



FACT SHEET

Paid Sick Days

Paid Sick Days Work for U.S. Employees and Employers

Jane Farrell and Joanna Venator August 16, 2012

Introduction

Most Americans are working hard to pay their bills and to take care of their families, yet too many employers make it impossible to juggle those work and family obligations. The danger of losing a job or missing a promotion because of illness, pregnancy, or taking care of loved ones when working at companies focused solely on the bottom line leaves too many moms and dads having to choose between their jobs and their families.

About half of all workers on U.S. payrolls today are women.¹ Moreover, the majority of mothers, whether married or single, work outside the home, meaning that in most American families, all of the adults work and there is no full-time stay-at-home caregiver.² This is not just a “women’s issue” since the changing nature of our families impacts men and women, adults, and children. Indeed, as our population continues to rapidly age, more and more workers are finding themselves providing elder care to their aging parents as well.³

While our workforce and families have changed dramatically, our nation’s labor standards have not been updated in decades. There are sensible policies that would assist families while simultaneously helping employers’ bottom lines, but both employers and policymakers have been slow to recognize how fundamentally our lives have changed and what needs to be done to make our workplace policies match the way that we live and work today.

In this series we identify five issues facing workers today: paid sick days, paid family and medical leave, workplace flexibility, child care, and the wage gap. As our nation has reached a pivotal moment in history, policymakers will have to decide whether they will take the necessary steps to support hardworking American families or whether they will continue along with the status quo.

Here are the key facts you need to know about the importance of paid sick days.

Paid sick days

- **38 percent of private-sector workers lack even one paid sick day.**⁴ This percentage is lower for full-time private-sector workers (25 percent), but it is significantly higher for part-time workers, with 73 percent lacking access. Full-time workers are more than three times as likely to have access to any form of paid leave than part-time workers.⁵
- **Low-income workers are less likely to have access to paid sick days.** The average wage of workers without paid sick leave is \$10 per hour. If a worker with this salary has a family of two children and misses more than three days of work without paid leave, the family would fall below the poverty line due to lost wages.⁶ What's more, 90 percent of private-sector workers whose earnings are in the top 10 percent in their occupation get paid sick days compared to only 23 percent of workers in the bottom 25 percent.⁷ And workers with a college degree are more than twice as likely to have access to paid leave than those with less than a high school education.⁸
- **Women are less likely than men to have paid sick days.** Female-dominated jobs, such as those in service industries, are less likely to offer paid sick leave.⁹ This discrepancy becomes crucial when considering that 80 percent of mothers assume responsibility for their children's doctor visits, meaning they are more likely to need time off work for a child's illness than male workers.¹⁰ Parents with access to paid sick days to care for a child are also nearly twice as likely to report being very satisfied with their work than those without access.¹¹
- **Workers with access to paid sick days are more likely to utilize preventative health services such as cancer screenings and tests.**¹² Studies show they are also less likely to use costly hospital emergency rooms or delay treatment for themselves or a family member, even after controlling for access to health insurance. Universal paid sick leave would reduce emergency room visits by 1.3 million a year, saving \$1.1 billion in medical costs annually.¹³ Finally, workers with access to paid sick days are nearly one-third less likely to be injured on the job, resulting in lower health care and employer costs.¹⁴
- **Many Americans risk their jobs to care for themselves and their families.** Twenty-three percent of adults say they've been threatened with termination or fired for taking time off when they or a family member were sick.¹⁵
- **Latinos are the least likely to have access to paid leave of any type out of any racial or ethnic group.**¹⁶ Only 43 percent of Hispanic workers have access to paid leave, compared to 59 percent of whites, 61 percent of African Americans, and 62 percent of Asians. Latinos are also the least likely group to have access to even unpaid leave—meaning that when they or a family member get sick, they truly have no options.

- **Workers without paid sick leave are 1.5 times more likely to go to work sick and contagious than those who have paid sick days.**¹⁷ For instance, 90 percent of employees in the food service industry do not have paid sick days.¹⁸ Seventy percent of women and 67 percent of men in the restaurant industry report cooking, preparing, or serving food while sick. Moreover, many of the workers least likely to have paid sick days are those who care for our families and loved ones in schools or elder care facilities.¹⁹
- **Employers have little to lose and much to gain from granting paid sick days.** A study of Connecticut's policy mandating five days of sick leave found that full use of this leave would cost an employer only 0.4 percent of their sales revenue on average.²⁰ Without paid sick days, employees come to work unhealthy, costing employers \$160 billion per year due to lower productivity levels.²¹
- **Workers who have paid sick days don't abuse them.** On average, workers who are covered take 3.9 days per year for illness and 1.3 days to care for sick family members, while workers without sick days take an average of 3 days per year.²²
- **The United States is the only developed country that doesn't guarantee paid sick leave.**²³ This hurts both our economy and U.S. workers. As wage growth has stagnated, benefits such as paid sick days have become all the more important to ensuring workers can stay out of poverty and in the middle class.
- **Some states and municipalities are seeing the benefits of paid sick days.** Across the country, campaigns are underway to make paid sick leave a reality for all Americans.²⁴ San Francisco, the first locality to guarantee paid sick days, experienced few problems with its policy and its economy grew faster than those of surrounding cities once paid sick days were in place.²⁵
- **Americans want a paid sick day policy.** Three-quarters of adults support a policy giving employees a minimum number of paid sick days.²⁶ Ninety percent of adults support a specific proposal allowing up to seven paid sick days per year.
- **The Healthy Families Act would provide workers with the right to up to seven job-protected paid sick days per year to recover from their own short-term illnesses or to care for an ill family member.**²⁷ Sen. Tom Harkin's (D-IA) Rebuild America Act would also implement paid sick leave, helping working Americans enjoy job security while strengthening the middle class.²⁸

The bottom line: Our nation's new work and family responsibilities require paid sick days for the good of employers, employees, and their families.

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Endnotes

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