

# Abortion Onscreen in 2021

**Abortion access in the United States is at a critical point**, with the Supreme Court poised to erode the right to abortion rooted in *Roe v. Wade*. Yet, even as legal precedents precariously stand and state legislatures subversively undermine access, our ability to tell stories remains unhindered: stories about what is urgent, dire, or hopeful about the current moment, and stories about what the future might hold. This year, how have television storytellers responded to this historical moment?

This year brought us 47 abortion plotlines on 42 television shows, with a mix of familiar demographic patterns, insights into what meaningful emotional support to loved ones having abortions looks like, and significant missed opportunities to depict the hardships that result from diminished access.

**Barriers remain under-portrayed.** Depictions of abortion restrictions remain largely absent on television, an omission that is particularly egregious when considering that a majority of patients face at least one logistical or financial obstacle when obtaining an abortion. Only two television plotlines depicted significant barriers to abortion access. In a flashback on *The Handmaid's Tale*, Janine inadvertently visits an anti-abortion crisis pregnancy center, where she receives misinformation about the safety of abortion. When she later visits a legitimate clinician, she is forced to listen to a legally-required but medically inaccurate script, which the abortion provider immediately debunks before providing her with abortion pills. On *This is Us*, a teenaged Kate goes through a mandatory waiting period before accessing her abortion in 1999-era Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

While these stories are important in their inclusion of *any* barriers, they were easily surmounted by both characters. There were no shows that depicted a character lacking insurance coverage for abortion, needing to raise money towards the cost of an abortion, scrambling to arrange childcare or take off work in order to obtain one, or the myriad other logistical and financial hurdles facing such patients in reality. Close to half (40%) of this year's depictions were disclosures of past abortions, which may help explain this lack of current political context -- although such barriers are not new. If storytellers want to respond to our current political moment, they must fully engage with the reality of what dwindling access looks like now for many Americans.

**Characters still fall short of representing actual U.S. abortion patients.** As in previous years, the vast majority (68%) of television characters in abortion plotlines featured white women. This is particularly noteworthy because the majority of actual abortion patients are women of color. In 2021, we saw only two Black women in abortion plotlines (*The Good Doctor*, *Love Life*), the lowest number in recent years. There were notably more Latina characters (*Sky Rojo*, *Inocente*, *Somos*, *Control Z*, *Queens*) and Asian characters (*Girl from Nowhere*, *Ray*) than in years past, though all but one of these characters were on television shows that originated outside the United States, and thus did not represent the racialized experience of accessing an abortion in the U.S. However, this year we did see seven characters (including Janine on *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aracely on *Somos*, and Cherry on *Call the Midwife*) that were parenting at the time of their abortions. Parenting characters represent 14% of all characters in 2021, an important increase over 2020 when only one character (3%) was parenting. This still falls quite short of the 59% of real-life abortion patients who are raising children at the time of their abortion, but it is a small step closer to reality than what we've seen in recent years.

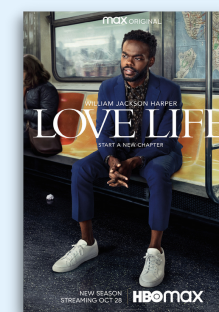


### We saw more medication abortion portrayals -- with mixed results.

The types of abortions characters obtained differed slightly this year. *Law & Order: SVU*, *A Million Little Things*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Scenes from a Marriage* all had characters who obtained medication abortions, more than we've seen in any prior year. While this increase is important -- about one third of abortions in the U.S. are done via pill -- these portrayals varied greatly with regard to accuracy, stigma, and support. On *Law & Order: SVU*, a teenaged Nydia's foster dad ordered mifepristone and misoprostol online and coerced Nydia into taking them; she eventually ends up in the hospital and needs a surgical procedure to complete the abortion. This is 2021's only depiction of abortion pills ordered online, and gives the mistaken impression that such pills are unsafe. In contrast, *A Million Little Things*, *Scenes from a Marriage*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* all feature clinicians dispensing the pills and giving matter-of-fact instructions for taking misoprostol at home. The regimen is portrayed as safe and simple, with all three characters having varying levels of emotional support throughout the process.

This year's increase in medication abortion portrayals is important, given that such pills are likely to become essential means of obtaining abortion care as legal access continues to erode. Our [recent study](#) found that these kinds of plotlines may increase audience knowledge about medication abortion, which will be an important baseline knowledge for the public to have in a post-Roe world.

**There were more depictions of how to support someone you love having an abortion.** Across genres, from critically acclaimed dramas (*This is Us*, *A Million Little Things*, *Scenes from a Marriage*) to new and noteworthy comedies (*Queens*, *Love Life*), many abortion plotlines featured characters providing emotional support. In the three dramas, male partners provide emotional support (*This is Us*) and are physically present during the medication abortion (*A Million Little Things*, *Scenes from a Marriage*), with Jaime in *A Million Little Things* flying from the UK to Boston to be by Maggie's side during her abortion. In *Queens*, Brianna offers to accompany the woman her late husband was having an affair with to Planned Parenthood for her abortion -- an incredible display of support even in an emotionally charged circumstance. In *Love Life*, Marcus listens compassionately as a friend discloses a past abortion and also supports a sex partner in pregnancy decision-making. Taken together, these portrayals provide important social suggestions for ways to support loved ones before, during, and after their abortions. These examples are important because they are depoliticized and personal -- they are rooted in friendship and care, and give a tangible way for those who may be uncomfortable with abortion to consider what they would want a loved one's abortion experience to be like.



