

How long is a parental leave and for whom? An analysis of methodological and policy dimensions of leave length and division in Sweden

Policy
dimensions of
leave length

479

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Abstract

Purpose – Parental leave in Sweden can be taken both as paid and unpaid leave and often parents mix these forms in a very flexible way. Therefore, multiple methodological issues arise regarding how to most accurately measure leave length. The purpose of this paper is to review the somewhat complex legislation and the possible ways of using parental leave before presenting a successful attempt of a more precise way of measuring leave lengths, including paid and unpaid days, for mothers and fathers.

Design/methodology/approach – The study makes use of administrative data for a complete cohort of parents of first born children in 2009 in Sweden. The authors examine what characteristics are associated with the use of paid and unpaid leave for mothers and fathers during the first two years of the child's life, focusing particularly on how individual and household income is associated with leave patterns.

Findings – Among mothers, low income is associated with many paid leave days whereas middle income is associated with most unpaid days. High income mothers use a shorter leave. Among fathers it is the both ends with high and low household income that uses most paid and unpaid leave.

Practical implications – A measure that includes unpaid parental leave will be important to not underestimate the parental leave and to prevent faulty comparisons between groups by gender and by socioeconomic status.

Originality/value – A measure of parental leave including both paid and unpaid leave will also facilitate international comparisons of leave length.

Keywords Sweden, Gender equality, Household income, Parental leave, Division of leave

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Sweden has a generous parental leave policy in terms of length, benefit level and also in terms of flexibility in how leave can be used. Regulations make it possible for parents to use 16 months of paid leave in various ways; they can share parts between them, save parts of leave to use later during the preschool years and they can extend leave with unpaid days. They can mix paid and unpaid leave to extend the period at home; a strategy that is commonly used. The flexible and generous leave system gives rise to different patterns of leave use and this study analyses who uses the flexibility the system offers and what factors enable and limit flexible use. The particular focus is on flexibility in parents' leave length during the child's first two years. Our overarching question is which parents may benefit from the flexibility in the parental leave system and we pay special attention to parents of different gender and income.



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Parental leave systems vary considerably between countries and most commonly the attention has been on length of paid leave and benefit level (see e.g. Koslowski *et al.*, 2018). However, the dimension of flexibility is also important as it indicates how accessible the leave is, which can be particularly important for fathers' leave use. Flexibility in how leave can be used however has also problematic aspects as it makes it harder to decline demands from work while on leave, such as being available by phone or e-mail (Brandth and Kvande, 2019). Flexibility obviously also makes it harder for employers to foresee leave periods and their lengths, something that will be more disruptive in some jobs more than other. Despite concerns about the negative sides of flexibility, the Swedish parental leave has become more flexible over time, mainly in accordance with ideas about promoting parents' choice and enabling gender equal use of leave. The possibility to use paid and unpaid leave days in Sweden stand out also in a Nordic context, even if flexible options seem to increase over time.

This study focuses on the possibility in the Swedish system to extend the paid parental leave period with unpaid leave as such strategies are important for understanding the real lengths of labor market exits of mothers and fathers when they become parents. If the length or timing of such exits are underestimated, the estimation of labor supply will be faulty. Moreover, if women use unpaid leave more than fathers, this must be taken into account when estimating how leave is shared between parents. It is also important to find out which socioeconomic groups of parents use flexibility, as such knowledge may indicate stratified differences in access to parental leave. In addition, it is important to know how long the individual leave really is for researching possible consequences of various leave lengths, such as continued childbearing, sharing of household tasks and childcare and also for continued labor market participation (see e.g. Duvander and Andersson, 2006; Rege and Solli, 2013; Schober, 2014). Another reason to investigate the actual labor market exits for women and men is that when comparing to other countries it is important to have an accurate measure of leave lengths.

We begin with a short background on parental leave in Sweden, followed by a discussion about what one might expect regarding who will use the flexibility of the parental leave system. Thereafter we will describe the data used to capture the flexibility in leave use and how we analyze the data to answer our questions about leave lengths. The results will be followed by a concluding discussion on what parents' use of flexibility in leave may mean and what its consequences might be.

Swedish parental leave

Current Swedish family policy is often said to have its origins at the beginning of the 1970s when a number of reforms were enacted to transform the economy for families with children from a single-earner family model to what is termed an earner-carer family model (Ferrarini and Duvander, 2010; Gornick and Meyers, 2008). Often mentioned political changes included the introduction of individual taxation, expansion of publicly financed daycare and parental leave (Cedstrand, 2011; Lundqvist, 2011). The aim of parental leave policy was to make the combination of work and family possible by enabling women and men to make short exits from the labor market when they become parents, granting them strong protection of their jobs during parental leave. When introduced in 1974, parental leave was six months, entitling parents to share the leave as they preferred. The earnings-related benefit was 90 percent of earlier income, a level that, in the 1990s, decreased to 80 percent and in the 2000s to 77.6 percent. The benefit also has a ceiling, that in especially the 1990s affected a large share of parents. However, in the 1990s extra payments during leave provided by the employer, based on collective agreements, also became popular, even if they varied in their extent (Sjögren Lindquist, 2018). A common situation is that the employers top up the government benefit with 10 percent extra and also covers the income loss over the ceiling to

90 percent, resulting in almost 90 percent of the whole salary when on leave. Such extra payments are universal in the state sector and increasingly common in the private and municipal sector.

