






# MATERNITY LEAVE IN THE UNITED STATES

Source: American Association of University Women <sup>1</sup>

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## TRENDS

The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 is associated with a 3% decrease in the likelihood of a low birth weight and a 3% decrease in the chance of a premature birth.<sup>9</sup>

70.2% of employed pregnant women took maternity leave following childbirth.<sup>11</sup>

**40%**

The number of families in which the mother is the primary source of income.<sup>6</sup>

## FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE ACT OF 1993

In the United States, the Family and Medical leave Act of 1993 governs maternity leave policies. The act mandates that employers provide 12 weeks of unpaid medical leave to eligible employees.<sup>10</sup> Eligible employees are those whom have worked for the employer for at least 1,250 hours over the past year.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, eligible employees excludes those who work for an employer who employs less than 50 individuals within 75 miles.<sup>10</sup>

## RACIAL & INCOME DISPARITIES

- Hispanic women or women from a household with an income below 100% of the federal poverty level were less likely to take maternity leave.<sup>11</sup>
- Black or Hispanic individuals without at least a bachelor's degree or a household income below \$30,000 are less likely to take leave when compared to white individuals or those who are educated.<sup>8</sup>
- Of individuals with incomes below \$30,000, 62% did not receive pay while on leave compared to 26% of individuals with an income above \$75,000.<sup>8</sup>

## GREATER BREASTFEEDING RATES



Mothers who receive at least 12 weeks of paid maternity leave are 2.83 times more likely to begin breastfeeding and 2.26 times more likely to continue breastfeeding at 6 months when compared to mothers who are not offered any paid leave.<sup>5</sup>

## INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION (ILO)

The ILO recommends that at least 14 weeks of maternity leave, with at least 6 weeks following childbirth, be provided to mothers.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, pay should be provided in order to ensure that the woman and child maintain a healthy standard of living. They recommend that the level of pay should be at least 2/3 of the woman's previous earnings.<sup>4</sup> However, if paid leave is not applicable to a woman, then social assistance should be provided in order to protect the mother and child.<sup>4</sup> Another recommendation of critical importance is employment protection during pregnancy and following childbirth to encourage the use of maternity leave.<sup>4</sup>

## BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

Women must begin to use leave, even though many are concerned about the implications for their career. Many women believe that leave will inhibit their progress in the workforce and will harm their relationship with their boss.<sup>12</sup> They are concerned there will be negative effects on their wages if they are perceived as a part-time employee and that women's equality in the labor force will be impeded by taking leave.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, many believe that mothers put forth less effort in the labor force, thus causing them to receive lower wages.<sup>12</sup> As a result, mothers are more likely to reduce their hours or leave the labor force in order to care for their children because they receive lower earnings compared to the child's father.<sup>11</sup> This has severe impacts on equality in the labor force and impedes the use of maternity leave.

## Benefits to Mothers

Mothers benefit from legally mandated maternity leave because up to six months following childbirth, every day of leave is associated with a reduction in postpartum depressive symptoms.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the physical health of new mothers improves with greater leave, especially for the first 12 weeks.<sup>3</sup>

## PAID MATERNITY LEAVE

Currently, the United States is the only developed nation without paid maternity leave policies.<sup>5</sup> The United States should implement policy mandating 18 weeks of paid maternity leave at previous earnings with an additional 9 weeks unpaid for eligible employees. This policy should incorporate job protection as well. This policy would encourage women to spend time with their newborns while recovering mentally and physically from childbirth. Additionally, this policy would reduce maternity leave bias by enabling mothers of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds to take leave by ensuring that wages are not lost. The ability of mothers to take leave will benefit return rates and the labor force because they were given time away.

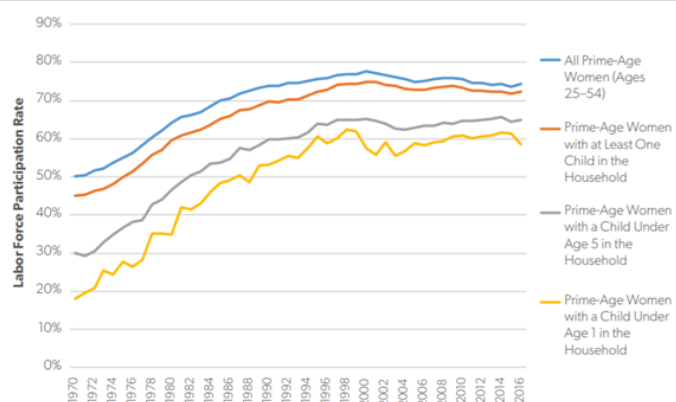
### Family Benefits

The implications for families is broad. Longer leave, especially if paid, enables mothers to spend more time with their newborn infants, which positively influences their development. In Norway, a policy was instituted that required paid maternity leave for 4 months.<sup>2</sup> This policy led to a decrease in high school dropout rates by 2-3 percentage points and an increase in college attendance by 3.5 percentage points.<sup>2</sup> Potentially more shocking is the associated increase in earnings by 5-7 percentage points for thirty-year-old individuals that were born following this policy change.<sup>2</sup> A policy that provides greater paid maternity leave enables new mothers to foster a connection with their child that will provide developmental benefits far into the future.

### Economic Benefits

Paid maternity leave is beneficial because it provides mothers with time to recuperate and bond with their child, while remaining in the labor force. In Britain, maternity leave policies were reformed to provide mothers with 40 weeks of leave, at least 18 weeks of which were paid.<sup>12</sup> This policy increased the percentage of new mothers in the labor force from 24% to 46% and the return rate of mothers to their place of work rose from 38% to 65%.<sup>12</sup> Paid maternity leave is essential to encourage new mothers to continue working and providing for their families (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Labor Force Participation Among Prime-Age Women and Mothers with Children of All Ages



Source: US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, 1970-Present.

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