

Accessing parental leave in Australia: the impact of labour market status and location*

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Abstract

In spite of longstanding provisions for unpaid parental leave, and a combination of public sector legislation and company policies that ensure that at least some Australian workers have access to periods of paid parental leave, there is little information available on accessibility, take-up rates or the extent to which leave provisions meet the needs of parents. While a survey based on a sample of parents would be necessary to address all these issues, recent longitudinal household surveys in Australia have provided data to allow investigation of the main determinants of access to parental leave. In this paper, data from the first and second waves of the *Negotiating the Life Course* survey are used to examine the influence of labour force status and location on perceptions of access to paid and unpaid parental leave. The analysis suggests that access to parental leave is considerably more variable than might be expected from a reading of formal legislative provisions.

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Introduction: formal provisions for parental leave

Although Australia is one of the two remaining OECD countries without national level legislation for paid maternity leave (the other being the US), it has relatively comprehensive and longstanding arrangements for unpaid parental leave, as well as legislative provisions in federal and state public sectors for paid maternity leave. Within this formal framework, the criteria for access to paid and unpaid parental leave are clearly established.

Maternity leave was first introduced in the federal public sector with the *Maternity Leave (Commonwealth Government Employees) Act* of 1973, which provided for a total of 52 weeks leave, of which 12 were to be paid. Paid maternity leave was subsequently introduced for public sector employees by most state governments, although several have opted for shorter periods than 12 weeks. Extension of leave provisions to the private sector was achieved not through legislation but through the industrial tribunals, initially in a maternity leave test case presented to the federal industrial tribunal in 1979 by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). This case established the right to a maximum of 52 weeks unpaid maternity leave (with a compulsory period of six weeks leave immediately following the birth) for full-time and part-time permanent employees with at least 12 months continuous employment prior to taking leave. It also established a right to return to work after taking leave, preserving continuity of employment and proscribing termination of employment on the grounds of pregnancy or absence on maternity leave (218 CAR 120, 130). However, this process did not deliver paid leave for private sector employees.¹

Subsequent test cases have extended unpaid leave provisions for private sector employees – unpaid adoption leave was made available to women in 1985 (298 CAR 321), and in 1990 a right to 52 weeks unpaid paternity leave was granted. The total amount of unpaid ‘parental’² leave per family was 52 weeks, available until the child’s first birthday. Parents could thus share the leave, but could not take it simultaneously, apart from one week at the time of the birth, or up to three weeks at the time of adoption (Print J3596, July 1990).³ Additionally, access has subsequently been extended following a test case brought before the federal industrial tribunal by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in 2001, which made unpaid parental leave available to employees on casual contracts.

¹ Paid maternity leave is nevertheless available to some private sector employees through company policies and agreements in a number of private organisations, including the major banks.

² The term ‘parental leave’ is used in Australia to refer to this 52-week period which can be taken by either parent and is inclusive of what would elsewhere be termed ‘maternity’ and ‘paternity’ leave. In most countries the practice is to distinguish between ‘maternity/paternity’ leave (as leave taken at the time of a child’s birth), and ‘parental leave’ (as leave for child care purposes at a later date).

³ An ongoing test case at the time of writing is seeking extension of the period of leave available to be taken simultaneously.

While unpaid parental leave for private sector employees was primarily won through the industrial tribunals, Australia's ratification of international conventions, including International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 156 (*Workers with Family Responsibilities*) in 1990, enabled the government to ensure universal access to these benefits by including them in the federal *Industrial Relations Reform Act* of 1993. Although the subject of some debate, they were retained in the revised industrial relations legislation introduced after a change of government in 1996, and the *Workplace Relations Act* of 1996 continues to provide for 52 weeks unpaid parental leave with a guaranteed right of return to work, accessible to full-time and part-time employees with 12 months continuous employment. Several states have also encoded these entitlements in industrial relations legislation, in some cases (Queensland and NSW) formally extending unpaid parental leave to 'long-term' or 'regular' casuals.

In view of the relatively long history and legislative status of unpaid parental leave, it seems reasonable to expect employees to be aware of their entitlements to this benefit, and for it to be seen as universally accessible across the labour market, with the exception that those with less than 12 months tenure with their current employer, and – prior to the 2001 test case – those employed on a casual basis, have fallen outside the eligibility criteria. Access to paid leave, on the other hand, is likely to be much more dependent on location (public or private sector), and - within the private sector - on occupational category and employment status (permanent or casual, full-time or part-time, income level).

