

Effect of Abortion vs. Carrying to Term on a Woman's Relationship with the Man Involved in the Pregnancy

CONTEXT: When a woman who seeks an abortion cannot obtain one, having a child may reshape her relationship with the man involved in the pregnancy. No research has compared how relationship trajectories are affected by different outcomes of an unwanted pregnancy.

METHODS: Data from the Turnaway Study, a prospective longitudinal study of women who sought abortion in 2008–2010 at one of 30 U.S. facilities, are used to assess relationships over two years among 862 women who had abortions or were denied them because they had passed the facility's gestational age limit. Mixed-effects models analyze effects of abortion or birth on women's relationships with the men involved.

RESULTS: At conception, most women (80%) were in romantic relationships with the men involved. One week after seeking abortion, 61% were; two years later, 37% were. Compared with women who obtained an abortion near the facility's gestational age limit, women who gave birth had greater odds of having ongoing contact with the man (odds ratio at two years, 1.7). The odds of romantic involvement at two years did not differ by group; however, the decline in romantic involvement was initially slower among those giving birth. Relationship quality did not differ between groups.

CONCLUSIONS: Giving birth temporarily prolonged romantic relationships of women in this study; most romantic relationships ended soon, whether or not the woman had an abortion. However, giving birth increased the odds of nonromantic contact between women and the men involved throughout the ensuing two years.

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A substantial body of research seeks to understand the factors that foster two-parent rather than single-parent child-rearing using studies that track parents' relationships from their children's births or even conceptions. Nevertheless, almost no research exists on the topic of the present article: how the relationship of a couple who experience an unwanted pregnancy that the woman would prefer to terminate develops differently depending on whether the pregnancy ends in an abortion or a birth. When a woman seeks an abortion but is unable to obtain one, how do carrying the pregnancy to term and bearing a child reshape her relationship with the man involved in the pregnancy? Does bearing the child extend the parents' relationship and make them less likely (or more likely) to separate?

This research is broadly applicable. Half of all pregnancies in the United States are unintended,¹ 70% of unintended pregnancies are among unmarried women² and about half of nonmarital unintended pregnancies (excluding those that end in miscarriages) result in a live birth.¹ Some women who carry an unintended pregnancy to term never consider abortion, while others seriously consider it but may find it unavailable for financial, geographic or other practical reasons. This article compares the relationship trajectories of the latter group with those of otherwise similar women who had abortions. Data are from the Turnaway Study, a longitudinal interview study expressly designed to investigate and establish effects of abortion on

various aspects of a woman's life, including her intimate relationships.

PAST RESEARCH

Although women of all backgrounds and circumstances have abortions, a large majority of U.S. abortions—85%—are among unmarried women.^{3,4} The prospect of single parenthood and relationship challenges such as serious conflict, instability, relative newness and imminent dissolution figure prominently among reasons women give for abortion.⁵ In one interview study of 1,200 women who had abortions, 48% of respondents mentioned not wanting to be single mothers or relationship problems as reasons for their decision.⁶

A small literature exists on the effect of abortion on relationships. We located only one study—from Germany, published in 1992—that is comparative, prospective and longitudinal.⁷ A study group of 92 women in stable (married, cohabiting or steady) relationships were interviewed when they were about to have first-trimester abortions and then a year later; they were compared with a matched group of 92 women, interviewed on the same schedule, who had been using contraceptives, continued to do so over the following year and did not become pregnant. Women in the abortion group initially reported more relationship conflict than those in the comparison group; however, after one year, the groups did not differ in the stability or quality of

their relationships or in levels or degrees of change in their sexual satisfaction and coital frequency. At the one-year interview, women in the abortion group were asked if the abortion had created any problems in their relationships. More than half of the (relatively few) unmarried women whose relationships had ended said the abortion had contributed indirectly to the breakup by creating emotional distance or disagreements. Yet the statistical results indicate that having an abortion had not made it more likely that couples would separate. This point is worth noting when considering other studies that rely on retrospective reports to assess the impacts of abortion on relationship stability and quality.

Miller et al., studying a volunteer U.S. sample of 145 women interviewed two weeks and 6–8 months after having abortions, found most women reporting that the quality of their relationships had not changed.⁸ The proportion of women reporting substantial improvement in their relationships following abortion was not significantly different from the proportion reporting substantial deterioration.

