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Pulling His Weight: Reducing Negative Impacts from Paid Family Leave Through Paternity Leave Policies

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Abstract: Paid family leave (PFL) policies worldwide have long been associated with a number of positive impacts, from improvements to infant and maternal health to increasing women’s labor market attachment. However, PFL has also been shown to increase unemployment rates among women compared to women in areas without paid family leave. This paper models unemployment after the 2008 introduction of PFL in New Jersey. The model finds no significant impacts on women’s unemployment in New Jersey compared with other similar states. Given a number of other papers demonstrating negative employment impacts, as well as confounding factors caused by increased unemployment rates during the 2008 Great Recession and 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the actual effects on unemployment are unclear. These results are augmented with a discussion on how paid paternity leave may reduce any negative impacts that do exist. Using Sponton (2023)’s framework of non-demand, non-awareness, and non-orientation to characterize uptake disparities, the discussion section recommends an ideal paternity leave policy design.
I. Introduction

The United States, despite being one of the wealthiest nations in the world, is notable in its remarkable lack of robust, well-funded social support and welfare programs. One area where this lack is particularly clear is paid family leave (PFL). The United States is the only industrialized country to lack a federal-level PFL program (Rossin-Slater 2013). Although many workers in the United States have access to job protected leave under the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act, this leave is unpaid, making it inaccessible to American families who are unable to forgo their income to care for a newborn. In light of this policy shortage, a number of states have introduced their own PFL policies – as of 2022, 11 states and Washington DC offer paid leave (“Brief State Family and Medical Leave Laws” 2022). These policies are motivated by the wealth of evidence that PFL programs have positive impacts in a number of arenas such as lower infant and child mortality rates, as well as reductions in postpartum depression in mothers (Gault et al. 2014). Additionally, PFL programs have been found to reduce incidences of low birth weights, particularly among Black and unmarried mothers (Rossin-Slater & Stearns 2020). These findings indicate that PFL can be an effective way to boost infant and maternal health and lessen systemic inequalities. Beyond this, PFL has been associated with a number of economic impacts, increasing women’s attachment to the labor force with minimal impacts on earnings (Gault et al. 2014, Rossin-Slater and Stearns 2020).

Despite these benefits, there is a potential impact that appears less positive: a number of papers found that the PFL program in California resulted in increased unemployment among women1 (Chang 2021, Das & Polacheck 2015, Stock & Inglis 2021). Some researchers have

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1 For the purpose of analysis, I often equate “womanhood” with “ownership of a uterus and a capacity for pregnancy.” I recognize that this is a simplistic definition, and do not seek to invalidate the existence of transgender and nonbinary identities. Rather, I am using the language of “womanhood” as a broad, imperfect categorization of a very salient experience of socialization, which in turn impacts how individuals relate to both the economic and domestic spheres.
interpreted this as evidence that PFL is not an effective policy in addressing gendered labor market issues – the title of Chia Jung Chang’s 2021 article, *Is the Road to Unemployment Paved with Good Intentions?*, aptly demonstrates this line of thinking: PFL is framed as a well-intentioned but ultimately fraught attempt at improving labor market outcomes among women. However, this paper posits an alternative view, which is increasingly being adopted by states worldwide: that negative impacts of PFL are not so much indicators of failed policy, but rather the outcome of economic structures that place the primary burden of childrearing on mothers. Inspired by this framing, a number of countries, including Germany, Denmark, Portugal, and Japan have introduced leave that is specifically geared toward fathers (Earle et al. 2023). These policies aim to encourage men to take family leave, distributing negative employment impacts more evenly across the whole population, and reducing disparate outcomes.

This paper expands on existing literature by examining how the introduction of PFL impacted the unemployment rates among women in New Jersey, aiming to create a more holistic notion of the state policy’s impact on the labor market. Using a difference-in-differences model and demographic data drawn from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), this paper demonstrates that the relationship between paid family leave and unemployment is unclear. This is because the model generates insignificant results, but concerns about increased unemployment due to the 2008 Great Recession and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic make it difficult to apply these results to other contexts. Given that other literature has demonstrated negative employment impacts after the introduction of PFL, it is still useful to explore what policies can address these concerns. Therefore, these results are augmented by a discussion of how paternity leave policies might be introduced in order to minimize different gendered outcomes. Finally, using Sponton (2023)’s characterization of the mechanics of paternity leave
uptake, this paper presents a number of recommendations for how paternity leave may be implemented to best incentivize uptake among fathers.

