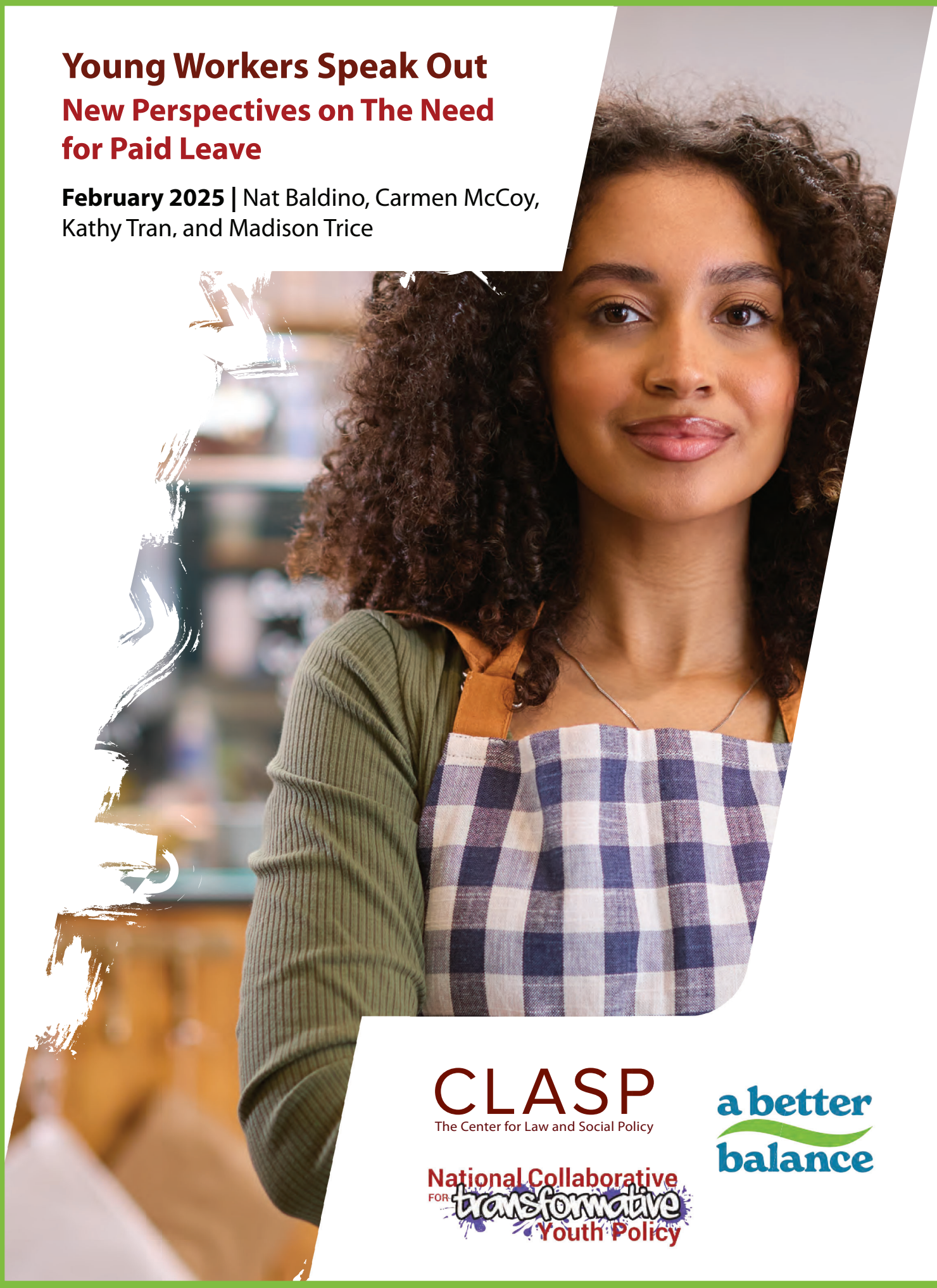
Young Workers Speak Out

New Perspectives on The Need for Paid Leave

February 2025 | Nat Baldino, Carmen McCoy, Kathy Tran, and Madison Trice



CLASP
The Center for Law and Social Policy

National Collaborative FOR transformative Youth Policy

a better balance

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This first-of-its-kind report provides an in-depth case study analysis of young people from across the country and their paid leave needs. Conducted over 18 months, the report uses eleven detailed examples of youth ages 18 to 30 in seven states and Washington, D.C., including both localities that have access to paid leave laws and those that do not.

This report finds that youth in America, especially in regions like the South that have high populations of young Black and Brown people, desperately need policies that provide adequate and accessible paid leave from employment.

Our youth cannot thrive without robust paid leave policies that work for them – whether that means taking time off to care for a sick younger sibling or a parent with a disability, dealing with a mental health issue without risking their economic security, or feeling confident applying to a job while pregnant knowing they will have leave to take care of a new infant.

What's New in This Report

- Prior reports that focused on the needs of youth did not include the critical area of paid leave for young workers. Paid leave reports leave out the unique perspectives of youth. This report is the first to analyze the intersection of these two areas in detail.
- This report provides qualitative and quantitative analysis of the needs and concerns of youth who require paid leave for physical and mental health, including their direct perspectives and experiences.
- This report provides recommendations for how to enact and implement paid leave policies in ways that most benefit young workers, a core demographic for our economy and democracy.

The issue

One generation of workers is left out of the paid leave conversation in the United States, which is focused on stereotypical white professionals aged 30 to 45. Youth workers are a large segment of the American work and care force but often occupy positions that do not offer guaranteed rights to paid leave, whether that be paid family and medical leave (PFML) or paid sick time.

Without a national law ensuring that all workers are able to care for themselves and their loved ones, many young workers are left to choose between their personal or financial well-being.

Data has increasingly revealed that young workers are an expanding portion of caregivers in the country. For these sandwiched generations – those caring for aging or ill family members and raising children of their own while simultaneously caring for themselves – the demand for flexible policies that recognize their humanity is at an all-time high.

Despite this, youth workers reveal that they experience extreme difficulties utilizing or obtaining paid leave. Whether it be fear of a hostile work environment, a lack of knowledge about what is available, or a general lack of access, it is clear that these workers are not receiving the help they need. With Americans struggling to juggle the dual mental loads of clocking out of work just to clock in at home, American policies are proving drastically slow to catch up.

The United States remains one of the only developed nations that does not offer a guaranteed right to paid leave. This means that it is left to the discretion of the states and local governments to implement PFML and paid sick day programs, a majority of which have yet to do so. This creates an inequitable patchwork that stops these lifesaving policies at the arbitrary boundaries of state or city lines.

For youth workers who live in a state with guaranteed rights to paid leave, there remain barriers that make it difficult for them to feel empowered to utilize these rights. For workers who do not live in a state that provides a legal right to paid leave, the fear of financial ruin is even more heightened.

The perplexing and counterintuitive political landscape illustrates that there is a very real need for paid leave among young workers, but they are rarely at the center of the conversation. Not only are they leading the new wave of caregiving, including chosen and non-nuclear style families, but they are also taking over the workforce from an aging population and voting in record numbers. Youth workers have made it clear that paid leave is one of their top workplace benefits. Lawmakers need to center the lived experiences of the generation that needs these policies most.

Methodology

In late 2023 and early 2024, the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and A Better Balance (ABB) interviewed young advocates for this report to highlight the need for paid leave within the youth workforce. We conducted one-on-one interviews with 11 young workers between the ages of 18 and 30. Several of these workers were identified after they utilized ABB's helpline for legal aid. Their experiences encompassed needing and accessing leave—including unpaid leave, paid family and medical leave, and paid time off including paid sick days. CLASP also identified interviewees who experienced struggles with varying types of leave.

