

EVALUATING PRIORITIES

Measuring women's and children's health and well-being against
abortion restrictions in the states

State Brief: North Carolina

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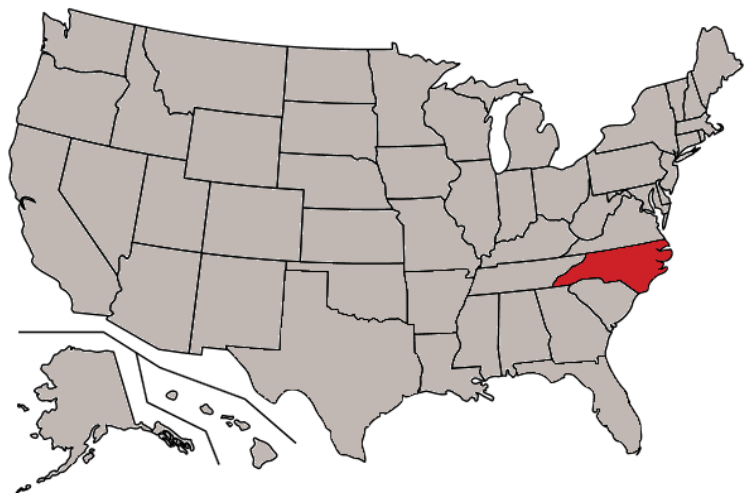
CONTEXT

Since abortion was legalized in the United States (US) in 1973, states have passed hundreds of laws limiting whether, when, and under what circumstances a woman may obtain an abortion.¹ Such attacks on abortion are on the rise; from 2011-2013 states enacted more restrictions than were enacted in the entire previous decade.² Anti-choice groups claim these restrictions are necessary to protect and support the health and well-being of women, their pregnancies, and their children, a claim that has become the foundation of many successful proposals to restrict abortion access further.³

To support an evidence-based effort to fight back against the onslaught of abortion restrictions, Ibis Reproductive Health and the Center for Reproductive Rights collaborated to evaluate the claims of anti-choice policymakers. We aimed to determine if the concern that anti-choice policymakers say they have for women, pregnancies, and children translates into the passage of state policies known to improve the health and well-being of women and children, or into improved state-level health outcomes for women and children. We also aimed to document how states with relatively few abortion restrictions fare in terms of women's and children's health policies and outcomes. This brief provides a snapshot of the findings detailed in our full report⁴ and an in-depth look at our findings for North Carolina.

North Carolina overview

North Carolina, a coastal state located in the southeast, is a mix of urban and rural areas,^{5,6} and is the 11th poorest state in the country.⁷ Compared to the US as a whole, North Carolina has a higher proportion of Black residents, a lower proportion of Hispanic residents, and a similar proportion of residents who are White or other races.⁶ North Carolinians tend to be more religious than other Americans.^{8,9} Its state legislature is strongly anti-choice; Governor Pat McCrory (R), the North Carolina Senate, and the North Carolina House are all anti-choice.¹



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North Carolina is home to an estimated 2,070,090 women of reproductive age.¹⁰ The proportion of North Carolina women who have abortions each year is slightly lower than the national average, as is the percentage of pregnancies ending in abortion.¹¹ In 2011, there were 36 abortion providers in North Carolina. The majority of women in the state live in a county with no abortion provider.¹¹ More detail about North Carolina can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Key facts about North Carolina

	North Carolina	US
Population, n⁶	9,523,000	310,197,000
Population density, people per square mile⁵	196	87
Metropolitan status, %⁶		
Metropolitan	67	84
Non metropolitan	33	16
Race/ethnicity, %⁶		
White	63	63
Black	21	12
Hispanic	8	17
Other	7	8
Median household income, \$^{7,12}	44,620	51,771
Religion, %^{9,9}		
Very religious	50	40
Moderately religious	30	29
Nonreligious	21	31
Abortion rate, per 1,000 women of reproductive age¹¹	15	17
Pregnancies ending in abortion, %¹¹	16	18
Women living in county with no abortion provider, %¹¹	53	38

METHODS

We examined state-level policies and outcomes related to the well-being of women and children; our definition of well-being is broad, encompassing health, social, and economic status. We then determined what, if any, relationship exists between those policies and outcomes and state-level restrictions on abortion. This involved: (1) selecting indicatorsⁱ of abortion restrictions, outcomes related to women’s and children’s health and well-being, and policies that support women’s and children’s health and well-being, (2) scoring the selected state restrictions, outcomes, and policies, and (3) graphically exploring the relationship between abortion restrictions and women’s and children’s well-being.