The paper is organized as follows: Section II provides background on existing federal and state-level PFL policies in the US and reviews existing literature, Section III presents data and methodology, Section IV presents the results of the model, Section V augments the results with a discussion on paternity leave, and Section VI concludes.

II. Policy Background and Literature Review

a) Policy Background

The paid leave coverage available to American families is spotty at best. The only federal-level family leave program is the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which offers up to 12 weeks of job-protected unpaid leave to qualifying employees. An employee is eligible to take FMLA leave if they have been working for the employer from whom they are requesting leave for 12 months, and have worked at least 1,250 hours in that time. Additionally, employers must have at least 50 employees within a 75 mile radius of the work site to be eligible for coverage. These requirements, as well as the lack of financial support offered by the program, mean that FMLA is often inadequate in providing leave opportunities to families. When FMLA was passed in 1993, it only covered about 40% of American workers, many of whom were not financially able to take unpaid leave (Peletier 2007, 558). This policy shortage has prompted a number of states to pass their own PFL programs.

The first state to implement PFL was California, which passed its program in 2004, and was followed by New Jersey in 2008. In total, 11 states now offer (or have passed legislation that plans to offer) paid leave: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland,
Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington. The programs vary in the duration of covered leave and wage replacement rate, but they all offer between 4 and 12 weeks of pay at between 60-90% wage replacement.

b) The Economics of Paid Family Leave

In order to depict the economic impacts of paid family leave, it is helpful to understand its theoretical effects. This can be done by analyzing the cost-benefit analysis used by employers when making hiring and layoff decisions. When employers are making these choices, they are implicitly weighing the costs of keeping or hiring an employee against its benefits. PFL impacts this analysis by effectively making it more expensive to hire workers – firms are now not only obligated to pay wages at or above the legally mandated minimum wage, but they must also pay workers who choose to take leave, meaning that they are required to pay out more money and receive no (direct) productivity benefits. This analysis in turn disproportionately impacts women, who are more likely to take leave and will therefore be perceived by firms as more expensive, making them less hireable. Although there are legal protections that prohibit hiring or layoff decisions based on sex or gender identity, it is often difficult to prove claims of this type of discrimination in the workplace, particularly when it impacts hiring decisions. This is the primary argument concerning why PFL appears to result in increased unemployment among women: PFL makes it more expensive to hire women, and the existing legal frameworks are ineffective in preventing these impacts.

There are certain undeniable aspects of humanity that make it difficult to rectify these effects. For example, issues of reproductive justice will always disproportionately impact people with wombs, as the brunt of carrying a pregnancy, delivering a child, and early life care such as breastfeeding naturally fall onto those people. Therefore, the cost-benefit analysis used by
employers will naturally favor people whose bodies are perceived to be incapable of pregnancy and who will therefore be less likely to use policies such as pregnancy leave. However, changes to PFL policy may induce changes to social norms that position women (or people with wombs) as the primary caretakers of young children. Many states have introduced PFL programs that offer increased benefits to families where both parents are planning to take leave, which are designed to increase leave-taking rates among men. By encouraging men (or people without wombs) to take leave, the disparity of employer’s cost-benefit analysis is reduced, as people of any gender are perceived to be capable of and likely to take leave. In this sense, the increased unemployment effects of PFL are not necessarily fixed, but are rather distributed more evenly across the population, reducing the burden on women as primary caretakers of children and helping improve their labor force outcomes.

c) Empirical Evidence

A number of papers have been written exploring PFL’s impact on unemployment, as well as the labor market more generally. As described in the Economics of Paid Family Leave section, the introduction of PFL is likely to result in an increase in unemployment among women. A number of papers, including Chang (2021), Stock & Inglis (2021), and Das & Polacheck (2015) have empirically demonstrated these impacts in California. Additionally, Reed & Vandegrift (2016) found that New Jersey’s PFL program also led to increased unemployment.

However, many papers have also found that the introduction of PFL has widespread positive impacts. A 2014 report from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) gives an extensive overview of the policy landscape for PFL, as well the research on its economic and health benefits. The authors find that access to PFL improves women’s labor force attachment, contributes to economic growth, and can increase birth rates with low costs to firms. They also
show that PFL improves infant and maternal health (Gault et al. 2014). These findings may now be outdated, as the report is almost 10 years old, but Rossin-Slater and Stearns (2020) find similar, albeit less detailed, results in their overview of PFL.

Because the PFL policy in most states is fairly new, with all but four states having implemented their policies after 2018, California’s policy (CA-PFL) is by far the most studied in the United States. Rossin-Slater et al. (2013) conducted a difference-in-differences analysis of the CA-PFL program’s impact on the labor market, finding that it increased leave-taking rates, particularly among unmarried and Black women, along with increases in hours worked and wage income. Among Black women, leave-taking increased by 10.6%, and the average number of leave weeks taken increased from 1 to 6. Leave-taking increased by 7.2% among unmarried mothers. This offers evidence that PFL may play an important role as a redistributive policy, providing greater equity in support structures for mothers across the socioeconomic spectrum. Luce et al. (2014) similarly find that CA-PFL provides a crucial source of support for low-income workers in their book What Works for Workers. These findings are corroborated by Dennison et al. (2022)’s study of New York’s PFL program, which found that lower income workers were more likely to claim benefits, and generally took longer leaves.

Outside of the US, extensive research has been done examining the impacts of PFL on women’s labor market outcomes. Bergemann & Riphahn (2020) conducted a study of Germany’s Elterngeld² program, finding that it had no significant impacts on long-run labor force participation, but did result in women returning to work more quickly. These results are similar to those found by Kluve and Tamm (2013), who found that women were more likely to return to work after the introduction of Elterngeld. Outside of Germany, Gehringer and Klasen (2017)

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² The term Elterngeld translates to “parent’s money,” and refers to the PFL policy passed by Germany in 2006. The policy provided significant increases in benefits over the prior Erziehungsgeld (“upbringing money”) policy.
conducted a study of family policies, including PFL, in the European Union. They found that PFL policies were effective in increasing labor force participation among women working both part and full time.

Given that the impacts of PFL appear to be overwhelmingly positive, it is crucial to develop policy solutions that minimize potential adverse employment impacts. This is done in this paper by augmenting the analysis with discussion about how we can ease the burden of these unemployment impacts on women. This will allow us to retain the policy’s positive impacts while minimizing its downsides. One way to do this is to encourage men to take paid leave, so that the economic burden is shared equally across genders. Section V will include a more detailed discussion on the literature behind paid paternity leave and how it may improve economic and health outcomes.

The program in New Jersey, called the New Jersey Family Leave Insurance (FLI) will be the primary focus of this paper. FLI offers either 12 weeks or 56 intermittent days of paid leave at 85% wage replacement for a maximum benefit of $1,025 per week. In order to be eligible, workers must have worked for at least 20 weeks, earning a minimum of $260 weekly or $13,000 total in the past base year period (“Paid Family Leave — NJ Time to Care”, n.d.). The program does not directly guarantee job protection, but New Jersey has some policies in place that guarantee a right to return to work. The NJ Family Leave Act offers job protection to employees at firms with over 50 employees, and was expanded to include firms with more than 30 employees in 2019. Employees may also be covered by the federal-level FMLA (“Paid Family Leave — NJ Time to Care”, n.d.).
III. Data and Methodology

In order to conduct this research, data is pulled from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) Current Population Survey (CPS) series, which collects representative data about employment, leave-taking behavior, demographic information, and more. The dataset is composed of a cross-sectional sample of women ages 18-40 surveyed between 2000 and 2023. All respondents resided in either New Jersey or one of the control states at the time of the interview. The treatment group consists of women ages 18-40 in New Jersey. The control group is women in that age group from the other states. The years 18-40 were chosen because this is the age group most likely to have children and therefore take up PFL. In total, the sample size consists of 22,196 respondents in the treatment group and 123,395 in the control group.

This paper utilizes a difference-in-differences (DID) model to examine the impact of paid family leave among women in New Jersey. New Jersey was chosen as the state of focus because of the relative longevity of its program, which was implemented in 2008. This provides ample time for the policy to impact the labor market, and for data capturing those impacts to be collected. Additionally, New Jersey’s FLI is significantly understudied compared to CA-PFL, the other program that has existed for more than the past decade.

One of the major concerns of a DID model is the construction of treatment and control groups. Past papers on this topic have generally attempted to match state size in order to create these groups. For example, Rossin-Slater (2013) used women from California as their treatment group and women from the next three largest states – Texas, Florida, and New York – as controls. However, matching by size alone is not enough to fulfill the parallel trends assumption needed to effectively use a DID model. Therefore, this model matches many other factors, such as geographical area, political culture, and policy landscape, in order to justify a parallel trends
assumption as strongly as possible. In total, the control group consists of women aged 18-40 from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Connecticut, and Delaware, as each one shares particular characteristics, from geography to political culture, with New Jersey. The similarities between these states can be observed in Table 1 – all four states have similar distributions in terms of race, age, educational attainment, and the percent of people employed in the state’s top industry. These similarities allow for the reasonable justification that employment rates would have moved along parallel trends had NJ-FLI not been introduced in 2008. Additionally, Figure 1 shows the number of respondents in the IPUMS dataset who were unemployed by year in New Jersey and each of the control states. This depicts that, with the exception of a spike in New Jersey in 2002, unemployment rates moved along similar trends from 2000 to 2007. Finally, this model is mathematically represented by Equation 1.
Table 1: Summary Statistics for Control and Treatment Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (continuous)</th>
<th>Mean (NJ)</th>
<th>Mean (DE)</th>
<th>Mean (CT)</th>
<th>Mean (MD)</th>
<th>Mean (PA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HH Income*</td>
<td>99,373</td>
<td>77,795</td>
<td>96,329</td>
<td>95,010</td>
<td>79,749</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education**</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>29.74</td>
<td>29.73</td>
<td>29.91</td>
<td>29.75</td>
<td>29.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable (discrete)</th>
<th>% (NJ)</th>
<th>% (DE)</th>
<th>% (CT)</th>
<th>% (MD)</th>
<th>% (PA)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>4.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>4.59%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>4.05%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>3.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Food Stamps</td>
<td>4.16%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>43.9 %</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>42.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top Industry***</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>7.02%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>6.01%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># of Observations</td>
<td>22,196</td>
<td>12,997</td>
<td>15,012</td>
<td>17,696</td>
<td>30,184</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IPUMS Current Population Survey series

*Mean household incomes are rounded to the nearest dollar

**Mean education is given in years of schooling

***The % value refers to the percent of respondents employed in the state’s top industry
Figure 1: Unemployment Levels by State, 2000-2007

Equation 1:

\[ unemployment_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{treatment}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{post}_{it} + \beta_3 \text{treatment}_{it} \times \text{post}_{it} + \beta_4 Z_s + \beta_5 Y_t + \beta_6 X_{it} + u_{it} \]

Unemployment in this case is measured at the individual level as a binary variable, \( unemployment_{it} \), which tracks whether an individual, \( i \), was unemployed at time \( t \). Individuals were considered to be unemployed if they did not have a job and reported having looked for work within the past four weeks. \( \text{treatment}_{it} \) refers to the treatment group, women aged 18-40 in New Jersey. \( \text{post}_{it} \) refers to respondents from both groups interviewed after 2008, when NJ-FLI was implemented. Additionally, year and state fixed effects were introduced in order to
account for variations across states and time that are not explicitly included in the controls. These are notated in the equation as $\beta_4 Z_s$ (state fixed effects) and $\beta_5 Y_t$ (year fixed effects).