While recent survey data do not provide sufficient detail to enable investigation of actual usage of different forms of parental leave⁴, data from the first two waves of the *Negotiating the Life Course Survey* (NLCS) (McDonald et al 2000; Baxter et al 2003) do enable examination of perceptions of access to these provisions and the extent to which such perceptions are influenced by individual and labour market characteristics. The advantages of NLCS data for investigating these questions include the size and scope of the survey⁵, and the extent to which it can be taken as representative of the Australian population.⁶ Additionally, its focus on women's and men's labour force engagement and household arrangements over the life course means that it contains a wide range of suitable variables for this research.

Investigating perceptions of access to parental leave

In this section of the paper, NLCS data are used to investigate a series of questions on access to parental leave. The first group of questions is focused on the extent to which

⁴ A comprehensive survey of the use of paid and unpaid parental leave was last conducted in Australia in the 1980s (see Glezer 1988). Although the Australian Bureau of Statistics has recently conducted supplementary labour force surveys in New South Wales and Queensland (ABS 2001, 2003) and produced estimates such as numbers of female employees with a child under six years who have taken some form of maternity leave in the previous five years, this information does not enable assessment of uptake in terms of eligibility for leave, or investigation of the determinants of access.

⁵ Wave 1 delivered 2231 responses with 1297 variables per case.

⁶ Based on a random sample of persons aged 18-54 years living in Australia with a telephone number listed in the White Pages telephone directory, with the respondent in each household chosen on the basis of having the next birthday

employees are aware of entitlements to paid and unpaid parental leave, how perceptions of access to parental leave compare with other forms of leave and other work/family provisions, and the extent to which these perceptions have varied over the time period between wave 1 and wave 2 of data collection.⁷ The second set of questions is concerned with the extent to which perceptions of access vary in line with formal criteria for eligibility, that is, in terms of permanent/casual status, length of tenure, and – for paid leave – location in the public or private sector. The final set of questions focuses on the determinants of perceptions of access to these leave provisions.

The basis for these analyses is the question ‘Do you have any of the following benefits in your job?’, which specified six different forms of leave: paid sick leave; paid holiday leave; long service leave; paid maternity/paternity leave; unpaid maternity/paternity leave; family or carers’ leave.⁸ Table 1 shows the proportion of respondents answering this question who believe they would have access to these leave provisions in their job in 1997 and 2000.

Table 1: Perceptions of access to leave provisions among employed persons, Australia 1997 and 2000 (column percentages)

	Paid sick leave	Paid holiday lve	Long service lve	Paid mat/pat lve	Unpaid mat/pat lve	Family/carers’ leave
<i>Wave 1, 1997</i>						
Yes	67.3	67.3	61.9	33.6	49.5	38.9
No	32.3	32.3	35.0	55.0	34.5	49.8
Don’t know	0.1	0.1	2.7	10.9	15.2	10.8
NA	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.8	0.6
<i>Wave 2, 2000</i>						
Yes	66.5	66.0	59.9	37.6	51.2	47.5
No	33.0	33.6	37.9	53.9	37.7	44.8
Don’t know	0.2	-	1.7	7.9	10.4	7.2
NA	0.3	0.4	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.5

Notes

For 1997 (wave 1), each column is based on a total N of 1655 cases (omitting skipped and missing cases). For 2000 (wave 2), each column is based on a total N of 1437 cases (omitting skipped and missing cases). Percentages have been rounded and some columns may not sum to exactly 100 per cent.

Source of data

Negotiating the Life Course Survey, Waves 1 & 2 (McDonald et al 2000; Baxter et al 2003)

An initial observation from these data is that respondents appeared less certain about parental and family care leave (reported in the last three columns of Table 1) than about longer standing, more general forms of leave such as sick, holiday and long service leave;

⁷ In this paper the focus is on overall changes in percentages between the two waves rather than tracking changes in individuals’ perceptions over the time period.

