

Health Policy fact sheet



Employment and maternal and child health

Effective policy has the power to create a future where everyone, regardless of socio-economic status, race or place of residence, enjoys the same opportunities for a healthy and fulfilling life. Policies can empower individuals and parents by ensuring supportive workplaces and accessible health resources, allowing them to reach their full potential in the workforce, drive economic growth and nurture the next generation.

This factsheet highlights employment policies that support maternal and infant health using the city of Cincinnati as a case study. Policies outlined in this brief are important because they empower individuals and parents, enhance job opportunities and have been demonstrated to improve birth outcomes.

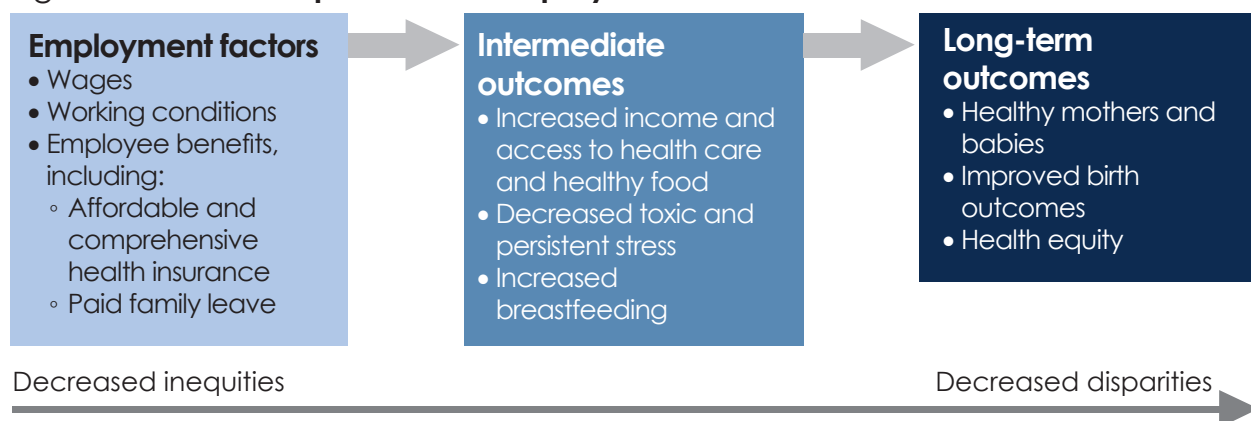
The Health Policy Institute of Ohio (HPIO) interviewed two city of Cincinnati leaders, Latisha Hazell, Human Resources Director, and Laura Castillo, Director of the [Department of Economic Inclusion](#). By implementing a [living wage initiative](#) and an updated [parental leave policy](#), Cincinnati has championed evidence-based practices designed to increase equity and foster a supportive work environment for city employees and contractors.

“I think for me, I want the governor to know that healthier families, healthier women, make healthier neighborhoods, make healthier cities, make a healthier state.”
— Latisha Hazell

Employment and maternal and child health

Employment can support health and reduce infant mortality when it provides access to a living wage, resources and benefits such as health insurance and paid leave.¹ On the other hand, research indicates that unemployment during pregnancy is linked to lower birth weights and higher infant mortality rates (as displayed in figure 1).² Working parents are essential contributors to Ohio’s economy. When their jobs support their ability to provide stable housing, high-quality child care and healthy food to their families, all Ohioans benefit.³ Research shows that access to employment, housing and transportation overlap and impact maternal and child health outcomes. To learn more, see HPIO’s briefs and action guides on the [Social Drivers of Infant Mortality](#).

