



# Gender Differences in Needing and Taking Leave

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Using data from the 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey, this paper explores patterns of needing and taking leave from work for a family or medical reason—either for one’s own health, or to care for someone else.<sup>i</sup> The 2018 FMLA Employee Survey asks US employees about their need for leave for a family or medical reason, whether they took leave, and their experiences while on leave—all for the twelve months prior to the survey.<sup>ii</sup> This paper begins by exploring patterns in needing and taking leave between women and men.<sup>iii</sup> It then explores how these patterns vary between single and partnered women.

## Differences by Gender

The need for leave from work for a family or medical reason often varies with employees’ demographics—for instance, their age, parental status, and whether they are a single parent. Among US employees, the characteristics of male and female employees are generally similar (Exhibit 1). For instance, male and female employees are on average the same age, and approximately the same percentage have children under age 18 living in the household. However, compared to employed men, a higher percentage of employed women are divorced, separated, or widowed, and a higher percentage are heads of a single-parent household.<sup>iv</sup> Male and female

### Key Findings

- Compared to men, more women need leave (24 percent versus 17 percent) and take leave (18 percent versus 14 percent).
- Yet more women than men still have unmet need for leave (9 percent versus 6 percent).
- Women and men need and take leave from work for the same reasons. Among all leave needers, approximately 50 percent need leave for their own health, 30 percent to care for someone else, and 20 percent for a new child.
- The average length of women’s leaves is longer than men’s (34 days versus 21 days), primarily because women take longer leaves for a new child (54 days versus 18 days).
- While on leave, substantially fewer women than men receive full pay (32 percent versus 55 percent), and more receive no pay (41 percent versus 25 percent). These differences are not exclusively driven by women taking longer leaves.
- Among women, single and partnered women take leave at the same rate (approximately 18 percent), and take equally long leaves (approximately 33 days), but more single women take leave for their own health (60 percent versus 46 percent).
- Compared to partnered women, more single women receive no pay while on leave (52 percent versus 33 percent), and more lose their job because of taking leave (15 percent versus 3 percent).

