

Policy Brief

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Alleviating the Stress on Working Families: Promoting Family-Friendly Workplace Policies

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TALKING POINTS

Compared to other high-income nations, contemporary U.S. work–family policies provide very limited support to families.

Research indicates that three cost-effective policies—workplace flexibility, paid leave, and paid sick days—can support the well-being of employees and their families, as well as the businesses that implement these policies.

The U.S. FMLA is unpaid and not all businesses can easily provide flexibility which makes it problematic for most workers to actually utilize this benefit.

Work-family policy discussions must include research and multiple stakeholders such as state governments, businesses, and families.

ABSTRACT

In contemporary families, paid work intersects with family needs in a conflictual manner. At some point in their lives, most individuals become caretakers of family members. Despite this occurrence, current work-family policies provide limited support and few consider that most individuals have both family- and work-related responsibilities. Supportive policies exist in some U.S. states and in other high-income countries that sustain the well-being of employees and their families, as well as the businesses that implement these policies. These efforts include workplace flexibility, expansion of family leave, and paid sick days. Because not all businesses are equally able to institute such policies, work-family policy discussions should include research findings and incorporate multiple stakeholders.

Conflict Between Work and Family

Families in the United States have been changing at an unprecedented rate: currently 57.7% of all women aged 16 years and older are in the labor force (72.6 million), compared to 70.2% of all men (82.3 million) and 71.3% of women with children younger than age 18 who are working outside of the home.¹ Moreover, at some point in their lives, most individuals are involved in caretaking for elderly, disabled, or ill family members. For instance, the number of men and women who are older than age 50 and are taking care of an elderly parent has tripled in the past 20 years—now over 10 million individuals care for an elderly parent.² Despite such staggering figures, contemporary work–family policies in the United States provide very limited support to families. Few policies account for the fact that most individuals have both family- and work-related responsibilities, nor do they address specifically gender-related job concerns.³ Instead, many U.S. policies, as well as business and school arrangements, reflect a mid-20th-century perspective that families consist of a middle-class, two-parent household with one parent working outside the home for pay, and the other available at home to take care of domestic responsibilities and sick children, disabled family members, and elders' needs. This view does not mesh with the realities of the 21st century. According to recent census data, only 6% of U.S. households today comprise a married couple with children younger than 18 and a wife not in the labor force who is at home taking care of household chores and dependents.^{4,5,6}

Given the growth of families in which both parents work, as well as the fact that more than one out of every 10 households are headed by a single parent (usually the mother),⁷ the

need to negotiate family and work demands is urgent and widespread. For instance, the Families and Work Institute has indicated that approximately one-third of U.S. employees report that they consistently have to choose between advancing in their jobs or attending to their family or personal lives, and one-third of employees will have dealt with elder care for a parent over the previous year. These tensions between workplace and caregiving demands in the everyday lives of many Americans has led the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to rank the United States in the bottom third out of 34 countries with respect to work–life balance.⁶ Moreover, the United States is now the only high-income country in the world that does not provide federal paid leave for the birth of a child.⁸ The United States also surpasses all other high-income nations with respect to the number of hours worked outside of the home, which creates even greater strain around work–family balance.

All U.S. Households Are Negotiating Family and Work Concerns

Current legislative activity indicates that women’s specific workplace concerns are slowly moving to the forefront of political agendas. For instance, equal pay, domestic violence leave, and nursing mothers’ workplace rights are pending legislative approval in a multitude of states across the nation. While these are obviously steps in the right direction, the situation from a policy perspective is even more complex. Negotiating work and family obligations also affects men and all family caretakers of elderly parents, as well as those with disabilities and serious illnesses. As a result of the lengthening workday (and so longer work year), the aging of the population, and cultural pressures around intensive parenting for both women and men, meeting work demands and maintaining a healthy, well-functioning family has become increasingly complex for almost everyone.⁹