ⁱ“Indicator” refers to the presence or absence of a policy (either an abortion restriction or a policy to support women’s or children’s well-being) or a health outcome statistic (e.g., infant mortality rate, prevalence of asthma, etc.).

We selected indicators based on evidence of their importance to the well-being of women and children and the availability of up-to-date, state-level data. We ultimately included 76 indicators in five topic areas: abortion restrictions (14), women’s health outcomes (15), children’s health outcomes (15), social determinants of health (10), and policies supportive of women’s and children’s health and well-being (22).ⁱⁱ The data were collected from a variety of government and nonprofit organizations with expertise in women’s and children’s health, well-being, and policy.

For each state, we calculated two primary scores: one score for abortion restrictions and one score for overall women’s and children’s well-being.

- For abortion restrictions, each state was scored 0-14 to reflect the total number of 14 possible abortion restrictions. Any legislation signed into law was counted, including those unenforced due to court challenges. Higher scores indicate more abortion restrictions.
- For overall women’s and children’s well-being, we calculated scores for each of the four topic areas within women’s and children’s well-being, and then summed the four sub-scores to calculate an overall well-being score. Each state was scored 0 or 1 for each of the selected indicators, for a total possible score of 0-62 (see below for details on how we determined 0 or 1 for indicators in each sub-topic). Higher scores indicate better performance on women’s and children’s well-being.
- For each indicator in the three health outcome sub-topics (women’s health, children’s health, and social determinants of health), we determined whether states met a pre-determined benchmark, which was set to be moderately but meaningfully better than the national average. Because the national average for selected indicators is often poor relative to other developed countries, the pre-determined benchmarks do not necessarily reflect an “ideal” but rather are meant to be attainable goals for states.ⁱⁱⁱ A state received a score of 1 if it met or exceeded the benchmark and a 0 if it did not. The score for each subtopic is the number of indicators for which a state met or exceeded the benchmark. Total possible

ⁱⁱ For a complete list of indicators and data sources, please see our full report, *Evaluating priorities: Measuring women’s and children’s health and well-being against abortion restrictions in the states. Research report.*

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information on how the benchmarks were calculated, please see our full report, *Evaluating priorities: Measuring women’s and children’s health and well-being against abortion restrictions in the states. Research report.*

scores were 0-15 for women’s health, 0-15 for children’s health, and 0-10 for social determinants of health. Higher scores indicate better performance in that sub-topic.

- For indicators of policies to support women’s and children’s well-being, each state was scored 0-22 to reflect the total number of 22 possible supportive policies. Higher scores indicate more policies supporting women’s and children’s well-being.

To examine the relationship between abortion restrictions and women’s and children’s health and well-being, we created a series of scatter plots, comparing states’ abortion restriction scores against their total scores on overall women’s and children’s well-being, as well as against their scores on each of the sub-topics (women’s health, children’s health, social determinants of health, and supportive policies).

RESULTS

We obtained data on all 76 indicators for all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Abortion restrictions

Of the 14 restrictions included in this analysis, North Carolina had 13. North Carolina tied with seven other states (Arizona, Indiana, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Carolina) for being the state with the second-most abortion restrictions in the country. Only Kansas, Oklahoma, and Mississippi had all 14 restrictions.

