The Landscape of Parental Leave-Taking in the United States

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Abstract

Despite its importance for maternal health, child well-being and gender equality, little is known about parents' work and leave-taking in the weeks around childbirth. Leveraging new data linkages, this paper shows that roughly one-quarter of mothers actively work in the first weeks postpartum. Parental leave lasts 7.2 weeks for mothers and 3 days for fathers. Despite expanding access to benefits, maternity leave has declined in recent decades. We supplement these findings with a novel analysis of time use data in the first 5 months of parenthood, showing that parental leave is associated with greater childcare and educational investments from parents.

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1 Introduction

Although the United States lacks a national paid parental leave policy, access to benefits has risen steadily in recent years as employers and state governments adopt new programs. These policies are typically motivated by the goal of helping parents balance career and family, giving parents time to recover from birth and care for their child without career interruption (Rossin-Slater and Stearns, 2020). Yet strikingly little is known about the most fundamental questions about the nature of U.S. parental leave: who takes leave, when do they take it, and how long does it last?

The gap in our knowledge about parental leave is consequential: The short window of time around childbirth is a critical period for investments in maternal health and child development (Almond and Currie, 2011; Paladine et al., 2019; Bartel et al., 2023). Parents of infants also make labor-market choices—such as how much leave to take or whether to exit a job—that have lasting implications for career advancement and the gender earnings gap (Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017; Goldin, 2021). These health investments and labor-market decisions are difficult to measure with precision. U.S. parents rely on a patchwork of paid and unpaid leave policies from state governments and employers, but they also utilize alternative sources such as sick leave, making parental leave use hard to measure (Horowitz et al., 2017; Goldin et al., 2020). Furthermore, precise measurement of benefits is not sufficient to characterize leave-taking, since benefits may crowd out private arrangements, or their take-up may be incomplete due to a lack of information, liquidity constraints, or career concerns (Rossin-Slater, 2018; Johnsen et al., 2024). Documenting the labor force participation, employment, and leave-taking of the parents of infants requires large-scale, high-frequency data linking their labor supply to the precise timing of the child's birth.

In this paper, we present the most detailed and comprehensive picture to date on the length and timing of parental leave-taking in the United States. We link the near-universe of individual fertility histories in the United States to nationally representative data from the American Community Survey (ACS). We leverage repeated cross-sectional surveys to study employment and absences from work, week-by-week and both before and after a child's birth, providing a level of detail and precision not feasible in any other source of data. We complement this analysis using data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), identifying individuals who had their first child in between survey waves, to provide new facts about time investments in maternal health and child development among parents of infants who are 0-5 months old.

We begin by documenting that the overwhelming majority of U.S. parents are strongly attached to the labor force and remain so throughout pregnancy and the first year of a child's life. About 70 percent of women work during pregnancy. Employment falls modestly in the weeks before and just after childbirth, but permanent labor-force exit is rare: nearly two-thirds of women are working as of the child's first birthday. A similar pattern holds among first-time mothers and across groups defined by race, ethnicity, and education. While we find moderate differences across these groups—employment declines by slightly more and rebounds more quickly among mothers from groups with lower socioeconomic status—no group of parents responds to parenthood by "opting out" of careers altogether. Among fathers, employment remains steady at about 93 percent throughout time period we study.

We then present our main findings on the timing and length of parental leave, and we show that its defining characteristic is its brevity. We find that many mothers take virtually no leave at all: one quarter are actively working even a week or two after the birth of a child. This trend is not driven by remote work. Among those who take leave from a job, two-thirds are back to work by week 9 and nearly all have returned before the child turns 5 months old. The average leave taken by mothers, including both paid and unpaid spells, lasts 7.2 weeks. First-time mothers take an average of 7.3 weeks. For context, this amounts

to about one-seventh the length of the average paid leave benefit in OECD countries, and it is more than a month shorter than the benefit offered by the next-least generous OECD country, Mexico (OECD, 2025). In contrast, fathers in the United States take an average of only 0.6 weeks of leave.[1]

We report results from a battery of tests that suggest our estimates accurately measure parental leave-taking in the United States. The primary threats to our descriptive estimates would be selective non-response—or selective timing of responses—to the ACS, or systematic error in our measurement of labor-market activity and childbirth. We directly investigate these two sources of potential bias and find little evidence of either. We also show that our preferred measure of parental leave duration is not sensitive to assuming even implausibly large patterns of selection into employment.

Our results also show that despite significant inequality in access to paid leave benefits, there are few differences in the amount of time that parents actually take away from work. Across demographic groups, we find that the total length of leave varies less than the timing: women from more disadvantaged groups take a larger share of their leave in the weeks just before or after birth, but are less likely to take extended leave in the ensuing months. We find similar patterns across occupations, where mothers in jobs requiring substantial leadership or decision-making tasks spend more time working in the first weeks after childbirth but are also more likely to take extended leave. Conversely, mothers in physically demanding jobs take more leave in the weeks immediately surrounding birth, but less in the following months.

The most striking differences in the length of leave are related to the availability of state-mandated paid leave benefits. Mothers in states with either universal provision of short-term disability insurance or formal paid family leave programs take about 9 weeks away from work on average, while mothers in states without these benefits take fewer than 7 weeks. But even in states where parents have access to paid leave, take-up is incomplete. For example, the average duration of leave-taking by women in California is the longest in the nation at 9.7 weeks, but still falls far short of the length of paid leave benefits available.[2] These results contrast sharply with the near-complete take-up of leave benefits found in the European context (e.g., Dahl et al., 2016), and suggest that other factors, such as information frictions about eligibility, workplace norms against taking leave, or income constraints, limit the amount of leave U.S. parents take. We plan to make these estimates of average parental leave duration and employment decline, by state, publicly available at our project GitHub site, as a companion to this paper.

The strong correlation between access to paid leave and length of leave raises the question of how leave has changed over the last two decades, a period when provision of paid and unpaid leave benefits has expanded substantially. We show that maternity leave has changed little, falling from approximately 8 weeks in 2005 to about 7 weeks by 2019. Paternity leave duration has also remained flat. Over the same time frame, mothers' employment rates in the months around childbirth have risen modestly, suggesting a trend toward spending more time at work during and just after pregnancy, even as public and private benefits become more widely available. These findings show that access to benefits does not necessarily translate to longer leave.

The implications of the brief nature of parental leave for health, child development, and policy depends in part on the nature of time spent away from work after the birth of a child. We therefore turn to the ATUS to provide novel evidence on parents' use of time for activities likely to promote better health outcomes

[1]The OECD average of 52 weeks includes a mix of mandatory maternity leave, voluntary leave, and additional allotments—sometimes called home care or child care leave—of employment-protected, paid time off to care for a young child.

[2]Mothers in California are eligible for benefits from two sources. The state has offered pregnancy benefits through its disability insurance system since 1977, and mothers are eligible for 4 weeks before birth and 6 weeks (or 8 weeks for cesarean birth) after childbirth. Separately, mothers can collect up to 8 weeks of paid family leave benefits. Both sets of benefits pay 60-70 percent of workers' usual salary with minimal eligibility criteria.

for mothers and infants. We leverage the fact that respondents in the public-use ATUS can be linked to their earlier responses to the Current Population Survey (CPS), which allows us to identify households with infants age 0-5 months. We track the average daily number of minutes parents spend across detailed activities, including work, childcare, and educational and health investments in themselves and their children. Mothers on leave spend more time doing childcare (347 minutes per day) than both mothers at work (168 minutes per day) and fathers (105 minutes per day). Mothers on leave also spend more time on educational investments (52 minutes per day)—time that includes reading, arts and crafts, and teaching—compared to mothers at work (36 minutes per day) and fathers (28 minutes per day). Mothers on leave spend more time sleeping (525 minutes compared to 503 minutes for mothers at work) and more time on socializing and leisure (206 minutes compared to 165 minutes for mothers at work), activities that may support maternal mental and physical health. We study whether fathers increase time investments in childcare when mothers are at work compared to when mothers are on leave, using a subsample of married and cohabiting couples, and find limited evidence of this type of substitution.

This paper contributes to a literature studying the expansion of parental leave policies in the United States and around the world over the last several decades. These expansions have led to substantial increases in the amount of time mothers—and, to a lesser extent, fathers—take away from work to bond with a new child, recover from the physical demands of pregnancy, and adjust to parenthood (Klerman et al., 1997; Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017; Rossin-Slater, 2018; Canaan et al., 2022). Yet a more fundamental question—who takes leave, when they take it, and how long it lasts—has proven far more difficult to answer. One response is to focus on access to parental leave benefits as a proxy for leave-taking, a strategy that works well in Europe and other countries where access and take-up is nearly universal and complete (Lalive and Zweimüller, 2009; Lalive et al., 2014; Dahl et al., 2016). But in the United States, where benefits are both decentralized and relatively meager, parents' reliance on a variety of formal and informal arrangements makes measurement of time use essential (Horowitz et al., 2017). Existing evidence is based largely on publicly available data, where the ability to characterize parental leave with precision is limited by small samples, limited information on fertility, and low-frequency measures of labor-market activity (Han et al., 2009; Rossin-Slater et al., 2013; Baum and Ruhm, 2016; Byker, 2016; Goldin et al., 2020; Timpe, 2024). Public data also generally relies on household roster information to measure fertility, prohibiting measurement of outcomes prior to childbirth, or on retrospective responses that may lead to substantial recall bias. Related work studying California leverages high-quality administrative tax records and claims data (Bana et al., 2018; Bailey et al., 2025), but these data sources generally measure only earnings and benefits received, rather than time spent on leave. In addition, they capture receipt of benefits by workers eligible for benefits, rather than leave-taking among the broader population of U.S. workers. Our paper contributes to this literature by providing the most detailed accounting to date—in a large, nationally representative sample at the week-by-week level—of parental leave and employment in the United States.

The importance of documenting the nature of parental leave in the United States is underscored by a closely related body of literature on the consequences of parental leave for maternal health and child well-being. The medical community identifies the early postpartum period as a critical time for mothers' health (Paladine et al., 2019), a recommendation that aligns with a social science literature that finds little impact of expanding maternity leave at high levels (Baker and Milligan, 2008; Dahl et al., 2016; Ahammer et al., 2020), but meaningful benefits from reforms that provide time off for the first weeks or months (Bullinger, 2019; Bütikofer et al., 2021; Bartel et al., 2023). Fathers' leave-taking may also be an important determinant of mothers' health outcomes postpartum (Persson and Rossin-Slater, 2019). Similarly, parental

leave may improve child health in both the short and long run through several channels, including promotion of investments at a critical period for development (Rossin, 2011; Carneiro et al., 2015; Pac et al., 2019). This paper contributes to this literature by providing a uniquely detailed characterization of parents' labor-market activity and health investments around childbirth.

This paper also contributes to a broader literature on parenthood as a driver of the gender earnings gap in the 21st century (Bertrand et al., 2010; Kleven et al., 2019; Goldin, 2021; Cortes and Pan, 2023). The birth of a first child marks a clear inflection point in the gender gap, and this fact has attracted attention to the role of "family-friendly" policy and the design of the workplace (Goldin, 2014). This literature has also highlighted the importance of social norms (Dahl et al., 2014) and the propensity for family benefits to interact with prevailing gender norms and workplace structure to limit women's opportunities for advancement and create other unintended consequences (Blau and Kahn, 2013; Thomas, 2020). While isolating the influence of these forces is beyond the scope of this paper, we provide novel evidence that parental leave has, if anything, declined as access to benefits expands, and that mothers in higher-ranking positions are actually more likely to return quickly to work after childbirth despite greater access to paid leave benefits. These new facts are consistent with norms and workplace structure substantially moderating parents' choices about taking leave, and point to this link as an important avenue for future research.

Finally, this paper also contributes to the literature on parental time use in early infancy. We are the first to our knowledge to exploit the longitudinal linkage of ATUS to the CPS—identifying parents who have had their first child in between survey waves—to provide new evidence on time investments in maternal health and child development during children's early infancy (age 0-5 months). Our results show that mothers on parental leave provide more childcare and educational investments than mothers at work. These investments do not appear to be offset by higher investments by fathers, although we cannot rule out that other caregivers such as grandparents are providing compensating care. These time use findings raise the possibility that short leave durations are a contributor to poor maternal and infant health outcomes in the United States, which lag those of other developed countries and have deteriorated in recent years (Gemmill et al., 2022; Kennedy-Moulton et al., 2022). Our finding, in both the time use data and the linked ACS, that mothers and fathers perform substantial amounts of work in the first weeks after childbirth raises health concerns, both for infants and for mothers recovering from childbirth.

2 Background: Parental Leave Benefits in the United States

The United States' lack of a national paid family leave policy makes it a unique setting to study parental leave. In Europe, Canada, and other industrialized countries, long-standing and virtually universal parental leave policies are the norm. Most of these policies provide lengthy spells of paid time off with benefits that cover 70 to 100 percent of usual earnings (Ruhm, 2011). Demand for these policies also tends to be high, as mothers' time off after childbirth tends to extend at least as long as paid parental leave benefits last, if not longer (Lalive and Zweimüller, 2009; Carneiro et al., 2015; Dahl et al., 2016).

Parental leave is more complicated in the United States, the only industrialized country without a national paid leave policy. In the absence of a centrally administered parental leave program, parents have gained access to benefits through state and local governments and private employers. Beginning with Massachusetts in 1972, dozens of states enacted legislation creating a right to unpaid, job-protected leave before the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993. Yet even this national legislation falls short of universal access: as of 2018, 44 percent of U.S. workers fail to satisfy the FMLA's eligibility requirements (Brown

et al., 2020). Access to paid leave benefits has followed a similarly winding path, starting with a series of state laws—and, eventually, the federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978—that required short-term disability insurance policies to cover pregnancy, effectively creating a paid maternity benefit (Kamerman et al., 1983; Wisensale, 2001; Timpe, 2024). More recently, 13 states and the District of Columbia have created formal paid family leave programs, beginning with California in 2004.

Beyond publicly provided or mandated leave, some workers are also offered paid leave benefits through their employers. These benefits may be administered as formal paid leave programs, but they also commonly come in the form of more general workplace amenities such as paid vacation and sick time (Goldin et al., 2020). Finally, many parents report relying on personal savings or seeking loans or transfers from family and friends to finance a leave of absence from work (Horowitz et al., 2017), sources that are typically omitted from statistics on paid leave benefits but nevertheless serve as a substitute for formal paid leave benefits.

Although this patchwork system raises difficulties in accurately measuring parental leave benefits, survey data suggest recent decades have been marked by steady expansion of access. Figure A1 plots changes in access to benefits as reported by private-sector employers to the National Compensation Survey, as well as the share of workers who live in a state with a paid family leave program. One in 4 workers lacked unpaid family leave benefits in the late 1990s, but the benefits are nearly universal today. Employer-provided paid leave has also risen from 2 percent to 28 percent over this time frame. Separately, the share with access to employer-provided STDI maternity benefits rose by about 5 percentage points and the share in a state with paid family leave grew to nearly one-third.[3]

The lack of universal access to formal parental leave benefits, as well as the frequency with which parents use alternative sources such as STDI, raises the question: Who takes leave, when, and for how long? These questions are crucial for scholars and policymakers interested in the tradeoffs faced by working parents, but they have received far less attention than access to benefits or parents' responses to policy expansions. The value of benefit access as a proxy depends in large part on the extent to which allotments of leave are taken up by workers. Studies of parental leave in Europe generally find very high take-up, suggesting that the length of parental leave benefits and the length of parental leave itself are approximately identical. Dahl et al. (2016) show that Norwegian mothers who gave birth in 1992—and who were therefore eligible for 32 weeks of paid leave benefits—took about 32 weeks of paid time off and another 8.4 weeks unpaid. When paid leave benefits were extended to 35 weeks the next year, mothers took 35 weeks paid and 8.3 weeks unpaid. Similarly, Lalive and Zweimüller (2009) find that mothers took about 85 percent of the 22 months of paid leave offered to them in a 1990 Austrian reform. In contrast, take-up of social benefits in the United States is generally far lower and may be limited by factors such as the generosity of the benefits, social norms surrounding use of the benefits, and knowledge about their availability and means of accessing them (Currie, 2004). For example, administrative tax data from California suggest that state's 2004 expansion of Paid Family Leave led to a take-up rate of only 16-18 percent (Bailey et al., 2025, section IV and footnote 15).

The decentralized nature of parental leave benefits in the United States suggests taking a broad view of parental leave. In the sections that follow, we use large-scale data to trace parents' leaves of absence from work, week-by-week, both before and after the birth of a child. Because there is significant inequality in access to benefits, we examine heterogeneity across a broad range of demographic groups. In addition,

[3]The share with employer-provided STDI maternity benefits does not count workers with state-run STDI policies, such as those in California and Rhode Island. Because some workers have access to multiple types of benefits, these figures cannot be added to obtain a total share with access to paid leave benefits.

because parental leave for some populations may involve temporary exit from the labor force, we also examine patterns in employment before and after childbirth. These approaches allow us to track the time parents actually spend working versus caring for a new child, regardless of the source of any benefits or income they may receive. Furthermore, by emphasizing parents' use of time at the week level, our estimates are closely connected to the medical and social science literature emphasizing the importance of time investments in health and human capital at a critical period for both parents and children (Almond and Currie, 2011; Almond et al., 2018; Paladine et al., 2019).

3 Data and Research Design

3.1 CHCK-ACS Sample

We use the near-universe of birth records from the Census Household Composition Key files (CHCK), which are derived from Social Security Administration data and connect parents to their children born between 1997 and 2022. More than 90 percent of children are connected to their mother and more than 80 percent are connected to their fathers (Genadek et al., 2022).[4] The CHCK includes children's exact dates of birth and allows one to infer birth parity. We link parents in the CHCK at the individual level to their responses in the 2005-2019 restricted-use ACS. The ACS contains comprehensive information about demographic characteristics and labor-market activity in the previous week. Crucially, we also observe the exact date of the survey. This allows us to infer the timing of the respondent's labor-market activity relative to the birth of a child—at the week level, and even if the child had not yet been born as of the survey date.

