

Effects of Clinic Harassment on Abortion Patients

It's 2021, and clinic harassment is happening across NYC. Anti-abortion groups intimidate patients by praying, holding offensive signs, engaging in "sidewalk counseling," and impersonating Planned Parenthood escorts to coerce patients. This harassment is **unacceptable**. Everyone has the right to access reproductive healthcare without facing harassment, stigmatizing language, and intolerant religious activity while entering an abortion clinic.

Of the minimal research conducted on the effects of clinic harassment on abortion patients and clinic staff, here's what we know:

- According to studies conducted in the US, Canada, and the UK, over half of abortion patients who encounter anti-abortion protesters report feelings of **discomfort, stress, shame, and sadness** at the presence of the protesters.
- In Canada, patients who made the decision to end the pregnancy due to health issues, rape, abusive relationships, or insufficient support from their families, encounters with protesters were especially **emotionally taxing**.
- In the US, patients who had more difficulty making the decision to terminate their pregnancy reported feeling more upset at the presence of protesters.
- In a 2013 study, 83% of clinics across the US reported that their staff have to regularly comfort patients who encounter protesters, and 17% occasionally provide comfort to patients. This emotional labor from clinic staff puts further strain on already taxed clinic resources.
- In a 2019 study conducted in the UK, allegedly prayerful protesters at clinics were observed confronting patients as they entered the clinic, handing them flyers and questioning their decisions. According to patients, these encounters were **unwelcome** and **constituted harassment**.
- Since 1993, **at least 11 people have been killed** in anti-abortion attacks and acts of violence have been on the rise for several years.
- According to the National Abortion Federation, violent incidents at abortion clinics went from 521 incidents in 2016 to 1,081 in 2017, to 1,724 in 2019. **Protests continue to increase in size and frequency**: There were more than 123,000 incidents of picketing in 2019, compared with just over 99,000 in 2018.

Clinic harassment is harmful to patients, clinic staff, and the community at large. "Prayerful" protests are not benign—they facilitate forms of harassment that distress and upset abortion patients, some of whom are already emotionally burdened at making the decision to terminate their pregnancy. Though the state and the police permit and facilitate this harassment, we will not stand by while our right to free, safe, and accessible abortion without stigma or shame.

Sources

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