

Research finds few US workers aware of COVID sick leave protections

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Even with federal provisions aimed at protecting workers, instances of sick people being unable to take time off tripled during the pandemic and fewer than half of workers were aware that emergency COVID-19 sick leave was available, new Cornell research has found.

In the study, "Awareness and Use of (Emergency) Sick Leave: US Employees' Unaddressed Sick Leave Needs in a Global Pandemic," which published in July in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, researchers found that [part-time](#) and foreign-born workers were most at risk of being unaware of the available paid leave.

"When the government does not ensure that people have access to paid [sick leave](#), people go to work sick," said Nicolas Ziebarth, associate professor in the Cornell Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy and co-author of the study.

"And when you have a virus going on—it could be the flu or coronavirus, it doesn't really matter—then the [sick people](#) at work infect coworkers who go on to infect other people," Ziebarth said. "If they send a kid sick to school, because they can't afford to stay home with them, the sick kid infects other kids who likely infect their families. The point is that you have more virus infections in the population, which is bad for population health."

Ziebarth is also the associate director of the Cornell Institute for Healthy Futures.

In March 2020, the United States, one of the only developed nations without universal paid sick leave, implemented the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), providing federally funded emergency paid sick leave due to COVID-19.

Analyzing the data from a nationally representative Cornell National Social Survey conducted between October and December 2020, Ziebarth and colleagues found that around 8 million U.S. employees utilized FFCRA sick leave in the first six to eight months of the policy's implementation.

The study found that awareness of the FFCRA provision was particularly low among service and hospitality workers—some of the very people who made up the essential workforce that carried the nation through the worst of the surges and subsequent shutdowns.

Women were at a 69% higher risk of unmet sick leave needs, which Ziebarth said suggests that universal paid leave can improve gender equity.

"One reason the unmet needs for women is so much higher is that they are overrepresented in the hospitality and service industries," he said. "Another is that women tend to have a higher burden of work. They are still more likely to be the primary caregiver for children and have to balance paid work, chores, and childcare."

In a previous study, Ziebarth found the FFCRA policy prevented 15,000 new infections a day in March and April 2020. The policy, which was set to expire in March 2021, was extended through the end of September.

More information: Emma Jelliffe et al, Awareness and use of (emergency) sick leave: US employees' unaddressed sick leave needs in a global pandemic, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2107670118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2107670118)

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