



POLICY BRIEF

# GUARANTEE PAID FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE FOR ALL WORKERS

## THE PROBLEM

Care is an issue that impacts everyone—at some point, we will all need to provide care for a loved one or receive care ourselves. Yet the United States remains **one of the only wealthy countries** in the world with no national paid leave policy, and only **13 states** and the District of Columbia have laws guaranteeing paid leave. As a result, people across the country—especially women—are struggling to care for themselves and their loved ones while paying the bills and supporting their families.

Nearly **three-quarters of workers** in the United States lack access to paid family leave through their employers (i.e., paid time away from work to, for example, care for a family member with a serious health condition or a new baby); and **nearly 60% don't receive** paid medical leave to address their own serious health conditions through an employer-provided short-term disability program. For people working in low-paid and part-time jobs—**most of whom are women**—access is even more limited; among workers in the lowest quartile of wage earners, for example, only **14% have access** to paid family leave. The lack of paid leave falls particularly hard on Black women, **38% of whom** reported not taking leave, even when it was needed. Many workers don't take leave because of the **economic hardship** that could come from unpaid or partially paid time away from work.

## THE SOLUTION

- **Guarantee at least 12 weeks of paid leave for all workers.** Currently, no state paid leave policy provides **less than 12 weeks**. A robust body of research shows that parental leave of less than 12 weeks is insufficient for maternal or child health and well-being, and there are meaningful **improvements to health outcomes** with a longer duration of leave.

- **Reimburse all or most of employee’s wages using a progressive scale**, so the lowest paid workers receive the largest percentage of their wages—and so everyone can actually afford to take time off.
- **Protect all workers, including part-time workers and independent contractors, regardless of industry or employer size.** A paid leave law that does not provide benefits for part-time workers would disproportionately harm women, who are [overrepresented in part-time jobs](#) while also acting as caregivers for their families.
- **Guarantee that all workers are protected from retaliation for taking leave**, can maintain health insurance coverage during leave, and have the right to return to their jobs following leave.
- **Ensure workers can take leave to care for themselves and a broad range of family members**, including spouses, domestic partners, parents, children of any age, siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, and other individuals who comprise someone’s “chosen family.” LGBTQI+ individuals are [twice as likely](#) as non-LGBTQI+ people to rely on chosen family members when needing to take time off work for health-related concerns. And people of color and immigrants are [more likely to live in multigenerational households](#), where they may need to provide care to a wider range of family members.
- **Allow workers to use the benefit for a full range of caregiving needs, including time for their own serious health conditions**, parental leave, leave to care for a loved one’s serious health condition, deployment-related leave, and [safe leave](#) for survivors of domestic violence.

## TALKING POINTS ON THE SOLUTION

- **Paid leave promotes gender equity.** Women working full time, year-round are typically paid only [83 cents](#) for every dollar paid to men; that translates to nearly \$462,000 lost over a 40-year career. That lifetime loss doesn’t account for the women who are pushed out of the labor force each year when their caregiving responsibilities come into conflict with their jobs. Providing national paid family and medical leave can help narrow these disparities by increasing women’s ability to stay [attached to the workforce](#), [normalizing](#) men as caregivers, and increasing fathers’ involvement in [child care among lower income families](#).
- **Paid leave helps ensure long-term economic security, especially for women.** Retirement programs like Social Security and employer-sponsored pensions disadvantage people who take time out of the workforce, including for caregiving responsibilities. In 2019, women on average received around [\\$5,000 less in annual Social Security benefits](#) than men, driven in part by women spending fewer years in the workforce.
- **Paid leave helps combat racial inequality.** Nearly seven in 10 Black mothers are primary [breadwinners](#) in their families, but Black and Latinx\* workers have less access to paid family and medical leave compared to white workers. And when faced with an unforeseen illness or caregiving need, the [racial and gender wealth gaps](#) in this country mean that women of color are less likely to have the economic resources to allow them to take time away from work. Providing all workers with paid time to care would help close these gaps, while also improving persistent racial [health disparities](#) during pregnancy.

- **Paid family and medical leave contributes to a robust economy.** Research shows that paid leave strengthens businesses of all sizes by [reducing turnover costs and increasing employee retention](#).
- **When new mothers have access to paid leave, they experience improvements** in their own physical and mental health, including a decrease in [postpartum depression](#).
- **Paid safe leave helps survivors of violence keep their jobs and economic security while navigating complicated needs,** including preparing for or participating in legal proceedings, seeking supportive services, enrolling children in a new school or child care, moving, or addressing their own physical or mental health.

## PUBLIC POPULARITY

- Paid Family and Medical Leave is incredibly popular with voters. [More than three in four](#) independents, 70% of Republicans, and nearly 90% of Democrats support establishing a national paid leave program.

## STATES AND LOCALITIES THAT HAVE PASSED THESE POLICIES

- Paid family and medical leave is a proven solution to help families manage work and care while creating a more just and equitable society. Currently [13 states](#)—including Colorado, Maryland, and Minnesota—and the District of Columbia have laws guaranteeing paid leave for workers.
- In states that have passed paid leave laws, [research shows](#) that public health has improved, including increased on-time vaccination rates for children, reductions in infant hospitalizations, and improvements in maternal physical and mental health after childbirth.
- Employers also report seeing benefits from paid leave. In a [study of the New Jersey](#) paid leave law, for example, most employers reported no negative impact on profitability while also seeing a meaningful increase in employee morale and a decrease in stress.

\*The data uses the term Hispanic, but this Playbook uses the terms Latina/Latinas/Latinx.