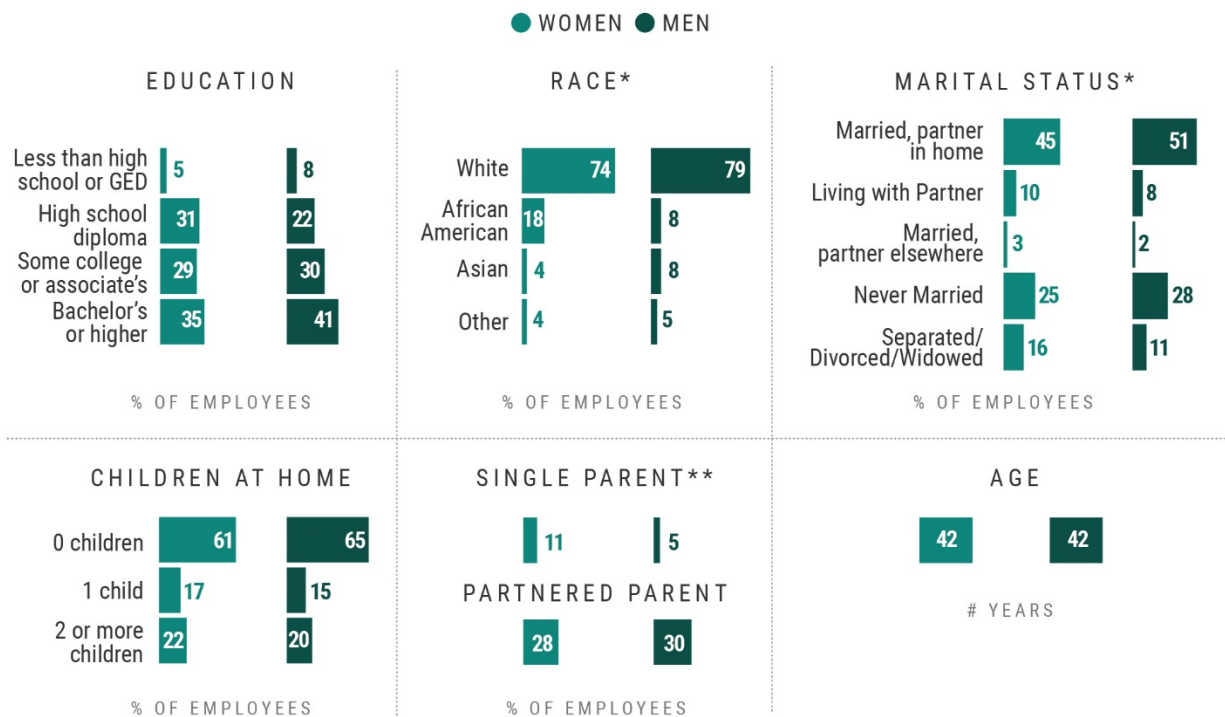
### About the 2018 FMLA Surveys

In 1993, the United States Congress passed the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), updating it in the years since. To understand how employees and employers understand and experience the FMLA, the U.S. Department of Labor surveyed employees and employers in 1995, 2000, 2012, and 2018.

The present paper is part of a series of publications on findings from the 2018 FMLA Surveys conducted by Abt Associates, including *Results from the 2018 Surveys*, *Methodology Report for the 2018 Surveys*, and *Gender Differences in Needing and Taking Leave*.

employees also vary by race; compared to employed men, a higher percentage of employed women are African American.

**Exhibit 1. Percentage of US employees by selected demographic characteristics, by gender**



\*/\*\* = difference statistically significant at the 5%/1% level. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

### Leave Needed and Taken for a Family or Medical Reason

Compared to men, more women need leave from work for a family or medical reason; that is, for one's own serious health condition, to care for a new child (by birth, adoption, or foster placement), or to care for another individual with a serious health condition (24 percent versus 17 percent, Exhibit 2).<sup>v</sup> Consistent with more need for leave, more women take leave from work for a family or medical reason (18 percent versus 14 percent). Yet despite taking leave at higher rates than men, more women still have unmet need for leave for a family or medical reason—namely, a higher percentage of employed women than men do not take leave when leave is needed (9 percent versus 6 percent).

**Exhibit 2. Percentage of employees who need, take, and have unmet need for leave, by gender**

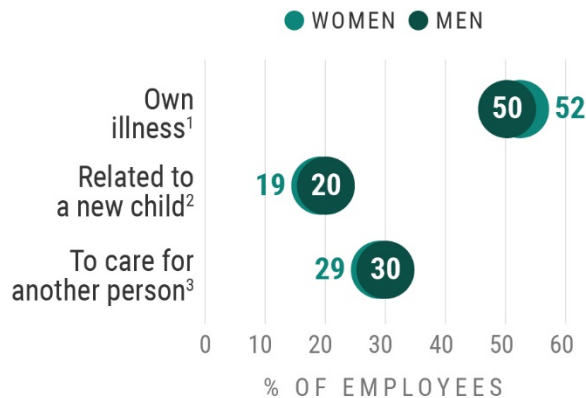


\*/\*\* = difference statistically significant at the 1%/5% level.

Source: 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

Unlike the *rates* of needing and taking leave, women and men have similar *reasons* for leave (see Exhibit 3 for reasons among all employees who needed leave).<sup>vi</sup> Approximately half need and take leave for their own illness. An almost equal percentage of women and men also need and take leave for a new child,<sup>vii</sup> and to care for a child with a serious health condition (4 percent and 5 percent, respectively, results not shown).

**Exhibit 3. Percentage of leave needers by reason for needing leave, by gender**



<sup>1</sup>Own illness includes all serious health conditions except those related to pregnancy or miscarriage.

