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U.S. Department of Labor

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# Why Parental Leave For Fathers Is So Important For Working Families

## **Abstract**

[Excerpt] Although paid leave is often framed as an issue that matters to working women, paid parental leave is also critically important for fathers. Policies that ensure fathers have the support they need to prioritize their family responsibilities, while also meeting work demands, can significantly increase the personal and economic well-being of their families. Paternity leave – and especially longer leaves of several weeks or months – can promote parent-child bonding, improve outcomes for children, and even increase gender equity at home and at the workplace. Paid parental leave for fathers, as well as for mothers, provides a real advantage to working families.

## **Keywords**

paternity leave, fathers, working families

## **Comments**

### **Suggested Citation**

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# DOL POLICY BRIEF

## Paternity Leave

*Why Parental Leave For Fathers  
Is So Important For Working Families*



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

# 2 million U.S. fathers were stay at home dads in 2012.

Although paid leave is often framed as an issue that matters to working women, paid parental leave is also critically important for fathers. Policies that ensure fathers have the support they need to prioritize their family responsibilities, while also meeting work demands, can significantly increase the personal and economic well-being of their families. Paternity leave – and especially longer leaves of several weeks or months – can promote parent-child bonding, improve outcomes for children, and even increase gender equity at home and at the workplace. Paid parental leave for fathers, as well as for mothers, provides a real advantage to working families.

Despite these advantages, fathers still face economic and social barriers that keep them from taking longer paternity leaves, such as inadequate access to paid leave and outdated workplace norms about male breadwinners. Here in the United States where parental leave is already too rare, social and cultural biases along with gaps in policy make fathers even less able to access time away from work for their children. Paid paternity leave is less likely to be offered by employers than maternity leave, and may not always be taken even if offered. For two-dad families, and the increasing number of fathers who are serving as stay at home parents, addressing this unequal access and uptake is particularly important.<sup>1</sup> Workers often face tension in balancing their roles as workers and parents, since there can be adverse consequences to prioritizing family over work *or* work over family. Empowering more dads with paid parental leave means they can achieve their professional goals and be supportive, nurturing fathers and partners.

This is an area where paid leave policy is evolving on the international stage, although even in other countries that have made much greater strides to offer robust and generous maternity leave policies, paternity leave lags behind. (Fewer than half the countries in the world provide men with access to paid leave to care for a new child, while virtually all provide paid maternity leave.<sup>2</sup>) But innovative new efforts to boost fathers' use of parental leave are accelerating a cultural change and breaking down gender stereotypes about work and family.

Best practices to support increased access to and use of parental leave by fathers include making leave paid, educating workers and employers about the benefits of paternity leave, and structuring leave programs to incentivize fathers taking leave and be more inclusive of all parents. The combination of better economic supports and changing cultural norms can ensure all families can benefit from paternity leave.

**Secretary Perez: “Fathers taking parental leave helps not just children but moms, too, by changing who changes the diapers and the whole culture around work and family.”**



*DOL fathers and their children.*

Nine out of ten U.S. fathers took some time off work for the birth or adoption of a child.

### **Paid parental leave for men is more limited than for women.**

**Fathers typically take time off but take very short leaves.** While survey data shows that nine out of ten U.S. fathers take some time off work for the birth or adoption of a child, seventy percent of fathers take ten days of leave or less.<sup>3</sup> In other countries, paid paternity leave is also typically substantially shorter than paid maternity leave. Some nations provide couples with shared parental leave (a period of paid and/or unpaid parental leave that the parents may divide as they choose) and under that system men tend not to utilize the shared leave as much as women or use only relatively small amounts.<sup>4</sup>

**Access to paid paternity leave in the United States is rare.** Although most workers have no access to paid parental leave at all, more employers provide paid maternity leave than paid paternity leave. A 2012 Department of Labor study found that fewer employers offer paid parental leave for men than for women, and also that fewer men report receiving paid parental leave than women. (Only 13 percent of men who took parental leave received pay compared with 21 percent for women).<sup>5</sup> Three states – California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island – provide paid family leave to both mothers and fathers on an equal basis.

