Introduction

Families’ economic stability and security depend on several factors beyond their working situation. For some workers, wages are supplemented by benefits, like paid leave. However, Ohio’s low-wage workers are less likely to have access to these benefits, which leads to higher levels of economic insecurity and a higher risk of violence.

Low-wage workers have limited access to paid time off. When workers have access to paid time off, they know that their financial situation is secure even if they or a loved one become ill or have other needs that prevent them from working. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of paid leave for the safety and security of workers.

The Family and Medical Leave Act

Twelve weeks of unpaid leave per year for parental, family caregiving, or personal medical needs are guaranteed to workers at companies with 50 or more employees through the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993. Ohio has no laws that provide for additional leave, paid or unpaid, except for one related to military service. FMLA falls short for most workers. Less than half (48.5%) of workers who earn below $40,000 per year have access to FMLA. Eligibility rates vary across demographic groups.

Due to its eligibility criteria, only 56% of workers across the country are even eligible for the 12 weeks of unpaid leave provided by the FMLA.

56%

FMLA is inaccessible to 62% of Ohio workers, either due to eligibility requirements or because they cannot forgo the pay.

Access to Paid Leave

The majority of workers in Ohio functionally have no access to leave. Access to paid leave is even rarer. Nationally, 13% of private-sector workers had access to paid family leave in 2017. For full-time workers, this number was 16%, and for part-time workers, it was just 5%. Access also varies based on income level, with low-wage workers having the least access. Only 4% of workers with incomes in the lowest 10% had access to paid leave.
Access to paid sick days is higher. Sick days allow a worker to miss work to recover from an illness when the recovery time needed falls short of requiring FMLA.

Paid leave and paid sick days have become even more critical during the coronavirus pandemic. Paid leave is necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Moreover, paid leave is necessary to protect public health and give sick workers time to recover without the risk of eviction or hunger.

Parents and caregivers are another large group for whom paid leave during the pandemic is especially important. Many workers’ caregiving responsibilities have increased substantially. It is important that these workers not be forced to choose between their jobs and their families. Paid leave is particularly important for women because they typically take on a larger share of caregiving responsibilities than men.

The U.S. Congress passed emergency paid leave policies in March 2020 through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA). Under the FFCRA, some workers were entitled to two weeks of paid leave at their full rate of pay if they were quarantined due to the coronavirus, two weeks at two-thirds of their pay if they needed to care for a loved one for COVID-19-related reasons, and ten additional weeks at two-thirds of their pay if they could not work because they had to care for a child whose school or care was unavailable.

Many workers were included in the FFCRA that are excluded from the FMLA, including part-time workers, contract workers, and recent hires.

However, the FFCRA emergency paid leave policies were temporary and expired on December 31, 2020. Additionally, the FFCRA had several other gaps in coverage. For example, large firms with over 500 employees were not covered. Small businesses with fewer than 50 employees could seek an exemption from the ten weeks of paid leave for childcare. Organizations that employ “health care providers or emergency responders” could apply to be exempt from all paid leave policies.

The most significant problem with the emergency paid leave program was its exclusion of workers at organizations with 500+ employees. Workers at companies like McDonald’s, Wal-Mart, Kroger, and Amazon were entitled to no paid leave - not even if they were sick with COVID-19. Workers at these large businesses make up the majority of the workforce.

In the US, a maximum of 47% of the workforce could obtain emergency paid leave through the FFCRA. At most, only 45% of workers had access in Ohio. These estimates assume that no employers who could apply for exemptions from the FFCRA’s emergency paid leave policies did. If all eligible employers obtained an exemption from FFCRA policies, only 17% of workers in the U.S. and Ohio had access to emergency paid leave while the FFCRA was in effect.

The lack of a comprehensive paid leave policy increases stress on families and communities. The need to choose between getting paid and fulfilling caregiving obligations exponentially increases this stress. Significant economic stress increases the risk for IPV. Increasing workers’ access to paid leave is one step that can be taken now to reduce violence in the U.S.

Paid Leave Barriers and Opportunities

**Barsrers**

- Only a quarter of even the highest paid workers have access to paid family leave. Only 4% of lowest wage workers do.
- Between 55 and 83 percent of Ohio workers could not access paid leave under the temporary federal program.
- Temporary paid leave from the federal government expired at the end of 2020 and has not been renewed.

**Opportunities**

- For the first time, emergency federal paid leave policies for the pandemic included part-time and contract workers, as well as recent hires.
- Most full-time workers have access to paid sick days, although this is heavily concentrated among workers who are paid more.

References can be found at [https://www.odvn.org/intersecting-pandemics/](https://www.odvn.org/intersecting-pandemics/)