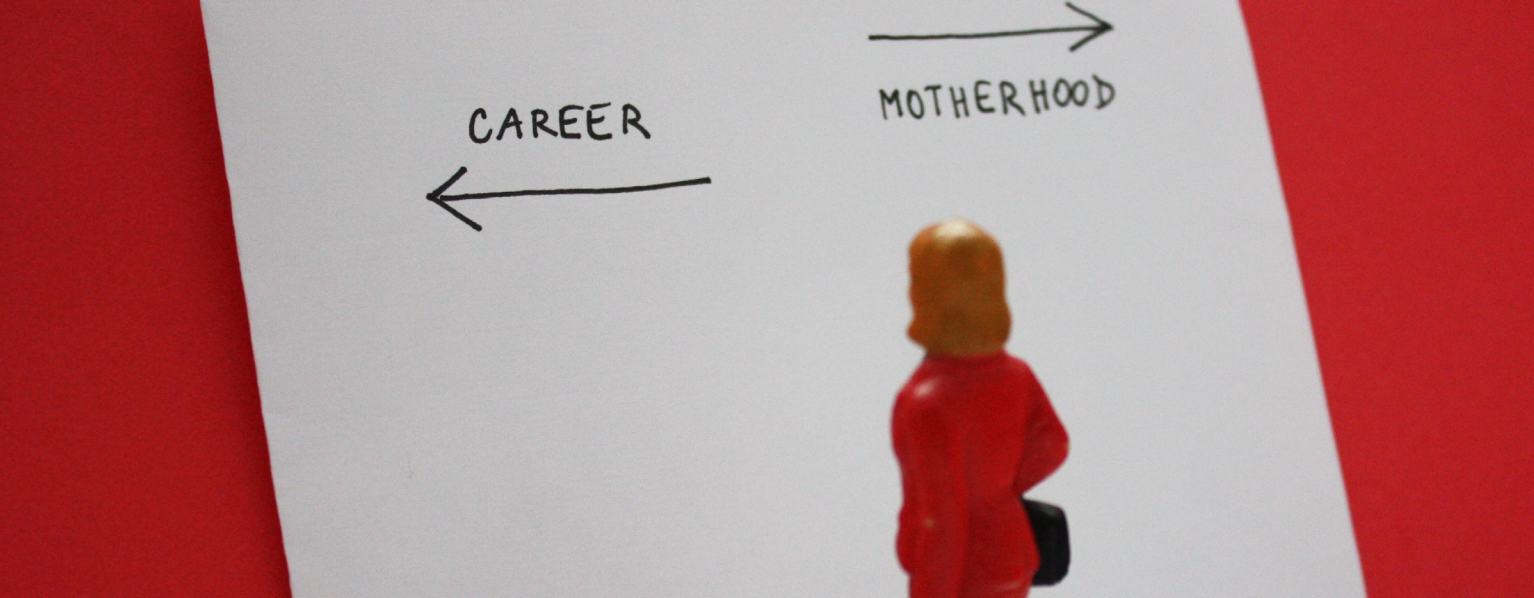


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Reducing Breast Cancer Risk Through Better Family Leave Policies

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SUMMARY

In 2023, an estimated 32,000 women in California will be diagnosed with breast cancer, and approximately 4,680 will die from it. For birthing women, both the initiation of breastfeeding and the duration of it can reduce the risk of breast cancer. Therefore, it is important to understand the barriers to a woman's decision to start breastfeeding and to continuing its practice for as long as desired.

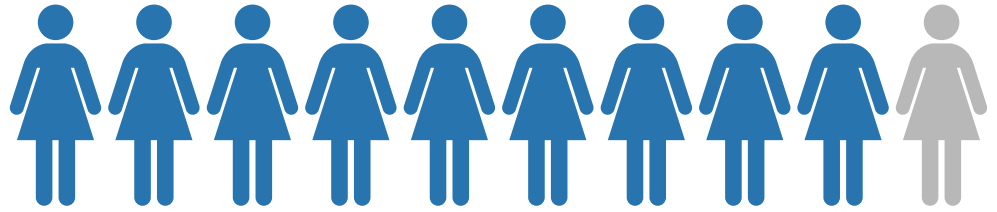
Through our study of mothers of newborns, maternal care providers (including physicians, nurses, lactation consultants, and doulas), and community advocates for child and maternal health, we gained insights into the barriers to initiating and continuing to breastfeed, particularly among working women.

