

# The outcome of unwanted pregnancy and its effect on intimate relationships

Diana Greene Foster, Sarah Roberts and Jane Mauldon

## **Abstract**

We examine how having an abortion rather than bringing a pregnancy to term affects intimate relationships, tracking changes over time in the relationship with the father of the pregnancy (FOP) among women in the Turnaway Study. This quasi-experimental prospective study compares similar women who did and did not receive an abortion when they presented near the maximum gestational age for abortion at abortion facilities nationwide. “Abortion Controls”, who presented within the permitted gestational age, aborted; “Turnaways” presented just after the cut-off. Interviewed eight days later, 28% of both groups had no relationship with father (FOP), while 12% were married to him. Six months later, 35% of Abortion Controls had no relationship with FOP compared to 28% of all Turnaways, and 24% of Turnaways who kept the baby, statistically significant higher disruption rate. Disruptions in marriage/engagement to FOP did not differ between groups, and neither did the quality of the relationships.

## **Introduction**

The present research investigates the effect of abortion on women’s intimate partnerships using data from the Turnaway Study. This is a prospective study of U.S. women who either received or were denied an abortion. The study relies on a quasi- experimental research design that exploits the substantial similarities between women who did, and those did not, receive an abortion when they presented near the maximum permitted gestational age for abortion at one of 30 abortion facilities across the country. Some women in the study presented just within the permitted time frame and received an abortion, while others presented just after the cut-off data and were turned away without an abortion.<sup>1</sup>

## **Theoretical Framework**

A variety of theoretical frameworks posit that when a woman becomes pregnant and bears a child, the birth will have substantial effects on her relationship to the father of the child. Depending on the disciplinary perspective invoked, fathers and mothers might each have reasons to prefer that both parents invest in the child: parents try protect their genetic reproductive investment, mothers seek fathers’ help to cover the work and costs of childrearing, and many societies are structured to reward with higher status and resources two-parent over one-parent child-rearing.

Simple versions of these theories predict that ending a pregnancy would increase risks of relationship disruption between parents. This effect might be more pronounced if the pregnancy termination were voluntary and known to the father as well as the mother. This event would signal to both parents that the mother was not willing to carry their joint reproductive investment. She would

---

<sup>1</sup> As discussed in the paper, some of those who were turned undertook to travel to another clinic for an abortion. The clinics where women were recruited for the study were at least 150 miles from any other clinic that had a later gestational cut-off date.

also have less need for his contributions of time and resources, compared to carrying the pregnancy to term and bearing the child.

Contrary theoretical predictions, however, are also plausible. Adults may be sexual partners and, perhaps, social couples not in order to procreate, but for reasons such as sexual satisfaction, emotional fulfillment, economic efficiencies, or social status. In such circumstances, a new birth could disrupt rather than cement a relationship. Pregnancy and parenthood typically will make a woman less sexually and emotionally available to her intimate partner, and her social role (and so the role of her male partner) will change dramatically, as will her economic circumstances. A birth will change and perhaps break up the relationship; an abortion could restore the status quo as it existed prior to the pregnancy.

Couples who are parents already may have enough children and want no more. In these families, an unplanned and, perhaps, unwanted new child will create additional stresses that will have complicated effects on the quality and stability of the parents' relationship. Some may be drawn closer together as a result, but others may split up.

Finally, a woman can become pregnant without having any significant relationship to her sexual partner; whether or not she aborts, she may have no intention of having a relationship with him. The man may, likewise, have no desire or expectation for a relationship with the woman. The two may not even know each others' names. In such circumstances the abortion would not disrupt the relationship, as no relationship exists.

### ***Previous Research***

Research papers investigating the consequences of abortion for marriages and intimate relationships are quite few in number and often methodologically quite weak. Although this literature predominantly reports abortion to be associated with negative relationship quality outcomes, much of the research has not successfully addressed two key methodological challenges. First, studies that rely on retrospective reports of relationship quality may suffer from post-hoc rationalization and the absence of relevant data prior to the abortion; briefly put, respondents may retroactively explain relationship difficulties as due to an abortion. For example, in one widely-cited study that surveyed 548 Russian and American women after abortion, 8% of Russian women and 20% of American women indicated that their relationships had ended as a direct consequence of the abortion, while fewer than 2% in either group reported relationship benefit from the abortion. (Rue et al. , 2004). However, this research did not include reference groups that would suggest how study couples might have fared had they carried the pregnancies to term. Studies such as this that rely on retrospective reporting and no control group are not very informative.

