

Women's Experiences with Protestors while Accessing Abortion Care in Louisiana

Erin Carroll and Kari White

INTRODUCTION

Women seeking care at free-standing abortion clinics often encounter anti-abortion protestors. In efforts to dissuade people from getting abortions, protestors picketing outside facilities use a range of tactics: holding signs with slogans and graphic images, offering 'sidewalk counseling,' and handing out literature about abortion. Some actions are more aggressive, such as shouting at patients and making it difficult to access the facility by standing on sidewalks or in front of parking lot entrances.¹⁻⁶

While women seeking abortion have reported that the presence of protestors constitutes a negative and even traumatic aspect of care,^{3,4} laws protecting patients from protestor activity vary. Federal law prohibits protestors from blocking clinic entrances, but some states and municipalities have enacted other laws that extend the physical distance protestors must maintain from clinics and patients, while also ensuring that protestors' First Amendment rights are protected. These include the creation of buffer zones, defined as a designated number of feet from clinic property into which a protestor cannot legally enter, and bubble zones, defined as a designated number of feet surrounding an individual into which a protestor cannot legally enter. Louisiana currently has no such laws in place.

Researchers interviewed 35 women who were seeking abortion care at Louisiana's three facilities about their experiences accessing services, including any interactions they may have had with people outside the clinics at their consultation appointments (required at least 24 hours before an abortion) and abortion visits. This brief summarizes the main themes in women's responses about their experiences with protestor activities.

RESULTS

Protestors were frequently present outside clinics and were often disruptive.

Nearly all patients interviewed at the three facilities reported that several protestors were present when they attended their appointments. Some women noted that the number of protestors increased during the day, and more protestors tended to be present on the days when a clinic scheduled abortion visits (versus counseling appointments only). In addition to seeing protestors holding signs with statements such as "'God wants to help you' and 'There's a different way. You don't have to do this,'" women said protestors often approached them and tried to hand them religious pamphlets, fliers, and other materials aimed at discouraging abortion:

"They had crosses in their hands and [were] trying to hand out little pamphlets about Jesus, and how bad abortion is, and stuff like that." (25-year-old, Baton Rouge)

"As soon as you're walking, they stand up, and they start giving you fliers and talking to you about Jesus. They gave out these plastic babies... It was kind of creepy." (23-year-old, New Orleans)

Participants also commented that protestors were loud, and some yelled and screamed at them as they neared the clinic. A couple of women reported they could hear the noise from outside as they waited inside the clinic for their visit. One of them reported that the noise grew louder as the day went on and more people congregated outside the facility:

"[I]t was just too much... Everybody started raising their voices. The room where I was at, the window was directly by where they were sitting. That's why I could hear them [inside]." (23-year-old, New Orleans)

RESULTS, CONT.

Some protestor activities physically interfered with patients' access to care.

Several women recounted that protestors' activities made it difficult for them to access clinic property. Patients seeking care in Baton Rouge and Shreveport described challenges getting into the parking lot when they arrived because protestors were blocking the entrances:

"One of the protestors had a big, gigantic cross...and he was standing right on the driveway." (22-year-old, Baton Rouge)

"It was hard to get into the driveway because the person was standing in the middle of the driveway...He wouldn't move." (21-year-old, Shreveport)

In New Orleans, where only street parking is available, women often had to walk down the block, directly in front of protestors seated or standing on the sidewalk, before they reached the clinic entrance. One woman who had been concerned about protestor violence prior to arriving described how difficulties finding nearby parking and protestors' presence affected her experience at the consultation visit:

"I was worried about the protestors. When I went in the first time, I was freaking out. I was sitting in my car, saying, 'I can't do this.' ... I had driven around the block, and then I ended up calling [the clinic] to see if there was a back entrance or something to get into to avoid the protesters, and the woman on the phone just said, 'You know, you have to go through [the] front door, but the [clinic escorts] will be there, for sure, as you walk, so they'll help you get you in.' There was a guy that helped me get in, and he was really nice. I think he could tell I was kinda freaked out." (24-year-old, New Orleans)

Some women commented that protestors were "relentless" and "disrespectful" as they persisted in approaching patients walking to the facility. One participant described being uncomfortable as protestors came too physically close to her:

"I was trying to ignore them and trying to just go past them and take care of what I needed to take care of. I was just there for my first visit, finding out how far along I was. They were trying to stop me and talk, and talk about God, and give you hugs and stuff. It was just overwhelming." (25-year-old, Baton Rouge)

Protestors' presence was unwelcome.

