

The State of Employee Leave: Sparrow's Annual Benchmark Report





Introduction

With an upsurge of public interest in federal leave, the expansion of paid leave at the state level, and with [leave claims at an all time high](#), understanding the employee leave landscape is more important than ever. As employers build out or evaluate their leave policies, they need to consider many different questions, including:

1. Who has access to state-run paid leave programs?
2. What type of leaves to include in a leave policy?
3. How much leave to offer in a leave policy?
4. How much leave do employees take?

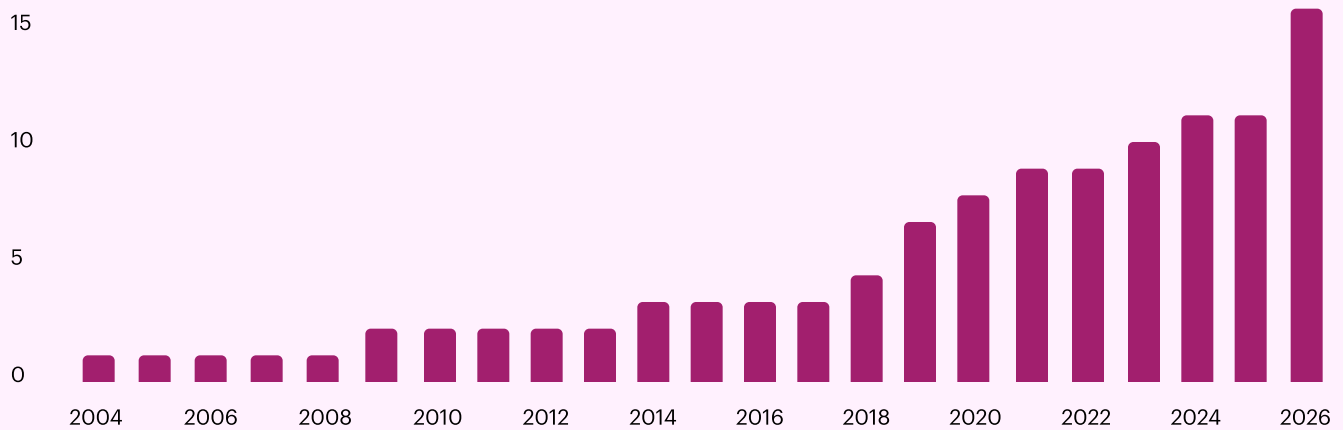
Since Sparrow's inception as the first true end-to-end Leave Management solution, we have worked with hundreds of employers and have managed [more than a million days of employee leave](#). In this report, we share insights gleaned from leave policy and usage data to shed light on the questions above. We also consider broader trends to offer a comprehensive picture of employee leave in 2024 and beyond.

Who has access to state-run paid leave programs?

Since the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) in 1993, there has been limited progress at the US federal level for supporting paid leave. According to the WORLD Policy Analysis center's [report](#), the US is just one of six countries in the world without any national paid leave. (The other five are The Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga.)

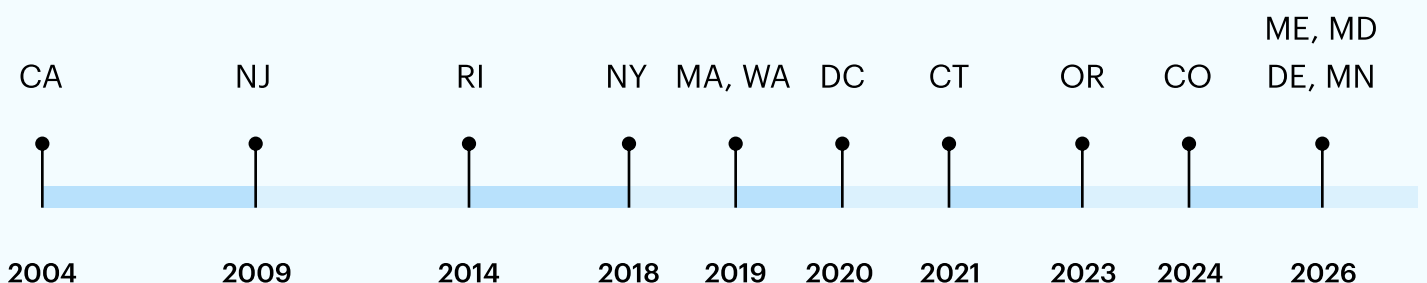
In the absence of federal paid leave, more and more states are filling in the gaps and enacting programs for paid family and medical leave:

Number of states offering paid family and medical leave

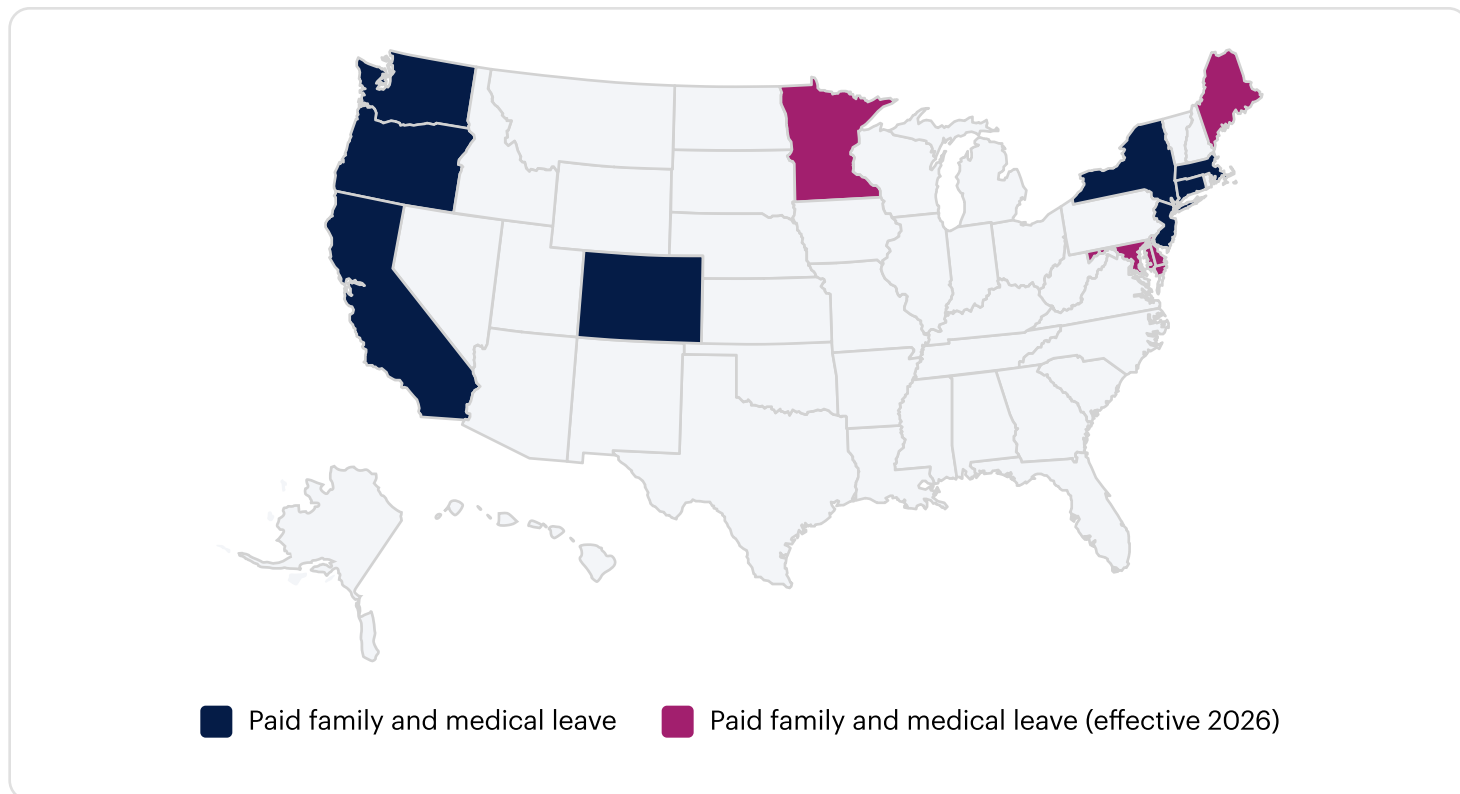


While some states like Rhode Island, New Jersey, and California instituted state disability insurance programs as early as the 1940s, California was the first state to offer paid family and medical leave with the passage of California Paid Family Leave (CA PFL) which took effect in 2004. There was slow uptake initially; only one other state (New Jersey) rolled out paid family leave in the subsequent decade. But over the last 10 years, we've seen a huge upswing in state legislatures enacting such programs:

