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Risk for referral to the child welfare system following parental relationship transitions in Norway

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ABSTRACT

Background: There is a lack of knowledge concerning how changes in family structures are associated with involvement in child welfare systems. Particularly little attention has been paid to the role of parental relationship transitions, which may involve major changes in the lives of children and parents in terms of housing, finances, and relationship boundaries between family members.

Objective: To investigate how transitions in parental relationship status are linked to referrals to the child welfare system.

Participants and setting: All children born in Norway in 1995 ($N = 60,218$) and 2005 ($N = 56,644$) and their parents.

Methods: This retrospective birth cohort study consisted of child welfare statistics merged with various registers from Statistics Norway. Logistic panel-data models were used to examine the relationship between the occurrence of a parental relationship transition and referral to the child welfare system. Four types of relationship transitions were analyzed: (1) couple to a single mother, (2) couple to a single father, (3) single mother to a couple, and (4) single father to a couple.

Results: The occurrence of any type of relationship transition increased the likelihood of referral to the child welfare system in the year that the transition occurred, with the transitions to single motherhood, to single fatherhood, and from single fatherhood to a couple associated with greater odds of referral than the transition from single motherhood to a couple.

Conclusions: Understanding how parental relationship transitions are associated with referrals to the child welfare system is important to appropriately facilitate help to families in need.

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1. Introduction

Single parent households are significantly overrepresented in the child welfare system (CWS) population, both in a Norwegian and an international context (Ericsson, 1996; Storhaug et al., 2012; Zerr et al., 2019). The underlying causes for this overrepresentation are complex and likely stem from factors related to both characteristics of the group of single parents as well as characteristics of the CWS. One perspective is that the overrepresentation of single parents could be seen as the disciplining of family forms that have historically been deemed “immoral” (Hennum, 2010; Scourfield, 2003). Single mothers in particular have historically been exposed to shaming and lack of support from society and have been targeted by the CWS since its origin (Frank, 1998; Syltevik, 2015). However, the overrepresentation of single parents could also be due to increased need, as single parents have a high risk of experiencing poverty even when they are working (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018a), with single mothers more so at risk than single fathers (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018b). As parental well-being has a profound effect on offspring, the additional stressors that single-parent families are exposed to may negatively impact their children as well (Amato & Booth, 1997).

Regardless of the reasons for the overrepresentation of single parent families in the CWS, single parenthood is often a transitional phase (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018b). Parents typically transition into and out of relationships across time, spending various amounts of time in both partnered and non-partnered arrangements. Therefore, rather than a permanent status, single parenthood can be thought of as a stage in family life, with international research indicating that this stage lasts on average around five and a half years (McKendrick, 2016). Parental relationship transitions may involve major changes in the lives of children in terms of housing, financial and relational bonds between the children, their parents of origin, new partners of the parents and extended family members. Therefore, instability is a consequence of transitions in family structures that may cause stress and affect the caring environment for the child.

Although some children and parents handle relationship transitions without conflicts, the risk for interpersonal conflicts increases following transitions in family structure, especially relating to the question of child custody (Drapeau et al., 2009). Previous studies have shown that children in high-conflict families are at a higher risk for developmental problems (Harold & Sellers, 2018; Rhoades, 2008), with research from Canada further suggesting a link between custody disputes, child abuse and neglect (Black et al., 2016). Additionally, a study from the United States indicated that parental relationship transitions to single parenthood increase the risk for child maltreatment (Schneider, 2016). Furthermore, this study was based on parental self-reporting, which may have resulted in underreporting of undesirable practices (Krumpal, 2013). However, these studies cannot necessarily be adapted to the Norwegian context, as the welfare systems in the United States, Canada and Norway differ in terms of resources, organization and the level of social and economic support that is provided for single parents (Bradshaw & Richardson, 2009; Freymond & Cameron, 2006). Nevertheless, there has been an observed increase in the Norwegian CWS's involvement in high conflict cases (Statistics Norway, 2023), with several studies referring to such cases as “wicked” problems that are complex and difficult for child welfare workers to deal with (Heggdalsvik et al., 2022; Heggdalsvik & Samsonsen, 2022; Saini et al., 2019; Sudland, 2020; Sudland & Neumann, 2021).

Previous research has indicated that children of families that experience parental breakup attain lower economic, social, and emotional well-being than children of continuously married families, with these adverse outcomes potentially persisting throughout the children's lives in the forms of higher marital instability and increased risk of being unemployed and on welfare (Amato, 2001, 2010; McLanahan et al., 2013). There are generally three explanations that are offered as to why parental breakup negatively correlates with children's outcomes. The first explanation focuses on the stress associated with parental breakup, the second emphasizes the economic and social deprivation that are associated with the altered household structure, and the third emphasizes selection into the breakup of parents with specific pre-existing characteristics (Amato, 1993, 2000; Kreidl et al., 2017). However, while in most cases parental breakup is associated with negative consequences for children, there is a lack of knowledge about how transitions in family structure are associated with children's involvement with different welfare services. Additionally, as many parents who break up ultimately find new partners, it is relevant to understand the impact of various kinds of relationship transitions on the risk for referral to the CWS. Gaining insight into the consequences of relationship transitions can improve the way welfare services support children and families who experience relationship transitions.

1.1. Divorce-stress-adjustment perspective

Most studies on the negative effects of parental breakup begin with the assumption that parental breakup is a stressful life transition to which adults and children must adjust (Amato, 2000). The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, proposed by Amato (2000), is a combination of elements of various established stress frameworks, including the family stress and coping theory (McCubbin et al., 1980), general stress theory (Pearlin, 1989), and the risk and resiliency perspective (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, which can be considered for all forms of parental breakup, views the dissolution of a couple as a process that starts while the couple still lives together and ends long after the breakup is concluded. The idea behind this perspective is that the uncoupling process sets several events into motion that can be experienced as stressful. These stressors, in turn, increase the likelihood of negative emotional, behavioral and health outcomes for children (Amato, 2000).

