



WHAT JUSTICE REQUIRES:
*PAID FAMILY LEAVE FOR
LOW-INCOME FAMILIES*



THE CENTER FOR
PUBLIC JUSTICE



About the Center for Public Justice

The Center for Public Justice (CPJ) is an independent, non-partisan, Christian organization devoted to civic education and policy development. We equip citizens and public officials to respond to God's call to pursue justice for all.

About Shared Justice

Shared Justice, an initiative of CPJ, is an online publication and community for Christian 20 and 30 somethings interested in the intersection of faith, politics, and justice. The defining feature of Shared Justice is the voice of college students and young professionals who shape the conversation – discovering together what it means to share justice.

With Thanks

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Foreword

This report is one of three by *Shared Justice*, an online publication and community for Christian 20 and 30 somethings run by the Center for Public Justice. The reports' authors are Christian college students and young professionals inviting their peers to join them in the pursuit of justice.

The issues covered in these reports are often hidden in our own backyard: the vast racial and socioeconomic disparities in a juvenile justice system that locks up youth in adult-like prisons, the impossible decision that low-income families face when they have a child but their employers don't offer paid family leave, and the devastating impact of payday loans on families and children.

However, these reports were not written to simply make us aware of an injustice. Awareness of injustice is an invitation from God to love others more fully. But responding to God's good invitation -- taking seriously our responsibilities as citizens -- likely means something about our lives will change.

More than ever, we need Christian 20- and 30-somethings committed to the Biblical call to *do* justice, not just to learn about injustice. We need a generation of Christians committed to a vision of public justice in their communities.

Public justice is achieved when the institutions that contribute to human flourishing each make their fullest contribution. These are families, religious communities, businesses, and schools, among others. When government and citizens commit to pursuing public justice, each of these different institutions is better able to fulfill their right roles and responsibilities. Society flourishes when each sphere is in harmony with the others.

Each of the policy reports in the series offers tangible steps for action in your local community and state. We pray that you will take steps to pursue justice for your neighbors who may be afflicted by one of these injustices.

God calls us all to pursue justice together. The question is, will you join us?

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephanie Summers". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letter of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Stephanie Summers

CEO, The Center for Public Justice

Executive Summary

The birth of a child is a life-changing event for families. But not all parents can spend those critical first few months, or even weeks, at home with their newborn children. Many low-income families face the impossible decision of either working to put food on the table or staying home with their child and therefore losing needed wages.

Nearly one in four mothers returns to work within two weeks of having a child. In most cases, they do so because their employers do not offer paid family leave. Paid family leave guarantees a continuous income for parents for the period of time they take off from work for the birth of a child or to care for a sick relative. For the majority of Americans who do not have paid family leave, this unfortunate dilemma of having to choose between economic stability or time with one's family, the place where children are nurtured and grow, is all too common.

The need for strong paid family leave policies in the United States, particularly for low-income families, is a public justice matter that deserves our attention. Our inaction on this issue has failed children and their families across the country.

Understanding God's design, desire, and love for families is imperative for addressing this policy question. We must also understand the right role and responsibility of business. Empowering working families who face significant tension between financial and parental obligations is a matter of public justice. But what does it look like in practice?

This report examines the current landscape for paid family leave policies and articulates public justice principles for considering various options. It outlines the right roles and responsibilities that institutions like government, the Church, and businesses must fulfill for upholding the dignity of families, and it provides clear examples of ways that citizens can work for stronger paid family leave policies.

By supporting robust paid family leave policies, we can strengthen families and honor God in doing so.

DISCOVER

Allison is pregnant with her first child. She and her husband are thrilled to welcome their baby and have been busy preparing the nursery in their home. However, there is something that they are unprepared to face: the reality that Allison will have to return to work less than two weeks after bringing her newborn home.

Both Allison and her husband work hourly minimum wage jobs. Finances are extremely tight. When she found out she was pregnant, Allison agonized over her options at work. Her employer didn't offer paid maternity leave, which ideally would have given her up to six weeks of paid leave. She was faced with two options: quit her job or go back to work far sooner than she would have chosen. She knew that she didn't have a real option--she had to go back to work. If her family was going to be able to provide food, clothing, diapers and more, they needed two incomes.

So she will do what she has to do: return to work 14 days after the birth of her child. Her mother and her sister live close by and will take turns staying home with the baby. It is hard for Allison and her husband to think about having to leave their newborn so soon, but they know they must.

Though fictional, Allison's story is not unique. Each year, more than half a million women must make the impossible decision to return to work far sooner than they should need or want to.¹

Christians committed to the high value of human life and the inherent dignity of every

person recognize and affirm the vital importance of family. Family is not only the place where human life begins, but also where it is nurtured, develops, and grows. Family is foundational.