Progression of state-level paid family and medical leave programs

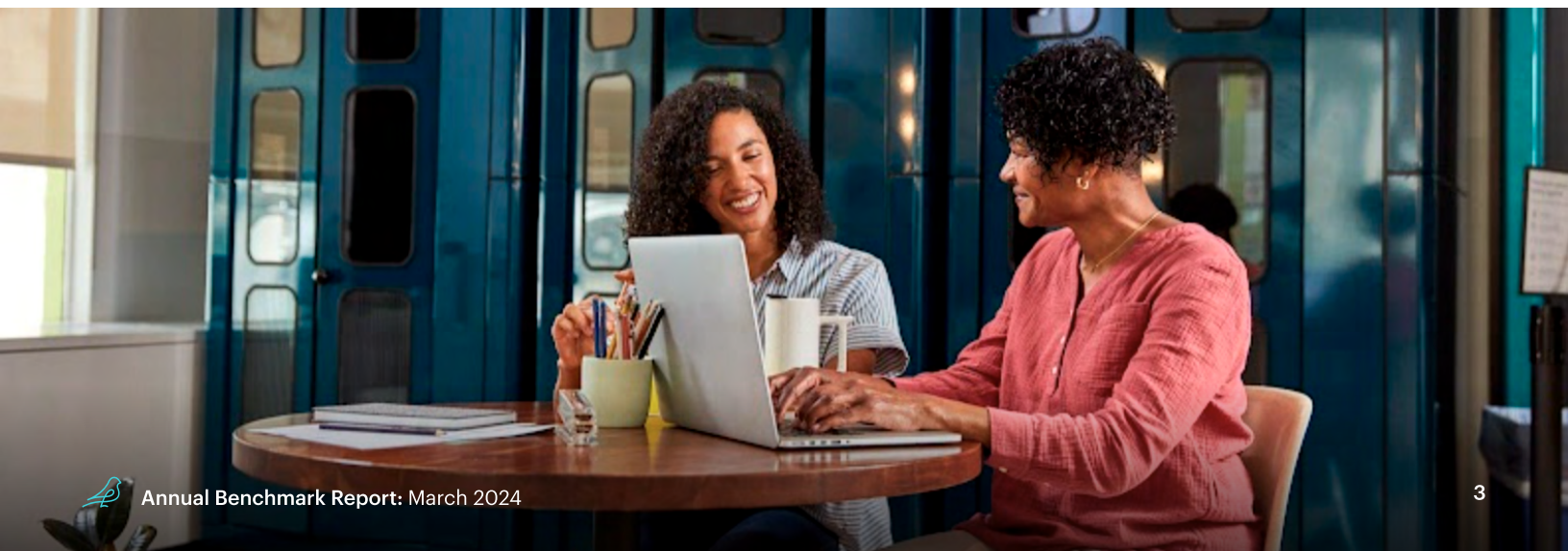


By 2026, 13 states and the District of Columbia will support paid family and medical leave for their residents:



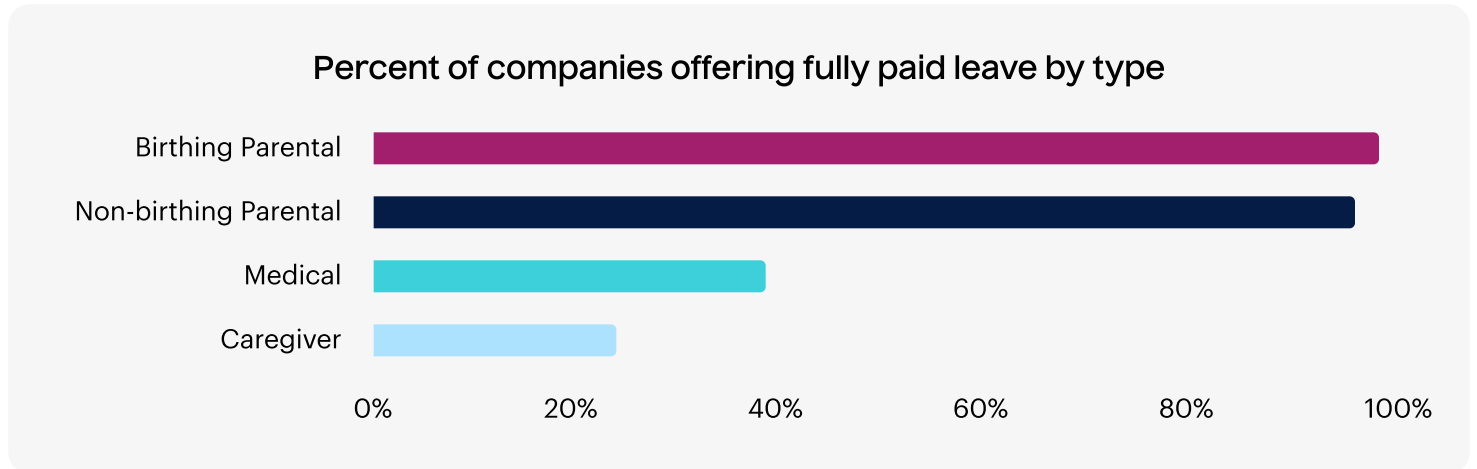
Not surprisingly, each of these programs has varying rules for who is eligible, how much time employees can take, how much wage replacement is provided, not to mention how to file for and receive these benefits.

Paid leave is only one aspect of state, local and federal leave laws. Notably, most legislation that enacted paid leave also includes provisions for job protection for employees. These state job protection programs are often similar to FMLA, but have their own rules for eligibility and their own set of required notices.



What type of leaves to include in a leave policy?

The four most common types of leave that employees take are: Birthing Parental, Non-birthing Parental, Medical and Caregiver leaves. These leaves account for **more than 95% of all leaves** in our data set, and also have the broadest support in leave policies:



It is important to keep in mind that writing inclusive leave policies requires care and consideration.

Historically, many policies referred to *Maternity* and *Paternity* leaves, leading to inequitable outcomes, e.g. for same-sex couples. Some employers offer *Primary* and *Secondary* Caregiver leaves so that policies do not make distinctions based on which parent (if any) gave birth; however this opens up thorny questions of equitably defining “primary” vs “secondary”.

A common option for employers today is offering *Birthing* and *Non-birthing* Parental leaves. For simplicity, this report will use this terminology for all such leaves.

While these four leave types are the most common, there are many other important types of leave offered by employers.

Bereavement Leave, also sometimes known as compassionate leave, allows employees to grieve and make arrangements in the event of the death of a close family member, such as a spouse, child, parent, or sibling.

Safe Leave is provided to employees who are victims of domestic violence, stalking or other crime, to enable them to seek assistance, relocate, or take legal action to ensure their safety.

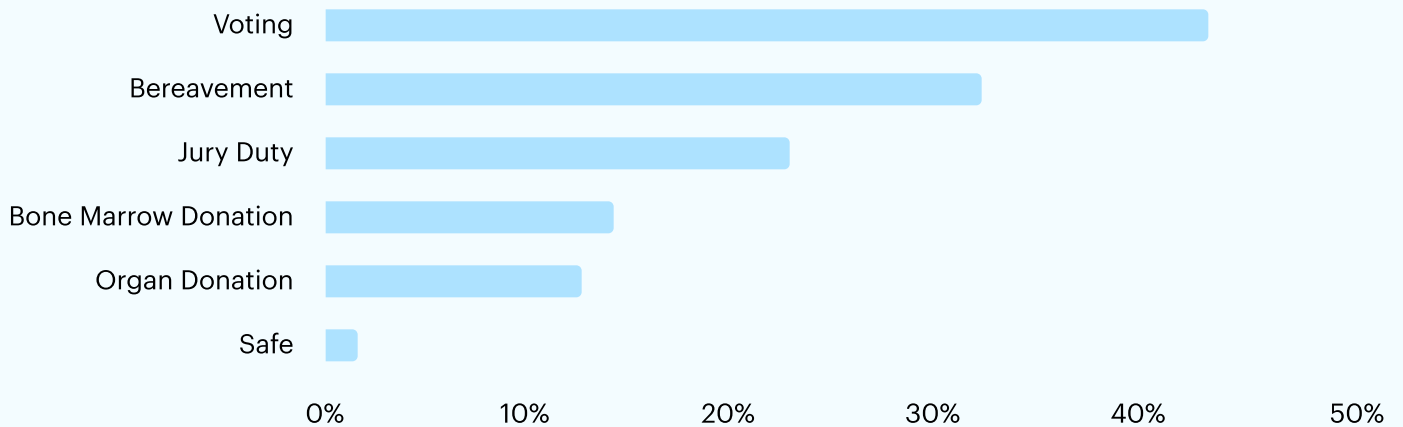
Voting Leave ensures that employees have the opportunity to participate in the democratic process without facing repercussions at work.

