

All Work or No Pay

The United States Without Paid Time Off

A Report from Paid Leave for All

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**PAID
LEAVE
for ALL**

For many of us, the calendar can be a comfort as we look ahead to our next break from work, the time that lets us visit loved ones or catch up on tasks at home, giving us the change in pace we need to balance life and work. But while nearly all wealthy countries guarantee various forms of paid time off, including to cover holidays, the U.S. does not. Instead, federal law in the United States provides no paid leave of any kind—not for holidays like Labor Day or Thanksgiving, not for illness, not for family needs. As a result, many workers have too little paid time off and millions have none at all.

For those without paid days off, often, holidays are just another day at work, even when they would greatly prefer—or need—to be home or with loved ones. Others must take the day off and go without pay to do so, whether to meet caregiving needs, engage in religious observance, or simply get needed rest. This report examines the impact of our national lack of guaranteed paid time off.





MILLIONS OF AMERICANS HAVE *no paid time away* FOR HOLIDAYS OR REST.

Nationwide, more than 29 million employees have no paid holidays off.¹ In the private sector, nearly one in five employees (19%) have no paid holidays.² Moreover, access to paid holiday time is profoundly unevenly distributed. In the private sector, only half of all part-time employees have paid holidays, compared to the vast majority of full-time employees.³ Low-wage workers are dramatically less likely to have paid holidays: less than half of those in the lowest 10 percent of wage earners have access, compared to 95% of those in the highest 10 percent.⁴ There are also significant gaps by occupation and industry: for example, those in management, business, and financial occupations are nearly twice as likely to have paid holidays as those in service work.⁵ Those who work at smaller employers are also less likely to receive paid holidays than employees of larger employers.⁶

Nor can employees simply cover with other paid time. With no federally guaranteed paid leave of any kind, many workers have no paid leave at all or too little to meet their needs. One in five private sector employees have no paid vacation time,⁷ disproportionately low-wage workers.⁸ Even those who have paid vacation receive, on average, only 10 days per year.⁹ Only half of private sector employees have any paid personal days.¹⁰ And a whopping one in eight private sector employees have no paid vacation, personal, or holiday days, including 43% of the lowest-wage workers.¹¹ For the more than 19 million Americans with none of these forms of paid time off,¹² time away from work must be weighed against the price of a paycheck they need.



LACK OF PAID TIME OFF *comes at a high price,* ESPECIALLY FOR PARENTS

Failure to guarantee paid time off deprives Americans of the documented benefits of workplace leave. Taking vacation improves wellbeing, both during and after vacation¹³ and reduces stress and burnout.¹⁴ More broadly, vacation time can have important mental¹⁵ and physical health benefits.¹⁶ Paid time off also reduces employee turnover,¹⁷ which can have valuable bottom line benefits for employers.¹⁸

For parents without paid holidays or other paid time off to use, covering days when schools or child care are closed but work remains open can be particularly burdensome. Consider, for example, nearly two thirds of food service workers have no paid holidays (62%);¹⁹ more than half have no paid vacation (54%).²⁰ In an industry where most employees are women, more than a third of women in restaurants are moms, of whom more than half are single mothers.²¹ As a result, every time schools or daycares close for a holiday or break, many parents working in restaurants must choose between the paycheck their family counts on and the care their kids need.

Even those with some paid time off often face gaps. Among employees with some paid holidays, only 43% receive the day after Thanksgiving off;²² service workers are especially unlikely to have the day off,²³ including those who must work “Black Friday” sales.²⁴ Less than a quarter (24%) of employees with some paid holidays receive a paid holiday for President’s Day,²⁵ a day when most schools are closed.²⁶ When added on to extended winter and spring breaks, professional development days, and the summer break, a lack of sufficient paid time off places a profound strain on working parents.

THE U.S. PROVIDES *no right to any paid time off for any reason*—LEAVING WORKING FAMILIES IN THE LURCH.

LACK OF GUARANTEED PAID LEAVE MAKES THE U.S. *an international outlier.*

The U.S.'s lack of protection stands in sharp contrast to our economic peers. Every other OECD country requires at least 10 paid vacation days per year.²⁷ Many countries also provide public holidays as paid days off in addition to annual or vacation leave.²⁸ Similar countries also commonly provide by law that those who do work on public holidays must be paid a substantial premium over their normal rate to work on holidays, such as double their normal pay.²⁹