⁸ Family or carers’ leave generally refers to time off work to care for a sick family member, and has been made widely available through test cases in the federal industrial relations system in 1994 and 1995 which allowed the use of sick and other forms of leave for this purpose. It is likely to be dependent on negotiations at workplace level to formalize the process, or on individual company policies.

and least certain overall about unpaid parental leave (15 per cent⁹ of respondents in 1997 and 10 per cent of respondents in 2000 didn't know whether they would have access to this form of leave, in comparison with less than one percent for provisions like paid sick and holiday leave). It is also apparent, however, that levels of uncertainty were lower in Wave 2 compared with Wave 1.¹⁰

While unpaid parental leave was (unsurprisingly) seen as considerably more accessible than paid parental leave (50 per cent compared with 34 per cent of respondents believing they had access in 1997, and 51 per cent compared with 38 per cent¹¹ respectively in 2000), it was viewed as much less accessible than sick and holiday leave (to which 67 per cent of respondents in both waves believed they had access). Among respondents to the question on paid leave in Wave 2, 31 per cent believed they would have access to paid maternity/paternity leave of less than three months duration, while 26 per cent believed they would have access to paid leave of longer than three months (there was some overlap between these categories – ie some respondents answered that both these options would be available to them at their workplace). Overall, although there was some increase between waves in the proportion perceiving access to paid maternity/paternity leave (primarily at the expense of the 'don't know' category), the most significant change between waves was in the increased perception of access to family/ carers' leave, with fewer in both the 'no' and the 'don't know' categories in 2000.

With respect to correspondence between perceptions of access and expectations based on formal provisions, it is important to note that formal provision for unpaid parental leave at the time of these surveys (1997 and 2000) did not extend to casual employees; however sick leave and holiday leave are also normally unavailable to casuals under the Australian system. Another formal limitation on access to parental leave is the requirement for 12 months continuous service, but again paid holiday leave is not without service requirements in most cases. At around 50 per cent of respondents in both waves, it does seem that perceptions of access to unpaid parental leave are somewhat lower than might be expected in light of the formal provisions, although the comparatively large 'don't know' group adds some uncertainty to comparisons between forms of leave.

The data allow further investigation of this issue further through bivariate associations between perceptions of access and the types of employment excluded from the formal provisions. The extent to which perceptions of access to unpaid (and paid) parental leave are linked with permanent/casual status is shown in Table 2. It is evident that a significant association exists - while 62 per cent of permanents thought they has access to unpaid parental leave in 1997, this was the case for only 30 per cent of casuals (the comparable figures in 2000 provide an even more marked contrast at 68 and 26 per cent respectively).

⁹ Figures in the tables are given to one decimal place in order to allow inclusion of cells with <1 per cent of responses. In the text, however, figures are rounded to the nearest whole number as this is more consistent with the level of accuracy that can be obtained from the data.

¹⁰ Between wave comparisons may be biased by the reduced numbers in the sample in 2000 compared with 1997.

¹¹ Figures from the NLCS are somewhat higher than recent estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) which indicated that in 2003, around 31 per cent of employees believed they have an entitlement to paid maternity or paternity leave (ABS Cat. No 6310.0: 2004).

As expected, paid parental leave is less accessible to both permanents and casuals, with 48 per cent of permanents compared with only 5 per cent of casuals believing they had access in 1997. The comparable figures for 2000 show a marked increase in perceptions of access for permanents but not for casuals (57 compared with 4 per cent).¹² These comparisons underline the extent to which the distinction between permanent and casual status marks a major divide in access to entitlements in the Australian labour market, and it will be important to ascertain whether formal extension of unpaid parental leave entitlements to casuals in 2001 has impacted significantly on the contrasts illustrated in Table 2. Also of interest in Table 2, however, is the sizeable minority (30 per cent in 1997 and 26 per cent in 2000) of casuals who believed they did have access to unpaid parental leave. While this may be an erroneous assumption on the part of respondents, it may also indicate the presence of informal arrangements at workplace level; or may simply reflect ambiguity in the question, which could be taken as referring to the general availability of access to leave at the workplace rather than the specific entitlement of the individual. None of these possibilities can be assessed from the NLCS data.

