



Paid Sick Leave in Virginia

Evidence from the Shift Project

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has cast a bright light on the difficult working conditions faced by many workers in the service sector. Workers in retail, food service, delivery and fulfillment positions are now lauded as “essential” and front-line heroes, yet, even in the midst of this praise, and in the midst of a pandemic, these same workers often lack the basic ability to take a paid sick day.

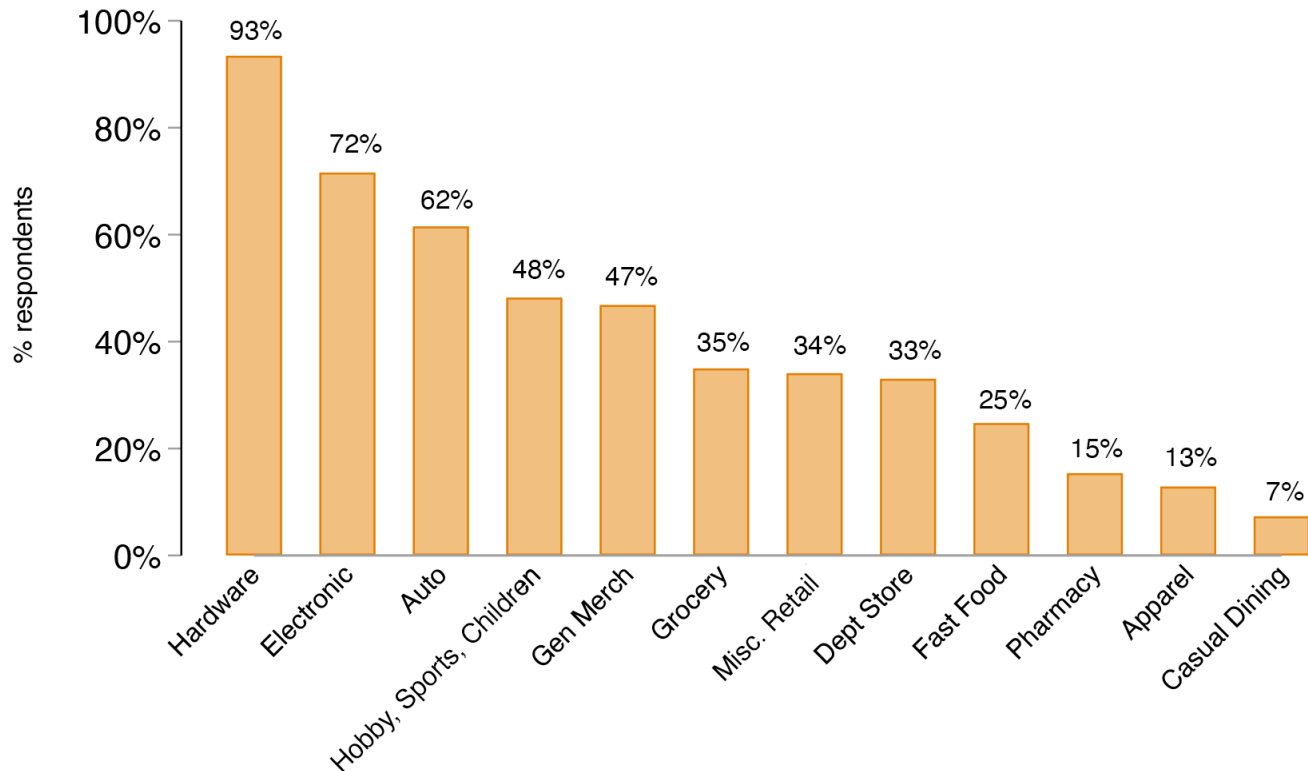
The Federal Families Coronavirus Response Act (FFRCRA) provided paid sick leave (PSL) coverage to millions of private sector workers for the first time. However, this important legislation specifically exempts large firms with more than 500 workers, including those in the service sector, leaving many workers unprotected.

In this brief, we draw on Shift Project data from 733 hourly workers at 103 of the largest service sector employers in Virginia who were surveyed between February of 2018 and May of 2020.

We document four key facts:

- Just one-third of workers in the service sector overall reported access to paid sick leave at work and that share fell to fewer than 10% in casual dining and to 25% in fast food.
- Access was also unequal – Black workers, students, and workers with young children were all less likely to have access to paid sick leave.
- Sick days are a luxury that few workers without paid sick leave can afford. Eighty percent of workers who lacked paid sick leave had trouble making ends meet, nearly half lacked confidence in their capacity to cope with a \$400 shock, and a quarter had experienced hunger hardship.
- While access to paid sick leave increased slightly in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, access remained low and far from universal.