For example, in Mexico, employees are entitled to at least 12 paid vacation days, with longer periods for longer-serving employees,³⁰ as well as seven annual public holidays.³¹ In Canada, required paid annual leave is set by province, generally at a minimum of two weeks per year;³² employees are also generally entitled to paid holidays set by their province.³³ In Australia, employees have four weeks of paid annual leave by law,³⁴ plus several paid public holidays.³⁵ Under the E.U.'s Working Time Directive, member countries must provide at least four weeks paid annual leave per year;³⁶ several member states provide more annual leave by law or provide additional paid public holidays.³⁷ In the U.K., workers have the right to at least 5.6 weeks annual leave or, for those working a five-day work week, 28 days.³⁸

Americans aren't simply doing without paid holidays or vacation. U.S. federal law does not provide *any* paid leave for *any* reason—not one day, not one dollar. That means no legal right to paid time to recover from serious illness, to care for a loved one with cancer, or to welcome a new child.³⁹ More than a half a decade after a global pandemic ravaged the country, the U.S. does not even guarantee a single paid sick day.⁴⁰

It doesn't have to be that way. Virtually all of the U.S.'s economic peers—and, for that matter, countries with considerably fewer resources—already offer paid leave for workers' own health,⁴¹ to care for ill loved ones,⁴² or for the arrival of a new baby.⁴³ These rights accompany the paid annual leave, paid holidays, and other labor protections that workers in other wealthy countries rightly take for granted, while Americans must hope to get lucky with a generous employer.

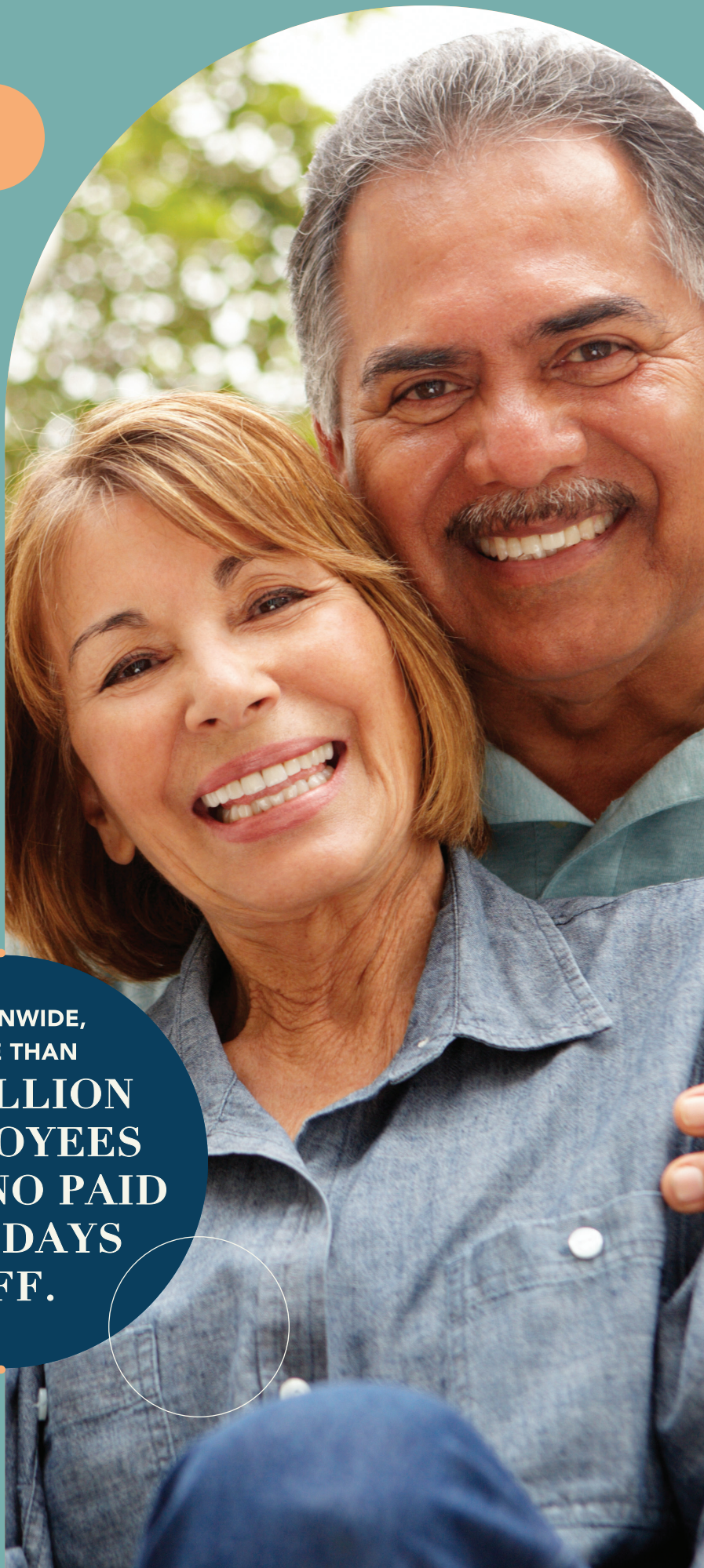
Nor must we look abroad for examples of a better path: a growing number of U.S. states already ensure important paid leave rights.⁴⁴ Fourteen states and the District of Columbia have passed laws to guarantee paid family and medical leave,⁴⁵ while 18 states and D.C. along with several municipalities have paid sick time laws.⁴⁶ Three states, joined by a few cities and counties, already have general use paid time off laws.⁴⁷ There are also robust federal proposals that would provide workers the kinds of paid leave they need, including the FAMILY Act (serious health and caregiving needs),⁴⁸ the Healthy Families Act (paid sick and safe time),⁴⁹ and the Protected Time Off Act (paid vacation time).⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

