



RESEARCH REPORT

Parents' Access to Work-Family Supports

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Executive Summary

This research used national survey data to examine patterns in parents' access to work-family supports in three areas that are crucial for their ability to effectively manage work and family: paid leave, workplace flexibility and control, and support for child care. Although our analysis is limited by the data we explored, our findings are relevant to ongoing discussions about work-family policy. Below, we list key findings related to our three research questions.

Key Findings

How Prevalent Is Access to Work-Family Supports among Working Parents?

- **Most working parents reported having access to some type of leave at their jobs, but for every type of leave, unpaid leave was more common than paid leave.** Seventy-eight percent of working parents reported having some unpaid leave, while 59 percent reported having some paid leave. Various types of leave were covered by our data—including sick leave, parental leave, family caregiving leave, unspecified paid time off, and vacation—and could be provided by employers as an employee benefit or through a social insurance system or mandated by government. The prevalence varied by subgroup and was lower for low-wage workers.
- **A small majority of working parents reported having workplace flexibility and control, defined as the ability to change their work schedules or locations if they needed to take time off.** Fifty-eight percent of parents reported being able to change their schedule or location. But most parents cannot do both: 56 percent can change their schedule (hours or days), while only 25 percent can change their location.
- **Parents with no access to leave were less likely to report access to workplace flexibility and control.** This suggests that employers are not leveraging these types of benefits as substitutes. Rather, some jobs offer leave and workplace flexibility and control, and others do not.
- **Almost no working parents reported receiving help paying for child care from their employers.** Across all categories of parents examined, less than 1 percent said they received employer assistance for this purpose.

How Does Access Vary by Parental Characteristic?

- **The socioeconomic pattern was clear.** More advantaged parents were more likely to have access to paid leave and workplace flexibility and control at their jobs. For example, 74 percent of working parents with a college degree reported having access to some paid leave, compared with only 21 percent of working parents who do not have a high school diploma.
- **Parents with lower educational attainment were more likely to say that they did not take leave when they needed it because they could not afford to do so.** Only 5 percent of college-educated parents who needed leave and had access to it but didn't take it said that they didn't take leave because they couldn't afford it, compared with 26 percent of those who do not have a high school diploma.
- **Receiving help paying for child care from employers was very unusual for all parents, regardless of socioeconomic characteristics.** We found no notable differences across such attributes as poverty level, educational attainment, full- or part-time employment status, gender, race and ethnicity, or citizenship status.

How Prevalent Is the Need for These Work-Family Supports among Working Parents, and Why Are They Needed?

- **Need for leave among parents is widespread.** More than a quarter of parents reported that they needed leave in the previous week; mothers were slightly more likely to report need (29 percent), but fathers were not far behind (24 percent).
- **Many parents reported taking some leave in the previous week.** More than one in five parents reported taking some type of leave in the previous week, and the average length of leave taken was short (about a day).
- **Fewer parents used schedule or location changes instead of taking leave.** About one in 10 parents reported changing their work schedule or location in the previous week.
- **Parents used leave and workplace flexibility and control for many reasons other than illness or birth.** Many parents cited day-to-day needs like errands and personal reasons (17 percent for leave, 50 percent for schedule/location changes) or child/elder care needs unrelated to illness (5 percent for leave, 20 percent for schedule/location changes).

Considerations for Policy and Research

- **The need for work-family supports is widespread, but access to them is uneven.** Parents generally reported high levels of need. Yet access to supports is uneven, with more advantaged subgroups of parents generally more likely to report that they have benefits like paid leave or the ability to change their schedule or location. This pattern is consistent with prior research that has generally found that workers who are affluent and professional have more access to valuable benefits. It suggests a need for continued policy debate about how both employers and public policies can be leveraged to ensure that all children and families have the stability they need.
- **Parents need work-family supports for many reasons not addressed in prominent public policy debates.** In recent years, public support has been growing around key issues such as sick leave, which provides a worker time off because of an illness, and paid family leave, which provides a worker time off to care for a child after a birth or adoption or to care for a family member with a disability or major medical condition. Yet our analysis found that day to day, parents need to be away from work for many reasons. For example, of the parents who reported changing their schedule or location in the previous week, half did so to attend to errands or personal matters. The ability to do so may be important for meeting children’s needs while maintaining successful employment. This suggests that a broader discussion around leave and workplace flexibility and control may be needed to ensure that all parents can maintain employment while caring effectively for their children.
- **Help from employers in paying for child care appears much more limited than for other work supports, leaving a larger gap for public policy to fill.** We found that employer assistance paying for child care is very unusual. When we looked at working parents by socioeconomic subgroups, we found this was the case across the board. This result is consistent with the research we describe in the companion report to this one that suggests that employers view child care as a social good that is more of a public policy responsibility (Stanczyk et al. 2019). It also suggests that employers are not filling gaps to ensure workers have access to affordable child care and that other solutions—through either public policy or employer engagement—are needed.

Parents' Access to Work-Family Supports

Social and economic trends have increased the challenges faced by working families, especially those with young children. For example, most families with children now rely on two working parents or a single working mother.¹ Stressors like poor job quality and insufficient time for family and personal responsibilities are especially acute for low-income families, who are less likely to have access to employer-based benefits and who have fewer personal resources to fill the gap. For many families, such challenges are associated with negative family and work outcomes, such as declines in mental health and absenteeism. As a result, policymakers, employers, researchers, and advocates are interested in finding solutions that can ensure that workers can meet their needs at home as well as in the workplace (Winston 2014).

In this report, we analyze patterns in access to work-family supports in three areas that are fundamental to parents' ability to effectively negotiate work and parenting—paid leave (including paid parental and family leave, paid sick leave, personal time off, and other unspecified types of leave), workplace flexibility and control (including both location and schedule), and support for child care.² (These terms, which have several meanings, are defined further below.) Specifically, we examine national survey data to address the following research questions:

1. How prevalent is access to these three work-family supports among working parents?
2. How does access vary by parental characteristic?
3. How prevalent is the need for these work-family supports among working parents, and why are they needed?

Our findings are intended to inform work-family policy debates. The remainder of this report lays out the motivations for our research, describes our analytical approach, and discusses our findings. We begin by defining “work-family supports” and providing an overview of research on the impacts of paid leave, scheduling, and child care supports for children, parents, and employers. Next, we present findings from the analysis we conducted on two national surveys to examine patterns in access to benefits and the use of benefits in each of our research areas among working parents and certain subsets of parents. We conclude with a summary of findings and considerations for policy and research.

Why Are Work-Family Supports Needed?

Widespread discussions about the need for policies to address work-family challenges reflect the significant changes that have reshaped the landscape of work and family in the US, including the following:

- **Most families rely on working mothers.** According to the US Department of Labor, about 70 percent of women and over 90 percent of men with children younger than 18 are in the labor force, including nearly 60 percent of mothers of infants.³
- **Traditional two-parent, single-earner families are on the decline.** Dual-earner and single-parent families have become the norm. Recent data indicate that about one-third of all households with children and two-thirds of low-income households with children are single-parent families (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013). Additionally, women are now the sole or primary breadwinners in 41 percent of households (Glynn 2019).
- **Because of economic demands, many American women return to work quickly after having children.** The majority of mothers return to work within two months—faster than mothers in many other nations (Washbrook et al. 2011). This means that to ensure their economic survival, more families than ever need child care that begins in infancy. But child care costs are high—especially for infant care (Child Care Aware of America 2018)—and infant care is in short supply (Resnick et al. 2015).
- **The cost of child care has soared.** The average inflation-adjusted weekly cost of child care for families with working mothers who make child care payments has increased over 70 percent in the past 30 years, a challenge that is particularly problematic for low-income families, who already spend as much as 30 percent of their family budgets on child care (Laughlin 2013).
- **Gender norms are changing.** National survey data show that between 1965 and 2011, fathers more than doubled the amount of time they spent on housework and child care. However, father involvement varies by income and whether the father lives with the child, and mothers still devote significantly more time to these tasks (Pew Research Center 2015). Opinion surveys also show increasing preferences for more egalitarian parenting (McGill 2014).
- **More families are dealing with elder care along with child care.** According to Census Bureau projections, by 2030, the population age 65 and older will outnumber children for the first time in US history, and by 2050, this group will account for one in five Americans.⁴ Six in 10 people who care for an elderly family member are in the workforce (NAC and AARP 2015). Record numbers of Americans are part of the “sandwich generation,” simultaneously providing care

and financial support to their parents and children. For example, about 15 percent of adults ages 40 to 59 are providing support to both a child and a parent (Parker and Patten 2013).

- **The nature of work is changing.** We have witnessed the growth of a “24/7” economy characterized by nonstandard, unfixed, and rotating work hours (Presser 2003). Additionally, the rise of the “gig economy” is reflected in increasing numbers of workers who are self-employed, which leaves many people without access to benefits that have historically been provided through employers (Abraham et al. 2018).

