

Roe repeal may lead to fewer female student applicants for some universities

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October 8, 2023

Research from the [Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine](#) suggests that the 2022 repeal of the landmark Supreme Court decision that made abortion legal in 1972 was associated with a decrease in the number of applications from female students in states where abortion bans and restrictions ultimately went into effect.

The research was conducted by [Dr. Brigham Walker](#), assistant professor of health policy and management (HPM), and [Dr. Janna Wisniewski](#), assistant professor of international health and sustainable development, along with HPM doctoral student Jillian Torres and Dr. Rajiv Sharma, a colleague at Portland State University.

["Anticipatory Impacts of the Repeal of Roe v. Wade on Female College Applicants,"](#) published in the journal *Economics Letters* delves into the anticipatory consequences of the repeal of Roe v. Wade on the demographics of female college applicants in states where abortion access was banned versus states where it remained legal.

In June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Dobbs* effectively overturned the landmark Roe v. Wade decision, returning the authority to regulate abortion to individual states. Before this ruling, many states had enacted anticipatory trigger laws that would automatically ban abortion if Roe v. Wade were overturned, leading to abortion bans in parts of the South, Midwest, and Southwest United States. This shift in reproductive health policies introduced a considerable level of uncertainty into abortion access across the country.

The researchers utilized data from the Common Data Sets of 71 of the top 100 institutions in the United States, spanning academic years 2018-2022. These data allowed them to compare the share of female undergraduate applicants in states where abortion was banned to states where it remained legal through time.

The paper's key findings indicate a nearly one percentage point relative decrease in the share of female undergraduate applicants in states where abortion became illegal following the repeal. In essence, this shift represented a two-percentage-point swing in the gender composition of applicants. The results were particularly prominent in top-ranked universities and institutions with a high percentage of out-of-state applicants.

Dr. Walker notes that, "These findings suggest that just the anticipation—not the final decision—of restricted access to abortions dissuaded a sizable share of female applicants from applying to universities in the affected states."

The study's findings shed light on the significant role that reproductive health policies may play in college choice, with a focus on top-ranked institutions and schools with a diverse applicant pool. Given that college graduates often contribute to the labor pool in the areas surrounding their institutions, this shift in applicant

demographics may have broader economic implications for states affected by abortion bans. The extent to which these changes will impact states' abilities to attract and retain an educated workforce, also known as "brain gain," remains to be seen.

The research acknowledges certain limitations, including the focus on top-ranked universities and institutions with a high percentage of out-of-state applicants. It also highlights the difficulty in assessing the effects on future applicant cohorts when the fate of abortion access was better understood post-2022. Moreover, the study could not examine how female applicants who chose not to apply differed from those who did. Research on these important topics is ongoing.

The research was funded by a grant from the [Newcomb Institute](#).