

# Abortion: The History and the Data Part IV

## Introduction:

- The Turnaway study was the first of its kind to investigate how abortion affects women by comparing those who get an abortion and those who want one but are turned away.
- Nearly 1,000 women seeking abortions from 30 facilities around the United States were interviewed periodically over a five year period.
- Previous studies compared women who had abortions with women who gave birth, regardless of whether they had considered abortion first.
  - The problem with this comparison is women are more likely to choose to give birth when times are good - when they are in good relationships, financially stable, and when they feel ready to support a child.
  - Women are more likely to choose to have an abortion when times are not so good - when relationships are rocky, their health is poor, when they don't have enough money to cover rent and food etc.
  - So comparing women who have abortions with those who give birth says more about a woman's circumstances and whether the pregnancy was wanted rather than the experience of abortion and what follows from it.
- In 1987 Reagan addressed leaders of the anti-choice movement and promised to overturn Roe v. Wade.
- His roadmap for accomplishing involved gathering data to prove that abortion harms women.
- However his anti-abortion Surgeon General C. Everett Koop found no evidence of this. He wrote the following in 1989.

*"I regret, Mr. President, that in spite of a diligent review on the part of many in the Public Health Service and in the private sector, the scientific studies do not provide conclusive data about the health effects of abortion on women."*

- Following this Koop called for more research on abortions effects, specifically a five year prospective study analyzing all the many outcomes of sex and reproduction. This call was unfulfilled for over 20 years until 2007 when Diana Greene Foster would begin to work on what would become the Turnaway Study.
- The women who agreed to participate in the turn away study closely resemble the profile of women who get abortions nationally

37% white  
29% African American  
21% Latina  
4% American Indian.

## Why Do People Have Abortions:

- Abortion opponents often accuse women seeking abortions of being misinformed, irresponsible, or amoral.
- However the study found that women make thoughtful, well-considered decisions about whether to have an abortion. And their fears and concerns tend to be borne out by the outcomes of those who are denied the procedure.
- The Turnaway Study is also helpful in that it goes beyond the data and covers the stories of some of the women who seek abortions

- This is helpful as it demonstrates the types of circumstances and dilemma's which lead women to seek abortions.

**Table 1**

**Reasons Women Seek Abortions  
in the United States, 2008–2010**

	Percentage (n=954)
Not financially prepared	40%
Not the right time for a baby	36%
Partner-related reasons	31%
Needs to focus on other children	29%
Interferes with future opportunities	20%
Not emotionally or mentally prepared	19%
Health-related reasons	12%
Wants a better life for the baby than she could provide	12%
Not independent or mature enough for a baby	7%
Influences from family or friends	5%
Doesn't want a baby or to place baby for adoption	4%
Other	1%

Source: Biggs MA, Gould H, Foster DG. Understanding why women seek abortions in the US. *BMC Women's Health*. 2013 Jul 5;13:29.

**\*\*Read pg. 31-32\*\***

- Two thirds of women reported multiple reasons for wanting to end their pregnancies. Most women reported financial reasons - that they already did not have enough money to pay for basic living expenses like food, housing, transportation.
- Some reported that it was the wrong time. Like one Jessica whose story is covered in the book. She fell pregnant five months after having a child, she was also experiencing deteriorating health and her relationship with her husband was deteriorating as well. She could not manage another child and decided to abort.
- Bad relationships with men represent another common reason for women seeking to end a pregnancy. Many were in relationships that they did not feel were stable enough to support a child (or another child).
  - Within two years more than half of the women in the study had broken up with the man involved in the pregnancy.

