Rural Women’s Access to Reproductive Health Services

Access to quality health care is an acknowledged challenge in rural communities; women and girls in rural America are experiencing worse health outcomes than are urban women and girls. Within strained rural health systems and given political controversy, access to reproductive health care is particularly tenuous.

Despite the unique experiences rural women may have in accessing reproductive health, including abortion, there is a stark absence of research in this area. A study that focuses directly on women’s experiences, specifically one that is able to capture a range of experiences, has the opportunity to add significant value to our understanding of the facilitators and barriers to access and to our ability to create interventions that improve access.

In response to this gap in knowledge and the potential benefit of new information to guide programming, Provide has partnered with Jenny O’Donnell, a doctoral student at the Harvard School of Public Health, to use qualitative research methods to capture the range of experiences that women living in rural Appalachia have around accessing reproductive health including abortion.

Research Questions

The study’s primary research question is: what barriers and facilitators do women of reproductive age face in seeking reproductive health care, with specific attention to abortion? Secondary research questions include: (1) what are women’s pressing reproductive health needs, if any? and (2) how and from what sources do women obtain information about accessing reproductive health care, if they do so at all?

Methodology

Recruitment for this study will take place at three different categories of sites, with two selected in each category. The three categories of recruitment sites are abortion clinics within 300 miles of the center of this region, primary health care centers within 50 miles of the center of this region, and ‘big-box’ store parking lots in the region.

The primary research question focuses on three subgroups of women of reproductive age who live in the rural Appalachian region: women who are currently accessing abortion care and live in the area under study, women who are currently accessing reproductive health care other than abortion and live in the area under study, and women who are not currently accessing care and live in the area under study. The study sample will reflect these subgroups through stratified purposeful sampling. The study aims to achieve a total sample size of 45 respondents with an equal distribution among care being accessed at time of recruitment. The sampling method considers the possibility of saturation dictating the final sample size and research timeline. If neither the desired sample size nor saturation is achieved within the three-month study period, an extension of the recruitment period or inclusion of another recruitment site in the study will be considered.

The study will primarily use semi-structured interviews to capture information that addresses the research questions. Interviews will solicit rich narratives of each woman’s experiences accessing reproductive health care, paying special attention to abortion as one service among many.

Sponsored Research Underway

Where?
Appalachian region
Who?
45 women (15-45 yrs)
What?
Semi-structured interviews
When?
Quarter 3 of 2013
Why?
To explore what barriers and facilitators women of reproductive age face in seeking reproductive health services, including abortion
About the Researcher

Jenny O’Donnell is a doctoral student in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Harvard School of Public Health. She received a Master of Science degree from the same institution in 2011. Her dissertation research focuses on the influence of place-level attributes on access to abortion, explored through qualitative and quantitative methods (specifically multilevel analysis). Previous research includes a qualitative study of stigma as experienced by health care professionals who provide abortion care (Resistance and vulnerability to stigmatization in abortion work. O'Donnell J, Weitz TA, Freedman LR. Social Science & Medicine, 2011).

In addition to her studies, she currently serves as the Deputy Director for Provide, overseeing the organization’s evaluation, communications, and development efforts. The findings of this study strive to be independent from the funding of the Research and the Researcher’s affiliation with Provide as a staff member. Provide supports this work without specific expectations of the Research’s conclusions.

Questions or comments on this study? Be in touch via e-mail (joe185@mail.harvard.edu) or phone (206-369-4883).