Table 2: Abortion restrictions

Abortion restrictions	Yes	No
Parental involvement before a minor obtains an abortion	✓	
Mandatory waiting periods between time of first appointment and abortion	✓	
Mandatory counseling prior to abortion	✓	
Requirement to have or be offered an ultrasound	✓	
Restrictions on abortion coverage in private health insurance plans	✓	
Restrictions on abortion coverage in public employee health insurance plans	✓	
Restrictions on abortion coverage in Medicaid	✓	
Only licensed physicians may perform abortions	✓	
Ambulatory surgical center standards imposed on facilities providing abortion	✓	
Hospital privileges or alternative arrangement required for abortion providers		X
Refusal to provide abortion services allowed	✓	
Gestational age limit for abortion set by law	✓	
Restrictions on provision of medication abortion	✓	
Below average number of providers (per 100,000 women aged 15-44)	✓	
Total number of restrictions	13	

Women's and children's well-being

North Carolina performed poorly on indicators of women's and children's health and socioeconomic well-being. With a total score of 18, North Carolina ranked 33rd out of 51.

Women's Health

North Carolina performed below average on indicators of women's health. The state ranked 33rd out of 51, meeting only three of the benchmarks for women's health, and tied with six other states (Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and South Carolina).

Table 3: Women's health

Women's health indicators	NC	US	Benchmark	NC meets benchmark	
				Yes	No
Cervical cancer screening rate, % of women (range)	84.0	80.9 (73.2-88.9)	82.5 or ↑	✓	
Women without health insurance, % of women (range)	24.0	21.0 (5.0-33.0)	17.9 or ↓		X
Women with no personal health care provider, % of women (range)	18.2	17.3 (8.0-26.8)	14.7 or ↓		X
Maternal mortality ratio, deaths per 100,000 live births (range)	10.9	12.1 (1.2-38.2)	9.0 or ↓		X
Women reporting poor mental health, % of women (range)	36.3	40.1 (30.1-46.1)	38.4 or ↓	✓	
Suicide deaths, per 100,000 women (range)	6.5	6.1 (2.6-12.5)	5.0 or ↓		X
Prevalence of overweight or obesity, % of women (range)	59.9	56.6 (47.0-66.4)	54.5 or ↓		X
Smoking prevalence, % of women (range)	19.3	16.4 (9.2-27.6)	14.6 or ↓		X
Prevalence of sexual violence, % of women (range)	51.0	44.6 (28.9-58.0)	41.5 or ↓		X
Asthma prevalence, % of women (range)	9.6	10.7 (7.3-14.1)	9.9 or ↓	✓	
Proportion of pregnancies unintended, % of pregnancies (range)	52.0	49.0 (37.0-70.0)	45.9 or ↓		X
Preterm birth rate, % of live births (range)	12.7	12.0 (8.4-17.6)	11.1 or ↓		X
Prevalence of low birth weight, % of live births (range)	9.1	8.1 (5.7-12.1)	7.5 or ↓		X
Chlamydia incidence, per 100,000 women (range)	790.3	643.3 (322.2-1,358.6)	546.2 or ↓		X
HIV incidence, per 100,000 women (range)	20.8	19.0 (2.3-177.9)	6.6 or ↓		X
Number of indicators meeting benchmark				3	

Children's Health

North Carolina performed below average on indicators of children's health. The state met the benchmark for only three of the 15 children's health outcome indicators evaluated. Compared to other states, North Carolina ranked 31st of 51 and had the fourth-lowest score, tied with the District of Columbia and eight other states (Alaska, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, New Mexico, and West Virginia).

Table 4: Children's health

Children's health indicators	NC	US	Benchmark	NC meets benchmark	
				Yes	No
Children with health insurance, percent of children (range)	91.6	91.1 (81.7-97.9)	92.9 or ↑		X
Children with a medical home, percent of children (range)	60.9	57.5 (45.4-69.3)	60.3 or ↑	✓	
Children who had both medical and dental preventive visits in the past 12 months, percent of children (range)	67.2	68.1 (56.0-81.4)	71.2 or ↑		X
Infants exclusively breastfed for six months, percent of children (range)	14.8	16.4 (4.1-27.4)	19.3 or ↑		X
Children receiving complete vaccination, percent of children (range)	75.4	68.4 (59.5-80.2)	70.9 or ↑	✓	
Children with emotional, developmental, or behavioral problems that received needed care, percent of children (range)	54.3	61.0 (40.4-86.3)	65.1 or ↑		X
Infant mortality rate, per 100,000 infants (range)	776.3	638.7 (423.6-989.5)	573.5 or ↓		X
Child mortality rate, per 100,000 children (range)	17.0	17.0 (9.0-30.0)	14.6 or ↓		X
Teen mortality rate, per 100,000 teens (range)	54.0	49.0 (29.0-85.0)	41.8 or ↓		X
Children overweight or obese, percent of children (range)	31.4	31.3 (22.1-39.8)	29.2 or ↓		X
Children living with someone who smokes, percent of children (range)	28.9	24.1 (12.4-41.0)	21.3 or ↓		X
Confirmed cases of child maltreatment, per 1,000 children (range)	10.0	9.0 (1.0-23.0)	6.7 or ↓		X
Children with asthma problems, percent of children (range)	9.0	9.0 (4.0-16.0)	7.9 or ↓		X
Teen alcohol or drug abuse, percent of teens (range)	6.1	6.5 (4.7-9.2)	6.1 or ↓	✓	
Teen birth rate, per 1,000 female teens (range)	32.0	29.0 (14.0-47.0)	24.7 or ↓		X
Number of indicators meeting benchmark				3	

Social Determinants of Health

North Carolina performed poorly on social determinants of health. The state met the benchmark for only one of the ten indicators. This score ranked North Carolina second to last, and tied with ten other states. Arizona, Arkansas, and Tennessee were the only states that did more poorly on this subtopic than North Carolina, each having a score of zero for social determinants of health.

Table 5: Social determinants of health

Social determinants of health	NC	US	Benchmark	NC meets benchmark	
				Yes	No
Women participating in the labor force, percent of women (range)	58.1	58.8 (49.6-66.9)	60.7 or ↑		X
Women's earnings, % of men's earning (range)	82.9	78.6 (64.0-92.3)	81.2 or ↑	✓	
On-time high school graduation, percent of students (range)	76.9	78.2 (57.8-91.4)	81.8 or ↑		X
Women in poverty, percent of women (range)	20.0	20.0 (10.0-27.0)	18.1 or ↓		X
Children in poverty, percent of children (range)	26.0	23.0 (13.0-35.0)	20.4 or ↓		X
Household food insecurity, percent of households (range)	16.6	14.7 (8.7-20.9)	13.5 or ↓		X
Children aged 3-5 not enrolled in preschool or kindergarten, percent of children (range)	44.0	40.0 (17.0-54.0)	36.5 or ↓		X
Homelessness rate, per 10,000 population (range)	14.0	20.3 (8.1-112.5)	12.2 or ↓		X
Unemployment rate, percent of labor force (range)	6.2	6.3 (2.6-8.3)	5.6 or ↓		X
Violent crime rate, per 100,000 population (range)	353.4	386.9 (122.7-1243.7)	297.5 or ↓		X
Number of indicators meeting benchmark				1	