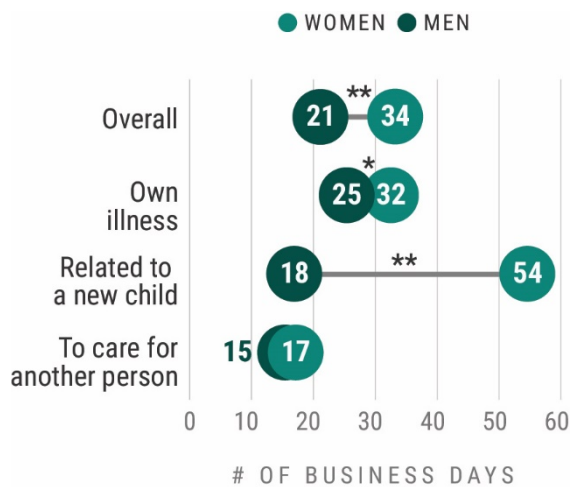
<sup>2</sup>Care for or bonding with a newborn, a newly adopted child, or a newly placed foster child, and miscarriage and pregnancy-related own serious health conditions.

<sup>3</sup>To care for another person with a serious health condition, including a respondent's child, spouse, parent, other family member, or an unrelated person.

Source: 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

Although women and men take leave for the same reasons, women take substantially longer leaves than men, on average 34 days versus 21 days (Exhibit 4). This difference is driven almost exclusively by the difference in length of leave taken for a new child. On average, women take 54 days of leave from work for reasons related to a new child, three times longer than men (18 days for a new child). There is a smaller difference in length of leave for own illness (32 days among women versus 25 days among men), and no difference for leaves taken to care for another person.

**Exhibit 4. Average length of leave in business days, overall and by reason, by gender**



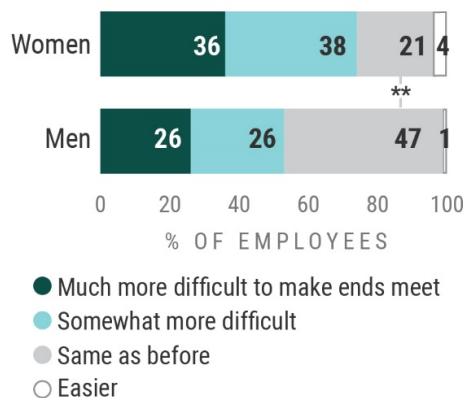
\*\*/\* = difference statistically significant at the 1%/5% level.

Source: 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

## Pay Received While on Leave

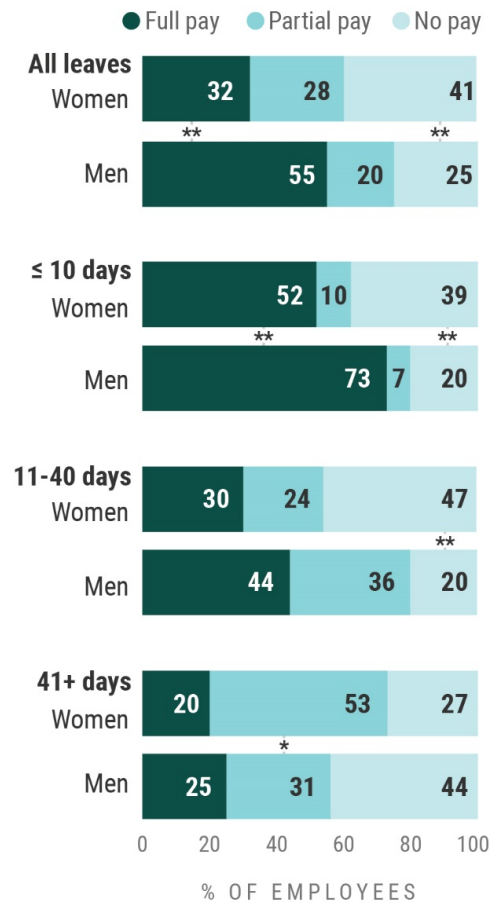
Pay while on leave differs strongly by gender, and is not only driven by differences in leave length.<sup>viii</sup> Across all leaves, substantially fewer women than men receive full pay while on leave (32 percent versus 55 percent, Exhibit 5), and substantially more receive no pay (41 percent versus 25 percent). In part, fewer women receive full pay because on average they take longer leaves, and for both genders fewer of those taking longer leaves (41 days or more) receive full pay than those taking shorter leaves (10 days or fewer). Yet even for the shortest leaves (10 days or fewer), fewer women than men receive full pay (52 percent versus 73 percent) and more receive no pay (39 percent versus 20 percent). Note, however, that among the longest leaves (41 days or longer), more women than men receive partial pay (53 percent versus 31 percent).