Table 2: Perceptions of access to unpaid and paid maternity/paternity leave by employment contract, Australia 1997 and 2000 (row percentages)

	Unpaid maternity/paternity leave ^a				Paid maternity/paternity leave ^b			
	Yes	No	Don't know	N (100%) ^c	Yes	No	Don't know	N (100%) ^c
<i>Wave 1, 1997</i>								
Permanent	62.4	17.1	20.5	1040	48.4	36.0	15.6	1042
Casual	29.8	60.0	10.2	215	4.6	91.7	3.7	217
Contract	39.6	44.0	16.5	91	27.5	63.7	8.8	91
<i>Wave 2, 2000</i>								
Permanent	68.4	17.4	14.2	885	56.5	32.1	11.4	866
Casual	25.8	68.0	6.2	194	3.7	95.3	1.1	191
Contract	41.0	47.0	12.1	83	24.7	64.2	11.1	81

Notes

- a) Unpaid maternity/paternity leave chi-square = 188.55, p<0.001 for 1997 data; 219.3, p<0.001 for 2000 data.
- b) Paid maternity/paternity leave chi-square = 332.5, p<0.001 for 1997 data; 268.1, p<0.001 for 2000 data. For 2000 data, access to paid leave includes respondents who reported access to either or both paid leave for <3months or 3months or more.
- c) Excludes 'not applicable' responses and skipped cases; row percentages have been rounded and some may not sum to exactly 100 per cent.

Source of data: *Negotiating the Life Course Survey* (McDonald et al 2000; Baxter et al 2003)

Another factor that would limit formal access to both forms of parental leave is lack of the prescribed 12 months continuous service. Examination of NLCS data shows that perceptions of access do vary on this basis – in 1997, 53 per cent of those who had been with their current employer for one year or more believed they had access to unpaid parental leave, compared with 32 per cent of those who had been with their employer for

¹² The NLCS data distinguish between permanent, casual and fixed term contract forms of employment. All three dimensions are included in Table 2, although our focus is primarily on the distinction between permanent and casual.

less than one year (the corresponding figures for 2000 were 58 and 40 per cent respectively). Similarly, paid parental leave was seen as accessible by 35 per cent of those with tenure for a year or more, and 23 per cent of those with less than a year (again the figures had increased for both categories in 2000, but with a similar difference between the two – 43 and 31 per cent respectively). While these differences are to be expected, in both waves a sizeable minority with tenure of less than a year reported access to forms of parental leave – a finding subject to the same qualifications raised earlier in relation to casuals.

One other determinant of formal access to parental leave relates specifically to paid maternity leave, which is a legislated provision only in government employment (although some private companies have made it available to their employees). Unpaid parental leave, though (all else being equal), should be accessible at comparable levels in both public and private sectors. However Table 3 shows that sector-based differences in perceptions of access to parental leave are not limited to paid leave provisions. The difference is more marked for paid leave (60 per cent of government, compared with 31 per cent of private sector, employees believed they had access to paid parental leave), but is also strongly significant for unpaid leave (70 per cent of government, compared with 50 per cent of private, employees and only 24 per cent of self-employed respondents believed they had access to unpaid parental leave).

Table 3: Perceptions of access to unpaid and paid maternity/paternity leave by sector^a, Australia 1997 and 2000 (row percentages)

	Unpaid maternity/paternity leave ^b				Paid maternity/paternity leave ^c			
	Yes	No	Don't know	N (100%) ^d	Yes	No	Don't know	N (100%) ^d
<i>Wave 1, 1997</i>								
Govt emp'ees	70.2	16.0	13.7	430	59.9	31.8	8.4	431
Private emp'ees	48.9	30.3	20.8	917	30.5	53.8	15.7	920
Self-empl'd	23.5	76.2	0.3	294	5.7	94.3	0	296
<i>Wave 2, 2000</i>								
Govt emp'ees	71.5	18.9	9.6	365	65.6	28.5	5.9	358
Private emp'ees	53.7	32.2	14.1	799	36.1	52.6	11.4	782
Self-empl'd	16.9	82.7	0.4	260	4.6	95.0	0.4	260

Notes

- a) The NLCS separates 'self-employed' respondents from employees in public and private sectors. Although self-employed respondents will be predominantly in the private sector, the three categories are reported separately here to allow comparison between public and private employees.
- b) Unpaid maternity/paternity leave chi-square = 332.52, $p < 0.001$ for 1997; 304.1, $p < 0.001$ for 2000.
- c) Paid maternity/paternity leave chi-square = 337.04, $p < 0.001$ for 1997; 305.9, $p = 0.001$ for 2000. For 2000 data, access to paid leave includes respondents who reported access to either or both paid leave for <3months or 3months or more.
- d) Excludes 'not applicable' responses and skipped cases; row percentages have been rounded and some may not sum to exactly 100 per cent.

