

FACT SHEET: Importance of Paid Family and Medical Leave for Young Breastfeeding & Lactating Workers

The United States is the only developed nation without a nationwide right to paid leave. Paid family and medical leave is an essential tool in establishing and sustaining breastfeeding, as many people stop breastfeeding earlier than intended due to a lack of parental leave and unsupportive workplaces.¹ When forced to return to work prematurely, both parents and babies suffer. This is especially true for young workers, ages 16 to 24, who disproportionately work in low-wage industries without employer paid leave policies.² Ensuring that all workers have a legal right to paid family and medical leave would improve health equity and the ability to continue breastfeeding and encourage youth to pursue education and careers that would otherwise be unattainable.

How Paid Leave Can Support Lactating Parents

- Breastfeeding and chestfeeding has lasting health benefits for parents and babies, including improving the function of the digestive system and immune system of the child, and reduced risk of breast and ovarian cancer, diabetes, and obesity in birth parents.³
 - Paid leave is associated with better physical and mental health for birth parents, including longer breastfeeding duration and a lower risk of postpartum depression.⁴
 - According to one study, those who received 12 or more weeks of paid leave were more likely to initiate breastfeeding and continue breastfeeding for at least 6 months than those without paid leave.⁵
 - Another study looked at breastfeeding rates following enactment of state paid leave policies and found that more birthing parents exclusively breastfed after passage of these policies.⁶

Young Workers Face Particular Barriers to Breastfeeding & Accessing Paid Leave

¹ Sriraman NK, Kellams A., *Breastfeeding: What are the barriers? Why women struggle to achieve their goals*, J Womens Health (Larchmt). 2016;25(7):714–722.)
[https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/facts.html#:~:text=Younger%20mothers%20aged%20%20to,years%20or%20older%20\(84.9%25\)](https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/facts.html#:~:text=Younger%20mothers%20aged%20%20to,years%20or%20older%20(84.9%25))

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Unemployment Among Youth – Summer 2022* (Aug. 17, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/youth.pdf>.
Elise Gould & Melat Kassa, *Young Workers Hit Hard by the COVID-19 Economy*, Econ. Pol’y Inst. (Oct. 14, 2020), <https://www.epi.org/publication/young-workers-covid-recession>.

³ A Better Balance, *The Health Case for Paid Family and Medical Leave*, (Nov. 30, 2021), <https://www.abetterbalance.org/resources/the-health-case-for-paid-family-and-medical-leave/>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Mirkovic KR, Perrine CG, Scanlon KS., *Paid Maternity Leave and Breastfeeding Outcomes*, Birth. 2016 Sep;43(3):233-9. doi: 10.1111/birt.12230. Epub 2016 Mar 17. PMID: 26991788.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26991788/>

⁶ Hamad R, Modrek S, White JS., *Paid Family Leave Effects on Breastfeeding: A Quasi-Experimental Study of US Policies*, Am J Public Health. 2019 Jan;109(1):164-166. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2018.304693. Epub 2018 Oct 25. PMID: 30359107; PMCID: PMC6301394. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6301394/>

- According to the CDC, “Younger mothers aged 20 to 29 years are less likely to ever breastfeed (79.9 percent) than mothers aged 30 years or older (84.9 percent⁷.” Another study found that mothers that were 30 and over were twice as likely to be exclusively breastfeeding to 6 months as mothers 20 years and younger.⁸
- According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), in July 2022, 22.9 million young people ages 16 to 24 were employed in the U.S., representing 55.3 percent of all young people.⁹ Young people are concentrated in industries that are lower-wage and among the least likely to provide paid leave.
- In 2019, nearly 26 percent of workers ages 16-24 were employed in the leisure and hospitality industry and nearly 19 percent were employed in the retail trade (compared to 7.4 percent of workers age 25 and above employed in leisure and hospitality and 9.4 percent in retail¹⁰). Of all sectors tracked by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, those employed in the service sector—which includes leisure, hospitality, and retail—are the least likely to have access to paid leave.¹¹
- Among the 25 percent lowest-paid workers, only 9 percent had access to paid family leave in 2020.¹²
- Over a quarter of Opportunity Youth, youth ages 16-24 who are neither working nor in school, reported that the reason they were unable to work or be in school was due to child rearing and home responsibilities. For Opportunity Youth, who are more likely to be female and Black¹³ or Latine¹⁴, paid family and medical leave is especially vital. Without paid leave, Opportunity Youth will continue to face barriers to entry into the workplace.
 - The more we work to put systemic structures like paid leave in place to engage the 4.8 million¹⁵ Opportunity Youth, the more they, their families, and our economy will thrive. For instance, \$65.8 billion of earnings is lost each year when Opportunity Youth are left out of the workforce.¹⁶

⁷Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *Key Breastfeeding Indicators*, [https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/facts.html#:~:text=Younger%20mothers%20aged%20to%20years%20or%20older%20\(84.9%25\)](https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/facts.html#:~:text=Younger%20mothers%20aged%20to%20years%20or%20older%20(84.9%25).).