Today in the United States, paid time off is a story of haves and have nots.

For as long as they stay lucky, the fortunate ones look forward to time to spend with their families, to reflect, to relax; they reap the rewards of breathing just a little easier. But for those doing without paid time off, even a single day to mark a holiday or care for kids home from school can come with a great cost or never come at all. That burden becomes even heavier when lack of paid leave stands in the way of health or care. Until and unless we change our laws to protect our precious time, we as a nation will keep paying the heavy price.

NATIONWIDE,
MORE THAN
**29 MILLION
EMPLOYEES
HAVE NO PAID
HOLIDAYS
OFF.**



FOOTNOTES

- 1 Author's calculations based on data from Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2025," (September 2025), <https://www.bls.gov/ebs/publications/employee-benefits-in-the-united-states-march-2025.htm>. Calculation reflects the 20% of the civilian workforce who do not have access to paid holidays.
- 2 Bureau of Labor Statistics, *supra* note 1.
- 3 *Id.*
- 4 *Id.*
- 5 In the private sector, 96% of management, business, and financial occupations have paid holidays compared to 56% of those in service occupations. *Id.*
- 6 In the private sector, more than one in four (27%) employees of employers with fewer than 100 employees have no paid holidays, compared to only 9% of those at employers with 100 or more employees. *Id.*
- 7 *Id.*
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- 9 John Schmitt, "No-Vacation Nation: Comparing the US to Other Wealthy Nations," CEPR (August 2026), <https://cepr.net/publications/no-vacation-nation-comparing-the-us-to-other-wealthy-nations/>.
- 10 Bureau of Labor Statistics, *supra* note 1.
- 11 *Id.*
- 12 Author's calculations based on data from Bureau of Labor Statistics, *supra* note 1. Number represents the thirteen percent of the civilian workforce with no paid vacation, personal, or holiday days.
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- 17 Candice Vander Weerd *et al.*, "The role of paid time off, flexible scheduling and job satisfaction in voluntary turnover," *International Journal of Manpower* (2025), <https://www.emerald.com/ijm/article-abstract/46/5/919/1250474/The-role-of-paid-time-off-flexible-scheduling-and>.
- 18 Kate Bahn and Carmen Sanchez Cummings, "Improving U.S. labor standards and the quality of jobs to reduce the costs of employee turnover to U.S. companies," Washington Center for Equitable Growth (December 2020), <https://equitablegrowth.org/improving-u-s-labor-standards-and-the-quality-of-jobs-to-reduce-the-costs-of-employee-turnover-to-u-s-companies/>.
- 19 Among private sector workers in accommodations and food service. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *supra* note 1.
- 20 *Id.*
- 21 Molly Weston Williamson, "The Family and Medical Leave Act at 30: Spotlight on Restaurant Workers," Center for American Progress (February 2023), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-family-and-medical-leave-act-at-30-spotlight-on-restaurant-workers/>.
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- 24 Pat Garofalo, "Black Friday Isn't the Only Time Workers Face Unfair Schedules," TalkPoverty (November 2018), <https://talkpoverty.org/2018/11/20/black-friday-isnt-time-workers-face-absurd-unfair-schedules/index.html>.
- 25 Bureau of Labor Statistics, *supra* note 21.
- 26 PBS Newshour, "It's President's Day. Here's what open and closed," (February 2026), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/its-presidents-day-heres-whats-open-and-closed>.
- 27 Schmitt, *supra* note 9.
- 28 OECD, *OECD Employment Outlook 2021: Navigating the COVID-19 Crisis and Recovery*, (2021), pg. 293, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/07/oecd-employment-outlook-2021_e81fed73a/5a700c4b-en.pdf.
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- 32 Schmitt, *supra* note 9.
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