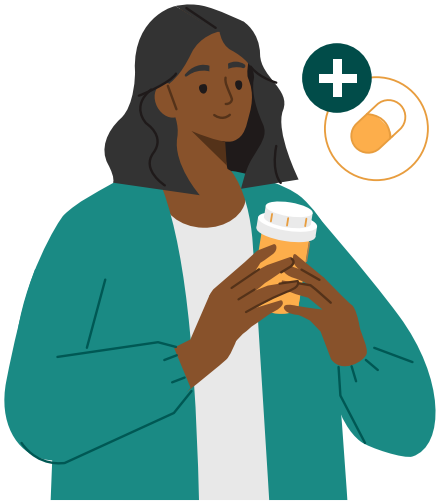
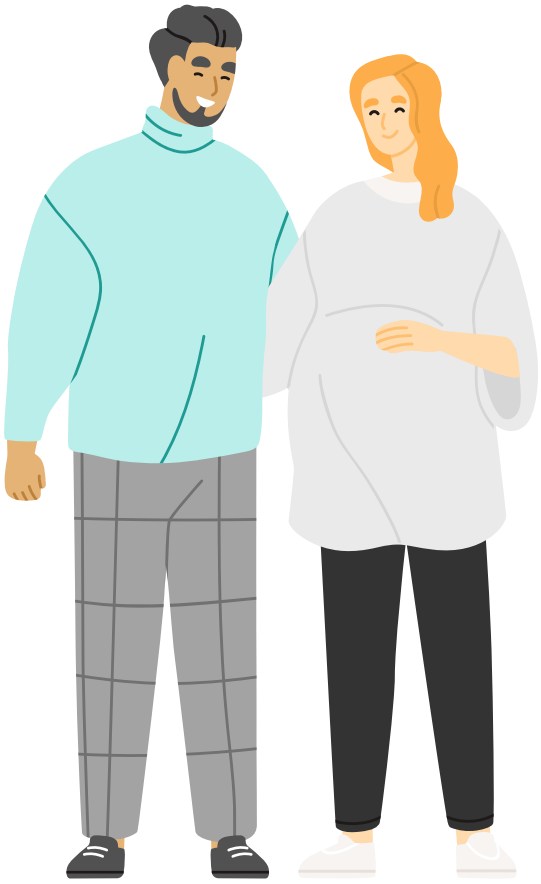
Putting Pregnancy, Abortion, and Care into Context on Screen

A Data Brief for Storytellers

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Reproductive health decisions—including contraception, pregnancy care, and abortion—are deeply personal and, in many cases, interconnected with many aspects of a person's life. People make decisions about whether, when, and under what circumstances to have a child or grow a family based on a range of factors, including existing family responsibilities and relationships, health conditions, work and financial circumstances, and personal aspirations.

However, a new analysis of television and film storylines shows that when reproductive health decisions, particularly abortion, have been shown on screen over the past 10 years, they've often been oversimplified, treated as one-offs, or unrepresentative of people's lived experiences, commitments, and concerns. New audience data shows that viewers are eager to see more realistic, authentic depictions.

Read online at newamerica.org/entertainment/reprohealth.

Americans Overall—Including U.S. Television and Film Viewers—Favor Legal Abortion

Some may assume that the American public broadly disapproves of legal abortion given decades of cultural and political conflict around bodily autonomy.

In reality, though, **63 percent of adults in the United States support guaranteeing legal access to abortion**, according to the Pew Research Center, and this figure has remained relatively constant for at least two decades.[1] Majorities of people across the political spectrum, except the most conservative, support the legality of abortion, as do people of nearly every faith tradition. The majority of people of every race, ethnicity, and educational level also support access to abortion.[2]

Similarly, **television and film viewers in the United States also favor legal abortion by a 30-point margin**—62 percent legal in all/most cases versus 32 percent illegal in all or most cases—according to a 2025 survey for New America by the media research firm MarketCast.[3] More than 60 percent of viewers of nearly every genre, and even a majority of those with traditional views of women's and men's roles in society, express support for legal abortion.[4]