**Exhibit 6. Percentage of leave takers reporting degree of difficulty making ends meet among those receiving less than full pay, by gender**



\*\*\* = difference statistically significant at the 5%/1% level.  
**Source:** 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

**Exhibit 5. Percentage of leave takers receiving full, partial, or no pay, by gender**



\*\*\* = difference statistically significant at the 5%/1% level.  
 Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.  
**Source:** 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

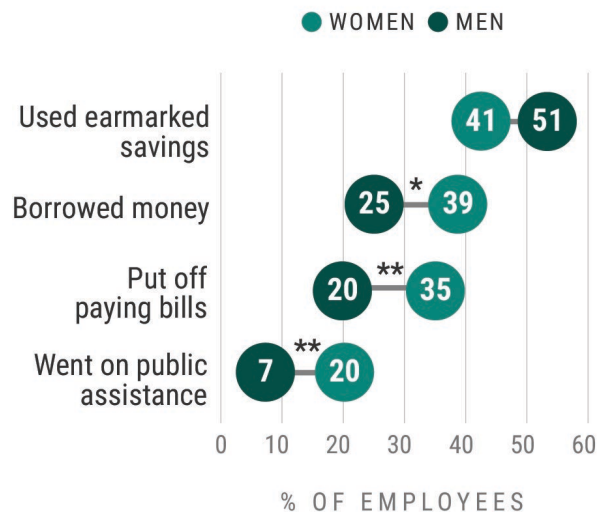
Among leave takers who receive less than full pay while on leave, more women report financial distress than men. While almost half of men report that it is as easy to make ends meet as before leave (47 percent, Exhibit 6), only 21 percent of women report this. Conversely, almost three quarters of women report that it is more difficult to make ends meet, with more than a third reporting that it is much more difficult.

Women and men use different methods to make up for lost earnings while on leave. More women than men borrow money (39 percent versus 25 percent, Exhibit 7), put off paying bills (35 percent versus 20 percent), and go on public assistance (20 percent versus 7 percent).

## Differences by Women's Partner Status

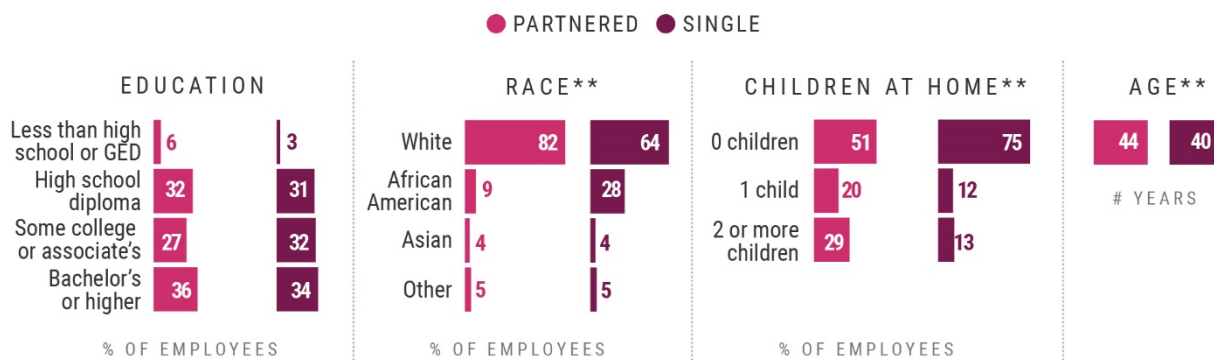
This section considers patterns in leave needing and taking among women by their partner status. Women are classified as “partnered,” that is part of a dual-adult family, if they report that they are living with a partner (whether married or not); women are classified as “single,” that is part of a single-adult family, if they report that they are never married, separated, divorced, widowed, or are married with their partner living outside of the household.<sup>ix</sup> Exhibit 8 shows demographic characteristics by women’s partner status. Among the employed, compared to single women, partnered women are on average older, have more children under age 18 living at home, and a lower percentage are African American.