Even if relationship changes over time are accurately measured, a second methodological challenge is to distinguish causality from association. If a woman in a troubled relationship decides to abort, abortion could be an effect, not a cause, of poor relationship quality: women who become pregnant while in a conflicted relationship may be more likely to terminate their pregnancies. Additionally, an unplanned pregnancy could cause relationship conflict and abortion could be the response, even if it did not resolve the conflict.

A methodologically strong prospective study of 92 German women seeking a first-trimester abortion for non-medical reasons, who were compared with 92 demographically matched non-pregnant controls

(Barnett, Freudenberg, and Wille, 1992) found that one year after the abortion, the number of separations in the abortion group was not significantly higher than in the control group. In both groups, all separations were among unmarried couples; no marriages disrupted. Shortly prior to abortion, partnerships in the study group showed considerably more conflicts and were less harmonious than in the control group, possibly because of the unplanned pregnancy. A year later, there were no differences between the groups in the quality of their relationships.

More research exists on individual psychological functioning among women following an abortion than on relationship outcomes. A review of the post-1990 research (Bradshaw and Slade, 2003) summarizes this literature, finding that close to the event of an abortion, women due to have an abortion are more anxious and distressed than other pregnant women, and that up to 30% of women experienced emotional problems up to a month after the abortion. However, in the long term they do no worse psychologically than women who give birth. Thus, there seems little reason to expect that on average, abortion will lead to psychological difficulties which, in turn, could predict relationship disruption.

### ***Study design***

The Turnaway Study is designed to study the socioeconomic and health effects of having children from unwanted pregnancies by comparing women obtaining terminations with women carrying unwanted pregnancies to term because they presented for care after a clinic's gestational limit. Focusing on women who all sought - but did not all obtain - terminations at 30 facilities across the U.S., the design permits more accurate causal inference than possible in prior studies regarding the consequences for relationships of having a child from an unwanted pregnancy.

Data come from the baseline through 2-year follow-up interviews from the Turnaway Study. The Turnaway Study dataset includes three groups. Women who presented for abortion up to three weeks over the clinic's gestational limit and were turned away ("Turnaways"), up to two weeks under the limit and received an abortion ("Controls"), or under the limit and in their first trimester ("First Trimester Patients") were considered eligible. The First Trimester sample was collected to identify ways in which Controls differ from the typical experience of women seeking termination in the U.S., about 90% of whom receive terminations in the first trimester<sup>3</sup>. The Turnaway Study follows women in each group for five years via semiannual telephone interviews. The Turnaway Study has been approved by the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) Committee for Human Research.

From 2008 to 2010, women seeking pregnancy terminations were recruited from 30 clinic sites around the U.S. Sites were selected based on the criterion that they must have the latest pregnancy termination gestational limit compared to all other pregnancy termination facilities within 150 miles. Eligible women included English- and Spanish-speaking patients, aged 15 years or older, with no known fetal anomalies, presenting for abortion within the gestational age range of one of the three groups (i.e., Turnaway, Control, First Trimester).

We asked women at the first interview (8 days after recruitment) about their current relationship with the father of the pregnancy (FOP) and the relationship at the time they became pregnant. At each subsequent interview we asked about their current relationship with the FOP and the quality of that relationship. We asked, "Would you say that your relationship with him is very good, good, fair, poor or very poor?" Responses were coded from 1 "very good" to 5 "very poor."

We use general linear mixed models to account for clustering by recruitment site intrinsic to our study design and for repeated measures of women over time. We estimate the effect of receiving versus being denied an abortion on a categorical variable describing the relationship with the father of the pregnancy: no relationship, friend/acquaintance, partner/boyfriend, and fiancé/husband.