Figure 1. Relationship between employment and health



Living wages support family health and well-being

Living wage is the minimum amount an individual or family would need to earn to meet their basic needs without added public assistance such as Medicaid.⁴ Living wage rates typically account for basic household needs, including healthcare, housing, food, transportation, child care and other necessities.⁵ In Ohio, families with the median household income typically spend 29% of their income on child care for two children alone.⁶ Additionally, 12% of Ohio households experience severe housing cost burden, spending 50% or more of their income on housing expenses.⁷ Living wage policies lower poverty among low-wage workers, which is particularly crucial for families with children due to the long-term negative effects of childhood poverty.⁸

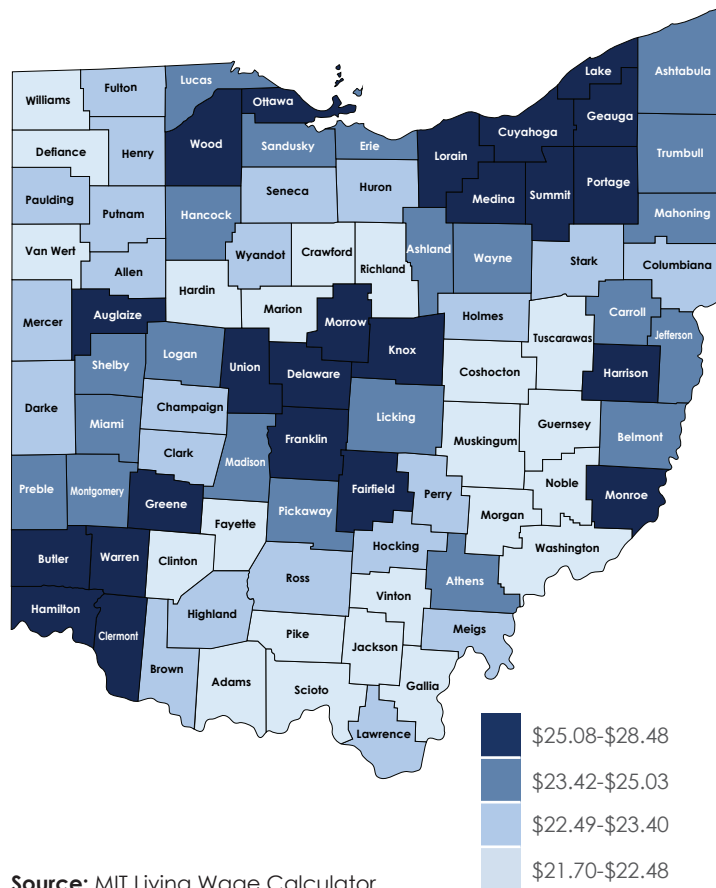
Some researchers and community members feel the term living wage is better defined as the minimum wage that covers necessary costs for people to survive but not thrive. Many factors impact how much is needed to live, and the current [living wage calculator](#) does not include repaying loans, saving for retirement, buying gifts, vacations or eating at a restaurant.⁹

Figure 2 shows the living wage by county for Ohio households with two adults and two children. For Ohio overall, the current minimum wage (\$10.45) is less than a third of the living wage needed for an average single-parent family with one child (\$35.13). It is also less than half of the living wage needed for two working adults with two children (\$25.16 per adult).¹⁰

In Ohio, living wage policies are largely driven by individual employers in the public and private sectors, as [Senate Bill 331](#) exempted local governments from setting their own minimum wage for all entities in their jurisdiction in 2017.¹¹ However, public and private entities are able to determine their own wage ranges.