We interviewed workers across several industries, experiences, and locations. Several interviewees are from states with statewide PFML or paid sick time programs; several live in states with no such program, but they had workplace-specific paid leave; and some had no access to paid leave at all. The qualitative data collected from these interviews highlights that across industry, age, gender, background, and location, youth workers are experiencing similar realities when it comes to paid leave.

Central findings

- **Young workers do not know what type of leave they can access.** While state programs offer critical benefits and job protections, young workers often have a difficult time navigating their rights and accessing their benefits. Those interviewed voiced uncertainty about which laws applied to them, finding the patchwork of federal, state, and local laws confusing and complicated. Youth were also confused as to what counts as paid family and medical leave (longer-term paid leave) versus other workplace leave benefits used for shorter increments of time, such as paid time off (PTO) and accrued sick days. Often interviewees conflated one bucket of leave with another, using them interchangeably, illustrating that there need to be clear differentiated rights to each type of leave.
- **Even when able to access leave, young workers do not have the necessary information about the application process.** Some of our participants used PFML programs in the past but described difficulties in navigating the application process and approval process, and in accessing their benefits. Many young workers described detrimental economic consequences from delays in medical certification, approval, appeals, and receiving payment of benefits. Some of these delays were due to legal provisions and some were due to employer policies.
- **Young workers desire access to information on their rights and benefits.** Almost all of our interviewees described feeling disconnected from the information on leave benefits that are currently offered by their workplaces, cities, and states. In the workplace, participants stressed the importance of written and media-based communications about leave. They expressed frustration with workplace policies that were often communicated via word-of-mouth, as well as training that only took place during hiring. Young workers want to learn their rights through multiple formats, and to learn continuously.

- **Fear of retaliation often keeps young workers from taking needed leave.** Both in states with active paid leave programs and in states without such programs, several young workers described encountering employer resistance to leave-taking. Workers in states with paid leave programs were often unaware of the law's job protection or anti-retaliation provisions, and some employers seemed to illegally ignore them. This often led to prohibited retaliation in the form of outright firing, being denied promotions, or being pressured to leave their jobs. In general, fear of economic instability through retaliatory action led workers to refrain from taking needed time off, quit their jobs, or engage in presenteeism (coming in to work while sick).
- **Young workers struggle, due to systemic racism, sexism, and adultism, when trying to take leave and maintain economic stability.** Young workers are acutely aware of how systemic inequality affects their working lives. Our participants described how racism, sexism, and their status as young workers boxed them out of information and into low-quality jobs. Participants voiced their hopes for the future and bold visions for job quality while recognizing how cultural stereotypes around their identities are at odds with these visionary futures. One interviewee, a Haitian immigrant, dreams of working with the federal government to help those with experiences like hers, but she also stated that pursuing such a career would "not work with having a family."
- **Workplace culture plays a large role in fostering environments where taking time off feels possible.** Some participants described gaining knowledge and confidence from encouraging and supportive coworkers and supervisors. Conversely, other participants described workplace cultures of overwork, understaffing, and surveillance where taking any time off felt impossible in states where there were no legal rights.
- **Scheduling and flexibility—both within the workplace and in young workers' home lives—play an outsized role in determining their ability to take leave.** Participants described how their ability to take leave depended on schedule flexibility. In their workplaces, workers describe needing to get their shifts covered, worrying about burdening coworkers with extra work, and having to predict their leave needs. Many participants are working while navigating childcare, being primary caregivers, having multiple jobs, and other situations that stymie their flexibility.
- **Young workers recognize the negative effect a lack of paid leave has on their mental health.** Across all the topics we covered, young workers deeply understood how poor job quality ate away at their mental health. Our participants desire policies that prioritize mental health equally to physical health and make room for workers to be well. They view paid leave as just one policy in a suite of job quality policies that can improve young workers' mental health.

Recommendations

- **Youth workers should be involved in all policy conversations that will involve them and their futures.** We've long heard the battle cry "nothing for us without us," and policymakers are responsible for ensuring even the youngest of their constituents are being brought to the table. This report makes it clear that young workers know what they need in order to thrive at home and at work. They should feel empowered to share their stories and have them valued by decision-makers.
- **America needs a national paid family and medical leave program to provide rights for all, regardless of the state in which they live.** While statewide PFML programs are proving these policies are not only sustainable but also help communities thrive, they can only offer protections to those who live within their jurisdictions. Paid family and medical leave gives workers the power to make choices about their own lives while continuing to feel empowered and protected in the workplace. By enacting a national policy, Americans across the country can take the time they need to care for themselves and their loved ones without jeopardizing their financial well-being.
- **A national right to paid sick time would keep workers healthy and attached to the workforce.** Paid sick time is proven to reduce absenteeism, improve employee morale, and increase public health across communities. Far too many young workers do not have even a single day of sick time, making it impossible for them to take time off from work without the fear of losing a paycheck or their jobs. Setting a national standard for the minimum number of sick days every worker in America is entitled to would help reduce the spread of illness and lessen the fear of taking a day off from work to heal.

The findings of this report reveal not only the critical need for paid leave policies on the state and federal level as a transformational tool to improve youth workers' physical and mental health and economic security but also the need for increased investment in community education and worker outreach to create a more equitable and positive workplace. Any nationwide paid leave program must take into consideration the unique needs of youth while developing the program and implementing it.

Background

What is Paid Family and Medical Leave?

Paid family and medical leave (PFML) refers to policies that give workers the right to receive wage replacement when they need extended time off work because of the worker's own serious health condition or for caregiving reasons, such as caring for a seriously ill loved one, or bonding with a new child, including adoptive and foster children.

PFML may also cover safe leave, which is leave to address certain needs arising from domestic or sexual violence. This may include taking time off to attend court proceedings, social service appointments, or moving to a new living situation.[1] Many state programs also cover leave related to a military family's needs in connection with a family member's deployment. Typically, PFML is longer-term leave, usually taken in increments of weeks or months.

The current landscape of Paid Family and Medical Leave in the U.S.

On a national level, the United States does not have a federal paid family and medical leave policy. However, many states do.[2] The U.S. remains one of only seven countries in the world without a paid parental leave benefit of any kind.[3] The only federal workplace leave law in the U.S. is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which provides covered workers with unpaid, job-protected leave to bond with a new child, deal with a serious illness or injury, care for a loved one with a serious health condition and handle certain military family needs.

Although the FMLA provides important protections to covered workers and their loved ones, the law falls short for many workers throughout the country and its rigid eligibility criteria cuts out around 40 percent of workers.[4] Even many workers who do qualify for FMLA do not use this leave because they are unable to afford to forego their paycheck and take unpaid leave, even when they need it.[5]

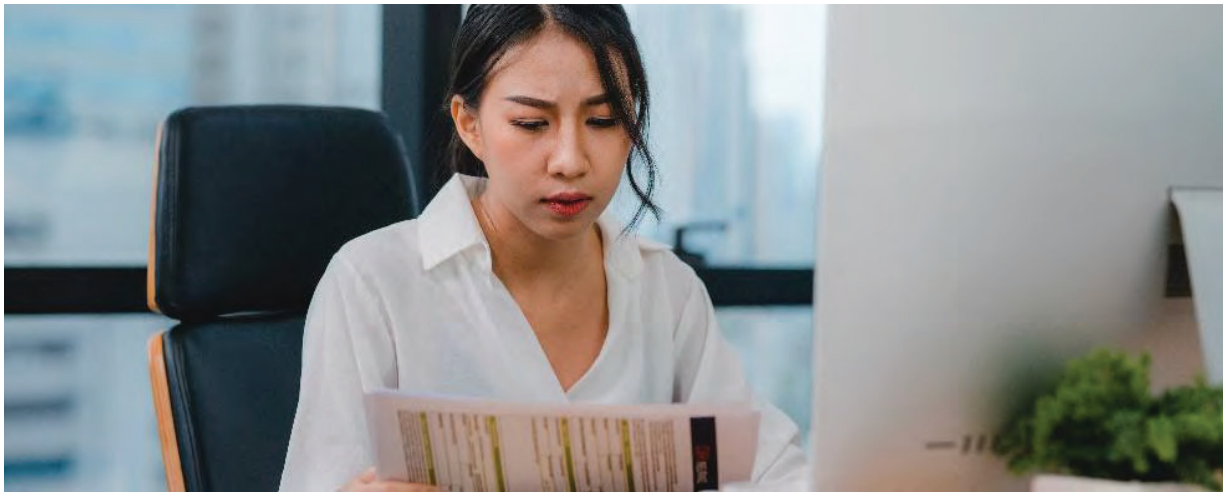
Further, the FMLA's narrow definition of family misses the mark for many—under the law, workers are only able to take family caregiving leave to care for their spouse, parent, or minor child, likely excluding many of a worker's closest loved ones.