### **When fathers take paternity leave – especially when they take longer leaves – it can lead to better outcomes for their children and the whole family.**

**Longer paternity leaves are associated with increased father engagement and bonding.** Longer leaves mean dads have more time to bond with a new child, and will be more involved in caring for their children right from the start. This hands-on engagement can set a pattern that lasts long after the leave ends. For example, in one study of working fathers in the U.S., those who took leaves of two weeks or more were much more likely to be actively involved in their child's care nine months after birth – including feeding, changing diapers, and getting up in the night.<sup>6</sup> Studies from other countries have confirmed that fathers who take more paternity leave have higher satisfaction with parenting and increased engagement in caring for their children.<sup>7</sup>

**Increased engagement leads to improved health and development outcomes for children.** We also know that when fathers are more engaged with their children, their children have better developmental outcomes. This includes fewer behavioral problems and improved cognitive and mental health outcomes.<sup>8</sup> A study of four OECD countries, including the United States, found evidence suggesting that longer paternity leaves and increased time fathers spent caring for their very young children is associated with higher cognitive test scores for their children.<sup>9</sup>

Seven in ten U.S. fathers taking parental leave took ten days of leave or less.

48% of men  
working full time  
reported job  
demands interfered  
with family life  
sometimes or often.

**Families with fathers who take more leave also share chores and childcare more equally between mothers and fathers.**

One of the more interesting emerging new research findings is that increasing paternity leave may also change longstanding cultural norms about gender, work and household responsibilities. When men increase their use of paternity leave, time studies show that the amount of household work fathers and mothers perform may become more gender balanced over time, with the men spending longer amounts of time per day on household chores and childcare.<sup>10</sup> This means that increasing how much parental leave fathers take can change the culture in ways that make it more gender-equal.

**Paternity leave reduces work-family conflict for fathers.**

Fathers are increasingly concerned about work-life balance, and nearly half of men surveyed report that the demands of work interfere with family life.<sup>11</sup> Paid leave makes it easier for fathers, like mothers, to better balance their responsibilities at work and at home.

**When fathers take leave, it can increase employment and pay for mothers.**

Finally, when fathers take more paternity leave, it may increase the ability of mothers to engage in paid work, with a positive effect on female labor force participation and wages. One new study of paternity leave in Canada found that when fathers take more paternity leave, mothers increase their level of full-time work, and another study from Sweden found increasing the amount of paternity leave men take has similar positive impacts on women's labor force participation.<sup>12</sup> If this increase in work by mothers brings in more household income, it is good for the whole family.

**Yet fathers who want to take advantage of these benefits often face economic and cultural barriers to taking more paternity leave.**

**Many workers cut leave short for economic reasons.**

Many parents cannot afford to take any unpaid time off work. Nearly half of workers surveyed in 2012 who needed leave but didn't take it reported not taking leave for economic reasons.<sup>13</sup> More than three in ten individuals who received partial or no pay reported cutting their leave

short of what was needed, and more than four in ten would have taken longer leaves if they had received more pay.<sup>14</sup> For two parent families, when mothers may already be taking unpaid leave for a new baby, keeping a father's paycheck coming in may be critical – and having dads take unpaid time off is simply not an option.

**Our workplace culture, and the male breadwinner norm, is a barrier for men seeking to take more extended paternity leaves.**

Even where men have access to paid leave, they might still cut their leaves short to avoid being perceived as less dedicated employees. One recent survey of highly educated professional fathers – who had more access to paid parental leave than most U.S. workers – found a substantial portion took less than the full amount of paid leave available. In that survey, fathers cited workplace pressures as a factor in the length of leave they took.<sup>15</sup> Other studies have found that fathers who reduce their work hours or leave work for family reasons may incur a “flexibility stigma.”<sup>16</sup>

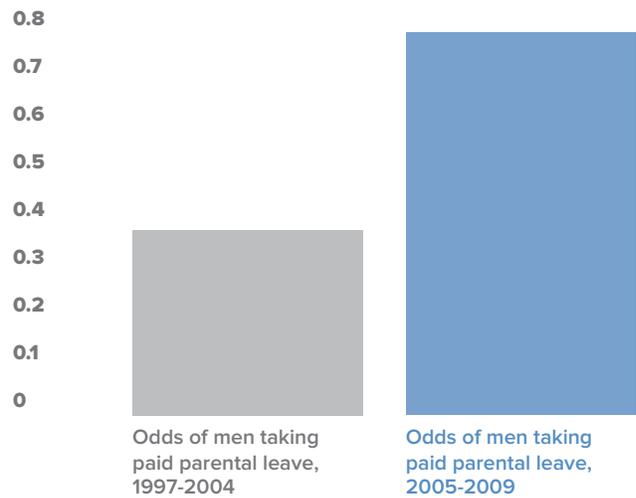
## Increasing paid leave, and innovative strategies to break down cultural barriers, can have a big impact on how much paternity leave fathers take.

