

UC Newsroom

Few women take pregnancy leave in California, study finds

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Only one in three working women who qualify for pregnancy leave in California take advantage of the employee benefit, according to a new study by researchers at University of California, Berkeley. Those who do cite medical necessity, physical discomfort and stress or fatigue as the reason for taking time off from work before their baby is born.

The study, one of the first to examine how women in California use their maternity leave benefit, was published online on March 31 by *Maternal and Child Health Journal*. It will appear in print later this month when the journal's delayed January 2006 issue goes to press.

"What struck us most is that so few women do think about taking leave," said the study's lead author, Sylvia Guendelman, a professor of maternal and child health in UC Berkeley's School of Public Health. "And when they do, it's because they have to, not because they want to."

The findings suggest that pregnancy leave benefits in California are being used almost exclusively out of necessity and are not contributing to excess leave-taking, Guendelman said.

California is one of five states that offer paid pregnancy leave. All public or private employers in the state with five or more employees must offer the benefit, which allows women to take up to four weeks off work before birth. Unused pregnancy leave may not be rolled over to supplement the maternity benefits that kick in after childbirth - i.e., women who don't use the pregnancy leave benefit, lose it. Pregnancy leave benefits are funded through employee payroll deductions into a state-sponsored disability insurance program. In 2003, those payments to women averaged \$293 per week.

In an effort to find out who is using these pregnancy leave benefits, how they are being used, and what drives women's decisions about whether to use them, Guendelman and her team interviewed 1,214 women who had participated in a study of birth outcomes in Southern California. All women had recently given birth, and all had either worked at least 20 hours per week during the first six months of their pregnancy or had worked through the date of prenatal screening, which usually occurs about 15 to 20 weeks into pregnancy. The interviews took place between July 2002 and November 2003.

The researchers found that 52 percent of the women worked up to the time of delivery, while only 32 percent took pregnancy leave. Another nine percent quit their jobs before giving birth, five percent cut back on their hours and two percent were fired during pregnancy. Of the women who took leave, about 75 percent received cash benefits.

Half of the women who took leave as well as half of the women who quit their jobs attributed their decisions to medical problems, including stress and fatigue. Another 10 percent in both groups said they had left work due to physical discomfort. Interestingly, only one in four of the 32 percent of women who took leave - a mere 100 women in the group of 1,214 interviewees - said they based their decision on the availability of the leave benefit.

Comparing these statistics with other information obtained in the interviews, Guendelman and the co-authors then looked for patterns that might predict whether a woman would take leave or stay on the job. They found that predictors for taking leave were having young children at home, working night shifts and having work flexibility. Women who quit their jobs were about two times more likely to work for employers who did not offer pregnancy or maternity leave benefits or health insurance than were women whose employers offered these benefits. On the other hand, women who stayed at work were more likely to have post-graduate education and to feel fulfilled in their jobs compared to women who took leave.

The findings suggest that rather than being used predominantly as health-promoting behavior, pregnancy leave constitutes a coping response to stress and tiredness and the need to mother young children already in the house, Guendelman said.

"Women who take leave are not doing it out of a culture that tells them to slow down, relax and take care of their bodies so that they can perform better and have easier deliveries or healthier babies, or be in a better position to nurse their child. They are taking it because they are feeling fatigued or stressed or are having complications," she said.

There are a number of other take-home lessons from the study, Guendelman said. One is that women who have a strong attachment to their work or who are afraid of sacrificing career advancement opportunities seem to be more likely to work through their pregnancies. And employers should note, she added, that if they want to boost worker retention, offering benefits like pregnancy leave or health insurance would be a good place to start.

The next project that Guendelman plans to tackle is to determine, from a public health standpoint, whether taking pregnancy leave can improve maternal or birth outcomes, such as reducing the number of caesarian or premature births, or improving a woman's ability to breast-feed her infant.

Other researchers who worked on the study are Michelle Pearl, Steve Graham and Martin Kharrazi of the California Department of Health Services, and Veronica Angulo from UC Berkeley's School of Public Health.