Currently, 13 states and Washington D.C. have enacted PFML programs. The states with programs in place include: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington State.[6] While each program varies, at a minimum they all allow workers to take PFML for bonding with a new child or caring for a worker's own personal serious illness or injury or that of a loved one.

Unfortunately, workers in many states still lack access to this crucial policy. In lieu of comprehensive, statewide PFML programs, where there may not yet be a political path for a solution that covers all workers, advocates are working to advance creative legislation that grants paid leave to smaller, more specific categories of employees. However, this geographical stalemate highlights the dire need for a national program that sets a baseline for leave for working Americans, upon which states can build.

The importance of PFML

To be afflicted by an illness, suffer an injury, welcome a new child, or need to care for a loved one are universal human experiences. *Everyone* will at some point need to care for themselves or a loved one. PFML gives autonomy back to workers and recognizes the humanity and basic needs that exist within every workforce by ensuring that workers can take this necessary time without jeopardizing their financial security.



According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 27 percent of the private sector workforce have access to paid family leave through their employer.[7] In other words, a significant majority—73 percent—of private sector employees do not have access, leaving them vulnerable when they need time off from work to care for a new child or a seriously ill loved one. There are also significant gaps in access to short-term disability (or paid medical leave) to address a worker's own serious health needs, with 57 percent of private-sector workers in the United States lacking paid medical leave through their employer.[8] Among workers with low incomes, these numbers are even more stark; 95% percent of the lowest wage workers have no access to paid family leave and 90 percent lack access to short-term disability.[9] Without access to paid leave, workers who experience illness are 33 percent more likely to have to change jobs or lose their jobs altogether.[10]

There is clear evidence that shows the positive impacts paid family and medical leave has on families, including increased health, improved economic prosperity, and a lower reliance on public assistance programs. Nearly one-third of U.S. adults under the age of 65 suffer from at least one chronic health condition, which often results in costly medical bills.[11]

Not only can PFML keep workers attached to the workforce, it allows them to seek the treatment they need, while also reducing the heavy financial burden associated with seeking medical care.[12] By ensuring patients and survivors can obtain and afford consistent treatment, PFML has proven to be an important component of healing and recovery during periods of serious illness. Nationally, U.S. workers and their families experience $22.5 billion each year in lost wages alone due to the lack of paid leave.[13]

PFML is particularly important for young workers

For young workers, PFML is important to keeping them connected to the workforce. Without access to paid family and medical leave, workers are forced to choose between their job and caring for their health or the health of their family members, which can force them into a downward cycle of poverty following a major medical or life event. More than 25 percent of youth aged 16-24 find themselves unable to work or attend school due to a lack of support related to their childrearing needs, as well as family care needs.[14]

Young workers of color, who are more likely to hold low-paying jobs that do not offer this critical benefit, are especially affected by the lack of a national policy. Youth of color are also more likely to live in diverse family structures, meaning they are especially in need of PFML laws that recognize those varied structures.[15] Guaranteed access to PFML would provide young workers of color much-needed support and flexibility to handle family health emergencies or personal illness, thus reducing barriers to entering and remaining in the workforce and providing greater economic security to these workers.

Moreover, young adults are a large portion of family caregivers: there are over 3 million Gen Z caregivers, which encompasses those born between 1997 and 2012.[16] This reflects the reality that young people need access to paid leave in order to maintain their caregiving responsibilities. Further, young women aged 18-34, regardless of wages, report the lowest rates of access (45 percent) to paid leave for the birth or adoption of a new child, despite being the group most likely to give birth, and therefore the group with the highest need for paid family leave.[17] Young workers aged 18-34 also have lower rates of access to leave for their own illness or medical care and the medical care of a family member.

These statistics illustrate that young workers who have historically been left out of the paid leave conversations to their detriment need to be uplifted as our nation considers a comprehensive PFML program.

What is paid sick time?

Paid sick time laws give workers the right to take time off from work for shorter-term needs, usually in increments of hours or days, to address their or their family member's health needs. Examples of these needs include a worker catching a cold or when a child has a doctor's appointment. Paid sick time is also accrued over time, meaning that workers earn their paid sick time as they work. Like paid family and medical leave, there is no federal paid sick time policy, but 18 states and Washington, D.C. have laws guaranteeing that covered workers can earn and use paid sick time.[18]

Who has access to paid sick time?

There are significant disparities in access to paid sick time among workers. More than one-fifth of private sector workers do not have access to even a single paid sick day to recover from an illness or care for a sick family member.[19] Access to sick time is even lower for women and BIPOC workers who are occupationally segregated into lower-quality jobs. These jobs are often those with high levels of public contact, for example in the restaurant/service industry and child care.

Unsurprisingly, these are the industries that often lack paid sick time: more than 50 percent of retail and fast-food workers do not have access to paid sick time.[20] The largest national survey of U.S. restaurant workers found that two-thirds of restaurant wait staff and cooks have come to work sick.[21] In surveys of service sector workers, women were 11 percent less likely than men to have access to paid sick time.[22] Moreover, almost half of working mothers—which encompasses 54 percent of Latina and 42 percent of Black mothers—do not have access to paid sick time.[23]

Without guaranteed access to comprehensive paid sick time, workers will continue to suffer under cyclical poverty, either jeopardizing their health or their wages. Paid sick time laws benefit workers because they allow them to take time off without sacrificing their economic security. For many, the choice between taking care of their health and receiving their paycheck is an impossible one. Without paid sick time, workers suffer statistically significant, higher rates of psychological distress compared to those who have access to this important safety net.[24] Paid sick time is a crucial component of increasing equity throughout the United States.

Who are young workers?

Youth and young adults ages 18 to 29 are the focus of this report because this population is often overlooked when it comes to workforce policies. Youth experience major transitions and life changes throughout adolescence, which ends around age 25.[25] This is a critical time for young adults to engage in meaningful economic and educational opportunities that suit their interests and meet their needs. Various systemic factors affect the likelihood that young people become disconnected, both individually and in aggregate.

School pushout (which disproportionately affects Black and Brown students), or punitive school discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion often push students out of school temporarily or permanently and can lead to disconnection. Insufficient academic and counseling supports make it more difficult for students to remain in school, contributing to academic disconnection.

Disconnected youth are twice as likely to live in poverty and three times as likely to have a disability.[26] Systemic racism makes certain groups more vulnerable to pushout factors and other circumstances that correlate with disconnection. Black and Indigenous young people are significantly more likely to be disconnected, with nearly one in four Indigenous and one in five Black youth being disconnected.[27] The COVID pandemic decreased access to academic and social support for many, even as it simultaneously increased poverty and disability rates among youth, creating unique challenges to lowering disconnection rates.

When youth have multiple identities that are particularly targeted by push out factors and are systematically discriminated against or disenfranchised, they face intersectional oppression and intersecting forces of marginalization, making them particularly likely to become disconnected and to have difficulty becoming reconnected.

Youth access to paid leave has not been studied very extensively, but those studies that have been done demonstrate that youth have lower access to paid leave and tend to work in jobs that are less likely to provide paid leave.