Source of data: *Negotiating the Life Course Survey* (McDonald et al 2000; Baxter et al 2003)

Table 3 also shows that private sector employees were less certain of these entitlements than those in government employment or the self-employed (for example, 21 per cent of private sector employees didn't know if they had access to unpaid parental leave, compared with around 14 per cent of government employees and less than one per cent of self-employed respondents).

These observations suggest the influence of factors beyond simply formal eligibility criteria in explaining perceptions of access to leave, and this issue is now examined in more depth with multivariate logistic regression models to predict the likelihood of perception of access to both unpaid and paid forms of parental leave. This procedure allows investigation of a range of labour market and demographic factors, and control for overlapping effects between variables. Labour market and employment variables included in the model are: sector; tenure; casual/permanent status; part-time/full-time status; earnings; and occupational group.¹³ Sector has already been shown to be influential (at least in a bivariate model) in spite of the formal availability of unpaid parental leave across public and private employment. Being in the government sector may in effect be a proxy for comparatively regulated and unionized work environment, and it is reasonable to anticipate that it will retain its significance even when permanent/casual status, tenure and other variables are controlled for in the multivariate model. Tenure of <12 months and casual status are indicators of formal restrictions on access at the time of the survey and have also been shown to be influential in the discussion presented above, although their effects are likely to overlap. Additionally, the model tests other aspects of labour market status, specifically whether absolute length of tenure (that is, total number of years rather than simply meeting the obligatory 12 months service), being full-time, having high earnings, and being in a female dominated or a higher status occupational group¹⁴ increase the likelihood that parental leave will seem accessible.

Alongside these labour market and employment variables, a number of individual characteristics - sex, age, number of children aged under six years¹⁵ - are included in the model. It could be argued, for example, that women, people of child-bearing age, and those with children (particularly those with numerous young children) may actively select jobs where they believe access to parental leave will be available. However, it is not clear that such a choice could be easily exercised in contemporary labour markets, and in Australia the simplest and most common choice for women with children is to work part-time. Thus, while people's awareness of their rights to parental leave may well vary in

¹³ Ideally, size of workplace should also be included. Larger organisations may be more likely to have formal processes in place to inform employees of their entitlements, and to deliver them in a standardized manner; although there is an alternative argument that communication and flexibility around leave taking could be better in small organisations (see Glass and Fujimoto 1995). Unfortunately, the absence of information on workplace size for the government sector prevents inclusion of this variable in the analysis, except where the focus is limited to private sector workplaces.

¹⁴ It could be argued, for example, that access to parental leave may be more in demand or made more visible in female dominated occupational groups; but it could also be the case that access is more readily apparent or more practically feasible in higher status occupational groups. These propositions can only be tested at a very basic level in this analysis as occupational classification is only at the one-digit level.

¹⁵ For a full list of variables and summary statistics, see Appendix.

terms of sex, age and number of young children, there is not a strong rationale for expecting that perceptions of access will be significantly influenced by these factors.

The results of the analysis of unpaid parental leave based on Wave 2 data are presented in Table 4. The figures indicate that being in the public sector has a positive impact on the likelihood of perceived access to unpaid parental leave, consistent with the relationship shown in Table 3, and in spite of the ‘universality’ of the provisions. The strongest predictor in the table is permanent status, which exerts a positive effect on the likelihood of perception of access to unpaid leave in comparison with casual status (the referent category). Tenure with current employer (in this case measured in years, but also tested as a dummy variable to indicate whether or not tenure had been for a period of 12 months or more) does not show up as statistically significant in this model. The likelihood of perceived access is, however, shown to be associated with the level of earnings, being female and within the broad ‘child bearing age’ category (25-40 years).¹⁶

Overall, the results suggest that in spite of universal provision, access (or at least perception of access) is uneven across public and private sectors, and appears to be influenced by factors outside the legislative provisions such as level of earnings. It is also clearly influenced by the permanent/casual divide, which is not surprising given the information presented in Table 2 and the fact that these data were collected prior to the formal extension of unpaid leave provisions to casuals.