⁸Buckland, C., Hector, D., Kolt, G.S. *et al.*, *Interventions to promote exclusive breastfeeding among young mothers: a systematic review and meta-analysis*, *Int Breastfeed J* **15**, 102 (2020).

⁶<https://internationalbreastfeedingjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13006-020-00340-6>

⁹U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Unemployment Among Youth – Summer 2022*, (Aug. 17, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/youth.pdf>.

¹⁰Elise Gould & Melat Kassa, *Young Workers Hit Hard by the COVID-19 Economy*, Econ. Pol’y Inst. (Oct. 14, 2020), <https://www.epi.org/publication/young-workers-covid-recession>

¹¹U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Access to and Use of Leave Summary*, (Aug. 29, 2019), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/leave.nr0.htm>

¹²National Partnership for Women and Families, *Paid Leave is Essential for Healthy Moms and Babies*, (May 2021), <https://nationalpartnership.org/report/paid-leave-is-essential-for/#:~:text=For%20people%20working%20in%20low,paid%20family%20leave%20in%202020>.

¹³Kristen Lewis, *A Decade Undone, Youth Disconnection in the Age of Coronavirus*, pg. 9, Measure of America, 2020, <https://src-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/ADecadeUndone.pdf>

¹⁴*Id.*

¹⁵Measure of America, *Youth Disconnection in America*, 2020, <https://measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/#:~:text=Disconnected%20youth%20are%20young%20people,percent%2C%20or%204%2C830%2C700%20young%20people>.

¹⁶Youth Advocate Programs Inc., *The Cost of Disconnection*, (Aug. 14, 2023), <https://www.yapinc.org/News/Article/ArticleID/47/The-Cost-of-Disconnection>

The U.S. Needs A National Paid Leave Program to Better Support Young Breastfeeding & Lactating Workers

- Nationwide, only 23 percent of private sector workers receive paid family leave through their employers to bond with a new child. Among low-income workers, the number is even lower.¹⁷
- Without a legal right to paid leave, a shocking 1 in 4 mothers return to work within just two weeks of giving birth.¹⁸
- Currently, thirteen states and Washington D.C. have paid family and medical leave laws.¹⁹ Every worker in this country deserves the same right. The U.S. needs a national paid leave policy that provides at least 12 weeks of job protected paid leave to bond with a new child, care for a seriously ill loved one, or care for oneself.
- Lack of paid leave disproportionately affects Black and Latine workers.²⁰ Access to paid leave “remains highly skewed toward adults with higher incomes (81 percent), with college degrees (79 percent), and who work full time (79 percent).”²¹
- For disconnected youth who work in low-wage and part-time jobs a lack of fundamental workplace supports, such as paid leave, creates barriers to maintaining consistent employment that only perpetuates the cycle of poverty.²²

For workers with the greatest need, access to paid leave remains unattainable. Young breastfeeding and lactating workers, who already experience immense systemic challenges getting the support they need, need equal footing on the economic playing field. Without protections like paid leave, America continues to hold disconnected youth back from reaching their full potential. The nation needs to hold itself accountable to those who have been left out of the conversation for too long, including young adults. A national right to paid leave would enable *all* community members, especially new parents, to have power over their bodies, the well-being of their family, and their economic security.

¹⁷ A Better Balance, *The Health Case for Paid Family and Medical Leave*, (Nov. 30, 2021), <https://www.abetterbalance.org/resources/the-health-case-for-paid-family-and-medical-leave/>.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ A Better Balance, *Comparative Chart of Paid Family and Medical Leave Laws in the United States*, (July 11, 2023), <https://www.abetterbalance.org/resources/paid-family-leave-laws-chart/>

²⁰ Chantel Boyens, Michael Karpman, and Jack Smalligan, *Access to Paid Leave Is Lowest among Workers with the Greatest Needs*, pg. 2, The Urban Institute, (July 2022), <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/Access%20to%20Paid%20Leave%20Is%20Lowest%20among%20Workers%20with%20the%20Greatest%20Needs.pdf>

²¹ *Id.*

²² Olivia Golden, *Poverty and Career Opportunities for Young Adults: The Census Poverty Report Dials Up the Urgency—And Congress Provides New Opportunities*, The Center for Law and Social Policy, (Sep. 30, 2014), <https://www.clasp.org/whats-next/poverty-and-career-opportunities-young-adults-census-poverty-report-dials-urgency-and/>