

# Tennessee woman charged in attempted coat-hanger abortion

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A Tennessee woman accused of attempting to terminate her pregnancy with a coat hanger last year was arraigned November 28 on three felony charges. The case highlights legislative efforts to criminalize abortion and miscarriages across the US.

Anna Yocca, 32, of Murfreesboro, was arrested in December 2015 after allegedly attempting to perform an abortion on herself at her home. She was 24 weeks into pregnancy when she climbed into a bathtub and used a straightened wire coat hanger to “self-abort.”

When Yocca began bleeding profusely into the bathwater, she panicked and feared for her life. Her boyfriend drove her to the local emergency room in Rutherford County. She was transferred to a larger hospital, where the baby was delivered alive two weeks later, weighing 1.5 pounds and allegedly exhibiting trauma.

Yocca has been in the Rutherford County jail for a year on a \$200,000 bond, initially charged with attempted first-degree murder. That charge was downgraded in the spring to aggravated assault. On November 12, a Rutherford County grand jury filed three new charges of aggravated assault with a weapon, attempted procurement of a miscarriage, and attempted criminal abortion. Yocca entered a plea of not guilty. Her next court date is December 9.

Following her arrest last year, local police, media, and the prosecutor’s office portrayed Yocca, a low-wage Amazon fulfillment center employee, as sadistic and selfish. The *Murfreesboro Post* newspaper published her home address and personal information—all but inviting violence upon Yocca and her family from religious anti-abortion extremists.

In making the case for an attempted murder charge, police told a grand jury that the infant was permanently damaged and would require lifelong care for eye, lung, and heart problems. No medical evidence has been

provided to support the charge that these injuries were caused by the coat-hanger; premature babies often have similar health problems. Details of the child’s current situation have not been released, but the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services told the *New York Times* that the baby is no longer in state custody and is “safe” in foster care.

Yocca’s attorney, public defender Gerald Melton, filed a motion to dismiss the case in October, stating that bringing her to trial “makes every pregnant woman vulnerable to arrest and prosecution if she is perceived to have caused or even risked harm to a human embryo or fetus.” Melton called the prosecution “absurd, illogical, and unconstitutional.”

Tennessee has among the most restrictive abortion laws in the country, and women have access to clinics in only four out of 95 counties. Rutherford County has no abortion provider.

State law requires women to wait 48 hours before receiving an abortion and receive a state-mandated counseling session. The process requires multiple trips to a clinic, which often means staying in hotels—adding significant costs to an already expensive procedure. No clinics in Tennessee perform abortions after about 17 weeks.

Lynn M. Paltrow, executive director of National Advocates for Pregnant Women, told the *New York Times* that the prosecution of Yocca was part of a trend toward implementing “feticide” laws for abortions and miscarriages.

Last year, a woman in Indiana was convicted of feticide after taking abortion drugs to end her pregnancy. Purvi Patel was sentenced to 20 years in prison, but in July 2016, a state appeals court overturned her conviction on the grounds that the feticide law was not intended “to be used to prosecute women for their own abortions,” the *Washington Post* reported.

In some states, pregnant women have faced charges for falling down stairs, not wearing a seatbelt, or trying to commit suicide while pregnant. Many states, including Tennessee, have also imposed criminal charges on drug-dependent mothers whose babies are affected by their addictions.

“This is the problem around the criminal justice system being involved in pregnancy outcomes,” Paltrow told the *Times*. “In a country where more and more things have been criminalized, there is a virtually limitless number of crimes that prosecutors can choose from if we allow pregnancy to become the subject of criminal justice and court systems.”

The “coat-hanger abortion” is a grisly throwback to an era before the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court ruling guaranteeing women the right to abortion. President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to pursue the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* during his term in office, and suggested “punishment” for abortion providers and patients. A federal clampdown will only augment the multitude of severe restrictions imposed at the state level over the past several years, making an increase in botched self-administered abortions and back-alley clinics all but inevitable.

A November 21 report by the British *Guardian* detailed the efforts of poor American women to obtain assistance via the Internet in procuring medications to self-induce abortions. Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, an economist who analyzes Google searches, told the newspaper that between 2008 and 2011, online queries about self-inducing abortion nearly doubled. The period Stephens-Davidowitz studied coincided with both a rise in abortion restrictions across the US and the worsening of the economic situation facing millions of working class and poor women.

Abortions are already prohibitively expensive, and as clinics are forced to close or meet onerous new state regulatory demands, the cost of obtaining the procedure has risen substantially. Texas has recently introduced a rule requiring funeral arrangements for embryos and fetuses—even when “the embryo is so small as to be invisible,” according to Center for Reproductive Rights attorney David Brown.

The new law will prohibit clinics or other health care facilities from disposing of fetal remains in sanitary landfills, instead requiring cremation or burial—adding \$2,000-\$4,000 to the cost of the abortion, which already ranges from \$300 to \$950. “Forcing a woman to pay for a burial after she ends a pregnancy or experiences a

miscarriage is not just absurd—it is an unnecessary burden and an intrusion on her personal beliefs,” Brown said.

There is little doubt that the result of the law will be an increase in self-induced abortions. “It may dissuade women who need medical care from seeking medical treatment,” Brown noted.

One survey of abortion patients cited by the *Guardian* indicated that 2.2 percent had attempted at some point in their lives to induce an abortion without medical assistance. Another study estimated that 4.1 percent of Texas women—at least 100,000—have tried to self-induce. Many Texas women have crossed the Mexican border to access abortion drugs like misoprostol, which is available much more cheaply and without a prescription there.

This social crisis is the product of a deliberate and sustained effort on the part of the political establishment to cater to the religious bigotry of the extreme right. As of mid-year 2016, state legislatures have considered 1,256 provisions relating to reproductive healthcare and rights, more than a third of them focused on restricting access to abortion, according to the Guttmacher Institute. Between 2010 and July of this year, states have enacted 334 abortion restrictions—amounting to 30 percent of all abortion restrictions imposed by states since the *Roe v. Wade* decision four decades ago.

The attack on access to abortion is an attack on basic democratic rights of the working class and the poor. Reproductive rights and access to health care, including abortion and family planning services, are life-and-death questions for working women and their families.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, even as the Affordable Care Act nominally raised the number of insured women, funding for the Title X family planning program has decreased by 10 percent under Obama. In 2014, some 20.2 million low-income women of child-bearing age were in need of publicly funded family planning services, a figure which increased by 1 million (5 percent) since 2010.

*The author recommends:*

Tennessee woman arrested after attempting self-induced abortion

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