

During the COVID-19 pandemic and following the *Dobbs* Supreme Court decision, increasing numbers of abortion facilities adapted their services to include telehealth options with abortion pills by mail. These services now face threats due to legal challenges to the use of mifepristone for abortion.

Background

Telehealth for medication abortion care was first introduced in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020¹ and proliferated in 2021 when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) removed the requirement to dispense mifepristone, or the “abortion pill”, in person.² Subsequently, both brick-and-mortar clinics and new “virtual clinics” began to offer medication abortion via telehealth, with abortion pills delivered by mail. We assessed trends in the availability of telehealth options for medication abortion from 2020-2022 among all 50 U.S. states.

Even as it expands, telehealth for medication abortion is now facing new legal challenges through a federal lawsuit that contests the use of mifepristone for abortion care.⁴ This research shows part of the landscape under threat.

ANSIRH’s Abortion Facility Database

ANSIRH’s Abortion Facility Database collects data on all publicly-advertising abortion facilities in the U.S. and is updated once annually during summer/fall via systematic online searches and mystery shopper phone calls. In 2022, data were finalized as of October to more accurately assess for changes since the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision in June 2022, which removed federal protections for abortion.

Abortion Pills by Mail

The number of facilities offering medication abortion increased from 733 in 2020 to 773 in 2021 to 789 in 2022. The proportion of those facilities that provided telehealth with the option to have abortion pills mailed to pregnant people increased from 52 (7%) facilities in 11 states in 2020 to 91 (12%) facilities in 25 states in 2021 to 243 (31%) facilities in 27 states in 2022. This included both brick-and mortar-facilities, as well as virtual clinics that only provided telehealth services.

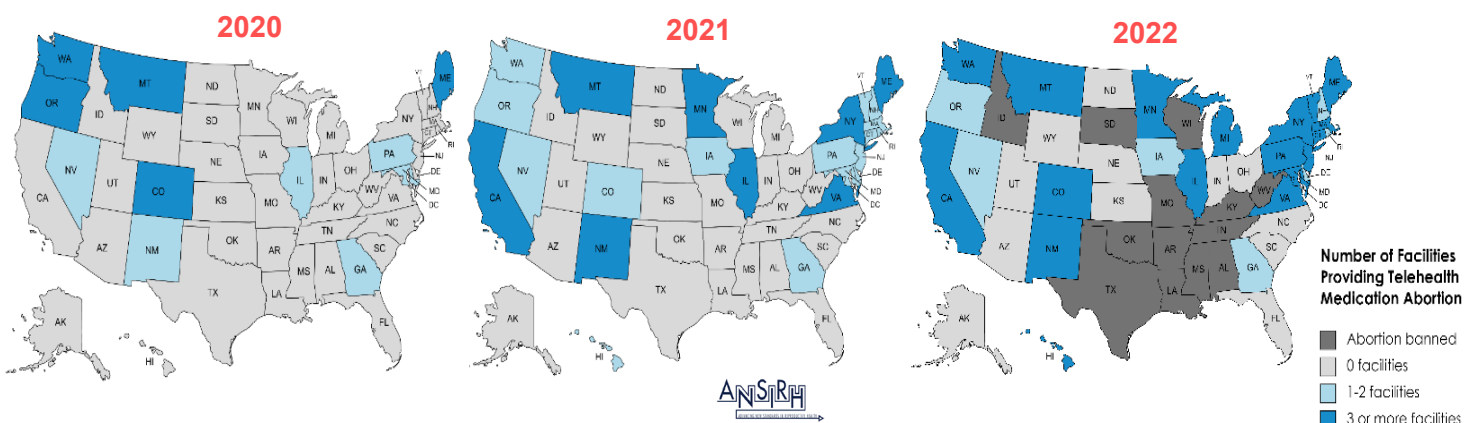


Figure 1. Facilities providing telehealth medication abortion by state, 2020-2022

Virtual Clinics

In 2020, there were no virtual clinics providing medication abortion. In 2021, 32 virtual clinics (4% of 773 facilities offering medication abortion) began providing care via telehealth in 22 states and DC. By 2022, 69 virtual clinics (9% of 789 facilities offering medication abortion) provided this care in 23 states and DC. Virtual clinics were largely concentrated in the Northeast and West, while state bans³ were enacted in the Southeast and Midwest prohibiting any type of abortion, including telehealth medication abortion.

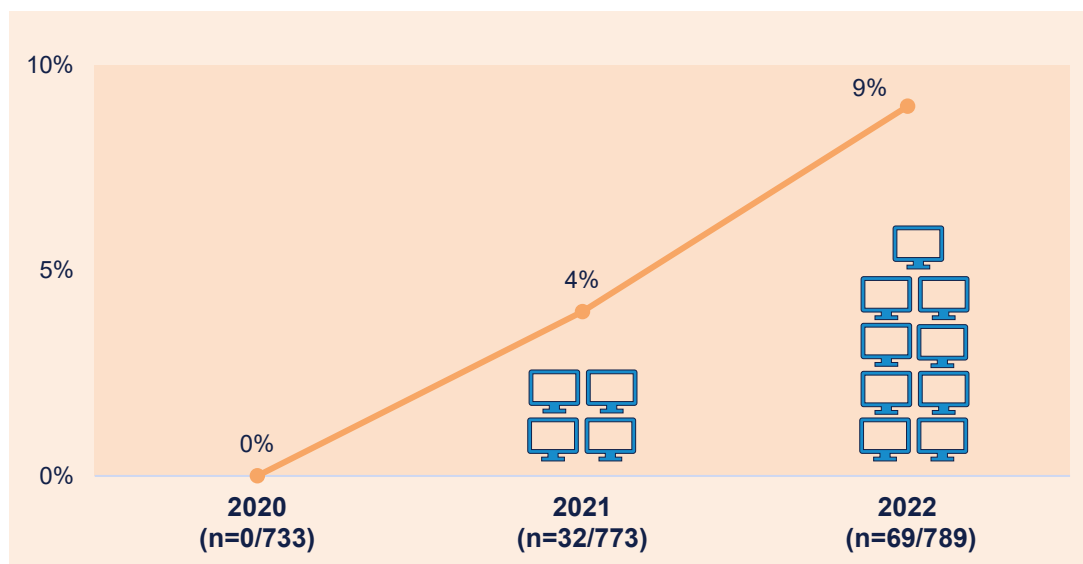


Figure 2. Proportion of medication abortion facilities that were virtual clinics, 2020-2022

Implications

During the COVID-19 pandemic and following the *Dobbs* decision, increasing numbers of abortion facilities adapted their services to include telehealth options, including new virtual clinics. These services can help people access abortion in increasingly restricted environments.

References

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