

Divergent Trends in US Maternity and Paternity Leave, 1994–2015


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Objectives. To determine the number and type of US workers taking maternity or paternity leave.

Methods. We created a publicly available ecological long-term series for measuring parental leave from 1994 to 2015 by using the Current Population Survey, which interviews about 60 000 randomly selected households monthly.

Results. The average month from 1994 to 2015 saw 273 000 women and 13 000 men on maternity or paternity leave. Maternity leave rates per 10 000 births showed no trend over 22 years (mean = 677.6). Paternity figures increased by a factor of 3, but started from a small base (14.7–54.6). We observed no national impact on maternity or paternity leave after implementation of state laws that provided paid leave. About half (51.1%) of employees on maternity or paternity leave during 2015 received paid time off. The typical woman on maternity leave was older, more likely married, more likely non-Hispanic White, and more educated than the typical woman who gave birth.

Conclusions. Although the US economy has expanded dramatically since 1994, this improvement does not appear to have translated into more women taking maternity leave. (*Am J Public Health.* 2017;107:460–465. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2016.303607)

 See also Galea and Vaughan, p. 363.

Maternity and paternity leave policies, which give new parents time off after a baby's birth, are an essential part of any country's support for children and families.¹ The policies help mothers who are exhausted or experiencing childbirth complications restore their vitality, resulting in improved ability to care for their infants. Research has shown that giving parents time off from work to bond with new babies is extremely beneficial to overall maternal health,² improving mother's mental health,^{3,4} reducing cesarean deliveries,⁵ saving infants' lives,⁶ promoting mother–infant interaction,⁷ and encouraging breastfeeding.^{8,9} Family-leave policies are gaining importance because of the rising numbers of dual-career couples and single working parents, which result in less family support available to new parents. Since 1952, the United Nations' International Labor Organization has called for not less than 14 weeks of paid maternity leave for all employed women.¹⁰

The United States is one of the few countries that does not offer guaranteed paid

leave for women after childbirth. A 2007 analysis found that out of 173 countries, only 4 lacked paid leave: Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Swaziland, and the United States.¹¹ The same study found that 98 countries require working women to receive at least 14 weeks of paid time off when a child is born. This is far more generous than in the United States, where the Department of Labor estimates “only 12% of private sector workers have access to paid family leave through their employer.”¹²

Although maternity leave is positive for health, it often has negative consequences in the United States for family income, job security, promotion, and pay.¹³ Because few companies pay for maternity or paternity leave, there is a low likelihood that new

parents can afford to stop working.¹⁴ There is also the potential that maternity leave laws could encourage businesses to discriminate against women who are, or who are likely to become, pregnant, because hiring pregnant women potentially leaves companies temporarily short-staffed, and saddled with higher medical costs and possibly higher wage costs.

Since 1993, most workers are covered by the federal government's Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). This law gives eligible workers 12 weeks of unpaid time off during the first 12 months after birth to care for a newborn.¹⁵ Not all workers are covered because eligibility for FMLA is based on meeting 3 criteria: length of employment (> 1 year), hours worked (> 1250 hours in past 12 months), and employer size (> 50 workers). In 2006, the state of Washington enacted a law providing an additional 12 weeks of time off beyond the FMLA's requirements for workers at large companies in that state.¹⁶

California enacted paid time off for newborn care in 2002, which took effect in July 2004. California's system is part of the state disability insurance program and provides a maximum of 6 weeks of paid leave. Research suggests that this policy lowered the number of cases of pediatric head trauma in California, a leading cause of fatal child abuse.¹⁷

Following California, 3 other states also enacted paid family leave laws—Washington in 2007, New Jersey in 2008, and Rhode Island in 2013.¹⁸ More states and some cities are contemplating paid family leave policies, with New York State implementing a policy

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starting in 2018. The issue was part of the 2016 US presidential campaign, with Donald Trump promising to provide 6 weeks of paid leave to new mothers.¹⁹

Washington State's law is not effective because of a lack of funding.²⁰ Rhode Island provides only 4 weeks of paid time off and New Jersey provides 6 weeks. Some new parents may be reluctant to use these paid benefits. One problem is highlighted by the state of New Jersey's Web site, which states that "Family Leave Insurance does not protect anyone's job,"²¹ leaving some workers vulnerable to losing their jobs when caring for a newborn.