A Canadian study interviewed 127 women and 69 men 1–3 weeks after an abortion, with no reinterview; 12% of the female and 18% of the male respondents reported “negative effects” on their relationships.⁹

In an interview study of 217 U.S. and 331 Russian women who had ever had an abortion, 20% of U.S. and 8% of Russian respondents asserted that it had led to a relationship’s ending.¹⁰ This study relied on retrospective reports and had problems of reliability and generalizability. Respondents were asked to report on the most problematic of their abortions if they had had more than one. The abortion might have been illegal in its time or setting, or conducted with procedures very different from today’s. The U.S. respondents reported an exceptionally high rate of subsequent abortion-related health problems (31%); the medical consensus is that abortion presents few health risks.¹¹ Additionally, the U.S. sample was not representative of adults in the contemporary United States with respect to support for abortion: Some 60% did not “believe in a woman’s right to choose”; by comparison, 44% of U.S. adults today do not “believe that abortion should be legal in most or all circumstances.”¹² Thus, this study’s findings should be taken with considerable caution.

Research on the impacts of having children on couple relationships suggests that separation risks are lowered for a couple if they have a child (or another child) together, even when the selectivity into childbearing of couples in strong relationships is taken into account.^{13,14} However, while this research suggests that having a child postpones or prevents relationship disruption among some couples, the effect may not apply when the pregnancy is unwanted.

In sum, there is no solid evidence that having an abortion leads to relationship disruption, or that having a child as a result of an unwanted pregnancy will extend a relationship. No prior research has compared the trajectory of a relationship when an unwanted pregnancy results in a birth

with its path when the pregnancy is terminated. This study addresses that gap.

METHODS

Study Design

The Turnaway Study recruited English- and Spanish-speaking women who sought an abortion at one of 30 U.S. facilities in 2008–2010. Recruitment sites serve populations that together capture the regional diversity of the United States; each had the highest gestational age limit for abortion of any facility within a 150-mile radius. The study was approved by the University of California, San Francisco, Committee for Human Research. Details about the Turnaway Study have been published previously.¹⁵

Women were recruited into one of three study groups: near-limit abortion, consisting of women who presented within two weeks of the recruitment facility’s gestational age limit for abortion and obtained an abortion; turnaway, comprising women who did not obtain an abortion at the recruitment site because they presented up to three weeks after the gestational age limit; and first-trimester abortion, made up of women who obtained a first-trimester abortion. Women were not recruited if a fetal anomaly or fetal demise was their reason for seeking an abortion, or if they were younger than 15. Interviews were in English or Spanish only.

Turnaway participants are further divided into two groups for analysis. Three-quarters of these women carried their pregnancies to term and are categorized as the turnaway/birth group. The remainder, who either miscarried or obtained an abortion at a different facility, constitute the turnaway/no birth group.

The study participation rate was 38%. Importantly, non-participation was the same among women who obtained near-limit abortions as among women who were turned away.¹⁵ This participation rate, for a study asking women seeking a stigmatized health service to participate in a study involving semiannual interviews over five years, appears to be within the range of those for other large-scale prospective studies. Lengthy studies that offer no direct benefit to participants often have participation rates lower than this.^{16,17}

We excluded three women from our study because their pregnancy was the result of stranger rape; 12 because at first interview they did not know the identity of the man involved in the pregnancy; and three because they were in the near-limit or first-trimester abortion group, but later reported that they did not obtain an abortion at the recruitment site. Also excluded were all 76 participants recruited from the site with the lowest gestational limit (10 weeks) among all sites, as 90% of turnaways recruited at this facility did not carry to term.

We draw on the first five interviews conducted for the Turnaway Study, which occurred approximately eight days and six, 12, 18 and 24 months after the women presented to request abortion care. Attrition was modest: Ninety-two percent of participants who completed an initial interview were reinterviewed at six months, and

77% at 24 months. Study group was not associated with loss to follow-up.

The present analyses are based on 862 women—405 in the near-limit abortion group, 156 in the turnaway/birth group, 48 in the turnaway/no birth group and 253 in the first-trimester abortion group.