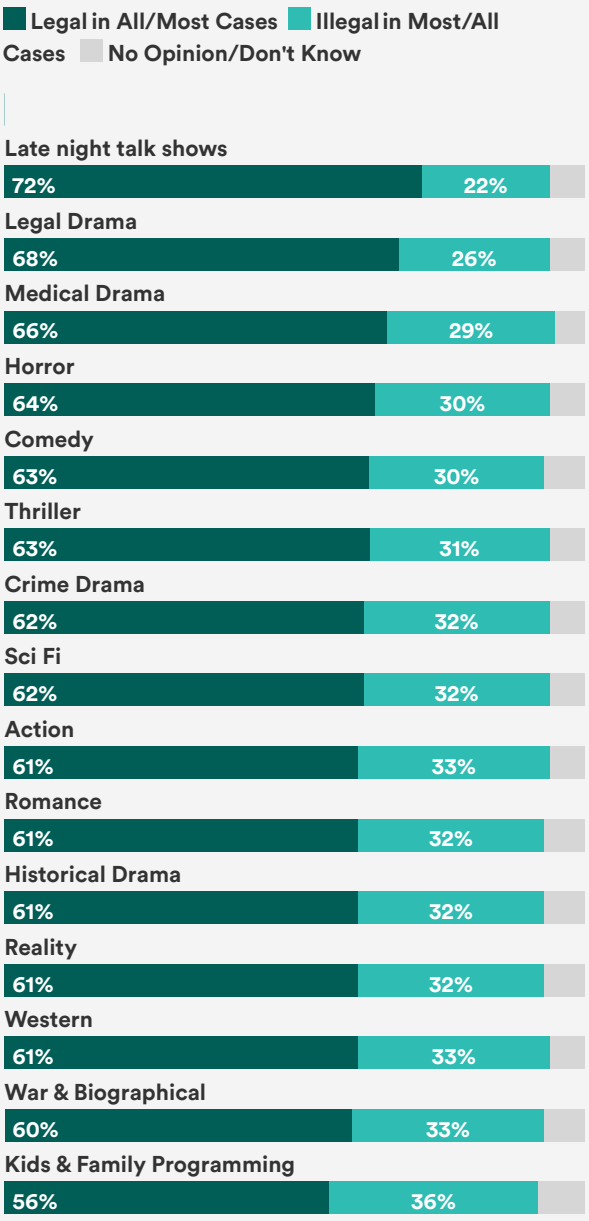
Abortion Is a Routine Part of Reproductive Health Care

Abortion is a common health experience. About six in 10 Americans say they know someone who's had an abortion, and about 25 percent of cisgender women have an abortion at some point in their lifetime.[5] That familiarity translates into relatability on screen for women of all ages: **One-third of women viewers, including 43 percent of women under 25 and 36 percent of women 40–54, say they relate to storylines that explore reproductive health topics** such as birth control, abortion, and peri/menopause.[6]

It's safe to say that, like other sexual and reproductive health experiences, including pregnancy scares, pap smears, prenatal care, and shifts around menopause, abortion is part of the fabric of people's lives, yet socially stigmatized, politically restricted, and culturally invisible.

Across Genres, U.S. TV and Film Viewers Support Legal Abortion in the United States

Which of the following comes closest to your opinion on abortion? Abortion should be legal in all cases, legal in most cases, illegal in most cases, illegal in all cases, or no opinion/don't know?



Source: MarketCast survey of 1,310 U.S. Streaming Viewers, aged 18-59, for New America, April 2025

What Are Audiences Seeing Now?

Television and film can shape audiences' understandings of themselves and others, provide visibility of underrepresented experiences, and offer a range of perspectives on complicated issues, but depictions of abortion fail to deliver on this potential. **Abortion Onscreen's analysis of abortion plotlines from 2015–2025**—475 on TV and 85 in film—**found that depictions usually lack context and representation of lived circumstances**. See Methodology section below.

These stories often miss opportunities to capture nuanced, authentic, and complex considerations that would create the conditions that draw audiences into characters, stories, and relationships, particularly related to demographics; the rationale for seeking an abortion; the caregiving aspects of abortion; and challenges with abortion access.

The demographics of characters who have abortions don't match reality.

Characters who have abortions on screen are often white (58 percent in TV, 67 percent in film) and middle-class or wealthy (66 percent in both TV and film). **The vast majority of television characters (87 percent) and film characters (89 percent) who have abortions are not parents at the time of their abortion. The demographics of U.S. abortion-seekers are quite different.** In reality, people who seek abortions are more likely to be people of color, have lower incomes, and already have children.[7] Storytellers are missing opportunities to authentically explore how racism impacts health care, finances, parenting, and other dynamics that affect pregnancy decisions.

TV and film rarely depict the most common reasons people seek abortions.

Almost half (46 percent) of characters on film and television don't give any particular reason for their abortion. When they do, their commonly cited reasons include age and mistimed pregnancies. Though some patients name these as reasons for seeking abortion care, they are far from the most common. **Most people's considerations include financial responsibilities, concerns about a current partner, and existing caretaking responsibilities, particularly those related to children and older family members.**[8] Storytellers are losing compelling elements of stories, characters, and relationships by failing to show characters grappling not just with their feelings about becoming a parent, but also with their experiences of family, love, and caretaking responsibilities.

Characters rarely receive non-medical care from friends, loved ones, or support services.

Only about one-third of television and film characters are shown receiving any kind of support before, during, or after their abortion. **This means that the majority of portrayals depict abortion as an isolating, lonely experience instead of giving audiences a blueprint for how to provide emotional, financial, or logistical care** to someone before, during, or after their abortion.

Abortion is often portrayed as easy to access, when, in reality, people often face barriers.