As couples who are considering a breakup may spend significant time attempting to renegotiate the relationship, seeking advice from others, or avoiding the problem, the initial negative effects of a breakup may occur years prior to the final separation. Additionally, overt conflict between parents may lead to behavior problems in children. These problems can be seen as early effects of parental breakup (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Once the separation is finalized, additional stressors often arise. For adults, these stressors may include having sole responsibility for the care of children; conflict with the ex-partner over child support; visitation, or custody; downward economic mobility (particularly for mothers); and moving from the family home into less expensive

accommodation. For children, additional stressors may include less effective parenting from the custodial parent; decrease in involvement with the noncustodial parent; exposure to continuing conflict, a reduction in economic resources; moving; and changing schools (Amato, 2000). However, it must also be noted that in certain cases, such as children living in high-conflict households, parental breakup may offer relief from the stress of high-conflict family environments (Musick & Meier, 2010; Strohschein, 2005).

The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective culminates in two possible scenarios. The first scenario, called the crisis model, assumes that parental breakup represents a disturbance to which the majority of individuals adjust over time. According to this model, most individuals return to pre-breakup functioning after stressors resolve. The second possible scenario, called the chronic strain model, assumes that being divorced is accompanied with persistent strains, such as economic difficulties, loneliness, and, in the case of single parents, sole parenting responsibilities. Although the experience of these issues or how they are dealt with may change, the issues themselves do not disappear with time. Therefore, according to the chronic strain model, declines in well-being associated with parental breakup may continue indefinitely. To our knowledge, no studies to date have investigated how parental breakup impacts risk for referral to the CWS. Therefore, there is a knowledge gap in understanding the time course of risk for referral to the CWS both before and after a parental relationship transition occurs.

1.2. Socioeconomic status

Norway is internationally and comparatively considered to be an egalitarian society (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2019). However, income inequality has risen significantly in Norway in recent years. In 2019, 11.7 % of the child population had been living with persistent low income for at least 3 years, compared to 8.6 % in 2013. Low socioeconomic status is a well-documented risk factor for involvement in the CWS, both in Norwegian and international contexts (Fævelen et al., 2023; Kojan & Fauske, 2011; Kojan & Storhaug, 2021; Skinner et al., 2023). This increased risk may be further compounded in the midst of a relationship transition, as such transitions often involve a splitting of financial resources. The family stress model (Masarik & Conger, 2017) focuses on the impact of economic hardship on family functioning, proposing that economic hardship leads to economic pressures, which in turn leads to psychological distress in parents and disrupted parenting of children.

1.3. The Norwegian child welfare system

The Norwegian CWS has been typologized as family-oriented and child-centered (Gilbert et al., 2011; Melinder et al., 2021). While harmful and illegal conditions of care, such as abuse and violence, are reported to the CWS, many referrals also involve less serious conditions that have more to do with child welfare conditions rather than child protection concerns. These welfare concerns may involve a lack of opportunities in a child's life, such as a lack of social network or access to enriching activities, which can translate to an extended legitimacy for interference in family matters. Referrals to the Norwegian CWS are made by both mandated as well as non-mandated reporters. Mandated reporters include public employees such as doctors, nurses, teachers, and kindergarten teachers. Such public employees are required to report concerns to the CWS if they have "reason to believe" that a child is being subjected to abuse or serious neglect, or if a child has demonstrated "serious, persistent behavioral problems" (The Child Welfare Act, 1992). In addition to public employees, referrals can also be made by private parties such as family members and neighbors. In 2021, the Norwegian CWS received 53,486 referrals concerning 47,345 children. High degree of conflict in the home was listed as registered cause of 15 % of these referrals, while conflict between parents who do not live together was listed as the cause for 5 % of the referrals (Statistics Norway, 2023).

1.4. The current study

Using longitudinal cohort data, we aim to investigate how transitions in parental relationship status are linked to referrals to the CWS. From this point of departure, the research question that guides this study is: *What are the associations between family relationship transitions and referrals to the Norwegian Child Welfare System?* For each individual year and each individual child, we identify: (1) if a parental relationship transition has occurred and (2) if the child was referred to the CWS in the course of that same year. Based on previous literature, we hypothesize that: (1) the occurrence of a parental relationship transition will increase a child's risk for referral to the CWS in the year that the relationship transition occurred; (2) parental relationship transitions to single motherhood and single fatherhood will constitute the greatest risks for referral; and (3) low socioeconomic status will either directly increase the likelihood of referral to the CWS or moderate the relationship between parental relationship transitions and referral to the CWS.

2. Methods

2.1. Data

In Norway (as well as other Nordic countries), all residents receive a personal identification number that is used in several registers covering most administrative domains (social security, employment, demographics, civil status and household, social welfare, income, education, housing and many others). Two birth cohorts (1995 and 2005) were included in the study. The 1995 cohort consisted of 60,218 individuals and the 2005 cohort consisted of 56,644 individuals. Deidentified administrative CWS records were linked with various registers from Statistics Norway. Additionally, registers containing deidentified parental information were linked to each child.

The data used in this paper is panel data. For the 1995 cohort, there were 1,083,924 observations, corresponding to 60,218

individuals over 18 years (1995–2013), with each observation representing an individual for each year of data (person-year). 10.7 % of children in the 1995 cohort were referred to the CWS at some point between the ages of 0 and 18. For the 2005 cohort, there were 737,372 observations, corresponding to 56,644 individuals over 13 years (2005–2018). 16.9 % of children in the 2005 cohort were referred to the CWS at some point between the ages of 0 and 13. The two cohorts differed in the number of years included due to a lack of access to data after the year 2018. The 1995 and 2005 cohorts differed in terms of the percentage of children referred to the CWS after the year 2013 (see Fig. 1). This was due, at least in part, to change in registration practices of referrals to the CWS. Before 2013, referrals that did not lead to investigations were not registered, while after 2013, all referrals were registered, regardless of whether the referral lead to an investigation. After reaching the age of 18, adolescents are no longer within the scope of the CWS. Therefore, for the 1995 cohort, we see negligible effects of this 2013 change in registration practice, though the minor increase in referrals from age 17 to age 18 may be related to this change. Given the change in registration practice after 2013 and the associated differences in the percentages of children referred to the CWS in each cohort, the 1995 and the 2005 cohorts were analyzed separately.

2.2. Variables

2.2.1. Referral to the CWS

The variable for referral to the CWS was coded 0 for children who were not referred to the CWS in a given year and 1 for children who were referred to the CWS in a given year.