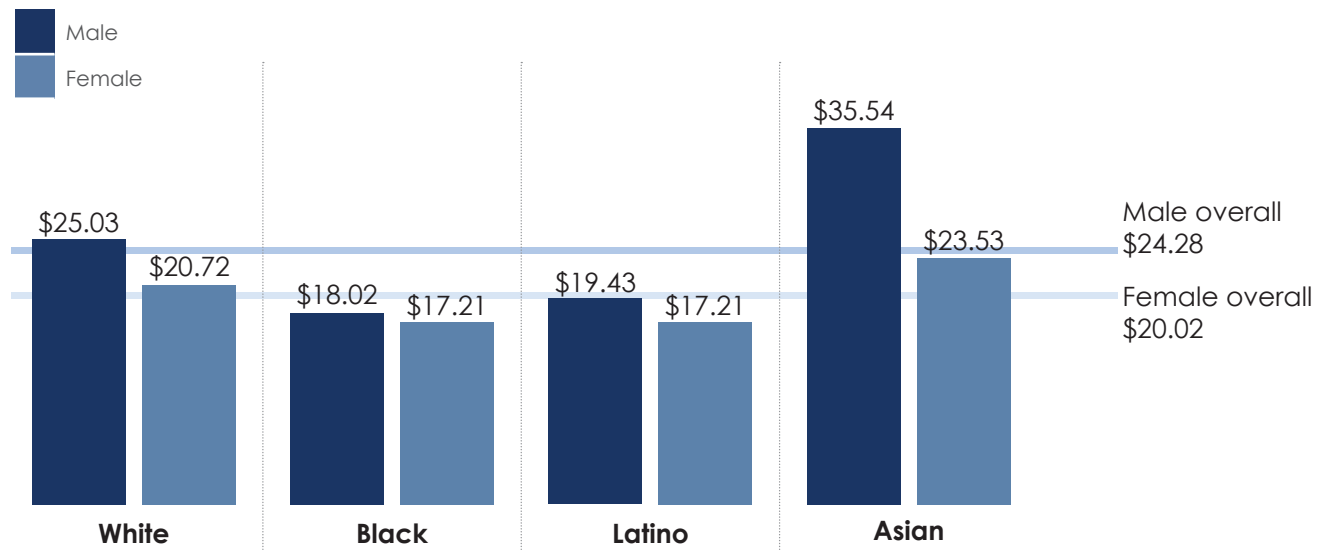
Figure 3 shows the median wage for the state by race and gender. Wage gaps between races and genders vary by occupation and factors such as discrimination, racism, type of job, education and work experience.¹²

Figure 2. Living wage of households with two working adults and 2 children, by county, 2024



Source: MIT Living Wage Calculator

Figure 3. Median wage by race/ethnicity and gender, Ohio, Ages 25-64, 2020



Note: Race and ethnicity are broad categories. Subgroups within these categories may experience different outcomes that are not represented at this level of disaggregation.

Source: IPUMS USA compiled by National Equity Atlas

Case study: City of Cincinnati living wage policy

Enacted in 2016 and overseen by the Department of Economic Inclusion, the Cincinnati Municipal Code mandates a living wage for all full-time city employees and for both full-time and part-time employees of contractors and subcontractors providing services to the city of Cincinnati. Adjusted annually, both the city and covered employers must ensure that affected employees receive a living wage.¹³

“It is not just the standard, but we’re talking about directly supporting families and citizens here in our own community when we’re talking about the living wage ordinance.”

— Laura Castillo

Wage theft

In addition to overseeing implementation of the living wage, the Department of Economic Inclusion also focuses on preventing wage theft through wage enforcement. Wage theft occurs when employers deny employees benefits they have earned, such as breaks or pay. Often unreported, wage theft includes practices such as paying less than minimum wage, requiring off-the-clock work, making illegal paycheck deductions, misclassifying employees, not providing overtime and violating tipped wage laws.¹⁴

“There was a section [of the [Cincinnati Financial Freedom Blueprint](#)] that specifically looked at wage theft, and part of this process was conducting a lot of outreach ... to our community partners on what are the challenges that our community, especially our Black community, is facing. And they found that over 36% of all residents have experienced some form of wage theft, the highest occurring among Black men.”

— Laura Castillo

According to Policy Matters Ohio, approximately 213,000 workers in Ohio—including 54,000 parents—are paid below the state or federal minimum wage each year. Women constitute 60% of those impacted, losing an average of \$55 per week, or 24% of their earnings. Low-income workers earning \$11.44 an hour or less are especially impacted, facing wage theft at a rate of 18.4%, compared to 3.8% statewide.¹⁵

“We do site visits as well ... and we try to speak with employees, and we have caught cases where people were not only not paid the proper rates and not informed of what their paychecks should look like or what’s being taken out of their paycheck, but blatantly not paid at all. So that’s really why we’re here — to ensure that doesn’t happen.”

