

# A scarring effect of transnational separation from parents?

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MEI Conference - Milano, 9 ottobre 2024

# At a glance

- I study the **long-term mental health outcomes** of experiences of **Transnational Separation from a Parent (TSP) in childhood** in the adult immigrant population in the UK.
- Data from Understanding Society (UKHLS) waves 1 to 11

# Introduction

- Families often get (temporarily) transnationally separated in the migration process, due to restrictive immigration policies but also to preferences and cost-benefit considerations (incl. to protect children from the stress of migration).
- Previous literature mostly compares TSP children in countries of origin to children in intact non-migrant families = **what would have their mental health been if their parents had never migrated?**
- I compare people who experienced TSP as children and then migrated themselves to reunite with their parents to people who migrated with their parents as children = **what would have their mental health been if they had migrated with their parents?**

***Given parental migration, what is better for children's long-term mental health?***

# What do we know

- **TSP is stressful:** TSP children tend to have worse mental health than children in non-migrant intact families \*.
- **Childhood migration is stressful:** results depend by age at migration and other concomitant circumstances.

# Expectations

**(H1a) Cumulative stress:** children who experience both TSP and childhood migration have **worse mental health** than children who migrated with their parents (i.e. only experienced one of the stressors);

Or:

**(H1b) Protective effect of TSP:** temporary TSP (followed by reunification at destination) at least partially protects children from the stress of migration (e.g. because they only move after the parents have settled, found a stable home and job and accumulated sufficient resources and skills). So, children who experienced TSP before migration have **better mental health** than children who migrated with their parents.

**(H2)** The age of the children at (parental) migration affects their agency in the family migration decisions and their ability to understand (and cope with) it. So, **age moderates** the association between TSP (versus migrating together) and mental health.

# Data

- UKHLS waves 1-11 (2009 – 2022); first observation with complete information on mental health available
  - Adult (ages 18-60) foreign-born individuals living in the UK
  - Age at first migration 0-40 years old
  - Excluding respondents who migrated as minors **before both parents**
  - N=365 1.5gen with no TSP; 1231 with some TSP experience; 5518 1gen with no TSP
- Age by which 98% of the respondents who experienced TSP as children migrated to the UK
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# Variables

**Mental health** Short Form-12 Mental Component Summary

Range = 0 (bad) to 100 (good), SD = 10

**Experience of TSP in childhood** No TSP, 1.5gen

TSP only from father

TSP from both parents

Other TSP (only from mother + partial information)

