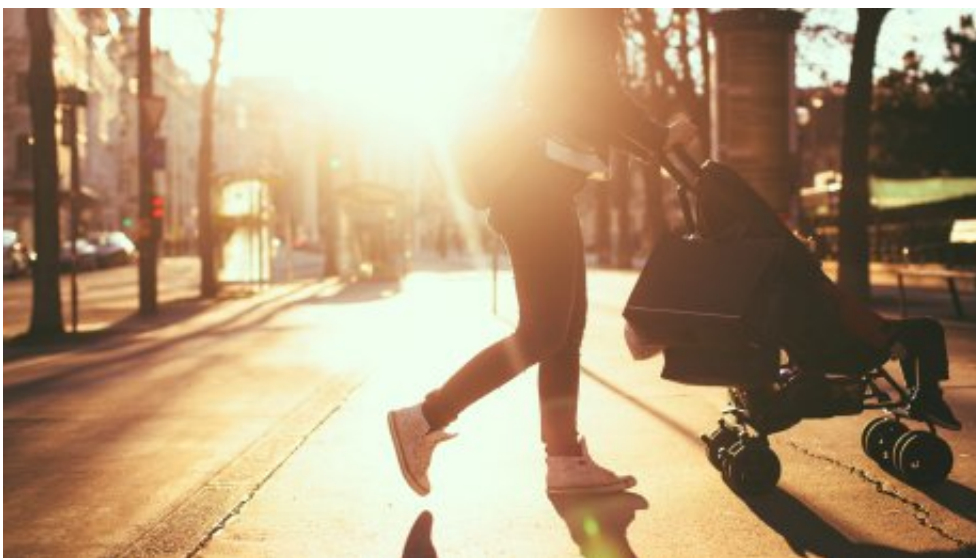


Pregnant women and new mothers feel watched and judged

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Credit: Cardiff University

In a small study published in *Families Relationships and Society*, researchers interviewed mother-grandmother pairs and found that community surveillance of pregnant women and infant feeding had significantly increased between the generations, with many of the new mothers reporting feeling watched, evaluated and judged.

Some also reported experiences of being questioned by strangers about their choices during pregnancy and when feeding their babies. In the most extreme cases, strangers had regulated the behaviour of pregnant

women by restricting their access to food that they believed might harm the foetus.

'Observation and interference'

Dr Aimee Grant, lead researcher on the study, from Cardiff University's Centre for Trials Research, said: "Our study found that today's [mothers](#) can be subjected to increased surveillance compared to the generation before..."

"This observation and interference by others can result in pregnant women and [new mothers](#) performing public motherhood in ways that are highly self-aware and self-conscious, which makes it difficult to follow advice from health professionals."

Participants reported a range of pressures to feed their babies in particular ways, including a general desire to breastfeed, as opposed to using [infant formula](#), which came from societal knowledge and information from midwives resulting in a view that 'breast is best'. They reported being questioned by [family](#) and strangers on their methods of infant feeding during pregnancy and whether they were going to breastfeed, with both friends and family suggesting they should.

A 'good mother' role

They also discussed an awareness of their visibility when feeding infants in public, or in the presence of family members, that related to breasts as sexual objects to be covered at all times. Because of this, some of them attempted to perform a 'good mother' role when breastfeeding infants in public, where they were aware of having an audience, by simultaneously demonstrating they were breastfeeding whilst showing as little as possible of their body. By contrast, women who were formula feeding

also tried to perform a 'good mother' role by hiding formula packaging when preparing bottles in public.

The new mothers felt the most challenging form of surveillance was that from strangers, as they felt less able to control it. One recounted a visit to a café where the waiter acted "like the kinda food police" refusing to serve the afternoon tea she had ordered because of her "big belly", showing that she was pregnant. During her interview, this mother reported that she felt as though she, or at least her bump, was "everyone's property".

Feeling judged

All the new mothers admitted that comments and behaviour from their family could influence their feelings towards [infant feeding](#) and felt that the comments were judgements of their capability to look after their children. One of the mothers talked about comments from [family members](#) about the frequency of her baby's feeds and admitted that it made her question her ability to feed her baby properly. Another recounted that a relative had told her she couldn't drink alcohol on a night out because she was breastfeeding. She felt that this intervention was both intrusive and rude, particularly as she had already spoken to her health visitor regarding how she could safely feed her baby with breastmilk and drink alcohol on a night out. In addition, she recounted that friends also commented on her plans to drink alcohol, saying they would not judge her, but making her feel judged by doing so.

Based on the study's findings, Dr Grant is keen to highlight ways that the public can make it easier for [pregnant women](#) and new mums to get used to their roles. She adds: "Don't touch a woman's bump unless she has given you permission. Also, if you wouldn't ask someone what they had for lunch, it probably isn't appropriate for you to ask them questions about feeding their baby.

"If you know someone who wants to breastfeed and needs some support, the National Breastfeeding Helpline can provide telephone support, and there is a network of breastfeeding support groups around the UK. Facebook is often the best place to find information. Other practical support includes making sure mum has had a meal, and that she has a drink and can reach it; breastfeeding is thirsty work. If you have any medical concerns, as always, contact your midwife, health visitor or GP."

The six mother/grandmother pairs were from deprived urban areas of South Wales. These areas were selected because of low rates of [breastfeeding](#) and high rates of [public health intervention](#). The mothers' youngest children were aged between six weeks and 25 months. Mothers themselves were aged between 22 and 43 years, and grandmothers between ages 42 and 74 years.

The study is published in *Families Relationships and Society*.

More information: Aimee Grant et al. 'People try and police your behaviour': the impact of surveillance on mothers and grandmothers' perceptions and experiences of infant feeding, *Families, Relationships and Societies* (2017). [DOI: 10.1332/204674317X1488886530223](https://doi.org/10.1332/204674317X1488886530223)

Provided by Cardiff University

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