

# Are Single Parents Discriminated Against in the Swedish Labor Market? Evidence from a Field Experiment

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## Introduction

Divorce and separation is by far the most common ground for single parenthood. In Sweden, employment rates were traditionally higher for single mothers than for mothers in two-parent families. Since the early 1990s, however, the pattern is reversed, mothers in two-parent families are now employed to a higher extent than single mothers. Studies suggest that single mother's labor supply does not match their labor demand. Could this mismatch (partly) be an effect of employer discrimination? Are employers reluctant to hire single parents due to, e.g., perceptions of lower work commitment or productivity in the group? Moreover, does employer behavior vary by job qualification level, due to, e.g., higher employer cost of low productivity/work commitment in high qualification jobs?

## Aim of the study

To investigate potential employer discrimination against single parents, by job qualification level, in the Swedish labor market.

## Data

Fictitious applications are sent to real jobs in the Swedish labor market, and we observe employer callback rates for these.

We apply for jobs in around 20 occupations, varying by, e.g., qualification levels, sector and gender composition, randomly assigning gender, civil status and parenthood status to applications.

So far, we have sent out 1,444 applications, and received callbacks for 35,2 percent of these. Data collection is still ongoing and we plan to send out approximately 4,000 applications in total (200 per occupation).

## Main results

Our very preliminary results show no indication of employer discrimination against single parents. The callback rates for single mothers and fathers are at least as high as for any other category, i.e., mothers and fathers in two-parent families, and childless women and men (see Figure 1).

Callback rates are generally higher for highly qualified jobs than for jobs with low qualification levels. We find no evidence, however, of employer discrimination against single parents by either job qualification level. If anything, there is a tendency that the interaction *single\*parent* is *positive* for women in low qualified jobs (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Callback rates by applicant gender, parental status, and civil status

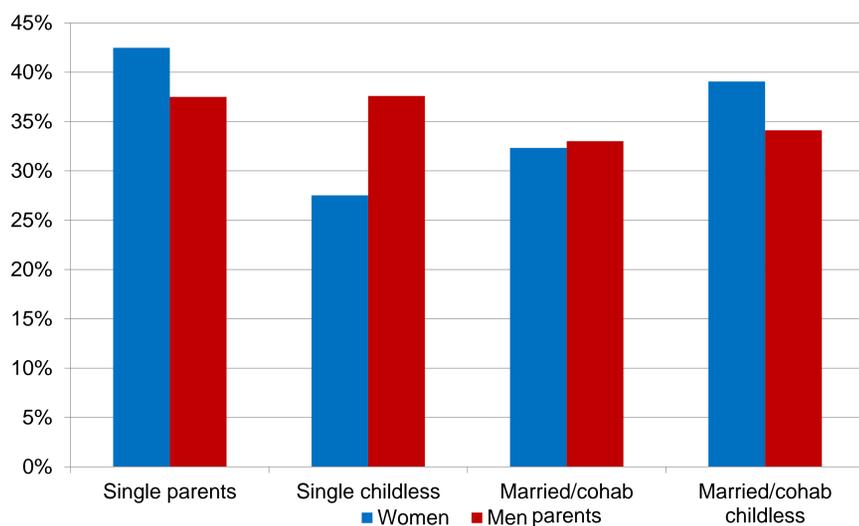
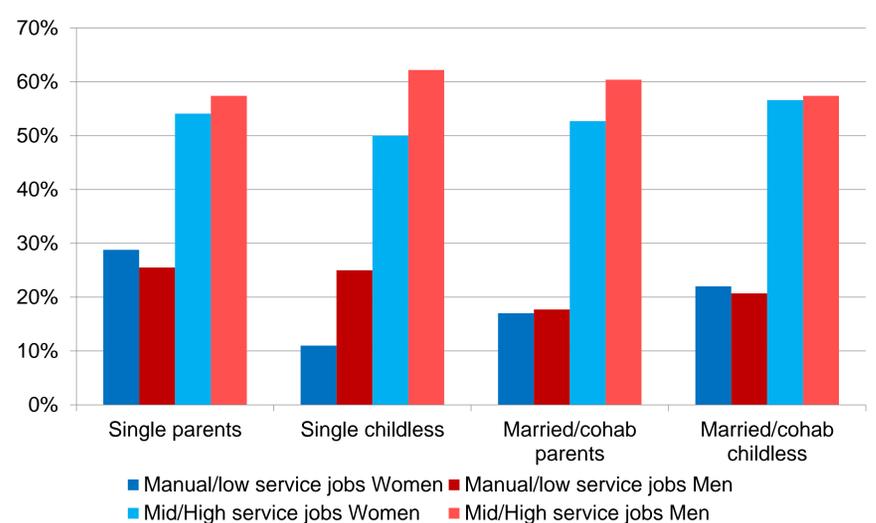


Figure 2. Callback rates by applicant gender, parental status, civil status, and job qualification level



## Conclusions

Would zero differences between categories defined by civil status\*parenthood imply that there is no (average) employer discrimination by civil and parental status in Sweden? While our study only captures discrimination in the initial stage but not later on in the hiring process, there is massive evidence from audit studies showing discrimination to be much more common in the first stage, i.e., selecting applicants to an interview, than in later stages. So a zero difference result would lend support to the claim that employers do not engage in discrimination by parental status and civil status.

However, discrimination may of course also occur within an organization or a workplace, for instance an employee might be at disadvantage in the wage setting or promotion process, but the use of correspondence testing does not shed any light on this type of discrimination. While we would admit that discriminatory mechanisms could be at work in organizational processes, or through homophily in social networks, the question that remains to be answered then is why the effects of such mechanisms are not at play when employers decide whom to contact among otherwise unknown job applicants.

Statistical power is still too low to reach any definitive conclusions. Once data collection is finished, statistical power will be much stronger, making analyses by occupation and more complex interactions possible.