Though abortion access in the United States is riddled with political and logistical barriers, characters on screen rarely face these challenges.[9] **Only 29 percent of plotlines on TV and 33 percent of plotlines in film show characters contending with obstacles to abortion access that at least 60 percent of all real-life abortion patients face.**[10] Barriers can include struggling to pay for an abortion, needing to travel hundreds of miles to receive abortion care, and not knowing where to obtain an abortion. These restrictions disproportionately impact people of color, who already face systemic barriers to health care and medical racism.[11] Television and film plotlines often miss the chance to bring these hardships to life, exploring the creative ways people can overcome these obstacles to care.





What Do Audiences Want?

Audiences crave authenticity and context, realistic portrayals of characters grappling with complex issues, and portrayals that are light-hearted but relatable. By portraying reproductive decisions without nuance and texture, storytellers and media companies are missing opportunities for viewer engagement.

According to the New America/MarketCast survey of 1,310 streaming viewers conducted in the spring of 2025, viewers perceive as unique on-screen stories that highlight the personal, workplace, health, caregiving, financial, and emotional factors that shape whether or not to carry a pregnancy to term.

When presented with how on-screen abortion depictions deviate from real life—particularly how few abortion seekers on screen are already parents and how infrequently work, family, and care context is presented—about half of viewers (49 percent) say they want on-screen representation to be more authentic to reality, and only 15 percent say they are okay with the status quo.

Demographically, the viewers most eager to see more authentic, nuanced pregnancy and abortion stories are among those that studios, networks, and streamers are most eager to attract:

- Younger viewers, especially Gen Z and younger Millennials
- People with children under 18
- Black and Latine viewers who represent the growing diversity of America
- "Enthusiast" viewers who are highly engaged in fandoms and participate in social media and real-life discussions of shows and films

As storytellers and executives consider how characters in their shows and films navigate reproductive health decisions, there's an opportunity to increase the accuracy and nuance of stories. This authenticity can draw in new viewers, create parasocial relationships that drive engagement, and help to create understanding, spark discussions, and shift culture.

69%

of viewers express interest in stories about characters making decisions about whether to start or grow a family, including 41 percent who are very or extremely interested.

40%

of viewers say they are interested in seeing pregnancy and reproductive health decisions at the center of a story, with work and family issues also woven into the show.

We Love to See It!

Ginny and Georgia (Netflix, 2025) for showing Ginny's parents providing their teenager with unconditional support through her abortion.



Life & Beth (Hulu, 2024), for showing Beth and Jess, who joke about supporting each other through geriatric pregnancies and geriatric abortions.

The Girls on the Bus (HBO Max, 2024) for showing medication abortion access via telehealth, as well as the logistical travel barriers imposed by state prohibitions on mailing abortion medication into the state.

Big Mood (U.K. Channel 4, 2024) for showing Eddie figuring out if and how to use her public insurance to pay for an abortion and struggling to come up with the cash to cover private abortion care.



Eva Lasting (Caracol Televisión in Colombia & Netflix, 2024) for showing Luisa's friends helping her pay for a safe illegal abortion and showing Eva sharing the feminist history of abortion access.

Methodology

For Abortion Onscreen's analysis, we combined data from our annual Abortion Onscreen reports, starting in 2016 and going through 2025. Since we did not publish a report for 2015, we collected data from our AbortionOnscreen.org database for content that aired that year. We coded each of these plotlines and films using the same codebook that the Abortion Onscreen team uses to track yearly abortion plotlines, which include mostly deductive, descriptive codes (i.e., race of character seeking an abortion, reason for abortion, legal status of abortion). We then calculated descriptive statistics for our categories of interest.

Data on what audiences want to see was collected by the media research firm MarketCast for New America's entertainment initiative, Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care, in April 2025. MarketCast conducted a scientific, online survey of 1,310 U.S. viewers aged 18–59 in households that subscribe to at least one streaming service and watch at least five hours of programming per week. The data is weighted to represent the U.S. population of viewers, using U.S. Census data. The methodology is explained in more detail in New America's full report, **The Power of Stories About Work, Family, and Care on Screen**, published in July 2025. The data released in this brief is being published for the first time here and was not included in that report.

About ANSIRH and Abortion Onscreen

American film and television has always included stories about abortion. Abortion Onscreen is a research program from USCF's Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health initiative aimed at investigating these narratives and analyzing their impact on broader social and cultural understandings of abortion.

abortiononscreen.org

About Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care

The Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care initiative at New America's Better Life Lab advises entertainment creators and executives on ways to tell rich, meaningful stories and amplify the great shows and films already doing that work. We aim to see more authentic stories on screen that engage and grow audiences by reflecting realistic lived experiences and aspirations.

newamerica.org/entertainment

Learn More

This brief is the third collaboration between Abortion Onscreen and Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care and complements the information in our other resources:

Re-Scripting Depictions of Abortion on Screen Telling Stories about Pregnancy Decisions and Abortion in Context (2023)

https://newamerica.org/rescriptingabortion

Fast Facts for TV Writers: Writing Holistic Pregnancy and Abortion Stories (2024)

https://newamerica.org/abortionfastfacts

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Read it online at **newamerica.org/entertainment/reprohealth**.

Endnotes

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