Adding to this complex situation is the fact that work intersects with family needs in multiple ways that are not uniform across social class, gender, or ethnic and racial lines. For instance, families at the lower end of the economic spectrum have little, if any, control over their work hours, and they often do not earn enough to cover basic needs. Simultaneously, purchasing child and elder care is often out of reach for middle-class families, and all families, including high-earning individuals and families, frequently face intense work demands that include long hours and overlapping obligations.¹⁰ Moreover, many employers offer a patchwork of benefits, with those at the top of the income ladder accessing more generous benefits than those at the

bottom. This leads to growing inequities between white-collar workers and professionals and those who are lower-income earners. Research has indicated that working-class women and men often have very little flexibility and control over their schedules and may be working several jobs to earn enough money to support their families.¹¹ Socioeconomic disparities also intersect with racial and gender-based inequities, which means that some individuals from various minority groups are more vulnerable in that they experience more difficulty in finding paid work and are more easily dismissed from paid employment. The Institute for Women’s Policy Research recently reported that 51% of working Hispanic women have access to paid sick days, which stands in stark contrast with 65% of working Asian or White women.¹²

The consequence of a mismatch between outdated conceptualizations of families, increased and intensive work responsibilities, and extreme socioeconomic, gendered, and racial/ethnic disparities with respect to access to work-related benefits has resulted in a crisis of work–family negotiation in the United States. Furthermore, job insecurity, partly caused by globalizing pressures, is exacerbating the tensions between work and family life.

The United States Lags Behind in Work–Family Policies

Despite empirical documentation of the long-term employment and social gains from the implementation of federal and state policies that support the family lives of working individuals who have caregiving responsibilities, most U.S. employers have been slow to institute family-friendly policies and programs. Instead, many employers and politicians contend that the economic cost of policies such as workplace flexibility, job sharing, and paid leave are too great, despite compelling evidence suggesting their economic feasibility as well as long-term benefits for workers, their families, and workplace environments.⁸ For example, in a work–family brief, Haskins, Waldfogel, and McLanahan pointed out that although federal and state governments have focused on extensive child-care policies and programs, those benefits are often not available to most families because of strict eligibility requirements and a lack of adequate funding. Moreover, policies that allow family members to care for those who are ill or elderly are even less common. This has led to a situation in which “work–family policies are now being shaped primarily by market forces” (p. 6).¹³ The report’s authors also pointed out that, because of government budget deficits, it is unlikely that we will see major new government-supported work–family related policies in the near future.

Cost-Effective Policy Solutions to Support Working Families

Policies and programs that support the negotiation of work and family responsibilities have become a crucial component of today's world. Extensive research indicates that there are a number of policies already in place in some U.S. states and in other high-income countries that support the well-being of employees and their families, as well as the businesses that implement these policies.^{6,14} These efforts focus specifically on three areas: workplace flexibility, expansion of family leave, and paid sick days.

Workplace Flexibility

Research has indicated that the most beneficial policy that supports individuals and families as they attempt to balance family and work is workplace flexibility.¹⁵ Having some control over when—and at times even where—to work allows workers to juggle the demands of long hours and care and domestic obligations.^{6,11}

In 2010, President Obama convened the first White House Forum on Workplace Flexibility. During the forum he highlighted the fact that tensions between workplace responsibilities and family obligations are not just “women’s issues” but instead affect all workers, including men and those individuals who do not have children but do have other care responsibilities.¹⁴

A policy on workplace flexibility does not just benefit workers; it also allows for businesses to function at an optimal level. From the business side, workplace flexibility has proved to attract better workers, reduce turnover, and increase productivity.¹⁶ Allowing workers flexibility over their schedules reduces stress and, in turn, diminishes absenteeism and turnover. This translates into a savings of up to \$300 billion per year, or between \$496 and \$1,984 per employee per year.¹⁷

Despite the overwhelming empirical evidence that workplace flexibility enhances the lives of both employers and employees, less than one-third of full-time workers state that they have access to such an arrangement, and according to a 2009 study, 40.6% of employees fear negative job repercussions if they were to exercise the option when it is available to them.¹⁸ It is important to note that not all businesses are able to implement workplace flexibility, which is a policy often most easily implemented for professional positions. Many types of service jobs, in particular, are dependent on the presence of workers at regular times. However, other types of flexibility could be instituted in such cases. For example, job sharing or having a

bank of substitute employees available in times of emergency absences could greatly aid employees in these positions.^{17,19}