Family is one of the core institutions created by God for human flourishing; it's where children develop physically, spiritually, and emotionally. The family has its own distinct identity, a whole greater than the sum of its parts, a community of covenant love and trust binding mother, father, and children together.



ONE IN FOUR MOMS RETURN TO WORK WITHIN TWO WEEKS OF HAVING A CHILD

Yet many families face powerful forces of fragmentation and many obstacles to equality of opportunity. Many working families are forced to choose between time spent with their young children or putting food on the table. When surveyed, half of mothers felt they had to return to work far sooner than they would like, with 80 percent reporting they had to return because of financial need.²

This situation does not allow many families to thrive and fulfill their whole responsibilities. Too many low-income families cannot fulfill their potential because the parents have to choose between caring for their children and working to provide for them.

Christians who are concerned with justice and God's good purposes for all citizens must stand at the forefront of efforts to ensure every family has the opportunity to thrive.

What is Paid Family Leave?

As Christians, we celebrate both the value of work and the value of family; God created both. Yet there are times when these two parts of our lives are in unhealthy tension-- to the detriment of both. Government and citizens must uphold just laws that enable both of these institutions to flourish. At times, this may mean arbitrating between them.

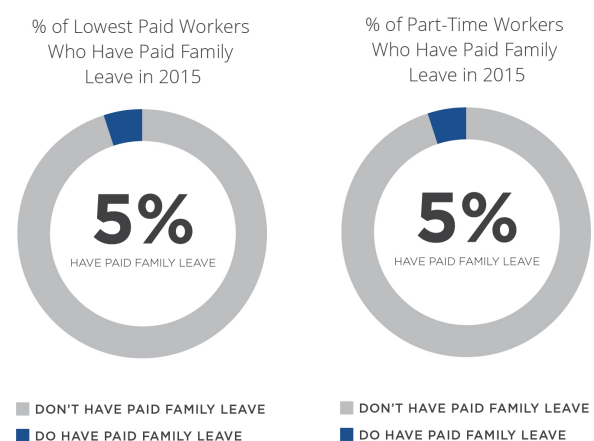
When salaried employees need to take time off to care for a sick child or for the birth or adoption of a son or daughter, the company may very well have a *paid* leave policy. Even if it doesn't, if the employee earns enough to save some money each month, they may be able to take *unpaid* time off under the Family and Medical Leave Act. Passed in 1993, this Act, which only applies to employers with 50 or more employees, guarantees up to 12 weeks per year of unpaid leave to all employees to care for a sick child or relative or for the birth or adoption of a son or daughter. Employees are only covered when they have worked for the organization for at least a year and must work at least half time.³

For millions of families who are just getting by, it can become impossible to afford groceries or other basic necessities if unpaid time off is the only option.

That's where *paid* family leave comes in. Paid family leave guarantees a continuous income for parents during the period of time they take off of work at either a full or reduced portion of their current salary. For the majority of Americans living without the option of paid family leave, a choice between economic stability and quality time with one's family is an all too common trade-off.

Why Paid Family Leave Matters for Low-Income Families

New parents, out of necessity for an infant's well-being, often take a leave of absence after the birth of a child. This is done not only for the infant's sake, but also for the health and recovery of the mother, and for the new parents to emotionally bond with and tend to the needs of the newborn. A child's earliest years are imperative to establishing a strong foundation for future health, behavior, and learning skills. Children's early years help shape their life direction: to thrive and grow or to struggle to survive.⁴ While working parents with paid time off or childless adults may view paid family leave as a luxury and not a justice issue, that is not the reality for many low-income working families.



While it is common for political rhetoric to focus on early childhood education, this focus overlooks the significant role that parents play in the lives of their children during their earliest days. A child's genes provide a general blueprint for the brain's structure, but the child's experiences determine its strength. Science both affirms and supports the vital role that parents play in their child's early years. The best experiences for a child to have (beginning at

What Justice Requires: Paid Family Leave for Low-Income Parents

birth) are based on responsive interactions with parents. These experiences affect the overall physical, mental, and emotional health of children.⁵ In sum, parenting matters.⁶ All children need and deserve high quality relationships with their parents from the very beginning of their lives.

Work environments often do not assist parents in fulfilling their God-given roles and responsibilities, including as both parents and workers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2015 National Compensation Survey:

- Only five percent of the lowest paid workers (bottom quartile) had paid family leave in 2015. This compared with 23 percent of the highest paid workers (top quartile).
- Only eight percent of employees who worked for businesses with less than 50 employees had paid family leave in 2015. This compared with 22 percent who worked for businesses with more than 500 employees.
- Only five percent of employees who worked part-time had paid family leave in 2015.

