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POLITICAL SCIENCE ■



**Health
Inequalities Lab**
Research at LSE ■

The Impact of Family Policies on the Mental Health of Caregivers

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Overview

1. What is the potential role of family policies?
2. Key findings on maternity and paternity leave
3. Are there long-term benefits beyond the postpartum period?
4. What about long parental leave?
5. Who might benefit the most from these policies?
6. What we still don't know

A neglected public health priority?

1 in 5

mothers experience
a perinatal mental
health disorder

1 in 10

fathers are affected
in the perinatal
period

40%

of affected mothers
ever seek treatment

Howard et al. (2014) *Lancet* series in perinatal mental health
Howard & Khalifeh (2020) *World Psychiatry*

An intergenerational issue

Where do the costs fall?

UK estimate per annual birth cohort · **Total: £8.1 billion**

Impact on the child

72%



Direct costs (mother & services)

28%

Bauer, Parsonage and Knapp (2014) *LSE/Centre for Mental Health*

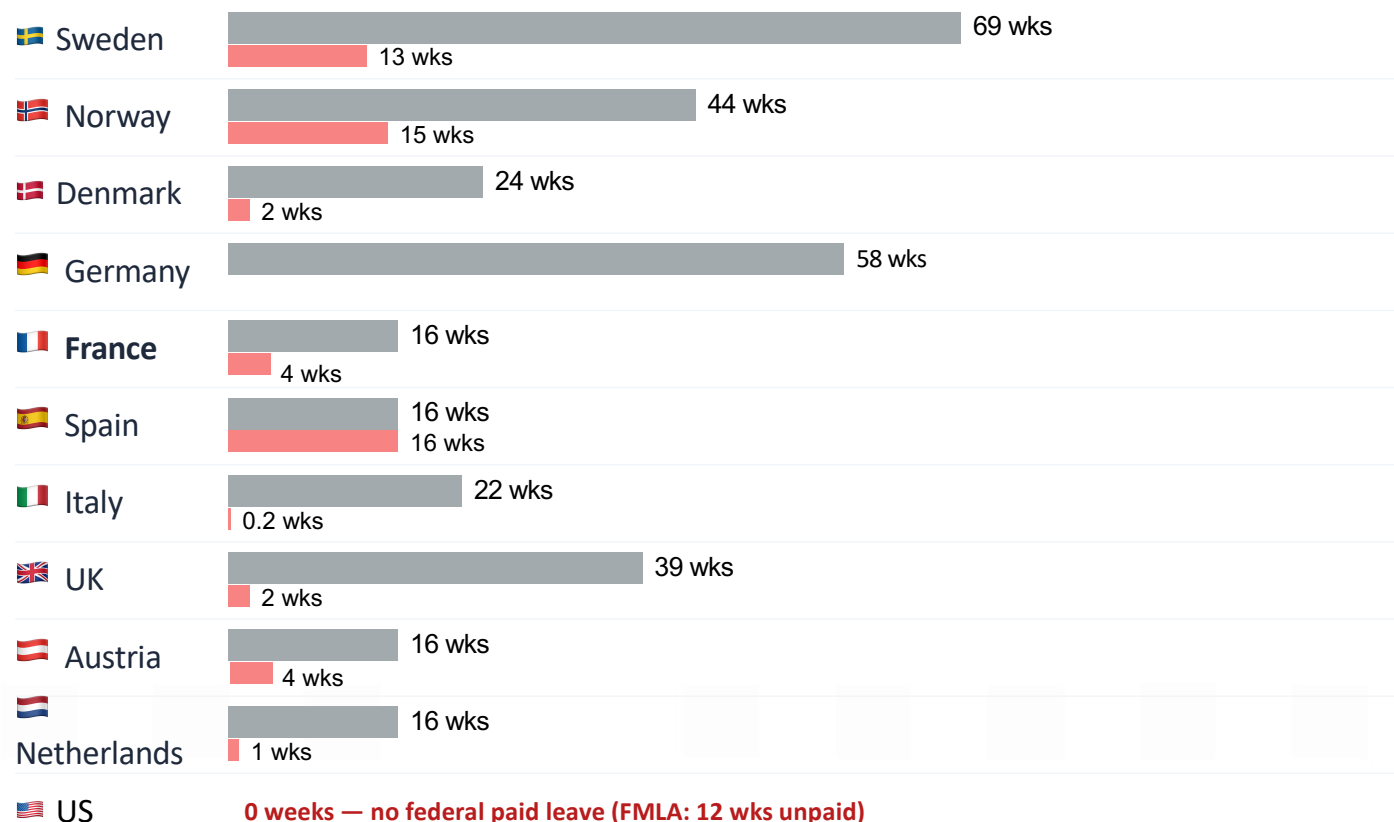
The role of parental leave