**Sample Characteristics.** The Turnaway Study sample includes 231 Turnaways, 452 Controls, and 273 First Trimester Patients. The sample is racially/ethnically diverse. 37% are White, 33% Black, 21% Hispanic, and the remaining 9% Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American. The mean gestational age at termination seeking was 16.3 weeks. Due to varying gestational limits at participating clinics (10-28 weeks), there are Turnaways and Controls at each gestational age (Range for Turnaways = 10–29 weeks; Range for Controls = 7.4–28 weeks).

At baseline, the mean age of the entire sample (Turnaways, Controls, and First Trimesters) was age 25. Nearly two-thirds (63%) were below the federal poverty line. One-fifth (20%) had not completed high school, 33% had a GED/high school diploma, 47% had some education beyond high school. 59% were in a relationship with the father of the pregnancy and 63% had had a previous live birth. For this analysis of the effects on relationship status, we have removed one recruitment site where the vast majority of turnaways received an abortion elsewhere after having been turned away.

Our final sample for this analysis is 415 abortion Controls and 210 Turnaways, divided into 146 who kept the baby and 64 who did not because they miscarried or had an abortion elsewhere (49) or gave the baby up for adoption (15). The Turnaways and Abortion Controls are the focus of this paper. The two samples are statistically indistinguishable on most characteristics (Table 1). While the Turnaways are slightly more disadvantaged, the differences are not statistically significant. The Abortion controls are significantly more likely, however, to have already born a child (65% v 55%).

**Table 1. Characteristics of Turnaways and Abortion Controls**

	<b>Turnaways</b>	<b>Abortion Controls</b>
Age	24.0	24.9
Race/ethnicity		
<i>White</i>	35.5%	34.9%
<i>Black</i>	32.5%	34.2%
<i>Hispanic/Latino</i>	23.3%	20.4%
<i>Asian/Pacific Islander</i>	4.0%	4.7%
<i>Native American</i>	4.8%	5.8%
Income		
<100% poverty	70.5%	64.4%
100%-200% poverty	20.9%	24.2%
>200% poverty	8.6%	11.4%
Education		
<high school	25.1%	19.0%
High school grad	32.0%	35.2%
>high school	42.9%	45.8%
Parity>0	56.7%	65.9%*
*p<.05		

**Relationship Status.** At baseline interview, 8 days after seeking abortion, the two main comparison groups (abortion controls and turnaways) were nearly identical in their relationship with the father of the pregnancy: 28% had no relationship, 13-14% described the father as a friend or acquaintance, 46-47% as a boyfriend and 11-13% as their fiancé or husband. Turnaways who did not either receive an abortion elsewhere or give the child up for adoption were, however, slightly more likely (16%) to be married to the father of the baby. See Table 2.

**Table 2: Relationship status at time of seeking abortion**

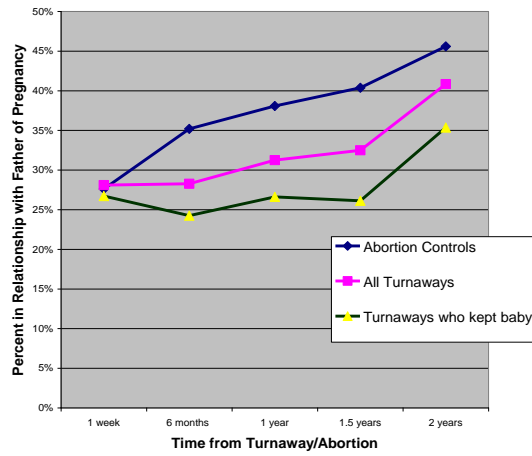
	Turnaways who did not receive an abortion elsewhere	Turnaways who bore and kept the baby	Abortion Controls
N	210	146	415
No current relationship	28%	27%	28%
friend/acquaintance	13%	13%	14%
partner/boyfriend	46%	44%	47%
fiance/husband	13%	16%	11%
Total	100%	100%	100%

## **Results**

Data were collected at 8 days after the pregnancy termination or turnaway event, and at six-month intervals thereafter.