Women and men who do not meet the requirement of having worked for six months before using the leave will receive a flat rate benefit that today is SEK 250 (approximately \$25) but remained at SEK 60 a day (approximately \$6) during the entire decade of the 1990s. This benefit started to increase stepwise in 2002, with the aim to give families economic security. Nevertheless, the low benefit for parents who have not worked implies a strong incentive for parents to obtain a reliable job with decent salary before having children, especially for women who use most of the parental leave. Indeed, 12.4 percent of women and 4.6 percent of men use the leave at the flat rate (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2018a)

After the introduction of parental leave, the paid leave length was extended gradually from six months to a full year mainly during the 1980s. The increase in length of paid leave might have made fathers' increased leave use easier, as there were more days to share between parents. The leave was also extended with an additional three months paid at a low flat rate. The complete length, thus, added up to 15 months in 1990 and was then extended with 1 month in 2002 to today's 16 months, 13 paid at a high level and 3 paid at a low level. The 16 months can be used up to the child is 12 today (to eight years old up to 2014) and the employer cannot deny anyone leave, it is also not legal to fire someone during a parental leave period.

Even though paid leave was available to both mothers and fathers, mothers took the major part of the leave and fathers' share increased very slowly. The unequal division of the leave was seen as a problem for gender equality and in 1995 the leave was individualized, meaning that half of the leave days were designated to the mother and half to the father. However, all leave, except for one month of leave for each parent, could be transferred between parents. The months reserved for each parent, often referred to as the mother's and father's quota, cannot be used by the other parent and will be lost if not used by the designated parent. For the rest of the leave, fathers often sign over days to mothers so the individualization may in part be seen as symbolic. Nevertheless, the reserved months increased the share of fathers using the leave dramatically (Duvander and Johansson, 2012). Before 1995, about half of all fathers used any leave, but since 1995, nine out of ten fathers use some leave (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2012). The reserved months to each parent were, in 2002, extended to two months, and in 2016 to three months. Only in cases of sole custody does one parent get the whole parental leave period and such cases are quite rare (as custody is joint also in most cases when parents live apart). However, sole custody overrepresented among young mothers.

Parental leave is regulated by both: the right to benefits and the legal right to be off work to care for children. The benefit is as mentioned 16 months (8 months to each parent) while the right to be off work is actually more generous. Parents have the right to be off work for 18 months after birth (with or without using benefits) and then whenever the benefit is used during the preschool years. It is thus the extended right to leave from work, with or without parental benefits, that offers major flexibility in how the benefit is used. This leads to that many parents refrain from taking paid days all days home (thereby using unpaid days) during the first 18 months to extend their leaves, thus using the flexibility of the system. While it is (in most cases) not possible to use parental leave benefit for the same time it is possible to use parental leave parttime, and that can be done by both parents. It is, for example, possible (but not common) for parents to use parental leave benefits every second day.

The added-up leave length of mothers' and fathers' leave is, thus, not a zero-sum game; rather, it can be extended if the household economy allows for it. Parental leave can also be saved, for example, to extend summer vacations or reduce work hours during the child's preschool years.

Earlier studies on paid and unpaid leave

Earlier studies show that the flexibility in leave use is prevalent among parents in Sweden. This leads to somewhat varying results from research relying on surveys, where parents refer to their memory of the actual leave length, while in population register studies only paid leave days are counted (Eriksson, 2019; Swedish Inspectorate for the Social Insurance, 2013). For example, while the registered paid benefit days for the first four years for children born in 2006 was 305 for mothers and 69 for fathers, survey results for the same time period indicate that mothers use approximately 14 months of leave, and fathers 1.7 months (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2012; Duvander, 2014). Also, a study comparing parents' reports on leave length to the registered days found large variations, where parents' work orientation lead to using fewer unpaid days. Parents with low education also used fewer unpaid days while going on part-time leave increased the leave length for fathers (National Social Insurance Board, 2004). A follow up study 10 years later indicated that the use of unpaid days had increased (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2013). Another early attempt to consider both paid and unpaid leave found that unpaid leave was more common among middle to high income parents, while the parents with low and the highest income used fewer unpaid days. Also, foreign-born parents were less likely to use unpaid leave (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2013).

Additionally, when considering children's age at preschool start it is found that unpaid leave is used to extend the time at home, and especially so for highly educated parents. As many as one-third of the paid days are saved to be used during the preschool years, to for instance extend holidays or to cover cost for reducing working hours (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2018b). Differences in when children start preschool by parents' income also remain over the period of the 1990s–2000s, but diminish somewhat when the guarantee of a place for all children comes into effect in the beginning of the 2000s (Viklund and Duvander, 2017).

