

# Troubling connection between workplace pregnancy discrimination and health of mothers, babies

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Kaylee Hackney, Ph.D., assistant professor of management in Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business. Credit: Baylor University

Perceived pregnancy discrimination indirectly relates to increased levels of postpartum depressive symptoms for mothers and lower birth weights, lower gestational ages and increased numbers of doctor visits for babies,

according to a management study led by Baylor University.

The study—"Examining the Effects of Perceived Pregnancy Discrimination on Mother and Baby Health"—is published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

"Despite being illegal, [pregnancy discrimination](#) still takes place in the workplace," said lead author Kaylee Hackney, Ph.D., assistant professor of management in Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business. "Obviously, this is troublesome. Our research highlights the [negative impact](#) that perceived pregnancy discrimination can have on both the mother's and the baby's health."

The researchers surveyed 252 pregnant employees over the course of two studies. They measured perceived pregnancy discrimination, perceived stress, demographics and postpartum depressive symptoms. The second study included the measurements of the babies' health outcomes, including gestational age (number of weeks of pregnancy when the baby was delivered), Apgar score (heart rate, respiration, muscle tone, reflex response and color), birth weight and visits to the doctor.

Sample survey statements and questions used to measure perceived discrimination, perceived stress and postpartum [depressive symptoms](#) included: "Prejudice toward pregnant workers exists where I work," "In the last month, how often have you felt nervous or stressed?" and "I am so unhappy that I cry." Mothers also logged their babies' health outcomes.

"I think the biggest surprise from this research is that pregnancy discrimination not only negatively impacted the mother, but also negatively impacted the baby she was carrying while experiencing the discrimination," Hackney said. "This just shows the far-reaching

implications of workplace discrimination and highlights the importance of addressing it."

## **More than 50,000 discrimination claims in a decade**

The study noted that over the last decade, more than 50,000 pregnancy discrimination claims were filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and Fair Employment Practices Agencies in the United States.

Pregnancy discrimination is defined as unfavorable treatment of women at work due to pregnancy, childbirth or medical conditions related to pregnancy or childbirth, Hackney said. Pregnant women perceive discrimination when they experience subtly hostile behaviors such as social isolation, negative stereotyping and negative or rude interpersonal treatment.

Examples might include lower performance expectations, transferring the pregnant employee to less-desirable shifts or assignments or inappropriate jokes and intrusive comments.

## **Practical steps for managers**

Given that pregnancy discrimination led to adverse [health outcomes](#) through increased stress, the researchers believe managers are in a unique position to provide the support that pregnant employees need to reduce stress.

Some steps managers might take include:

- Providing flexible schedules
- Keeping information channels open and the employee in the

loop, specifically with regards to work-family benefits and expectations leading up to leave/returning from leave

- Accommodating prenatal appointments
- Helping to plan maternity leave arrangements
- Normalizing breastfeeding in the workplace

"Overall, I would suggest that managers 1) strive to create a workplace culture where discrimination does not take place and 2) not make assumptions about what pregnant employees want," Hackney said. "The best approach would be to have an open dialog with their employees about what types of support are needed and desired."

## Healthcare partnerships

In addition, Hackney said the findings suggest that healthcare organizations may find opportunities to provide guidance and outreach to workplaces to help pregnant workers reduce stress via reduced pregnancy discrimination and enhanced work-family support for [pregnant women](#).

Some steps may include training managers to be more family supportive and less biased against expectant mothers, she said.

**More information:** Hackney, K. J. et al. (2020). Examining the effects of perceived pregnancy discrimination on mother and baby health. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Advance online publication. [doi.org/10.1037/apl0000788](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000788)

Provided by Baylor University

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