

# CORE RESEARCH BRIEF

## Physician Support of Unrestricted Abortion Services in Wisconsin

November 2021



### Executive Summary

With extensive abortion restrictions in place, as well as a law that would criminalize abortion if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned, Wisconsin is considered a hostile state for abortion access. Physicians work directly with patients and provide reproductive healthcare, including abortion. Doctors are trusted public figures with potential influence on healthcare policy. However, no prior research has documented Wisconsin physicians' attitudes about abortion and abortion restrictions. Researchers at the UW Collaborative for Reproductive Equity (CORE) conducted a survey of all currently practicing physicians at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health to assess Wisconsin doctors' perspectives on abortion.<sup>1,2</sup>

- Among the more than 900 physicians who responded to the survey, findings demonstrated extremely high support for abortion and very low support for abortion restrictions.
- Doctors overwhelmingly reported that abortion restrictions prevent the provision of appropriate and timely care and interfere with the doctor-patient relationship. More than nine in ten also indicated that women's health in Wisconsin would get worse if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned.
- These findings held across medical specialties as well as sociodemographic factors such as gender and age.
- However, physicians tended to underestimate abortion support among their peers. These misperceptions decreased physicians' willingness to consult on abortion-related cases—for example, by referring one of their patients to a colleague who provides abortion services.

Taken together, CORE's research underscores that abortion restrictions in Wisconsin do not reflect the beliefs and preferences of most physicians at the state's largest medical school. While doctors' personal beliefs vary, the majority of doctors surveyed report that current abortion restrictions worsen patient care and that women's health will decline further if abortion becomes illegal in our state.

### The Restrictive Abortion Landscape in Wisconsin

The overwhelming majority of major medical organizations support abortion access, yet abortion services in the U.S. have become harder to obtain, including in Wisconsin. Current state laws restricting abortion care include:

- A mandatory 24-hour waiting period between an initial intake appointment and the abortion appointment.
- A ban on all abortions past 20 weeks estimated gestational age.
- A ban on providing medication abortion via telemedicine services, and a requirement that the same physician conduct both the intake appointment and second appointment for medication abortion.

- Payer restrictions such that Wisconsin Medicaid does not provide coverage for abortions, nor does the health insurance provided to state employees.
- A requirement that physicians perform all abortions, as opposed to other advanced practice providers such as nurse practitioners, who are permitted to provide abortion care in other states.

Notably, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Wisconsin state law would criminalize abortion altogether if the 1973 US Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision is overturned. *Roe* established the legal right to abortion prior to fetal viability nationwide, regardless of existing state laws that had prohibited the procedure. If the Supreme Court overturns *Roe*, these state laws would again become enforceable, including in Wisconsin—which would immediately revert to the state law that makes provision of abortion a felony.

Collectively, these policies and other factors have contributed to the closure of 40% of our state's abortion clinics in the last ten years.<sup>3</sup> They have also earned Wisconsin a designation of “hostile” to reproductive rights.<sup>4</sup> State legislators continue to propose bills that would further limit abortion access.

## Why Are Physician Attitudes about Abortion Important?

Most physicians provide healthcare to people with the capacity for pregnancy, and some provide abortion services directly. Due to this expertise, doctors' attitudes and perceptions matter to healthcare policy and delivery. They have influenced the development of and public support for major healthcare policies such as Medicare and the Affordable Care Act.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, physicians hold the public's trust, ranking above teachers, police officers, and clergy in terms of their perceived honesty and ethics.<sup>6</sup>

Yet we know little about physicians' personal abortion attitudes or their perceptions about the impact of restrictive abortion policies on patients and the larger practice of medicine. These attitudes could play a role in the state's future abortion landscape, especially light of *Roe v. Wade's* uncertain future.

## Our Study of 900 Wisconsin Physicians

In 2019, researchers from CORE conducted a study to better understand abortion opinions among the practicing physicians at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, the state's largest medical school and Wisconsin's only public medical school.<sup>1,2</sup>

Investigators sent all 1,357 currently practicing physicians a 45-question, cross-sectional survey gauging their attitudes, practices, and perceptions of abortion and abortion restriction, among other related topics. Of those distributed surveys, 913 physicians responded, for a response rate of 67%. This high response rate was an achievement, particularly for a survey directed at busy practicing physicians. Respondents included physicians from 20 medical specialties, and 94% said they see women of reproductive age in their practices. Only 12% of physicians surveyed said that they currently participate in some aspect of abortion care.