- This is important because people who believe abortion is wrong also tend to be uncomfortable with children being raised in “broken homes” or single parent households.
- It is also important to note that the men in these unstable relationships often escape judgement for the decision to abort.
- 60 percent of the women were already mothers and reported wanting the abortion to be able to better take care of the children they already had.
  - One woman had a daughter with her husband and only just managed to provide well for her. A second child would have driven them into poverty and severely curtailed the opportunities available to their first child.
  - One 31 year old woman reported that her 10 year old son was diagnosed with cancer and she needed to drive ten hours for his treatments. She aborted a pregnancy in order to focus on her ailing son. This is one of many heartbreaking stories in the study.
- Many reported that having a baby would derail life plans and career goals. Women who received an abortion were more likely to stay employed and live above the federal poverty line.
- Politicians and anti-choice activists have posited that abortion likely causes depression or some form of harm to women’s mental health. But for almost 20 percent of the women, concern about their mental stability is what actually led them to choose to have an abortion.
- One in eight women in the study elected to end a pregnancy due to concerns about their own health.
- Five percent of the women chose abortion because of alcohol, tobacco, or drug use at the beginning of their pregnancies.
  - Some partake of these things before they realize they are pregnant, especially when they were not trying to conceive.
- The idea that women are pressured into abortions looms large in the public imagination and has been used to justify a range of parental consent laws, state-mandated counselling before abortion, and required waiting periods before abortion.
  - The study reported that only five percent stated that family or friends played a part in their decision. Only one percent actually reported pressure from family or friends as their reason.

## Why Are Women Becoming Pregnant if They Do Not Want to Have a Baby?:

- There are judgements around women supposedly neglecting to use contraception and falling into an unwanted pregnancy - “why didn’t they just condoms?”
- Consistently using contraception from the first time having sex to menopause, and only taking a break to conceive and carry a couple of intended pregnancies is quite a feat.

**Table 2**

**Family Planning Methods Needed from First Intercourse to the End of Menopause to Have Only Two Children Over One’s Lifetime**

	Estimated number needed	Unwanted pregnancies expected (despite use of the method)
<i>Contraception as a method of family planning</i>		
Condoms	Over 2,000 condoms	0.5–3.8
Copper IUD	4 IUDs	0.2
Hormonal IUD	6 IUDs	0.1
Implant	9 implants	0.0
Oral contraceptives	6,844 pills	0.1–2.0
Contraceptive patch	975 patches	0.2–2.5
Contraceptive ring	325 rings	0.1–2.0
Injectable contraceptives	100 shots	0.1–0.8
Withdrawal	Over 2,000 times	1.0–6.8
<i>Abortion as a method of family planning</i>		
Early medication abortions	30 abortions	30
Second-trimester abortions	25 abortions	25

Source: These estimates are based on published contraceptive failure rates and frequency of intercourse data by age.<sup>20</sup>

Note: Estimates assume a woman is sexually active throughout her reproductive years and uses just one method of family planning over that time period.

- This leaves a lot of room for things to go wrong.
- Most unintended pregnancies in the US are caused not by contraceptive failure, but by gaps in contraceptive use.
- Even for a woman who uses contraceptives consistently, there would still be significant chances of becoming pregnant.
- Over a reproductive lifetime, she might still become pregnant as many as two times on the pill, four times with condoms, and seven using withdrawal.

**\*\*Read pg. 51.\*\***

- Compounding this is the fact that women have trouble accessing contraceptives.
  - A separate study found that two in five women seeking abortions report some problem accessing contraceptives, including one in five who reported that they ran out of contraceptive supplies before becoming pregnant.
- That is why at the clinical and policy levels it is important to make contraceptive methods as easy to procure as possible for everyone.
  - Many who feel abortion is wrong also tend to have a level of discomfort about various forms of contraception.

**Mental Health:**

- Some have judgements about the volatility of women who seek abortions.
- Women seeking abortions are not different from women in general. The proportion of women in the study who have used drugs, who have a history of heavy alcohol use, and who experienced a history of depression are all similar to national estimates.
- Some anti-choice proponents argue that abortion causes emotional harm to the women who undergo them.
  - The most common emotion felt after having an abortion was relief (90%). The most common emotion reported a week after having been denied an abortion was sadness (60%), followed by regret (50%), relief (49%), happiness (43%), and anger (42%).
  - Women who had abortions also expressed declining intensity of all emotions - both negative and positive - over time. With the biggest declines happening in the first year.
  - This disproves the assumption that lasting damage to mental health is done by undergoing the process.
  - Some women did feel negative emotions about having an abortion. These were usually those who perceived abortion would be looked down upon by their communities and those who had less social support.
- Some anti-choice proponents also argue that women who get abortions are misinformed and it is insinuated that they will regret their decision later.
  - 95 percent of the women reported that having the abortion was the right decision for them.
  - Those who over time reported that it was not the right decision for them were those who came from communities that reported high community stigma towards abortion.
  - The other group who said it was not the right decision for them were women who said in their first interview that the decision to have an abortion was “very difficult.” But over time even women who reported that the decision was very difficult were increasingly likely to say the the abortion was the right decision for them nearly approaching the level of decision rightness among women for whom the decision was not difficult.
- In conclusion—some events do cause long lasting psychological damage, but abortion is not common among these.
- What was linked to higher likelihood of mental health problems over the period of study? The biggest predictors were a history of mental health problems and a history of traumatic life events such as childhood abuse and neglect.