Measures

•**Outcomes.** We assess two outcome measures. The first, relationship status, is based on the question “What is your relationship now to the man you became pregnant with?” Response options were “husband,” “fiancé,” “partner/boyfriend,” “ex-boyfriend,” “ex-husband/separated,” “friend,” “acquaintance,” “other (specify)” and “no relationship.” We consider four possible outcomes: married, romantic relationship, ongoing contact and no ongoing contact. “Married” denotes that a woman reported that the man she became pregnant with is her husband. “Romantic relationship,” which encompasses marriage, denotes that the woman described the man involved as her husband, fiancé, or partner or boyfriend, or indicated “other” and specified a dating relationship or other romantic involvement. “Ongoing contact” signifies that the woman reported a romantic relationship or specified an “other” relationship; the most frequent responses in this category, apart from romantic relationships, were friend, acquaintance, ex-boyfriend or ex-husband and the baby’s father.* “No ongoing contact” means that women selected “no relationship” or gave an “other” response that specified no ongoing contact, such as “not on speaking [terms]” or “hate him.”

The second outcome, relationship quality, is assessed only for women who had some type of ongoing contact. They were asked, “Would you say that your relationship with [the man involved] is very good, good, fair, poor or very poor?” Responses were rated on an interval scale from 1 (very good) to 5 (very poor).

•**Independent variables.** The woman’s race and ethnicity, her age, her education level and whether she had already borne a child were recorded at the initial interview and are used as unchanging covariates in regressions. We estimate an effect for each study group against the reference group of near-limit abortion. “Months” for each interview is the number of months elapsed since the woman was recruited into the study. The quadratic of elapsed months is included in each regression where it improves model fit. Several models include the interaction of each study group with the measure of elapsed months and, if appropriate, the quadratic of months.

Analysis

We run a series of bivariate and multivariate analyses, all using STATA 12. In one set of bivariate comparisons, we compare the near-limit abortion group with the other groups on the following variables: average gestation at which women sought abortion, demographic characteristics, recruitment facility’s gestational limit (less than 20 weeks vs. at least 20 weeks) and relationship status at conception. We expect

the turnaway/birth and near-limit abortion groups to have similar characteristics, as both presented for abortion care close to (either just after or just before) a facility’s gestational limit. As long as the two groups resemble each other on key characteristics, the experiences of the turnaway/birth group can be used to indicate what the experiences of the near-limit abortion group would have been had near-limit women not obtained an abortion.

We also compare the first-trimester abortion group, who represent the large majority of women who obtain abortions in the United States, with the near-limit abortion group, who presented for abortion later than is typical.†¹⁸ As long as the outcomes from these groups resemble each other, the study findings are arguably generalizable to all women having an abortion, not only those whose abortions are later than typical.

To model relationship outcomes reported in the 24-month interview, we run binomial mixed-effects multivariate logistic regressions. The independent variables are study group and demographic characteristics. To accommodate possible correlation of outcomes within facilities, bivariate comparisons and binomial models include random effects for facility.

Finally, using outcome data from all five interviews, mixed-effects longitudinal logistic models estimate relationship outcomes over time. Independent variables are the same as in the binomial models, plus months and interactions between months and group; when it improves model fit, we also include a quadratic term for months and interactions between the quadratic of months and group. Mixed-effects linear regression, also on data from all five interviews and incorporating measures of elapsed months and interactions, model relationship quality on a five-point scale. All these models include facility-specific and subject-specific random intercepts and, to account for the possibility of differential change over time across participants, subject-specific random slopes.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Groups differ in the gestational ages at which they presented for abortion care (Table 1): Women in the near-limit abortion group averaged 20.0 weeks’ gestation at recruitment; those in the turnaway/birth and turnaway/no birth groups averaged 23.4 weeks’ and 19.1 weeks’ gestation, respectively; and those in the first-trimester group averaged 7.8 weeks. The majority of women in the near-limit abortion group (71%) presented at facilities that had gestational

*Relationship status correlates strongly with the frequency with which women reported seeing the man involved in the pregnancy over the past month. Women classified as having no ongoing contact with him uniformly reported no contact, whereas virtually all women in a romantic relationship and three-quarters of those classified as having ongoing contact had seen him at least once.