Supportive Policies

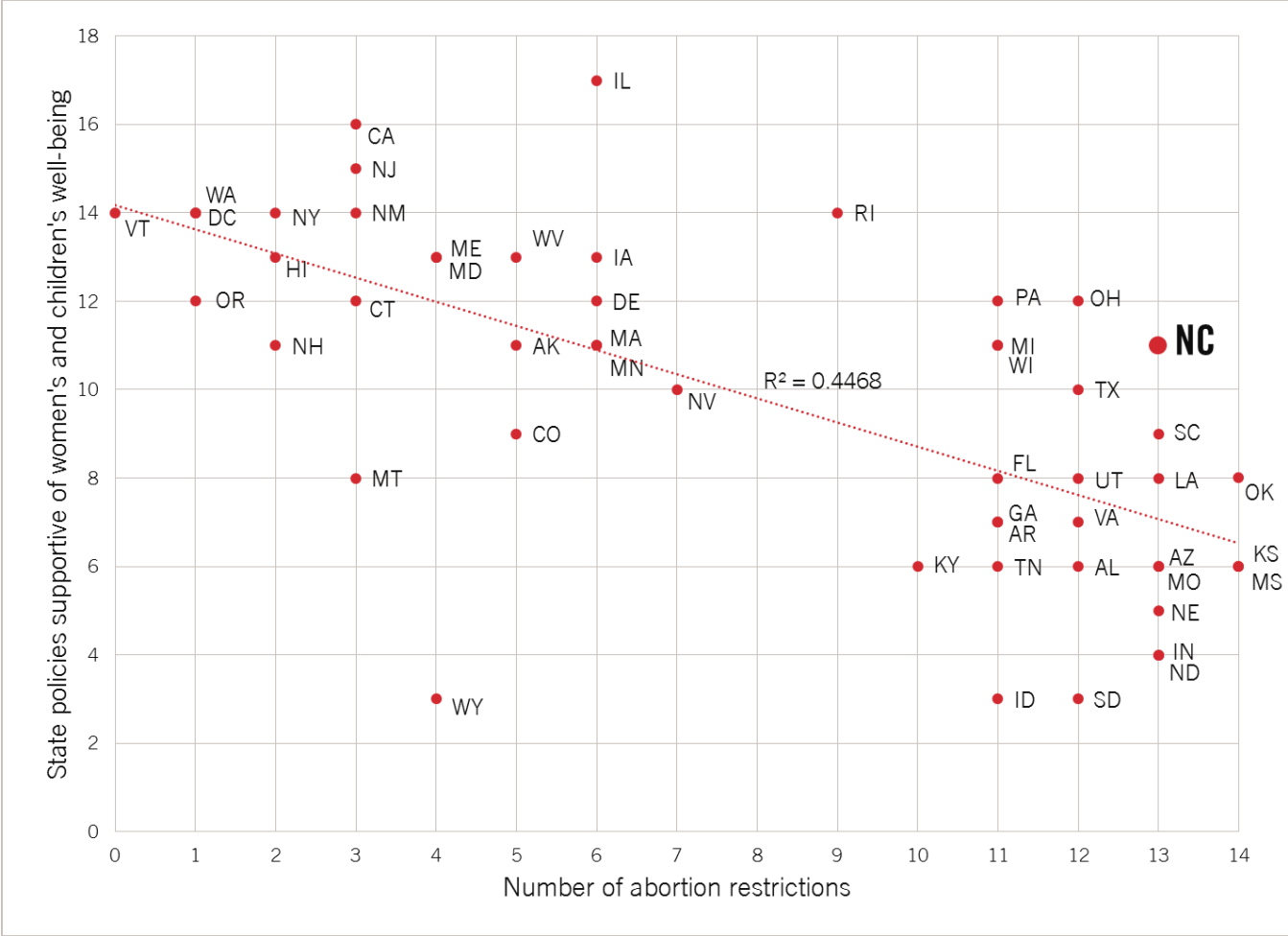
North Carolina performed above average on policies that support women’s and children’s well-being. Of the 22 policies included in this analysis, North Carolina had 11. This score placed the state 20th out of 51, tied with Alaska, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin.

Table 6: Supportive policies

Supportive policies	Yes	No
Improving access to health care		
Moving forward with the Affordable Care Act’s Medicaid Expansion		X
Allows telephone, online, and/or administrative renewal of Medicaid/CHIP	✓	
Requires domestic violence protocols, training, or screening for health care providers	✓	
Supporting pregnant women		
Medicaid income limit for pregnant women is at least 200% of the federal poverty line		X
Has expanded family/medical leave beyond the FMLA	✓	
Provides temporary disability insurance		X
Maternal mortality review board in place	✓	
Requires reasonable accommodations for pregnant workers		X
Prohibits or restricts shackling pregnant prisoners		X
Promoting children’s and adolescents’ health, education, and safety		
Allows children to enroll in CHIP with no waiting period	✓	
Requires physical education for elementary, middle, and high school	✓	
Mandates sex education	✓	
Mandates HIV education	✓	
Has broad eligibility criteria for Early Intervention services for children at risk of developmental delay		X
Initiative(s) to expand Early Head Start in place		X
Requires districts to provide full-day kindergarten without tuition	✓	
Has firearm safety law(s) designed to protect children	✓	
Supporting families’ financial health		
Allows families receiving TANF to keep child support collected on their behalf		X
State minimum wage is above the federal minimum		X
Income limit for child care assistance is greater than 55% of state median income	✓	
Does not have a family cap policy or flat cash assistance grant		X
Promoting a healthy environment		
Requires worksites, restaurants, and bars to be smoke free		X
Total number of supportive policies	11	

North Carolina's above average number of supportive policies is somewhat inconsistent with the overall trend we observed of states with more abortion restrictions having fewer evidence-based policies that support women and children (see Figure 1). However, while North Carolina has more supportive policies than most other states with many abortion restrictions, it still has relatively few supportive policies when compared to less restrictive states.