## Physical Health:

- A common assumption is that abortion is dangerous - that mortality following abortions is high and in need of government regulation.
  - Complications occurred after only two percent of abortions.
  - To put this in perspective this is lower than the risk of wisdom-tooth extraction (7%), tonsilectomy (8-9%) and childbirth (29%).
- The risk of a major complication from abortion - needing surgery, a blood transfusion, or hospitalization - is less one-quarter of one percent.
- Data from 54,911 abortions in California between 2009-2010 show there was not a single death from abortion.
- With pregnancy on the other hand - one in four births in the US is associated with some serious complications including obstetric trauma and lacerations (8%), infection (6%), hemorrhage (4%), gestational diabetes (4%), severe preeclampsia (3.4%) and eclampsia (0.1%).
- For women with chronic health conditions pregnancy is even more complicated. The list of conditions made worse by pregnancy fills medical textbooks.
- Legal abortions in the United States are safe.
  - Contrast this with the pre-Rowe era where whole hospital wards treated women for sepsis after they had gone to untrained providers or tried to self-induce an abortion with unsterilized instruments like coat hangers.
- Sometimes women have abortions to end wanted pregnancies.
  - These are the tragic stories of women with life-threatening health conditions or fetuses with serious anomalies.
  - Some of these abortions are taking place in circumstances in which the woman's health is already compromised; so physical health outcomes in these cases may be worse than for abortions of unwanted pregnancies.
- Over the five years of the study there were no differences in chronic conditions, chronic pain, and overall self-rated health between women having a first-trimester abortion and those receiving a second-trimester abortion.
  - Later abortions are more difficult to perform and are associated with a greater risk of complications. So this finding was pleasantly surprising.

## Women's Lives:

- An analysis was conducted of how having an abortion affected women's ability to realize a one-year life plan.
- The answers were categorized by outlook. Aspirational - e.g. having a better job or staying in school; neutral - e.g. kids will be older; and negative - e.g. I will probably have less money.
- Most of the women having an abortion had a lot of plans for their lives. An average of almost two plans per woman. 80 percent of them were aspirational, 17 percent were neutral and only two percent of the one-year plans were negative.
- Women who were denied abortions were much less likely to have an aspirational plan for the coming year (56 %) than women who received an abortion (86%).
- In other words denying women abortions they wanted caused them to scale back their plans for the coming year; while allowing women to have a wanted abortion enables them to set more aspirational plans for the coming year.