Expansion of Family Leave

The expansion of paid and unpaid family leave is another critical policy that allows individuals and families to balance their domestic and work obligations. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 is the only federal law that specifically addresses employees’ need to balance work and family. Under the law, workers can take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave due to illness, to care for a newborn or adopted child, or to care for an ill family member. However, given the many restrictions associated with this policy, less than half of all workers in the United States are currently eligible to utilize the FMLA. Because the law applies only to employers with 50 or more employees, about 60% of U.S. businesses are exempt from having to extend this provision to their employees.²⁰

In contrast to similar laws in other parts of the world, the FMLA is unpaid, which makes it problematic for most workers to actually utilize. The lack of paid leave time has many unintended consequences, including being detrimental to the health of new mothers and their infants. The World Health Organization, for instance, warned that “a period of absence from work after birth is of utmost importance to the health of the mother and the infant.”²⁰ For example, evidence suggests that paid medical leave provides health benefits to children (e.g., higher birth weights, lower infant mortality).⁸ Yet despite these critical health benefits, the United States is the only high-income country that does not provide legally mandated paid family leave.

Empirical research has indicated that the FMLA encourages new mothers to return to the workplace after the birth of their child, encourages more rapid recovery from illness, and assists with keeping elders out of nursing homes.²⁰ Businesses also benefit from paid family leave. Extensive research has shown that businesses that offer paid leaves have a lower rate of employee turnover, and that such policies foster a more productive and loyal environment.^{16,21}

Currently, the most promising path forward to the expansion of the FMLA is through state efforts. California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island have been leaders in expanding FMLA through instituting state insurance programs for all public employees and for private employees who work in organizations with 50 or more employees. These programs pay workers a share of their wages during those periods when they need to care for a family member with serious health concerns or upon the

birth or adoption of a child. A survey of California businesses indicated that the majority reported that there was a cost savings by instituting the new paid family leave insurance programs instead of employees using personal, vacation, and sick leave.²² Moreover, in all three states, few businesses indicated suspecting any abuses of the system, and employers even reported cost savings as a result of the new measures.

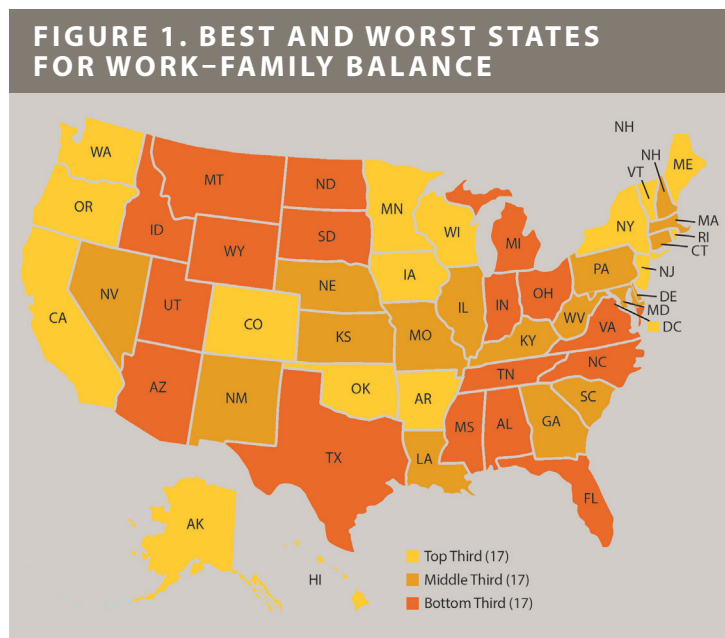
Paid Sick Days

Paid sick days are another expedient mechanism for ensuring that employees can take time off not just for their own needs but also in the case of the illness of a dependent family member.²³ The increased focus on paid sick days indicates the recognition that working individuals have an ongoing responsibility to care for dependents that goes beyond childbirth and dealing with catastrophic illness. Yet despite the wide support among most Americans for paid sick days and a variety of efforts at the federal level (beginning with the proposed Healthy Families Act, introduced in 2009), no federal bill has been passed. However, efforts at the state level have been increasingly successful. For instance, a joint venture by Connecticut Working Families and the Everybody Benefits Coalition resulted in the passage of the first statewide bill on paid sick days, enacted on July 1, 2011.²⁰ Currently, Connecticut, California, Massachusetts, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington, DC, have paid sick time on the books. In most of these states, the law was enacted in 2015.²³