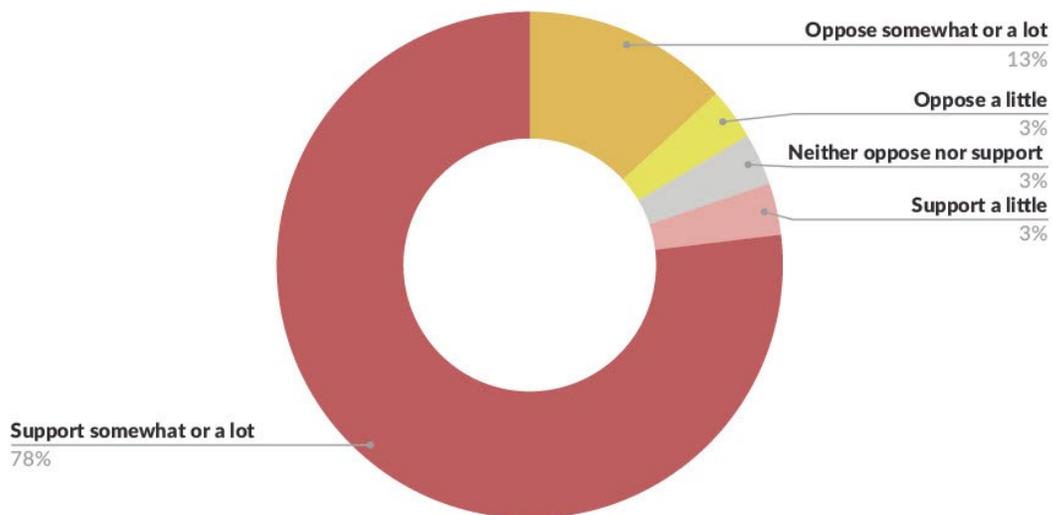
**Physicians overwhelmingly support abortion, disagree with abortion restrictions, and believe that overturning *Roe* would make women's healthcare in Wisconsin worse. However, physicians perceive that their colleagues have more anti-abortion opinions than findings indicate, which reduces their willingness to participate in abortion care.**

## Key Findings

1. Physicians reported very high levels of support for abortion services, for unrestricted access to abortion, and for abortion providers.

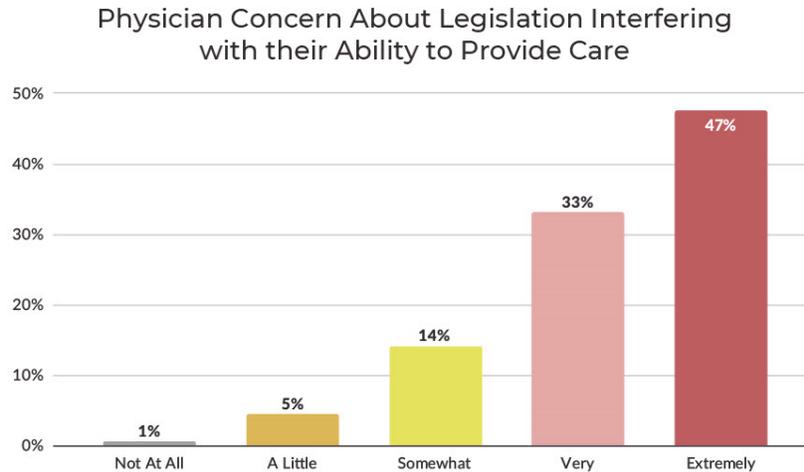
- More than 80% of physicians, to at least some degree, supported abortion healthcare services (both in-clinic and medication abortion) and unrestricted patient access to abortions.
- Even more physicians (84%) reported at least some level of support for their colleagues who provide abortions.

Physician Support for Unrestricted Access to Abortion



2. Across all measures, at least 9 in 10 physicians were concerned about either statewide or institutional restrictions on the provision of abortion care.

- 99% were at least a little concerned about legislation interfering in the doctor-patient relationship, and nearly half (48%) were extremely concerned.
- Most doctors expressed at least some level of concern that abortion laws will make it difficult for physicians to offer timely and appropriate care (93%) and for patients to receive the care they need (91%).
- 90% stated that women's healthcare in Wisconsin would be worse if *Roe* were overturned and abortion was made illegal.
- Finally, doctors were worried about how abortion restrictions would affect their own medical institution—the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. More than four in five (83%) expressed concern that they would make it harder to recruit physicians, and two thirds (66%) were concerned about their effect on recruiting trainees
- While these concerns were most concentrated among obstetricians and gynecologists and primary care providers, they held across all across 20 medical specialties.



3. Despite high levels of support for abortion, physicians predominantly believed that their colleagues were less supportive, and this misperception was associated with reduced willingness to consult in abortion care.

- Only one in five (21%) of physicians correctly perceived that their colleagues shared their same level of support for abortion access.
- Those who (incorrectly) perceived less support among peers also reported less willingness to consult in abortion-related care—for example, by referring one of their patients to a colleague who provides abortion services, or by fielding a call from an abortion provider who wishes to confer about a mutual patient.
- Researchers hypothesized that the deep-seated cultural stigma surrounding abortion minimizes discussion about abortion among medical professionals. The relative silence may in turn present challenges to providing abortion-related care and supporting policy efforts.

## Conclusion and Implications

Public health and policy leaders have called for using physician attitudes to change policies and public perceptions.<sup>5</sup> Abortion policy is opportune and time-critical for such efforts<sup>1</sup>—especially in an already restrictive state where abortion may be criminalized in the coming years. Physicians have a unique vantage point on the direct effects of anti-abortion laws on their patients as well as on their medical institutions. Our findings underscore substantial physician concern that Wisconsin abortion restrictions can negatively affect patient care, the patient-provider relationship, and patients' health overall. Further, their belief that abortion should be accessible and unrestricted is consistent with guidance from major national medical organizations, including the American Medical Association<sup>7</sup> and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.<sup>8</sup> Wisconsin legislators can improve health outcomes by considering physicians' expert perspectives in the legislative process.

CORE researchers also documented that, due to widespread cultural stigma about abortion, medical professionals underestimate their colleagues' abortion support and refrain from taking part in abortion-related discussions. Efforts to normalize communication about abortion could improve abortion access in Wisconsin and beyond.

## References

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