†In 2008, most abortions (63%) were performed at or before eight weeks’ gestation, and almost all (92%) at or before 13 weeks’ gestation.¹⁸

TABLE 1. Selected characteristics of women seeking abortion at 30 U.S. facilities, by whether they had the abortion at a gestational age near the facility's limit, were turned away because they had passed the limit or had a first-trimester abortion, Turnaway Study, 2008–2010

Characteristic	All (N=862)	Near-limit abortion (N=405)	Turnaway/birth (N=156)	Turnaway/no birth (N=48)	First-trimester abortion (N=253)
MEANS					
Gestational age (weeks)	17.0	20.0	23.4***	19.1***	7.8***
Age	24.9	25.0	23.5**	24.5	25.8†
PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTIONS					
Facility's gestational limit (weeks)					
<20	29	29	19	66	32
≥20	71	71	81	34	68
Race/ethnicity					
White	33	32	25	44	39
Black	32	31	35	27	32
Hispanic	22	21	28	13	21
Other	13	16	13	17	8
Prior births					
0	38	34	47	42	38
≥1	62	66	53	58	62
Education					
<high school	19	18	24	19	16
High school/GED	33	34	34	27	31
Some college	40	40	37	46	42
College graduate	8	7	6	8	11
At conception, relationship to man involved in pregnancy					
Romantic	80	80	85	75	78
Married	9	9	10	10	10
Other	71	71	75	65	68
Not romantic	20	20	15	25	23
No ongoing contact	0	0	0	0	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

*Mean or distribution differs from that for near-limit group at p<.05. **Mean or distribution differs from that for near-limit group at p<.01. †Percentage differs from that for the near-limit group at p<.001. ‡p<.10. Note: Significance tests include random effects for facility.

TABLE 2. Percentage of women, by selected outcomes of their relationship with the man involved in their pregnancy, and mean relationship quality among those reporting any contact with him, by study group

Outcome	All	Near-limit abortion	Turnaway/birth	Turnaway/no birth	First-trimester abortion
Any ongoing contact					
At one week	90	89	94	92	89
At 24 months	68	68	79*	63	62
Romantic relationship					
At one week	61	61	63	54	60
At 24 months	37	39	40	35	33
Married					
At conception and at 24 months	5	5	8	0	5
After conception and at 24 months	3	2	3	11**	5*
At conception but not at 24 months	4	4	3	9	6
Never	87	90	86	79†	86
Mean relationship quality (range, 1–5)					
At one week	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.0	2.2
At 24 months	1.8	1.7	2.0	1.1	2.0

*Percentage differs from that for the near-limit abortion group at p<.05. **Percentage differs from that for the near-limit group at p<.01. †Percentage differs from that for the near-limit abortion group at p<.10. Notes: The relationship quality scale ranges from 1="very good" to 5="very poor." Significance tests include random effects for facility. Sample size at 24 months was 652 overall, 306 for near-limit abortion, 120 for turnaway/birth, 35 for turnaway/no birth and 191 for first-trimester abortion.

age limits of at least 20 weeks; the same was true for women in the turnaway/birth group, although the proportion was higher (81%). By contrast, most women in the turnaway/no birth group (66%) presented at facilities that had limits of less than 20 weeks.

At the initial interview, women in the sample averaged 24.9 years old; those in the turnaway/birth group were, on average, 1.5 years younger than those in the near-limit abortion group (23.5 vs. 25.0 years). Thirty-three percent of women were white, 32% black, 22% Hispanic and 13% of other races and ethnicities. A greater proportion of women in the first-trimester abortion group than in the near-limit abortion group were white (39% vs. 32%). Thirty-eight percent of women had had no previous birth; this proportion was higher among turnaway/birth women than among near-limit abortion women (47% v. 34%). Nineteen percent of the women had less than a high school education, 33% had completed high school and the rest had at least some college education; there were no significant differences across groups.

At the time of conception, all women were in some type of relationship with the man involved in the pregnancy. Most (80%) were in a romantic relationship with him: Nine percent were married to him, and 71% were romantically involved and not married. Relationship status at conception did not differ significantly among study groups.

Bivariate Results

One week after presenting for abortion care, 90% of women were still in ongoing contact with the man involved in the pregnancy; no statistically significant differences were found by group (Table 2). At two years, the proportion with ongoing contact had fallen to 68% and was significantly higher among the turnaway/birth group than among the near-limit abortion group (79% vs. 68%).

From the time of conception to the first interview, the proportion in a romantic relationship with the man involved fell from 80% to 61%; at one week, there were no significant differences across study groups. By the 24-month interview, the proportion had plummeted to 37%, still with no significant differences across groups.