Although these trends have increased pressures on working parents, the US lags many other developed countries in providing robust policies to support working parents (Lin and Burgard 2018). Cross-national evidence suggests that differences in family policies, especially paid time off and help paying for child care, may help explain lower levels of happiness and well-being among parents in the US, compared with those in other countries (Glass, Simon, and Andersson 2016). Research also suggests that the lack of work-family supports may account for declining labor force participation rates among American women (Blau and Kahn 2013). Perhaps as a result, both men and women report high work-life and work-family conflict—that is, competing responsibilities that interfere with each other (Aumann, Galinsky, and Matos 2011).

For low-wage workers, challenges associated with managing work and family are especially acute (Vogtman and Schulman 2016; Winston 2014). Low-wage workers are more likely to have jobs that lack stability and benefits. And low wages mean families struggle to pay for essential needs (Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez 2019), including child care (Minton and Durham 2013). Additionally, children in low-income households are disproportionately likely to live in single-parent families in which parental resources, including time, are even more limited.

These challenges are consequential for families, children, and employers. Parental work stress and job instability are negatively associated with children’s cognitive and social-emotional development (Heinrich 2014). For workers, work-family conflict is related to strained family relationships and poorer physical and mental health (Kossek and Lee 2017), all of which are known to have negative impacts on child well-being (Moore, Kinghorn, and Bandy 2011; Newland 2015). Workers who report high levels of stress and work-family conflict are also less engaged and satisfied with their jobs, and they have higher levels of absenteeism and turnover (Kelly et al. 2008). Conversely, family-supportive work environments are associated with reduced work-family conflict and improved outcomes such as job satisfaction, job retention, and healthier behavior (Hammer et al. 2011).

These broader trends provide context for the experiences of individual families. In our analysis, we examine access to and use of key work-family supports, particularly leave and workplace flexibility and control.

What Are Work-Family Supports?

We define “work-family supports” as programs or policies—provided either through employers or public policy—that help workers effectively manage work and nonwork responsibilities related to family. Although workers may face a wide range of nonwork responsibilities, including caring for elders, our focus in this research is on family responsibilities among workers with children.

In this report, we focus on three types of work-family supports: paid leave, workplace flexibility and control, and support for child care. These supports include a range of benefits and services provided through public or employer policy, and when these sources are not adequate or available, families often rely on personal resources such as income, savings, and help from family, friends, or neighbors (Vogtman and Schulman 2016). Table 1 gives examples of public and employer policies in each area, and we follow that with additional detail on the policy landscape. In our empirical analysis, we focus on a subset of supports that were asked about in the surveys we analyzed, and we use our results to inform broader discussions and suggest where future research on access to work-family supports is needed.

We focus on these three policy areas because they are fundamental to parents’ ability to effectively negotiate work and parenting. For example, they address the widespread challenge of time management. Research shows that majorities of both men and women report experiencing “time famine”—the feeling that they do not have enough time for themselves or their families (Matos and Galinsky 2011). Programs and policies that provide working parents with paid time off from work (paid leave), the ability to match work schedules to life demands (workplace flexibility and control), and resources to ensure that their children are cared for while they are working (support for child care) are central to managing work and parenting.

Considerable evidence supports the centrality of these three policy areas to parents’ ability to effectively manage work and family demands. For example, nonstandard schedules and a lack of worker control over scheduling create stress that makes it difficult to arrange child care and parent effectively, particularly when combined with the financial strain of low wages (Enchautegui 2013; Joshi and Bogen 2007; Li et al. 2014). Even workers with traditional schedules struggle to manage work and child care demands. Nearly half of working-family households report that child care problems have affected

parents' employment, including by causing them to miss work, to change their schedules, or to leave a job altogether (Montes and Halterman 2011).

TABLE 1

Examples of Public and Employer Work-Family Supports

Paid leave, workplace flexibility and control, and support for child care

Policy area	Public policy examples	Employer policy examples
Paid leave <i>Paid time off from work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Paid family and medical leave laws ■ Paid sick and safe leave laws^a ■ Paid school-related leave laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Paid leave for flexible purposes (e.g., paid time off)^b ■ Paid leave for specific purposes (e.g., sick leave, family leave) ■ Leave banks and transfer programs ■ Advanced leave
Workplace flexibility and control <i>Flexibility and control over timing, amount, or place of work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fair scheduling and workweek laws (providing greater predictability, stability, input, or flexibility for employees) ■ “Right to request” flexibility laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Flexible schedules ■ Telework ■ Job sharing ■ Predictable scheduling ■ Stable scheduling ■ Shift swapping ■ Gradual return to work ■ Guaranteed work hours
Support for child care <i>Help finding, securing, or paying for child care</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Child care subsidies for low-income families ■ Public early care and education programs (universal and targeted) ■ Child care resource and referral ■ Child and dependent care tax credit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Child care subsidies ■ Child care resource and referral ■ Dependent care flexible spending accounts ■ On or near-site child care

Source: Authors' analysis.

^a In 2019, Maine passed the first law that allows workers to use paid sick days for time off that is not related to an illness. See Scott Thistle, “New Law to Make Maine First State with Paid Sick Time That Covers More Than Getting Sick,” *Portland Press Herald*, May 28, 2019.

^b Some states and localities such as New York City are considering PTO legislation. See Jeff Stein, “New York Mayor to Unveil Plan Guaranteeing Paid Time Off, Aiming for a First,” *Washington Post*, January 9, 2019.

No matter the nature of a working parent’s schedule or child care arrangement, the need to be away from work at least occasionally to take care of family needs is universal. This is true not only around a birth or an adoption, but throughout a child’s life. Research suggests, for example, that paid leave is needed to help parents make child care arrangements before a parent returns to work (Appelbaum and Milkman 2011), get timely medical care for their children (Asfaw and Colopy 2017), be involved in children’s school-related activities (Murray et al. 2014), and maintain stable employment (Hill 2013). Similarly, research shows that access to affordable, high-quality child care and flexible work practices (including both leave and managing schedule/location) have impacts related to the security of parents’

income and employment, as well as health and well-being for both young and school-age children (Christensen, Schneider, and Butler 2011; Ruhm 2011).

What Are Paid and Unpaid Leave Policies?

Paid leave policies provide workers with paid time off from work. Leave may be provided for specific purposes such as holidays, vacations, illnesses, or childbirths, or it may be flexible. Generally, US employers pay for the paid time off that workers receive. Employers may provide paid leave voluntarily as part of benefit packages, or they may be required by law to provide a certain amount of leave. A growing number of states and localities have enacted paid leave laws that either mandate employers to provide leave or establish state social insurance programs for leave. In a social insurance program, leave is paid for through payroll taxes.

Paid leave laws vary in their function, financing, and the populations they affect. For example, “paid sick and safe days” are for short-term illnesses; these have passed at both the state and local levels, and are provided through an employer mandate. “Paid family and medical leave” can be used for bonding with a newly born or adopted child or for providing long-term care to a family member with a serious illness or disability; these are generally provided through a social insurance model.⁵ The federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) guarantees 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave for a birth, an adoption, or a new foster care placement, or if an employee has a serious health condition or needs to provide care for a family member who has a serious health condition. However, only about 50 percent of working parents are covered because of FMLA’s eligibility requirements related to employer size, job tenure, and full-time status,⁶ and any leave is unpaid. Our empirical analysis includes all these types of leave, but the data are not able to distinguish whether leave comes from a government policy or through an employer benefit package.

What Are Workplace Flexibility and Control Policies?

Workplace flexibility and control policies pertain to the timing, amount, or place of work. These issues may look different for professional, more affluent workers than for frontline and low-wage workers. High-wage workers generally have greater flexibility and control over the timing, amount, and place of their work and are more likely to have the ability to change their work hours when needed and the option to telework. In contrast, for workers whose work days, shifts, locations, or number of hours are subject to change based on employer demand, it can be important to have policies that provide adequate notice of schedules, opportunities for employee input into days or times scheduled, the ability

to swap schedules, stability in the timing or number of hours, and assurance of being scheduled enough hours to make ends meet. These issues predominantly affect low-wage workers who are paid by the hour, likely because in-person coverage and employer control over work continue to feel central to business operations (Stanczyk et al. 2019). Recently, states and localities have begun to address these issues through “fair scheduling” laws that provide employees with greater input and control.⁷ Our data on workplace flexibility and control generally refer to the ability of workers to control the timing, amount, or place of work, rather than the work scheduling issues related to employer demand for schedule control over frontline workers.

What Are Child Care Support Policies?

Policies related to support for child care provide workers with help finding, securing, or paying for child care. Examples of employer-provided child care supports are resource and referral programs for finding child care, emergency back-up care for when regular arrangements fall through, on-site child care centers, subsidies for purchasing child care, flexible spending accounts for using pretax dollars for child care, and parent listservs or parent support groups.

Several government programs and policies support families’ child care needs. Many of these provide free care or help reduce the cost of care. The child and dependent care tax credit reduces the tax liability for taxpayers who incur eligible child care costs. Examples of direct government investments are child care subsidies, available through the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and early care and education programs, funded through federal Head Start or state prekindergarten programs. Most federal and state direct public investment in child care and early education is targeted to low-income families and is usually funded at levels that don’t allow the assistance to reach all families.⁸ However, child care tax credits are not as beneficial to low-income families.⁹ Public child care investments can also support broader efforts to increase quality and supply, such as child care resource and referral programs. Our data provide some information about support from employers and support from government.