The support our country provides to low-income mothers and fathers to fulfill their family responsibilities is inadequate. Data collected and analyzed for the U.S. Department of Labor in 2012 showed that nearly one in four working mothers returned to work within two weeks after giving birth.⁷ The situation is no better for fathers. According to a study by Boston College, "Three quarters of men who don't receive paternity leave take off work for a week or less after the birth of a child, and 16% are unable to take any days off."⁸

Despite its importance to preserving the just boundaries between family and work, access to paid family leave remains out of reach for low-income working families. Those hurt most by a lack of paid family leave are some of the most vulnerable families in this country. Our obligations as citizens require us to evaluate the weaknesses of our existing policies and work for policies that uphold public justice, which is the upholding of God's good purpose for our political community. This means understanding the right roles and responsibilities of institutions including government, families, and employers.

FRAME

Families Are Foundational

Scripture reveals that God wove families into the foundation of creation. They are intertwined with the very core of what it means to be human and what it means to be an image bearer of God. Families nurture and care for children, giving them a foundation for the rest of life. Understanding God's design, desire, and love for families and their roles and responsibilities within human life is imperative for addressing this policy question.

Children should be raised in nurturing, healthy families so that they can flourish throughout every stage of their lives. Healthy families have good communication, spend quality time together, and aren't exposed to toxic stress. Toxic stress refers to high levels of stress within the family that can be the result of poverty, abuse, and neglect, and other problems in the family.⁹ Within healthy families, children

What Justice Requires: Paid Family Leave for Low-Income Parents

have the opportunity to flourish the way they deserve. The early years of a child's life, when the brain is building its foundational structure, are crucial to the child's future flourishing.



The brain's foundational structure will exist for the rest of the child's life, and it affects the future physical, mental, and emotional health of the child. To form a strong structure, all children need responsive, meaningful time with their parents. For families with limited resources, finding this time is seemingly impossible for parents. When parents are not supported in upholding their responsibilities to both provide financially for the family and spend quality time with their children during their early years, children do not have the opportunity to flourish.

Empowering working families who face significant tension between financial and parental obligations is a matter of public justice. But what do solutions look like in practice?

Public Justice Considerations for Paid Family Leave Policies

As we consider paid family leave policies from the perspective of public justice, there are several key questions to consider. These

questions are primarily around the right roles and responsibilities of government, families, and employers.

- Do proposed policies empower and enable families to fulfill their primary responsibility to raise and nurture children, or might they diminish or replace it?
- Do proposed policies take into account and appropriately address the disproportionate impact a lack of paid leave has on low-income working families, part-time workers, or workers at small businesses?
- How is the policy funded? Is the allocation of funding, for example, between all employees, businesses, and general taxation just?

The Current Policy Landscape

As we look at the current policy landscape, we have an opportunity as Christian citizens to promote public justice by both evaluating existing policies and helping shape future ones. Several states and cities across the nation have passed legislation to try to address the tension between being both parents and workers that low-income families face.

In April, San Francisco became the first U.S. city to approve six weeks of paid family leave at full wages for new parents. The state of California covers 55 percent of the employee's wages, and under this policy, employers will cover the 45 percent difference.¹⁰ San Francisco joins several other localities and states that have some form of paid family leave. Currently,

What Justice Requires: Paid Family Leave for Low-Income Parents

Rhode Island, New Jersey, and New York also provide some form of paid family leave, with the money coming from payroll deductions from employees' paychecks.

At the federal level, there are currently several proposals, each taking a different approach. The *Family and Medical Insurance Act*, introduced in the Senate, would provide a universal paid family and medical leave benefit for all workers that is operated through the social security system. All workers would pay into the system through an additional tax on their wages and would then be eligible to apply to the United States Social Security Administration for benefits when they take leave.¹¹



The *Strong Families Act*, also introduced in the Senate, would provide non-refundable tax credits to employers that provide paid family leave. This proposal does not require employers to provide leave, it just incentivizes them to do so.¹² The *Earned Income Leave Benefit*, a proposal from the American Action Forum, would focus on low-income workers by providing a refundable tax credit for family leave. Eligibility would be based on income and would be funded from general taxation.¹³

ENGAGE

As we engage the issue of paid family leave, we must also be in dialogue about the issues specific to low-income families. Many service industries or minimum wage jobs are among the worst places to work in terms of family leave benefits.¹⁴ As a result, low-income families who are already facing significant financial pressures are hit the hardest economically if they choose to take time off to care for a child. If the policies we develop are only benefiting a small portion of our communities, then we risk leaving behind members of our society and further exacerbating the vulnerabilities many American families are facing.

The Responsibility of Government and Christian Citizens

As citizens living in a political community, we have a role to play in pursuing justice in paid family leave policies. First we can become educated on the topic. Do you know what the current policies are in your state? By researching what's happening in our own communities, we become better equipped to speak and share about the issue.