Job-protected leave of absence for employed parents after childbirth to take care of their baby

Policy types	Mechanisms	Mental health outcomes
Maternity leave <i>Duration and wage replacement</i>	Reduced time pressure <i>More time for recovery and bonding</i>	Postnatal depression <i>Mothers and fathers</i>
Paternity / partner leave <i>Quota and incentive designs</i>	Financial security <i>Reduced economic stress postpartum</i>	Anxiety disorders <i>Antenatal and postnatal period</i>
Shared parental leave <i>Flexible splitting schemes</i>	Shared care burden <i>More equitable division of tasks</i>	Post-traumatic stress <i>Birth trauma and adjustment</i>
	Social support & inclusion <i>Reduced isolation for new parents</i>	Psychiatric hospitalisation <i>Severe and crisis episodes</i>
	Labour market attachment <i>Identity, purpose, income continuity</i>	Intergenerational health <i>Child cognitive and emotional outcomes</i>



Varied entitlements across countries



 Paid leave for mothers (maternity + shareable parental, weeks)
  Father-specific paid leave (weeks)

0 wks

US federal paid leave

69 wks

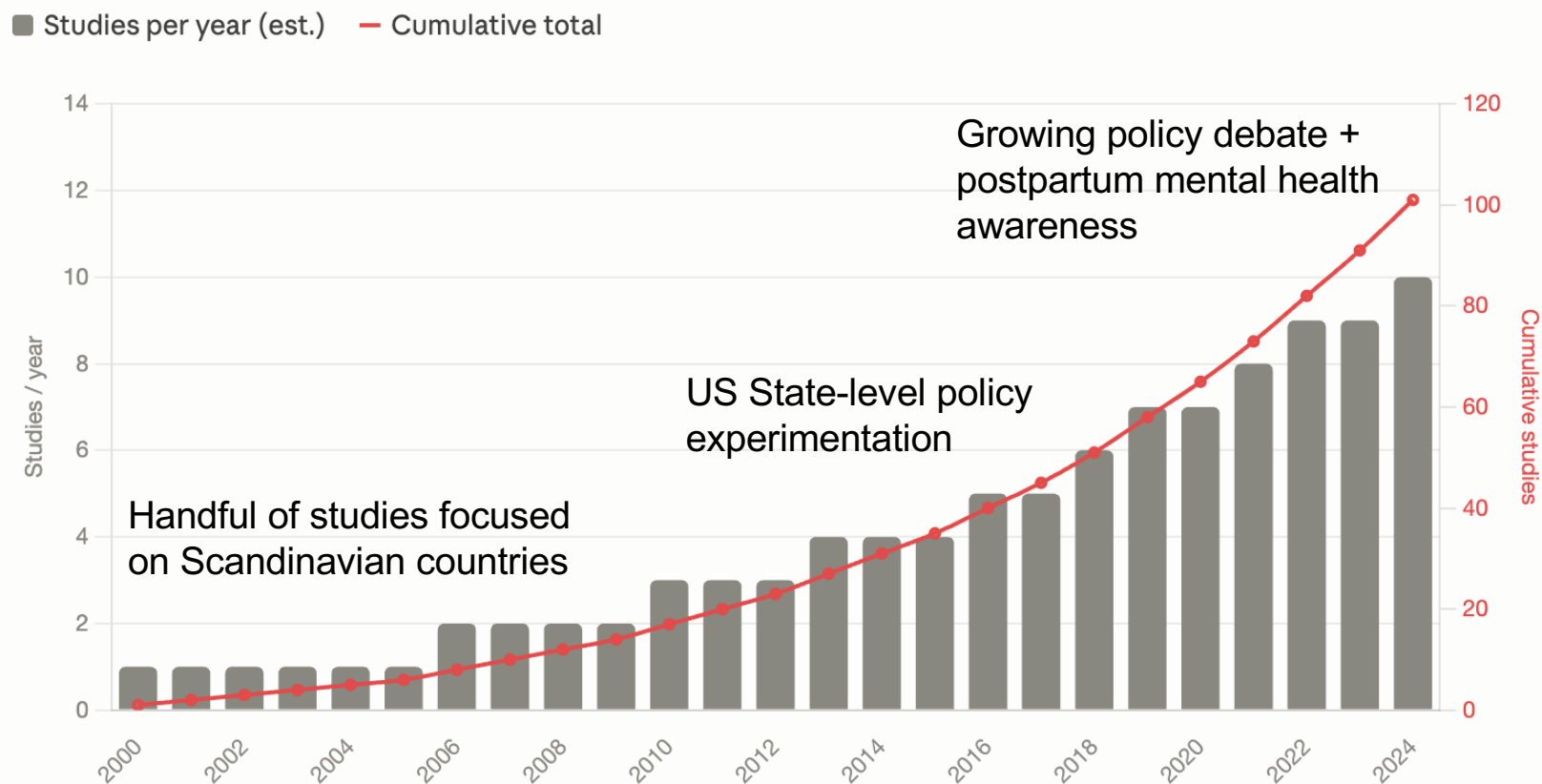
Sweden leads for mothers — 480 days shared leave