Another issue is that paid leave often does not completely replace a worker's salary. In California, parents taking paid family leave only receive approximately 55% of their usual pay, up to a maximum of \$1129, which means families on the paid leave program experience reduced income during a period of increased expenses.²² Finally, research shows that some programs are confusing to new parents, and applying for benefits is difficult.²³

We developed a data series showing the number of workers actually using parental leave. This series will supplement occasional government surveys that gather information on company benefit plans that include maternity or paternity leave,²⁴ data from small-scale surveys,²⁵ and national surveys at a single point in time.²⁶

METHODS

To create a long-term series showing the number of workers actually using maternity leave, we analyzed secondary data from the Current Population Survey (CPS). The primary goal of the CPS is to determine the nation's unemployment rate. The CPS is a monthly national multistage random sample that contacts approximately 60 000 households across all 50 states.²⁷

The CPS records detailed information on what each person in the household who is aged at least 16 years was doing during the survey week. People analyzed in this research were individuals who had a job but were temporarily absent because they were on maternity or paternity leave. Maternity and paternity categories started in January 1994, which is when a redesigned questionnaire was

first introduced to provide more detailed information on reasons for not being at work.²⁸

We took data from each month from the US Census Bureau's publicly available DataFerret Web site, an Internet-based data analysis and extraction program.²⁹ DataFerret provides updated CPS information to the public after slightly more than a month lag. Because DataFerret is complex to use and is a relatively unknown resource, an electronic data appendix is available as a supplement to the online version of this article at <http://www.ajph.org> that shows the steps needed to extract maternity and paternity data.

We extracted monthly data from January 1994, when maternity data begin, until December 2015, the latest full year of data

available. We averaged the monthly data to create annual figures. We extracted 3 variables from DataFerret: the reason for work absence in the last week, gender, and whether the absence from work was paid. We weighted all data to adjust for the complex survey design and to ensure that the results match national population estimates. We did not do statistical analysis at the state level because DataFerret only identified 4 geographic regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West).

We analyzed monthly data with least squares regressions. The regressions explain the number of people on parental leave with 11 factors. The factors are the number of births; number of previous month's births; unemployment rates; a time trend; indicators tracking the seasons; state indicators tracking

TABLE 1—Average Number and Rate of People Each Month on Maternity and Paternity Leave: United States, 1994–2015

Year	Maternity Leave, No. (SE)	Paternity Leave, No. (SE)	Births, No.	No. on Maternity Leave per 10 000 Births	No. on Paternity Leave per 10 000 Births
1994	278 454 (11 735)	5 798 (1 695)	3 952 767	704.5	14.7
1995	263 655 (11 419)	5 696 (1 680)	3 899 589	676.1	14.6
1996	271 878 (11 596)	6 365 (1 776)	3 891 494	698.6	16.4
1997	275 866 (11 680)	7 019 (1 864)	3 880 894	710.8	18.1
1998	287 459 (11 923)	7 435 (1 919)	3 941 553	729.3	18.9
1999	275 644 (11 676)	6 850 (1 842)	3 959 417	696.2	17.3
2000	291 440 (12 005)	9 745 (2 197)	4 058 814	718.0	24.0
2001	258 468 (11 307)	9 953 (2 220)	4 025 933	642.0	24.7
2002	256 040 (11 254)	9 780 (2 201)	4 021 726	636.6	24.3
2003	261 437 (11 371)	13 213 (2 558)	4 089 950	639.2	32.3
2004	257 717 (11 290)	10 946 (2 328)	4 112 052	626.7	26.6
2005	256 562 (11 265)	12 122 (2 450)	4 138 349	620.0	29.3
2006	292 164 (12 020)	13 016 (2 539)	4 265 555	684.9	30.5
2007	294 463 (12 067)	18 915 (3 061)	4 316 233	682.2	43.8
2008	295 385 (12 086)	18 592 (3 034)	4 247 694	695.4	43.8
2009	284 191 (11 855)	18 999 (3 067)	4 130 665	688.0	46.0
2010	279 099 (11 749)	14 673 (2 696)	3 999 386	697.9	36.7
2011	237 761 (10 845)	16 381 (2 848)	3 953 590	601.4	41.4
2012	265 934 (11 469)	21 156 (3 237)	3 952 841	672.8	53.5
2013	258 978 (11 318)	20 048 (3 151)	3 932 181	658.6	51.0
2014	268 938 (11 533)	19 411 (3 100)	3 985 924	674.7	48.7
2015	299 861 (12 177)	21 703 (3 278)	3 977 745	753.8	54.6
Average	273 245 (11 620)	13 083 (2 488)	4 033 380	677.6	32.3

Source. Number of births from US Vital Statistics.^{31,32} Standard errors calculated using values from the US Bureau of Labor Statistic's Table 1-D.²⁷

when paid leave was instituted in California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island; and a binary variable indicating when the US economy was in an economic recession as declared by the National Bureau of Economic Research.³⁰

We performed all statistical analysis with SAS Enterprise version 4.3 (SAS Institute Inc, Cary, NC). We reported results as significant if *P* was less than or equal to .05. We performed mean comparisons by using a 2-tailed student *t* test, via SAS's PROC TTEST function.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the average number of women in the United States on maternity leave from 1994 to 2015 exhibited no trend over time. On average, 273 000 women (95% confidence interval [CI] = 250 000, 296 000) took maternity leave in the typical month.