Figure 1. Virginia Service Sector Workers' Access to Paid Sick Leave by Sub-Sector



Access to Paid Sick Leave

As shown in Figure 1 (above), paid sick leave has benefits both for workers, who are then able to stay [home when sick](#) themselves or to care for ailing household members, as well as for [public health](#). In the midst of a historic pandemic, paid sick leave allows workers to effectively quarantine when ill and so [help to arrest the spread of COVID-19](#).

This public health function of paid sick leave is especially important for front-line service sector workers who often have substantial customer contact. Yet, in Virginia, just one-third of service sector workers at large firms reported that they could receive paid sick days as part of their job.

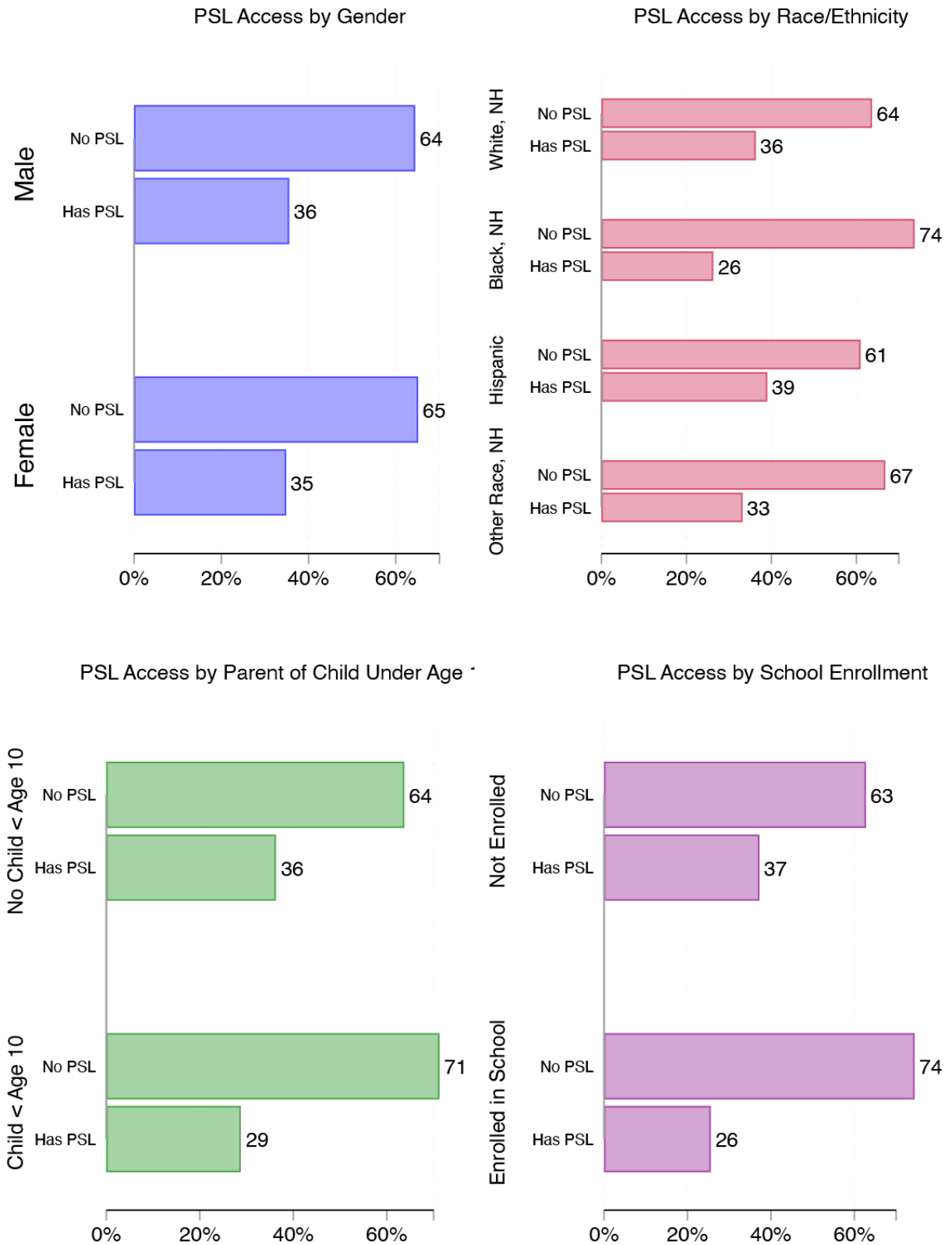
Access was quite variable across sub-sectors, with better than 90% of workers in hardware and building supply reporting PSL against less than 10% in casual dining, and just 13% in retail apparel and 25% in fast food.

