

The Importance of a National Paid Sick Leave Law for Young Workers of Color

The United States is the only wealthy country in the world that does not guarantee workers a right to paid sick leave.¹ In fact, 28 million Americans do not have access to even a single day of paid sick leave a year,² and 80% of those that do are not allowed to use those days to care for a family member.³ Millions more work for employers that have policies that may penalize them for taking leave.⁴ Without access to paid sick leave, workers are forced to choose between their job and caring for their health and the health of their family members. This is a problem especially affecting young workers of color aged 16 to 24 facing barriers to achieving economic security and thriving.

Youth of Color Disproportionately Lack Paid Sick Leave

- Young workers disproportionately work in low-wage jobs, especially in the hospitality and retail industries.⁵ In 2024, 5.5 million workers aged 16-24 worked in leisure, hospitality, and retail.⁶
- These industries with youth overrepresentation are the least likely to provide paid sick leave.⁷ For example, only 70% of workers in sales and related industries had any access to paid sick leave in 2024.⁸ The service sector—comprising leisure, hospitality, and retail—is the employment sector least likely to receive paid sick leave.⁹
- At the same time, Black and Latine workers are more likely to be in low-wage positions and are the groups least likely to have access to paid sick days.¹⁰ Black and Latine workers continue to have considerably lower earnings than the rest of the workforce.¹¹
- Black and Latine workers aged 16-24 are more likely to be underemployed than both their white counterparts and older adults; this includes those who are involuntarily working part-time and would prefer full-time employment.¹² Only 51% of part-time workers have access to paid sick time compared to 86% of full-time workers.¹³

Youth of Color Would Especially Benefit from Access to Paid Sick Leave Due to their Family Structures and Caregiving Responsibilities

- Guaranteed access to paid sick leave would provide young workers of color much-needed support and flexibility to handle personal illness or family health needs, thus reducing barriers to entering and remaining in the workforce and providing greater economic security to young workers of color.
- Young adults are a large portion of caregivers: there are over 3 million Gen Z caregivers, or caregivers born between 1997 and 2012.¹⁴
- Youth of color are also more likely to live in diverse family structures, meaning they are especially in need of paid sick leave laws that recognize those family structures.
 - Black, Latine, and Asian and Pacific Islander young adults are more likely to live with extended families that may include grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, as well as their parents and siblings.¹⁵
 - LGBTQ youth of color especially are also disproportionately likely to live in chosen families, often due to stigma within their families of origin.¹⁶

The U.S. Needs a National Right to Paid Sick Leave that Also Serves Youth of Color

- The Healthy Families Act, a bill that would establish a national right to paid sick leave, has been introduced in Congress every year since 2006, but never passed.¹⁷
- Currently, only 18 states (including Washington, D.C.) and 20 localities have laws guaranteeing paid sick leave to covered workers.¹⁸ It is critical we enshrine a nationwide right to paid sick leave, and such a law must reflect several key principles that would particularly benefit young people of color.
- A national right to paid sick leave must contain:
 - Universal coverage: Especially given that young people of color disproportionately work part-time and in low-income positions unlikely to provide paid sick leave, it is critical a national law have expansive coverage to account for these oft-overlooked workers.
 - Broad sick leave purposes: A paid sick leave law must reflect and permit the many reasons workers need to take sick leave, such as for an emergency room visit, family caregiving, or public health emergency.
 - An inclusive family definition: Because young people of color are more likely to live in diverse family arrangements, and need to care for a variety of family members, any law serving young people of color must reflect this reality.

¹ Hye Jin Rho et al., Center for Economic Policy Research, Contagion Nation 2020: United States Still the Only Wealthy Nation without Paid Sick Leave (Mar. 2020), <https://cepr.net/report/contagion-nation-2020-united-states-still-the-only-wealthy-nation-without-paid-sick-leave/>.

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2022, (Sept. 2022) <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ebs2.pdf>.

³ The American Civil Liberties Union, Why the Fight for Paid Sick Leave is a Civil Rights Issue, (Aug. 2020), <https://www.aclu.org/news/racial-justice/why-the-fight-for-paid-sick-leave-is-a-civil-rights-issue>.

⁴ A Better Balance, Misled and Misinformed: How Some U.S. Employers Use “No-Fault” Attendance Policies to Trample on Workers’ Rights (June 2020), <https://www.abetterbalance.org/misled-misinformed/>.

⁵ A Better Balance, Sick Without A Safety Net, (May 2023), <https://www.abetterbalance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Healthy-Families-Act-May-2023-Update-Final.pdf>.

⁶ Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/youth.pdf>.

⁷ Elise Gould & Melat Kassa, Young Workers Hit Hard by the COVID-19 Economy, Economic Policy Institute. (Oct. 2020), <https://www.epi.org/publication/young-workers-covid-recession>.

⁸ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Selected Paid Leave Benefits*, 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/ebs2.t06.htm>

⁹ A Better Balance, Sick Without A Safety Net.

¹⁰ Sarah Jane Glynn and Jane Farrell, Center for American Progress, Latinos Least Likely to Have Paid Leave of Workplace Flexibility, (Nov. 2012), https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/GlynnLatinosPaidLeave1.pdf?_ga=2.207541971.1314585480.1692036280-444735732.1684431125.

¹¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity, 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/race-and-ethnicity/2023/>.

¹² A Better Balance, Sick Without A Safety Net.

¹³ Molly Weston Williamson, Center for American Progress, *The State of Paid Sick Time in the U.S. in 2023*, Jan. 5, 2023, [https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-state-of-paid-sick-time-in-the-u-s-in-2023/#:~:text=Those%20in%20the%20lowest%2010,have%20any%20paid%20sick%20time.&text=Part%2Dtime%20workers%20\(51%20percent,time%20workers%20\(86%20percent\)](https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-state-of-paid-sick-time-in-the-u-s-in-2023/#:~:text=Those%20in%20the%20lowest%2010,have%20any%20paid%20sick%20time.&text=Part%2Dtime%20workers%20(51%20percent,time%20workers%20(86%20percent)).

¹⁴ Nat Baldino, Carmen McCoy, Kathy Tran, and Madison Trice, Young Workers Speak Out: New Perspectives on The Need for Paid Leave, A Better Balance, Feb. 2025, <https://www.abetterbalance.org/young-workers-speak-out/>.

¹⁵ Michela Zonta, Center for American Progress, Housing the Extended Family, (Oct. 2016) <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/10/ExtendedFamilies-report.pdf>.

¹⁶ Moira Bowman et al., Center for American Progress, Making Paid Leave Work for Every Family, (Dec. 2016), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/making-paid-leave-work-for-every-family/>.

¹⁷ A Better Balance, Sick Without A Safety Net.

¹⁸ A Better Balance, Young Workers Speak Out: New Perspectives on The Need for Paid Leave.