The average number of men on paternity leave each month was 13 000. Unlike maternity leave, paternity leave has grown; rising from 5800 men per month in 1994 to 22 000 per month in 2015, a more than 3-fold increase.

Table 1 shows the numbers of births per year in the United States. From 1994 to 2007, births followed a rising trend, increasing from

3.95 million to 4.32 million. Since the 2007 peak, births have fallen and in 2015 were less than 4 million. The correlation between the number of women each year on maternity leave and births is 0.377 (*P* = .08), indicating a positive but not statistically significant relationship between births and women on leave.

Table 1 shows the rate of men and women on leave per 10 000 births. For every 10 000 babies born in a year, about 700 parents (677 women and 32 men) in a typical month were on leave. Visual and statistical analyses revealed no statistically significant trend over time in the rate of women on maternity leave in either monthly or yearly data.

Table 2 compares the marital status, race, ethnicity, and educational status of women on maternity leave to information recorded about mothers on birth certificates and shows that women on leave were qualitatively and statistically distinct from all mothers who gave birth. From 1994 to 2015, approximately three quarters of women on maternity leave were married, but less than two thirds of births occurred to married women. Women on maternity leave were much more likely to be non-Hispanic White compared with birth mothers.

Table 2 shows that women on maternity leave had much more educational attainment than the typical women who gave birth. For

example, 71.6% of women on maternity leave started or graduated college compared with 49.7% of birth mothers. Because educational data from birth certificate records has not been released for 2015, the calculations for educational attainment stop in 2014.

A comparison of the age distribution of women on maternity leave with the age distribution of mothers who gave birth in 1994 to 2015 shows that the average woman on maternity leave is 2.4 years older (29.8 ± 0.2 years) than the average woman giving birth (27.5 years ± 0.09 years; *P* < .01).

Regression results are shown in Table 3. The combined and maternity data provide no statistical support for a time trend or seasonal pattern. They also suggest that states introducing paid leave did not appear to have any statistically measurable impact on the national number of people on leave. Maternity leave did not appear to be related to current births, but was related to births in the previous month with a 0.42 coefficient (95% CI = 0.05, 0.79). This coefficient suggests, but cannot prove, that for every 10 births in the United States, there will be roughly 4 more women on maternity leave the following month.

Unemployment rates were negatively related to maternity leave and recessions were positively related, but neither was statistically significant. We tried additional variables tracking numbers of births in the past 2 months, 3 months, and 4 months plus data on the US population in the regressions, but we excluded these from the results because they were not statistically significant.

There was a statistically significant rise in the number of men taking parenting leave. The value on the time trend was 67 (*t* stat 4.3; *P* < .01), which means that, from 1994 to 2015, about 67 more men took paternity leave each month. No other coefficients were statistically significant in the paternity regressions.

Trends in the percentage of workers receiving pay from their employer while on maternity or paternity leave are shown in Figure 1. Approximately half (48.3% overall average) of all employees on leave were paid for taking care of their newborn children, which means that 51.7% of workers on parental leave were unpaid. There was a lower overall average rate (47.5%) of paid maternity leave than of paid paternity leave (66.1%).

TABLE 2—Marital Status, Race, Ethnicity, and Education of US Women on Maternity Leave and Birth Mothers: 1994–2015

Characteristic	Mothers on Maternity Leave, %	Mothers Giving Birth, %	Difference, Percentage Points	<i>P</i> ^a
Married	75.5	63.3	+12.2	<.01
Race/ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic White	68.8	56.5	+12.3	<.01
Non-Hispanic Black	12.5	14.7	-2.3	<.01
Hispanic	12.0	21.7	-9.7	<.01
Other, including mixed race	6.7	7.1	-0.4	.41
Educational attainment ^b				
< high-school education	5.7	20.8	-15.1	<.01
High-school degree	22.7	29.6	-6.9	<.01
Attended college	71.6	49.7	+21.9	<.01

Source. Maternity leave data from the Current Population Survey.²⁹ Birth data from US Vital Statistics.^{31,32}

^aColumn shows whether the difference between mothers on maternity leave and those giving birth is statistically distinct. *P* values determined by *t* test.

