

U.S. workers need paid sick leave to stop the spread of coronavirus

5 March 2020, by Gisele Galoustian



Those who lack paid sick leave are highly represented among food service workers, day care workers, and home health aides who work in positions that can greatly influence the health of others. Credit: Florida Atlantic University

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that almost one-third of Americans do not have access to paid sick leave and 69 percent of part-time workers do not have access. Only the U.S. and Japan do not mandate a national sick leave benefit. Currently, seven states in the U.S. mandate that employers provide paid sick leave benefits.

Given the latest information from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regarding the potential impact that the coronavirus could have on the nation, researchers from Florida Atlantic University and Cleveland State University urge that it is critical to consider the role paid sick leave has in stopping the spread of a contagious virus.

"Now is the time to consider the importance of having access to guaranteed paid sick days in public [health](#) epidemics," said LeaAnne DeRigne, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Phyllis and

Harvey Sandler School of Social Work within FAU's College for Design and Social Inquiry. "Those who lack paid sick leave are highly represented among food service workers, day care workers, and home health aides who work in positions that can greatly influence the health of others, especially the elderly, vulnerably ill, and children. It is dangerous when any employees are sick with highly contagious viruses but have no other choice but to report to work or else lose wages. Paid sick leave also allows working parents the opportunity to care for their sick children rather than sending them to school when they show signs of contagious illness."

DeRigne explains that as the world rushes to contain the spread of coronavirus, workers will need to have adequate time off so their entire family unit can self-quarantine if needed and recuperate from the illness faster. In addition, if a vaccine becomes available for coronavirus, having paid time off from work to get it will be important. Past research has shown a clear link between access to paid sick leave and receipt of preventive vaccinations.

During the 2009 H1NI outbreak, workers who were sick and did not stay home exposed an additional 7 million people to the virus. Lack of paid sick leave was estimated to have resulted in an additional 1,500 deaths.

DeRigne and Patricia Stoddard-Dare, Ph.D., a professor in the School of Social Work at Cleveland State University, have conducted numerous studies on the lack of paid sick leave in U.S. workers. They found that workers without paid sick leave are less likely to stay home when ill. This has important implications when considering the spread of contagious diseases at work such as the flu and [coronavirus](#). Workers who lack paid sick leave are also more likely to delay or forgo needed health care for themselves and their family members. This could lead to increased spread of disease and more serious conditions, which are more expensive

to treat.

"People use paid sick leave days to care for themselves or their family members who have acute health problems and to get adequate rest to avert escalation of the condition," said Stoddard-Dare. "In order to comply with public health recommendations, Americans need access to guaranteed sick leave."

In their prior research, DeRigne and Stoddard-Dare showed that workers without paid sick leave also are at risk of becoming financially insecure with an increased likelihood of experiencing poverty, food insecurity and of utilizing welfare programs by missing work.

"Workers who lack paid sick leave lose their daily wage and are at risk of losing their job at the exact time their needs are increasing due to illness," said Stoddard-Dare.

Workers without paid sick leave benefits also reported a statistically significant higher level of psychological distress. They were 1.45 times more likely to report that their distress symptoms interfered "a lot" with their daily life and activities compared to workers with paid [sick leave](#). Those most vulnerable: young, Hispanic, low-income and poorly educated populations.

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

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