

The Turnaway Study: Ten years, a thousand women and the consequences of having—or being denied—an abortion

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The Turnaway Study is a book that reports the results of a significant research study that aimed to answer the question: “what happens when a woman seeking an abortion is turned away?” A team of scientists including psychologists, epidemiologists, demographers, nurses, physicians, economists, sociologists, and public health researchers conducted a landmark 10-year study. They followed 1000 women from across the United States of America, some of whom had had an abortion and some who were turned away. The Turnaway Study was the first to investigate how abortion affects women by comparing those who get an abortion and those who want one but don’t get one. The researchers sought to interview each woman in the study every six months over five years to understand how getting an abortion versus being denied an abortion affected their mental and physical health, their life aspirations, and their family well-being. From the study, the research team published almost 50 academic papers and it has been widely reported. To make an accessible text bringing together many of the findings, Foster Greene has gathered the stories of 10 women, reporting in their own words how they came to want an abortion and what happened to them after they were successful or were turned away. It is compelling reading.

The Turnaway Study found no evidence that abortion harms women. Women who got the abortion they wanted reported better physical health, employment and income than those denied an abortion. Their mental health was initially better and then eventually

the same and their hopes for the future were better. They were more likely to be in a positive romantic relationship and have a wanted pregnancy. The others, denied an abortion, faced complications of pregnancy and birth, longer-term health conditions. Two women died. The social consequences were also significant—increased anxiety, difficulty leaving violent relationships, economic hardship and there were some impacts on the health of their existing children.

While the data are compelling, and it is worth pursuing the many scientific articles published, the strength of this book is in the narratives of 10 women. These are sandwiched between the analysis-based chapters. These are first-person narratives constructed from the interview transcripts. Foster Greene starts with ‘Amy’ whose story is of an “ordinary abortion” and illustrates abortion as a normal part of “planning a family and living a meaningful life” (p. 24). Other stories relate the experiences of women who had major health problems that made pregnancy very dangerous or who were using alcohol and other drugs. These chapters also provide a window into everyday lives of girls and women who struggled with poor access to health care and contraception. As a social worker who worked in an abortion service, all these stories were familiar. From the simple but crucial need to have agency over when, and if, to have a child and in what circumstances, to the painful choices of women with chronic health conditions or living with intimate partner violence, to the

unhelpful involvement of family members in private decisions, all had good reasons. Because all reasons are valid. And ultimately, the Turnaway Study is a rigorous report that confirms that whatever the reasons, having the right to make the choice, and living with the conditions to make that choice to parent or not sustainable (Ross, 2006; Ross & Solinger, 2017) is what is best for pregnant people. Any reason for freely choosing an abortion is valid (Jones et al., 2023).

This book is strongly recommended for the study of reproductive justice in social work education, not just for what it teaches us about abortion, but for what it also tells us about health care, access and the barriers and enablers of personal choices that are meaningful and supported. It will be helpful in dispelling mis/disinformation that plagues many students' (and sadly, some educators') approach to reproductive health in social work education.

Abortion continues to be a contested site across the globe and the fight for reproductive justice seems never-ending. The unseemly scabbling for power over the bodies of pregnant people drags on and on. Grown men (and some women) grasp for the right to force a pregnant child to give birth as pregnancy is a consequence of sex. It's always about control. Never life. The architects of anti-abortion laws are rarely the same people as those who fight for benefits, for free high-quality health care, access to early childhood care/education, and decent housing. Rather, these are the people who want to control and punish women. They do not care about the children who are born, only preventing pregnant people from deciding when and if they want to parent and whether they have the resources to enable them to raise children with dignity.

This book provides tangible, compelling evidence of the importance of reproductive justice. Abortion rights are a social work issue and progressive social workers will always fight for reproductive justice (Beddoe

2021; Goldblatt et al., 2022, Lavalette et al, 2022; Poehling et al., 2023).

In the afterword to this book, author Diana Greene Foster wrote "the familiar clash between science and ideology that characterises the debate on abortion also defined the debate over the pandemic and hampered the response. At the same time, the pandemic deepens the conflict over abortion rights by giving politicians another opportunity to restrict abortion while making access to care more fraught and riskier" (p. 315). Sadly, since she wrote these words, the famous 1973 Supreme Court ruling known as *Roe v Wade* has been overturned. At the time of writing this review, medical professionals, social workers and counsellors across the US are scrambling to find ways to help people and avoid the consequences of some of the absurd and hasty legislation that puts so many at risk, including people whose medication for chronic conditions is teratogenic. The struggle continues. Green has provided us with another powerful resource.

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