At the Wave 1 interview, conducted soon after the the babies were born to the Turnaway group, significant differences were apparent between the groups. The Abortion Control group was 7 percentage points less likely than all Turnaways ( $p < 0.10$ ) and 11 points less likely than Turnaways who kept the baby ( $p < 0.05$ ) to be in a relationship with the father. These differences persisted throughout the rest of the interviews. (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
**Proportion in each group not in relationship with the father of the pregnancy**



However, there were no significant changes in any of the groups in the proportions married/engaged to be married; all the relationship disruptions were non-marital. (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Proportion in each group married to the father of the pregnancy**

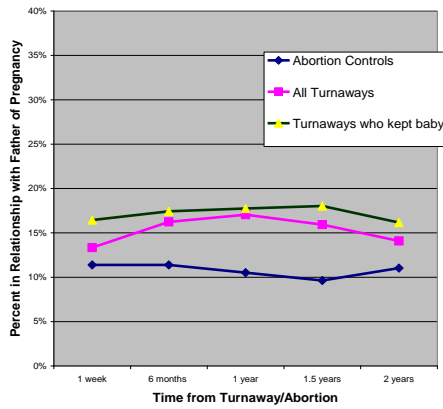
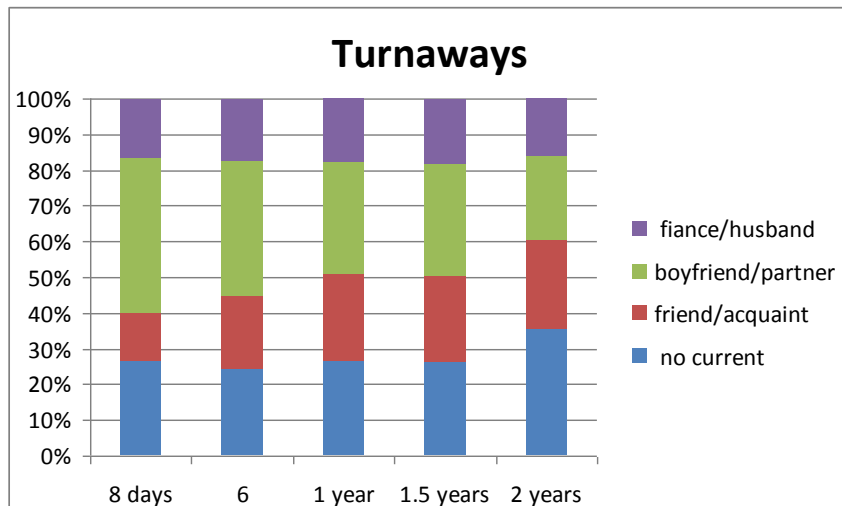
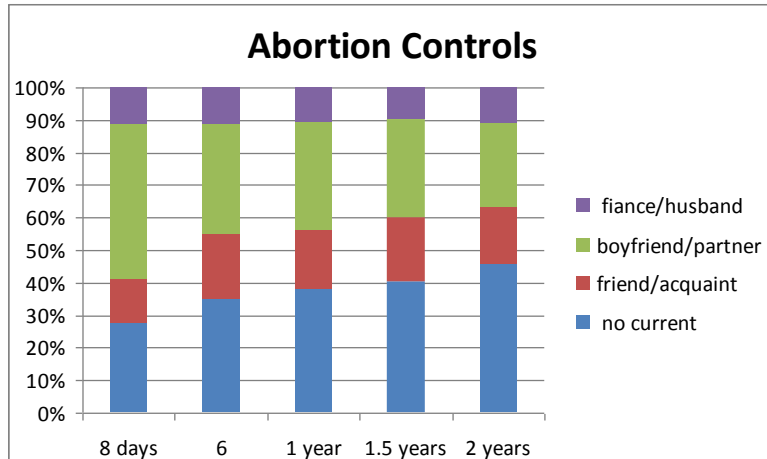


Figure 3 shows the overall patterns across four relationship statuses over time for the two groups:

**Figure 3**  
**Relationship to the father of the pregnancy**



A multinomial logistic regression on the four outcomes that are in Figure 3, controlling for demographic variables, reveals no significant effects of Turnaway on relationship status. The excluded category in the model is No Relationship. (See Table 4.)

However the model reveals that Turnaways are more likely (non-significant effects) to be in any one of the relationship categories, rather than no relationship. The next step in the analysis is to repeat the model with a bivariate outcome: No Relationship vs. Any Relationship. Our expectation is that it will confirm in a multivariate context the significant differences evident in Figure 1.

