

ABORTION BANS COULD DEEPEN THE COLLEGE DROP-OUT CRISIS

What seems like a resounding victory for Pro-Life advocates will have an unintended consequence: derailing the educational plans of millions of Americans—women and men.

The anti-abortion movement is feeling hopeful following the Supreme Court's decision to take up a major abortion case that could open the door to overturning *Roe v. Wade*. 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.

While often not seen as related topics, reproductive rights and the college dropout crisis go hand in hand. And the people who are most at risk of dropping out of college—low-income Americans and racial minorities—are also the ones who are most likely to unexpectedly become pregnant at an early age. This is alarming because low-income Americans and racial minorities are the ones who benefit the most from graduating college.

Caring for a child that you did not plan for, especially as a single parent, is at odds with attending college. As sociologists of education, we were curious why nearly a third of all college students still don't have a degree six years later. We analyzed interviews from a racially, socioeconomically, religiously, and geographically diverse sample of 300 American teenagers who were interviewed repeatedly between 2003-2013 as part of the National Study of Youth and Religion. We found that unplanned pregnancy was the most common reason why people dropped out of college.

This trend is 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 little ones. Though almost everyone in our sample expressed a desire 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% 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 who face many social and economic barriers. Now add on the responsibility of childrearing and college becomes too steep—and too long--of a journey. Take Isabella, who works at a laundromat to help pay her college tuition. Ambitious and diligent, she aspires to earn a degree in Criminal Justice. Little does she know that by the time she enrolls in college, she is eight weeks pregnant. One semester after her daughter is born, Isabella drops out of college. 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. 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."

This isn't just a problem that affects women. Abortion bans could also derail educational plans for millions of men. Two years into his degree at a public university in Texas, Ty dropped out of college after his girlfriend became pregnant. They got married and Ty took a job as a prison guard to provide for his new family. "We ended up picking up more bills. 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."

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 will only deepen.

Dr. Ilana Horwitz is an Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies at Tulane University. Kaylee Matheny is a PhD candidate at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. Natalie Milan is an undergraduate at Stanford University.