When considering the length of leave of women and men it seems that while men's leave length is increasing, women do not always decrease their leave length but instead use more unpaid days (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2013). The same result is found when investigating mothers labor supply before and after the introduction of the daddy month (Karimi *et al.*, 2012).

Turning to the neighboring country of Finland we also find that less well-paid ways are used to prolong the time at home. In Finland, women use the cash for care extensively to prolong the parental leave that is shorter than in Sweden (Duvander and Ellingsaeter, 2016).

Expectations of parents' leave length

As described, there is quite a lot of flexibility in how Swedish parental leave benefits can be used. Decisions about parental leave use may be guided by preferences, but even with a large amount of flexibility there are obvious constraints in how leave can be used, and these constraints vary between subgroups of parents. Preferences and orientations will change over the life course, depending on previous circumstances and previous experiences. Närvi (2012) discusses how not only individual circumstances but also the structural and cultural context will frame individuals' actions and this study is based on this idea. In general, preferences are constrained and shaped by individual and institutional factors (Crompton and Harris, 1998; McRae, 2003). The relevant context in the case of parents using (or not) the flexibility in the Swedish parental leave program mainly consists of gendered expectations of parenthood and economic constraints of the individual and the household. But also possibilities on the labor market, including the workplace, structure the parental leave use.

We start by acknowledging that gendered practices are still dominating the use of Swedish parental leave, not surprisingly but despite gender-neutral legislation. Eriksson (2019) for instance shows that it is very uncommon for fathers to take the first part of the

leave and sharing mainly happen toward the end of the parental leave period. Official statistics tell us that women use over two-thirds of the benefit days, i.e. paid leave (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2018a). Only in 17 percent of couples is paid leave split between the mother and father somewhere round 40–60 percent each; however, when mothers have a high income, the number is close to 30 percent (www.forsakringskassan.se). Thus, even in present-day Sweden, women's and men's parental leaves need to be considered separately as patterns are likely to be different.

Next, the space for economic manoeuvre is what sets the frame for various choices of leave use. Put plainly, individuals and households with larger economic resources will have more possibility to choose how they want to use the leave. Earlier studies show that women with high income take a shorter parental leave and in these families men use a longer leave (Hobson *et al.*, 2006; Li *et al.*, 2019). Earlier studies also show that men with high income use longer leave, but that the relationship is curvilinear and does not increase for the men with highest income (Sundström and Duvander, 2002). When considering both paid and unpaid leave it is also likely that more economic resources lead to saving more paid days and using more unpaid days. Parents can then save days for future needs during the preschool years. However, using a long leave and foreseeing the possibility to use paid leave later requires a secure and stable position on the labor market, something that may vary between individuals with different length work experience and between sectors (Haas *et al.*, 2002). Self-employed parents may have the most difficulties to be off work. Immigrant parents also have less access to the flexibility in the leave system, which likely is connected to their more precarious situation on the labor market (Mussino and Duvander, 2016).

When considering economic restrictions and possibilities to use parental leave, an intersection with gender always has to be considered, not least as the Swedish labor market still have a gender wage gap that does not seem to diminish (Boye *et al.*, 2017), is clearly gender segregated (Halldén, 2014) and there are gendered consequences of parental leave use (Duvander *et al.*, 2015). Thus, decisions on parental leave use are set in different contexts for women and men. Also, when the leave is distributed in the couple, it seems without doubt that gender trumps economic concerns (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2013).

It is not just the economic possibility to be on leave will be important; this possibility will have to be seen in relation to the preferences for care, work and gender equality. Even if the parents with highest income may have the most option to be on leave the longest, these parents may also be more work oriented and importantly also have more opportunity cost for being on leave. Often the parent's educational level is used to measure norms and attitudes leading to care preferences. Highly educated fathers are more likely to use leave than fathers with less education, both in Sweden and in other countries (Duvander and Johansson, 2014; Geisler and Kreyenfeld, 2011). Mothers' high education is also associated with fathers using more leave, perhaps because these mothers prefer to go back to work earlier. In addition, we know that mothers who are more family-oriented take longer leaves, which is also true for fathers with gender equal attitudes (Duvander, 2014). Obviously such attitudes, and preferences derived from the attitudes, are shaped by the individual and structural setting of these individuals.

It is important to keep in mind that the numbers of leave benefit days are set and if one parent uses many days the other has to use fewer. Parents in the public sector with long work experience are likely to want many days as they are more often in secure positions with less to lose (or risk) from a longer leave. Because of the different starting points, where mothers' leave is assumed and fathers' still an alternative, we expect highly educated mothers will want to take less leave while highly educated fathers will want more leave.

