

## **Reasons U.S. Women Choose Abortion**

Abstract submission to PAA 2005, sessions 114 and 101  
September 24, 2004

Lawrence B. Finer, Ph.D.  
Lori F. Frohwirth  
Lindsay A. Dauphinee  
Susheela Singh, Ph.D.  
The Alan Guttmacher Institute  
120 Wall Street, New York, NY 10005  
(212) 248-1111

### **Short abstract**

Little recent national-level information has been collected on the reasons women give for choosing to terminate their pregnancies, and as the abortion rate has declined over the past 15 years, a new examination of these reasons may help to develop policies and programs to improve women's ability to prevent unplanned pregnancy. In 2003, we surveyed 1,209 women at 11 abortion providers and completed in-depth interviews with 38 women. The most common reasons given for having an abortion were "Having a baby would dramatically change my life" (74% of respondents) and "I can't afford a baby now" (73%). The frequency with which women gave common reasons was similar to that in a 1987 survey on the same topics. A factor analysis identified several key dimensions of women's decision-making. Additional analyses to be completed include examination of the qualitative data collected and the relationship between reasons given and difficulties obtaining abortions.

### **Detailed abstract**

#### **Context**

The prominent political debates over abortion rights in the United States often lack the context of the issues faced by those facing an unwanted pregnancy. Abortion rates vary from group to group, and the higher levels of abortion among more disadvantaged population groups suggest there is a need to better understand the reasons behind these trends. In 1987, The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI) conducted a study of the reasons women choose to resolve unplanned pregnancies by abortion. Since that time, little information has been collected on this topic, and 15 years later, with many changes that have occurred — not least the decline in the abortion rate between the high point (a rate of 29 per 1,000 women of reproductive age in 1980) and the recent period (a rate of 23 per 1,000 in 2000) — there is need for finding out what has changed and what has remained the same in terms of reasons why women seek abortion. This can provide us with a better understanding of women's needs regarding reasons for unplanned pregnancy and therefore help to develop policies and programs to improve women's ability to prevent unplanned pregnancy. Such a study can also detail some of the specific experiences that lead low-income, minority and otherwise disadvantaged women to obtain an abortion. Finally,

this work would allow us to compare findings from the United States with international analyses of women's reasons for choosing abortion.

## **Data and methods**

The two main fielding components of the project are a structured survey of 1,200 women at 11 large abortion clinics and in-depth interviews with 40 women at four of those clinics.

### *Quantitative component*

Eleven abortion clinics that perform more than 2,000 abortions per year were selected. Clinics represented a range of regions, types, city sizes and state abortion restrictions.

An anonymous paper-and-pencil questionnaire was completed by 1,209 patients at the selected clinics, representing 58% of all patients seen during the survey period (December 2003 to March 2004). The content of the questionnaire was similar to the 1987 AGI survey. One open-ended question was asked: "Please describe briefly why you are choosing to have an abortion now." In addition, 38 closed-ended items asked about specific reasons for choosing abortion. Finally, demographic information was collected. Questionnaire data were coded and cleaned, and analyzed using Stata statistical software.

(Women were also asked to answer a number of questions about the logistics of obtaining abortion; For example, they described the time intervals between their last menstrual period, first suspecting pregnancy, confirming pregnancy, deciding to obtain an abortion, and making an appointment. Women were asked if they would have preferred to have the abortion earlier, and if so, what delayed them. These logistical variables will be analyzed in a separate paper, although when relevant the relationship between these variables and the reasons women gave will be discussed here.)

### *Qualitative component*

AGI staff conducted 38 in-depth interviews at four clinics (two of which participated in the quantitative study) on the same topics covered in the quantitative survey. All interview tapes were transcribed and edited for quality and accuracy. Coding of the transcripts is beginning in order to determine major themes and correlations. Findings from the qualitative component of the project are not yet complete, but will be incorporated into the results from the quantitative component in time for presentation at PAA.