A small fraction of women in the sample were married to the man involved in the pregnancy at some point over the two years: Five percent were married the entire time, 3% wed sometime after conceiving, and 4% were married at conception but no longer were at the two-year interview. These proportions did not differ between the turnaway/births and the near-limit abortion groups. However, the proportion who married the man involved in the pregnancy sometime after conception and were still married to him at two years was higher in the turnaway/no birth and in the first-trimester abortion groups than in the near-limit group.

The average quality of women's relationships with the man involved was similar across groups at both the one-week and the two-year interviews.

Multivariate Results

The binomial multivariate regression results for relationship outcomes confirm that at the two-year mark, women in the turnaway/birth group were significantly more likely than those in the near-limit abortion group to have ongoing contact with the man involved in their pregnancy (odds ratio, 1.7—Table 3). In contrast, there were no differences by group in women's odds of being in a romantic relationship with him. The odds of being married at month 24 were marginally higher among turnaway/birth than among near-limit abortion women (2.0); the odds of postconception marriage were greater in the first-trimester abortion and turnaway/no birth groups than in the near-limit abortion group (3.6 and 7.6, respectively). The results for marriage, however, must be interpreted with caution, as this was a rare outcome (Table 2).

In the longitudinal mixed-effects logistic regression model, the estimates for the interaction of months with study group capture the pace of change across time in the odds of ongoing contact. A significant odds ratio for months (0.9) is estimated for the near-limit abortion group, and because none of the interactions between group and months is significant, the same odds ratio can be assumed to apply to all groups (Table 4). The odds ratio in the longitudinal model for ongoing contact is significant and substantial for the turnaway/birth group (3.3), indicating that initially, this group had a significantly and substantially higher likelihood than the near-limit abortion group of having ongoing contact with the man involved. There is no statistical evidence of any shrinking over time in this difference. The predicted probability of ongoing contact with the man involved in the pregnancy differed by 5–10 percentage points between the turnaway/birth group and the reference group (Figure 1).

With respect to romantic relationships, none of the main group effects are significant in the longitudinal mixed-effects regression (Table 4), which implies no group differences at the first interview. From the significant odds ratios of 0.8 for the linear slope on months and 1.0 (more precisely, 1.003—not shown) for the quadratic, one sees that over the two-year period, romantic relationships fell away for women in the near-limit abortion group. A significant interaction between months and group, along with one between months-squared and group, indicates a less steep decline in the likelihood that women in the turnaway/birth group were in a romantic relationship with the involved man.

The gap between the turnaway/birth and near-limit abortion groups in the likelihood of being in a romantic relationship quickly rises to its maximum of about 10 percentage points. It narrows during the second year and disappears by month 24. None of the interactions with months are significant for the first-trimester abortion and turnaway/no births groups.

Women in the turnaway/birth group have a consistently higher likelihood than those in the near-limit abortion group of having ongoing contact with the man involved. This results, in part, from their temporarily

TABLE 3. Odds ratios from binomial mixed-effects logistic regression analysis assessing the likelihood that women reported selected outcomes of their relationship with the man involved in their pregnancy at the 24-month interview, by study group

Group	Any ongoing contact	Romantic relationship	Married	
			All women	Women not married at conception
Near-limit abortion (ref)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
First-trimester abortion	0.72	0.79	1.49	3.55**
Turnaway/birth	1.69*	1.10	2.03†	1.98
Turnaway/no birth	0.78	0.90	1.90	7.59***

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001. †p<.10. Notes: ref=reference group. Models include random effects for facility and controls for age, race and ethnicity, education (in categories) and any prior births. Romantic relationships include marriage.

TABLE 4. Odds ratios from longitudinal logistic regression analysis assessing the likelihood that women reported any ongoing contact or a romantic relationship with the man involved in their pregnancy over 24 months, by selected characteristics

Characteristic	Ongoing contact	Romantic relationship
Group		
Near-limit abortion (ref)	1.00	1.00
First-trimester abortion	0.88	0.96
Turnaway/birth	3.29*	1.34
Turnaway/no birth	1.69	0.53
Months	0.94**	0.82***
Months-squared	na	1.00*
First-trimester abortion x months	0.96†	0.90†
First-trimester abortion x months-squared	na	1.00
Turnaway/birth x months	1.03	1.17*
Turnaway/birth x months-squared	na	0.99*
Turnaway/no birth x months	0.96	1.07
Turnaway/no birth x months-squared	na	1.00

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001. †p<.10. Notes: ref=reference group. na=not applicable, because the measure was not included in the model. Models include controls for age, race and ethnicity, education (in categories) and any prior births; random effects for facility and individuals; and random slopes for individuals.