Table 4: Logisitic regression results for probability of access to unpaid parental leave, 2000

	Odds ratio	Coefficient	SE
Public sector	1.779	.576	.229*
Tenure	1.011	.011	.013
Permanent	11.145	2.411	.291***
Fixed term	1.784	.579	.395
Full-time	.839	-.176	.278
Earnings	1.497	.403	.108***
Managers	1.731	.548	.478
Professionals	1.372	.316	.316
Para-professionals	1.265	.235	.355
Advanced clerical	1.378	.321	.584
Other clerical	.903	-.102	.435
Intermediate production	1.479	.391	.317
Sex (female)	4.404	1.482	.255***
Child bearing age	1.977	.681	.215**
Number of children <6yrs	1.006	.006	.164
Constant		-3.601	.490

Notes

Number of observations = 759 (329 respondents excluded because they were not working, 161 missing on dependent variable, 517 missing on one or more independent variables)

Log likelihood = -343.74869; Pseudo R²=.242; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Source of data: *Negotiating the Life Course Survey* (Baxter et al 2003)

¹⁶ The same analysis using Wave 1 produced similar results, with the exception that earnings did not appear as statistically significant in that analysis, while tenure did have a small effect.

The association with being female and of child-bearing age is more difficult to interpret, especially in the absence of any relationship with the presence of young children or particular occupational categories. Splitting the sample between public and private sectors shows that the relationship between being female and perception of access to unpaid parental leave is essentially a private sector phenomenon. The strongest relationship across both government and private sector models is with permanent/casual status, indicating the strength of this divide in the Australian labour market and its relevance for entitlements.¹⁷

As argued earlier, there is an expectation that the determinants of access to paid leave will be more varied than those for unpaid leave, at least within the private sector. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 5. As expected given legislative provisions, being in the public sector has a positive impact on the likelihood of perceived access to paid parental leave. Also, as with unpaid leave, being permanent (and in this case also being on a fixed contract) increases the likelihood of perceived access compared with being casual – and the relationship with permanent status is again the strongest association in the model.

Table 5: Logistic regression results for probability of access to paid parental leave, 2000

	Odds ratio	Coefficient	SE
Public sector	3.746	1.32***	.212
Tenure	.990	-.01	.012
Permanent	36.144	3.59***	.491
Fixed contract	4.913	1.59**	.590
Full-time	1.436	.362	.252
Earnings	1.233	.210*	.098
Managers	1.532	.427	.404
Professionals	1.601	.471	.313
Para-professionals	.932	-.070	.339
Advanced clerical	1.057	.055	.490
Other clerical	.730	-.315	.474
Intermediate production	1.865	.623*	.316
Sex (female)	1.873	.628**	.223
Child bearing age	0.967	-.033	.193
Number of children <6yrs	0.553	-.592***	.158
Constant		-4.709	.619

Notes: Number of observations = 762 (329 respondents excluded because they were not working, 149 missing on dependent variable, 528 missing on one or more independent variables)

Log likelihood = -382.98259, Pseudo R² = .2721; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Source of data: *Negotiating the Life Course Survey* (Baxter et al 2003)

While the model shows that the likelihood of perceived access is associated with being higher up the earnings scale, this effect does not show up when the sample is split between public and private sectors, hence there is little evidence here to support the notion that paid parental leave is more likely to be available in salary packages to higher

¹⁷ In the interests of saving space, not all models referred to are reproduced in the paper. Full details may be obtained from the author.

earning employees.¹⁸ Rather, for both public and private sectors separately, it is permanent status that remains the most significant and strongest predictor.¹⁹

Table 5 also shows that, as with unpaid leave, being female increases the likelihood of perception of access, although again this is shown to be a private sector effect only. An apparent anomaly of the paid leave model, as represented in Table 5 as well as in the separate public and private sector models, is a negative association with the number of children under six years of age (a relationship that remains if the variable is replaced with a dummy to represent whether or not the respondent has children aged under six years). This is a finding of some concern, suggesting that the presence of children leads people to take employment options where paid parental leave provisions are least likely to be available.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study of perceptions of access has enabled some assessment of knowledge of parental leave entitlements, as well as an indication of the extent to which access in practice may differ from expectations based on formal provisions. In spite of some change between waves 1 and 2 of data collection, there remains a high level of uncertainty about access to parental leave in Australia, and this is most marked for our main policy provision – unpaid parental leave. It also shows that, contrary to expectations based on formal entitlements, perceptions of access to unpaid parental leave differ markedly between public and private sectors, even when factors such as casual status and tenure are controlled for. Additionally, while the association between perceptions of access and permanent/casual status is perhaps unsurprising, the analysis does illustrate the strength of this relationship for paid and unpaid forms of leave across both sectors and it emphasises the need to investigate how more recent changes in formal provisions may have affect this situation (a concern being that regardless of formal changes, actual practice and understandings at the workplace level will still be highly influenced by the division between permanent and casual status). The analysis also draws attention to different influences on unpaid and paid leave access, and differences across public and private sectors, and suggests that parenthood may itself be a factor in locating employees in jobs where they are least likely to be able to access paid leave provisions. Overall, the results reaffirm the importance of well-known dimensions of difference in the Australian labour market but underline the need for more comprehensive data collection and qualitative study to investigate actual usage of leave provisions and the perceptions and preferences of parents.