In addition to a restriction in benefit days obviously an alternative childcare has to be available once parents go back to work. In Sweden, there is universal preschool available from age one, although not all children begin at age one and there is considerable variation between

socio-economic groups in age at start (Viklund and Duvander, 2017). The municipality is obligated to offer a place in preschool within a couple of months of application and childcare is heavily subsidized and of general good quality with a high proportion of well-educated preschool teachers. The participation rate of children is more or less universal over age 2 (see official statistics at www.skolverket.se). However, when parents are asked, it is common to perceive the starting age in preschool as too early and to wish that their children had started later (Duvander, 2006).

This study focuses on how the combination of economic restrictions and preferences play out in how the benefits are used (paid leave) but also for how long the total leave will be, including the use of unpaid days. Patterns are expected to be different for women and men. Data on parental benefit and leave refer to children born in 2009 and it is important to note that patterns are likely to change over time, in particular as norms, strength of norms and expectations on fathers and mothers are changing.

Data

The data used in this study come from the administrative registers at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency and include all parents who had their first child in 2009. These parents were followed for two years regarding their use of: paid parental benefit days and parental leave days (paid + unpaid). Paid parental benefit days is the measure of parents' leave taking commonly used in other studies and in official statistics (see e.g. Mussino and Duvander, 2016).

For mothers with a firstborn in 2009 we find that an average of 286 paid benefit days (~9.5 months) are used, and for the same group of fathers 88 paid benefit days (~3 months). Practically all mothers use paid leave, but almost one-fourth of fathers do not use any paid benefits the first two years. If all fathers are included, also non-users, the average number of benefit days is reduced from 88 to 67 during the first two years. The second measure of parental leave days includes the unpaid days to estimate the whole period on leave. We make use of the fact that the administrative register includes the episodes of parental leave with dates for start and end. The episodes are based on parents' application for paid benefits. Some of these episodes are close in time and we count days between episodes. For example, one episode may start January 1 and end January 5, the next start on January 8 and end on January 15. If these unpaid days are not "too many" one may assume that the parent is at home unpaid. If the unpaid days between episodes are many, the parent may actually work during unpaid days. The regulations are very flexible in that there is no limit in the number of episodes a parent can be on leave or how a parent combine leave and paid work (e.g. part-time or occasional days), as long as the same day (or part of day) is not both on leave and in paid work.

Unfortunately, a measure of when an individual is working day-by-day is not available in Sweden. To come up with a plausible estimate of leave length, we tested different assumptions before the conclusion was reached that when there was two days of unpaid days between any episodes of paid benefit days it was assumed to be part of a leave period. The measure does not change much if we allow for instead three, four or more unpaid days, as this is less common. It is concluded that it is a common pattern to claim parental benefit for five days a week. Note that only the first two years of the child's life are observed and that it is quite common to use benefit days also later, so these estimates are not the final number of leave days used by the father and mother. They are an estimate of parental leave during the first two-year period when a parent may be off work to look after a very young child. The novelty of the measure is that unpaid days are included after sensitivity testing of how many unpaid days are sensible to include.

Data on parental benefit days and parental leave length are combined with parents' characteristics and as women and men take very different leave lengths models were

performed separately. Measures on parent's individual income the year before the child was born are included, so leave would not affect the income measure. In a second set of models, a measure of household income before childbirth was used. The individual educational level, age, immigration status, establishment on the labor market (income over a threshold of 180 SEK/day for at least three years), work sector (private and public) and whether parents are self-employed are all included in the model (see descriptive statistics in Table AI).

Descriptive results

As mentioned, mothers use on average 9.5 months of paid leave and fathers almost 3 months of paid leave during the child's first two years. If fathers who use no paid leave are included, their average number of paid days is reduced to just over two months. These days may be used in different episodes. When parental leave is defined as possibly including two days of unpaid leave between the episodes of paid leave, women use 13.5 months (404 days) and men use 4.5 months (135 days). Both women and men thus use substantial amounts of unpaid days and the use of unpaid days does not largely change the proportion that men use at approximately 20 percent out of all leave during the first two years. As men often use days during the child's preschool years, this share increases to the final number of days in the official statistics.

These findings indicate that the use of unpaid leave matters for leave length and will influence the labor market exits for both women and men in Sweden. The distribution of benefit days and parental leave days are presented in Figures 1 and 2 for women and men, respectively. Particularly for women, including unpaid days in a measure of parental leave extends the leave substantially. There is a peak at 15 months of leave but large variation between women. For men, the difference between paid benefit days and leave length is less visible as the numbers are lower.

