

ADOLESCENCE POST-DOBBS: A POLICY-DRIVEN RESEARCH AGENDA FOR MINOR ADOLESCENTS AND ABORTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Julie Maslowsky, PhD, Laura Lindberg, PhD, Emily S. Mann, PhD

May 2024

Overview of the Report

Minors, or adolescents under age 18, are vastly underrepresented in research on abortion in the United States. Their absence limits researchers' ability to monitor and address the impacts of the rapidly changing abortion policy environment on this important population—failing to produce needed research on minors and abortion is a health equity issue. The overarching aim of this report is to present an actionable research agenda on abortion policy and its impacts on minors. This report's target audiences include researchers, funders of research, and individuals and organizations who help translate research evidence into policy.

The report's goals are to:

- Describe the need for research on minors and abortion.
- Identify the challenges that limit research on minors and abortion and the translation of research evidence to policy.
- Demonstrate that, despite extant challenges, research on minors and abortion is feasible and impactful.
- Lay out a clear and actionable path for generating and translating rigorous, equitable, and impactful research on minors and abortion.

The report includes: a review of the importance of minors' abortion access and reasons for its absence to date (Chapter 1); methods used in our expert convenings and overarching research principles to guide the conduct of equitable, actionable, and impactful research in this area (Chapter 2); a scan of the abortion policy landscape with a focus on minors (Chapter 3); a detailed policy-responsive research agenda to advance knowledge and evidence-based policy (Chapter 4); detailed research questions to be addressed across identified policy domains (Chapter 5); summary of overarching challenges that have historically hampered research on minors' abortion and recommended strategies for overcoming those challenges (Chapter 6); and key recommendations for bringing the proposed research agenda to fruition (Chapter 7).

Objective

Despite the significant progress made in the field of sexual and reproductive health research in emphasizing equity and centering the populations most affected by changes in policies related to abortion,^{1,2} minors have thus far been overlooked. Following the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision, more than half of U.S. adolescents ages 13-19 now live in a state with severely restricted or no legal abortion access.³ Minors already faced additional barriers to accessing abortion prior to *Dobbs*. Now, minors are disproportionately impacted by new abortion restrictions and are either targeted by restrictive policies or overlooked in protective policies at the state level. Minor abortion access is regulated by all the laws that impact adults as well as many minor-specific laws. Even when minors can overcome legal obstacles to abortion care, they face greater barriers related to cost, information, and access than adults.^{4,5} Minors' rights are often restricted as a compromise in order to secure votes for abortion policies that apply to adults.^{6,7} Restricting the rights of minors sets a dangerous precedent for other marginalized groups. Yet minors are systematically underrepresented in research on abortion. The objective of this report is to guide the conduct of equitable, actionable, and impactful research in this area.

Our Process

We conducted three environmental scans to assess the state of the current research and synthesize the available evidence and key informant interviews with individuals and organizations currently engaged in research on abortion policies to facilitate the development of an actionable research agenda. In a series of four convenings, we assembled 30 experts representing the following constituencies: young people, researchers, clinicians, leaders of nonprofit and reproductive justice-focused organizations, and legal and policy experts. We established four overarching research principles to guide research on minors and abortion:

- 1 RESEARCH NEEDS TO INCLUDE DIVERSE SAMPLES OF MINORS.**
- 2 ACCURATE EVIDENCE ABOUT MINORS' CAPABILITIES SHOULD INFORM RESEARCH AND POLICY.**
- 3 REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE PRINCIPLES NEED TO BE INCORPORATED INTO RESEARCH.**
- 4 RESEARCH SHOULD INCORPORATE MINORS' PERSPECTIVES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES.**

The research agenda, themes, priorities, and gaps presented here were developed through this process.

KEY FINDINGS

Policy Scan

We conducted a policy landscape scan in June 2023 to identify state abortion policies that are specific to minors and/or likely to disproportionately impact minors, including both protective and restrictive policies. After completing the policy scan, we classified policies into four categories: (1) minors' access to abortion, (2) minors' access to information about abortion, (3) parental and adult involvement in minor adolescent abortion, and (4) minors' privacy and confidentiality about abortion. We outline detailed research questions for each category of policies focused on producing specific data that can inform evidence-based policies.

Research Agenda

Our expert panel identified key components of a policy-responsive research agenda and associated recommendations for action (Table 1). The agenda is organized into three research areas: (1) conceptual and bioethics; (2) legal; (3) and social and behavioral. We conclude by identifying specific research needs for each research area.

We present a novel typology of methods for increasing minors' representation in sexual and reproductive health research. To proactively include minors in social and behavioral research relevant to abortion, we propose studying both the **direct** impacts on pregnant minors who do or do not receive an abortion and

the **indirect** impacts of abortion policies on the general population of minors. Studying direct impacts can be accomplished through 1) **expanding** studies that have traditionally focused on adults to encompass minors or 2) **tailoring** studies specifically focused on minors. Indirect impacts on the total population of minors can be studied by 3) **contextualizing**: conducting population-representative studies of adolescents that are not solely focused on abortion or sexual and reproductive health but capture relevant contexts of adolescents' lives as abortion access is changing.

