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Nearly Half of Workers in City Lack Paid Sick Days, Report Finds

By Jennifer 8. Lee

About half of New York City workers reported having no paid sick days, an increase over last year, according to survey of more than 1,200 New Yorkers by the [Community Service Society of New York](#) and [A Better Balance](#), a legal center that works on family and work issues.

According to the annual [survey](#), released on Thursday, 48 percent of working New Yorkers — 1.65 million to 1.85 million — now do not have paid sick days, up from 42 percent in 2008.

“It’s a very big deal,” said Jeremy Reiss, director of work force and economic security initiatives for the Community Service Society. He said the jump was caused in large part by the recession, as employers were not just shedding jobs, but also benefits and [even pay](#). “Employee-sponsored benefits are dropping across the board,” he added.

About two-thirds of low-income New York workers don’t have sick days, compared with a third of higher-income workers. (Low-income workers were defined in the report as those earning less than twice the income in the [federal poverty guideline](#), or about \$44,000 for a family of four. High incomes were defined as four times the earnings in the federal poverty guideline.) Over 70 percent of low-income Latinos reported not having paid sick days, the survey said.

The survey found that the restaurant, retail and construction industries were least likely to give paid sick days. In contrast, health care and educational services were most likely to provide paid sick days.

Advocacy groups and politicians have been pushing for New York City to follow the lead of other cities, notably San Francisco and Washington, in adopting mandatory paid sick days policies. In July, Gale A. Brewer, a city councilwoman from the Upper West Side, [introduced a bill](#) that would require large employers to give workers the ability to earn at least nine paid sick days a year, while small businesses that have fewer than 10 employees would provide five paid sick days. A hearing is scheduled for Nov. 16.

The bill has about 40 co-sponsors, making it likely it will pass the 51-member Council, Ms. Brewer said. Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg initially expressed concern over the burden on small businesses, but he has also [given qualified support to the idea](#).

While businesses in New York City and else where [have criticized such proposals as costly to small businesses](#), an assessment released in August by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors of that city’s 2006 paid-sick-leave law found that implementation “has been relatively smooth, with generally positive feedback from the business community.”

Sick leave became a more high-profile issue last year because of the swine flu outbreak, which resulted in dozens of school closings in New York City, the center of the outbreak in the United States. Parents had to scramble to find child care for their children if they could not take off work.

The survey asked workers about the hard choices they had to make as a consequence of not having paid sick days. It found that low-income workers without paid sick days were more likely to go to work sick compared with those workers with paid sick days (70 percent to 60 percent), and low-income workers were more likely to use an emergency room (24 percent to 17 percent).

“It’s a public health issue,” Ms. Brewer said. “This is a no-brainer. You shouldn’t be going to work sick.” Her proposed bill would also allow workers to take paid sick days to care for relatives.

The survey of 1,212 New York City residents from July 7 to Aug. 3 used random digit dialing. It oversampled residents of poorer neighborhoods but used statistical techniques to adjust the numbers to reflect the demographics of the city as a whole. The margin of sampling error for all respondents was 3 percentage points. The margin of sampling error for low-income respondents was 4 percentage points, and for moderate- and higher-income respondents, 5 percentage points.

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