Jury Duty Leave may be required by law in some jurisdictions when an employee is summoned to serve on a jury. Employers typically cannot penalize employees for fulfilling their civic duty by serving on a jury.

Bone Marrow Donation Leave allows employees to take time off work to undergo a medical procedure to donate bone marrow to a recipient in need. It is intended to support employees to contribute to potentially life-saving medical treatments.

Organ Donation Leave is similar to bone marrow donation leave, and provides employees with time off to undergo surgery and recover from donating an organ, such as a kidney or liver, to someone in need of a transplant.

Percent of companies offering fully paid leave by type





In aggregate **50% of employers** in our data set offer at least one of these types of leave.

Slicing by company size, we see that as companies scale up, they typically include more leave types in their policies:

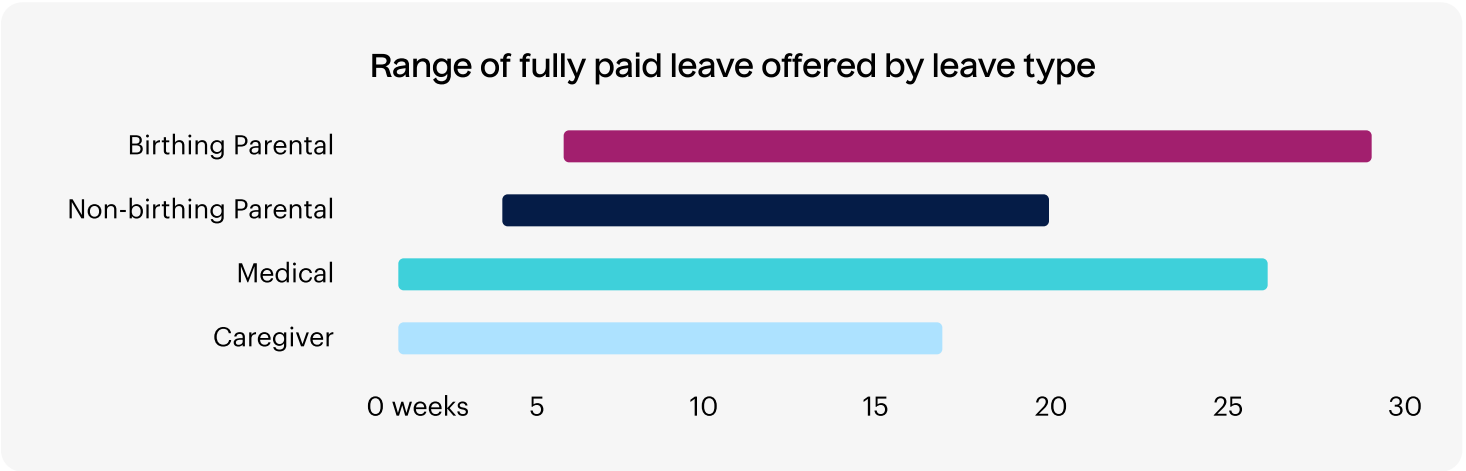
	Birthing Parental	Non-birthing Parental	Medical	Caregiver	Other*
<200 employees	100%	97%	34%	19%	55%
201-500 employees	98%	95%	40%	20%	45%
501-1000 employees	89%	87%	28%	22%	49%
1001-5000 employees	92%	92%	45%	50%	71%

*Companies that include at least one of the additional leave types (Voting, Bereavement, Jury Duty, Bone Marrow/Organ Donation, Safe)

While leaves such as Bereavement Leave and Safe Leave occur less frequently, they can be incredibly critical to employees when situations arise that require them. Offering employees paid leave during these times is an effective way to support employees when they need it most.

