



Danger Ahead: how restricting teens' access to safe abortion threatens their lives & health

FACT SHEET

High Rates of Unintended Pregnancy among Teens

- About 10 percent of pregnancies worldwide occur among teenagers.¹
- In developing countries, on average one-third of young women give birth before the age of 20 years.²
- In some countries (including the United States), one- to two-thirds of sexual assault victims are under the age of 15.³
- Studies indicate that in some countries between 50-60 percent of adolescents who become pregnant have histories of physical or sexual abuse.⁴
- In the United States, more than 900,000 teenagers become pregnant each year; more than 40 percent of women are pregnant at least once before they reach the age of 20 years and 25 percent of births to adolescents are not first births.⁵
- In the United States, more than 90 percent of pregnancies to girls aged 15-19 years are unintended.⁶
- In the United States, many adolescents using prescription contraceptives reported that they did not begin using the method until they had been sexually active for one or more years.⁷

Teen Pregnancy: Increased Health Risks to Mother and Child

- An adolescent younger than 17 years may not yet be physically mature; when her pelvic bones and birth canal have not fully developed, the pelvis may be too narrow to accommodate the baby's head and she may suffer prolonged or obstructed labor, increased risks of hemorrhage and infection, or permanent damage to her bladder and bowels.⁸
- Conditions such as anemia and iodine deficiency, which may contribute to adverse pregnancy outcomes, are found frequently among young women living in underprivileged circumstances. These conditions occur in both industrialized and developing countries.⁹
- In the United States, 83 percent of adolescents who give birth are from low-income families.¹⁰
- In industrialized countries, younger adolescents tend to have a higher prevalence of adverse pregnancy outcomes, such as premature births and low birth weight babies, than older women. Though the risk of maternal death is low, it is twice as high for adolescents under the age of 17 than for adult women.¹¹
- Adolescents younger than 15 years are more likely than older women to have miscarriages and stillbirths.¹²
- A U.S. study found that the risk of death was greater for babies born to mothers 15 years or younger than for mothers aged 23-29 years. And the rates of infant deaths due to neglect or abuse were highest among the younger age group.¹³

Teens More Susceptible to Injuries and Deaths from Unsafe Abortion

- Nineteen percent of abortions in the United States are obtained by women in their teens, although 48 percent of women who have abortions are over the age of 24, and the majority of women who have abortions have at least one child.¹⁴
- Each year, roughly 13,000 women have abortions for pregnancies resulting from rape or incest.¹⁵
- Worldwide, many teenagers seek abortions at a later stage of pregnancy when the risk of complications is higher.¹⁶
- Clinicians in the United States have noted that clients who seek abortions at 12-18 weeks of pregnancy tend to be younger than those who seek abortions earlier in pregnancy.¹⁷
- It is currently estimated that 2-4 million unsafe abortions occur among adolescent women in developing countries each year.¹⁸
- Where induced abortion is highly restricted by law, adolescents have the highest risks of suffering serious complications from unsafe abortions.¹⁹
- Women younger than 20 years account for 38-68 percent of patients admitted to hospitals for treatment of unsafe abortion complications in many developing countries.²⁰

Teens Face Significant Legal Barriers to Safe Abortion

- Parental consent laws for adolescent abortion exist in 24 countries.²¹
- Second-trimester abortions among adolescents in Missouri increased by 17 percent after that state enacted its parental consent law.²²
- As of October 2005, 43 U.S. states had adopted laws requiring a young pregnant woman to obtain parental consent or to notify one or both parents before having an abortion.²³
 - State courts in nine of these states have temporarily or permanently enjoined such laws, finding them in violation of their states' constitutions.²⁴
 - Of the 34 states currently mandating parental involvement, 21 require consent and 13 require notification. Some state laws have exceptions for medical emergencies and in cases of abuse or neglect, or allow for consent or notification from another adult relative.²⁵
- Utah is the only state without an exception that permits minors to seek permission from a court as a bypass to parental involvement.²⁶
- Studies in two U.S. states showed that some judicial officials were unprepared to implement bypass procedures because they were not even aware of them, despite the fact that the laws had been in place for several years.²⁷

When Deciding Whether to Have an Abortion, Many Teens Involve their Parents

- In most cases in the United States, adolescents involve their parents and guardians in their decisionmaking. A 1991 national survey in the United States investigated abortion decisionmaking among 1,519 unmarried adolescents in states *without* parental involvement laws. The study showed that only 39 percent had an abortion without the knowledge of either parent. Among adolescents younger than 15 years, 90 percent of their parents knew about the abortion.²⁸
- The same study showed that 30 percent of the teens who did not involve their parents had experienced family violence, feared such violence or were afraid they would be forced to leave home.²⁹

CITATIONS

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