ABB has published research on youth access to paid leave— specifically focusing on youth of color—that established that youth of color disproportionately work in jobs that have low access to paid sick leave, specifically low-wage and part-time jobs. They are disproportionately likely to be underemployed as well.[28] ABB's research established the importance of paid leave for young caregivers and young people in non-nuclear family structures, particularly young people of color.

Though young people are most likely to give birth to a new child, they are also least likely to have access to paid parental leave to give birth or adopt: only 45 percent have this access.[29] They also have low access to paid leave for personal illness, with about 57 percent having access to leave for personal needs and 43 percent having access to leave for family's needs.[30] Workers of color are more likely to work jobs that don't provide paid family leave, and are less likely to take needed leave because of the threat of financial duress.[31]

According to recent data published by CLASP and Data for Progress, nearly 2 in 5 workers between the ages of 18 and 29 have left a job or been fired because they did not have paid family and medical leave.[32] This rate is twice that of all workers, and likely contributes to levels of youth disconnection.

A study by CLASP and Data for Progress found that 79 percent of likely voters support paid and family leave for young workers.[33] Adults between 18-34, or the youngest group polled, were the least likely to have access to paid leave for the birth of a child, personal illness or care, or family illness or care.[34]

In terms of why access is so low, young workers are disproportionately likely to work jobs that do not provide paid leave, such as low-wage and part-time jobs. They are more likely to be underemployed and work part-time jobs when they'd prefer full-time work.

Young Workers' Experience of Paid Leave: Interview Findings

During our interviews, we asked participants from California, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, New York, Texas, Utah, and Washington D.C., to identify personal experiences of either needing or taking leave, distinguishing between public paid family and medical leave through a state law (PFML), paid sick leave (PSL), paid time off (PTO), and voluntary paid family and medical leave provided by an employer but not required by law.

Several of the young people we interviewed live in a state that does not have a PFML or paid sick time law on the books, leaving them with no legal right (unless they are part of a Collective Bargaining Agreement through a union) to take time off when they need it. Their insights revealed several key findings.

Young workers in profile

Aniyah (she/her)

Houston, TX
Age 30

Living situation: Aniyah has 1 son who is 8 years old. They live alone together.

Job situation: Aniyah is currently a project coordinator as an independent contractor, working with youth and creating mentorship programs. Prior to becoming an independent contractor, she primarily worked in retail, fast food, and other customer-facing jobs.

Jamie (they/them)

San Francisco, CA
Age 25

Living situation: Jamie has an 11-year-old child. They also help take care of their 8-year-old sibling. Jamie's husband is currently incarcerated.

Job situation: Jamie has 2 jobs. They work during the day at a non-profit, and then an evening shift at another non-profit that is youth focused.

Nadia (she/her)

Brooklyn, NY
Age 24

Living situation: Nadia lives in an apartment with her husband and 9-month-old daughter.

Job situation: Nadia is currently on leave; she works full-time at a non-profit in a salaried position.

Nina (she/her)

Bronx, NY
Age 21

Living situation: Nina in an apartment with her 9-month-old child.

Job situation: Nina is currently unemployed and actively looking for work. Previously, she worked in security.

Kendall

(she/her)
Minneapolis, MN
Age 25

Living situation: Kendall has a 3-year-old daughter. They live together in a 1-bedroom apartment.

Job situation: Kendall is not currently employed in the traditional sense but is making some money part-time through care work.

Jacob (he/him)

Washington, D.C.
Age 29

Living situation: Jacob lives with his grandmother, his mother, and his daughter.

Job situation: Jacob has a full-time position at a university.

AJ (he/him)

Atlanta, GA
Age 29

Living situation: AJ lives with his son and his son's mother.

Job situation: AJ works in finance. He gets paid hourly and works full-time.

Leah (she/her)

Morningside, MD
Age 23

Living situation: Leah lives with her husband and 3-month-old baby in a basement apartment in her husband's grandparent's house.

Job situation: Leah is currently unemployed. She started a new job in July last year and was there until about 2 weeks before she gave birth.

Dayna (she/her)

Prince George's County, MD / Age 27

Living situation: Dayna lives with her child and her child's father in a 2-bedroom apartment.

Job situation: Dayna works full-time within local government.

Willow (they/them)

Salt Lake City, UT
Age 31

Living situation: Lives alone in Section 8 housing after living with their parents for several years.

Job situation: They currently do freelance consulting with government agencies, universities, and nonprofits on disability justice, autism, and mental health. Prior to their chronic illness, they worked part-time jobs in gardening and wildlife preserve.

Knowledge of paid leave policies

> If you've never seen it used before, you're not going to know.
>
> - Kendall

While all participants could recall an experience of needing leave, many were unfamiliar with the distinction between types of leave. In some cases, even where the participants took extended paid leave, they were unsure if the leave they took was through a state PFML program or privately offered via their employer. Jamie (CA), for example, took leave for their pregnancy, but were uncertain if it was privately offered leave through their company or paid leave through California state's program.

Similarly, Kendall (MN) described her retail job as having paid family and medical leave, but when explaining the eligibility requirements, described an hourly accrual that suggests it was not paid leave but earned sick time. Throughout the interview process, we frequently needed to seek clarification because workers described paid sick time as paid leave and vice versa.

A lack of awareness or understanding of the differences between types of paid and unpaid time off is not the fault of young workers. Rather, it points to a systemic gap in policy that prevents workers from easily accessing information to inform them of their rights and benefits.[35]

Our participants spoke of this lack of information when describing their frustrations with the ways in which their employers communicated information and provided resources.

> It should be the company's responsibility to make sure everyone is aware of these laws . . . no company I've ever worked for has actually been upfront about paid leave.
>
> - Leah

One participant, Nadia (NY), took maternity leave for the birth of her daughter. Living in the Bronx, she was able to use New York state's paid leave program, through which she initially believed she could only get six weeks of paid leave Through a friend's recommendation, she called ABB's legal helpline to get advice, where she found out that she could qualify for 12 weeks of leave. Only after Nadia learned this did her employer send her the application.

Unfortunately, during her pregnancy, she had to attend regular doctor's appointments to receive infusions for low iron levels. Having only five sick days and not being aware of New York's Temporary Disability Insurance program, the only time Nadia could schedule her infusions was after work. In her interview, Nadia expressed that if she had known about the existence of New York state's program during her pregnancy rather than right when she was preparing to give birth, she would have attempted to use medical leave during that time.

> I would get off work at 5PM, go to the hospital, do the iron infusion, come home at 10PM and wake up at 7AM so I could get to work at 9AM.
>
> - Nadia

Navigating benefits systems

Even when young workers were able to access leave, they expressed confusion around the application process. Uncertainty around timelines, requirements for eligibility, and a lack of resources from employers, communities, and agencies often led to young workers not using leave. Our participants especially faced difficulties navigating the approval process and the detrimental economic consequences from delays in medical certification, appeals, and payment. Nadia (NY), for instance, experienced many issues surrounding paperwork for her paid leave claim. She ended up only being able to take 11 weeks instead of 12 because her employer did not send paperwork on time. To make up for their mistake, her employer agreed to cover her pay for that week—but not all workers are so fortunate. Workers should not have to rely on the chance of having a compassionate boss in such circumstances. And, while the application process was relatively straightforward, Nadia felt that the approval process was far more complicated. She said, "I would call them every day and ask, 'what is going on? Why is it taking so long?'"

Just as our participants expressed a desire for outreach and education materials in a variety of mediums, application processes themselves need to be available in multiple mediums. Nina (NY) experienced trouble applying for leave when the physical application she filled out was left at home when she went to the hospital. She expressed that by the time she was able to figure out what to do to submit her application, she felt like it was too late: "so I was like, just forget it."

