

# Employee-friendly, paid-sick-leave laws may decrease foodborne illness outbreaks

20 October 2017, by Jennifer Cruden

Paid-sick-leave laws may contribute to a decline in foodborne illness outbreaks, and laws with stronger employee protections may provide greater public health benefits, according to a study led by a Penn State researcher.

More than 50 percent of [foodborne illness outbreaks](#) in the United States originate at food establishments, of which 46 percent are connected to an infected food worker. Food workers may be such a large contributor to such outbreaks because about half go to work even while ill. Only 26 percent of food workers receive paid sick leave from their employers.

Researchers found that foodborne [illness](#) rates declined after implementation of paid-sick-leave laws in jurisdictions with laws more supportive of employees taking leave, and increased in jurisdictions with laws that are less supportive. Specifically, paid-sick-leave laws that were more supportive of employees taking sick leave were associated with an adjusted 22 percent decrease in foodborne illness rates.

"What this study tells us is that paid-sick-leave laws that are more employee-friendly were associated with reduced foodborne illness rates. However, this decrease was primarily driven by a reduction in infections related to the *Campylobacter* bacterium, which are more likely to be associated with poor food safety practices, and less with sick food workers." said Charleen Hsuan, lead investigator and assistant professor of health policy and administration at Penn State. "Perhaps the laws reward food establishments that are already conscious of [food safety](#) issues. We need more research to understand why these laws were associated with better health."

First, researchers analyzed paid-sick-leave laws for how [employee](#)-friendly they were, looking at laws in San Francisco and Seattle, which researchers assessed as "more supportive" of

employees taking paid sick leave, and laws in Washington, D.C., and Connecticut, which researchers calculated as "less supportive" of employees.

Researchers then looked at the association between the laws and foodborne illness rates and how supportive the laws were of employees taking the leave. The foodborne illness rates included those who contracted an illness from all sources. Finally, to account for changes in rates over time, researchers examined how the change in foodborne illness rates in the jurisdictions with the laws compared with changes in rates in jurisdictions of similar size and density that did not have these laws.

The study showed that, after accounting for changes in foodborne illness rates in similar cities, [foodborne illnesses](#) decreased in 3 of the 4 jurisdictions that passed paid-sick-leave laws. This decrease was bigger in San Francisco and Seattle, where laws were more supportive of employees taking paid sick leave, than in Washington, D.C. and Connecticut, where the laws were less supportive of employees.

After controlling for other factors that may influence foodborne illness rates, the more supportive laws in San Francisco and Seattle were associated with a 22.3 percent decrease in foodborne illness rates, while the less supportive laws in Washington, D.C. and Connecticut were associated with a non-significant increase in rates.

Investigators say more research is needed to see why paid-[sick-leave](#) laws were associated with decrease in foodborne illness rates, and whether similar results occur for other infectious disease or industries.

The findings appeared in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

**More information:** Charleen Hsuan et al.  
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