Introduction to the Turnaway Study

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The Turnaway Study is ANSIRH's prospective longitudinal study examining the effects of unintended pregnancy on women's lives. The major aims of the study are to describe the mental health, physical health, and socioeconomic consequences of receiving an abortion compared to carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term. From 2008 to 2010, we recruited women from 30 abortion facilities around the country—from Maine to Washington, Texas to Minnesota. We interviewed nearly 1,000 women who sought abortions, some who received abortions because they presented for care under the gestational limit of the clinic and some who were “turned away” and carried to term because they were past the facility's gestational limit. We interviewed participants by phone every six months over a period of five years. We conducted nearly 8,000 interviews over the course of the study. During surveys and in-depth interviews, women shared with us complex and diverse stories about the effect of their unintended pregnancies on their lives. The Turnaway Study is an effort to capture women's stories, understand the role of abortion and childbearing in their lives, and contribute scientific data to the ongoing public policy debate on the mental health and life-course consequences of abortion and unwanted childbearing for women and families.

Why women in the U.S. seek abortions

The most common reasons for seeking an abortion are not being able to afford to have a child, the pregnancy coming at the wrong time in life and the man involved not being a suitable partner/parent. Alcohol, tobacco and drug use is an uncommon reason but women who cite this reason do not have otherwise wanted pregnancies.


Who seeks later abortion and who is denied because they are beyond gestational limits?

We estimate that even before most 20-week bans were implemented, more than 4,000 women per year were denied wanted abortions due to gestational limits. Women who seek later abortions are often slowed down by not realizing they were pregnant, followed by logistical barriers to getting a later procedure. Young women and women who have never had a child before are at higher risk of not recognizing pregnancy in the first trimester.


Recruiting for the Turnaway Study

We recruited women from 30 facilities over three years. The paper below describes the strategies we used to increase the number of women who were approached and the participation rate.

Women’s experiences with paying for abortion, counseling, ultrasound viewing and protesters

The following papers describe the counseling that occurs in abortion clinics and shows that most women don’t feel pressured and that they find counseling less helpful when it is state-mandated. Many women choose to view their ultrasounds and their emotional responses to viewing, are not all negative, and some are even positive. About half of women report seeing protesters at the clinics. The more contact, the more upsetting the protesters are but protesters don’t change how women feel about their abortions. There is a substantial burden women face trying to raise money for an abortion. Many women who did not have access to public or private insurance coverage were delayed due to raising money for the abortion.


Effect of abortion and abortion denial on mental health and wellbeing

The Turnaway Study examined the effects of receiving or being denied abortion on women’s mental health (anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and suicidal ideation) and well-being (self-esteem, life satisfaction, stress and social support). We find no evidence that abortion causes negative mental health or well-being outcomes. However, we do find that being denied an abortion is associated with elevated levels of anxiety, stress, and lower self-esteem, soon after abortion denial. Over time these outcomes generally improve so that by six months to one year post-abortion seeking, women who have an abortion and those denied one have similar levels of mental health and well-being. Perceived abortion stigma at the time of seeking an abortion is also associated with negative psychological outcomes years later.


Emotions and Decision Rightness

Women experience a mix of positive and negative emotions in the days after an abortion, with relief predominating. The intensity of all emotions diminishes over time, mostly over the first year. The overwhelming majority – over 95% - of women feel that abortion was the right decision for them at all times over five years after. This is true even for women who had abortions later in pregnancy, who reported it was very difficult to decide to have the abortion and those who felt they would be looked down on by people in their communities.

21. Rocca CH, Samari G, Foster DG, Gould H, Kimport K. Emotions and decision rightness over five years following an abortion: An...
Consequences of abortion and abortion denial for alcohol, tobacco and drug use

The following papers show the effect of receiving or being denied a wanted abortion on drug, alcohol, and tobacco use. Women who are denied abortions and carry the pregnancy to term reduce/cease some, but not all, substance use, while women who have abortions tend to continue substance use patterns from before their abortions. Women who carry unwanted pregnancies to term do not decrease their alcohol-related problem symptoms, tobacco use and drug use.


Consideration of adoption among women seeking abortion

Considering adoption and placing a child for adoption are rare, even when abortion is no longer an option. This paper describes the experiences of the women who make that choice.


Physical Health after Abortion and Abortion Denial

Carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term is far riskier to women’s physical health than having an abortion. In the short term, women giving birth after being denied an abortion experience more potentially life-threatening complications such as preeclampsia and postpartum hemorrhage. Over five years, women denied abortions who give birth report more chronic pain and rate their overall health as worse. Highlighting one of the most serious consequences of restricting abortion access, two women died due to maternal, or pregnancy-related, causes after being denied a wanted abortion and giving birth.


Socioeconomic consequences of abortion and abortion denial

The Turnaway Study shows that being denied a wanted abortion results in economic insecurity for women and their families, and an almost four-fold increase in odds that household income will fall below the Federal Poverty Level. As seen through credit reports, women who receive and were denied abortions were similar in the three years leading up to the pregnancy but their trajectories diverge with women denied abortions experiencing more debt, lower credit scores and worse financial security for years after the pregnancy.
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Consequences of abortion for women’s life plans and education

Women who receive abortions have six times higher odds of having positive one year plans and are more likely to achieve them. Women who are denied abortions are neither more nor less likely to graduate or drop out of school than women who receive abortions. But women denied abortions are less likely to graduate with an advanced degree because they are seeking lower level degrees at baseline. Women who are denied abortions are somewhat less likely to set an aspirational five-year plan than women who receive one, but there are no differences in achievement of five-year plans.


Contraceptive use and subsequent pregnancies

Women who receive an abortion are more likely to have an intended pregnancy within the next five years compared to women who are denied. There is no difference in rates of unintended pregnancy. Women who have an abortion are more likely to use contraception than those denied the abortion, but they rely less on sterilization and more on condoms and short-acting hormonal methods.


Effect of abortion and abortion denial on romantic relationship

There is no difference in the likelihood of being in a relationship with the man involved in the pregnancy whether that pregnancy ends in abortion or birth. For women who give birth after being denied an abortion, ongoing contact with the man involved results in continued exposure to violence. Women who receive wanted abortions are more likely to describe themselves as being in very good relationships years later compared to women who are denied an abortion.


Effect of abortion on attitudes toward abortion rights and morality

Nearly all women who sought abortions report that they support abortion legality in all (80%) or some (18%) situations, yet 20% also believed abortion is morally wrong. The majority of women denied an abortion support the legal right to abortion 4.5 years later (77%), but women who received an abortion are more likely to support abortion rights (88%).


Effect of abortion and abortion denial on women’s existing and future children

These two papers show that when women have control over the timing of having children, the children benefit. We find measurable differences in the economic wellbeing and development of existing children that adversely affects those whose mothers were denied a wanted abortion. Children born later to women who are able to get an abortion experience more economic security and better maternal bonding than the children born because a woman was denied an abortion.


Pregnancy intentions

Over time after the abortion or abortion denial, women somewhat shifted their perceptions of the intendedness of their pregnancy in correspondence with the pregnancy outcome. The intendedness of a new pregnancy over five years, as reported after the pregnancy occurred, reflected significantly higher intendedness than when reported before the pregnancy occurred.


Additional Resources:


