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Workplace Flexibility: The Next Anti-Poverty Strategy?

Research Shows Paid Leave and Workplace Flexibility Policies Can Benefit Families, Employees, and Employers

Princeton, NJ: Under pressure to balance their budgets, states are cutting government subsidies that help pay for child care ([New York Times](#)). The reduction threatens the wellbeing of families by making it more difficult for parents to maintain their jobs while caring for their children. One option to offset the impact of such cuts may lie in increased provisions of workplace flexibility.

The *Future of Children's Work and Family* volume, released by Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School and the Brookings Institution, finds workplace flexibility is linked with engagement, satisfaction, retention, and better health for employees; and higher productivity and a better "bottom line" for employers. The volume also shows that providing short to moderate periods of paid parental leave – from three to twelve months – for all workers is unlikely to have negative repercussions in the labor market and is likely to have positive benefits for child and family wellbeing.

In a global comparison, the data presented in the volume suggest that guaranteeing paid parental leave as well as paid leave when a child is sick is feasible for the United States without jeopardizing its competitive economy or low unemployment rates in the future. And perhaps contrary to popular opinion, the volume shows that when employees are offered workplace flexibility, they tend to use it conservatively, minimizing costs to employers.

"Allowing employees more control over their hours and more flexibility to adjust hours or work location when family demands arise can lead to increased employee productivity, satisfaction, and retention," say issue editors Sara McLanahan of Princeton and Jane Waldfogel of Columbia University. "Far from representing a cost to employers, such policies, if well designed to take into account the needs of both employers and employees, can yield benefits."

Paid leave and workplace flexibility policies are particularly important for low-income workers, who are the least likely to have access to flexibility policies. For these families, taking care of their families can put their wages – and their jobs – at risk. Because current welfare policies encourage low-income parents to work, workplace policies that encourage job retention should follow.

In the face of unprecedented federal government budget strains, the volume recommends initiatives with minimal costs and maximum benefits. Namely, the volume recommends that state and local governments pass paid leave initiatives (Connecticut recently became the first state to require employers to provide paid sick leave); that employers implement workplace flexibility policies that encourage "right to request" and "compensatory time"; and that community organizations think carefully about the ways they can adjust their work to better accommodate working families by, for example, changing the hours they are open or providing better coordination of care.

For more information about the *Future of Children's Work and Family* volume, or to contact any of the journal authors, please contact Lauren Moore Kase at 609-258-0340 or lm3@princeton.edu. Or go to: www.futureofchildren.org.

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