Our analysis sample is restricted to parents who are age 18-45 and whose ACS reference week—i.e., the week for which we observe employment and leave-taking behavior—falls within the 24 weeks prior to the birth of a child or the 52 weeks after the birth of a child. Table 1 shows the sample is broadly representative of U.S. parents. In total, we observe 896,000 mothers during the final two trimesters of pregnancy or first year after childbirth, representing about 1 in 70 U.S. births during the 2005-2019 time period. First-time mothers account for about 42 percent of the sample. Even though our CHCK-based match between fathers and children does not require co-residence at the time of the ACS survey, our sample of fathers is smaller at 751,000. This disparity is consistent with the CHCK's lower parent-child match for fathers, and highlights the fact that our sample will tend to pick up only fathers who had at least a minimal level of involvement with their children. Mothers in our sample are 28.5 years old at birth on average, and first-time mothers are 26.8, very close to the national averages from administrative birth-record data.[5] First-time fathers are 29.4 over this time period. Nearly three-quarters of our sample is white. Among mothers, 89 percent have a high school degree and 35 percent have a four-year college degree, closely mirroring aggregate Vital Statistics data. About 62 percent of mothers live with a spouse and 15 percent live with their own parents.

Our linked data allows us to provide the most granular and comprehensive analysis to date on leave-taking, and has four main advantages over prior research. First, in contrast to research that relies on survey household rosters to measure fertility, we can observe parents' leave-taking even before a child's birth and

[4]Construction of the parent-child linkages in the CHCK requires observing the names of the parents on the child's Social Security application form, as well as observing the parent and child living in the same household at some point in time. It does not require parents and children to continue co-residing, so coverage rates are much higher than those obtained using household rosters.

[5]In Vital Statistics birth-record data, among mothers who gave birth at age 18-45 from 2005-2019, the average age was 28.4. The average was 26.4 for first-time mothers.

in a manner that is less sensitive to family separation or mortality. Second, because the sample has the child's date of birth and the date of the survey, the repeated cross-sections of ACS interviews allow us to provide a week-by-week characterization of leave-taking. Third, the one-week reference period of the ACS reduces concerns about recall bias in measuring leave-taking behavior at this high frequency (Clarke et al., 2008). Fourth, because the ACS is a large-scale survey and the CHCK tracks the near-universe of U.S.-born children, our large samples permit a more detailed study of heterogeneity than was previously possible.

Measuring parental leave. Our goal is to characterize how parents in the United States balance labor-market activity and the demands of family around the birth of a child. Given the decentralized nature of parental leave in the United States (see section 2), we focus on a broad definition of parental leave—time spent on leave from employment, regardless of receipt or sources of benefits. This margin of leave-taking is highly relevant for policy and our understanding of parental employment in the United States.

We measure parental leave using ACS questions about respondents' labor-market activity in the previous week, which are designed to match the labor force questions from the CPS (Raglin and Holder, 2007). Respondents are asked: "Last week, did this person do any work for pay, even for as little as one hour?" Responses are coded "yes" if the person worked for wages, salary, piece rate, commission, tips, or payments in kind (for example, food or lodging received as payment for work performed); worked in their own business, professional practice, or farm; performed any work in a family business or farm, paid or not; did any part-time work including babysitting, paper routes, etc.; or were on active duty in the Armed Forces. The answer is coded as a "no" if the person's activity was limited to housework or yard work at home, unpaid volunteer work, or school work as a student. Respondents who did not work in the previous week are asked whether they were on layoff or were temporarily absent from a job or business.[6]

We construct two key outcomes: first, an indicator for being employed during the prior week; and second, conditional on being employed, an indicator for being absent from work. Our measure of leave-taking reflects both paid and unpaid leave. This measure would not classify those with intermittent or remote work as being on leave, and instead reflects time spent disconnected from work to focus on recovering from childbirth, caring for an infant, or performing other household duties. This measure is consistent with measures used in prior research and in public policy discussions surrounding parental leave, which emphasize bonding time to promote health and child investments.

Validating our measure of leave-taking. An important question is whether our absence measure accurately captures being absent from work. We explore two main concerns about the validity of the measure. First, if there are linkage errors between the ACS and CHCK, we may misclassify the timing of parents' leave spells, biasing week-relative-to-childbirth-specific estimates of the share on leave. In fact, Figure A2 shows that our linkage is extremely accurate. The figure plots, by month relative to childbirth, the share of women who report giving birth in the previous year. The ACS measure of recent childbirth rises from nearly 0 to nearly 1 at precisely the date of the CHCK measure of childbirth, suggesting little scope for error in the timing of a child's arrival.[7]

[6]The ACS offers little information on the reason for absence. While the survey asks specifically about layoffs, it aggregates all other reasons into a residual category of absence due to "vacation, temporary illness, maternity leave, other family/personal reasons, bad weather, etc." The ATUS sample, described below, has a dedicated response category for parental leave only. We show in Table A4 that in the 5 months after childbirth, the vast majority of absences for women are due to parental leave and not these other categories. See the Appendix for further discussion on implications of ACS question wording.

[7]Our results are not sensitive to dropping the small share of mothers who tell the ACS they have not given birth after a birth event in the CHCK. We do not make this sample restriction because it would introduce differential selection into the post-

A second potential source of measurement error could arise if ACS respondents misunderstand or misreport their work activity during the previous week. It is worth noting that the one-week recall period in the ACS is likely to produce more accurate information than data sources that ask respondents to report activity in the more distant past or for wider time periods. Nevertheless, if respondents erroneously classify themselves as absent even if they worked during the week, we may overstate leave-taking; alternatively, if respondents on paid leave mistakenly state that they performed work for pay, we would understate the share on leave. Reassuringly, we find no evidence of this errors in either direction. First, if respondents respond with error to questions about their labor-market activity—for example, by reporting they worked for pay when they were truly at home on paid leave—we would expect find inconsistencies with later portions of the questionnaire, such as those related to their method of commuting. As discussed in section 4.1, we find no such inconsistencies. Second, we exploit the fact that leaves of absence around childbirth vary significantly across states. We find a strong negative correlation between access to paid leave and work activity after childbirth, consistent with paid leave affecting leave durations but inconsistent with the pattern we would expect to see if workers misunderstand the labor-market activity questions in the ACS. We discuss these results further in section 4.1 and Appendix B. Finally, we make use of the fact that the ATUS is uniquely suited to assess whether workers' job activity is misclassified. Individuals in the ATUS first respond to CPS questions about their work activity in the previous week, and then later fill out a time-use diary. The CPS work activity questions closely mirror those in the ACS—the ACS questions are intentionally designed to mimic the CPS—so the time-use data therefore serves as a useful check. In Appendix C.2, we use these time use diaries to cross-validate the absence measure, showing that workers who say they are absent perform minimal work, and those who say they are at work are not absent.

3.2 ATUS Sample

While our ACS-CHCK sample provides precise, high-frequency information on parents' labor-market activity, it lacks detailed information about parents' activities throughout the day. These activities are of great interest because they may speak to whether leave-taking is associated with behavior thought to improve child or maternal health. To gain more insight, we use our main ATUS sample to characterize time use among parents of infants. The ATUS samples a large cross-section of Americans in every year beginning in 2003 and through 2024, and is available through IPUMS (Ruggles et al., 2024). The sample is drawn from the outgoing rotation group of the CPS, and occurs 2-5 months after the final CPS survey date. Time use is recorded for one respondent per household, and we focus on the respondent parent's time use across categories. The respondent's employment and demographic information is recorded as in the prior CPS surveys. In addition, the respondent is asked to provide a detailed 24-hour time diary over the previous day's activities, which are classified into 400 detailed time use categories (Hamermesh et al., 2005).

To identify parents with infants, we limit the sample to those who in their final CPS interview have either no child present or have a youngest child at least 1 year old, and in their ATUS interview have a youngest child age 0. The ATUS occurs between 2-5 months after the CPS survey, and thus these households have infants between 0 and 5 months old.[8] We further restrict the sample to respondents age 18-45 with an own

childbirth period of our sample, and because it is not clear whether to attribute these responses to linkage errors or well-known errors in survey responses (Meyer et al., 2015).

[8]The IPUMS version of the ATUS has the month and year of the survey, as well as the month and year of the outgoing CPS survey. In some tables we present results by the number of months between surveys, which allows us to study parents with infants of 0-2 months, 0-3 months, 0-4 months, and 0-5 months.

child in the household, to remove the few cases where grandparents or extended family are completing the time diary. We do not restrict to the first-born child unless noted. Our main ATUS sample does not restrict to responses on particular days of the week, but we present robustness to restricting our sample to weekdays. While for some subgroups the sample sizes become small, most have a few hundred individuals. We measure parental leave in the ATUS sample using the same question as described above for the ACS analysis.

3.3 Research Design

In our main analysis using the linked ACS-CHCK, our objective is to characterize the evolution of U.S. parents' employment and leave-taking—week by week—in the six months before and year after the birth of a child. We define event time as $r = t - t_i^*$, where t_i^* is the week in which parent i's child is born. To accommodate the survey's focus on work in the prior week, t is defined as the week before their ACS interview. We estimate the regression:

$$y_{it} = \sum_{r=-24}^{51} \eta_r D_r + X_{it}\delta + \epsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

where D_r is a series of indicators for time relative to birth and X_{it} is a quadratic in de-meaned age. For transparency, and because our results are not sensitive to controls, we do not add additional covariates. Our main estimates $\hat{\eta}$ are regression-adjusted means of outcome y_{it}. Our main outcomes of interest are binary indicators of employment and absence from a job.

Because our analysis relies on repeated cross-sectional samples of U.S. mothers and fathers, our estimates capture the average pattern of employment and leave-taking around childbirth under the assumption that the timing of respondents' ACS interview is effectively random with respect to the date of childbirth. A primary threat to this assumption would be selective response to the ACS across event time r. While we do not observe response rates directly, we can use our estimates to construct a proxy for changes in the size of our sample. We report these estimates in Appendix Figure A3.[9] Perhaps surprisingly, our sample remains relatively constant over time except in the week of birth, when responses drop by about 23% before immediately recovering and remaining stable.

We also find that the composition of our sample is well-balanced across time relative to childbirth, r. In Appendix Table A1, we test for changes in composition by regressing a series of demographic characteristics on equation 1. To the extent that $\hat{\delta}$ departs from 0 in this exercise, it could indicate that our sample is changing over event time in ways that could bias our estimates of employment and leave-taking. On the contrary, nearly all of the estimates are statistically indistinguishable from 0. In a handful of cases where a 95% confidence interval would rule out 0 effect, the point estimates are economically small. For example, in the second half of the year after childbirth, the share of mothers who are non-Hispanic and white falls by about 0.5-0.6 percentage points, but this amounts to less than 1% of the baseline share of 71.3 percent.

As discussed in section 2, parental leave in the United States may take various forms—absences from work may be paid by the firm, paid through another source such as government or an insurance company, or unpaid entirely. Alternatively, some parents—especially those without pecuniary or job-protection benefits—may use spells of non-employment in place of a formal leave of absence. We therefore adopt multiple approaches to characterizing parental leave. Our preferred estimate is constructed by restricting our sample to those who

[9] We describe this exercise in more detail in Appendix B.

are employed in week t, and then measuring the share absent week-by-week. We interpret these estimates as characterizing the timing of leave from employment. We then estimate the total length of leave by summing the share absent from work during the month prior to childbirth and the six months immediately following it (event time $r = -4$ through $r = 23$). This approach is analogous to life table methods of calculating life expectancy or fertility and leverages the random timing of ACS responses relative to childbirth. We choose these cutoffs because they capture the dates when absence from work is most likely to comprise parental leave, although our results change little if we slightly narrow or broaden the range. As discussed further in the following sections, these estimates are very robust to assumptions about the nature of selection into employment over time. Nevertheless, as an alternative measure, we also report estimates that include brief spells of non-employment in our measure of leave Finally, we report unconditional estimates that allow us to decompose parents' time use into active employment, leave from employment, and non-employment.

Because access to parental leave benefits has grown steadily but remains highly unequal in the United States (see section 2), we are also interested in characterizing heterogeneity in employment and leave-taking. To explore changes over calendar time and differences across states and demographic groups, we modify equation 1 to estimate

$$y_{it} = \sum_{g} \sum_{r=-24}^{51} \eta_{rg} D_r G_g + X_{it}\delta + \epsilon_{it} \tag{2}$$

where our key event-time indicators are interacted with G_g, an indicator for belonging to one of several mutually exclusive and exhaustive groups g. In our analysis, groups g include the calendar year of childbirth, race and ethnicity, combinations of educational attainment and potential experience, residence in a state with a paid family leave program, and residence in a household with the focal child's father. In some specifications, to obtain more parsimonious estimates and increase precision, we pool event weeks r into broader time periods.

4 Results

4.1 How Much Leave Do U.S. Parents Take?

We begin by characterizing parents' labor-market activity, week by week, in the six months before and year after the birth of a child. Figure 1 provides these estimates for the following outcomes: (i) an indicator for being currently employed; (ii) an indicator for being currently employed and at work in the prior week; and (iii) an indicator for being employed, at work, and commuting rather than working from home.

The results, shown in Figure 1, demonstrate that U.S. parents—both mothers and fathers—remain strongly attached to the labor market throughout the six months before and year after the birth of a child. Approximately 70 percent of women are employed as of 24 weeks prior to birth. The vast majority are also actively working: only about 3 percent of women are employed but absent 6 months prior to a birth. Mothers' employment steadily declines in anticipation of childbirth, falling to 64 percent by the week prior to birth. At the same time, the share actively working drops sharply in the week of birth. The large gap between the share employed and the share at work makes clear that taking a leave of absence is far more common than labor force exit. Notably, a large share of mothers—roughly one-quarter of all mothers, and about 40 percent of those employed—do at least some work for pay even in the first weeks after giving birth.

Mothers return rapidly to the workplace in the second and third months after childbirth. By the child's first birthday, maternal employment is just 5.8 percentage points (8%) lower than its level six months prior to birth.

Appendix Figure A4a shows that these patterns also hold for first-time parents. At baseline, maternal employment is higher, with nearly 80 percent working six months before childbirth. As in the full sample, first-time mothers' employment falls modestly before recovering steadily during the year after childbirth. A substantial minority of first-time mothers report performing at least 1 hour of paid work even in the first few weeks after birth.

Could the large share of mothers working shortly after childbirth be explained by misreporting or minor tasks performed from home? The dashed line in Figure 1 suggests the answer is no. After reporting on their work activity the previous week, ACS respondents are asked a separate question about whether and how they commuted to their job in the previous week.[10] Nearly all mothers who report performing work in the first weeks after birth are commuting—suggesting this pattern is not explained by short spells of email or telephone check-ins with co-workers. In addition, as described in Appendix C.2, ATUS time diaries can be used to evaluate whether individuals' actual time use lines up with their responses to CPS questions—which are by construction nearly identical to those in the ACS—about work in the previous week. We see no evidence that respondents systematically misreport their labor-market status from the previous week.

Figure 1 also shows that fathers' work activity responds little to the birth of a child. The share employed remains near 93 percent throughout our sample period. Fathers are more likely to be actively working at any point, with about 1 percent absent at any given time period. The exception is the three-week period starting with the birth of a child, when about 6 percent of fathers are absent from a job. Unlike mothers, we do find that among fathers who continue working in a child's first weeks of life, a meaningful share do so remotely. Nevertheless, the results show fathers take starkly less time away from work than mothers, even in the periods just before and after childbirth that may be most important for maternal and child health (Persson and Rossin-Slater, 2019).

How does the employment vary across different groups of mothers? Figure 2 plots these patterns for several groups that vary by race and ethnicity, education and labor-market experience, a proxy for involvement of the child's father, and access to state-mandated paid leave policies, using equation 2. These patterns show that mothers from more disadvantaged groups—including Black and Hispanic mothers, those without a college education, and moms who do not reside with the child's father—are more likely to exit employment shortly after childbirth but also see a rapid rebound in employment rates in subsequent months. Notably, while we do not observe paid-leave benefits in the ACS, data from the ATUS shows that access is far lower for these groups of mothers, as shown in Table A2. In contrast, there is little difference in trends in employment for mothers with and without access to paid leave under a state-mandated program. Furthermore, despite the short-run differences across some groups, our findings suggest that in all groups, most mothers—and the vast majority of those who work during pregnancy—remain strongly tied to the labor market throughout pregnancy and their children's early years.

We characterize the timing and length of parental leave in Figure 3, which plots the share of employed parents who are absent from work in each week relative to childbirth. While the share of mothers on leave rises during the third trimester of pregnancy, leave generally begins no sooner than the final few weeks before birth. The share of employed mothers on leave peaks in the second week after birth at nearly 60 percent.

[10] After reporting labor-market activity, respondents who worked last week are asked where they performed their work, and then how they would "usually get to work LAST WEEK?" (Emphasis in the original.) Options include work at home.

While 95% confidence intervals are omitted for clarity, they rule out deviations of more than 1.5 percentage points in either direction, underscoring the large ACS samples and the precision of our estimates. In the second month after the child's birth, the share on leave decreases steadily, and by week 19 only about 6.6 percent of employed women are on leave. These facts imply that nearly 95 percent of women in the United States take fewer than 19 weeks leave.

Our preferred estimate of the average length of leave, which sums the share on leave from 4 weeks prior until 24 weeks after childbirth, suggests that U.S. mothers take 7.2 weeks of leave on average. In contrast, about 95 percent of fathers take zero weeks of leave, and the average paternity leave lasts only 0.6 weeks. These estimates, which encompass both paid and unpaid time away from work, suggest that the duration of U.S. maternity leave is eclipsed by the duration of paid leave benefits offered in all other OECD nations, which reaches 52 weeks on average (Table PF2.1.A, OECD, 2025). Furthermore, this conclusion is highly robust to alternative methods. One possible source of bias is the changing composition of maternal employment in the weeks around childbirth, but a bounding exercise—described in detail in Appendix B.4—shows that even under extreme assumptions about selective labor-force exit, the average length of leave conditional on employment is no longer than 7.4 weeks. Similarly, a more conservative estimate would net out a baseline share of parents on leave to account for the fact that some absences can be accounted for by factors plausibly unrelated to parenting, such as vacation or sick time. This method delivers an average length of 7.0 weeks.

