

What Happens After an Abortion Denial? A Review of Results from the Turnaway Study

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Recent years have seen a tremendous surge in the number and type of regulations for abortion services in the United States. Between 2011 and 2017, more than 400 abortion restrictions were enacted by states (Nash et al., 2018). This period represents one of the most active and restrictive legislative efforts by states since the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court *Roe vs. Wade* decision to legalize abortion (Tavernise, 2019). These restrictions can result in large reductions in access to and receipt of abortions, as has been well-documented in the literature.¹

Yet, we still know little about the characteristics of the women who are denied abortion care. Even though abortion is not an uncommon event (it is estimated that at least one in four women will have an abortion during their reproductive years, see Jones and Jerman, 2017), the research on the reasons that women seek an abortion and their particular circumstances is limited, due to the sensitive nature of the subject. In addition, there is very little research following women after an abortion encounter or documenting how legal constraints to abortion access may affect women's lives.

The Turnaway Study is the first study to collect longitudinal data on individual women who received versus were denied a wanted abortion in the U.S. The study team collected data on

nearly 1,000 women seeking an abortion from 30 facilities around the country. Some of these women were denied an abortion because their pregnancy was past the facility's gestational age limit, while others received an abortion with pregnancies just under the gestational age limit or earlier. The study tracked its participants for five years after the initial abortion encounter with survey interviews every 6 months to collect detailed information on the health and well-being of the women and their children. It also collected valuable information on the women's reasons for seeking an abortion and their initial living circumstances.

In this review article, we provide a brief overview of the study and discuss its main findings, with a focus on results related to the socioeconomic, labor market, schooling, and health outcomes of the women who were denied wanted abortions and gave birth.

I. Details of Turnaway Study

The Turnaway Study worked collaboratively with 30 different abortion facilities to recruit women into the study between January 2008 to December 2010. Facilities with the latest abortion gestational limit within 150 miles were selected to decrease the likelihood of women who were denied an abortion receiving one elsewhere. The study aimed for diversity in geography when selecting study sites, while prioritizing areas with earlier gestational limits. Sites from 21 states were included. The gestational limits at the study sites ranged from 10 weeks to the end of the second trimester.

Women were recruited into three different study groups in a 1:2:1 ratio. The "Turnaway" group was the focus of the study and was comprised of women seeking an abortion with gestational ages up to 3 weeks above the facility's gestational limit. A "Near Limit" group was enrolled as a comparison group and included women seeking (and receiving) an abor-

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¹For example, a number of recent papers have documented sizeable reductions in abortions resulting from new policies regulating abortion providers in Texas and Wisconsin (see Colman, Colman and Joyce, 2011; Fischer, Royer and White, 2018; Grossman et al., 2014; Lindo et al., 2019; Quast, Gonzalez and Ziemba, 2017; Venator and Fletcher, 2019).

tion within 2 weeks below the facility's gestational limit. The enrollment target for Near Limit participants was higher than the Turnaways because fewer women met the criteria for the Turnaway group. A third group ("First Trimester") served as an additional comparison group and enrolled women seeking and receiving an abortion during their first trimester. To be eligible for the study, patients needed to be 15 years of age or older, speak English or Spanish, and have no known fetal anomalies or imminent maternal health indication.

When recruiting study participants, researchers screened for eligibility and informed women that they would be interviewed by phone every 6 months for 5 years. The study involved no interventions other than phone surveys and a small financial incentive for participants to complete each interview. Topics of the surveys included the women's health and socioeconomic status, as well as child development and health if they were parents. Prior to these interviews, women participating in the study first completed a baseline telephone interview approximately 1 week after receiving or being denied an abortion at the recruitment facility. As a result of clinic and researcher recruitment efforts, 37.5 percent of eligible women (N=1132) consented to participate in the Turnaway Study and, of these, 85 percent (N=956) completed the baseline interview. Among those who completed the baseline interview, 58 percent were retained at the end of the 5-year period. More detailed information on the recruitment process may be found in Dobkin et al. (2014).