Both national and international research has indicated that flexible and supportive work–family policies are cost effective both for employers and in terms of making the United States economically competitive in the global market. For example, in the United States, evidence from studies on paid leave initiatives in California and Connecticut found that, on a net basis, paid sick days do not lower business profits, they decrease the instance of employees taking “unnecessary sick days,” and they actually increase total employment in the regions affected by the policies.^{24,25} Globally, various studies in Japan, the United Kingdom, and Sweden have shown that providing women with paid maternity leave leads to employee retention, as does increasing workplace flexibility.^{10,26} In contrast, long hours often lessen employee productivity, as does not having a weekly day of rest. Shepard and Clifton illustrated, for example, that in a study of 18 U.S. manufacturing industries over 35 years, every 10% increase in overtime hours led to a 2%–4% decline in productivity.²⁷ The persistent failure to expand family-friendly policies at the federal level indicates that the most productive path forward is to make

a business case for improving family-friendly policies and to focus on state and local initiatives.¹³ In a large and diverse environment such as that of the United States, emphasis on global competitiveness and economic benefits seems to be more effective than focusing primarily on individual workers and their needs. This approach needs to be coupled with documented successes at the state and local levels.

A leader in the movement to analyze the effects of work–family policies state by state is the Institute on Women’s Policy Research (IWPR). According to the IWPR, New York State, California, and Washington, DC, currently have the most effective overall work–family policies in the United States (see Figure 1).¹² The IWPR based this ranking on four indicators: (a) policies on paid leave, (b) dependent and elder care, (c) availability of quality child care, and (d) the gender gap in the labor-force participation of parents with young children. Figure 1 indicates that there is much room for improvement in terms of alleviating the pressures on families and businesses across the country. However, the success of some of the state initiatives indicates that ultimately change on the federal legislative level is possible as well.



Institute for Women’s Policy Research. (2015). *The status of women in the states, chapter 3*. Retrieved from <http://statusofwomensdata.org/app/uploads/2015/09/PDF-of-final-Work-Family-chapter-9-4-2015.pdf>.

Conclusion

As we move further into the 21st century, a challenge for the United States is to participate in a process that allows individuals and families, employers, and the government to engage in a mutually beneficial dialogue. We also need to find mechanisms that will lead to the implementation of policies that are responsive to key social and family changes. In particular, we need to change the fundamental assumption that employee and employer interests are mutually exclusive, and in opposition to one another. Empirical research has indicated that allowing employees more flexibility with respect to their hours and location of work, and providing a more individualized selection of benefits, actually increases productivity and employee retention.²⁸ Instead of decreasing an employer's profits, well-thought-out work–life policies that draw on an empirical research base can contribute significantly to the overall success of businesses while concurrently supporting the health of American workers and their families and children.¹⁷

Social scientists need to work closely with businesses to create databases that illustrate how family-friendly policies can improve their bottom line. This is a particularly important endeavor for employees who are less educated and/or work in lower-income jobs. They are currently the ones who are least likely to be able to access those benefits and are thus severely affected by the negotiation of family and work responsibilities.

Social scientists also need to provide empirical evidence that demonstrates that when community-based institutions such as schools, health-care providers, and programs for elderly adults adapt to the changing nature of American families, individuals' health improves and families are strengthened. These outcomes fundamentally make us more competitive in the global arena.

In conclusion, it is critical to acknowledge that negotiating work and family responsibilities affects all U.S. workers. Because, however, not all businesses are equally able to institute such policies—given their size or constraints based on the service they provide—we also need to work with schools, health-care providers, and community agencies to implement new work schedules and programs that specifically address the concerns of today's working families. Changes at the community level will help alleviate some of the stress on America's working families. This requires that work–family discussions and initiatives be at the forefront of legislative, business, and social scientific agendas and that they also meet the needs of the employees earning low incomes and those who are less educated. Family-friendly initiatives ultimately do not just assist individuals or employees. They also work to make us a stronger, globally competitive nation.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- **Promote stakeholder participation in the formation of effective work–family policies in order to understand which policies are the most effective for various constituencies and to ensure that the appropriate participants are at the table.**
- **Build effective partnerships between local businesses and state governments that make them accountable for implementing work–family policies that include low-income and less educated workers as well.**
- **Facilitate exchanges of examples of policies, programs, and practices that have proved successful in various regions of the country as well as effective local initiatives.**

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