

Sweden ranked as best place to have a baby; Canada places fifth on maternity leave, 15th for benefits [INT] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Having a baby is easier if the baby is a girl and the mother lives in Sweden, two studies suggest: At 96 weeks, Sweden has the longest paid maternity leave of 33 countries studied; and, as long suspected by doctors, delivering boys is more complicated than delivering girls, according to an Irish study.

Canada is the fifth best country for parents wanting time off to raise their newborn and is the 15th most generous nation for maternity leave payments, according to an international ranking of 33 countries released yesterday.

Canada, which increased its leave for new parents from six months to one year in December, 2000, tied with Denmark and followed Sweden, Norway, New Zealand and Australia for the number of weeks allowed off work. Sweden is one of the best places to have a baby -- it is the only country to offer couples nearly two years of paid leave to raise their child.

"I don't think you could do better than Sweden. You have 96 weeks leave and a year of that is at 80% of salary," said Gary Bowker, an employment law specialist with Mercer Human Resources Consulting, which wrote the study.

The United States, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan have the shortest maternity leaves. In the United States, mothers must work for a company of more than 50 employees in order to get 12 weeks off without salary, while in Taiwan they get only eight weeks off.

Overall, Scandinavian countries are the most generous in terms of time and maternity pay. The study found Norway, Brazil and Denmark offer the highest amount of money for maternity leave. A mother or father in Norway who earns about \$38,000 per year would get \$19,000 within his or her first six months home with a newborn. In Canada, which ranked below most European countries for maternity pay, a person on an equivalent salary would earn about half that amount -- \$9,500 -- after six months, the study found.

While Australia gives parents a year off, it is unpaid with the exception of a small benefit of less than \$700 for the first six months.

Across Canada, the benefits vary widely depending on the employer. Mothers are eligible for 15 weeks of government benefits, which are followed by an additional 35 weeks that can be taken by either parent. During the year, the government pays employment insurance to a maximum of \$413 per week. However, the amount companies pay to top-up the government benefits can range from nothing (in the case of small firms) to nearly 100% of an employee's salary. The federal government is among the most generous to its own workers, paying some mothers more than 90% of their income for the full year.

There are also some differences between the provinces. In Ontario, parents have to work for the same employer for 13 weeks to be eligible, whereas in Alberta they have to be employed by the same firm for one year before they get the benefits.

Quebec is trying to expand benefits in its province to give all mothers 80% of their salary for a full year, and is lobbying the federal government to provide funding.

Canadian parents have taken advantage of the extended leave, a sign they are willing to forgo their full income in order to have more time with their child. In November, the government released results from the first full year of maternity leave that showed a 24% increase in the number of people taking time off. The most dramatic change was among men: 12,010 fathers took time off to be with their baby in 2000 compared with 21,530 in 2001, an 80% increase.

While Canada has improved its international position by allowing parents to have more time at home, there are still things that need to improve before the country is as advanced as many European nations, said Jane Jenson, a professor of political science at the University of Montreal and director of the Canadian Policy Research Networks.

The Employment Insurance benefit, for example, is helpful for people in lower incomes but amounts to a dramatic drop in income for most Canadians. She said the benefits are also not extended to all Canadians. Self-employed parents do not qualify because they do not pay employment insurance.

Donna Lero, research director for the Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being at the University of Guelph in Ontario, said Canada lags behind other countries that are more flexible and family-friendly. Norway, for example, gives 52 weeks of leave at 80% of the person's pay and also allows parents to take another two years, which is paid at a flat rate.

The study was part of a larger survey of employment benefits in 60 countries.

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Region: Canada ^[2]

Europe ^[3]

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