

Implications of *Dobbs v Women's Health* on pregnant people's psychological wellbeing

M. Antonia Biggs, PhD

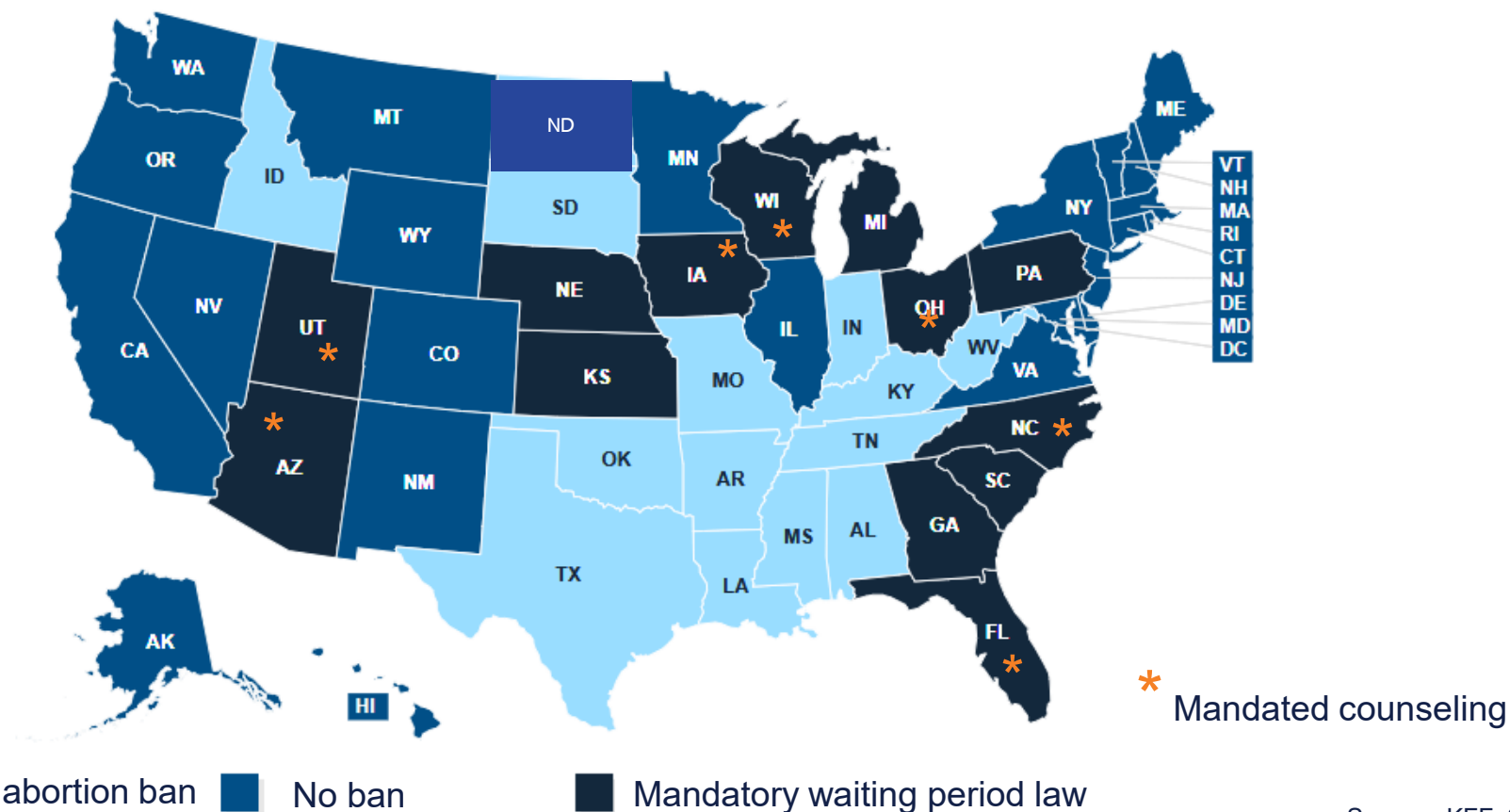
October 24, 2024

***NASEM Webinar: Examining Critical Mental Health Issues Across the
Reproductive Life Cycle***

University of California, San Francisco | Bixby Center for Global Reproductive Health

Abortion policies are rooted in claims of the mental health harms due to abortion

13 states with mandated waiting period laws; 7 states with mandated in-person counseling (2-vist requirement)



Source: KFF, 2023

Attempts to ban mifepristone, in case against FDA

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
AMARILLO DIVISION

ALLIANCE FOR HIPPOCRATIC
MEDICINE, *et al.*,

Plaintiffs,

v.

2:22-CV-223-Z

U.S. FOOD AND DRUG
ADMINISTRATION, *et al.*,


Defendants.

MEMORANDUM OPINION AND ORDER

Before the Court is Plaintiffs' Motion for Preliminary Injunction ("Motion") (ECF No. 6), filed on November 18, 2022. The Court **GRANTS** the Motion **IN PART**.

SO ORDERED.