2.2.2. Relationship transitions

Four types of relationship transitions were analyzed among the parents of children included in the study: (1) the transition from a married or cohabitating couple to a single mother, (2) the transition from a married or cohabitating couple to a single father, (3) the transition from a single mother to a married or cohabitating couple, and (4) the transition from a single father to a married or cohabitating couple. For each of the four relationship transitions, an individual was coded as 0 if the relationship transition did not occur in a given year and 1 if the relationship transition did occur in a given year.

2.2.3. Moved district

As it is reasonable to assume that a parental relationship transition may be accompanied by the family physically moving to a new location, a variable was included to control for this possibility. This variable was coded 0 if the family did not move districts in a given year and 1 if the family did move districts in a given year.

2.2.4. Socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status (SES) was measured at the household level for each child two years after the birth year. Socioeconomic status is often measured using a combination of income, education and occupation (Diemer et al., 2013). For the present study, data was only available on income and education.

The group with *high SES* was defined as high if one parent had either income over the defined boundary or high education for three years in a row from two years after the cohort's birth year. The income boundary was defined empirically as the highest 20 % household income in the data material, grouped by year and family size. High education was operationalized as at least one parent having education at the PhD level. Although a PhD may appear to be a high threshold, through the years included in the study



Fig. 1. Percentage of children referred to the CWS by cohort and age.

(1995–2018), such a high percentage of the adult population achieved high education at the master level that we have considered that high socioeconomic status would have been too large of a group if the boundary had been lower. It must be emphasized that the purpose of the study was not to give an accurate representation of the size of the high SES group in the population, but to have a meaningful group with which to compare low SES.

The group with *low SES* was defined by income and/or education from information available in the administrative data. There are several different ways to define low income. The EU defines low income as 60 % of median income, while the OECD sets the limit to 50 %. The EU and the OECD also differ on how household size is defined. We have chosen a pragmatic approach by defining low income as under 50 % of the median income of the collected data for every year and for every family size.

We have operationalized low education as being maximum lower secondary school level. However, we have excluded individuals from being defined as low education if they had a maximum of secondary school level education for three years in a row from two years after the cohort's birth year but then later received a master's degree before the age of 30. An individual was defined as having low SES if: 1) neither parent was defined as high socioeconomic status and 2) either income was under the calculated income boundary, or education was under the boundary, for three years in a row from two years after the cohort's birth year. The group with *middle SES* is a category that included individuals that were neither grouped in the high or the low socioeconomic groups. We have furthermore taken a conservative approach by classifying any individuals with missing income on all three relevant years as middle SES, which applied to 524 individuals in the 1995 cohort and 436 individuals in the 2005 cohort.

2.2.5. Other covariates

Other demographic characteristics included in the analyses were: an indicator of female child sex (0/1), child immigrant background (no immigrant background, one immigrant parent, two immigrant parents), an indicator of at least one parent receiving unemployment benefits in a given year (0/1), an indicator of at least one parent receiving disability benefits in a given year (0/1), and an indicator of at least one parent receiving social assistance in a given year (0/1).

2.3. Analysis

2.3.1. Panel data analysis

The advantages of using panel data are that changes over time can be accounted for and unobserved explanatory variables can be controlled (Mehmetoglu & Jakobsen, 2017). The data is considered balanced, as all individuals have datapoints for each year of analysis. While choosing between a fixed effects and random effects model, the Hausman test is typically employed to test whether the coefficients of the two models are consistent (Hausman, 1978). If the null hypothesis of the Hausman test is rejected, the fixed effects model is preferred. However, cases that do not exhibit a change in the dependent variable in at least one year of the panel are dropped automatically in a fixed effects model. As we were interested in observing the impact of relationship transitions on being referred to the CWS in the entire population, not just the population of children already involved in the CWS, a random effects model was used. Results of fixed effects model analyses are included in Supplementary File A to demonstrate that a similar pattern is observed in both the fixed and random effects models. The benefit of using a random effects model is that it allows for the use of both time-varying and time-constant variables in the analysis (Peterson, 2004). As the dependent variable in this model was binary, logistic panel regression was employed with the *xlogit* function. Odds ratios (OR), a measure of the ratio of two opposing odds (Bland & Altman, 2000), and marginal effects, the percentage point effect on the dependent model when all other values are set to their means (Mehmetoglu & Jakobsen, 2017), are included for interpretation of results. Robust standard errors in the current model were implemented with the *vce*-function in Stata, using the *robust*-option, which automatically corrects for clustering at the level of the panel variable (individuals in the current model). All statistical analyses were completed with Stata 16 software.

2.3.2. Lags and leads

Panel data can also be used to investigate the presence of pre-treatment differences and lagged effects. In the case of the current study, it is reasonable to assume both that problems in a household may arise before a relationship transition occurs and that problems in a household may be present after the occurrence of a relationship transition. Additionally, the causality between household problems, relationship transitions, and CWS referrals is not obvious, both theoretically and empirically. Therefore, observing lags and leads is a matter of empirical association, which can reveal the chronology but not causality of events. To test robustness and differences in size of association, we have allowed timing of independent variables to vary between -2 and $+2$ around the year of transition. A summary table with the main independent variables is provided in Section 3.3, while full regression tables are only provided for the year of transition in Section 3.2.

2.3.3. Sensitivity analysis with interaction terms

In a separate panel data model, we have included socioeconomic status as an interaction term with each of the four relationship transitions in order to test if there are differences between how socioeconomic status moderates the relationship between CWS referral and parental relationship transitions depending on the type of parental relationship transition.

