

ISF Report 2013:13

Parental leave

Length, benefit level and number of episodes

Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate

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Summary

The Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate (Inspektionen för socialförsäkringen, ISF) is an independent supervisory agency for the Swedish social insurance system. The objectives of the agency are to strengthen compliance with legislation and other statutes, and to improve the efficiency of the social insurance system through system supervision and efficiency analysis and evaluation.

This report concerns the use of the Swedish parental leave system from the 1990s to the present. The legislations concerning “parental leave benefits” and “parental leave” (right to leave from work to care for children) are separate. Though similar in English, these two terms are more distinct from one another in Swedish. Therefore, the number of paid parental leave days is not the same as number of days off work for most parents. Because the right to leave from work is more extended, parents often shift between paid days and unpaid days to extend the length of leave. Administrative registers include paid days, but no information on length of leave from work.

This report aims to come closer to an understanding of parental leave use by using a measure of parental leave episodes created by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency. This measure defines an episode of parental leave as a length of period with paid days with no more than six unpaid days in between. This measure has its shortcomings and is just one of many definitions of leave. It should be seen as a contribution to coming closer to an understanding of parental leave use.

The report focuses on length of parental leave episodes, number of episodes, and the number of paid days per week in an episode. These measures are examined for women and men with different incomes, educational levels, work sectors, addresses within Sweden, number of children, and birth origin. Parents’ leave episodes are followed from the child’s birth to when the children are four and eight years old.

The main result is that the length of the parental leave episode appears considerably longer than the number of paid parental leave days. This is a strong argument to continue to investigate the length of parental leave, and to question estimates based solely on paid parental leave days.

It is clear, as expected, that women take longer episodes of leave, but that women and men take about the same number of episodes. Men thus take many shorter episodes. Women and men take about the same number of paid days per week on leave.

Both women and men with low income use shorter and fewer episodes with more paid days during the episodes. This may indicate a pattern where parents with more resources use more flexibility in parental leave. However, the parents with highest income have shorter and fewer episodes and more paid days per week than parents in the next to highest income bracket. This may indicate other factors at work or a curvilinear relationship with income.

The differences in leave use between women and men with different levels of education resemble the differences between income groups. Highly educated parents take longer episodes, more episodes and fewer paid days per week during the episode.

Women employed in the municipal sector take the longest leave. The municipal sector includes many female dominated jobs and jobs in the health and care sector. Similarly, men in the public sector (both state and municipal) take longer leave. Women in the state sector and men in the private sector use the most episodes, perhaps for different reasons. The number of paid days per week per episode does not vary too much, but parents in the state sector seem to use the fewest.

Differences between uses in different parts of Sweden are not as pronounced. Nevertheless, women in cities take shorter leave, and men in cities take longer leave. Outside urban areas, parents use somewhat more episodes, especially men.

Parents of firstborn children use longer episodes, more episodes and fewer paid days per week on leave. The more children they have, the shorter and fewer their episodes and the more paid days per week they use. The reasons may be that having many children restricts them from using the flexibility in the system, but also that they may use remaining parental leave benefit for the older children instead. This usage of siblings is not seen in these analyses.

Foreign-born mothers and fathers both use shorter and fewer episodes with more paid days per week. Clearly, foreign-born parents use the flexibility in the parental leave system less. A likely explanation is that foreign-born parents often have a worse labor market situation.

The results can be interpreted to indicate that more resources lead to more flexible leave usage, but that also other factors may matter, such as preferences.

There is a clear trend of men increasing the length of their episodes over time, which parallels their increased use of parental leave benefit. However, women's episode lengths have not shortened in the same way, which is unexpected. It is possible that women's unpaid part of leave has increased since the 1990s began.