We also construct a broader definition of parental leave that includes spells of non-employment, motivated by the evidence in Figure 2 that some groups of mothers take brief spells of non-employment immediately after childbirth. This definition departs from the concept of parental leave as a temporary absence to bond with a child while retaining an employment relationship, but it may also be a policy-relevant margin to the extent that it facilitates time investments in maternal health and child development. To construct this alternative estimate, we focus on the same time window—the 4 weeks before and 24 weeks after childbirth. To avoid counting permanent exit from the labor force as parental leave, we assume that the maximum employment rate in this window represents the population of interest, and then sum all person-weeks not spent at work, whether due to absence from a job or non-employment. By including non-employment through this procedure, our estimate of the average length of maternity leave rises to 8.2 weeks.[11] An even broader conception of maternity leave would assume all women who returned to the labor force by one year after birth are the population of interest; this procedure gives us an estimate of 9.6 weeks of leave on average. This result highlights both the lack of substantial exit from the labor force among U.S. mothers and the fact that the vast majority of leave-taking happens in the handful of weeks around childbirth. In summary, even these much broader definitions that conflate absence from work and non-employment suggest that maternity leave in the United States last only a fraction of the time allotted to mothers in other OECD countries.

4.2 Who Takes Parental Leave?

The vast differences in access to paid leave benefits raise questions about whether our measure of parental leave varies across groups. We explore heterogeneity in this measure in Figure 4. Each set of bars reports estimated leave for a set of mutually exclusive groups based on race and ethnicity; education and experience; the presence of the father or marital status; parity of the child, sex of the child; and presence of a state paid

[11] Since we do not observe longitudinal information on employment, this procedure assumes that increases in employment after childbirth is driven by mothers who worked during pregnancy. Specifically, we calculate the highest share employed in any event-time period between $r = -4$ and $r = 23$. This is 64.5 percent in week -4. For each week r in this 7-month time period, we define the share on leave as the difference between 64.5 and the percentage who are both employed and at work. We then sum these differences across all weeks $r \in [-4, 23]$ and rescale by 0.645 to get our estimate of 8.2 weeks.

family leave policy. The length of each bar corresponds to the number of weeks of leave taken in the 7-month period around childbirth, with separate sections of the bar corresponding to the month before birth, month after birth, and following five months.

Figure 4a shows that the most important heterogeneity in leave-taking is in the timing rather than length of work absences. Groups defined by race or education and experience take very similar amounts of leave in total, although the time off is much more concentrated in the weeks just before and after birth for more disadvantaged groups. Relative to college-educated women, less-educated mothers take about twice as much leave in the month before birth (0.3-0.5 weeks) and 30% more leave in the first month after (0.5-0.6 weeks). Yet mothers in more advantaged groups are more likely to take extended leave—evidence in the medium purple section of the bars corresponding to the following 5 months—leaving the total length of leave very similar across the groups we study.[12] Figure 4b shows similarly muted differences across groups of fathers, and we find no subgroup that takes as much as 1 week of leave.

We also find very similar leave lengths when using the more expansive definition of parental leave that includes spells of non-employment, as described in section 4.1. For example, despite the heterogeneity by race in patterns of maternal employment (see Figure 2), we find very similar lengths of leave for white (8.3 weeks), Black (8.3 weeks), and Hispanic mothers (8.2 weeks) when counting temporary labor-force exit as leave. Other non-Hispanic mothers take slightly more leave by this measure, at 9.0 weeks. Similarly, the gap between leave taken by mothers in states with (10.2 weeks) and without paid leave (7.7 weeks) is unaffected by this more expansive definition. The alternative measure of duration makes the largest difference when comparing mothers who reside with the child's father to those who do not, although the gap is still only slightly more than 1 week, with co-resident mothers taking 8.8 weeks and non-co-resident mothers taking only 7.6 weeks.

While these muted differences may be surprising given the large differences in access to benefits, one possibility is that inequality in paid leave is offset by differences in the type of work performed. In Table 2, we report estimates from equation 2 where G_g is a measure of occupation-specific job tasks. These job task measures, derived from O*NET survey data, capture the occupational-level intensity of tasks such as leadership, decision-making, and physical demands (Deming, 2021; Tannenbaum and Timpe, 2025).[13] The estimates can be interpreted as the increase in weeks of leave associated with a 1-standard deviation increase in the occupation-level intensity of these tasks. Unsurprisingly, mothers in physically demanding jobs take more time off in the month before and after childbirth—35 percent and 9 percent more, respectively—but less time in the following months. In contrast, mothers in the most leadership- and decision-intensive jobs are more likely to work in the weeks just before or after childbirth, but are also more likely to take lengthy leave. While these results are purely descriptive, they suggest that there may be a tension between the availability of paid leave benefits and the career consequences of, or desire for, lengthy spells of parental leave.

A striking departure from this lack of heterogeneity comes in the presence of a state paid family leave program. Figure 4a shows that mothers in states with paid leave take 9.4 weeks of leave (sum of the three sections of the bar), 2.5 more weeks than those in states without paid leave. Fathers with access to

[12]These results are not inconsistent with previous research finding larger take-up of paid leave policies among relatively disadvantaged groups of mothers (e.g., Rossin-Slater et al., 2013). While prior research largely explores how parents respond to newly available benefits, this paper focuses on a fundamentally different question: how parents allocate their time between work and home, week-by-week around childbirth, net of any responses to the availability of benefits. Our analysis also benefits from the large-scale data that has been previously unavailable to researchers and is able to capture heterogeneity across demographic groups with far more precision.

[13]See Appendix B.5 for more detail on our construction of these measures of task intensity.

state-provided paid leave take 0.32 more weeks than those without.[14]

The importance of paid leave policies is underscored by Figure 5, which plots the average length of leave by state. States along the west coast and in New England take upwards of 7 weeks of leave, while states in the Great Plains and a few in the South, including Arkansas and Mississippi, and Mountain West, including Montana, Utah, and Arizona, take fewer than 5 weeks of leave. Mothers take the longest leaves in states with long-standing STDI pregnancy benefits and relatively recent paid family leave programs, led by California (9.7 weeks), New Jersey (9.4 weeks), and Rhode Island (9.1 weeks). Nevertheless, there is substantial variation across states even among those without paid leave, ranging from as low as 4.2 weeks (South Dakota) to as long as 6.9 weeks (Pennsylvania).

Although much of the variation across states can be explained by the presence of paid family leave programs, these results also highlight the importance of measuring actual leave taken, rather than access to leave benefits. Mothers in states with paid leave policies take shorter leaves than their benefits allow. For example, California's paid family leave policies combined with the pre-existing STDI program to raise the number of weeks of paid leave to 16 weeks for birth without complications (Bailey et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the average leave lasts slightly more than half that long. At the same time, mothers in states without universal leave take more leave than we might expect given the low level of paid leave benefits.

The strongly cross-sectional relationship between paid leave and leave duration raises the question of whether leave has changed over the past two decades, a time when—as shown in Appendix Figure A1—access to benefits has expanded meaningfully. We depict trends in the length of parental leave over the last two decades in Figure 6a. For each birth year, we construct the leave duration by summing the share of workers who are absent from work in each period from week $r = -4$ to 23. The main finding is that in the last pre-Covid year (2019), women take approximately 7 weeks of leave, while men take approximately 0.5 weeks of leave. Women's leave has actually declined since our earliest sample year, 2005, when it was close to 8 weeks.[15] While many of these programs also apply to men, we find little change in the length of paternity leave. Nor can these stagnant trends in leave-taking be attributed to parents substituting non-employment for leave. Figure 6b plots the evolution of parental employment in the months prior to birth (circle markers) and the first six months after birth (end of arrows), separately by the calendar year of childbirth. Among fathers, the trend closely follows the health of the labor market. With the exception of the period just after the Great Recession, mothers have steadily increased their employment during pregnancy with no discernible change in the propensity to work in the months after childbirth. In sum, despite the steady expansion of parental leave benefits from 2005-2019, U.S. parents have only increased the time they spend working during pregnancy and a child's first months of life.

4.3 Time Use Among Parents of Infants

While the results in previous sections show that parents in the United States take far less leave to bond with a new child than their counterparts in other industrialized nations—and in many cases, substantially less than the duration of benefits to which they are entitled—the implications for maternal and child health depend on how parents use their time on leave. Our final analysis uses the ATUS sample to characterize

[14] For access to paid leave, we classify states as offering paid leave to mothers if they have either universal STDI or a state-level paid family leave program in the year of birth. Fathers, who are not eligible for STDI pregnancy benefits, are classified as having "state paid leave" only if their child is born in a state and year where paid family leave programs have been instituted.

[15] Although part of this decline may be attributable to the minor re-design of the ACS employment questions after 2007 (Raglin and Holder, 2007), the length of maternity leave also declined during the 2008-2019 period, when the ACS employment questions were consistent.

time use in early infancy. While our analysis is descriptive and welfare analysis is beyond the scope of the paper, we seek to shed light on the extent to which parents on leave undertake activities that could plausibly improve outcomes of interest to policymakers, such as maternal health and child development.

A strength of the ATUS data is that individuals are longitudinally linked to their final CPS survey responses 2-5 months earlier, allowing us to measure parents who had a newborn in between the CPS outgoing survey and the ATUS survey.[16] We take the sample of mothers of infants and classify them based on their employment status: (i) employed and at work, (ii) employed and on leave, or (iii) those who were employed in their final CPS survey but have since exited the workforce. Given the small share of fathers who take leave or who exit the labor force, we are unable to construct the corresponding subgroups of fathers, but for context we include summary statistics for employed fathers. The first panel of Table 3 reports summary statistics. Consistent with our ACS analysis, mothers on leave at this time frame are more educated and have smaller households.

Our analysis of the ATUS shows that U.S. parents spend substantial time investing in their children—and even more for those parents who are on leave. The second panel of Table 3 shows that mothers on leave spend substantially more time on child care than those at work—and that fathers' provision of child care lags far behind all three groups. Mothers at work do 271 minutes of work per day, on average.[17] Mothers on leave spend almost zero time working, as expected, a finding that once again validates our use of information on work in the previous week in the ACS to study leave-taking.[18] They instead devote much more time to childcare than working mothers (820 minutes per day compared to 514 minutes per day) and slightly more than mothers who exit (808 minutes per day). Consistent with the short duration of paternity leave observed in our ACS-CHCK analysis, fathers spend much less time on childcare than all groups of mothers (394 minutes per day). Only about half of the 121-minute gap in child care time between working mothers and working fathers is explained by fathers' longer hours at work.

Table 3 also documents differences across groups in time inputs to mothers' physical and mental health. We find that mothers on leave get slightly more sleep on average compared to mothers who are at work (525 minutes per day compared to 503 minutes per day). Note that these modest differences don't capture differences in the timing or quality of sleep. We proxy for sleep quality by leveraging the ATUS data on when activities are occurring, constructing an indicator for any childcare occurring during the night (12:00AM to 4:59AM) and the total number of these occurrences. We find that mothers on leave do more childcare during the night: 71% perform some child care during these early-morning hours, with 1.4 interruptions on average.[19] Fathers get less sleep overall, consistent with the overall gender gap in sleep (Burgard and Ailshire, 2013), but only about 1 in 6 care for the child during the night. We also find that mothers on leave spend more time on socializing and leisure (206 minutes per day compared to 164 minutes per day), a potentially important input given the role of social support in prevention of postpartum depression (Stewart and Vigod, 2016).

While our setting does not lend itself to a causal analysis of the effect of leave-taking, it is noteworthy that

[16] As a validation of our approach to measuring households with infants, note that in Table 3 the household size variable in the ATUS compared to the CPS outgoing survey shows approximately 1 person added to the household, which is what we expect, since these households by construction have added an infant between surveys.

[17] If we restrict the sample to weekday surveys, mothers work 333 minutes per day (see Table A6).

[18] Mothers on leave do less than 7 minutes of work for pay on average. This average is driven by the 7.9 percent of the sample with non-zero work for pay, and the median in this group is 30 minutes, suggesting little mismeasurement among this population.

[19] Note that the time use variable for sleeping includes activities like "cat napping," "dozing," and time spent falling asleep or waking up. This measure therefore likely overstates the true amount of sleep per night.

little of the differences between mothers on leave and at work can be explained by observable characteristics. Table A7 explores the influence of observables by regressing several categories of time use on an indicator for being on leave and, in even-numbered columns, controls for having a college degree, age, an indicator for having an older child in the household, and an indicator for being married. In each case, the controls account for a relatively small share of the differences. For example, the 174-minute gap in child care falls by about 15 minutes when adjusting for observable characteristics. In the case of socializing and leisure, the estimated gap actually widens when we account for observable characteristics. These differences should be interpreted with caution, as they cannot account for unobserved confounders, but they provide novel evidence consistent with the medical community that parental leave can promote maternal and child-well-being, and they highlight the need for additional research on families' time use in the crucial early weeks after birth.

5 Conclusion

This paper provides new and comprehensive evidence on parental leave in the United States, using large-scale, nationally representative survey data linked to administrative birth records. We complement this analysis with novel descriptive evidence on how parents in the United States use their time in the first months of a child's life.

Our analysis shows that the vast majority of parents, including mothers, remain employed after having children, and most mothers—but few fathers—take some parental leave. Yet parental leave is brief. One-quarter of mothers perform at least an hour of work for pay even in the first weeks after childbirth. On average, our preferred estimates suggest that maternity leave lasts only 7.2 weeks. Even under the broadest definitions, the length of maternity leave *taken* in the United States is only a fraction of the length of paid leave *benefits* in other industrialized countries. In contrast, the birth of a child has little impact on fathers' work activity.

Our analysis also shows that inequality in maternity leave is not as wide as inequality in access to paid leave benefits would suggest. Mothers from more disadvantaged groups are more likely to temporarily drop out of the labor force after childbirth, perhaps to account for the lack of paid benefits or willingness of employers to provide leave. But conditional on employment, the total length of maternity leave is surprisingly consistent across groups. Mothers in groups with more access to paid leave—such as those with more education or in occupations that require leadership or decision-making tasks—do not necessarily take longer spells of leave. The main exception to this rule is access to state-mandated paid family leave programs: mothers in states with universal paid leave take substantially more than mothers in other states, although still far less than they would be entitled to. Our descriptive analysis cannot disentangle the various determinants of parents' leave-taking decisions, which may be impacted not only by the availability of benefits but also factors like information frictions, family income, or career concerns. Nevertheless, this pattern of results provides suggestive evidence that the structure of the labor market plays an important role in the shape of maternity leave in the United States.

Our analysis also highlights the policy stakes of the ongoing debate over parental leave. Our estimates from the ATUS show that parents on leave spend more time on activities that plausibly promote child development and maternal health, including child care and sleep. While causal evidence on the impacts of leave on health and development is scarce, the literature has found some evidence that expansions of leave can translate into economically meaningful improvements in maternal health and children's outcomes, at least at modest levels of leave (Carneiro et al., 2015; Bütikofer et al., 2021; Bartel et al., 2023). Similarly,

advice from the medical community suggests cause for concern for the sizable share of mothers who return to work too soon after childbirth (Paladine et al., 2019). At the same time, in a setting where few fathers take substantial paternity leave—even where benefits are available to them—policymakers must also confront the potential for parental leave policies to exacerbate gender inequality in the labor market.

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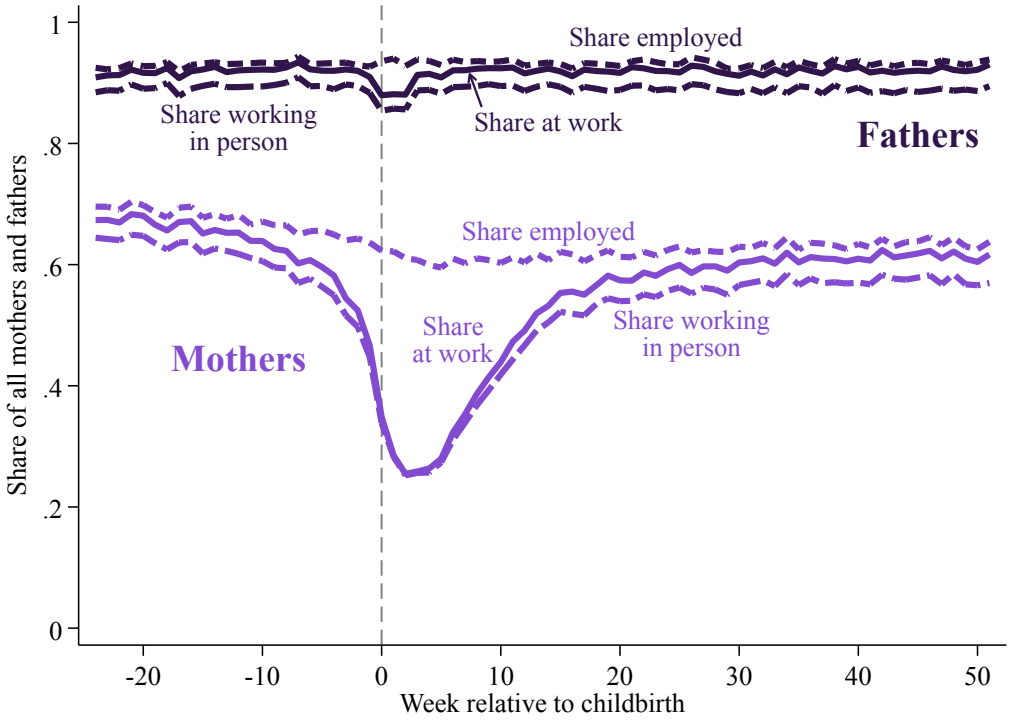
6 Figures

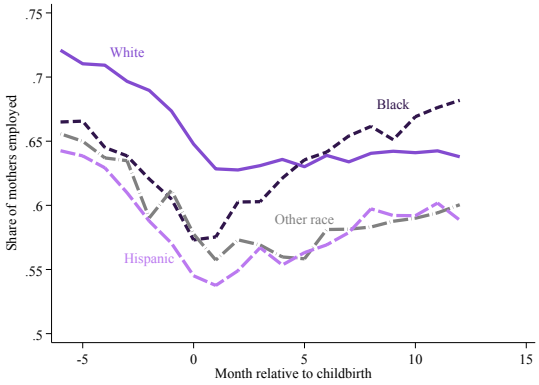
Figure 1: Parental employment and work activity around childbirth



