

'Set them up for failure': Sex education not required in many states where abortion is or will be banned

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Close to half of the roughly two dozen states where abortion is or will soon be outlawed or heavily restricted do not require sex education.

Most of those [states](#) require any schools that do choose to teach sex [education](#) to emphasize abstinence as the main or only way to avoid getting pregnant. Almost none require teaching about contraception.

In contrast, in states with broader access to abortion, nearly all require sex education. Still, sex education tends to be limited even in those states, with many stressing an abstinence-only approach or making lessons on topics such as contraception and relationships optional.

"Very few young people in the U.S. get outstanding sex education," said Leslie Kantor, a professor and sex education expert at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "To leave young people without information about [birth control](#) suddenly in this context, where they cannot legally get an abortion in half the states—that is an incredible human rights violation."

Researchers and advocates said variations in sex education across different states could contribute to more girls and women being forced to take [unwanted pregnancies](#) to term. Teen pregnancy rates have declined in the past few decades, but some experts worry the new laws could force them back up.

Three of the top five states for [teen pregnancy rates](#)—Arkansas, Oklahoma and Alabama—had trigger laws banning abortion that went into effect as soon as the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. The other two states on that list—Mississippi and Louisiana—appear poised to soon follow suit. Just one of the states, Mississippi, has a sex education requirement.

Abstinence-only vs. comprehensive sex ed

Sex education, which can vary not only from state to state but also school to school within the same district, is essential for teaching young people about the laws and rights they have, particularly as abortion laws change, said Chris Harley, president and CEO of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, an advocacy group for comprehensive sex education.

"That also becomes more critical than ever for them to be able to navigate this Wild West in terms of where you can access care and where you can't," she said. "Knowing those distinctions is going to be really critical for young people to navigate their own sexual and reproductive health."

The outcomes of sex education vary depending on what young people are taught. Some studies have found abstinence-only education, for example, has little impact on teen pregnancy rates.

"The science shows that it doesn't work," Harley said. By excluding other strategies for preventing pregnancy, "what you do is you set (students) up for failure. You set them up for having more adverse sexual health outcomes."

Researchers have found promising results when schools teach comprehensive sex education, which typically focuses on various aspects of sexual health such as relationships and consent and discusses abstinence in addition to alternative strategies for pregnancy and STI prevention.

One 2008 study found adolescents who received comprehensive sex education were significantly less likely to become pregnant as a teen than their peers who received no sex education. The same study also found no significant difference in teen pregnancy rates among adolescents who received no sex education and those who were taught abstinence-only.

"It becomes this cycle of not having accurate information and then not having access to abortion," said study co-author Pamela Kohler, an associate professor of child, family and population health nursing at Seattle's University of Washington. "We're restricting access to the most vulnerable populations—the people who need it most—and setting them up for future unintended pregnancies and future risks of STDs."

Another study, published this year, analyzed the causal relationship between more comprehensive sex education and teen birth rates using data on federal funding for such programs as well as births in the respective counties. The study found a more than 3% decline in teen births in counties that received funding for more comprehensive sex ed.

"The unfortunate reality is that there exists this correlation between states that are likely to ban or severely restrict abortion and the sorts of sex education policies that they do or do not have," said Lawrence L. Wu, a sociology professor at New York University who co-authored the study.

Many young people seem to want a comprehensive version of sex education, as documented in 2020 by a team of professors who conducted focus groups with students and parents at a handful of Arkansas high schools with high pregnancy and STI rates.

"Instead of being like, 'Don't do this because you could get pregnant or you could get an STD or STI,' I feel like they should tell us, 'Well, if you're gonna do it, you're gonna do it.' Just ... teach safe sex," said one student who participated in the study.

In Michigan, Hafiza Khalique, 16, said having inclusive sex education in schools is "more important than ever" to combat a rise in misinformation about abortion and to ensure young people—particularly people of color and LGBTQ youth—know where they can access contraceptives and

other reproductive health resources.

