

How City Policymakers Can Address Verbal Harassment at Abortion Clinics

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When patients arrive at clinics, they are often bombarded with verbal assaults and harassment by anti-abortion protesters. This loud and inescapable interference – which we label “sonic violence” – can cause emotional, physical, and logistical problems for both patients and providers. But amplification bans, noise ordinances, and safety zones are interventions that may protect those seeking and providing reproductive health care.

HOW BIG IS THIS PROBLEM?

Sonic violence affects the majority of clinics that offer abortion.



HOW DOES SONIC VIOLENCE AFFECT PATIENTS?

Patients who reported being yelled at by protesters or experiencing “loud” sounds were likely to experience anxiety, fear, and intimidation. Although anti-abortion noise and harassment do not tend to change patient’s decisions about their abortions, they do make accessing abortion a particularly harrowing experience for them.

In a [2013 study](#) of pregnant people’s reactions to anti-abortion protesters:

53% reported being upset by the protesters with a significant minority reporting being “quite a bit upset” (9%) and “extremely upset” (7%).



Incidents of picketing:



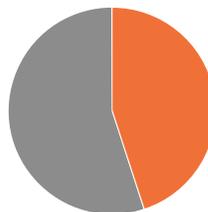
HOW DOES SONIC VIOLENCE AFFECT CLINICS?

Anti-abortion noise and harassment can increase patients' blood pressure, which may necessitate providers' administering more sedation (which ultimately increases patient risk during any medical procedure). Patients may also neglect to return to the clinic for a two-day procedure for fear that they will be harassed again. And patients' distress from protesters often requires additional counseling and caretaking from clinics that already have limited capacity.

In 2019, abortion providers continued to [report](#) an increase in targeted violence and disruption and incidents of picketing rose

2018 99,409 incidents

2019 123,000 incidents



45% of abortion providers in the country experienced some form of severe violence, threats of severe violence, and/or severe harassment.

WHAT CAN I DO TO PROTECT MY CONSTITUENTS?



Federal and local governments have previously instituted protections at abortion clinics that address physical interference, but verbal aggressions remain unaddressed. Legislators can institute a ban on the use of voice amplification devices – such as speaker systems, personal microphones, and megaphones – in front of all healthcare facilities and coordinate with the correct

agencies and local police to enforce this ban. Noise ordinances or the creation of quiet zones outside of healthcare facilities might also prohibit noise that exceeds a certain decibel, noise made by amplification devices, or noise that disturbs the peace – and the granting of protest permits could be contingent on compliance with these noise regulations. Safety zones for protestor activity outside of abortion clinics have historically taken a variety of forms, including buffer zones and bubble zones.

HOW DO WE DIFFERENTIATE HARASSMENT AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH?

In the majority opinion for **Hill v. Colorado** upholding a floating buffer zone outside of a Colorado abortion clinic, U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens stated that free speech was not limited by the creation of a buffer zone, but rather preserved the rights of unwilling listeners.