

The Health Case for Paid Family and Medical Leave

Comprehensive paid family and medical leave presents a game-changing opportunity to improve the health of working families. No one should have to forego or delay the care they need because of lack of leave or sacrifice their economic security to care for themselves or their loved ones.

Many Americans lack access to paid family and medical leave, causing predictable and devastating health consequences for workers and their families.

- Nationwide, about 3 in 5 private sector workers lack access to short-term disability insurance through their employers, leaving them vulnerable when they need time off from work to address their serious health needs.¹
 - Among low-income workers, these numbers are even more stark: over 80% of those in the bottom quarter of earners and over 90% of those in the bottom tenth of earners lack access to short-term disability insurance through their employers.²
- Nearly 1 in 3 seriously ill workers either lose their jobs or have to change jobs as a result of their illness.³ Paid medical leave can help workers balance their health needs with work and keep their jobs.
- Nationwide, only 23% of private sector workers receive paid family leave through their employers to bond with a new child or care for a seriously ill or injured family member; among low-income workers, the number is even lower.⁴ Only 35% of non-federal public and private employees work for employers that offer paid parental leave.⁵
 - The U.S. remains one of only two countries in the world, along with Papua New Guinea, with no national paid parental leave benefit of any kind.⁶
 - Nearly 1 in 3 U.S. households provide care for an adult loved one with a serious illness or disability.⁷ Because most caregivers providing care for adults are employed,⁸ the demands of providing care are in constant tension with earning a much-needed income.
- Families who have access to paid leave are healthier, more economically secure, and less likely to require taxpayer-funded public assistance resources. The lack of paid leave costs U.S. workers and their families \$22.5 billion each year in lost wages alone.⁹
 - In addition to helping workers stay attached to the workforce, paid family and medical leave can also help families stay afloat when dealing with the financial burden of costly medical bills.¹⁰

Paid family and medical leave create substantial health benefits for working families.

Medical Leave & Health

- Nationally, 1 in 3 U.S. adults under 65 has at least one chronic health condition.¹¹ Paid medical leave allows workers to get the treatment they need, when they need it. For example, paid medical leave helps cancer patients and survivors determine a course of treatment, follow through with that treatment, afford treatment, and manage side effects.¹²
- Paid leave can help fight substance abuse, including the rising threat of opioid abuse, which costs our nation over \$740 billion each year.¹³
 - Key treatment options, including both in-patient and outpatient care,¹⁴ generally require time off work, which is why treatment of substance use disorders is covered under existing leave laws.¹⁵
 - Family caregivers are critical in ensuring those with substance use disorders can get treatment,¹⁶ but caregiving can come at a high mental, physical, and financial cost.¹⁷ Paid leave can ensure they have the time away from work they need, along with easing the financial burdens of caregiving.
- Paid leave also helps keep workers safe on the job, increasing productivity and decreasing employer costs. Workers with paid leave are significantly less likely to suffer dangerous injuries on the job¹⁸ or deaths on the job.¹⁹
 - Paid leave allows workers to recover and return to full productivity more quickly than they would by continuing to work. When workers must return to work before a chronic condition is stabilized or before they have healed from an injury, they are more likely to relapse or re-injure themselves while working.²⁰

Bonding Leave & Health

- Generally, paid leave is associated with better physical and mental health for mothers, including a lower risk of postpartum depression.²¹
 - Conversely, taking too little leave, particularly leave of less than eight weeks, is associated with reduced overall postpartum health.²² Women who take paid maternity leave have a 51% decrease in the odds of being re-hospitalized within 21 months of giving birth as compared to those who took unpaid leave or no leave.²³ Taking paid leave also has positive associations with stress management and exercise, which can translate into better health.²⁴
 - Greater access to paid leave can help redress existing maternal health disparities. One study found that the positive effects of increasing the length of paid maternity leave are especially pronounced for low-resource families.²⁵ Moreover, there are significant racial disparities in maternal health, especially for Black

