



# Changing the Conversation: Abortion Onscreen

Abortion has been depicted on screen since the silent film era, but the stories told haven't always reflected the real experiences of people who have and provide abortions. As creators and storytellers, Hollywood can have a consequential impact on how people who have abortions see themselves and their experiences, educating the general public on what happens during an abortion, and how they can offer support to their loved ones who need care. **With your help, we can make sure the characters who have abortions on screen are as nuanced and varied as the people who have them in our communities.**

## Separating Fact From Fiction

People who have abortions are varied in our identities and experiences—the characters on TV and in film having abortions should be too! Here's a look at how characters on American television and film match up to their real-life counterparts:

### Real-life people who have abortions:

Over 60% are people of color

60% of people who have abortions are in their 20s

59% are already parenting at least one child

75% are living in poverty

A majority experienced one or more financial, logistical, and/or legal barriers to care

Most abortions are now via medication

39% white  
28% Black  
25% Latinx  
9% other  
races &  
ethnicities

Onscreen characters  
who have abortions  
(2005-2014):

88% White

33% are Teens

83% are not  
parenting

80% are middle  
class or above

58% did not  
experience a barrier

Most are in-clinic  
abortion depictions

Onscreen characters  
who have abortions  
(2015-2019):

66% White

22% are Teens

87% are not  
parenting

59% are middle  
class or above

67% did not  
experience a  
barrier

Most are in-clinic  
abortion depictions

Data provided by the unionized employees of Guttmacher Institute.

Data provided by Abortion Onscreen at the University of California, San Francisco.

# How Hollywood Can Change the Conversation

On screen, characters having abortions have shifted over time to show more thoughtful, nuanced, and accurate depictions, but we still have more work to do. Here are a few ways Hollywood can tell more accurate stories about people who have abortions.

## Move The Tension Away From The Decision

Abortion patients are the most certain in their decision-making among medical patients. Perpetuating a narrative of uncertainty surrounding abortion decision-making can contribute the myth that people who have abortions don't know what they want, and justify restrictions that make it more difficult to access care. **Instead, place the tension and drama on the barriers someone has to jump through to get their abortions.**

## Show How Common Abortion Really Is

Similar to the Bechdel Test, we dream of a measure for TV shows and films with abortions in them: does the character having the abortion ever speak to other characters who've had or are also having abortions? Does the character get to explore their abortion experience beyond the abortion moment? One in four of us will have an abortion during our lifetime, and we talk to each other about it! **Show your characters receiving love and support from other characters who've gone through it before, during, and after their abortions.**



## Show How to Afford Abortions

Think about the most recent abortion depiction you saw; how did the character pay for their abortion? Can't remember? That's probably because it wasn't shown. It's rare to see characters navigate financial, logistical, and legal barriers to abortion on screen, but in real life, it's a major delay factor. **Showing how characters afford their abortions offers more opportunity for drama and educates the audience about ways they can pay for their own abortions when the time comes.**

## Show Abortion As A Parenting Decision

Nearly 60% of people who have abortions are already parenting and one-third are parenting two or more children, yet their stories are few and far between. Showing parents deciding to have an abortion will help normalize the decision and educate audiences about why people who already have children choose to have abortions, whether it's to space pregnancies, because they cannot afford another child, or cannot handle another pregnancy medically or because they're trying to escape monsters chasing them! **Let your imagination run with it, and help audiences imagine why parents have abortions.**

# Queer and Trans Characters Have Abortions Too!

Despite what is shown on screen abortion access is critical to queer liberation. A few storylines have shown queer characters who've needed abortions, but trans men, nonbinary, bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, and queer people are largely left out of the conversation. **As characters explore their sexuality and gender identities, an abortion experience can be part of that, and the additional barriers faced can be the villain.**

## Let The Story Take Place Over Multiple Episodes

Many television shows fit the abortion decision and procedure neatly into one episode, but in real life it can take place over a few weeks or even months as they save enough money to afford their procedure, arrange childcare, travel to the nearest clinic, or navigate barriers like a judicial bypass system. **If your arc allows, let the abortion experience to linger a bit longer.**



## For More Information

We Testify and the Abortion Onscreen Project at the University of California San Francisco have deep experience working with creators, writers, directors, and producers to talk through how Hollywood can make abortion depictions more accurate and reflective of our real abortions. From presentations to writers' rooms to brainstorming character development, we're happy to help. Connect with us and let us know how we can support your project.



**We Testify** | [wetestify.org/abortion-onscreen](http://wetestify.org/abortion-onscreen)

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### Other Resources We Love

**Abortion Care Network** | A network of independent abortion providers and clinics

**Physicians for Reproductive Health** | Doctors advocating for unrestricted access to reproductive health care for all

**If/When/How: Lawyering for Reproductive Justice** | Transforming legal systems & institutions that perpetuate oppression