How much leave to offer in a leave policy?

Assuming an employer does include paid leave in their policy, how many fully paid weeks should they offer employees? This amount varies quite a bit, ranging from 1 week of fully paid Medical leave in some cases to up to 30 weeks of fully paid leave for Birthing Parental leaves.



For employers who include paid leave in their policies, the median amount ranges from 8 to 12 weeks of fully paid leave:





Slicing this data by company size reveals similar trends as before, with larger employers offering more leave. Notably, for companies with 1000+ employees, we find the median lengths go up to **15 weeks** of fully paid Birthing Parental leave and **10 weeks** of fully paid Non-birthing Parental leave.

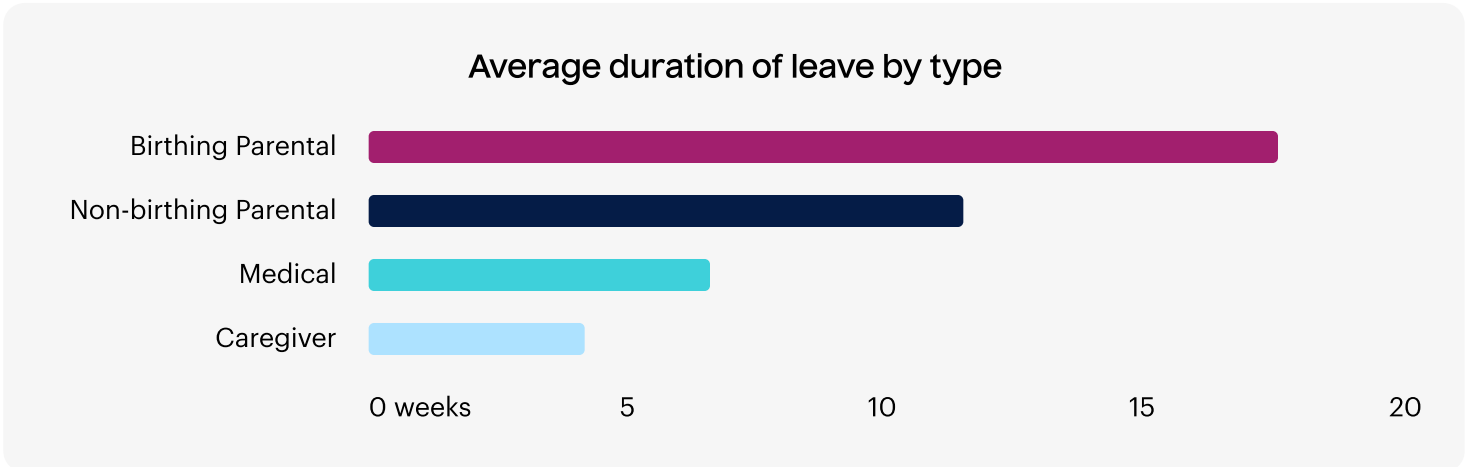
	Birthing Parental	Non-birthing Parental	Medical	Caregiver
<200 employees	12 weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks
201-500 employees	12 weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks
501-1000 employees	12 weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks
1001-5000 employees	15 weeks	10 weeks	8 weeks	8 weeks

This data shows that there are some emerging “standards” in the market for how much paid leave to offer, but also that there is plenty of room for companies to deviate based on business needs.

How much leave do employees take?