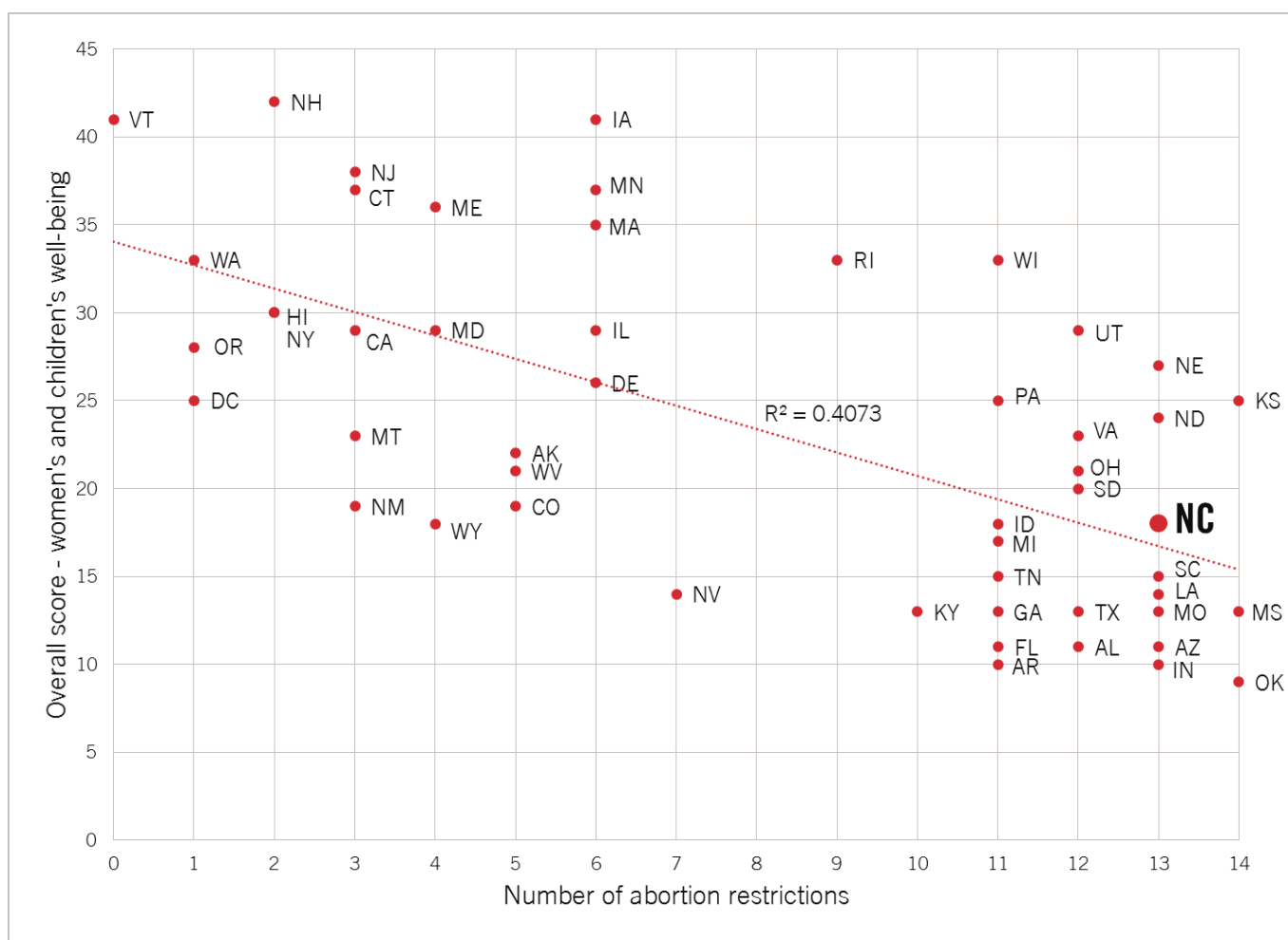
Figure 1. State abortion restrictions and policies supportive of women's and children's well-being