Needing to take leave often comes at some of the most stressful times in a worker's life, and complicated paperwork can add an undue burden to an already burdensome time. For young people, paperwork can be a unique barrier to accessing leave because they are still developing the executive functions necessary to handle stress, solve problems, and make plans.[36] Facing massive executive functioning tasks during an already stressful time makes it less likely for workers to be able to complete the paperwork necessary to access leave.[37]

Dayna (MD) needed to take leave for the birth of her child while working at a grocery store and was overwhelmed by the "huge packet" she had to fill out. She turned it in early and felt prepared for her daughter's birth in December. But then her daughter was born several months early. She expressed feeling stressed and unable to balance needing to inform her workplace of her emergency c-section, expedite paperwork, and go through a difficult childbirth.

On top of this, because of her daughter's early birth and the application process for leave, there was a delay in Dayna receiving her benefits—her daughter arrived in September, but Dayna didn't receive her benefits until the beginning of November. She described the economic consequences of this delay: she had to ask her partner at the time to help with bills. Looking back at this stressful period, Dayna wishes that there were guidelines for extenuating circumstances, because "everything isn't cookie cutter."

Accessing information

Participants like Aniyah (TX) often took unpaid sick days because they were unaware of how to access the paid leave offered privately and voluntarily through their employer. Aniyah could only remember a couple of former jobs where she knew how to access an online portal to see how many hours of sick time or PTO she had left and could not remember if information on taking extended time off was readily available on that portal.

Other participants like Jamie (CA) described how they felt as though employers put it on the workers to "figure it out." Nina (NY) said that "if you don't ask, [employers] won't let you know."

For Jacob (DC), who works an hourly job within a university system, information about workplace rights, laws, and benefits often comes in the form of emails—but as the employee of such a large institution, his inbox is always inundated with university-wide announcements that are usually irrelevant. Because of this, Jacob doesn't think that email is the best way to relay information about workers' rights. In several instances, our participants ended up using a worker's rights organization like A Better Balance to find out what their workplace rights were.

> They give you a handbook, but honestly as a young person, who really reads that?
>
> - Aniyah

Participants constructively considered ways in which information could be available in multiple formats, especially considering different learning styles. One participant described herself as a visual learner at a workplace that primarily communicated through word-of-mouth, leading her to retain less information. Many participants talked about the importance of social media and meeting young workers where they're at. AJ (GA) said, "if it's not interesting, it doesn't get most young people's attention."

More digestible information seems preferable to singular communication about leave—Dayna (MD) thinks "young workers need more easy access and not a big, giant packet to do," especially where workers new to the workforce may be uncomfortable asking for help.

For workers like Aniyah (TX), this could also look like more brief communications, like a "short, accessible pamphlet" given about leave on top of a handbook, one that lets workers know the most relevant information. She says leave-taking needs to be "emphasized and uplifted," both in the workplace and in the public.

Information on leave should be easily accessible, available, and in formats that cater to many audiences. Public notices, external hotlines, and community trainings can all be useful measures. Meeting young workers where they're at can also be literal: Leah (MD) and others suggest that workplace laws should be taught in high school courses like home economics, and that workers should know their rights *before* they enter the workforce.

Jacob (DC) would love it if his job would set aside office hours every month for workers to drop in to human resources and talk one-on-one about their benefits. Lastly, Nina (NY) emphasized that workers need access to more than just knowledge of laws: they need communities of support and empowerment that allow them to utilize their knowledge.

> If you're old enough to get a job at McDonald's, you should know about paid leave and paid sick days as well.
>
> - Nadia

Fear of retaliation

> I felt like I was kicked when I was in hell.
>
> - Jamie

Many young workers we spoke to feared taking time off work. In both states that provided workers a legal right to leave as well as those without any sort of job protections, workers too often experience negative consequences from attempting to take any sort of time off. While workers in states with paid leave laws or cities with paid sick leave laws did not report frequent instances of direct retaliation in the form of firings, demotions, or the cutting of hours, they still worried they would face retaliation anyway, often leading to them either not taking leave or leaving a job rather than being forced out.

This suggests that education and outreach around job protection is critical to ensuring workers in states with leave laws feel confident in their ability to utilize and enforce their right to benefits. Many young workers with longer work histories had earlier jobs—typically in the service and retail sectors—that retaliated against workers taking any time off, and expressed gratitude for their more recent jobs where they feel comfortable taking leave.

Kendall (MN), for instance, was fired from her first job at a pizza chain at 17 because she called in sick. Later, she worked at a shoe store when she contracted COVID and needed to take time off. Four days later, when she was still testing positive, she received a text message from her employer letting her know she was fired. Others described a fear of even inquiring about leave. Jacob (DC) was unsure if any of his coworkers had taken leave, but shrugged and suggested that if they had they were probably "pushed out" for it.

Jamie (CA) feels as though needing to take time off as a young worker is culturally stigmatized: they believe employers associate a need for leave with laziness and described feeling stigmatized for needing to attend to their child. When Leah (MD) had bronchitis, she reached out to her store manager to take time off; her manager threatened her with "corrective action" if she didn't come in. While working at a hardware store, Leah explains, "Whenever I tried to use [my sick days] . . . I was pressured not to and to come in sick anyway. I would try to call out and I would get like 20 questions."

> How can people feel appreciated if they know, 'if I get sick, that could be the end of my job?'
>
> - AJ

Many of the parents we spoke to also shared experiences of losing their jobs because of the birth of a child. These firings came at a precious time that was already stressful and life-changing; firing added a burden of financial fear and economic insecurity.

Nina (NY) let her employer know her due date well in advance and thought that everything was fine. But when she went back to work, she discovered that they had taken her off the schedule altogether and told her she had to reapply for her position. Several other workers also experienced being taken off the schedule, especially while taking extended time off while working in part-time positions.

Other workers faced pressure to either resign or come back to work before they felt ready. Nadia (NY)'s employer told her, "if you don't come back, we're going to have to look for somebody else—we cannot wait for you." She ended up coming back early but felt like they held it against her.

Detaching young workers from the workforce during such pivotal points in their lives also decreases the likelihood of young workers building their careers and landing in higher-paying and higher-quality jobs—the kind that are typically more likely to have leave in the first place.

Two years ago, Jamie (CA) experienced a miscarriage and received a doctor's note to take time off for medical recovery as well as bereavement. They recall, "it felt like my supervisor wanted me to explain in detail why I needed the time." After six weeks, Jamie was put on suspension without pay, and subsequently fired. When Jamie threatened to sue, they were given a small severance check and told it was a payout of their PTO—which, after working for this organization for six years, they knew was much larger. After this incident, Jamie was out of work for almost a full year and relied on public assistance.

Such common fears or experiences of retaliation underscore why legal protections are so important for young workers. Where laws that prohibit retaliation do exist, young workers need to be aware of their rights and empowered to exercise them.

Presenteeism

> Especially when you're both a young person and a minority, you've got to make that decision, 'I'm gonna work sick,' because otherwise, it's either that or losing your job.
>
> - Aniyah

Fear of retaliation can also lead to workers coming in to work while they're sick. When workers feel they have to choose between their health and their financial well-being, they often feel like they don't truly have a choice. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends workers stay home when sick to minimize contact and reduce the spread of disease,[38] but many workers cannot afford to take time off without pay. AJ (GA) says that "if rent was due and I needed the money, I'd go in sick."

