

Paternity Leave and Maternal Mental Health

Marta Curull-Sentís* Lídia Farré† Laia Maynou‡

Abstract

Motherhood is associated with persistent penalties in both labour market outcomes and health. However, the role of family policies in mitigating these effects, particularly with respect to maternal mental health, remains unclear. This paper examines the impact of extending paternity leave on maternal mental health. Using administrative health records covering all publicly funded births in Catalonia (Spain) between 2006 and 2024, we implement a local difference-in-differences design around the April 1st, 2019 reform, which introduced partially mandatory paternity leave for fathers. The analysis focuses on first-time mothers giving birth within a three-month window around the reform cutoff and compares them to a control cohort from 2016. Maternal mental health is measured using diagnoses and prescription records for stress-related, mood-related, and broader mental health conditions drawn from primary care and pharmacy data. We find an increase in stress-related diagnoses and in the use of antidepressants and anxiolytics from the second year after childbirth among mothers exposed to the reform. These effects are concentrated among older mothers (above the median age of 31) and among those who do not have a second child within four years after birth. We find suggestive evidence that these patterns may be related to increased healthcare use and to stress-related mechanisms, including delayed fertility, changes in labour market attachment, and relationship instability. Ongoing work will extend the analysis to additional mental health outcomes and to subsequent paternity leave reforms.

*Universitat de Barcelona

†IAE-CSIC and IZA

‡Universitat de Barcelona; LSE Health, London School of Economics and Political Science; CRES, Universitat Pompeu Fabra