$\beta_6 X_{it}$ encompasses a number of other explicit controls which were introduced in order to account for variations in unemployment not related to PFL uptake. The model controls for age, as women who are on the older or younger side may be more likely to be unemployed. Additionally, because unemployment likely changes across race, the model contains variables controlling for respondents’ race. The model also controls for variations in socioeconomic status that may impact unemployment. This includes controls for household income, industry of employment, education level, and whether the respondents are on food stamps. Finally, the model controls for firm size. Because New Jersey FLI does not include job protection, only those working at firms with 50 more employees are guaranteed job protection under New Jersey’s Family Leave Act. This was expanded to include firms with 30 or more employees in 2019. Because job protection is highly related to employment, it is necessary to control for these variations in protection, and firm size is a way to do so. Summary statistics for the dataset can be found above, in Table 1.

IV. Results and Limitations

Three versions of this model were generated. Variation (1) contains only the basic treatment, control, and interaction variables. Variation (2) contains all of the control variations but exempts state and year fixed effects, and variation (3) adds fixed effects. All three variations generated insignificant results for the interaction variable, indicating that the 2008 introduction of paid family leave in New Jersey did not meaningfully increase unemployment among working-age women compared with women in other states. In the most robust model, variation
(3), the calculated coefficient for the interaction variable was -0.0024, meaning that women in New Jersey were about 0.24% less likely to be unemployed following the introduction of NJ-FLI in 2008. This coefficient fell very short of being significant, with a calculated t-statistic of 0.667. This result differs substantially from the prior literature, which has nearly universally found that PFL results in increased unemployment rates. However, there are a number of limitations to this model that must be discussed in order to more accurately contextualize the results. The first is that the year in which New Jersey implemented its program, 2008, was the same year that the Great Recession hit, meaning that unemployment rates at the time increased significantly nationwide. This increase is observable in the results, with the post-2008 variable generating a coefficient of 0.0097. This means that any given individual was about 1% (0.97%) more likely to be unemployed after 2008. This finding is significant at the 5% level. Interestingly, the treatment group alone did show higher unemployment rates, with women in New Jersey being about 1.02% more likely to be unemployed than women in other states, a result which is significant at the 0.1% level. These results may have been offset by rising unemployment in other states in 2008, leading to an insignificant interaction variable. Due to these limitations, these results should not be extrapolated beyond their specific relevance to unemployment rates in New Jersey in the years following 2008. Additionally, they should not be perceived to discount the adverse employment effects found in prior literature.

Despite these results, the other control variables generated coefficients that indicate that the model is giving reasonable results in relation to unemployment. Both variations (1) and (2) indicated that education has a negative impact on unemployment, with an additional year of education being associated with either a 0.046% or 0.045% reduction in the likelihood of being unemployed. Additionally, both models showed that being on food stamps is associated with a
6.8% increase in the likelihood of being unemployed. Finally, respondents working at larger firms were 0.4% less likely to be unemployed. All these results mirror expected trends in unemployment, in which people who are poorer, less educated, and working at smaller businesses are more likely to be laid off. Table 2 contains detailed results from the three variations on the model. This illustrates how the inclusion of different controls impacted the results.

Table 2: Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable:</th>
<th>Unemployed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-2008*Treatment Group</td>
<td>-0.0028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-2008</td>
<td>0.0047***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment Group</td>
<td>0.0040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Income</td>
<td>-0.00000006***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000000008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Food Stamps</td>
<td>0.0679***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>0.00001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.0002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm Size</td>
<td>-0.0040***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>0.0024***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.00033)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.00046*** (0.00003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>0.00009*** (0.000002)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations 145,491 145,591 145,591
R-Squared 0.0030 0.0367 0.0389
Adjusted R-Squared 0.00278 0.0365 0.0385

Significance Codes: *=0.05, **=0.01, ***=0.001, ****=0

V. Mitigating Employment Effects: A Discussion on Paternity Leave

While the model presented in this paper does not display the adverse employment results found in other papers, it has a number of limitations that make it difficult to extrapolate this model beyond its immediate context. The first is that, as noted above, unemployment rates were significantly higher nationwide following the 2008 financial crisis. Additionally, the years immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 had higher unemployment rates as well, which may have further impacted the accuracy of the model’s results. As noted in Section II, a significant number of other studies have found that paid leave policies increase unemployment among women. This discrepancy in results makes it difficult to definitively say whether the introduction of PFL increases unemployment. However, given that there is both empirical and theoretical evidence supporting a hypothesis of increased unemployment rates, it is still prudent to develop policies that may lessen these effects. One way in which this can be done is through the introduction of paid leave specifically aimed at fathers, called paid paternity leave. Increasing leave-taking rates and durations among fathers can help reduce potential adverse impacts from paid family leave by distributing them more evenly across the entire population.
a) Paternity Leave Literature Review