Relationship between abortion restrictions and well-being

North Carolina, one of the most restrictive states in the country for abortion, performed poorly across indicators of women’s health, children’s health, and social determinants of health. While North Carolina performed relatively well on supportive policies, the state’s overall score is consistent with the general trend we observed that the more abortion restrictions present, the worse a state scored overall on indicators of women’s and children’s well-being (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. State abortion restrictions and overall score on indicators of women’s and children’s well-being



DISCUSSION

This analysis shows that, compared to other states, North Carolina has one of the highest numbers of abortion restrictions. This is troubling as a large body of scientific evidence documents that restricting abortion is not beneficial to women and can interfere with women's reproductive decision-making, increase the risks of the abortion procedure by forcing women to delay desired health care, and lead to a number of emotional and financial harms.¹³⁻¹⁹ Despite the existing evidence base, North Carolina policymakers have continued to pass legislation restricting abortion access.

We also found that, compared to other states, North Carolina performs below average on indicators of women's and children's well-being. The indicators of women's health, children's health, and social determinants of health included in this analysis are widely accepted indicators of health status.²⁰⁻²² There is also considerable evidence of the benefits to women and children of putting in place the supportive policies we evaluated and of addressing major social determinants of health.²³⁻²⁵ Such benefits include improved health and safety, lower poverty rates, decreased reliance on public assistance, and better developmental and educational outcomes for children.⁴ While North Carolina policymakers have enacted a number of policies that support women and children, the state's policies are lacking in support for pregnant women, such as increasing access to Medicaid, disability insurance, job protection, and protections for pregnant prisoners, as well as in support for families' financial health. Additionally, North Carolina's decision not to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act will leave over 200,000 women in the state without access to affordable health care coverage.²⁶ Compared to other states, women and children in North Carolina have poorer health outcomes and face greater challenges in their social and economic contexts; efforts to address social determinants of health and improve women's and children's health are clearly needed. Notably, North Carolina failed to meet any benchmarks in regard to mortality; maternal mortality and child mortality approximate the national average, while infant mortality and teen mortality are above the national average.

These data help dismantle the claim that anti-choice policymakers are working to protect and support the health and lives of women, their pregnancies, and their children, as there is little evidence of this in North Carolina's state policies or state-level health outcomes.

Our analysis does have some limitations. While we made every effort to select the most meaningful, evidence-based indicators, any attempt to analyze a concept as broad as women’s and children’s well-being is a simplification. Specifically, we did not adjust for poverty, which has been shown to play a major role in women’s and children’s well-being,²⁷ and is associated with other social issues that may play a role in our findings, such as racism²⁸ and sexism.²⁹ However, as detailed in our full report, the data suggest that while household income (an incomplete, but important indicator of poverty³⁰) does play a role in our findings, it cannot explain all of the differences observed between states. Among the poorest states in the country, those with many abortion restrictions (including North Carolina), had lower scores than those with fewer restrictions.

Additionally, our simple yes/no scoring methodology is limited in its ability to detect the degree of variation in states’ health outcomes and does not account for differences in specific policies across states (e.g., 24-hour vs. 72-hour waiting periods prior to an abortion). Nevertheless, we feel this simple approach is also a strength because it facilitates understanding and replicability of our analysis, and makes the information accessible to policymakers and advocates.³¹

Ultimately, we used a straightforward approach to evaluate lawmakers’ stated aims to improve the well-being of women, their pregnancies, and their children. Our results show a disconnect between these aims and the policies implemented, emphasizing the need to ensure policies designed to affect well-being are founded on evidence. To ensure better population outcomes, North Carolina policymakers must focus on implementing policies shown to improve the well-being of women and children, and not on restricting access to needed health care services such as abortion.

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