April 7, 2023

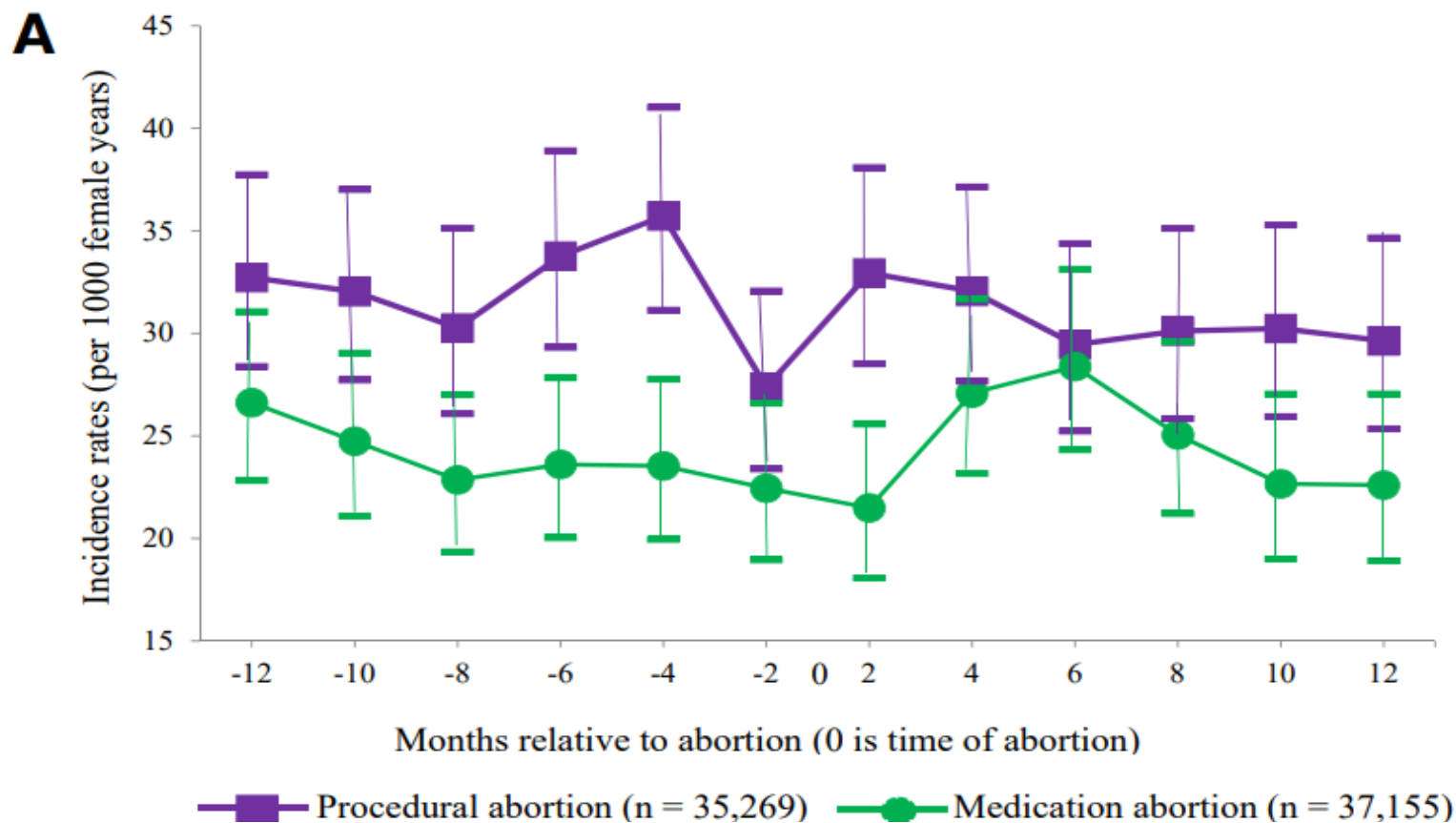

MATTHEW J. KACSMARYK
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

*"The FDA "entirely failed to consider an important aspect of the problem" by omitting any evaluation of the psychological effects of the drug.... Considering the **intense psychological trauma and post-traumatic stress women often experience from chemical abortion**, this failure should not be overlooked or understated."*

*"Women who have already obtained an abortion may be more hindered than women who challenge restrictions on abortion. **Women who have aborted a child ...often experience shame, regret, anxiety, depression, drug abuse, and suicidal thoughts because of the abortion.**"*

Prospective cohort study of 72,424 people in Danish registry data

Incident rate of any psychiatric diagnosis from 1 year before to 1 year after an abortion by method of and age at abortion



Slide 4

What is the mental health impact of having versus being denied an abortion?

"If you read only one book about democracy, *The Turnaway Study* should be it. Why? Because without the power to make decisions about our own bodies, there is no democracy. There is no freedom and justice without reproductive freedom and justice." —GLORIA STEINEM

THE TURNAWAY STUDY



Ten Years, a Thousand Women,
and the Consequences of Having—
or Being Denied—an Abortion

DIANA GREENE FOSTER, PhD

JAMA Psychiatry | [Original Investigation](#)

Women's Mental Health and Well-being 5 Years After Receiving or Being Denied an Abortion A Prospective, Longitudinal Cohort Study

M. Antonia Biggs, PhD; Ushma D. Upadhyay, PhD, MPH; Charles E. McCulloch, PhD; Diana G. Foster, PhD

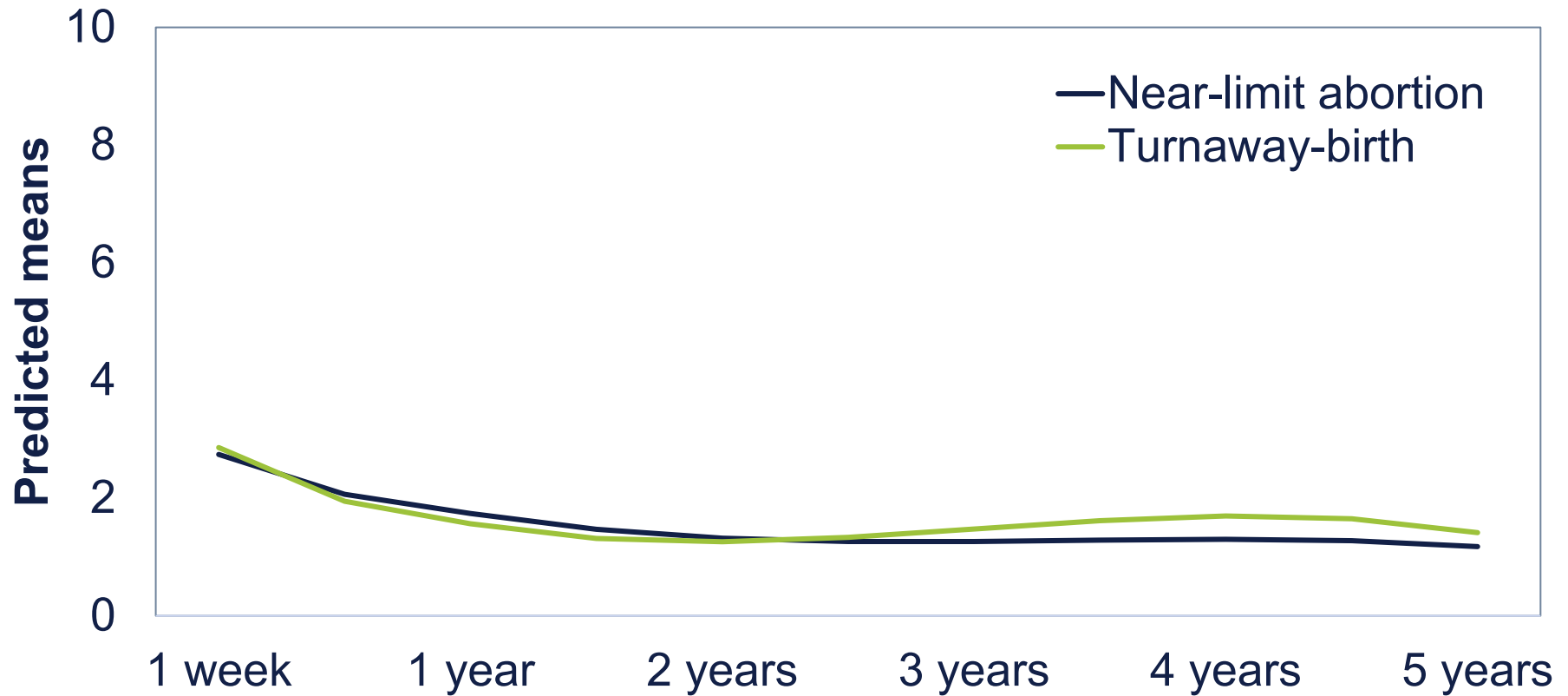
Slide 5

How do people who have a near-limit abortion differ from people denied an abortion (Turnaway Births) on the following outcomes:?