Patterns in Access to Work-Family Supports

In this section, we analyze patterns in access to work-family supports among parents, focusing on the three policy areas described above: paid leave, workplace flexibility and control, and support for child care. Using the measures available in our data, we examine (1) the prevalence of access among parents,

(2) variation in access by parents' characteristics, especially socioeconomic status, and (3) the reasons parents say they need supports such as leave and schedule/location changes.

Specifically, we use the following measures of “access” to work-family supports available in the surveys we analyzed:

- **availability and use of leave** (American Time Use Survey Leave Module 2011), including availability and use of any paid or unpaid leave such as sick leave (for a worker's own care), parental leave (maternity/paternity), family leave (illness/medical), caregiving leave (child/elder care not for illness), and other leave
- **availability and use of workplace flexibility and control** (American Time Use Survey Leave Module 2011), including availability and use of adjustment to schedule (days or hours) or location of work
- **receipt of help paying for child care** (Survey of Income and Program Participation 2011), including use of help from government, employer, or other sources to pay for child care

Our data provide insights into variation in access to and use of these key work-family supports among parents, but it is important to note a few limitations. Our analysis focuses on the worker perspective. Prior research has generally found that employers tend to report different rates of benefit provision than employees do (e.g., Council of Economic Advisers 2014). This may be in part because having a formal policy does not necessarily mean that workers know about it or feel comfortable using it. It may also be because workers asked about employer benefits report access to policies that are actually informal employer practices (e.g., a flexible supervisor) or public programs (e.g., state paid family and medical leave program). Also, our data cannot disentangle the source of some benefits, particularly leave benefits—that is, whether employees have access via a state or employer program.

Where possible, we document both *availability* and *use* of the work-family supports we examined. However, in the case of support for child care, our data speak only to *use*. Additionally, prior research suggests that our data source, the Survey of Income and Program Participation, may significantly undercount enrollment in child care, participation in Head Start, and receipt of government-subsidized child care (Besharov, Morrow, and Shi 2006). Thus, our analysis should be interpreted cautiously with regard to the precision of the estimates. Nevertheless, the Survey of Income and Program Participation provides information that is helpful for assessing the relative availability of supports and the variation among parents, particularly when looking at receipt of help from employers—a measure that is subject to less error.

Our results offer insights into access gaps and variation among certain subgroups of families. Additionally, unlike many other analyses, ours focus specifically on access among parents with children who are younger than 15, rather than workers more broadly. This information can inform future research and considerations for action, both for public policy and employers.

BOX 1

Analyzing Parents' Access to Work-Family Supports

To understand patterns in parents' access to paid leave, workplace flexibility and control, and support for child care, we analyzed two national surveys:

- **The American Time Use Survey Leave Module** (fielded by the Bureau of Labor Statistics) provides data on access to various types of paid leave and workplace flexibility and control options.
- **The Survey of Income and Program Participation** (fielded by the Census Bureau) provides data on receipt of help paying for child care from different sources.

We use 2011 data for both surveys because those are the most recent available for the American Time Use Survey Leave Module. In addition to looking at overall patterns of access to supports in each of our three areas of focus, where possible we examine variation among parents by poverty level, race and ethnicity, marital status, educational attainment, citizenship status, and full- or part-time employment status.

Leave and Workplace Flexibility and Control

In this section, we examine patterns in parents' access to leave and the ability to change work schedule or location instead of taking leave. We begin by looking at the percentage of parents who report that they have leave or the ability to change their work schedule or location, including variation by socioeconomic characteristic. We also examine the prevalence of the need for leave and look at why parents report needing to take leave or change their work schedule or location.

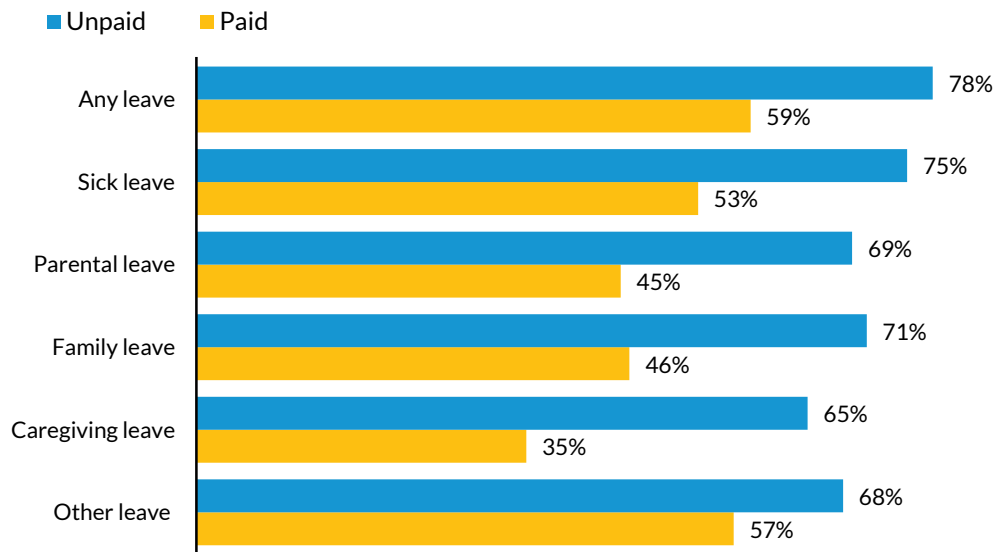
In our analysis below, we consider the employee perspective on whether workers can adjust their schedules (hours or days) or work locations. The questions we analyze pertain primarily to *worker control* over the time and place of work. We also look at whether access to leave, paid or unpaid, is associated with parents' having access to the scheduling options.

HOW PREVALENT IS ACCESS TO PAID AND UNPAID LEAVE AMONG WORKING PARENTS?

Similar to patterns that other research has observed in the workforce as a whole, we found that **most working parents reported having some type of leave** at their jobs, although this varies widely by socioeconomic status. As shown in figure 1, 78 percent of working parents reported have some access to unpaid leave, and 59 percent reported having some access to paid leave. Access to leave varies by the type of leave.

In general, **access to unpaid leave was more common than access to paid leave** for every category of leave measured. The most common specific form of paid leave measured in our data was sick leave for one’s own illness; 53 percent reported having access to paid sick leave. In contrast, only 35 percent of parents reported having access to paid leave to attend to caregiving needs of a child or older family member unrelated to illness.

FIGURE 1
Availability of Workplace Leave, by Type of Paid and Unpaid Leave
Among employed parents with children younger than 15



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Source: American Time Use Survey Leave Module, 2011.

Notes: Sample is people who worked in the previous seven days for pay or had at least one full- or part-time job, including one for which they were temporarily absent, and who are the parents of children younger than 15. “Sick leave” refers to leave for a worker’s own illness or medical care. “Parental leave” refers to maternity or paternity leave for a birth or adoption. “Family leave” refers to leave for an illness or medical care of a family member. “Caregiving leave” refers to leave for child care or elder care that is not illness-related. “Other leave” is holidays, vacation, annual, or personal leave.

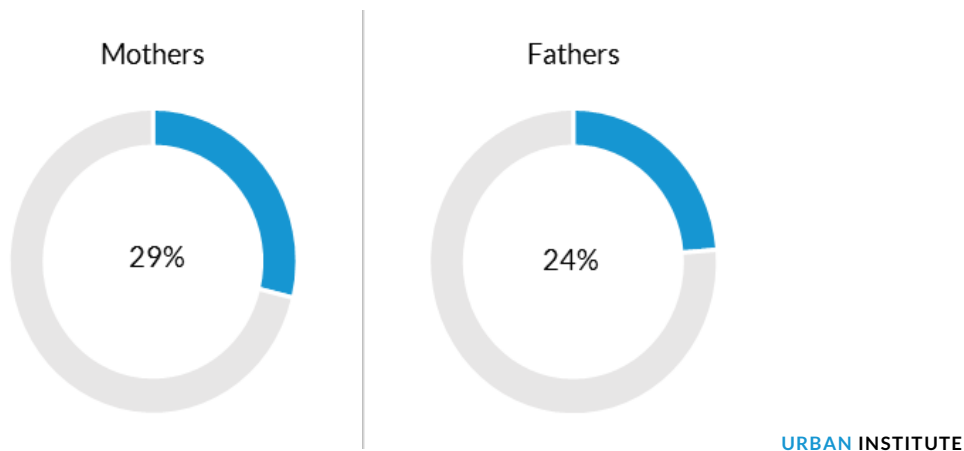
HOW PREVALENT IS THE NEED FOR LEAVE AMONG PARENTS?