2.4. Ethics and data protection

Current research ethics guidelines for the use of data were followed in this study, including approval from the Norwegian Data Protection Officer for research and licensing from the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD), with case number 58129. All

formal requirements for the use and storage of the data material were met. Permission from Statistics Norway to access and use the data material was approved.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 summarizes descriptive statistics for the 1995 and 2005 cohorts. The descriptive statistics are presented in person-years, with the percentage of individuals that exhibited a change in the dichotomous variables at some point in the period of eligibility included. In the 1995 cohort, 28.8 % of parents experienced a transition from a couple to single motherhood, 8.9 % experienced a transition from a couple to single fatherhood, 18.9 % experienced a transition from single motherhood to a couple, and 2.8 % experienced a transition from single fatherhood to a couple at some point before the child turned age 18. Additionally, 64.7 % of families moved districts, 20.3 % received social assistance, 56.8 % experienced unemployment, and 12.5 % received disability benefits at some point before the child turned 18. The majority of individuals were classified as middle socioeconomic status (51.3 %) and did not have immigrant background (86.7 %). In the 2005 cohort, 20.1 % of parents experienced a transition from a couple to single motherhood, 6.6 % experienced a transition from a couple to single fatherhood, 12.5 % experienced a transition from single motherhood to a couple, and 2.0 % experienced a transition from single fatherhood to a couple at some point before the child turned 14. Additionally, 58.6 % of families moved districts, 14.0 % received social assistance, 46.8 % experienced unemployment, and 9.4 % received disability benefits at some point before the child turned 14. The majority of individuals were classified as middle socioeconomic status (60.3 %) and did not have immigrant background (78.9 %). Descriptive statistics of relationship transition occurrence by immigrant background and socioeconomic status are included in Supplementary File B.

3.2. Do relationship transitions impact risk of referral to the CWS?

Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the relationship between the risk of referral to the CWS and the occurrence of a parental relationship transition in the family. The occurrence of any type of relationship transition in the family increased the likelihood of being referred to the CWS in the year that the relationship transition occurred. By exploring the marginal effects of each variable, we see that the transitions to single motherhood and single fatherhood nearly doubled the risk of referral to the CWS in the year that the transition occurred, from a baseline probability of approximately 0.9 % to 1.6 % and 1.7 % in the 1995 cohort, respectively (see **Fig. 2**), and 2.3 % to 4.1 % and 4.3 % in the 2005 cohort (see **Fig. 3**), respectively. The transition from single fatherhood to a couple increased the risk for referral from a baseline probability of approximately 0.9 % to 1.9 % in the 1995 cohort and 2.3 % to 3.5 % in the 2005 cohort. The smallest increase in risk for referral occurred alongside the transition from a single mother to a couple in both cohorts, from a baseline probability of 0.9 % to 1.1 % in the 1995 cohort and from 2.3 % to 2.8 % in the 2005 cohort. These effects were consistent even after controlling for the possible effect of moving districts during the year that the relationship transition occurred.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for the 1995 and 2005 cohorts, 1995–2018.

| Variable | 1995 cohort | | 2005 cohort | |
|--------------------------|-------------|------|-------------|------|
| | Frequency | % | Frequency | % |
| <i>N</i> | 1,083,924 | | 737,372 | |
| Referred to CWS | 116,262 | 10.7 | 124,540 | 16.9 |
| Relationship transitions | | | | |
| Couple to single mother | 331,688 | 28.8 | 148,486 | 20.1 |
| Couple to single father | 95,922 | 8.9 | 48,555 | 6.6 |
| Single mother to couple | 205,128 | 18.9 | 92,300 | 12.5 |
| Single father to couple | 30,834 | 2.8 | 14,950 | 2.0 |
| Moved district | 701,586 | 64.7 | 431,769 | 58.6 |
| Gender | | | | |
| Female | 526,230 | 48.6 | 359,892 | 48.8 |
| Male | 557,748 | 51.4 | 377,455 | 51.2 |
| Socioeconomic status | | | | |
| Low | 436,554 | 40.3 | 224,575 | 30.5 |
| Middle | 556,650 | 51.3 | 444,769 | 60.3 |
| High | 90,774 | 8.4 | 68,003 | 9.2 |
| Immigrant status | | | | |
| No immigrant background | 939,402 | 86.7 | 580,905 | 78.9 |
| 1 immigrant parent | 83,826 | 7.7 | 85,540 | 11.6 |
| 2 immigrant parents | 60,696 | 5.6 | 69,927 | 9.5 |
| Social assistance | 219,474 | 20.3 | 103,337 | 14.0 |
| Unemployed | 615,690 | 56.8 | 345,267 | 46.8 |
| Disability benefits | 135,846 | 12.5 | 69,342 | 9.4 |

Table 2

Random-effects logistic panel analysis of relationship transition and demographic variables on referral to the child welfare system, 1995 cohort.

| Variables | Odds ratio (Z) | 95 % CI | Marginal effect |
|----------------------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Couple to single mother | 1.898*** (12.24) | 1.713–2.104 | 0.007 |
| Couple to single father | 2.088*** (7.54) | 1.725–2.529 | 0.008 |
| Single mother to couple | 1.299*** (3.78) | 1.134–1.487 | 0.002 |
| Single father to couple | 2.271*** (5.60) | 1.704–3.026 | 0.010 |
| Moved district | 1.681*** (17.26) | 1.585–1.783 | 0.005 |
| Female | 0.915** (–3.11) | 0.865–0.1.070 | –0.001 |
| Age group (ref. 1–3 years) | | | |
| 4–6 years | 1.355*** (7.26) | 1.249–1.471 | 0.002 |
| 7–9 years | 1.498*** (9.48) | 1.378–1.629 | 0.002 |
| 10–12 years | 1.840*** (14.03) | 1.689–2.003 | 0.004 |
| 13–15 years | 3.296*** (29.02) | 3.041–3.572 | 0.010 |
| 16–18 years | 2.898*** (25.27) | 2.669–3.148 | 0.008 |
| SES | | | |
| Low SES | 2.365*** (28.09) | 2.223–2.511 | 0.007 |
| High SES | 0.579*** (–6.85) | 0.496–0.677 | –0.002 |
| Immigrant category | | | |
| One foreign parent | 0.955 (–0.79) | 0.852–1.070 | –0.000 |
| Two foreign parents | 1.337*** (6.05) | 1.217–1.468 | 0.003 |
| Social assistance | 6.107*** (51.01) | 5.697–6.547 | 0.030 |
| Unemployed | 1.401*** (11.08) | 1.320–1.487 | 0.003 |
| Disability benefits | 1.634*** (7.36) | 1.433–1.862 | 0.005 |
| Constant | 0.001*** (–146.83) | 0.001–0.001 | |
| /lnsig2u | 0.841 | 0.791–0.892 | |
| Observations | 1,083,924 | | |
| Number of groups | 60,218 | | |

** $p < 0.01$.*** $p < 0.001$.**Table 3**

Random-effects logistic panel analysis of relationship transition and demographic variables on referral to the child welfare system, 2005 cohort.