Results from regression analyses

The results will focus on the associations of mothers' and fathers' characteristics and the two measures; paid benefit days and parental leave days where both paid and unpaid days are included. The analyses are performed with OLS regressions. In Table I, we turn to

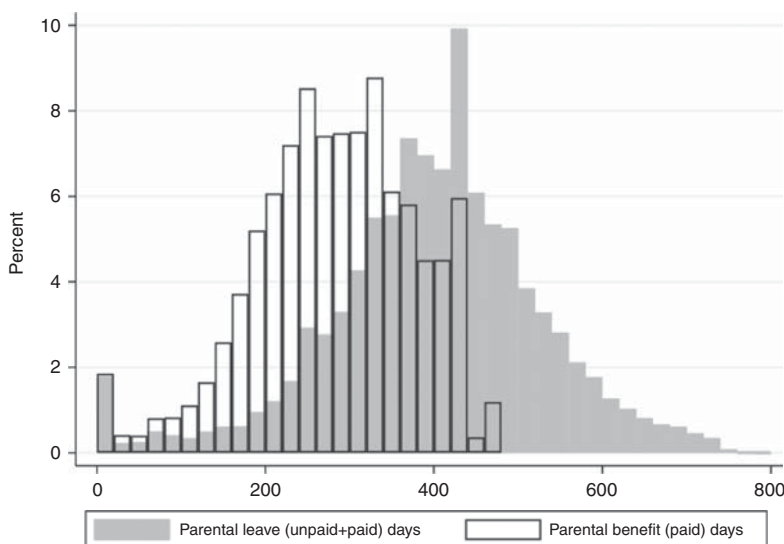
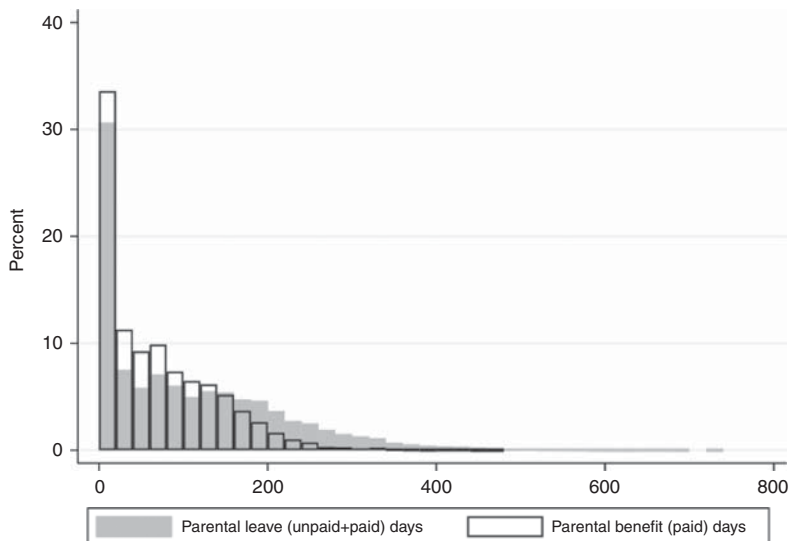


Figure 1. Distribution of parental benefit (paid) days (white) and parental leave (unpaid +paid) days (grey) for mothers

Figure 2.
Distribution of
parental benefit (paid)
days (white) and
parental leave
(unpaid) days (grey)
for fathers



women's leave, the first two columns showing estimates for benefit days used, and the third and fourth columns showing the estimates for the leave length, that is including also unpaid days. Looking first at income, the association between individual income and parental benefit days is an inverted u-shape, where low to middle income women use most benefit days. Mothers without income and those with the highest income use less benefit days, especially mothers with income over the ceiling of the benefit. Partners' (fathers') income is clearly negatively associated with mothers' parental benefit days. If the father has no or low income the number of benefit days used by the mother is substantially higher, perhaps because these families cannot afford to save mothers' benefit days.

The same pattern is found in Model 2 where household income is used as the measure instead of partners' separate individual incomes. In high income households, mothers use on average 60 fewer benefit days than in households with low income. Remember that parents are followed for two years so it is likely that these benefit days are used later on during the child's preschool years. Saving days in this fashion makes it easier to combine work and children for many families, but such flexibility seems not to be used by low income households.

When we turn to the models of parental leave days in Columns 3 and 4, we can evaluate whether the fewer benefit days among high income households means shorter leave for mothers or whether they instead use unpaid leave. In Column 3, it can be seen that the association between mothers' income and parental leave days has the same inverted u-shaped pattern as for benefit days, but that the differences between groups are larger. Middle income mothers use longer leave compared to mothers with no income and mothers with very high income.

Turning to the impact of fathers' income on mothers' overall leave length, instead of a negative association as was found for mothers' parental benefit days, there is a u-shaped pattern. When fathers have no or low income or high income, mothers use a longer overall leave (combining paid and unpaid leave). The pattern is thus in contrast to the one for benefit days; it is likely that when the father has high income the mother can afford to stay home longer without using as many benefit days. In cases where the father has low income the parental leave is likely to consist of many paid benefit days. Turning to the association