Inequalities in Access to Paid Sick Leave

While just a third of Virginia service sector workers at large firms report access to paid sick leave, as shown in Figure 2 (below), some groups of workers have even less access. While there is little evidence of gender inequality in PSL in Virginia, there are pronounced gaps by race/ethnicity with Black, non-Hispanic workers in particular less likely to have access to paid sick leave at 26% versus 36% of white, non-Hispanic workers.

There are similar gaps between workers who were parents of young children under the age of 10, only 29% of whom reported access to PSL, and those without young children, 36% of whom had access. Students were also less likely to have PSL, at 26%, than non-students (37%).

Figure 2. Inequality in Access to Paid Sick Leave Among Virginia Service Workers at Large Firms

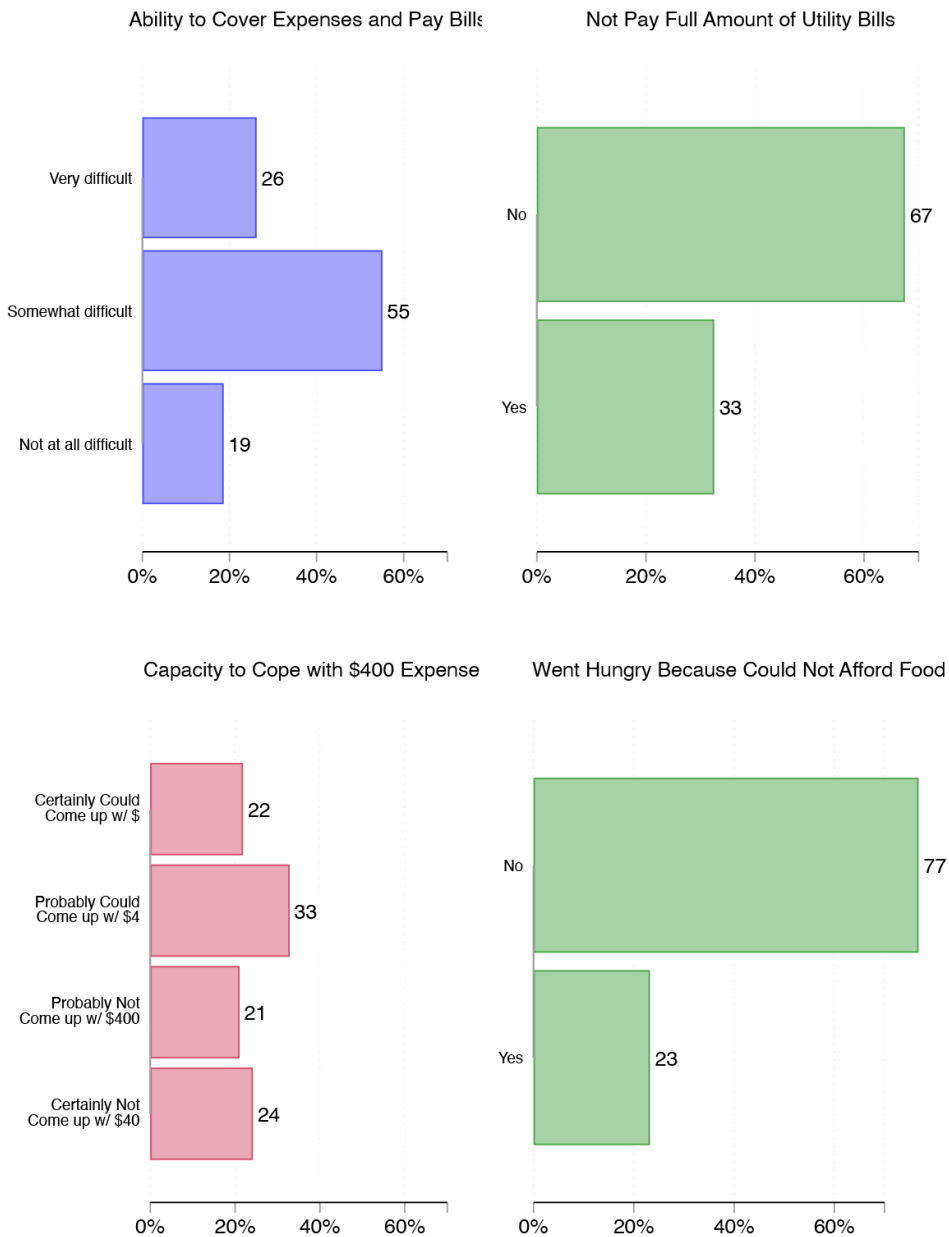


Financial Fragility Among Workers without Paid Sick Leave

Without PSL, staying home sick is a luxury few Virginia retail and food service workers can afford. Retail and food service workers live very close to the financial edge. As shown in Figure 3 (below), two-thirds of Virginia workers at large service sector firms who lacked paid sick leave have household incomes of less than \$35,000 per year.

One in four reported experiencing a time in the last year when they went hungry because they couldn't afford enough to eat. Forty-five percent report that they would not be able to cope with a \$400 unexpected expense or income shock. A quarter of workers who lacked PSL reported that it was very difficult to cover expenses and pay bills and another 55% reported that it was somewhat difficult. One in three had not been able to pay the full amount of a utility bill in the last year. These levels of financial fragility and material hardship belie the notion that workers might be able to afford to stay home while sick without being paid.

Figure 3. Financial Fragility of Virginia Service Sector Workers at Large Firms Who Lacked PSL

