

# Paid Sick Days Improve Public Health

NOVEMBER 2023

Everyone gets sick, but not everyone has time to get better. Every day, millions of working people in the United States face an impossible choice when they are sick: stay home and risk their economic stability or go to work and risk their health and the public's health. A national paid sick days standard would give workers the time they need to recover from illness or care for an ill family member in ways that would help improve public health.

## Too many people must go to work sick because they cannot earn paid sick time.

- More than one-fifth of private sector workers – and more than six in 10 of the lowest-income workers – don't have access to even a single paid sick day.<sup>1</sup> Millions more don't have access to paid sick days because they are too new to their jobs to be eligible for their employers' policies. In total, nearly 28 million U.S. workers don't have access to this basic protection.<sup>2</sup>
- Disparities in access to paid sick days disproportionately expose Latinx and Black workers to increased risk of illness.<sup>3</sup> Nearly half (48 percent) of Latinx workers and more than one-third (36 percent) of Black workers report having no paid time away from work of any kind.<sup>4</sup>
- Workers in more dangerous and public-facing occupations,<sup>5</sup> like construction and service workers, are less likely to have paid sick days than those in professional or management jobs, leading to increased risk of illness and injury.<sup>6</sup>
- People without paid sick days are 1.5 times more likely than those with paid sick days to report going to work with a contagious illness like the flu or a viral infection.<sup>7</sup>

---

**“PAID SICK LEAVE KEEPS OUR HOMES, OFFICES AND COMMUNITIES HEALTHIER WHILE ENSURING THE FAMILY’S ECONOMIC SECURITY.”**

**— Dr. Barbara L. McAneny, Former Board Chair, American Medical Association**

---

- Many people go to work sick because they fear workplace discipline or losing their jobs. Nearly one in four workers has reported either losing a job or being threatened with job loss for needing to take a sick day.<sup>8</sup>

## **There Are Significant Public Health Costs When People Cannot Earn Paid Sick Days**

### **Lack of access to paid sick days leads to an increased risk of community contagion and workplace injury.**

- Workers who interact the most with the public are often the least likely to have paid sick days. Across all service workers, nearly four in ten lack access to paid sick days, and access is even worse in occupations such as food service and child care.<sup>9</sup> Workers in these occupations are also more likely to be exposed to contagious illnesses and, therefore, to spread illnesses to the public when they are forced to go to work sick.
- Implementing emergency paid sick leave through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act prevented 400 COVID-19 cases per day in each state that previously had lacked a paid sick days laws – but this program expired in 2020 and did not cover other infectious illnesses.<sup>10</sup>
- Service workers who have certain illnesses, including the flu or norovirus, are required by the Food and Drug Administration to work on a restricted basis until 24 hours after symptoms subside,<sup>11</sup> yet these workers typically can't afford to take unpaid sick time. In fact, nearly 60 percent of food service workers surveyed in a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study reported working while sick, and nearly half of those workers said they went to work because they didn't have paid sick days.<sup>12</sup>
- Nearly half (46 percent) of restaurant-associated illness outbreaks involve an infected food service worker,<sup>13</sup> and there are approximately 48 million cases of foodborne illness in the United States each year.<sup>14</sup>
- Lack of paid sick days increases workers' likelihood of being injured on the job, most likely because illness reduces workers' functional capacity, such as physical capability and ability to focus, making worksites less safe. Impacts are greater in more dangerous occupations: a construction worker without paid sick days is 21 percent more likely to experience a non-fatal occupational injury than one with paid sick days.<sup>15</sup>

### **People without paid sick days are less likely to access medical care, resulting in delayed and often costlier treatments.**

- Workers without paid sick days are more likely to delay needed medical care, which can lead to prolonged illnesses and turn minor health problems into major, more costly ones.<sup>16</sup> Workers who do not have paid sick days are three times more likely than those with paid sick days to neglect medical care for themselves, and they are nearly two times more likely to forgo medical care for their families.<sup>17</sup> And workers who lack paid sick days are less likely to be able to afford health care goods and services, more likely to incur high medical expenses and more likely to have a family income below the poverty threshold than those who have paid sick days.<sup>18</sup>
- Not having sick days remains a significant barrier to health care access, despite increased affordability of preventive health care services under the Affordable Care Act. Workers without paid sick days are less likely to go to the doctor or access preventive care, such as cancer screenings, annual physicals, Pap smears and flu shots.<sup>19</sup>
- Workers without paid sick days are 61 percent more likely than those with paid sick days not to have received a flu shot.<sup>20</sup>
- When workers cannot take time off to seek medical care during normal work hours, they are left with few choices for care and are more likely to resort to costly emergency room visits. Working people with paid sick days are 32 percent less likely than people without paid sick days to visit the emergency department recurrently.<sup>21</sup>
- It is estimated that preventable emergency room visits among workers without paid sick days cost the United States more than \$1.1 billion per year, with nearly half of the costs coming from taxpayer-funded programs like Medicaid, Medicare and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program.<sup>22</sup> If all workers had paid sick days, 1.3 million emergency room visits could be prevented and public and private costs would be saved.<sup>23</sup>