We found that **the need for leave is widespread among parents**. When respondents were asked whether they had a need for leave in the previous week, 29 percent of mothers and 24 percent of fathers responded that they did (figure 2). The actual need for leave could be even higher, because parents who did not have access to leave may have been less likely to report that they needed it. **Although mothers were slightly more likely to report needing leave in the previous week, the difference with fathers was small** (5 percentage points).

FIGURE 2

Need for Leave in the Previous Week

Among employed parents with children younger than 15



Source: American Time Use Survey Leave Module, 2011.

Note: Sample is people who worked in the previous seven days for pay or had at least one full- or part-time job, including one for which they were temporarily absent, and who are the parents of children younger than 15.

DOES ACCESS TO PAID LEAVE VARY BY PARENTAL CHARACTERISTIC?

A considerable amount of research has suggested that access to crucial work-family supports is uneven, with more affluent, professional workers more likely to have workplace benefits of all kinds. This tends to be especially true for more expensive benefits like paid leave (Winston 2014).

We examined patterns in parents' reported access to leave at their jobs across demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, including full- or part-time work status, educational attainment, poverty level, marital status, citizenship status, race and ethnicity, and gender. For each characteristic, we looked at the percentage of parents who reported that they have access to different types of paid leave.

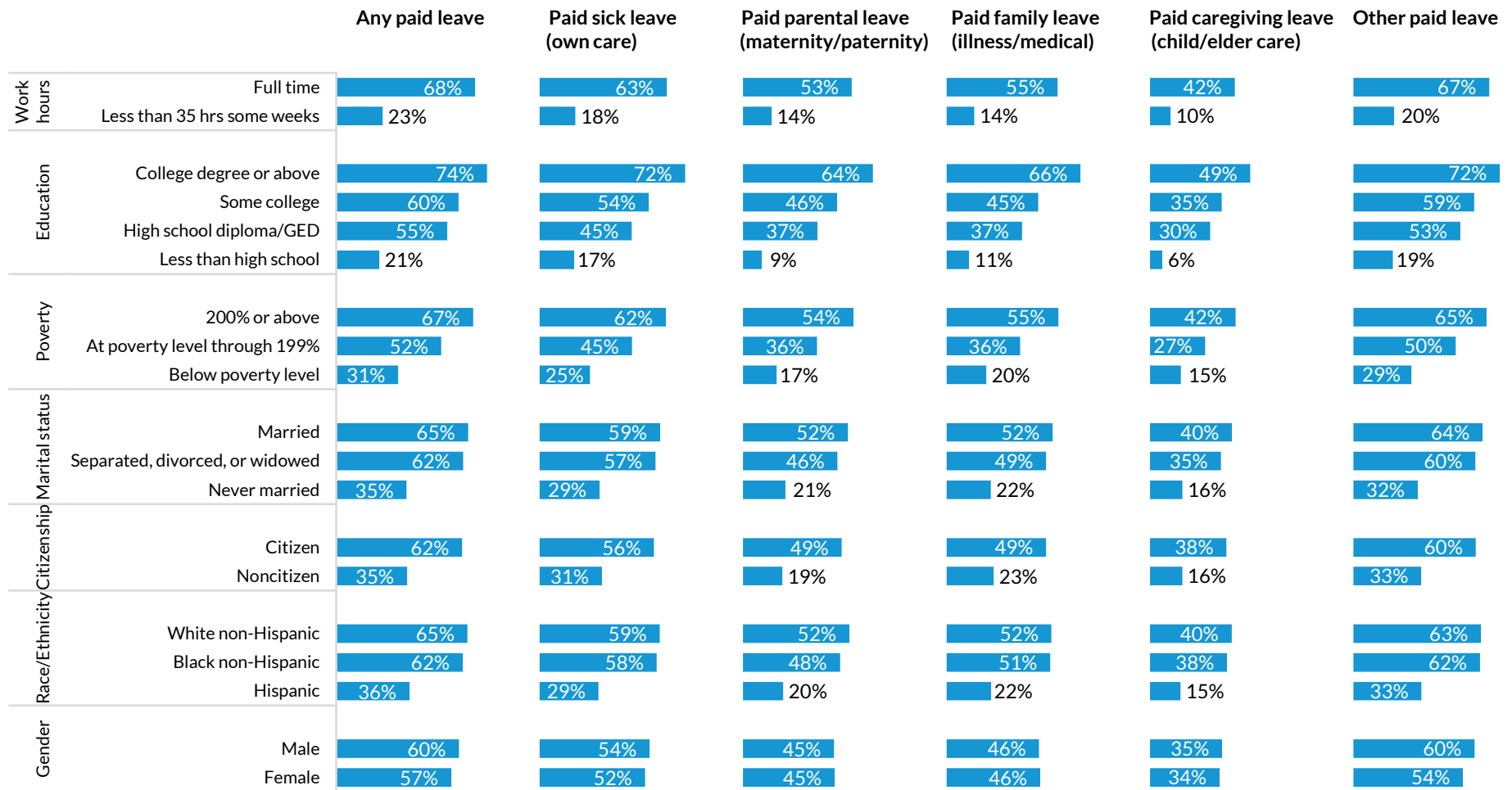
Our results, shown in figure 3, suggest that the widespread overall access to leave discussed above **masks considerable variation among parents**. Although gender differences in access to paid leave tend

to be small, there is a clear pattern along socioeconomic lines: **more advantaged parents are more likely to have access to paid leave.** For example, 74 percent of working parents with a college degree have access to some paid leave, compared with 21 percent of working parents who do not have a high school diploma or GED. The pattern for other socioeconomic indicators, such as poverty level, is very similar—the **poorest parents are the least likely to have paid leave of any kind.**

FIGURE 3

Availability of Paid Leave, by Type of Leave and by Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristic

Among employed parents with children younger than 15



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Source: American Time Use Survey Leave Module, 2011.

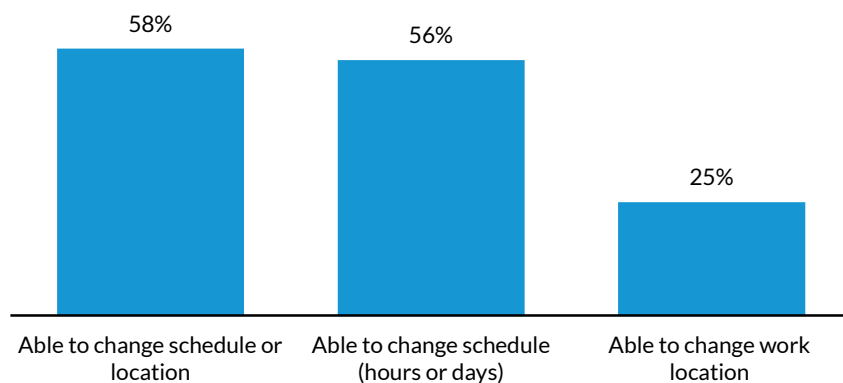
Notes: Sample is people who worked in the previous seven days for pay or had at least one full- or part-time job, including one for which they were temporarily absent, and who are the parents of children younger than 15. "Sick leave" refers to leave for a worker's own illness or medical care. "Parental leave" refers to maternity or paternity leave for a birth or adoption. "Family leave" refers to leave for an illness or medical care of a family member. "Caregiving leave" refers to leave for child care or elder care that is not illness-related. "Other paid leave" is holidays, vacation, annual, or personal leave.

HOW PREVALENT IS ACCESS TO WORK SCHEDULE OR LOCATION CHANGES?

Although access to paid time off is an important benefit for any working parent, workplace flexibility—including flexibility in one’s schedule and place of work—can also be crucial to managing work and family demands. When parents need to attend to a family responsibility, they may benefit from being able to change their work schedule or location. For example, if a child is sick, a parent might be able to work from home and be available for the child simultaneously. Alternatively, if a parent needs to attend a school meeting during regular work hours, being able to work different hours can be useful.

Our analysis found that a **small majority (58 percent) of parents reported some ability to change their work schedule or location if they need to take time off work** (figure 4). But most parents are not able to do both: 56 percent can change their schedule (hours or days), while 25 percent can change their work location.

FIGURE 4
Ability to Vary Work Schedule or Location If Time Off Work Is Needed
Among employed parents with children younger than 15



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: American Time Use Survey Leave Module, 2011.

Note: Sample is people who worked in the previous seven days for pay or had at least one full- or part-time job, including one for which they were temporarily absent, and who are the parents of children younger than 15.

Although the results are not shown, we also looked at whether access to schedule or location changes was associated with access to paid or unpaid leave. We found that **parents who have no access to leave are less likely to have workplace flexibility and control than those who do have access to**

leave. This suggests that employers are not leveraging these types of benefits as substitutes. Rather, some jobs offer leave and workplace flexibility or control, and others do not.

DOES ACCESS TO SCHEDULE OR LOCATION CHANGES VARY BY PARENTAL CHARACTERISTIC?

Research has shown that as is the case with paid leave, low-wage workers tend to have less access to workplace flexibility and control (Winston 2014). Often, this is because they work in frontline, hourly jobs or cannot obtain full-time schedules. We examined patterns in the percentage of parents who reported that they can vary their work schedule or location if they need to take time off work, comparing parents by key characteristics.