The literature on paid paternity leave indicates a wealth of positive benefits associated with encouraging men to take paid time off after the birth of a child. Existing research finds a significant discrepancy in PFL uptake rates between men and women: Bana et al. (2018) found that less than half as many men as women filed PFL claims in 2014 (121,816 women compared to 52,478 men). This gap can also be seen in the data used for this paper – of the respondents who reported being on maternity or paternity leave in the past week, 1,016 were women and only 84 were men. Figure 1 provides a graph of this data, showing the breakdown of leave-taking by year and gender. As depicted in the figure, the vast majority of leave-takers were women, with only one or two individual men taking leave each year.

![Figure 1: PFL Uptake by Gender](image)

Further research has been conducted addressing why fathers tend not to take up leave, and what policies have been most effective in addressing low paternal uptake. Petts et al. (2020)
found that low paternity leave uptake is tied to gendered structures that emphasize mens’ roles as breadwinners and limits their access to leave possibilities. Additionally, the study found that higher levels of income and education, and strong identification with fatherhood, are indicators of increased leave uptake. Ndzi (2023) found similar results in her review of paternity leave in the United Kingdom. Sponton (2023) used a mixed-methods approach to explore paternity leave uptake in France, finding that strong commitments to work and low awareness of leave possibilities informed low uptake rates among fathers. Mansdotter et al. (2010) conducted a study of paternity leave uptake in Sweden, finding that fathers who took leave generally had more education, higher incomes, and more stable employment than those who did not. This highlights the ways in which privilege impacts leave takeup, offering helpful keys to constructing accessible paternity leave policies.

Increased paternity leave uptake (and more involved fatherhood in general) is not only helpful in easing disproportionate economic outcomes, but is also associated with a number of positive parental health outcomes. It has been shown to improve mental health outcomes among both parents (Cardenas et al. 2021), and also appears to decrease parenting stress among fathers (Lidbeck et al. 2018). Additionally, Mansdotter et al. (2006) found that more equal gender roles, characterized partly through increased male involvement in the domestic sphere, led to better health outcomes. More involved fatherhood has also been linked to improved infant health. Amato and Rivera (1999) found that increased paternal involvement led to fewer behavioral problems in children. It also led to “increased cognitive competence, increased empathy, fewer sex-stereotyped beliefs, and a more internal locus of control” (Lamb 2010, 7).

Recognizing these positive impacts, a number of countries have introduced leave programs specifically aimed at encouraging leave uptake among fathers. Earle et al. (2023)
conducted a survey of global paternity leave programs, finding substantial increases in the availability and duration of paternity leave throughout the last 30 years. According to their study, the percentage of countries offering paid paternity leave rose from 13% to 56% between 1995 and 2022. These policies are largely concentrated among high-income countries, with Europe and Central Asia boasting the highest rates of paternity leave availability. However, these policies are still characterized by, on average, shorter leave lengths for men and fewer incentives encouraging uptake.

b) Non-Uptake Characterization and Policy Design

By analyzing the structure and effects of these specific policies, this paper develops a recommendation for what kind of paternity leave policy might be implemented in the United States. In order to do so, the framework developed in Sponton (2023) is utilized. Sponton characterizes paternity leave non-take-up in three ways: non-demand, non-awareness, and non-orientation. Non-demand encompasses fathers who refuse to take up leave due to a fear that it will compromise their role as a primary breadwinner. This is the “classic” reason why fathers might not take leave, and is arguably the most difficult to address in policy design. Non-awareness indicates a lack of awareness of the existence of or eligibility for paternity leave. Non-orientation applies to fathers who are aware of paternity leave, but do not take it up because of a lack of resources or other barriers that dissuade take-up. These characterizations allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the specific factors driving leave non-take-up which can be applied to different aspects of paternity leave policies. The following section will introduce these characterizations, and give policy recommendations that may address them.