**Exhibit 7. Percentage of leave takers that use reported methods to cover reduced earnings among those receiving less than full pay, by gender**



Source: 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

**Exhibit 8. Percentage of female US employees by selected demographic characteristics, by women's partner status**



\*\* = difference statistically significant at the 5%/1% level. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.  
 Source: 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey



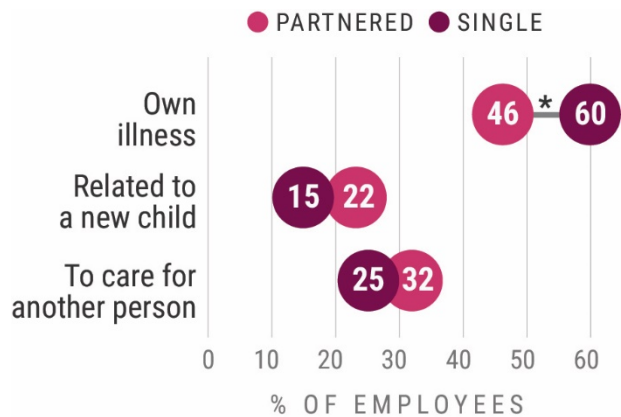
Among women there is no difference by partner status in the rates of needing leave, taking leave, or having unmet need for leave (Exhibit 9). However, compared to partnered women, more single women need and take leave for their own illness (see Exhibit 10 for reasons for needed leave). Although single and partnered women take leave for different reasons, on average they take leaves of the same length (34 days among partnered women, 33 days among single women, results not shown).

**Exhibit 9. Percentage of women who need, take, and have unmet need for leave, by partner status**



Source: 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

**Exhibit 10. Percentage of female leave needers by reason for needing leave, by partner status**



\* = difference statistically significant at the 5% level.

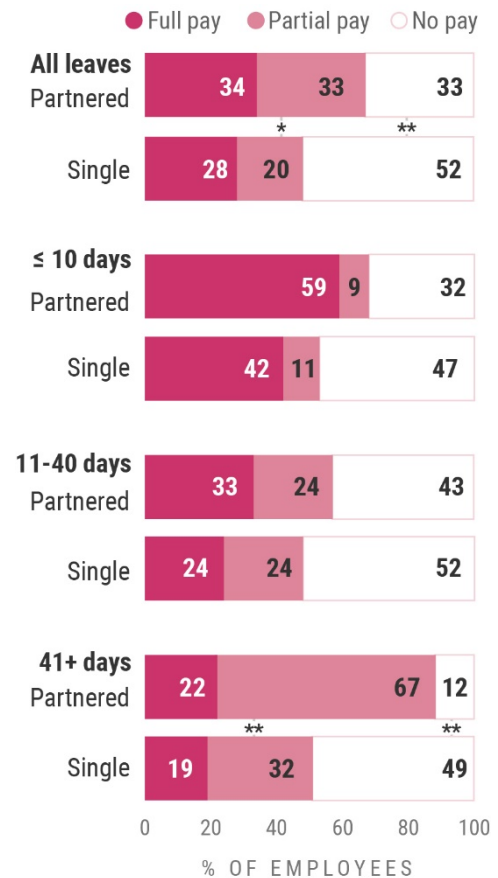
Source: 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

Among women there are significant differences by partner status in receipt of pay while on leave. Although an approximately equal percentage receive full pay, compared to partnered women, fewer single women receive partial pay (20 percent versus 33 percent, Exhibit 11), and substantially more receive no pay (52 percent versus 33 percent). These differences are driven largely by those taking long leaves (41 days or longer).

