

But Not Miscarriage or Stillbirth

Study Shows Abortion Increases Risk for Substance Abuse in Future Pregnancy

Are women who have an abortion more likely to abuse substances in a later pregnancy? Yes, according to a study published in the most recent issue of the *British Journal of Health Psychology*.

By including women who have experienced other forms of perinatal loss—miscarriage and stillbirth—the study highlights the uniquely destructive nature of abortion.

Led by Dr. Priscilla Coleman, associate professor of human development and family studies at Bowling Green State University, the researchers compared substance use among pregnant women with histories of abortion, miscarriage, and stillbirth against women who had not experienced such losses.

A prior history of abortion was linked with a 201% higher risk of using marijuana, a 198% higher risk of using crack cocaine, a 406% higher likelihood of using cocaine other than crack, a 180% higher risk of using any illicit drugs, and a 100% higher likelihood of using cigarettes. The study carefully controlled for age, marital status, education, and number of people in the household. However, no differences were observed in the risk of using any of the substances if there was a prior history of miscarriage or stillbirth.

The negative effects of substance use on unborn children are well established. The results of this study suggest that abortion-related psychological distress may extend beyond the woman to her unborn children.

The study adds to an expanding literature suggesting that women who have had an abortion are at an increased risk for substance abuse problems. One study, published by Coleman and colleagues in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* in 2002, employed a nationally representative sample.

It found that pregnant women with a prior history of abortion, compared to women who had previously given birth, were more than 10 times as likely to use marijuana and over 5 times as likely to use various illicit drugs. In addition, they were more than twice as likely to use alcohol.

Coleman told **NRL News**, “Enhanced risk during this time makes sense because pregnancy-related physical and psychological changes are likely to function as reminders of negative memories and

but is often overlooked in studies of post-abortion psychological adjustment.

With no associations observed between involuntary forms of loss and substance use, on the one hand, and strong associations identified between abortion and substance use, on the other hand, it becomes clear that abortion-related psychological distress is distinct from the distress experienced with miscarriage and stillbirth.

When asked how she might explain the difference, Coleman indicated that

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who have not had an abortion to experience fears, anxiety, and depression in later pregnancies. Guilt may be at the heart of these mental health problems.

Coleman further speculated that with the specific cause of a prior miscarriage or stillbirth likely unknown, these women may have made a more concerted effort to reduce the chance of re-occurrence by taking better care of themselves during pregnancy as reflected in lower rates of substance use.

In the last several years we have witnessed a proliferation of studies published in high quality academic journals linking abortion to mental health problems, substance use, and parenting difficulties. When asked if attitudes in the scientific community seem to be changing and moving to a point of recognition that abortion is often not in women’s best interest, Coleman noted that progress has been slow, but the fact that the editors of many peer-reviewed journals acknowledge the importance of the work and are willing to publish the papers is a hopeful sign.

Apparently the more difficult challenge is getting the information from the scientific journals to the public, when much of the media is dominated by those who are highly invested in maintaining the myth that abortion is largely risk-free.



Prof. Priscilla Coleman (center) shown here with Profs. Michael New and Catherine Coyle. Each was a presenter at the annual meeting of the Association for Interdisciplinary Research in Values and Social Change, which took place June 15 just prior to the annual National Right to Life Convention.

emotions associated with the abortion.” She added, “This is also a time when women are paying close attention to information on prenatal development and for many women it may be the first time they fully understand the abortion procedure.”

An important contribution of the study relates to the fact that the large Baltimore-based sample consisted of mostly unmarried, low-income black women. This segment of society has higher than average rates of abortion

the source of the difference is likely tied to the voluntary nature of abortion.

Studies of women who have aborted reveal that feelings of guilt or remorse are experienced by up to 75% of women. Substances such as cocaine and marijuana may be used in an effort to mask such feelings.

Consistent with this interpretation, there are other studies suggesting that women with a prior history of abortion are more inclined than those

