



# abortion bans and college drop-outs

by ilana horwitz, kaylee matheny, and natalie milan

Isabella works at her mother's laundromat to save up for college tuition. Ambitious and diligent, she aspires to earn a degree in Criminal Justice, which would go a long way in helping her get out of poverty. Little does she know that she is already eight weeks pregnant by the time she enrolls in college.

Abortion bans being passed all over the United States, including the recent ban in Texas, would make it impossible for Isabella to terminate her unintended pregnancy after the fetal heartbeat is detected, usually at six weeks of gestation. Most women don't even know they are pregnant at this point. If Isabella lived in Texas, she couldn't terminate her pregnancy even if she were raped.

But what seems like a resounding victory for Pro-Life advocates will have an unintended consequence: derailing the educational plans of millions of Americans, both women *and* men.

Caring for a child that you did not plan for, especially as a single parent, is at odds with attending college. Isabella is just one example, dropping out of college one semester after her daughter is born. Despite excelling in her classes, she was overwhelmed by the rivaling responsibilities of motherhood, school, and working full-time to provide for her daughter. "I'm like a sponge," she says. "I love going to school, I do. It's just when I'm in school, I need to be one hundred percent focused...I did one semester after my baby was born and then I needed to take a break. [College] is too much right now."

The prevalence of people like Isabella who aspire to complete college but drop out after becoming parents surprised us. As sociologists of education, we were curious if these stories of unplanned pregnancy could help explain why nearly a third of college students still don't have a degree six years later. We analyzed longitudinal interviews from a diverse sample of 220 American teenagers who were interviewed repeatedly between 2003-2013 as part of the National Study of Youth and Religion. We found that people dropped out of college for several reasons: financial hardship, academic difficulties, health crises, and yearning to enter the workforce. But the most common reason was unplanned pregnancy.

This trend was especially prevalent at community colleges, where nearly half of all students, both male and female, have experienced an unplanned pregnancy. We found that young parents often abandoned their academic pursuits to work long hours at minimum-wage jobs to provide for their children.

Though almost everyone in our sample wanted to finish college before becoming a parent, they often had to modify their plans. Forced to split time, energy, and resources between their child and their degree, 61 percent of community college students who have children after enrolling do not finish their education.

The struggle to finish college is especially acute for low-income Americans. Ruby grew up in the foster care system, and her foster family scraped by on disability insurance and food stamps. Determined to escape poverty and become a registered nurse, Ruby earned a tuition grant and enrolled in community college. However, an unintended pregnancy impeded her plans. She worked the night shift from 7 PM to 7 AM to provide for her son. Sleep-deprived with no time to devote to her studies, she dropped out. With no college degree, her job prospects were low, and Ruby fell into a state of despair. By age 25, she had two more children, was addicted to painkillers, and had no money to feed her family—let alone finish her degree.

Unintended pregnancies aren't just a problem that affects women—they also derail the educational plans for millions of men. Two years into his degree at a public university in Texas, Ty found out that his girlfriend was pregnant. He dropped out of college, married his girlfriend, and took a job as a prison guard to provide for his new family. "My girlfriend got pregnant and we ended up picking up more bills," he says. "I needed to get a job that paid more...going to college wasn't worth it...[now] I have to go to work at a job I don't really like to pay off [\$80,000] in student debt."

Reproductive rights and educational attainment go hand in hand. And the people who are most at risk of dropping out of college—low-income Americans and racial/ethnic minorities—are also the ones who are most likely to unexpectedly become pregnant at an early age. Cutting off access to safe abortions could exacerbate existing racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in college completion and will limit college-going opportunities for millions of Americans. Accessible abortion is a catalyst for college completion, and without it, the dropout crisis might only deepen.

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