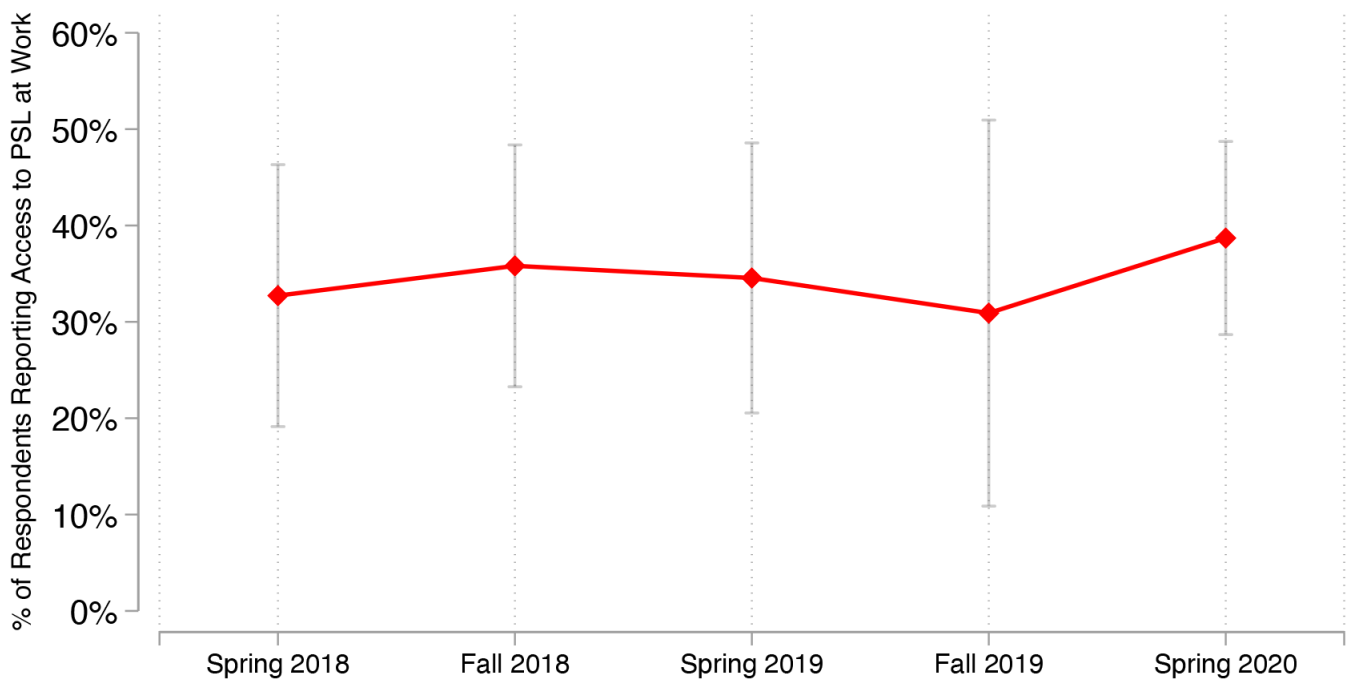


Change Over Time in Paid Sick Leave Access

The FFCRA significantly broadened access to paid sick leave for many workers. Yet, the law exempted workers at both small firms (with fewer than 50 workers) and large firms (with more than 500 workers). At the same time, it appears that some firms [voluntarily expanded paid sick leave](#) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For Virginia service-sector workers employed by large firms that were exempt from FFCRA requirements, these voluntary increases did not meaningfully move the needle towards coverage. In the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, between 31% and 36% of Virginia workers in our sample reported PSL coverage. That share increased, but only modestly, to 39% in the Spring of 2020.

Figure 4. Change Over Time in Access to PSL Among Virginia Service Sector Workers at Large Firms
(Feb 2018 – May 2020)



Conclusion

Paid sick leave affords workers what many take for granted – the ability to take paid time off from work to recover from illness or care for sick household members. In the midst of a global pandemic, PSL is not just a convenience, but an important policy to protect public health.

Yet, we find that most service sector workers at large firms in Virginia lack access to PSL, especially Black, non-Hispanic workers, student workers, and working parents of young children. For these workers, sick days are a luxury that is difficult to afford given the financially fragile position that low wages and unstable hours produce. Even as COVID-19 took hold in the spring of 2020, we find little evidence that employers increased paid sick leave access.

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Methodological Appendix

The Shift Project has collected survey data from hourly service-sector workers employed at large retail and food establishments since the fall of 2016. This brief focused on a subsample of 733 hourly service-sector workers employed at 103 of the largest food-service and retail firms who were interviewed between February 2018 and May 2020 in Virginia.

The Shift Project recruits survey respondents using online Facebook/Instagram advertisements, targeted to workers employed at large retail and food-service employers. Those who responded to the Shift survey invitation were automatically routed to a survey landing page where they were asked to consent to participate in the study, then began the online self-administered survey using the Qualtrics platform. As an incentive, those who completed the survey and provided contact information were entered into a lottery for an Apple iPad. The survey included modules on job characteristics, work schedules, demographics, economic stability, health, parenting, and child outcomes. To screen out invalid survey responses, we