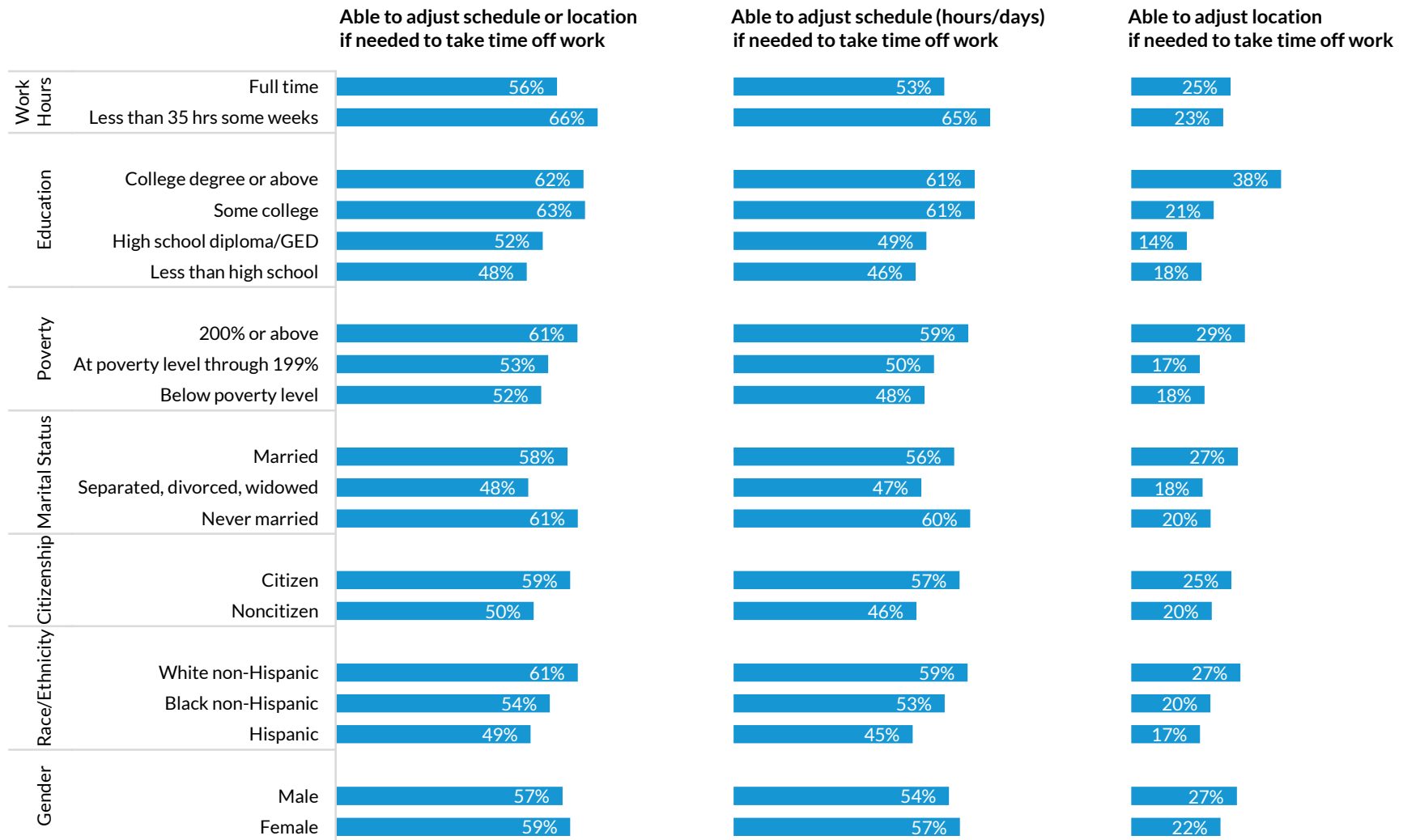
As shown in figure 5, there is considerable variation among parents in whether they can change their work schedule or location if they need to take time off work—**as with leave, more advantaged parents are often more likely to have access to workplace flexibility and control.** Although the pattern is not as consistent as that observed for paid leave (figure 3), there is a clear socioeconomic pattern along several dimensions. For example, 62 percent of college-educated parents report that they can vary their schedule or location if they need to take time off work, compared with only 48 percent of those who do not have a high school diploma.

The socioeconomic gradient is weaker and less consistent for schedule change than for location change. This is likely driven by part-time workers, who are more likely to be able to control their schedules. For example, figure 5 shows that 65 percent of parents working part-time schedules can vary their schedules, compared with 53 percent of full-time workers. Mothers with young children are more likely than women without young children to work part time¹⁰ to better manage their work and family demands (Pew Research Center 2007). Thus, there is less difference in access to flexible schedules by socioeconomic characteristic because of the correlation between part-time work and flexible schedules.¹¹

FIGURE 5

Ability to Vary Work Schedule or Location, by Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristic

Among employed parents with children younger than 15



Source: American Time Use Survey Leave Module, 2011.

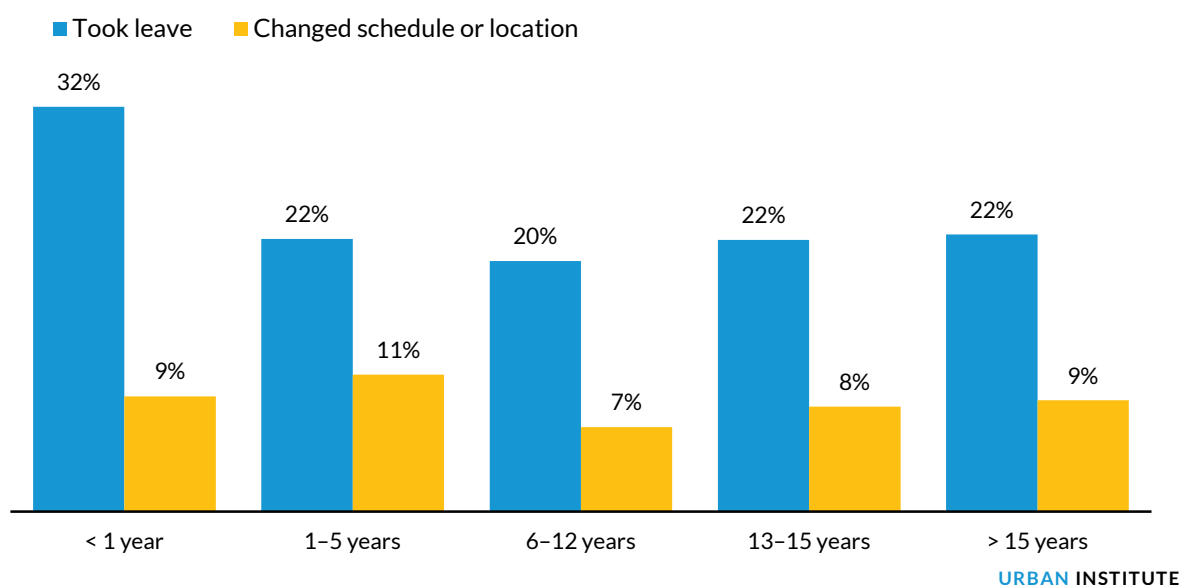
Note: Sample is people who worked in the previous seven days for pay or had at least one full- or part-time job, including one for which they were temporarily absent, and who are the parents of children younger than 15.

DOES PARENTS' USE OF LEAVE OR CHANGES TO WORK SCHEDULE OR LOCATION VARY BY CHILD AGE?

Although access to paid time off or workplace flexibility and control is important for all working parents, family needs can change as children get older. For example, parents may need more leave when children are first born or adopted and more control over scheduling when children are older.

Figure 6 shows the percentage of parents who reported that they took leave or changed their work schedule or location if they needed to take time off work in the previous week. To examine variation by child age, we computed usage rates based on the age of the youngest child in the household. We found that **workers whose youngest child was less than 1 year old** were the most likely to take leave (32 percent of parents), but the rates were similar among parents of older children (20 to 22 percent of parents). **For schedule or location changes, usage rates were fairly similar across child age categories, ranging from 7 to 11 percent.**

FIGURE 6
Share of Parents Who Took Leave or Changed Work Schedule or Location in the Previous Week, by Age of Youngest Child



Source: American Time Use Survey Leave Module, 2011.

Notes: Sample is people who worked in the previous seven days for pay or had at least one full- or part-time job, including one for which they were temporarily absent, and who are the parents of children younger than 15. All types of leave, not just parental leave, are included.

WHY DO PARENTS NEED TO TAKE LEAVE OR CHANGE THEIR WORK SCHEDULE OR LOCATION?

The preceding analysis examined parents' reports of access to leave and schedule control at their jobs. But why do parents need and use these benefits? This is important to consider as employers and policymakers think about the kinds of benefits working parents need to succeed.