| Variables | Odds ratio (Z) | 95 % CI | Marginal effect |
|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Couple to single mother | 2.129*** (16.34) | 1.945–2.331 | 0.018 |
| Couple to single father | 2.200*** (9.85) | 1.881–2.574 | 0.020 |
| Single mother to couple | 1.289*** (4.06) | 1.140–1.458 | 0.005 |
| Single father to couple | 1.672*** (3.64) | 1.268–2.205 | 0.012 |
| Moved district | 1.422*** (13.10) | 1.349–1.499 | 0.007 |
| Female | 0.851*** (–6.28) | 0.810–0.895 | –0.003 |
| Age group (ref. 1–3 years) | | | |
| 4–6 years | 1.450*** (10.74) | 1.355–1.551 | 0.003 |
| 7–9 years | 3.747*** (40.12) | 3.513–3.997 | 0.019 |
| 10–12 years | 5.270*** (50.20) | 4.939–5.623 | 0.027 |
| 13–15 years | 6.483*** (48.57) | 6.012–6.991 | 0.034 |
| SES | | | |
| Low SES | 3.082*** (41.02) | 2.921–3.252 | 0.024 |
| High SES | 0.462*** (–11.71) | 0.406–0.526 | –0.007 |
| Immigrant category | | | |
| One foreign parent | 1.378*** (8.30) | 1.278–1.487 | 0.006 |
| Two foreign parents | 1.644*** (13.71) | 1.531–1.765 | 0.010 |
| Social assistance | 4.234*** (42.45) | 3.961–4.526 | 0.043 |
| Unemployed | 1.301*** (9.16) | 1.230–1.376 | 0.005 |
| Disability benefits | 1.391*** (4.94) | 1.220–1.585 | 0.007 |
| Constant | 0.001*** (–162.43) | 0.001–0.001 | |
| /lnsig2u | 0.921 | 0.881–0.961 | |
| Observations | 736,372 | | |
| Number of groups | 56,644 | | |

*** $p < 0.001$.

3.3. In the years surrounding a relationship transition, when is the risk for referral to the CWS greatest?

Tables 4 and 5 illustrate the risk for referral to the CWS in the two years prior to a relationship transition and the two years after a relationship transition for the 1995 cohort and the 2005 cohort, respectively. The risk for referral to the CWS for families experiencing a transition from a couple to a single mother was highest during the year before the transition and the transition year itself for both cohorts. The risk for referral for families experiencing a transition from a couple to a single father was highest in the years surrounding the occurrence of a relationship transition in both cohorts. For families experiencing a transition from a single mother to a couple, the

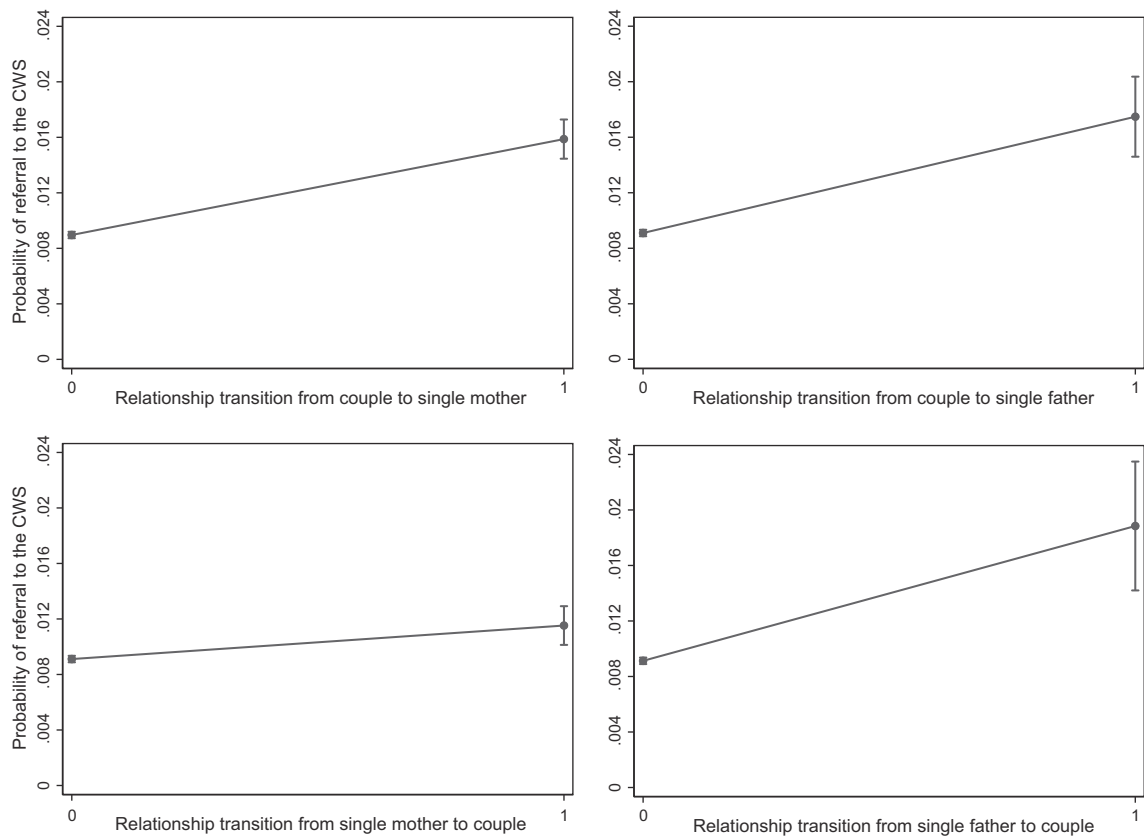


Fig. 2. Visualization of the predictive margins of relationship transitions on the probability of referral to the CWS with 95 % confidence intervals, 1995 cohort.

risk for referral was fairly stable throughout the years before the transition and the years after, with a slight increase in risk one year after the relationship transition for the 1995 cohort and during the two years after the relationship transition for the 2005 cohort. For families experiencing a transition from a single father to a couple, the risk for referral was highest during the transition year for the 1995 cohort and one year before the transition for the 2005 cohort. Visualizations of these results are shown in [Figs. 4 and 5](#).

3.4. Does socioeconomic status moderate the association between the occurrence of a parental relationship transition and referral to the CWS?