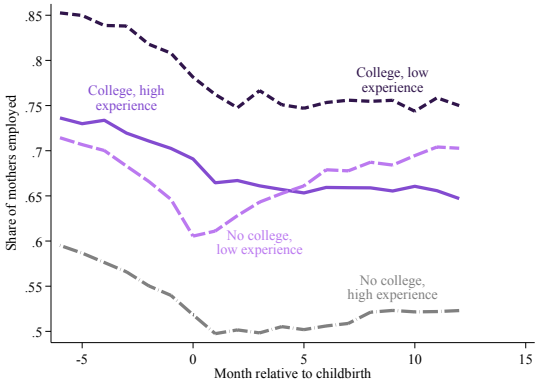
Notes: Sample includes mothers and fathers who gave birth to a child in the CHCK from 2005-2019 and responded to the ACS in the 24 weeks prior to and 52 weeks after the birth of a child. Figures shows estimates of η_r come from equation 1. Outcomes are binary indicators for employed in the previous week; employed and at work in the previous week; and employed, at work, and reported commuting to work in the previous week. Results were approved for release by the U.S. Census Bureau. (CBDRB-FY25-P2593-R12161,CBDRB-FY26-P2593-R12884)

Figure 2: Heterogeneity in maternal employment around childbirth

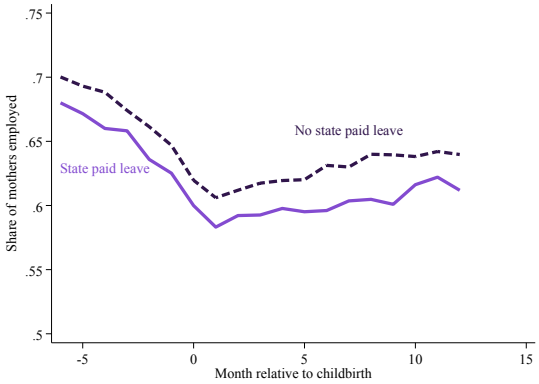
(a) By race and ethnicity



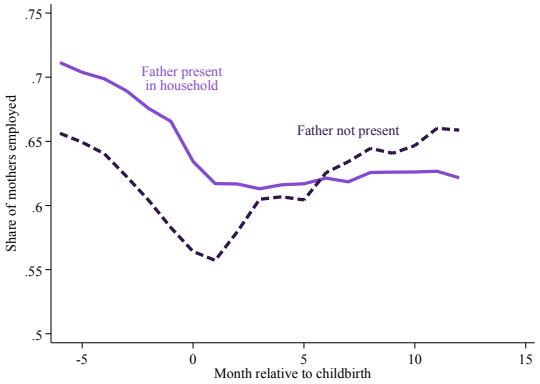
(b) Education and potential experience



(c) By presence of state paid leave policy

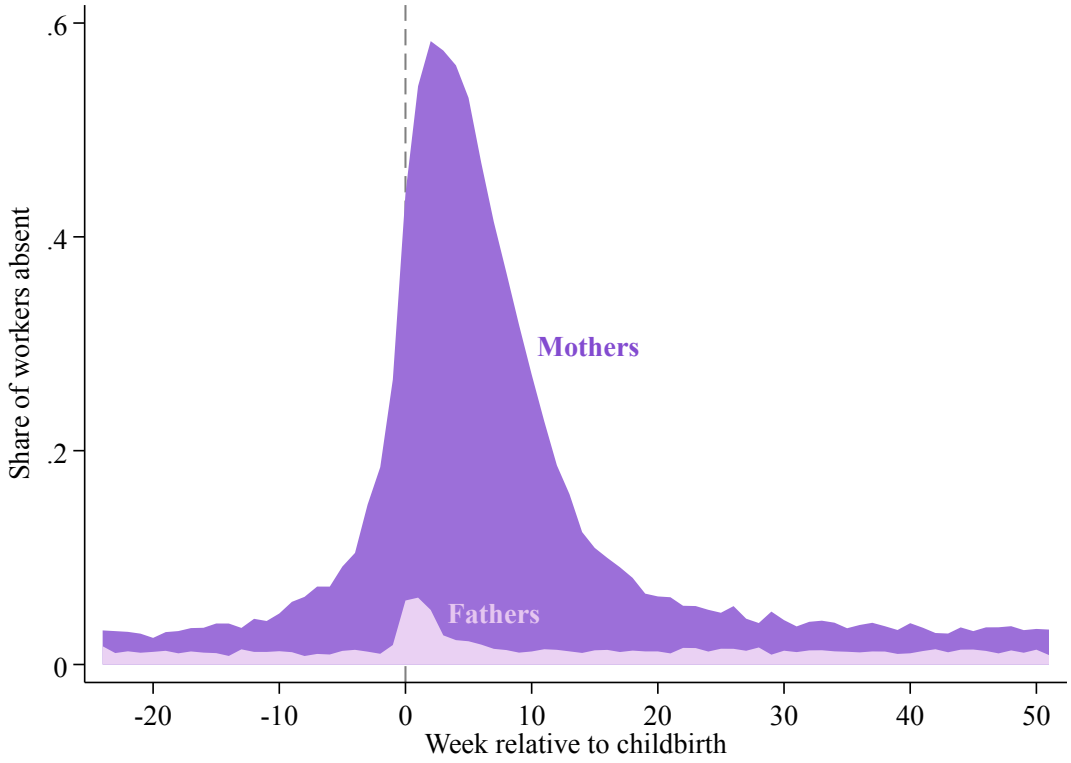


(d) By presence of father in household



Notes: Data includes mothers and fathers who have a child born 2005-2019 in the CHCK and respond to the ACS in the 24 weeks prior and 52 weeks after the child's birth. Figures present estimates from equation 2, where event-study coefficients η_{rg} correspond to a month relative to childbirth interacted with indicators for mutually exclusive and exhaustive demographic groups. In panel (a), race is defined using ACS indicators for race and Hispanic ethnicity. In panel (b), sample is split into four groups based on median completed education and potential experience, which is calculated as age minus years of completed education minus 6. In panel (c), mothers are counted as having access to paid leave if their residence is in a state with a universal paid family leave or short-term disability insurance program. In panel (d), father is counted as present if the CHCK identifies the child's father and the father is observed in the ACS household. Results were approved for release by the U.S. Census Bureau. (CBDRB-FY26-P2593-R12884)

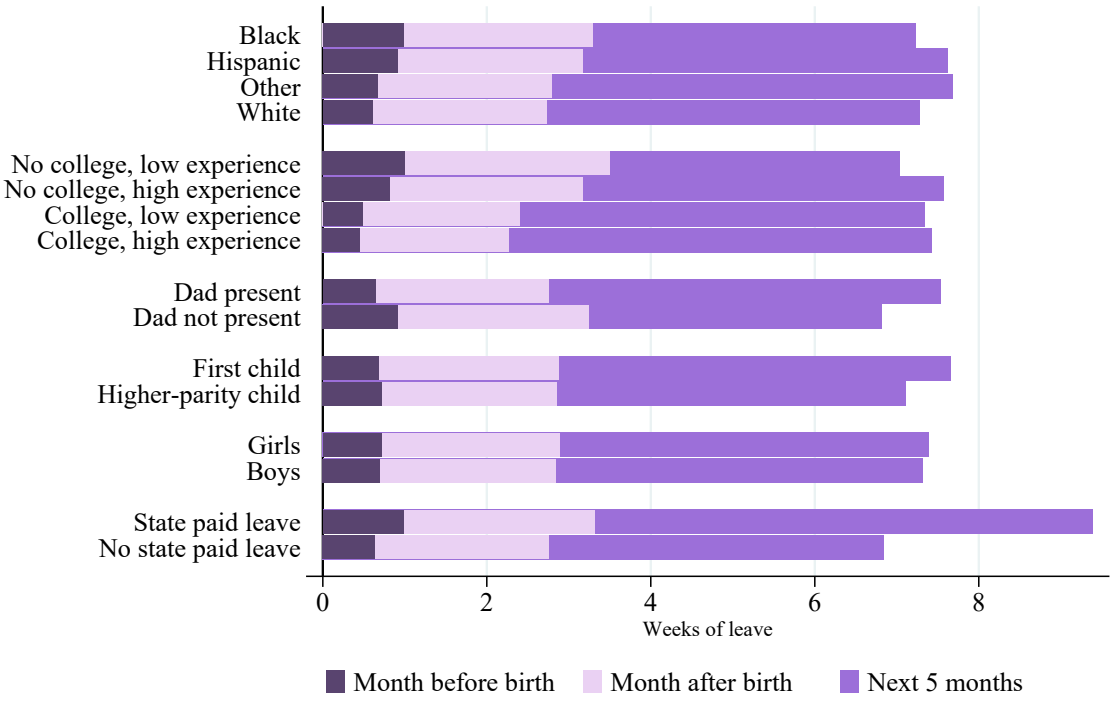
Figure 3: Parental leave from work, week by week around birth of a child



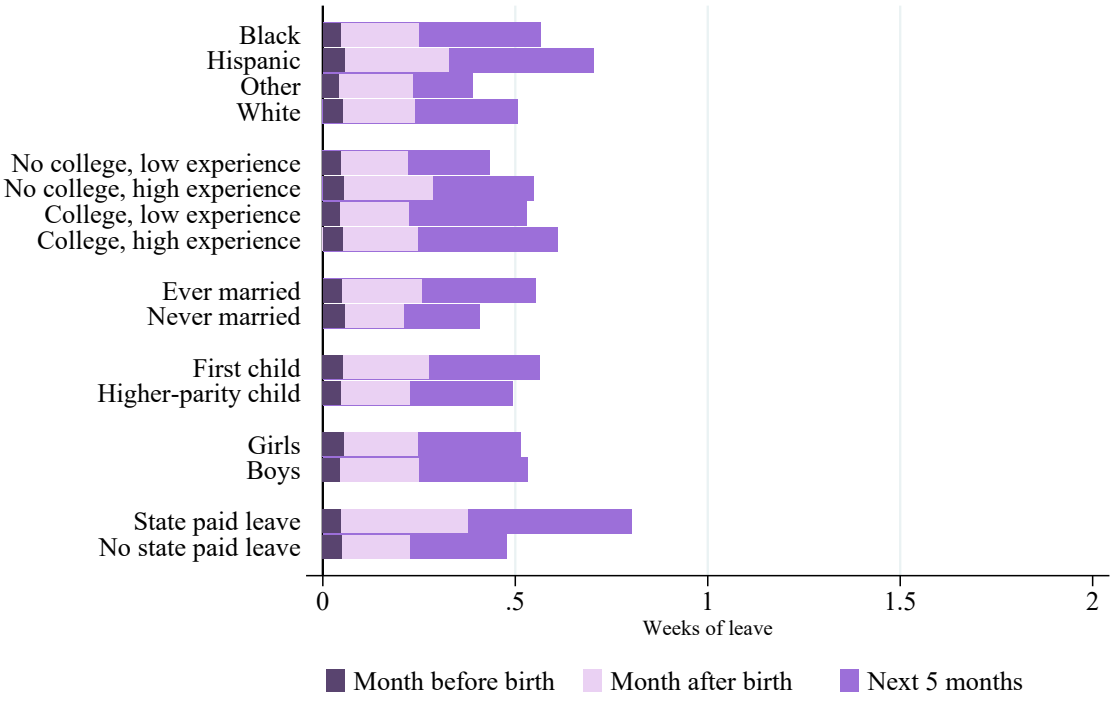
Notes: Sample includes mothers and fathers who gave birth to a child in the CHCK from 2005-2019, responded to the ACS in the 24 weeks prior to and 52 weeks after the birth of a child, and reported being employed in the previous week. Figures shows estimates of η_r come from equation 1. Outcome is a binary indicator for being absent from a job in the previous week. Results were approved for release by the U.S. Census Bureau. (CBDRB-FY25-P2593-R12161)

Figure 4: Average weeks of leave-taking around childbirth by parent characteristics

(a) Mothers

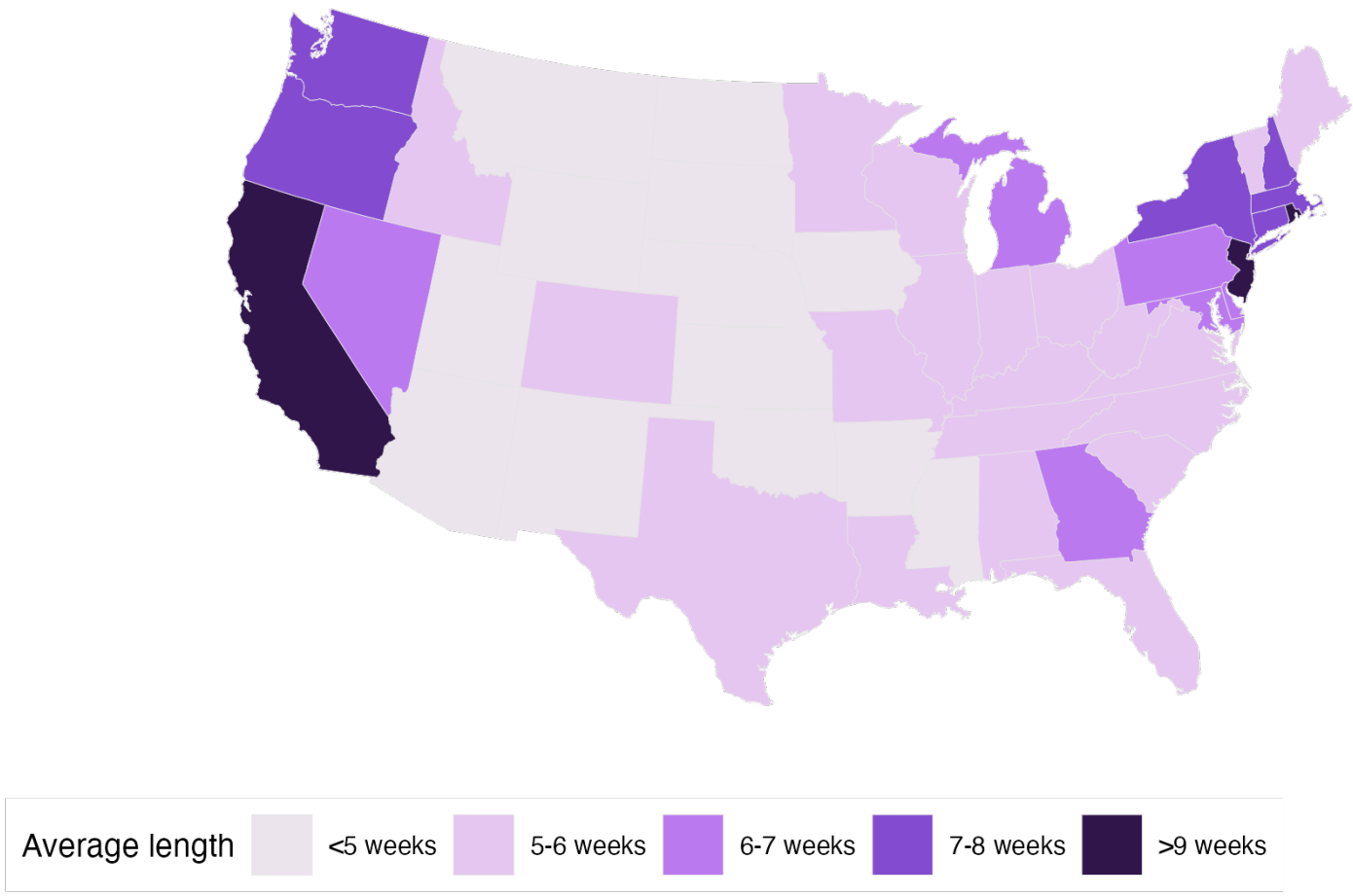


(b) Fathers



Notes: Sample includes employed mothers and fathers who gave birth to a child in the CHCK from 2005-2019, responded to the ACS in the 24 weeks prior to and 52 weeks after the birth of a child, and reported being employed in the previous week. Figure show estimates of η_{rg} from equation 2, where time relative to childbirth r is pooled into three time periods: one month prior to the child's birth, one month after the child's birth, and six months after the child's birth. Outcome is a binary indicator for absence from work, and coefficients are multiplied by the number of weeks in the corresponding time period. Results were approved for release by the U.S. Census Bureau. (CBDRB-FY25-P2593-R12161).