- **Depression symptoms and cases (BSI):** Includes feeling lonely, blue, worthless, hopeless, loss of interest, and thoughts of ending life
- **Anxiety symptoms and cases (BSI):** Includes feeling nervous, tense, scared, terror, restless, and fearful
- **Suicidal ideation (PHQ9 & BSI)**
- **Post-traumatic stress symptoms**
- **Self-Esteem**
- **Life satisfaction**

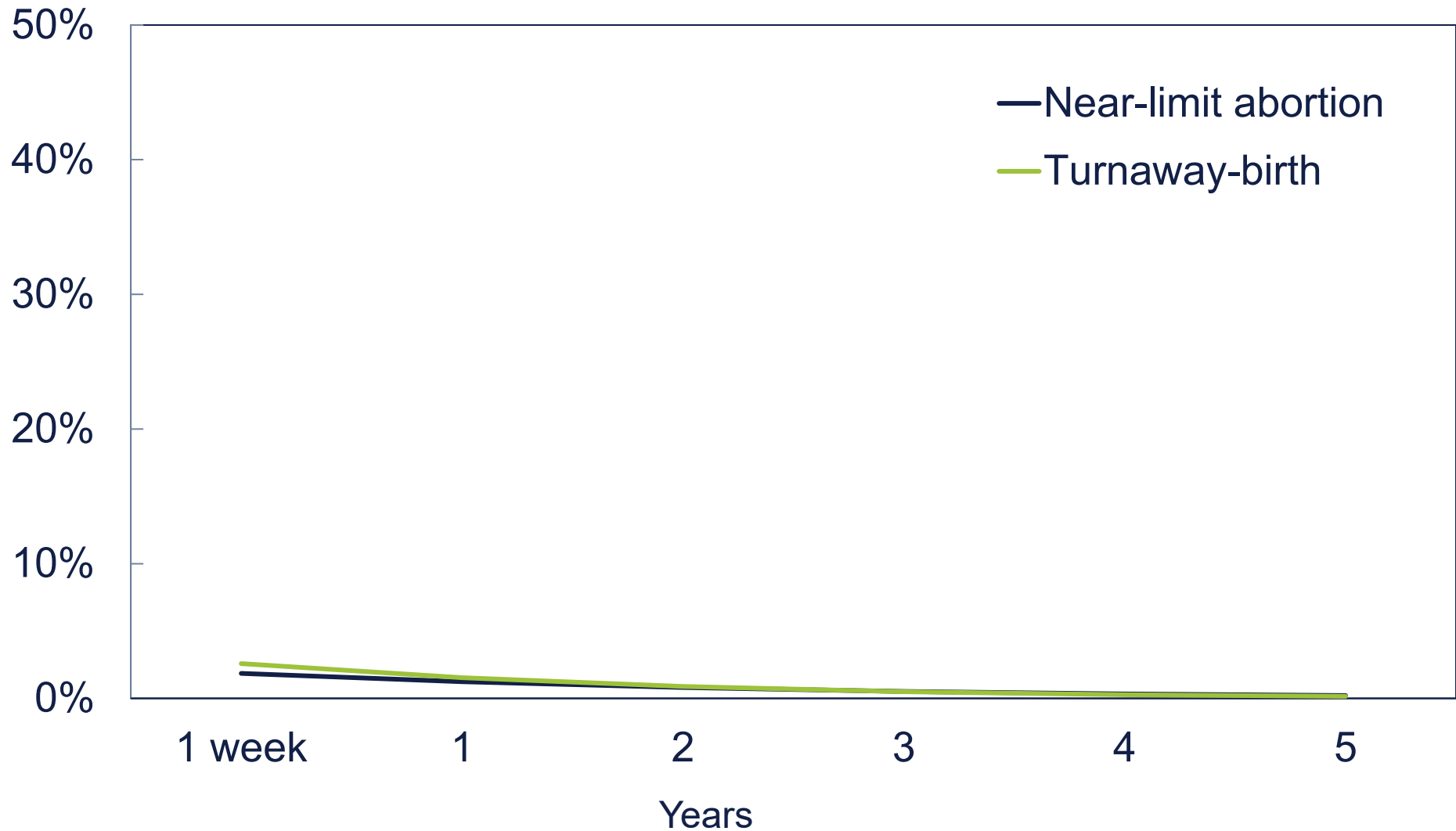
Depressive symptoms (scale 0-24)

In the past 7 days, to what extent have you felt [loneliness, loss of interest, blue, worthless, hopeless, thought of ending life]?