No TSP, 1gen

**Age at migration** 0-5, 6-12, 13-17, 18-25, 26-40

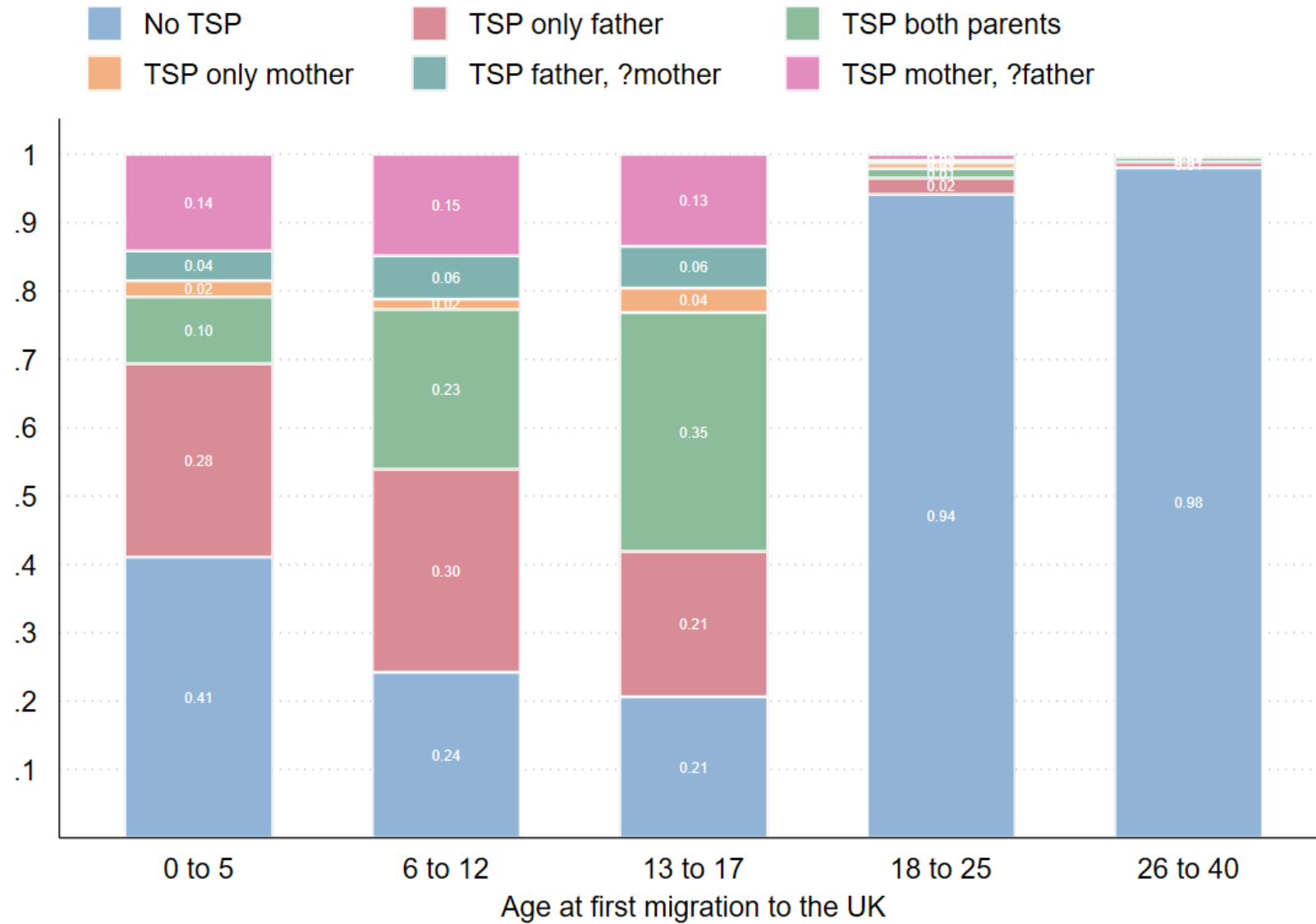
**Controls** Age, gender, parental employment at age 14, parental divorce at age 14, country of birth, UK country, survey wave