— Laura Castillo

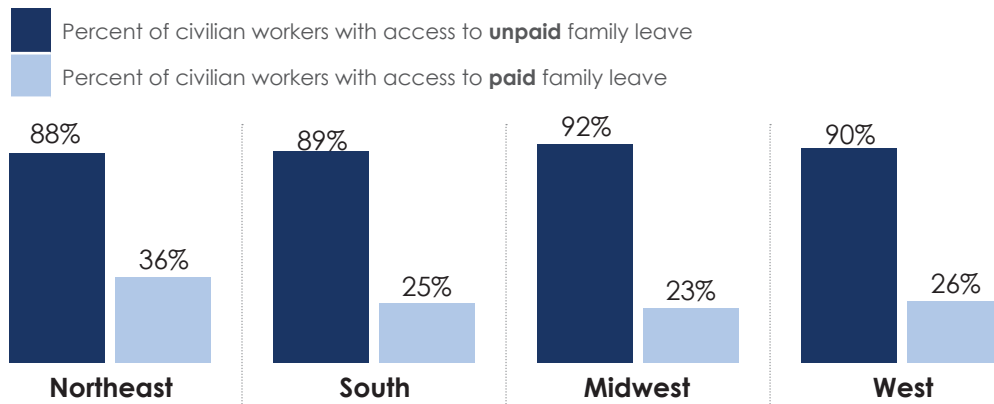
Parental leave supports family health and well-being

The United States is one of the only wealthy nations that does not have some form of legal guarantee that new parents can take paid time off to be with their child.^{16,17} Research shows that paid parental leave is beneficial to the physical, mental and economic health of parents, infants and children. Paid parental leave has been shown to have the following benefits¹⁸:

- Reduced postpartum maternal depression
- Reduced intimate partner violence
- Improved infant attachment and child development
- Decreased infant mortality
- Decreased mother and infant rehospitalization
- Increased pediatric visit attendance
- Increased timely administration of infant immunizations
- Increased breastfeeding initiation and duration

While Ohio does not have a statewide policy that provides paid parental leave to private or local sector employees, 23 states and the District of Columbia have either mandatory or voluntary paid family leave.¹⁹ Instead, paid leave policies in Ohio are driven by individual employers, similar to living wage policies. Notably, Ohio recently increased paid parental leave for state employees to 12 weeks of paid leave at 70% pay.²⁰ Figure 4 shows the variation of access to paid and unpaid family leave by region.

Figure 4. **Percent of U.S. civilian workers with access to paid and unpaid family leave, by region, 2023**



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Case study: City of Cincinnati parental leave policy

Through engagement with the consulting firm **Ellequate** and the **Hamilton County Commission on Women and Girls**, the city of Cincinnati committed to making policies that are supportive of all genders and ensure equitable pay and benefits, particularly for Black women and girls.

In January 2023, the city of Cincinnati updated its parental leave policy to better support the health and well-being of their employees. Major changes to the policy included:

- Extending paid parental leave from six weeks to 12 weeks
- Ensuring that leave is accessible to parents giving birth, adopting parents and to partners
- Eliminating the waiting period to allow full-time staff to use parental leave from the beginning of their time on staff

Policy change involves challenges and successes

Discussions with city of Cincinnati staff uplifted both challenges and successes to implementing the highlighted policy changes.

Policy challenges: Ensuring economic feasibility and equitable implementation

Economic factors, such as concerns about rising service contract costs and effects on small businesses, were a significant barrier to implementing the living wage policy in Cincinnati. In response, the city concentrated on supporting contracts with women-owned, minority-owned and other small businesses.

Although doubling parental leave was also viewed as costly, it was considered a worthwhile investment in the well-being of the workforce.

“Ultimately where a lot of those conversations ended, was that, yes, it will be more expensive when we’re talking about some of these service contracts, but it is directly to impact those families living here within Hamilton [County], within the city of Cincinnati.”

— Laura Castillo

“It was a challenge to try to figure out how that could economically make sense... But we overcame the challenge. We worked hard to trade off the economic costs with the value-added benefits of having a healthier [workforce], having the workforce be better and be OK when they return to these roles.”

— Latisha Hazell

Ensuring equitable implementation of the policies was also a concern. To address this, the human resources team and Department of Economic Inclusion communicated with staff through liaisons to ensure that people were not only aware but also had a clear understanding of the policies.

Policy successes: Supporting families' well-being and boosting employee recruitment

The city of Cincinnati has seen positive outcomes from its living wage and updated parental leave policies. Latisha and Laura highlighted the benefits to employees, including greater ability to attend to the health and financial needs of themselves and their families. Latisha noted that the extended parental leave provided employees with additional time to address physical and mental health challenges.