18.5 wks

OECD average paid maternity leave

OECD Family Database (2024)

An expanding field of research



Estimates derived from the Lancet 2023 systematic review (45 studies to Aug 2022) and subsequent literature growth. Exact counts vary by database and search criteria.

Key findings on maternity and paternity leave



The positive impact of more generous leave duration

- Recent systematic review: 45 studies in 14 countries (Europe, North America, Australia, Chile and Japan)
- Mix of quasi-experimental and associational studies – 38 out of the 45 deemed medium or high quality
- ✓ Consistent reduction in maternal depressive symptoms
- ✓ Reduction in psychological distress and burnout (particularly when leave was paid)
- ✓ Some evidence of reduction in mental health care use (e.g. lower GP visits in Canada)

Threshold effect

Protective effects most consistently observed for paid leave of at least 2-3 months; shorter or unpaid leave showed less consistent results

Heshmati *et al.* (2023) *Lancet Public Health*

The evidence on paternity leave is mixed



The Lancet Public Health
Volume 8, Issue 1, January 2023, Pages e15-e27



Articles

Paternity leave uptake and parental post-partum depression: findings from the ELFE cohort study

Katharine M Barry MSc^a, Ramchandar Gomajee MSc^a, Xavier Benarous MD^b,
Marie-Noëlle Dufourg PhD^c, Emilie Courtin PhD^d, Maria Melchior ScD^a  

- Effect of paid paternity leave (2 weeks, statutory entitlement) on post-partum depression at 2 months post birth in the ELFE cohort (nationally representative birth cohort, 2011)
- IPW logistic regression, adjusted for sociodemographic confounders

- ✓ Fathers who used the leave reported lower odds of depression
- ✓ BUT mothers whose partners used the leave reported higher odds of post-partum depression (OR: 1.13).



An example from the UK



- Effect of paid paternity leave (2 weeks at about 20% of average earnings) depressive symptoms and wellbeing up to a year after birth in the Understanding Society survey
- IPW, adjusted for sociodemographic confounders

- ✓ No effect overall on mothers or fathers
- ✓ BUT important heterogeneity by fathers' income: fathers with above median income were more likely to take the leave and to benefit from it in terms of their mental health

Are there long-term benefits beyond the post-partum period?



