

Qualifying for Unpaid Leave: FMLA Eligibility among Working Mothers

Issue Brief—Worker Leave Analysis and Simulation Series¹

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The participation rate of mothers in the labor force has increased significantly over the last four decades with an estimated 71% participating in 2014 compared to 47% in 1975.ⁱ Similarly, the share of households with mothers of children under the age of 18 as the sole or primary income earner has grown substantially, increasing from 11% in 1960 to 40% in 2011.ⁱⁱ

However, while the role of mothers as sole or primary income earners in the household has increased significantly over time, time use data suggest that mothers continue to be the primary caregivers.ⁱⁱⁱ The Family Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) has played an important role in supporting mothers in balancing their family and career obligations. Previous research has found positive associations between the use of FMLA leave and improved health outcomes for newborn children, including increased birthweights, increased rates of breastfeeding, and decreased infant mortality.^{iv} However, a considerable number of working mothers are ineligible for FMLA and its associated benefits. In this Issue Brief, we explore FMLA eligibility among working mothers, and the reasons and likelihood of taking leave using data from the 2012 DOL FMLA Employee Survey².

In this Issue Brief, we explore Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) eligibility and leave use among working mothers using data from the 2012 U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Surveys.

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FMLA ELIGIBILITY AMONG WORKING MOTHERS

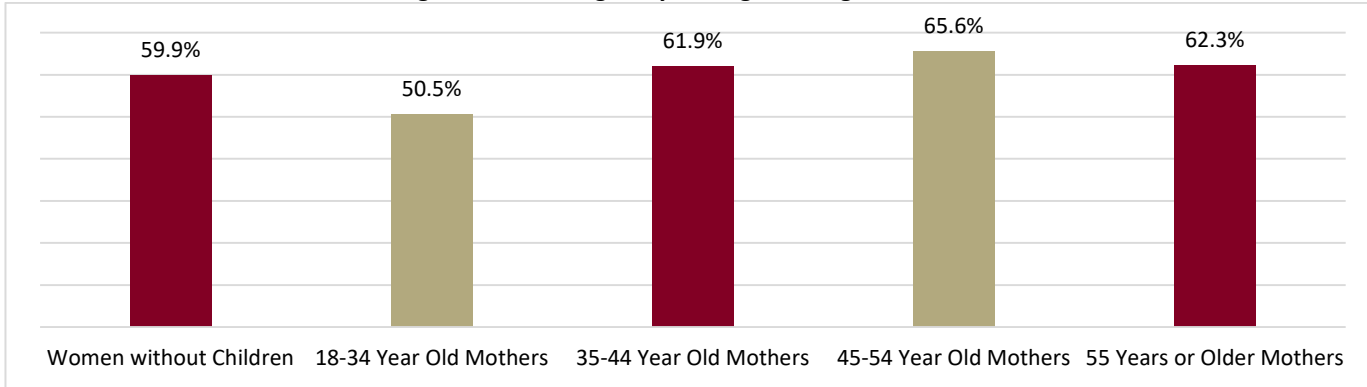
Key Finding: About Half of Young Mothers are Not Eligible for FMLA

Many working mothers ages 18 to 34 were not eligible for FMLA in 2012, with only about a half (50.5%) of mothers qualifying for job-protected unpaid leave compared with 65.6% of those ages 45 to 54 (the age group of mothers with the highest eligibility) and 59.9% for non-mothers (see *Figure 1* on the following page).

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² Family and medical leave is defined in the FMLA survey as leave for one's own serious health condition; caregiving for a serious health condition of a parent, spouse, relative, or child; for a new child; or to respond to the military deployment of a family member.

Figure 1. FMLA Eligibility among Working Mothers in 2012



PROBABILITY OF TAKING LEAVE

Key Finding: Young Working Mothers are More than Twice as Likely to Take Leave as Older Working Mothers

When compared to non-mothers, young mothers (ages 18 to 34) are significantly more likely (25.6 percentage points) to have taken leave within the prior 12 months than older working mothers ages 35 to 44 (11.6 percentage points).