When considering paid family leave policies, as the Center for Public Justice's *Guideline on Family* states,

“Government’s policies should aim to uphold the integrity and social viability of families, which do not exist in a social, economic, or political vacuum. Public policy should, therefore, take carefully into account the ways that other institutions and the dynamics of society impact families

What Justice Requires: Paid Family Leave for Low-Income Parents

positively and negatively from the earliest stages of family formation on through to the last stages of elder care.”¹⁵

The primary role of government is to promote public justice and enact policies that aim to promote the political common good. As it relates to families, government must ensure families are able to uphold their God-given purpose.

As citizens, we can advocate for paid family leave policies. When thinking about principles that should animate these policies, we can refer to those considered earlier:

- Do proposed policies empower and enable families to fulfill their primary responsibility to raise and nurture children, or might they diminish or replace it?
- Do proposed policies take into account and appropriately address the disproportionate impact a lack of paid leave has on low-income working families, part-time workers, or workers at small businesses?
- How is the policy funded? Is the allocation of funding, for example, between all employees, businesses, and general taxation just?

Concurrent with political participation, understanding family leave policies at places of work and advocating for stronger ones is fundamental. We can also look for opportunities to share this knowledge and advocate for paid family leave in a meaningful way. If we should find ourselves, either currently or in the future, in positions of power to make decisions on behalf of our co-workers, then the knowledge we have gained should influence our hearts and minds to create

policies that are family friendly and which honor individuals as both employees and family members.



Engaging in the discussion of paid family leave and advocating for family supportive policies is the responsibility of all citizens who seek a just society. It is not merely the responsibility of parents of young children to advocate for policy changes. For people without children or who have older children, it may seem that advocating for family leave policies is not their responsibility. However, family leave policies affect the ability of parents in our communities to support their children and affect the immediate and future health and opportunities for children born into low-income or single parent households. Our world operates best when all institutions in life work harmoniously - and paid family leave takes us a step closer to that goal.

Although parents hold the primary responsibility for raising children, God never intended for families to exist separate from the rest of the community. Creation is not merely a set of isolated institutions. The relationships between institutions are part of creation, too.

As God's image bearers, we are never just one thing-- an employee, citizen, spouse, or parent.

What Justice Requires: Paid Family Leave for Low-Income Parents

The overlapping of these roles, and how they relate to each other, influences us. Government, churches, and nonprofit and business employers are not completely separate from families; they influence and shape each other, both positively and negatively. These different institutions of life inhabit one whole, and public justice is upheld when they are best able to fulfill their creational roles and responsibilities.

The Responsibility of Non-profits and Businesses

This issue of paid family leave confronts the tension many low-income people face as both parents and employees, whether working at for-profits, non-profits, or state employers. Employers should recognize and affirm that their employees are not *only employees*, and that what it means to be human is far deeper and broader than the work a person accomplishes.

For businesses, this right role clearly includes the *creation* of profit, but not its maximization *at any cost*. The well-being of employees matters, and not just while they are at work. Employers need to consider ways in which all their employee policies (including whether they provide paid family leave) honor and uphold their employees as *people* not just workers.

We should encourage faith-based employers to consider how their faith-based identity informs the policies and practices around family supportive policies.

The Responsibility of the Church

The Church has long affirmed the importance of family. It now has an opportunity, in standing with that tradition, to speak on behalf

of low-income mothers and fathers who desire to fulfill their role as parents while continuing to earn an income to support their family. Galatians 6:10 exhorts us, “So, then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith...” The Church can demonstrate its commitment to upholding children and families through family-supportive policies.

The Church should consider how public policies supporting families, like paid family leave, fit into the church’s broader concern for the well-being of families. These policies are a matter of justice for children born into lives with limited opportunities and for their families. Additionally, the church can encourage mothers and fathers in their child rearing by educating them on the importance of participating in their children’s early years.

CONCLUSION

Whether or not one ever faces the tension of choosing between time with a child and having to work, as Christian citizens dedicated to God’s vision of public justice, we are called to uphold public policies that affirm the importance and distinctiveness of families and the ability for families, government, and businesses to *all* fulfill their right roles and responsibilities.

The need for strong paid family leave policies in the United States is a matter of justice deserving of our attention. Our lack of action has failed children and their families across the country. Many mothers and fathers face the

What Justice Requires: Paid Family Leave for Low-Income Parents

impossible tension between economic stability and quality time at home.

Protecting and honoring the dignity and worth of every child and family is a responsibility that

falls on all of us, including our governments, non-profit organizations, businesses, and churches. By working together to advocate for and support paid family leave policies, we can strengthen families and honor God in doing so.

**For more information and additional resources,
visit www.sharedjustice.org/paidfamilyleave**

Endnotes

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What Justice Requires: Paid Family Leave for Low-Income Parents

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*An online version of this report, including additional resources, is
available at: www.sharedjustice.org/paidfamilyleave*