¹⁸ This could have been inferred from the analysis of Wave 1 data, but for this paper the Wave 2 figures are taken as more reliable, particularly in view of the decrease in ‘don’t know’ responses to questions of access to parental leave.

¹⁹ Separate analyses of access to paid leave of <3 months duration and >3 months duration produce similar results, with public sector, permanent status and being female the most important relationships evident. Level of earnings is also shown to be significant in these models.

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Appendix

List of variables and summary statistics for regression models, Wave 2 data

Variable	Mean	SD
<i>For model predicting access to unpaid parental leave (759 observations for each variable)</i>		
Public sector (no=0, yes=1) ^a	.3399	.4740
Tenure (years with current employer) ^b	7.8590	7.9529
Permanent employee (no=0, yes=1) ^c	.7800	.4145
Fixed-term contract employee (no=0, yes=1)	.0685	.2528
Full-time (35+hrs/week in main job; no=0, yes=1)	.7181	.4502
Earnings (1=<10,000; 2=10,000<25,000; 3=25,000<45,000; 4=45,000<65,000; 5=65,000-85,000; 6=85,000+)	3.3188	1.1886
Managers (no=0, yes=1) ^d	.0764	.2658
Professionals (no=0, yes=1)	.3188	.4663
Paraprofessionals (no=0, yes=1)	.1383	.3455
Advanced clerical (no=0, yes=1)	.0435	.2041
Other Clerical (includes intermediate and elementary) (no=0, yes=1)	.0659	.2482
Intermediate production (no=0, yes=1)	.2332	.4231
Sex (0=male, 1=female)	.5415	.4986
Child bearing age (0=other age; 1=within most common child-bearing age[25-40])	.4453	.4973
Children (number of children, 0-6 years) ^e	.2780	.6336
<i>For model predicting access to paid parental leave (762 observations for each variable)</i>		
Public sector (no=0, yes=1) ^a	.3425	.4749
Tenure (years with current employer) ^b	7.9186	8.0899
Permanent employee (no=0, yes=1) ^c	.7795	.4148
Fixed-term contract employee (no=0, yes=1)	.0656	.2478
Full-time (35+hrs/week in main job; no=0, yes=1)	.7270	.4458
Earnings (1=<10,000; 2=10,000<25,000; 3=25,000<45,000; 4=45,000<65,000; 5=65,000-85,000; 6=85,000+)	3.3320	1.1685
Managers (no=0, yes=1) ^d	.0801	.2716
Professionals (no=0, yes=1)	.3110	.4632
Paraprofessionals (no=0, yes=1)	.1404	.3477
Advanced clerical (no=0, yes=1)	.0472	.2123
Other Clerical (includes intermediate and elementary) (no=0, yes=1)	.0617	.2407
Intermediate production (no=0, yes=1)	.2336	.4234
Sex (0=male, 1=female)	.5315	.4993
Child bearing age (0=other age; 1=within most common child-bearing age[25-40])	.4409	.4968
Children (number of children, 0-6 years) ^e	.2795	.6397

Notes:

- a) 'No' category includes self-employed
- b) Also tested as a dichotomous variable (0=<12months in current job, 1=12 months or more)
- c) 'Permanent' and 'Fixed term contract' employees are compared with the omitted reference category 'Casual employees'
- d) The six occupational categories listed are compared with the omitted reference category combining 'trades' and 'labourers'.
- e) Also tested as a dichotomous variable (0=no children <6yrs; 1=some children <6years)