

Unpaid time off work rose 50% during pandemic

August 15 2022



U.S. workers without paid leave lost out on an estimated \$28 billion in

wages during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new report.

The [analysis](#) showed that the greatest increases in unpaid absences were among low-income workers who were self-employed, Black or Hispanic, female, or raising families with children. Work absences brought on by personal illness, child care requirements, or obligations to [family members](#) rose 50% from previous years.

"Missed [wages](#) from unpaid leave have affected populations already at greater risk of severe COVID infection and of economic and material [hardship](#), compounding existing economic, racial and [gender disparities](#)," said Chantel Boyens, principal policy associate at the Urban Institute, an economic and social policy research group.

"Workplace safety standards and [public health](#) policies combined with comprehensive paid leave policies that cover all workers, could help reduce the spread of COVID while protecting workers and families from [missed wages](#) due to medical and caregiving needs," Boyens said in a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation news release. The foundation helped to support the new study.

In all, 58% of all absences from work were unpaid before the pandemic and during its first two years, the analysis showed.

During those first two years, women had a 40% higher likelihood of missing work without pay than men did. Unpaid absences were most often due to child care needs.

[Researchers reported](#) that the same period during the pandemic also saw a higher rate of absences among Black and Hispanic workers. Two-thirds of Hispanic workers and 57% of Black workers were unpaid when they missed work due to illness, [child care](#) needs or other obligations.

Compared to workers in households with annual incomes over \$100,000, those making less than \$25,000 a year had more than triple the odds of being absent without pay, the study found.

"The pandemic caused unpaid work absences across the entire workforce, but data on gender and race highlight the greater toll on women and [minority populations](#)," said Mona Shah, senior program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

"The United States is one of the few developed nations without a comprehensive paid family leave plan," Shah said in the release. "Policymakers should consider how paid sick leave policies can promote public health and advance equity."

More information: The international Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has more about [policy responses to COVID-19](#).

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Citation: Unpaid time off work rose 50% during pandemic (2022, August 15) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-08-unpaid-rose-pandemic.html>

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