Figure 2. Probability of Taking FMLA-Leave, Compared to Women without Children



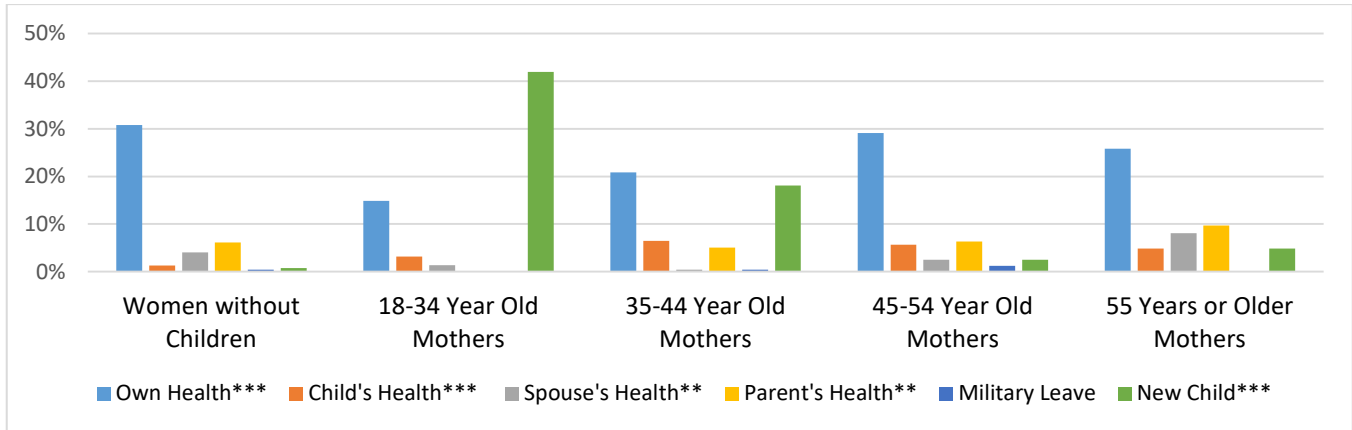
Note: Statistically Significant at the following levels: ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001.

REASONS FOR TAKING LEAVE ACROSS WORKING MOTHERS IN 2012

Key Finding: Young Working Mothers are More Likely to Take Leave to Care for a New Child while Older Working Mothers are More Likely to Take Leave to Care for their Own Health

Across all age groups, working mothers are most likely to take leave for their own health, with an average of 22.7% of working mothers taking this type of leave. A notable exception is evident for working mothers ages 18 to 34 who are most likely to take leave to care for a new child (41.9%). In contrast, utilizing leave to care for a new child is the second most common type of leave among older working mothers (at an average of 8.5%). *Figure 3* presents a summary of reasons for taking leave among working mothers of various age groups as well as non-mothers.

Figure 3. Reasons for Taking FMLA Leave Across Working Mothers in 2012



Note: Statistically Significant at the following levels: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this brief suggest that the reasons for taking leave among working mothers vary by age, and that the presence of wide-ranging challenges require working mothers of all ages to carefully balance their work and family obligations.



TECHNICAL APPENDIX

Data for the analysis consisted of employee responses from the 2012 DOL FMLA Employee Survey. Employee data were collected via a nationwide random-digit dialing and computer-assisted telephone interviews, with sampling weights used to adjust for stratified sampling methods and survey non-response. Interviews were conducted with one employee per household (with the self-employed excluded), and a total of 2,852 employee surveys were completed.

The analysis employed a logistic regression model that examined the relationship between the ‘Mothers by Age Group’ explanatory variable and the outcome variable of whether a leave was taken for FMLA-qualifying reasons. The outcome variable, as constructed, examines whether a female worker took leave for FMLA-eligible reasons, but does not examine the types of leave that a female worker used, such as sick leave, FMLA leave, vacation leave, or short- or long-term disability. The explanatory variable used in this model consisted of a variable comparing mothers in different age groups to a reference group of non-mothers, which allowed for an analysis of the association between leave-taking and mothers of varying ages. In addition, a collection of control variables were included within the model. The control variables consisted of worker- and organizational-level variables that were expected to have an effect on whether mothers took leave.