Based on interviews, as well as on literature and policy reviews, this fact sheet presents our findings on the perceived benefits of comprehensive family leave, lack of family leave policies as a barrier to breastfeeding, and recommendations for improving family leave policies. (The full UCLA Center for Health Policy Research report, *Reducing Barriers to Breastfeeding in Disadvantaged Communities*, can be found at <https://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/our-work/publications/strategies-increasing-breastfeeding-disadvantaged-communities>.)

Exhibit 1 / Mothers Who Gave Birth in 2019 and Breastfed, California

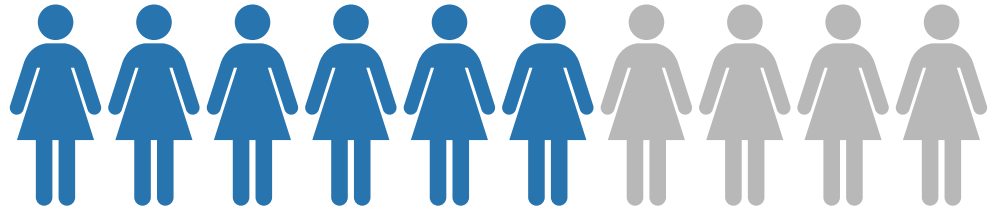
9 in 10

mothers who
ever breastfed



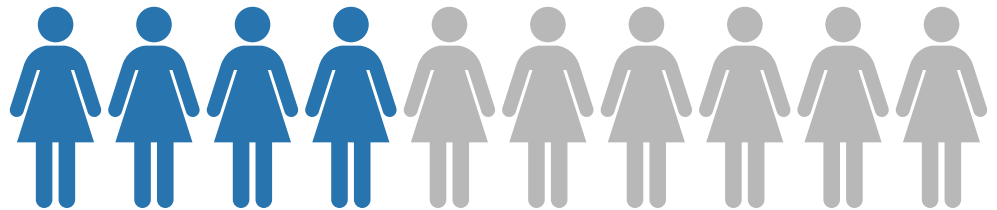
6 in 10

breastfed some
at 6 months



4 in 10

breastfed some
at 12 months




Source: National Immunization Survey, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Breastfeeding Report Card, United States, 2022*

Breastfeeding benefits the health of both a baby and its mother. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) recommend exclusive breastfeeding for a baby's first 6 months, and continued breastfeeding until the baby is at least 12 months (AAP) or 24 months (WHO). In California, about 90% of mothers who gave birth in 2019 reported ever breastfeeding (compared to 83% in the U.S. overall), based on responses on breastfeeding in the National Immunization Survey (NIS) (Exhibit 1). The NIS found that 62% of the California mothers reported any breastfeeding of their babies at

6 months of age, and 27% reported exclusive breastfeeding through 6 months of age. By 12 months, only 44% reported any breastfeeding. Public health efforts are needed to support mothers' breastfeeding goals.

The UCLA Center for Health Policy Research report *Reducing Barriers to Breastfeeding in Disadvantaged Communities* shares the experiences of Black, Asian American, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) women with family leave policies and offers recommendations for how to improve leave policies to meet the needs of breastfeeding mothers and their families.



“I think going back to a job reduces the hours that you breastfeed the baby, and you find that the women will wean off the baby earlier than six months because they have to go back to a job.”

Findings are based on interviews with 33 mothers of recent newborns, maternal care providers (including physicians, nurses, lactation consultants, and doulas), and community advocates for child and maternal health, as well as on literature and policy reviews.

FAMILY LEAVE POLICIES A POTENTIAL BARRIER TO BREASTFEEDING

Family leave from work supports time to bond with infants and to breastfeed them or feed them expressed breastmilk. The 23 mothers and 10 providers/community representatives interviewed for the study had many different experiences when it came to family leave: Some had paid leave, some had a mix of paid and unpaid leave, and some chose unemployment to spend the time with their children. Although the length of leave varied, most participants still felt it was inadequate.

