

Are forces past their 'due date'? The impact of mothers' experiences during pregnancy and returning to the workplace after a period of maternity leave

Research aiming to understand the impact of pregnancy and maternity leave on the organisational health and personal wellbeing of officers and staff.

Key details

Lead institution	The Open University
Principal researcher(s)	Kendal Wright and Dr Keely Duddin kendal.wright@open.ac.uk
Police region	South East
Collaboration and partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police Federation • Unison • British Transport Police
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	July 2022
Date due for completion	July 2025

Research context

Historically, police forces have been male-dominated (Diaz and Nuno 2021). However, recruitment efforts in the past decade have significantly increased female representation, with over 50,000 female officers now in UK police forces (Gov.uk 2022).

Despite these advances, Tyson and Charman (2022) highlight a rise in voluntary resignations among female officers, often due to a lack of flexible working options for mothers in senior roles. Our research focuses on the intersection of parental pathways and policing, aiming to support parents navigating pregnancy and parenthood with dignity and empowerment.

Key questions

1. What challenges do women in policing face during pregnancy, maternity leave and returning to work, and how can supportive policies be developed and implemented?
2. What unique challenges do women of colour face during maternity in UK police forces, and how can inclusive solutions promote their retention and career advancement?
3. How do gender biases, maternity stigmas and barriers to flexible working impact the career progression of working mothers in frontline roles?
4. What are the diverse parental pathways in policing, including the experiences of fathers, non-carrying partners, and those navigating adoption leave, baby loss and fertility? How does support in policing compare to other frontline occupations?
5. What factors influence the desirability of policing as a career for working parents, and how can strategies effectively balance policing duties with childcare obligations?

Aims

1. Understand the organisational challenges faced by women in policing during pregnancy, maternity leave and return to work.
2. Propose evidence-based policies to support pregnant women, new mothers and returning parents.
3. Identify barriers faced by women of colour during maternity and propose inclusive solutions for their retention and advancement.
4. Explore the intersection of gender, parenthood and frontline work in public service occupations.

Research methodology

An online survey using Qualtrics was designed and made available online over a period of 10 weeks. The survey included a mixture of open-ended, qualitative and closed questions which were designed around three different stages of maternity experience: pregnancy, maternity leave and returning to work.

The majority of the questions were closed and involved asking participants a series of satisfaction questions using a Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Disagree and 5 = Strongly Disagree). Participants were then provided with the opportunity to provide a more in-depth response at the end of each section. The questions also included several background and demographic questions. The survey was designed in consultation with the Police Federation, Unison and the research lead force British Transport Police to ensure the questions were fit for purpose

Data were gathered across all UK police forces (including specialist forces). The sample included 5920 women aged between 21 and 46+, all of whom had at least one period of maternity leave while working for the police. A total of 1061 staff and 4345 officers took part in the survey and a range of ranks and roles were gathered.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Open University Ethics Committee (HREC/4250/Wright) before the launch of the survey. Participants were recruited online through social media and through email communication from the Police Federation, several police forces and the Centre for Police Research and Learning at The Open University. Participants were voluntary and remained anonymous.

Interim reports or publications

- Duddin K, Wright K, Bell S and Wright F. 2023. ['Are police forces past their due date? Examining the impact of pregnancy, maternity leave and returning to work on women in policing.'](#) Centre for Policing Research and Learning, The Open University.
- Wright K. 2022. ['Mothers and maternity leave: Are police forces past their 'due date'?'](#), Policing Insight.
- Wright K. 2023. ['The Motherhood Penalty: Evidence of maternal bias in the workplace and why policing needs to do more'](#), Policing Insight.

Research participation

The research is not currently recruiting individual participants. If any forces would like to discuss the research further, then please [contact the researchers](#). If any forces use any of the data from the research, then the researchers would appreciate you getting in contact so that they can record the impact of their work.

References

Diaz VM and Nuño LE. 2021. 'Women and policing: An assessment of factors related to the likelihood of pursuing a career as a police officer'. *Police Quarterly*, 24(4), pp 465–485.

GOV.UK. 2022. ['Over 50,000 female police officers now in forces'](#). GOV.UK [internet].

Tyson J and Charman S. 2022. ['Police officer resignations have risen by 72% in the last year – we asked former officers why'](#). *The Conversation* [internet].

Additional resources

[Project website](#)