While the results indicate that socioeconomic status is an important factor in referral to the CWS, we did not find significant interaction effects between socioeconomic status and most parental relationship transitions. We did find a slight moderating effect of low socioeconomic status for the couple to single motherhood transition in both cohorts, but the low socioeconomic status group still had the greatest risk for referral after the occurrence of this transition. By exploring the marginal effect of each socioeconomic status category within each relationship transition category, we see that low socioeconomic status increases the likelihood for referral to the CWS regardless of the relationship transition category. Summary tables with the main independent variables and interaction terms, tables with marginal effects, and visualizations of marginal effects for each socioeconomic status interaction category are provided in [Supplementary File C](#).

4. Discussion

This study furthers our understanding of the risk for referral to the Norwegian CWS following parental relationship transitions. Three findings are highlighted: (1) all four relationship transitions studied in this paper are associated with increased risk to the CWS compared to children whose parents did not experience a relationship transition, (2) the transition from a married or cohabitating couple to a single mother, the transition from a married or cohabitating couple to a single father, and the transition from a single father to a married or cohabitating couple constitute greater risks for referral than the transition from a single mother to a married or cohabitating couple, and (3) coming from a low socioeconomic status background significantly increases risk of referral to the CWS, irrespective of the transition type.

There may be several explanations as to why any kind of relationship transition increases the risk for referral to the CWS. Parental

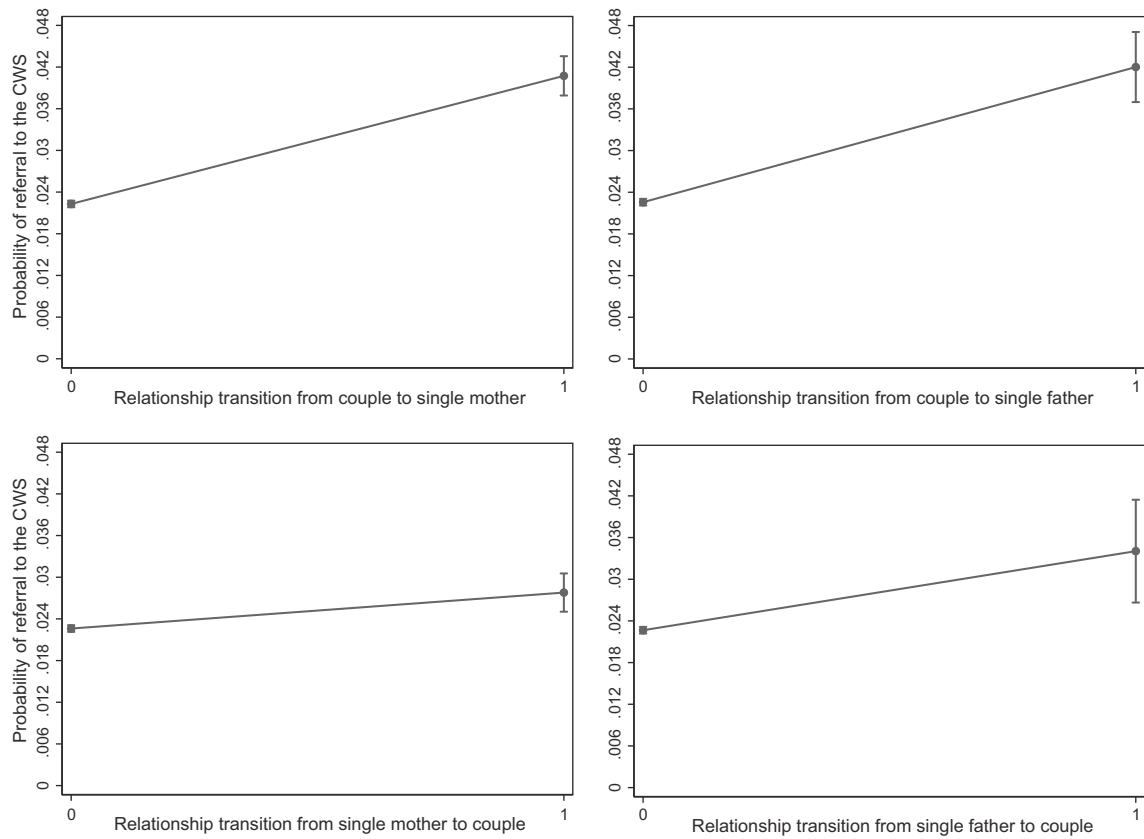


Fig. 3. Visualization of the predictive margins of relationship transitions on the probability of referral to the CWS with 95 % confidence intervals, 2005 cohort.

Table 4

Odds ratios of relationship transition (RT) leads and lags on risk for referral to the CWS, 1995 cohort.

| Variables | 2 years before RT | 1 year before RT | Transition year | 1 year after RT | 2 years after RT |
|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Couple to single mother | 0.791** (0.681–0.919) | 1.851*** (1.669–2.052) | 1.898*** (1.713–2.104) | 1.620*** (1.452–1.807) | 1.462*** (1.298–1.646) |
| Couple to single father | 1.308* (1.029–1.662) | 2.867*** (2.400–3.427) | 2.088*** (1.725–2.529) | 2.098*** (1.706–2.580) | 1.737*** (1.365–2.210) |
| Single mother to couple | 1.327*** (1.140–1.545) | 1.256** (1.088–1.450) | 1.299*** (1.134–1.487) | 1.395*** (1.218–1.598) | 1.276** (1.101–1.479) |
| Single father to couple | 1.000 (0.677–1.476) | 1.672** (1.203–2.322) | 2.271*** (1.704–3.026) | 1.166 (0.782–1.738) | 1.178 (0.777–1.785) |
| Observations | 843,052 | 963,488 | 1,083,924 | 963,488 | 843,052 |
| Number of groups | 60,218 | 60,218 | 60,218 | 60,218 | 60,218 |

Note: Parentheses denote 95 % confidence intervals.

