

Research Evidence Related to the Servicemember Parental Leave Equity Act

Dr. Jennifer Heissel, Assistant Professor at the Naval Postgraduate School and
Dr. Olivia Healy, Postdoctoral fellow at Cornell University

The Servicemember Parental Leave Equity Act will expand benefits to Servicemembers. It will allow both military mothers and fathers time to recover physically post childbirth and return to peak performance in fulfilling their duties. The following shares research insights relevant to the Servicemember Parental Leave Equity Act.

- 12-month body composition and fitness test deferments give mothers time to recover.
- 12 weeks of secondary caregiver leave could give parents time to recover their physical health.
- Giving access to more leave doesn't mean parents will take all of it.
- Mothers take parental leave continuously rather than intermittently when given an option.

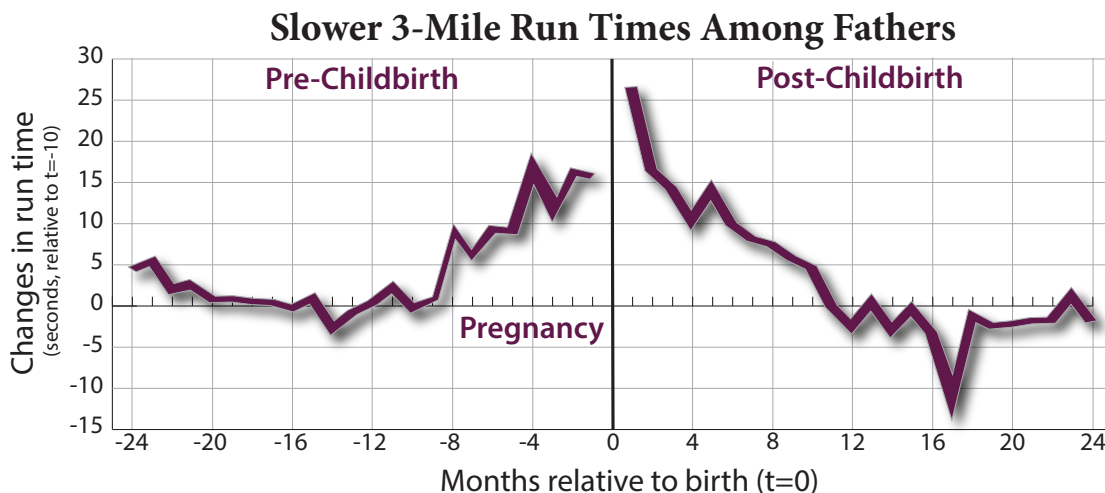
Compared to Before Pregnancy, Mothers Perform Worse After Birth Across Various Fitness Components, Especially in the First Year.

New mothers have reduced physical performance after giving birth. Similar patterns occur across the Army, Navy, and U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) for various fitness outcomes.¹ The table shows changes in physical performance for female Marines. Mothers are still recovering from the birth in the 12 months after it occurs (and even into 24 months post-birth in some physical events).

| Mothers' Performance Relative to Pre-Pregnancy Across Various Fitness Components Over Time | | | | | | |
|--|--------------|---------|-------------|------------|----------|----------|
| Time post-birth | 800 yard run | Lifts | Shuttle run | 3-mile run | Crunches | Pull-ups |
| 8 months | Worse | Worse | Worse | Worse | Worse | Neutral |
| 12 months | Worse | Neutral | Worse | Worse | Worse | Better |
| 24 months | Neutral | Neutral | Neutral | Worse | Worse | Neutral |

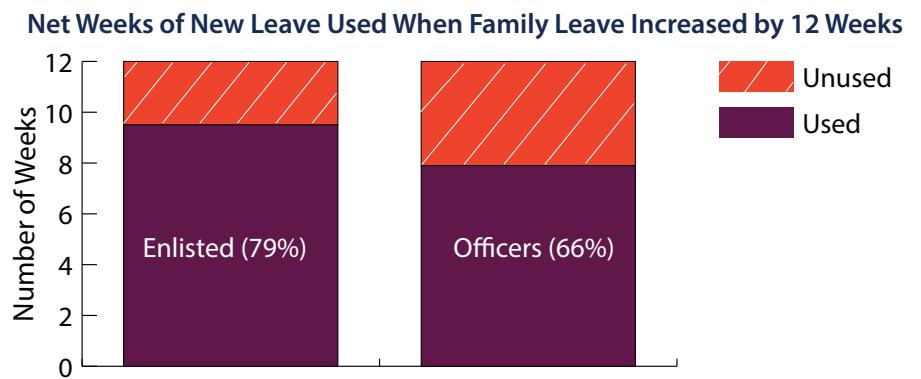
Compared to Before Pregnancy, Marine Fathers Run 25 Seconds Slower on a 3-mile Run Immediately After Birth, Though They Get Back to Pre-pregnancy Times within a Year.

