Abstract

The health benefits of breastfeeding for mothers and children are well known. However, breastfeeding may conflict with mothers’ early labor market return. In 2007, Germany put into effect a new parental leave benefit (‘Elterngeld’). The related reform increased the number of parents eligible for the benefit as well as its amount and duration. The reform sought to decrease the pressure to return quickly to the labor market, especially for those parents who did not benefit under the old system. The current analysis investigates if this parental leave benefit reform impacted breastfeeding initiation and duration in Germany. This study draws on representative survey data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) from 2002 through 2012. We exploit three binary breastfeeding measures 1) breastfeeding at birth or no breastfeeding initiation; 2) breastfeeding for at least 4 months or less; and 3) breastfeeding for at least 6 months or less.

We find no effect of the ‘Elterngeld-Reform’ on breastfeeding initiation or breastfeeding for at least 6 months, but indeed on breastfeeding for at least 4 months. Applying a difference-in-difference approach, it is shown that mothers who were not affected by the reform did not change breastfeeding behavior. Mothers who benefit from the reform increased breastfeeding duration. The results were robust over various sensitivity tests covering placebo regressions as well as controlling for regional indicators. Thus, our empirical results provide evidence that the reform’s goal of providing time for the parents with their newborn child during the first year of life also impacted breastfeeding behavior.

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