- * $p < 0.05$.
- ** $p < 0.01$.
- *** $p < 0.001$.

relationship transitions may involve major changes in the lives of children in terms of housing and financial and relational boundaries for and between the children and their parents, even if the relationship transitions are not characterized by conflict. Family stress models are based on the tenet that economic disadvantage triggers feelings of economic pressure, contributing to psychological distress in parents that negatively impacts the development of their children (Conger et al., 1994). As relationship transitions are often associated with a division of economic and material resources, it is possible that the stress associated with such divisions of resources leaves parents and their children particularly vulnerable in the years surrounding a relationship transition. This may be especially pronounced among families that are already coming from a low socioeconomic status background.

However, it is also reasonable to assume that at least some relationship transitions are associated with high levels of conflict. Although economic hardship is especially emphasized in family stress models, marital dissatisfaction can also be a source of family

Table 5
Relationship transition (RT) leads and lags on risk for referral to the CWS, 2005 cohort.

| Variables | 2 years before RT | 1 year before RT | Transition year | 1 year after RT | 2 years after RT |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Couple to single mother | 1.188 (1.048–1.346) | 2.391*** (2.176–2.628) | 2.129*** (1.945–2.331) | 1.701*** (1.536–1.883) | 1.506*** (1.345–1.685) |
| Couple to single father | 1.692*** (1.393–2.056) | 3.359*** (2.897–3.895) | 2.200*** (1.881–2.574) | 2.467*** (2.086–2.918) | 2.018*** (1.481–2.222) |
| Single mother to couple | 1.321*** (1.138–1.532) | 1.378*** (1.211–1.568) | 1.289*** (1.140–1.458) | 1.579*** (1.395–1.788) | 1.524*** (1.325–1.752) |
| Single father to couple | 1.993*** (1.495–2.657) | 2.053*** (1.575–2.677) | 1.672*** (1.268–2.205) | 1.788*** (1.319–2.422) | 1.831** (1.274–2.630) |
| Observations | 509,796 | 623,084 | 736,372 | 623,084 | 509,796 |
| Number of groups | 56,644 | 56,644 | 56,644 | 56,644 | 56,644 |

Note: Parentheses denote 95 % confidence intervals.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

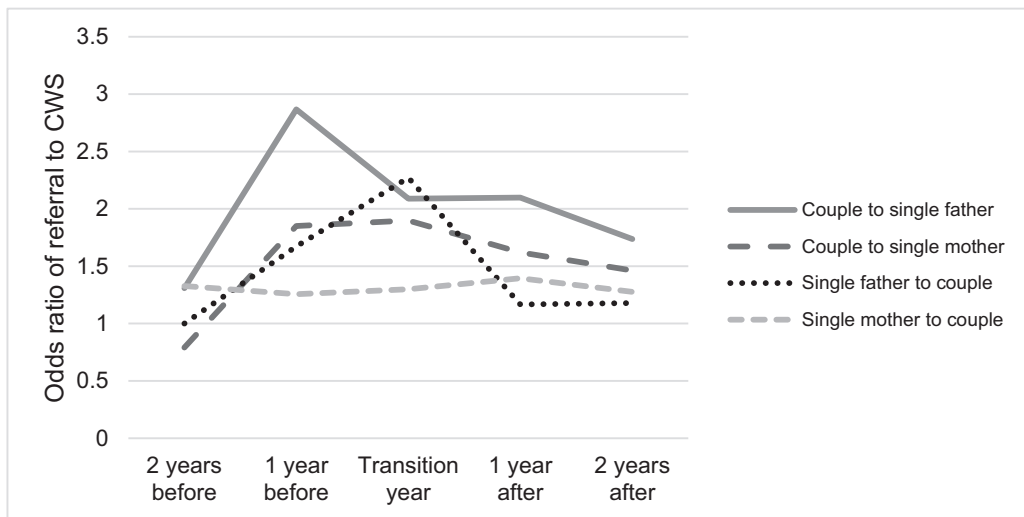


Fig. 4. Visualization of the risk for referral to the CWS in the years surrounding a relationship transition, 1995 cohort.

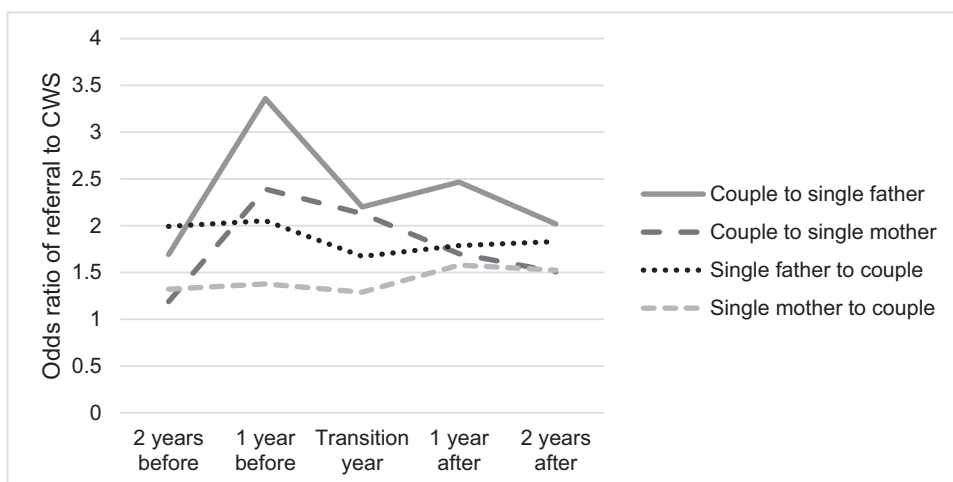


Fig. 5. Visualization of the risk for referral to the CWS in the years surrounding a relationship transition, 2005 cohort.

stress (Nelson et al., 2009). Previous research has demonstrated that parental stress is associated with higher family conflict (DeCarlo Santiago & Wadsworth, 2009), with increased economic pressure and concomitant emotional distress further increasing risk for conflict (Conger et al., 1999). Therefore, it is possible that the increased risk for referral observed after parental relationship transitions is a result of higher levels of stress and conflict in the families, which thereby impact the child(ren) in the family. This increased stress may explain why even transitions that may be more positive in the long run, such as the transitions from single motherhood to a couple and single fatherhood to a couple, may be associated with increased risk for referral to the CWS in the short-term.

