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Who Gets Time Off?

Predicting Access to Paid Leave and Workplace Flexibility

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Introduction and summary

In most families today—whether headed by a married couple or a single adult and with or without children—all of the adults are employed.¹ As a result, virtually all families experience days when they have a conflict between work and home responsibilities. Whether it is waiting at home for a repair person to fix the refrigerator, picking up a child when after-school arrangements fall through, or simply being too sick to make it to work, nearly all workers will at some point need time away from work. But while the need may be universal, access to supports that address these conflicts—such as paid leave and workplace flexibility—is not.

It is common for professionals in higher-paying jobs to have benefits such as paid leave and workplace flexibility, but lower- and middle-income workers are often left without the same options. Because there are no federal policies ensuring the right to access paid leave or flexibility, workers are lucky if their employer offers paid sick leave or the ability to work flexible hours. Those who are not as fortunate can lose wages or potentially be fired from their job when they need to care for a sick child or take an elderly parent to the doctor. These basic workplace standards should not be left up to good fortune or to individual employers.

There is growing recognition among policymakers and the voting public that the playing field needs to be leveled: The right to earn paid time off and to request workplace flexibility or a predictable schedule are not simply nice things to have but are necessary for working families to achieve economic security. There is growing momentum for work-life policies. Every year, new pieces of legislation are introduced, more policies are passed into law, and voter support for these policies remains high across political ideologies.² Since 2002, three states have passed laws to provide workers with access to paid family leave;³ 23 cities and five states have guaranteed workers the right to earned sick leave;⁴ and one city and one state have implemented policies to ensure that workers have the right to request flexibility and predictability and that their employers can deny these requests only for valid business reasons.⁵

The progress made in those states and cities, however, is still too slow and uneven to affect the majority of working families: Nearly 40 million workers—39 percent of all employees—still lack access to even a single paid sick day.⁶ Understanding which groups of workers are most likely to have paid time off and workplace flexibility can help inform whether policy interventions are necessary and, if so, which would best help to support workers and their families.

Thanks to the efforts of the Obama administration and advocates, data on workplace benefits that can help address this issue are now available.⁷ The U.S. Department of Labor collects annual information on how people spend their time as part of the American Time Use Survey. In 2011, it included an additional supplement that asked questions about workers' access to different forms of paid and unpaid leave and workplace flexibility.⁸ This marks the first time since 2004 that the U.S. Department of Labor has collected data from workers on their access to workplace flexibility and the first time that data about both paid leave and flexibility have been collected in the same survey.⁹

This report uses data from the American Time Use Survey to explore the characteristics that predict access to paid leave and flexibility. The goal is to answer the following questions:

- Who has access to paid leave and workplace flexibility benefits?
- Is access equitable, or are certain types of workers more likely than others to have the benefits?
- What, if any, policy interventions are necessary?

The findings clearly demonstrate that some workers have access to good benefits, while others have none:

- Surprisingly, parents and workers who have elder care responsibilities are no more likely to have paid sick days or flexibility than identical workers who are not caring for children or elders, highlighting that the need for these benefits is not associated with having access to them.
- Hourly workers, workers with jobs in the service industry, and Latino workers are all significantly less likely to have access to paid sick days than otherwise similar individuals.
- Older workers, full-time workers, and workers with higher earnings are all more likely to have access to employer provided paid sick days than otherwise identical workers.

- While younger workers and those who work part time report higher levels of flexibility, it is likely that this data is capturing unpredictable scheduling practices rather than worker-centered flexibility.

All workers, regardless of their job type or family structure, have the potential need for paid leave and flexibility. Similar to other workplace protections, paid leave and flexibility should not be left up to the generosity of individual employers responding to the forces of supply and demand in the labor market. Rather, all workers should at least have some guaranteed minimum paid time off for things such as illnesses. A better understanding of who currently has access and who does not helps demonstrate the types of policy interventions necessary to ensure that all workers have the ability to care for themselves and their families while staying employed. Doing so is not only important for family well-being, it is also important for the economy.

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