Many participants anticipated that they would encounter protestors at the facility because they had seen protestors there before, had previous experience with abortion clinics, or had been told by clinic staff they would be outside. For several women, this created anxiety about their scheduled visits, as a 36-year-old seeking care in Baton Rouge recalled, *"My biggest concern [was] that I would have to walk through all that hate and anger."* Some women also were worried that their decision to get an abortion would not remain as private as they would like because of protestors' presence.

Almost universally, participants said that protestors were an unwelcome presence and described the experience of passing through protestors on their way into the facilities as "uncomfortable," "annoying," "frustrating," and "nerve-racking." Many women stated that they were not dissuaded by protestors' actions and tried to ignore them, and a few elaborated that protestors' behaviors did not respect people's decision-making. A mother of two, who worked full-time while going to school, said she would not have been able to continue her education and get into a better career if she had continued her pregnancy. She said of the protestors:

"You gotta respect everyone's beliefs. That's how I feel about it. If I respect your beliefs and what you do with your life, then you should respect my beliefs and what I do with my life." (23-year-old, New Orleans)

RESULTS, CONT.

Women felt protestors did not understand their individual situations.

Some participants commented that protestors lacked empathy for the varied circumstances that contributed to women choosing abortion when they called abortion patients “murderers” and used other condemnatory language. A few participants further considered protestors’ efforts to convince women to continue their pregnancies and promises to adopt or raise the child as insincere. These women noted that it was unlikely that someone would take the baby or that the resources would be available to women if they chose to raise the child. One woman, who reported that she almost died during the pregnancy with her first child due to complications and had health conditions that made continuing another pregnancy difficult, said she did not think protestors should tell people what to do with their bodies:

“For somebody to come and try to protest and tell you what to do and what not to do with your body, that shouldn’t be a factor [in someone’s decision] ... You’re telling me not go through with whatever I may decide to go through, but you’re not the one that’s going to be there to take care of my child if I die while having this other child. Or you’re not going to be there to try to cover any kind of expenses, or send them to school, or send them to college. You’re not going to be there, so don’t tell me what to do with my own body.”

(37-year-old, Shreveport)

For several participants who described themselves as Christian or religious, protestors’ actions made them feel embarrassed and sad; however, these women similarly noted that they did not like seeing protestors in front of clinics telling women what they are doing is wrong because they are unaware of women’s values, feelings and experiences. One woman, who described protestor activity outside the Shreveport clinic as “bad,” said:

“I’m Baptist, and I believe, and I believe hard. You can’t make people like that understand anything, because it’s either right or it’s wrong. With some religions, there’s no coming back from it, but in mine, there is. It just bugs me that they’re out there on a corner judging people.” (24-year-old, Shreveport)

CONCLUSIONS

- Women seeking abortion care in Louisiana frequently encountered protestors outside all three facilities in the state. Some protestor activity made it difficult for women to access clinic property and was loud and disruptive outside, as well as inside, the facility.
- Women felt that protestors’ presence was unwelcome because it caused unnecessary anxiety and did not respect their decision making. Even women who experienced complex feelings about their abortion because of their faith did not want to see and hear protestors telling women what they perceived was best.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Regulations that require protestors to maintain a defined distance from abortion facilities and people entering facilities, such as buffer and bubble zones, and legislation that places limits on noise levels would help protect the dignity, privacy, and safety of patients accessing care.

METHODS

Between June 2018 and January 2019, the research team recruited patients seeking abortion services at each of Louisiana's three abortion facilities. Patients were eligible if they were a Louisiana resident who was 18 years of age or older and spoke English. Participants completed in-depth interviews by phone and discussed their experiences accessing abortion in Louisiana. Participants provided informed consent before the interview and received a \$30 gift card for taking part in the study. The authors' university Institutional Review Board approved the study.⁷

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Erin Carroll (erincr@uab.edu) is a researcher in the Department of Health Care Organization and Policy at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and **Kari White** is an associate professor of social work and sociology and the lead investigator of the Texas Policy Evaluation Project at The University of Texas at Austin.

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