### **Quality of the relationship with the father of the pregnancy**

For those who were in a relationship with the father of the pregnancy, the quality was assessed using a scale from 1 (Very Good) to 5 (Very Poor). At the time of the first interview, there are no differences in the quality of the relationship: a mean of 2.20 among Abortion controls and 2.22 among Turnaways,

where 2 is “good” and 3 is “fair.” Again at one and two years there were no statistical differences in the quality of the relationship (2.24 Abortion control versus 2.28 among Turnaways at 1 year, 2.29 and 2.50 at 2 years.)

When the samples are restricted to women who had a relationship with the father at Wave 5 (and who almost all had a relationship in the intervening years), the same pattern holds, although average relationship quality is slightly higher. There are no significant differences between any of the groups, and no significant changes on average over time.



Table 4: Multinomial logistic model of type of relationship with the father of the pregnancy.

		friend/acquaintance	boyfriend/partner	husband/fiancé
Study group	Abortion control	1.00	1.00	1.00
	Turnaway birth	0.33 [-0.50, 1.16]	0.38 [-0.40, 1.16]	0.81 [-0.04, 1.66]
	Turnaway no birth	-0.63 [-1.96, 0.70]	-0.67 [-1.92, 0.57]	-0.36 [-1.73, 1.01]
Study group x time	Months	-0.04 * [-0.07, -0.02]	-0.08 * [-0.10, -0.06]	-0.06 * [-0.08, -0.03]
	Turnaway birth x months	0.03 [-0.01, 0.06]	0.01 [-0.02, 0.05]	0.02 [-0.02, 0.06]
	Turnaway no birth x months	0.03 [-0.03, 0.10]	0.03 [-0.03, 0.09]	0.04 [-0.03, 0.10]
Age at baseline	age	0.04 [-0.02, 0.10]	0.03 [-0.03, 0.09]	0.05 [-0.01, 0.11]
Race/ethnicity	white non-Latina	1.00	1.00	1.00
	African American	0.49 [-0.26, 1.24]	-0.08 [-0.81, 0.65]	-0.77 [-1.54, 0.00]
	Latina	0.03 [-0.80, 0.87]	-0.09 [-0.90, 0.72]	-0.23 [-1.07, 0.61]
	Other	0.28 [-0.66, 1.22]	-0.08 [-1.00, 0.83]	-0.53 [-1.49, 0.43]
Employment status at baseline	not employed	1.00	1.00	1.00
	Employed	-0.13 [-0.50, 0.24]	-0.14 [-0.49, 0.20]	-0.30 [-0.69, 0.09]
Parity and age of children at baseline	No children	1.00	1.00	1.00
	At least one child under age 1	-1.29 * [-2.33, -0.24]	-0.80 [-1.80, 0.20]	0.26 [-0.79, 1.30]
	one child above age 1	-1.42 * [-2.20, -0.64]	-1.26 * [-2.02, -0.49]	-1.03 * [-1.85, -0.20]
	two or more children above age 1	-0.78 [-1.66, 0.09]	-1.07 * [-1.93, -0.21]	0.22 [-0.68, 1.11]
Constant		-0.16 [-1.70, 1.39]	1.46 [-0.04, 2.97]	-0.65 [-2.24, 0.93]

\* p<0.05

Reference category is no relationship.

## Citations

Barnett W, Freudenberg N, Wille R. 1992. Partnership after induced abortion: A prospective controlled study. *Arch Sex Behav.* 21(5):443–455.

Rue, Vincent M., Priscilla K. Coleman, James J. Rue, David C. Reardon. Induced abortion and traumatic stress: A preliminary comparison of American and Russian women. *Med Sci Monit*, 2004; 10(10): SR5-16 WWW.  
[http://www.medscimonit.com/fulltxt\\_free.php?ICID=11784](http://www.medscimonit.com/fulltxt_free.php?ICID=11784)

Bradshaw, Zoe and Pauline Slade “ The effects of induced abortion on emotional experiences and relationships: A critical review of the literature”. *Clinical Psychology Review* Volume 23, Issue 7, December 2003, Pages 929–958  
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0272735803000928>