

Parental Leave Policies and Parents' Employment and Leave-Taking

Extended Abstract

The labor force participation of women with children has risen sharply in recent years and women are now much more likely than in the past to work continuously over their lifecycle. For no group has the change been more dramatic than it has for women with newborns. In 1968, only 21% of women with a child under the age of one were in the labor force (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). By contrast, over half of such women have been in the labor force in every year since 1986 (Dye, 2005).

The fact that mothers are employed does not mean that they are at work. In most countries, mothers with infants are entitled to take a period of paid and job-protected leave to recover from the birth and care for the newborn. Many nations have extended parental leave rights to fathers as well.

The U.S. was long an outlier in this regard and had little or no legislation providing parental leave rights, but in recent years, parental leave laws have been enacted at both the federal and state level. Specifically, the U.S. had no national maternity leave law until the passage of the FMLA in 1993, relying instead on a patchwork of state laws and company policies (Han & Waldfogel, 2003; Kamerman, 2000; Waldfogel, 2001a). The FMLA requires employers with 50 or more workers to offer a job-protected leave of up to 12 weeks to qualifying employees who need to be absent from work for family or medical reasons that meet the requirements of the law. The leave is unpaid, but employers who offer health insurance must continue to do so during the leave. Because of the firm size and qualifying conditions, less than 50% of private sector workers are

eligible for leave under the FMLA (Ruhm, 1997). Men are slightly more likely to be eligible than women; there are also differences by race and ethnic group (Commission on Family and Medical Leave, 1996; Cantor et al., 2001; Waldfogel, 2001b).

The intent of the federal and state laws is to provide mothers and fathers with the opportunity to take some time off work after the birth of a child, without the risk of losing their job (some laws also permit work absences for other reasons, such as to care for sick relatives). Even the most generous of US laws provide leave for relatively short periods (typically, less than 3 months) and the limited previous research does not conclusively indicate how such legislation has influenced the leave-taking of mothers or fathers.

This study investigates whether recent changes in federal and state parental leave legislation have led to more mothers and fathers taking leave in the birth month and succeeding months. If so, this could have important implications for children as it would presumably increase the time that parents are able to spend with their infants and would delay children's entry into non-parental care. We also explore whether leave extensions have resulted in more mothers being employed post-childbirth as opposed to leaving work altogether, as this would tend to have the opposite effect, reducing maternal time with young children.

Our primary finding is that the leave expansions have had little effect on overall employment rates but have increased the amount of time that new mothers spend on leave. Conversely, fathers typically take extremely short leaves (or none at all) and these have scarcely been affected by the changes in legislated entitlements.

References

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