

SPA Policy Brief

Abortion Access, Economic Hardship, and Crime: Unintended Consequences of Restrictive Policies

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abortion policies, typically debated on moral and legal grounds, have broader economic and social consequences. In [“Abortion, Economic Hardship, and Crime.”](#) SPA **Professor Erdal Tekin** and colleagues drew on a comprehensive 2009-2019 Texas study to reveal a link between restricted abortion access, increased economic hardship, and a subsequent rise in financially motivated crime.

BACKGROUND

[Texas House Bill 2](#) (HB-2), first enforced in 2013, [closed numerous abortion clinics](#). Counties furthest from an abortion facility saw a [marked reduction in abortion rates](#) and [an increase in births](#), particularly among [younger women](#). Tekin’s study provides novel evidence that these access restrictions also resulted in significant economic distress, characterized by lower labor force participation, rising debt, widening income inequality, and heightened housing insecurity (e.g., higher mortgage delinquency and evictions). Critically, in support of [previous work](#), this [financial strain](#) translated into a measurable [increase in property crimes](#) such as theft, burglary, and motor vehicle theft, with no significant impact on violent crimes. The impacts extended beyond those directly affected, via intrahousehold spillovers, impacting both men and women. The findings highlight the far-reaching, often unexpected, economic and public safety costs of limiting reproductive healthcare access, and the need for a revised policy approach.

STUDY CONTEXT

The debate surrounding abortion access typically focuses on moral convictions, legal rights, and health considerations, neglecting serious economic and social consequences. Restrictions on reproductive autonomy can [disrupt individuals’ ability to plan or defer childbearing](#), leading to [unplanned or mistimed parenthood](#). This may impose significant financial strain on households, affecting labor force participation, increasing reliance on public assistance, and potentially further destabilizing vulnerable communities. The study leverages a unique natural experiment: the enforcement of Texas House Bill 2 (HB-2) in 2013, which resulted in the closure of numerous abortion providers across the state. By analyzing panel data from Texas counties



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between 2009 and 2019, the researchers exploit the variation in travel distance to the nearest abortion facility created by these closures to identify causal links. The study employs a difference-in-differences strategy, comparing counties with significant increases in travel distance to those with stable access.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF RESTRICTED ABORTION ACCESS: A PROBLEM STATEMENT

Tekin’s work holds that disruptions in reproductive timing, induced by abortion restrictions, translate into measurable economic and social consequences, eventually spilling over into increased rates of financially motivated criminal activity. The theoretical framework, grounded in Becker’s economic theory of crime, posits that individuals weigh the expected utility of criminal activity against legal alternatives. When economic hardship increases, the relative cost of engaging in illegal, financially motivated activities decreases, making such actions more attractive, especially for individuals facing acute financial distress.

Research has long documented the [adverse effects of limited abortion access](#) on various aspects of life, including maternal health, educational attainment, employment, and poverty. For instance, the [liberalization of abortion policies in the 1970s](#) was shown to [reduce unintended births and maternal mortality](#), particularly among non-White populations, and improve women’s long-run economic trajectories through [increased labor force participation and educational attainment](#). More recent studies have connected denial of abortion to [persistent financial instability](#).

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The current study explores an understudied, yet critical, outcome: community-level crime rates. The focus is on immediate economic mechanisms rather than long-run effects, demonstrating how restricted abortion access can destabilize short-term household finances and elevate crime.

The natural experiment in Texas, following HB-2, provides a compelling case study. The bill imposed stringent requirements on abortion providers, such as admitting privileges at nearby hospitals and compliance with ambulatory surgical center standards. These regulations led to the closure of nearly half of Texas’s abortion facilities by November 2013, dramatically increasing travel distances for many residents. Although the Supreme Court struck down key provisions of HB-2 in 2016, clinics were slow to reopen, allowing researchers to observe its effects on economic outcomes and crime.

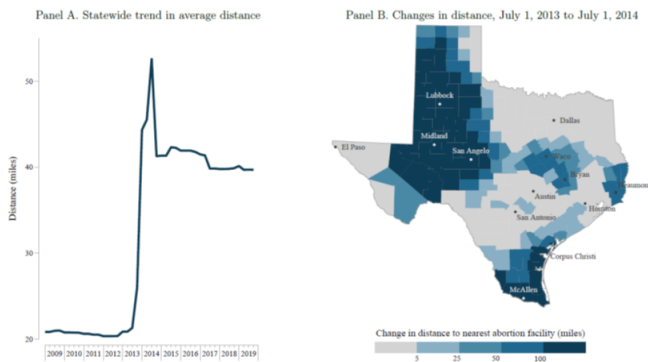


Figure 1. Variation in driving distance to the nearest abortion facility

MECHANISMS AND IMPLICATIONS

These patterns strongly support the theoretical pathway: restricted abortion access leads to unintended births, which impose significant financial burdens on families, especially those already economically vulnerable. These burdens include the direct costs of raising a child, medical expenses, and the indirect costs of reduced labor force participation for mothers and other caregivers. This financial strain increases the incentive for individuals to engage in financially motivated crimes, as the cost of such activities decreases relative to the benefits. The study’s findings on intrahousehold spillovers are particularly noteworthy. The fact that property crimes increase among both men and women suggests that the economic consequences of unintended births are shared across household members, leading to broader community impacts. The shift toward higher-gain, higher-risk crimes (like robbery) under acute hardship, despite higher detection risks, further illustrates the desperation that can arise from severe financial stress.