TABLE 1: RESEARCH AREAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conceptual and Bioethics Research	Social and Behavioral Research
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Develop an overarching conceptual framework to guide research on adolescents' sexual and reproductive health as a whole and minors' abortion experiences specifically. 2 Develop and disseminate bioethics research responsive to the unique sexual and reproductive health experiences and needs of minors to guide IRB oversight of this research. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7 Increase and improve the inclusion of minors in patient population studies and state and national abortion surveillance. 8 Present age-specific data and analyses, with minors presented separately from adults, to allow identification of minors' experiences. 9 Field a longitudinal study of pregnant minors over time, across different abortion policy environments. 10 Conduct dedicated studies of abortion among systems-involved and multiply marginalized youth.
<p data-bbox="354 1003 509 1033">Legal Research</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Conduct a legal analysis of existing restrictive and protective policies to determine their applicability to minors and those assisting them in accessing abortion. 4 Translate legal research into state-specific legal guidance on minors' abortion rights for health care providers and the general public. 5 Create and maintain a comprehensive, longitudinal database of state abortion policies, including those specific to minors. 6 Conduct legal epidemiology and other studies to document differential experiences and outcomes across a range of domains among minors exposed to different policy environments. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11 Field timely studies of the general population of minors to understand their current knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to changing abortion access. 12 Promote and support federal, state, and private efforts to expand and improve sexual and reproductive health data collection from minors with attention to sample size and measurement quality. 13 Field a population-representative longitudinal survey of adolescents that allows for research on the impact of the post-<i>Dobbs</i> environment on minors' behavior, education, economic, and health outcomes into adulthood. 14 Conduct developmental science studies on adolescents' development as it relates to abortion experiences and decision making. 15 Apply developmental science to the creation of developmentally optimized policies and clinical practices for minors in abortion and sexual and reproductive health. 16 Enrich research on minors by studying attitudes and actions of adults who are influential in minors' abortion experiences.

Building Capacity and Overcoming Challenges

We identify six enduring and overarching challenges related to infrastructure, oversight, and workforce composition, and capacity that systematically hamper the field's ability to produce actionable research evidence related to minors and abortion. We propose recommendations to address these challenges.

Challenge	Recommendation
Researcher training: The field of sexual and reproductive health research has traditionally not trained researchers to focus on minors.	Train researchers on how and why to include minors in sexual and reproductive health research, including research focused on abortion.
Researcher composition: Scholars from marginalized groups are underrepresented.	Diversify the abortion research workforce to include more scholars from marginalized and traditionally underrepresented groups.
Need for interdisciplinary expertise: Siloing of expertise and approaches limit the production of relevant research.	Encourage adolescent-focused researchers to integrate an attention to abortion into their work and, correspondingly, encourage abortion researchers to integrate a focus on minors into their work.
IRB: Overreaching IRB oversight often creates unnecessary obstacles to conducting abortion research with minors.	Create best practice guidelines for researchers seeking IRB approval for abortion research with minors and for IRBs on how to review proposals on minors' abortion.
Funding: Funders fail to prioritize research on minors in their funding strategies.	Expand funding to support minor-focused research, including training and development and dissemination of best practice guidelines.
Need for additional translation and dissemination of research.	Translate research on minor abortion into actionable tools and recommendations for practitioners and policymakers.

Conclusion

U.S. abortion policy is changing rapidly, and minors are disproportionately affected every day. Minors have historically been vastly understudied compared to adults in abortion-related research. This gap in knowledge has become a liability given the lack of evidence the field has generated to refute unfounded claims used to justify restrictions on minors' abortion access and, eventually, expand those restrictions to other populations. There is an urgent need to generate evidence to inform policies that govern minors' abortion access. The experts we convened to develop this roadmap are confident in the field's ability to produce high-quality, actionable research evidence to inform policy on minor abortion access. We urge researchers, professional organizations, funders, and policy advocates to join together in the pursuit of evidence-based policy that supports adolescents' human right to bodily autonomy and advances reproductive equity.

References

- Hart, J. (2022). Reshaping Contraceptive Access Efforts by Centering Equity, Justice, and Autonomy. *American Journal of Public Health*, 112(S5), S468–S468. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2022.306926>
- Kozhimannil, K. B., Hassan, A., & Hardeman, R. R. (2022). Abortion Access as a Racial Justice Issue. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 387(17), 1537–1539. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2209737>
- Wilkinson, T., Maslowsky, J., & Lindberg, L. (2022, June 26). A Major Problem for Minors: Post-Roe Access to Abortion. *Stat News*. <https://www.statnews.com/2022/06/26/a-major-problem-for-minors-post-ro-e-access-to-abortion/>
- Hoopes, A. J., Maslowsky, J., Baca, M. A., Goldberg, J., Harrison, M. E., Hwang, L. Y., Romano, M., Tebb, K., Tyson, N., & Grubb, L. K. (2022). Elevating the Needs of Minor Adolescents in a Landscape of Reduced Abortion Access in the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 71(5), 530–532. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2022.08.007>
- Vear, K., Esbrook, E., Padley, E., Maslowsky, J., Allison, B. A., & Hoopes, A. J. (2023). "Time and money and support": Adolescents and Young Adults' Perceived Social and Logistical Support Needs for Safe Abortion Care. *Contraception*, 126, 110128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.contraception.2023.110128>
- Messery, M., & Ollstein, A. (2023, May 17). Dems Split on Whether Parents must Know their Child is having an Abortion. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/05/16/democrats-gop-parental-notification-abortion-laws-00097245>
- Bethencourt, L. P., Parker Hill, Isabel. (2022, November 29). She wanted an Abortion. A Judge said she wasn't Mature enough to Decide. *ProPublica*. <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-states-limit-teen-access-to-abortion>