Nina (NY) walked us through her decision-making process for taking a sick day. She said that if she had recently called out, she'd go to work sick, worrying that if she called out too many times in a row, she might lose her job. Aniyah (TX) said she would "stick it out like a lot of people do." As described in her quote above, the pressure Aniyah felt to come in was compounded by the need to battle racist stereotypes around young workers of color. Unsurprisingly, guaranteed access to paid sick time increases the likelihood a worker will stay home when sick, rather than bring illness into the workplace.[39] States with paid sick time laws reported a reduction in infection rates with illnesses, such as the flu, by approximately 11 percent within the first year of implementation.[40]

Our participants spoke to the detrimental consequences of coming into work while sick—both for themselves and their coworkers. For Aniyah (TX), coming in while sick often looked like "dragging my body to work . . . just kind of, you know, push[ing] through the day." Both Nina (NY) and Aniyah believe that coming into work while sick made it more difficult for them to recover and led to coworkers getting sick. Paid sick time improves health outcomes for workers and their families. It has consistently been shown to reduce recovery time for workers, promote the use of regular medical providers rather than hospital emergency departments, and enable workers to seek preventive care.[41]

Access to paid sick time increases rates of preventive care for workers and their families, as well as decreases the likelihood that a worker will put off needed care. Addressing wellness needs proactively results in fewer compounding illnesses and shorter illness times, which can save workers money in the long run.[42] Working while sick isn't just physically exhausting, but mentally exhausting as well. Nadia (NY) says, "if your body needs rest and you're not giving it rest, then you're just pouring salt into the wound." Leah (MD) found herself burnt out and "miserable," taking out how horrible she felt by being shorter with customers; she also noted how it made life more difficult for her coworkers as well.

> I lost well-needed rest. I was sick four more days than if I had taken that one day.
>
> - Nadia

The importance of work culture on leave-taking

For many workers, their fear of using paid sick time or taking PFML depended heavily on what their workplace culture was like. Participants voiced that the way in which they learned of their ability to take leave, and developed confidence in doing so, was typically through watching coworkers and supervisors model good leave-taking practices. Conversely, other participants described toxic cultures of overwork, understaffing, surveillance, and judgment, where taking time off felt like a punishable offense. Unsurprisingly, workers in the more hostile workplaces were less likely to take leave when needed and suffered mentally, physically, and economically. For those who must be reliant on voluntary company policies due to a lack of state or local law, workplace culture is highly volatile from workplace to workplace. Having laws on the books that provide legal protection for workers to utilize paid sick time and PFML positively shifts workplace culture and ensures workers can take the time they need.

Young Workers On Intersectionality

Throughout our interviews, young workers described the ways in which systemic racism, sexism, and adultism impacted their ability to take time off, obtain financial security, and build their lives and careers. BIPOC workers noted how they already felt surveilled and judged by their employers. As young BIPOC workers trying to break into an industry, they said that "especially if you're a young Black or Brown person . . . the last thing you're worried about are your rights, you don't want to come in bringing what your boss will think is an unnecessary issue."

Workers also described how gender roles overdetermined their ability to take leave no matter what their gender was. Mothers like Nadia (NY) felt exploited, overworking without adequate benefits. She says, "[these] are the gender roles that you assigned to me. The least you can do is help me—I'm helping your economy!" But sexism doesn't only affect young mothers: young fathers like Jacob (DC) describe the ways that "America has instilled in me that for men, regardless of how you feel you need to get out there and provide" And admitted, "I'm a little locked into that mindset." Across our interviews, young workers felt that they were not listened to because of their age. Aniyah (TX) says, "when I was a young person, nobody really took the time to ask me how I was feeling about my work experience." Participants displayed a keen awareness of the intersecting power dynamics in the workplace and the ways in which they impacted their lives.

Many workers spoke of "cultures of distrust" in the workplace fueled by stereotypical views of "hard work." Jamie (CA) had the sense that their employer considered taking leave merely "slacking off," and described fearing their request for leave would be rejected because of their employer's worry about workers "tricking the system." Other workers felt like there was a hierarchy of need when considering using a sick day: highly transmittable illnesses like the cold and flu were less respected than more isolated, acute injuries or preplanned medical appointments. Jamie resents the lack of autonomy given to workers. They said that when it's "my body, my time," they shouldn't have to ask for permission to do what's best for them. Other workers like Kendall (MN) and Jacob (DC) described feeling that asking to take sick days simply was not worth the trouble they felt they would get into with their bosses, whether or not they had a legal right to take leave.

Part of why Jacob (DC) experienced a need for leave in the first place was from burnout. He described overwork and the "mental strain" that his workplace environment put on him. Morale was low, and turnover was high. He wanted to take a leave of absence or quit altogether, but his manager convinced him to take a shorter leave using the sick time he had accrued.

Other workers experienced coercion by their managers to not take care of emergent illnesses. When working in retail, for example, Leah (MD) got a concussion from hitting her head on a trash compactor. Her store manager didn't file an incident report or allow her to take time off. At the time, she didn't realize how wrong this was.

> I didn't know what needed to be done. All I knew was that I was in pain, and I was at work.
>
> - Leah

While AJ (GA) now works at a higher-quality job where he feels more confident taking time off, he said that he "couldn't imagine" taking time off at any of the previous retail jobs he had. When he worked at a major department store, AJ got hit by a car and went into work anyway. He looked into the possibility of taking extended time off, and even though his manager was sympathetic, AJ felt he "was doing his best but had to work within the confines of the company," which meant that he could only use his PTO.

He left the job a month later and admitted that during the time he was still working, he did not take care of his injuries in the ways he should have. He cites a judgmental workplace culture as a reason: "honestly, I felt like I shouldn't ask, and maybe that was just me being young."

Other workers reported having positive workplace cultures that made leave feel possible, and even encouraged. Aniyah (TX) spoke to the types of informal systems created in the workplace to spread information, help, and care. Knowledge of leave is often spread through word-of-mouth and hearing stories of other workers' experiences, rather than any formal mechanisms.

One of Aniyah's former managers was very proactive in teaching her coworkers how to access their PTO. She taught Aniyah how to request it and find out how many hours she had gained or used. Aniyah credits this manager with helping her feel empowered to both take time off and assert her rights in the workplace.

> If you create an environment where people can communicate openly, people will easily communicate and say, 'I need to take time.'
>
> - Jacob

As early as the initial interview process for their current job, Jamie (CA) felt the difference a positive workplace can make. An employee on their hiring panel had just returned from maternity leave, where the company paid for two extra months off.

Jamie remembers seeing how excited the woman's coworkers were to have her back: "[watching her] made me feel . . . excited, cherished . . . they welcomed her back with so many open arms and you could tell that she was missed . . . I want to feel like that." Jamie says that witnessing this interaction was pivotal in their accepting the job. Similarly, Dayna (MD)'s current workplace now includes supervisors that are proactive in helping workers understand their workplace benefits, although she acknowledges that they are still beholden to the overall rules of the larger corporation itself in terms of the quality of those benefits. AJ (GA), too, describes a workplace culture where taking leave feels both easy and common. He says that he "doesn't even think twice" about calling in. Workers in more supportive workplace environments had noticeably less fear of retaliation and described more confidence in their ability to take care of themselves and their loved ones, and plan for their futures.

Workplace Culture and Scheduling

"You still have to find coverage—that's one of the hardest parts. Even if you did let them know you won't have anyone to cover your shift, some places consider that a no-call-no-show and they'll fire you or write you up."

- Aniyah

While many participants' experiences of taking leave were determined by the attitudes and behaviors of their managers, workers described systemic scheduling issues as a main indicator of their willingness and ability to take leave. Particularly in hourly positions within sectors like customer service, retail, and food service, being able to use any sort of time off is entirely dependent on being able to find someone to cover your shift—an employer requirement that state and local paid sick time laws, where they exist, prohibit. Almost all of the workers we spoke to explained finding coverage in their description of how they think through taking leave. Aniyah (TX) described how scheduling culture determined how easily she was able to take leave. Typically, when taking paid sick time for doctor's appointments, she would let them know a week in advance, before they made the schedule. Yet she still had to call in frequently, because there were plenty of times where even though she had communicated her time off to her supervisors, they scheduled her anyway. In these instances, Aniyah explains, the worker was still responsible for finding coverage. This became especially difficult for workers facing chronic understaffing. Oftentimes, workers described being unable to take time off simply because there was no one to replace them. In these instances, workers either faced the threat of being disciplined for not coming in, or they had to worry that they were creating more work for the few coworkers they had. Jacob (DC) said that understaffing is one of the main reasons that he often feels like he has to come in when he is sick: "if I don't [come in], that's gonna leave just one person to do a bunch of different things."