“Having a policy that extends beyond six weeks gives you a little bit more comfort when you have whatever challenges arise in dealing with having a new child or having a new part of your family join your family. Whether it’s a mental challenge, whether it’s physical healthcare, whether it’s a financial challenge.”

— Latisha Hazell

Laura recounted a situation where an employee reached out to their office about possible wage theft, and they successfully helped resolve the issue.

“...We worked with her and found that she was owed \$1,500 that she had not been paid. And so that is when you think about, especially at a period where you’re building your family or you’re going through a time where you really need to focus on your mental health or making sure that your physical and emotional well-being is where it needs to be, the last thing that you need to be concerned about is not getting paid properly.”

— Laura Castillo

Not only do the policies benefit individuals and families, they are also beneficial to the city of Cincinnati as an employer. Latisha described how the updated parental leave policy made the city more competitive in recruiting and retaining staff.

“What it has done for the city of Cincinnati is it has allowed us to recruit and retain our workforce.... I have a person who we recently hired last fall who took advantage of parental leave in February... She was really nervous about...having to start from the beginning with earning her leave balances. After we talked about the parental leave policy that we had, that you’re a new employee, but... you [still] qualify for this benefit. She accepted the job offer and she’s been working out great since she’s been here.”

— Latisha Hazell

What can be done?

Public and private entities across the United States are making improvements that support healthy workforces and communities. In Ohio, along with Cincinnati, localities including but not limited to **Cleveland**, **Cuyahoga County**, **Columbus**, **Dayton** and **Newburg Heights** have living wage, wage theft and/or paid family leave policies. Implementing these policies requires cross-sector partnerships and a commitment to community well-being.

“It can be done. They’re [employers] coming to the table, working with government officials, community members, labor, small businesses and finding a way in which we can come together and really move policy forward [in a way] that is in the best interest of the city...”

— Laura Castillo

There are opportunities for policy change at the state and local levels to improve access to high-quality employment and improve maternal, child and family health. Many of the recommendations listed below are being implemented in communities across Ohio and the United States. Examples and further information can be found in HPIO’s **Social Drivers of Infant Mortality: Employment Action Guide**.

Goal 1: Increase access to work supports



State recommendations

- 1.1. **Child care subsidies.** State policymakers can officially increase initial eligibility for child care subsidies (i.e., publicly funded child care) to 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL), providing access to child care for more families with low- and moderate-incomes.
- 1.2. **Benefits phase-outs.** State policymakers can review eligibility levels for government programs to remove disincentives to job attainment and wage increases (“benefits cliff”). Eligibility levels for benefits programs should be structured to support families on their journey to self-sufficiency.
- 1.3. **Employer-sponsored child care supports.** State policymakers can incentivize employers to provide child care subsidies to their employees to remove barriers to employment for parents, particularly those with part-time and/or low-wage jobs.

Goal 2: Adopt more robust leave policies and employment benefits



State and local recommendations

- 2.1. **Flexible workplace benefits.** State and local policymakers can offer low-cost incentives, such as awarding extra points during contracting processes, to employers who offer benefits including paid family leave, sick leave and work schedule predictability and/or flexibility.
- 2.2. **Paid family leave.** State and local policymakers can expand paid family leave benefits to 12 weeks or more and eliminate or mitigate the impact of waiting periods to access paid leave for public employees.
- 2.3. **Living wage standard.** State and local policymakers can increase the minimum wage paid to public employees to a self-sufficient wage, creating an example for private-sector employers to follow.
- 2.4. **Breastfeeding supports.** State and local policymakers can prohibit employers, primarily those offering part-time, classified and/or low-wage work, from discriminating against employees who breastfeed and require supports, such as paid breaks to express milk.