## **Key findings to date**

- The most common reasons given for having an abortion were:
  - 74% said "I am concerned that having a baby would dramatically change my life."
  - 73% said "I can't afford a baby now."
- When asked their most important reason,
  - 19% of women said they couldn't afford a baby.

- 18% said they were not ready for a(nother) child.
- 15% said they already had as many children as they wanted.
- Percentages for most top-level reasons (e.g., a baby would change my life) were similar to those reported in 1987. However, some more specific sub-reasons (e.g., a baby would interfere with my career) showed changes from 1987 to 2003. For example:
  - Fewer women indicated that abortion would interfere with their job/employment/career, and more gave “I have dependents” as a reason.
  - Fewer women gave “my husband/partner wanted me to have an abortion” as a reason for having one. (Implications for those who claim women are coerced?)
  - Fewer women indicated that they were not mature enough to raise a child.
- Age, relationship status and number of previous children were the most important demographic determinants of who gave which reasons.
  - Younger women were less likely to say “I have all the children I want” or to report health concerns, and were more likely to say “it would dramatically change my life,” “I’m not mature enough,” or “I don’t want others to know I had sex/got pregnant.”
  - Married women and women with children were less likely to report fear of others finding out or “I’m not mature enough,” and more likely to report that they had all the children they wanted.
  - Older, married and wealthier women were less likely to say they couldn’t afford a baby.

In the multivariate context, many findings were those that might be expected. For example, women with no children were more likely to say a baby would dramatically change their lives; poor and unemployed women were more likely to say they could not afford a baby; and separated and divorced women were most likely to report partner problems. Other notable findings:

- Older women were more likely to report a problem with their health
- Older and white women were more likely to report a possible problem with the fetus’s health
- Women with children, older women, poorer women and less-educated women were more likely to give “other children” as a reason for choosing abortion
- Young and never-married women were more likely to report that they didn’t want others to know that they had had sex or gotten pregnant
- Younger women and childless women were more likely to say they were not mature enough to have a baby; black women were less likely to say this

A factor analysis of the 2003 closed-ended questions identified several key dimensions of women’s decision-making:

Factor 1 (“no job”): I am unemployed; my husband/partner is unemployed; I don’t receive enough support from my husband/partner; I am unmarried; I can’t afford the basic needs of life; I am currently or temporarily on welfare or public assistance.

Factor 2 (“school/youth/future”): I am a student or planning to study; having a baby now would interfere with my going to school; I do not feel I am mature enough to raise a(nother) child; having a baby now would interfere with my job/employment/career.

Factor 3 (“employed but poor”): My job does not pay enough to afford a baby and child care; I can’t leave my job to take care of the baby; I would have to find another place to live; having a baby now would interfere with my job/employment/career.

Factor 4 (“no partner or partner support”): I don’t have a relationship with anyone right now; it’s too hard to raise a(nother) child by myself; I wouldn’t get enough childraising support from family or friends; my partner wouldn’t be a good father; my partner and I can’t or don’t want to get married.

Factor 5 (“relationship problems”): My relationship or marriage may break up soon; I am not sure about my relationship; having a baby would cause problems in my relationship; my partner and I can’t or don’t want to get married.

Factor 6 (“physical health/abuse”): My partner/husband is abusive to me or my children; some physical problem or problem with my health; possible problems affecting the health of the fetus.

Factor 7 (“dependents”): I have other children or people depending on me to take care of them; I already have as many children as I want.

Factor 8 (“privacy concerns”): I don’t want my parents or other people to know I had sex; I don’t want my parents or other people to know I got pregnant.

### **Additional analyses planned for inclusion in paper**

In addition to the results above, we will present findings from the qualitative analyses, which provide a fuller picture of the circumstances women faced when deciding how to resolve an unwanted pregnancy. In addition, we will further explore the link between the reasons women report and the logistical difficulties they faced when attempting to obtain abortions. Finally, we will compare the results of our survey to those conducted in the international context.