

ARTICLES

Parental Involvement In Minors' Abortion Decisions

By Stanley K. Henshaw and Kathryn Kost

In a 1991 study based on a nationally representative sample of more than 1,500 unmarried minors having an abortion, 61% of the respondents said that one or both of their parents (usually the mother) knew about the abortion. Only 26% of the respondents said their father knew about the abortion; furthermore, 57% of the mothers who knew about their daughter's pregnancy did not tell her father. In this study, which was conducted in states without parental involvement laws in effect, about 75% of the parents who knew about the pregnancy had been told by the daughter herself, and the great majority supported their daughter's decision to have an abortion. Among the minors whose parents found out without being told by the minor, 18% said their parents were forcing them to have an abortion and 6% reported physical violence, being forced to leave home or damage to their parents' health. Minors who did not tell their parents were disproportionately older (aged 16 or 17), white and employed. The minors' most common reasons for not telling their parents were wanting to preserve their relationship with their parents and wanting to protect the parents from stress and conflict. Of those who did not tell their parents, 30% had experienced violence in their family, feared that violence would occur or were afraid of being forced to leave home. Among minors whose parents were unaware of the pregnancy, all consulted someone other than clinic staff about the abortion; most frequently, they consulted their boyfriend (89%), an adult (52%) or a professional (22%).

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Each year about 7% of all U. S. women aged 15-17, some 400,000 women, have a birth, abortion or miscarriage.¹ In 1988, 172,000 young women aged 17 or younger—41% of those whose pregnancy did not end in a spontaneous miscarriage—obtained an abortion.² Despite these large numbers, only a few studies have examined the decisions made by pregnant adolescents to determine the factors associated with the choice of birth or abortion, the pressures acting on the adolescents, and the roles played by parents and other adults.

Some studies have found that pregnant adolescents are more likely to abort their pregnancy if they have high educational achievements or aspirations,³ and one study has found that the educational level

among the mothers of adolescents who have an abortion is higher than that among the mothers of those who give birth.⁴ Robert Blum and Michael Resnick have reported that adolescents who choose abortion have a better ability to conceptualize the future, a greater feeling of control over life, less anxiety and a less traditional view of female sex roles than do those who decide on childbirth.⁵ An investigation of decision-making competence among women seeking a pregnancy test found that among those considering an abortion, women younger than 18 appeared as competent as legal adults aged 18-21.⁶

In a study of 432 unmarried women younger than 18 who had an unintended pregnancy ending in birth or abortion, Raye Hudson Rosen found that 57% involved their parents, usually their mother, in the pregnancy resolution decision; this proportion was about the same among those who had an abortion as it was among those who continued the preg-

nancy. Male partners had more influence on the decision of adolescents who decided to have and keep the baby than on those who had an abortion. The adolescents who were most likely to consult their parents were those who had difficulty making the decision.⁷

Studies of parent-child communication about sexual issues have found that such communication is often limited. In a review of 15 studies on the family's role in adolescent sexual behavior, Greer Litton Fox reported that none found that parents were a major source of information about sex for a majority of respondents.⁸

Of a sample of pregnant inner-city black minors in Baltimore, 91% said that they consulted a parent or surrogate parent before the outcome decision; the proportion was about the same for those who continued the pregnancy as for those who had an abortion.⁹

In a national survey of 1,170 unmarried minors having an abortion in 1979-1980, Aida Torres and colleagues found that 55% said that their parents knew they were having an abortion; the younger the minor, the more likely her parents were to know. Informing parents was more common among minors who had discussed birth control with their parents before they became pregnant.¹⁰

The purpose of this study is to obtain a deeper understanding of how unmarried minors who have induced abortions initially react to their pregnancy and how they arrive at the decision to have an abortion. The study focuses on the following topics: the minors' initial feelings about their pregnancy; the proportion who, in the absence of legal requirements, consult their parents, and the proportion of parents who find out about the pregnancy in other ways; the reasons minors do or do not consult their parents; the reactions of parents when they discover their daughter is pregnant and the consequences of

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this discovery; parental and other pressures to continue or terminate the pregnancy; the characteristics of minors who choose not to involve their parents; and other aspects of the process by which pregnant minors choose abortion and carry out that decision.