The first characterization provided by Sponton is that of non-demand, defined as the situation in which “potential recipients are aware of their eligibility but do not request it”
This describes fathers who do not take up leave because of perceptions that it may compromise their status as breadwinners or cause complications at work. This issue can be addressed by creating policies that incentivize paternal takeup. At the moment, a notable way in which paternity leave policies differ globally is in whether leave is offered to both parents and shared, or if it is offered and marketed specifically toward fathers. Some countries design their leave structure such that both parents are entitled to take a shared amount of leave. For example, Sweden offers 480 days of paid leave, which is designed to be split between the two parents. It is largely up to individual parents to decide how this leave will be allocated (“Sweden - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission”, n.d.). The programs in the United States function in a similar way. In other countries, paternity leave is explicitly allocated for the non-birthing parent – in Japan, fathers are specifically entitled to 8 weeks of paid leave (“Maternity, Paternity, and Childcare Leave in Japan” 2023). These differences in design result in varying incentive structures, which in turn inform how effective they are in encouraging take-up. Programs such as the ones in Sweden and the US fail to effectively address the non-demand portion of Sponton’s non-take-up framework because they do not incentivize changes to gender roles – without a policy that explicitly encourages men to take leave, uptake will resort to traditional patterns. These patterns are observable in the massive discrepancies seen in US (and global) uptake rates. A program such as the one in Japan, however, places pressure on these roles by allocating a certain amount of leave specifically for fathers. If fathers fail to take up this leave, it can not be applied to the mother’s leave. Additionally, passing leave specifically aimed at men changes the price signals of leave being sent out to citizens by the government. By targeting fathers in paid leave policy design, the state sends the message that taking leave is an
acceptable, or even encouraged, act, inducing more people to take up the policy. States can begin to address discrepancies in take up by offering this type of explicit incentive to fathers.

The second characterization in Sponton’s framework is that of non-awareness. Sponton defines this as “when potential recipients are not aware of their eligibility” (Sponton 2023). This describes fathers who would be open to taking leave, but were not aware that it was an option. Lack of awareness is generally an issue with the current US policies. For example, a 2011 study found that fewer than half of California workers were even aware that the state had a PFL program (Luce et al. 2014, 311). In this context, the introduction of paternal-specific leave would likely be ineffective in rectifying unemployment impacts because awareness would be too low to make a substantial difference. A crucial aspect of effective welfare programs is its accessibility to constituents. This can be done in a number of ways. The most straightforward way to do so is through easily accessible information provided by the government. All US PFL programs already have websites communicating information about benefits, eligibility, and the application process. However, in order to effectively build awareness, more needs to be done. Websites require constituents to actively seek out information about benefits, a barrier that may keep those who are not already oriented toward seeking welfare benefits, or who do not have access to the internet, from getting information about leave eligibility. Governments can increase awareness of benefits in a number of ways by actively reaching out to constituents with information about policies. This can occur in the form of pamphlets mailed directly to eligible households or requiring employers to communicate with their employees about existing policies. Additionally, communicating through posters in pregnancy clinics and doctors offices can ensure that parents are made aware of the policy when they are accessing prenatal care. Awareness can also be increased by making pamphlets and posters available at workplaces. By increasing policy
awareness, uptake rates will likely also be increased. If the US government were to implement a leave policy specifically aimed at fathers, it would be crucial to spearhead sustained communication programs to ensure that awareness of the program was as high as possible, and that detailed information about the policy could be easily accessed.

