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The Science Behind Parental Involvement Laws and Teen Abortion



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By [Michael J. New, Ph.D.](#) | July 23, 2013



On July 1, the Guttmacher Institute published an updated paper entitled, "[Parental Involvement in Minor's Abortions.](#)" Just ten days later, it was out-of-date again.

On July 11th, the Illinois Supreme Court upheld a state parental-notification law. This law was signed back in 1995, but has been enjoined since that time due to a hydra-headed array of legal challenges. This particular parental-involvement law is not as strong as some others because it allows a minor seeking an abortion to notify a grandmother, a stepparent, or a legal guardian. Every state which borders Illinois is enforcing a parental-involvement law.

Although accurate data on minor abortion rates is sometimes difficult to obtain, the peer reviewed research on the impact of state level parental involvement laws arrives at a great deal of consensus about their effects. In my [testimony](#) on the Child Interstate Abortion Notification Act, I reported on an article of mine on this topic, which was published in March 2011 in *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*, the top state politics journal in the country. In addition, I also evaluated the research on parental involvement laws that has appeared in peer reviewed public health journals, economics journals, and political science journals. I have come across 19 peer reviewed studies on this subject to date (the full citations from which are here in the [full report](#)).

Here are the four most important findings:

- First, every peer-reviewed study I have seen, 16 in total that I analyze here, finds that state-level parental involvement laws reduce the in-state abortion rate for minors. This is true of studies that analyze time series-cross sectional data which allow for the simultaneous analysis of multiple state-level parental involvement laws (Haas Wilson 1993, 1996; Levine 2003; Medoff 2007; New 2007, 2009, 2011; Ohsfeldt and Gohman 1994; Tomal 1999). It is also true of studies that focus on the impact of individual state-level parental involvement laws. There have been separate studies analyzing the laws in 6 states including Indiana (Ellertson 1997), Massachusetts (Cartoof and Klerman 1996), Minnesota (Ellertson 1997; Rogers et al.), Mississippi (Henshaw 1995), Missouri (Ellertson 1997; Pierson 1995), and Texas (Colman, Joyce, and Kaestner 2008; Joyce Kaestner and Colman 2006). The findings are very similar. After the passage of a parental involvement law, the research shows that there is a statistically significant reduction in the in-state minor abortion rate from anywhere from 13 percent (Henshaw 1995) to 42 percent (Cartoof and Klerman 1986). Most studies found a decline in the in-state minor abortion rate ranging from 15 to 20 percent (Colman, Joyce, and Kaestner 2008; Ellertson 1997; Haas-Wilson 1996; Joyce, Kaestner, and Colman 2006; Levine 2003; New 2011; Ohsfeldt and Gohman 1994; Tomal 1999). Additionally, in my own research, I have found some evidence that laws requiring the involvement of both parents, such as the laws in Minnesota and Mississippi, result in even larger declines in the in-state abortion rate (New 2008).
- Second, state-level parental involvement laws are worth enacting because the in-state abortion decline consistently exceeds any out-of-state increase. The two best studies of state-level parental involvement laws both show this. The first is “Parental Consent for Abortion: Impact of the Massachusetts Law.” This study appeared in the *American Journal for Public Health* in 1986 and analyzed the Massachusetts parental involvement law which took effect in 1981 (Cartoof and Klerman 1986). The second is “Changes in Abortions and Births and the Texas Parental Involvement Law.” This study appeared in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 2006 and analyzed the Texas parental involvement law which took effect in 2000 (Joyce, Kaestner, and Colman 2006). Both studies were unique because they were able to analyze monthly data on in-state minor abortions, out-of-state minor abortions, and births to minors. Both studies found that after the enactment of both the Massachusetts law and the Texas law, the in-state abortion decline clearly exceeded the out-of-state increase. Furthermore, both studies found evidence of short-term increases in the minor birth rate. The Texas study found statistically significant increases in the birth rate of minors who were over 17 and one half years old when they conceived (Joyce, Kaestner, and Colman 2006). Another Texas study which analyzed similar data found that the birth rate for 17 year olds increased by 2 percent after the parental involvement law took effect (Colman, Joyce, and Kaestner 2008). The Massachusetts study suggests that in the year after the parental involvement law took effect, anywhere from 50 to 100 minors gave birth — instead of having abortions — as a result of the law (Cartoof and Klerman 1986).
- Third, every study that tracks out-of-state abortions finds that after a parental involvement law goes into effect, the number of girls obtaining abortions in adjacent states without parental involvement laws will increase by a statistically significant margin (Cartoof and Klerman 1986; Ellertson 1997). Now, in geographically large states like Texas relatively few minor girls obtained abortions in neighboring states (Joyce, Kaestner, and Colman 1996). However, in a geographically small state like Massachusetts a substantial percentage of the decline in the minor abortion rate is due to minor girls obtaining abortions in adjacent states where the laws are more permissive (Cartoof and Klerman 1986). A study of the parental involvement law that took effect in Missouri in 1985 had similar findings. Much of the decline in the minor abortion rate was due to increases in the number of minor girls obtaining abortions in adjacent states without parental involvement laws (Ellertson 1997).
- Fourth and finally, the knowledge that their parents will be involved with an abortion decision provides teen girls with a strong disincentive to engage in unprotected sexual activity. Indeed, there is a body of research on the positive public health effects associated with the presence of parental involvement laws. A 2003 study in the *Journal of Health*

Economics (Levine 2003) found that parental involvement laws reduce the pregnancy rate of 15 to 17 year olds by 4 to 9 percent. A 2008 study in the *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* shows that parental involvement laws reduce the gonorrhea rate anywhere from 12 to 20 percent for females under 20 (Klick and Stratmann 2008). Finally, this past February the journal *Economic Inquiry* published a study which shows that the enactment of parental involvement law is associated with an 11 to 21 percent reduction in the number of 15 to 17 year old females who commit suicide (Sabia and Rees 2012).

This particular parental-involvement law just upheld in Illinois is not as strong as some others because it allows a minor seeking an abortion to notify a grandmother, a stepparent, or a legal guardian. However, a relatively weak law is better than no law. Likewise, previous Supreme Court rulings in *H.L. v. Matheson* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* have upheld the constitutionality of parental-involvement laws. Ultimately, this Illinois law should go a long way toward protecting minors and their unborn children.

2 Responses to *The Science Behind Parental Involvement Laws and Teen Abortion*

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