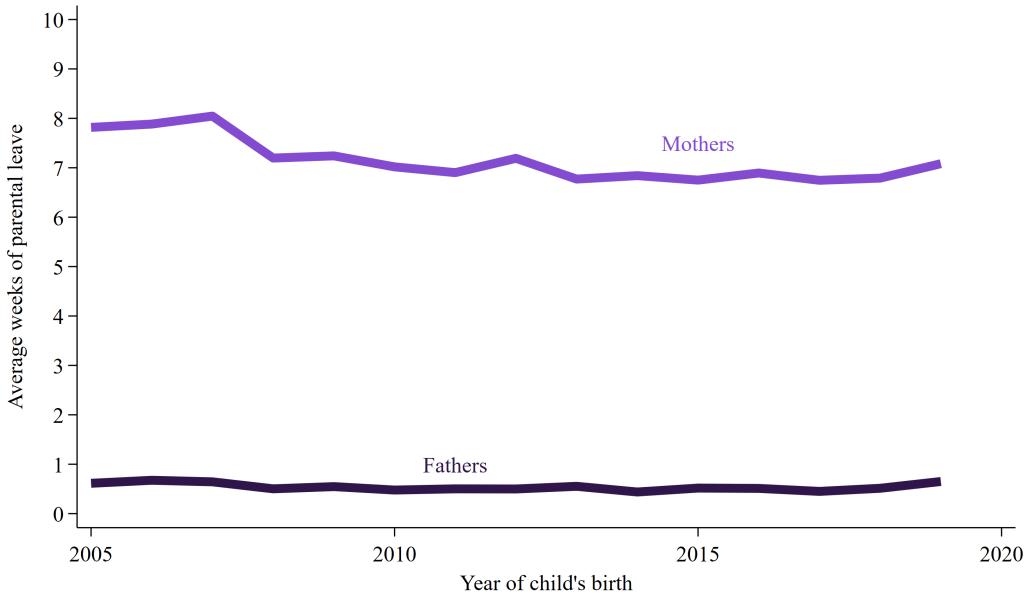
Figure 5: Length of Leave-Taking Among Women, By State



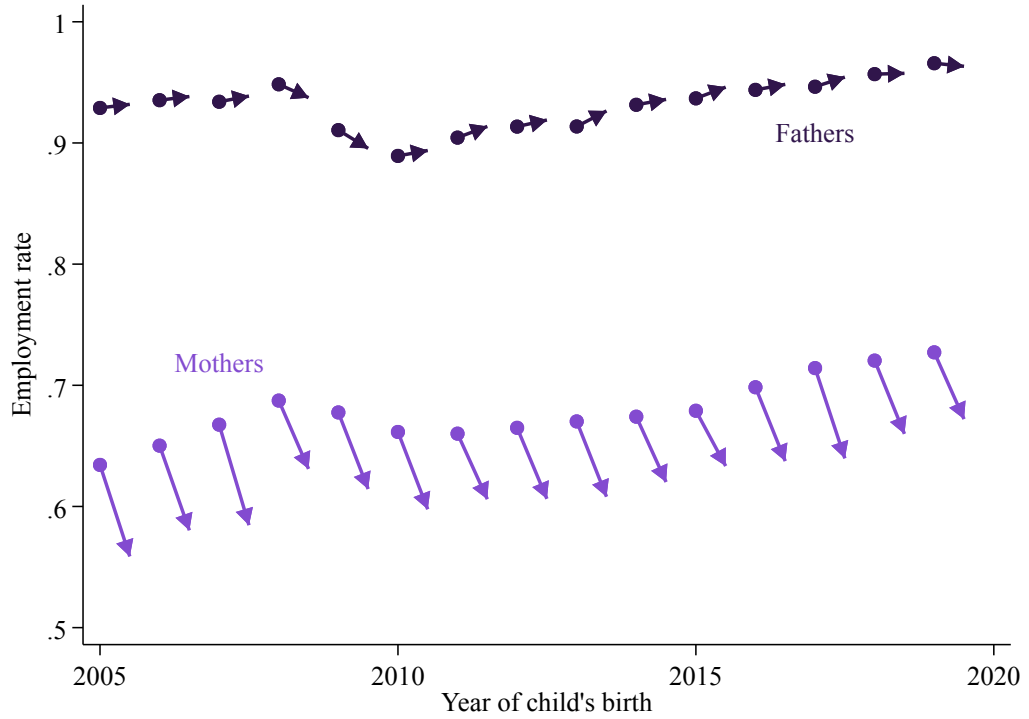
Notes: Data includes mothers and fathers who have a child born 2005-2019 in the CHCK and respond to the ACS in the 24 weeks prior and 52 weeks after the child's birth. We estimate these state-specific leave durations as the share of employed parents on leave 4 weeks before through 24 weeks after birth, multiplied by the 28 weeks during this time period. Alaska (5.1 weeks), the District of Columbia (6.3 weeks), and Hawaii (7.1 weeks) are omitted. Results were approved for release by the U.S. Census Bureau. (CBDRB-FY25-P2593-R12161)

Figure 6: Trends in length of parental leave and employment during and after childbirth

(a) Length of parental leave



(b) Employment before and after childbirth



Notes: Data includes mothers and fathers who have a child born 2005-2019 in the CHCK and respond to the ACS in the 24 weeks prior and 52 weeks after the child's birth. Estimates come from equation 1 with event-time collapsed to three time periods: 5 to 24 weeks before birth, 4 weeks before through 24 weeks after, and 25 to 52 weeks after birth. Panel (a) presents our estimates of leave duration by child birth year, for mothers and fathers, which is the share of employed parents on leave 4 weeks before through 24 weeks after birth, multiplied by the 28 weeks during this time period. Panel (b) shows the employment rate 5 to 24 weeks prior to birth (circle marker) and the employment rate in the period from 4 weeks before through 24 weeks after birth (end of arrow). Results were approved for release by the U.S. Census Bureau. (CBDRB-FY25-P2593-R12161,CBDRB-FY26-P2593-R12884)

7 Tables

Table 1: Summary statistics: ACS-CHCK sample

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Full sample		Firstborn children	
	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Age at birth	28.48	31.05	26.79	29.43
	(5.94)	(6.10)	(6.18)	(6.28)
Female infant	0.489	0.488	0.488	0.486
	(0.500)	(0.500)	(0.500)	(0.500)
Children ever born	2.58	2.45	1.95	1.88
	(1.13)	(1.07)	(0.91)	(0.86)
White	0.713	0.741	0.715	0.733
	(0.453)	(0.438)	(0.451)	(0.443)
Black	0.142	0.109	0.139	0.118
	(0.350)	(0.312)	(0.345)	(0.322)
Hispanic	0.172	0.168	0.155	0.154
	(0.377)	(0.374)	(0.362)	(0.361)
High school degree	0.888	0.893	0.893	0.898
	(0.315)	(0.309)	(0.309)	(0.302)
College degree	0.345	0.349	0.372	0.344
	(0.475)	(0.477)	(0.483)	(0.475)
Ever married	0.705	0.800	0.625	0.712
	(0.456)	(0.400)	(0.484)	(0.453)
Spouse in household	0.622	0.741	0.563	0.654
	(0.485)	(0.438)	(0.496)	(0.476)
Grandparent in household	0.153	0.101	0.218	0.140
	(0.360)	(0.301)	(0.413)	(0.347)
Observations	896,000	751,000	372,000	333,000

Notes: Data includes mothers and fathers who have a child born 2005-2019 in the CHCK and respond to the ACS in the 24 weeks prior and 52 weeks after the child's birth. Sex of infant and number of children ever born are measured using the CHCK, and children ever born measures all children born to the parent between 1997 and 2022. Presence of spouse and grandparent in household measured using ACS household rosters.

Table 2: Leave-taking and occupational task content

	(1) *Mean*	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
		Change in weeks of leave per 1sd increase in task intensity					
	Weeks of leave	Physical	Routine	Decision-making	Leadership	Social	Nonroutine analytic
Month before birth	0.705	0.246***	0.030***	-0.244***	-0.183***	-0.211***	-0.194***
		(0.015)	(0.010)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.013)
Month after birth	2.14	0.199***	0.097***	-0.265***	-0.202***	-0.226***	-0.199***
		(0.019)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.016)
Next 5 months after birth	4.31	-0.077**	-0.141***	0.318***	0.230***	0.324***	0.238***
		(0.036)	(0.026)	(0.029)	(0.032)	(0.034)	(0.030)
Observations	896,000	896,000	896,000	896,000	896,000	896,000	896,000

Notes: Data includes mothers who have a child born 2005-2019 in the CHCK and respond to the ACS in the 24 weeks prior and 52 weeks after the child's birth. Sample is restricted to mothers who were employed in the ACS reference week. Table provides estimates of the association between occupational task content and the length and timing of maternity leave among U.S. mothers, estimated using equation 2 with G_g is a measure of occupational task intensity and event time is consolidated into bins that include the month prior to birth, month after birth, and subsequent five months after birth. Column 1 reports average weeks of leave in the specified time relative to childbirth. Columns 2-7 report the coefficient from a regression of weeks of leave on the task intensity of the worker's occupation, measured in standard deviation units. Task content includes a measure of leadership from Tannenbaum and Timpe (2025), physical intensity of the occupation from Cortes and Pan (2018), and measures of decision-making responsibility, social tasks, routine, and non-routine analytic tasks from (Deming, 2021). Standard errors are clustered by individual.

Table 3: Time Use Among Parents of Infants

	Mothers (employed, at work)	Mothers (employed, on leave)	Mothers (new exits)	Fathers (employed)
Person characteristics				
Age	30.95	29.92	27.55	31.99
College	0.32	0.61	0.36	0.44
Household size (ATUS)	4.59	3.96	4.12	4.31
Household size (CPS8)	3.35	2.94	3.23	3.27
Usual hours (ATUS)	35.58	37.45		45.25
Usual hours (CPS8)	36.69	38.29	33.50	43.83
Time use (minutes)				
Working	270.96	6.82	4.84	332.36
(25th percentile, cond.>0)	310.00			430.00
(75th percentile, cond.>0)	537.00			600.00
Childcare	168.00	346.50	288.95	104.51
Physical care and looking after children	131.73	294.07	244.90	76.06
Educational investments in children	36.27	52.44	44.05	28.45
Health investments in children	2.70	3.48	15.14	2.12
Secondary childcare	346.45	473.74	518.88	289.21
Household activities	95.82	146.67	140.05	73.21
Socializing and leisure	164.32	205.99	226.24	192.97
Health self-care	0.31	0.38	0.02	0.18
Sleep	503.11	525.02	529.24	493.12
Any childcare (12:00AM-4:59AM)	0.30	0.71	0.51	0.17
Total childcare interruptions (12:00AM-4:59AM)	0.42	1.44	0.97	0.26
Household members				
Grandparent present	0.12	0.09	0.08	0.03
Grandparent or other relative present	0.19	0.10	0.12	0.07
Observations	343	262	68	719

Notes: This table provides summary statistics of time use among parents of infants (age 0-5 months) in the ATUS. The employed and on leave sample are those who are currently employed and report being absent from the job due to parental leave. The newly exited sample are those who were working as of the CPS (2-5 months earlier) but are currently (as of ATUS) out of the workforce. Time use is reported for a particular reference day and are in minutes. Variables labeled "CPS8" are measured during the outgoing rotation group survey of the CPS, which is 2-5 months earlier than the ATUS. Time use variables are recorded in minutes of a daily time diary. See Table A5 for details on the construction of time use variables.

Online Appendix

A Background: Parental Leave Benefits in the United States

In this section, we provide a brief history of parental leave policy in the United States and offer evidence, using worker surveys, of recent trends and current levels of access to parental leave through employers.

The current policy debate centers on the needs of parents who are balancing a career with childcare. As recently as the 1950s, however, policy surrounding parenthood aimed at discouraging mothers from working, with many employers and states requiring women to separate from their jobs after marrying or becoming pregnant (Koontz, 1971; Goldin, 1988; Canaan et al., 2022). The modern concept of maternity leave as a voluntary absence to support women's careers began with the civil rights movements of the 1960s (Goldin, 2023), and has since expanded to include fathers to promote bonding with infants and gender equality in parenting.

Policies designed to provide unpaid leave—but with "job protection" guaranteeing the right to return to work—appeared first in 1972 in Massachusetts (Engeman, 2020). More than a dozen states followed suit before the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) was enacted in 1993, giving workers a right to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave after the birth of a child, adoption, or a new foster care placement. While the FMLA is a common source of parental leave benefits, its reach is limited by its lack of paid benefits and relatively strict eligibility criteria.[20] As of 2018, 44% of U.S. workers are not covered by federal FMLA, and coverage rates are even lower among single parents and workers without a college education (Brown et al., 2020). Several states offer unpaid leave benefits that go beyond FMLA, protecting absences for a longer time period or covering workers who would otherwise not qualify for unpaid leave (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2019).[21]

In contrast, the United States has never had a national policy offering *paid* parental leave, i.e., partial or full wage replacement during a leave of absence to care for an infant. The United States is the only industrialized country without one (OECD, 2025).[22] In the absence of a national paid family leave policy, *de facto* paid maternity leave began to appear at the state level as early as 1942 in the form of short-term disability insurance (STDI). A series of state laws—and eventually, the federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978—required STDI policies to include childbirth as a "disability" (Kamerman et al., 1983; Wisensale, 2001; Timpe, 2024). Since STDI is virtually universal in five U.S. states, and a relatively widespread benefit elsewhere in the country, these policies became a common source of pecuniary benefits for mothers on leave.[23] These policies do not provide paid leave to fathers, and are available only to women who are eligible for STDI through work or a state-run program, but otherwise operate similarly to formal paid family leave. STDI policies typically replace between one-half and two-thirds of usual wages for six weeks (or eight weeks in the case of delivery by cesarean section).

[20] Job-protected leave under the FMLA is available only to workers in the public sector or at private companies that employ 50 or more individuals within 75 miles of their worksite. In addition, in order to be eligible, employees must have worked at their current employer for 12 months prior to taking leave, working at least 1,250 hours during the 12 months prior.

[21] For example, Connecticut offers a longer unpaid leave of 16 weeks for parents who have worked at least 1,000 hours in the last year for an employer with 75 or more employees.

[22] While European nations vary in the amount of job protection and wage replacement, all offer paid leave, typically 14 to 20 weeks, with 70 to 100 percent of previous wages replaced (Ruhm, 2011).

[23] California, Hawaii, New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, and Rhode Island have universal or near-universal STDI coverage. Rhode Island was the first state to cover "normal" childbirth through STDI, but the other states followed suit in the 1960s and 1970s (Koontz, 1971; New York State Senate Task Force on Critical Problems, 1974; Timpe, 2024).

More recently, state governments have created formal paid family leave programs, beginning with California (2004), New Jersey (2008), Rhode Island (2013), and New York (2018). These programs provide between 7 and 14 weeks of paid benefits to both mothers and fathers, and are built on top of existing STDI policies, meaning the total amount of paid leave available is longer. As of 2025, thirteen states have created programs, although many of them have not yet gone into effect.[24]

Beyond publicly provided or mandated leave, some workers may have access to leave through their employers. Workers may also rely on other workplace amenities such as paid vacation and sick time to extend their leave duration (Horowitz et al., 2017). In the next subsection, we provide evidence from worker surveys to characterize worker access to paid and unpaid parental leave, including through employers.

In Appendix Section C.1, we use an alternative dataset, the American Time Use Survey Leave Module, to analyze access to benefits across demographic groups.

A.1 Worker Access to Paid and Unpaid Leave Benefits

The patchwork of benefits offered by U.S. and state policies, and by private employers, raises the question: what share of workers actually have access to paid and unpaid leave? We provide evidence from two worker surveys, the National Compensation Survey (1996-2023), and the American Time Use Survey Leave Module (2011, 2017, and 2018), which are both conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Figure A1, which draws on benefit receipt data from the National Compensation Survey and employment counts from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, shows that the share of American workers with access to paid leave is low but has been steadily rising. As recently as the late 1990s, only about 2 percent of private-sector workers had access to paid family leave through an employer (dark purple line), but this figure rises to more than one-quarter by 2023. As discussed in the previous section, workers on maternity leave may also receive partial wage replacement through employer-sponsored STDI, and coverage under these benefits has risen only slightly since the late 1990s, from about 35 percent to 42 percent (middle black line).[25] A third source of pecuniary benefits, state-level paid family leave programs, was non-existent at the turn of the century but has grown to cover nearly one-third of workers by 2023 (medium purple line).[26]

Meanwhile, the share of workers with access to unpaid leave has risen from about 75 percent in the late 1990s to nearly 90 percent in 2023. This growth again highlights the role of employers and state governments, which have expanded unpaid leave coverage beyond FMLA.

Overall, Figure A1 suggests that while the United States remains easily at the bottom among developed countries in providing parental leave benefits, the 21st century has been a period of steady expansion of benefits, driven both by private employers and a handful of state governments. It also highlights the fractured nature of parental leave benefits in the United States. Beyond the sources of paid leave depicted in Figure A1, mothers and fathers may draw on paid vacation time, sick leave, personal savings, and transfers from family and friends (Horowitz et al., 2017).

[24]The thirteen states are California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington. The District of Columbia has also passed a paid-leave policy. See https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/featured-paid-leave.

[25]Data on heterogeneity in STDI coverage are scarce, but Levy (2004) found that as of 1993, women were slightly more likely to have coverage than the general population. Single mothers are an exception. STDI coverage is highly correlated with health insurance coverage, and more common among prime-age workers and those with higher levels of educational attainment.

[26]The share with formal paid family leave is calculated using data on employment from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. In each year, we calculate the share of workers in a state that has enacted paid family leave.

B American Community Survey

The main analysis in this paper relies on the restricted version of the 2005-2019 American Community Survey (ACS). This section provides further detail on the variables we use to construct our measures of employment and parental leave.

The ACS asks a battery of questions about respondents' labor-market activity. The most important questions for this paper pertain to activity in the previous week. One potential concern is the extent to which question wording may affect the interpretation of our estimates, as well as changes in question wording. This section examines those issues in detail.

The ACS began in 1996, but it did not become a large-scale survey, and one fit to replace the traditional "long-form" decennial Census, until 2005. In that year, the ACS elicited information about labor-market activity with the following series of questions:

- LAST WEEK, did this person do ANY work for either pay or profit? *Mark (X), the "Yes" box even if the person worked only 1 hour, or helped without pay in a family business or farm for 15 hours or more, or was on active duty in the Armed Forces.*

Respondents who answered "no" were then asked a series of follow-ups:

- LAST WEEK, was this person on layoff from a job?
  - Yes
  - No
- LAST WEEK, was this person TEMPORARILY absent from a job or business?
  - Yes, on vacation, temporary illness, labor dispute, etc.
  - No

Early evaluations of the ACS questions found that they tended to overestimate the size of the labor force relative to the Current Population Survey. In an effort to deliver estimates that are consistent across the two surveys, Census altered the ACS labor-market questions to mimic the CPS, beginning with the 2008 survey (Raglin and Holder, 2007).

- LAST WEEK, did this person do ANY work for pay at a job (or business)?
  - Yes
  - No
- LAST WEEK, did this person do ANY work for pay, even for as little as one hour?
  - Yes
  - No

Respondents who answered "no" to both questions were then asked:

- LAST WEEK, was this person on layoff from a job?
  - Yes

- No

- LAST WEEK, was this person TEMPORARILY absent from a job or business?
  - Yes, on vacation, temporary illness, maternity leave, other family/personal reasons, bad weather, etc.
  - No

The revised 2008 question was implemented after testing that found that the new wording increased the estimated number of employed people without affected the estimated number of unemployed people (Gottschalck et al., 2012). This was seen as desirable because the ACS had produced lower employment levels and higher unemployment rates than the Current Population Survey, the "gold standard" for tracking the labor force.

The main reason for the difference in employment rates between the two sets of questions was the greater sensitivity to "marginal workers," or those who might say they didn't do any work at a job or business last week, but nevertheless respond "yes" when asked if they worked for pay "even as little as one hour." Gottschalck et al. (2012) show that these workers have characteristics consistent with irregular work hours: relative to the general population, they are more likely to be enrolled in school, self-employed, or work as farmers, ranchers, designers, and real estate agents. Among "marginal" workers in the 2008 ACS, 37% were self-employed or unpaid family workers, relative to less than 8% in the general population age 16 and over.

B.1 Implications of the ACS question wording for our estimates

It is crucial to note that the ACS question focuses on performing *any* work for pay in the previous week. A key question is how workers interpret this question. A worker on parental leave may spent a short time answering phone calls or emails from co-workers, and if so, might be measured in our estimates as working. We interpret our estimates as capturing a "strong" version of parental leave on the extensive margin; those on leave in our estimates are truly disconnected from work and spending all of their time focused on recovery from childbirth, bonding with a new child, etc. We argue that this is a relevant margin, especially considering the literature in health care and economics suggesting that parental leave is important because it provides time for investments in physical and mental health of both parents and children.