To learn more

More information related to employment policies that support workers can be found through:

- **Cincinnati Financial Freedom Blueprint** — City of Cincinnati
- **Honest day's pay: Protecting working people from wage theft** — Policy Matters Ohio
- **State of Working Ohio 2023** — Policy Matters Ohio
- **Paid Leave Means a Stronger Ohio** — National Partnership
- **Creating a financially prosperous Ohio: Strategies to improve family financial security** — HPIO

Notes

1. "Does 'Out of Work' Get into the Womb? Exploring the Relationship between Unemployment and Adverse Birth Outcomes - Helen Scharber, 2014," accessed September 16, 2024, <https://journals-sagepub-com.proxy.library.ohio.edu/doi/10.1177/0022146514543799>.
2. *ibid*
3. Health Policy Institute of Ohio, "Social Drivers of Infant Mortality: Employment Action Guide," June 2023.
4. Gould, Elise, Zane Mokhiber, and Katherine de-Courcy, "What Constitutes a Living Wage?: A Guide to Using EPI's Family Budget Calculator," Economic Policy Institute, January 31, 2024. <https://www.epi.org/publication/epis-family-budget-calculator/>.
5. *ibid*.
6. Living Wage Institute and U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, as compiled by County Health Rankings and Roadmaps
7. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, "Ohio County Health Rankings & Roadmaps," 2024, <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/ohio>.
8. Richard V. Burkhauser, Drew McNicholas, and Joseph J. Sabia, "Minimum Wages and Poverty: New Evidence from Dynamic Difference-in-Differences Estimates," Working Paper, Working Paper Series (National Bureau of Economic Research, April 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w31182>.
9. Nick Romeo, "What the Living Wage Leaves Out - by Nick Romeo," *Behavioral Scientist* (blog), February 26, 2024, <https://behavioralscientist.org/what-the-living-wage-leaves-out/>.
10. Glasmeier, Amy K. "Living Wage Calculator," Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2024. Accessed September 20, 2024, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/39>.
11. Pelzer, Jeremy. "Gov. John Kasich signs bill blocking Cleveland's \$15 minimum wage proposal." *Cleveland.com*, December 19, 2016. https://www.cleveland.com/open/2016/12/gov_john_kasich_signs_bill_blo.html
12. "Mind the Gap: Causes of Women's Lower Earnings Compared to Men," accessed September 24, 2024, <https://www.communitysolutions.com/resources/maher-gender-wage-gap>.
13. City of Cincinnati, "Living Wage," accessed September 10, 2024, <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/inclusion/bid-contract-requirements/living-wage/>.
14. Mangundayao, Ihna, Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, and Ali Sait. "More than \$3 Billion in Stolen Wages Recovered for Workers between 2017 and 2020." Economic Policy Institute, December 22, 2021. <https://www.epi.org/publication/wage-theft-2021/>.
15. "Honest Day's Pay," accessed September 4, 2024, https://www.policymattersohio.org/research-policy/fair-economy/work-wages/honest-days-pay?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwiuC2BhDSA-RlsALOVfBlSFQoOth9ZTGukPPDXQ6G2omfgr1V7S-GF8ypihkismiu41r5mOJdEaApY7EALw_wcB.
16. Adam Burtle and Stephen Bezuchka, "Population Health and Paid Parental Leave: What the United States Can Learn from Two Decades of Research," *Healthcare* 4, no. 2 (June 2016): 30, <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare4020030>.
17. U.S. Department of Labor, "The Cost of Doing Nothing: The Price We All Pay without Paid Leave Policies to Support America's 21st Century Working Families," September 4, 2015, <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/Cost-of-Doing-Nothing.pdf>.
18. Maureen Sayres Van Niel et al., "The Impact of Paid Maternity Leave on the Mental and Physical Health of Mothers and Children: A Review of the Literature and Policy Implications," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 2 (March 2020): 113–26, <https://doi.org/10.1097/HRP.0000000000000246>.
19. "State Paid Family Leave Laws Across the U.S. | Bipartisan Policy Center," accessed September 17, 2024, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/explainer/state-paid-family-leave-laws-across-the-u-s/>.
20. "Section 124.136 - Ohio Revised Code | Ohio Laws," accessed October 1, 2024, <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-124.136>.

Acknowledgments

HPIO thanks the interview participants for sharing their stories, time and knowledge.

Authors

Robin Blair-Ackison, MPH

Tonni Oberly, PhD, MPH

Contributor

Carrie Almasi, MPA

Graphic design and layout

Nick Wiseloge, MA

Support for this project was provided by Interact for Health and HPIO's other **core funders**.



www.hprio.net