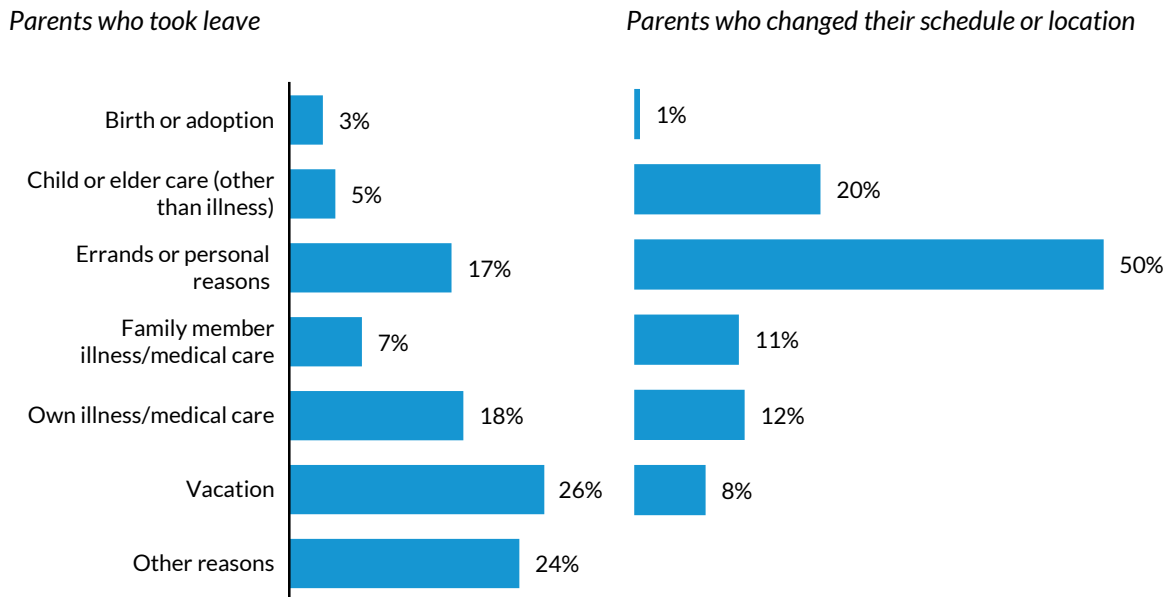
A striking finding from our analysis is that not only do many working parents need leave in a given week (as shown in figure 2), but many also take it. According to our analysis, **22 percent of parents reported taking some leave in the previous week; the length of the leave was generally short, 8.7 hours on average. A smaller percentage of parents, 9 percent, reported changing their work schedule or location** in the previous week (7 percent changed their schedule, and 2 percent changed location).

The relatively short length of leave suggests that many parents were using it for day-to-day needs, rather than because of major life events such as the birth of a child or longer-term issues such as caring for a family member with a serious medical condition. This was confirmed when we looked at why parents who used leave or changed their schedule or location reported doing so.

As shown in figure 7, families used work-family supports for various reasons. Among parents who said they took leave in the previous week, only 3 percent did so for a birth or adoption, and only 7 percent did so to care for an ill family member. The most common reasons were vacation (26 percent), "other" reasons (24 percent), their own illness or medical care (18 percent), and errands or personal reasons (17 percent). Among parents who used schedule or location changes instead of taking time off work, the most common reason by far was for errands or personal reasons (50 percent).¹²

FIGURE 7

Parents' Reasons for Taking Leave or Changing Schedule or Location If They Needed to Take Time Off Work in the Previous Week



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Source: American Time Use Survey Leave Module, 2011.

Notes: Sample is people who worked in the previous seven days for pay or had at least one full- or part-time job, including one for which they were temporarily absent, and who are the parents of children younger than 15. Estimates exclude respondents who did not answer the question (15.5 percent of respondents who said they needed leave). "Other reasons" was asked only with respect to leave, so the two categories are not perfectly comparable.

The reasons parents cited for using leave or changing their work schedule or location are notable because the needs cited most often by parents are not addressed in prominent policy debates around leave and workplace flexibility and control.¹³ Although bipartisan work support laws have been enacted and debated at all levels of government, they generally focus on paid sick or family and medical leave. Our findings suggest that parents' ability to manage work on a day-to-day basis may require leave and flexibility for a wider range of needs.

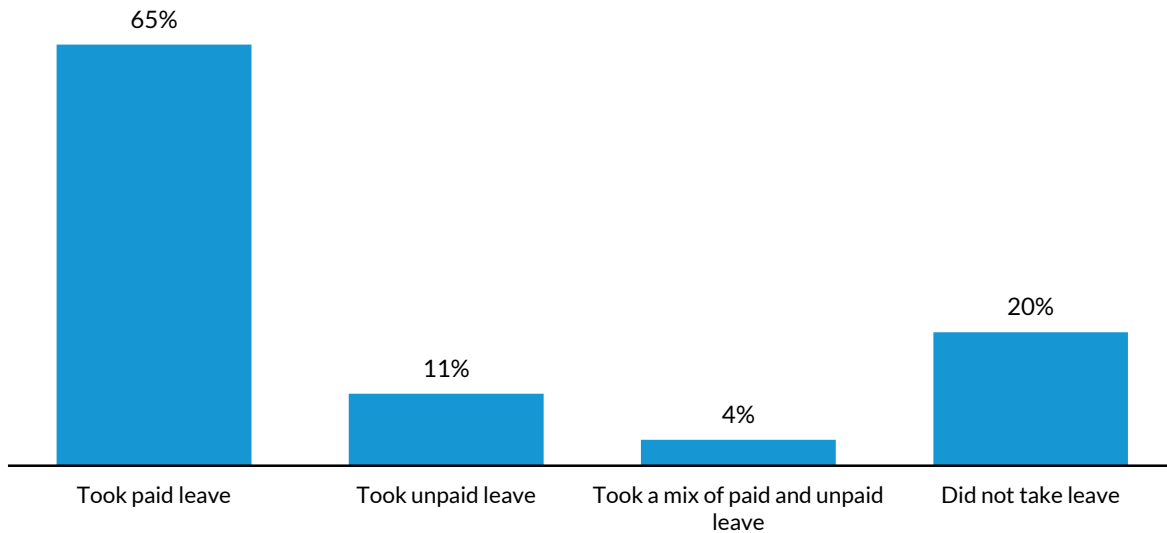
WHY DO SOME PARENTS CHOOSE NOT TO TAKE LEAVE WHEN THEY NEED IT?

The analysis above shows that parents need to be away from work for many reasons. But **some parents may not be able to do so, potentially hindering their success at work or at home.** Our analysis found that among parents who said they needed leave in the previous week and had access to it, 20 percent did not take any leave (figure 8). Among those who took leave, the large majority took only paid leave.

FIGURE 8

Leave Used in the Previous Week

Among employed parents who reported a need for leave and had access to leave



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Source: American Time Use Survey Leave Module, 2011.

Notes: Sample is people who worked in the previous seven days for pay or had at least one full- or part-time job, including one for which they were temporarily absent, and who are the parents of children younger than 15. Estimates exclude respondents who did not answer the question (25 percent of respondents who said they needed leave).

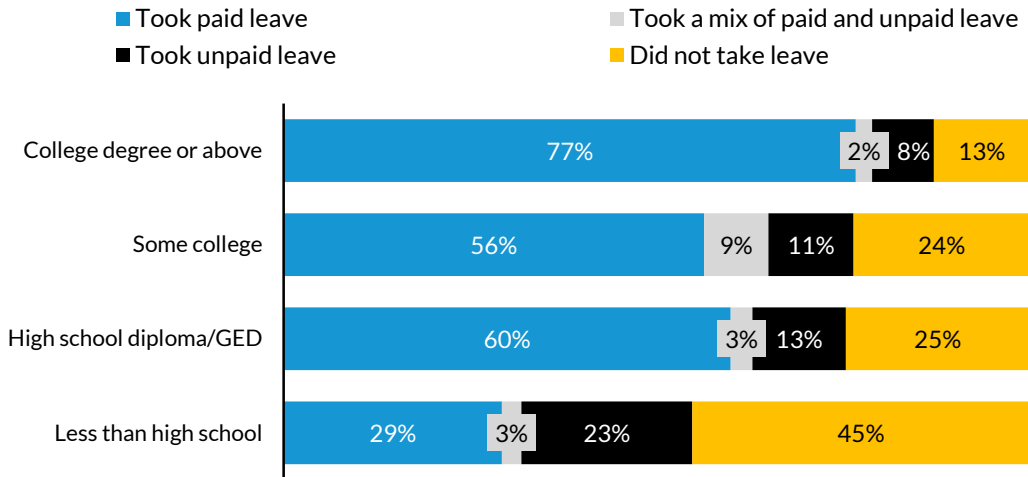
That such a high share of leave-takers used paid leave suggests that **receiving pay during leave may be an important factor driving parents' ability to take leave to address family needs.** When we examined patterns of leave-taking among parents by educational attainment, we found evidence to support this. As shown in figure 9, among college-educated parents who needed leave in the previous week and had access to it, 77 percent took only paid leave, while only 29 percent of those without a high school diploma took paid leave, likely reflecting the findings from figure 3 showing the much lower likelihood that those without a diploma had access to *paid* leave. Similarly, only 13 percent of college educated parents who needed leave in the previous week and had access to it took no leave, compared with 45 percent of those without a high school diploma, suggesting that parents who had access to unpaid, but not paid leave, were less likely to take it at all.