**\*\*Read pg. 169\*\***

- This communicates that the time in life when many women seek abortion is pivotal. It is a time when they are setting life goals and making important decisions.
- Women denied abortions tend to scale back their career and financial expectations, realizing that having a child - or another child - will affect their life trajectory. Women know that carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term will limit their other accomplishments.
- Most women seeking abortion are already experiencing financial hardship.
  - Just over half of the women seeking abortion in this study were living below the poverty line at the time they sought the abortion, consistent with national figures on poverty among people having abortions in the United States.
  - Three-quarters reported that they didn't have enough money to pay for basic living expenses like food, housing, and transportation.
- Contrary to expectations, carrying a pregnancy to term does not significantly increase the likelihood of living with the man involved.
  - In the short term, women denied abortions are more likely to live with other adult family members. Over time, women denied abortions gradually dissolve their relationships with men and move away from other family members, so that by the end of the five years they are more likely to be raising children alone than women who receive an abortion (47% vs. 39%). What is seen is the burden of raising a child often falls to women alone rather than being shared with a partner or supported by a whole extended family.
- Among the women who received abortions the rate of full-time employment slowly increased from 40% at the time of the abortion to 50% five years later.
- Among women who were denied abortions only 30% were working full-time at six months. This isn't low if one considers that they had just given birth. But it is also true that pregnancy and giving birth forced some women to stop working involuntarily.
- It took four years for women who were turned away and gave birth to catch up to the level of employment experienced by women just under the limit who received their abortion.
  - Those years of either steady or unstable employment can have significant impact on women and their families economic well being.
- To compensate for the loss of employment income, some women who are denied abortions receive public assistance.
  - One in six women (15%) denied an abortion compared to one in twelve (8%) who received one were receiving welfare benefits at six months, a difference that was significant right up until the five-year interview.
  - Food stamp use is higher (44% vs. 33%) among women who are denied abortions. Half of women who are denied compared to only 8% of women who received an abortion participated in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants, and Children (WIC) - a nutrition program for new mothers.
  - The policy implications of this should be considered. Politicians who oppose abortion tend to prioritize the minimization of costs to the public purse. Denying women abortions is costly to the tax-payer.

### **Children:**

- An unwanted pregnancy carried to term affects the well-being of the existing children in the family because if resources (money, time, parents attention) are fixed, then the more children there are, the less any one of them will receive. When there is not enough to go around, one more mouth to feed, one more body in need of holding and protecting, one more mind to nurture may be more than the parents can provide for.

- Additionally circumstances surrounding an unwanted pregnancy may compromise the mothers physical or mental health and make it difficult to take care of more children.
- When an existing child's mother is denied a wanted abortion the child is more likely over the next four years to live in poverty (72% vs. 55%); to live in a household that receives public assistance (19% vs. 10%); and to live with adults who don't have enough money to pay for food, housing, and transportation (87% vs. 70%), compared to children whose mother received an abortion, even though the two groups of kids were initially the same.
- Another area where the two groups of children differed was in the achievement of development milestones.
  - They used a measure called Parents Evaluation of Development Status: Development Milestones (PEDS:DM). It asked questions about six areas of development - fine motor, gross motor, receptive language, expressive language, self-help, and social-emotional.
- Children whose mothers received an abortion were more likely to accomplish these developmental milestones than children whose mothers were denied the abortion (77% compared to 73% of milestones achieved).
  - The cause of this small but significant difference is not known. Maybe material hardships impede children's development by reducing the amount of food available or causing housing insecurity. Perhaps the strain on the mother of raising an additional child impacts the next older child's growth by reducing the amount of time and attention she can devote to it.
- Many women who sought abortion still wanted to have children later. When we compare the wellbeing of children born after women were denied abortion, and children born at a later date to women who received an earlier abortion, we see that the latter group do better in terms of economic well-being and maternal bonding. They are also more likely to live in a two-parent household.
- Abortion is not just about a woman's rights versus an embryo's or foetus' rights; its also about whether women get to have children when are ready to care for them. Everyone cares about the well-being of children, and this study shows that when women are able to decide whether to carry a pregnancy to term, their children do better. This includes the children they already had at the time of the unwanted pregnancy - again, 60% of the women seeking abortions are already mothers - and it also includes their future children.

### **Overview of Findings:**

- There was no evidence that abortion hurts women. For every outcome analyzed women who received an abortion were either the same, or more, frequently, better off than women who were denied an abortion.
- Their physical health was better
- Their mental health was initially better and then the same.
- They had more aspirational plans for the coming year.
- They had a greater chance of having a wanted pregnancy in a good romantic relationship years down the road.
- Carrying unwanted pregnancies to term hurt women in many ways.
- It was associated with significant health risks (so great that two women in the study died from child birth related causes). Many experienced complications from delivery extending over fives years, increased chronic head and joint pain, hypertension and poorer overall health.
- In the short-run women experienced increased anxiety and loss of life satisfaction.



- They experienced economic hardships not experienced by women who received abortions.
- Women denied abortions are more likely to live in poverty. They worry about not being able to take care of their existing children
- Women's children do worse on several measures of health and development when women carry an unwanted pregnancy to term than when they receive an abortion.