Additionally, most mothers were unclear as to the legal rights around family leave for themselves or their partners. Even a mother who was aware of the rights for family leave was unclear on the details. One woman noted, “We were looking at options for disability or getting paid family leave for PFL [paid family leave] ... But I did read up on it, and it did say the 12 weeks, but it said up to eight paid. So I’m a little confused about that.”

Paternity leave policies also led to confusion. One woman whose husband wanted to take off time to support her was struggling to figure out whether his job allowed leave, and if so, whether it would be paid. The mother said, “But that’s the problem. If he stays back, then that cuts both of our incomes. And so that’s a little of what we’re struggling with now.”

Ultimately, all participants in the study pointed to the return to work as a significant barrier to achieving long-term breastfeeding plans.

Exhibit 2 / Federal and State Family Leave Policies

Name	Year Passed	Description	Duration
The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)	1993	Requires certain employers to give eligible employees unpaid, job-protected leave per year for certain family and medical reasons, including the birth of a child and the care of a newborn child. Employers must also give breastfeeding mothers reasonable break time to express milk for a nursing child. The law applies to employers with 50 or more employees within 75 miles of the worksite.	12 weeks within one year of birth Within one year of birth
The California Family Rights Act (CFRA)	1993	This state law generally mirrors the federal FMLA of job protection but applies to employers in California with five or more employees.	Up to 12 weeks
California Paid Family Leave (PFL)	2002	Benefit payments of approximately 60% to 70% of the wages an employee earned per week during the 5 to 18 months leading up to the start date of the claim. Must be taken concurrently with leave under federal FMLA and state CFRA.	Up to 8 weeks

One doula said, “A lot of the times there are work barriers, and people cannot see breastfeeding their children or even feeding them pumped milk beyond the time that they're able to spend at home. A lot of the people I work with have six weeks, and it's hard to continue after that six-week period because of what they perceive to be pumping restraints.”

Mothers overall were very concerned about how returning to a regular work schedule would impact breastfeeding. A provider echoed these concerns: “I think going back to a job reduces the hours that you breastfeed the baby, and you find that the women will wean off the baby earlier than six months because they have to go back to a job.”

However, several mothers in the study cited financial concerns as the need to return to work, ultimately impacting their breastfeeding goals.

“If I could ask for anything at all, it would be paid maternity leave for the first year, however long we want them to breastfeed. So, the new recommendation had been up to a year; it's now two years. I understand it's asking for a lot, but if there could be paid maternity leave for up to a year for parents, I think that would be the biggest get.”

“I was given two months off, and two months is not enough. You cannot leave a 2-month-old baby.”

One woman said, “I didn't really want to [return to] work for as long as I could during his first year. But at three months postpartum, my family needed money for rent, so I kind of just went to work. ... I wanted to stay home and breastfeed, but making money halted that for me.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING FAMILY LEAVE POLICIES

The following recommendations, based on a policy and literature review as well as on key informant interviews, could help reduce barriers to breastfeeding related to family leave:

Align family leave policies with recommendations for breastfeeding practices and duration. Leading public health institutions promote breastfeeding for *at least* up to one year after birth. Every study participant was adamant that family leave must be longer, paid, and cover both parents. One doula said that leave policies do not align with medical recommendations for breastfeeding: “If I could ask for anything at all, it would be paid maternity leave for the first year, however

long we want them to breastfeed. So, the new recommendation had been up to a year; it's now two years. I understand it's asking for a lot, but if there could be paid maternity leave for up to a year for parents, I think that would be the biggest get.” One participant stated, “I was given two months off, and two months is not enough. You cannot leave a 2-month-old baby.”

Improve awareness among workplace owners, managers, and employees about family leave rights. The full list of rights for breastfeeding mothers should be on display at or provided in materials given by hospitals, birthing centers, and other prenatal programs. Additionally, promotional campaigns could partner with other maternal and child health organizations to increase awareness of rights in the workplace.

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