

Fast Facts

The Consequences of Unplanned Pregnancy

Unplanned pregnancyⁱ, and in particular unwanted pregnancy, has a wide range of serious consequences. One of the most obvious is, of course, abortionⁱⁱ. In 2001, there were approximately 1.3 million abortions in the United States, and although this number has been decreasing, the abortion rate in this country is still higher than in most other developed countries.¹

Listed below are a variety of additional consequences, beginning with some important new findings from Child Trends, a nonpartisan research organization based in Washington, DC (www.childtrends.org), detailed in the box below.

Child Health and Development

A new analysis indicates that children 2 years old who were born as the result of an unplanned pregnancy had significantly lower cognitive test scores when compared to children born as the result of an intended pregnancy. After controlling for important background factors, these significant differences persisted for children who were born as the result of an unwanted pregnancy (a subset of unplanned pregnancy). The cognitive test scores include direct assessment of a variety of skills, including listening, vocabulary, exploring, problem solving, memory, communication, as well as a child's overall mental ability relative to other children in his or her age group.

This analysis is based on data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort, a nationally representative longitudinal study of about 11,000 children born in 2001 conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics.²

Parents and Relationships

New analysis shows that women who had a child as a result of unplanned pregnancy experience greater relationship instability than women whose pregnancies were intended. That is, in the five years following the birth of the child from an unplanned pregnancy, 46 percent of mothers had one or more cohabitating or married relationship changes. This compares to 21 percent among mothers who had a birth as a result of an intended pregnancy.

This analysis is based on data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, a nationally representative periodic survey conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics that includes over 5,000 women aged 15-44.³

ⁱ Unplanned pregnancies include those reported by woman to be unwanted or mistimed (also known as "unintended").

ⁱⁱ A small number of women who planned their pregnancy make the difficult decision to terminate it after learning that it poses a serious maternal health risk or that the fetus has severe abnormalities. Other reasons may arise as well. Even so, abortion itself is a clear indication that a pregnancy was or became unwanted.

Findings from previous research on the consequences of unplanned pregnancy are detailed below.

Preconception Care, Prenatal Care and Infant Health

- Women who experience an unplanned pregnancy often do not have the opportunity to engage in preconception care, which has been shown to benefit both mothers and babies (e.g. reductions in spina bifida).^{4,5}
- Compared to women who planned their pregnancies, women who have an unplanned pregnancy, and in particular an unwanted pregnancy, are more likely to delay the initiation of prenatal care.^{4,6-8}
- The risk of both preterm delivery⁹⁻¹¹ and low birthweight^{4,9,10,12} are higher for births resulting from unplanned pregnancies.
- Babies born to women as the result of an unplanned pregnancy are significantly less likely to be breastfed than are babies born to women who intended their pregnancies.¹³ Some studies report that this is particularly true among women who experience an unwanted pregnancy rather than a pregnancy that is mistimed.

Child Health/Development and Family Environment

- Children born from an unplanned pregnancy, and especially an unwanted pregnancy, are at risk on a number of developmental fronts.
- For example, in one study, children who were born as the result of an unplanned pregnancy exhibited higher levels of fearfulness and lower levels of positive affect by age two. When these children entered preschool, they scored lower on tests of verbal development.⁴
- They also have lower vocabulary scores¹⁴ and reduced levels of educational attainment^{15,16} compared to children born from intended pregnancies.
- These children have poorer physical^{15,17-19} and mental health^{15,20} compared to those children born as the result of an intended pregnancy.
- They also have relationships with their mothers that are less close during childhood (and possibly into adulthood) when compared to peers who were born as the result of an intended pregnancy.²¹⁻²⁴
- They may also have higher levels of delinquency during adolescence compared to children born from intended pregnancies.^{7,25}
- Along these same lines, one very unique study compared children born to women who were twice denied an abortion with the children of women who had not made similar requests. The study, conducted in Eastern Europe, found that throughout their childhood, and particularly as they aged, the children born as the result of an unwanted pregnancy had a larger burden of various social and relationship problems including psychological issues and greater levels of criminal activity than did the controls.¹⁵
- The majority of children born as the result of an unplanned pregnancy are born to women who are either single or cohabiting.²⁶ This is important because children raised in one-parent families face more challenges in a variety of areas than do children raised in two-parent, low-conflict married families.²⁷⁻³⁰
- For example, when compared to similar children who grow up with two parents, children in one-parent families are twice as likely to drop out of high school, 2.5 times as likely to become teen mothers, 1.4 times as likely to be both out of school and out of work, and five times more likely to be poor.²⁸
- Even after adjusting for a variety of relevant social and economic differences, children in single-parent homes have lower grade-point averages, lower college aspirations, and poorer school attendance records. As adults, they also have higher rates of divorce.²⁸⁻³⁰

Mothers

- Women whose pregnancies are unplanned are more likely to experience post-partum depression than women who report their pregnancies as intended.^{4,31}
- Women who experience an unplanned pregnancy may also be at increased risk of physical abuse compared to women who have an intended pregnancy.^{6,32,33}

Sources

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