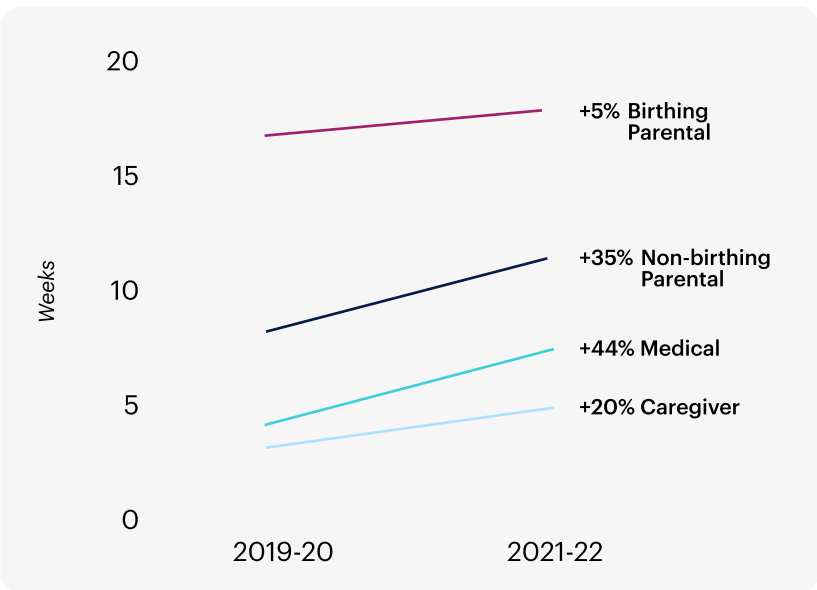
Paid leave offered by employers and state programs paints only one side of the picture. How much leave are employees actually taking?

As one might expect, we find that the average duration of leaves varies by type:



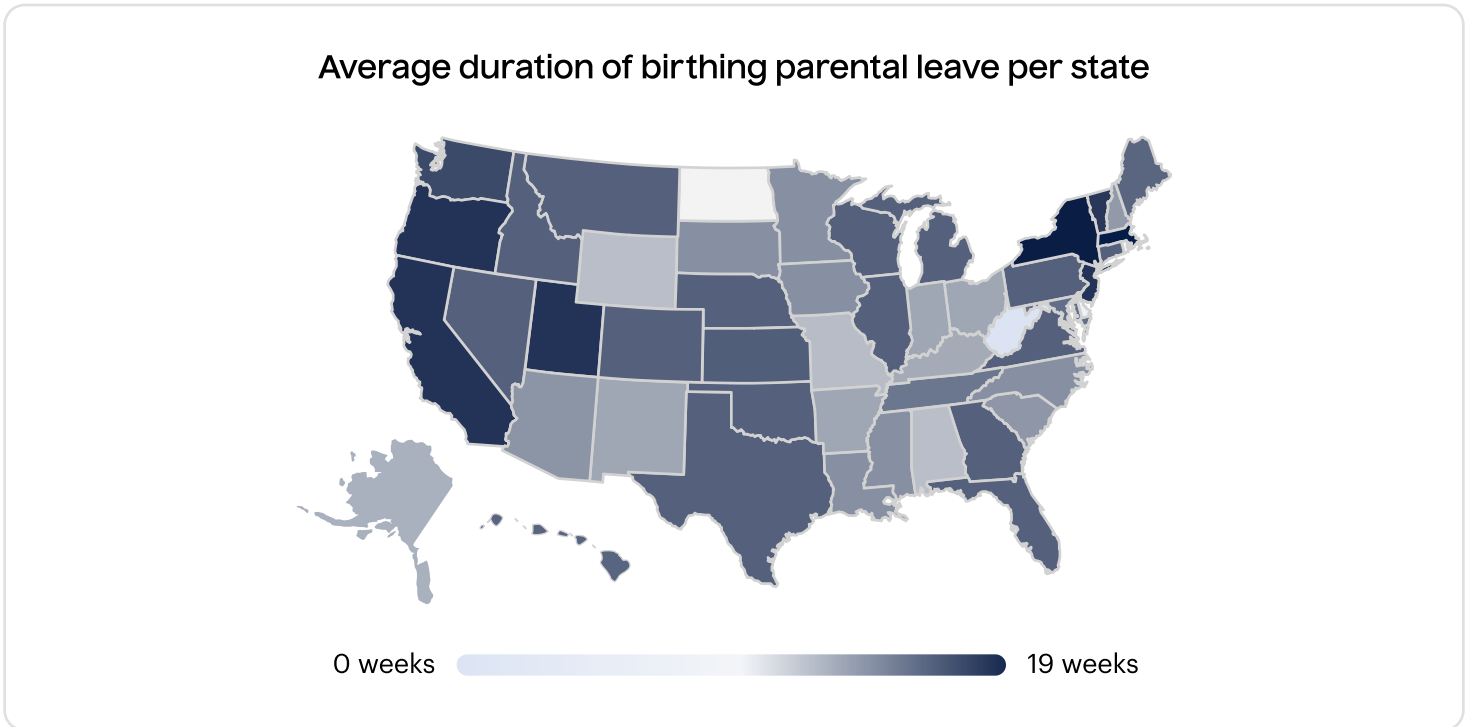
This data shows that the average duration of employee leave is longer than the average length of fully paid leave offered by companies. That is, employees often need to take more time than what is fully paid, and thus they will often take some partially paid or unpaid leave.