**Expanding paid leave.** California's paid family leave program shows how broad and equal access to paid parental leave for mothers and fathers can substantially increase the number of fathers taking leave. This program more than doubled the odds that men would take paid parental leave after the birth of a child, and the proportion of men filing claims for bonding leave increased from 17% in the first year to 26% after five years.<sup>17</sup> California employers also reported an increase in men taking leave as well as an increase in the amount of leave they took, and the median length of leave was higher for men who used paid family leave than for those who did not.<sup>18</sup> In surveys men report they are much more likely to take leave if it is paid.<sup>19</sup>

**Dedicated leave programs for dads.** Some European countries and the Canadian province of Quebec have begun offering up to several months of paid parental leave specifically designated for fathers, instead of providing couples with shared parental leave to divide as they choose. Fathers with access to paid parental leave designated specifically for fathers take paternity leave at higher rates than those where leave is discretionary for either parent – especially when that leave also has higher levels of income replacement.<sup>20</sup>

**Employer Best Practices.** When the work culture is supportive, fathers are more likely to take leave and to take longer leaves.<sup>21</sup> Some employers are leading on paternity leave, including major tech firms that typically offer between 6 and 17 weeks of paid paternity leave.<sup>22</sup> Paid paternity leave may be a key workplace benefit for retaining high-skilled workers. In a 2014 study of highly educated professional fathers in the U.S., nine out of ten reported that it would be important when looking for a new job that the employer offered paid parental leave, and six out of ten considered it very or extremely important. These numbers were even higher for millennial workers.<sup>23</sup>