The questions of parental consultation and the needs of pregnant adolescents have practical importance because of proposals in state legislatures and in Congress to require parental involvement or court authorization for unemancipated minors to obtain abortions. As of August 1992, the consent of one or both parents was required in 10 states, and notification of one or both parents was required in an additional nine states.* Seventeen more states have passed parental involvement laws that have been enjoined by the courts or are not enforced for other reasons.† The laws have various stated purposes, among which are encouragement of family communication and assurance that minors who have an abortion receive adult guidance.

In all of the states with parental involvement laws except Utah and Idaho, minors can avoid parental involvement if they demonstrate to a court that they are mature enough to make an informed decision or that the abortion would be in their best interest.‡ Access to courts and to impartial judges may be difficult, however. In 1985, the latest year for which data are available, about 40,000 minors obtained an abortion in the 19 states that now have such laws in effect, and about 140,000 did so in other states.¹¹

This study was designed to examine the "natural" behavior of pregnant minors and to determine whom they consulted in the absence of legal constraints; thus, it was limited to minors having an abortion in states without parental notification requirements in effect. A study assessing the actual impact of parental involvement laws through comparisons between minors in states with restrictions and those in states without restrictions would be valuable but would require a much larger sample than was possible in our study, as well as accurate coverage of minors who travel from restrictive to nonrestrictive states to obtain abortions. A complete study of pregnancy decision-making that included minors who continued their pregnancy would also be valuable; this, too, was impossible, given the available resources.

Methods

We used a self-administered questionnaire distributed in abortion facilities to collect data on minors having an abortion in

states without parental notification requirements. (The questionnaire had been extensively pretested in six clinics to assure that the questions were understood and would provide the necessary information.) All facilities were in states that had no parental involvement requirements in effect as of September 1990 and were not expected to have restrictions in effect within the next nine months.§ From a master list maintained by The Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI) of all abortion providers, we drew a sample of nonhospital clinics and physicians' offices where 1,000 or more abortions had been performed in 1988. Nationally, such facilities accounted for 75% of all abortions that year.¹² The sample was stratified by the country's nine census divisions.

Of the 81 facilities approached to field the survey, two were no longer providing abortion services and 26 refused to participate or were unable to give a definite acceptance. Seven more agreed to participate but could not, because they were temporarily closed or for other reasons. This left 46 facilities that provided usable questionnaires. Each facility was instructed to give the questionnaire, which was available in both English and Spanish, to all unmarried patients younger than 18 who received an abortion during a 12-week period between December 1990 and June 1991. All patients were informed that participation was voluntary and that failure to participate would not affect the care they would receive.

Of the 1,793 patients seen in these facilities during the study period, 8% did not receive the questionnaire because of administrative oversight or because there was not enough time for the patient to complete it, and 1% were too physically uncomfortable to respond or were unable to answer because of a language problem. Of the remaining 1,624 patients, 94% returned a usable questionnaire.

To evaluate how representative the sample was, we used state and national abortion statistics to estimate the proportion of nonwhites among minors having an abortion in the study states. The resulting estimate (35%) was higher than the proportion among the sample respondents (26%), so the respondents were weighted to adjust the racial proportions to the external estimate. Weights were chosen to sum to the actual sample total of 1,519. Except for data included in the regressions, all data shown in tables are weighted. With the exception of Table 4, the tables do not show significance because of the numerous possible compar-

isons; differences are mentioned in the text only if they are statistically significant at the .05 level, taking into account the effect of weighting, which reduced the effective sample size by an estimated 6%.

The age distribution of the weighted sample of respondents is close to that found in national data collected by the Centers for Disease Control.¹³ The sample was also compared with 1,115 unmarried minors in a national survey of 9,480 abortion patients conducted by AGI in 1987.¹⁴ There were, at most, only small differences between the two studies in the weighted percentage distributions by age, employment, religion, receipt of Medicaid, and prior births and abortions. The demographic composition of our sample (weighted by race) is therefore nationally representative of all minors having an abortion, even though the sample was drawn only from states without parental involvement requirements.

