



# HOW DOES THE U.S. RANK IN WORK POLICIES FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES?

A Briefing Paper Prepared for the  
Council on Contemporary Families

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## How Does the U.S. Rank in Work Policies for Individuals and Families?

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The Work, Family, and Equity Index, a creation of the Project on Global Working Families with support from the Ford Foundation, is the first venture to systematically compare public policies for working families in 180 countries. Analyzing data from a wide range of government, private, and academic sources, we have found that the United States is positioned well alongside other high-performing countries in policies protecting individuals from discrimination on the basis of race, gender, age, and disability in the workplace. But when it comes to protecting the family lives of workers, U.S. public policies lag dramatically behind other high-income countries, and even behind many middle- and low-income countries.

### Where Does The U.S. Have Strong Work Protections?

- The U.S. compares well to many other countries in having policies that ensure an equitable right to work for all racial and ethnic groups, regardless of gender, age or disability. U.S. social insurance policies have also had marked success in lowering the poverty rates of the elderly, although they have been less successful than other affluent nations in protecting children from poverty.
- In addition, the U.S. is also one of 117 countries guaranteeing a pay premium for overtime work. The U.S. rate of 150 percent (or "time and a half") for overtime is near the top in the range of guaranteed payments. Only eight countries mandate more.

### Where Does The U.S. Lag Behind?

#### *Leave around childbearing*

- Out of 173 countries studied, 168 countries offer guaranteed leave with income to women in connection with childbirth; 98 of these countries offer 14 or more weeks paid leave. Although in a number of countries, many women work in the informal sector, where these government guarantees do not always apply, the fact remains that the U.S. guarantees no paid leave for mothers in any segment of the work force, leaving it in the company of only 4 other nations: Lesotho, Liberia, Papua New Guinea, and Swaziland.

- 65 countries ensure that fathers either receive paid paternity leave or have a right to paid parental leave; 31 of these countries offer 14 or more weeks of paid leave. The U.S. guarantees fathers neither paid paternity nor paid parental leave.

### ***Support for breastfeeding***

- 107 countries protect working women's right to breastfeed; in at least 73 of these the breaks are paid. The U.S. does not guarantee the right to breastfeed, even though breastfeeding is proven to reduce infant mortality.

### ***Work hours***

- 137 countries mandate paid annual leave, with 121 of these countries guaranteeing 2 weeks or more each year. The U.S. does not require employers to provide any paid annual leave.
- 134 countries have laws that fix the maximum length of the work week. The U.S. does not have a maximum length of the work week or a limit on mandatory overtime per week.
- While only 28 countries have restrictions or prohibitions on night work, 50 countries have government-mandated evening and night wage premiums. The U.S. neither restricts nor guarantees wage premiums for night work.

### ***Leave for illness and family care***

- 49 countries guarantee leave for major family events such as marriage or funerals; in 40 of these countries, leave for one or both of these family events is paid.
- 145 countries provide paid leave for short- or long-term illnesses, with 127 providing a week or more annually. More than 79 countries provide sickness benefits for at least 26 weeks or until recovery. The U.S. provides only unpaid leave for serious illnesses through the FMLA, which does not cover all workers. Moreover, the U.S. does not guarantee any paid sick days for common illnesses.

## **Why Does It Matter?**

### ***Paid leave for childbearing and childrearing***

- Improves children's health outcomes by making more time available to parents to provide essential care for children, by facilitating breastfeeding, which reduces the risk of infections, and by increasing the likelihood that children will receive necessary immunizations, all of which contribute to lower infant mortality and morbidity rates. More time for parents also allows for the formation of bonds between parents and children, fostering positive emotional development of children.

- Improves economic conditions of families by increasing the long-term employment and earning prospects of working parents, so they do not have to quit their jobs to get time off with children.
- Benefits employers by reducing staff turnover, which can lower recruitment and training costs and improve workers' productivity. When workers feel supported, they have higher levels of job satisfaction, which in turn increases their commitment to their company's success.
- Is enshrined in two widely accepted human rights protocols: the International Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (signed by 156 countries), and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (signed by 178 countries).

### ***Support for breastfeeding***

- Results in lower infant and child mortality, with studies finding a 1.5 to 5-fold lower relative risk of mortality among breast-fed children.
- Breast-fed children have lower rates of gastrointestinal infections, respiratory tract infections, ear infections, meningitis, and other infections. A higher illness and fatality rate from diarrhea has been documented among bottle-fed children in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, as well as in developing countries.

### ***Work hours and availability of leave markedly affect parental involvement***

- Parental involvement is critical to children's educational, developmental and health outcomes. When parents are involved in their children's education, children achieve more in elementary school, junior high school and high school. Parental involvement is particularly important for children who are at risk educationally, including children living in poverty and children with learning disabilities.
- Yet in the U.S., half of all low-income working parents face barriers to becoming involved in their children's education. Thirty-nine per cent of low-income working parents find it hard to get time to participate in school meetings, school trips, or school events. Eighteen percent of the low-income parents we interviewed had little or no time with their children during the week.
- In the absence of restrictions on night work or requirement of pay premiums, the number of parents working during the evenings, nights and weekends is on the rise. Over three-fifths of employees working nonstandard schedules do so because they "could not get another job," because it is "mandated by the employer," or because of "the nature of the work." Yet parental evening and night work can have negative consequences for children and families. Parents who work non-standard shifts are more likely to have children who score poorly in math, vocabulary, and reading tests; who repeat a year; and who are suspended from school. Families with adults who work the night and evening shifts report lower-quality home environments, and shift-working couples have higher divorce rates.

### ***Leave for illness and family care***

- Parents play a crucial role in caring for their children's health care needs. Parental involvement helps children recover more rapidly from illnesses and injuries and is equally critical for children's mental health. Parents who have paid leave are more likely to care for their sick children themselves, as well as to provide preventive health care.
- Sick adults also fare better when they receive support and care from family members. For example, social supports have been linked to reduced severity and improved survival rates for patients with heart problems.
- Poor working parents in the U.S. are more likely than better-off families to have three weeks or more a year of illness caregiving to manage. Yet low-income working parents are less likely than middle-income parents to have paid leave or the flexibility at work needed to address the health needs of children or other family members.

### **Feasibility Of Change**

There is an enormous payoff to improving working conditions -- from lowering long-term family poverty to improving population health and education and increasing their associated economic and social benefits. The comparative data do not support the common notion that establishing good working conditions leads to job loss. Our studies found that none of these protections is associated with higher unemployment rates on a national level. In fact, on a global scale, countries that provide longer parental leave, as well as more leave to care for children, are among the most economically competitive.

## For Further Information

For a comparison of work-family and child care policies in high-income countries (e.g., Europe, North America, Australia, New Zealand), contact Janet C. Gornick, Director, Luxembourg Income Study, and Professor of Political Science and Sociology, CUNY Graduate Center: 212.817.1872.

For more information on how motherhood affects women's wages, contact Shelley Correll, Professor of Sociology, Cornell University: [sjc62@cornell.edu](mailto:sjc62@cornell.edu), 607.255.1697; and Paula England, Professor of Sociology, Stanford University: [pengland@stanford.edu](mailto:pengland@stanford.edu), 650.723.4912

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## About CCF

The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

Founded in 1996 and now based in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

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