

Paid family leave more enticing for dads, but not a game-changer

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California's paid leave program has brought more dads in for tag-team parenting, but men who take anything more than a brief break are still rare.

Recent headlines suggest that it is becoming more common for men to take advantage of paid parental leave options, but University of Virginia professor Christopher Ruhm has found that it's a little more complicated than that.

Ruhm, a professor of public policy and economics at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, is co-author of the recent study, "Paid Family Leave, Fathers' Leave-Taking, and Leave-Sharing in Dual-Earner Households."

"Most, if not all, of the literature is primarily focused on mothers, because they tend to take more [leave](#) around the time of a new birth," Ruhm said. "We asked, 'Well, what about [fathers](#)?' This paper really focuses on fathers' leave-taking in a family perspective."

Together with researchers from Columbia University and the University of California, Santa Barbara, Ruhm conducted a National Bureau of Economic Research study on the impact of California's Paid Family Leave Program on fathers. The program, implemented in 2004 and the first of its kind in the United States, offers six weeks of paid leave to new parents – mothers and fathers – in the form of a 55 percent wage replacement rate up to \$1,104 per week. Their study took the up-to-date perspective in that it focused on the joint aspect of leave-taking, looking specifically within households and at the coordination of dual-earning married couples.

"Essentially, the main result – as we see with the California program – is that fathers actually increase their leave-taking by something like 50 percent, but since they take so little leave to start with, that's not necessarily a huge effect," Ruhm said. "They might go from a week [of leave] to maybe a week and a half."

When men were offered paid leave, Ruhm and his colleagues found that several additional factors influenced how likely they were to take advantage of that leave, including the sex of the child, the child's birth order, and the share of females in their occupation.

Men were 58 percent more likely to take leave if they were having a son rather than a daughter (women are similarly more likely to take longer leave with daughters than with sons). Fathers are also 96 percent more likely to take leave for a first child versus any subsequent children. Additionally, men who were employed in occupations with a higher ratio of female workers were 56 percent more likely to take leave, while those

who worked with fewer female colleagues were only 39 percent more likely.

Despite these variables and the slow growth rate in leave-taking by fathers, many health and childhood development experts agree that there are inherent benefits to a system that allows both parents to take paid leave.

"Paid leave after the birth of a child has been shown to reduce depression primarily in women, but many people don't know that dads are also susceptible to postpartum depression, so leave is important for them too," Emily Drake, an associate professor of nursing, said.

Drake specializes in infant and maternal health and is an award-winning instructor on those topics in UVA's School of Nursing. She added that fathers who are able to stay home also have more opportunities to play important health advocacy roles for new mothers and infants.

"Often mothers who are struggling with postpartum depression won't tell anyone for a long time, so a father who is at home may be the first person to detect early symptoms and offer help before anyone else knows what's going on," she said.

Amanda Williford, an early childhood development specialist and research assistant professor in the Curry School of Education, said that having two parents able to take paid leave can also have a ripple effect on children's eventual kindergarten readiness.

"To be clear, there isn't any research that shows that parents going back into the workforce after having kids is detrimental to their education," Williford said. "What studies have shown is that the type of care that children have to go to does matter for educational readiness."

Williford explained that the flexibility of paid leave for both parents can open more child care options for them and give parents the freedom to choose higher-quality care.

"Parents with limited time off and more rigid hours may have to choose their day care based more on logistics like proximity to their office or how long the day care is open," she said. "But if you have the flexibility to drive a little farther or were able to continue earning some money while on leave, then you can choose care based on factors such as the quality of the adult-child interactions which are a key factor in high-quality care."

Having two parents with paid leave who can tag team on care has been shown to impact infants' immune systems as well as their personal development.

"There are many studies that show parental leave increases breastfeeding rates, and if it's just a father on leave, that father is much more invested in making sure their child receives pumped breast milk than a day care provider," said Drake. "Having regular access to that milk is going to reduce the number of infections an infant has."

She added that having two parents with flexible schedules or leave also increases early immunization rates. When the burden is more easily shared, parents are less likely to miss those doctor's appointments.

Still, as more states begin to follow California's example, there are a number of questions that remain about the potential health and economic impacts of two-parent leave.

"We know that mothers are more likely to remain employed as a result of these programs," Ruhm said. "It'd be nice to study if that persists for fathers too."

Prior research into the Family Medical Leave Act – the federal regulation that guarantees 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave for specified family and medical reasons – suggests that those who have taken advantage of it are primarily advantaged mothers who are married and highly educated.

"That's probably partly because it's unpaid leave," Ruhm said. "However, the paid leave provided in California appears to make it more possible for disadvantaged mothers to also take leave."

Ruhm would like to see if this holds true in other parts of the country and expects there will be more data to examine soon. Massachusetts, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Connecticut have all recently joined California in offering some type of paid parental or [sick leave](#).

"I think it's likely that these aren't going to be the last states who put programs into effect. We're going to have more variation across the nation eventually," Ruhm said.

Provided by University of Virginia

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