

The effect of expanded parental benefits on union dissolution^[1]

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Excerpts from abstract

Abstract

Objective

The aim of the study was to examine whether gender equality-focused parental benefits affect the union stability of couples.

Background

Generous, flexible, and gender equality-focused parental benefits have been shown to increase fathers' use of parental leave and time with children. Even though these policies have no explicit aims regarding relationship stability, two longstanding theoretical perspectives (traditionalist and egalitarian) offer potential mechanisms through which this type of policy can shift relationship dynamics either to increase or to decrease union dissolution.

Method

Using Canadian administrative data, we estimate difference-in-differences and local average treatment effects to examine the effects of the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP 2006) on union dissolution. Then we examine whether the policy had heterogeneous effects on couples which are likely to be either traditional or egalitarian.

Results

We find that QPIP decreased the separation rate by half of a percentage point overall, a 6% decrease. The greatest reductions in union dissolution are found among couples likely to be more egalitarian in orientation.

Conclusion

The large negative effects of this family policy on union dissolution are significant, as they show one clear way in which family policies can encourage egalitarianism and stabilize families during the second phase of the gender revolution.

Background

We are currently in the midst of the second phase of the gender revolution. The first phase, the movement of women into the formal labor market, is complete in many parts of the world (Goldscheider et al., 2015). Paid parental benefits are one type of policy that was instituted to encourage the first phase of the gender revolution by offering job protection and financial support after a birth, encouraging new parents to return to work. These policies have been very effective in increasing labor force participation of women with young children across many countries (Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011; Misra et al., 2011). According to the International Network on Leave Policies and Research, 35 of 42 examined countries offer paid maternity benefits (benefits reserved for the birth mother) and many also offer paid parental benefits, which can be split between the two parents (Blum et al., 2017). In places where there are parental benefits to share, it is common for women to use most or all of the time, with biological differences often cited as an important factor when new parents decide how to share parental benefits (McKay & Doucet, 2010). The fact that mothers, and not fathers, experience pregnancy and childbirth means that women need time off work to physically recover. The fact that only women can breastfeed make it easier for the mother to do early childcare alone than men.

Some recent expansions of parental benefit policies have an explicit gender equality focus and aim to encourage the second phase of the gender revolution, the movement of men into care work and housework (Goldscheider et al., 2015). First introduced by Scandinavian countries, gender equality-focused parental benefits reserve weeks of generously paid benefits for mothers and fathers separately, and aim to encourage new fathers' engagement in childrearing and the more equal allocation of housework, care work, and paid work within families. Because there are weeks of benefits reserved for fathers, these policies make it easier for fathers to negotiate with partners and the workplace to take parental leave (McKay & Doucet, 2010). Even though these policies have no explicit aims regarding relationship quality or stability, these policies have the potential to shift union stability within couples. This is because the transition to parenthood is a stressful time, and one when social roles often become more traditional within heterosexual couples. The newly unequal division of labor

is a source of stress and a common cause of union dissolution after the transition to parenthood (Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Doss et al., 2009). Therefore, a policy that shifts the likelihood of more equal parenting could affect couples' relationships and union stability. More broadly, this addresses whether and how family policies can shape unions and family structure (Coontz & Folbre, 2002).

In this study, we examine how the Québec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP), implemented in 2006, shifted parents' union stability. The Canadian province of Québec introduced its own gender equality-focused parental benefits plan while the rest of the provinces kept the existing federal policy. QPIP instituted nontransferable leave for fathers, increased benefits, and allowed for more flexibility in use and eligibility. Our analysis from Canada is a particularly useful case. The little published research on this topic is all based in the Nordic countries, which are quite unique in their family policy innovation and gender equity, and therefore might not be generalizable. As more and more contexts implement parental benefits earmarked for fathers (Blum et al., 2017), it becomes more essential to understand the broad ways in which these policies can shape relationships and families.

Related link: Expansion of parental benefits saved marriages^[3]

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