	Parental benefit days		Parental leave days	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Individual income</i>				
No income	-7.59*		-48.23***	
Low	0.31		-28.30***	
Middle	Ref		Ref	
Mid-high	-21.35***		-26.55***	
Over ceiling	-35.11***		-67.61***	
<i>Father's income</i>				
No income	48.89***		17.21***	
Low	22.09***		6.10***	
Middle	Ref		Ref	
Mid-high	-6.71***		6.71***	
Over ceiling	-7.30***		5.94**	
<i>Household income</i>				
Quintile 1		31.88***		-13.79***
Quintile 2		4.66***		-15.82***
Quintile 3		Ref		Ref
Quintile 4		-10.97***		4.21*
Quintile 5		-29.39***		-18.04***
<i>Age</i>				
-21	18.29***	14.15***	4.06	-0.86
21-25	10.69***	8.34***	-2.92	-6.67***
26-30	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
31-35	-2.54*	-3.45**	-0.02	-3.46*
35-	0.89	-0.46	3.96	-1.58*
<i>Education</i>				
Low (up to 2 years secondary)	22.68***	23.56***	6.19***	7.39***
Middle (up to 2 years tertiary)	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
High (3 or more years- tertiary)	-31.89***	-32.72***	-17.26***	-19.65***
<i>Immigrated within last 5 years</i>				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	12.39***	11.17***	-5.11*	-6.47**
<i>Established in labor market</i>				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	5.87***	8.79***	21.35***	23.42***
<i>Sector</i>				
State	-21.62***	-19.04***	-18.58***	-13.14***
Private	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Municipality	0.95	2.95**	-1.34	3.51*
County	-4.98**	-2.35	9.19***	13.67***
No sector	6.60*	-1.32	-11.10*	-25.36***
<i>Self-employed</i>				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	-27.21***	-28.32***	-27.94***	-31.20***
Constant	287.44***	288.34***	417.21***	411.50***
Adjusted R ²	0.19	0.18	0.05	0.04

Table I. Ordinary least squares models of mothers' benefit days and leave days

Note: Only users are included - $n = 41,355$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

with household income, mothers use the most overall leave days in households where the income is in the third and fourth quintile. These mothers can thus afford a longer leave without using as many benefit days. But in the highest income quintile, mothers have a somewhat shorter leave length, which may have to do with their preferences for continuing work and a shorter exit from the labor market, as well as a greater preference for sharing leave with the father.

In all models, we control for a number of important factors for leave use, and we found these factors were significantly related to leave use in the expected ways. Younger mothers use more benefit days while the difference in overall leave length is smaller between age groups. Among the young mothers there are more mothers with sole custody and thus access to the whole leave, making them use more benefit days. However, these mothers are likely less often able to use the flexibility and a longer leave length. Women with low education use more benefit days and women with high education use both less benefit days and have shorter overall parental leave, perhaps because these women prefer sharing the leave with the father which obviously makes the mother's leave shorter. We also found that immigrant women use more benefit days but take a shorter overall parental leave. Also, women who are established in the labor market take more benefit days and also longer overall leave, something that they may allow themselves as they are less likely to risk repercussions at work. Differences between work sectors show that women in state employment take fewer benefit days and shorter overall leaves than privately employed women do. These jobs are often career jobs, and even though secure, a long exit may harm the career. Parents with state employments will also get extra payments during leave because of substantive collective agreements, which may make these parents able to save more paid days. Differences between women employed in the municipality and privately employed are slight and county employees take somewhat longer leave. These are often women in the health sector and collective agreements are still to be improved here. Mothers outside the labor market take shorter overall leaves, which may be explained by sharper economic restrictions in this group. Lastly, it seems difficult for self-employed women use fewer benefit days and have shorter overall leave length, perhaps as it is hard to be absent from a self-employment.

Table II displays correlates of men's leave use. These models only include fathers who have used any leave, which excludes 23 percent of the cases. Additional analyses have investigated the situation for non-using fathers and these results will be referred to when it matters to the conclusions drawn. We find that the father's individual income is not strongly associated with the number of benefit days; only fathers with income over the ceiling for the benefit use somewhat fewer days. In additional analysis (not shown), it is very clear that fathers who took no leave are overrepresented among fathers with low or no income. Thus, it can be concluded that among fathers with sharp economic restrictions for parental benefit use, many use no benefits but the ones who do use parental leave benefits, do not differ from fathers with higher income.

Continuing with the association between mothers' income and fathers' benefit days, a u-shaped pattern is found, indicating that fathers use more benefit days when the mother has no income or very high income. In both situations it may be economically strategic to restrict the mothers' leave use so that the father uses more leave. Mothers with no or low income will only get the flat rate benefit and when they have very high income they might lose income above the ceiling of the benefit if they take leave. The same pattern is found for household income in Column 2. Fathers use most benefit days in families with low or very high income. The pattern of "saving benefit days" found among mothers, however, is not found among fathers.