Among those who receive less than full pay, more single women report financial distress than partnered women. Substantially more single women report that it is “much more difficult” to make ends meet while

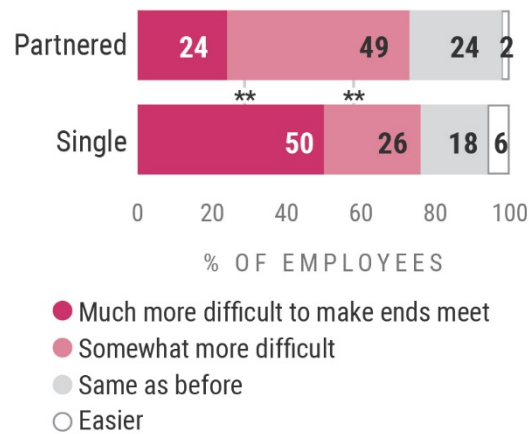
**Exhibit 11. Percentage of female leave takers receiving full, partial, or no pay, by partner status**

\*\*\* = difference statistically significant at the 5%/1% level. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Source: 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey



on leave (50 percent versus 24 percent, Exhibit 12), while more partnered women report that it is only “somewhat more difficult” (49 percent versus 26 percent). Fewer single women than partnered women use savings put aside for the leave (31 percent versus 49 percent, Exhibit 13), and more borrow money (51 percent versus 31 percent).

**Exhibit 12. Percentage of female leave takers reporting degree of difficulty making ends meet among those receiving less than full pay, by partner status**



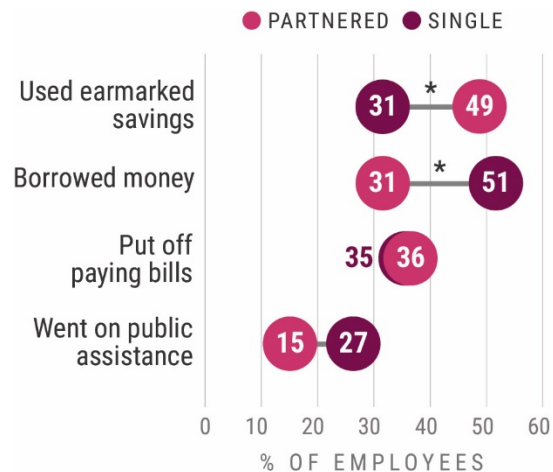
\*/\*\* = difference statistically significant at the 5%/1% level. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. **Source:** 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

Finally, among all female leave takers, more single women than partnered women report that they lost their job because of taking leave (15 percent versus 3 percent, Exhibit 14).<sup>x</sup>

## Summary of Findings

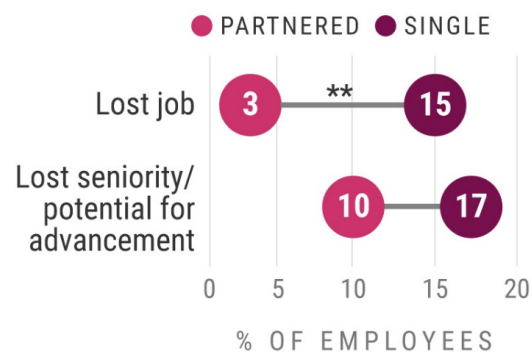
This paper explores differences by gender, and among women by partner status, in the experiences of needing and taking leave from work for a family or medical reason. This analysis shows that women and men need and take leave from work for the same reasons. Yet more women than men need leave. Furthermore, although more women take leave than men, a higher percentage of women also forgo taking leave when it is needed. Women also take much longer leaves, driven primarily by those taking leave for a new child: maternity leaves are on average three times longer than paternity leaves.

**Exhibit 13. Percentage of female leave takers that use reported methods to cover reduced earnings among those receiving less than full pay, by partner status**



\* = difference statistically significant at the 5% level. **Source:** 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

**Exhibit 14. Percentage of all female leave takers who experience negative effects from taking leave, by partner status**



\*/\*\* = difference statistically significant at the 5%/1% level. **Source:** 2018 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) Employee Survey

Compared to men, women also face a larger financial loss when taking leave, and this difference is not driven exclusively by long maternity leaves. Single women also face greater financial penalties than partnered women, as well as greater career penalties for taking leave.