Biggs et al. JAMA-Psychiatry, 2017

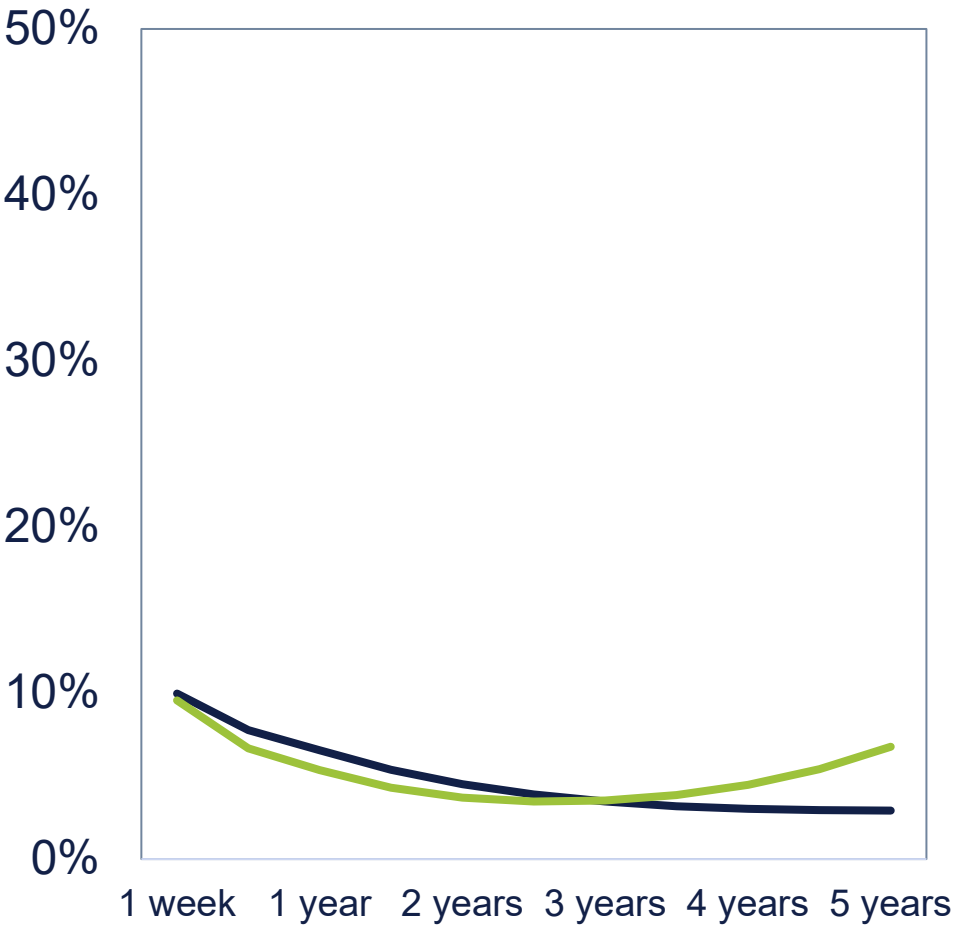
Any suicidal ideation symptoms



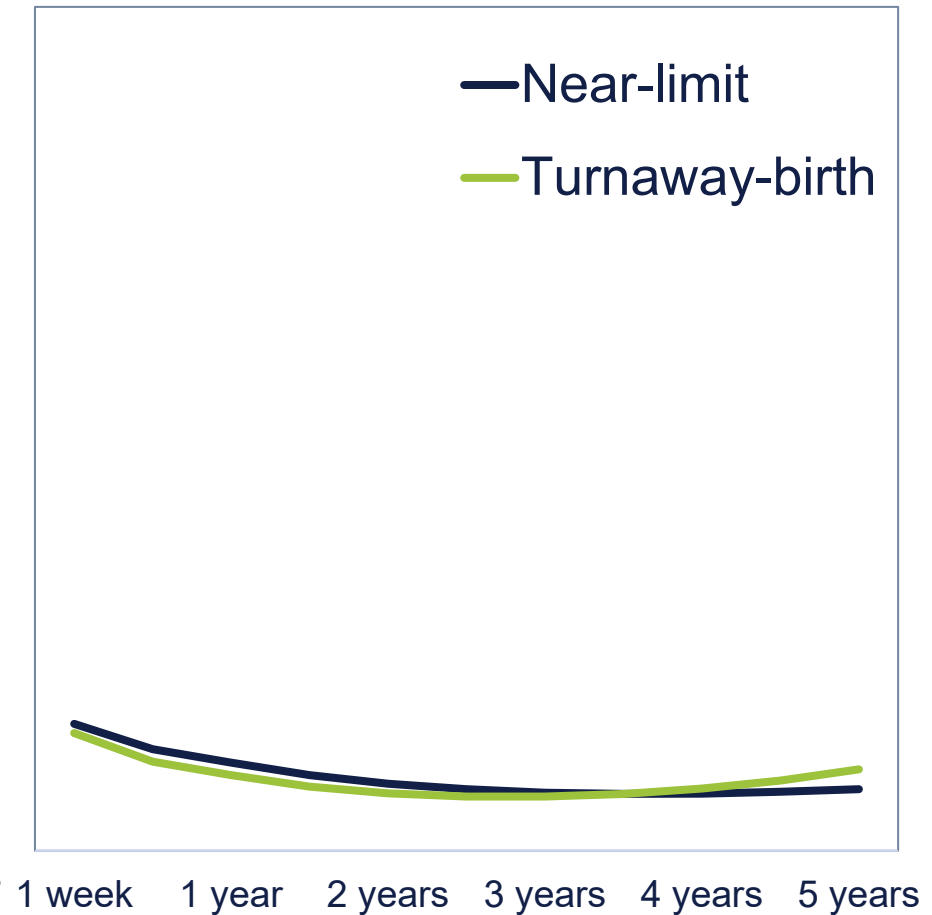
Biggs et al. Am J Psychiatry 2018

Clinically significant cases of depression and anxiety

Depression cases



Anxiety cases

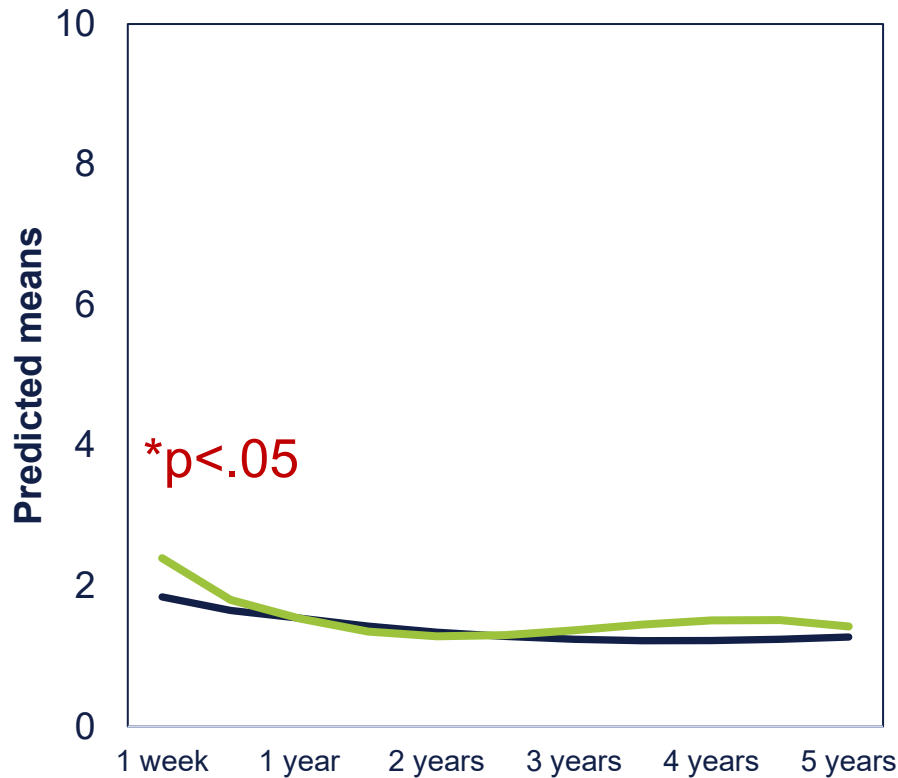


Biggs et al. JAMA-Psychiatry, 2017

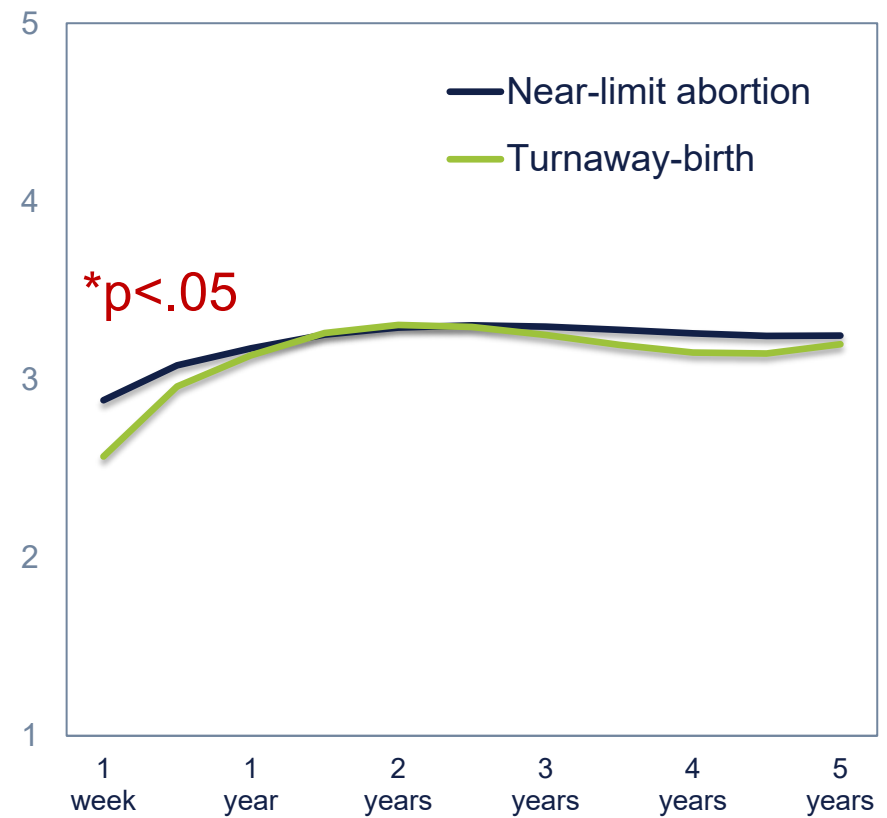
Anxiety symptoms & self-esteem

In the past seven days, ...?

...felt [nervous, tense, scared,
terror, restless, fearful]
(0-24 anxiety symptoms)?



...felt high self-esteem?
(1=not at all, 5=extremely)



Violence and access to abortion

- People who have abortions experience a decrease in physical violence from the man involved in the pregnancy.
- People who carry to term experience no decrease in physical violence.

“It is very, very difficult to find a job when you're pregnant, to keep a job when you're pregnant, and to find or maintain a job with a baby especially if your partner ...doesn't want to help. So ... domestic violence skyrockets because you're ... financially dependent on your