

# The US abortion ruling is a tragedy; here's what research bodies must do now

**Universities need to support those affected, ensure that education and research on abortion continue and advocate for evidence-based policy.**

**T**he consequences of the US Supreme Court's 24 June decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the court's own landmark 1973 decision that enshrined the constitutional right to abortion for nearly 50 years, are already being felt. By striking down *Roe*, the court has put abortion rights in the hands of US state legislators. They have already responded.

Abortion is now either severely restricted or banned in 9 states, a figure that is expected to rise to at least 26. This is a shocking and unacceptable denial of human rights. The American Medical Association, which represents physicians, rightly describes it as "a brazen violation of patients' rights to evidence-based reproductive health services".

The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), which represents the medical-education community, says the decision will ultimately put more women's lives at risk. This is, in part, because legal abortion procedures have a lower risk of death than do pregnancy and childbirth. Overall, the United States had a maternal mortality rate of 24 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2020 (compared with just 3.3 deaths per 100,000 live births in the European Union in the same year). Maternal deaths due to abortion in the United States constitute only a small fraction of this number – between 2013 and 2018, there were fewer than 0.5 deaths from abortion per 100,000 live births (K. Kortsmitt *et al.* *MMWR Surveill. Summ.* **70**, 1–29; 2021).

The court's decision to overturn *Roe* was not unexpected – a draft was leaked to the news outlet *Politico* nearly two months ago. University faculties of medicine and public health, as well as clinicians' and researchers' organizations, have a grave responsibility to try to temper the disastrous impact this will have on health and research. There are several things they must do.

First, they must provide support to students, researchers and other staff members who are affected by the decision – and to whom institutions have a duty of care. In 2019, more than half (57%) of those who had an abortion were women in their twenties (K. Kortsmitt *et al.*, 2021). Many people in university communities fall into this age group, so campus reproductive health-care advisory services need to have strategies to protect their staff and



The Jackson Women's Health Organization in Mississippi now faces closure.

**Access to abortion contributes to improved health-care outcomes and equality.”**

students from harm while following the law.

Second, universities must take steps to ensure that researchers who work in reproductive health, especially those involved in the study of abortion, can continue to do this work. Their work will come under more scrutiny from lawmakers and campaigners opposed to abortion as a result of the Supreme Court's verdict, but it is essential that their research and scholarship continues.

Third, medical education and training in abortion must continue. In its statement, the AAMC rightly says that physicians need to have "comprehensive training in the full spectrum of reproductive health care". But the statement also says that the association will "evaluate the court's decision and its implications for medical education and health care". Institutions must avoid pulling back on training or research on abortions so that physicians can safely support people seeking abortions where they are legal.

Fourth, scientists must advocate for an abortion policy based on evidence and expert consensus. Researchers submitted 50 years' worth of evidence to the Supreme Court ahead of the ruling that revealed, among other things, that access to abortion contributes to both improved health-care outcomes and equality. Although the court seems to have disregarded these findings, scientists should continue such evidence-based advocacy at every opportunity.

Researchers can push for policies to counter the rise in maternal mortality rates expected to occur as a result of *Roe's* demise, and they can advocate for policies that will help to ease any further burdens on new parents. For example, last month researchers showed that targeting cash transfers (universal child benefit) to new mothers in Spain

improved health outcomes for their children (L. González and S. Trommlerová *J. Health Econ.* **83**, 102622; 2022). Research shows that when people are denied an abortion, they often struggle financially and can be forced into poverty, making it hard for them to care for their children.

The United States' research, education and training communities can and must act to temper the impacts of the Supreme Court's decision. The verdict cannot be undone, but every opportunity must be taken to mitigate the worst of its effects.

## Protecting the ocean requires better progress metrics

**Sixteen world leaders have now promised to protect the ocean. Researchers need to work with them to create and improve measurable indicators.**

**T**hree billion people need the ocean to make a living. But climate change and industrial pollution mean there are now more than 700 'dead zones', areas of ocean that can no longer support marine life because of reduced oxygen. This is up from 400 in 2008. This week, scientists and policymakers are meeting for a much-delayed United Nations summit in Lisbon (27 June to 1 July) on how the world could do better to ensure ocean sustainability.

The meeting is the first such high-level gathering since the end of 2020, when 14 world leaders, led by Norway and Palau, promised to accelerate science-based solutions to managing ocean areas sustainably in their national jurisdictions. Back then, members of what they named the 'High Level Panel' (now called the Ocean Panel) appointed a team of researchers to advise them. They also commissioned a series of 'blue papers', research illuminating various aspects of how to meet environmental goals while protecting livelihoods and food security. All this was in line with the UN's 14th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), called 'life below water'. Rather ambitiously, the leaders pledged to achieve ocean sustainability within their national borders by 2025, instead of the SDG deadline of 2030.

Now, the group is bigger – France and the United States have joined. The Ocean Panel has published a toolkit: a guide to how countries can make their own sustainable ocean plans and ensure that they are acting on those plans. Sensibly, the toolkit proposes indicators to measure progress. This is a welcome development, but the work of

researchers is far from over.

To avoid unnecessary extra work, the toolkit proposes that countries adopt existing measures, such as indicators of SDG progress and those developed through the UN's System of Environmental Economic Accounting (SEEA). These could include, for example, the contribution of sustainable fisheries to national income; tracking the share of energy research and development spending that goes to ocean and offshore renewables; and reporting the density of ocean plastics. But new indicators will also be needed, for example, to monitor a pledge made last week by some 164 countries (at the World Trade Organization) to stop government subsidies that threaten the sustainability of fisheries. That will need researchers to advise on the nature and extent of subsidies and how these can be reduced in a way that people, especially those on the lowest incomes or who are most vulnerable, are not harmed.

Kristian Teleki, the head of the Ocean Panel secretariat and global director of the ocean programme at the World Resources Institute, based in London, told *Nature* that the panel plans to report on how member countries are "converting ambition to action", and that they will do so by the next UN General Assembly meeting, in New York City in September. This is promising. But Ocean Panel countries need also to report how they, collectively, are making progress on the indicators they have proposed in their toolkit. This should ideally be a separate, easily identifiable part of their September report so that readers can judge whether, or how, their ambition is being matched by progress.

Not all countries will have access to the required data and some might need time to collect, standardize and analyse the information. That's where the panel's research advisers can, and should, help. The panel members are being advised by an expert committee of more than 70 researchers, in addition to more than 250 researchers representing 48 countries who contributed the blue papers ahead of the 2020 launch.

Researchers must now work with the panel to help improve and standardize existing indicators and, where necessary, create new ones. Reporting on progress doesn't need to be a legally binding process. Most important is that progress is measurable, based on a consensus of international expert opinion, and that it is reported on regularly by the panel. A number of frameworks might be suitable for this, including one suggested in a study in *Nature Sustainability* by Eli Fenichel, a researcher now at the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy in Washington DC, and his colleagues (E. P. Fenichel *et al. Nature Sustain.* **3**, 889–895; 2020).

Ocean sustainability is now on the agendas of the UN, the G7 group of wealthy countries, the World Economic Forum and the seafood industry, through its ocean-stewardship initiative with scientists, called SeaBOS. The Ocean Panel has set itself an ambitious goal – 2025 will soon be here. A system of indicators is an obvious next step for the researchers involved in the panel's work. But, more important, it is needed for accountability, which is integral to trust in public institutions and is urgently needed to ensure that promises translate into policies and real change.

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