Another important point to note in our estimates is that parents are classified as on leave only if they spend the entire week away from work. The implications can be seen in our main figure showing that leave-taking is higher for mothers one week after childbirth than in the week the child is born. This is likely due to the practice of working until childbirth; since the mother worked before the child's arrival, we do not classify her as on leave. This suggests that we are likely to understate the share of parents on leave at any given point in time. Nevertheless, our estimates provide the most high-frequency, detailed information available to date on work activity around childbirth, and we once again note that we are capturing an extensive-margin measure of fully disconnected parental leave.

B.2 Implications of changes in ACS questions for our estimates

The ACS question re-design successfully increased the number of "marginal" workers who were classified as employed. Evidence suggests that these workers had irregular work schedules that might otherwise prevent them from being classified as employed. The result was the sample of employed workers would have been

less likely to be employed in a typical wage and salary position with regular hours. This group makes up a relatively small share of the U.S. labor force, but it is possible that it is particularly important for measuring employment around childbirth, when mothers may turn to work with greater flexibility.

The question re-design may also have implications for our estimates of trends in parental leave. Our sample for these estimates is conditional on employment. It is noteworthy that a visible downward jump in the length of leave coincides with the 2008 change. This suggests that these "marginal" workers may have been less likely to think of themselves as "on leave" from a job—perhaps because their work allowed them the flexibility to alter their hours at will—pushing the estimated length of leave.

It is noteworthy that the effects above appear to outweigh the other change to the labor-market questions, the addition of "maternity leave" to the list of reasons a worker might be absent from a job. We would expect the inclusion of maternity leave to raise the salience of this question and result in higher measures of leave, but in fact we see lower length beginning in 2008.

Most importantly for our results, we see no almost no change at all in the length of maternity or paternity leave from 2008 to 2019, a period when the labor-force questions were held constant. This surprising result—that parental leave did not grow longer over our time period, despite the steady expansion of access to benefits—therefore cannot be driven by changes in measurement in the ACS.

B.3 Testing for selection and measurement error in ACS sample

In this section, we provide further details on our sample of mothers and fathers from the 2005-2019 ACS, linked to birth records from the Census Household Composition Key files. Our sample is restricted to women and men age 18-45 whose were interviewed at a time such that the reference week for the ACS employment questions lies within 24 weeks prior to the birth of a child and 52 weeks after the birth of a child.

Table 1 reports means and standard deviations for mothers and fathers. It also reports means separately for first-time mothers and fathers. Our sample is broadly representative of U.S. parents in this age range. For example, mothers are 28.48 years old on average and 26.8 years old for first-time mothers; among mothers age 18-45 in 2012 U.S. Vital Statistics data, the average age is 28.23 for all women and 26.3 for first-time parents.

We use this sample to construct estimates of employment and leave-taking by week relative to the birth of a child. To provide unbiased estimates, we rely on the assumption that the date of parents' ACS interviews are approximately random relative to the birth of the child. We explore the validity of this assumption with several exercises.

First, bias could arise from measurement error in the linkage between the CHCK and the ACS. If the CHCK mistakenly identifies some persons in the ACS as parents who are not, then the ACS responses will lead us to understate leave-taking. To study this issue directly, we take advantage of an ACS question that asks whether the respondent has given birth in the previous year. Figure A2 plots an event-study where the outcome variable is an indicator for giving birth in the previous year and event-time is defined as the month relative to the birth of a child as measured by the CHCK. The results show that when the CHCK indicates a parent is having a child, the proportion of their ACS responses in the linked sample indicating having a child changes sharply from nearly 0 to nearly 1, exactly what one would expect if the linkage is accurate, and ruling out this source of measurement error.[27]

[27] An alternative approach would drop respondents who do not report giving birth in the prior year. Our results are robust to this restriction, but we do not adopt it for our main results for two reasons. First, since we cannot use this information to restrict our sample of mothers prior to birth, it would introduce a sharp change in sample selection criteria at the week of

Second, we test for systematic changes in ACS response rates by date relative to childbirth. To minimize the risk of disclosure of confidential information, we do not report sample sizes by week relative to childbirth. However, we can obtain an approximate picture of changes in our sample size using changes in the standard errors on our estimated effects on employment. Specifically, we approximate the sample size in week $r = t - t_i^*$, where t_i^* is the week of childbirth, by calculating $r = \frac{\hat{\sigma}^2}{\hat{\eta}_r(1-\hat{\eta}_r)}$. In this expression, $\hat{\eta}_r$ is the estimated coefficient on an indicator for week r relative to childbirth from a equation 1 with employment as the dependent variable. We then use these estimates to calculated approximate changes in the sample size relative to week $r = -4$.

Figure A3 shows the resulting estimates. Sample sizes change very little across our sample period, consistent with response rates remaining relatively constant. The sole exception is the week of childbirth, when response rates fall by about 23% before recovering and remaining relatively close to their pre-childbirth level.

A third test evaluates the possibility that the composition of our sample changes systematically over event-time periods r. We estimate the regression:

$$x_{it} = \alpha + \sum_{g=-1}^{3} \psi_g D_g + X_{it}\gamma + \nu_{it}$$

where x_{it} is a time-invariant, observable characteristic of mothers and fathers and g indexes 13-week periods relative to childbirth (e.g., $g = -1$ corresponds to the period between 1 and 13 weeks prior to childbirth). Consistent with our main specification, we include only a quadratic in age in X_{it}. Our estimates $\hat{\psi}_g$ can be interpreted as changes in observable characteristics of our sample relative to the time period 14-24 weeks before childbirth.

Results are shown in Table A1. In all but a handful of cases, we find no statistically significant evidence of a change in observable characteristics. More importantly, the estimates are all economically small. For example, in the last quarter of the child's first year, we see a slightly higher share non-white and average educational attainment rises, but these effects are less than 1% of the overall sample mean. This evidence suggests that compositional changes in respondents over time relative to parenthood are not likely to affect our estimates of leave-taking.

Finally, another potential source of measurement error could stem from respondents misunderstanding ACS questions about absence. For example, workers who are paid during absence or receive parental leave benefits may mistakenly report working. Yet the ACS questions' wording and order suggests this type of error is unlikely to be widespread. The questions begin by asking, "LAST WEEK, did this person work for pay at a job (or business)?" Those who report working are then asked where they performed that work and how they got to that location. As a result, if an employee who is truly on leave misunderstood the question about working for pay, we would nevertheless expect them to report working from home. Yet Figure A4 shows that the mothers working shortly after childbirth overwhelmingly reported commuting to a workplace, contrary to the pattern we would expect under response bias. An additional check for response bias is inspired by our finding of substantial cross-state heterogeneity in the length of maternity leave. If mothers who are on leave respond mistakenly to the ACS employment questions—reporting that they worked for pay, when they actually received benefits while on leave—we would expect this to be more common in states with widespread

birth. Second, for women who are linked in the CHCK to a recent birth but do not report giving birth in the ACS, it is unclear whether the discrepancy is due to error in the CHCK-ACS linkage or due to well-known survey response errors (Bound et al., 2001).

access to paid leave. On the contrary, Appendix Figure A5 shows virtually no correlation between post-childbirth decline in maternal employment and the length of maternity leave. Furthermore, the length of leave is actually negatively correlated with the share of mothers who work during the first month after childbirth—consistent with greater access to maternity leave, but inconsistent with mothers mistaking paid leave benefits for compensation that would require them to report working for pay.

B.4 Bounding the potential effect of selection on employment and absence from work

Our preferred method for calculating the length of parental leave in the United States involves summing the share of parents on leave from a job over the time period -4 through 23. This approach, which is inspired by life-table methods of calculating fertility rates and life expectancy, provide a parsimonious summary of the length of leave among U.S. parents.

One drawback of this strategy is that, like other life-table statistics, it does not necessarily correspond to the experience of any one cohort of parents. This drawback is less pronounced in our case, given the narrow window of time of interest for parental leave. Nevertheless, employment rates among mothers change in the time period around childbirth. To the extent that our measure is intended to represent leave-taking among a stable group of parents, changes in the composition of employed mothers may bias our results if mothers who exit the labor force are systematically different in their leave-taking behavior than those who do not. In this section, we bound the impact that labor-force exit could have on our estimates.

An important note is that parental leave in the United States has no single, clear-cut definition. We accompany our preferred estimates of the length of leave with alternative, broader definitions that count short spells of non-employment as part of parental leave. Those alternative estimates are detailed in the main text. This section focuses on a narrower definition, and can be interpreted as characterizing the timing and length of leave among mothers who are always employed during the six months prior to and year after childbirth.

To bound these effects, we assume that the lowest maternal employment share we see in our sample –59.5%, 5 weeks after birth—represents the share of mothers who work throughout our sample period. Employment rates higher than this amount must necessarily represent employment among mothers who are less attached to the labor force. Our goal is to purge leave-taking among that excess employment from our estimates.

Our main results are shown in Figure A6. The solid purple line represents actual leave-taking, week by week, among our sample. The shaded area reports the share of always-employed mothers who would be on leave, week by week, if either i.) "excess" mothers never take leave when they are employed; or ii.) "excess" mothers always take leave when they are employed. Of course, the lower bound cannot go below 0.

Our results demonstrate that the changing sample composition has very little effect on our inferences about the shape of maternity leave or its duration. Our preferred estimate of 7.2 weeks is very close to the upper bound of 7.4 weeks. The lower bound of 6.4 weeks is also quite close and would suggest U.S. mothers take even less time off. These results are driven in large part by the fact that relatively few mothers alter their employment status in the weeks and months around childbirth—maternal employment in the United States is quite high and persistent.

B.5 Heterogeneity by occupational task content

Figure 4 in the main text reports differences in leave-taking by state policy and demographic characteristics. We are also interested in how leave-taking interacts with the nature of mothers' and fathers' occupations.

We explore this question by linking mothers in the ACS to O*NET data on occupation-level job tasks. We then use these tasks to construct six measures of tasks. First, to measure the extent to which mothers' jobs involve managing or directing teams, we construct a measure of leadership task intensity (Tannenbaum and Timpe, 2025). We also construct four distinct measures of decision-making, social tasks, routine tasks, and non-routine analytic tasks, following Deming (2021). Finally, we construct a measure of physical intensity from Cortes and Pan (2018). Each index is expressed in standard deviation units. We regress the length of leave—once again, split into the month before birth, month after birth, and next five months—on our task indices, so that the results can be interpreted as the expected difference in leave duration associated with a 1-standard-deviation increase in task intensity.

Our results, reported in Table 2, are consistent with the theory that factors like demanding jobs or positive selection into work play an important role in the patterns of leave-taking observed among American mothers. Column 2 shows that mothers with physically demanding jobs take more time off just in the short run—as expected, given common limitations late in pregnancy and just after childbirth—but slightly less time in the next several months. Summing across all three time periods, a mother with a 1-standard-deviation more physically demanding job would be expected to take an extra 2 days of parental leave. We find a similar pattern, although economically much, pattern across jobs as ranked by routine-ness of tasks. In contrast, we see a very different pattern in the remaining task indices. Mothers in occupations that require decision-making ability or offer leadership opportunities take substantially less time off in the short run, compensating only partly by taking longer leave after the first month. These findings are significant because these types of jobs are increasingly associated with career high wages and high earnings growth (Deming, 2021). We find similar results when examining similarly lucrative types of jobs, such as those that require social or non-routine analytic tasks. While these results should be interpreted as descriptive and do not pinpoint a single mechanism, it is noteworthy that these tasks are generally correlated with higher wages and access to paid leave benefits. This suggest that an important channel may be related to the structure of the U.S. workplace and the career costs of taking extended maternity leave (e.g., Goldin, 2014).

B.6 Calibrating the expected stakes for maternal health

Our main results raise questions about the implications of the United States' relatively short maternity and paternity leaves for our understanding of the U.S. labor market and the health of parents and their children. A large literature has studied the implications of parental leave for mothers' career outcomes, with nuanced results that suggest that leave allotments may increase labor-force attachment but also potentially reduce earnings and even increase fertility in the long run (Waldfogel, 1998; Baker and Milligan, 2008; Rossin, 2011; Bartel et al., 2018; Malkova, 2018; Bailey et al., 2025). On the other hand, such policies can also incentivize demand-side responses that widen gender inequality (Thomas, 2020; Timpe, 2024), despite evidence that the cost of parental leave is relatively modest from the firm's perspective (Brenøe et al., 2020; Ginja et al., 2023). A further consideration is the impact on child and maternal health. Several studies have found evidence that access to parental leave may improve children's long-run outcomes (Ginja et al., 2020; Carneiro et al., 2015). A particularly relevant outcome is maternal health, as evidence in the medical and economics literature underscore the health benefits of allowing mothers—and their spouses—time to recover and receive care in

the lead-up to and wake of childbirth (Bullinger, 2019; Paladine et al., 2019; Persson and Rossin-Slater, 2019).

To assess the implications of our findings for maternal health, we perform a simple calibration exercise based on our findings and the effects reported by Bütikofer et al. (2021). This section documents our calculations.

Bütikofer et al. (2021) study the impacts of a Norwegian policy that increased paid maternity leave from 0 to 18 weeks. Previous research has found that the expansion resulted in approximately full take-up of paid leave (Carneiro et al., 2015), and (Bütikofer et al., 2021) find no evidence of crowd-out of unpaid leave. Wage replacement levels were 100%. As a result, the authors interpret their estimates as the impact of an increase in time spent at home with no change to income. See Sections III.D and V.C of Bütikofer et al. (2021) for additional details.

Our calibration exercise is therefore based on a thought experiment that would increase the average maternity leave in the United States from 7.2 weeks to the 12 weeks legislated by the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993. We view this level as a reasonable benchmark because it is roughly in line with the length of leave included in the FMLA, state unpaid leave laws, and most of the proposals to expand paid parental leave at the state or national level. It is worth noting that 12 weeks of leave would still fall short of the length of leave benefits provided by nearly all other OECD countries.

Bütikofer et al. (2021) estimate the impact of this expansion of maternity leave on maternal health using a regression discontinuity and difference-in-discontinuities design. We use estimates from their preferred regression discontinuity design. Specifically, they estimate that the leave expansion decreased obesity by 2.8 percentage points (s.e. 0.009, pre-reform mean 0.077, panel C of Table 1), decreased the share experiencing pain by 3.7 percentage points (s.e. 0.008, pre-reform mean 0.234, panel C of Table 3), and decreased the share with hypertension by 3 percentage points (10%, see page 83).

Since the Norwegian policy extended leave by 18 weeks, our thought experiment considers an extension that is 27% the size (12-7.2 / 18). We use this to scale the estimates of (Bütikofer et al., 2021), assuming the effects on maternal health are linear in time spent at home after childbirth. The result is a decline in hypertension of 2.7 percent, a 10 percent decline in obesity, and a 4 percent decline in the share experiencing pain.

C American Time Use Survey

This section provides additional results using the public-use American Time Use Survey (ATUS) data. We first use the ATUS Leave Module, which is available for 2011, 2017, and 2018, to characterize access to parental leave benefits, which supplements the background section and documents increasing access to parental leave over time and also widening inequality of access by socioeconomic groups. Second, we use the data to validate the ACS leave-of-absence measure. Third, we use the ATUS to validate our main, restricted-use ACS leave-taking estimates over the 0-5 month period. Third, we Fourth, we use our main ATUS sample of parents of infants aged 0-5 months to present several robustness checks. Specifically, we show that differences between mothers on leave and mothers at work are statistically significant and robust to individual controls; we present a version of Table 3 restricted to weekday time diaries; and we provide limited evidence that childcare is not higher among fathers when their partner/spouse is at work vs. on leave.

C.1 Access to Leave Benefits

To characterize access to parental leave benefits by demographic groups, we use the ATUS Leave Module, which is available for 2011, 2017, and 2018. Table A2 shows that access to paid parental leave for 18-45 year olds is available to 48 percent of women and 49 percent of men. College-educated workers are nearly 30 percentage points more likely to have access to paid leave compared to non-college educated workers (65 percent vs. 38 percent). Access to paid leave is higher for workers who are non-hourly workers (63 percent) compared to hourly workers (39 percent).

The ATUS, while smaller and offering less precision than the ACS, paints a picture about the length and timing of parental leave that is broadly consistent with the basic facts presented in Section 4.1. Table A4 presents summary statistics of parents of infants (children aged 0-5 months). Approximately 56 percent of mothers of infants are employed, compared to 91 percent of fathers. Approximately 47 percent of mothers of infants are absent from work in the prior week, conditional on being employed, compared to 7 percent of fathers. This figure closely matches our ACS results, which would suggest we would observe between 46 and 50 percent of mothers absent averaged over this time period.[28]

Among mothers of infants, 42 percent report being absent due to parental leave—representing 89 percent of all absences. If we also include vacation, personal, or medical absences—categories that arguably also reflect forms of parental leave—46 report being absent, accounting for 98 percent of absences. These results are broadly consistent with those presented above using the ACS sample, which is reassuring since they come from a different household survey; they also validate our approach of using any absence from work in the weeks surrounding birth as our primary measure of leave. Table A4 also shows that approximately 11 percent of mothers who were employed just prior to birth are out of the labor force as of months 0-5 after birth. Restricting the sample to firstborns only, this share is 10 percent. These exit rates are similar to those shown in Figure 1, which is based on the ACS, and underscore the point that the vast majority of women who are employed prior to birth return to the workforce.

C.2 Validating the Leave-of-Absence Measure

An important question is whether our measure of a leave of absence in the weeks surrounding a child's birth accurately captures being absent from work. If respondents erroneously classify themselves as absent even if they worked during the week, we may overstate leave-taking. Alternatively, respondents on paid vacation or paid leave might mistakenly state that they are working for pay, leading us to understate the share on leave.

