

Abortion bans linked to increase in children entering foster system, researchers find

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In June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade*, effectively ending 50 years of federal protections to abortion care. As of October 2023, 26 states have since enacted laws to ban or restrict

abortion access, with 14 states completely banning the procedure.

Today, [an estimated 25 million American women](#) of childbearing age, or about one third of women ages 15 to 45, live in areas where [abortion care](#) is severely restricted. Historically, many states were able to restrict access to abortion even before 2022 through Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers (TRAP) laws; these laws decrease abortion volumes by legally limiting the number of abortion-providing facilities.

With more than 4 million children placed into [foster care](#) during the study period, researchers at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC) and Bentley University used state-level data to evaluate the link between restricted abortion access and subsequent entries into the foster care system.

The findings, published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, reveal fewer children conceived in years when abortions were more accessible were subsequently placed into foster care. Conversely, first trimester pregnancy in a state with a TRAP law in place was associated with an overall 11 percent increase in children entering the foster care system.

"Limited access to abortion has significant personal impacts for the mothers and children affected, but also broader national economic and policy-level implications," said senior author Ashley L. O'Donoghue, Ph.D., an economist in the Center for Healthcare Delivery Science at BIDMC. "With the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*, and many states already facing overburdened foster care systems, it is important to study the impact that restricted abortion access has on the foster care system to help inform future policy changes."

To compare the number of children conceived between 1990–2011 and placed in foster care between 2000–2020 in states with and without TRAP laws, O'Donoghue and colleagues looked at the comprehensive

Jones and Pineda-Torres data on state-level TRAP laws enacted since the 1970s and federal data from the [Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System](#).

The team found an overall increase in foster care entries in states with restrictive abortion laws, compared to states without them, including a 15% increase for Black and racial and ethnic minority children in states with TRAP laws.

"Our findings highlight the complex interplay between [race](#), socio-economic status and abortion, noting that those who are less able to provide for their children may be the most vulnerable when denied an abortion," said O'Donoghue, who is also an instructor in medicine at Harvard Medical School.

"Additionally, the race-specific findings are particularly salient. Policies that restrict [abortion](#) may contribute to the over-representation of racial and ethnic minority children in the foster care system, perpetuating inequities and further straining vulnerable populations."

When the team compared states with TRAP laws to states without a decade before the laws' enactment, they saw few differences in foster care entries. However, when they compared [states](#) with and without TRAP laws a decade after the laws were enacted, they saw the increases in children entering the foster care system persisted.

"The ripple effects are persistent for years after the TRAP law's passage, resulting in lasting effects on foster care systems," O'Donoghue said. "Our findings suggest that overturning *Roe vs. Wade* could have significant consequences for the foster care system and beyond in years to come."

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More information: Association Between Restricted Abortion Access and Child Entries Into the Foster Care System, *JAMA Pediatrics* (2023). DOI: [10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.4738](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.4738)

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