Sleep deprivation and stress change the whole family, especially in the early months post-birth. Marine fathers have worse run times during pregnancy and following birth, though they get back to pre-pregnancy levels 10-11 months post-birth. Similar patterns occur across the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps and other fitness outcomes (e.g., sit-ups).² More leave allows Servicemembers to bond with their child, support their partner, and physically recover.



Access does not mean full use. Military leaders must encourage a culture of leave use.

Allocating someone leave does not mean they'll take it. When mothers had 6 weeks of leave, they used it all in the USMC. When family leave increased by 12 weeks (to 18 weeks), USMC mothers did not take all the family leave and used less annual leave – meaning that actual leave use went up by only 9.5 weeks for enlisted and 7.9 weeks for officers.

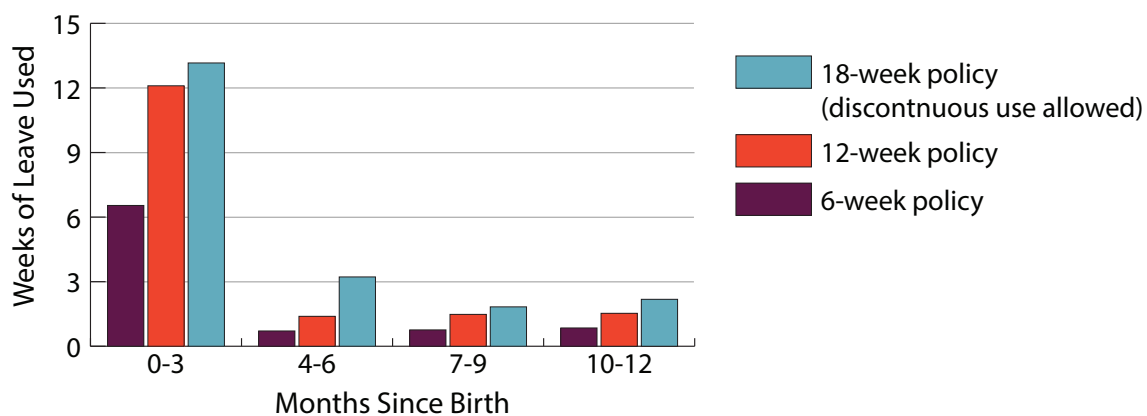


Mothers take parental leave continuously rather than intermittently when given an option to use leave flexibly in the year post-birth.

The Navy and USMC experimented with allowing 18 weeks of flexible leave in 2015-16. The graph shows leave use over time periods following birth under a 6- and 12-week leave policy, as well as under the flexible 18-week policy (where leave could be used discontinuously throughout the first year of the child's life).³ Even when they had flexibility under the 18-week policy, mothers chose to use most of their leave right after the birth and return to consistent duty. They did not spread leave use over the year much more so than under other leave policies.

Leave Used in Year Following Birth

(For 6, 12, & 18 week maternity leave policies)



Notes

- 1 United States Air Force (USAF) data is missing due to data access.
- 2 USAF missing due to data access. Each point estimates how much a given month differs from just before pregnancy (t=10 month before birth).
- 3 Figure displays weeks of leave used by month after birth (birth month=0). Includes annual leave. Excludes mothers who gave birth in Jan.–May 2015, as they had returned to work after 6 weeks of leave before SECNAV announced the 18-week policy in July 2015.

For more information, please contact Dr. Heissel at jaheisse@nps.edu.

Sources

M. Bacolod, J.A. Heissel, Maj L. Laurita, LT M. Molloy, and R. Sullivan, “Mothers in the Military: Effect of Maternity Leave Policy on Take-Up,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, June 2020).

O. Healy and J.A. Heissel, “Baby bumps in the road: The impact of parenthood on job performance and career advancement,” Working Paper (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, June 2021).

Funding Support & Disclosures

Partial support for this work was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Evidence for Action program. Views expressed in this document are those of the individuals and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, the Department of the Navy, the Naval Postgraduate School, or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.