

Does paid family leave increase leave taking among fathers?

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Most industrialized countries have national policies for paid parental leave. Advocates often claim such leave policies support career women. However, leave policies can have other societal benefits as well. According to “Paid family leave, fathers’ leave-taking, and leave-sharing in dual-earner households” (National Bureau of Economic Research working paper no. 21747, November 2015) by Ann Bartel, Maya Rossin-Slater, Christopher Ruhm, Jenna Stearns, and Jane Waldfogel, paid family leave policies that are gender-neutral may increase the participation of fathers within the family and may eventually help address the gender wage gap.

The authors point out that studies show fathers are more involved throughout the lives of their children when they take leave at their child’s birth. In the United States, employers typically do not offer paid coverage to fathers, and the question is largely unanswered as to whether fathers would take advantage of this benefit if offered. Bartel et al. analyzed the 2000–13 waves of the American Community Survey—a national survey that covers demographic factors, housing, work, and more—with 2000 Census data to estimate how California’s first-in-the-nation government-paid family leave program has affected fathers’ leave taking. The researchers compared leave-taking among employed fathers and mothers across states before and after the implementation of California’s leave program.

Data show that the program yielded an increase of 0.9 percentage points in fathers taking leave: an increase of 2–3 days for fathers compared with an increase of 5 weeks for mothers. This represents a 46-percent increase for fathers relative to the average leave-taking rate of 2 percent before the program. However, significant heterogeneity was found in the leave-taking behaviors of both fathers and mothers. The effect of the California program was larger for fathers of sons than for fathers of daughters, and larger for mothers of daughters than for mothers of sons. A finding consistent with prior research was that fathers spend more time at home with sons than with daughters. In addition, the program effects for fathers were almost entirely among fathers of first-born children; this kind of difference was not found among mothers.

Data show that occupations with higher female employment experienced a larger increase in leave-taking behavior, possibly because those occupations have less stigma associated with taking leave. Evidence suggests the largest effects were for non-Hispanic White, African-American, and Asian fathers. The effects were negatively correlated among fathers with a 4-year degree.

The researchers found no significant trends for years prior to the implementation of California’s program, and data remained consistent when collapsed to a state-year level while using control methods. As states adopt gender-neutral parental leave policies, it is expected that fathers taking leave will become a more common practice. This study extends paid-leave research by filling the gap of policy implications that arise from promoting work-family

balance for fathers. In addition, the study breaks new ground for research into how mothers and fathers share leave-taking responsibilities within dual-earner households.