It is important to remember that the dependent variable in this paper is risk for referral to the CWS, which does not necessarily mean that the referral led to investigation, in the case of the 2005 cohort after the year 2012, or mandated or volunteer measures, in the case of both cohorts. Therefore, referral to the CWS can be seen more accurately as an indication of societal interpretation or judgement of a situation, rather than necessarily an indication of serious problems in the family. Single mothers as a group have a long history of being on the receiving end of negative judgments from society (Frank, 1998; Giles, 2012; Swadener, 2003). However, the current study suggests that the transition to single fatherhood is associated with at least as high of a risk for referral to the CWS as the transition to single motherhood. It is worth noting that Norway consistently ranks among one of the top countries in the world in regards to gender equality (United Nations Human Development Programme, 2001; World Economic Forum, 2023). Therefore, it is possible that single mothers in Norway are less exposed to negative moralizing judgments than single mothers in countries with lower levels of gender equality. An interesting finding in both cohorts is that the highest odds ratio for risk for referral is observed one year before the occurrence of the transition from a couple to single fatherhood. Previous research has demonstrated that single fatherhood is often the result of serious problems with the mother of the child, such as acute mental illness, drug use, or death (Storhaug & Øien, 2012). Therefore, the acute increased risk for referral one year before the occurrence of a transition to single fatherhood in the current study may be related to such serious problems.

Although the transition to single-parent households and the transition to new two-parent households both lead to an increased risk of being reported to the CWS, the problems can be somewhat different. While single parenthood can be challenging, lone parenthood in itself does not cause problems. Single parents are a heterogeneous category, and those who experience income poverty and material deprivation fare worst. There is a tendency for single parents to have a higher incidence and persistence of poverty, particularly if they are single for a more extended period. In contrast, the problems associated with re-partnering and a new household may be more temporary than those connected to transitions to single parenthood. However, an unexpected finding in the current study is that the transition from single fatherhood to a couple is associated with greater risk for referral than the transition from single motherhood to a couple. This is in line with previous research suggesting that father-stepmother families may experience greater difficulties than mother-stepfather families (Downey, 1995; Hoffmann & Johnson, 1998; White, 1994). Future research should explore differences and similarities between the challenges that families experiencing various parental relationship transitions encounter.

Given that the results indicate that the risk for referral to the CWS decreases sharply in the years after the relationship transitions, it is worth considering whether such referrals occur too often in a relationship transition context. The Norwegian CWS has a low threshold for intervening in the family, which is justified in that an early intervention can prevent more serious problems from arising (Helland & Luhamaa, 2020). However, a large proportion of the referrals are dismissed either because they are unfounded or because the problems are not severe enough to be a case for the CWS. We do not know the level of seriousness of each individual referral or the situation of individual children in different families. However, given the theory about stress being a consequence of relationship transitions, it is reasonable to assume that this stress reduces once the 'new normal' is established and daily life falls in place.

Being referred to the CWS is both legally and morally demanding. Contact with the CWS can be experienced as highly stressful for children and parents, possibly having a cumulative stressful effect on the life situation of the child. Recent research demonstrates that misinterpretations and misunderstandings of the legislation on the duty to refer to the CWS leads to many families unjustifiably being subjected to significant stressors (Ohnstad & Gudheim, 2019). As family stress in itself can be a barrier to positive parenting (Nelson et al., 2009), it is worth considering whether there are less stressful alternatives than referring families in need of support to the CWS. In Norway, one such alternative could be Family Counseling Services, who offer free advice, guidance, and courses to families that need help concerning either relationship or family difficulties.

4.1. Limitations

Although this study has numerous strengths, including the use of high-quality, population-based linked data and detailed demographic information, several limitations should be noted. The choice of variables that can be derived from administrative data is limited by the official registered information. This often means that certain types of variables are missing, such as indicators of physical and mental health. In the case of current study, we are unable to include indicators of the stress or conflict levels of families undergoing relationship transitions. This means that although we can theorize about the experience of a relationship transition based on previous literature, we are unable to test certain hypotheses involving the actual attitudes or opinions of families involved in this study. Furthermore, our data material did not afford us the possibility of separating single parenthood that is a result of parental breakup from single parenthood that is a result of the death of one parent. It therefore remains unknown whether these two causes are associated with similar or different risks for referral to the CWS.

An additional limitation is that the socioeconomic grouping used in the study is not perfect. The intention behind creating a composite SES measure based on parental education and income was to create meaningful groups to compare with low SES. However, the composite variable may have limitations concerning families in which the parents have greatly differing income and/or education levels. Furthermore, while the administrative data can be considered complete, there were limited cases of certain parental relationship transitions interacting with socioeconomic status categories that were also referred to the CWS. Therefore, it is unsurprising

that the confidence interval estimates were mostly large for the socioeconomic status interaction estimates.

The other limitation with the current data material is that one must be extremely careful in claims of causality. Although panel data analysis has the benefit of having the same units of analysis recorded over time, making causal analysis more possible than when using cross-sectional data (Mehmetoglu & Jakobsen, 2017), it is still not possible to establish that relationship transitions are the definite cause of the observed increased likelihood for being referred to the CWS. As Statistics Norway updates civil status only once per year, we are limited to determining whether a parental relationship transition occurred based on a registered change from the previous year's civil status. Even though Norwegian administrative data is considered to be high quality from an international perspective, errors in the registration of data still occur. For example, there may be some delay in the registration of family status in the current study, as in some cases the actual change in family type may be updated first in the next year in the data, so the years should be interpreted with some caution.

Finally, as previously noted, there was a change in registration practices of referrals to the CWS. Before 2013, referrals that did not lead to investigations were not registered, while after 2013, all referrals were registered, regardless of whether the referral led to an investigation. This is a limitation that adds some uncertainty in both differences between the cohorts and time trends. Finally, as the included number of years for the two cohorts differs, the number of observations differs as well, which makes the odds ratios between the two cohorts less comparable strictly speaking. However, as the purpose is to illustrate the possible differences from different leads and lag times, this is not an issue in the current analysis.

5. Conclusions

By linking child welfare statistics to detailed individual and family-level register data of two population-based birth cohorts, this study demonstrates that relationship transitions increase the risk for referral to the Norwegian CWS. Given that parental breakups are associated with well-documented stressors, it is reasonable to assume that families experiencing such transitions may be in need of support. However, as referral to the CWS is often a significant stressor in itself, it is worth exploring other avenues for helping such families in need.

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106459>.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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