The importance of flexibility, community, and scheduling

> When you clock out from work, you're going home to clock in. It's never done.
>
> - Nadya

Participants described how their ability to take leave depended on schedule flexibility. As described above, workers' ability to plan their lives is complicated by needing to get their shifts covered, worrying about burdening coworkers with extra work, and having to predict their leave needs. But work is just one facet of life. Our participants described trying to figure out how to fit stressful jobs into the structure of the rest of their lives, many of which involve caretaking for others. Young workers are constantly trying to rearrange their lives to fit into inflexible work schedules. Jamie (CA) has an 11-year-old and their husband is incarcerated. To make ends meet Jamie currently works two low-paying jobs, forcing them to work a difficult schedule: their first job is from 8 a.m. – 1 p.m., and their second job is from 2 p.m. – 10 p.m. This makes scheduling child care difficult. They told us they've been getting support from their daughter's grandmother because Jamie isn't available to pick up their child from school. Because of inflexibility at work, their child stays at their grandmother's house during the week, and Jamie gets them back on Fridays. Jamie shared the mental toll this has taken on them: "it makes me feel like an absent parent because I'd rather they be here, but it's also like, I have to pay the bills. It makes me feel depressed sometimes." Kendall (MN), too, described parenting as especially hard for young people, especially without support systems in place. Dayna (MD) worries about her daughter's health and doesn't take sick days for herself, in case she needs them to care for her child.

Many of our young workers also took care of other loved ones. This is not unusual, as today 66.7 million Americans live in multi-generational family households—a figure that is even higher among communities of color.[43] Forty-five percent of Latines and 33 percent of Black Americans report living in multi-generational households.[44] Nadia (NY), for example, was a primary caretaker for her grandmother while also working full-time and being a full-time student. When her grandmother was dying, Nadia's work did not inform her that she could use her time off to care for her. She instead would go to the hospital after work on nights she didn't have classes, creating more stress during a critical time in her life.

Nuclear family units—comprised of a heterosexual, married couple and their children—are also less common. Instead, families are blended,[45] LGBTQ,[46] and increasingly include close loved ones who aren't biologically or legally related.[47] Many young workers rely on chosen family and communities of care. AJ (GA) is currently the primary caretaker for his son's mother. When asked why being able to take leave has been important for him, he explained that he is currently the sole manager of how his son gets to and from school and has had to take on a lot of responsibilities while his son's mother faces chronic illness. While grateful for the ability to take time off, he hopes for more flexibility in the future.

> Sometimes we're just working to live. We're not living through our work. I want to live through my work, I don't want to just work to live.
>
> - Kendall

Recommendations

What workers want: bold ideas and progressive policies

One thing is clear from our interviews: young people need access to paid leave legal protections. Their ability to take both short-term and longer-term leave to care for themselves and their families should not be dependent on the state lines they are confined to nor the choice of their employers to provide it.

Below are the policy ideas that surfaced from the interviews.

Helping to realize young workers' dreams: national policy recommendations

Paid leave laws currently only exist at the state or local level. Forcing young workers to depend upon a patchwork of programs in order to access paid leave is fundamentally inequitable. Federal policies can establish a nationwide minimum of rights, while still allowing state and local governments to innovate and build on a national floor of rights shared by all Americans.[48]

Additionally, federal policies can provide critical relief for young workers in states without an existing paid leave program, especially in the South where legal protections for vulnerable workers are scarce. By creating a national right to programs like paid sick time and paid family and medical leave, Americans' access to basic workplace protections would no longer depend on where they live or be subject to the whim of their employers or their state's political climate.

At the same time, federal solutions on paid sick time and paid family and medical leave can ensure that eligible workers have the ability to take the time they need to heal without fear of job loss or financial instability.

The time for bold ideas is now

The young workers we spoke to have big dreams and hopes for the future. Many felt like they were not heard in their workplaces or in policy spaces more broadly. Yet, they are experts of their workplaces and understand that transformative policy change is needed to improve their job quality. We asked them what policy change was needed to allow them to not only know about and have access to strong, universal leave, but to feel empowered to use it without fear of retaliation.

"No matter your pay, paid leave and paid sick leave should be included."

Aniyah (TX) expressed how important it is to remove unnecessary stipulations around leave-taking eligibility. She urges policymakers to be proactive in drafting legislative text that is focused on expanding access to as many workers as possible.

In states where legislation has already passed, policymakers can use statutory language or make legislative changes to remove eligibility requirements like tenure, quarterly earnings, and hourly status.

"Our policies should reflect our lives."

Workers like Dayna (MD) want leave policies to be flexible enough to match the circumstances of leave itself. She advocated for guidelines around giving birth early and separating out maternity time from bonding time. As a mother whose child was put into the NICU for several weeks, she wants lawmakers to keep in mind that all births can look different. An interview with a Better Balance Community Advocate highlighted the dire need for PFML following her cesarean section to not only heal from the trauma of such an invasive surgery, but also to bond with her new baby.

Comprehensive PFML can ensure that workers can physically and emotionally heal while simultaneously fostering supportive relationships between parents and their baby and otherwise care for themselves and their families. Workers like Jamie (CA) also advocated for expanding understanding of paid leave policy to better incorporate mental wellness, having experienced postpartum depression. Paid leave policies are truly universal only if they are created with the real-life experiences of workers as their guide.

As one example, in 2021 a D.C. public school teacher experienced a stillbirth and, in her moment of grief, found that the rest of her paid leave was revoked. After she shared her experience, she publicly sparked a movement of workers calling on D.C. to act. In response, the city first expanded paid bereavement leave for public employees to include stillbirths and later expanded D.C.'s Universal Paid Leave Act to not only include prenatal medical care, but also to enshrine the right to take paid leave to recover from a miscarriage or stillbirth. This is a testament to how critical hearing worker stories are to creating holistic policy.[49]

"I shouldn't have to worry about losing my job."

A common reality for most of the interviewees without legal protections was fear of retaliation or loss of employment. When they faced the denial of promotions, reduced hours, and the palpable threat of firing, many youth workers reported returning to work early or denying themselves necessary leave in order to retain their employment.

"A lot of times [workers are] struggling when there could be an easier way, they just don't know about it."

Many of our participants, even those who had legal protections, suggested that employers should be required to have a better understanding of leave policies, as well as a role in helping to provide required information if the employee requests assistance. If the primary responsibility for employment paperwork is on the employers, it reduces the significant paperwork burden on employees and allows them to focus on their leave need. However, such responsibility must ensure non-retaliation, non-interference, and confidentiality considerations. To shift the balance, policymakers need to put robust enforcement guardrails in statute and ensure continuous funding for education to employers on their responsibilities.

Many young workers also wished for better community supports. This could come in the form of workplace leave navigators, strategically positioned within the community to provide education, outreach, and guidance throughout the leave-taking process. Kendall (MN) described how overwhelming it can feel for young workers to apply on their own, saying "it's really helpful to have a support system [who can] teach you things like about paid time off, sick time maternity leave." While outside resources like ABB's free legal helpline assist workers, having these community supports built into the program itself and the funding model for leave can promote better communication between communities and program administrators. Partnering with social workers, hospitals, community-based organizations, food pantries, recreational centers, schools, and child care centers can help get workers information faster, through already-trusted channels.

"Please stop making laws for us when you're not us."

Most of the young workers we spoke to advocated for giving young people a chance to be in the room to help create laws like paid leave. They think that giving young workers a more active role in policy creation can help make policies less "cookie-cutter," and encompass the variety of experiences modern workers face. The workers we spoke to have experience as activists and advocates. Many have successfully met with policymakers on the Hill and federal agencies, as well as submitted comments on proposed regulations, wrote legislative scorecards, and more. Agencies can proactively create spaces like roundtables, youth councils, and town halls to foster communication with young workers.