^bBecause educational data from birth certificate records has not been released for 2015, the calculations for educational attainment stop in 2014.

TABLE 3—National Regression Results Using Number of People Each Month on Maternity or Paternity Leave as Dependent Variable, United States, 1994–2015

Variable	Combined No. on Maternity and Paternity Leave, b (95% CI)	No. on Maternity Leave, b (95% CI)	No. on Paternity Leave, b (95% CI)
No. births (no. babies)	0.24 (−0.11, 0.58)	0.25 (−0.07, 0.58)	−0.02 (−0.08, 0.05)
Previous month's births (no. babies)	0.45 (0.06, 0.84)	0.42 (0.05, 0.79)	0.03 (−0.04, 0.10)
Time trend (Jan 1994 = 1)	−66 (−236, 103)	−133 (−293, 28)	67 (36, 97)
Unemployment rate (% of labor force seeking work)	−4418 (−9 245, 408)	−4487 (−9 064, 90)	69 (−791, 929)
Recession indicator ^a	15 530 (−689, 31 749)	13 538 (−1 842, 28 918)	1992 (−899, 4 883)
Season ^b			
Winter (Dec–Feb)	2485 (−12 142, 17 112)	1308 (−12 563, 15 179)	1177 (−1 430, 3 784)
Spring (Mar–May)	3676 (−12 446, 19 799)	2814 (−12 474, 18 103)	862 (−2 011, 3 736)
Summer (Jun–Aug)	−6274 (−19 126, 6 578)	−6698 (−18 885, 5 489)	424 (−1 867, 2 714)
State with paid leave law			
California ^c	4979 (−13 258, 23 216)	4 602 (−12 692, 21 895)	377 (−2 874, 3 627)
New Jersey ^d	21 903 (−6 354, 50 160)	22 592 (−4 203, 49 387)	−689 (−5 725, 4 347)
Rhode Island ^e	13 441 (−8556, 35 438)	13 355 (−7 505, 34 214)	86 (−3 834, 4 007)
Intercept	78 952 (−77 988, 235 893)	79 837 (−68 985, 228 659)	−887 (−28 861, 27 087)
R-square	0.124	0.109	0.435
Fvalue	3.3	2.8	17.6

Note. CI = confidence interval. No. observations = 264.

^a1 when National Bureau of Economic Research declares recession; 0 otherwise.

^bAutumn is the reference season and is therefore excluded. Season units are 1 in the months indicated; 0 otherwise.

^cUnits are 0 until June 2004; 1 after.

^dUnits are 0 until June 2009; 1 after.

^eUnits are 0 until December 2013; 1 after.

As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of those on parenting leave who were paid increased during the study period. Regressions explaining the percentage of paid leave using time as the explanatory variable show that each year approximately 0.32 percentage points (*t* stat 5.9; *P* < .01) more workers received paid time off. Broken down by gender, the growth in paid paternity leave was 0.44 percentage points (*t* stat 2.3; *P* = .03) per year, whereas paid maternity leave grew at 0.26 percentage points (*t* stat 4.7; *P* < .01) per year.

DISCUSSION

This research determined that from 1994 to 2015, slightly more than a quarter of a million US women workers took maternity leave each month, and over this time frame, there was no increase or decrease in the

number or rate of women on maternity leave. This lack of a trend is surprising because 3 states implemented paid maternity leave legislation. Potential reasons for the lack of a trend are that paid maternity legislation is ineffective, not fully implemented, or too narrowly defined to have an impact, or legislative changes in some states were offset by changes occurring in other states or regions.

Other potential reasons are that mothers are not using up their maternity leave, but instead are saving or banking time off from work to ensure they can handle first-year wellness visits and unexpected sickness. In addition, mothers might not take leave for fear of losing their positions or cannot afford financially to lose their job's income.

The lack of change is not attributable to trends in the number of working women. In 1994, approximately 42 million women aged 16 to 45 years were in the US labor force. Although this number fluctuated as economic

conditions changed, in 2015 there were 42 million childbearing-age women in the labor force. The lack of trend is also likely not attributable to women dropping out of the workforce. Census Bureau estimates from 1981 to 2008 show a steadily falling percentage of women quitting their jobs after giving birth.³³ The change is also not likely to be attributable to men shifting out of the labor force and into primary caregiver roles, as the male labor force expanded over the time period.³⁴

The lack of change is surprising because during this period the United States experienced dramatic economic growth with inflation-adjusted gross domestic product rising from \$9.9 trillion a year in 1994 to \$16.4 trillion in 2015. This suggests, but cannot prove, that the benefits of the large economic expansion did not flow to women with newborn children.

