

# United States ranks lowest in overall policies to help parents support children

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Baylor University sociologist Matthew A. Andersson, Ph.D. Credit: Baylor University

National work-family policies that give lower-income families more time together while allowing them paid time off are more effective for

children's psychological health than cash transfers, according to a study of developed nations led by Baylor University.

In a study of about 200,000 children in 20 developed nations, the United States ranked lowest in overall policies aimed at helping parents support children.

The study, published in the journal *Social Forces*, supports the view of critics who say that the United States government does not do enough to mandate flexible hours and paid leave.

"Perhaps not surprisingly, the United States also shows some of the largest gaps in overall health between rich and [poor children](#)," said lead author Matthew A. Andersson, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology at Baylor University. "Our study argues that these two phenomena are connected across nations. And as national work-[family](#) policy improves, inequalities in children's health lessen between advantaged and disadvantaged families."

A significant gap exists between the well-being of children from richer and poorer families, and the research found that children's self-rated health improves as federally mandated work flexibility and paid leave become more generous.

Cash transfers such as policies subsidizing [child care](#) and providing income support are important in fighting hunger and homelessness in individual families, Andersson noted.

"But cash transfers only give money," he said. "Paid [parental leave](#) and work flexibility gives parents time plus money—and that seems to be the key combination to combating inequalities in children's health across developed nations."

But parents at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum often work jobs which do not entitle them to schedule flexibility or time off to spend with their children, and they may not be able to negotiate those benefits with employers.

"Sadly, it's often not even a matter of negotiation," Andersson said. "Employers do not offer benefits—or if they do, these benefits are quite limited. Not surprisingly, advantaged families tend to be attached to higher-quality jobs where benefits are available regardless of federal mandate."

Researchers analyzed data about work-family policies, cash transfer mandates and self-reported child well-being in countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, an intergovernmental organization.

The data included how generous each country was with paid vacation and sick leave, vacation, work flexibility, maternity leave and child care, including [cash transfers](#) made to families with children.

Researchers also examined data from health surveys of school-aged children ages 11, 13 and 15 to determine whether there were links to [psychological health](#) complaints, life satisfaction levels and health. The information was gathered in the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children, a World Health Organization cross-national survey.

Children were asked whether they had their own bedroom, whether their family owned a vehicle, whether they owned a computer or computers and how many times, if any, they had traveled with their family on a holiday in the past year.

Children also answered questions about how often they had felt "low" or experienced "irritability or bad temper" within the past six months, how

satisfied they were with their lives and how they rated their health.

"Traditionally, the U.S. has placed burdens for establishing work-family accommodation on employers and individual businesses," Andersson said. "If the U.S. could switch course by mandating work-family benefits regardless of employer, findings suggest that children in this country would show some of the largest [health](#) gains across all OECD countries."

He noted that the research also is significant for [children](#)'s futures, as those starting off in disadvantaged circumstances are at a high risk of having socioeconomic setbacks over many years.

**More information:** Matthew A Andersson et al, Work–Family Reconciliation and Children's Well-Being Disparities across OECD Countries, *Social Forces* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/sf/soaa132](https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soaa132)

Provided by Baylor University

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