Headquarters

5 Columbus Circle, 11th floor
New York, NY 10019
tel: 212.430.5982

Southern Office

2301 21st Ave. South, Suite 355
Nashville, TN 37212
tel: 615.915.2417

DC Office

815 16th Street NW, Suite 4162
Washington, DC 20005

Colorado Office

303 E. 17th Ave., Suite 400
Denver, CO 80203

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women who are significantly more likely to die in childbirth or experience serious complications than white women.²⁶

- Fathers can also reap important health benefits from taking leave. One large study found that, over the long term, fathers who took paternity leave took less sick time, needed fewer days of inpatient care, and even had longer life expectancy than men who did not take leave.²⁷
- When parents have access to paid bonding leave, there are substantial health benefits for their children.
 - Paid leave is tied to reduction in infant and child mortality. In one study of 141 countries, controlling for other factors, an increase of 10 full-time-equivalent weeks of paid maternal leave reduced neonatal and infant mortality rates by 10% and the mortality rate of children younger than 5 by 9%.²⁸ As other research on country-level data has shown, providing paid, job-protected leave reduces infant and child mortality, while other leave (unpaid leave or leave without clear job protection) does not have the same effect.²⁹
 - Experts including the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that healthy full-term infants should not be enrolled in child care until they are at least 12 weeks old due to rapid developmental changes and the risk of developing severe undetected illness.³⁰
 - Paid leave is also positively associated with improved infant brain development. Compared to infants whose mothers took unpaid post-birth leave, infants whose mothers took paid post-birth leave were more likely to have brain function patterns that are associated with more mature brain activation patterns in childhood. This is true even after controlling for factors like family income and parent-child interactions. Researchers suggested that this could be connected to reduced maternal stress.³¹
 - Moms who return to work within 12 weeks of giving birth are less likely to breastfeed and, when they do, breastfeed for less time than those who stay home longer.³² In this context, it is unsurprising that access to paid leave has substantial positive effects on breastfeeding. For example, one leading study of California's paid family leave program found that use of paid family leave more than doubled the average number of weeks of breastfeeding and, among workers with low-quality jobs, notably increased the percentage of women who initiated breastfeeding at all.³³
 - Breastfeeding, in turn, has significant and well-documented positive health impacts. For infants, in the short term, breastfeeding substantially reduces the risk of serious respiratory infections,³⁴ ear and throat infections,³⁵ and gastrointestinal infections, including necrotizing enterocolitis, an

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5 Columbus Circle, 11th floor
New York, NY 10019
tel: 212.430.5982

DC Office

815 16th Street NW, Suite 4162
Washington, DC 20005

Southern Office

2301 21st Ave. South, Suite 355
Nashville, TN 37212
tel: 615.915.2417

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especially dangerous condition.³⁶ Breastfeeding also has positive longer-term health impacts for children, including reducing the risk of childhood inflammatory bowel disease, obesity, and diabetes.³⁷ Increased duration of breastfeeding is also correlated with reduction in childhood leukemia and lymphoma.³⁸ The short and long term health benefits of breastfeeding are especially pronounced for babies born prematurely, including boosting their vulnerable immune systems.³⁹

- When parents can take the leave they need, babies are more likely to get checkups and important vaccinations, and less likely to develop behavioral problems.⁴⁰ Children whose mothers do not return to work full time in the first 12 weeks are more likely to receive medical checkups and critical vaccinations.⁴¹ Fathers who take longer leaves experience greater engagement in their children's lives;⁴² greater paternal engagement has cognitive and developmental advantages for children.⁴³ For foster children, the first few months are a critical adjustment period in the transition to a new placement,⁴⁴ during which children need time to bond with their foster parents.