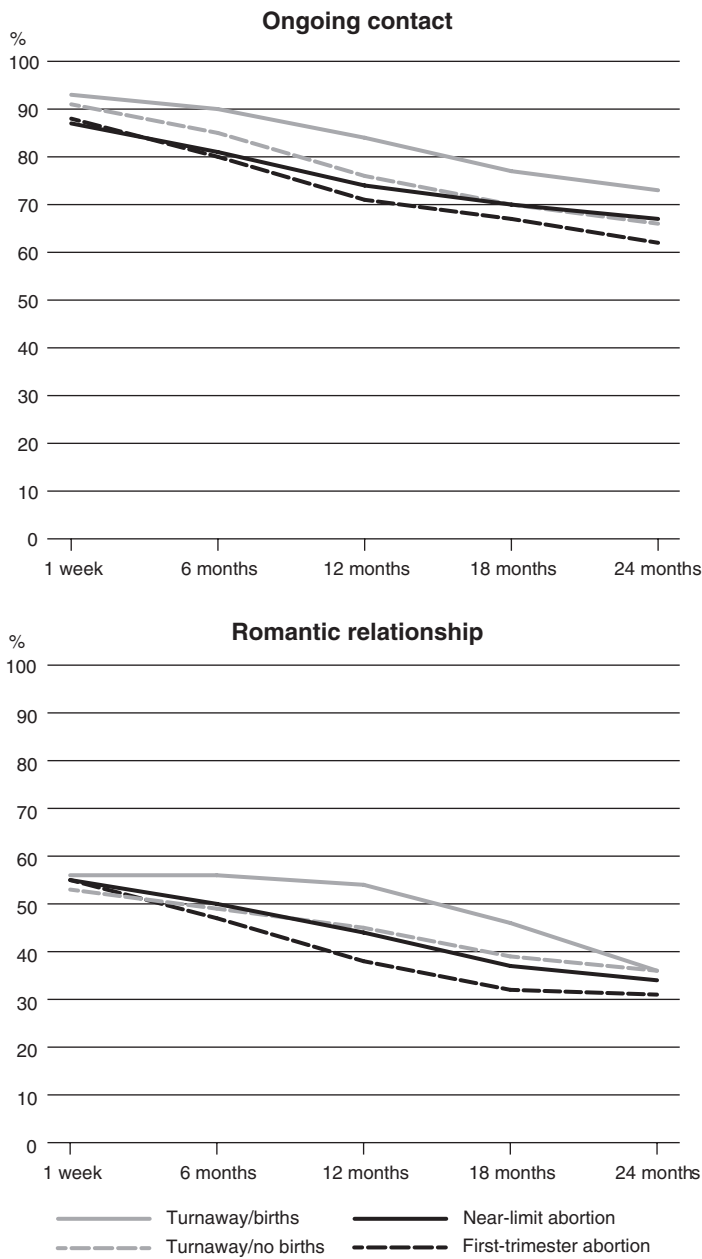
higher likelihood of romantic involvement. By the 24th month, ongoing contact was no longer primarily romantic (Figure 1).

The final analysis is a linear mixed-effects regression to predict relationship quality among women with any contact (Table 5). The absence of significant group effects indicates that there was no differential change over time by study group; at the start and at the end of the period, relationship quality was no better and no worse in the turnaway/birth group than in the near-limit abortion group.

DISCUSSION

Our findings carry some implications for policy and for future research. Most of the children born as a result of women's limited access to abortion will not be cared for by two romantically involved parents. Policymakers seeking to foster paternal involvement among children of unmarried parents can take some comfort in two findings: First, throughout the study period, women in the turnaway/birth group were more likely than those in the near-limit abortion group to have some type of ongoing contact, even if

FIGURE 1. Predicted percentage of women reporting selected relationship outcomes with the man involved in their pregnancy, by study group, according to time since they sought abortion care



Note: Data are regression-adjusted population-averaged predictions.

nonromantic, with the man involved in the pregnancy. Second, childbirth put a temporary brake on the rapid pace at which these couples' romantic relationships dissolved. Neither of these effects is large; for example, the rate of ongoing contact was higher by 5–10 percentage points among women who had given birth than among near-limit abortion women. It is plausible that parenting or support responsibilities led to the higher rate of contact with the man involved among women who carried to term.