II. Reasons for Seeking an Abortion

Interviews with participants in the Turnaway study provide us with new insights into the varied and sometimes complicated reasons why women seek abortions, as well as why some women present at abortion clinics later in their pregnancies when a service denial is more likely.

The most common reasons for seeking an abortion cited by women in the Turnaway Study were related to not being financially prepared to have another child (40 percent) and that the timing was not right (36 percent). Along these lines, one in five women stated that having a child would interfere with her future educational or vocational opportunities. Other common rea-

sons were related to the woman's partner not being ideal (31 percent), her need to focus on her other children (29 percent), and not being emotionally or mentally prepared to raise a child (19 percent) (Biggs, Gould and Foster, 2013).

Women who sought an abortion later in their pregnancies reported travel costs and costs of the abortion procedure as the most common reason for the delay in seeking abortion care. More than two-thirds of women in the Near Limit group (67 percent) named this as a reason, as did 58 percent of women in the Turnaway group. Women in these groups were also younger in age, had lower levels of educational attainment, and lower household incomes than women seeking abortions during their first trimester.

The second most common reason for a delay was the woman not recognizing her pregnancy (reported by 43 percent of the Near Limit group and 48 percent of the Turnaway group). Unsurprisingly, the Turnaway group reported the latest gestational ages when asked when they discovered their pregnancy. The majority of women in all three groups reported that they did not have a prior abortion prior to the recruitment encounter (Upadhyay et al., 2014).

III. Consequences of An Abortion Denial

Analysis of Turnaway Study data has documented significant differences over time in the socioeconomic and health outcomes of women who were denied wanted abortions, compared with women who received abortions.² Foster et al. (2018a) examine how household structure, employment, income, and use of public assistance for the Turnaway group members compare to the Near Limit group members during the 5 year study. The authors focus on the 76 percent of respondents in the Turnaway group who carried their pregnancy to term ("Turnaway-Birth" group), rather than having an abortion elsewhere or miscarriage. This analysis finds that the Turnaway-Birth group was

²Researchers have also used the Turnaway Study to examine a wide range of other outcomes, such as the well-being of women's existing children (Foster et al., 2019), the health, development, and maternal bonding of subsequent children (Foster et al., 2018b), the prevalence of suicide ideation (Biggs et al., 2017), alcohol and drug use (Roberts et al., 2018), and many other topics which we cannot discuss here due to space constraints. See Foster (2019) for an annotated bibliography of other Turnaway Study articles.

much more likely to reside with family (rather than alone or with a male partner) at the 6-month follow up, which occurred on average about 1.6 months after their expected date of delivery. Over time, the household composition difference between the Turnaway-Birth and Near Limit group narrowed, although at the end of the 5-year period the Turnaway-Birth group was more likely to be raising a child alone without a male partner or family. Women in the Turnaway-Birth group had much higher rates of receipt of public assistance (TANF, SNAP, and WIC) at the 6-month survey; rates of SNAP receipt remained significantly different across the two groups after 5 years while the higher rates of TANF and WIC did not. Self-reported income was also lower among the Turnaway-Birth group as compared to the Near Limit group at the time of the 6-month survey, although this differences did not persist in later survey waves. Although self-reported income was similar across the Turnaway-Birth and Near Limit groups in later surveys, poverty rates were higher among the Turnaway-Birth group due to their larger household size. However, it should be noted that there were high rates of non-response to income questions, particularly in early survey waves. Turnaway-Birth participants were also less likely to report working full time for the first 4 years, at which point rates of full time employment converged to those in the Near Limit group.

Ralph et al. (2019b) examine educational attainment among the women who were in school at the time of the baseline survey. The authors evaluate whether women in the Turnaway group were more likely to drop out or less likely to graduate when compared to women in the Near Limit group. With an interest in the role of childrearing, the authors divide the Turnaway sample between women who miscarried, had an abortion at another provider, or placed the child for adoption (“Non-Parenting” Turnaways) and those who raised the resulting child (“Parenting” Turnaways). While the Non-Parenting and Parenting Turnaways graduated at lower rates and dropped out of school at higher rates than the Near Limit group, these differences were not statistically significant.