We also see that the amount of leave taken by employees has increased over the past few years. If we compare the average duration of leaves taken over 2019-2020 to 2021-2022, we see significant increases across all leave types:



Many underlying factors could be at play behind these trends. For instance, much of this time period coincides with the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected all kinds of leave, but especially Medical leaves (which saw the greatest increase). The ongoing transition from primarily office-based workforces to hybrid workforces resulted in many employers re-evaluating and evolving their benefits and leave policies during this time. Finally, employee attitudes towards leave and willingness to take leave might have also been a factor.

Finally, we consider: does the availability of paid leave programs affect how much leave employees take? Focusing in on Birthing Parental leaves, we find a wide spread of average duration across different states.



Looking carefully, we note that there are hotspots in many of the states that offer paid leave programs (e.g. California, New York, Oregon, etc). In fact, if we compare average leave duration in states offering paid leave benefits to states without paid leave benefits, we see that birthing leaves are on average **13% longer** in states offering benefits.

Average duration of birthing parental leaves

States without benefits

16 weeks

States with benefits

18 weeks



What's Next?

As we see from these trends, the employee leave landscape is both complex and changing quickly. While it's impossible to predict exactly how things may evolve, there are several durable macro trends which are likely to affect the future of employee leave.

Demographic Changes

According to [a report](#) published by the US Census Bureau, the overall US population is getting older and by 2034, older adults will outnumber children for the first time in US history. As the share of people 65 and older grows, there will be a corresponding need for workers to help care for their parents and older relatives. As a result, Caregiver leave will likely gain increased importance in the coming years to support these employees.



Legislation

Over the last decade, we've seen an explosion of states enacting paid leave programs: we've gone from a single paid family and medical program in California to 14 such programs already. And there are another dozen proposals in state legislatures across the country. Our data shows that employees do take more leave when these programs are available and we should expect this trend to continue.

Additionally, while there has been little progress towards paid leave at the federal level, we do see federal legislation that has a major impact on leaves. For example, the [recent passage](#) of the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act (PWFA) and PUMP Act enable employees to seek accommodations (sometime in conjunction with a leave) that they previously could not have under ADA.

Awareness and evolving expectations

The last few years have seen a surge in public discourse about the importance of paid leave, and we see no signs of this slowing down. The incredibly successful [#ShowUsYourLeave campaign](#) from [theSkimm](#) spotlighted transparency into leave policies and drove broader awareness about paid leave. Social media amplification of poor leave experiences resulted in [national attention](#) and public boycotts of employers. A [recent survey](#) shows that a majority of employers plan to change their leave policy in the near future.

Navigating this complex landscape is not easy for employers, and thus many choose to [partner with a third-party administrator](#) to manage employee leaves. We at Sparrow remain more committed than ever in our mission to demystify and simplify the leave process for all employees and employers.



About Sparrow

Sparrow is the first end-to-end leave management solution for modern employers to care for their people during major life events. Sparrow's high-tech, high-touch approach automates the most painful parts of employee leave management, while our world-class leave specialist team ensures a premium experience for all types of leaves across the United States and Canada.

By partnering with Sparrow, caring companies reduce compliance risks, enhance the employee experience, and contain costs.

[Connect with our experts to learn more](#)