A seminal study



The long-run effect of maternity leave benefits on mental health: evidence from European countries

Mauricio Avendano ¹, Lisa F Berkman ², Agar Brugiavini ³, Giacomo Pasini ⁴

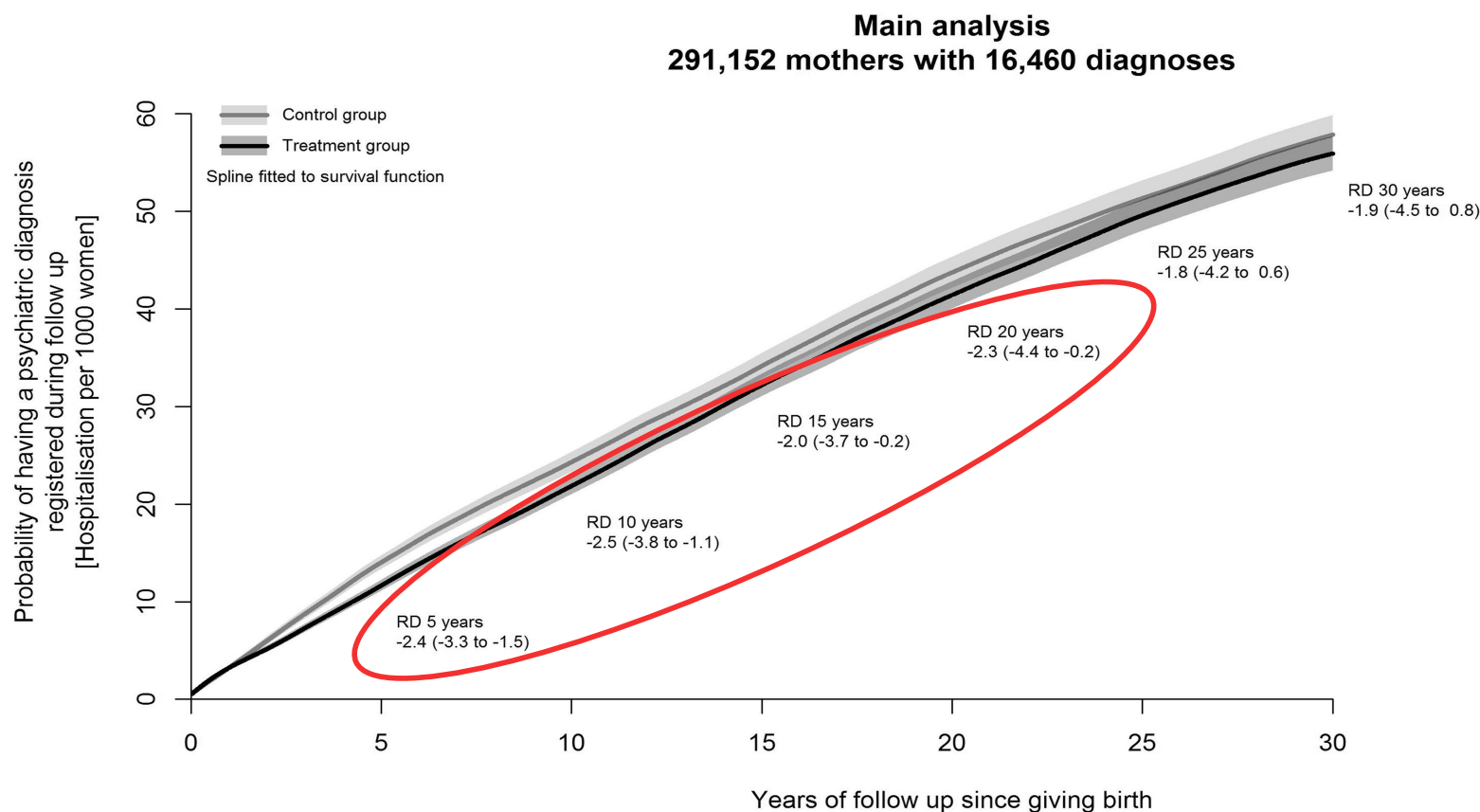
→ Maternity leave benefits are associated with a reduction in depressive symptoms in later life, decades after the eligible birth



The long-term effects of a parental leave extension

- 6-week extension of parental leave in Denmark in 1984
- Quasi-experimental approach using linked individual-level data from Danish national registries
- Outcome: first psychiatric diagnosis following the child's birth (first day of inpatient hospital admission for any psychiatric disorder)
- 291 152 mothers who gave birth between 1 January 1981 and 31 December 1987
- They were followed for a maximum of 30 years

The long-term effects of a parental leave extension



Courtin *et al.* (2023) *International Journal of Epidemiology*

What about long parental leave?