partner because you have to be home with the kid ... Where you're like, oh no ... I can't be homeless with this kid ... I need him for money ... **Pregnancy is an incredibly scary thing especially if you cannot trust the person you're with.**”

24 year old who was denied an abortion and carried the pregnancy to term.

Factors NOT associated with mental health symptoms

The abortion

Pregnancy duration

Younger age

Factors associated with adverse mental health post-abortion seeking

Abortion denial

History of mental health diagnoses

History of child abuse and neglect

Abortion stigma

Pre-Dobbs Psychosocial Burden Study

Is the experience of delay-causing obstacles trying to access abortion care associated with stress, anxiety, and depression?

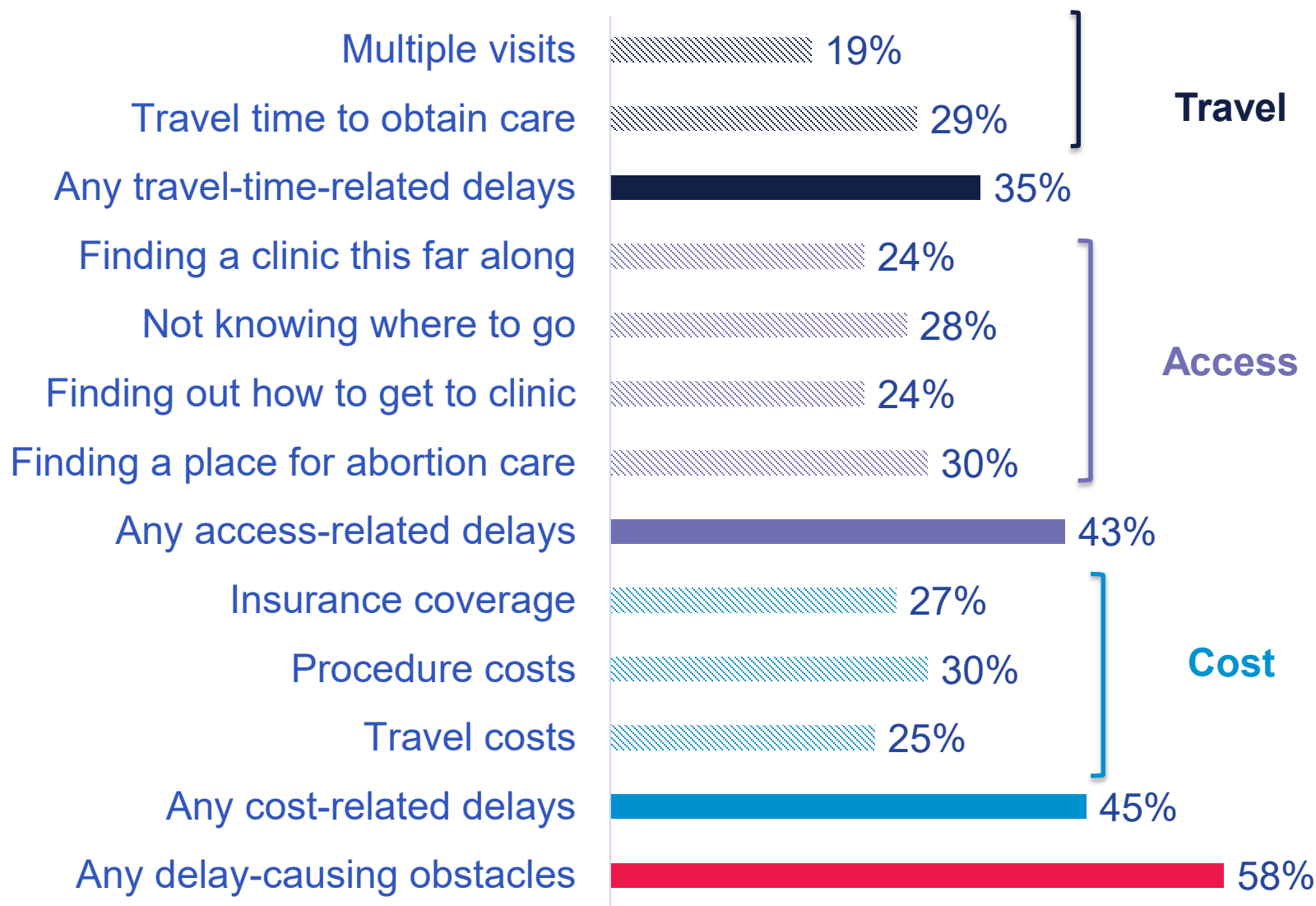
Methods

- Recruited people seeking abortion from 4 facilities in protected access states (CA, IL, & NM) in 2019
- Self-administered iPad survey prior to abortion
- In-clinic RA approached patients
- Eligibility criteria: ages 15 and over, English- or Spanish-speaking

784 respondents
(73% response rate)