Results

Minors Having an Abortion

Table 1 (page 198) provides a picture, based on the survey results, of unmarried minors who have an abortion. Although the respondents ranged in age from 12 to 17 years, 74% were either 16 or 17 years old, and only 8% were younger than 15. More than half were non-Hispanic whites, 30% were black, 12% were Hispanic (1% nonwhite, 11% white) and 4% were Asian or of another race.

Only 38% of the minors lived with both biological parents; 46% lived with their mother but not their father, 5% lived with

*The states that require consent of one or both parents are Alabama, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Wisconsin and Wyoming. Those requiring notification of one or both parents are Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, Utah and West Virginia. In addition, Maryland has passed a law providing for one-parent notification with physician and court bypass; it is scheduled to be submitted to voter referendum in November 1992. For a detailed analysis of parental involvement laws, see P. Donovan, *Our Daughters' Decisions: The Conflict in State Law on Abortion and Other Issues*, The Alan Guttmacher Institute, New York, 1992.

†States with laws that are enjoined or are not being enforced are Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, South Dakota and Tennessee.

‡Some statutes state that abortion without parental involvement must be in the minor's best interest and some that parental involvement must not be in her best interest.

§The sample was drawn from abortion facilities in the District of Columbia and the following states: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

their father but not their mother, and 12% lived with neither. Ten percent lived with a parent and stepparent; these minors were included with the 51% who lived with only one parent. Parental involvement laws usually refer only to "parents" and "guardians" and not to stepparents; thus, stepparents were not treated as parents in this study. Respondents presumably understood the terms "mother" and "father" to refer to their biological or adoptive parents, because many questions provided for separate answers for stepparents.

Although 17% of the respondents did not live with their mother, most had some contact with her; only 2% said that they did not know how to contact her, that they communicated with her less than once a year, or that she had died (not shown). In contrast, 10% did not know how to contact their father, another 8% said they communicated with him less than once a year, and 5% said he was deceased, for a total of 23% who had virtually no contact with their father. An additional 6% communicated with their father less than once a month but at least once a year.

At the time of the survey, 31% of the minors were working full-time or part-time, and 32% had never been employed. They appeared to represent all socioeconomic classes. At least 19% of the households in which the minors lived received some form of public assistance or Medicaid. Twenty-six percent of their mothers had not graduated from high school, while 44% had attended college.

Forty-four percent of the minors identified their religion as Protestant and 30% as Catholic; 17% were born-again or evangelical Christians. These percentages are roughly similar to those found for women of all ages in an earlier national survey of abortion patients.¹⁵ Seventy percent of the minors said that they attended church services; 27% did so every week. Sixty-three percent reported that their mother attended services.

One minor in five had been pregnant previously, including 9% who had given birth. Among those who had had one or more prior pregnancies, 53% reported having had an abortion, 41% a birth and 12% a miscarriage.

Minors and Their Parents

To put into context the minor's and her family's responses to a pregnancy, we included in the questionnaire a number of

*The questions on closeness and communication with parents were adapted, with permission, from questions developed by M. Resnick, R. Blum and T. Stark, Adolescent Health Program, University of Minnesota.

items about the minor's relationship with her parents and about her perception of their attitude toward her sexual behavior.* As Table 2 shows, 49% of the respondents said that they were "very close" to their mother, and an additional 37% that they were "somewhat close." Only 20% of the respondents reported a "very close" relationship with their father.

Although half of the teenagers said they felt very close to their mother, only 24% said they could talk "very freely" with her about their feelings, problems and fears, and only 21% said they could talk "very freely" about sexual issues. The proportions who reported being able to talk very freely to their father about these issues were much smaller (5% and 4%, respectively). Overall, 48% said that before they became pregnant (this time), their mother knew that they were sexually active, but only 19% believed that their father knew.