The example of the French APE

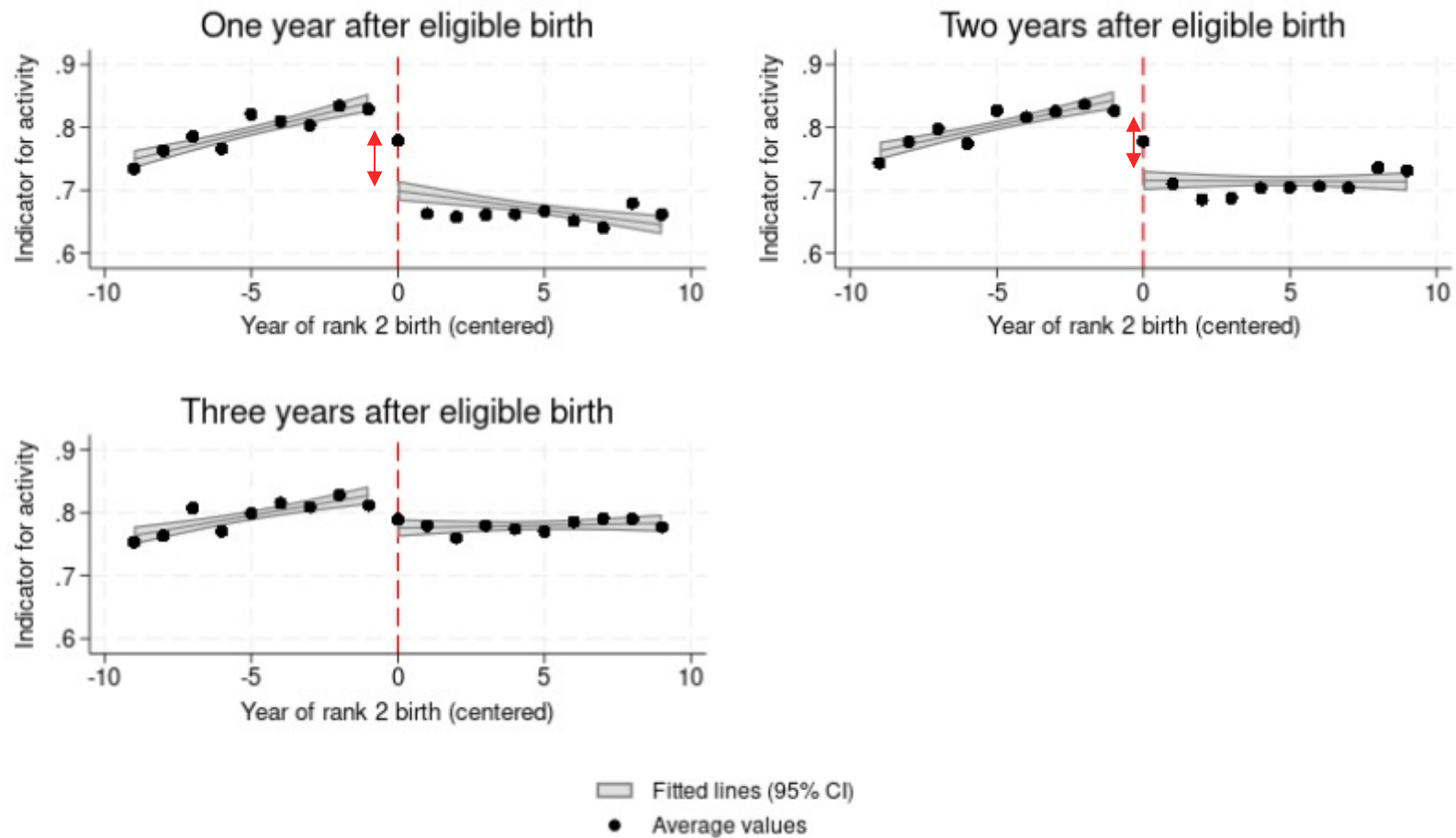


- Allocation Parentale d'Education (1983-2003)
- Paid parental leave (400 euros per month), lasting up to **3 years** by child
- 500,000 beneficiaries in 1997
- 1994 reform of the APE: extension to the scheme to mothers of 2 children
- Quasi-experimental approach in the Constances cohort, matched with administrative data on APE eligibility and labor market history

