

Paid Sick Leave: Prevalence, Provision, and Usage among Full-Time Workers in Private Industry

by Ross O. Barthold, Jason L. Ford
Bureau of Labor Statistics

Originally Posted: February 29, 2012

BLS data from the March 2009 [National Compensation Survey \(NCS\)](#) show that full-time private industry workers who had a paid sick leave plan with a fixed number of sick leave days earned per year did not, on average, use all of the paid sick leave they were provided. The data also show that usage varies among different industry groups.

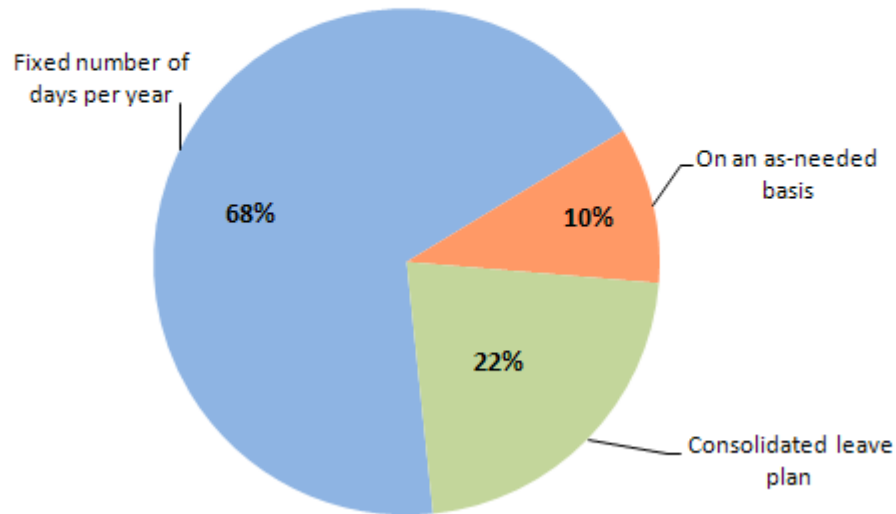
Paid sick leave benefits allow workers to take time off for illness and have been shown to help increase worker productivity and reduce the spread of disease within a company and community.¹ Although there is no federal legal requirement that employers provide paid sick leave benefits, 73 percent of full-time private industry workers in the United States were provided with paid sick leave plans in 2009.² Paid sick leave may be provided by the employer in a number of ways. The following are some of the most common:

1. **A plan with a fixed number of days per year.** These plans may give the worker a set number of days at the start of the year to be used as needed. For example, a worker may get 12 days of sick leave at the start of the year to be used at any time during the year. Alternatively, the employer may allow the worker to accumulate days based on time worked. For example, the worker may get 1 day of sick leave for every month worked. The NCS would consider both of these plans to offer a fixed number of sick days per year, even though the method of accumulating leave is different between these two types of benefits.
2. **A plan that provides sick leave on an “as needed” basis.** These plans are less formal and have no predetermined number of paid sick leave days.
3. **A consolidated leave plan.** In these plans, multiple forms of leave are combined into one plan. An example of such a plan is one in which workers are given 4 weeks of leave for vacation and illness or disability, and the workers can allocate days between these various uses as they choose.

Prevalence Of Paid Sick Leave Plans By Type Of Plan

Chart 1 shows that among full-time workers who participated in paid sick leave plans, 68 percent participated in plans in which a fixed number of days of paid sick leave were provided each year.³ Ten percent received paid sick leave on an as-needed basis, in plans that did not specify the maximum number of sick days that could be taken. Such plans were most common in establishments with fewer than 50 employees. The remaining 22 percent received paid sick leave through a consolidated leave plan.

Chart 1. Percent distribution of full-time private industry workers, by type of paid sick leave access, National Compensation Survey, March 2009



Paid Sick Leave Benefits And Length Of Service

As shown in chart 2, among full-time private industry workers who are provided with a fixed number of days of paid sick leave per year, workers received an average of 8 days per year at 1 year of service and 9 days per year at 20 years of service.⁴ The majority of full-time private industry workers with these plans, regardless of their length of service, received 5 to 9 days of sick leave per year.⁵

Chart 2. Average number of annual paid sick leave days provided to workers in plans with fixed number of sick days, by years of service, full-time private industry workers, National Compensation Survey, March 2009



Workers participating in plans with a fixed number of paid sick-leave days per year used an average of 4 days of their paid sick leave annually.⁶ The relationship between usage and days provided is complex. For example, in 2011, 44 percent of workers in private industry were able to carry over unused sick leave, so leave taken in a year may not reflect leave earned in that year.