Table A1 presents the full results for the factors associated with utilization of leave among mothers of different ages. The first column specifies the explanatory and control variables included in the model. The ‘Odds Ratio’ column provides the odds ratio coefficients and level of statistical significance for each variable. Odds ratios calculate the odds of an explanatory outcome occurring for one categorical group divided by the odds of that outcome occurring for another categorical group. For instance, the odds ratio for leave-taking among working mothers is calculated by dividing the odds of leave-taking for working mothers by the odds of leave-taking among working women without children. The third column reports the robust standard errors for each variable included within the model, with smaller errors indicating higher model precision. The final columns report the 95% confidence intervals for each variable. The column provides another measure of model precision, with a 95% confidence level that the figures in the columns include the true point estimator.

Table A1. Factors Associated with Utilization of Leave among Working Mothers

	Odds Ratio	Robust Std. Err.	[95% Conf. Interval]	
<i>Mothers by Age Group (Reference: Non-Mothers)</i>				
18-34	2.959***	0.615	1.970 4.445	
35-44	1.594*	0.298	1.106 2.300	
45-54	1.066	0.223	0.708 1.606	
55 or Older	1.656	0.560	0.853 3.213	
<i>FMLA Eligibility & Knowledge (Reference: Non-Eligibility)</i>				
FMLA Eligible	1.251	0.304	0.777 2.014	
FMLA Eligible & Knowledgeable	1.592**	0.243	1.181 2.146	
<i>Education</i>				
High School Graduate	1.983	0.887	0.825 4.767	
Some College	1.932	0.859	0.808 4.619	
College Graduate	1.576	0.716	0.646 3.839	
Graduate School	1.693	0.799	0.671 4.271	
<i>Family Income</i>				
\$20,000-\$34,999	1.327	0.440	0.693 2.542	
\$35,000-\$49,999	1.740	0.577	0.908 3.333	
\$50,000-\$74,999	1.434	0.487	0.736 2.791	
\$75,000-\$99,999	1.963	0.693	0.983 3.920	
\$100,000+	1.393	0.494	0.695 2.791	
<i>Hispanic Ethnicity (Reference: Non-Hispanic)</i>	1.395	0.443	0.749 2.599	
<i>Race (Reference: Caucasian)</i>				
American Indian/Native American	1.249	0.554	0.524 2.980	
Asian	0.981	0.427	0.418 2.303	
Black/African American	0.921	0.185	0.622 1.364	
Other Race	0.376*	0.158	0.165 0.856	
<i>Marital Status (Reference: Married)</i>				
Living with Partner	0.968	0.271	0.560 1.675	
Separated	1.350	0.524	0.631 2.889	
Divorced	0.897	0.186	0.597 1.348	
Widowed	1.004	0.338	0.519 1.941	
Never Married	0.734	0.150	0.491 1.100	
<i>Labor Union Member</i>	1.356	0.258	0.934 1.970	
<i>Government Worker</i>	1.178	0.198	0.848 1.637	
<i>Pay Type</i>				
Salaried	0.839	0.308	0.409 1.722	
Hourly	0.935	0.340	0.459 1.906	
<i>Access to Paid Leave</i>	1.005	0.107	0.816 1.239	
<i>Constant</i>	0.262*	0.161	0.079 0.872	
Observations	1,089			

Note: Statistically Significant at the following levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

ⁱ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2015). *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook* (BLS Reports No. 1059). Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/cps/women-in-the-labor-force-a-databook-2015.pdf>
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ⁱⁱ Wang, W., Parker, K., & Taylor, P. (2013). *Breadwinner Moms*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2013/05/Breadwinner_moms_final.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Gerstel, N., & McGonagle, K. (1999). Job Leaves and the Limits of the Family and Medical Leave Act The Effects of Gender, Race, and Family. *Work and Occupations*, 26(4), 510–534. <http://wox.sagepub.com/content/26/4/510.short>
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^{iv} Rossin, M. (2011). The Effects of Maternity Leave on Children’s Birth and Infant Health Outcomes in the United States. *Journal of Health Economics*, 30(2), 221–239. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhealeco.2011.01.005>