KEY FINDINGS

- Increased travel distance to the nearest abortion facility significantly reduces abortion rates and increases birth rates, with pronounced effects for younger women (20-29).
- A 100-mile increase in travel distance was associated with a 34% decline in abortion rates. Young mothers (under 20) experienced an approximately 5% increase in live births.
- Restricted abortion access is linked to a decline in labor force participation and a rise in unemployment, particularly among younger, unmarried, and less-educated individuals. The time costs associated with childcare can crowd out labor market participation, leading to frictional unemployment as individuals search for jobs that better accommodate their new responsibilities.
- Reduced access to abortion leads to elevated debt-to-income ratios and widening income inequality. A travel-distance increase was associated with a ~\$5,000 increase in the inter-quartile range (IQR) of personal income, reinforcing concerns about rising inequality among the most economically vulnerable.
- Financial strain manifests as heightened housing insecurity, indicated by higher mortgage delinquency rates and an increased number of eviction filings, particularly in counties experiencing the largest increases in travel distance.
- Counties that experienced a travel distance increase of 100 miles or more saw an approximate 14.9% increase in property crimes (e.g., theft, burglary, motor vehicle theft), concentrated in areas with the most substantial changes in abortion access.
- The study found no consistent or statistically significant changes in non-financially motivated or violent crimes, supporting the idea that the observed increase in crime is driven by economic necessity rather than a general rise in criminality.
- The increase in property crimes lags: it begins to manifest one to two years after the decrease in abortion access, suggesting crimes motivated by the financial strain that materializes from unintended births rather than efforts to fund the abortion itself.
- The increase in property crimes was observed among both males and females, indicating that the economic hardship stemming from restricted abortion access spills over within households. The increase in property crimes was more pronounced among adults 18 and older.
- Motor vehicle theft, burglary, and robbery increased across all travel distance increase. Robbery, a higher-gain, higher-risk offense, increased significantly when travel distance exceeded 100 miles, consistent with the Beckerian framework: acute hardship drives individuals toward more lucrative but riskier criminal activities.
- One prevented abortion corresponds to approximately 2.8 additional annual crime counts. The low clearance rates for property crimes (e.g., ~8% for motor vehicle theft) reduce the opportunity cost of these offenses, potentially incentivizing repeat offenses.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Tekin's findings suggest the profound, costly consequences of policies restricting abortion access, extending beyond the realm of reproductive health into economic stability and public safety. The article makes the following recommendations to mitigate these adverse effects:

- 1. Holistic Assessment of Abortion Policies:** Policy-makers must adopt a comprehensive approach when evaluating abortion policies, considering not only moral or legal arguments but also the broader economic and social costs borne by individuals, families, and communities. The current focus often overlooks the significant financial strain and public safety implications identified in this research.
- 2. Strengthen Economic Support for Families:** To ease the financial hardship associated with unintended births, robust social safety nets and economic support programs are crucial. This includes:
 - **Accessible and Affordable Childcare:** Policies that make childcare more affordable and available can reduce the time costs for parents, particularly mothers, enabling greater labor force participation.
 - **Parental Leave and Workplace Flexibility:** Expanding paid parental leave and promoting flexible work arrangements can help parents manage new family responsibilities without sacrificing their careers or financial stability.
 - **Targeted Financial Assistance:** Providing direct financial aid, housing support, and other social assistance to families facing economic hardship due to unintended births can buffer financial shocks and reduce the incentive for crime.
 - **Education and Job Training:** Investing in educational and job training programs for young mothers can improve their long-term economic prospects and reduce vulnerability to financial distress.

- 3. Invest in Community Resources:** Support for mental health services, addiction treatment, and family planning clinics can address underlying vulnerabilities that may contribute to both economic hardship and criminal behavior.
- 4. Evidence-Based Policymaking:** Policy decisions related to reproductive health should be informed by rigorous, data-driven research that quantifies their full societal impact, and regularly assessed. Policymakers should scrutinize whether such regulations offer genuine medical benefits that outweigh their significant economic and social burdens on vulnerable populations.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offer a stark reminder that restrictions on abortion access carry substantial, often hidden, societal costs. By demonstrating a causal link between diminished abortion access, increased economic hardship, and a subsequent rise in financially motivated property crimes, the research calls for a re-evaluation of current policy approaches. Policymakers have a responsibility to consider the full spectrum of consequences of their decisions. A more comprehensive and empathetic policy framework, one that prioritizes support for families and reduces barriers to essential healthcare, can mitigate these costly unintended consequences and build a more resilient society.