

With paid leave, older adults care for parents instead of grandchildren

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In 2004, California passed a law requiring employers above a certain size to provide paid family leave to their employees.

Much of the research looking at this policy has examined its impact on the work, income and leave-taking of new parents and [women of childbearing age](#)—but less research has focused on how paid leave may impact older adults.

Now, a University of Michigan researcher has found that with paid leave, older adults are spending less time looking after their grandchildren and more time looking after their parents. The research is published in the *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*.

"The law could affect older adults directly, by enabling them to take paid leave to take care of sick relatives when they wouldn't have before. But it could also affect older adults indirectly, if it enables new parents to take paid leave," said U-M economist Joelle Abramowitz.

"If grandparents provided significant amounts of care to their grandchildren because the parents of those grandchildren did not have access to paid leave, now that the parents of those grandchildren are able to take paid leave, we would expect to see grandparents spend less time caregiving to their grandchildren."

The research team, which includes Marcus Dillender of Vanderbilt University, drew from the 1998–2016 waves of U-M's Health and Retirement Study, a [longitudinal study](#) of approximately 20,000 Americans over age 50 and their spouses. The study is nationally representative, and participants are interviewed every two years.

The HRS asks respondents with grandchildren if they or their spouses spent 100 or more hours in total taking care of their grandchildren in the past two years. If respondents answer yes, they are asked how many hours they spent taking care of grandchildren in the past two years and how many hours their spouse spent taking care of grandchildren in the past two years.

Likewise, the HRS asks respondents with parents if they or their spouses spent 100 or more hours in total helping their parents with basic personal activities in the past two years. If respondents answer yes, they are asked how many hours each they and their spouse spent helping their own parents and their spouse's parents in the past two years. The researchers combined values for helping the respondent's own parents and their spouse's parents.

Additionally, the researchers were able to compare outcomes for residents of California to residents of other states using a restricted-use version of the data with state identifiers.

After the implementation of the paid-leave law, the researchers found that the respondents spent, on average, 96 hours helping parents with basic needs and 190 hours caring for grandchildren over the past two years. Compared to before the paid leave law was implemented, this represents a 17% decrease in grandparents' time spent caring for grandchildren in the past two years and a 40%–50% increase in time spent helping parents with personal activities. In terms of hours, older adults are spending 39 fewer hours caring for grandchildren and 41 more hours caring for their parents.

The effects for women are larger, Abramowitz said. Women spend 48 hours fewer caring for their grandchildren and 53 more hours caring for their parents. Men spend 24 hours less caring for grandchildren and 30 hours more caring for their parents.

These hours don't reflect the total amount of time that people spend with their grandchildren or parents, Abramowitz said. The hours only include time spent caregiving to relatives.

"One distinction I want to make is that the question on the survey specifically asks about caring for grandchildren, not about spending time

with your [grandchildren](#). For parents, we look at spending time helping them with [basic needs](#)—just chores and functional tasks," Abramowitz said. "We really focus on the caregiving aspect as opposed to how much time respondents are spending with their family members."

Abramowitz said it's important to look beyond the immediate effects of this policy on the caregiving choices of new parents. The policy may have indirect effects on older adults' ability to work longer rather than retiring in order to give care to their parents.

"There has been a lot of focus on [new parents](#) and not as much focus on [older adults](#), but they're also people who engage in a lot of caregiving," she said. "This law potentially supports older caregivers, which enables more options for providing care to their parents."

"I think it's important to have more evidence about how policy can influence people's choices in terms of institutional care versus home care. Additionally, these policies can influence people's ability to work longer. If people want to work longer, how do we facilitate that ability?"

More information: Joelle Abramowitz et al, Effects of California's Paid Family Leave Law on Caregiving by Older Adults, *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/08959420.2023.2226283](https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2023.2226283)

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