"Because kids are going to keep having sex," she said. "Telling them to abstain from having sex is not going to help. You can only teach them how to do it safely."

Khalique said the only sex education she remembers receiving was an hour-long, abstinence-only lesson at her public middle school in Detroit. She said it wasn't until she came out as queer and started going to community events and organizations like Planned Parenthood that she was able to unlearn some of the myths she'd been taught in school.

"I have never, ever received proper sex education at all," she said. "That was really, really terrifying because there's so much misinformation."

Some opponents, however, have said comprehensive sex education encourages young children to experiment sexually and corrupts their innocence. Many stress that such education—or at least certain aspects of it—is a private family matter.

"Schools are veering so far from the mission of academics," said New Jersey Republican Assemblyman Gerry Scharfenberger in a video earlier this year. "People are paying two-thirds of their property taxes to send their kids to school, not learn about porn."

Scharfenberger was responding to the state's controversial sex education standards, which were adopted in 2020 and are scheduled to go into effect later this year. The standards would start teaching children about sex and gender at an earlier age in elementary school and touch on topics such as masturbation and consent.

Mary Elizabeth Castle, senior policy advisory at the conservative [advocacy group](#) Texas Values, said teaching abstinence is the preferred

method to help young people avoid pregnancy and STIs

It's "teaching kids to live the most healthy, optimized lifestyle," she said.

Castle said comprehensive sex education—such as teaching kids about consent—"doesn't create a healthier environment for kids." Instead, she said, "it actually creates a more sexualized environment for kids."

The past few years have seen various debates at the state level over what to include in sex education. In 2020, the Texas State Board of Education voted to update the state's standards to include information for middle school students on birth control. The board declined to approve other elements of comprehensive sex education, such as lessons on consent, sexual orientation and gender identity.

But some parents, like Bernita Bradley, said schools need to be doing more to educate children about sex. Bradley, from Michigan, said neither her two children nor the children she works with in the community got sufficient sex education in school—leaving her to fill in the gaps.

"I've always been the one to take the community kids to Planned Parenthood. I've done this for years," said Bradley, 51, director of parent voice and outreach at the National Parents Union. "I used to teach sex education class in the church. I used to be the youth pastor and I would literally sit the young people down to have sex education."

Sex education disparities

There are grave disparities in who receives what type of sex education based on gender, race and class, research shows. Advocates worry the overturning of Roe will widen these disparities.

The combination of restricting access to information and health care could create "trauma, harm and misery that ... are going to devastate large portions of America, especially in the South and in rural communities," said Harley of the Sexuality Information and Education Council.

"Sex education is in the crosshairs as much as access to comprehensive [reproductive health](#) care," she continued. "Young people are really going to suffer."

The risks are amplified for certain groups.

In a study published late last year, Rutgers' Kantor and her co-author found notable gender and racial differences in the type and extent of sex education received. Using nationally representative data from surveys conducted between 2011 to 2015 and 2015 to 2019, the study found that, as has long been the case, girls were more likely than boys to be instructed to wait until marriage.

"The double standard is alive and well," Kantor said. "We are trying to raise young women to be the gatekeepers of sex, and we're raising males to try to get sex."

Kantor and her co-researcher found other inequities as well. Close to 0% of [young people](#) who exclusively received sex education through the church learned about birth control, for example.

And Black and Hispanic male students were less likely than their white counterparts to have learned about condom skills and birth control before having intercourse for the first time. One reason could be that students of color are far more likely to attend poorly funded schools that lack the resources to provide quality sex education.

Some educators who support comprehensive [sex education](#) said they are worried about the challenges ahead with reduced access to abortion, but say their responsibility to teach sex ed comprehensively has never been greater.

For Shafia Zaloom, a sexuality and relationship educator who works with students across the country, the Supreme Court's decision will force her to further modify what she teaches depending on what state she's in.

"Before, we used to talk about what people's options are, what their rights are, and now I have to include how they are limited," she said. "I'm very careful of that. I have to be because this is my livelihood."

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