Whether or not a respondent said that her parents knew before finding out about the pregnancy that she had had sex, we asked her to check off items on a list that described her parents' attitude toward her sexual activity. (Respondents could choose more than one answer.) Thirty-four percent of the minors said their mother thought they should not have sex, and 25% said she left the decision up to them. Forty-two percent of the minors said their mother encouraged them to use birth control; in some cases, the mother did not approve of the daughter having sex, but thought that if the daughter did have sex she should use birth control. Among those who knew how their mother felt about their sexual activity, 9% said that their mother had conveyed both attitudes (not shown).

Almost half of the respondents who said their mother left the decision about whether to have sex up to them also indicated that their mother encouraged them to use birth control, while only a few said their mother disapproved of their having sex. Thus, the minors who said their mother left decisions on sexual activity up to them may have meant that their mother accepted their being sexually active or that she at least did not express open disapproval. It is surprising that 19% of the daughters did not know what their mother's attitude was.

The minors were much more likely to believe that their father disapproved of their sexual activity. When the 59% who had little or no contact with their father or who did not know their father's attitude were omitted, 69% of the respondents said their father believed that they should not have sex. The comparable figure for moth-

Table 1. Percentage distribution of U.S. minors having an abortion, by background characteristics, 1991

Characteristic	%
Age (N=1,519)	
<14	2
14	6
15	19
16	31
17	43
Race/ethnicity (N=1,472)	
White (non-Hispanic)	55
Black (non-Hispanic)	30
Hispanic	12
Asian or other	4
Household (N=1,517)	
Both biological parents	38
Biological mother only	46
Biological father only	5
Neither biological parent	12
Respondent's employment (N=1,457)	
Working full-time	2
Working part-time	29
Not employed but worked in the past	38
Never employed	32
Household receives public assistance or Medicaid (N=1,458)	
Yes	19
No	78
Don't know	3
Mother's education (N=1,275)	
<12 yrs.	26
12 yrs.	30
>12 yrs.	44
Religion (N=1,406)	
Protestant	44
Catholic	30
Jewish	1
Other	2
None	22
Born-again or evangelical Christian (N=1,345)	
Yes	17
No	83
Respondent's church attendance (N=1,446)	
≥Once a week	27
About once a month	18
<Once a month	26
Never	30
Mother's church attendance (N=1,426)	
≥Once a week	31
About once a month	13
<Once a month	20
Never	37
Prior pregnancy† (N=1,473)	
Birth	9
Abortion	11
Miscarriage	3
None	79
Total	100

†Percentages total more than 100% because more than one answer could be checked. Note: Ns in all tables except those for regression analyses are weighted to reflect the proportion of non-whites among minors having abortions in the states studied.

ers was 43%. Both the fathers and the mothers who knew that their daughter had had sex were much more likely to be perceived as encouraging use of birth control than were all parents.

One reason for the differences between the minors' relationship with their mother and their relationship with their father

is that only 43% lived with their father, while 84% lived with their mother. Therefore, when the sample for Table 2 is limited to minors who lived with one or both of their parents, the differences between the minors' relationship with their mother and their relationship with their father are somewhat reduced for three of the six variables in the table (feeling close to the parent, freely talking about feelings, and a parent's knowing that the minor had had sex), but they remain very large. Daughters who lived with their father were more likely than all respondents to say that their father believed they should not have sex (47% vs. 29%), and they saw their father as more disapproving of their sexual activity than their mother (47% vs. 38%).

To investigate the extent to which family pathology or fear of family violence might discourage minors from involving their parents in their pregnancy outcome decision, we asked the respondents whether they had concerns about any of four kinds of problems happening in their home, either because such a problem had occurred or because they thought it might occur. We asked these questions before we asked about the pregnancy or parental knowledge of the pregnancy.

Although 72% of the respondents indicated no concerns about any of these problems (not shown), 8% of minors were concerned that their mother might drink too much or use drugs, 15% had the same concern about their father, 11% were worried about physical violence between their parents and 14% worried about violence between themselves and their parents. Eighteen percent reported concerns because one or more of these problems had already occurred, and an additional 10% were concerned that one or more might occur.