Figure 9 also shows that among parents who had access to leave but did not take it when they needed it, parents with less education were more likely to forgo leave because they couldn't afford the income loss. Other research has suggested that additional barriers, such as management resistance and fear of retribution, are especially acute for less advantaged workers (Lambert and Haley-Lock 2004; Vogtman and Schulman 2016; Williams and Huang 2011).

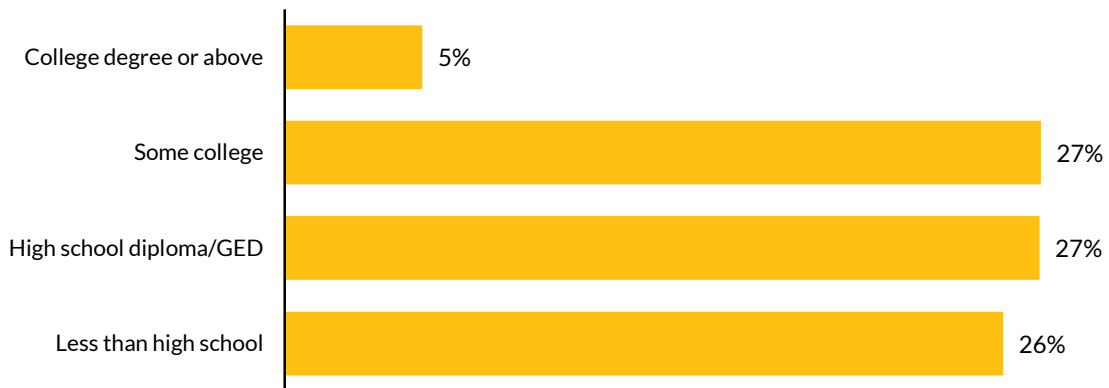
FIGURE 9

Use of Leave and Reasons for Not Taking Leave, by Educational Attainment

Among parents who needed and had access to leave in the previous week, whether they took it and what types they used



Among the parents who did not take leave, share who did not take it because they could not afford income loss



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: American Time Use Survey Leave Module, 2011.

Notes: Sample is people who worked in the previous seven days for pay or had at least one full- or part-time job, including one for which they were temporarily absent, and who are the parents of children younger than 15. Estimates exclude respondents who did not answer the question (25 percent of respondents who said they needed leave).

Support for Child Care

In this section, we look at the help that working parents receive for child care. Support for child care comes in many forms. Our data allow us to look at only one type, help paying for child care. This issue is especially important for low-income families, as the cost of child care has soared in recent years (Laughlin 2013).

Our data include information on whether parents reported receiving help paying for child care from different sources. This measures *receipt* of help, but not necessarily the *availability* of help. Additionally, we know from prior research that many parents underreport receipt of help paying for child care, especially from government sources. For example, parents who send their children to public early care and education programs like Head Start or state prekindergarten may not think of these as help paying for child care. Similarly, parents who receive the child and dependent care tax credit may not think of this when asked about government assistance for child care.

HOW PREVALENT IS HELP PAYING FOR CHILD CARE?

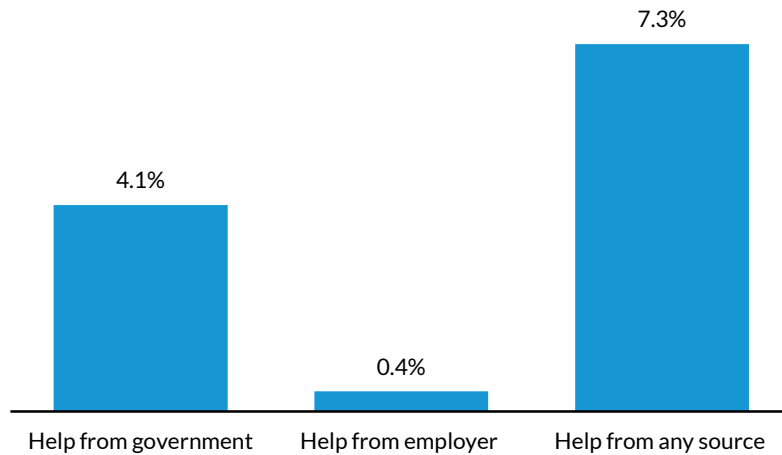
Keeping important limitations described above in mind, we report the available data but focus our conclusions on receipt of employer-provided help paying for child care. On the public side, it is worth noting that although there is a patchwork of potential supports to help families access affordable child care, access can be limited. For example, recent federal data show that only 15 percent of eligible children receive a child care subsidy (Chien 2019), 31 percent of eligible children have access to Head Start,¹⁴ and 12 percent of families with children benefit from the child and dependent care tax credit.¹⁵ Also, the various forms of child care assistance target different groups of families; child care subsidies and Head Start are targeted toward low-income families, and the child and dependent care tax credit primarily supports middle- and high-income families.

Our analysis shows that **receipt of help paying for child care from nongovernmental sources—particularly employers—is very low**. Focusing on employer-provided supports, we found that less than 1 percent of parents received help paying for child care from their employer (figure 10). This is consistent with other data sources—our analysis of similar items in the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education produced virtually identical results (not shown). It also aligns with results from employer surveys. For example, the National Study of Employers found that only 2 percent of employers offer help paying for child care (Matos, Galinsky, and Bond 2017).

FIGURE 10

Receipt of Help Paying for Child Care

Among employed parents with children younger than 15



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2011.

Note: Sample is parents who have at least one child younger than 15, who are working but not self-employed, and who have a regular child care arrangement.

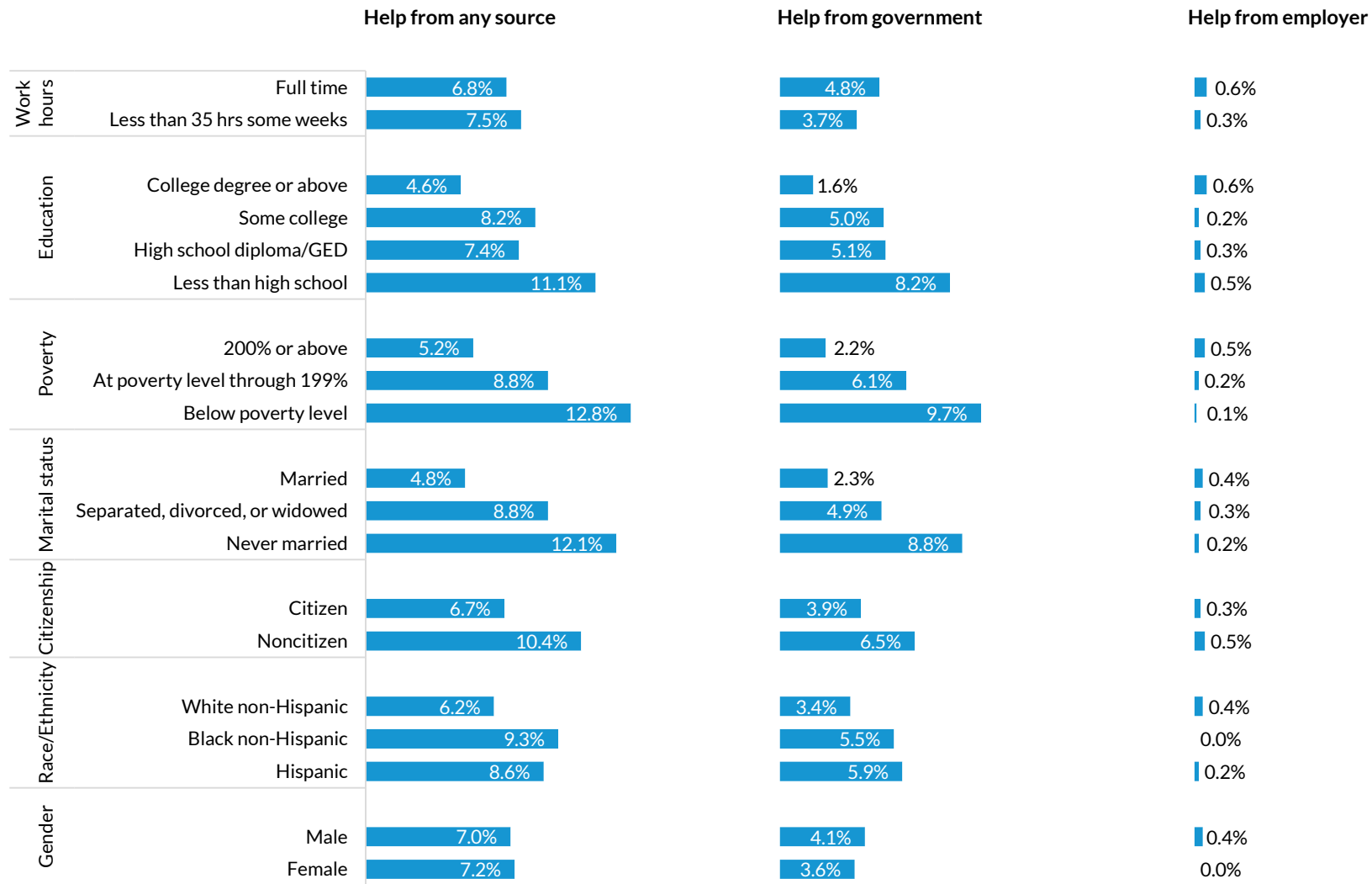
DOES RECEIPT OF HELP PAYING FOR CHILD CARE VARY BY PARENTAL CHARACTERISTIC?

