

Absenteeism and Presenteeism among American Workers

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Key Findings and Policy Implications

This paper analyzes the relationship between work absences, presenteeism (working while sick) and work outcomes using data from the American Working Conditions Survey and the American Life Panel. We establish baseline trends in absences and presenteeism for a nationally representative sample of U.S. workers and relate contemporaneous patterns in absences, presenteeism and interactions between the two behaviors to labor force outcomes three years later. The paper finds that:

- On average, absence rates and productivity losses when working while sick are quite low in the overall population. The median worker takes only one absence day per year; workers in the 90th percentile take 7 absences per year.
- While nearly two-thirds of the population reports working while sick at least once in the past year, productivity losses while working sick are also moderate, averaging around 20 percent.
- Absenteeism and presenteeism are highly positively correlated. Workers who report ever engaging in presenteeism are 36 percent more likely to have a high absence rate, and workers with a high absence rate are 13 percent more likely to report ever engaging in presenteeism. Furthermore, workers with a high absence rate are nearly 50 percent more likely to report productivity losses in the top quartile of the loss distribution.
- We find no relationship between labor force outcomes and either absence rates or presenteeism except for individuals in the extreme right tail of the absence distribution. Workers with absence rates above the 95th percentile and who engage in presenteeism have a significantly reduced probability of working or participating in the labor force three years later.

Labor force exit due to disability is often preceded by a gradual decline in health. Frequent or increased rates of absence from work or presenteeism could serve as a signal that a worker has begun transitioning out of the labor force. The importance of the project is in better understanding the process of health decline while workers are still employed, and the potential value of interventions that may support them, thereby reducing subsequent labor force withdrawals. The findings suggest it could be useful to target individuals with significant deviations from the normal patterns of absence for additional screening or intervention.

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