

U.S. paid family leave policies improve health

BACKGROUND

While the U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act provides 12 weeks of job-protected *unpaid* leave, there is no federal mandate for paid leave. Less than a third of American workers have any access to paid leave after birth or adoption of a child.² There are also vast inequities in who can access paid family leave.

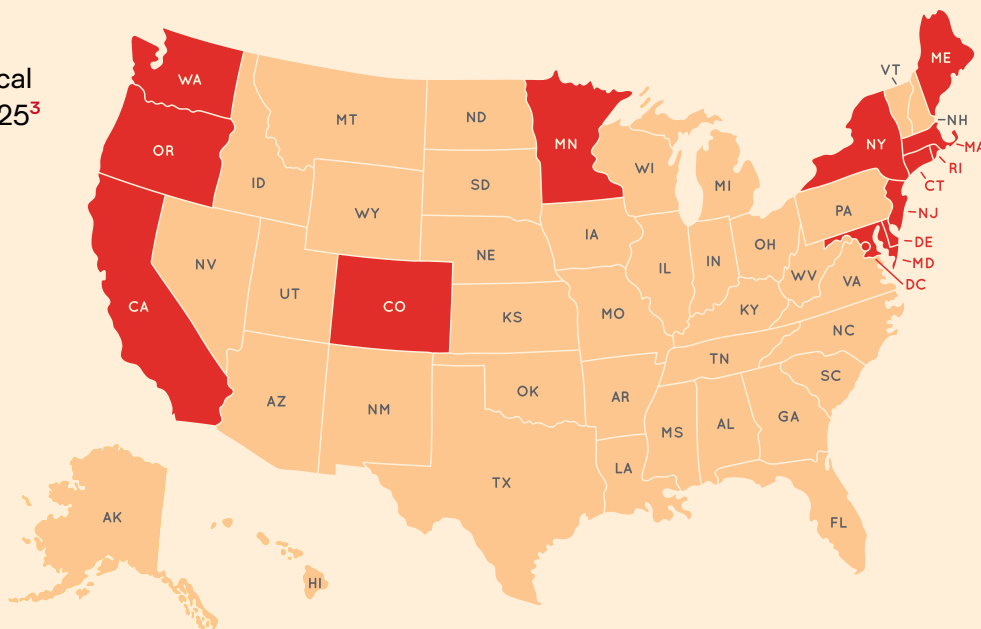
As of the start of 2025, thirteen states and Washington, D.C. have passed paid family and medical leave laws.³ Policies vary across states in design, duration, and wage replacement levels.⁴

8 in 10
Americans are in favor of paid family leave.¹ It has broad bipartisan support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** To improve parent health, paid family leave should be enacted at a federal level in the U.S.
- 2.** In the meantime, individual states can enact state-level policies.
- 3.** Policymakers should ensure policies are designed to benefit all people to reduce disparities: provide generous wage replacement and reduce administrative burden.

States with paid family medical leave laws enacted as of 2025³



THE EVIDENCE

Studies have shown that state paid family leave policies have positive impacts.



IMPROVED MENTAL HEALTH

Paid leave decreases parents' psychological distress by 25%.^{5,6}

It also decreases maternal postpartum depressive symptoms by ~8%.⁷



INCREASED BREASTFEEDING

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months, which improves babies' immunity and development.⁸

Paid leave increases breastfeeding duration by ~5%.⁷

It increases the likelihood of exclusively breastfeeding at six months.⁹



OTHER HEALTH BENEFITS

Paid leave improves self-rated health, decreases likelihood of being overweight, and reduces alcohol consumption.⁵



FINANCIAL BENEFITS

Paid family leave enables mothers to stay in the workforce, increasing their future earnings and tax contributions.¹⁰

It also reduces future health care costs by improving parent and child health.¹¹



BENEFITS MAY NOT BE EQUAL FOR ALL PARENTS

Paid leave leads to a greater improvement in breastfeeding among more advantaged women⁹ and a greater reduction in postpartum depression among White and middle-income parents.⁶

Paid leave also increases maternal postpartum check-up attendance among low-income people.⁷

Policies providing more generous wage replacement may be more accessible for lower-income families, which could address health inequities.

REFERENCES

1. Horowitz et al. [Americans widely support paid family and medical leave, but differ over specific policies](#). Pew Research Center. 2017.
2. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. [Employee Benefits: Family leave benefits fact sheet](#). 2023.
3. Williamson MW. [The State of Paid Family and Medical Leave in the U.S. in 2025](#). The Center for American Progress; 2025.
4. Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center. [Paid Family and Medical Leave](#). Vanderbilt University; 2024.

5. Lee et al. [The effect of California's paid family leave policy on parent health: a quasi-experimental study](#). Social Science & Medicine. 2020.
6. Irish et al. [Paid family leave and mental health in the US: A quasi-experimental study of state policies](#). American Journal of Preventative Medicine. 2021.
7. Wells et al. [Effects of US state paid family leave policies on perinatal and postpartum health: A quasi-experimental analysis](#). American Journal of Epidemiology. 2025.

8. Meek et al. [Policy Statement: Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk from the American Academy of Pediatrics](#). Pediatrics. 2012.
9. Hamad et al. [Paid family leave effects on breastfeeding: a quasi-experimental study of US policies](#). American Journal of Public Health. 2019.
10. Jones et al. [Reducing maternal labor market detachment: A role for paid family leave](#). Labour Economics. 2023.
11. Wang et al. [The Benefits and Costs of Paid Parental Leave in the United States](#). Social Service Review. 2025.



The Social Policies for Health Equity Research (SPHERE) Center examines the impacts of social and economic policies on disparities in health, supporting evidence-based policymaking to achieve health equity.



To learn more about SPHERE scan the QR code or visit hsph.me/sphere