On the following page, you'll find a table that includes all of this year's abortion depictions, including plotlines in which characters discuss abortion, consider having an abortion, and actually obtain an abortion.

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# Abortion on Scripted and Reality Television, 2021

SHOW	EPISODES	AIR DATE	TYPE OF CONTENT
<i>This is Us</i> (NBC)	A Long Road Home	1/5/2021	Abortion
<i>Law &amp; Order: SVU</i> (NBC)	Sightless in a Savage Land	1/7/2021	Abortion
<i>The Good Doctor</i> (ABC)	Lim	1/11/2021	Abortion, Past Disclosure
<i>Bonding</i> (Netflix)	Stand Me Up, Stand Me Down	1/27/2021	Abortion
<i>Firefly Lane</i> (Netflix)	Total Eclipse of the Heart	2/5/2021	Consideration
<i>911 Lone Star</i> (Fox)	Difficult Conversations	2/15/2021	Consideration
<i>A Million Little Things</i> (ABC)	Miles Apart	3/18/2021	Abortion
<i>Sky Rojo</i> (Netflix)	Sex and Blood	3/19/2021	Consideration
<i>Calls</i> (Apple TV)	Episode 2	3/19/2021	Discussion
<i>The Good Doctor</i> (ABC)	Teeny Blue Eyes	3/22/2021	Consideration
<i>Shtisel</i> (Netflix)	A Long Path That is Short	3/25/2021	Abortion
<i>The Innocent</i> (Netflix)	Episode 2, Episode 5	4/30/2021	Abortion, Consideration
<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> (Hulu)	Milk	5/5/2021	Abortion
<i>Girl From Nowhere</i> (Netflix)	Pregnant	5/7/2021	Abortion, Past Disclosure
<i>Hacks</i> (HBO Max)	There is No Line, A Gig's a Gig	5/13, 5/20	Discussion
<i>Panic</i> (Amazon Prime)	Returns	5/27/2021	Abortion
<i>Mare of Easttown</i> (HBO)	Sacrament	5/30/2021	Consideration
<i>Flack</i> (Amazon Prime)	Brand Barron	6/10/2021	Abortion
<i>Workin' Moms</i> (Netflix)	Finger in the Butt	6/15/2021	Abortion
<i>Katla</i> (Netflix)	The Rock, I am You	6/17/2021	Abortion
<i>Ray</i> (Netflix)	Forget Me Not	6/25/2021	Abortion

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<i>Somos</i> (Netflix)	Tell the Moon to Come	6/30/2021	Abortion
<i>The Republic of Sarah</i> (HBO Max)	A Show of Hands, Sanctuary	7/19, 7/26	Abortion
<i>The Good Fight</i> (Paramount +)	And the Two Partners Had a Fight	7/29/2021	Discussion
<i>Control Z</i> (Netflix)	Nothing to Hide	8/4/2021	Abortion
<i>Heels</i> (Starz)	Cutting Promos	9/5/2021	Abortion
<i>On the Verge</i> (Netflix)	The Human Condition	9/6/2021	Consideration
<i>Scenes From a Marriage</i> (HBO)	Innocence and Panic, Poli	9/12/2021	Abortion
<i>American Crime Story: Impeachment</i> (FX)	The President Kissed Me	9/14/2021	Discussion
<i>Sex Education</i> (Netflix)	Episode 1	9/17/2021	Consideration
<i>Chicago Party Aunt</i> (Netflix)	Chicago Party Aunt	1/7/2021	Abortion
<i>Law &amp; Order: SVU</i> (NBC)	Never Turn Your Back on Them	1/7/2021	Abortion
<i>Maid</i> (Netflix)	Ponies	10/1/2021	Discussion
<i>One of Us is Lying</i> (Peacock)	One of Us is Dead	10/21/2021	Abortion
<i>Vanderpump Rules</i> (Peacock)	Drink the Tea, Spill the Tea	10/26/2021	Abortion
<i>Curb Your Enthusiasm</i> (HBO)	Angel Muffin	10/31/2021	Abortion
<i>Hightown</i> (Starz)	Fresh as a Daisy, Dot Dot Dot	10/31/2021	Consideration
<i>Queens</i> (ABC)	Anything for Clout	11/3, 11/16	Abortion, Consideration
<i>Love Life</i> (HBO Max)	Becca Evans, Becca Evans Part II	11/4, 11/11	Past Disclosure, Abortion
<i>Call the Midwife</i> (PBS)	Episode 6	11/7/2021	Abortion
<i>Teen Mom: Young and Pregnant</i> (MTV)	Give Yourself Some Grace	11/23/2021	Abortion
<i>Insecure</i> (HBO)	Chillin', Okay?!	12/5/2021	Consideration