When investigating fathers' parental leave days, including unpaid days, for only those men who took any leave, the patterns are slightly different. Father's income is associated with their leave length in an inversed u-shape pattern. Middle income fathers use the

	Parental benefit days		Parental leave days	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Individual income</i>				
No income	-0.61		-10.87	
Low	-0.91		-7.87***	
Middle	Ref		Ref	
Mid-high	0.14		-1.88	
Over ceiling	-4.25***		-18.93***	
<i>Mother's income</i>				
No income	19.11***		9.46***	
Low	7.99***		5.11***	
Middle	Ref		Ref	
Mid-high	15.39***		21.60***	
Over ceiling	21.63***		25.48***	
<i>Household income</i>				
Quintile 1		20.29***		11.38***
Quintile 2		8.29***		6.57***
Quintile 3		Ref		Ref
Quintile 4		4.23***		7.62***
Quintile 5		11.46***		10.28***
<i>Age</i>				
-21	-2.72	-5.81	-9.07	-13.63**
21-25	-9.31***	-10.04***	-16.31***	-17.15***
26-30	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
31-35	4.79***	4.69***	10.12***	9.01***
35-	2.03	2.21*	9.87***	7.91***
<i>Education</i>				
Low (-2 years secondary)	-2.63**	-2.62***	-7.49***	-7.08***
Middle (3 years -2 years tertiary)	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
High (3 years - tertiary)	23.68***	23.49***	33.12***	31.60***
<i>Immigrated last 5 years</i>				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	-14.63***	-14.09***	-21.23***	-21.74***
<i>Established on labor market</i>				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	-3.79**	-0.09	-1.15	-1.99
<i>Sector</i>				
State	13.06***	14.08***	18.56***	21.31***
Private	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Municipality	12.90***	13.37***	18.19***	20.99***
County	14.56***	15.56***	18.86***	20.42***
No sector	1.19	-2.05	1.89	7.77*
<i>Self-employed</i>				
No	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Yes	-6.27***	-6.22***	2.75	3.08
Constant	75.95***	72.07***	120.54***	114.18***
Adjusted R^2	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.06

Table II.
OLS models of
fathers' benefit days
and leave days

Note: Only users are included - $n = 32,540$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

longest leave. This is similar to mothers' patterns and may be explained in the same way. Turning to the impact of mothers' income on fathers' leaves, a u-shaped pattern is found; when the mother has high earnings the father takes a longer leave, and also if the mother has low or no income the father takes a longer leave, similar to the impact of fathers' income on mothers' leave length, although the pattern is less strong. When fathers who took no leave are analyzed separately (not shown), it is clear that in many of the cases the mother has a low income. The pattern is similar to benefit days, since sharp economic restrictions lead to bifurcation among fathers regarding both benefit days and leave length. When we turn to household income (Column 4) the same u-shaped pattern is found as for the association of mothers' income and fathers' leave days. Among men who use any leave, it is fathers in the households with highest and lowest incomes who use the longest leave. In separate analyses, however, it is found that fathers who took no leave are heavily concentrated in the households with low income. This pattern of bifurcation in the groups with heaviest economic constraints is not found in the analyses of mothers.

In addition to the income variables it seems that age increases both benefit days and leave length for fathers. High education also leads to more benefit days and longer leave. Among fathers who use leave it does not seem to be very important whether the father is established in the labor market, but it increases the propensity to use leave (not shown). Fathers in the public sector use both paid and unpaid leave much more than other groups, while self-employed fathers use less benefit days. The self-employed fathers may be considered the least generously replaced during leave, and for example do not receive any extra payments through collective agreements. Self-employed fathers are also much less likely to use any leave (not shown). The fathers in the public sector are more likely than the fathers in the private sector to get extra payments, and this may facilitate their leave use. For especially the state sector, the parental leave tends toward more gender equal use, as mothers in this sector use a shorter leave and fewer days (see above). Lastly, recently immigrated fathers use less leave than fathers who have lived in Sweden more than five years.

Conclusions

This study concerns one important aspect of flexibility in the Swedish parental leave system – combining benefit days and unpaid days of leave, and examines how this flexibility may lead to different use patterns among subgroups of parents. The focus is the use of paid benefits, the use of nonpaid leave and the total leave length parents take during the child's first two years. While parents' use of only a few paid benefit days may indicate that they took a short leave, it may also indicate a long less well-paid leave. These parents may save benefit days to use during the child's preschool years. Findings indicate that gendered patterns and economic constraints are determining here; preferences for different leave lengths may also be related to interests in returning to work and in sharing leave more equally with partners. Such preferences obviously are shaped by the opportunity cost for leave, the gains from going back to work earlier and potential gains of a gender equal division of childcare.

Among mothers, it is found that low income mothers are constrained to use more benefit days than high income mothers, and fathers' income and household income clearly impact how many benefit days low income mothers use. Mothers with a partner with high income use less benefit days but the leave length is not necessarily shorter as these mothers extend the leave with unpaid days. However, the mothers who themselves earn the most, or are in households with the highest income, do not maximize their leave length, possibly for work preferences or in order to share the leave more with the father. The opportunity costs to take a long leave is also higher for these women, both in direct loss of income and long-term career opportunities. But it is clear that mothers with more economic resources make the

most use of the flexibility in the system when it concerns opportunities to use benefit days and unpaid days.

Findings showed that among men it is those with the lowest income who use no benefit days but that among users the differences are slight. However, as for women, the leave length is highest among fathers with middle income. Mothers' income and the household income indicate that high income leads to fathers using more benefit days and longer leave.