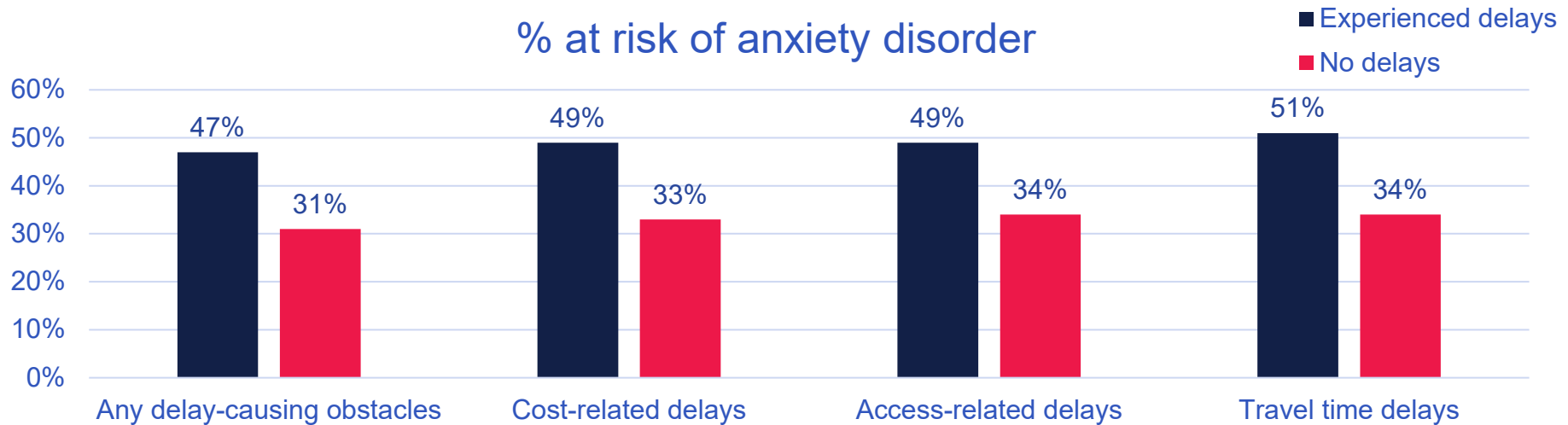
Source: Biggs, Neilands Kaller, Wingo, Ralph (2020) Developing and validating the Psychosocial Burden among people Seeking Abortion Scale. PLoS ONE.

Pre-Dobbs Delay-causing obstacles to abortion care

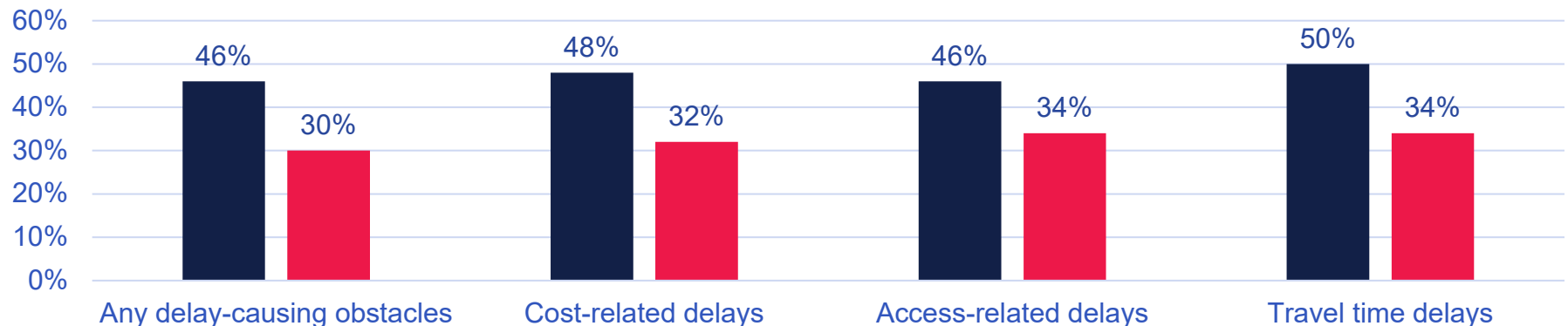


Slide 15

Pre-Dobbs delays is associated with being at risk of anxiety and depression (N=784)



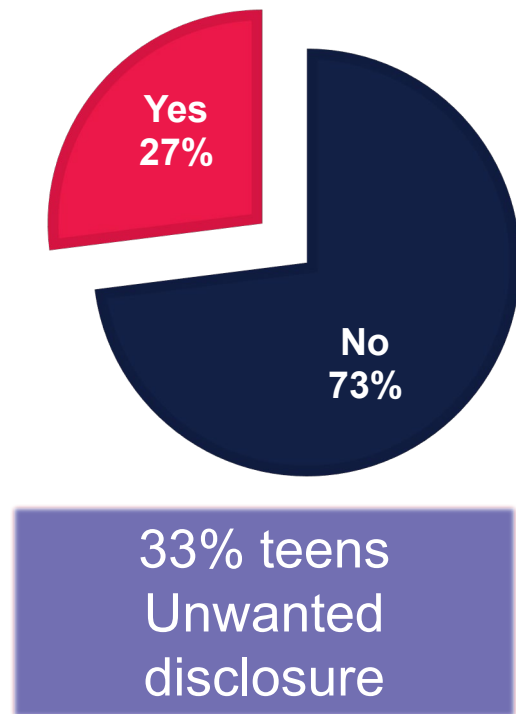
% at risk of depressive disorder



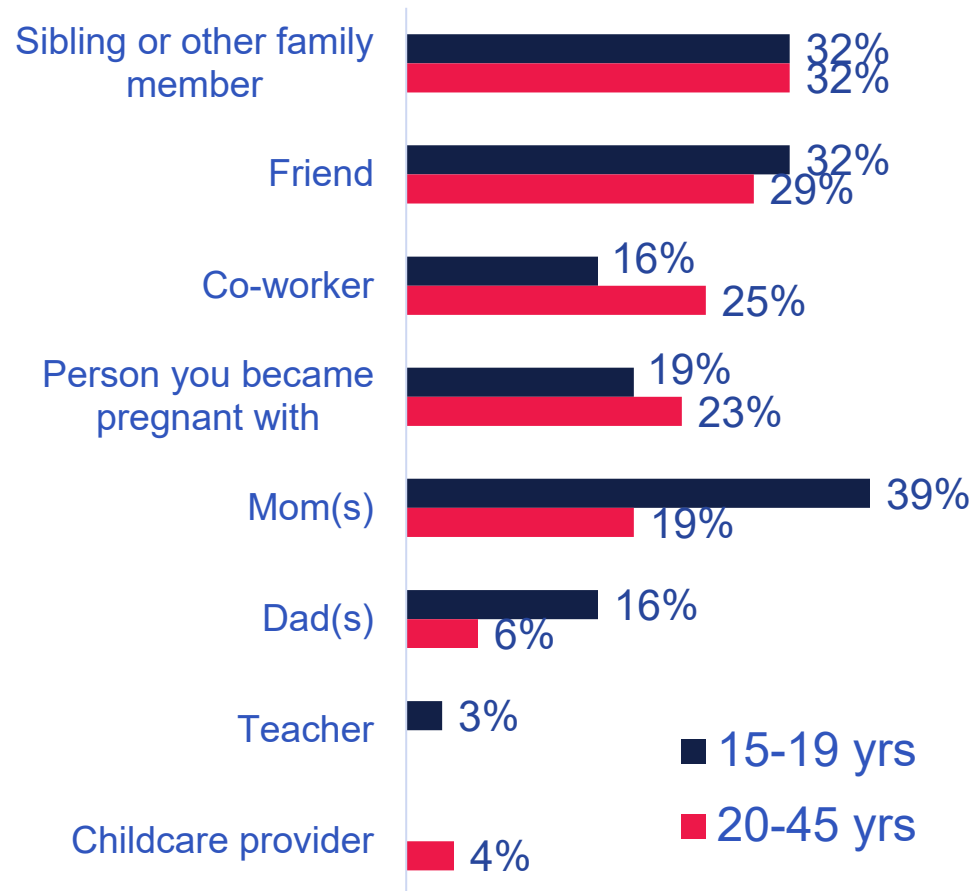
Slide 16

Unwanted disclosure about the abortion (n=746)