Family Care Leave & Health

- Family care leave provides significant health benefits for care recipients.
 - Nearly one in three U.S. households provide care for an adult loved one with a serious illness or disability.⁴⁵ With an aging population, these numbers will only increase in the future. Family caregivers can help these individuals recover more quickly and spend less time in hospitals.⁴⁶
 - Family caregivers also help to ease the burden on our crowded hospitals and long-term care facilities, freeing up resources for other crucial health needs. For example, recipients of family caregiving are less likely to have nursing home care or home health care paid for by Medicare.⁴⁷
 - Paid family leave also has important health benefits for caregivers, who face many negative health repercussions from caregiving. Research shows that access to paid leave improves caregivers' mental and emotional health.⁴⁸
- Family care leave also benefits children with serious health needs.
 - Seriously ill children benefit when their parents can afford time off to care for them. Research shows that ill children have better vital signs, faster recoveries, and reduced hospital stays when cared for by parents.⁴⁹ Paid leave is a crucial part of this equation, because parents with paid leave are more than five times more likely to care for their sick children than those without.⁵⁰

- In one study, parents of children with special needs who received paid leave were more likely to report positive effects on their children’s physical and mental health than those who took leave without pay.⁵¹
- Family care leave also has significant health benefits for caregivers themselves.
 - In studies, caregivers are more likely than non-caregivers to report overall fair or poor health.⁵² This effect is especially acute among comparatively high-hour caregivers, those caring for a spouse, and those caring for a loved one with a mental health condition.⁵³ Nearly half of all caregivers report moderate or high physical strain on themselves as a result of their caregiving responsibilities, while 63% of caregivers report moderate or high emotional stress.⁵⁴ Employed family caregivers, in particular, often find it difficult to make time for their own health care needs or to get important preventive health screening like mammograms.⁵⁵
 - Similar effects are seen on America’s estimated 5.5 million military caregivers—people caring for a loved one who became ill or injured through military service.⁵⁶ Military caregivers suffer profound physical and mental health challenges as a result of their caregiving responsibilities.⁵⁷ For example, in one major study, 58% of military caregivers reported “delaying/skipping your own doctor/dentist appointments” due to their caregiving responsibilities.⁵⁸ Physical and mental health difficulties are especially common in those caring for veterans and servicemembers who served after September 11, 2001.⁵⁹
 - Paid family leave has important health benefits for caregivers. Research shows that access to paid leave improves caregivers’ mental and emotional health.⁶⁰ Greater access to paid time away from work can also increase caregivers’ ability to address their own health needs, improving their health outcomes.⁶¹ A majority of caregivers are employed, which can mean difficulties in balancing work and care responsibilities that paid leave can help to relieve.⁶²

Paid family and medical leave is especially crucial during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Paid family and medical leave will be crucial as our nation recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - States that had paid family and medical leave programs in place prior to the pandemic were better able to respond to workers’ needs, while, even with emergency interventions, our lack of a national paid leave policy compromised the effectiveness of our pandemic response.⁶³
 - As we move forward, paid family and medical leave will ensure workers can take the time they need to address their own or a loved one’s COVID-related needs in the years to come,⁶⁴ while also responding to longstanding existing needs.

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5 Columbus Circle, 11th floor
New York, NY 10019
tel: 212.430.5982

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815 16th Street NW, Suite 4162
Washington, DC 20005

Southern Office

2301 21st Ave. South, Suite 355
Nashville, TN 37212
tel: 615.915.2417

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Denver, CO 80203

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5 Columbus Circle, 11th floor
New York, NY 10019
tel: 212.430.5982

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2301 21st Ave. South, Suite 355
Nashville, TN 37212
tel: 615.915.2417

Colorado Office

303 E. 17th Ave., Suite 400
Denver, CO 80203

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5 Columbus Circle, 11th floor
New York, NY 10019
tel: 212.430.5982

Southern Office

2301 21st Ave. South, Suite 355
Nashville, TN 37212
tel: 615.915.2417

DC Office

815 16th Street NW, Suite 4162
Washington, DC 20005

Colorado Office

303 E. 17th Ave., Suite 400
Denver, CO 80203

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5 Columbus Circle, 11th floor
New York, NY 10019
tel: 212.430.5982

DC Office

815 16th Street NW, Suite 4162
Washington, DC 20005

Southern Office

2301 21st Ave. South, Suite 355
Nashville, TN 37212
tel: 615.915.2417

Colorado Office

303 E. 17th Ave., Suite 400
Denver, CO 80203

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