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Is Access to Sick Days Color-Coded?

New research finds that access to paid sick leave is significantly rarer among Hispanic and black employees. Can HR help bring balance to the equation?

By Michael O'Brien



While the color of your skin will not protect you from getting sick at work, it definitely affects your access to paid sick days, according to a new report.

Asian-Americans and whites have the highest rates of access to sick days, at 67 percent and 60 percent, respectively, compared to 56 percent of blacks and 42 percent of Hispanics, according to a national estimate released by the Washington-based Institute for Women's Policy Research.

The report was compiled using data on private-sector employees from the *2009 National Health Interview Survey* by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Robert Drago, research director of the Institute for Women's Policy Research, cautions that no individual employers were involved in the research.

"This doesn't have to do with any particular employer," he says. "If they were basing access to paid sick leave according to race, then it would be illegal, for one thing."

Instead, Drago says, the report highlights a phenomenon in inequity that may get less attention than pay issues.

"Wage-and-earnings inequality have been, and continue to be, linked to race, ethnicity and gender," he says, "but these estimates document an additional source of economic inequality in the U.S. -- the ability to affordably take time off work in order to care for yourself or your family."

Drago says the inequity is ultimately tied to educational opportunities for minorities.

"We have not been successful at moving people of color into higher education," he says, "and higher education is not moving certain groups into high-wage jobs," where access to sick days is more prevalent.

"If you're a high-wage worker, the odds of you having paid sick days is very high," he says. "But only a quarter of workers in food services [including restaurant workers and caterers] have access to paid sick days."

Rick Brenner, principal of Chaco Canyon Consulting of Cambridge, Mass., says most HR leaders are already -- or should be -- working on a long-term solution to the inequity.

"Most companies do have sick-leave policies that vary with pay grade," he says. "If the correlations with ethnicity are actually correlations between pay grade and ethnicity, then HR can address this issue by reducing the correlation between pay grade and ethnicity. Most HR professionals are already hard at work on that."

The NHIS figure used in the estimate closely parallels a recent estimate from the institute that utilized data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' *National Compensation Survey* -- a survey of private-sector workers including personal-care workers -- which showed an average rate of access to paid sick days at 58 percent.

That analysis found that only 23 percent of food-service workers and 38 percent of personal-care workers (who work directly with the elderly or disabled) have access to paid sick days.

"For many workers, including the majority of Latinos taking a day off to attend to a sick child could mean losing their job," says Eric Rodriguez, vice president of the office of research, advocacy and legislation at the National Council of La Raza.

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"Fair wages, a safe and healthy workplace, and paid sick leave are all part of the formula of job quality," he says.

The inequality was not surprising to either Drago or Barbara Gault, executive director and vice president of the institute.

"We have long known that low-wage workers, those working in home care and those who have close contact with the public in workplaces, such as restaurants and hotels, rarely have access to paid sick days," says Barbara Gault.

"Expanding access to paid sick days is in the interests of economic equality and public health," she says. "Improved access is also needed to counter economic disadvantage in the black and Hispanic communities."

Drago says HR directors should keep an eye on the example being set in cities such as San Francisco, where a mandatory, paid-sick-days plan for workers has proven to be a success for both workers and employers since it was enacted in 2007.

San Francisco's system, in which workers can accumulate up to nine paid sick days a year, "represents a cost savings to the employer," in that a cut-off point would preclude workers from amassing an endless pile of sick days to cash in all at once, he says.

Without such a cut-off point, "[workers] could end up with months of paid sick days when they retire, because they don't want to use sick days when they are actually sick," he says. "When you hit the maximum, that's it, and it saves a lot of money in the long run."

Several years of review of the city's system, he adds, determined that employees used a median of three sick days a year.

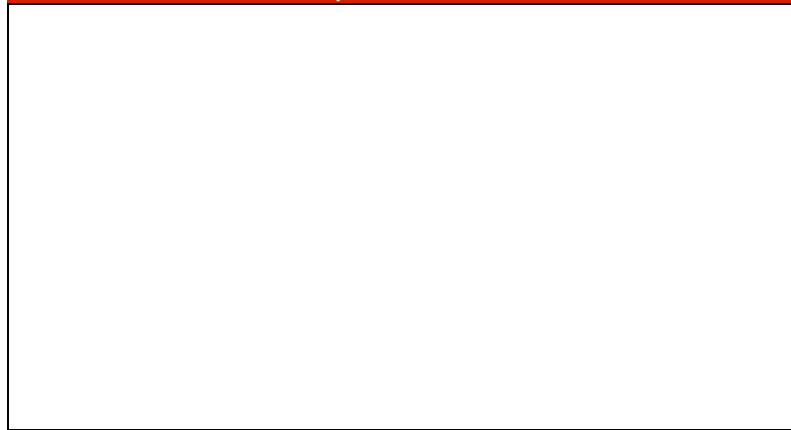
Such a system can help diminish the racial inequity of access to paid sick days, he says.

"They're using it the way they're supposed to be using it," he says. "It's a reasonable system that helps employees and is not that expensive for employers. It can be done, even in a hyper-competitive environment."

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