Did you have to tell anyone about the abortion, that you would have preferred not to tell?



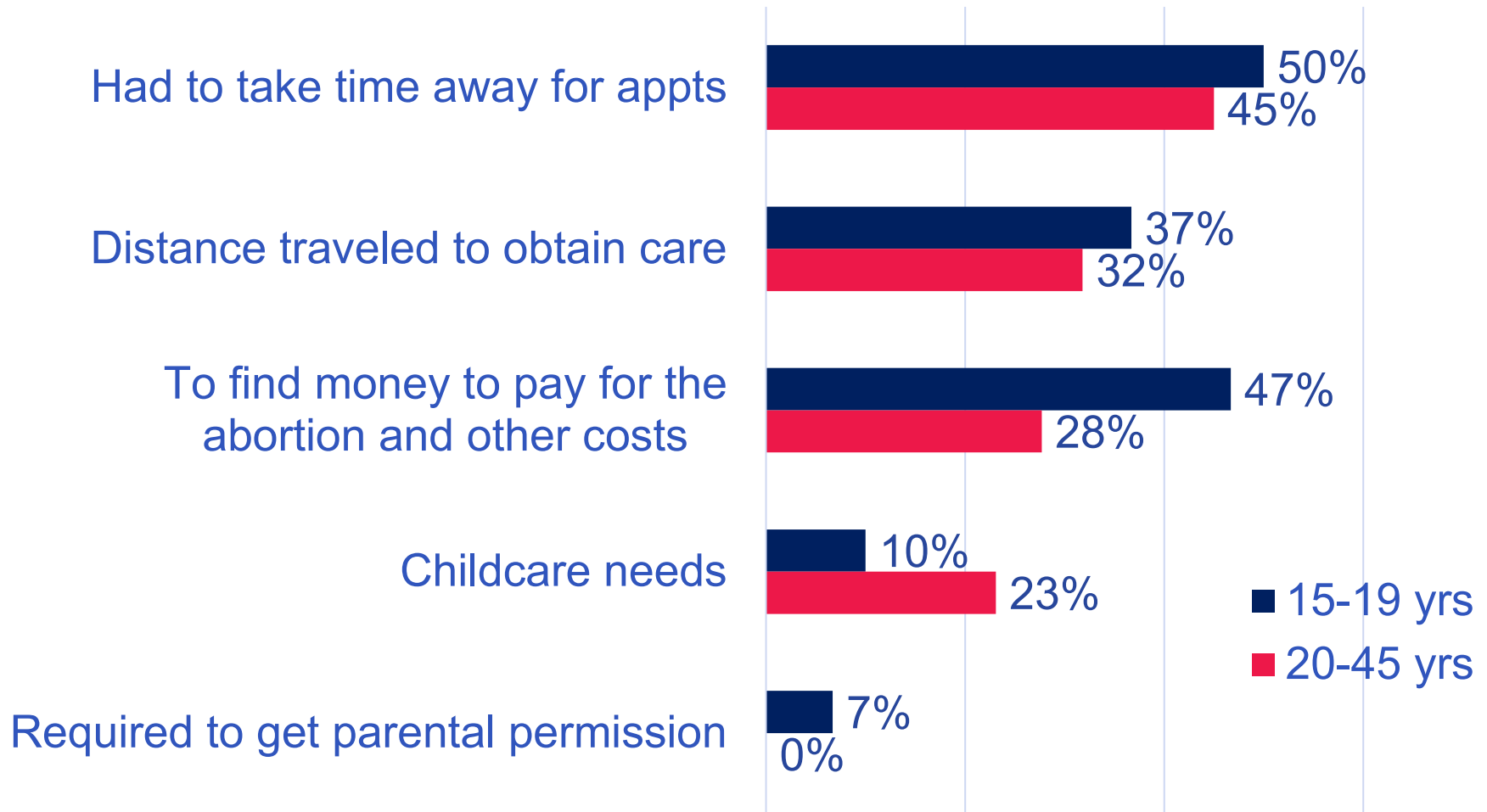
Who did you tell, that you would have preferred not to?