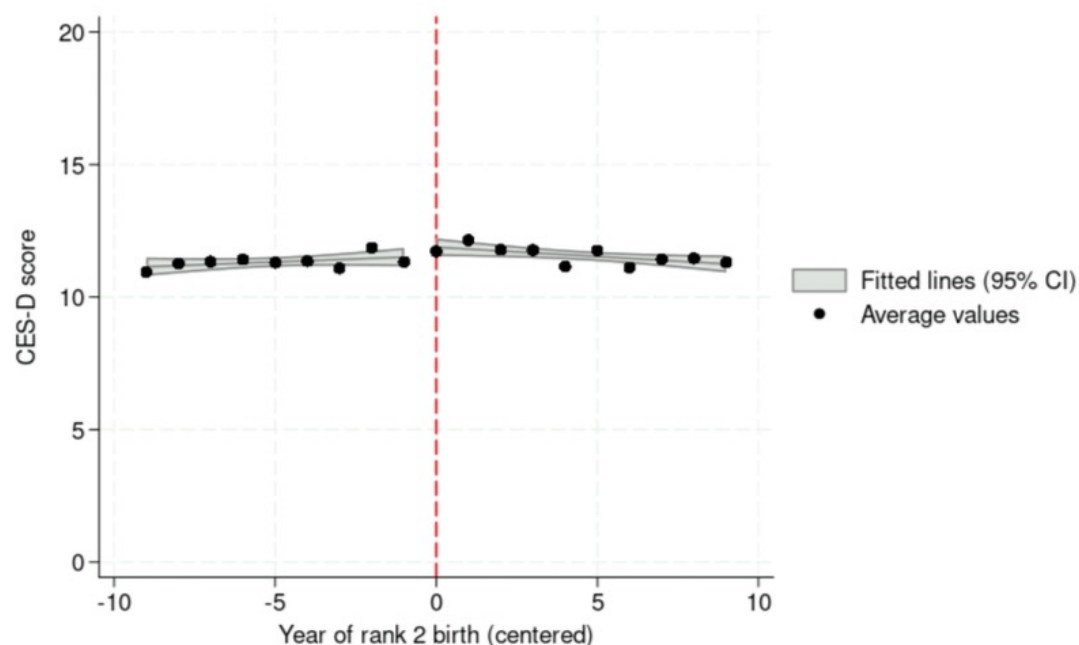
Is this scheme beneficial for eligible mothers' mental health or does it have long-term negative effects by reducing their attachment to the labor market for example?