**Children whose parents don’t have paid sick days face negative health consequences.**

- Working parents without paid sick days are nearly twice as likely as those with paid sick days to send a sick child to school or day care.<sup>24</sup> As a result, they are forced to put the health of their children and their children’s classmates and teachers at risk.
- Working parents without paid sick days are 2.5 times more likely than those with paid sick days to report taking a child or family member to the emergency room because they were unable to take time off during their normal job hours.<sup>25</sup>
- Children whose parents have paid sick days are more likely to receive preventive health care – specifically, they are 13 percent more likely to receive a flu vaccine and 13 percent more likely to have an annual checkup, compared to children whose

parents do not have paid sick days.<sup>26</sup> Children whose mothers lack paid sick days are also less likely to receive routine well-child checkups, dental care and flu shots.<sup>27</sup>

## **Paid Sick Days for All Would Reduce Costs and Promote Healthier Families and Communities**

**A national paid sick days standard would benefit working people and their families, businesses and our public health.**

- Public policies that guarantee a minimum number of earned paid sick days provide working people the time they need to recover from an illness or care for a sick family member without compromising their financial stability. And they benefit public health: A recent study found that the general flu rate in jurisdictions with paid sick days laws decreased by 5.5 to 6.5 percent after the laws took effect.<sup>28</sup> Connecticut’s paid sick days law led to a faster decline in occupational injuries and illnesses in jobs covered by the law compared to rates for those same occupations in New York and nationally.<sup>29</sup> In Washington state, a paid sick days law cut the share of retail and food service workers who reported working while sick by eight percentage points.<sup>30</sup>
- Already, 36 jurisdictions nationwide have adopted paid sick days laws, including 15 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington.<sup>31</sup>
- At the federal level, it is estimated that a proposed paid sick days law would expand access to more than 90 percent of the private sector workforce. This would enable millions of additional workers to earn paid sick time, with the largest impacts in sectors like food service and personal care.<sup>32</sup>
- The **Healthy Families Act** would allow workers to earn seven paid sick days to use to recover from illness, access preventive care or care for a sick family member.

---

**“[P]AID SICK DAY LEGISLATION WOULD BE A PRACTICAL AND EVIDENCE-BASED PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY TO PREVENT COMMUNICABLE DISEASE AND TO ENABLE TIMELY, PREVENTATIVE CARE FOR OURSELVES, OUR CHILDREN AND OUR ELDERS.... [A] PAID SICK DAY LAW HAS POTENTIAL TO REDUCE HEALTH DISPARITIES AND CONTROL HEALTH CARE COSTS.”**

**— Dr. Rajiv Bhatia, Director,  
Occupational & Environmental Health,  
San Francisco Department of Public  
Health**

---

Workers at places of employment with fewer than 15 employees would earn seven unpaid, job-protected sick days.

The evidence is clear: When workers have access to paid sick days, everyone benefits.  
**Learn more at [PaidSickDays.org](https://www.paid sick days.org).**

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023, September). *National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2023 (See Excel tables, Private industry workers, Leave)*. Retrieved 17 November 2023, from <https://www.bls.gov/ebs/publications/annual-benefits-summary.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kumar, S., Crouse Quinn, S., Kim, K. H., Daniel, L. H., & Freimuth, V. S. (2012, January). The Impact of Workplace Policies and Other Social Factors on Self-Reported Influenza-Like Illness Incidence During the 2009 H1N1 Pandemic. *American Journal of Public Health, 102*(1), 134-140. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2011.300482

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019, August 29). *Access to and Use of Leave Summary* (Table 1). Retrieved 13 October 2022, from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics website: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/leave.t01.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Afsaw, A., Pana-Cryan, R., & Rosa, R. (2012). Paid Sick Leave and Nonfatal Occupational Injuries. *American Journal of Public Health, 102*(9), e59-e64. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2011.300482

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, T. W., & Kim, J. (2010, June). *Paid Sick Days: Attitudes and Experiences*. National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago for the Public Welfare Foundation Publication. Retrieved 13 October 2022 from <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/economic-justice/paid-sick-days/paid-sick-days-attitudes-and-experiences.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See note 1; Xia, J., Hayes, J., Gault, B., & Nguyen, H. (2016, February). *Paid Sick Days Access and Usage Rates Vary by Race/Ethnicity, Occupation, and Earnings*. Retrieved 17 October 2022 from Institute for Women's Policy Research website:

<https://iwpr.org/publications/paid-sick-days-access-and-usage-rates-vary-by-raceethnicity-occupation-and-earnings>

<https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/esme/paid-sick-days-access-and-usage-rates-vary-by-race-ethnicity-occupation-and-earnings/>

<sup>10</sup> Pichler, S., Wen, K., & Ziebarth, N. R. (2020, October 15). COVID-19 Emergency Sick Leave Has Helped Flatten The Curve In The United States. *Health Affairs, 39*(12): 2197-2204. doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2020.00863

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (2013). *FDA Food Code 2013 (Chapter 2.2, Employee Health)*. Retrieved 13 October 2022, from <https://www.fda.gov/media/87140/download>

