

# New research finds paid family leave helps prevent child abuse

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Child maltreatment is a serious public health issue in the United States, particularly affecting young children who are most vulnerable due to their dependence on caregivers. Infants under two years old account for

over one-quarter, or 28.1%, of all maltreatment cases in the U.S., and infants under one year of age experience the highest rate of victimization, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

But [new research](#) from Michigan State University may have found a way to prevent this abuse: state-paid [family leave](#). The paper is published in the journal *Child Abuse & Neglect*.

Previous research found that paid family leave policies have the potential to promote secure and healthy attachments, improve maternal and child health outcomes, enhance parental mental health and support household [economic stability](#). These outcomes are known protective factors for [child maltreatment](#). Michigan State University researchers have now established a direct link between paid family leave and reductions in infant maltreatment.

The [World Health Organization](#) states that child maltreatment includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

"Child maltreatment is a complex issue that requires innovative tools to address the multiple challenges faced by vulnerable families," said Jenny Tanis, MSU College of Social Science doctoral candidate and assistant professor of social work at Hope College. "Our research provides evidence that paid family leave policies may be an effective innovative [policy](#) tool to promote child safety and family well-being."

According to co-author Sacha Klein, an associate professor in the MSU College of Social Science's School of Social Work, the United States is one of only five countries in the world that does not provide federal

compensation guarantee for [maternity leave](#). The other four being the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Palau and Papua New Guinea.

"In the absence of a national paid family leave policy, U.S. states have been left to decide whether they should adopt this as a state policy," Klein said. "To date, 14 states and Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico have taken the matter into their own hands and enacted state-paid family leave policies. Several other states, including Michigan, are actively considering adopting this policy."

The research team compared four states that implemented paid family leave (California, New Jersey, New York and Rhode Island) to states that do not have it. They found a statistically significant reduction in infant maltreatment rates over time for states that passed paid family leave policies compared to those that did not.

The researchers noted that although the pool of states with paid family leave was small, the differences in infant maltreatment rates were large enough to produce statistically significant results. They also found these policies may be especially protective for infants in states with high levels of family poverty and adults without a high school education.

According to Klein, this research adds to the growing evidence that policies aimed to support household economic stability could be a vital child maltreatment prevention policy tool.

"Traditional arguments in support of paid family leave policy highlight its positive effect on maternal labor force participation and maternal and infant health benefits," Klein said. "The results of this study highlight considerable implications for the design and implementation of future paid family leave policies."

"We hope our results inform national and state debates about paid family

leave policy by providing evidence of the beneficial effect on infant maltreatment rates. States considering paid family leave policies should also consider the importance of designing policies prioritizing the needs of low-income workers, who would benefit the most from such policies and are more likely to encounter the U.S. child welfare system."

It's important to note that paid family leave is not just an economic support policy, Tanis said.

"Paid family leave provides designated time at home to care for and bond with a new child without the added pressure of economic hardship. When we approach child maltreatment prevention from a socioecological model, we recognize the importance of addressing risk factors at all levels: individual, family, community and society."

**More information:** Jennifer M. Tanis et al, State paid family leave policies and infant maltreatment, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106758](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106758)

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