Impact of the reform on labour market participation



Impact of the reform on depressive symptoms

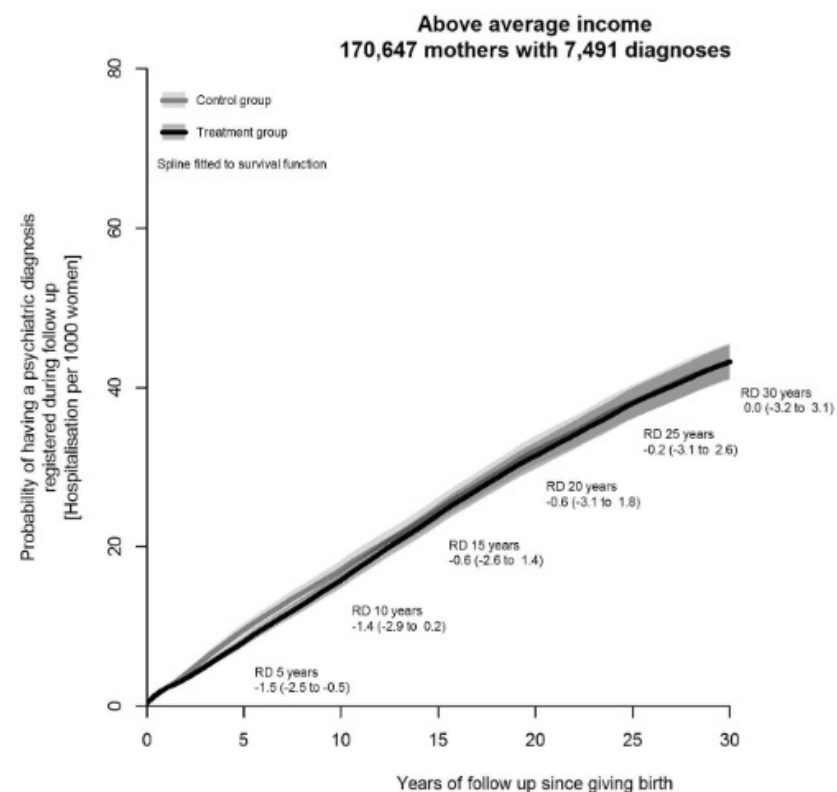
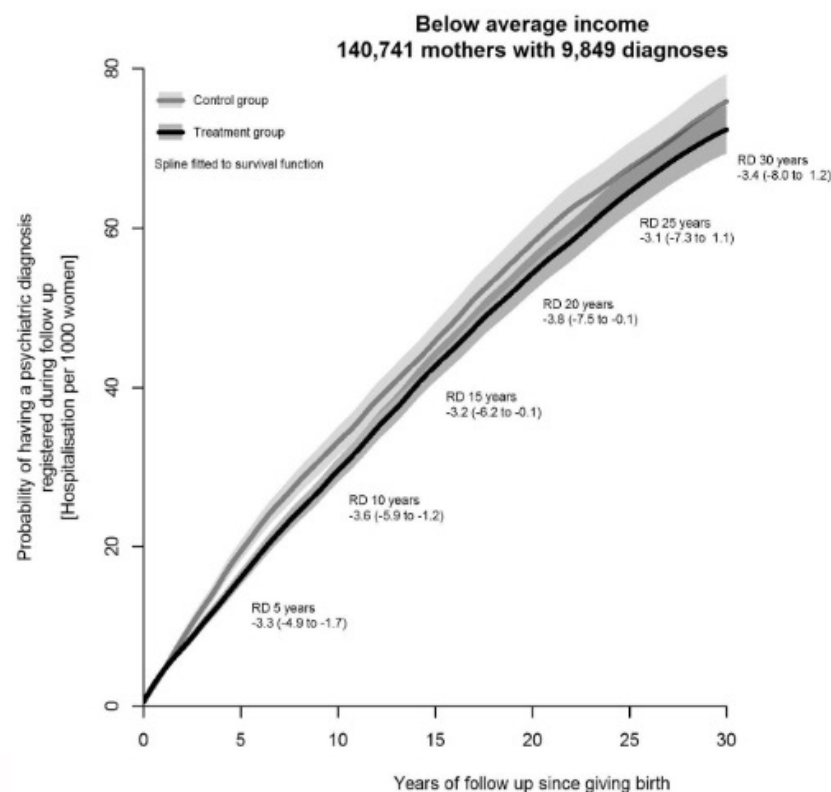


- Consistent null effect across all subgroups considered
- In contrast with Austrian study that found a detrimental effect of going from 1.5 years leave to 2.5 years (Chouard, 2023), including depressive symptoms and associated medications
- Importantly not the case for low birth weight babies

Who might benefit the most from these policies?



Consistent heterogeneous effects



Courtin *et al.* (2023) *International Journal of Epidemiology*

Average effects masks important differences

- Women with lower educational level or below average income or single at birth benefited the most from the policy expansion.
- Consistent finding in the literature that **most socially vulnerable parents** would benefit the most, but may not be able to take up the policy.
- *E.g.* Swedish 1995 Father quotas: protective effect on psychiatric hospitalization rates only among migrants and not Swedish-born fathers.

→ These policies might have a role to play in reducing social inequalities in mental health

What we have learned

- Clear mental health benefits of parental leave for mothers, with diminishing returns
- The effect of paternity leave is more complex and ongoing evaluations will bring new evidence soon
- The quality of the evidence is varied, with more robust quasi-experimental approaches in recent years
- Long-term effects show the importance of supporting parents during the transition to parenthood
- Heterogeneous effects are the rule rather than the exception, with implications for take-up of the policies



What we still need to know

- Partner spillover
- Mechanisms
- Empirical test of that threshold effect for leave duration
- Other relevant family policies that can support parents' mental health?





Thank you!

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