used an attention filter (a question that instructed respondents to select a particular response category to verify the accuracy of their responses) as well as a speed filter (discarding data for surveys that were completed too hastily). We multiply impute the data for non-response. We condition the sample on respondents who completed the survey but who may have item non-response. This yields an analysis sample of 733 respondents.

The survey recruitment approach yields a non-probability sample of workers, which may differ from the broader population of service-sector workers. Therefore, the estimates in this brief may differ somewhat from the percent and number of workers who lack paid sick leave in the broader population of workers. To mitigate this potential bias, we have applied weights that adjust our sample to reflect the universe of service-sector workers in Virginia. These weights are constructed in two stages.

First, we construct survey weights to adjust the demographic characteristics of the Shift survey sample to match the demographic characteristics of service-sector workers in the American Community Survey (ACS) for the years 2008-2017. We align the ACS sample with the Shift sample by selecting workers in the ACS who are employed in the same occupations and industries as the Shift sample. These weights are constructed using age, gender, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment by state.

Second, to ensure that our sample accurately reflects the distribution of employment types among large retail and food-service employers, we use data from the Reference USA database of U.S. establishments. The RefUSA database contains a detailed listing of all retail and food establishments nationally. RefUSA contains the size of the workforce for each establishment, which we aggregate up to the industry level. Then, using the aggregated RefUSA employer data, we weight our Shift survey sample to match the distribution of workers by industry within state. All of the descriptive results we present in this report apply these ACS demographic and RefUSA employer weights.

In our analysis of the extent of access to paid sick leave, the financial insecurity of workers without paid sick leave, and gender gaps in sick leave and insecurity, we estimate weighted unadjusted descriptive statistics. In our analysis of time trends in paid sick leave, we present predicted levels of paid sick leave from weighted regression models that adjust for age, gender, race/ethnicity, school enrollment, and having children.

For a detailed discussion of The Shift Project data collection, methodology, and data validation, see: Schneider, D. and K. Harknett. 2019. "What's to Like? Facebook as a Tool for Survey Data Collection." *Sociological Methods & Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124119882477>.