

Poor maternity benefits can prompt new mothers to leave their jobs

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If companies want to ensure pregnant employees and new moms stay on their payrolls, they'd do well to offer competitive maternity benefits.

So suggests new research by Samantha Paustian-Underdahl, the Mary Tilley Bessemer Associate Professor of Business Administration in the Florida State University College of Business.

Paustian-Underdahl's findings show that when women see their maternity benefits as less favorable than peers at other companies, they are more likely to experience pregnancy discrimination, and ultimately decide to leave their jobs.

However, the study also suggests that this becomes less of an issue when pregnant women and new mothers believe they are supported by their supervisors.

"Our study is the first to show that maternity benefits, specifically, can be very important for retaining pregnant women and mothers in the workplace," Paustian-Underdahl said. "We think investing in these benefits and investing in supportive supervisors are really important" if organizations want to hold on to their female employees.

Paustian-Underdahl's study will appear in a coming print edition of *Personnel Psychology*, a scholarly journal that publishes [psychological research](#) with a focus on the workplace. It is already available online.

FSU business doctoral student Andrew Keyes co-authored the study, as did faculty members Laura M. Little of the University of Georgia, Ashley M. Mandeville of Florida Gulf Coast University and Amanda S. Hinojosa of Howard University.

For working pregnant women in this country, Paustian-Underdahl says, the problem starts with accessibility to benefits. The U.S. remains the world's only high-income country that [doesn't guarantee paid leave](#) for mothers of infants, according to the World Policy Center.

The U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act, or FMLA, stipulates up to 12 weeks of leave for eligible employees of covered employers for the birth of a child and care for a newborn. But only a little more than half of the private-sector workforce qualifies for FMLA, the study points out, and participating employers are not required to pay employees who choose this benefit. Only 24% of private-industry workers and 27% of state and local government workers had access to paid family leave in 2022, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"There are many examples of companies that offer very good maternity benefits, but most people in the United States work for smaller companies that offer none at all," Paustian-Underdahl said. "That means many women must really patch together their maternity leave through, for example, short-term disability insurance, if they have it, and any unused paid time off or unused vacation days."

Citing previous research, the new findings emphasize concepts of identity threats and perceived value for working pregnant women: Upon learning of her pregnancy, a woman undergoes an identity transition from a working woman to a pregnant working woman. And because coworkers and supervisors often perceive pregnant workers as fragile, less competent and less committed to their jobs, pregnancy can initiate fear of stigmatization at work in [women](#).

"Organizations that maybe don't have the budget to provide more [maternity](#) leave benefits could at the very least make sure they're training their supervisors to be supportive," Paustian-Underdahl said. "That can help ensure that [pregnant women](#) feel supported, are not experiencing discrimination and are more likely to stay with the company."

More information: Samantha C. Paustian-Underdahl et al, Examining the role of maternity benefit comparisons and pregnancy discrimination in women's turnover decisions, *Personnel Psychology* (2023). [DOI](#):

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