Researchers have also examined the association between being denied, versus receiving, a wanted abortion and health outcomes using the

Turnaway Study data. Gerds et al. (2016) report that several women in the Turnaway group who gave birth experienced potentially life-threatening complications from pregnancy and childbirth. There were also two maternal deaths (Ralph et al., 2019a). Researchers also assessed differences in self-reported health measures that were not directly related to childbearing. After controlling for a large number of covariates that varied across the Turnaway and Near Limit groups at the initial survey, Ralph et al. (2019a) found that women in the Turnaway group who gave birth experienced increased in fair or poor health, as well as some types of chronic pain, over the 5 years.

IV. New Evidence from Administrative Data

Existing research using Turnaway Study survey data provides valuable new information on women’s lives following an abortion denial, but nevertheless exhibits a few limitations. First, not all women who agreed to participate in the study completed the initial survey and non-response increased over time. The response rate to the final wave of the survey was 58 percent.

Second, it was not feasible for the study to collect data prior to the abortion encounter since this would require impossible foresight regarding what women in the population would become pregnant and seek an abortion. Yet, without pre-pregnancy data, it is not possible to assess whether outcomes for the Near Limit and Turnaway groups were on similar trajectories prior to the encounter at the recruitment facility. This makes it difficult for the study to address the concern that the outcomes studied may have evolved differently for the two groups even if the Turnaways had not been denied a wanted abortion. Notably, women in the Turnaway group differed from those in the Near Limit group on several dimensions even at the time of the baseline survey about 1 week after the abortion encounter; for example, women in the Turnaway group were significantly younger, had different rates of employment, and were more likely to be living with other adult family members even prior to giving birth (Foster et al., 2018a; Ralph et al., 2019a). While Turnaway Study analyses adjusts for these differences using data collected at the baseline interview, data from prior to the pregnancy would provide a useful addi-

tional check on the comparability of the trajectories of the groups and whether the Near Limit group represents a reasonable counterfactual for the Turnaway group.

Next, as is true of all surveys, respondents may have difficulty accurately recalling or reporting information, or may opt not to answer certain questions. This may be especially true of information related to income or program participation. For example, among respondents who completed more than one survey, 40 percent of those in the Turnaway group who gave birth and 36 percent of those in the Turnaway group who did not give birth had missing information on income (Foster et al., 2018a).

In new work, Miller, Wherry and Foster (2019) overcome these challenges by linking Turnaway Study participants to administrative data from a credit reporting bureau. Linkages were attempted for all Turnaway Study participants (not just survey respondents) with match rates exceeding 75 percent. These linked data allow researchers to observe women for several years both before and after the pregnancy. The data also are comprised of high-quality administrative records containing information on economic and financial outcomes that do not rely on subject recall.

Using these linked data, Miller, Wherry and Foster (2019) implement a difference-in-differences design to show that women who were denied an abortion experience a substantial increase in measures of financial hardship. Debts 30 days or more past due increased by over 75 percent among the Turnaway group relative to the Near Limit group, and the number of negative “public records”—including bankruptcies, judgments, and tax liens—increased by more than 80 percent. Negative effects were present for several years after women in the Turnaway group gave birth, suggesting that abortion denial has large and long-reaching adverse financial consequences for women.

V. Conclusion

The Turnaway Study provides researchers with new insights into why women seek abortions and how being denied an abortion affects a woman’s health, well-being, and socioeconomic circumstances. The study provides the first longitudinal evidence on women receiving

and being denied wanted abortions on the basis of gestational age, overcoming the data challenges associated with recruiting and surveying this sensitive group. Evidence from surveys indicates that women who were denied versus received wanted abortions experienced worse health, higher poverty rates, and higher levels of public assistance receipt over the next five years. Newly linked administrative data shows that women who were denied abortions experienced large and persistent increases in markers of financial distress, even when accounting for pre-existing differences in the characteristics of women seeking an abortion at later gestational ages. These results highlight a cost of existing restrictions on abortion access.

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