

SOS

Online pleas for help getting abortions have increased in Zika-affected countries

Aamna Mohdin | June 23, 2016



📷 Women are forced to seek help from outside their countries. (Reuters/Nacho Doce)

Demand for abortions seems to have increased in the countries worst affected by

the Zika outbreak, at least judging by pleas to an online organization that helps women in countries where abortions are restricted.

Following the outbreak, a number of health authorities [advised women to avoid pregnancy](#) for up to two years. The Zika virus has been linked to a birth defect called microcephaly that causes children to be born with small brains. But in the Latin American countries where the advice was issued, many women concerned about Zika exposure have [little access to contraceptives](#).

So some have turned to unofficial providers instead, such as Women on Web, a nonprofit that provides abortion pills in countries where abortion is illegal. It's difficult to measure abortions in countries where the procedure is outlawed, so to better understand the impact of the Zika outbreak on women's health, researchers analyzed abortion requests received by Women on Web in the past five years in 19 Latin American countries.

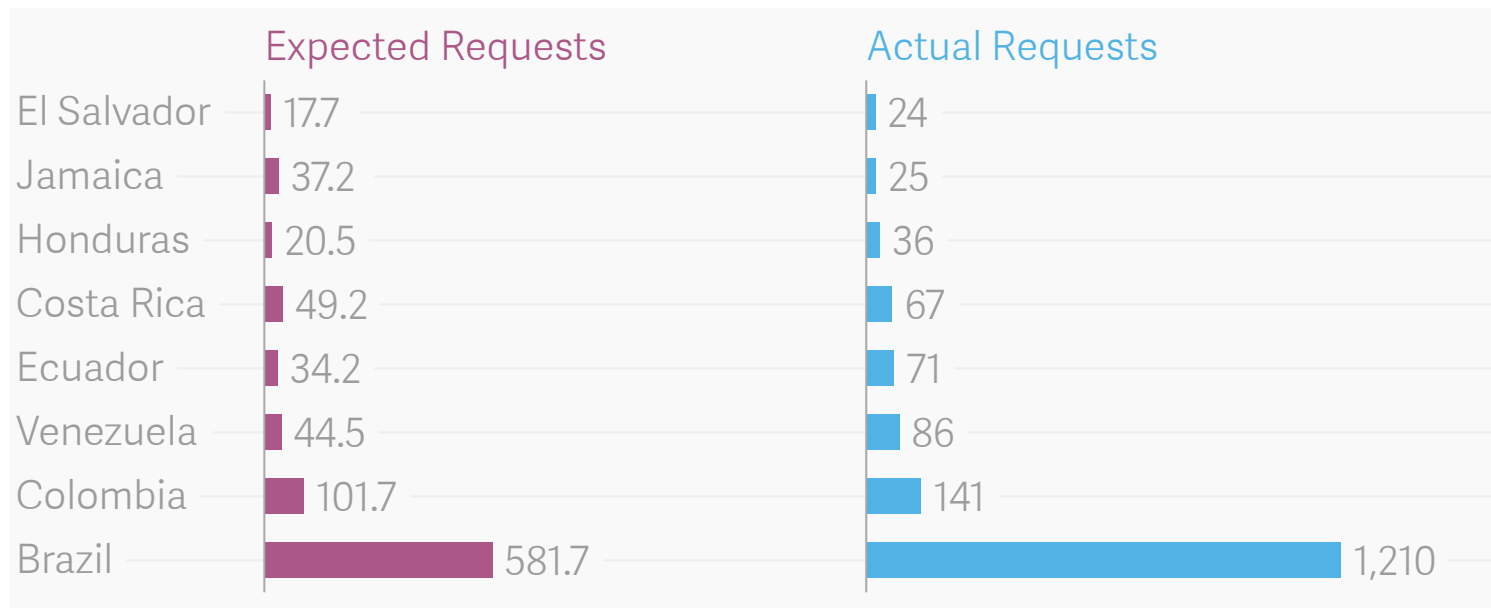
The findings, detailed in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#), showed a spike in demand for abortions following the Zika outbreak. Though the numbers overall are relatively small, they do provide an indication that something has changed.

The researchers classified 19 Latin American countries into three groups; group A included countries that reported local transmission of Zika, legally restricted abortions, but still had health authorities advising women against pregnancy or medical professionals that highlighted pregnancy risks; group B consisted of countries with no local transmission of Zika and legally restricted abortions; group C included countries that had seen local transmission of Zika, legally restricted abortions, but had no official public health warning.

Researchers compared the total number of requests received from a country after the Zika outbreak to the expected number of requests based on previous trends. The increase in the number of women seeking abortions was most pronounced in group A (those with Zika warnings and restrictions on abortions), with demand doubling

in Brazil and Ecuador.

Abortion demand in countries affected by Zika outbreak (Group A)

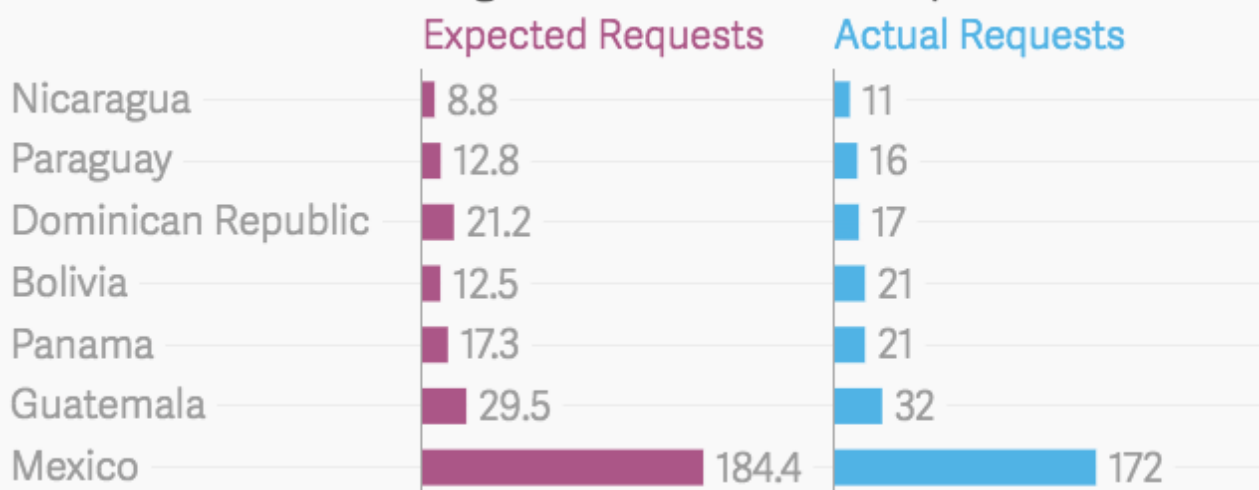


△ T L △ S | Data: New England Journal of Medicine

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There was also a smaller increase in demands in countries where Zika had been detected, but health authorities had issued no warnings against pregnancy (group C).

Abortion demand following the Zika outbreak (Group C)



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While researchers can't definitively attribute the increase in demand for abortions via Women on Web to fears about the Zika virus, many women shared their fears about the outbreak to the organization. One woman from Brazil said:

I need to do an abortion because of the great risk of infection with Zika here... Please help me. My economic situation is extremely difficult.

Another from Colombia added:

Here Zika is a major problem and the health authorities do not help with it ... I have no resources at this time and want to.