From Bold Ideas to Actionable Policies

Paid Family and Medical Leave

Foundationally, a strong PFML program is a universal one that covers *all* workers to ensure that the program and its protections are broadly accessible. This includes covering all workers regardless of the size of their employers; covering both private and public sector workers; allowing self-employed workers, freelancers, and independent contractors to opt in; and covering historically under-protected sectors, like seasonal, domestic, agricultural, and part-time workers.[50]

Based on our interviews, it is clear that many workplace paid leave policies are conditional and not broadly applicable. Ensuring all workers have access to these programs is necessary to keeping young people attached to the workforce. Additionally, accessible eligibility requirements ensure as many workers as possible have access to the program; this may look like setting a small minimum earnings requirement for workers to qualify for benefits and allowing portability so workers can still access their benefits when changing jobs.[51] Accessible eligibility markers are especially critical for young workers at the beginning of their career as they seek more stable employment.

It is also critical that a national PFML program ensures that workers can access at least 12 weeks of leave and benefits during life's most trying moments.[52] In particular, workers should be able to access PFML when the worker has their own serious health needs, needs to bond with a new child (including adopted or foster children), is caring for a seriously ill loved one, needs to take safe leave, or is addressing the impact of military deployment.[53]

Through our interviews, we found that many parenting participants were forced to abandon employment altogether to ensure they could stay home with their new child for as long as necessary and desired. Approximately 57 percent of young workers report having medical leave for personal needs, and only about 43 percent report having access to leave for a family member's care.[54] These troubling discoveries reveal why it is all the more urgent for all workers, particularly young workers, to have access to a comprehensive national PFML program.

A paid leave policy should also require use of an inclusive family definitions to ensure that workers can take leave to care for their closest loved ones, regardless of legal or biological relationships.[55] This is especially important for workers of color, who are more likely to live in multi-generational households; and LGBTQ workers, who are more likely to provide care for loved ones to whom they are not legally or biologically related.[56]

A comprehensive, equitable PFML program should also contain a wage replacement level that ensures workers can afford to take their leave. Wage replacement is an essential element of PFML—without receiving a meaningful portion of their income while on leave, many workers would likely not be able to fully access the program.[57] Providing a sufficient portion of a worker's wages while they are on leave is critical to ensuring that workers, especially younger workers who may be on the lower end of the earnings spectrum, can afford to take PFML.

Perhaps most importantly, workers need to be able to take leave without fear of being fired or fear of retaliation, without which a national PFML program would be rendered ineffective for many who need the protections most.

PFML programs need strong anti-retaliation measures and employment protections so workers are empowered to take leave knowing their employment is protected under the law and that they can meaningfully enforce their rights when the law is violated.

Lastly, a strong national PFML program should also be as accessible as possible. This includes streamlined and straightforward application procedures so that workers understand how to access benefits; employer requirements to provide written and at least annual notice to employees of their rights under the law; and program-funded public education campaigns so workers, employers, and health care providers are aware of the program. All application and educational materials should be provided in numerous languages that are representative of America's workforce. In addition to providing written notice to employees of their rights, employers should be required to place posters in the workplace (or in app-based platforms, if relevant) that detail step-by-step instructions on the rights workers are entitled to and the application process. If the program is inaccessible and workers are unaware of their rights, then there will remain a large gap in protections for our most vulnerable communities.

A national PFML program will ensure all workers, at any stage of life, are able to care for themselves and their families without jeopardizing their financial future. For young workers in particular, a national program would have lasting impacts on their overall financial prosperity.

Paid Sick Time

Over and over again young workers made it clear that paid sick time is crucial to being a productive employee and healthy individual.

Strong paid sick time laws have several key components. In particular, universal coverage is necessary because when more workers can take time off from work to care for their health and that of their loved ones, contagious illnesses are less likely to spread across the entire community.[58] Additionally, workers should be able to earn sufficient time off to address their short-term health needs through the year—ideally, workers should be able to accrue at least 64 hours, or eight days, of paid sick time per year.[59] The purposes for which workers can use their paid sick time should be broad to reflect that workers need paid sick time for a variety of reasons, from attending preventive care appointments to sudden emergency room visits, as well as for safe time to deal with the effects of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking. Defining family broadly to reflect diverse family arrangements—including extended family and loved ones who aren't biologically or legally related to each other—is also necessary for a fully inclusive paid sick leave law where workers can care for their loved ones.[60]

It is critical that workers get to use their sick time as soon as they earn it in order to respond to their health and family needs whenever necessary; too many employers have long waiting periods before a worker can access crucial benefits like paid sick time, which harms young workers who are more likely to experience job instability. Finally, similar to the recommendations for PFML, there should be vigorous public education; required notice of rights to employees; and strong enforcement mechanisms, both through a private right of action that allows workers to go to court as well as administrative enforcement.

Conclusion

The universal need for paid family and medical leave and paid sick time among young workers, combined with inconsistent access to these foundational workplace rights across the country, only reinforces that the easiest and most impactful solution would be minimum federal policies that provide a right to paid leave for all.

All workers in the United States will have a need during their lives to recover from surgery or a serious illness, bond with a new child, take care of an ailing loved one, or simply rest and recover from a routine health need. The American workforce deserves policies that are reflective of lived experiences. Nobody is immune from the realities of life, and therefore there must be a national policy that creates a right to paid leave so workers are equipped with the tools and resources they need when that time inevitably comes.

Young workers deeply understand how poor job quality eats away at their mental health. Our participants desire policies that prioritize mental health equally to physical health and make room for workers to not just survive but thrive. Kendall (MN) put this well when she said, "every job I've worked at, I've only worked there because I needed the money . . . it's time to do something that I like."

What could young workers' lives look like if they were given voices, choices, and resources? Imagining this future requires expanding our understanding of policy itself. Our workers intuitively understood that paid leave and paid sick time are just a few laws in a suite of job quality policies that can improve young workers' lives. Access to improved childcare, funding for community support systems, a living wage, and stronger worker protections are also necessary first steps to giving young workers the resources to build their futures and thrive.

About Us

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose mission is advocating for policies that advance economic and racial justice. Founded more than 50 years ago, CLASP works to develop and implement federal, state, and local policies that reduce poverty, improve the lives of people with low incomes, tear down barriers arising from systemic racism, and create pathways to economic security.

A Better Balance works to ensure all individuals can care for themselves and their loved ones, without sacrificing their economic security. Through legislative advocacy, direct legal services, strategic litigation, and public education, our expert legal team combats discrimination against pregnant workers and caregivers and advances supportive work-family policies like paid sick time, paid family and medical leave, fair scheduling, and more. A Better Balance's free, confidential work-family legal helpline can be reached at 1-833-NEED-ABB and our website is www.abetterbalance.org.

The National Collaborative for Transformative Youth Policy (TYP Collaborative) brings together policy, advocacy, and activism to drive transformational change by and for young people. Through youth-led policymaking and power-building initiatives, we address a wide range of interconnected issues and pursue multi-level policy change to maximize impact. By centering the experiences and vision of young people, we can achieve a liberated future rooted in abundance, community, and joy.

Endnotes

[1]New Hampshire and Vermont have enacted a voluntary law that allows private sector employers or employees who opt in by purchasing coverage. These programs do not guarantee a legal right to paid family and medical leave, therefore, they are not included in the list of comprehensive paid family and medical leave programs. See New Hampshire Rev. Stat. §§ 21-I:99 to 21-I:111, https://casetext.com/statute/new-hampshire-revised-statutes/title-1-the-state-and-its-government/chapter-21-i-department-of-administrative-services/granite-state-paid-family-leave-plan (last accessed January 2024); and Wilson Ring, "Vermont to begin offering voluntary paid leave program," Associated Press, December 6, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/health-business-legislature-vermont-montpelier-756a054f3a21691c7f890f82f0b47faf.

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