Sick Leave Plans By Major Industry Group

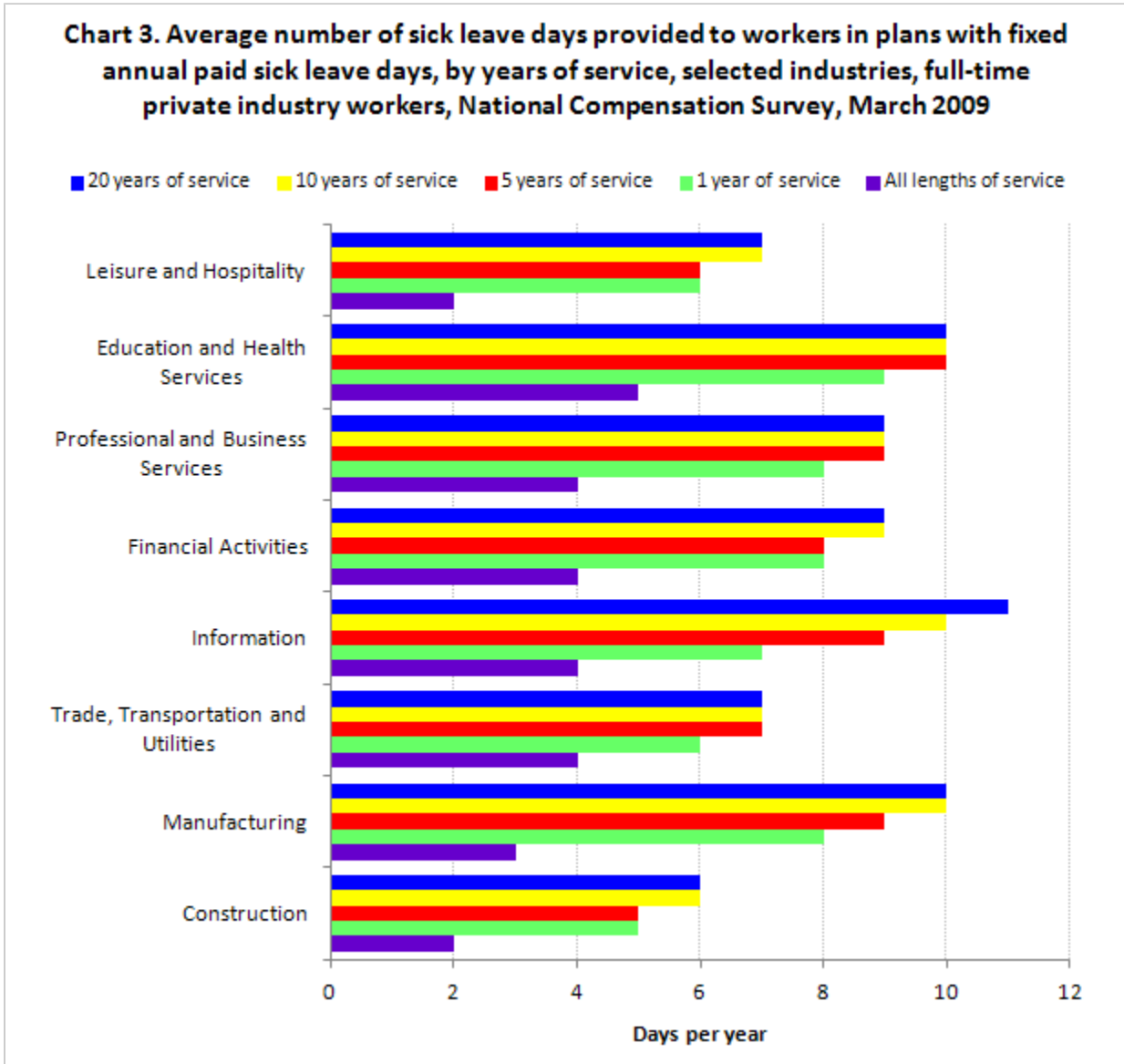
The most prevalent type of sick leave plan in private establishments is one that provides a fixed number of days per year. According to March 2009 NCS data, the prevalence among the industries selected in this study ranged from 58 percent of workers in the information industry to 79 percent of workers in the trade, transportation, and utilities industry.⁷

Table 1. Paid sick leave: Type of provisions, selected industries, private industry workers, National Compensation Survey, March 2009
(All workers with paid sick leave = 100 percent)

Industry	Sick leave provision		
	Fixed number of days per year	As needed	Consolidated leave
Leisure and hospitality	59	-	-
Education and health services	64	5	31
Professional and business services	67	14	19
Financial activities	67	9	24
Information	58	22	20
Trade, transportation, and utilities	79	9	12
Manufacturing	67	10	23
Construction	67	18	15

NOTE: Dash indicates no workers in this category or data did not meet publication criteria.

Chart 3 shows how the number of sick leave days provided to full-time workers varies with the length of service of the worker. For 1 year of service, the number of sick leave days provided varies from 5 for the construction industry to 9 for the education and health services industry. For 20 years of service, the number of days ranges from 6 for the construction industry to 11 for the information industry. (Note that the NCS does not break out usage data by length of service.)



Sick Leave Usage By Major Industry Group

The NCS collects the average amount of sick leave used for each job. Workers in the following industries used, on average, about 4 days of sick leave per year:

- financial activities
- information industry
- trade, transportation, and utilities
- professional and business services

Workers in the leisure and hospitality industry and those in the construction industry used about 2 days of sick leave per year.

