

Opinion

Rhonda Vonshay Sharpe

Focus the Abortion-Rights Fight on the Vulnerable

Pushing for stronger laws in a handful of states could help safeguard access for millions.



Safe state. Photographer: Mario Tama/Getty Images

By Rhonda Vonshay Sharpe

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The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is devastating for women across the country – particularly for those who live in states that don't adequately protect their reproductive rights, and who lack the wherewithal to go elsewhere.

That said, all is not lost. By focusing on those places where they can make the most difference for the most vulnerable, activists can still improve on the horrible new status quo.

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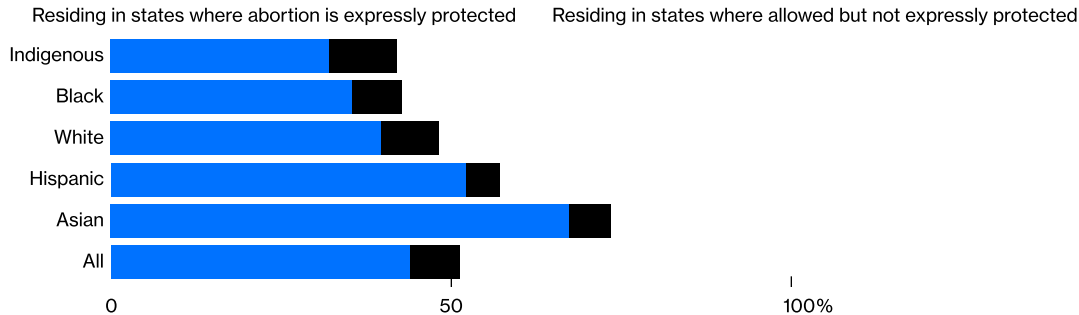
About 44% of women of childbearing age are fortunate enough to live in the 20 states (and the District of Columbia) that have laws explicitly safeguarding access to abortions. But a breakdown by race and ethnicity shows that some are much less protected than others: Only 32% of Indigenous, 36% of Black

and 40% of White women reside in these states, compared with 52% of Hispanic and 67% of Asian women, according to the 2020 American Community Survey. By this measure, the Supreme Court’s decision presents the greatest threat to Indigenous, Black and White women.

What’s the best way to mitigate this threat? Consider four states – New Hampshire, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Virginia – where abortion is allowed, but not expressly protected by state law. If those states adopted legislation to ensure access, they would cover an added 7% of childbearing-age women, bringing the total to 51%. Protection of Indigenous, Black and White women would increase to 42%, 43% and 48%, respectively.

Protecting the Vulnerable

Stronger abortion laws could benefit Indigenous, Black and White women

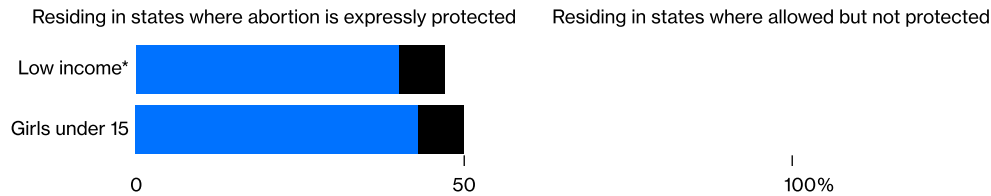


Source: 2020 American Community Survey; Women's Institute for Science, Equity and Race

Other vulnerable populations would benefit, too. About one in four women of childbearing age is poor – meaning their income is less than 150% of the poverty level, and they probably lack the financial resources to travel for an abortion. If the states in question moved to guarantee rights, coverage of such women would increase from 40% to 47%. Similarly, coverage of girls under the age of 15 would increase from 43% to 50%.

Protecting the Poor and the Young

Stronger abortion laws could benefit low-income women and girls under 15



Sources: 2020 American Community Survey; Women's Institute for Science, Equity and Race
*Less than 150% of poverty level

It’s completely understandable that activists want to wage battle in the 26 states that have banned or are expected to ban abortion. The data suggest, however, that getting other states to better protect access might be a more effective use of resources. Doing so could help guarantee 4.7 million women, and 2.1 million girls, the bodily autonomy and the full scope of health care options that everyone deserves.

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