More noteworthy, however, are both the overall rapid rate of relationship dissolution among women in the

TABLE 5. Coefficients from linear mixed-effects regression analysis assessing characteristics associated with relationship quality among women reporting any contact with the man involved in their pregnancy

Characteristic	Coefficient
Group	
Near-limit abortion	ref
First-trimester abortion	0.007
Turnaway/birth	0.068
Turnaway/no birth	-0.102
Months	-0.030**
Months-squared	0.001**
First-trimester abortion x months	0.005
First-trimester abortion x months-squared	0.000
Turnaway/birth x months	0.003
Turnaway/birth x months-squared	0.000
Turnaway/no birth x months	0.018
Turnaway/no birth x months-squared	-0.001

**p<.01. Notes: ref=reference group. Models include controls for age, race and ethnicity, education (in categories) and any prior births; random effects for facility and individuals; and random slopes for individuals.

study, of whom only 37% were in a romantic relationship with the man at the 24th month, and the proportion who at conception were already not romantically involved with him (20%). Policy-focused research could investigate strategies to expand sources of support, whether from fathers or others, for children whose birth resulted from an unwanted pregnancy. The reasons that women seek abortion suggest caution in trying to increase father involvement uniformly in these situations. Some births result from pregnancies that women would have preferred to terminate because of serious problems in the relationship. These women's reasons for abortion quite often include that the man involved is violent, abuses alcohol or drugs, or would make a poor father.^{5-7,19} Increasing such fathers' engagement in children's lives may not benefit anybody.

The statistically higher rates of postconception marriage (a very rare outcome in general) among women in the first-trimester abortion and turnaway/no birth groups might reflect selection into marriage by some women in these groups. In particular, perhaps compared with women in other groups, these women were more likely to be involved with men who provided a relatively high level of practical and emotional support when they sought abortions, thereby facilitating the first-trimester abortion or the ability to continue seeking an abortion after one had been denied.

Strengths and Limitations

This study of abortion's impacts on the duration and quality of a woman's relationship with the man involved in her pregnancy is the first we are aware of that relies upon a robust scientific design. It draws on data from six-monthly interviews over two years; the sample of women is quite large and is geographically and ethnically diverse; and the women all either obtained an abortion or were unable to do so and carried an unwanted pregnancy to term. The women provided information about their relationship with

the man involved at regular intervals and contemporaneously, not retrospectively. Finally, by recruiting participants from abortion clinics, the study avoided problems of underreporting of abortion²⁰ and focused attention on the outcomes for women who did not want to carry their pregnancy to term, rather than on all women with unplanned pregnancies.

One important limitation of the study is that three of the four study groups presented for abortion later than is typical in the United States.¹⁸ Another limitation is the participation rate, which at 38% is respectable for a study of this type, but leaves open the possibility of significant differences between participants and nonparticipants.

However, several features of the research argue for the findings' generalizability to the experiences of women whose abortions are more typical, in that they occur prior to 13 weeks' gestation. First, comparisons between the first-trimester and near-limit abortion groups show them to be very similar demographically, differing only (slightly) in their ethnic composition and in the (very low) rate of postconception marriage. Second, the study sample is demographically similar to a nationally representative sample of U.S. women who had abortions in 2008. The only pronounced difference is that women in our study were more likely to have no college education (52%) than is true nationally of women who seek abortion (40%²¹). Given that women who obtain a second-trimester abortion have, on average, less education than those who obtain a first-trimester abortion,²² and that our sample is heavily weighted toward women in the second trimester, it is not surprising that a smaller proportion of our sample than of a national sample are college-educated. The overall similarities between our sample and national samples of women having abortions suggest generalizability of our findings to all English- and Spanish-speaking U.S. women who obtain later abortions and, plausibly, to women who undergo first-trimester abortions as well.

Conclusion

We find no evidence that having an abortion causes relationship dissolution, but rather observe a downward trajectory of romantic involvement among all the women who sought to terminate unwanted pregnancies. Earlier research that found romantic relationships deteriorating after an abortion^{15,23} may have simply picked up on this trend. We also find a small and fleeting bump in romantic relationships that is associated with parenting rather than abortion—a gap that is only 5–10 percentage points at its peak and gone by two years after the woman sought an abortion. Thus, having an abortion appears to allow relationship dissolution to continue at its own pace, while having the baby seems to postpone the end of the relationship.

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