Slide 17

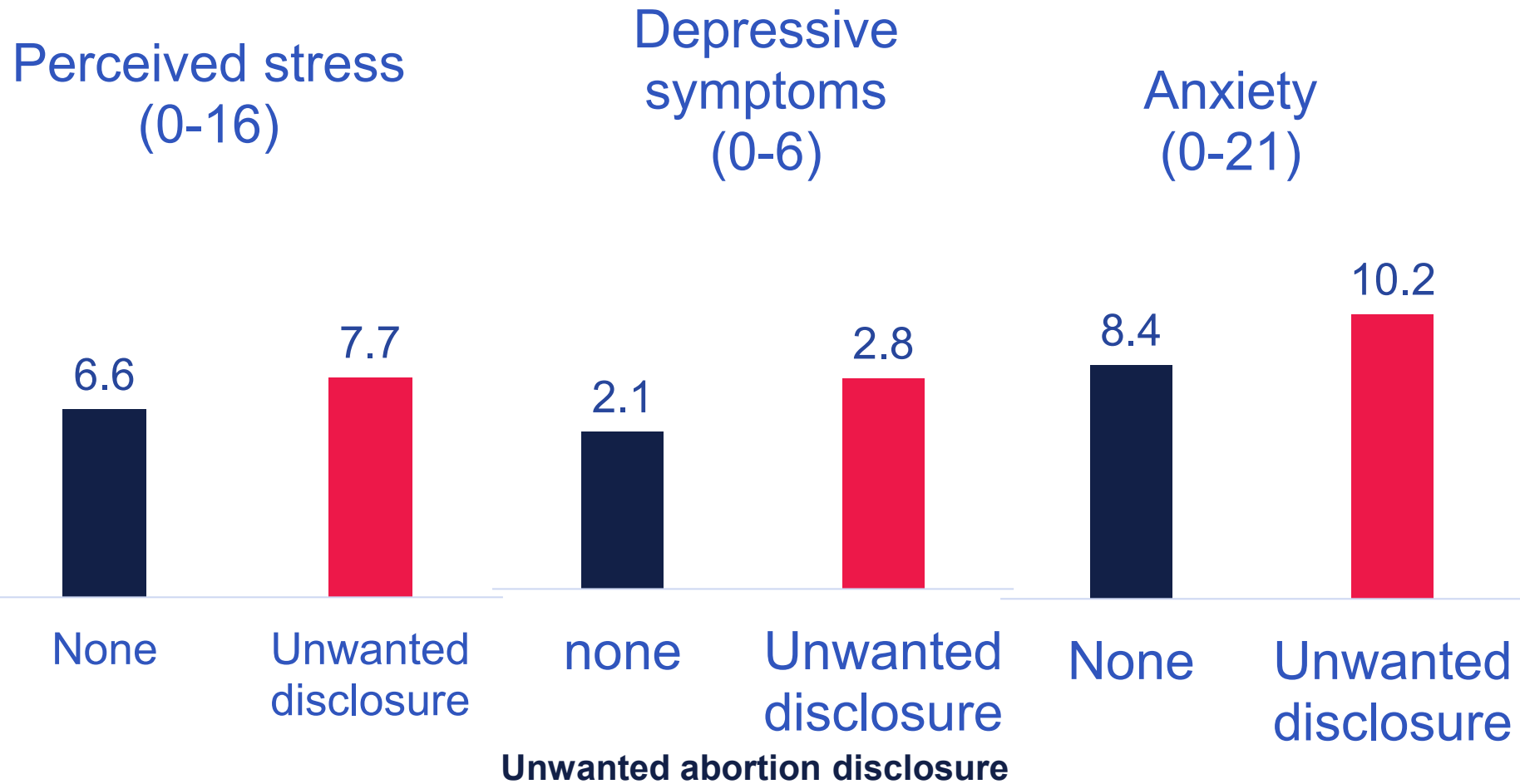
Reasons for unwanted disclosure about the abortion

Reasons for unwanted disclosure



Slide 18

Unwanted disclosure and symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression (n=746)



Predicted values based on adjusted multivariable analyses

Conclusion

- Denying people an abortion is more harmful, at least initially, than allowing people get their wanted abortion.
- The added obstacles that people must overcome can lead to reduced privacy about the pregnancy decision, added costs, more travel, all of which may add stress, depression and anxiety to people's lives.
- Policies rooted in claims that abortion causes mental health harm are not evidence-based and likely add to pregnant people's psychosocial burden negatively impacting their psychological well-being.

The impacts of abortion denial on other life outcomes

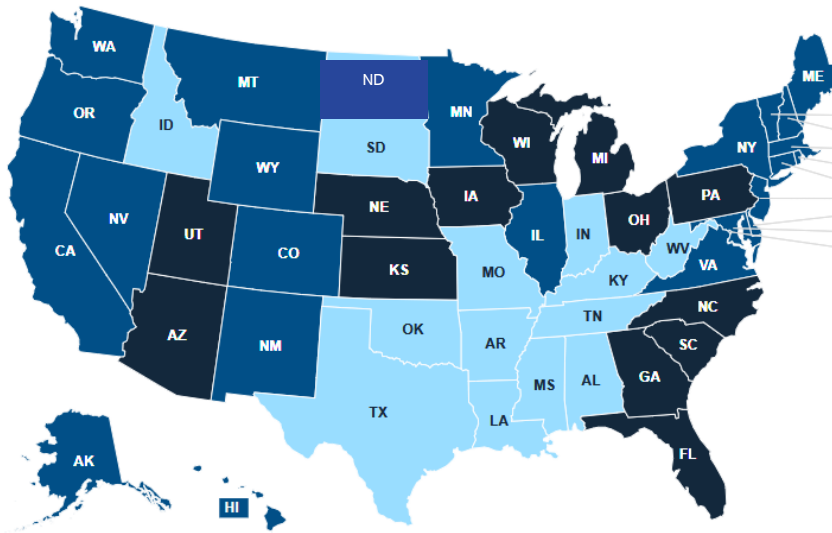
Compared to women who received an abortion, women denied a wanted abortion

- Worse physical health
- More likely to live below the poverty level.
- More likely to report that they can't afford basic living expenses.
- More likely to be evicted, declare bankruptcy, have a lot of debt
- Less able to provide for existing children.
- Less likely to have an *intended* pregnancy in the next five years.
- Equally likely to be in a romantic relationship with the man involved in the pregnancy
- Less likely to be in a “very good” romantic relationship with any partner.
- Less likely to set aspirational plans.
- Report worse maternal bonding with child born from unwanted pregnancy

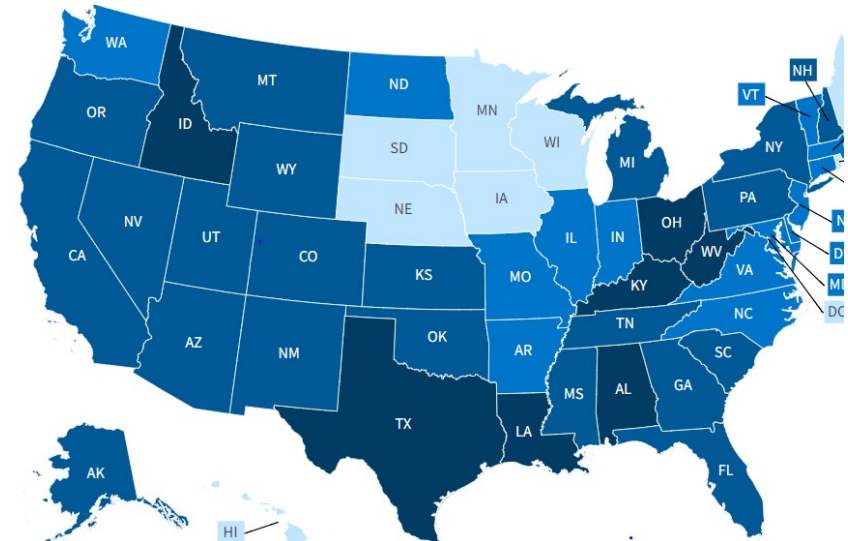
States with abortion bans also have many people experiencing anxiety or depression symptoms

→ Abortion bans and mandatory counseling laws

→ % of adults w/ anxiety and/or depression symptoms (2023)



Light blue: Total abortion ban
Dark blue: No ban
Black outline: Mandatory counseling law



Lightest blue: 24%-28%
Medium-light blue: 28%-31%
Medium-dark blue: 32%-34%
Darkest blue: 35%-39%

Source: KFF, 2023

Slide 22

Population-level studies examining impact of abortion policy on people's mental health

- Cross-sectional study of 197 countries and regions finds modest relationship between access to abortion and mental health among women of childbearing age (Rajkumar, 2022)
- Serial cross-sectional surveys shows a small but significantly greater increase in anxiety and depression symptoms after the Dobbs decision among females but not males (Thornberg, 2024)