## References

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- Parker, K. and W. Wang, 2013, “Modern Parenthood: Roles of Moms and Dads Converge as they Balance Work and Family,” Pew Research Center, March 14, 2013

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<sup>i</sup> In the 2018 FMLA Employee Survey “family and medical reasons” include the following four reasons for needing leave from work: (1) To address an employee’s own serious health condition, including miscarriage/pregnancy-related reasons; (2) To care for or bond with an employee’s new child (by birth, adoption, or foster placement); (3) To care for an immediate family member (child, spouse, or parent) with a serious health condition; and (4) To care for an individual who is not an immediate family member with a serious health condition. The first three reasons qualify for protection under the Family and Medical Leave Act; the fourth does not. A “serious health condition” includes a condition that lasted more than three days and required treatment by a health care provider, a condition that required an overnight hospital stay, or a long-lasting condition for which one must see a health care provider at least twice a year for treatment. See the glossary of the *Results from the 2018 FMLA Surveys* for additional technical details on key definitions. The survey was fielded from March 2018 through February 2019. The survey collected information on instances of needing or taking leave from work for family or medical reasons, not instances of taking an FMLA-protected leave.

<sup>ii</sup> The weighted survey response rates for the 2018 FMLA Employee Survey were 5.8 percent for cell phones, 5.5 percent for landlines, and 5.5 percent for the web. The results reported here apply survey weights developed to provide a sample that matches the U.S. population of adults (aged 18+) who are employed for wage/salary in the private sector or a public agency, excluding the self-employed. See the *Methodology Report for the 2018 Surveys* and the *Results from the 2018 FMLA Surveys* for more detail.

<sup>iii</sup> Research finds that over time men are performing more hours of unpaid care for other individuals—both of children (Parker and Wang, 2013) and of older adults (Neal et al., 1997). Nevertheless, it remains true that women perform substantially more hours of unpaid care than men (Patten, 2015, Navaie-Waliser et. al, 2002). This paper explores how these gender differences in caring for others translates into patterns of needing and taking time off from work for caring responsibilities.

<sup>iv</sup> Single parents include employees with children under age 18 in the household who report that they are never married, divorced, separated, widowed, or married with their spouse not living in the household. Partnered parents are those who report that they are married with their spouse living in the household, or living with a partner.

<sup>v</sup> Throughout this paper, all reported differences are significant at the 5 or 1 percent level, indicated with one or two stars, respectively. Results in exhibits with no stars are not significantly different across groups.

<sup>vi</sup> Reasons for leaves among the subset of employees who take leave are also almost identical by gender and are not shown in the exhibit.



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<sup>vii</sup> Among all employees who need leave for a family or medical reason, among both women and men approximately 20 percent need leave to care for a new child, and 30 percent need leave to care for another person (Exhibit 3). Because employees are more likely to take leave if it is needed for a new child, among the subset of employees who take leave, an almost equal percentage take leave for a new child and to care for someone else (25 percent and 24 percent, respectively).

<sup>viii</sup> Sources of pay include paid sick or vacation time, temporary disability pay, or paid family or medical leave in jurisdictions where this is offered. Leaves taken under FMLA are unpaid, but employees may take accrued paid time off while on leave.

<sup>ix</sup> Note that respondents classified as “single” may live with other adults (e.g., a parent or a roommate), and some may be part of a couple but not living with their partner; for these purposes, the analysis only considers cohabiting romantic partners. These classifications are defined based on a question about marital status which included the following response categories: married, living with a partner, separated, divorced, widowed, or never married. If a respondent were both divorced and living with a partner, this person would be classified based on which of these two responses was reported: “partnered” if she reported “living with a partner” and “single” if she reported “divorced.”

<sup>x</sup> Among all leave takers, an approximately equal percentage of women and men report losing their job or losing job seniority because of taking leave.

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