

## US postdocs face steep challenges when starting families

Researchers from ethnic minorities are more likely to be discouraged from taking parental leave.

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*Nikki Kahn/WaPo/Getty Images*

New parents face myriad challenges with the birth of a child — and for postdocs, time off isn't always a given.

A survey of 741 US postdoctoral researchers has found that their ability to take time off after the birth or adoption of a baby varies widely depending on the person's funding source and principal investigator.

Postdocs from ethnic minorities were more likely to report that their principal investigator discouraged them from taking time off. Twenty per cent of Asian respondents and 17% of participants from other under-represented minority groups, such as African Americans, said that their boss discouraged leave. Only 9% of white respondents reported the same.



**Young, talented and fed-up: scientists tell their stories**

“We think about mothers being driven out of science, but there are also subgroups that are especially vulnerable,” says Jessica Lee, lead author of the report and a lawyer at the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco. “That’s something that isn’t really being raised in a lot of the conversation about this.”

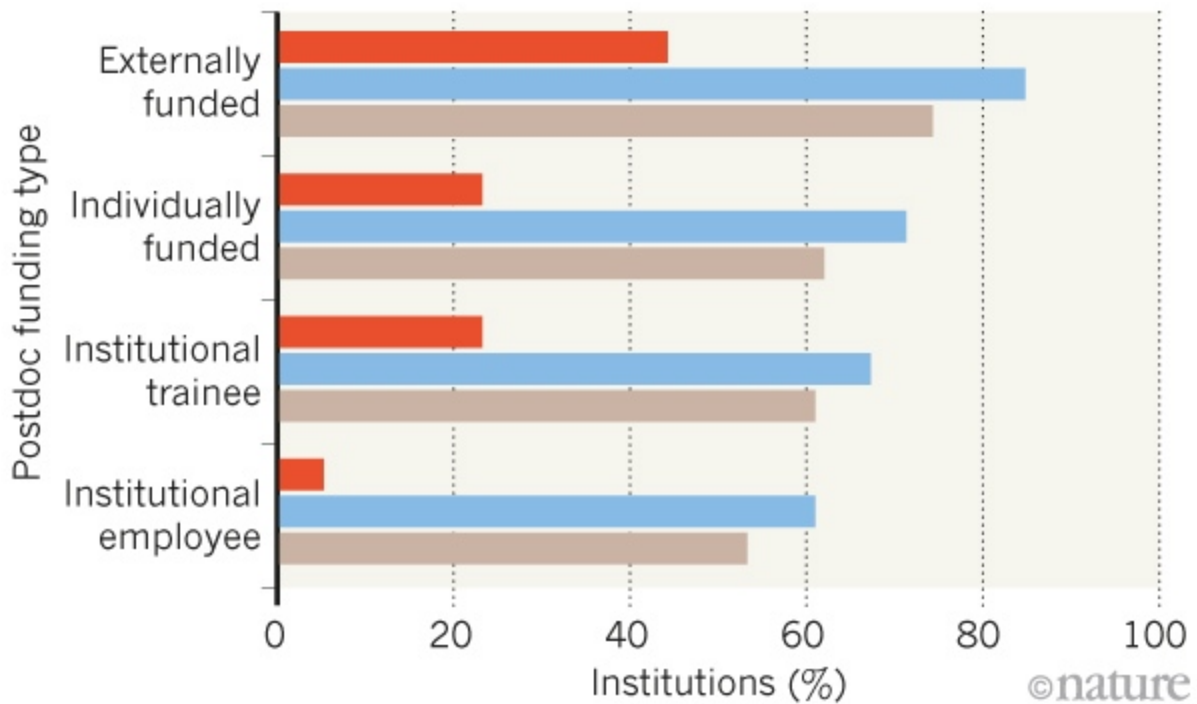
Postdocs who are paid by an external funder, such as through a fellowship, were particularly vulnerable. The report also includes a survey of 66 institutions, which found that 44% did not give externally funded postdoc mothers time off of any kind after they had given birth (see 'Postdocs and parental leave'). This included paid and unpaid leave during which their jobs would be protected.

Paternity-leave policies were even less common. Just 15% of externally funded postdocs and 39% of directly employed postdocs had the option of paid paternity leave at their institutions. Fathers also reported having to fight the stereotype that men do not need time away from work to provide care.

# POSTDOCS AND PARENTAL LEAVE

A survey of 66 US institutions found that many don't offer postdocs parental leave.

- No time off of any kind for new mothers
- No paid paternity leave
- No paid maternity leave



Source: *The Pregnant Scholar*; <http://go.nature.com/2TELPYJ>

The analysis, published on 21 June, was conducted by the Center for WorkLife Law and the National Postdoctoral Association in Rockville, Maryland. Study participants included men and women, because they were not randomly selected so might not reflect the general US postdoc population. Women, biologists and US citizens or permanent residents were over-represented in the pool of respondents.

Nevertheless, the results highlight the difficulty faced by postdocs. This group has a complicated mix of employment statuses and funding sources, and often lacks the structured policies that are in place for graduate students and faculty members, says Lee. “The postdoc situation is very unique because they often feel they have no one to turn to,” she says. “One of the first steps to combating that is for there to be formal written institutional policies.”



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