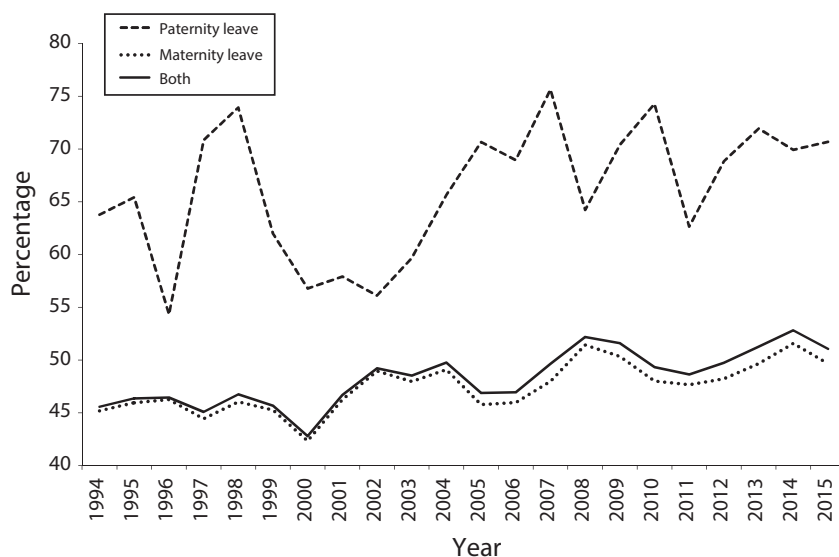
The research also showed that the number of male workers taking paternity leave grew to 21 700 men per month by 2015. This means currently around 10% of employed fathers take time off from work following childbirth.

Data on paid versus unpaid maternity and paternity leave show a slight positive trend over time. This means the economic burden of having a child among those taking leave is falling. Nevertheless, by 2015, less than half (47.5%) of all women received paid maternity leave from their employer. As paid maternity leave is only increasing 0.26 percentage points each year, it will take approximately another decade before half of US women going on leave will get paid time off. This is a very low figure for the nation with the world's largest annual gross domestic product.

The data show a clear gender gap in paid maternity leave with men (70.7% in 2015) on paternity leave more likely than women to receive pay from their employer. One possibility for this gap is that few men are willing to take unpaid leave to care for a newborn. Disaggregated data show that women on leave are economically better off than the typical mother as they are more likely to be married, White, and more educated.

Limitations

The CPS data underlying these results are imperfect measures of maternity or paternity



Note. Maternity leave: slope 0.26 ($P < .01$); paternity leave: slope 0.44 ($P = .03$); and both: slope 0.32 ($P < .01$).

FIGURE 1—Trends in Percentage of US Workers Receiving Pay From Their Employer While on Maternity Leave, Paternity Leave, and Both: 1994–2015

leave and likely result in this research slightly underestimating the number of individuals on leave, primarily because the data capture only individuals who spent the entire workweek with their newborn. Individuals who worked part of the week before starting or stopping their leave are not included in the figures. The data also cannot reveal the total length of time workers spend on maternity or paternity leave, nor do they record information that could shed light on the timing or delays in taking family leave.

Nevertheless, because the CPS has not changed between 1994 and 2015, even if the total number of people on maternity or paternity leave is biased, the absence of any trend in maternity leave over time is likely accurate.

Public Health Implications

The medical literature is overwhelmingly positive about the impact of allowing parents to spend time with newborn children. Paid maternity and paternity leave laws are designed to ensure society and individuals receive these medical and social benefits. Unfortunately, the benefits do not appear to be growing in the United States. Maternity leave has stagnated over the past 2 decades; at the same time, the economy has grown 66%.

Three states (California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island) have enacted and implemented paid maternity leave legislation in an attempt to boost the ability of parents to bond with infants. These 3 states in 2015 encompassed 16.1% of the female labor force. If the laws were effective, some impact should be seen in national data. As there is no visual or statistical evidence of an increase in the number of women on maternity leave, public health officials, pediatricians, and child advocates should determine why the legislation did not work as intended. *AJPH*

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HUMAN PARTICIPANT PROTECTION

No protocol approval was needed for this study because secondary data were used and no human participants were involved.

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