In contrast to leave and scheduling patterns, we found little variation among parents in receipt of help paying for child care from employers (figure 11). Across all characteristics, **very few parents in any demographic category receive help paying for child care from their employers.** This is consistent with the research we describe in the companion report to this one that suggests that employers view child care as a social good that is more of a public policy responsibility (Stanczyk et al. 2019). The data show that low-income families, and parents who are single, are nonwhite, and have less education are more likely to report receiving help from government. This result makes sense because some of the most visible government programs, such as child care subsidies and Head Start, are targeted toward low-income families. Although the child and dependent care tax credit is more likely to be used by middle- and high-income families, subsidies through the tax system may be less salient to respondents when they are asked about government help.

FIGURE 11

Receipt of Help Paying for Child Care, by Source and by Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristic

Among employed parents with children younger than 15



Source: Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2011.

Note: Sample is parents who have at least one child younger than 15, who are working but not self-employed, and who have a regular child care arrangement.

Summary of Findings

This research used national survey data to examine patterns in parents' access to work-family supports in three areas that are crucial for their ability to effectively manage work and family: paid leave, workplace flexibility and control, and support for child care. While our analysis is limited by the information available in our data, our findings contribute to ongoing discussions about work-family policy. Below, we highlight key findings for each of our three research questions.

How Prevalent Is Access to Work-Family Supports among Working Parents?

- Most working parents reported having some type of workplace leave, but this varied by socioeconomic status. Access to unpaid leave was more common than access to paid leave for every type of leave.
- A small majority of working parents reported having the ability to change their work schedules and/or locations instead of taking leave.
- Parents who did not have access to leave were less likely to report access to workplace flexibility and control than parents who did have access to leave, suggesting that employers are not leveraging these benefits as substitutes, but rather that some jobs have good benefits and others do not.
- Although we had data only on the use (rather than the availability) of child care supports, almost no working parents reported receiving help paying for child care from their employers.

How Does Access Vary by Parental Characteristic?

- There was a clear pattern along socioeconomic lines: more advantaged parents were more likely to have access to paid leave and workplace flexibility and control at their jobs.
- Parents with lower educational attainment were more likely to say that they did not take leave when they needed it because they could not afford to do so.
- The share of parents who received help from their employer to pay for child care was low—less than 1 percent—for all parents, regardless of socioeconomic characteristics, although less advantaged parents were more likely than more advantaged parents to report receiving government assistance.

How Prevalent Is the Need for These Work-Family Supports among Working Parents, and Why Are They Needed?

- Need for leave among parents is widespread, with about a quarter of parents reporting that they needed leave in the previous week.
- More than one in five parents reported taking some type of leave in the previous week, and the length of leave taken was generally short.
- About one in 10 parents reported changing work schedule or location instead of taking leave in the previous week.
- Parents reported using leave and workplace flexibility and control for many reasons other than illness or the birth or adoption of a child.

Considerations for Policy and Research

- **The need for work-family supports is widespread, but access to them is uneven.** Parents reported high levels of need generally: for example, 29 percent of mothers and 24 percent of fathers said they needed leave from work for some reason in the previous week. Yet access to this and other supports is uneven, with more advantaged subgroups of parents generally more likely to report that they have key benefits like paid leave or the ability to change their schedule or location instead of leave. This pattern is consistent with prior research that has generally found that workers who are affluent and professional have more access to valuable benefits. It suggests that there is a need for continued debate about how both employers and public policies can be leveraged to ensure that all children and families have the stability they need.
- **Parents need work-family supports for reasons not addressed in prominent public policy debates.** In recent years, momentum has been growing around key policies such as paid family leave that focus on meeting the needs of new parents or the longer-term needs of caretakers of family members who have serious medical issues or disabilities. Yet our analysis found that on a day-to-day basis, parents need to be away from work for many reasons. For example, of the parents who reported changing their schedule or location in the previous week, half did so to attend to errands or personal matters. Parents' ability to do that may be important for meeting children's essential needs while maintaining employment. This suggests that a broader discussion around leave and workplace flexibility and control may be needed to ensure that all parents can maintain employment while caring effectively for their children.

- **Employer support for child care appears more limited than for leave or workplace flexibility and control, leaving a gap for public policy to fill.** We found that a very low share of parents receive help paying for child care from their employer. When we looked at working parents by socioeconomic subgroups, we found this to be the case across the board. This is consistent with research in the companion report to this one that suggests that employers view child care as a social good that is more of a public policy responsibility (Stanczyk et al. 2019). It also suggests that employers are not filling gaps to ensure parents have access to affordable child care and that other solutions—either through public policy or employer engagement—are needed.

Notes

- ¹ “Table 4. Families with Own Children: Employment Status of Parents by Age of Youngest Child and Family Type, 2017–2018 Annual Averages,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 18, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.t04.htm>.
- ² The policy discussion differs across these types of benefits, which is discussed in more detail later in the report.
- ³ “Table 4. Families with Own Children: Employment Status of Parents by Age of Youngest Child and Family Type, 2017–2018 Annual Averages,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 18, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.t04.htm>.
- ⁴ “Older People Projected to Outnumber Children for First Time in U.S. History,” US Census Bureau, March 13, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/cb18-41-population-projections.html>.
- ⁵ Currently, 10 states, the District of Columbia, and 17 localities have passed “paid sick days” laws that require employers to provide and pay for leave for covered workers (NPWF 2019a). Additionally, six states and the District of Columbia have established paid family and medical leave programs that are funded through employer and/or employee payroll tax contributions to a state system (NPWF2019b). These laws vary in eligibility, generosity, and whether an employee has a right to return to a job after taking leave. A few localities have passed paid family and medical leave policies that cover only municipal workers and are financed through the general fund.
- ⁶ “Family and Medical Leave Act,” Diversity Data Kids, accessed July 11, 2019, <http://www.diversitydatakids.org/data/policy/5/family-and-medical-leave-act>.
- ⁷ A small but growing number of jurisdictions—one state and four cities—have passed laws that require “fair scheduling” practices aimed at these workers, such as requiring advance notice of schedules, providing compensation for last-minute schedule changes, guaranteeing pay for a minimum number of hours, or extending protections to part-time workers (NWLC 2018). Additionally, “right to request” laws are emerging that provide all workers with the right to request flexibility or schedule changes without fear of retribution. Serious consideration of employer and public policies to increase workplace flexibility and control for low-wage workers is more recent than efforts to address scheduling related to work-family challenges faced by professional workers.
- ⁸ The considerable variation in policy implementation across states and across time affects access, such as eligibility requirements or funding levels. In addition, some state prekindergarten programs are universal (i.e., eligibility is not dependent on income), while other state prekindergarten programs target low-income families.
- ⁹ Elaine Maag, “Simplifying and Targeting Tax Subsidies for Child Care,” *TaxVox* (blog), Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, March 23, 2017, <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/taxvox/simplifying-and-targeting-tax-subsidies-child-care>.
- ¹⁰ “Employment Characteristics of Families Summary,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 18, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.nr0.htm>.
- ¹¹ A challenge with our data is that we cannot be sure whether parents are reporting that they can vary their work schedule or location based on their control or whether this variation occurs because of their employer’s control. Although the survey question asks whether respondents can vary their schedules if they “needed to take time off work,” respondents with schedules that vary might report that their schedules are flexible. Significant prior research has shown that low-wage, hourly, and frontline workers are generally more vulnerable to “flexible” scheduling practices that are controlled by their employers’ needs rather than their own (Lambert 2014).

- ¹² Excluding parents who cited vacation, these rates are even higher: for example, 23 percent of parents took leave for errands or personal reasons.
- ¹³ Some states and localities such as New York City are considering PTO legislation. See Jeff Stein, “New York Mayor to Unveil Plan Guaranteeing Paid Time Off, Aiming for a First,” *Washington Post*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/01/09/new-york-city-mayor-unveil-plan-guaranteeing-paid-time-off-aiming-first/>.
- ¹⁴ “National Head Start Fact Sheet: Head Start by the Numbers,” National Head Start Association, accessed July 11, 2019, <https://www.nhsa.org/national-head-start-fact-sheets>.
- ¹⁵ “How Does the Tax System Subsidize Child Care Expenses?” Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center Briefing Book, accessed July 11, 2019, <https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/how-does-tax-system-subsidize-child-care-expenses>.

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