



FAMILY LEAVE: Can Public and Private Policies Be Supportive of America's Families?

Millions of American workers who qualify for family or medical leave don't take it because they cannot afford to go without pay.¹

policy brief

Background

Although the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) guarantees unpaid leave for childbirth or family illness, many Americans simply can't afford it. For those who take leave, the financial hardship can be great.

- 78% of American workers who qualify for leave under the FMLA say that they cannot afford to go without pay.¹
- Nearly 1 in 10 workers who take unpaid family leave are actually forced into public assistance to make ends meet.¹
- For many more of the lowest paid workers, even unpaid leave through FMLA is not an option.¹
- The median length of family leave is only **10 days**.¹

About 59% of employed mothers and 51% of employed fathers do not qualify for FMLA benefits.²

Paid Family leave would support the needs of working families

Family and work patterns have shifted dramatically in recent decades, yet workplace policies have not kept pace with these changes.

- The proportion of mothers with children ages 6-17 in the workforce increased from 39% in 1960 to 82% in 2000.³
- The employment rate for mothers with children under 6 increased more dramatically, from 18% in 1970 to 75% in 2000.³
- Similarly, the proportion of single-parent households has more than doubled, from 12% in 1970 to 32% in 2000.³
- About 25% of Americans have an elderly relative to care for, and many of them reduce their work hours or take at least a brief leave from work to care for that person.⁴

Why workers have taken family and medical leave?⁴

- 52% to care for their own serious illness
- 26% to care for a new child or for a maternity-related disability
- 13% to care for a seriously ill parent
- 12% to care for a seriously ill child
- 6% to care for a seriously ill spouse

(Sum is greater than 100% because some take more than one leave)

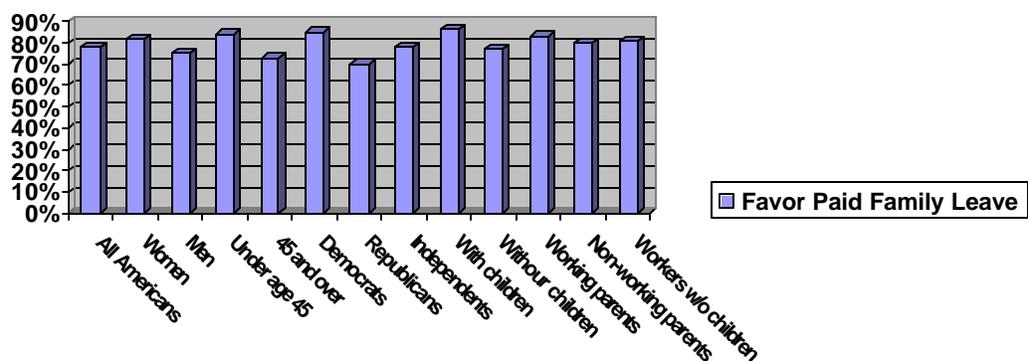
Family leave benefits strengthen businesses

The vast majority of employers – 84% - found that the benefits of providing leave under FMLA offset or outweighed the costs.⁴

- Nearly 42% reported a positive return on their leave programs.⁴
- Another 42% said the costs had a neutral effect.⁴
- 98% of employees who took family leave returned to work for the same employer.⁴
- 77% of employers reported cost savings because of decreased turnover.⁴

Americans strongly support paid family leave

- 82% of women and 75% of men favor the idea of developing some sort of paid family leave plan¹.
- An average of 79% of voters from every demographic group in America support a paid family leave initiative, including men, women, parents, non-parents, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents¹.



Policy Recommendations:

Pass legislation granting employees paid Family Leave benefits with these features:

- Offer sliding scale benefits depending on the employee's salary, available for all workers for at least 12 weeks.
- Combined contributions of federal, state, corporate, and employee resources.
- For the lowest wage workers, federal and state governments, along with companies, would contribute all of the wage supplement.
- For more advantaged workers, employees would pay into a mandatory fund for later family leave wage replacement, with employers contributing as well.
- A payroll tax with exemptions in place for the lowest wage workers.

Selected References

¹Commission on Family Leave. (1996). *A Workable Balance: Report to Congress on Family and Medical Leave Policies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government. Retrieved on December 2, 2002 from

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⁴Galinsky, E., & Bond, J. T. (1998). The 1998 business work-life study: Executive summary. Retrieved on November 13, 2002 from http://fwi.igc.org/publications/pubs/worklife_1.html.

(Compiled by Jennifer K. Henk, March 2003)

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