

POVERTY AND ABORTION: A VICIOUS CYCLE

“My boyfriend Jimmy and I had been going from shelter to shelter just to stay warm as winter’s chill coursed through us. I was with Jimmy and pregnant.”
– Anna*

“On several occasions we had to deal with homelessness. I can remember sleeping on a park bench and sleeping at bus stops... In 2009 I discovered I was pregnant, with my daughter Mia. And prior to being pregnant with her I had been pregnant before. I had an abortion... So this time around I wanted to do things the right way. I wanted to choose life.”
– Jacqueline*

Anna and Jacqueline* describe a plight that is too common. If anything, surveys indicate that low-income women are more *against* abortion than other women. Yet economic realities pressure many to act against their convictions. This has been a disturbing reality for a long time, and is getting worse.

In a 2005 study, 73% of women undergoing an abortion said not being able to afford a baby now was a reason for the abortion. That number rose to 81% for women below the federal poverty line.¹ And while the abortion rate for American women declined by 8% between 2000 and 2008, among poor American women it increased by 18%.²

Economic pressure and government abortion policy can combine to make things worse. One study found that poor women on Medicaid had twice the abortion rate of other women in their state. If the state’s Medicaid program paid for elective abortions, their abortion rate was more than *four times* that of other women.³ By offering “free” abortions, the government effectively places its thumb on the scale to favor death for the unborn child. By contrast, if these programs continue funding care for mothers and babies but stop funding abortion, abortions among women in the program decrease by as much as 35%.⁴

For many years policymakers have debated whether we should reduce abortions by fighting poverty or by passing pro-life laws. The question is misplaced. It is not a matter of either/or, but of both/and. We need to address both poverty *and* bad abortion policies.

So poverty can lead to an increase in abortions. How does abortion affect poverty?

Here we have to look at a trend called “the feminization of poverty.” Women are more likely than men to be poor, and to be in “deep poverty” (with an income less than half the federal poverty line). U.S. Census Bureau figures show that 5 million more women than men were poor in 2012. Almost 31% of households headed by a single woman are below the poverty line, compared to 6% of households headed by a married couple.⁵ Women head over 80% of single-parent households, and almost half of children living with only their mother are poor.⁶ So poverty in America is often a story of poor women and children, with no man in the house.

Some social observers once thought legalized abortion would solve this problem. If single poor women had access to abortion, they could avoid the hardships of trying to raise a child alone without resources. But after more than forty years of legalized abortion, out-of-wedlock births have increased, and the plight of poor women has worsened.

Beginning in the 1990s, groundbreaking research has found that the “technology shock” of widely available contraception and abortion has *increased* out-of-wedlock births. Previously, it was widely accepted that an unexpected pregnancy out-of-wedlock should lead a man to offer marriage. Once contraception and abortion became widespread, the same pregnancy came to be seen as the woman’s responsibility – and as her problem. The man’s obligation can end with an offer to pay for abortion; if the woman refuses, she often soon finds herself to be a single mother. Today over 40% of births are out-of-wedlock.⁷

What if the woman does have the abortion? Besides suffering from psychological and spiritual burdens as an individual, she may find that the abortion has poisoned her relationships. The rate of marital breakups and relationship dissolution after an abortion is said to be between 40 and 75 percent, often related to a breakdown of intimacy and trust.⁸ And that often leaves women alone to care for themselves and any other children. In fact, sixty percent of abortions are performed on women who already had one or more children.

Marriage has been called “America’s greatest weapon against child poverty.”⁹ By the same token, anything that disrupts lasting relationships undermines the ability of women and men to join together to make a

promising future for themselves and their children. In short, poverty can lead to abortion, and abortion can lead to more poverty.

Pope Francis has seen a deeper link between the poor and the unborn. They are both among the first victims of a “throw-away society,” an attitude that sees people as disposable when they do not serve the selfish interests of those with more power.

In *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)*,¹⁰ Pope Francis rededicated the Church to solidarity with the poor and marginalized, including women who are “doubly poor” because they endure “situations of exclusion, mistreatment and violence.” He added: “Among the vulnerable for whom the Church wishes to care with particular love and concern are unborn children, the most defenseless and innocent among us.” To those who would abandon the unborn in order to be more “progressive,” he insisted: “It is not ‘progressive’ to try to resolve problems by eliminating a human life.” He went on to say that not enough has been done “to adequately accompany women in very difficult situations, where abortion appears as a quick solution to their profound anguish, especially when the life developing within them is the result of rape or a situation of extreme poverty” (nos. 212-14).

In defending unborn children, whom Mother Theresa called “the poorest of the poor,” we resist a “survival of the fittest” attitude that ignores the needy – including poor women, many of whom feel pressure to undergo abortions. And in standing for the needs of the poor, we oppose a mentality that treats the very lives of some human beings – any human being, from conception to natural death – as unimportant or burdensome.

Anna and Jacqueline were fortunate. They found a network of church support that provides material, emotional and spiritual support for women with unintended pregnancies. Thousands of pregnancy centers throughout the country provide such help every day, assuring women in crisis that they and their unborn children really matter.**

We should support these centers and consider volunteering for them or opening our homes to a pregnant woman in need. And we can all help encourage our government and other institutions to support life. They must always aid and support mothers and children, and never offer to pay for the destruction of life as a “solution” to the challenges women face. The call to uphold women’s dignity and well-being, and that of their unborn children, is one and the same.

* Names have been changed to protect the privacy of those mentioned.

** To find out what resources may be available locally, contact your diocesan pro-life or respect life office.

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- 1 L. Finer et al. in *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Sept. 2005, pp. 110-118 at 115.
 - 2 R. Jones and M. Kavanaugh, in *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, June 2011, pp. 1358-1366 at 1362.
 - 3 R. Jones et al. in *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Sept./Oct. 2002, pp. 226-35 at 231.
 - 4 S. Henshaw and R. Jones, Guttmacher Institute, Sept. 20, 2007, at <http://paa2008.princeton.edu/papers/80673>.
 - 5 “Poverty in the United States: A Snapshot,” National Center for Law and Economic Justice, at <http://www.nclj.org/povertyin-the-us.php> (accessed July 2014).
 - 6 “Single Mother Statistics,” June 23, 2014, at <http://singlemotherguide.com/single-mother-statistics/>.
 - 7 See H. Alvarez in *Villanova Law Review* (2013), pp. 379-436 at 408-11, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2272821.
 - 8 The deVeber Institute, *Women's Health after Abortion: The Medical and Psychological Evidence*, Chapter 15, at <http://www.deveber.org/text/whealth.html#fifteen> (accessed July 2014).
 - 9 R. Rector, Heritage Foundation Backgrounder #2465, Sept. 16, 2010, at http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/09/marriage-americas-greatest-weapon-against-child-poverty#_ftn1
 - 10 See Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

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