of respondents that religious activities such as chanting, praying and singing were conducted at a volume that could be heard by people entering or within reproductive choice services buildings whilst others talked about placards being placed so as to be visible from building windows.

Less often, but still notable, respondents talked about pavements being blocked and entrances being partially obstructed. This sort of obstruction was not a one-off; there were similar reports from various sites around the country with little formal intervention by Police. Cardiff was the exception to the latter, with a 45 year old man noting, “They were forced to go by the police after attempting to set up by the clinic's main entrance”.

#### *Demographics of protestors*

Several respondents noted that the demographics of those who would need to use reproductive choice providers and those who were protesting were markedly different. This was commented on as being indicative of both the judgementalism/shaming of the protests and the attempts to impose viewpoints on others.

“there are way too many men holding banners. It's an issue that effects women primarily. It's understandable if you might want to take a male partner or friend to a Pro-Life march as an ally, but when they start making their own banners...”

“I see a lot of men - mostly men and old woman- demographics to which the 'choice' doesn't apply anyway. Further - the old white man male presence makes my blood boil - he doesn't know his own ignorance.”

“They are not the ones facing a life changing choice. Where are they when a woman faces life with a pregnancy and child she can't manage?”

## Summary & Recommendations

This study sought to collect thoughts from the general public on the spectacle of Pro-Life protests and on attitudes to protests in general by surveying a self-selected, online questionnaire sample.

Analysis of the data suggests that

- For respondents to the questionnaire, attitudes to restricting Pro-Life protests was not, in general, one of limiting freedom to protest, but rather of enforcing appropriate responsibility in selecting sites for protest for this issue.
- Buffer zones were supported by 84% of respondents, including 60.9% of those who favoured no restrictions on the freedom to protest.
- Pre-existing attitudes to reproductive choices may not be salient grounds for decision-making about ‘buffer zones’ (either in terms of who has majority viewpoint on the issue, or who is able to most strongly articulate it) because framed this way there is a good deal of group-motivation in responses. Instead, impact on legal reproductive choice service users, the public and questions about the nature of actions may be a better guide to decision-making.
- Pro-Life protests are viewed significantly more negatively compared to other protests by the general public.
- In both the case of the photograph-based prompt question addressed to the wider public and reflections on actual protests seen, there were broad similarities in the issues raised around Pro-Life protest activities. These included the Attributes and Nature of material used (particularly inaccurate and/or graphic materials); the emotional response it engendered; the impact on others including service users, staff (through attempts to disrupt legitimate activity) and passers-by; and the imposition of moral or religious conduct/discourse into public spaces.
- Part of the practice of Pro-Life protests is not just the operation of static sites of protest but the extension of this and claims to space made by “pavement counsellors” (i.e. handing out leaflets, attempts to engage in conversation, etc.) (Jackson & Valentine 2017) and filming of both building/site users and of those who object to their presence/ tactics/message. Whilst filming in public spaces is, and should continue as a right, the purposes of the photographs and videos is deeply debated, especially in light of internet activism such as *RedWatch*<sup>3</sup> and similar sites. Whilst Pro-Life groups argue that the videography is to ensure they cannot be accused of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Redwatch>

wrongdoing (Jackson & Valentine 2017), this would not explain the reports from respondents here that the videoing targeted people other than the Pro-Life protest, particularly building/site users and passers-by.

Jackson & Valentine (2017) p.232

When they trumpet about having a turnaround, that a woman hasn't done it, I think its crap, basically. I think what happens is that some women are frightened and will turn away and they'll come back to have a later abortion at a later date and they'll go through the whole thing again.

- As has been noted by others (see side bar), the idea of pavement conversations claimed by Pro-Life protestors who target reproductive choice providers may be an artificial claim fuelled more by fear provoked within those seeking reproductive choice advice. Indeed, intimidation, distress, judgementalism and anger were the most cited emotional responses to seeing Pro-Life protests. No descriptions of Pro-Life protests were contained positive emotional words (such as "it made me happy to see this") even

from those who stated they held Pro-Life stances.

- Much of the concern about the wording of visible materials related to the stigmatisation of a legal healthcare choice. Indeed some seemed to be purposefully designed to provoke or mirror "abortion stigma"<sup>4</sup> (Benyon-Jones, 2017). Indeed, in the US Pro-Life advocates (who are increasingly influencing Pro-Life actions in the UK Jackson & Valentine 2017) have written about purposefully targeting women for their rhetoric and actions (Hawkins & Enriquez 2016). As such, the purpose of such material seems to be less to debate the issues than to shame both service users and passers-by who may fit into this category.
- Medoff (2003) found that, in the US, Pro-Life protests had no statistically significant impact on the rates of abortion. As such, there is no clear requirement for Pro-Life protests to be able to protest directly outside of reproductive choice providers other than the attempt to stigmatise individuals' healthcare choices and attempt to disrupt the legitimate activities of such providers and anyone else who is co-located with them. This is also demonstrated by the protests impact on space, including temporary blocking of pavements and pathways, and indeed at times doorways, and by claiming of protest rights which they do not extend to counter-protestors.

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<sup>4</sup> Defined as negative attributions of inferior womanhood applied to women who seek terminations.

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## Appendix Data Tables

Table 1 Stance on freedom of assembly to protest by general stance on reproductive rights

		Do you generally support people's freedom of assembly to protest?		
		Yes in most cases but with other limits %	Yes, in most cases but with limits for "hate" groups %	Yes in all cases %
Which of the following best describes your general stance on access to reproductive choices including abortion:	Strongly Pro-Life	25	25	50
	Generally Pro-Life	33	0	67
	Conflicted	0	100.00	0
	Undecided	0	100.00	0
	Generally Pro-Choice	15	75.00	10
	Strongly Pro-Choice	11	73.28	16

Table 2 Stance on "Buffer Zones" by support for freedom of assembly to protest

		Do you support the idea of compulsory exclusion zones (also known as "buffer zones") around reproductive choices providers?	
		No	Yes
Do you generally support people's freedom of assembly to protest?	Yes in most cases but with other limits	19.05	80.95
	Yes, in most cases but with limits for "hate" groups	10.00	90.00
	Yes in all cases	39.13	60.87



Table 3 Stance on "Buffer Zones" by reproductive choices position

		Do you support the idea of compulsory exclusion zones (also known as "buffer zones") around reproductive choices providers?	
		No	Yes
Which of the following best describes your general stance on access to reproductive choices including abortion?	Strongly Pro-Life	83.33	16.67
	Generally Pro-Life	0	100
	Conflicted	25	75
	Undecided	0	100
	Generally Pro-Choice	12.5	87.5
	Strongly Pro-Choice	8.65	91.35

Table 4 Source Photo Variation by Condition

	Size of protest	Visible presence of children	Specific interest group represented
<b>Junior Doctors</b> 	Medium	No	Yes
<b>Local Traffic Issue</b> 	Small	Yes	No
<b>TTIP Protest</b> 	Large	no	No
<b>Pro-Life Protest</b> 	Small	Yes	Yes