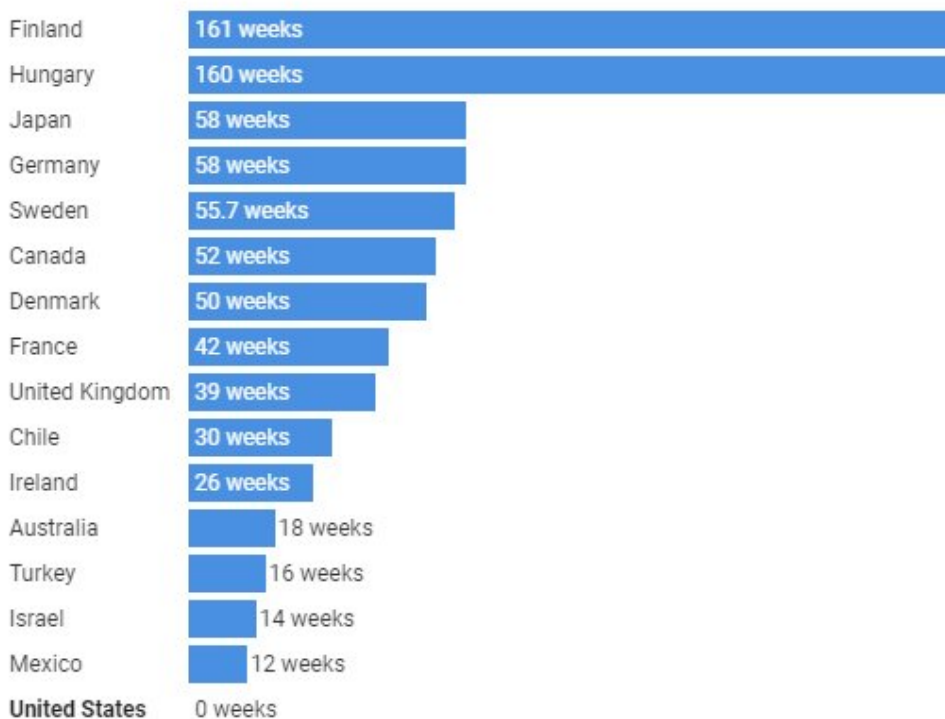


The US is stingier with child care and maternity leave than the rest of the world

April 19 2018, by Joya Misra

Paid maternity leave

The U.S. is the only developed country that does not mandate paid time off to women after they give birth.



Not all OECD countries shown. Credit: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: OECD

In most American families led by couples, both parents are [in the workforce](#). At the same time, nearly [1 in 4](#) U.S. children are being raised by single moms.

Yet child care is generally [unaffordable](#) and paid leave is not available to [most U.S. parents](#).

Around the world, however, most employed women automatically get paid [maternity leave](#). And in most wealthy countries, they also have access to affordable child care.

These holes in the national safety net are a problem for many reasons, including one I've been [researching](#) with my colleagues for years: Paid [parental leave](#) and child care help women [stay in the workforce](#) and [earn higher wages](#) over time. This lack of parental leave and child care may explain why the U.S. is [no longer a leader](#) in women's workforce participation.

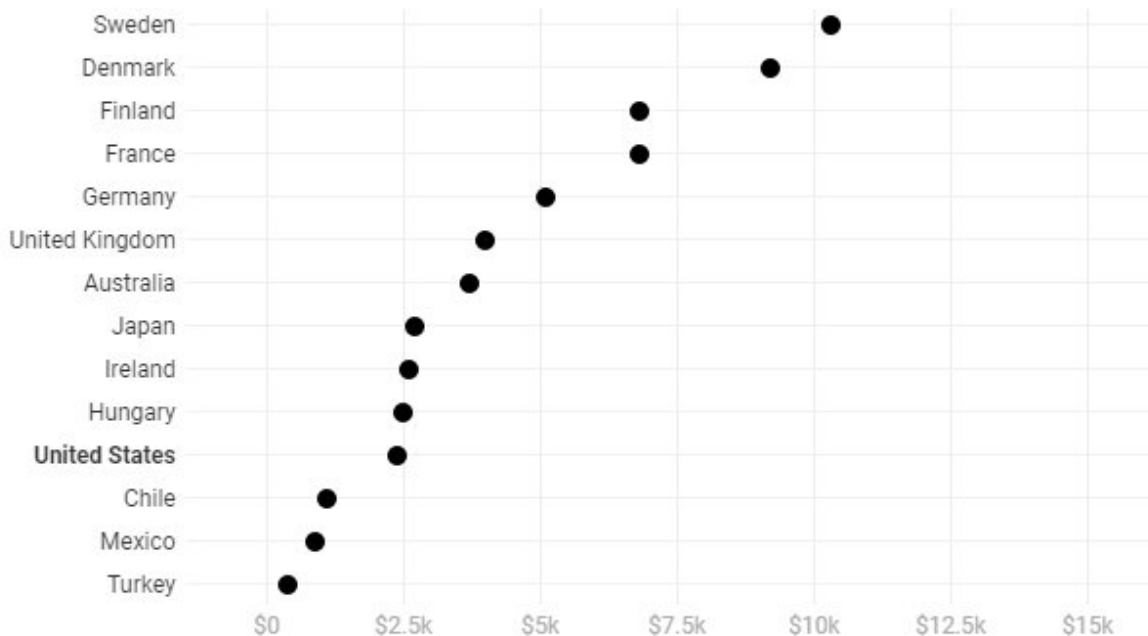
Maternity leave

The U.S. is [one of a handful of countries worldwide](#) that does not mandate paid maternity leave. The other four are the low-income nations of Lesotho, Liberia, Papua New Guinea and Swaziland.

Paid leave, which typically lasts at least 14 weeks, needs to be designed thoughtfully. When women can and do take two or even three years off after having a baby, as they may in Hungary, long leaves can limit mothers' work experience and lead to [discrimination](#).

Public spending on child care and early-childhood education

While European Union countries spend an average of about \$4,500 per child on early childhood education and care, the U.S. spends \$2,400.



Figures are in U.S. dollars and represent data for 2013 or latest available date. European Union average excludes Latvia. Credit: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND
Source: OECD Social Expenditure Database

The [1993 Family and Medical Leave Act](#) did mandate 12 weeks of unpaid job protected leave for some American workers. Yet most families can't forgo the income that moms bring home.

[Denmark](#) offers what I think is a strong example. There, moms get almost 18 weeks of paid maternity leave and dads get two weeks of paid paternity leave. On top of that, couples get up to a total 32 weeks of parental leave, which parents can split. This policy grants parents both the time and resources necessary to care for children, without "mommy

tracking" mothers.

Child care

In many wealthy countries, [child](#) care and preschool are considered a mainstay of the educational system. But in the U.S., only about half of all children between the ages of 3 and 6 are getting publicly supported [child care](#) of any kind, including kindergarten, versus 99 percent of kids that age [in France](#).

Interestingly, high-quality [early childhood education](#) programs are associated with many [excellent outcomes](#) for children from lower-income families: higher graduation rates, along with lower rates of teen pregnancy and juvenile crime.

In other words, when governments [invest in child care](#) and [maternity](#) leave, it fosters a more productive, healthy and creative workforce.

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