Ross O. Barthold
 Washington University of St. Louis summer intern (2010), Office of Field Operations, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Jason L. Ford
 Economist, Division of Compensation Data Analysis and Planning, Office of Compensation and Working Conditions, Bureau of

Labor Statistics.

Telephone: (202) 691-6267; E-mail: Ford.Jason@bls.gov.

Notes

1 See Vicky Lovell, *Valuing Good Health: An Estimate of Costs and Savings for the Healthy Families Act*, IWPR Publication #B248 (Washington, DC: Institute for Womens Policy Research, April 2005), <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/valuing-good-health-an-estimate-of-costs-and-savings-for-the-healthy-families-act-b248>. See also Jody Heymann, Alison Earle, and Jeffrey Hayes, *The Work, Family and Equity Index, How Does the US Measure Up?* (Montreal, QC: McGill University Institute for Health and Social Policy, 2007), p.5, <http://www.mcgill.ca/files/ihs/WFEIFinal2007.pdf>, in which the authors note that paid sick leave is a benefit ensured in 145 countries.

2 *National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2009*, Bulletin 2731 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2009), table 30, <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/benefits/2009/ebbl0044.pdf>. Companies subject to the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) are required to provide unpaid sick leave to eligible employees. For more information, see the Work Hours page on the U.S. Department of Labor website at <http://www.dol.gov/dol/topic/workhours/sickleave.htm>.

3 The figures in chart 1 are from *National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2009*, table 32, <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/benefits/2009/ebbl0044.pdf>.

4 The establishment sample and weights used in producing the benefit incidence estimates were consistent with those used to produce the usage of sick leave estimates. However, a different establishment sample and weights were used in producing earlier estimates on access and participation than those used in producing these sick leave estimates. Care should be taken when comparing these estimates because of the differences in establishment samples and weights.

5 *National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2009*, table 33, <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/benefits/2009/ebbl0044.pdf>.

6 There are no standard errors available for the NCS usage data cited in this article; therefore, a statistical test to confirm the validity of comparisons made between usage estimates is precluded. Also, usage data are not included in other published releases of NCS data.

7 These percentages include full-time and part-time workers.

Technical note

NCS data are collected from a sample of establishments. Standard errors have not yet been developed for the NCS sick leave usage estimates presented in this article; therefore, the validity of the comparisons of sick leave usage among various groups of workers cannot be confirmed by a statistical test for reliability.

Data on the sick leave plan type are based on all full-time private industry workers with access to a paid sick leave plan. The type of plan is identified by the respondent. Plans can either provide a fixed number of sick days per year, allow workers to take time off for illness on an as-needed basis, or enable workers to use a leave bank.

Data on the number of sick leave days provided, the number of days used, and the percent of leave used are based on all full-time private industry workers with access to a paid sick leave plan that provides a fixed number of leave days per year and thus do not include as-needed plans or consolidated leave plans.

For each sick leave plan, the employer provides information on the number of sick leave days at each length of service. NCS calculates estimates of the number of leave days provided per year at 1, 5, 10, and 20 years of service by identifying the number of leave days that a worker with the given number of years of service would earn. For example, if a worker receives 5 days per year when hired and this number increases to 10 days per year at 3 or more years of service, NCS would record that at 1 year of service, the worker is eligible for 5 days per year of sick leave. At 5, 10, and 20 years of service, the worker would receive 10 days of sick leave per year.

An annual plan may allow a certain number of days at the start of a calendar, fiscal, or school year that the worker may use during the year. Alternatively, a plan may allow the workers to accumulate a certain amount of time for each period of time worked. With these plans, NCS calculates the amount of sick leave received if the worker works a standard work schedule for a year.

Data for Chart 1. Percent distribution of full-time private industry workers, by type of paid sick leave access, National Compensation Survey, March 2009

Type of plan	Percent
Fixed number of days per year	68

Type of plan	Percent
No formal plan: On as-needed basis	10
Other plans: Leave banks or combining sick leave with personal leave or vacation days	22

Data for Chart 2. Average number of annual paid sick leave days provided to workers in plans with fixed number of sick days, by years of service, full-time private industry workers, National Compensation Survey, March 2009

	Years of service			
	1 year	5 years	10 years	20 years
Average days provided	8	8	9	9

Data for chart 3. Average number of sick leave days used and provided to workers in plans with fixed annual paid sick leave days, by years of service, selected industries, full-time private industry workers, March 2009

	Leisure and Hospitality	Education and Health Services	Professional and Business Services	Financial Activities	Information	Trade, Transportation and Utilities	Manufacturing	Construction
Average usage for all lengths of service	2	5	4	4	4	4	3	2
Average days offered at 1 year of service	6	9	8	8	7	6	8	5
Average days offered at 5 years of service	6	10	9	8	9	7	9	5
Average days offered at 10 years of service	7	10	9	9	10	7	10	6
Average days offered at 20 years of service	7	10	9	9	11	7	10	6