

## Box 5.1 Neglecting the Unborn Child

The term *prenatal neglect* refers generally to any actions of a pregnant woman that can potentially harm her unborn child. Most conceptualizations of prenatal neglect focus on women who abuse illicit drugs (e.g., opiates such as heroin and morphine, marijuana, amphetamines, cocaine) as well as legal substances such as alcohol and nicotine during pregnancy, exposing infants to the effects of these substances in utero. Although some have referred to prenatal drug exposure as a form of *abuse* (fetal abuse; McCoy & Keen, 2013), it is most commonly seen as a form of child neglect. Many legislators, for example, view this problem as an act of omission or as a failure to provide adequate prenatal care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016b).

Estimates of the numbers of drug-exposed infants in the United States vary widely, because no state requires the uniform testing of infants for drug exposure. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 5.2 percent of pregnant women aged 15 to 44 years reported using illicit drugs in the past month while 11.6 percent of pregnant women reported current alcohol use with approximately 4 percent reporting heavy or binge drinking (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2008).

Most of the concern about prenatal drug exposure has arisen because increasing numbers of studies have demonstrated a relationship between prenatal drug exposure and pregnancy complications, infant drug withdrawal, and negative child developmental outcomes (Anthony, Austin, & Cormier, 2010; Burke, 2007; CRC Health Group, 2016; Holbrook & Nguyen, 2015). The most compelling evidence comes from studies that have examined the effects of fetal exposure to alcohol.

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