CHANGE IN MEN TAKING LEAVE IN CALIFORNIA AFTER PAID FAMILY LEAVE ADOPTED



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Two million men were stay at home dads in 2012. Pew Social Trends, “Growing Number of Dads Home With the Kids,” retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/06/05/growing-number-of-dads-home-with-the-kids/> (last visited June 17, 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> 79 of 167 countries have legislation providing paternity leave. International Labor Organization. 2014. *Maternity and Paternity at Work: Law and Practice Across the World*. Geneva: International Labour Office at 51.
- <sup>3</sup> 89 percent of fathers took some leave, based on a 2007 study of resident U.S. fathers in opposite sex two-parent households using data from the 2001 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort. Lenna Nepomnyaschy and Jane Waldfogel. 2007. “Paternity Leave and Fathers’ Involvement with Their Young Children: Evidence from the American Ecls-B.” *Community, Work & Family* 10(4): 427-453. Harrington, et al found in a 2014 survey of highly paid professional U.S. fathers that only about 5% took no paternity leave, but over 80% took two weeks of leave or less. Brad Harrington, et al. 2014. *The New Dad: Take Your Leave*. Boston College Center for Work and Family, retrieved from: <http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/cwf/news/pdf/BCCWF%20The%20New%20Dad%202014%20FINAL.pdf> (last visited June 17, 2015). A 2012 Department of Labor survey found that 70 percent of men taking leave for parental reasons took 10 days or less. Jacob Alex Klerman, et al. 2012. *Family and Medical Leave in 2012: Technical Report*. (Prepared for U.S. Department of Labor.) Cambridge: Abt Associates, at 141. Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel (at 433-37) similarly find paternity leaves in the U.S. are short and that two thirds of fathers take less than two weeks of leave.
- <sup>4</sup> ILO (2014); OECD. 2014. *Trends in Leave Entitlements Around Childbirth* No. PF2.5, retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/social/family/database.htm> (last visited June 17, 2015); Margaret O’Brien. 2009. “Fathers, Parental Leave and Infant Quality of Life: International Perspectives and Policy Impacts.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 624: 190-213.
- <sup>5</sup> Klerman (2012) at 135 (a third of employees work at worksites that offer paid maternity leave to all or most female employees versus 20% for male employees) and at 143 (13% of men report receiving pay for parental leave compared with 20% of women).
- <sup>6</sup> Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel (2007) at 442-45.
- <sup>7</sup> Maria Del Carmen Huerta, et al. 2013. “Fathers’ Leave, Fathers’ Involvement and Child Development: Are They Related? Evidence from Four OECD Countries.” *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 140, retrieved from [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/fathers-leave-fathers-involvement-and-child-development\\_5k4dlw9w6czq-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/fathers-leave-fathers-involvement-and-child-development_5k4dlw9w6czq-en) (last visited June 17, 2015); Linda Hass and C. Philip Hwang. 2008. “The Impact of Taking Parental Leave on Fathers’ Participation in Childcare and Relationships with Children: Lessons from Sweden.” *Community, Work and Family* 11(1): 85-104; Sakiko Tanaka and Jane Waldfogel. 2007. “Effects of Parental Leave and Work Hours on Fathers’ Involvement With Their Babies: Evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study.” *Community, Work and Family* 10(4): 409-426.
- <sup>8</sup> Huerta, et al (2013); Nepomnyaschy and Waldfogel (2007); Anna Sarkadi, et al. 2008. “Fathers Involvement and Children’s Developmental Outcomes: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies.” *Acta Paediatrica* 97: 153-158; Erini Flouri and Ann Buchanan. 2002. “The Role of Father Involvement in Children’s Later Mental Health.” *Journal of Adolescence* 26: 63-78.
- <sup>9</sup> Huerta, et al (2013).
- <sup>10</sup> Ankita Patnaik. 2015. “Reserving Time for Daddy: The Short and Long Run Consequences of Fathers’ Quotas.” *SSRN Working Paper*, retrieved from [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2475970&download=yes](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2475970&download=yes) (last visited June 17, 2015). See also Makiko Fuwa and Phillip N. Cohen. 2007. “Housework and Social Policy.” *Social Science Research* 36: 512-530.
- <sup>11</sup> 2010 General Social Survey data reported by Council of Economic Advisors. CEA Calculations in Council of Economics Advisors. 2014. *The Economics of Paid and Unpaid Leave* at 7, retrieved from [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/leave\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/leave_report_final.pdf) (last visited June 17, 2015).
- <sup>12</sup> Patnaik (2015); Elly-Ann Johansson. 2010. “The Effect of Own and Spousal Parental Leave on Earnings,” *Institute for Labour Market Policy Evaluation Working Paper 2010:4*, retrieved from <http://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/45782/1/623752174.pdf> (last visited June 17, 2015).
- <sup>13</sup> Klerman, et al (2012) at 127.
- <sup>14</sup> Klerman, et al (2012) at 105-106.
- <sup>15</sup> Harrington, et al (2014) at 8-9.
- <sup>16</sup> Scott Coltrane, et al. 2013. “Fathers and the Flexibility Stigma.” *Journal of Social Issues* 69(2): 279-302.
- <sup>17</sup> Linda Houser & Thomas P. Vartanian. 2012. *Policy Matters: Public Policy, Paid Leave for Workers, and Economic Security for U.S. Parents*. Report of the Rutgers Center for Women and Work at 14; Eileen Appelbaum and Ruth Milkman. 2011. *Leaves That Pay: Employer and Worker Experiences With Paid Family Leave in California*. Center for Economic and Policy Research at 18.
- <sup>18</sup> Appelbaum and Milkman (2011) at 23.
- <sup>19</sup> Harrington, et al (2014) at 8-10.
- <sup>20</sup> O’Brien (2009) at 199. For example, in Quebec, establishing a nontransferable period of paternity leave in 2006 doubled fathers’ leave taking — from 22 to 50 percent, and by 2011 that had risen to 84 percent. Andrea Doucet. 2009. “Dad and Baby in the First Year: Gendered Responsibilities and Embodiment.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 624: 78; see also Patnaik (2015).
- <sup>21</sup> Harrington, et al (2014) at 7-8.
- <sup>22</sup> Nanette Fondas. May 1, 2013. “Marissa Meyer’s Potential Revolutionary Paternity Leave Policy.” *The Atlantic*, retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/05/marissa-mayers-potentially-revolutionary-paternity-leave-policy/275468/> (last visited June 17, 2015); Dana Liebelson. May 28, 2015. “Can Facebook and Reddit Fix America’s Maternity Leave Problem?” *Mother Jones*, retrieved from <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/05/silicon-valley-maternity-leave-paternity-leave> (last visited June 17, 2015).
- <sup>23</sup> Harrington, et al (2014) at 6.