The unique design of the ATUS makes it well-suited to study the extent to which workers' job activity is misclassified in the ACS. The ATUS asks a question about work in the previous week that closely mirrors the questions asked by the ACS. Crucially, the ATUS follows up with a detailed accounting of respondents' time use on a representative day. We use these time use diaries to explore the extent to which workers who say they are on leave actually perform work, and vice versa. Our results, summarized in Table A3 provides evidence against misclassification error. Among all ATUS workers, age 25-64 (excluding the self-employed), approximately 4 percent were absent in the previous week. Among absent workers, almost zero time is spent doing work: the average is 0.6 to 0.8 hours, and the 75th percentile is 0 for all groups except college-educated

[28] We calculate these estimates as follows. First, for mothers of infants in the ATUS, we assume the date of childbirth was uniformly distributed between the date of their time-use interview and the date of their previous CPS interview. We then use our week-specific ACS estimates to calculate the share of mothers we would expect to see absent from work, conditional on appearing in the ATUS with a given lag between the time-use and CPS interviews. We then average across groups defined by the length of lag between CPS and ATUS, weighting by the share of the ATUS sample represented by each group. This calculation suggests we should see between 46-50 percent of working mothers absent.

workers, for whom it is 0.17 hours. These results suggest that when ACS respondents say they are absent from work, they are truly disconnected from work. Table A3 also shows respondents who say they are at work are unlikely to be on leave. Among respondents who report being employed and at work, we would expect approximately 2 out of 7 to complete the time diary for a weekend or other non-work day, and therefore to report 0 hours. We find that the share of employed workers at work who report working less than one hour is 28 to 33 percent across all subgroups, which is what one would expect if respondents are correctly interpreting the question.

C.3 Time Use Among Parents of Infants

This subsection provides additional information on the main ATUS sample of parents of infants aged 0-5 months. Table A5 provides details on the time use variable descriptions and associated ATUS codes. Next, we present Table 3 restricted to weekday time diaries. Third, we show that the differences in time use among mothers at work and mothers on leave are significantly significant and robust to controls. And lastly, we consider whether there is evidence for substitution across family members in childcare; specifically, we check whether fathers with a spouse/partner at work do more childcare than fathers with a spouse/partner on leave.

The patterns of time use across parental subgroups are quite similar if we restrict to weekday surveys (Table A6), instead of including all days, as in Table 3. One distinction is if we restrict the sample to weekday surveys, employed mothers work 333 minutes per day, more than the 271 minutes per day for employed mothers using both weekdays and weekends.

Table A7 presents regression results with and without individual controls. The sample includes mothers of infants who are currently employed. Each column is a separate regression of the time use category in the heading on an indicator for the parent being on leave. In columns 2, 4, 6, and 8, we include individual controls to account for socioeconomic differences across households in which the mother is working compared to those in which the mother is on leave. These controls include an indicator for having a college degree, age, an indicator for having an older child in the household, and an indicator for being married.

The main result is that parental leave allows mothers to shift their time investments away from work and towards caring for their infants. Time spent on childcare is far higher among mothers on leave: 178.5 more minutes per day, relative to an overall mean of 246.3 minutes per day—a 72 percent increase that is significant at the 1 percent level. When including individual controls, the magnitude of the difference diminishes only slightly, by about 15 minutes. The educational investments subcategory of childcare are 16.2 minutes per day higher among mothers on leave compared to mothers at work, representing a 37 percent increase from the sample average of 43.4 minutes. This result remains significant at the 10 percent level even after including individual controls. Daily health investments in children are not significantly different between groups, and overall parents make only a few minutes of health investments per day on average.

Substitution across family members in childcare is not directly observed in the data, because the ATUS only collects time use for one member of the household. But the ATUS has information on whether a spouse or unmarried partner is present and also their employment status, and we study fathers' time use when their partner is on leave vs. at work. For this exercise we restrict to respondents age 18-45 who have an opposite-sex spouse or unmarried partner and an infant in the household. This sample restriction means respondents are slightly older and more educated than our main ATUS sample. The main finding, presented in columns 3 and 4 of Table A8, is that fathers with a partner at work actually do less physical caretaking compared to fathers with a partner on leave. Moreover, fathers with partners on leave do not make greater

educational investments in their children, compared to fathers with partners at work.[29] Because we do not observe a child's total time investments, which may include those of other family members or formal childcare providers, we cannot say whether total health and educational investments in the child are different under different parental working arrangements. Nevertheless, we show that childcare is highly gendered regardless of the working status of the mother and that mothers on leave shift their time towards caretaking.

[29]We study whether households with mothers on leave are more likely to have grandparents and extended family living in the household and find that they are (Table 3). These results may reflect socioeconomic differences across households, too, but they are suggestive that extended family provide more caretaking when the mother is working.

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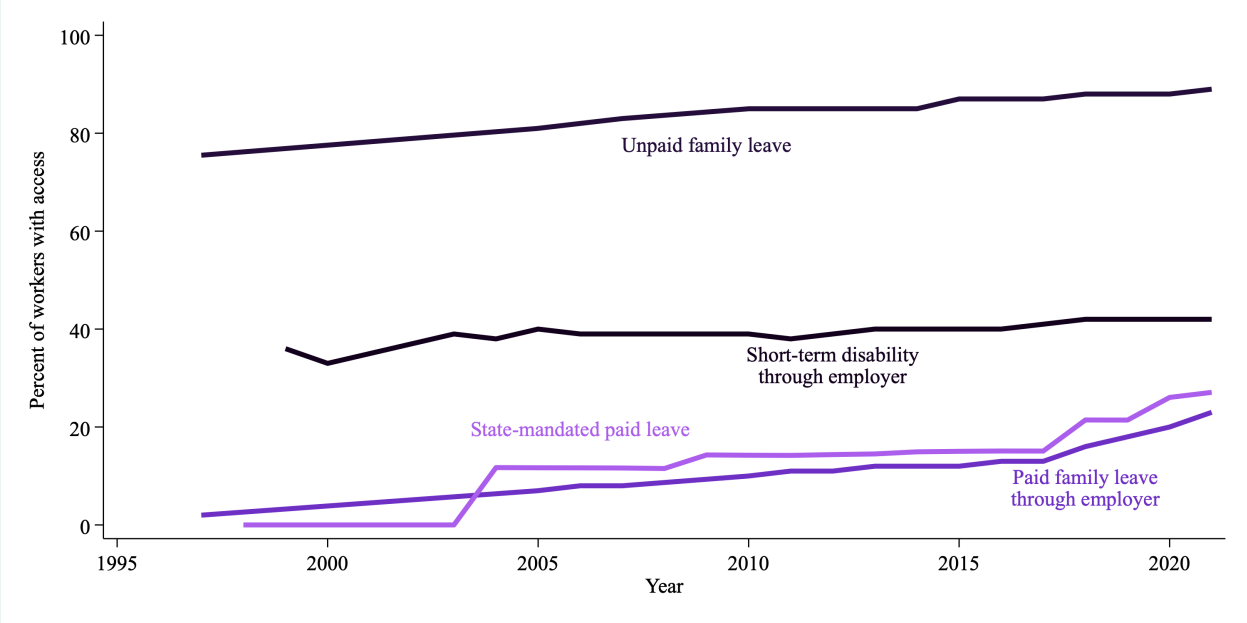
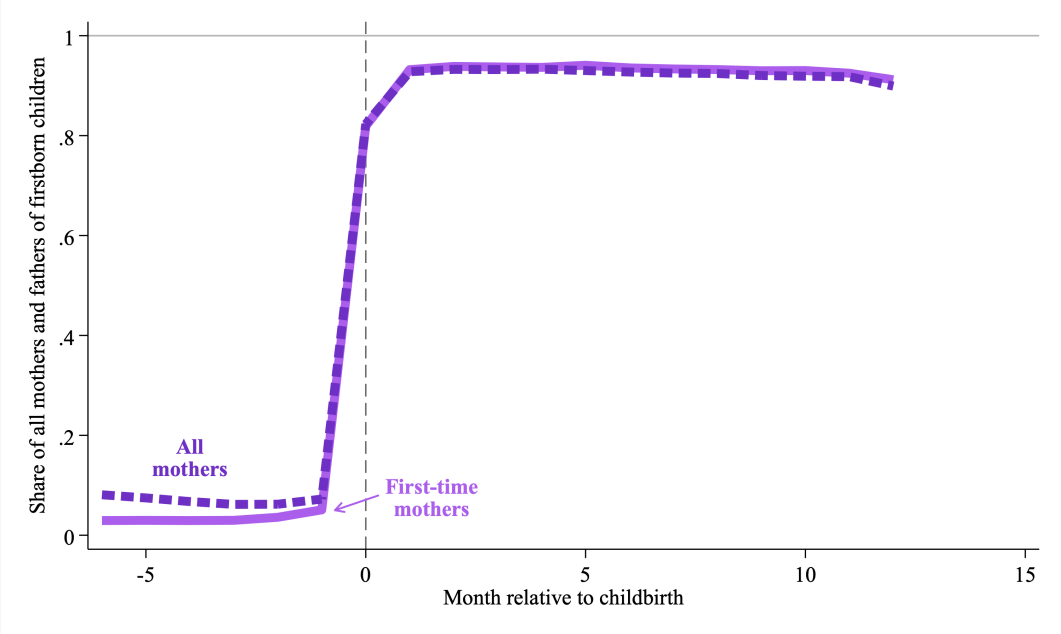
Appendix Figures and Tables

Figure A1: Share of workers with access to various sources of parental leave benefits



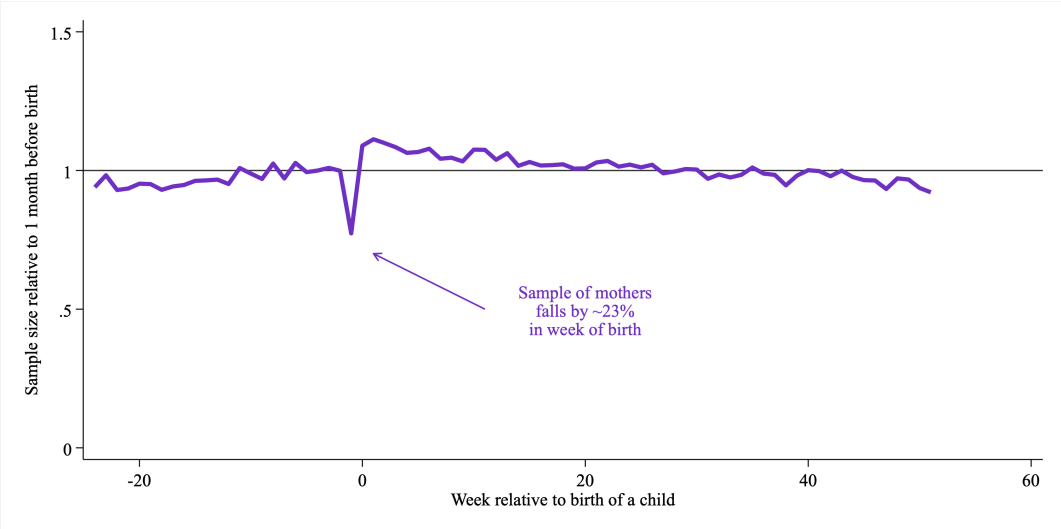
Figures shows the share of U.S. workers with access to specified sources of parental leave benefits. Data on unpaid family leave, paid family leave through an employer, and short-term disability insurance apply to private-sector workers only and come from the National Compensation Survey. Short-term disability insurance measure does not count workers covered by state-run programs. Share with state-mandated paid leave is constructed using Bureau of Economic Analysis estimates of state-level employment and dates of enactment of formal paid family leave programs, starting with California in 2004.

Figure A2: Share of mothers who gave birth in last year by week relative to birth



The figure presents event-study estimates of the share of respondents who report giving birth in the past calendar year, by month relative to birth. Months are four-week increments, where month 0 includes the week of a child's birth and the three weeks afterward. Standard errors are omitted for clarity, and 95% confidence intervals in all time periods rule out values more than 0.005 (half a percentage point) above or below the point estimates. Month relative to birth is measured using CHCK birth record data. Indicator for having a child in last year is measured using ACS survey responses. (CBDRB-FY25-P2593-R12690)

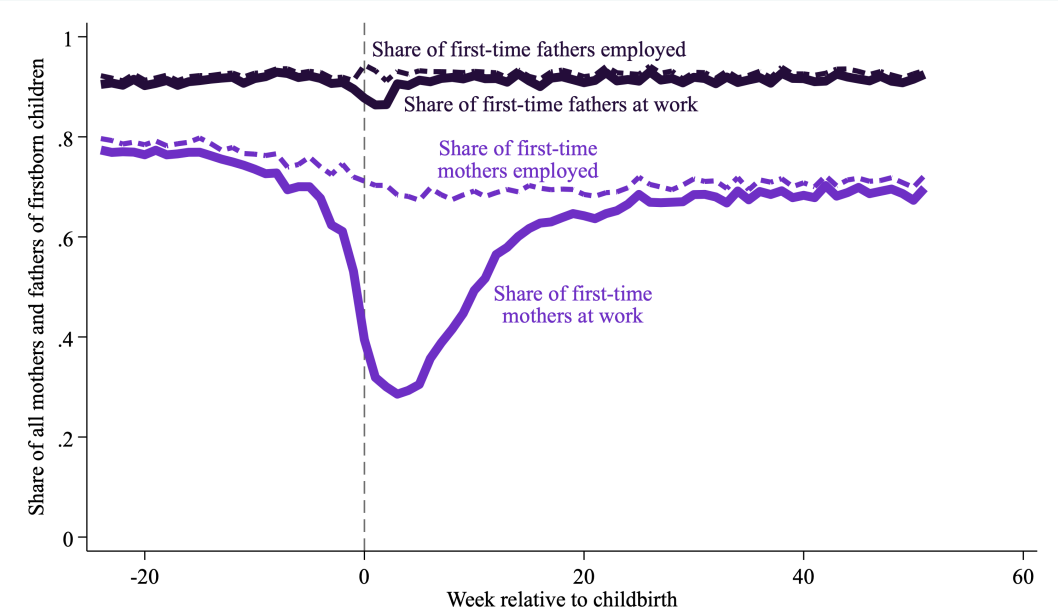
Figure A3: Changes in sample size by week relative to birth



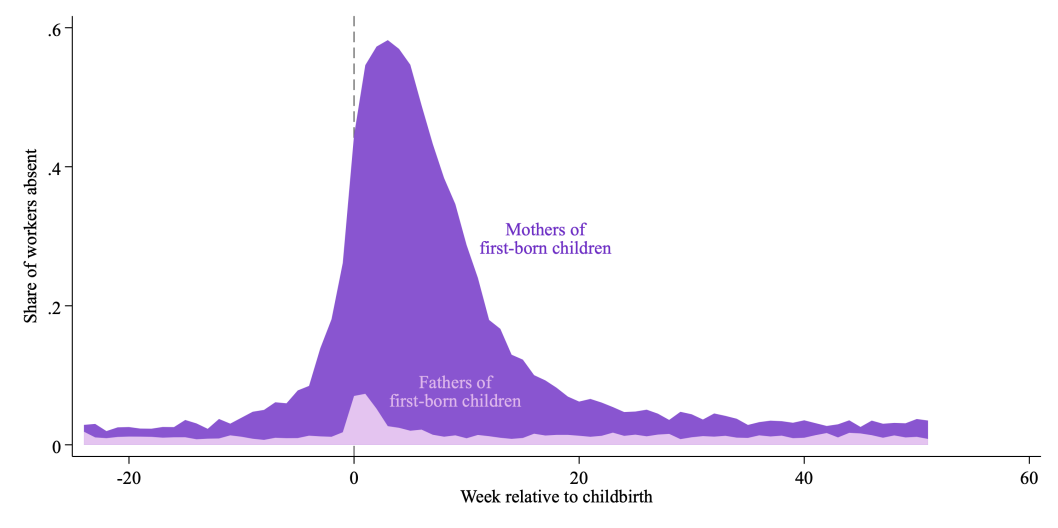
The figure above presents an approximation of the size of our sample of mothers by week relative to childbirth. Approximate sample sizes are shown relative to the size of the sample four weeks prior to birth. Sample sizes are approximated using the standard error for $\hat{\eta}_r$. This approach minimizes the risk of disclosing confidential information. (CBDRB-FY25-P2593-R12161)