<sup>12</sup> Carpenter, L. R., Green, A. L., Norton, D. M., Frick, R., Tobin-D'Angelo, M., Reimann, D. W.,... Le, B. (2013, August 4). Food Worker Experiences with and Beliefs about Working While Ill. *Journal of Food Protection, 76*(12), 2146-2154. Retrieved 13 October 2022 from <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/ehsnet/docs/jfp-foodworker-beliefs-working-ill.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> DeBurgh, K. & Jacobson, D. (2017, September 1). Association of Paid Sick Leave Laws With Foodborne Illness Rates. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. Retrieved 13 October 2022, from <http://phlr.org/product/association-paid-sick-leave-laws-foodborne-illness-rates>

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, November 5). *Estimates of Foodborne Illness in the United States*. Retrieved 13 October 2022, from U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: <http://www.cdc.gov/foodborneburden/2011-foodborne-estimates.html>

<sup>15</sup> See note 4.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, K., Williams, C., & Yi, Y. (2011, November 14). *Paid Sick Days and Health: Cost Savings from Reduced Emergency Department Visits*. Institute for Women's Policy Research Publication. Retrieved 13 October 2022, from: <https://op.bna.com/dlrcases.nsf/r?Open=dcan-8nms5r>

<sup>17</sup> DeRigne, L., Stoddard-Dare, P., & Quinn, L. (2016, March). Workers Without Paid Sick Leave Less Likely To Take Time Off For Illness Or Injury Compared To Those With Paid Sick Leave. *Health Affairs, 35*(3), 520-527. doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2015.0965

<sup>18</sup> Stoddard-Dare, P., DeRigne, L., Mallett, C., & Quinn, L. (2018, March). How does paid sick leave relate to health care affordability and poverty among US workers? *Social Work in Health Care, 57*(5), 376-392, doi: 10.1080/00981389.2018.1447532

---

<sup>19</sup> Peipins, L. A., Soman, A., Berkowitz, Z., & White, M. C. (2012, July 12). The lack of paid sick leave as a barrier to cancer screening and medical care-seeking: results from the National Health Interview Survey. *BMC Public Health*, *12*, 520. doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-12-520; DeRigne, L., Stoddard-Dare, P., Collins, C., & Quinn, L., (2017, February 9) Paid sick leave and preventative health care service use among U.S. working adults. *Preventive Medicine*, *99*, 58-62. doi: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2017.01.020

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Bhuyan, S. S., Wang, Y., Bhatt, J., Dismuke, S. E., Carlton, E. L., Gentry, D.,... Chang, C. F. (2016, May). Paid sick leave is associated with fewer ED visits among US private sector working adults. *American Journal of Emergency Medicine*, *34*(5), 784-789. doi: 10.1016/j.ajem.2015.12.089

<sup>22</sup> See note 16.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> See note 7.

<sup>25</sup> See note 7.

<sup>26</sup> Afsaw, A., & Colopy, M., (2017, March). Association between Parental Access to Paid Sick Leave and Children's Access to and Use of Healthcare Services (Table II). *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* *60*(3), 276-284. doi: 10.1002/ajim.22692

<sup>27</sup> Shepherd-Banigan, M., Bell, J. F., Basu, A., Booth-LaForce, C., Harris, J. R. (2016, February 28). Mothers' Employment Attributes and Use of Preventive Child Health Services. *Medical Care Research and Review*, *74*(2), 208-226. doi: 10.1177/1077558716634555

<sup>28</sup> Pichler, S., & Ziebarth, N. R. (2017, December). The Pros and Cons of Sick Pay Schemes: Testing for Contagious Presenteeism and Noncontagious Absenteeism Behavior. *Journal of Public Economics*, *156*, 14-33. doi: 10.1016/j.jpubeco.2017.07.003

<sup>29</sup> Hawkins, D., & Zhu, J. (2019, July 22). Decline in the rate of occupational injuries and illnesses following the implementation of a paid sick leave law in Connecticut. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, *62*(10), 859-873. doi: 10.1002/ajim.23028

<sup>30</sup> Schneider, D. (2020, February 20). Paid Sick Leave in Washington State: Evidence on Employee Outcomes, 2016–2018. *American Journal of Public Health*, e1-e6. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2019.305481

<sup>31</sup> National Partnership for Women & Families. (2023, June). *Current Paid Sick Days Laws*. Retrieved 17 November 2023, from <http://www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/work-family/psd/current-paid-sick-days-laws.pdf>

f

<sup>32</sup> U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee. (2010, March). *Expanding Access to Paid Sick Leave: The Impact of the Healthy Families Act on America's Workers*. Retrieved 13 October 2022, from [http://jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File\\_id=abf8aca7-6b94-4152-b720-2d8d04b81ed6](http://jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File_id=abf8aca7-6b94-4152-b720-2d8d04b81ed6)

The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, reproductive health and rights, access to quality, affordable health care and policies that help all people meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at [NationalPartnership.org](http://NationalPartnership.org).

© 2023 National Partnership for Women & Families. All rights reserved.