The final mechanism of non-take up identified by Sponton is non-orientation, defined as “when potential recipients . . . are not notified or supported to access the granting or renewal of a right” (Sponton 2023). Sponton specifically uses this frame to describe fathers who do not file leave claims because the administrative burdens of accessing leave is too high. This applies primarily to those who are self-employed or work hourly jobs where they do not have access to a Human Resources or other department that can aid them in navigating the claim process. While non-orientation is closely related to non-awareness, it differs in that non-orientation is primarily concerned with barriers to accessing the program, not barriers to knowing about it. This characterization highlights the need for policy that specifically addresses how different types of workers will access leave. As noted above, paternity leave take up is correlated with certain types of privilege, with salaried, higher-income men being generally more likely to take leave (Mansdotter et al. 2010, Sponton 2023). The language of non-orientation, which recognizes how different types of labor result in structural barriers to accessing leave, is useful in explaining this discrepancy. It also highlights a need for policy that addresses different types of employment. In order for paternity leave to be effective, policymakers must wrestle with how they will ensure that fathers who do non-salaried work, including self-employed and contract workers, are able to easily access leave. This can be done in a number of ways, from streamlining the application to ensure that it is easily accessed and completed, to ensuring that employers without a human resources department are still communicating with their employees about leave benefits.
The framework of non-demand, non-awareness, and non-orientation helps identify which mechanisms drive paternity leave takeup, and how they can be addressed in policy design. Non-demand highlights the need for incentive structures that encourage fathers to take leave. This can be done by offering leave specifically for fathers, or by predicking extended leave opportunities on takeup by both parents. These policy structures would encourage men to take leave in a way that the current US policy design does not. Non-awareness recognizes that knowledge about a policy is crucial to getting people to use it. This knowledge can be ensured through active outreach campaigns by the government, in the form of communication through pamphlets, posters in health clinics and fertility centers, and requirements that ensure employers educate their workers about the policy. Finally, non-orientation characterizes the barriers to uptake that exist among non-salaried or non-traditional workers. It recognizes the need for an accessible application process, and a variety of methods through which employers communicate with workers about benefits. By addressing these three characteristics, policymakers can craft a paternity leave policy that actively targets fathers and incentivizes their leave takeup, helping normalize leave use regardless of gender and easing the burden of unemployment impacts on women. Table 3 presents these mechanisms and their policy implications.

### Table 3: Mechanisms, Solutions, and Policy Implications for Paternity Leave Non-Uptake

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Solution</th>
<th>Policy Implications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Demand</td>
<td>Incentivize PFL uptake among men</td>
<td>- Implement policy explicitly aimed at men</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>- Decrease the “price” of uptake by indicating to men and</td>
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<td>their employers that taking leave is acceptable and/or</td>
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### Mechanism | Solution | Policy Implications
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Non-Awareness | Increase awareness of PFL’s existence | - Communicate to constituents through active outreach  
- Place posters in doctor’s offices and workplaces  
- Create a mail campaign that sends information about policies directly to constituents’ homes

Non-Orientation | Reduce the barriers to accessing PFL benefits | - Streamline the application process as much as possible  
- Ensure that Human Resources (HR) departments are able to aid employees in accessing benefits  
- Create support structures aimed at fathers in non-traditional work, such as self-employed or contract workers

### VI. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the need for a thorough, comprehensive parental leave policy in the United States. Although PFL is associated with widespread positive impacts, from improvements in maternal and infant health to increased labor force attachment among women, there is evidence that implementation of PFL leads to increased unemployment rates among women. This paper’s model fails to show these impacts, a result which is likely driven by increased unemployment following the Great Recession in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. However, because so many other papers have illustrated this link, it is reasonable to
assume that the relationship of paid family leave to unemployment is unclear. This paper recontextualizes these potential increases in unemployment by illustrating how they are driven by societal expectations that women perform the brunt of domestic and childcare labor. This is illustrated by large gendered discrepancies in PFL takeup, which show that women are the primary users of this policy. In response to this relationship, this paper suggests the implementation of paternity leave, an increasingly popular policy in industrialized countries, which has well-established benefits for both parental and infant health. By using the framework of non-demand, non-awareness, and non-orientation developed in Sponton (2023), this paper addresses the different mechanisms driving low paternity leave takeup rates, and recommends how policy can address these. This will aid policymakers in the construction of PFL programs that incentivize father take up, are well-advertised, and are easily accessible through straightforward application processes and ample employer communication.
References


Rossin-Slater, Maya, Christopher J. Ruhm, and Jane Waldfogel. 2013. “The Effects of California’s Paid Family Leave Program on Mothers' Leave-Taking and Subsequent