# Variables

## Experience of TSP in childhood

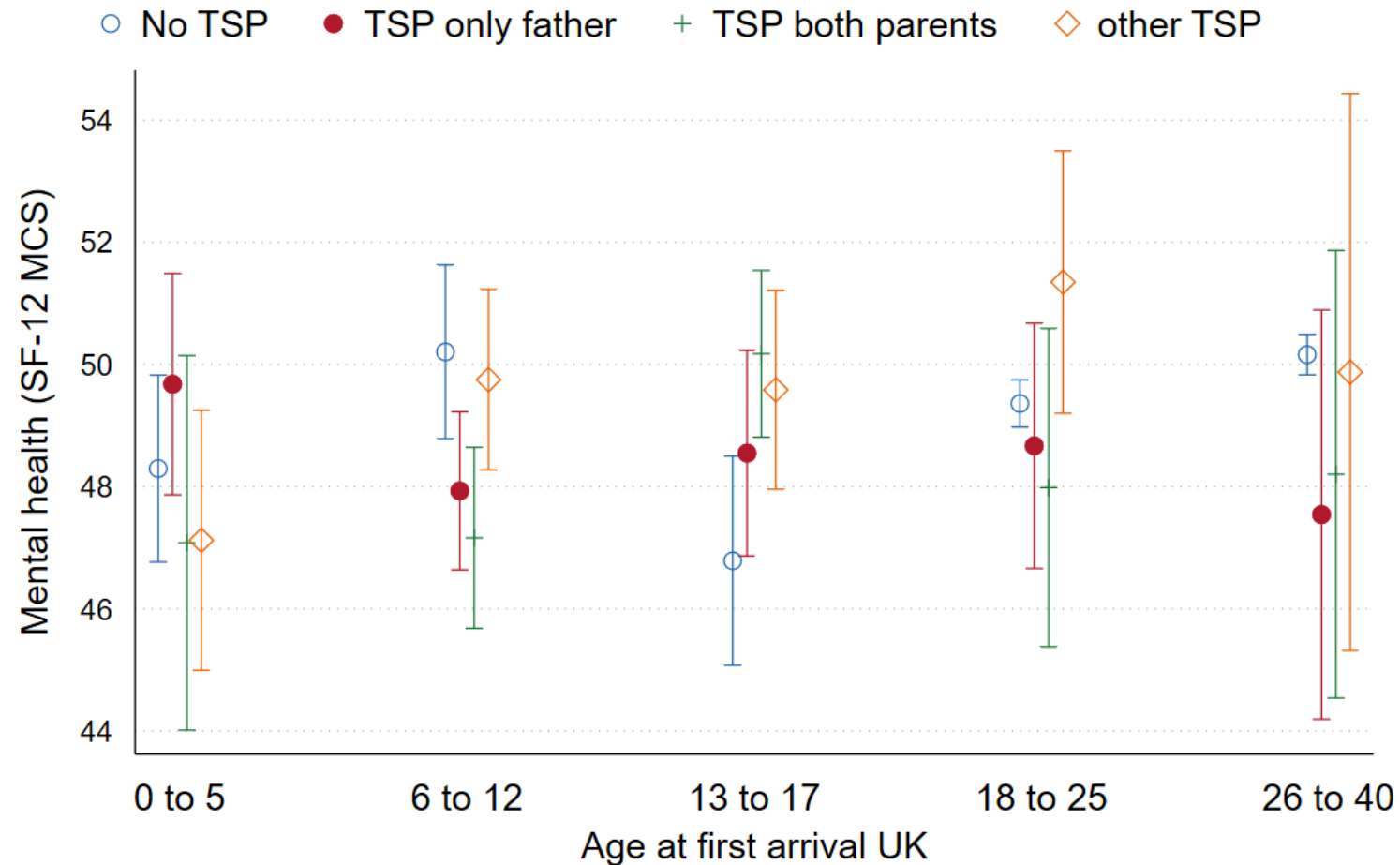
- Based on information on the year of migration of the respondent and of each parent
- TSP = moved in a different calendar year than the parent
- Insufficient information if:
  - R was never asked the parents' year of migration (i.e. did not participate in waves 1 and 6)
  - P migrated before R's birth
  - P was dead when R was 14 and R migrated before 14
  - R did not give a valid answer to the question on parent's year of migration