Figure A4: Parental employment and leave-taking around first birth

(a) Work and employment around childbirth

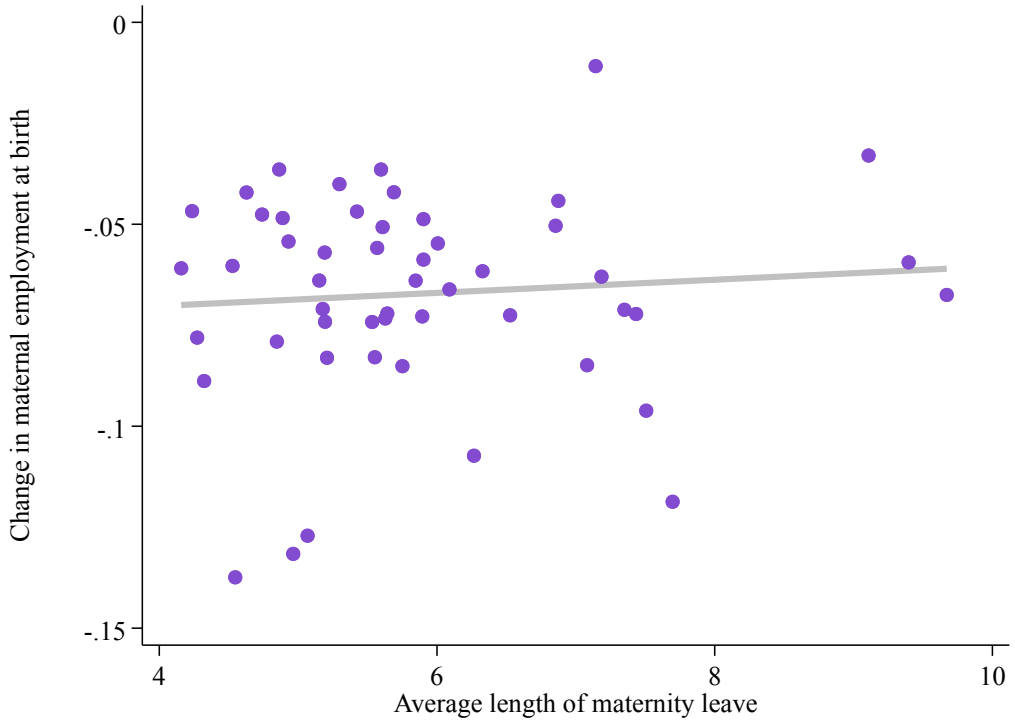


(b) Absence from work around childbirth



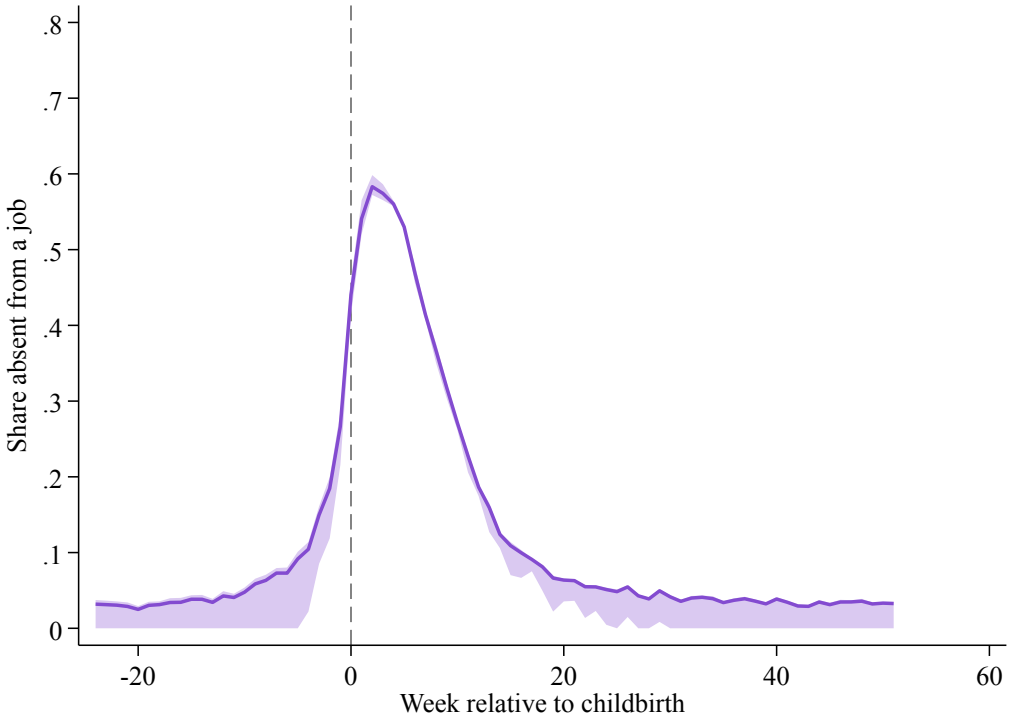
Notes: Panel (a) depicts the results from the estimation of equation 1. The coefficients plot week-by-week trends for first-time mothers and fathers around birth in (i) being employed, and (ii) being employed and not absent from work. The population includes parents observed in the 6 months before or year after the birth of their first child, and we do not condition on labor force participation. Panel (b) plots estimates the same regression where the dependent variable is an indicator for being absent from work, and the sample includes only those person-weeks where the individual is employed. Results were approved for release by the U.S. Census Bureau. (CBDRB-FY25-P2593-R12690)

Figure A5: Association between between state-level maternity leave length and change in maternal employment



Notes: Sample includes women who gave birth to a child between 2005-2019 and responded to the ACS in the 24 weeks prior and 52 weeks after birth. Horizontal axis shows length of maternity leave, from equation (1) estimates of the share of mothers in each state on leave in the 4 weeks prior and 24 weeks after childbirth. Vertical axis shows estimates of the state-specific decline in mothers' employment after childbirth relative to the period 5 to 24 weeks before birth. Correlation between the two sets of estimates is 0.08. (CBDRB-FY26-P2593-R12884)

Figure A6: Bounds on timing and length of leave for always-employed mothers



Notes: Data includes mothers who gave birth between 2005-2019 in the CHCK and appear in the ACS in the period 24 weeks before and 52 weeks after birth. Sample includes mothers age 18-45 who are employed as of the week of their interview. Figure shows the share absent from a job (purple line). Shaded areas show bounds on the share absent from a job among a population of mothers who are always employed during our sample period of 24 weeks before and 52 weeks after childbirth. See text in section B.4 for more details on calculations. Preferred estimate of the length of leave is 7.2 weeks, calculated by summing share on leave between weeks -4 and 23. Lower bound is 6.4 weeks, upper bound is 7.4 weeks. (CBDRB-FY26-P2593-R12884)

Table A1: Selection into ACS sample by month relative to birth

	(1) Non-Hispanic white	(2) Non-Hispanic Black	(3) Hispanic	(4) Years of education	(5) Children ever born	(6) Child female	(7) Child parity
Panel A: Mothers							
1-13 weeks before birth	-0.0004	0.0011	0.0021	0.0215*	-0.0021	0.0018	-0.0060
	(0.0024)	(0.0020)	(0.0020)	(0.0118)	(0.0059)	(0.0025)	(0.0047)
0-12 weeks after birth	-0.0022	0.0017	0.0022	-0.0055	0.0043	0.0014	0.0010
	(0.0023)	(0.0019)	(0.0020)	(0.0116)	(0.0057)	(0.0024)	(0.0046)
13-25 weeks after birth	-0.0037	0.0014	0.0028	0.0031	0.0055	0.0001	-0.0002
	(0.0024)	(0.0019)	(0.0020)	(0.0116)	(0.0057)	(0.0025)	(0.0046)
26-38 weeks after birth	-0.0052**	0.0034*	0.0027	0.0162	0.0013	0.0020	-0.0019
	(0.0024)	(0.0019)	(0.0020)	(0.0116)	(0.0057)	(0.0025)	(0.0046)
39-51 weeks after birth	-0.0059**	0.0034*	0.0040**	0.0203*	0.0073	0.0002	-0.0017
	(0.0023)	(0.0019)	(0.0020)	(0.0117)	(0.0057)	(0.0025)	(0.0046)
Mean	0.713	0.142	0.171	13.8	2.58	0.489	1.90
Panel B: Fathers							
1-13 weeks before birth	0.0009	-0.0003	0.0070***	0.0099	0.0024	0.0001	-0.0025
	(0.0025)	(0.0020)	(0.0022)	(0.0141)	(0.0060)	(0.0027)	(0.0048)
0-12 weeks after birth	-0.0028	0.0014	0.0023	0.0073	-0.0033	0.0001	-0.0032
	(0.0025)	(0.0019)	(0.0022)	(0.0139)	(0.0058)	(0.0027)	(0.0047)
13-25 weeks after birth	0.0011	-0.0012	0.0045**	0.0182	0.0150**	-0.0016	0.0034
	(0.0025)	(0.0019)	(0.0022)	(0.0140)	(0.0059)	(0.0027)	(0.0048)
26-38 weeks after birth	-0.0026	0.0016	0.0020	0.0081	0.0020	0.0011	-0.0001
	(0.0025)	(0.0020)	(0.0022)	(0.0140)	(0.0058)	(0.0027)	(0.0048)
39-51 weeks after birth	-0.0009	-0.0024	0.0065***	0.0195	0.0021	-0.0015	-0.0034
	(0.0025)	(0.0019)	(0.0022)	(0.0140)	(0.0058)	(0.0027)	(0.0048)
Mean	0.741	0.109	0.168	13.8	2.45	0.488	1.81

Each row shows the estimated change in the average demographic characteristic of the sample relative to the time period consisting of 14-26 weeks before childbirth. Mean for the full sample shown at the bottom of each panel. Standard errors are clustered by individual. (CBDRB-FY25-P2593-R12690)

Table A2: Access to Paid and Unpaid Parental Leave

	Women		Men		College		Non-College		Hourly		Non-Hourly	
	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N
Paid leave	0.48	4,720	0.49	4,552	0.65	4,303	0.38	4,969	0.39	5,097	0.63	4,175
2011	0.42	1,920	0.39	1,800	0.57	1,553	0.31	2,167	0.30	2,066	0.57	1,654
2017	0.49	1,418	0.54	1,428	0.67	1,380	0.41	1,466	0.43	1,572	0.67	1,274
2018	0.53	1,382	0.53	1,324	0.71	1,370	0.40	1,336	0.44	1,459	0.67	1,247
Unpaid leave	0.79	4,720	0.77	4,552	0.74	4,303	0.81	4,969	0.82	5,097	0.72	4,175
2011	0.79	1,920	0.75	1,800	0.76	1,553	0.77	2,167	0.80	2,066	0.73	1,654
2017	0.80	1,418	0.79	1,428	0.73	1,380	0.83	1,466	0.83	1,572	0.74	1,274
2018	0.79	1,382	0.78	1,324	0.74	1,370	0.82	1,336	0.84	1,459	0.71	1,247

This table uses data from the public-use ATUS Leave Module, which is available for years 2011, 2017, and 2018. We restrict the sample to employed workers who are not self-employed, and are between ages 18 and 45. The paid leave question asks if the respondent is able to take paid leave for birth or adoption of a child in their current job. The unpaid leave question asks if the respondent is allowed to take time off from work without pay for birth or adoption, in addition to their paid leave in their main job. We drop missing responses. We present means and observation counts for several subgroups, including women, men, college degree holders (or more), those with less than a college degree, hourly workers, and non-hourly workers.

Table A3: Characterizing the Absent from Work Variable

	Women	Men	College	Non-College	Hourly	Non-Hourly
Share absent previous week	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04
Conditional on being absent						
Usual hours	37.02	44.39	39.85	40.10	37.90	42.24
Time spent working (hours)	0.67	0.83	0.82	0.66	0.64	0.84
25th percentile	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
75th percentile	0.00	0.00	0.17	0.00	0.00	0.08
Reason for absence:						
Vacation	0.49	0.55	0.61	0.44	0.44	0.60
Own illness	0.19	0.25	0.09	0.32	0.31	0.11
Other family or personal obligation	0.16	0.14	0.16	0.15	0.14	0.17
Parental leave	0.12	0.02	0.11	0.05	0.07	0.09
Other	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.03
Conditional on being at work						
Usual hours	38.91	44.26	42.85	40.94	39.43	44.37
Fraction working <1 hour	0.33	0.28	0.29	0.31	0.33	0.28
Time spent working (hours)	5.20	6.07	5.69	5.64	5.44	5.92
25th percentile	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
75th percentile	8.33	9.17	8.83	8.67	8.50	9.00
Observations	59,239	55,080	49,852	64,467	59,103	55,141

This table uses ATUS 2003-2023 to understand the employment variable indicating the worker was absent in the previous week. The sample includes workers age 25-64 excluding the self-employed. The table presents sample averages unless indicated.

Table A4: How Much Leave Do Parents of Infants 0-5 Months Old Take?

	Mothers		Fathers	
	Mean	N	Mean	N
Fraction employed	0.56	1,146	0.91	775
Fraction at work, conditional on employed	0.53	638	0.93	719
Fraction absent, conditional on employed	0.47	638	0.07	719
Fraction on parental leave, conditional on employed	0.42	638	0.03	719
(CPS8-to-ATUS: 2 months)	0.41	68	0.05	74
(CPS8-to-ATUS: 3 months)	0.46	422	0.04	471
(CPS8-to-ATUS: 4 months)	0.30	134	0.02	167
(CPS8-to-ATUS: 5 months)	0.23	14	0.00	7
Fraction with parental leave (or vacation, personal, medical), conditional on employed	0.46	638	0.05	719
Fraction who exit between CPS8 and ATUS	0.11	593	0.03	702
Fraction who exit between CPS8 and ATUS (first born)	0.10	164	0.03	161

This table provides summary statistics of employment and leave-taking among parents of infants (age 0-5 months) in the ATUS. All variables are measured at the time of the ATUS, which is 2-5 months after the CPS outgoing rotation group ("CPS8").

Table A5: Time Use Variable Descriptions and Associated ATUS Codes

Time Use Variable	**IPUMS Name**	**Description and ATUS codes**
Working	ACT_WORK	Work and Work-Related Activities (050000). This variable indicates the minutes per day each respondent reported spending work activities such as working, doing activities as part of one's job, engaging in income-generating activities (not as part of one's job), and looking for jobs and interviewing.
Childcare	Researcher-defined	Caring for and Helping Household Children (030100)
Physical care and looking after children	Researcher-defined	Physical care for household children (030101); Organization and planning for household children (030108); Looking after household children (as a primary activity) (030109); Attending household children's events (030110); Waiting for or with household children (030111); Picking up or dropping off household children (030112); Caring for and helping household children, n.e.c. (030199)
Educational investments in children	Researcher-defined	Reading to or with household children (030102); Playing with household children, not sports (030103); Arts and crafts with household children (030104); Playing sports with household children (030105); Talking with or listening to household children (030106); Helping or teaching household children (not related to education) (030107)
Health investments in children	Researcher-defined	Children's Health (030300)
Secondary childcare	SCC_ALL	This variable reports the total amount of time during the diary day that the respondent spent in secondary childcare for all children under the age of 13. This variable is calculated by summing the amount of time during each activity that the respondent reported having a child in care.
Household activities	ACT_HHACT	This variable indicates the minutes per day each respondent reported spending in household activities such as maintaining their household, household management and organizational activities.
Socializing and leisure	ACT_SOCIAL	This variable indicates the minutes per day each respondent reported spending in personal interest or leisure activities such as communicating with others and attending parties and meetings; and leisure activities such as relaxing, playing (passive) games (unless playing with children only), watching television, playing or listening to music, reading, writing, and all hobbies.
Health self-care	Researcher-defined	Health-Related Self Care (010300)
Sleep	BLS_PCARE_SLEEP	Sleeping (010100)
Any childcare (12:00AM-4:59AM)	Researcher-defined	This variable is constructed from the activity-level file, and indicates any physical care for household children (030101) occurring with a start time between 00:00 and 04:59

Table A6: Time Use Among Parents of Infants 0-5 Months: Weekdays Only

	Mothers (employed, at work)	Mothers (employed, on leave)	Mothers (new exits)	Fathers (employed)
Person characteristics				
Age	31.11	29.88	27.36	32.04
College	0.33	0.58	0.34	0.46
Household size (ATUS)	4.55	3.98	4.26	4.25
Household size (CPS8)	3.33	2.95	3.41	3.17
Usual hours (ATUS)	35.98	37.80		45.75
Usual hours (CPS8)	37.39	38.59	33.31	44.46
Time use (minutes)				
Working	333.42	5.62	6.61	428.02
(25th percentile, cond.>0)	360.00			445.00
(75th percentile, cond.>0)	540.00			600.00
Child care	170.56	369.38	300.32	97.73
Physical care and looking after children	134.48	315.01	248.17	72.20
Educational investments in children	36.07	54.37	52.15	25.53
Health investments in children	3.52	4.69	19.30	2.81
Secondary childcare	298.33	460.59	498.00	219.83
Household activities	79.32	145.03	155.30	65.43
Socializing and leisure	140.51	191.47	199.97	151.35
Health self-care	0.39	0.54	0.03	0.01
Sleep	487.03	522.63	531.54	464.25
Any childcare (12:00AM-4:59AM)	0.30	0.72	0.48	0.18
Total childcare interruptions (12:00AM-4:59AM)	0.41	1.48	0.94	0.26
Household members				
Grandparent present	0.12	0.09	0.11	0.02
Grandparent or other relative present	0.19	0.09	0.13	0.05
Observations	180	131	36	361

This table reproduces Table 2 but restricts to time diaries on weekdays only.

Table A7: Time Use Among Parents of Infants: Mothers on Leave v. Mothers at Work

	Childcare		Physical care		Education investments		Health investments	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Parental leave	178.500***	162.870***	162.339***	149.295***	16.161**	13.576*	0.775	1.120
	(16.535)	(17.196)	(15.173)	(15.849)	(7.266)	(7.637)	(1.603)	(1.715)
Controls		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes
Mean of outcome	246.33		202.96		43.37		3.04	
Observations	605	605	605	605	605	605	605	605
R^2	0.240	0.283	0.242	0.277	0.013	0.025	0.001	0.003

	Secondary childcare		Sleep		Socializing and leisure		Grandparent or rel.	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Parental leave	127.290***	109.443***	21.910	18.317	41.676***	43.290***	-0.095**	-0.064
	(20.926)	(21.229)	(13.320)	(13.041)	(14.593)	(14.186)	(0.041)	(0.042)
Controls		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes
Mean of outcome	402.30		512.72		182.60		0.15	
Observations	605	605	605	605	605	605	605	605
R^2	0.079	0.156	0.007	0.046	0.020	0.057	0.017	0.202

This table presents regressions of time use variables on an indicator for the mother being on leave. The sample is restricted to mothers of infants who are currently employed and are either at work or on parental leave. The coefficient of interest is the indicator for the mother being on leave. The controls in columns 2, 4, 6, and 8 include: an indicator for having a college degree, age, an indicator for having an older child in the household, and an indicator for being married.

Table A8: Time Use of Fathers by the Mother's Leave-Taking

	Mothers (at work)	Mothers (on leave)	Fathers (partner at work)	Fathers (partner on leave)
Person characteristics				
Age	31.64	30.70	31.94	32.78
College	0.43	0.65	0.45	0.62
Household size (ATUS)	4.38	3.91	4.14	3.92
Household size (CPS8)	3.23	2.87	3.09	2.90
Usual hours (ATUS)	34.81	37.20	45.86	45.89
Usual hours (CPS8)	37.03	38.07	43.68	44.23
Time use (minutes)				
Working	247.55	5.37	349.19	306.26
Childcare	183.78	348.00	114.16	129.75
Physical care and looking after	146.63	293.74	88.68	104.78
Educational investments	37.14	54.25	25.48	24.97
Health investments	2.32	3.21	6.02	0.33
Secondary childcare	374.25	486.72	273.69	302.24
Household activities	99.80	148.98	77.80	77.65
Socializing and leisure	167.03	206.05	173.59	199.98
Health self-care	0.37	0.37	0.00	0.00
Sleep	497.58	517.38	476.25	485.52
Any childcare (12:00AM-4:59AM)	0.36	0.71	0.18	0.28
Total childcare interruptions (12:00AM-4:59AM)	0.50	1.43	0.23	0.48
Household members				
Grandparent present	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.01
Grandparent or other relative	0.07	0.04	0.03	0.02
Observations	228	235	188	169

This table uses the ATUS and restricts to parents age 18-45 with an infant (age 0-5 months). We further restrict the sample so that the respondent has an opposite-sex spouse or unmarried partner in the household, and so that both the respondent and the partner are employed. We then provide summary statistics for four (mutually exclusive) groups in the household: (i) mothers, employed and at work, (ii) mothers, employed and on leave, (iii) fathers with their spouse or partner at work, (iv) fathers with their spouse or partner on leave.