From these somewhat complicated patterns two main conclusions can be drawn. First, both fathers and mothers are using the flexibility but the patterns are different. In particular, it should be pointed out that in households with middle-high income mothers are using a long leave while fathers are using longest leave in the households with highest income. It is also the case that mothers are likely to reduce the number of paid leave days when the household can afford it, resulting in that they often have less well-paid leave. Second, it is clear that income matters for how the leave is used, but that income has to be seen in relation to preferences. Economic restrictions are important but leave length is not maximized among the ones who can afford to do so, probably because of variations in preferences.

Flexibility in leave use can be seen both in how the benefit days are shared between parents, but also in how many unpaid days are used. Unpaid days can extend the time at home substantially if the family can afford it, without reducing the other parents' days. Some parents want to maximize the time on leave and those are likely to use more unpaid leave, if they can afford it. A parent with a stable employment situation that is not likely to suffer from a long leave will more often choose a longer leave. A stable position where a long leave is possible is most likely found in the public sector, in positions that require higher education and that pay relatively well. It can however be expected that as the starting points for mothers and fathers are so different, high education for fathers will indicate freedom to choose a longer leave, while for mothers, a high education is additionally likely to indicate a position that will be hurt by a long leave. Also, women and men who have some years of work experience are more likely to have a stable position to come back to after the leave.

On the other hand, those who do not want to, or cannot, maximize their leave length are likely to be the two ends; the ones who are very unstable on the labor market and need to come back fast (or not take leave at all for fathers) and the ones with the best career prospects where a long leave may be detrimental to income development and career chances (Evertsson and Duvander, 2010). These parents are more likely to have the lowest and the highest incomes. The ones with an unstable situation are more likely to have low education and no consistent work history before becoming parents.

Flexibility in leave use will thus be used differently leading to more or less saved up flexibility for the rest of the preschool years. The number of benefit days, the length of leave, will both have implications for the individual and the couple. A long less well-paid leave, typically used by mothers who can afford it, will lead to lower pension payments and possibly lower career chances, even if the job is secured. However, it will also lead to more benefit days to use later on and in practice more time for the child with any of the parents. It may also make it more possible for the father to use the leave. A shorter more well-paid leave will lead to higher pension payments and possibly better career prospects, but less days left for the preschool years and perhaps less room for the father to use leave. It can thus be argued that the flexibility in the Swedish parental leave system benefits children in families with a middle-high income, but disadvantages mainly the ones with lower income. These children will less often have a father on parental leave, will have less time with her/his parents during the preschool years, in addition to a less stable economic situation of the family. For young women and men in Sweden, the results thus boil down to a clear and strong incentive to delay having children until a stable position in the labor market with a decent salary is the case for both prospective parents.

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Further reading

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	Mothers (<i>n</i>)	Percentage	Fathers (<i>n</i>)	Percentage
<i>Income</i>				
No income	4,818	11.2	3,943	8.1
Low (1–214,000 SEK)	13,838	32.2	8,810	20.5
Middle (214–321,000 SEK)	16,208	37.8	13,924	32.4
Mid-high (321–428,000 SEK)	5,599	13.0	10,303	24.0
Over ceiling (428,000 SEK)	2,468	5.8	6,401	14.9
<i>Household income</i>				
Quintile 1	8,587	20.0	8,587	20.0
Quintile 2	8,586	20.0	8,586	20.0
Quintile 3	8,586	20.0	8,586	20.0
Quintile 4	8,586	20.0	8,586	20.0
Quintile 5	8,586	20.0	8,586	20.0
<i>Age</i>				
–21	2,696	6.3	965	2.3
21–25	10,091	23.5	6,238	14.5
26–30	16,336	38.1	14,545	33.9
31–35	10,527	24.5	13,547	31.6
35–	3,281	7.6	7,636	17.8
<i>Education</i>				
Low (up to 2 years secondary)	6,590	15.4	9,618	22.4
Middle (up to 2 years tertiary)	17,990	41.9	20,146	46.9
High (3 or more years tertiary)	17,338	40.4	12,166	28.3
No information	1,013	2.4	1,001	2.3
<i>Immigrated within last 5 years</i>				
No	37,889	88.3	38,507	89.7
Yes	5,042	11.7	4,424	10.3
<i>Established in labor market</i>				
No	15,951	37.2	11,417	26.6
Yes	26,980	62.9	31,514	73.4
<i>Sector</i>				
State	2,116	4.9	2,029	4.7
Private	23,695	55.2	33,984	79.2
Municipality	9,136	21.3	2,297	5.4
County	2,820	6.6	757	1.8
No information	5,164	12.0	3,864	9.0
<i>Self-employed</i>				
No	36,825	85.8	36,362	84.7
Yes	642	2.2	2,705	6.3
Total	42,931		42,931	

Table AI.
Descriptives for
mothers and fathers
with a first-born
in 2009

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