Initial Intentions and Decisions

A minor's initial reaction to becoming pregnant depended in part on whether the pregnancy was intended. Ninety-one percent of the minors who obtained an abortion reported that they had not wanted to become pregnant (not shown). Another 2% of respondents said that they had been forced to have intercourse, 2% reported that they had wanted to become pregnant and 5% were not sure about their original intentions.

Slightly more than half (56%) of the minors had initially wanted an abortion when they discovered the pregnancy; 44% had been so certain that they immediately decided on this option. Sixteen percent had at first wanted to continue the pregnancy, and 28% had not initially known what they

Table 2. Percentage distribution of U.S. minors having an abortion and of those who live with a parent, by indicators of relationship with parent, according to parent

Indicator	All minors		Those who lived with parent	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
Closeness to parent	(N=1,512)	(N=1,454)	(N=1,267)	(N=831)
Very close	49	20	52	31
Somewhat close	37	35	38	48
Not close	11	23	11	21
Little or no contact†	2	23	na	na
Talked to parent about feelings, problems and fears	(N=1,505)	(N=1,452)	(N=1,262)	(N=830)
Very freely	24	5	25	7
Somewhat freely	44	20	46	30
Not freely	29	52	29	63
Little or no contact†	2	23	na	na
Talked to parent about sexual issues	(N=1,506)	(N=1,434)	(N=1,262)	(N=828)
Very freely	21	4	21	4
Somewhat freely	29	11	30	14
Not freely	48	63	49	82
Little or no contact†	2	23	na	na
Parent knew before pregnancy that daughter had had sex	(N=1,510)	(N=1,495)	(N=1,258)	(N=642)
Yes	48	19	47	25
Not sure	16	11	16	14
No	31	46	33	58
Got pregnant the first time	4	2	5	3
Little or no contact†	2	23	na	na
Parent's attitude about daughter having sex‡	(N=1,508)	(N=1,473)	(N=1,256)	(N=634)
Disapproved	34	29	38	47
Left it up to daughter	25	8	23	10
Unknown	19	37	19	40
Encouraged use of birth control	42	10	42	14
Little or no contact†	2	23	na	na
Parent's attitude if he or she knew daughter was having sex‡	(N=718)	(N=285)	(N=592)	(N=158)
Disapproved	29	36	31	42
Left it up to daughter	33	24	31	22
Unknown	10	26	11	23
Encouraged use of birth control	58	31	57	32
Total	100	100	100	100

†Communicates with parent less than once a year. ‡Percentages total more than 100% because more than one answer could be checked. Note: na=not applicable.

wanted to do. More than two-thirds (68%) decided on the abortion within two weeks of discovering they were pregnant.

Parental Knowledge

Most of the minors had suspected or discovered their pregnancy without their parents' knowing about it. At the time of the abortion, however, 61% of respondents indicated that one or both of their parents knew about the pregnancy; this included 45% who had told at least one parent (Table 3, page 200).

When faced with the question of whether to involve one or both of their parents, 43% of the minors had responded by telling their mother. Not all of the others, however, had kept their mother from knowing about the pregnancy. Ten percent said their mother had been told by someone else, such as a relative, doctor or clinic staff member; this figure included 2% who either said they did not know who had told their mother or did not answer the question (not shown).

Six percent said their mother had found out in some other way. Although the questionnaire did not ask how the mother had found out, our experience during pretesting suggests that some mothers suspected that something was different and confronted their daughter, who was then unable to deny that she was, or might be, pregnant. In some of these cases, the daughter may have wanted her mother to find out. Similarly, in many of the cases in which the parents were told by a physician or by clinic staff, they were presumably notified with the daughter's consent.*

Only 12% of the respondents had told their father about the pregnancy. Nine percent of the fathers had been told by the minor's mother or stepmother and 4%, by someone else; 1% had found out in some

*About 1% of minors were unsure whether their mother or father knew about the pregnancy. In the analysis, these were included with those whose parents were unaware, since the unsure minors had evidently not discussed the pregnancy with their parents or benefited from parental involvement.