# Results (1): how common is TSP?



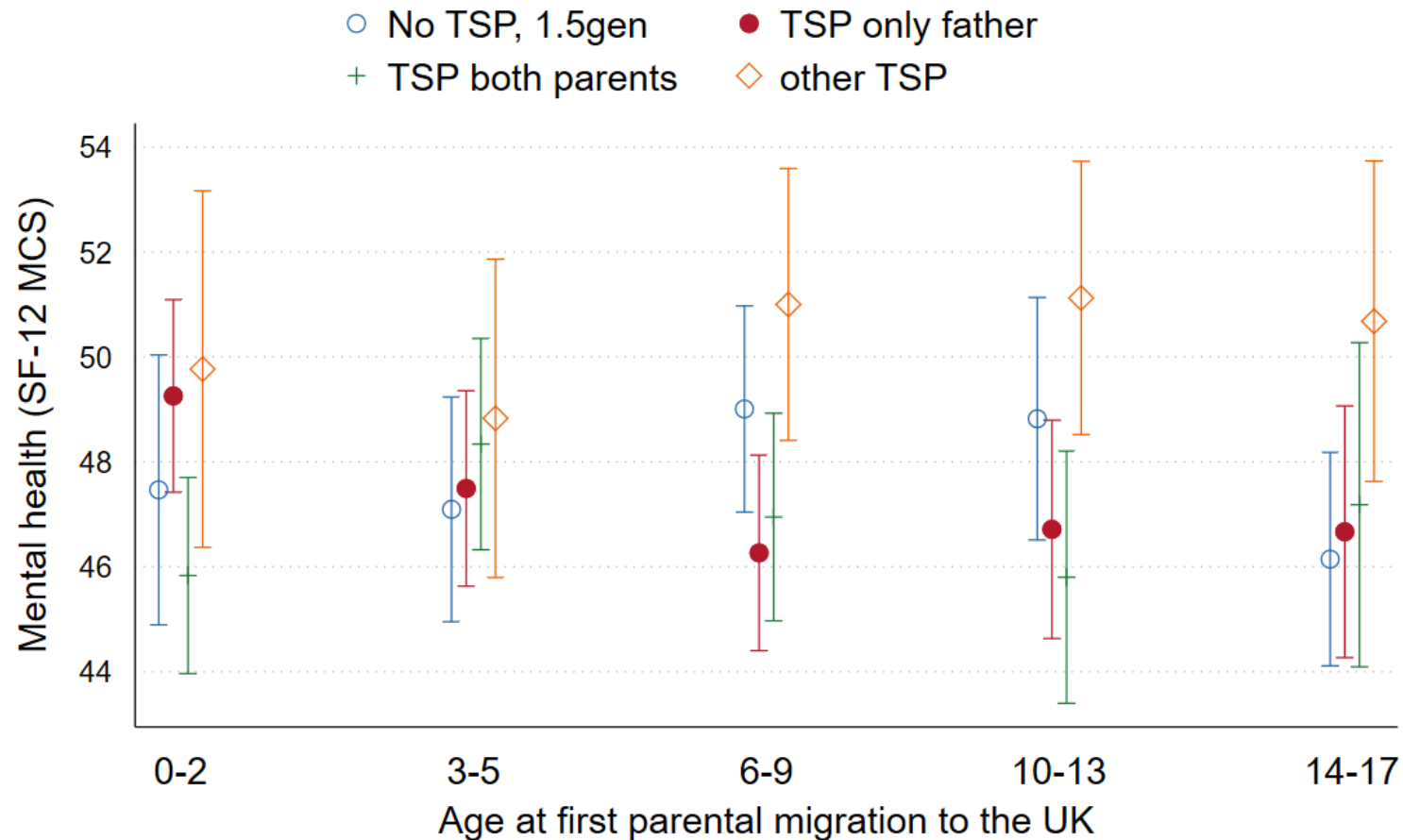
# Results (2): TSP x age at migration

Adjusted predictions by age at migration and experience of TSP with 90% CIs



# Results (3): TSP x age at parental migration

Adjusted predictions by age at parental migration  
and experience of TSP with 90% CIs



# Conclusions

- Most of the 1.5gen has been transnationally separated from at least one parent as a child.
- The association between TSP and mental health depends on the age at migration:
  - People who migrated between 6 and 12 years of age after TSP have worse mental health – even in adulthood – than those who migrated with their parents at the same age.
  - Among people who migrated as teenagers (age 13-17), TSP might have had a small protective effect on mental health.
  - TSP does not seem to significantly affect mental health in the long term among people who migrated as small children (<5 years old), or among those who migrated as (young) adults.

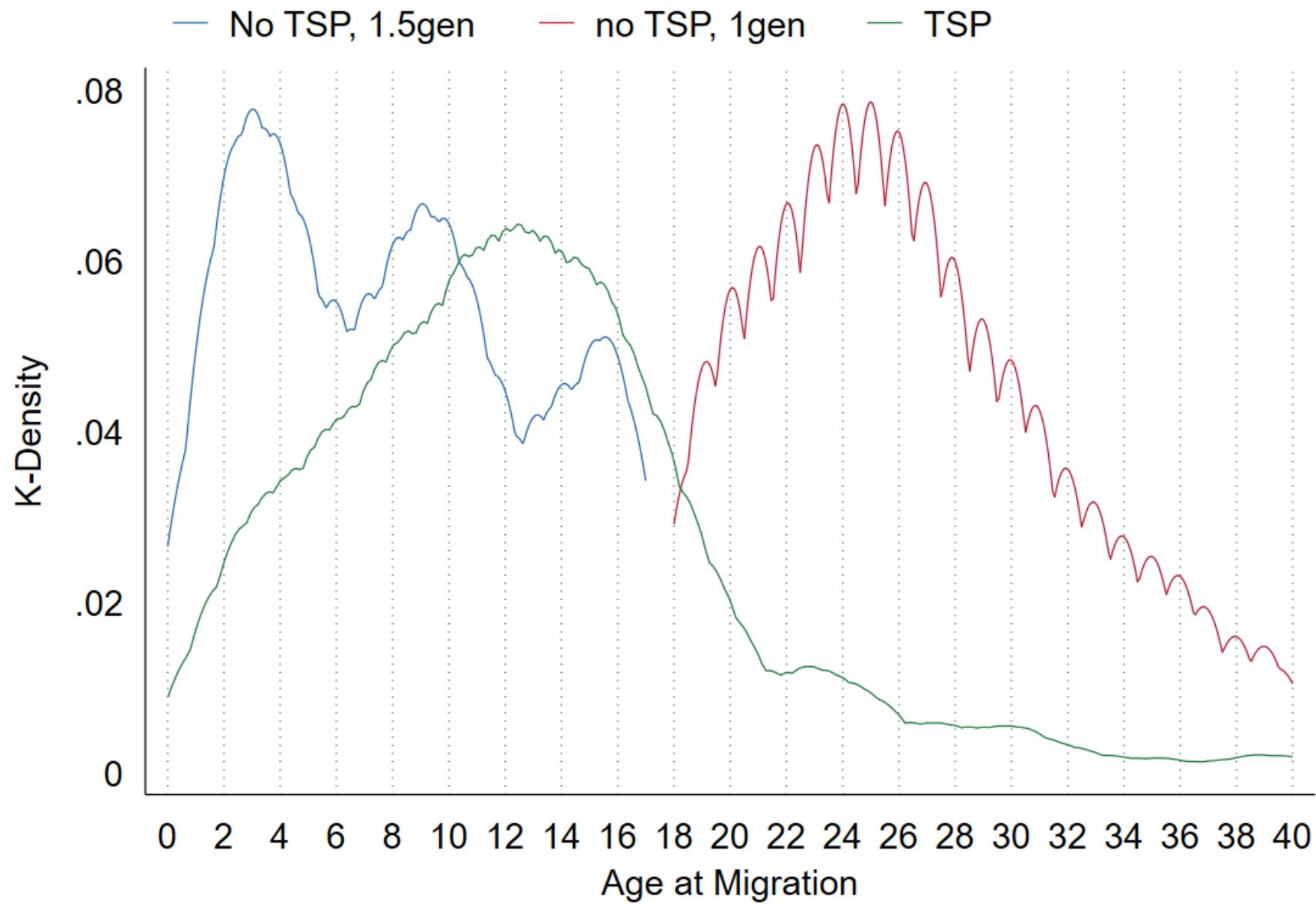
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# THANK YOU!

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## Age at first parental migration to the UK

